

Idiom by Lon Yan

臥薪嘗膽

wo4 xin1 chang2 dan3

Chief executive election candidate Regina Ip Lau Suk-yea said she had “臥薪嘗膽” (*wo4 xin1 chang2 dan3*) after leaving the government.

“臥” (*wo4*) is “to lie down,” “sleeping,” “薪” (*xin1*) “firewood,” “嘗” (*chang2*) “to taste,” “to try the flavor of” and “膽” (*dan3*) is “gall.” Literally, “臥薪嘗膽” (*wo4 xin1 chang2 dan3*) is “lie on firewood and taste gall.”

The idiom was about King Goujian (勾踐) of the Kingdom of Yue (越國) in ancient China who was defeated in a battle by King Fuchai (夫差) of Wu (吳國). He did not want to let his resolve for revenge be weakened by a comfortable life, so he slept on firewood instead of a soft bed, and licked the bitter bile of a gall bladder from time to time to remind himself of the humiliation he

had suffered. Such tactics worked, and he eventually beat his enemy.

“臥薪嘗膽” (*wo4 xin1 chang2 dan3*), therefore, means “to undergo self-imposed hardships,” “to nurse vengeance,” “to endure hardships to accomplish some ambition.”

Some said Ip had suffered no apparent hardship. But hardships, like love, is really in the eyes of the beholder, and Ip might feel having made sacrifices and endured difficult circumstances in pursuing a life in politics.

This idiom is not often used but if you want people to know that you have been putting yourself through hardship to achieve your goal, you can also say, “I have” 臥薪嘗膽” (*wo4 xin1 chang2 dan3*)!”

Terms containing the character “膽” (*dan3*) include:

膽怯 (*dan3 qie4*) – timid; nervous

蛇膽 (*she2 dan3*) – snake gall (used in Chinese medicine)

膽石 (*dan3 shi2*) – a gall stone

膽量 (*dan3 liang4*) – courage; bravery