

十大汉语成语故事

Top 10 Chinese Idioms with Origin Stories





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Top 10 Chinese Idioms with Origin Stories



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Contents

1. 爱屋及乌 (Ài wū jí wū) Love Me, Love My Dog 1
2. 笨鸟先飞 (Bènniǎo xiān fēi) 4
Clumsy Birds Have to Start Flying Early
3. 半途而废 (Bàn tú ér fèi) To Give up Halfway 7
4. 对牛弹琴 (Dui niú tán qín) 10
To Play the Harp to a Cow
5. 画蛇添足 (Huà shé tiān zú) 13
Draw a Snake and Add Feet to It
6. 惊弓之鸟 (Jīng gōng zhī niǎo) 16
A Bird Startled by the Mere Twang of a Bow String
7. 孔融让梨 (Kǒng Róng ràng lí) 20
Kong Rong Gave Away Bigger Pear
8. 盲人摸象 (Máng rén mō xiàng) 23
Blind Men and an Elephant
9. 亡羊补牢 (Wáng yáng bǔ láo) 26
It's Never Too Late to Take Action
10. 雪中送炭 (Xuě zhōng sòng tàn) 29
To Offer Fuel in Snowy Weather





1. 爱屋及乌 (Ài wū jí wū) Love Me, Love My Dog

Listening to the Whole Story

Note: If you are reading this story via Adobe Reader, Foxit Reader or PDF-XChange, you can listen to the audio files by scrolling over the red speaker button and double-clicking.

In this Chinese idiom “爱屋及乌 (ài wū jí wū) Love me, love my dog,” “爱 (ài)” means “like” or “love;” “屋 (wū)” refers to “house;” “及 (jí)” is a conjunction which means “and;” “乌 (wū)” refers to “乌鸦 (wūyā),” which is “crow.”

“爱屋及乌 (ài wū jí wū)” is a Chinese idiom originally from a story in history a long time ago:

Shāngcháo mònián, Zhōu Wǔwáng zài Jiāng Shàng (Tàigōng) děng rén de bāngzhù xià, chūbīng tǎofá Zhòuwáng bìng qǔdé shènglì.

商朝末年，周武王在姜尚（太公）等人的帮助下，出兵讨伐纣王并取得胜利。

At the end of the Shang dynasty, assisted by his counselor Jiangshang (Taigong) and other capable men, King Zhou Wuwang successfully attacked and killed Zhouwang, another King.

Zhòuwáng sǐ hòu, Wǔwáng gǎn dào tiānxià bìng méiyǒu āndìng.

纣王死后，武王感到天下并没有安定。

After Zhouwang died, Wuwang still felt anxious since the country was still unstable.

Tā wèn Jiāng Tàigōng: “Jìn le Yīndū, yīnggāi rúhé ānpái jiù wángcháo de guānyuán ne?”

他问姜太公：“进了殷都，应该如何安排旧王朝的官员呢？”

He asked Jiang Taigong: “After we enter the capital Yin, how should we deal with Yin’s officers?”



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Jiāng Tàigōng shuō: "Wǒ tīngshuō guò zhèyàng de huà—rúguǒ xǐhuān nà gè rén, jiù lián tā wūdǐng shàng de wūyā yě xǐhuān; rúguǒ bù xǐhuān nà gè rén, jiù lián tā jiā de qiángbì hé líba yě tǎoyàn."

姜太公说：“我听说过这样的话——如果喜欢那个人，就连他屋顶上的乌鸦也喜欢；如果不喜欢那个人，就连他家的墙壁和篱笆也讨厌。”

Jiang Taigong said, "I've heard of a saying—if you love a person, you should also love the crows on his roof; if you hate somebody, you should hate the walls and bamboo fences of his house as well."

Jiùshì shuō, shā jìn quánbù de dírén, yí gè yě bù liúxià. Dàwáng nǐ kàn zěnmeyàng?"

“就是说，杀尽全部的敌人，一个也不留下。大王你看怎么样？”

That is to say: eliminate all the hostile elements. How is that, your Majesty?"

Wǔwáng rènwéi bù néng zhèyàng.

武王认为不能这样。

Wuwang didn't think it was a good idea.

Zhèshí Zhōugōng shuō dào: "Wǒ rènwéi yīngdāng ràng tāmen dōu huí dào zìjǐ jiālǐ, gèzì gēngzhòng zìjǐ de tiándì."

这时周公说道：“我认为应当让他们都回到自己家里，各自耕种自己的田地。”

Zhougong then said, "In my opinion, we should ask them to go back home and farm on their own land."



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Wǔwáng tīng le fēicháng gāoxìng, xīn zhōng huò rán kāi lǎng, juéde tiānxià kěyǐ āndìng le.

武王听了非常高兴，心中豁然开朗，觉得天下可以安定了。

Wuwang was enlightened and delighted to hear the suggestion. He was confident about the future and the stability of the country.



生词 (shēngcí)
Vocabulary

1. 王朝 (wángcháo): n. Dynasty.
2. 屋顶 (wūdǐng): n. Roof.
3. 墙壁 (qiángbì): n. Wall.
4. 篱笆 (líba): n. Fence.
5. 豁然开朗 (huò rán kāi lǎng): To be suddenly enlightened.



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2. 笨鸟先飞 (Bèn niǎo xiān fēi)

Clumsy Birds Have to Start Flying Early

Listen to the whole Story

Note: If you are reading this story via Adobe Reader, Foxit Reader or PDF-XChange, you can listen to the audio files by scrolling over the red speaker button and double-clicking.

Shù shàng yì zhī niǎo māma fū chū le liù zhī niǎo bǎobao,

树上一只鸟妈妈孵出了六只鸟宝宝，

A bird hatches six baby birds,

Xiǎoliù yòu shòu yòu xiǎo, gēge jiějie men dōu qīfu tā;

小六又瘦又小，哥哥姐姐们都欺负它；

Xiaoliu is very weak and small; his sisters and brothers usually bully him.

Jīngcháng cóng tā zuǐlǐ qiǎng chóngzi, xiǎoliù zhǐ dǎi è zhe dùzi.

经常从它嘴里抢虫子，小六只得饿着肚子。

The other birds usually rob food from his mouth, and Xiaoliu suffers from hunger.

Gēge jiějie men jiào tā "bèn niǎo."

哥哥姐姐们叫他“笨鸟。”

Sisters and Brothers call him "clumsy bird."

Yúshì tā juéxīn duànliàn hǎo shēntǐ, ràng gēge jiějie men bú zài cháoxiào zìjǐ.

于是他决心锻炼好身体，让哥哥姐姐们不再嘲笑自己。

He decides to exercise more to be healthier, in order to not be teased by his sisters and brothers.



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Tā zhìqì fēicháng dà, měitiān dōu qǐ de hěn zǎo,

他志气非常大，每天都起得很早，

Xiaoliu has a strong will and gets up very early every day.

Děng gēge jiějie men xǐnglái, tā yǐjīng pǎo wán bù, chī wán chóngzi le.

等哥哥姐姐们醒来，他已经跑完步，吃完虫子了。

He always finishes exercising and eating worms by the time his sisters and brothers wake up.

Dōngtiān dào le, niǎoqún yào nán fēi le; bènniǎo shì niǎoqún zhōng dì yī gè fēi wǎng nánfāng de.

冬天到了，鸟群要南飞了；笨鸟是鸟群中第一个飞往南方的。

When the winter is coming and the bird flock prepares to fly to the south, the “clumsy bird” is the first one to start flying.



Key Learning Points

1. 笨鸟先飞 (Bènniǎoxiānfēi) Clumsy birds have to start flying early.

Usage:

“笨鸟先飞 (bènniǎoxiānfēi) Clumsy birds have to start flying early” is used to describe someone who compensates for his/her weaknesses by working hard. The character “笨 (bèn)” means clumsy. “鸟 (niǎo)” means bird; “先 (xiān)” means first and “飞 (fēi)” means to fly.



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Example:

Wǒ xiāngxìn tōngguò nǚlì wǒ huì dá dào mùbiāo de, bènniǎoxiānfēi ma!

我相信通过努力我会达到目标的，笨鸟先飞嘛！

A slow bird should make an early start; I believe I can reach my goal through hard work.

2. 决心 (juéxīn): v. To resolve.

Example:

Tā juéxīn zhècì yào kǎo quánbān dìyī.

她决心这次要考全班第一。

She resolves to win the first place in this examination.

3. 志气 (zhìqì): n. Aspiration.

Example:

Bié zhèyàng, yǒu zhìqì diǎnr, chóngxīn zhènzuo qǐlái!

别这样，有志气点儿，重新振作起来！

Don't be like that; please cheer up again with a strong aspiration.



Vocabulary

1. 嘲笑 (cháoxiào): n./v. Laugh.
2. 欺负 (qīfu): v. To bully.
3. 锻炼 (duànliàn): v. To exercise.
4. 鸟群 (niǎoqún): n. Bird flock.



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3. 半途而废 (Bàn tú ér fèi) To Give Up Halfway

Listen to the whole story 

Note: If you are reading this story via Adobe Reader, Foxit Reader or PDF-XChange, you can listen to the audio files by scrolling over the red speaker button and double-clicking.

Wèiguó yǒu gè jiào Yuè Yángzǐ de rén dào yuǎnfāng qù xúnshī qiúxué.

魏国有个叫乐羊子的人到远方去寻师求学。

There was a man called Yue Yangzi in the Wei State who went far away to study.

Yī nián hòu, Yuè Yángzǐ jiù huí lái le.

一年后，乐羊子就回来了。

A year after departing, he returned.

Qīzi wèn tā wèihé zhème zǎo jiù huíjiā le.

妻子问他为何这么早就回家了。

His wife asked why he came back so early.

Yuè Yángzǐ shuō: "chūmén shíjiān cháng le xiǎng jiā."

乐羊子说：“出门时间长了想家。”

He said, "I've been away so long, I just missed home."

Qīzi tīng hòu, ná qǐ yì bǎ jiǎndāo bǎ gāng zhī hǎo de bù jiǎn duàn le.

妻子听后，拿起一把剪刀把刚织好的布剪断了。

Then his wife took a pair of scissors and cut the cloth she had just woven.



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Ránhòu shuō: "zhè bù shì yì gēn sī yì gēn sī jīlěi qǐlái de, wǒ xiànzài yǐ jiāng tā jiǎnduàn, zhèyàng yǐqián de shíjiān jiù dōu báibái làngfèi le."

然后说：“这布是一根丝一根丝积累起来的，我现在已将它剪断，这样以前的时间就都白白浪费了。”

Then she said: "This cloth was woven one thread at a time. Now I have cut it, so the time spent weaving it was wasted."

Qīzi jiēzhe yòu shuō: "dúshū yěshì zhèyàng, yīnggāi měitiān huòdé xīn de zhīshi, rúguǒ bàn tú ér fèi, hé gēduàn zhībù yǒu shénme liǎng yàng ne?"

妻子接着又说：“读书也是这样，应该每天获得新的知识，如果半途而废，和割断织布有什么两样呢？”

Continuing she said, "Study is also like this. You should learn new knowledge everyday. If you give up halfway, it is the same as cutting the cloth."

Yuè Yángzǐ bèi qīzi de huà shēnshēn gǎndòng le, yúshì yòu qù wánchéng xuéyè, yì lián qī nián méiyǒu huí guò jiā.

乐羊子被妻子的话深深感动了，于是又去完成学业，一连七年没有回过家。

Yue Yangzi was very moved by what his wife said and went on to finish his studies. This time, he didn't return home for seven years.

This story tells people not to do things halfway. It is also frequently used now to persuade people to persist in their study or work.



Key Learning Points

1. 回家 (huíjiā): v. To go home.



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Example:

Shíjiān bù zǎo le, wǒ děi gǎnjǐn huíjiā le.

时间不早了，我得赶紧回家了。

It's getting late and I must go home.

2. 然后 (ránhòu): adv. Then/after that.

"然后 (ránhòu)" is a phrase showing that one thing follows another. Now it has become a frequently-used phrase in daily life, especially on talk shows.

Example:

Mài Kè: Qǐngwèn fùjìn yǒu shūdiàn ma?

迈克：请问附近有书店吗？

Mike: Excuse me. Is there a bookstore near here?

Zhāng Jié: Nǐ yánzhe zhè tiáo lù yìzhí zǒu, ránhòu zuǒ zhuǎn jiù néng kàn dào le.

张洁：你沿着这条路一直走，然后左转就能看到了。

Zhang Jie: Can you see that road? Just go straight along it, then, turn left, you can't miss it.



Vocabulary

1. 浪费 (làngfèi): v. To waste.
2. 感动 (gǎndòng): v. To be moved.
3. 时间 (shíjiān): n. Time.
4. 读书 (dúshū): n. Study.



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4. 对牛弹琴 (Dui niú tán qín) To Play the Harp to a Cow

Listen to the whole story 

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"对牛弹琴 (duì niú tán qín)" is used by Chinese people to describe someone who is explaining something complicated to a fool, or sometimes this idiom is used to describe a person who is trying to tell something to the wrong audience. In English, people sometimes joke around by sarcastically saying "whistle jigs to a milestone" or "cast pearls before swine" to mean "对牛弹琴 (duìniútánqín)."

Zhànguó shídài, yǒu yí gè jiào Gōngmíng Yí de yīnyuèjiā, tā hěn huì tánqín.

战国时代，有一个叫公明仪的音乐家，他很会弹琴。

During the Warring States Period, there was a musician named Gongming Yi, who played musical instruments very well.

Hěn duō rén dōu xǐhuan tīng tā tánqín, rénmen hěn jìngzhòng tā.

很多人都喜欢听他弹琴，人们很敬重他。

There were a great number of people fond of listening to him play, and who respected him greatly.

Yìtiān, Gōngmíng Yí zài jiāowài yóuwán shí, kàn dào le yí tóu niú.

一天，公明仪在郊外游玩时，看到了一头牛。

One day, Gongming Yi saw a cow when he was relaxing in the countryside.



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Tā xiǎng: dàjiā dōu zànyáng wǒ de qínjì, bùrú wǒ gěi niú yě tán yì qǔ ba.

他想：大家都赞扬我的琴技，不如我给牛也弹一曲吧！

He thought, "Everybody compliments my music. Why don't I play some music for this cow?"

Tā gěi niú tánzòu le yì qǔ gǔyǎ de qǔzi, niú máitóu chī cǎo bù lǐ tā.

他给牛弹奏了一曲古雅的曲子，牛埋头吃草不理他。

He played a piece of elegant quaint music for the cow, but the cow just kept grazing the grass with its head down.

Tā yòu tánzòu le yìqǔ huānkùai de qǔzi, niú yīrán máitóu chī cǎo bù lǐ tā.

他又弹奏了一曲欢快的曲子，牛然埋头吃草不理他。

He played another piece of joyful music, but the cow still kept its head down to graze the grass and totally ignored him.

Gōngmíng Yí náchū zìjǐ de quánbù běnlǐng, jiéguǒ niú háishì bù lǐ tā.

公明仪拿出自己的全部本领，结果牛还是不理他。

Gongming Yi showed off all his skills, but the cow still ignored him.

Gōngmíng Yí fēicháng shīwàng, kāishǐ huáiyí zìjǐ de qínjì.

公明仪非常失望，开始怀疑自己的琴技。

Gongming Yi was disappointed and started to question his ability.

Lùrén shuō: "búshì nǐ tán de qín bù hǎo, érshì niú gēnběn tīng bù dǒng a."

路人说：“不是你弹的琴不好，而是牛根本听不懂啊！”

A passerby said to him, "It's not because your ability is bad. It is because the cow can not understand music at all."



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The cow could not understand the beautiful music like humans. The swanky musician tried his best to play for the cow, but it was just like trying to tell something to somebody who can hardly understand. The idiom "对牛弹琴 (duìniútánqín)" is used to describe this sort of situation, or kind of person.



Key Learning Points

对牛弹琴 (duì niú tán qín)

Dialogue:

Érzi: Māma, zhècì kǎoshì wǒ yòu méi jígé.

儿子: 妈妈, 这次考试我又没及格。

Son: Mum, I failed this exam.

Māma: Wǒ měitiān dōu zhǔfu nǐ hǎohao xuéxí, jiǎnzhí shì duì niú tán qín a.

妈妈: 我每天都嘱咐你好好学习, 简直是对牛弹琴啊。

Mother: I asked you to work hard everyday, but it's just like playing a harp to a cow.

Example:

Shuōle nàme duō, tā dōu tīng bù dǒng, wǒ zhēn shì duì niú tán qín a.

说了那么多, 他都听不懂, 我真是对牛弹琴啊。

He cannot understand even when I say it again and again. It seems that I am just playing a harp to a cow.



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5. 画蛇添足 (Huà shé tiān zú)

Draw a Snake and Add Feet to It

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Chǔguó yǒu gè guìzú.

楚国有个贵族。

During the Chu dynasty, there was an aristocrat.

Jì guò zǔzong yǐhòu, tā bǎ yì hú jì jiǔ shǎng gěi bāngmáng de púrén.

祭过祖宗以后，他把一壶祭酒赏给帮忙的仆人。

After worshipping the ancestors (on one day), he gave a jug of libation to the servants who helped him.

Púrén shāngliang shuō: "Wǒmen dōu lái huà shé, shuí xiān huà hǎo, shuí jiù hē zhè hú jiǔ."

仆人商量说：“我们都来画蛇，谁先画好，谁就喝这壶酒。”

The servants discussed among themselves and said: "Every servant would draw a snake on the ground. The man who finished first would drink the wine."

Yǒu yí gè rén hěn kuài bǎ shé huà hǎo le.

有一个人很快把蛇画好了。

One man finished very quickly.



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Tā duān qǐ jiǔhú zhèng yào hē, kàn dào biérén hái zài máng zhe huà shé, jiù déyì de shuō: "Wǒ nénggòu zài gěi shé tiān shàng jǐ zhī jiǎo ne!"

他端起酒壶正要喝，看到别人还在忙着画蛇，就得意地说：“我能够再给蛇添上几只脚呢！”

He was about to drink the wine. However, when he saw others were still busy drawing, he said in triumph: "I can add feet to my snake."

Kěshì méi děng tā bǎ jiǎo huà wán, lìng yí gè rén yǐjīng bǎ shé huà chéng le.

可是没等他把脚画完，另一个人已经把蛇画成了。

However, before he finished drawing the feet, another man finished drawing a snake.

Nà rén bǎ nà hú jiǔ qiǎng guòqù, shuō: "Shé běnlái shì méiyǒu jiǎo de, nǐ zěnmé néng gěi tā tiān shàng jiǎo ne?"

那人把那壶酒抢过去，说：“蛇本来是没有脚的，你怎么能给它添上脚呢？”

That man grabbed the jar and said: "Who has ever seen a snake with feet? How do you add feet to it?"

Shuō wán, biàn bǎ hú zhōng de jiǔ hē le xiàqù.

说完，便把壶中的酒喝了下去。

Then, he drank up the wine.

Nàgè gěi shé huà jiǎo de rén zuìzhōng méiyǒu hē dào jiǔ.

那个给蛇画脚的人最终没有喝到酒。

The man who added feet to the snake didn't get the wine in the end.



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