

左右為難

zuo3 you4 wei2 nan2

Teenage Taiwanese singer Chou Tzu-yu (周子瑜) found herself in a bad situation after being accused by a pro-mainland fellow Taiwanese artist of being a Taiwan separatist.

To control damage, she quickly issued a videotaped apology saying “there is only one China” and that she has “always felt proud to be Chinese.”

The statement might have pacified critics in the mainland, but it created a backlash in Taiwan. Hers is a typical case of “左右為難” (*zuo3 you4 wei2 nan2*).

“左” (*zuo3*) is “the left,” “右” (*you4*) “the right,” “為” (*wei2*) “is” and “難” (*nan2*) “difficult.” Literally, “左右為難” (*zuo3 you4 wei2 nan2*) is “left right both difficult.” If you can neither go left, nor right, you are stuck. The idiom means “to be caught in a dilemma,” “to be in a quandary (窘困).”

Idiom by Lon Yan

“左右為難” (*zuo3 you4 wei2 nan2*) is why public administration is hard. If you suppress home prices, property owners will be upset; if you let prices run amok, those who want to buy will curse you.

“進退兩難” (*jin4 tui4 liang3 nan2*) is an idiom that has a similar meaning. It also contains the character “難” (*nan2*) - difficult - but instead going left and right, this idiom is about “進” (*jin4*) and “退” (*tui4*) - “advancing and retreating.” Neither advancing nor retreating is a viable option.

The English language has many colorful expressions about such a predicament. These include “being caught between the devil and the deep blue sea” and “between a rock and a hard place.”

Terms containing the character “難” (*nan2*) include:

難題 (*nan2 ti2*) - a difficult problem

難關 (*nan2 guan1*) - a crisis

難過 (*nan2 guo4*) - to feel sad

難忘 (*nan2 wang4*) - unforgettable