The “no-cello-on-train” incident has blown up into a big storm. Disproportionately so, some might say. Clearly, not all criticism directed at the MTRC is relevant or fair.

But there is really no need to look too hard at these angry words. After all, it is probably not about cellos or guzhengs and the real problem will not be solved even if the MTRC decides to allow grand pianos on trains.

As The Standard’s editorial observed: “After musical instruments, activists can always find something else to challenge the authorities on.” The real issue is the social atmosphere.

So it was venting, which can be described by the idiom “借題發揮” (jie4 ti2 fa1 hui1). “借” (jie4) is “to borrow,” “to take advantage of,” “題” (ti2) is “a topic,” “a subject,” “發揮” (fa1 hui1) is “to bring (skill, talent, etc.) into full play.”

Literally, “借題發揮” (jie4 ti2 fa1 hui1) is “to borrow a topic to bring something into full play.” It is most often used to mean “give vent to one’s pent-up feelings on some extraneous (無關的) pretext,” “to seize on an incident to exaggerate (誇大) matters.”

Unpopular politicians are often bashed for the most trivial matters. That is the people “借題發揮” (jie4 ti2 fa1 hui1). If they don’t like you, you can do no right. And if you should forget your girlfriend’s birthday, she may “借題發揮” (jie4 ti2 fa1 hui1) and give you a hard time for something totally unconnected!

Terms containing the character “借” (jie4) include:

- 借錢 (jie4 qian2) – to borrow money
- 借用 (jie4 yong4) – to borrow for temporary use
- 借出 (jie4 chu1) – to lend
- 借據 (jie4) – a promissory note, an IOU