

Idiom by Lon Yan

龍潭虎穴

long2 tan2 hu3 xue2

A man climbed over a wall into a zoo in the mainland and found himself in the tiger's enclosure. Tragically, and expectedly, he did not live to tell the tale. The man pulled the stunt to avoid paying admission fee, but ended up paying the ultimate price.

A tiger's den is not a place anyone in his or her right mind would want to enter. Even animal trainers sometimes got mauled or killed. And the idiom “龍潭虎穴” (*long2 tan2 hu3 xue2*) is about such danger.

“龍” (*long2*) is “a dragon,” “潭” (*tan2*) “a pool,” “虎” (*hu3*) “tiger,” and “穴” (*xue2*) “a cave,” “a den,” “a hole.” Literally, “龍潭虎穴” (*long2 tan2 hu3 xue2*) is “dragon's pool, tiger's den.”

The dragon in the Chinese folklore lives among clouds and has few occasion to mingle with mere mortals, but those that

lives in pools and rivers killed people.

Western dragons are fire-breathing monsters. The Hungarian Horntail that Harry Potter had to face in the Triwizard Tournament almost turned him into BBQ meat. Tigers do not live in stories or legends, and presents a very real danger.

Pools where dragons live and dens of tigers are deadly, so the idiom “龍潭虎穴” (*long2 tan2 hu3 xue2*) means “a dangerous spot.”

There are actually no dragon's pool in real life, and city dwellers find tigers only in zoos. But any place that poses a danger to life and limb can be called “龍潭虎穴” (*long2 tan2 hu3 xue2*), like an illegal gambling den controlled by triads, or a workplace run by bullies.

Terms containing the character “龍” (*long2*) include:

龍蝦 (*long2 xia1*) – a lobster

龍捲風 (*long2 juan3 feng1*) – a tornado

龍井 (*long2 jing3*) – Longjin (a famous green tea)

九龍城 (*jiu3 long2 cheng2*) – Kowloon City