

Idiom by Lon Yan

可大可小

ke3 da4 ke3 xiao3

Parents are warned about a dangerous toy – a miniature cross bow the size of half the palm.

The contraption looks cute and harmless. But a video by China's state broadcaster CCTV showed that a toothpick launched by it is powerful enough to pierce an aluminum can. A mother said on the social media, "This is not a toy, but a mini weapon of destruction."

The mainland authorities are taking this very seriously. Zhejiang police was reported to have sent 3,973 officers to inspect shops and took away 528 of these dangerous toys. Yunnan and Sichuan police carried out similar operations.

The media in Hong Kong warned that letting children play with these toys would bring consequences that are "可大可小" (*ke3 da4 ke3 xiao3*).

"可" (*ke3*) is "can," "may," "to permit," "大" (*da4*) "big," "great," "可" (*ke3*) is, again, "can," "may," and "小" (*xiao3*) "small." Literally, "可大可小" (*ke3 da4 ke3 xiao3*) is "can be big, can be small," "the size is changeable."

The expression originally referred to the flexibility of wise people, who could conduct themselves according to what is suitable for the circumstances. So "可大可小" (*ke3 da4 ke3 xiao3*) means "flexible."

But locally, "可大可小" (*ke3 da4 ke3 xiao3*) is often used as a caution of possible dire consequences. It means "This is no laughing matter." For example, if a friend has the habit of giving out personal information online indiscriminately, you can tell her the consequence of doing so is "可大可小" (*ke3 da4 ke3 xiao3*)!

Terms containing the character "可" (*ke3*) include:

可憐 (*ke3 lian2*) – pitiful

可信 (*ke3 xin4*) – believable; credible; trustworthy

可疑 (*ke3 yi2*) – suspicious; dubious; doubtful

可愛 (*ke3 ai4*) – lovable; lovely; sweet