Comment

YASUMURO Satoru

1. Introduction

The relationship between folk implements and folk techniques, which are the main theme of Session III, is similar to that between hardware and software. In many cases, common folk implements are not specialized for a single use; one tool may have a variety of uses. Also, as there are no handy manuals to take you through every step, folk techniques are important in their role as software in the way the folk implements are used.

The study of folk implements would certainly not be as useful in clarifying the entirety of human life — going beyond the traditional focus on their morphology, function, or system — without exploring the matter of folk techniques. In this sense, too, I feel that the theme for this third session on "Folk Implements and Folk Techniques" is significant and noteworthy.

As there is much discussion on folk implements in this symposium, I would first like to talk about my understanding of folk techniques, then comment briefly on the presentations by the three panelists.

2. What Are Folk Techniques?

Folk techniques are antithetical to industrial techniques in that they are skills backed by folk knowledge (knowledge gained from everyday life). As they mostly consist of skills that have been acquired physically, experientially, and traditionally on a personal basis, they tend to become personalized and specialized, rather than generalized. These techniques are usually not put into words, but go through the process of somatization to become implicit knowledge, and are handed down from memory. Furthermore, even when recorded and spread as generalized techniques, there is always the possibility that additional personal wisdom and ingenuity will refine them, thereby formulating a further range of folk techniques, so that making too sharp a distinction between the two is academically inefficient.

In their relation to nature, folk techniques have one notable characteristic: not only do they alter the natural environment, but they also generate a new form of nature (called secondary nature) as well. One such example is the rice paddy, which has been created and maintained with conventional pre-modern techniques.

Rice paddies are artificial fields under highly sophisticated control, yet they work to evoke the image of nature to many Japanese. The Japanese outlook on nature does not lie in the vast wilderness that forbids the entry of man, but rather in secondary nature such as rice paddies. In other words, folk techniques have worked to maintain a symbiosis with nature, and it is in this symbiotic relationship itself that the Japanese have always felt the presence of nature.

Let us look more closely on our symbiosis with nature, which is mediated through folk techniques, taking rice paddies as our example. As explained previously, rice paddies are fields where man has developed and

controlled nature, but at the same time, they have functioned as important habitats and wintering spots for the breeding fish and birds that have adapted to their environs. In wet-rice paddies, various methods of capturing such fish and birds were widely practiced in accordance with wet-rice farming methods. The triangular relationship between man, rice, and animals in the rice paddies is preeminently symbiotic; as long as wet-paddy rice farming is continued every year, this symbiotic relationship is preserved.

However, it is a mistake to categorically deem all folk techniques mediums for symbiotic relationships. Though folk techniques may seem that way in light of the harmonic relationship between human activities and nature, this does not mean that folk techniques have always been focused solely on maintaining such relationships. It is only because most folk techniques are practiced in adaptation to nature, in scenes where nature and human activities are mutually interlocking that this may appear to be the case. In other words, there was no choice but to mediate symbiotic relationships, whereas they were originally more oriented towards building industrial techniques. The symbiotic elements seen in folk techniques are, so to speak, the product of a turn of events when nature and human technical capabilities happen to run against each other. Confusing this fact will mislead us into becoming mired in the dogmas of “folk techniques = environment conservation techniques” and “folk world = utopia”.

3. Comments

Professor Zhou Xing outlined the current situation of studies on folk implements in China, and pointed out issues that need to be addressed, contrasting China with the history of folk implements in Japan. Note that in the report he deliberately uses the terms “folk implement studies” and “material culture studies” separately. In particular, he takes up the conception of comparative studies on folk implements once proposed in Japan, to argue the need for international comparisons among folk implements, as well as indicating the importance of the methodology of material culture studies. As a commentator, I took this to mean that a comparative study on folk implements should essentially be refined as one area of study for material culture.

When we speak of folk implements, we are implicitly setting national barriers（limits）against the concept of nations by describing them as something that is “all too familiar and near-at-hand within the reaches of our country”. However, as is clear from reports by Professor Yin, who points out the need to study the use of plows from the aspects of racial migration and cultural dissemination, and Mr. Koh, who points out the need to discuss the similarities and differences between China and Korea in the matter of discharge folklore, tools need to be viewed from a cross-border perspective. Rather than studying “Chinese”, “Korean”, or “Japanese” folk implements separately, they should be studied as the “material culture” of the entire East Asia region, as Professor Zhou indicates. This is an important assignment that should be discussed further within the academic community in the field of Japanese folk implements.

The empirical study on plows by Professor Yin Shaoting, which was based on criticism of Werth’s theory, was fascinating. What impressed me most was how he contested the validity of the commonly perceived notion that farming with hoofed animals such as by sheep and pigs, or fire-farming, were merely primitive

steps taken before the use of plows.

The invention of plow farming did not necessarily mean the improvement of the household maintenance system. Though plow farming was surely a technical improvement over farming with hoofed animals, it would not have been adopted without explicit need for it in helping to improve livelihoods. When we look at the use of power cultivators and rice-planting machines in modern Japan, the first to adopt these machines were part-time farming households and farms with employees, not the full-time farming households that specialized in farming. It turns out that the adoption of leading-edge technology does not necessarily prove a more advanced stage of farming.

The research on discharge folklore by Mr. Koh Kwang-Min takes on an area that has not been well covered in China, Korea, or Japan. Discharge is, to all animals including man, the most basic physiological phenomena along with sleep and sex. The concept of impurity, which in itself should be a target of research, may have affected the mentality of the researchers themselves, which may explain why such physiological phenomena have not been brought to light to date.

The foresight with which Mr. Koh took up this theme is important, especially since research on discharge folklore may possibly hold far greater importance, when taking into consideration the entire life experience of man and looking into other areas of research such as vocation or gastronomic culture.