

Idiom by Lon Yan

自相殘殺

zi4 xiang1 can2 sha1

Fierce knife-wielding men chased each other down a street in Jordan and police had to open fire to stop them. Such violence takes place everywhere in the world every day and we are left wondering why there are so many violent people among us.

But we should actually be asking why there aren't more. Report on a new study published in the science journal *Nature* found mammals to have an average lethal violence rate against their own of about three per 1,000 deaths. Human beings have been way worse than the average.

The study noted that the killing rate of early humans and many of our closer primate cousins was about 20 in 1,000, rising to 120 in the medieval period before dropping to 13 now. Such man-kill-man acts are called “自相殘殺” (zi4 xiang1 can2 sha1).

“自” (zi4) is “self;” “相” (xiang1) “mutually;”

“one another.” “自相” (zi4 xiang1), as a term, also means “mutually;” “each other.” “殘殺” (can2 sha1) is “to murder;” “to massacre;” “to butcher;” “slaughter.” Literally, “自相殘殺” (zi4 xiang1 can2 sha1) is “mutually slaughter each other.”

“自相殘殺” (zi4 xiang1 can2 sha1) means “to massacre one another;” “to kill each other.” It is used mostly to refer to people in the same group or members of the same family killing one another.

The idiom, however, does not only describe actual killing. Any infighting (內訌) can be described as “自相殘殺” (zi4 xiang1 can2 sha1) when it turns nasty and members of the same group try to exterminate each other, even if only figuratively.

Terms containing the character “殘” (can2) include:

殘忍 (can2 ren3) – cruel; ruthless; brutal

殘障 (can2 zhang4) – disabled; challenged

傷殘 (shang1 can2) – maim; incapacity; permanently disabled

殘陽 (can2 yang2) – the setting sun