

Chinese idioms

An idiom is a figure of speech that cannot be taken literally. For example, in English we have idioms such as “don’t let the cat out of the bag,” and “it’s a piece of cake.” We’re not really talking about letting cats out of bags, or eating a piece of cake! In Chinese language and culture, idioms are extremely important. They have been formalized to the point where they always consist of exactly four characters. Sometimes they are called four-character idioms. Here are some common Chinese idioms:

“Don’t play the lute to a cow.” (Consider your audience when you play!)

“Three liars make a tiger/” (If enough people say something, everyone will believe it.)

“Don’t plug your ears while stealing a bell.” (Don’t fool yourself that your sins are okay.)

“As precarious as a pile of eggs.”

“Tyranny is fiercer than a tiger.”

Building castles in the air.”

“Mend the fold after a sheep is lost.” (It’s not too late to learn your lessons.)

“Don’t supply feet to a painted snake.” (Don’t bother with extra details that will ruin the original.)

Chinese idioms always have a folktale that go with them. Some of these tales are from three thousand years ago. Often, emperors, courtiers and brave soldiers are featured in the tales.

I strongly suggest that you visit the following web site, where you will find delightful animated idioms, done in the style of Chinese puppets with Chinese music in the background. The narration is in Chinese (with the characters and pinyin words written out) but the story is written down below in English, so you can fully understand what’s going on. (It’s fun to try to follow along with the Chinese words with the narrator, too!)

www.china.org.cn/e-learning/34/idiom.htm

The following page has three Chinese idioms for you to copy. Thin guidelines are given to show you where the brush strokes go. Study the calligraphy strokes on the second page and try to imitate the beautiful brush strokes in the characters. If you would like to see a demonstration of how to hold the brush and how to make the strokes, use the key words “Chinese” and “calligraphy” on the [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com) search box. There are lots of demos out there that expert calligraphers have posted. Great stuff!!

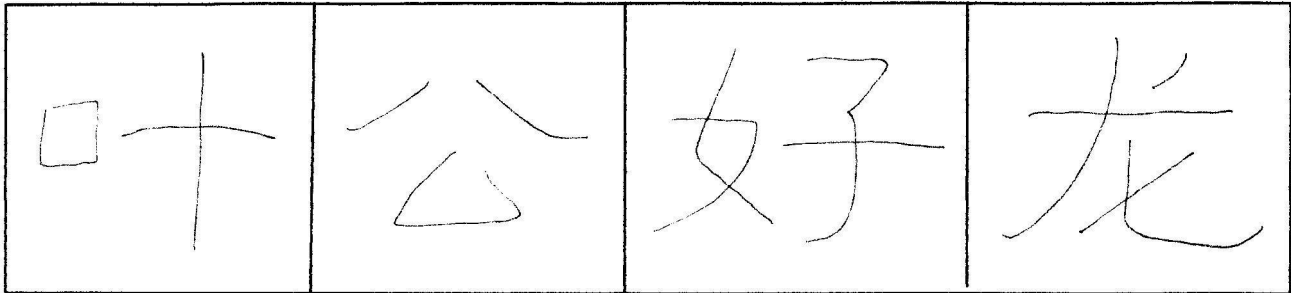
Materials for doing the calligraphy: I suggest a pointed watercolor brush (no bigger than 1/4 diameter) and black watercolor paint (the kind that comes in a tube), thinned with a little water, to make a nice ink consistency.



ellenjmchenry.com

CHINESE IDIOMS

An idiom is a figure of speech that can't be taken literally. For instance, in English we have: "Don't let the cat out of the bag." This idiom doesn't really mean don't let cats out of bags, it means don't give away secrets. In the Chinese language, idioms always consist of exactly four characters, and they all have an ancient story behind them. To see 16 nicely animated Chinese idiom stories (with translation below) check out this website: www.china.org.cn/e-learning/35/idiom.htm.



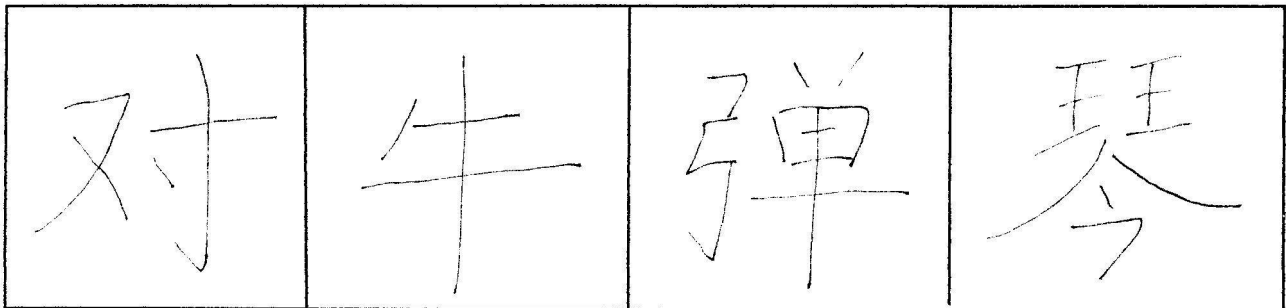
yè (Ye)

gōng (lord)

hào (love)

lóng (dragons)

"Lord Ye's professed love of dragons" This refers to someone who makes many claims, but when tested they prove to be false.



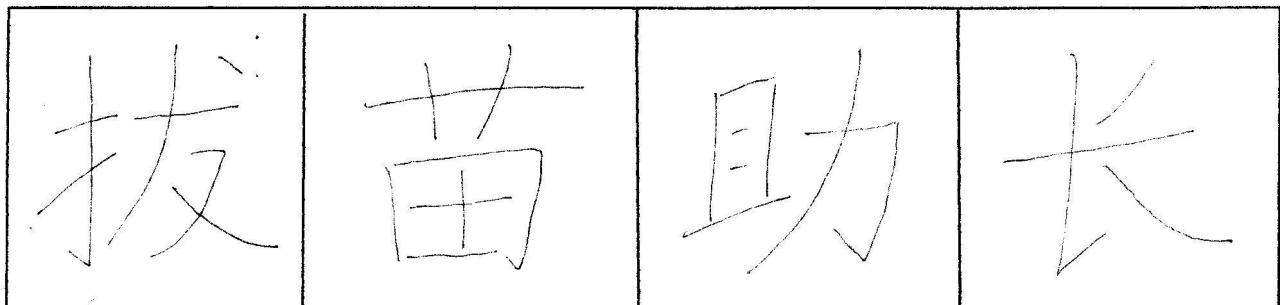
duì (face towards)

niú (cow)

tán (talk or play)

qín (lute)

"To play the lute to a cow" This means to do something without thinking about your audience.



bá (pull up)

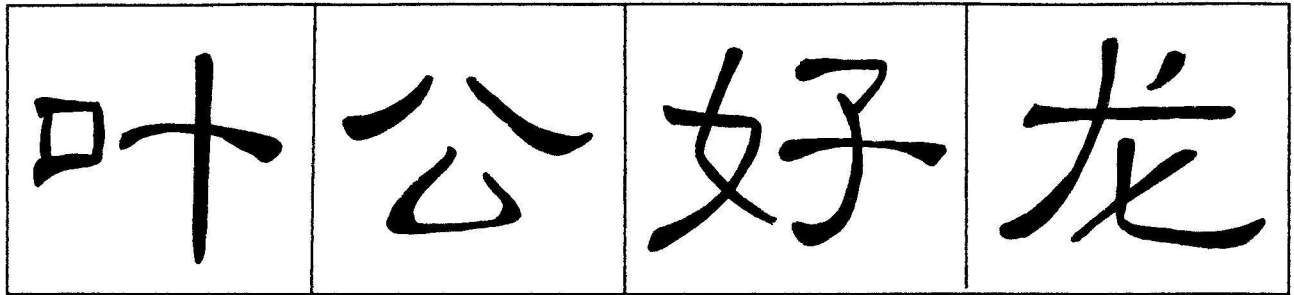
miáo (shoots)

zhù (help)

zhǎng (rise)

"To help the shoots grow by pulling them upwards" This means to be impatient and try so hard to help things along that your help is actually harmful.

This is how the calligraphy strokes should look. For an actual demonstration of how to hold the brush and make the strokes, go to [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com) and search for “Chinese calligraphy demonstration.”



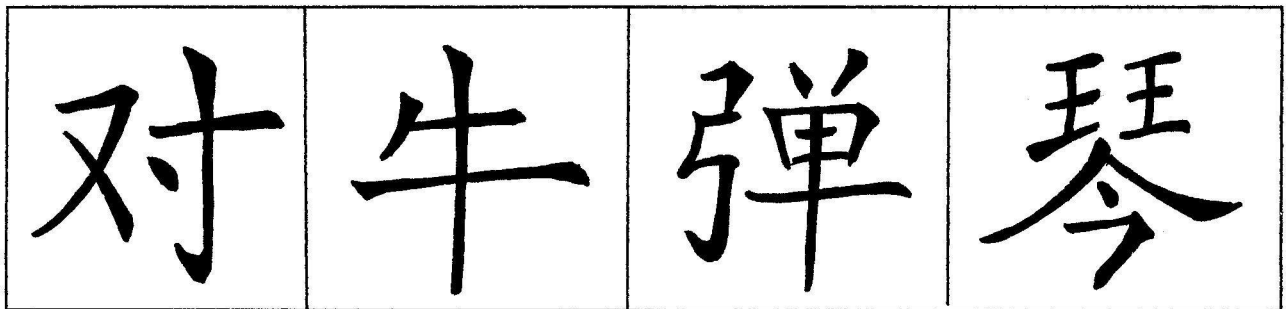
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