A Study of Yanagita Kunio’s “Subsistence” Research: Focusing on the Discourses of the 1910s to the 1930s

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This thesis will attempt to unravel Yanagita Kunio’s discourses from the 1910s to the 1930s in order to reappraise the aims and methods of his “subsistence” research from within that period, and demonstrate one aspect of its potential.

From an understanding of Yanagita’s general folklore data classification, today’s field of subsistence research can be classified as no. 1, tangible culture. The research cannot be said to focus on the spirit phenomena of classification no. 3. Further, it could be argued that Yanagita, who was “baffled” by agricultural policy, deliberately trivialized “subsistence” research in order to distance himself from it. However, after examining the discourses Yanagita wrote while he was establishing the discipline of folklore studies, it became clear to me that this understanding needed to be re-evaluated.

From the 1910s Yanagita distanced himself from agricultural policy, and strove to establish the new discipline of folklore studies, but his view on “subsistence” carried over from the agricultural policy period, and matured into a more contemporaneous concept. This process can be observed in discourses such as “Cities and farming villages”.

The main purpose of Yanagita’s “subsistence” research was to reach some kind of solution by understanding the current difficulties that farmers faced, as well as the history of their existence up to the present day and the conception of existence that they had created. He also hoped that this would cause the farmers to reflect on their own situation for themselves. He felt that the method of agricultural policy, which was essentially imposed from above by the state and academia, was unsuited to achieving these goals. Yanagita thus displayed renewed interest in the field of folklore studies. In other words, one aspect of Yanagita’s efforts to establish folklore studies relates to his deepening perspective on “subsistence”.

Today’s subsistence research and Yanagita’s “subsistence” research are in different phases of the discipline, but having re-evaluated the theories and philosophy of Yanagita’s “subsistence” research in terms of folklore studies, I conclude that today’s subsistence research – which also continues to develop in collaboration with adjacent fields – surely has much to learn from it.

Key words: Yanagita Kunio, subsistence, labor, agricultural policy, no. 3 classification