Women in Yanagita's Folklore

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It has often been pointed out that Yanagita Kunio sympathized with Japanese women. It is said that he attached much importance to the role Japanese women had played in the history of Japanese society and that he attempted to estimate it positively by investigating varied facets of their activities within the local folklore. Believing that women's own history should be elucidated by women researchers themselves, Yanagita held many study meetings only with women, furthermore, he spared no effort for them to organize their own study groups or to publish their own periodicals. Most women folklorists hold him in high regard and are thankful to him. But it should be noticed here that they have acceded to his points of view the role in the folk society of Japan, without even daring to criticize or to review his viewpoints. But are not there many problems in Yanagita's understanding of the role and situation of women throughout the folk history? This paper attempts to review the place he gave to women in his individual studies and to clarify the limits of his perception of women's role.

It is a fact that Yanagita Kunio appraised the role of Japanese women from diverse standpoints. But, on the one hand, in the case of women in a settled agricultural society, their role as assumed by him is limited to that of supplementary members in the male-oriented Japanese society. The women as seen by him did not act independently, but rather as supporters of men being always beside or behind them. From this standpoint he emphasized the role of women as a working force. On the other hand, in the case of itinerant women, he stressed that they were bearers of faith and culture. His achievements are great in that he highlighted the raison d'être of these women which had long been forgotten or neglected, and the social structure in which they appeared. What is most important is that Yanagita treated them as supporters of a settled society where they are supposed to have played predetermined roles. In this regard, their situation is no different from that of women living in a settled
agricultural family, in that they hold a subordinate existence in the society.
In conclusion, we can only say that Yanagita’s understanding of women was
narrowly limited.