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

Putonghua pronunciation: shou4
Cantonese pronunciation: sau6
Meaning: age, life-span, longevity, birthday, funerary item

壽 (shou4) (with top part showing top half of character 老 lao3, old/aged/used/passe) means 壽命 (shou4 ming4 = age-life). 壽辰 (shou4 chen2 = age-hour) = birthday. Birthday-girl 做壽 (zuo4 shou4 = do/make/celebrates-birthday), receives 壽禮 (shou4 li3 = birthday-rite = birthday presents). 人壽保險 (ren2 shou4 bao3 xian3 = human-age/life-protect-risk) = life insurance. Fortune-readers say long ears are 壽徵 (shou4 zheng1 = longevity-indication), evil-doers will 折壽 (zhe2 shou4 = bend/break/discount-age = have life shortened). Person 壽終 (shou4 zhong1 = life-terminate = dies), is fitted into 壽衣 (shou4 yi1 = deceased’s-funeral-outfit), 壽材 (shou4 cai2 = deceased’s-coffin). Tortoise can 龜縮 (gui1 suo1 = tortoise-withdraw into own shell) to avoid trouble, hence it symbolizes 長壽 (chang2 shou4 = long-life = longevity).