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 funerals

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

(its top part is top of character 老 lao3, old/aged/used/passé) means 壽命 (shou4 ming4 = age-life), 壽辰 (shou4 chen2 = age-hour = birthday). Grandpa 做壽 (zuo4 shou4 = do/make/celebrates-birthday), receives 壽禮 (shou4 li3 = birthday-presents). His long ears are 壽徽 (shou4 zheng1 = longevity-indication/symbol).

Tortoise symbolizes 長壽 (chang2 shou4 = long-life/longevity). Chinese home displays figurines of 福祿壽 (fu2 lu4 shou4 = three stars/immortals symbolizing blessings-high-official-rank-longevity). 壽終正寢 (shou4 zhong1 zheng4 qin3 = life-end-proper-sleep = oldster dies peacefully in bed) also describes well-established magazine/project’s termination.

Sage advises: buying 人壽保險 (ren2 shou4 bao3 xian3 = human-age/life-protect-risk = life insurance) helps your family, but doing bad things 折壽 (zhe2 shou4 = bend/break/discount-age = cuts short your life).

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