

JAPANESE FOLKLORE

In Japan folklore did not open its first page as an independent history until 1913. Until then, it had been studied as a branch of anthropology which was newly introduced to Japan following the opening of the country to the world in 1868 after two hundred years of national isolation. Although two different scholars had separately introduced folklore study from England and Germany earlier in 1910, they themselves did not go into this field any further. Even before the introduction of European studies, there had been a general trend among scholars to take an interest in and write about the way of life of the common people since about 1600.

The first issue of a folklore journal, Kyodo Kenkyu (Local Studies) in 1913 marked the first epoch of Japanese folklore study. Even at this early date, one of the editors, Toshio Takagi, stated that the aim of the journal was "the essential study of all the phenomena of all the aspects of life of the Japanese people." The editors requested in the same issue information about annual festivals and other events, customs and rituals concerning production, manners and other social intercourse, taboos and magic, religious customs, folk-beliefs, rites of passage, and so on. This may enforce the fact that the Japanese notion of the aim and objects of the study has been very settled from the beginning.

At present, the three-group classification of folklore material, hypothetically proposed by Kunio Yanagita in 1934, is generally employed. The groups are (1) physical culture, (2) oral arts, and (3) mental phenomenon. This classification is based on the procedure used for collecting each type of material; that is, the first group is comprised of that material which can be seen with the eyes; the second, that which can be learned from the ears; and the third, that which cannot be easily collected unless the collectors possess the same or similar mentality of feeling as that of the people in the community concerned. The following are the most common items that are found in each of the groups:

(1) Physical culture: houses, clothes, foods, forestry, fishing and hunting, agriculture, transportation and trades, gifts and other social intercourse, labour, social structure, family, marriage, birth, funerals, annual events, rituals, dances and contests, children's games and language.

(2) Oral arts: naming, words and terms, proverbs and riddles, folksongs, folktales and legends.

(3) Mental phenomena: ogres and ghosts, divination, taboos, curses, folk-medicine and treatment.

It goes without saying that one of the important methods of folklore collecting is to concentrate on a specific topic and collect every possible item concerned within the designed boundary of a region. However, another method, more often used, is to collect all possible folklore from a specific region. In the case of Japan, such regional research very seldom reveals a particular racial culture, but rather reveals the influences of historical and natural characteristics upon

the particular region, as well as revealing its social relations with other regions. In other words, we are interested in the meanings and positions of those materials we acquire through such regional research in the whole picture of Japanese folklore. Comparative studies of such material often indicates the route of its distribution and the procedure of its transformation.

One method of this comparative research which is very often used in our country is a comparative study of words and terms which are or were characteristically used in each region. Very often different words are used to indicate one and the same object, whereas in some other cases, the same word is used for different objects. Through close studies of the variations in the usage of such words, we can often trace the changes and transmigration of the culture expressed by the words.

We do not ignore the criticisms in the fields of anthropology or ethnology against such a method of study as to compare indiscriminately by one criteria all the materials that have been collected from various societies with different historical and cultural backgrounds. However, in our country the situation may be a little different. The integrations of various cultures having taken place such a long time ago, and those integrated cultures having penetrated to the whole of the country, it is nearly impossible to trace them back. And so, there results a greater sphere where we can possibly apply an indiscriminate comparative method.

Japanese folklore is a study of unwritten history of the common people, but at the same time, an emphasis is also put on its practical role. With its fundamental knowledge and understanding of the common people and their ways of life, folklore must enable us to approach many of the problems of the present day Japan with a wider viewpoint.

From the time of Yanagita's early definition of Japanese folklore as the "ethnology of our own country," the field of study has been restricted only to Japan. However, recently more scholars have been showing a strong interest particularly in the folklore of Okinawa and Southeast Asia. This certainly shows the prospective development of this field of study.

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