

# Idiom by Lon Yan

## 近墨者黑

*jin4 mo4 zhe3 hei1*

Undercover agents or cops charged with fighting syndicated crime going rouge is a popular movie plot. But such things happen in real life too.

There are news reports from time to time about anti-vice policemen taking bribes or receiving free sex service from vice establishments, and in return, would give them prior warning ahead of a police raid.

When such conducts come to light, it is usually because of an ICAC investigation. These cases involved not only junior policemen, but very senior officers as well.

Few of these policemen plan to be bad from the start. It is more likely that they changed gradually along the way, unable to escape the effects of “近墨者黑” (*jin4 mo4 zhe3 hei1*).

“近” (*jin4*) is “close,” “near,” “墨” (*mo4*) “ink,”

“black,” “black ink,” “者” (*zhe3*) “those who,” “he who,” and “黑” (*hei1*) “black,” “dark.” Literally, “近墨者黑” (*jin4 mo4 zhe3 hei1*) is “he who is near black ink becomes black,” “proximity to black ink makes you black.”

The idiom is part of the saying: “近朱者赤，近墨者黑” (*jin4 zhu1 zhe3 chi4 jin4 mo4 zhe3 hei1*), literally “one who mixes with vermilion will turn red, one who touches pitch shall be defiled therewith.”

The expression refers to “moral influence by contact or close association.” It means “different environments provide different influence,” “good companions have good influence while bad ones have bad influence.”

A police officer who constantly interacts with criminals could be corrupted and turns into a criminal. Sadly, the opposite seldom happens.

### Terms containing the character “黑” (*hei1*) include:

黑暗 (*hei1 an4*) – dark; darkness; sinister

黑夜 (*hei1 ye4*) – night

黑心 (*hei1 xin1*) – ruthless and lacking in conscience

黑社會 (*hei1 she4 hui4*) – criminal underworld; organized crime syndicate