

Idiom by Lon Yan

知易行難

zhi1 yi4 xing2 nan2

Chief executive election candidate John Tsang Chun-wah has unveiled his platform, and the 75-page election manifesto listed pledges that are apparently not easy to fulfil.

These include restarting the political reform process, negative income tax, and relaunch the legislation of the national security law which had been derailed by a massive street rally the last time the government tried it.

Tsang also noted the deep division in the local community and promised to try to bridge gaps and foster internal cohesion of the people. Admirable goals, but some have commented that these are goals that are “知易行難” (*zhi1 yi4 xing2 nan2*).

“知” (*zhi1*) is “to know,” “to be aware of,” “易” (*yi4*) “easy,” “行” (*xing2*) “to go,” “to walk,” “to do,” “to carry out,” and “難” (*nan2*)

“difficult.” Literally, “知易行難” (*zhi1 yi4 xing2 nan2*) is “easy to know but hard to carry out.”

The idiom is similar in meaning to the English expression “easier said than done.” It is an observation that ideas that are theoretically feasible are not always easy to put into practice.

That these goals would not be easy to achieve was not lost on Tsang. For example, on political reform, he acknowledged that “I do not underestimate the difficulties of achieving consensus.”

Worthy goals are, more often than not, hard to achieve. It is constructive if “知易行難” (*zhi1 yi4 xing2 nan2*) is used to remind one not to underestimate the complexity of a task, but destructive if we use it as an excuse not to even try, or discourage those who are willing to try.

Terms containing the character “難” (*nan2*) include:

難題 (*nan2 ti2*) – a difficult problem

難忘 (*nan2 wang4*) – unforgettable; memorable

難過 (*nan2 guo4*) – to feel sad; miserable

難關 (*nan2 guan1*) – a hurdle; a crisis