

Idiom by Lon Yan

虛無縹渺

xu1 wu2 piao1 miao3

Nomination is closed, and the dust has settled. With Regina Ip Lau Suk-yea out of the race after an admirable but futile fight, there will just be three candidates in the upcoming chief executive contest.

Each of them has unveiled his or her platform. Comparing the plans of Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor and John Tsang Chun-wah, a commentary used the term “虛無” (*xu1 wu2*) to describe Tsang’s administrative proposals, a term that is part of the related idiom “虛無縹渺” (*xu1 wu2 piao1 miao3*).

“虛無” (*xu1 wu2*) means “unreal,” “nihility (無; 虛無; 毫無價值的事物),” “nothingness,” “emptiness;” and “縹渺” (*piao1 miao3*) “dimly discernible,” “misty.” Literally, “虛無縹渺” (*xu1 wu2 piao1 miao3*) is “empty and misty.”

The idiom means “purely imaginary;”

“entirely unreal,” “illusory,” “shapeless,” “illusive.” When referring to talk, the idiom means “abstruse (難以理解; 隱晦),” “vague,” “insubstantial (缺乏實質).”

In using the term “虛無” (*xu1 wu2*), the commentator didn’t appear to mean that Tsang’s plan was “nothingness,” or purely imaginary.” He was making the point that Lam’s platform was “a little more substantial.”

Advanced ideas or new concepts can be “虛無縹渺” (*xu1 wu2 piao1 miao3*) when you first hear them, as they could be hard to grasp.

But more likely, you run into people who were just trying to look deep by being obscure, babbling about ideas with “dimly discernible” meanings. In those situations, you can say “Wow! That’s really “虛無縹渺” (*xu1 wu2 piao1 miao3*)!”

Terms containing the character “虛” (*xu1*) include:

虛弱 (*xu1 ruo4*) – weak; feeble; debilitated

虛假 (*xu1 jia3*) – false; unreal; dishonest

虛擬 (*xu1 ni3*) – fictitious; invented; virtual

虛偽 (*xu1 wei3*) – false; hypocritical