

天馬行空

tian1 ma3 xing2 kong1

In the Diploma of Secondary Education examination, some students called the mother of Mencius “tiger mom,” others questioned the practicality of her famous house moving that was immortalized by the idiom “孟母三遷” (*meng4 mu3 san1 qian1*) – Mencius mother, three moves.

The students were penalized with low scores for giving a modern spin to a classic tale. But others believe an updated interpretation of the 2,500-year-old legend illustrates creativity. It also shows the students were observant of present day circumstances.

When home prices are sky high and rents are expensive, it is in fact a challenge just to move house once, not to say three times. And if you happen to live in public housing, would the Housing Authority entertain repeated requests to change units just because you don't like it?

Viewed this way, the thinking of the students who proffered new views can be called “天馬行空” (*tian1 ma3 xing2 kong1*). “天” (*tian1*) is “the

Idiom by Lon Yan

sky,” “the heaven,” “馬” (*ma3*) is “a horse,” “行” (*xing2*) is “to go,” “to walk” and “空” (*kong1*) is “天空” (*tian1 kong1*), which is “the sky.” Literally, “天馬行空” (*tian1 ma3 xing2 kong1*) is “a heavenly steed soaring across the skies.”

Figuratively, it means “an unrestrained and vigorous style that brims with talent.” The idiom is often used as a compliment for someone who is capable of thinking out of the box.

But to the examiners, answers that deviate from the marking scheme are “信口開河” (*xin4 kou3 kai1 he2*) – “to talk nonsense,” “to say whatever comes to one's mind, without proper consideration.”

Terms containing the character “空” (*kong1*) include:

空間 (*kong1 jian1*) – space

空氣 (*kong1 qi4*) – air

空地 (*kong1 di4*) – vacant land

空頭支票 (*kong1 tou2 zhi1 piao4*) – a bad check