

偷樑換柱

tou1 liang2 huan4 zhu4

Three women stole a 3.12-carat diamond worth HK\$1 million at a jewelry show in Taiwan. They asked to see the stone under the pretext of shopping for a wedding ring. Two of them engaged the staff in conversation while the third swapped the diamond with a man-made replica.

The theft was not discovered until two hours later, by which time the thieves had already safely escaped by plane to Shanghai. Their tactic may be described as “偷樑換柱” (*tou1 liang2 huan4 zhu4*). “偷” (*tou1*) is “to steal,” “樑” (*liang2*) is “a beam,” “換” (*huan4*) is “to exchange,” “to swap,” and “柱” (*zhu4*) is “a pillar,” “a column.” Literally, “偷樑換柱” (*tou1 liang2 huan4 zhu4*) is “steal beam exchange pillar.” It is actually one of the famous 36 stratagems in ancient China concerning war and politics, which is “stealing the beams and pillars and replacing them with rotten timber.”

Idiom by Lon Yan

Figuratively, it means “to perpetrate a fraud,” “to substitute the fake for the genuine,” “to try to do something by underhand means.”

An idiom that is more often used in the local media to describe such a ploy is “偷龍轉鳳” (*tou1 long2 zhuan3 feng4*). “龍” (*long2*), “a dragon” and “鳳” (*feng4*), “a phoenix” are also used to refer to male and female child respectively. “偷龍轉鳳” (*tou1 long2 zhuan3 feng4*) means “secretly steal male child and substitute female child.” It also means to secretly switch two things.

So, the trio’s trick may also be called “偷龍轉鳳” (*tou1 long2 zhuan3 feng4*) too.

Terms containing the character “偷” (*tou1*) include:

偷竊 (*tou1 qie4*) – to steal, to pilfer

偷走 (*tou1 zou3*) – to make away with

偷懶 (*tou1 lan3*) – to slack

偷渡 (*tou1 du4*) – to stow away (for illegal immigration)