後生可畏
hou4 sheng1 ke3 wei4

Youngsters inspired by the Occupy Movement will take part in the November district council elections. One group, Youngspiration (青年新政), has about 140 members. It will field nine candidates.

The group will not say what its chances of winning are against the more experienced players. But incumbents will not want to underestimate the newcomers. When the older politicians meet their younger counterparts, they should probably say “後生可畏” (hou4 sheng1 ke3 wei4).

“後” (hou4) is “behind,” “afterwards,” “生” (sheng1) is to “give birth to,” “to live.” Those who are born after you must be younger than you. So “後生” (hou4 sheng1) means “young people,” “a member of the younger generation.” “可” (ke3) is “may,” “should,” and “畏” (wei4) is “to fear,” “to respect.” Literally, “後生可畏” (hou4 sheng1 ke3 wei4) is “young people should be respected /feared.”

The idiom is used to commend a bright young person or scholar. If you meet a new colleague who is young and capable, you may say “後生可畏” (hou4 sheng1 ke3 wei4) to express your admiration for his or her achievements or capabilities. (It would be good PR too because someday this young person may become your boss!)

The character “畏” in the idiom takes the meaning of “to respect.” But “畏” (wei4) may also mean “to fear.” The term “畏懼” (wei4 ju4) means “to be afraid of.”

Old timers are probably ambivalent as they may not be able to decide whether their younger competitors are to be feared or respected.

Terms containing the character “可” (ke3) include:

- 可以 (ke3 yi3) – can, may, could, should
- 可能 (ke3 neng2) – possible, may be
- 可怕 (ke3 pa4) – terrifying
- 可疑 (ke3 yi2) – suspicious