

Idiom by Lon Yan

先斬後奏

xian1 zhan3 hou4 zou4

RTHK criticized TVB for rescheduling its program "Headliner" to air president Xi Jinping's speech instead.

TVB returned fire, saying it has told RTHK beforehand. But RTHK's program staff union denied this, saying TVB had, in fact, pulled the program "unilaterally", and contacted RTHK for rescheduling only subsequently.

In a statement, the union described TVB's action as "先斬後奏" (*xian1 zhan3 hou4 zou4*).

"先" (*xian1*) is "ahead," "before," "in advance," "斬" (*zhan3*) "to chop," "to cut off," "to behead," "後" (*hou4*) "after," "afterwards," and "奏" (*zou4*) means "to play a musical instrument," "to achieve," "to report to the monarch."

Literally, "先斬後奏" (*xian1 zhan3 hou4 zou4*) is "behead first, report to the emperor later." In ancient China, law enforcement officials were sometimes given this power

to deal with urgent situation to effectively maintain law and order.

The idiom refers to a general power to execute person on the spot without prior approval from the court, or the king. Nowadays, the idiom means "to take action first and report afterwards."

"先斬後奏" (*xian1 zhan3 hou4 zou4*) can be applied to serious or trivial matters.

A staff member who spent HK\$5 million to purchase equipment without seeking prior approval from management is "先斬後奏" (*xian1 zhan3 hou4 zou4*), so is a small boy who eats the cake first and tells his mother later.

"先斬後奏" (*xian1 zhan3 hou4 zou4*) can be good if it is for dealing with an emergency, bad if the person doing it just wanted to ignore proper procedure.

Terms containing the character "奏" (*zou4*) include:

奏效 (*zou4 xiao4*) – achieving the desired effects

奏樂 (*zou4 yue4*) – to play music

奏國歌 (*zou4 guo2 ge1*) – to play the national anthem

協奏曲 (*xie2 zou4 qu1*) – a concerto