

Comparison of Quadro-Syllabic Idioms in Chinese, Korean and Japanese

Sino-Korean and Sino-Japanese Idioms mainly from Chinese Originals*

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1. The preliminary investigation

Some **Quadro-Syllabic Idioms (QSI)** mainly originated from Chinese is shared in Korean, Japanese and even Vietnamese. A few idioms were made in Korea and Japan in the recent centuries, especially through the period of modernization that began in the late 19th century. Many quadro-syllabic idioms are not read in four syllables but more in Japanese because of the way Japanese used to read original Chinese letters. Japanese supplies more vowels to make open syllables at the end.

180 idioms by the random sampling were checked in Sino-Korean(SK) and Sino-Japanese(SJ) against the list of the original Chinese(OC) idioms by <https://www.mdbg.net/Chinese/dictionary>. The matching ratio between SK and OC is **18.4%** (which is quite lower than that ratio in the *main* investigation) and that between SK and SJ is **53.3%**. This result needs a further explanation because the natural flow of these idioms is from OC found in Chinese classics to SK. The reason for the higher match between SK and SJ is speculated that SJ were penetrated to SK through the education under the Japanese occupation period in the first half of the twentieth century (1910-1945).

Other presumable reason is the typological difference between SVO in OC and SOV in SK and SJ. For example, OC '불성(不省)인사(人事)' vs. SK & SJ '인사(人事)불성(不省).' Likewise, VO '노출(露出)마각(馬脚)' vs. OV '마각(馬脚)노출(露出).' In Vietnamese, OC '정저지와(井底之蛙)' is used in the order of 'Attributive + Head' as in Chinese, or paraphrased into '와좌저정(蛙坐底井)' in the order of 'Head + Attributive' as in the usual Vietnamese.

2. The main investigation

More comparisons among OC, SK and SJ (preferably in each period) are necessary to explain the mismatching mentioned above

黃得森 Wong Tak-sum in Hong Kong and 石橋道秀 Ishibashi Michihide in Saga, Kyushu, have generously given thorough checking on the list of 180 QSI. They have applied four degrees of markings such as © identical to SK, ○ one can understand the meaning of SK although its form is a little different, △ found in classical Chinese/Japanese literature, X never heard of SK QSI.

-★- Used in China, Korea & Japan (102 QSI, 56.7%)

[All three cases of ◎, ○, & △ are included in this total of 102. Among them ◎ is marked in both OC and SJ on 20 QSI as follows.]

四分五裂 all split up and in pieces (idiom); disunity (in an organization) / complete lack of unity / to disintegrate / falling apart / to be at sixes and sevens

千篇一律 thousand articles, same rule (idiom); stereotyped and repetitive / once you've seen one, you've seen them all

三十六計 The Thirty-Six Stratagems, a Chinese essay used to illustrate a series of stratagems used in politics, war, and in civil interaction / all the possible schemes and stratagems

五臟六腑 five viscera and six bowels

四面楚歌 lit. on all sides, the songs of Chu (idiom) / fig. surrounded by enemies, isolated and without help

士農工商 "the four classes" of ancient China, i.e. scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants

朝三暮四 lit. say three in the morning but four in the evening (idiom); to change sth that is already settled upon / indecisive / to blow hot and cold

戰戰兢兢 trembling with fear / with fear and trepidation

青天白日 in broad daylight / in the middle of the day / emblem, a white sun on a blue background

自暴自棄 to abandon oneself to despair / to give up and stop bothering

大同小異 virtually the same / differing only on small points

半信半疑 half doubting / dubious / skeptical

言行一致 word and actions coincide (idiom); to live up to one's word / to match words with deeds / Practice what you preach.

一朝一夕 lit. one morning and one evening (idiom) / fig. in a short period of time / overnight

一石二鳥 to kill two birds with one stone. cf. **一舉兩得** one move, two gains (idiom); two birds with one stone.

百折不撓 to keep on fighting in spite of all setbacks (idiom) / to be undaunted by repeated setbacks / to be indomitable

外柔內強 No results

-★-Used in SK & OC (30 QSI, 16,7%)

刻鵠類鶩 to aim to carve a swan and get a semblance of a duck (idiom) / to fail utterly in trying to copy something / to get a reasonably good, if not perfect, result.

found in Japanese classics. [*The rest of examples are curtailed.*]

-★- Used in SK & SJ (23 QSI, 12,8%)

去頭截尾 To cut the head and tail, to behead and curtail, i.e. in short, in summary. No results found searching for '去頭截尾' in Chinese, i.e. only in SK & SJ.

甘香苦吐 if sweet, swallow; if bitter, vomit.

-★-Used only in SK (35 QSI, 19.4%)

多情佛心 No results found searching for '多情佛心' in Chinese, i.e. only in SK

千年一清 十盲一杖 十匙一飯 權不十年 五車(庫)之書 四面春風 乙丑甲子

玉石同匱 塵合泰山 根苗花實 知足知富 自行自止 以熱治熱 肉腐出蟲 以小成大

大奧大秘 脣齒之國 脣齒之勢 手足之愛 鳥足之血 氷炭之間 氷炭不容 小貪大失

柳綠花紅 生口不網 此日彼日 入耳出口 一人一技 鷄豚同社

福在積善 No results found searching for '福在積善' in Chinese, i.e. only in SK

In summary, about 57% is shared in three countries, while 17% is shared in between Korea and China, 13% in between Korea and Japan, and 19% 'used only in Korea' as follows.

1. Used in China, Korea & Japan (102 QSI, 56.7%)
2. Used in SK & OC (30 QSI, 16,7%)
3. Used in SK & SJ (23 QSI, 12,8%)
4. Used only in SK (35 QSI, 19.4%)

Among these results 2 and 3 is REVERSED comparing to the preliminary investigation. So it is unnecessary to seek any reason for the higher match between SK and SJ.

Reference

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<https://doi.org/10.36824/2020-graf-joyc>