

Idiom by Lon Yan

生吞活剥

sheng1 tun1 huo2 bo1

The Chinese history curriculum and whether it should be made a separate and compulsory subject are debated in the Legislative Council recently.

Political aspects aside, a commentator pointed out that one problem with the way the subject has been taught in local schools was “生吞活剥” (*sheng1 tun1 huo2 bo1*).

“生” (*sheng1*) is “uncooked,” “not ripe,” “吞” (*tun1*) “to swallow,” “活” (*huo3*) “alive” and “剥” (*bo1*) “to shell,” “to skin,” “to peel.” Literally, “生吞活剥” (*sheng1 tun1 huo2 bo1*) is “to swallow uncooked and skin alive,” “to swallow whole.”

“生吞” (*sheng1 tun1*) is to eat something uncooked, which, itself, is not necessarily bad, as that is the very nature of sashimi – raw seafood – a delicacy that many people love. But that is not what the idiom means.

In the idiom, “生吞” (*sheng1 tun1*) means to gobble down food without chewing and

without cooking. If you “生吞活剥” (*sheng1 tun1 huo2 bo1*), you won't be able to digest the food properly.

The story behind the idiom is that of a person who had the habit of lifting lines from famous poets, strung them together and present them as his own, and he was said to have “生吞活剥” (*sheng1 tun1 huo2 bo1*) the works of others.

Figuratively, “生吞活剥” (*sheng1 tun1 huo2 bo1*) means to apply uncritically, which cannot be good for studying.

Rote learning has been criticized as an example of “生吞活剥” (*sheng1 tun1 huo2 bo1*) as asking students to “生吞” (*sheng1 tun1*) information does not mean they can digest and understand it.

Terms containing the character “活” (*huo2*) include:

活動 (*huo2 dong4*) – activities; mobile

活潑 (*huo2 po1*) – lively; vigorous

生活 (*sheng1 huo2*) – to live; livelihood

活化 (*huo2 hua4*) – to revitalize