

Idiom by Lon Yan

揠苗助長

ya4 miao2 zhu4 zhang3

The summer holidays should be a well-deserved break for local kids, who have to work very hard during the school terms.

But a survey found many of them are actually no less busy, and some could even be busier because their parents have enrolled them in too many classes and activities. Some 10 percent of them are going to as many as five.

When parents overload the children in the hope that they will learn faster, we can call that “揠苗助長” (ya4 miao2 zhu4 zhang3).

“揠” (ya4) means “to pull up,” “to tug upward,” “苗” (miao2) “seedling,” “young plant,” “助” (zhu4) “to help,” “to assist,” “to aid” and “長” (zhang3) “to grow,” “to increase.” Literally, “揠苗助長” (ya4 miao2 zhu4 zhang3) is “to pull up seedlings in order to help them grow faster.”

The idiom originated from the parable of a farmer in ancient China who thought of a way to make his field of rice plants grow faster – by pulling each of the plants up an inch. The effect was instant – all the young plants looked taller within the short span of an afternoon.

But when the farmer returned the next day, he found all the plants dead, naturally, as they have been pulled up, unnaturally, and their roots were damaged.

So “揠苗助長” (ya4 miao2 zhu4 zhang3) means “to do harm to a thing by being over-enthusiastic (about it).” Another version of the idiom is “拔苗助長” (ba2 miao2 zhu4 zhang3), which means the same, as the characters “拔” (ba2) and “揠” (ya4) both mean “to pull up.”

Terms containing the character “助” (zhu4) include:

助長 (zhu4 zhang3) – to further; to encourage

助手 (zhu4 shou3) – an assistant; an aide

幫助 (bang1 zhu4) – to help; to support

無助 (wu2 zhu4) – helpless