

絃外之音

xian2 wai4 zhi1 yin1

Chief Secretary Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor quoted a passage from the Bible while giving a speech at a Caritas function: “Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Her quote was not in the press release of her speech issued by official government information sources. Her press secretary explained that the remarks were impromptu (即興的).

A source close to Lam assured that there was “no hidden message” behind the quote, and “we do not need to interpret it.” But when you are chief secretary, would you not know that nothing you say would escape being analyzed, interpreted, and analyzed again? What people are looking for is the “絃外之音” (*xian2 wai4 zhi1 yin1*) in her words.

“絃” (*xian2*) is “the string of a musical instrument,” “外” (*wai4*) is “outside,” “之” (*zhi1*) is

Idiom by Lon Yan

“those,” “that” and “音” (*yin1*) is “sound,” “tone.” Literally, “絃外之音” (*xian2 wai4 zhi1 yin1*) is “the sound outside of the string.” It refers to the notes that are not played, or the lingering sound of a string. It means “the implied meaning of an expression,” “the implication,” “overtone.”

To catch the “絃外之音” (*xian2 wai4 zhi1 yin1*), you have to read between the lines, which means to infer the unexpressed meaning from expressed words. Clever politicians often leave “絃外之音” (*xian2 wai4 zhi1 yin1*) in what they say. That way, they deliver their message but may always say it is only people’s interpretation.

Terms containing the character “音” (*yin1*) include:

音樂 (*yin1 yue4*) - music

音樂家 (*yin1 yue4 jia1*) - a musician

音響 (*yin1 xiang3*) - sound, acoustics

聲音 (*sheng1 yin1*) - sound, voice