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.

Pictogram 困 shows confinement in square. In 動物園 (dong wu yuan = moving-things-garden = zoos), birds/animals/fish 被困 (bei kun = are-confined) in 鳥籠 (niao long = bird-cages = aviaries), 獸籠 (shou long = beast/animal-cages), 水族館 (shui zu guan = water-species-pavilion = aquariums).

困難 (kun nan = confinement-hardship = difficulties) make us 困擾 (kun rao = confined/trapped-disturbed = depressed). However, 困獸猶鬥 (kun shou you dou = surrounded/cornered/jailed-animal-still-fight). Conquering 困境 (kun jing = confined-state = difficult situation) brings 自由 (zi you = self/autonomy-let-do = freedom/liberty).


This week: Words about zoos

Pronunciation: kun (Putonghua, 1st tone), kwan (Cantonese, 3rd tone)
Basic meaning: confinement, imprisonment