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

蝶
Putonghua pronunciation: die 2
Cantonese pronunciation: dip 6
Meanings: butterfly

蝴蝶 (hu2 die2 = butterfly) symbolizes superficial beauty: 彩蝶 (cai3 die2 = multi-colored butterfly), 穿花蝴蝶 (chuan1 hua1 hu2 die2 = pass-through-flowers-butterfly = attractively-dressed, flirting girl/woman). Children’s stories say 螞蟻 (ma2 yi3 = ants) are hard-working, while butterflies and 蚊蜓 (zha4 meng3 = grasshoppers) are lazy in summer so they starve in winter.

蝶泳 (die2 yong3 = butterfly-swim) = butterfly strokes.
Butterfly effect in chaos theory is 蝴蝶效應 (hu2 die2 xiao4 ying4 = butterfly-effect-response).

Taoist philosopher 莊子 (Zhuang1-zi3) told the fable “莊周夢蝶” (Zhuang1 Zhou1 meng4 die2 = 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