

## Book Review

### What have Japanese been thinking? - Taisho period

By NHK's Special Team of Reporters, 2012, Tokyo: NHK, 311 pages.

Japanese title: Nihonjinwa Naniwo Kangaetekitanoka.

Susumu NEJIMA\*

This book deals with seven Japanese thinkers during Taisho period (1912 – 1926). In this brief review I would like to pick up Yanagita Kunio (1875 – 1962) in Chapter 3. Yanagita Kunio is known as the father of Japanese folklore. One of the main issues he pursued is whereabouts of one's soul after death. After the 2011 Tohoku quake and tsunami (known as Great East Japan Earthquake in Japanese), this has become a critical issue in Japan.

The essay is double layered. While the works of Yanagita on Tohoku, especially those related to the 1896 Meiji-Sanriku quake is introduced in details, Shigematsu Kiyoshi, a popular writer, travels Tohoku with NHK's Special Team in order to think about whereabouts of one's soul after death. With the 1896 Meiji-Sanriku quake, 21,959 people were dead. Therefore, Tohoku after 1896 is superimposed with Tohoku after 2011 in his travel. Sometimes, Akasaka Norio, a Japanese folklorist, joins his travel, and they exchange ideas on the issue.

In Tohoku, the world after death is not far away. The dead can live happily in the world after death, the bereaved have wished so for a long time. They even come back to this world when annual events take place. Yanagita has thought of the issue for many years, and his conclusion supports the above-mentioned world view.

Shigematsu and Akasaka visit Disaster Prevention Countermeasure Office in Minami-Sanriku. In this building, Ms. Endo Miki lost her life while calling for evacuation through emergency radio system. In this small town, 564 people were dead. Now, the building has an altar. When people come to Minami-Sanriku, they fold their hands here. In front of Shigematsu and Akasaka, a man takes a cup of tea with a gesture of a toast. He has his hat off, and salutes to the front, right, and left. Without any word, he is gone, leaving Shigematsu and Akasaka. They have to sense that the man lives with the dead, and the building has become a holy place in a spontaneous manner.

Yanagita Kunio is best remembered with *The Legends of Tono*. 119 short stories are collected in it. Story No.99 is about a man called Fukuji (Following excerpt is based on translation by Ronald A.

---

\* 東洋大学国際地域学部 : Faculty of Regional Development Studies, Toyo University

Morse. See Yanagita 2008).

Fukuji married into a family in Tanohama on the coast, and he lost his wife and one of the children in the tidal wave that struck the area last year (1896). On a moonlit night in early summer, he got up to the toilet and saw two people. The woman was his wife, and the man was from the same village. It had been rumored that this man and Fukuji's wife had been deeply in love before Fukuji had been picked to marry her. She said, "I am now married to this man." Fukuji replied, "But don't you love your children?" The color of her face changed slightly and she cried. Fukuji didn't realize that he was talking with the dead.

Shigematsu meets Fukuji's descendant, Nagane Masaru in Tanohama. His family lived in the same place as Fukuji, and his ancestor's suffering is not an event in the distant past. Nagane lost his mother in the 2011 tsunami. She has not found yet. Now he lives in a temporary housing unit as his house was totally destroyed by tsunami.

Shigematsu and Akasaka discuss on the story. Why Fukuji told about this story to other people? He could have kept it untold as a personal experience. They think that Fukuji was living with suspicion on his wife even after her death. It was time of Obon, or Festival of the dead, when he met her. Though he felt shattered with her words, he could reconcile with his wife. Therefore, Fukuji could talk about his experience to other people.

Akasaka tells that there are many ghost stories like Fukuji's in the disaster-hit areas. Many people want to reconcile with the dead. In the end, Shigematsu says, "We live with the dead. We live with remembrance including the dead. How do we keep the 311 in remembrance? Not only people in Tohoku, with people in Japan, and with people all over the world? From now, we have to think of it."

Yes, we have to think of it for years to come.

## Reference

Yanagita, K. (translated by Ronald A. Morse). 2008, *The Legends of Tono*, Lanham: Lexington Books.