

隔靴搔癢

ge2 xue1 sao1 yang3

The violence on the streets of Mong Kok has been the subject of much comment and discussion. The unsettling incident was explored from different perspectives, and some commentators raised the question of whether the courts have been dealing with offenders in similar events too leniently.

For example, they pointed out that protesters who smashed the glass doors of the Legislative Council with metal barricades and bricks were only sentenced to community service and not jail terms. They called such a light penalty “隔靴搔癢” (*ge2 xue1 sao1 yang3*).

“隔” (*ge2*) to be separated from by a distance or time interval, “靴” (*xue1*) “boots,” “搔” (*sao1*) “to scratch,” and “癢” (*yang3*) “to itch,” “an itch.” Literally, “隔靴搔癢” (*ge2 xue1 sao1 yang3*) “to scratch an itch from outside the boot.”

You have an itchy foot, and you try to scratch it without taking off your boots, you will certainly not get rid of the itch.

Idiom by Lon Yan

So “隔靴搔癢” (*ge2 xue1 sao1 yang3*) means “to fail to lay one’s finger on the right spot,” “to talk way off the mark,” “to do something that is not effective in reaching your goal.”

Rioting and vandalism are serious criminal offenses. If allowed to spread, people will get hurt and the community will descend into chaos and not be able to function.

Punishment that is too light will not only be an ineffective deterrent, it will also send the wrong message that such conduct is acceptable, so it can certainly be described as “隔靴搔癢” (*ge2 xue1 sao1 yang3*).

Terms containing the character “隔” (*ge2*) include:

隔離 (*ge2 li2*) – to separate, to quarantine

隔音 (*ge2 yin1*) – soundproof

隔壁 (*ge2 bi4*) – the next door

阻隔 (*zu3 ge2*) – to disconnect