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 indefinite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about the gangsters

Putonghua pronunciation: xie2
Cantonese pronunciation: che4
Meanings: evil, unorthodox, incorrect, indecent, erotic, harmful, strange

邪 means 邪惡 (xie2 e4 = unrighteous-evil), opposite of 正 (zheng4 = correct/righteous). 邪教 (xie2 jiao4 = unorthodox/heretic-teaching/religion = cults) preach 邪說 (xie2 shuo1 = unorthodox/evil-sayings = heresy), worship 邪靈 (xie2 ling2 = evil/harmful-spirits).

Prigs frown on 邪裡邪氣 (xie2 li3 xie2 qi4 = indecent-inside-indecent-air = improper-looking) punks. Avoiding 邪念 (xie2 nian4 = bad/indecent-thoughts), monk 目不邪視 (mu4 bu4 xie2 shi4 = eyes-won't-sideways-look = gazes blankly ahead).

Law-enforcers emphasize: 正邪不兩立 (zheng4 xie2 bu4 liang3 li4 = righteous-unrighteous-no-both-stand = good forces and evil forces can't exist together). Eventually, 邪不能勝正 (xie2 bu4 neng2 sheng4 zheng4 = evil-forces-can't-conquer-righteous-forces). Criminals must 改邪歸正 (gai3 xie2 gui1 zheng4 = change-evil-return-to-correct-path = renounce/drop evil practices).

by Diana Yue