

Idiom by Lon Yan

隔岸觀火

ge2 an4 guan1 huo3

A portable gas stove for hotpot started to burn during dinner time at a Yuen Long restaurant packed with customers. But people continued to sit at the table.

Other customers started to come over to watch too as a staff member tried to put out the fire with a dry cloth, which made the fire burn even brighter. But instead of running for their lives, the spectators were gleeful like they were watching a dinner magic show. Fortunately, another staff member finally put out the flames with a wet cloth.

It was quite baffling why people would ignore the danger of a burning gas stove, which could, in all likelihood, have blown up in their face, literally. Perhaps they feared others would grab all the food if they left, or they might have thought they were “隔岸觀火” (*ge2 an4 guan1 huo3*).

“隔” (*ge2*) is “to be separated from by a distance or time interval”, “岸” (*an4*) “a bank,” “a shore,” “觀” (*guan1*) “to watch,” “to look at,” “to observe” and “火” (*huo3*) “fire.” Literally, “隔岸觀火” (*ge2 an4 guan1 huo3*) is “to watch the fires burning across the river.”

Figuratively, “隔岸觀火” (*ge2 an4 guan1 huo3*) means “to be apathetic or indifferent to others’ misfortune or troubles”, which was exactly the kind of attitude the customers displayed, as they did not even try to help.

Such morbid curiosity kills the cat, and those who “隔岸觀火” (*ge2 an4 guan1 huo3*) should at least make sure that they are really “隔岸” (*ge2 an4*) when they “觀火” (*guan1 huo3*), and not standing right next to the fire.

Terms containing the character “觀” (*guan1*) include:

觀察 (*guan1 cha2*) – to observe; an observation

觀眾 (*guan1 zhong4*) – spectators; viewers

觀感 (*guan1 gan3*) – an impression

觀光 (*guan1 guang1*) – sightseeing