

Character Builder 您好嗎？

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 the gangsters



Putonghua pronunciation: *hei1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *hak1*

Meanings: black, dark, unlucky, evil, secret underworld society

黑, part of character 墨 (*mo4*, black ink), means 黑色 (*hei1 se1* = black~color). Africans are 黑種人 (*hei1 zhong3 ren2* = black~race~people). 黑夜 (*hei1 ye4* = black~night) = night-time.

Sicilian 黑手黨 (*hei1 shou3 dang3* = black~hand~gang = Mafia) and Hong Kong's 三合會 (*san1 he2 hui4* = three~unite~society = triad societies) are 黑社會 (*hei1 she4 hui4* = black~society~club = criminal syndicates), i.e. 黑幫 (*hei1 bang1* = black~gangs = criminal gangs). Their members are 黑人物 (*hei1 ren2 wu4* = black~person~characters = gangsters).

If rulers/bureaucrats are 黑心 (*hei1 xin1* = black~heart = cruel/evil-intentioned) and 黑白不分 (*hei1 bai2 bu4 fen1* = black~white~no~distinguish = ignorant/unintelligent/biased), society will be 黑暗 (*hei1 an4* = dark~shaded = lawless/hopeless).