

Idiom by Lon Yan

以貌取人

yi3 mao4 qu3 ren2

When a passenger fell ill on a recent flight in the US, a doctor raised her hand to offer help but a flight attendant asked her to prove that she was an “actual physician.”

Tamika Cross, a fourth-year resident at McGovern Medical School, wrote on Facebook she tried to tell the attendant that she was a doctor but was “continually cut off by condescending (高傲的) remarks.”

The attendant apparently did not believe that Cross could be a doctor because she’s a woman, young, black, or more likely, all of the above.

Cross said she had to make public the incident because the attendant’s behavior could have delayed crucial minutes in medical assistance.

Fortunately in this case, the patient turned out fine, after being tended to by someone who fits the stereotype.

The flight attendant’s conduct was

discrimination. It was also “以貌取人” (yi3 mao4 qu3 ren2).

“以” (yi3) is “to use as,” “according to,” “because of,” “貌” (mao4) “facial appearance,” “features,” “a manner,” “取” (qu3) “to get,” “to take,” “to select” and “人” (ren2) “people,” “a person.” Literally, “以貌取人” (yi3 mao4 qu3 ren2) is “selecting people according to appearance.”

The idiom means “to judge people by appearances.” It is the equivalent of the English expression “judging a book by its cover,” which is, of course, superficial and unhelpful.

Unfortunately, “以貌取人” (yi3 mao4 qu3 ren2) is rather common in all sorts of situations, like when hiring people, school admission interviews and elections. We all tend to “以貌取人” (yi3 mao4 qu3 ren2) too when choosing friends or even a marriage partner, hence the frequent regrets.

Terms containing the character “貌” (mao4) include:

共識 (gong4 shi2) – a consensus

共鳴 (gong4 ming2) – resonance; sympathetic response

公共 (gong1 gong4) – public

公共巴士 (gong1 gong4 ba1 shi4) – public bus