“Korean Folklore Studies” and Japanese Colonialism: “Comparative Folklore Studies” as “Long-Range Missiles”

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What type of attitude and distance did Kunio Yanagita, who pursued “single-country folklore studies” as self-reflective research (内省の学), take toward the “Korean folklore studies” that were established and developed in Korea, under the Japanese imperial rule? In Japan, discussions of conventional theories of “Korean folklore studies” have mainly focused on this question. As a result, the following three theories have become common opinions: 1) Yanagita anticipated the establishment of “Korean folklore studies” and supported scholars from Korea such as Son Jin-Ta and Song Seok-Ha in their research; but 2) he exercised extreme caution concerning Korean folklore research conducted by the Government-General of Chosen and its government-controlled scholars; and yet 3) from the point of view of single-country folklore studies, he was circumspect and passive about comparing Korean and Japanese folklore.

Thus In this paper, I first reviewed the propriety of theses 1) and 2) above, which are also related to the relativity issues surrounding single-country folklore studies, and I found that each was hard to prove. In particular, as regards the latter, which involved the exploitation of “folklore studies” conducted by the Government-General of Chosen and the Government-General of Formosa for the purpose of compiling materials to be used for the colonial rule, Yanagita did not exercise “extreme caution”; on the contrary, I found that he placed high value on these studies, saying that they were “superb work that will stand the test of time.”

Next, I targeted the issue in the thesis 3) above, in the context of a series of statements by Yanagita concerning comparative folklore studies during the war. Specifically, to demonstrate the relationship between Yanagita’s folklore studies and colonialism, I chose a group of statements from around 1940 that advocated the necessity of comparative studies of ancient legends, based on the premise that “cultural exchange beyond that which was recorded” existed in East Asia as well as a grand plan for “Greater East Asian folklore” that was an extension of this position. At the same time, I picked out remarks that Yanagita made about his wartime view of life and death, and then explored the issue of whether the creation of a “martyrdom ideology in order to be useful to the world” (世用実益) as well as a “Greater East Asia folklore” with Japanese folklore at the pinnacle were becoming practical topics in Japanese folklore studies.