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/secrete-silk) to form 蟲 (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