

不翼而飛

bu2 yi4 er2 fei1

Renowned Chinese painter Lin Yao (林耀) staged an exhibition at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre earlier this month. Famous for his painting of the bauhinia (洋紫荊), Lin painted a small one at the exhibition as a gift for a home for the elderly.

Lin finished the work and went to lunch, leaving it on a table to dry. When he came back, it was gone. *Headline Daily* used the idiom “不翼而飛” (*bu2 yi4 er2 fei1*) in its report.

“不” (*bu2*) is “no,” “not,” “翼” (*yi4*) is “wing,” “而” (*er2*) is “but,” and “飛” (*fei1*) means “to fly.” Literally, “不翼而飛” (*bu2 yi4 er2 fei1*) is “no wings but fly,” “fly without wings.”

“不翼而飛” (*bu2 yi4 er2 fei1*) means something disappears without reason. Inanimate objects don't just take off and fly away, unless they are remote-control drones. The bauhinia was gone, somebody must have

Idiom by Lon Yan

taken it. So the idiom is used when a theft is suspected.

The original form of the idiom is “無翼而飛” (*wu2 yi4 er2 fei1*) “無” (*wu2*) means “without,” “nil.” The idiom warns that what one says and does may quickly become known far and wide.

The idiom “插翼難飛” (*cha1 yi4 nan2 fei1*) describes just the opposite. It is “hard to fly even with wings.” This idiom is often used these days to refer to criminals who are caught red-handed. If a burglar climbing out a window finds himself surrounded by police, we can say he “插翼難飛” (*cha1 yi4 nan2 fei1*).

Terms containing the character “翼” (*yi4*) include:

機翼 (*ji1 yi4*) – aircraft wings

拍翼 (*pai1 yi4*) – flap wings

折翼 (*zhe2 yi4*) – broken wing

羽翼 (*yu3 yi4*) – a wing, an assistant