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: bao4
Cantonese pronunciation: bo6
Meanings: sudden, violent, violence, huge, fierce, harm, bully


暴躁 (bao4 zao4 = violent-irritable) wife-beater commits 粗暴 (cu1 bao4 = rough-brutal) acts. 暴民 (bao4 min2 = violence-people = rioters) launch 暴動 (bao4 dong4 = violence-move = riots), overthrow 暴君 (bao4 jün1 = cruel-king/tyrant/despot)’s 暴政 (bao4 zheng4 = cruel-regime).

黑幫 (hei1 bang1 = criminal-gangs/gangsters) use暴力 (bao4 li4 = violent-physical-force = violence) for 殘暴 (can2 bao4 = cruel-brutal) purpose: 強暴 (qiang2 bao4 = force-violence = raping), 劫殺 (jie2 sha1 = robbing-killing).

by Diana Yue