

九牛一毛

jiu3 niu2 yi4 mao2

The European Commission ordered Apple to pay tax that it has avoided – 13 billion euros in total, or HK\$112.58 billion.

A tax bill of such magnitude could bankrupt many companies, even big ones, and would bring financial ruin to individuals, many lifetimes over.

But to Apple, while the sum is not exactly “九牛一毛” (*jiu3 niu2 yi4 mao2*), it is by no means disastrous. In the final quarter of last year, the company had a net profit of US\$11.1 billion (9.9 billion euros).

In other words, it can earn back the amount in just a few months, that is, if it decides to pay up, which it does not, as it is angry about the decision, and will appeal it.

“九” (*jiu3*) is “nine,” “牛” (*niu2*) is “an ox,” “a cow,” “一” (*yi4*) “one” and “毛” (*mao2*) “hair.” “九牛一毛” is, literally, “nine cows, one hair,” “a single hair out of nine ox hides.”

There are over 100,000 strands of hair on the head

Idiom by Lon Yan

of a young adult. Blondes and brunettes have more, redheads fewer. But when you search up the number of hairs on an average cow, Answers.com provided two answers. One was millions and trillions, and the other was far too many to count.

Helpful information? Probably not. But for the purpose of understanding this idiom, they suffice. If one cow has a million hairs, nine cows have nine million, and one hair out of nine million is practically nothing.

So the idiom “九牛一毛” (*jiu3 niu2 yi4 mao2*) means “an iota from a vast quantity,” “a drop in the bucket,” “a drop in the ocean.”

Terms containing the character “牛” (*niu2*) include:

牛肉 (*niu2 rou4*) – beef

牛奶 (*niu2 nai3*) – cow milk

牛市 (*niu2 shi4*) – bull market

牛津大學 (*niu2 jin1 da4 xue2*) – University of Oxford