

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: *can 2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *chaam 4*

Meanings: silkworm

養蠶業 (*yang3 can2 ye4* = breeding~silkworms~industry = sericulture) yields 絲綢 (*si1 chou2* = silk fabrics). Silk-moths's eggs hatch into 蠶蟲 (*can2 chong2* = silkworm~caterpillars), eat 桑葉 (*sang1 ye4* = mulberry-leaves), 吐絲 (*tu4 si1* = spit/secret~silk) to form 繭 (*jian3* = cocoon) which is 蠶蛹 (*can2 yong3* = silkworm~pupa) encircled in several-hundred-meters' single silk-thread. 抽絲剝繭 (*chou1 si2 bo1 jian3* = pull~silk~open~cocoon) means pulling silk-thread from boiled cocoon or unraveling/analyzing/dissecting facts/problems.

Aggressors 蠶食 (*can2 shi2* = silkworm~eat = eat/nibble into) others' territories/interests. Painters depict flowing garments with 春蠶吐絲 (*chun1 can2 tu4 si1* = spring~silkworms~spit~silk = unfurling/continuous/wavy) brushstrokes. Smart people sometimes 作繭自縛 (*zuo4 jian3 zi4 fu4* = make~cocoon~self~bind = fall victim to their own plots).

by Diana Yue