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 Boxer Uprising

拳 (radical 手 shou3 = hand/arm) = 拳頭 (qüan2 tou2 = fist-head) = fist. 磨拳擦掌 (mo4 qüan2 ca1 zhang3 = scrub-fists-rub-palms) describes person’s aggressive/militant posture. 拳打腳踢 (qüan2 da3 jiao3 ti1 = fists-beat-feet-kick) = beat up somebody.

西洋拳術 (xi1 yang2 qüan2 shu4 = west-ocean-fist-method) = western boxing/pugilism. Chinese kung-fu has 拳法 (qüan2 fa3 = fist-combat-methods). 太極拳 (tai4 ji2 qüan2 = Taijiquan/Tai-Chi-Chuan) combines 氣功 (qi4 gong1 = breathing-method) with fist-combat.

In 1900 China, 義和團 (Yi4 He2 Tuan2 = Righteous-Harmony-Group, aka 義和拳 Yi4 He2 Qüan2 = Righteous-Harmony-Fists = nationalistic, superstitious mobsters) attacked western Christians and churches, called for 扶清滅洋 (fu2 Qing1 mie4 yang2 = support-Qing-destroy-ocean = support Qing/Chinese empire, eliminate foreigners).

by Diana Yue