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 autumn

蟲 = simplified form 虫. 昆蟲 (kun chong = elder-bug) = insect: 螞蟻 (ma yi = ants), 蜜蜂 (mi feng = honey-bees), 蠶 (can = silkworms), 毛蟲 (mao chong = hairy-worm = caterpillars). Farmers fear 蟲 (huang chong = locusts). Housewives hate 蟑螂 (zhang lang = cockroaches), 蚊子 (wen zi = mosquitoes), 虱蟲 (zhu chong = eat-away-bugs/worms, e.g. silver fish).

Chinese literature 以蟲鳴秋 (yi chong ming qiu = uses-insects-sing-autumn = describes autumn by insects’ sounds), e.g. 蟋蟀 (xi shuai = cricket)’s chirping. 冬蟲草 (dong chong cao = winter-worm-grass/herb) is a medicinal herb containing a worm parasite.

Lazy/useless persons are 蛀米大蟲 (zhu mi da chong = eat-rice-bug-worm = only eats, never works).

by Diana Yue