

功虧一簣

gong1 kui1 yi2 kui4

A coup led by a faction of the army in Turkey has failed. But at one stage, it looked as if it might actually succeed. Rebellious troops blocked key bridges and fighter jets and helicopters were seen over the Turkish capital, Ankara. Soldiers raided television stations. There were explosions in key cities and the parliament and presidential buildings were fired upon.

Through a state broadcaster, the rebellious military faction said it had taken power from the president. They also announced a curfew and martial law, and said a new constitution is being prepared.

But within hours, soldiers involved in the coup began to surrender. Thousands of coup backers were detained. Those organizing the coup have apparently failed to get the support of the public or the majority of the military.

Clearly, much planning and scheming had gone into staging the coup, and that its failure in the end can be called “功虧一簣” (*gong1 kui1 yi2 kui4*).

Idiom by Lon Yan

“功” (*gong1*) is “achievement,” “虧” (*kui1*) “deficit,” “short of,” “一” (*yi2*) is “one” and “簣” (*kui4*) is “a basket for carrying soil.” “功虧一簣” (*gong1 kui1 yi2 kui4*), literally, is “achievement is short of one basket of soil,” “to ruin the enterprise for the sake of one basketful of soil.”

The idiom refers to a project to build a mound, but failed because it lacked the last basket of earth. It means “to fall short of success for lack of a final effort,” “to fail through lack of a final effort.”

The idiom is not only applicable to a military coup but all situations in which a goal is not achieved due to a small problem or shortfall.

Terms containing the character “金” (*gong1*) include:

功能 (*gong1 neng2*) – function

功效 (*gong1 xiao4*) – effectiveness

功課 (*gong1 ke4*) – homework

用功 (*yong4 gong1*) – studious