

Idiom by Lon Yan

仿如隔世

fang3 ru2 ge2 shi4

A Chinese soldier who fought in the Sino-Indian war got lost in a jungle in India and was captured and jailed for seven years on spying charges. He was released to a remote village in the country where he has been living since, got married and raised a family.

The soldier, now 80-year-old, recently returned to his former hometown in China with his son and daughter-in-law. The media used the idiom “仿如隔世” (*fang3 ru2 ge2 shi4*) to describe his feelings.

“仿如” (*fang3 ru2*) means “like,” “similar to,” “as if,” “隔” (*ge2*) “to separate” and “世” (*shi4*) “a generation,” “a lifetime,” “a person’s life span,” “an age.” “隔世” (*ge2 shi4*) means “separated by a generation,” “a lifetime ago.”

Literally, “仿如隔世” (*fang3 ru2 ge2 shi4*)

is “like separated by a generation ago,” “like a lifetime ago”, which is what the idiom means. “仿如隔世” (*fang3 ru2 ge2 shi4*) is used to describe the sad feeling when seeing things one is familiar with having changed or gone.

The old soldier felt “仿如隔世” (*fang3 ru2 ge2 shi4*) as it has been more than five decades since he left his hometown. Everything has changed and most of the people he knew are no longer there.

An immigrant returning to his or her former home country would have the same feeling, so would a prisoner released after having been locked up for a long time.

A person who returns to his or her primary school after decades might also have a feeling of “仿如隔世” (*fang3 ru2 ge2 shi4*).

Terms containing the character “隔” (*ge2*) include:

隔離 (*ge2 li2*) – to separate; to segregate; to quarantine

隔音 (*ge2 yin1*) – soundproof

阻隔 (*zu3 ge2*) – to cut off; disconnect

隔壁 (*ge2 bi4*) – the next door