

Idiom by Lon Yan

聽天由命

ting1 tian1 you2 ming4

A man burst into Wong Tai Sin Temple, brandishing a knife. Worshippers scurried for cover as the man started to slash up bunting and attacked a security guard who tried to subdue him.

Secondary school teacher Ada Tsang Yin-hung (曾燕紅) became the first woman in Hong Kong to have conquered Mount Everest.

Common folks don't get to go up the world's highest mountain, so everyone wanted to know how she felt as she was nearing the summit. Instead of "exhilaration" or "elation," Tsang described her feeling with the idiom "聽天由命" (*ting1 tian1 you2 ming4*).

"聽" (*ting1*) means "to listen," "to hear," "to heed," "天" (*tian1*) "the sky," "the heaven," "fate," "destiny," "由" (*you2*) "because," "to follow the wishes of," "to allow or entrust someone to do," and "命" (*ming4*) "life," "fate." Literally, "聽天由命" (*ting1 tian1 you2 ming4*) is "to listen to the Heaven and follow fate."

The idiom means "to submit to the will of Heaven and one's fate," "to resign (or abandon) oneself to one's fate," "to come to terms with one's fate," "to leave one's fortune with Heaven," "to be fatalistic."

Tsang was talking about the feeling of "helplessness" as she ran into "winds like those during typhoon signal No. 8" that threatened to stop her from going further. You just can't fight the forces of nature, she said, so all she could do was "聽天由命" (*ting1 tian1 you2 ming4*).

The idiom "人定勝天" (*ren2 ding4 sheng4 tian1*) describes the opposite mentality. It means "man's determination will conquer nature," "man will triumph over nature," which must be Tsang's belief for her to have completed such an arduous adventure. But brave people need to "聽天由命" (*ting1 tian1 you2 ming4*) at times so as not to become foolhardy.

Terms containing the character "命" (*ming4*) include:

命令 (*ming4 ling4*) – an order; a command; to command

命運 (*ming4 yun4*) – destiny; fate; a fortune

生命 (*sheng1 ming4*) – life

命案 (*ming4 an4*) – a homicide case