

Idiom by Lon Yan

火上加油

huo3 shang4 jia1 you2

Policemen held a rally to express their feelings about seven of their own getting two-year jail sentences for assaulting an Occupy action protester. Over 30,000 of them turned up with their family. There were also former colleagues, politicians and former top officials. The feeling that they have expressed was anger, clearly.

They waved placard and chanted slogans demanding “justice” and “respect,” and even shouted in foul language at one point, explaining, lamely one must say, that they were just repeating abuses hurled at them by hostile citizens.

Most people didn't like seeing our law enforcement officers behaving like that. Radicals may want to respond in kind (以牙還牙), or at least take the “rowdy” cops to task (責備, 責難). Others might sympathize.

The fact is, people often do silly things when they are emotional, which the police force clearly is. The question is whether it is in anyone's interest to “火上加油” (*huo3 shang4 jia1 you2*) in a volatile, touch-and-go (一觸即發的) situation.

“火” (*huo2*) is “fire,” “flames,” “上” (*shang4*) “above,” “on top,” “加” (*jia1*) “to add,” “plus” and “油” (*you2*) “oil,” “fat,” “grease.” Literally, “火上加油” (*huo3 shang4 jia1 you2*) is add oil to fire, “to pour oil on the fire,” “to add fuel to the flames.”

When you add fuel to a fire, it will burn more fiercely. So figuratively, “火上加油” (*huo3 shang4 jia1 you2*) means “to aggravate the situation,” “to stir up more trouble,” “to enrage people and make matters worse.”

This is something the media need to think about carefully.

Terms containing the character “油” (*you2*) include:

汽油 (*qi4 you2*) – petrol

食油 (*shi2 you2*) – cooking oil

油漆 (*you2 qi1*) – paint; to paint

油條 (*you2 tiao2*) – deep-fried dough stick