An Analysis of the History of Folklore Studies on the Ordinariness of Inter-regional People Movements

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Regular population movements between regions and their impacts on lifestyle and culture are difficult topics for today’s folklorists to address. In order to identify the causes of such difficulties, this paper examines the history of folklore studies. The end goal of this examination is to find clues as to how future folklore studies can address the issue.

The folklore studies systematized by Kunio Yanagita in the 1930s were derived from agro-politics. One of the major agro-political issues he was interested in was the development of medium-scale farmers. In order to increase their number, rural surplus labor needed to be reallocated. What was important there was the issue of labor allocation to make full use of rural surplus labor. This was a main focus of Yanagita in his research on agricultural policies. It was later absorbed by folklore studies while being transformed into the issue of impacts of population movements on rural life. Yanagita regarded population movements as a factor of social changes and examined the phenomenon to reveal changes in lifestyle.

His folklore studies, however, were criticized after his death, in the 1970s and 1980s, during which the issue of population movements was trivialized to the issues of “non-folks” and “non-farmers.” The rise of a separate analysis method based on the assumption that there were communities that served as bases for transmitting tradition also marginalized the issue of population movements from folklore studies. This is why regular population movements are difficult topics for today’s folklorists to deal with.

Now that we are living in a society where inter-regional population movements have become very common, it is essential for folklorists to recognize the above-mentioned historical context of folklore studies and incorporate the perspective of population movements into their studies.

Key words: Kunio Yanagita, issue of labor allocation, non-farmers, wanderers, separate analysis method