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A Contrastive Study of English and Japanese Proverbs

—Based on the Japanese *iroha karuta*—

日英諺の対照研究

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I Introduction

The Japanese proverbs used in this thesis are from the Edo, Osaka, and Kyoto *iroha karuta*. Each of these is a set of 48 cards, with a proverb on each card that starts with a different syllable of the Japanese syllabary. These cards have been used widely since the middle of the Edo period as playing cards for a children's game with educational overtones, teaching them the Japanese alphabet and traditional wisdom at the same time. The contents of the cards are very instructive, conveying many pithy and witty lessons. In this thesis, the 144 proverbs on these cards are divided into three categories: (A) Proverbs that have an almost exact equivalent in English in meaning, form, and usage.

(B) Proverbs that have an almost exact equivalent in English in meaning, but with

different forms and usage. (C) Proverbs that seem to have no equivalent in English. These categories are used solely in this thesis and should not be considered as a precise classification.

As for the number of proverbs taken up here, it would be difficult to use all the proverbs in the *iroha karuta* because of limited space ; so, 21 proverbs out of category (A) ; 34 out of (B) ; and 15 out of (C) have been selected, from 144 *iroha* proverbs. The selected Japanese proverbs were translated into English and given a simple commentary, with related English proverbs listed below each. The word ‘proverb’ as used in this thesis means a short, popular, and witty saying which expresses some truth or useful knowledge or idea.



Notation used in this thesis

italics : Japanese

() under Japanese proverbs : literal translation from the Japanese

— — : the meaning of each Japanese proverb

Category A

A-1 *Inu mo arukeba bō ni ataru.*

(A roaming dog will run into a stick.)

— Originally, the dog in this proverb was a stray dog ; so, when it roamed, someone hit it with a stick. That is, the dog met with a misfortune (stick). But currently, this proverb is used in a good sense ; that is, if a dog looks around, it is sure to find a bone (stick).—

<Related English proverbs>

‘Every dog has his day.’ (=At some stage in our lives, we all have a period of success.)

A-2 *Ichī o kiite jū o shiru.*

(to know ten from hearing one)

— There are many clever people who know ten from hearing only one ; — And many dull people do not know one from hearing ten. Many words to a fool, half a word to the wise. Those who think that learning is memorising much knowledge in fragments will not be able to be wise as this proverb says. Basic and systematic learning is of great importance.

<Related English proverbs>

‘A word to the wise is enough.’

‘Send a wise man on an errand and say nothing unto him.’

A-3 *Issun saki wa yami.*

(One inch ahead is all darkness.)

— *Issun saki* means the imminent future. We cannot anticipate what will happen in future ; so, this proverb is used when we had some bad luck or when we should be careful even when we are happy.—

<Related English proverbs>

‘Today a man, tomorrow none.’

‘Let us eat and drink ; for tomorrow we shall die.’

‘The unexpected always happens.’

A-4 *Heta no nagadangi.*

(Unskillful speech is long.)

— The worse the speaker, the poorer and longer the speech.—

Poor talkers usually talk in an uninteresting way to their listners for a long time. It is difficult for us to make a long story short. If we do not understand clearly and completely what we wish to say, we cannot be good speakers. Moreover, when we talk in public, we should have confidence in our own speaking abilities.

<Related English proverbs>

‘Brevity is the soul of wit.’

‘Better short and sweet than long and lax.’

‘Many speak much who cannot speak well.’

A-5 *Tōi ikka yori chikai tonari.*

(A near neighbour is better than a far relative.)

— In case of emergency, neighbours living nearby are more reliable and helpful than relatives living far away.—

As the proverb says ‘Out of sight, out of mind’, we are likely to cease worrying about what can no longer be seen. And relatives living far away cannot come to help us soon even if they wish to.

<Related English proverb>

‘A near friend is better than a far-dwelling kinsman.’

A-6 *Rui o motte atsumaru.*

(Like attracts like.)

— People of similar characters and tastes tend to come together in groups.—

The English proverb which is equivalent to this goes ‘Birds of a feather flock together.’ But this English proverb is often used about people we disapprove of, with an implication of criticism. The Japanese proverb is not used with such an implication.

<Related English proverbs>

‘Birds of a feather flock together.’

‘Men are known by the company they keep.’

A-7 *Warau kado ni fuku kitaru.*

(Good fortune enters a gate of laughter.)

— To the house from which we can hear laughter, good fortune often comes.—

When we are cheerful and merry, we shall be happy. Laughing stimulates our respiratory organs and abdominal muscles, and keeps us in good shape. What is even better, according to the latest medical science reports, laughing prevents from cancer.

<Related English proverbs>

‘Laugh and grow fat.’

‘Be always as merry as ever you can ; for no man delights in a sorrowful man.’

‘Laughter makes good blood.’

‘Laughter is the best medicine.’

A-8 *Ryōyaku kuchi ni nigashi.*

(Good medicine is bitter in the mouth.)

— As medicine which works well is often bitter and hard to take, so advice which is good for us sounds harsh to our ears.—

These days, small children are not likely to take bitter medicine ; so medicine for children is often sweet. And nowadays most school teachers do not scold their pupils as much as before. Good advice to us seems often harsh, but it will help us later in life.

<Related English proverbs>

‘Bitter pills may have wholesome (blessed) effects.’

‘Men take bitter potions for sweet health.’

‘Good advice is a bitter pill to swallow.’

A-9 *Raku areba ku ari.*

(Where there is comfort, there is pain.)

— Life is full of ups and downs. If there is pleasure, there is sorrow, and after sorrow, pleasure again.—

This proverb tells us that if we indulge in pleasures only, we are sure to suffer from pains ; and on the contrary, if we make efforts, we shall be able to live peacefully and comfortably.

<Related English proverbs>

‘Roses have thorns.’

‘No honey without gall.’

‘No cross, no crown.’

‘Today we sing, tomorrow we weep.’

A-10 *Uji yori sodachi.*

(Upbringing rather than birth.)

— Where we were born and how we were brought up is much more important than what family we come from.—

Nowadays, many people in the world may agree with what this proverb says. But there are still those who are conservative and reject this way of thinking.

<Related English proverbs>

‘Birth is much, but breeding is more.’

‘Not where one is bred but where he is fed.’

‘Nurture and good manners maketh a man.’

‘Nurture is above nature.’

A-11 *Nodomoto sugireba atsusa o wasureru.*

(Once down the throat, the heat is forgotten.)

— When we swallow something hot, we may burn our throat, but once it is past the throat, we are ready for some more.—

Even if we have an unpleasant experience, we are apt to forget it as time passes. In a sense, it is because of this forgetful character that we are able to keep balance in the course of our life.

<Related English proverbs>

‘Danger past, God forgotten.’

‘Vows made in storm are forgotten in calm.’

‘In time of affliction, a vow ; in time of prosperity, a greater increase of wickedness.’
‘Benefits please like flowers while they are fresh.’

A-12 *Yasumono kai no zeni ushinai.*
(To buy cheap goods is to waste one’s money.)

— Cheap things are usually of poor quality and not durable, so actually they are expensive. It is after all a waste of money to buy cheap merchandise. English people were said to use good clothes for a long time. For example, the name-brand suits which are expensive are passed on to one’s children. But currently, young people throughout the world tend to buy lower-priced goods and change them according as the fashion changes.

<Related English proverbs>

‘Penny wise and pound foolish.’

A-13 *Yami ni teppō.*
(a shot in the dark)

— The implication is that we have no target or goal, and that we act aimlessly or haphazardly, which is meaningless and not effective. It also means a lucky shot, as in ‘It was a shot in the dark really, but I was lucky.’—

In English, ‘a shot in the dark’ means ‘a guess unsupported by arguments, a wild guess.’

A-14 *Makeru wa kachi.*
(To be beaten is to win.)

— This proverb is a paradox. Sometimes losers are gainers.—

We may seem to be losing at one time, but on the whole, we often end up winners. By pretending to lose, eventually we attain our aims. Yielding is sometimes the best way of winning when we are patient. When our rival is strong, we pretend to be defeated and thus we retain our potential.

<Related English proverbs>

‘They lost the battle but won the war.’

‘Sometimes the best gain is to lose.’

A-15 *Makanu tane wa haenu.*
(Unsown seeds do not grow.)

— If you want to reap a harvest, you have to sow seeds in the soil.—

If there is no cause, there is no effect. Nothing comes from nothing. We shall be able to

have a good harvest, if we try to make patient efforts. If the seed is good, the crop will be good.

<Related English proverbs>

'Harvest follows seedtime.'

'You must sow before you can reap.'

'Nothing is given us in this life without much labour.'

A-16 *Gei wa mi o tasuku.*

(Art helps one's life.)

— If we have some skill, we shall always be able to earn a living.—

Skills or arts are sure to help us in times of difficulties or poverty. This proverb has been widely used in Japan. Japanese parents are likely to have their children acquire some skills especially when the future is uncertain.

<Related English proverbs>

'Learn a trade, for the time will come when you shall need it.'

'An occupation is as good as land.'

'When house and land are gone and spent, then learning is most excellent.'

A-17 *Ete ni ho o age.*

(to hoist sails when the wind is favourable)

— When a chance has come, we try to act in high spirits.—

In life, we may not have good chances. But we will definitely have several golden opportunities, and we should not let these opportunities slip by.

<Related English proverbs>

'Hoist your sail when the wind is fair.'

'Make hay while the sun shines.'

'Strike the iron while it is hot.'

A-18 *Atama kakushite shiri kakusazu.*

(to hide the head and leave the backside uncovered)

— We think that we conceal our whole body by covering up a part of it.—

This proverb is often put into practice by small children when they play hide-and-seek. This also means that we think we can hide all our crimes and defects, by hiding a part of them.

It is nonsense, but this happens very often.

<Related English proverbs>

'The foolish ostrich buries his head in the sand and thinks he is not seen.'

'You dance in the net and think nobody sees you.'

A-19 *Sawaranu kami ni tatari nashi.*

(Gods left alone do not curse.)

— If we do not get involved in anything, we will not get into trouble.—

This proverb tells us that we should not stick our noses into other people's affairs. Japanese people have a stronger tendency to keep away from trouble than English people.

<Related English proverbs>

'Let sleeping dogs lie.'

'Far from Jupiter, far from thunder.'

'It is not good meddling with edged tools.'

A-20 *Shiranu ga hotoke.*

(Knowing nothing is like Buddha.)

— If we know something unpleasant, we may get angry or be sad, but if we do not know about it, our minds will be untroubled.—

In present-day society, there are many things that it is better not to know. But as there is an opposite proverb which says, 'Knowledge is power', it may depend on the situation whether we should try to know something or not.

<Related English proverbs>

'Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise.'

'Who knows nothing, doubts nothing.'

'He that is not sensible of his loss has lost nothing.'

'The blind eat many a fly.'

A-21 *En wa i-na mono aji-na mono.*

(Our destinies are strange things.)

— This proverb is mainly used in reference to marriage. Strange and romantic is the affinity that binds two persons in marriage.—

It is almost impossible to predict when, where and with whom one may fall in love. In Western countries, it is often said that marriages are made by heaven. English and Japanese proverbs are almost the same in the interpretation of the outcome of marriage.

<Related English proverbs>

'Marriage is a lottery.'

‘Marriage is made in heaven.’

Category B

B-1 *Ron yori shōko.*

(Proof is better than discussion.)

— When we wish to make something clear, it is more important to show clear proofs or actual examples than to have a discussion —

<Related English proverbs>

‘Example is better than precept.’

‘The proof of the pudding is in the eating.’

B-2 *Rokujū no mitsugo.*

(A 60-year old is a 3-year old.)

— This proverb means that, when we become old, we tend to become innocent like an infant, and to be unreasonable and selfish.—

But currently, when the average life expectancy has become longer, there are many people over 60 who are more energetic and active mentally and physically than young people.

<Related English proverb>

‘to be in one’s second childhood.’

B-3 *Rongo yomi no rongo shirazu.*

(A reader of the Analects of Confucius does not understand them.)

— This proverb refers to those who read Confucius, but do not understand him well.—

They know the theory, but they cannot put it into practice. As putting some food into our stomach is different from digesting and absorbing it, so putting some knowledge into our brains is quite different from understanding, acquiring and putting it into use. We should be careful not to remain foolish in spite of extensive study.

<Related English proverbs>

‘A mere scholar, a mere ass.’

‘Astrology is true, but astrologers cannot find it.’

B-4 *Hana yori dango.*

(Dumplings are better than flowers.)

— To fill the belly with delicious sweet rice balls is better than to enjoy viewing cherry blossoms.—

This proverb means that actual benefits or profits are more important than elegant and refined tastes. Nowadays, especially among young people, there is a tendency to prefer actual profits to uncertain ideals.

<Related English proverbs>

‘Pudding rather than praise.’

‘The belly is not filled with fair words.’

‘Better have meat than fine clothes.’

B-5 *Nikumarekko yo ni habakaru.*

(Hated children present a strong face to the world.)

— In Japan, children who have a different attitude from others, and who have a strong character, are often unpopular.—

Those who are disliked are likely to be full of mental and physical strength, and become powerful and influential in the world. They may have fought with many people, and they are usually not discouraged by hardships. These days, there are not many strong-willed and individualistic children. Instead, there are many who are weak-willed and behave the same as others.

<Related English proverbs>

‘Ill weeds grow apace.’

‘The devil’s child, the devil’s luck.’

‘The weeds overgrow the corn.’

‘Naughty boys sometimes make good men.’

B-6 *Hotoke no kao mo sando.*

(Even a Buddha gets angry when he is betrayed three times.)

— Even the mild and meek are sure to get angry if treated badly three times.—

It is natural for even patient people to lose their temper when they are repeatedly treated rudely. Patience and humility were a virtue which Japanese women had to acquire and practice in the old days. But nowadays, young people may not be so patient and modest as before.

<Related English proverbs>

‘Even a worm will turn.’

‘The crushed worm will turn.’

B-7 *Chiri mo tsumoreba yama to naru.*

(When dust accumulates, it will make a mountain.)

— Even if each one is tiny like dust, when it is piled up, it becomes a huge thing like a mountain.— Even small items when saved will make a big pile.

<Related English proverbs>

‘Many a mickle makes a muckle.’

‘Look after the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves.’

‘Penny and penny laid up will be many.’

‘Tiny drops of water make the ocean blue.’

B-8 *Ware-nabe ni tojibuta.*

(a cracked lid for a cracked pot)

— Even if a pot is cracked, a cracked lid will suit it well.—

This consolatory proverb means that as far as marriage is concerned, everyone gets a suitable partner in the end. In the *iroha karuta*, another saying with a similar meaning is found: *Oni no nyōbo ni kijin* (=Like a devil wife, like a devil husband.)

<Related English proverbs>

‘Every Jack has his Jill.’ (Jack=a man, Jill=a woman)

B-9 *Kaeru no tsura ni mizu.*

(water on a frog’s face)

— Frogs do not care about having water splashed on their faces.—

This means that one remains calm even when one is reproached and treated badly. This refers to those who are unaffected by other people’s attacks. The saying, *kaeru no tsura ni shōben* (urine), has the same meaning.

<Related English proverb>

‘Like water off a duck’s back.’

B-10 *Yoshi no zui kara tenjō nozoku.*

(to peep at the ceiling through the stem of a reed)

— When we peep at the ceiling through the narrow stem of a reed, we can see only a part

of it.—

It is a big mistake to think as if we saw all when we have seen only a part of something. This proverb means that if we judge a big problem from an incomplete perspective and limited knowledge or experience, we cannot grasp the truth of the matter.

<Related English proverbs>

‘Some people cannot see the wood for the trees.’

‘to empty the sea with a spoon.’

B-11 *Tabi wa michizure, yo wa nasake.*

(in travelling, a fellow traveller ; in life, compassion)

— In the past, travelling was hard and painful. Because public transport was very poor, and travelling was much more inconvenient than today, people might have felt lonesome, desolate, and even in danger when they travelled alone.—

Life is often compared to travel, so both in travelling and in life, companions and compassion might have been needed. But nowadays travelling has become much more comfortable and pleasant.

<Related English proverbs>

‘A cheerful companion is as good as a coach.’

‘A merry companion is a wagon in the way.’

B-12 *Rengi de hara o kiru.*

(commit *hara-kiri* with a wooden pestle)

— A *rengi* is a wooden pestle of which the end is heavy and rounded. It is used for crushing substances in a special bowl ; so, it cannot be used for cutting.—

To commit *hara-kiri* is to cut open the stomach with a small sword to kill oneself. This mode of ritual suicide was formerly practiced in Japan, but not any more. This proverb shows that it is no use crying to attempt the impossible. The word *hara-kiri* is found in major English dictionaries as a loan word from Japanese together with *kimono*, *judo*, *ikebana*, and so on.

<Related English proverb>

‘Like trying to push a camel through the eye of a needle.’

B-13 *Nen ni wa nen o ireyo.*

(Check again and again.)

— We cannot be too careful. Whenever we do anything, we should pay the closest

attention.—

This way of thinking is alike throughout the world. Old people who know that a slight carelessness will cause a disaster, tend to be more careful than young people. A similar Japanese proverb says, *Ishibashi o tataite wataru.* (=Cross a stone bridge after striking it for safety.)

<Related English proverbs>

‘Look before you leap.’

‘Second thoughts are best.’

B-14 *Neko ni koban.*

(to give gold coins to cats)

— A gold coin which is a precious thing is nothing to a cat.—

And even when we have something precious unless we know its value, it is useless. In Western countries, instead of gold coins and cats, pearls and swine are used in the Bible.

<Related English proverbs>

‘Cast not pearls before swine.’

‘A barleycorn is better than a diamond to a cock.’

‘It is folly to strew roses amongst swine.’

B-15 *Naki-tsura ni hachi.*

(There is always a wasp to sting a weeping face.)

— When we are in pain, a wasp will sting us. Misfortunes are likely to come one after another.—

This proverb means that when misfortune befalls us, we should be careful lest another befall us. There are many similar Japanese and English proverbs ; Japanese : *Yowarime ni tatarime.* (=A curse befalls us when we are plagued.)

<Related English proverbs>

‘It never rains but it pours.’

‘An unhappy man’s cart is easy to tumble.’

‘Men use him ill that has ill luck.’

B-16 *Nasu toki no Enmagao.*

(the face of Yama (=King of Hell) when repaying)

— *Kariru toki no Ebisugao* precedes the above proverb. *Ebisugao* is a smiling face, *nasu* means to repay a debt. The whole proverb means when you borrow something from

someone, you smile, but when you repay your debt, you look extremely unpleasant.—
An angel in borrowing, a devil in repaying. Once we attain our aim, we are likely to forget it.

<Related English proverb>

'Many fair promises in marriage making, but few in dowry paying.'

'A borrowed loan should come laughing home.'

B-17 *Rainen no koto o ieba oni ga warau.*

(If you talk about next year, the devil will laugh.)

— This proverb means that if you talk about the future and expect or worry about what will happen, you will be sneered at, because the future is unknown and unpredictable.—
Another similar Japanese proverb says, *Ashita wa ashita no kaze ga fuku* (Tomorrow blows tomorrow's wind.) In the last scene of the movie "Gone with the Wind," the heroine Scarlett O'Hara, after losing everything but still hoping for the future, says resolutely, "Tomorrow will be another day!"

<Related English proverb>

'Fools set far trysts.'

B-18 *Muri ga tōreba dōri hikkomu.*

(If unreason comes, reason goes.)

— In a world where unreason prevails, reason gives way, and justice does not often triumph.—

The powerful often dominate the powerless. Reason is not compatible with unreason, but throughout the world unfortunately unfairness and injustice predominate. This situation seems to be prevalent both in the East and the West.

<Related English proverbs>

'Where might is master, justice is servant.'

'Might is right.'

B-19 *Baji tōfū.*

(the east wind to horses' ears)

— In Japan, the east wind is the spring wind. When the east wind starts blowing, people will be very happy, but horses do not react to it at all.—

This proverb refers to those who do not pay attention to others, and turn a deaf ear to advice. A similar Japanese proverb is *Uma no mimi ni nenbutsu*. (The implication is to

pray to Buddha into a horse's ear)

<Related English proverbs>

'In at one ear and out at the other.'

'A nod is as good as a wink to a blind horse.'

'like talking to a brick wall'

'to talk to the wind'

B-20 *Outa ko ni oshierarete asase o wataru.*

(to wade a ford guided by a child carried on one's back)

— Sometimes, we are taught something by our child or a younger and inexperienced person.—

This proverb teaches us the importance of modesty. Even wise and great men sometimes may have to be helped and taught by young and inexperienced persons, because good advice and learning sometimes come from such persons. As the fable says, a mouse may help a lion.

<Related English proverb>

'The weak may stand the strong in good stead.'

B-21 *Kusai mono ni futa.*

(to put a lid on something that smells bad)

— When something inconvenient or scandalous happens, one covers it up with some temporary device without working out any basic solution.—

The Japanese seem to have a tendency to avoid conflicts with others, preferring not to be involved in other people's troubles. But it may be difficult to keep away from trouble all the time.

<Related English proverb>

'Sweep something under the carpet.'

B-22 *Kahō wa nete mate.*

(Wait in bed for good luck.)

— If we actively try to improve our luck, we may not succeed. We should not be too impatient to bring good luck to us. This proverb means that if we are prepared to wait patiently, we will get what we want in the end.—

As a matter of fact, if we do not go on trying, we shall not be able to achieve our aim.

In the *iroha karuta* collection, similar proverbs are included: *Mateba kanro no hiyori ari*

(=Wait and have rain someday), *En to tsukihi* (=Wait for a good opportunity)

B-23 *Bushi wa kuwanedo takayōji.*

(A samurai, even when he is starving, uses a toothpick to show that he is satisfied.)

— A samurai shows patience and pride even when he is hungry. He should not let others know that he is hungry.—

After the end of World War II, many Japanese people were starving. The government supplied rice to the people with a rationing system, and prohibited buying rice on the black market. But most people had no option but to get food in whatever way they could. An honest judge refused to buy rice on the black market, and died of hunger. This sad but true story may be telling us that ‘honesty is the best policy’ but we cannot live without bread.

<Related English proverb>

‘It is better to go to bed supperless than to rise in debt.’

B-24 *Ahō ni tsukeru kusuri wa nai.*

(There is no medicine for an idiot.)

— There is no salve for stupidity.—

If there were such a marvellous medicine, it would be very costly. This proverb means that those who are born fools are never cured. Fools will always be fools. Another proverb says that ‘Some are wise and others are otherwise.’ This view is debatable, because those who do not have knowledge are not foolish but only uneducated. Mentally handicapped people can be cured.

<Related English proverbs>

‘Bray a fool in a mortar, but you cannot make him leave his folly.’

‘Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.’

B-25 *Kiite gokuraku mite jigoku.*

(Hearing is paradise, seeing is hell.)

— What we hear from others is quite different from what we actually see.—

This proverb means that we must not jump at a seemingly good thing.

<Related English proverbs>

‘Seeing is believing.’

‘Imagination goes a long way.’

B-26 *Mikara deta sabi.*
(the rust that comes from the blade)

— The blade of a sword becomes rusty, but not because of the elements, but because of some structural defects in the sword itself.—

You suffer from your own mistakes.

<Related English proverbs>

‘An ill life makes an ill end.’

‘Those who live by the sword will die by the sword.’

‘As you sow, so shall you reap.’

‘One must lie on the bed one has made.’

B-27 *En no shita no chikaramochi.*
(a strong man under the floorboards)

— An unsung hero - a person who makes efforts unseen by others.—

En no shita means ‘the space under the floor’ which is unnoticed by others. Therefore, this proverb refers to someone who works diligently without thanks behind the scenes, or labours at unrewarded drudgery but supports others. In the past, this was used in a contemptuous sense, but now it can be used either in a good sense or contemptuously.

<Related English proverbs>

‘One catches the hare and another eats it.’

‘a back-room boy’ (= a person whose work is important but secret or not seen publicly, esp. a scientist or planner.)

(Longman : Dictionary of Contemporary English)

B-28 *Binbō hima nashi.*
(Poor men have no leisure.)

— Poor people are so busy making their living that they have no time for leisure. Most Japanese people were poor in the past.—

We need enough leisure in order to grow up properly. Those who can make the best of their leisure time will be truly rich. This proverb can also be used by one who is not poor but is talking in a modest manner.

<Related English proverb>

‘Ever busy, ever bare.’

B-29 *Hyōtan kara koma.*

(A horse comes out of a gourd.)

— A *koma* is a horse, and a gourd is a small container for *sake*. It is impossible for a horse to come out of such a small container. Therefore, this proverb means that something unexpected has happened or what was said in jest came true.—

<Related English proverb>

‘It is the unexpected that always happens.’

‘Many a true word is spoken in jest.’

‘Always expect the unexpected.’

B-30 *Monzen no kozō narawanu kyō o yomu.*

(A boy living near a Buddhist temple can read sutras without formal learning.)

— Boys living near a temple are always hearing priests reciting sutras, so they learn to recite sutras without being taught formally. We are greatly influenced by the environment. When we try to teach, especially small children, they tend to be tense and nervous, and sometimes this tension may become a hindrance to learning. One remembers well what one has learned spontaneously in a good environment.

<Related English proverbs>

‘A good candleholder proves a good gamester.’

‘If one dwells next door to a cripple, he will learn to halt.’

B-31 *Momo kuri san-nen kaki hachi-nen.*

(peaches and chestnuts after three years, persimmons after eight years)

— Peach and chestnut trees bear fruit in three years, and persimmon trees in eight. Things take time to mature.—

This proverb means that it is important to be patient and to wait, by drawing a parallel between the time required by a tree to bear fruit and that required by a child to grow up.

<Related English proverbs>

‘Patience is a virtue.’

‘Out of little acorns does the mighty oak tree grow.’

‘A watched pot never boils.’ (The implication is that time appears to pass more slowly when one is impatiently waiting for something to happen.)

B-32 *Mochiya wa mochiya.*

(Leave mochi to the mochi maker.)

— One is most skillful at one's own trade. Anyone can make *mochi* (rice cake), but *mochi* made by professional *mochi*-makers is the most delicious.—

There are specialists for every trade, and every specialist has his/her own strong point. It takes much time and effort to acquire a technical skill.

<Related English proverbs>

'There are tricks in every trade.'

'Every man for his own trade.'

B-33 *Sumi ni somareba kurokunaru.*

(If you rub against charcoal, you will become black)

— We are likely to be influenced by those with whom we keep company and by experiences which we have, regardless of whether that influence is good or bad.—

This proverb means that it is important to choose good friends. A similar Japanese proverb goes *Shu ni Majiwareba akaku naru.* (=If something is mixed with red things, it becomes red.)

<Related English proverbs>

'The rotten apple injures its neighbours.'

'Who keeps company with a wolf will learn to howl.'

'Evil communications corrupt good manners.'

'A man is known by the company he keeps.'

B-34 *Suzume hyaku made odori wasurenu.*

(A sparrow does not forget dancing even when a hundred years old.)

— We do not forget what we learned while we were young.—

However, originally *odori* (dancing) referred to love affairs, so this proverb meant, when we become old, we still fall in love. Therefore, this proverb has two meanings. At any rate, it seems to be very difficult to shake off habits, especially those that we acquired while we were young.

<Related English proverbs>

'What is learned in youth is carried to the grave.'

'What youth is used to, age remembers.'

Category C

C-1 *Toshiyori no hiyamizu.*

(cold water for an old person)

— Old men should not drink too much cold water or shower with it without thinking of their advanced age and physical frailty.—

This proverb warns us that the old should not try to take hard exercise and attempt dangerous things to show their courage by imitating the young. It is true that old men should behave in accordance with their advanced age, but there are many old people who are full of vitality and are much stronger than young people mentally and even physically. To train the mind and body in moderation seems to be necessary, irrespective of age.

C-2 *Richigimono no kodakusan.*

(An honest man has many children.)

— An honest and hard-working man has many children.—

The implication is that honest men are of good conduct and hard-working and devote themselves to supporting their families, so that they come to have many children. At present, it is difficult to understand this proverb and to agree with it whether in Japan and abroad.

C-3 *Nusubito no hirune.*

(A thief lies down for a nap.)

— The implication is that there is a reason why a thief takes a nap.—

He may be planning to break into a house after nightfall. This expression illustrates an action we take now to make a future activity more effective.

C-4 *Oite wa ko ni shitagae.*

(When you are old, obey your children.)

— This proverb, originally addressed to women, is from the teachings of Buddhism : when women are little girls, they should obey their parents : when married, their husbands ; and when old, their children. That is, women never have a home of their own.—

However, currently this proverb applies to old people of both sexes. With age, they are required to pay more attention to the opinions of younger people. Not only in Japan, but in Western countries as well, the status of women in society used to be lower than that of

men in former times.

C-5 *Raku shi te raku shirazu.*

(To live a decent life is not to know it.)

— This proverb refers to those who live a happy and comfortable life without any cares, and who do not realize what a blessing it is that they can lead such a peaceful life.—

As we often do not know the blessing of health until we get ill, so happiness is not valued until we lose it. We tend to become blind to our true situation properly. When we get used to living in a certain situation, we begin to think that the situation is normal and natural.

C-6 *Mugei taishoku.*

(being a glutton without accomplishments)

— This refers to a person whose only merit is gluttony.—

This expression is used either when speaking modestly of ourselves or when poking fun at others.

C-7 *Imo no nieta mo gozonji nai.*

(You do not know that the potatoes have already been boiled.)

— The implication is that you do not know whether the potatoes are boiled or not.—

We cannot eat potatoes raw, but when they are boiled, they become soft and easy to eat. It is not difficult to see whether they are boiled or not, but there are some people who cannot tell the difference. This proverb refers to people, especially inexperienced sons and daughters of a rich family, who do not understand common sense.

C-8 *Iwashi no atama mo shinjin kara.*

(Even the head of a sardine can be a charm against evil if you believe in it.)

— In Japan, there was a custom that at night on the day before the beginning of spring, hanging the head of a sardine pierced with a holly twig on the gate will ward off evil. Even a trifling thing such as the head of a sardine works just as well as the gods or Buddha, for those who have faith in it. Even a trivial thing can be an object of faith.—

C-9 *Geta to yakimiso.*

(wooden clogs and roasted miso)

— When *miso* is baked on a board, it looks very much like *geta* (wooden clogs), but of

course the two are quite different.—

This proverb refers to two things that look alike but are quite different in content. At present, this expression does not seem to be so popular, especially among young people.

C-10 *Ko wa sangai no kubikase.*

(Children are like neck-shackles at all time.)

— *Sangai* means the three realms of existence : the past, present, and future, and *kubikase* is a burden.—

So, the implication is that children are like a millstone around their parents' neck. In Japan there are more proverbs dealing with the relations between parents and their children than in Western countries. In Japan, parents and children are one in body and mind; and therefore, the children, whether young or grown-up, can be burdens to their parents.

<Related English proverb>

'Children suck the mother when they are young and the father when they are old.'

C-11 *Enma no irogoto.*

(Yama's love affair)

— Yama is the ruler of hell, and has a devilish and formidable look. He judges the dead in hell and gives them a reward or a punishment. It is unthinkable for Yama with such a forbidding appearance to have a love affair. When two objects are absolutely different or when an unlikely event happens, this saying is used. But currently, it may not be so strange or unbecoming for one like Yama to have a love affair!—

C-12 *Teishu no suki-na akaeboshi.*

(the red headgear, beloved by the householder)

— The headgear worn by nobles in court dress was usually black, but when a nobleman said that he preferred to wear a red headgear on a certain day, the household had to let him have his way.—

Even if the master of the house insists on something unreasonable, his family cannot object. But at present, there are many wives who henpeck their husbands. Present-day householders look meek and faint-hearted in front of their wives.

C-13 *Tendō hito o korosazu.*

(Heaven does not kill people.)

— This proverb says that heaven is generous and merciful to all people, and never

forsakes anyone.— But when some misfortune befalls innocent or good people, we say in Japanese “*Kami mo hotoke mo nai !*” (=This is terrible. I do not believe in the gods!) Another Japanese proverb says “Some gods reject people, others save them.” (=When one door is shut, another is open.)

<Related English proverb>

‘God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb.’

C-14 *Sanben mawatte tabako ni shiyō.*

(Let’s take a rest after keeping night watch three times.)

— The implication is that after we finish our job, we should relax.—

This proverb puts emphasis on working more than on relaxation. The Japanese rest, so that they can work harder, but Europeans seem to work, so that they can enjoy their lives better.

C-15 *Giri to fundoshi kakaneba naranu.*

(Duty and loincloth are indispensable.)

— Men cannot do without duty or a loincloth.—

In Japan, until recent days, men usually wore loincloths, which are loose coverings for the lower part of the body as a sort of underwear. A sense of duty and humanity has been traditionally one of the most important virtues for the Japanese. These two things are indispensable. English gentlemen value duty and honour.

Conclusion

In order to become a proverb, a saying has to be taken up, and it has to be used and accepted by many people. It depends not on the will of some people with authority, but on the personal preferences and judgment of the common people whether the saying will be in use or not in future. The well-known remarks and proverbs which have been attributed to some great men are often not their own inventions at all. Among maxims and proverbs attributed to great men of letters or wise men, there are many proverbs which have become well-known by having been used by them in writing or speech, although these proverbs might have already existed and been used among the common people. It is impossible to prove that there was no evidence indicating that the same or similar proverbs had already existed before they made their first appearance in public. It might be true that proverbs had

their origin in a certain person or a certain situation, but it is very difficult to specify the person or situation precisely and clearly. The same can be said of the Bible and Western and Oriental proverbs. In this thesis, taking the above fact into consideration, the following conclusions have been reached :

(1) More than half of the 144 *iroha* proverbs are used in an abbreviated form, such as in *Heta no Nagadangi*, ending with a noun. On the other hand, most English proverbs are used in a sentence with a subject and a verb, such as 'Brevity is the soul of wit.'

(2) In the *iroha* cards, most proverbs are metaphorical, and the expression is exquisitely variegated. It is not direct but persuasive and memorable. On the other hand, English expression is logical, powerful, and straightforward.

(3) Japanese proverbs are strongly influenced by Confucianism and Buddhism, that is, by Oriental culture and civilisation, while English proverbs show traces of influences of Christianity, especially of Western culture and civilisation.

(4) Proverbs were produced under different social, cultural and geographical backgrounds, and these influences are seen in both Japanese and English proverbs.

(5) Both Japanese and English proverbs express lessons, warnings, satire, wisdom, knowledge, and so on. This thesis is written on the basis of the Japanese traditional *iroha karuta*, so that a comprehensive and equal comparison is not possible. These proverbs have been used and loved for a long time by many Japanese people. It is of great interest to find that a large number of English proverbs have contents which are almost the same as these Japanese equivalents, and that they are currently in use, although with differences in form, usage, and interpretation, because of differences in culture and national character.

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