

Idiom by Lon Yan

技驚四座

ji4 jing1 si4 zuo4

Nine-year-old Hong Kong girl Celine Tam won standing ovation from the audience and judges at an America's Got Talent audition with her rendition of Celine Dion's Titanic hit tune "My Heart Will Go On."

There were many "wows (使喝采)" and "stuns (使震驚;使驚嘆)" in English media headlines. One says "9-Year-Old Girl Wows America's Got Talent," others say she "stuns crowd" or "stuns audience." In the Chinese media, "技驚四座" (*ji4 jing1 si4 zuo4*) is used.

"技" (*ji4*) means "a skill," "an ability," "驚" (*jing1*) "to startle," "be startled," "to frighten," "be frightened," "四" (*si4*) "four" and "座" (*zuo4*) "a seat," "a place." A direct translation of "技驚四座" (*ji4 jing1 si4 zuo4*) is "skills stuns four seats" which doesn't make much sense.

"四座" (*si4 zuo4*), as a term, actually means

"the people around," "the people present." So "技驚四座" (*ji4 jing1 si4 zuo4*) is "skills that stun the people present." Figuratively, the idiom means "a very impressive performance," "a stunning show of skills," "amazing technique that wows everyone."

The idiom is used in respect of performance like singing or dancing. It also applies to other skills like calligraphy, martial arts or acrobatics.

The "驚" (*jing1*) in the idiom does not mean "to frighten," but "pleasantly surprise" or "amaze."

A knife-thrower with a bad aim performing in a crowded room will definitely make everyone "驚" (*jing1*) – frightened – but using "技驚四座" (*ji4 jing1 si4 zuo4*) to describe such a display of skills, or lack thereof, is certainly not appropriate.

Terms containing the character "技" (*ji4*) include:

技術 (*ji4 shu4*) – technique; technology

技能 (*ji4 neng2*) – a skill; an ability

技師 (*ji4 shi1*) – a technician; an engineer

技窮 (*ji4 qiong2*) – at the end of one's tether