

Idiom by Lon Yan

無可奈何

wu2 ke3 nai4 he2

The Zambian tourist city of Livingstone suffered a power failure recently because its electricity supply system was sabotaged.

The culprit was reported to have climbed into the power station at the south of the country and yanked loose power lines, leaving 50,000 people without power on a Sunday morning.

The perpetrator suffered “massive electric shock” but was expected to live. Despite the severity of the offence, the authorities have ruled out prosecution. In fact, there really wasn’t much they could do because the saboteur was a baboon.

Animals wreaking havoc with power supply is actually not uncommon. In Kenya last year, a monkey caused a nationwide power outage similarly. In this kind of situation, one can only say “無可奈何” (wu2 ke3 nai4 he2)!

“無” (wu2) is “without,” “nil,” “nothing,” “可” (ke3) “can,” “may,” “無可” (wu2 ke3) means “can’t.” “奈何” (nai4 he2) is “to no avail,” “to do something to a person,” “to deal with.” Literally, “無可奈何” (wu2 ke3 nai4 he2) is “can’t do anything,” “without means to deal with.”

The idiom means “to have no way out,” “to have no alternative,” “powerless,” “helpless.”

There are many things in life that are “無可奈何” (wu2 ke3 nai4 he2), like losing your job when your company closes down, girlfriend/boyfriend marrying someone else, having important matters held up due to endless filibustering, or incompetent civil servants messing things up.

And when such things happen, all you can do is shake your head and say: “無可奈何” (wu2 ke3 nai4 he2)! – “It can’t be helped!”

Terms containing the character “可” (ke2) include:

可能 (ke3 neng2) – possible; probable

可以 (ke3 yi3) – can; may; could; passable

可怕 (ke3 pa4) – dreadful; frightful

可疑 (ke3 yi2) – suspicious; dubious