Folk Beliefs, Proverbs, and Haiku over Animals and Plants

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This article discusses the mutual relationship among Japanese folk beliefs, proverbs, and seventeen-syllabled verses (Haiku), based on the expressions of various animals and plants appearing in the same. This kind of literary world flourished in Japanese society in the last half of the early modern era, when the "world of walking" and the "world of memorizing" were the basics of empirical knowledge for common people. While folk beliefs, proverbs, and seventeen-syllabled verses (Haiku) seem to have developed gradually in early modern society, empirical knowledge based on observation of nature in the regular work and lives of farmers and fishermen was accumulated and shared as folk proverbs for memory. Folk proverbs, including memories of empirical knowledge, were based on fine observation of nature against a perspective of the "world of walking" instead of one relying on mechanized trains, airplanes, etc. At the same time, folk proverbs were far from the world of printing and visualizing such empirical knowledge based on observation in books but embedded it in terms of a fixed number of letters for ease of recall.

Folk proverbs as empirical knowledge are divided into two major fields: the observation of animals and plants, and that of human beings. The empirical knowledge, basically a method to deal with things in life and regular works, might have taken the route of stylizing particular to each of three aspects: sensibility, the wisdom of living, and the norm of living. The aspect of sensibility creates the world of seventeen-syllabled verses (Haiku), which overlaps the transition of seasons and that of life. The aspect of the wisdom of living develops natural calendars and folk beliefs over animals and plants. The aspect of the norm of living enriches the world of proverbs which shows how we live and how individuals are in society. The worlds of folk beliefs, proverbs, and seventeen-syllabled verses (Haiku) are united at the base by folk proverbs developed from the "world of walking" and the "world of memorizing," through which the three fields have affinity.

Key words: Folk belief, proverb, seventeen-syllabled verse (Haiku), folk proverb, "world of walking," "world of memorizing," observation