Teenage Taiwanese singer Chou Tzu-yu (周子瑜) found herself in a bad situation after being accused by a pro-mainland fellow Taiwanese artist of being a Taiwan separatist.

To control damage, she quickly issued a videotaped apology saying “there is only one China” and that she has “always felt proud to be Chinese.”

The statement might have pacified critics in the mainland, but it created a backlash in Taiwan. Hers is a typical case of “左右為難” (zuo3 you4 wei2 nan2).

“左” (zuo3) is “the left,” “右” (you4) “the right,” “為” (wei2) “is” and “難” (nan2) “difficult.” Literally, “左右為難” (zuo3 you4 wei2 nan2) is “left right both difficult.” If you can neither go left, nor right, you are stuck. The idiom means “to be caught in a dilemma,” “to be in a quandary (窘困).”

“左右為難” (zuo3 you4 wei2 nan2) is why public administration is hard. If you suppress home prices, property owners will be upset; if you let prices run amok, those who want to buy will curse you.

“進退兩難” (jin4 tui4 liang3 nan2) is an idiom that has a similar meaning. It also contains the character “難” (nan2) – difficult – but instead going left and right, this idiom is about “進” (jin4) and “退” (tui4) – “advancing and retreating.” Neither advancing nor retreating is a viable option.

The English language has many colorful expressions about such a predicament. These include “being caught between the devil and the deep blue sea” and “between a rock and a hard place.”

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

- 難題 (nan2 ti2) – a difficult problem
- 難關 (nan2 guan1) – a crisis
- 難過 (nan2 guo4) – to feel sad
- 難忘 (nan2 wang4) – unforgettable