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.

This week: Words about martial arts

Pronunciation: quan (Putonghua, 2nd tone), kuen (Cantonese 6th tone)
Basic meaning: fist, boxing

拳 = 拳頭 (quan tou) = fist. 西洋拳 (xi yang quan = west-ocean-fist) = western-style boxing, 拳手 (quan shou = fist-hands) = boxers. 回合 (hui he = chapter-conclude) means rounds in a match, 一拳 (yi quan = one-fist) means a fist-blow.

Learning Chinese 拳法 (quan fa = fist-methods = body/fist-movement styles) involves learning 招 (zhao = designed movements), 套路 (tao lu = set-procedure = sequences of 招) and 運氣 (yun qi = summoning-breath = producing and exerting energy/force). Some styles imitate animal movements, e.g. 猴拳 (hou quan, 猴 hou = monkey).

太极拳 (tai ji quan = ultimate-extreme-fist = English “Taiji Quan”), a health exercise based on Taoist concepts, is also famously used for combat.

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