

# Idiom by Lon Yan

## 拉牛上樹

*la1 niu2 shang4 shu4*

University of Hong Kong scientists have found a rare species of tree-climbing crab Tolo Harbour.

The spider-like crabs are less than one cm long but they apparently have the ability to climb up mangrove branches 1.5 to 1.8 meters above water. Found at Ting Kok, the species was appropriately named *Habermatingkok*.

Crabs do not normally climb trees, neither do oxen. But there is an idiom about oxen and trees - “拉牛上樹” (*la1 niu2 shang4 shu4*)

“拉” (*la1*) is “to pull,” “to drag,” “牛” (*niu2*) “ox,” “上” (*shang4*) “up,” “to go up” and “樹” (*shu4*) “tree.” “拉牛上樹” (*la1 niu2 shang4 shu4*), literally, is “drag an ox up a tree.”

It is hard enough to get an ox to move if it doesn't want to, and almost impossible to

pull it up a tree without machinery assistance. So the expression means “trying to achieve the impossible,” “attempting a very difficult task.”

It is often used to describe an attempt to get someone to do something they don't want to do, like getting children to spend more effort on a subject in which they have no interest. Trying to get a stubborn person to listen to reason can also be like “拉牛上樹” (*la1 niu2 shang4 shu4*).

It is not strange to find ants on trees, as they do climb trees. Ants are “螞蟻” (*ma3 yi3*), but “螞蟻上樹” (*ma3 yi3 shang4 shu4*), ants climbing up a tree, usually refers to a classic Sichuan dish made with ground meat cooked in a sauce and poured over bean thread noodles.

### Terms containing the character “拉” (*la1*) include:

拉人 (*la1 ren2*) – to make an arrest

拉近 (*la1 jin4*) – to bring closer

拉票 (*la1 piao4*) – to campaign for votes

拉麵 (*la1 mian4*) – hand-pulled noodles