

Illustrated Version

Ancient Chinese Wisdom

CHINESE IDIOMS AND THEIR STORIES

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Introduction

Whenever the “cat gets your tongue” or a situation demands meaning “in a nutshell,” there can be no better way to “say it with words” than injecting an idiom into the conversation. The Chinese language is especially rich in idioms where a suitable phrase can be found for nearly every occasion.

It goes without saying that the expression contained in idioms is innately linked to their native culture and, although they are a refined method of expressing a specific meaning, the richness of this form of language can be greatly enhanced by an understanding of the historical background and origin of the phrase.

Chinese idioms abound in stories, many of which are now forgotten or unknown to Chinese speakers today even though the idioms themselves are still being used every day.

Originally published in a weekly column in *Shanghai Daily*, this collection of one hundred Chinese idioms details the stories behind each one and offers a humorous and fascinating insight into the cultural history of China.

From paper tigers to praying mantis, to the music of nature and heavenly robes, these tales have not only shed light on the traditional Chinese way of thinking, but also illustrated many of its ancient customs.

So for those who delight in history and are eager to gain a better understanding of the Chinese culture and language, the book *Chinese Idioms and Their Stories* provides an excellent way of “killing two birds with one stone.”

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按图索骥 (àn tú suǒ jì) A winged steed

A father and son both came to fame in ancient China because of their relationship with horses. Today, they are still well known to most Chinese thanks not only to the domestic animals, but also to this popular idiom called *An Tu Suo Ji*.

Bo Le, who lived during the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC), was a specialist at judging horses.

It is said that at just one glance, Bo could spot a “winged steed” (an exceptional animal that could run nearly 500 kilometers a day) from a thousand galloping horses.

So today, his name is frequently used to praise people who have a “good eye” at discovering talented young singers, dancers, athletes, artists, scientists or anyone who has an unusual gift in a specific field.

Bo had a son. Unlike his father, the son had no outstanding qualities at all and was known as a good-for-nothing.

However, like his father, the son is also remembered today by many because of his involvement in this idiom, which translates literally “looking for a steed according to a picture.”

As the best horse breeder of his time, the senior Bo was not only respected by his peers but also by the duke of the State of Qin. One day, the duke said to him: “As you are getting advanced in age, have you ever thought of passing down your exquisite skills to anyone?”

“Yes, Your Excellency,” answered Bo. “But regrettably my only son is really a dumb boy and knows little about horses. So, I will probably have to write down all my know-how and experiences if

they are to benefit future generations of horse breeders.”

With encouragement from the duke and after months of toil, Bo finished his book on horses. When the son saw it, he read a few pages on how to determine which horses could be tamed into “winged steeds.” According to the book, a potential “winged steed” should have a strong brow and deep-set eyes. There was also a graphic in the book depicting this part of such a steed.

After copying the picture, the son decided to go out to find a “winged steed” so that he could become a master horse breeder like his father.

However, after wandering around for a whole day, he failed to find a single horse that fitted the description and the picture.

On his way home, the son suddenly saw a big toad sitting on the roadside. He found that the toad had a strong brow and deep-set eyes similar to the ones in the picture. He was overjoyed at his discovery and ran into his father’s room shouting: “Dad, Dad! I’ve just found a winged steed!” “Really? Where’s it,” the father asked suspiciously.

“Just in front of our house. Come on, Dad, let’s go and have a look.” Going outside, the son pointed to the toad and said that the amphibian fitted the description of a “winged steed” in the book, except for its legs, which did not look quite like those of a horse.

Letting out a long sigh, the senior Bo said: “My son, you did very well. But the only problem is that the ‘winged steed’ you have found can only hop around and you will never be able to ride it.”

Today, people often cite this idiom to describe any single-minded dogmatist who brings back a “toad” when asked to find a “winged steed.”

百步穿楊



百步穿杨 (bǎi bù chuān yáng) Shooting a willow leaf

There must be hundreds of ways to evaluate a sharp-shooter. But for the Chinese, the sole qualification for an expert marksman is *Bai Bu Chuan Yang* or “to pierce a willow leaf with an arrow from the distance of 100 paces.”

The expression is derived from a story about a legendary archer named Yang Youji.

Yang lived in the State of Chu during the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC). He started to practice martial arts and archery when he was just a child. As he grew older, Yang became a top archer in his home district.

One day, Yang watched a group of young archers compete near his home. First, they shot a target erected beneath a willow tree at a distance of about 50 paces. Most seemed to do quite well, so it was difficult to judge who was the best archer.

Yang then suggested someone paint a willow leaf red and then the competitors shoot at the leaf from the distance of 100 paces. One by one, the archers tried and failed to hit the red willow leaf which was quivering in the gentle breeze.

“Let me have a try,” Yang finally said.

Taking the bow, he held his breath and concentrated on the crimson willow leaf. When he slowly released his grip, the arrow flew through the air with a powerful whoosh and pierced a hole in the painted leaf.

Loud applause burst from the onlookers.

However, one of the young archers dared Yang to shoot down

more willow leaves to prove he was really a sharpshooter. Yang agreed.

He collected 100 arrows and then shot them one after another. All the people present were awed to see that out of the 100 shots, Yang had 100 bull's eyes.

Since then, this idiom has become a widely quoted expression to describe an expert marksman regardless of whether he uses an arrow, a stone, a knife, a gun or a rocket.



班门弄斧 (bān mén nòng fǔ) Respecting rank

To explain the origin and meaning of the Chinese idiom *Ban Men Nong Fu*, or flaunting one's proficiency with an axe in front of Lu Ban, we must first introduce two great names in Chinese history.

One is Lu Ban, a legendary master carpenter, and the other is Li Bai, one of the greatest poets the Chinese nation has ever produced.

Lu lived in the State of Chu around the time that the Spring and Autumn Period (770-467 BC) was replaced by the Warring States Period (476-221 BC). As a carpenter, Lu was exceptionally dexterous with all kinds of tools, including axes.

To help his state battle its enemies, the carpenter invented various weapons, such as tactical push-hooks for fighting on boats and scaling-ladders for attacking walled cities. In addition, he created a number of carpenter's tools and helped build many famous bridges and palaces in the state.

Lu was remembered by successive generations as the best carpenter in Chinese history and the father of Chinese carpentry.

Li Bai (701-762 AD) was a highly-gifted poet during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), the golden age of Chinese poetry. After his death, people built a beautiful tomb for him in Caishiji, a craggy bank along the Yangtze River in today's Anhui Province.

Almost every day, throngs of his admirers visited the tomb. And, more often than not, they scribbled one or two poems on the tombstone as if visiting it gave them some fleeting inspiration.