

Sai Weng Shi Ma (塞翁失马)
Yan Zhi Fei Fu (焉知非福)
206 B.C. -220 A.D.:

Blessing in disguise.

Literally translated, the first four characters mean “old man lost horse.” The second four characters translate as “How can you know it is not a blessing?” Sometimes the first four characters are translated as “blessing in disguise.” This story comes from the works of Huainanzi (淮南子) in the West Han period (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.)

A poor old man lived on the Northern border of China. One day, his stallion (male horse) ran North of the China border into the Northern tribes, later to be known as the Mongolia. In the old days, a horse was one of the most valuable and useful possessions that a person could have. Therefore, the other villagers thought this was a very bad misfortune.

The old man did not worry, and he thought that this may actually be a blessing. A few months later, the old man’s horse returned with a mare (female horse). The mare was pregnant and gave birth to a foal (baby horse). Now the man had three horses as depicted in the painting: (1) the black stallion; (2) the white mare; and (3) the greyish blue foal. All the villagers congratulated the old man.

The old man thought that this may actually turn out to be a cause of misfortune. Later, his son became fond of riding the horses. One day, his son fell off the horse and broke his thigh bone. As doctors were not nearly as well trained in 206 B.C., a broken thigh bone meant that his son would be a cripple for life. The old man thought, “Perhaps this will turn out to be a blessing.”

One year later, the Northern tribes launched a major invasion into China. All able-bodied young men were required to fight against the Northern invaders. Unfortunately, the casualties of this war were very high, with nine of ten men dying in battle. Only one out of ten survived to return back to his village.

Since the father was old and his boy was crippled, neither were required to go to war, and both survived. The son’s injury had turned out to be a blessing in disguise – sai weng shi ma.

The artist Zhang Xin painted the entire idiom story as the upper part of the painting. However, what is most remarkable about the painting is that the artist researched the calligraphy at 221 B.C., which was known as xiaozhuan (小篆) and painted the story in the ancient calligraphy. This style of calligraphy was first adapted when the first emperor of China, Qin Shihuang (秦始皇), unified the seven warring nations that each had their own form of writing.

As related to the articles, every parent wishes to protect a child and provide for them. Sometimes life’s misfortunes are more than one would expect. However, with proper estate planning, not only may taxes be minimized, but parents may well care for a child through a trust long after they leave this world.