

Idiom by Lon Yan

對症下藥

dui4 zheng4 xia4 yao4

The police recently conducted territory-wide raids on vice establishments and gambling dens. Over 80 people were arrested and weapons including machetes (開山刀) and expandable telescopic batons (伸縮棍) were seized.

The point of these raids was probably not putting criminals in jail, as doing jail time is just part of their job description. What then was the purpose of these operations?

The main purpose, police explained, was to hit at the revenue source of crime syndicates, which was “對症下藥” (*dui4 zheng4 xia4 yao4*), as criminals apparently fear losing money more than losing freedom.

“對” (*dui4*) is “to suit,” “to fit,” “to respond to,” “to answer,” “症” (*zheng4*) “a disease,” “illness,” “下” (*xia4*) “to put in,” and “藥” (*yao4*) “medicine.” “下藥” (*xia4 yao4*) means “to prescribe medicine,” “to write a prescription.”

Literally, “對症下藥” (*dui4 zheng4 xia4 yao4*) is “to prescribe the right medicine for an illness,” “to suit the medicine to the disease.”

You can't cure a disease with the wrong medicine, and you can't solve a problem with a wrong solution. So figuratively, “對症下藥” (*dui4 zheng4 xia4 yao4*) means “to take the correct actions “to solve a problem,” “to study a problem to find the right way to solve it,” “to take appropriate steps.”

A related idiom is “藥石亂投” (*yao4 shi2 luan4 tou2*), literally “prescribing medicine haphazardly and indiscriminately,” figuratively, “applying all kinds of useless solutions to a problem,” a mistake critics said our officials often make.

Terms containing the character “藥” (*yao4*) include:

藥房 (*yao4 fang2*) – a drug store; a pharmacy

藥丸 (*yao4 wan2*) – a pill

藥膏 (*yao4 gao1*) – an ointment

藥劑師 (*yao4 ji4 shi1*) – a pharmacist