

Idiom by Lon Yan

不進則退

bu2 jin4 ze2 tui4

A test showed Hong Kong people's English ability, like Singaporeans, rose one position from last year. Not bad, one might say, if we don't look at the fact that we now rank 29th among 80 places while Singapore, a main competitor, ranks fifth!

Hong Kong is not even the best among cities in China as Shanghai took the top spot again.

The global institution that carried out the test noted that the SAR's English standards have remained at the same level since it first launched the test for compiling its English proficiency index seven years ago. Singapore and mainland, meanwhile, have kept improving.

What has happened to our English ability is a classic example of “不進則退” (*bu2 jin4 ze2 tui4*).

“不” (*bu2*) is “no,” “not,” “進” (*jin4*) “to move

forward,” “to advance,” “則” (*ze2*) “then,” “退” (*tui4*) “to move backward,” “to recede,” “to withdraw.” “不進則退” (*bu2 jin4 ze2 tui4*) means “if you are not moving forward, you're moving backward,” “not to advance is to go back.”

The idiom is often used to emphasize the need to constantly strive for advancement in academic pursuits, together with the analogy “rowing a boat against the flow,” which illustrates the inevitability of “不進則退” (*bu2 jin4 ze2 tui4*).

“不進則退” (*bu2 jin4 ze2 tui4*) is most evident in situations of competition in which one's standing is determined not by absolute standards but by one's position vis-à-vis one's competitors.

Hong Kong may be as good as it was seven years ago, but when everyone else has moved forward, we have practically moved backward.

Terms containing the character “退” (*tui4*) include:

退休 (*tui4 xiu1*) – to retire; retirement

退還 (*tui4 huan2*) – to return (something borrowed)

退出 (*tui4 chu1*) – to withdraw from; to drop out

退步 (*tui4 bu4*) – to do less well than before; to regress