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).

by Diana Yue