

Idiom by Lon Yan

星星之火

xing1 xing1 zhi1 huo3

Flick a cigarette butt out of a car window in Hong Kong and you will get a HK\$1,500 littering ticket. Doing that in British Columbia, Canada, is a more serious matter – it is a Wildfire Act offence carrying a fine of C\$575 (HK\$3,500), as a motorist found out the hard way.

It was actually quite dumb to toss a cigarette butt in public at this time when the province is literally burning – there are so many hill fires that a state of emergency has been declared.

Abbotsford police warned the public of fire risks by publicising the case. And if they knew Chinese idiom, they could have talked to them about “星星之火” (*xing1 xing1 zhi1 huo3*).

“星” (*xing1*) is “a star,” “minute things.” “

星星” (*xing1 xing1*) usually means “stars in the sky,” but in the idiom, it means “a spark.” “之” (*zhi1*) is “this,” “that,” “the possessive article ‘of’” and “火” (*huo3*) “fire.” “星星之火” (*xing1 xing1 zhi1 huo3*), literally, is “a spark.”

The idiom came from the expression “星星之火，可以燎原” (*xing1 xing1 zhi1 huo3 ke3 yi3 liao2 yuan2*).

“燎” (*liao2*) is “to burn,” “to set ablaze.” “原” (*yuan2*) is “原野” (*yuan2 ye3*), “a wide field,” “open country” or “草原” (*cao3 yuan2*) “grassland,” “prairie.” “燎原” is “to set the prairie ablaze.” The expression means “a single spark can start a prairie fire.”

Figuratively, the idiom means “an insignificant cause can have a massive effect,” “small things may cause big trouble.”

Terms containing the character “星” (*xing1*) include:

明星 (*ming2 xing1*) – a movie star

歌星 (*ge1 xing1*) – a singing star; famous singer

星星 (*xing1 xing1*) – stars in the sky; stars; planets

星相 (*xing1 xiang4*) – horoscope; astrology