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

幫 Putonghua pronunciation: bang1
Cantonese pronunciation: bong1
Meanings: help, band, group, gang, clique

幫 (radical 巾 jin1, kerchief/bandage) means 帮助 (bang1 zhu4 = bind-help) = 忙忙 (bang1 mang2 = help-busy) = help/aid/assist.
幫手 (bang1 shou3 = help-hand) = help/helper.
幫派 (bang1 pai4 = gang-faction) = closely/selfishly-bound group: 上海幫 (Shang1 Hai3 bang1 = faction representing Shanghaiese interests). Powerful 幫會 (bang1 hui4 = gang-society = underworld societies) influence businesses/politics. Early PRC media called Jiang Jieshi/Chiang Kai-shek-led KMT “蔣幫” (Jiang3/Chiang3 bang1 = Chiang Clique). 四人幫 (si4 ren2 bang1 = four-persons-gang = Gang of Four) was crushed in 1976.
黑幫 (hei1 bang1 = criminal-gangs), 匪幫 (fei3 bang1 = bandit-gangs) run 黃 (huang2, yellow = prostitution), 賭 (du3, gambling), 毒 (du2, poison = drug-trafficking) rackets. 幫兇 (bang1 xiong1 = help-violence) = abet/abettor.

by Diana Yue