

不了了之

bu4 liao3 liao3 zhi1

The report on the lead-water scandal has just been released, naming senior officials, various government departments, contractors, subcontractors and workmen for being responsible for letting the toxic substance get into the drinking water supply.

The officials have come out to apologize, but their boss, Chief Secretary for Administration Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, took a rather different line, not only refusing to do so, but also insisting that the problems did not point to “an individual for blatantly not following the rules or the law, or abusing his or her responsibility.”

Now we know the true meaning of the concept “more is less” - as the number of responsible parties increase, it would come to a point where responsibility is spread so thin and each part is so small that no one party can practically be held responsible.

How can anyone argue with such impeccable logic? So we can now move on to gripe about

Idiom by Lon Yan

some other absurdities, and the matter will, like most bureaucratic blunders, become “不了了之” (*bu4 liao3 liao3 zhi1*).

“了” (*liao3*) is “to settle,” “to conclude,” “to end,” “不了” (*bu4 liao3*) is “not to settle,” “unsettled.” “了之” (*liao3 zhi1*) is “to end like this.” Literally, “不了了之” (*bu4 liao3 liao3 zhi1*) is “not settle to settle.” It means “to settle a matter by leaving it unsettled.”

It now appears that no action would be taken against anyone named in the report, at least not any officials, and the matter is apparently deemed settled - another case of “不了了之” (*bu4 liao3 liao3 zhi1*).

Terms containing the character “了” (*liao3*) include:

了解 (*liao3 jie3*) - to understand

了不起 (*le bu4 qi3*) - amazing; extraordinary;

不得了 (*bu4 de2 le*) - terrible; desperately serious

了結 (*liao3 jie2*) - over and done with