

## Introducing Kanji Idioms or 4字熟語

Even if you have never heard the expression ‘4 character-compounds’, you could well be surprised at how many examples you already know. How about 单身赴任 (the husband who lives away from his family because of his work)? Or 満員電車 (crowded trains) and 一生懸命 (with all one’s heart?) You may well possess a 携帯電話 (a portable phone) and have 国民保険 (health insurance). Many kanji compounds, however, illustrate traditional characteristics of Japanese society as well as modern ones.

いしんでんしん 以心伝心	telepathic communication ( <i>from one heart to another</i> )
だんそんじよび 男尊女卑	male chauvinism ( <i>men respected, women despised</i> )
ていしゅかんぱく 亭主関白	a despotic husband ( <i>husband and chief advisor to the Emperor</i> )
たりきほんがん 他力本願	reliance on others ( <i>fulfill one’s wish depending on others’ power</i> ) Originally this was a Buddhist term meaning salvation by faith in Buddha.
なつかぼうず 三日坊主	someone with no staying power ( <i>a 3-day priest</i> )

A number of 4 character-compounds can also be found in Biblical contexts:

てんちそうぞう 天地創造	creation (神の天地創造)
ぜんしんぜんれい 全身全霊で	with all one’s heart and soul
にかいざしき 二階座敷	the Upper Room
むしんろんしゃ 無神論者	atheist

In a recent pamphlet from Inochi no Kotoba press there was an advert for a Bible concordance and the words 自由自在に聖句検索. In other words, here is a concordance in which you can look up Bible verses to your heart’s content. In the next issue we will take a look at a few more 4 character-compounds like 自由自在 in common use. In the meantime here are two resources I have found helpful.

1. “Kanji Idioms” by George Wallace and Kayoko Kimiya. Kodansha International ¥1,200  
This has full explanations in English and lots of sample sentences. The only disadvantage is the lack of an index. You have to search for idioms in their あ、い、う、え、お order.

2. くもんの四字熟語カード- 第1集&第2集 くもん出版社  
Kumon’s Yojijukugo 2 sets of 31 cards for children with pictorial illustrations of each idiom on one side and the meaning and examples on the other. Each set is ¥900. These are excellent for visual learners but, of course, there are no English translations although there is ‘furigana’ on the kanji.