The Diffusion and Transformation of Folktales

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Kunio Yanakita and Keigo Seki classified the folktale Sumiyaki Choja (The Charcoal Burner Millionaire) into a “first marriage type” and a “remarriage type”, Ling Chun Sheng (凌純聲) and Rui Yi Fu (芮逸夫) classified tales into Type A ancient stories of furnace gods (爐神) and Type B ancient stories of furnace gods, and Ting Nai-Tung (丁乃通) classified tales as The Princess Who was Responsible for Own Fortune (負責主宰自己命運的公主) type and The Beggar Who Fails to Recognize Gold (乞丐不知有黃金) type. These tales have been widely disseminated all over East Asia, including the Japanese Islands, the Korean Peninsula, Mainland China, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Folktales have regional characteristics. For example, in Japan and Korea, folktales with a charcoal burner as the protagonist are prominent, while folktales about the origin of furnace gods are seen widely throughout in China and Vietnam but not in Korea. Both types have nearly the same basic structure and share many motifs. This suggests that these types of folktales have been widely disseminated through diffusion, and the charcoal burner millionaire type folktale in Japan, which is presumed to have been accepted in East Asia and which acquired regional characteristics, cannot be an exception.

Yanakita hypothesized that folktales of this type were stories that had been handed down by artisans who were engaged in metal refining, forging, or casting, using charcoal as fuel. However, in materials of this type that have thus far been found in Korea, China, and Vietnam, it is impossible to find any direct proof that can positively affirm Yanakita’s hypothesis. To begin with, are the categorizations that Yanakita, and Seki, or Ling and Rui make appropriate, and do their methods of categorization have any significance? Furthermore, has the Charcoal Burner Millionaire type folktale in Japan, which is assumed to have been handed down by metal artisans, retained the ancient form of the same type that has been widespread in East Asia? Or, is it nothing more than a unique form that can only be seen in the Japanese Islands? These issues will likely be solved only through international comparative research.

Comparative research is also needed in the field of research on legends. Even considering only legends believed to have originated in Japan, and confining the research to comparisons within Japan—for example, the hakumai-jo (白米城・white rice castle) type or the wankashi-buchi (筍貨調・deep pond of bowl lending)
type—comparative research with legends in the nearby areas of East Asia may prove that there are many legends for which the process of the diffusion and transformation can be clarified.