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

剑
Pronunciation: jian (Putonghua, 2nd tone), gim (Cantonese 3rd tone)
Basic meaning: sword

The term 刀 (dao) includes knives, choppers, razors etc. 剑 (with radical 刀 = dao) only means swords. 西洋剑 (xi yang jian = west-ocean-sword) = epee.

In Chinese swordsmen stories, assassins send out 飞剑 (fei jian = flying swords) to kill the enemy. 剑招 (jian zhao = designed sword-movements) have visually-prompting names, e.g. 天女散花 (tian nu shan hua = heavenly-girl-disperses-flowers). 剑气如虹 (jian qi ru gong = sword-energy/force-resemble-rainbow) describes the eye-dazzling flashing of a sword. In Ang Lee’s Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, the 青冥剑 (qing ming jian = blue-depth-sword, translated as “Green Destiny”) symbolizes ultimate enlightenment in swordsmanship.

剑拔弩张 (jian ba nu zhang = sword-pulled-bow-arched) describes tension on the brink of opening fire.

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