Goldfish Appreciation and Breeding Standards in Japan and China

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This paper presents a folklore study that compares cultures in terms of how they appreciate plants and animals, using the breeding standards for goldfish appreciation as my subject. By the term "breeding standards", they refer to the standards for judging goldfish used in the field of goldfish appreciation. In this paper, I present three varieties of goldfish, Ranchu, Tosakin, and Jikin, as examples of Japanese goldfish today, and I identify trends in breeding standards as well as in goldfish appreciation. Second, by using the "Kingyo Sodate-Kusa", a manual for breeding goldfish written in the mid-eighteenth century, I examine the breeding standards for goldfish in the Edo period, and third, I compare my findings with the breeding standards for goldfish used in China.

The results show that Japanese breeding standards for goldfish are presented as idealized forms for each variety, and thus goldfish breeding is focused on strict conformity to these ideal standards. Accordingly, the trends in goldfish appreciation are also toward a deeper pursuit of each of the specified ideal forms. While very similar tendencies were found in the "Kingyo Sodate-Kusa", there was a tendency to go beyond the confines of just one variety and appreciate new varieties, which is different from the trend in goldfish appreciation we see in Japan today. In China, the breeding standards for goldfish are presented as classes and categories that inclusively conform to many actual varieties, and the Chinese approach to goldfish breeding promotes varieties other than those conforming to the fixed standards. Therefore the trend in goldfish appreciation can be seen as moving toward diversification.

Folk culture underlies these goldfish breeding standards. Breeding goldfish is about the technology used to create goldfish that conform to the breeding standards, and the standards are about a system of knowledge that is closely related to this goldfish breeding technology. Not only goldfish breeding, but all types of cultivation—of flowers, plants, and trees as well as bonkei and bonsai—concern the technology that renders the subject a form of "enhanced nature" and leads also to the appreciation of this "enhanced nature". This can be considered the culture of plant and animal appreciation. I anticipate that the culture of appreciating "enhanced nature" will move toward stricter standardization in Japan, while in China it will
move toward further diversification. These differences in trends in the appreciation of "enhanced nature" demonstrate a qualitative difference between the Chinese and the Japanese view of nature.