A lawmaker used the “idiom” “馬首是膽” (ma3 shou3 shi4 dan3) while speaking at the Legislative Council last week.

“馬首是膽” (ma3 shou3 shi4 dan3) means, literally, “horse head is gallbladder,” which does not make any sense, and it shouldn’t, as it is not a proper idiom. A fellow lawmaker quickly pointed out that the correct idiom should be “馬首是瞻” (ma3 shou3 shi4 zhan1).

“馬” (ma3) is “a horse,” “首” (shou3) “the head,” “chief”, “first,” “是” (shi4) “is,” “are” and “瞻” (zhan1) “to look up to,” “to view.” Literally, “馬首是瞻” (ma3 shou3 shi4 zhan1) is “looking to the horse head.”

“馬首” (ma3 shou3) in the idiom refers to the head of the general’s horse. So “馬首是瞻” (ma3 shou3 shi4 zhan1) means “to take the head of the general’s horse as guide”, figuratively “to follow somebody’s lead.”

While the mistake is a glaring one, we should not be too harsh on the person who made it, as we’ve all made embarrassing mistakes before. Also the character “瞻” (zhan1) in the idiom can very easily be confused with “膽” (dan3), the misread character.

“馬膽” (ma3 dan3) is an actual term often used by the local horseracing public. It means the “anchor” choice, the “banker” in multiple combination bets like quartet. Come to think of it, “馬首是膽” (ma3 shou3 shi4 dan3) – lead horse is banker - could actually win you some money!

Terms containing the character “首” (shou3) include:

首領 (shou3 ling3) – a leader; a head
首都 (shou3 du1) – the capital of a country
首先 (shou3 xian1) – first; in the first place
首爾 (shou3 er3) – Seoul, the capital of South Korea