

Idiom by Lon Yan

班門弄斧

ban1 men2 nong4 fu3

A North Carolina policeman pulled over an Uber taxi. When the driver turned on his phone and began filming, the officer warned him that there was a new state law banning people from filming policeman, and added, for good measure, “Turn it off or I’ll take you to jail.”

When the driver said there was no such law, the policeman insisted, “I know what the law is”. The driver turned out to be a criminal defence lawyer who was working for Uber to pay off his law school loans.

The police chief subsequently had to issue a statement, telling citizens that “taking photographs and videos of people that are in plain sight including the police is your legal right”, invited the public to do so, and said an internal investigation has been launched.

The policeman could have saved himself from such public embarrassment and from ruining his service record had he not “班門弄斧” (*ban1 men2 nong4 fu3*).

“班” (*ban1*) refers to Lu Ban (魯班), a very skillful craftsman and is revered as the Chinese god of builders and contractors. “門” (*men2*) “door,” “弄” (*nong4*) “to play with,” “to make or handle something”, and “斧” (*fu3*) “an axe,” “an hatchet.”

“班門弄斧” (*ban1 men2 nong4 fu3*), literally, is “playing with an axe in front of Lu Ban’s door,” “showing off one’s skills with tools in front of Master Lu Ban.”

The idiom means to “show off one’s slight accomplishments in front of an expert,” “to teach fish to swim.”

Terms containing the character “弄” (*nong4*) include:

玩弄 (*wan2 nong4*) – to fool with; to dally with

捉弄 (*zhuo1 nong4*) – to tease; to play a joke on; to make fun of

弄壞 (*nong4 huai4*) – to ruin; to spoil; to mess up

弄不清 (*nong4 bu4 qing1*) – unable to figure out