

Character Builder 您好嗎？

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 insects



Putonghua pronunciation: *die* 2

Cantonese pronunciation: *dip* 6

Meanings: butterfly

蝴蝶 (*hu*2 *die*2 = butterfly) symbolizes superficial beauty: 彩蝶 (*cai*3 *die*2 = multi-colored butterfly), 穿花蝴蝶 (*chuan*1 *hua*1 *hu*2 *die*2 = pass-through~flowers~butterfly = attractively-dressed, flirting girl/woman). Children's stories say 螞蟻 (*ma*2 *yi*3 = ants) are hard-working, while butterflies and 蚱蜢 (*zha*4 *meng*3 = grasshoppers) are lazy in summer so they starve in winter. 蝶泳 (*die*2 *yong*3 = butterfly~swim) = butterfly strokes. Butterfly effect in chaos theory is 蝴蝶效應 (*hu*2 *die*2 *xiao*4 *ying*4 = butterfly~effect~response).

Taoist philosopher 莊子 (*Zhuang*1-*zi*3) told the fable “莊周夢蝶” (*Zhuang*1 *Zhou*1 *meng*4 *die*2 = Zhuang~Zhou~dream~butterfly): Zhuang Zhou (= Zhuang-zi) dreamed he was a butterfly. He said: Who knows? Maybe I am a butterfly dreaming “I am Zhuang Zhou the man”.

by Diana Yue