Renowned Chinese painter Lin Yao (林耀) staged an exhibition at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre earlier this month. Famous for his painting of the bauhinia (洋紫荆), Lin painted a small one at the exhibition as a gift for a home for the elderly.

Lin finished the work and went to lunch, leaving it on a table to dry. When he came back, it was gone. *Headline Daily* used the idiom “不翼而飛” (*bu2 yi4 er2 fei1*) in its report. “不” (*bu2*) is “no,” “not,” “翼” (*yi4*) is “wing,” “而” (*er2*) is “but,” and “飛” (*fei1*) means “to fly.” Literally, “不翼而飛” (*bu2 yi4 er2 fei1*) is “no wings but fly,” “fly without wings.”

“不翼而飛” (*bu2 yi4 er2 fei1*) means something disappears without reason. Inanimate objects don’t just take off and fly away, unless they are remote-control drones. The bauhinia was gone, somebody must have taken it. So the idiom is used when a theft is suspected.

The original form of the idiom is “無翼而飛” (*wu2 yi4 er2 fei1*) “無” (*wu2*) means “without,” “nil.” The idiom warns that what one says and does may quickly become known far and wide. The idiom “插翼難飛” (*cha1 yi4 nan2 fei1*) describes just the opposite. It is “hard to fly even with wings.” This idiom is often used these days to refer to criminals who are caught red-handed. If a burglar climbing out a window finds himself surrounded by police, we can say he “插翼難飛” (*cha1 yi4 nan2 fei1*).

Terms containing the character “翼” (*yi4*) include:

- 機翼 (*ji1 yi4*) – aircraft wings
- 拍翼 (*pai1 yi4*) – flap wings
- 折翼 (*zhe2 yi4*) – broken wing
- 羽翼 (*yu3 yi4*) – a wing, an assistant