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

蜂
Putonghua pronunciation: feng 1
Cantonese pronunciation: fung 1
Meanings: bee

蜜蜆 (mi4 feng1 = honey-bees) inhabit 蜂巣 (feng1 cao2 = bee-hive). 蜂后 (feng1 hou4 = bee-queen), 雄蜂 (xiong2 feng1 = male-bees = drones) breed young. 工蜂 (gong1 feng1 = worker-bees) produce 蜂蠟 (feng1 la4 = bees-wax), 蜂蜜 (niang4 mi4 = brew-honey = make honey), have 刺 (ci4 = stings).

蜂腰 (feng1 yao1 = bee’s-waist) means slim waist. 蜂湧而來 (feng1 yong2 er2 zhi4 = bees-rush-and-come) describes crowds swarming forward.

Poetic lines “採得百花成蜜後 (cai3 de2 bai2 hua1 cheng2 mi4 hou4 = pick/gather-ed-hundred-flowers-made-honey-afterwards), 為誰辛苦為誰忙? (wei4 shei2 xin1 ku3 wei2 shei2 mang2? = for~whom~toil~hard~for~whom~busy?)” lament: Bees/workers made life-long contributions/sacrifice, yet who has ever thanked them for their toils?

by Diana Yue