Yanagita Kunio and “Worship of the Powerful” : Characteristics of the Meaning in Contemporaneous Discourse Space

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The saying “worship of the powerful” is generally interpreted as an attitude of people who are lacking in autonomy and independence and try to protect themselves by following the tide and the majority. According to Kamishima Jiro who was a political scientist, Yanagita Kunio tried to elucidate “insularism and worship of the powerful” of Japanese people through folklore studies.

The saying “worship of the powerful” was coined by Fukuzawa Yukichi who was an enlightenment thinker in the Meiji period. It was first used to indicate the bigotry of “a group of people without the spirit of independence” who intended to keep the Chinese Tributary System with the Qing Dynasty in the government of neighboring Korea, and eventually became fixed as a derogatory word in modern Japanese discourse to represent the backwardness of Korea or Korean people as a whole. However, after the Russo-Japanese War, the word was transformed by “reverse irradiation” into a word expressing non-autonomous and dependent thinking in Japanese people themselves. At this time, Yanagita began to discuss the “worship of the powerful” as indicating the way of thinking of people who assumed that it is right to live in the crowd or act by following past precedent. The “folk custom” meant by Yanagita has probability of being regarded as a representation at the intersection of the transverse axis and the vertical axis of the “worship of the powerful.”

According to Yanagita, the “worship of the powerful” occurs regardless of time and place in an “insular country” where people move along the coastline easily because new inhabitants worship old inhabitants. Therefore, the “worship of the powerful” is characteristic of Japan as an “insular country.” Based on this, Yanagita predicted the coming of the fascist situation through the voting behavior of people in elections, and his prediction became reality when people rushed into the 15-year war and Japan suffered a disastrous defeat after many people were killed and wounded. Yanagita tried to elucidate the “insularism and worship of the powerful” after the war because those are the principal factors that realize “folk custom.” Therefore, by questioning the “folk custom,” he tried to elucidate the mind of people who rushed into war.

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