Volkswagen’s new CEO Matthias Mueller vowed to be “ruthless” in investigating the scam in which millions of the German auto giant’s cars are fitted with pollution cheating software. When identified, the scam’s masterminds (策劃者) will certainly be punished.

The company’s original chief executive Martin Winterkorn and sales chief Christian Klingler have left. A dozen managers have already been suspended, and observers believe more heads will roll.

“Heads will roll” is a reference to “one’s head rolls on the ground,” “one’s head falls to the ground.” Human heads do not fall to the ground by themselves. It is usually because they are chopped off by an executioner. “Heads will roll” means someone will be severely punished.

A similar analogy in Chinese is “人頭落地” (ren2 tou2 luo4 di4). “人頭” (ren2 tou2) is the human head, and “落地” (luo4 di4) means falling to the ground. Literally, it is "human head falling to the ground.” Figuratively, it means “a very serious punishment.” This contemporary idiom is often used in the workplace to refer to a mistake that is so serious that it would cost someone’s job. If a colleague is doing something stupid that could lead to him or her being fired, you can advise, “Beware of 人頭落地 (ren2 tou2 luo4 di4).”

Like “heads will roll,” “人頭落地” (ren2 tou2 luo4 di4) “alludes to the punishment of being beheaded,” the ultimate punishment. As far as career matters are concerned, being fired is the ultimate price to pay for a mistake. So in that context, “人頭落地” (ren2 tou2 luo4 di4) means getting fired.

Terms containing the character “頭” (tou2) include:

- 頭髮 (tou2 fa4) – hair
- 頭腦 (tou2 nao3) – the brain, the mind
- 頭痛 (tou2 tong4) – a headache
- 頭目 (tou2 mu4) – a ringleader, head of a gang