Constructing a History of Folklore Studies in Modern Japan

SATO Kenji

This essay represents a preliminary attempt at constructing a "history of folklore studies" in the context of modern Japan. Because of the overwhelming number and range of studies documenting aspects of the Japanese folklore movement, it is necessary to engage in a process of "comparison," as Émile Durkheim advocated. By reconsidering the current state of the field, we can investigate alternative ways of studying the subject from a "relativistic" or "holistic" perspective. This essay takes into account how previous historical studies took into account publications issued in local areas or by local research groups, and attempts to rectify the scholarly neglect of such contributions. Historical studies to date as a rule do not fully take into account concrete evidence provided by local folklore studies, even if they try to avoid so-called "Yanagita Kunio centricity." By shifting our stance, we can take up issues concerning approaches taken up by researchers involving minzokugaku (folklore studies) on a localized level, kyōdo kenkyū (research on local history and culture), or kyōdo kyōiku (methods of teaching local history and culture).

For instance, through the investigation of the local history of folklore studies in Itoigawa, I have stressed the importance studying the work of a literary figure such as Sōma Gyōfū. I have also taken into account the painstaking efforts involved in the publication of the discoveries of local researchers such as The Collected Works of Aoki Shigetaka (15 volumes published to date). Similarly, the research and compilation of proceedings of the Osaka Minzoku Danwa Kai (Osaka Folklore Discussion Society), led by Sawada Shirosaku, suggests that consideration of the "place," where the local folklore studies were born plays an crucial role in the subsequent construction of a history of folklore in modern times. The investigation of the "place," where multiple interests were exchanged and diverse persons interacted with each other can open the way to a revised history of "practice" and "method," which differs greatly from a history according to "paradigm" and "theory." In this essay, I evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the use of "chronological tables." The "problem of origin," as proposed by Marc Bloch, who was a close contemporary of Yanagita, is also raised. Furthermore, I propose that an "algebraic" approach, which treats the composition of categories as variables or values and analyses the relation of variables. Such a methodology, while contributing the construction of a revised history of modern Japanese folklore studies, also incorporates what might be called "ecological" or "natural historical" approaches, which focus on searching for research material on a widespread basis and acquiring material objects that are required for study.

Key words: History of local folklore studies, holistic research, place where the folklore studies arose, history of practice and history of paradigm, historical perception