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.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zi is pronounced in one of four tones:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \\ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest

To pronounce each zi below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about centenary celebrations

Putonghua pronunciation: nian2
Cantonese pronunciation: nin4
Meanings: year, age

Character 年 (radical禾 he2, grain-shoot) = year: tree’s 年輪 (nian2 lun2 = annual/growth-rings), farmer’s 年 (feng1 nian2 = abundant-year/harvest), school's 學年 (xue2 nian2 = academic-year), government’s 財政年度 (cai2 zheng4 nian2 du4 = wealth-policy-year-pass = financial year). 光年 (guang1 nian2 = light-years) mark star’s distance.

年月 (nian2 yue4 = years-months) = time. Person's 年紀 (nian2 ji3 = year-record) = 歲數 (sui4 shu4 = year-number) = age: 十歲 (shi2 sui4 = ten-year/age = aged ten), 青年 (qing1 nian2 = green-years = youth/youngster), 中老年 (zhong1 lao3 nian2 = middle-old-age).

和平年代 (he2 ping2 nian2 dai4 = harmony-level-years-generation = peaceful era) fosters 百年大計 (bai3 nian2 da4 ji4 = hundred-years-big-plan = very long-term/ambitious plans).