

Idiom by Lon Yan

百上加斤

bai3 shang4 jia1 jin1

The examination authority announced that it will raise fees for the Diploma of Secondary Education examination – the third time in as many years.

The rate of increase is four percent, which does not seem much. But this follows increases of two and three percent in the previous two years. So an average student taking the exam in 2018 will be paying close to HK\$3,000, which cannot be said to be trivial to parents who are already paying thousands of dollars for their children's textbooks and fees for various lessons outside of school.

To the parents, this is a case of “百上加斤” (*bai3 shang4 jia1 jin1*).

“百” (*bai3*) is “a hundred;” “上” (*shang4*) “above;” “on top of;” “加” (*jia1*) “to add;” “to increase;” and “斤” (*jin1*) “catty.” Literally, “百上加斤” (*bai3 shang4 jia1 jin1*) is “to add a catty on top of 100 catties.”

Asking someone to carry something that weighs one catty does not seem to be too much. But when the person is already carrying 100 catties, the additional weight, no matter how small, could just be too much to bear.

“百上加斤” (*bai3 shang4 jia1 jin1*) is a local expression that means “to add to a heavy burden.”

A related English expression is “the straw that broke the camel's back” – “seemingly minor or routine action which causes an unpredictable large and sudden reaction, because of the cumulative effect of small actions.”

In any event, one cannot help but wonder why students should pay a fee for an examination that forms an integral part of local education, even if subsidies are available for poor families.

Terms containing the character “加” (*jia1*) include:

加速 (*jia1 su4*) – to speed up; to increase speed

加價 (*jia1 jia4*) – to increase price

加薪 (*jia1 xin1*) – to increase salary; a pay rise

加拿大 (*jia1 na2 da4*) – Canada