A 60-year-old man pulled out a gun and pointed it at his neighbor in an open area at a Tseung Kwan O public housing estate. The gunman was apparently trying to scare the other man with whom he had a nasty quarrel a few days back.

The 37-year-old neighbor was suitably intimidated, so much so that he made a report to the police. Even as the “gun” was believed to be a fake, the police are taking no chances, sending a team of 30 policemen in bullet-proof vest, with real guns, to lock down the building into which the gunman was seen entering, and conducted a door-to-door search. A suspect was subsequently arrested later that evening.

Fake or not, whipping out a gun in public is a very serious matter. So the man was duly charged with criminal intimidation, which is a real criminal offence that carries the very real penalty of imprisonment.

What has happened was “弄假成真” (nong4 jia3 cheng2 zhen1). “弄” (nong4) “to play with,” “to make,” “to do,” “假” (jia3) “false,” “假” (jia3) “false,” “成” (cheng2) “to become” and “真” (zhen1) “real;” “true.” Literally, “弄假成真” (nong4 jia3 cheng2 zhen1) is “make believe becomes real.”

The idiom means “pretense that turns into reality,” “to play at make-believe, but accidentally make it true.”

A boy who pretends to cry to attract attention, but is then spanked by his mom and starts to cry real tears is “弄假成真” (nong4 jia3 cheng2 zhen1). A happy variety of “弄假成真” (nong4 jia3 cheng2 zhen1) is screen lovers turning into real lovers.

Terms containing the character “真” (zhen1) include:

真心 (zhen1 xin1) – heartfelt; sincere
真相 (zhen1 xiang4) – a real situation; the actual facts
真實 (zhen1 shi2) – true; real; authentic
真理 (zhen1 li3) – truth; gospel