

Idiom by Lon Yan

百密一疏

bai3 mi4 yi4 shu1

Authorities in Mexico found a tunnel in a prison, stashed with drugs, alcohol and sharp tools. Tamaulipas state police said the five-metre hole had been hidden by bricks, and has yet to be finished, and no one has escaped.

Jail breaks in the country, in fact, happen quite often. One of the country's biggest drug lords, for example, escaped in 2105, through a tunnel. In March, 29 prisoners escaped, also via a tunnel, from a prison in the Tamaulipas state capital Ciudad Victoria.

The latest hole was found in a jail in Reynosa, a city close to the US border, after authorities used geothermal technology to detect activities underground.

Prisons are designed to keep people in, so they have high walls, barb wires, gun towers and sophisticated security systems manned by an army of highly-trained guards. But to

break through such a seemingly water-tight system, it seems all it takes is a sharp object and a lot of patience.

Letting prisoners dig a tunnel can be said to be “百密一疏” (*bai3 mi4 yi4 shu1*).

“百” (*bai3*) is “a hundred,” “密” (*mi4*) “dense,” “thick,” “tight,” “secret.” It refers to “周密” (*zhou1 mi4*), meaning “thoroughly considered,” “careful,” “—” (*yi4*) is “one,” and “疏” (*shu1*) “sparse,” “loose,” “not close.” But in this context “疏” (*shu1*) refers to “疏忽” (*shu1 hu1*) or “疏漏” (*shu1 lou4*) – “to neglect,” “to overlook,” “careless” “careless omission,” “oversight” “to overlook by negligence.” Literally, “百密一疏” (*bai3 mi4 yi4 shu1*) is “hundred careful, one negligence.”

The expression means “to be very meticulous yet overlook or neglect one little detail.”

Terms containing the character “密” (*mi4*) include:

密封 (*mi4 feng1*) – to seal up

密友 (*mi4 you3*) – an intimate friend

秘密 (*mi4 mi4*) – a secret

密碼 (*mi4 ma3*) – a secret code