

Idiom by Lon Yan

無功而回

wu2 gong1 er2 hui2

A family of four wild boars were spotted at a flower box in a park near Hin Keng Estate. Fearing that they would harm people, residents called for help. Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department staff soon arrived with policemen.

Armed with nets and shields, the officers tried to round up the pigs, but the animals proved too agile (敏捷的; 靈活的) for the team.

Finally after about two hours, the pigs decided they had had enough fun for one day playing hide-and-seek and ran back to the hills. Frustrated, the officers packed up and left. *Headline Daily* used the idiom “無功而回” (wu2 gong1 er2 hui2) to describe the officers' outing.

“無” (wu2) is “without,” “nil,” “nothing,” “功” (gong1) “merit,” “achievements,” “而” (er2)

“and,” “to” and “回” (hui2) “to return.” Literally, “無功而回” (wu2 gong1 er2 hui2) is “to return without any achievement,” “to return without accomplishing anything,” which is what the idiom means.

Another version of the idiom is “無功而返” (wu2 gong1 er2 fan3). “返” (fan3) and “回” (hui2) both mean “to return,” so the two versions mean the same.

A related idiom is “徒勞無功” (tu2 lao2 wu2 gong1). “徒” (tu2) means “in vain,” “勞” (lao2) is “to work,” “to make an effort,” “to labor,” “toil.” “徒勞” (tu2 lao2) means “futile efforts,” “fruitless labor,” “wasted efforts.” “無功” (wu2 gong1) is “no achievement,” “accomplishing nothing.” “徒勞無功” (tu2 lao2 wu2 gong1) is “to make a futile effort,” “to work in vain.”

Terms containing the character “功” (gong1) include:

功課 (gong1 ke4) – homework; an assignment

功效 (gong1 xiao4) – effectiveness

功夫 (gong1 fu) – efforts; kung fu

功能 (gong1 neng2) – function; capability