The idiom does not apply only to criminals, but generally to those who have reformed themselves and turned away from an undesirable past, people who are turning a new leaf in their life.

When a lazy student starts to work hard and gets to the top of the class, we can say he or she has “洗心革面” (xi3 xin1 ge2 mian4).

“革面” in the idiom is to “change or reform the face.” But this is totally different from the English expression “to rearrange someone’s face” which means to badly injure or mutilate the other person’s face.

Terms containing the character “革” (ge2) include:

- 改革 (gai3 ge2) – to reform
- 革職 (ge2 zhi2) – to dismiss, be dismissed, from office
- 革命 (ge2 ming4) – revolution
- 革新 (ge2 xin1) – to innovate