

Idiom by Lon Yan

覆水難收

fu4 shui3 nan2 shou1

A bag containing traces of moon dust and small moon rocks was sold at a Sotheby auction in New York for US\$1.8 million (HK\$14.4 million).

The outer decontamination bag from the Apollo 11 mission in 1969 was used by US astronaut Neil Armstrong to collect the first ever samples of the Moon.

Nearly all the equipment from the first moon-landing mission was sent to the Smithsonian museums, but due to an inventory error, the bag was left at the Johnson Space Center. And due to a further error, it was sold in a government auction two years ago for a meagre US\$995 (HK\$7,761).

When the mistake was discovered, NASA took legal action to try to get back the bag, the only Apollo 11 mission artefact in private hands. But it failed. So the mighty space

agency learned the meaning of “覆水難收” (*fu4 shui3 nan2 shou1*) the hard way.

“覆” (*fu4*) is “to turn upside down,” “to overturn,” “to topple,” “to capsize,” “水” (*shui3*) “water,” “難” (*nan2*) “difficult” and “收” (*shou1*) “to gather,” “to collect,” “to retrieve,” “to get back.” Literally, “覆水難收” (*fu4 shui3 nan2 shou1*) is “spilt water can’t be gathered up,” “spilt water is difficult to retrieve.”

Figuratively, it means “what is done cannot be undone,” “it’s no use crying over spilt milk.”

The idiom can be used to advice people not to dwell on something that cannot be changed. It can also be used as a caution against being rash with important decisions in life, like giving your heart to someone, which is notoriously hard to get back!

Terms containing the character “覆” (*fu4*) include:

覆蓋 (*fu4 gai4*) – to put a cover over; to cap

覆核 (*fu4 he2*) – to re-check; to reexamine; to review

覆沒 (*fu4 mo4*) – to capsize and sink; annihilated; destroyed

覆審 (*fu4 shen3*) – a retrial