

Idiom by Lon Yan

大禍臨頭

da4 huo4 lin2 tou2

A teenage camping instructor was sleeping outside his tent when he woke to crunching noises, which he soon realized came from the teeth of a bear gnawing his skull.

The bear was trying to drag the 19-year-old away, apparently hoping to bring home a feast to his children.

Fortunately, the young man and other campers managed to chase the wild beast away. But at the moment when his head was in the jaws of the beast, it was a situation of “大禍臨頭” (*da4 huo4 lin2 tou2*) in every sense of the idiom.

“大” (*da4*) is “big,” “great,” “禍” (*huo4*) “disaster,” “misfortune,” “calamity.” “大禍” (*da4 huo4*) is “a great misfortune,” “a catastrophe,” “臨” (*lin2*) “near,” “at,” “to arrive at,” “just before,” and “頭” (*tou2*) is “head.” “臨頭” (*lin2 tou2*) is “to befall,” “to be imminent.”

“大禍臨頭” (*da4 huo4 lin2 tou2*) is, literally, “big disaster imminent,” which is what the idiom means – “facing imminent catastrophe,” “calamity looms,” “all hell will break loose.”

The idiom is used to describe the situation in which a disaster has not happened but will, in all likelihood, happen soon.

A gambler who owes millions of dollar to loan sharks and found threatening words spray-painted in blood red on the wall outside his home is “大禍臨頭” (*da4 huo4 lin2 tou2*).

The idiom applies even if the victim does not know that a disaster is just around the corner, like the passengers on the Titanic, or the employees who are playing mah-jong in the office during office hour, not knowing their boss is coming through the door.

Terms containing the character “臨” (*lin2*) include:

臨時 (*lin2 shi2*) – temporary; provisional

臨床 (*lin2 chuang2*) – clinical

臨記 (*lin2 ji4*) – an extra in a film

臨盤 (*lin2 pan2*) – to be in childbirth