Former chief executive Donald Tsang Yam-kuen has been charged by the ICAC with “misconduct in public office.” Regardless of whether he is found guilty, the judicial process ahead will be grueling.

When Tsang was appointed chief executive, some people must have felt that it was rather fortunate for him to have landed the top job. But, with hindsight, some would now see it as a case of “焉知非祸” (yan1 zhi1 fei1 huo4).

“焉” (yan1) is “how,” “why,” “知” means “to know,” “非” is “not” and “祸” is a “disaster,” “calamity.” Literally, “焉知非祸” (yan1 zhi1 fei1 huo4) is “how do we know this is not a disaster?” and that is what the idiom means.

The story behind the idiom is that an old man lost his horse and it returned with another horse. So people say “塞翁失马，焉知非福” (sai1 weng1 shi1 ma3, yan1 zhi1 fei1 huo4) – when Old Man Cai loses his horse, how do you know it’s not good fortune?

The man’s son rode the new horse, fell off and broke his leg. So people said “塞翁得马，焉知非祸” (sai1 weng1 de2 ma3, yan1 zhi1 fei1 huo4) – when Old Man Cai gets a free horse, how do you know it’s not a disaster?

“焉知非福” (yan1 zhi1 fei1 huo4) and “焉知非祸” (yan1 zhi1 fei1 huo4) speak of the unpredictability of life. When a friend suffers a setback, you can say “焉知非福” (yan1 zhi1 fei1 huo4) to console him or her.

Terms containing the character “祸” (huo4) include:

車禍 (che1 huo4) – traffic accident
災禍 (zai1 huo4) – a catastrophe
禍根 (ho4 gen1) – root of trouble
嫁禍 (jia4 huo4) – put blame on others