The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zi has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string zi together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

This week: Words about birthdays


camtch

Pronunciation: sui (Putonghua, 4th tone), sui (Cantonese 3rd tone)
Basic meaning: year, age


歳 means year. 岁数 (siu shu = year-number) = someone's age. A minor comes of age at 十八岁 (shi ba sui = ten-eight-years/age). 岁入 (siu ru = year-in) means annual income.

“三十而立” (san shi er li = three-ten-so-erect/establish) means at age thirty a man should become independent. “四十不惑” (si shi bu huo = four-ten-no-confused) means at age forty a man no longer has illusions. 岁月催人 (siu yue cui ren = years-months-hurry-people) laments how fast people age and deteriorate.

千岁 (qian sui = thousand-years/age) is address for a prince. 萬歳爺 (wan sui ye = ten-thousand-years/age-grandpa) means the Emperor.

by Diana Yue