

Idiom by Lon Yan

草菅人命

cao3 jian1 ren2 ming4

When a cruel ruler kills his own people, we call it “草菅人命” (*cao3 jian1 ren2 ming4*).

“草” (*cao3*) is “grass,” “菅” (*jian1*) “a kind of wild grass,” and “人命” (*ren2 ming4*) “human life.” Literally, “草菅人命” (*cao3 jian1 ren2 ming4*) is “wild grass, human life,” “treating human life like wild grass,” “killing people like cutting down grass.”

The idiom means “to treat human life as if it were not worth a straw,” “to trample people like grass,” “to act with no regard for human life.”

“草菅人命” (*cao3 jian1 ren2 ming4*) is most often used to describe blood-thirsty dictators or bandits who kill people indiscriminately.

Such acts usually happen in war zones and places where law and order has broken down. But in fact, such conducts are often seen during peace time in civilized places too.

When a driver drove his vehicle onto the pavement, mowed down pedestrians like bowling pins and showed no concern for people whom he knocked down, the behavior is called “草菅人命” (*cao3 jian1 ren2 ming4*).

When the driver of a bus with a full load of passengers engaged in road rage with another vehicle, it can also be described as “草菅人命” (*cao3 jian1 ren2 ming4*).

Death need not actually occur, nor occur immediately. So long as a person shows disregard for human life, and his or her action could potentially be lethal, it is “草菅人命” (*cao3 jian1 ren2 ming4*), like putting toxin in baby milk powder.

Terms containing the character “命” (*ming4*) include:

生命 (*sheng1 ming4*) – life; living

拼命 (*pin1 ming4*) – to risk one’s life; to do one’s utmost

短命 (*duan3 ming4*) – to die young

長命 (*chang2 ming4*) – to have a long life