

後發先至

hou4 fa1 xian1 zhi4

The antithesis of having to “win at the starting line” has come from an unlikely source – a horse named Pakistan Star (巴基之星).

Despite a very bad start that saw it trailing far behind the field for the most part of the race at the Sha Tin racecourse recently, the three-year-old German-bred horse stunned everyone with one of the fastest finishing sprints on record to win its debut race.

The moral of the story: you can win even if you have lost badly at the starting line. What Pakistan Star has done can be called “後發先至” (*hou4 fa1 xian1 zhi4*).

“後” (*hou4*) is “behind,” “back” “after,” “發” (*fa1*) “to send,” “to start,” “先” (*xian1*) “ahead,” “earlier,” “before,” “first” and “至” (*zhi4*) “to arrive.” “後發先至” (*hou4 fa1 xian1 zhi4*), literally, is “start later, arrive earlier.” The idiom means “departing late but arriving early.”

Idiom by Lon Yan

Starting early is usually considered a better strategy, hence the idiom “先發制人” (*xian1 fa1 zhi4 ren2*) – the advantage of striking first. This is what people aim to do in war as well as in social and political fights. Commercially, it is referred to as the first-mover advantage.

But in some cases, waiting for the enemy to make a move first can give you an advantage, hence the expression “後發制人” (*hou4 fa1 zhi4 ren2*) – “to gain mastery by striking only after the enemy has struck” which clearly can work as is shown by Pakistan Star – or “巴基之星” (*ba1 ji1 zhi1 xing1*), which might someday become an idiom vindicating late bloomers.

Terms containing the character “發” (*fa1*) include:

發展 (*fa1 zhan3*) – to develop; to expand

發生 (*fa1 sheng1*) – to occur

發明 (*fa1 ming2*) – to invent

發財 (*fa1 cai2*) – to become rich