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.

This week: Words about animal symbolism

蟑 (= 螞蟻 ma yi) are 昆蟲 (kun chong = insects) living in 蟑穴 (yi xue = ant-hole), 蟑丘 (yi qiu = ant-hill). 蟑后 (yi hou = ant-queen) mates with雄蟻 (xiong yi = male-ants = drones) and lays eggs. 工蟻 (gong yi = worker-ants) gather food, feed young.

蟑路 (yi lu = ants-road) = ants’ trail. 蟑咬 (yi yao = ant-bite) means ant’s bite or itchy/gnawing feeling. 滅蟻組 (mi yi zu = destroy-ants-team) are pest control squads tackling nuisance ants.

蟑民 (yi min = ants-people) describes the poor masses trampled on/oppressed by cruel rulers. 蟑蟻 尚且偷生 (lou yi shang qie tou sheng = crickets-ants-even-also-steal-life) means all creatures will struggle hard to survive.

by Diana Yue