

Idiom by Lon Yan

一波三折

yi4 bo1 san1 zhe2

The plan to build a replica of Beijing's Palace Museum in Hong Kong is off to a rocky start.

Critics are angry that chief secretary Carrier Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor sprang the project on Hong Kong people only after all important decisions had been made.

So they staged a June 4th type protest in front of a giant promotional poster of the Imperial Palace at an MTR station and called for the project to be scrapped if the public so desire after a consultation.

What the plan has encountered is “一波三折” (yi4 bo1 san1 zhe2).

“一” (yi4) is “one,” “波” (bo1) “wave,” “ripple,” “三” (san1) “three” and “折” (zhe2) “to snap,” “to break.” But the “波” (bo1) and “折” (zhe2) in the idiom refers to the strokes in Chinese characters. The former is the downward right

stroke and the latter being a turning one.

“波折” (bo1 zhe2), means, figuratively, “an obstacle in the way,” “twists and turns,” “a setback.”

一波三折” (yi4 bo1 san1 zhe2) is originally used to describe the twist and turns of strokes in Chinese calligraphy. Figuratively, it means “twists and turns.”

The idiom is most commonly used to mean “frustrations on the way,” “unwelcome turns of events,” “full of twists and turns or ups and downs.”

Not all 折s (zhe2) are bad. Everyone loves “折” (zhe2) when shopping as it means “discount.” “折” (zhe2) refers to the part of the price you pay. So a 20 percent discount is “八折,” “八” (ba1) being “eight” as you pay 80 percent of the original price.

Terms containing the character “折” (zhe2) include:

折扣 (zhe2 kou4) – discount; rebate; reduction

折磨 (zhe2 mo2) – to torment; sufferings

挫折 (cuo4 zhe2) – a setback; a frustration

折舊 (zhe2 jiu4) – depreciation