

Idiom by Lon Yan

一毛不拔

yi4 mao2 bu4 ba2

A man burst into Wong Tai Sin Temple, brandishing a knife. Worshippers scurried for cover as the man started to slash up bunting and attacked a security guard who tried to subdue him.

Two men were accused of pulling tail feather from a free-running peacock at a Beijing zoo. Netizens were angry after seeing the video online, and demanded the zoo to take action.

Even though chicken vendors pluck feathers from the birds all the time, they only do it post-mortem. To pull feathers from a bird when it is alive is definitely cruelty to animals.

The zoo said it has posted notice to warn visitors against disturbing the animals. The men denied the accusation, saying that the long peacock feather they were seen holding was only picked up from the ground.

There is an idiom about plucking hair – “一

毛不拔” (yi4 mao2 bu4 ba2), but it actually has nothing to do with peacock feathers.

“一” (yi4) is “one,” “毛” (mao2) “hair,” “feather,” “wool,” “不” (bu4) “no,” “not,” “negative,” and “拔” (ba2) “to pull out,” “to uproot.” Literally, “一毛不拔” (yi4 mao2 bu4 ba2) is “not even pull one hair,” “unwilling to give up even a hair.”

The idiom was about philosopher Yang Zhu (楊朱) in ancient China who espoused the idea of self-preservation (為我) to the extent of asserting that he would not give a hair even if it would bring peace to the people.

“一毛不拔” (yi4 mao2 bu4 ba2) means “very stingy,” “parsimonious (過於儉省的).”

The idiom is often used to describe misers. It is also how people criticize successive financial secretaries for being stingy in handing out benefits despite humongous fiscal reserve and budget surplus.

Terms containing the character “拔” (ba2) include:

拔尖 (ba2 jian1) – tiptop; top-notch; the very best

拔取 (ba2 qu3) – choose; select; to pick out

拔河 (ba2 he2) – tug-of-war

拔起 (ba2 qi3) – to root out; to uproot; to pull up by the roots