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

年
Putonghua pronunciation: nian2
Cantonese pronunciation: nin4
Meaning: year, age, harvest

年 (radical 禾 he2, grain-shoot) = year: 今年 (jin1 nian2 = this-year), 明年 (ming2 nian2 = next-year), 年月 (nian2 yue4 = years-months = time), farmer’s 豐年 (feng1 nian2 = abundant-year/harvest), school’s 學年 (xue2 nian2 = academic-year), astronomer’s 光年 (guang1 nian2 = light-years).
花樣年華 (hua1 yang4 nian2 hua2 = flower-like-years-radiance) = girl’s blooming years. 財政年度 (cai2 zheng4 nian2 du4 = money-policy-year-pass) = fiscal year. Son pays inheritance tax after Dad 百年之後 (bai3 nian2 zhi1 hou4 = hundred-years-’s- Afterwards = dies).
Poet laments 似水流年 (si1 shui3 liu2 nian2 = resemble-water-flowing-years = the passing years): 少年 (shao4 nian2 = young-years/age = adolescence), 中年 (zhong1 nian2 = middle-age), 老年 (lao3 nian2 = old-age).

by Diana Yue