



# Let's get fiscal

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## The numbers game

For guys, it's size that matters when it comes to digits, says [Nury Vittachi](#)

**I**t seems I've been doing my new calorie counting app wrong! I got a new high score every day for a week. Then my wife tells me that the aim is to get low scores. "So how do you win?" I asked her. She said: "You don't. People just do it for a few months and then give up."

What's the point? Arrgghh! Whoever designed this app knows nothing about the male brain. We like numbers and we like them big. If you ask a man whether he would rather be killed with a single bullet or a volley of a thousand bullets, he'll go for the machine gun. It's something to do with the Y chromosome.

Now there was a thing on the TV news the other day where a guy said that Apple might become the first company to be worth US\$1 trillion. My male investment banker friends could hardly breathe. Even the Samsung fanboys in my social group want this to happen: a love of big numbers is in the male DNA.

Why is this not taken into account in accountancy training? "Now, students, we'll start with some mental arithmetic. Please calculate  $25 \times 43 \times 19$ . The male students can calculate  $25 \text{ billion} \times 43 \text{ billion} \times 19 \text{ billion}$  as this will get them more interested."

I wrote to someone in the English department of a university to discuss this. She told me that although there have been many famous female mathematicians, the people who invent big numbers seem to be male. The word "million" was dreamed up by some Frenchman in 1270 and then copied by Englishmen by 1370. So if you

want to be suitably pretentious, you should really say "million" with a French accent, like this: "Un meeee-leeee-ohnh."

But the world was young in those days, and nobody actually had a million of anything. So they needed smaller numbers. By 1555, English speakers were counting things in myriads, or units of 10,000. So why are English-monolinguals in Hong Kong incapable of comprehending the Cantonese *maan* (unit of 10,000) when they counted the same way just half a millennium ago?

By 1670, English speakers had invented the word "milliard" to mean "billion", but the word was eventually abandoned. It was too easy to confuse "milliard" and "million", and it would be awful to think you'd married a milliard-aire only to find he or she was a mere millionaire.

Asia also lost some old numbers. In ancient Buddhist texts, there was a number called "number of grains of sand in the Ganges" or *heng he sha*, which was 10 to the power of 52. (This suggests that someone actually counted them. Those guys must have been so patient.)

At the time of writing this, the Chinese stock market's daily turnover is one trillion yuan. Amazing. Almost exactly 25 years ago, when I was a young reporter, the Chinese stock market turnover was zero. On one particular day in 1990, not one share was bought, sold or swapped. Luckily, reporters (like financial analysts) can spout financial verbiage for hours. "Turnover was on the light side, holding steady at

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zero yuan for the first hour and the second hour and the third hour before excitement was triggered as rumours mounted that it might move in the fourth hour, although this turned out to be a false lead as the sidelines were hogged by the main players and indeed the minor players and even Mrs Chan who pops in from the *cha chaan teng* next to the stock exchange..."

One day we should revive the old terminology. "The stock market reached a new high of *heng he sha* today, exactly matching the number of sand-grains in the river Ganges."



**Nury Vittachi** is a bestselling author, columnist, lecturer and TV host. He wrote three storybooks for the Institute, *May Moon and the Secrets of the CPAs*, *May Moon Rescues the World Economy* and *May Moon's Book of Choices*.