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 O.

This week: Words about age

Age: nian2 ling2
Meaning: age, year, fixed number of years, duration

齢 (radical 齒 chi3, tooth) means 年齢 (nia2 ling2 = years-age):
樹齢 (shu4 ling2 = tree's-age), 学齢 (xue2 ling2 = school-age),
芳齢 (fang1 ling2 = flower/woman's-age). Chinese count person's 虛齢 (xu1 ling2 = empty-age = real age plus two years) at birthday/death.

Person quitting job loses 工齢 (gong1 ling2 = work-age = recognized years of service in that job). 妙齢少女 (miao4 ling2 shao4 nü3 = nice-age/teenage/twenty-ish-young-girl) gets many dates. 大齢青年 (da4 ling2 qing1 nian2 = big-age-green-years = "over-aged youths") are 超齢 (chao1 ling2 = past-the-age) for marriage.

高齢人士 (gao1 ling2 ren2 shi4 = high-age-people) = oldies/seniors. 高齢産婦 (gao1 ling2 chan3 fu4 = high-age-give-birth-woman) means relatively old pregnant woman giving birth.

Putonghua pronunciation: ling2
Cantonese pronunciation: ling4

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