

炒蝦拆蟹

chao3 xia1 chai1 xie4

A 45-year-old “sales manager” has been convicted of “炒蝦拆蟹” (*chao3 xia1 chai1 xie4*) in a public park, an offense punishable by a maximum fine of HK\$2,000 and up to 14 days in jail.

“炒” (*chao3*) is “to stir-fry,” “蝦” (*xia1*) “a prawn,” “拆” (*chai1*) “to take apart,” and “蟹” (*xie4*) “a crab.” Literally, “炒蝦拆蟹” (*chao3 xia1 chai1 xie4*) is “stir-fry prawn and take apart crabs,” which conjures up the image of a lavish seafood feast.

But this contemporary and colloquial Cantonese expression has nothing to do with either crustaceans (甲殼綱動物) or a feast. It means swearing, not just the occasional single syllable kind, but the kind that consists of a stream of expletives that could make grown men blush.

The defendant had unleashed his considerable repertoire of swearwords and expressions on a

Idiom by Lon Yan

female passerby who reprimanded him for lighting up a cigarette.

“炒蝦拆蟹” is, of course, not the official name of the offense. The man was charged under section 22 of the Pleasure Grounds Regulation, which provides that “No person shall, in any pleasure ground, use any obscene language (淫褻性言語) to the annoyance of any person.”

The exact origin of the connection between swearing and prawns and crabs is not immediately ascertainable, but one theory suggests that the characters “蝦” (*xia1*) and “蟹” (*xie4*) sound somewhat similar to crude words that refer to the female genitals.

Terms containing the character “蟹” (*xie4*) include:

螃蟹 (*pang2 xie4*) – a crab

蟹黃 (*xie4 huang2*) – roe of crabs

大閘蟹 (*da4 zha2 xie4*) – hairy crabs

沙蟹 (*sha1 xie4*) – “show hand” poker game