

杯弓蛇影

bei1 gong1 she2 ying3

A bunch of party balloons flew over the White House, and the place was immediately placed under a lockdown.

The president's security men were apparently nervous, and understandably so. Just a couple of days before, an armed man approached a security checkpoint of the White House and was gunned down when he ignored orders to drop his weapon.

Having emergency procedures kick in because of a few balloons was actually quite embarrassing. So the Secret Service tried to play it down by saying that there was no "lockdown" per se, and that they were just reacting "out of an abundance of caution."

Clearly, the security people were in a state of mind that can be described with the idiom "杯弓蛇影" (*bei1 gong1 she2 ying3*).

"杯" (*bei1*) is "a cup," "弓" (*gong1*) "a bow," "蛇" (*she2*) is "a snake" and "影" (*ying3*) "a shadow,"

Idiom by Lon Yan

"an image," "a reflection." Literally, "杯弓蛇影" is "cup bow snake image."

The idiom is based on the story of a man who was visiting his friend and saw a small "snake" in his wine cup as he was drinking from it. He was so scared that he fell ill after going home.

In fact, the "snake" was just the reflection of a bow that was hanging on the wall. When this was explained to him, he quickly recovered.

So "杯弓蛇影" is to "see a serpent's image in a wine cup." It means an "atmosphere of fear and admonition." In such an atmosphere, people are nervous and will see danger where none exist.

Terms containing the character "影" (*ying3*) include:

影響 (*ying3 xiang3*) - influence; effect

電影 (*dian4 ying3*) - a movie

影子 (*ying3 zi*) - a shadow

影印 (*ying3 yin4*) - photocopying