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

壽 = 壽命 (shou ming = life-span-life) = a person/animal's age. 壽辰 (shou chen = birthday-hour) means birthday, 做壽 (zuo shou = do-birthday) means hold birthday celebrations. Life insurance is 人壽保險 (ren shou bao xian = man-life-protect-risk/danger).

When someone 壽終 (shou zhong = life-end = dies in bed), his/her body is dressed in 壽衣 (shou yi = longevity-clothes = the deceased’s funeral attire).

長壽 (chang shou = long-life-span) means enjoying long life. 福 (fu = good fortune), 禄 (lu = high-ranking official's stipends), 壽 (shou = longevity) are three enviable blessings. 壽星公 (shou xing gong = longevity-star-grandpa) is the white-bearded smiling longevity fairy. 萬壽無疆 (wan shou wu jiang = ten-thousand-life-no-boundary) means “Long live the Emperor!”

Pronunciation: shou (Putonghua, 4th tone), sau (Cantonese 6th tone)
Basic meaning: life span, age, birthday, longevity

by Diana Yue