What is “Cultural Exchange” Research in Folklore Studies?
An Example of Cultural Exchange between the Ryukyu Kingdom and China

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In this paper I examine the role of cultural exchange within the realm of folklore studies, looking first at statements made by Kunio Yanagita and second at the question of whether it is possible to conduct comparative studies between Okinawa and China focusing on this concept.

Kunio Yanagita defined the scope of the folk culture as that which is handed down through popular tradition, and he differentiated this from recorded culture. In other words, culture such as academic learning, which is represented by writing, or art and technology is defined as the central urban culture, which is antithetical to local provincial culture, defined as popular tradition handed down by people without dependence upon written materials. According to Yanagita, cultural exchange within Japan is a process by which popular trends—the new, central, superficial culture—spread from the center to the periphery both temporally and spatially and then become established in provincial areas over time. Cities are the windows to new culture, the places from which new culture is created and the cultural center from which it is disseminated. International culture, such as academic learning, the arts and literature, first comes to the cities at the level of superficial culture. There it is filtered through Japanese culture, and in the process of spreading from the city to the countryside, becomes established as folk culture. Yanagita’s “Law of Cultural Diffusion” can be understood as two stages of cultural flow: an influx of foreign culture into city culture and its diffusion from the city to the countryside.

It is a historical fact that cultural exchange between Okinawa and China or mainland Japan has occurred repeatedly since prehistoric times. When we narrow the focus of our comparison to the exchange of Confucian systems, we can see that in Okinawa, Confucianism had a significant influence on the formation of “munchu” (Okinawan dialect), or groups bound by paternal blood relationships. In the Early Modern Ryukyu Kingdom, a Chinese-style family system, which included the creation of family records, the prohibition of marriage between those having the same family name, and the prohibition of adoption from a different family name, all which are based on paternal blood relationships, had been introduced to the elite class. At the same time, however, the Japanese family system, in which everything is passed on to one child who remains at home, was also incorporated, resulting in the Okinawa-style family system.
A comparative study of cultural exchange using Confucian systems as a means of comparison should not end by merely pointing out the fact that Confucian influences spread from China to Okinawa; we must come to a more comprehensive understanding of how they developed in Okinawa and what kind of significance they had there.