

捉襟見肘

zhuo1 jin1 jian4 zhou3

Textbooks are a substantial (大筆的) expense for Hong Kong parents and poor families are finding the ever-increasing costs too much to bear.

A mother of three boys told a radio interview that she is already paying thousands of dollars on textbooks for her two older sons who are in primary school. As the youngest is starting kindergarten, she has to find an extra HK\$3,000 to buy textbooks for him.

Her family income of HK\$13,000 has not increased, so she has had to give up extracurricular activities of her other children and cut back on food costs. Her predicament (困境) is a typical case of “捉襟見肘” (*zhuo1 jin1 jian4 zhou3*).

“捉” (*zhuo1*) is “to clutch,” “to catch,” “to seize,” “襟” (*jin1*) is “the lapel or collar of a garment,” “見” (*jian4*) is “to see” and “肘” (*zhou3*) means “elbow.” Literally, “捉襟見肘” (*zhuo1 jin1 jian4 zhou3*) is “clutch lapel sees elbow.”

Idiom by Lon Yan

It describes a jacket that is too small. When you pull it from the front, the elbow is exposed. The idiom means “cannot make ends meet,” or “to run short of ways in dealing with the situation,” “to have too many difficulties to cope with.”

The jacket analogy vividly conveys the meaning behind the idiom. If the jacket is too small, it either covers the chest or the elbow, but not both. To the mother, it is a matter of choosing one expense over another.

If a team that is already short of hands is asked to produce more, the team leader can tell the supervisor that the situation is 捉襟見肘 (*zhuo1 jin1 jian4 zhou3*).

Terms containing the character “捉” (*zhuo1*) include:

捉拿 (*zhuo1 na2*) - arrest or seize

捉迷藏 (*zhuo1 mi2 cang2*) - play hide-and-seek

捉弄 (*zhuo1 nong4*) - to play trick upon

捉住 (*zhuo1 zhu4*) - to have grabbed or arrested