

污煙瘴氣

wu1 yan1 zhang4 qi4

Air pollution in Beijing has reached an alarming level. The recent smog in the capital city was so severe that the highest red alert was issued — for the first time since the four-tier emergency response system was created in 2013.

Kindergartens, primary and high schools have been advised to suspend classes, outdoor operations on construction sites were banned and some industrial plants were asked to limit or stop production. Private cars were also ordered off the street.

Reports said cars needed their headlights even at noon. A Xinhua picture showed tall commercial buildings shrouded in dark smog, a scene straight out of a doomsday movie. The city is literally in a state of “污煙瘴氣” (wu1 yan1 zhang4 qi4).

“污” (wu1) is “dirty,” “foul,” “煙” (yan1) is “smoke,” “mist,” “vapor,” and “瘴氣” (zhang4 qi4) is “a noxious swamp gas.” Literally, “污煙瘴氣” (wu1 yan1 zhang4 qi4) is “dirty smoke noxious swamp gas.”

Idiom by Lon Yan

Used literally, the idiom means exactly that, which is dirty smoke and noxious gas, the recent situation in Beijing.

Figuratively, it means “a foul atmosphere of ignorance and confusion,” which is also another meaning of “瘴氣” (zhang4 qi4) — “a dangerous, foreboding (不祥的), or deathlike (死了一樣的) influence or atmosphere.”

Corruption can make an organization become “污煙瘴氣” (wu1 yan1 zhang4 qi4), so can office politics.

When parents admonish their children for not tidying up, they often like to say “Your room is 污煙瘴氣!” The idiom, in this case, means a big mess.

Terms containing the character “污” (wu1) include:

污染 (wu1 ran3) – pollution

污濁 (wu1 zhuo2) – muddy, murky

污點 (wu1 dian3) – a blemish

污穢 (wu1 hui4) – sordid