According to Chief Secretary Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, no officials should be held responsible for the lead-water fiasco (慘敗). She told a Legislative Council House Committee (立法會內務委員會) meeting there were “systematic inadequacies” but that did not mean “shortcomings” on the part of public officers who work according to the system. That argument did not wash with many lawmakers. Many of us are also wondering why officials should be let off the hook when the system they created failed. The public had hoped the officials would say “責無旁貸” (ze2 wu2 pang2 dai4).

“責” (ze2) is “duty,” “responsibility,” “無” (wu2) is “without,” “nil,” “旁” (pang2) means “other,” “side,” and “貸” (dai4) is “to lend,” “to borrow,” “to let off easily,” “to pardon.” Literally, “責無旁貸” (ze2 wu2 pang2 dai4) is “duty no side lending,” or “cannot unload responsibility on others.” The idiom means “responsibility for mistakes cannot be blamed on others,” “responsibility cannot be shirked.”

It also means “to be duty-bound.” To say “責無旁貸” (ze2 wu2 pang2 dai4) means “the buck stops here,” that you are taking responsibility, that a certain task or matter is within your scope of duties, and that there is no reason for you not to take it.

That, of course, does not mean that officials should be blamed for everything that has gone wrong. They cannot be blamed, for example, for mishaps caused by unpredictable circumstances or by someone who has deliberately circumvented (規避) the system.

Terms containing the character “責” (ze2) include:

- 責任 (ze2 ren4) – one’s duty, responsibility
- 責任心 (ze2 ren4 xin1) – sense of responsibility
- 自責 (zi4 ze2) – to blame oneself
- 卸責 (xie4 ze2) – to shift responsibility to others