

Character Builder

您好學？

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 short lives

Putonghua pronunciation: *chong2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *chung2*

Meaning: worm, bug, insect, addict

蟲 (radical 虫 *chong2*, worm) = worm/bug/insect. Bees are 益蟲 (*yi1 chong2* = useful/good-insects), locusts are 害蟲 (*hai4 chong2* = harmful-insects), 毛蟲 (*mao2 chong2* = hairy-worm) = caterpillar. 防蟲劑 (*fang2 chong2 ji1* = prevent-bugs-agent) = insect repellent.

書蟲 (*shu1 chong2* = book-worm) means avid/addicted reader, 網蟲 (*wang3 chong2* = net-worm) = addicted netizen.

Colloquially, 大蟲 (*da4 chong2* = big-worm) means tiger.

Chinese poets 以蟲鳴秋 (*yi3 chong2 ming2 qiu1* = use-insects-sound-autumn = use insects' buzzing to suggest autumn's arrival). But sage says: 夏蟲不可以語冰 (*xia4 chong2 bu4 ke2 yi3 yu3 bing1* = summer-insect-no-can-to-talk-ice): Insects have short life-span, can't survive winter, it's no use telling them what ice means — Ignorant people can't understand big concepts.

by Diana Yue