Leaked e-mails that emerged from a US investigation suggest Hong Kong Exchanges and Clearing chief executive Charles Li Xiaojia (李小加) was involved in hiring relatives of mainland officials when he worked for JPMorgan.

The investigation is ongoing and the bank has not been accused of any wrongdoing. The investigation may find no fault in the end. But the undesirable conduct the e-mails suggest is “任人唯親” (ren4 ren2 wei2 qin1).

“任” (ren4) is “to appoint,” “人” (ren2) is people, “唯” (wei2) means “only” and “親” (qin1) is “close,” “intimate.” Literally, “任人唯親” (ren4 ren2 wei2 qin1) is “appoint intimate people only.” It means “appointing only those who have a close relationship with the person doing the appointing,” “to appoint people by favoritism (偏袒).”

Li has responded, saying he followed the formal hiring processes, including a thorough screening (遴選) process involving the bank’s legal and compliance teams. Offers were made, he said, based on the applicants’ credentials (資歷) and feedback from multiple sources, not on the opinion or decision of any one individual within JPMorgan.

Following proper procedures and basing hiring decisions purely on the credentials of applicants is exactly the opposite of “任人唯親” (ren4 ren2 wei2 qin1). A fair appointment process is described by the idiom “任人唯賢” (ren4 ren2 wei2 xian2).

“賢” (xian2) is “able and virtuous.” “任人唯賢” (ren4 ren2 wei2 xian2) is “to appoint people on their merits,” “to appoint people according to their integrity and ability.”

Terms containing the character “親” (qin1) include:

- 親戚 (qin1 qi1) – relatives
- 親密 (qin1 mi4) – close, intimate
- 親自 (qin1 zi4) – personally
- 探親 (tan4 qin1) – to visit relatives and friends