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 longevity

龜
Cantonese pronunciation: gwai1
Meaning: tortoise, turtle

Pictogram 龜 shows 烏龜 (wu1 gui1 = black/all-tortoise) or 鰂 (bie1, soft-shelled turtle) with head, body, tail. Chinese fortune-tellers interpret cryptic inscriptions on 龜甲 (gui1 jia3 = tortoise-armor/shells). Chinese medicinal concoctions use 金錢龜 (jin1 qian2 gui1 = gold-coin-turtle = small water turtles). 龜板 (gui1 ban3 = tortoise-plank/under-belly-shells).

龜蛋 (gui1 dan4 = tortoise/turtle's-egg) also means 王八蛋 (wang2 bai1 dan4 = bastard). 縮頭烏龜 (su1 tou2 wu1 gui1 = pulling-back-head-black-tortoise) means coward.

龜 (gui1) and 归 (gui1, return) are synonyms, hence “海龜” (hai3 gui1 = sea-turtle) yields new term “海歸” (hai3 gui1 = from-sea-returned), nowadays' overseas Chinese returning to China for careers/resettlement.

by Diana Yue