

Idiom by Lon Yan

馬首是瞻

ma3 shou3 shi4 zhan1

A lawmaker used the “idiom” “馬首是瞻” (*ma3 shou3 shi4 dan3*) while speaking at the Legislative Council last week.

“馬首是瞻” (*ma3 shou3 shi4 dan3*) means, literally, “horse head is gallbladder,” which does not make any sense, and it shouldn’t, as it is not a proper idiom. A fellow lawmaker quickly pointed out that the correct idiom should be “馬首是瞻” (*ma3 shou3 shi4 zhan1*).

“馬” (*ma3*) is “a horse,” “首” (*shou3*) “the head,” “chief,” “first,” “是” (*shi4*) “is,” “are” and “瞻” (*zhan1*) “to look up to,” “to view.” Literally, “馬首是瞻” (*ma3 shou3 shi4 zhan1*) is “looking to the horse head.”

“馬首” (*ma3 shou3*) in the idiom refers to the head of the general’s horse. So “馬首是瞻” (*ma3 shou3 shi4 zhan1*) means “to take

the head of the general’s horse as guide,” figuratively “to follow somebody’s lead.”

While the mistake is a glaring one, we should not be too harsh on the person who made it, as we’ve all made embarrassing mistakes before. Also the character “瞻” (*zhan1*) in the idiom can very easily be confused with “膽” (*dan3*), the misread character.

“馬膽” (*ma3 dan3*) is an actual term often used by the local horseracing public. It means the “anchor” choice, the “banker” in multiple combination bets like quartet. Come to think of it, “馬首是瞻” (*ma3 shou3 shi4 dan3*) – lead horse is banker - could actually win you some money!

Terms containing the character “首” (*shou3*) include:

首領 (*shou3 ling3*) – a leader; a head

首都 (*shou3 du1*) – the capital of a country

首先 (*shou3 xian1*) – first; in the first place

首爾 (*shou3 er3*) – Seoul, the capital of South Korea