偷工減料

tou1 gong1 jian3 liao4

A building that collapsed and killed many residents in the magnitude-6.4 earthquake in Taiwan was suspected to be of substandard construction.

The media reported that tin cans appeared to have been used as fillers in pillars, beams and walls, leading to accusations of "偷工減料" (tou1 gong1 jian3 liao4). The developer and two other members of his management team have been taken into custody.

"偷" (tou1) "to steal," "工" (gong1) "work," "減" (jian3) "to reduce," "to decrease" and "料" (liao4) "material." Literally, "偷工減料" (tou1 gong1 jian3 liao4) "to steal work and reduce material." The idiom means "to save illegally on material and labor," "to do shoddy (劣質的) work and use inferior material."

When "偷工減料" (tou1 gong1 jian3 liao4) happens at construction works, the consequences may be tragic. Whole buildings and bridges have collapsed as a result. Yet "偷工減料" is not uncommon in construction projects.

Idiom by Lon Yan

One of the most notorious local cases was the short-piling scandal involving Home Ownership Scheme buildings at Yuen Chau Kok.

The two blocks involved were found to have pilings much shorter than the required length and had to be taken down. The public incurred a bill of HK\$605 million in lost assets, demolition costs and damages. The ICAC calls such construction work "jerry-building" – to build cheaply and flimsily (豆腐榨工程). The perpetrators were sentenced to long jail terms.

This idiom is applicable to any shoddy work that involves material and workmanship, such as a tailor who makes suits with cheap cloth and bad stitch work.

Terms containing the character "偷" (tou1) include:

偷竊 (tou1 qie4) - to steal

偷窺 (tou1 kui1) - to peek at

偷聽 (tou1 ting1) - to eavesdrop

偷懶 (tou1 lan3) - to slack