

驚弓之鳥

jing1 gong1 zhi1 niao3

A Thermos flask triggered another round of bickering among Hong Kong University Council members.

Engineering professor Cheung Kie-chung carries the stainless-steel flask into meetings when free drinks are available, and fellow member Leonie Ki Man-fung considered this good cause to suspect that it was actually some kind of eavesdropping contraption in disguise.

So she asked Cheung to pour some tea from it. The latter readily complied, and drank it too, thus presumably proving his innocence. The scene was not unlike airport security asking passengers to drink bottled water to prove that it is not a liquid bomb.

Ki said she had acted reasonably. Clearly, in some cases reason exists only in the eyes of the beholder. But then council members are “leak-shocked,” and have been described as “驚弓之鳥” (*jing1 gong1 zhi1 niao3*). “驚” (*jing1*) “frightened,” “弓” (*gong1*) “a bow,” “之” (*zhi1*) “this,” “that” and “鳥” (*niao3*)

Idiom by Lon Yan

“a bird.” Literally “驚弓之鳥” (*jing1 gong1 zhi1 niao3*) “a bird that is afraid of the bow.”

The story behind the idiom is that a goose apparently suffered from what is called today PTSD – post-traumatic stress disorder – after being nearly killed by an arrow. Since then, it may be startled even by the twang of a bow string.

Figuratively, “驚弓之鳥” (*jing1 gong1 zhi1 niao3*) means “a badly frightened person,” “a panic-stricken person.” Who could blame some council member becoming “驚弓之鳥” (*jing1 gong1 zhi1 niao3*) when proceedings of a supposedly confidential meeting kept being leaked to the media?

Terms containing the character “驚” (*jing1*) include:

驚慌 (*jing1 huang1*) – alarmed, frightened

驚險 (*jing1 xian3*) – alarmingly dangerous

驚人 (*jing1 ren2*) – alarming, astonishing

驚喜 (*jing1 xi3*) – pleasantly surprised