The study of martial arts requires a deep level of commitment beyond the daily activities of physical training. It defines a methodology of personal development. Martial artists are unique individuals. They are warriors, constantly developing their skill. They are historians, preserving an oral and practical tradition of knowledge and etiquette. They are philosophers, sharing their experience by example. They are architects, laying the foundations for future generations. Martial artists must take responsibility for this body of knowledge and skill to continue the proliferation and further development of the arts.

When martial arts developed in Asia, culture and language were the common variable. In many countries the written and spoken language, cultural behaviors and philosophical paradigms were shared among teachers and students. With the global proliferation of the martial arts, some of the underlying ideas were more difficult to maintain and others have been completely lost. Without the commonality of language and culture, these forgotten ideas might never resurface.
Most Asian martial arts were developed in China, Korea, Okinawa and Japan. An important link between them is the use of Chinese characters in their written language. The original thoughts pertaining to martial arts were written in Chinese, and many concepts can only be analyzed through a study of the characters. Many martial arts share this linguistic lineage with each other, though it is often obscured by politic. Examining the words in Chinese unlocks their common origins, and reveals the commonality and distinctiveness of their heritage. Martial artists, particularly instructors, need to gain an understanding of the history of the arts for their own enrichment. The practitioner needs both physical and mental information to evolve their skills to higher levels.

**Chinese Writing History**

For approximately 4000 years a writing system has been used in China. The first recorded use of Chinese characters (漢字) appears as *oracle script* (甲骨文) during the *Shang* Dynasty (商朝) 1600 BC – 1046 BC. These were pictographs incised on bones and tortoise shells that represented objects and ideas and were used for divinations. The first Emperor of China, *Qin Shi Huang* (秦始皇), standardized a form of characters called *seal script* (篆書), still in use today as an artists seal or *chop*. In the *Han* Dynasty (漢朝) 202 BC – 220 AD these early systems and ideas began to evolve into the formal script used today. The Chinese writing system uses ideograms to convey the meaning of a word or morpheme. Each character is classified according to its radical and stroke. The radical is the fundamental component of meaning in the character. They can also be used as a phonetic in the construction of the character. Stroke classification refers to the movements of the brush/pen that must be performed to create the character. Writers must make strokes in a specific order and direction to form the proper character. These characters are called *hanzi* (漢字) in Chinese, *kanji* (漢字) in Japanese and *hanja* (漢文) in Korean.

Today there are two standard sets of characters: traditional and simplified. Traditional characters (正體字) are evolved from the original characters. Simplified characters (簡體字) are modern versions of the characters made by reducing the number of strokes, combining complicated characters, and giving different meanings to traditional characters. This was done mostly to promote literacy and simplify writing. Modern Chinese writers use simplified characters. The Japanese use slightly modified traditional characters in *kanji* and the Koreans use traditional characters in *hanja*. Though the three use the same characters, the pronunciation is different in each language. In this article, traditional characters will be used when possible.
Interpretation of Chinese Characters

The radicals which comprise each character contain the information necessary to interpret them. The character that means tranquility is 安. It is constructed using the radicals (宀) roof and (女) woman: the two radicals combine to say a roof over a woman (安). A man who has both a roof over his head and a wife lives in tranquility; though this may be a mnemonic, the evoked image is apparent. The radical-radical compound method of interpretation is useful, but some characters can be abstract. This method is a starting point from which to begin understanding the characters. Interpretations will depend on experience and knowledge of the Chinese characters, their context, and the interpreter's imagination. Once martial artists gain familiarity with the characters, they can combine them to create more interpretations of martial thought.

Chinese Characters of the Martial Arts

武

Wǔ – Chinese Bu – Japanese Mu – Korean

This character (武) means martial and is also associated with bravery. It is made up of the radicals (止), to stop, and (戈), halberd/spear, thus meaning to stop the spear. Martial artists can find interesting interpretations of this character. To stop the spear could be considered a non-violent action, because it means stopping the violence before it happens. Alternatively, to stop the spear could imply that the practitioner is strong, skilled and trained in martial science. A warrior would have to be very confident and powerful to be able to stop a spear in combat. Both possibilities offer the martial artist an insight to the depths of the arts.
This character (士) means scholar and gentleman and is a combination of two radicals 一, one and 十, ten. The radicals can be interpreted to mean a person who knows from one to ten, having knowledge of many things about a subject. The character resembles a person standing with arms out to the side. A scholar is in a state of learning and must continue to look for knowledge.

道

The most important suffix for the martial artist is 道. It means path or way, in a philosophical sense. The character is made up of the radicals (首) head and (亅) path. The head radical implies thought, thus the thoughts while on the path. The suffix (道) was added to many martial practices when they began to change from battlefield arts to methods of improving the quality of life.

The first three characters (武), (士) and (道) put together in different combinations create some of the most important thoughts in martial arts.
The characters (武) and (士) together become warrior, a person who knows from one to ten about stopping the spear. This word is important to all who study martial arts. It implies a martial scholar, not just a fighter, but a person who studies martial ways.

武士道

Wǔ shì dào – Chinese  
Bu Shi Dō – Japanese  
Mu sa dō – Korean

The characters (武), (士) and (道) together denote a philosophy: way of the warrior. The Samurai (侍), a person (人) who serves (寺), are most associated with this concept. Warriors, even today, function better as a unit. This philosophical approach unifies and strengthens resolve for the difficult task in which the warriors must engage.

武道

Wǔ dào – Chinese  
Bu dō – Japanese  
Mu dō – Korean

The combination of (武) and (道) encompasses all martial arts. Simply put the martial way is the common denominator in the study of martial science. It implies not only martial skills, but martial thought. This is not an easy path, as the characters tell us; it is the way of becoming skilled enough to stop a spear.

先生
The word for teacher (先生) is formed with a combination of two characters. The first (先) is composed of the radicals (儿), *two legs walking*, and (之) *progress*. The second radical (之) is actually altered from (屮) *a growing plant* and (一) *the horizon*. The second character (生) is composed of the radicals (屮), *a growing plant* and (土) *the earth*. The interpretation hidden in these characters is the quintessential definition of a teacher: one who has grown and walked ahead of the new growth or *one who has gone before*. The teacher is defined by his or her experience, which has been gained by going before the student.

Another word for teacher commonly used in Chinese styles is (師父). This word is composed of two characters (師) and (父). The first character contains two radicals (阜) *hills or legions* and (匝) *encompassing*. The interpretation of this abstract concept is something that can encompass legions, a master or *teacher*. The second character is (父) *father*; thus a teacher who is as close as a father.

Another word for teacher commonly used in Chinese styles is (師範). This word is composed of two characters (師) and (範). The first character contains two radicals (阜) *hills or legions* and (匝) *encompassing*. The interpretation of this abstract concept is something that can encompass legions, a master or *teacher*. The second character is (範) *model* or *example*; thus a teacher who is as close as a father.
In many Korean styles the term for teacher is (師範). The word is composed of two characters (師) teacher and (範). The second character contains three radicals (車) cart, (竹) bamboo and (氾) water springing ahead or law. An interpretation of this character is a teacher following the cart or an example. This word suggests an exemplary teacher, or one who teaches teachers.

道場

The place where we practice and study martial arts is the 道場. It is considered a sacred place for training the body and mind. It should be a solemn environment which fosters discipline, etiquette and formal behaviors. The characters are (道) and (場). The second character is composed of the radicals (土) earth, (旦) sun above the horizon and (勿) pole flags. Combining the radicals (旦) and (勿) yields the character (昜) or the sun with rays shining down, thus enlightening the earth. When these characters are placed together, they depict a place where the way of enlightenment occurs. This word comes from the Sanskrit word meaning the place where Buddha was enlightened and taught.

氣

The most intangible aspect of martial arts is (氣), internal energy. The character is composed of the radicals (氣) vapor or breath and (米) rice. The result of vapor over rice is an abstract idea. The interpretation requires knowledge of Asian culture. A traditional Chinese saying proclaims “the precious
things are not pearls and jade but the five grains." Rice, the first grain, is the staple of Asian food and culture, and therefore symbolizes life. When the radical rice is replaced with the concept of life, the character comes to represent vapor of life, or the internal energy inherent in all human beings. Some also equate this concept to the spirit or soul.

The dualistic nature of martial arts is often associated with the symbol ☯. In Chinese philosophy these concepts are conveyed in two characters: (陰) darkness, female and (陽) light, male. The first character is composed of the radicals (阜) hills and (云) clouds and the phonetic (今) contact, thus the shady hills. The second character contains the radicals (阜) hills and (昜) sun’s rays shining down, this is the opposite pole: the sun shining on the hills. The use of these interdependent polarities is further characterized in the I Ching (易经) or Book of Changes. There 陰 is displayed by a broken line (—–) and 陽 by a solid line (——).

Chinese Characters and Styles of Martial Arts

Today many martial artists try to examine the differences among the various descendent arts. Terms like style are used to differentiate and classify techniques, philosophies and origins. The continuity of the linguistic basis for the diverse Asian martial arts may be more important than their differences. Using this knowledge we can relate the arts, see the similarities and point toward some origins. A martial artist should have knowledge of other arts and understand the lineage all styles share. Recognizing them and interpreting the characters is the first step.
拳法

This word contains two characters (拳) and (法). The first is composed of the radicals (丿) hands, (丵) rolling rice balls and (手) hand. This character implies the action of the hand making a fist while rolling rice balls. The second contains the radicals (氵) water and (亅) person going. A person going, like water, is following the way of nature thus the law. Combined 拳法 this word means fist law, or law of the fist.

功夫

This word (功夫) is often misused in modern martial arts. Although the word has become a generic term describing Chinese martial arts it does not actually have any linguistic elements to suggest that meaning. The word is composed of two characters: (功) and (夫). The first contains two radicals (力) strength and (工) work: thus strength with work or great achievement. The second character is composed of two radicals: (大) a person and (一) a hairpin, which means a person who wears a hairpin, a symbol that the individual is an adult. The combined meaning is an adult who has attained great achievement or skill in something. This could apply to any subject matter, not just martial arts.
In 1920, Takenobu's Japanese-English Dictionary translated this word to mean, "The craft/accomplishment of military affairs." Like 武道, this word encompasses all martial styles, but is used commonly to describe the many Chinese martial arts that exist. The word is composed of two characters (武) martial and (術). The second character contains the radicals (行) proceeding and (朮) a top heavy plant. The two combine to mean; something continuing to grow. A martial person who is growing is acquiring new talents or techniques; therefore this character implies the acquisition of martial skills.

The word is composed of two characters (劍) and (道) way of. The first character contains the radicals (亼) many joining, (口) mouth, (人) people and (刀) blade. This combines to mean the blade that many joined people, soldiers, carry or the sword, thus the way of the sword. Though most early civilizations used swords, Japan refined this discipline into an art.
This art was developed by Kano Jigoro (嘉納治五郎) in 1882. The word is composed of two characters (柔) and (道) way of. The first character contains the radicals (木) wood and the phonetic (矛) hooked lance. The interpretation is that of a lance hooking the top of a tree branch and pulling it down, thus showing its flexibility. The combined meaning is the way of flexibility. As this art was developed it became a model for all modern martial arts and also became an Olympic sport in 1964.

This art was developed in Japan by Ueshiba Morihei (植芝盛平) between the 1930s and 1960s. The word is composed of three characters (合), (气) energy and (道) way of. The first character contains two radicals (亼) many joining and (口) mouth, many joining mouths or combining. Basically the word means the way of combining energy. This art is also practiced in Korea though the origin is slightly different.

Some styles have direct linguistic links to their origins. This word is composed of three characters: (唐), (手) hand and (道) way of. The first character contains two radicals (口) mouth and a phonetic (庚). The second radical contains (卄) hands and (干) shield: hands holding a shield. When put together (唐) this means bold and rude. This character is used in reference to the Tang Dynasty in China, which was a
time of conquest. Basically this word (唐手道) means China hand way or Way of the China hand. This word has been used to describe Okinawan, Japanese and Korean martial arts.

空手道

Kông shòu dào - Chinese  
Kara te dō – Japanese  
Kong su dō – Korean

Around 1935, in Japan, the word (唐手道) Way of the China hand, was changed to (空手道), though they are homonyms in Japanese pronunciation. This word is composed of three characters: (空), (手) hand and (道) way of. The first character contains the radicals (穴) hole or cave and (工) work thus void or empty. Put together this became way of the empty hand. This is a better description of the art itself and it removes any reference to China. This word has been used by Okinawan, Japanese and Korean arts.

跆拳道

Tài quán dào – Chinese  
Te kon dō - Japanese  
T’ae gwón dō – Korean

This is a modern Korean martial art fused from indigenous and imported fighting systems. Earlier in its development practitioners used (唐手道), (空手道) and (拳法) to name the art. The word 跆拳道 was created in the 1950’s to describe the art, and is composed of three characters: (跆), (拳) making a fist and (道) way of. The first character is composed of the radicals (足) foot, (丷) selfish and (口) mouth. These combined radicals mean to trample or kick. The word basically means the way of kicking and punching. It became an official Olympic sport in 2000.
The warrior (武士) is not only a fighter, but a scholar who remembers the past for the benefit of the future. Martial arts are rich in history, tradition and thought. The principles of the originating individuals are coded into the written Chinese language and are an integral part of the study of martial arts. The study of Chinese also shows the relationships that all Asian arts share with one another. A practitioner of the arts should cultivate this knowledge to enrich their experience and inspire future generations of martial artists. As the arts move away from their source they begin to dilute. The responsibility to maintain them lies in the students, teachers and leaders of these systems.

Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the men of old; seek what they sought. -Basho

References: