

Idiom by Lon Yan

鑿壁偷光

zao2 bi4 tou1 guang1

Kuang Heng (匡衡) was an accomplished scholar and government minister during the Western Han (西漢) period. He loved books as a boy but his family could not afford candles, so he was unable to read at night.

One day, he noticed light seeping from a crack in the common wall with the neighbor's house. He used an instrument to make the crack bigger. More light came through, and after that he was able to continue to study at night. The story is immortalized in the idiom “鑿壁偷光” (*zao2 bi4 tou1 guang1*).

“鑿” (*zao2*) is “to chisel,” “to dig a hole,” “壁” (*bi4*) “a wall,” “偷” (*tou1*) “to steal” and “光” (*guang1*) “light.” “鑿壁偷光” (*zao2 bi4 tou1 guang1*), literally, is “dig a hole in the wall to

steal light.” “鑿壁偷光” (*zao2 bi4 tou1 guang1*) refers, figuratively, to diligence in studying under difficult conditions, and in general to the spirit of perseverance in the face of adversity.

But, apparently, not all “鑿壁” (*zao2 bi4*) – dig a hole in the wall – is for a laudable purpose. In fact, when people “鑿壁” (*zao2 bi4*) in the middle of the night it is most likely to be criminal conduct.

That was exactly the case when police received report of men “鑿壁” (*zao2 bi4*) at a money exchanger in Hung Hom. The burglars walked straight into the arms of the police waiting outside when they were done with their wall digging.

Terms containing the character “偷” (*tou1*) include:

偷竊 (*tou1 qie4*) – to steal

偷渡 (*tou1 du4*) – stowaway; illegal immigration

小偷 (*xiao3 tou1*) – a petty thief

偷情 (*tou1 qing2*) – to carry on a clandestine love affair