

What Chinese Folklore Can Learn from the Study of Folk Implements in Japan?

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From the standpoint of a Chinese folklore scholar, the study of Japanese folklore has two main traditions, represented by Yanagita Kunio by Shibusawa Keizo. Yanagita's folklore research is characterized by an emphasis on lived culture: manifestations of human mental processes, vocabularies, oral literature and indigenous culture. Shibusawa, on the other hand, created a distinct line in Japanese folklore studies that focuses on folk implements. His study is characterized by material culture, folk implements and folk technique. Both scholars valued the history of ordinary people and their culture and the need for studies on traditional Japanese folk culture amid the rising tide of modernization.

Each country has gone through different development processes in folklore studies and has therefore different characteristics. It is not easy to compare folklore studies of different nations and to make value judgments about which are best. As academic exchanges increase worldwide, research by Chinese scholars on material culture in folklore studies has a lot to learn from the way folk implements are studied in Japan. Chinese folklore, comparatively, lacks an academic tradition of study of material culture. Documents and records on Chinese folklore have only marginal descriptions of folk implements, if any. Technical descriptions of implements used in everyday life, are notably lacking in these records. Few documents are dedicated to folk implements. Chinese folklore scholars therefore have not created a line of studies similar to Japanese folk implements studies.¹

In the history of Chinese folklore, items used for celebrating the New Year were collected from across the nation as early as in the 1920s. The move was prompted by those who stressed the importance of collecting implements related to customs and manners and establishing a museum specializing in this area.² But later in the development of folklore studies, the focus gradually shifted to oral literature. Most folklore studies on material culture were about traditional folk crafts and folk art.³ The emphasis was placed on the aesthetic and artistic aspects of handicraft rather than on practical implements. In the process, scholars largely neglected mundane daily commodities and folk techniques and how they reflected the intelligent ways ordinary people improved their lives.

The Chinese word for folk cultural relics, *minsu-wenwu*, is probably closest in meaning to Japanese folk implements. But the word was a compound derived from *wenwu*, or cultural relics (similar to tangible cultural properties in Japan). Other combinations of words using *wenwu* include *geming-wenwu* or revolutionary cultural relics, *lishi-wenwu* or historical cultural relics, *minzu-wenwu* or folk cultural relics and *chutu-wenwu* or unearthed cultural relics. Chinese folk cultural relics are studied mainly in the context of archeology and

museology but not in folklore studies.

The word, *wenwu* or cultural relics, was used in Chinese books from ancient times, but it was generally defined as articles related to systems of decorum, music and rules. The definition is the same in *Houhunshu's Nan-Hsiung-Nu zhuan*, which is to prepare decent clothes and appropriate articles. In other words, *wenwu* originally referred to relics closely related to the upper classes, not mundane things used by ordinary people.

With the emergence of epigraphy in the Sung Dynasty [960-1279], words for objects such as antiques, toys and implements were created. These items, too, had little to do with the daily lives of ordinary people. In the 20th century, *wenwu* became widely used and its definition constantly evolved. Yet, its fundamental meaning remains historical ruins or relics of material culture. Cultural relics were first officially defined in a volume on cultural relics museums in the Encyclopedia of China series⁴ published in 1993. They were defined as relics or ruins that reflect customs, manners and other aspects of folklore.

The definition covers a wide spectrum of social life including clothes, food, shelter, transportation, production, religion, and rituals and social relationships. It also covers all sorts of systems and ideology that govern society. Folk cultural relics, which manifest different customs and manners, help us understand how these developed and evolved among societies in different regions. Even though their definition is broad, the primary focus remains on relics, and rarely deals with practical commodities still in use today. The current Cultural Relics Protection Law of the People's Republic of China does not have clear codes for folk cultural relics. That further supports the notion that folk cultural relics are a marginal subject in archaeology and museology.

In Japan, folk implements mainly mean concrete and portable objects, except for food and medicines, which were made as part of daily life and handed down for generations. It goes without saying that the history and aesthetic aspects of folk implements are almost ignored in the Japanese definition. This is what distinguishes Japanese implements from Chinese folk cultural relics. In China, one theory goes that folk art and traditional folk crafts can be regarded as an essential part of folk cultural relics. Based on that assumption, the theory goes that their external shapes, such as the way they are designed and manufactured from carefully chosen materials, should represent an aesthetic tendency of folk cultural relics.

China has a cornucopia of folk implements, not limited to folk art and traditional folk crafts. In Chinese daily life, implements of different designs and materials appear in different applications. These seemingly mundane implements demonstrate the ingenious ways ordinary people developed to make life easier and the designs and sophisticated processes they used. There is no question that they form an important part of Chinese folklore and culture. In recent years, these tools and implements have been rapidly replaced by metal, plastic and other industrial alternatives. Some scholars are alarmed by the massive loss of folk

implements and other folklore articles. The academic world has again engaged itself in intensive debates about the definition of folk cultural relics.

In response, three emerging trends in Chinese society have become clear: First, folklore museums of various kinds are being established across the nation.⁵ Collectors are scrambling for folklore articles among cultural relics, old articles and in antique markets, resulting in a folklore collection boom.⁶ The boom indicates that people are gradually waking up to the importance of folk implements. It also indicates we are facing an imminent risk of losing those precious implements.

Secondly, in many economically advanced regions of southern China, local governments and local academia are refocusing on folk cultural relics, folklore articles and implements as important cultural resources. Since these community-based cultural objects pluck the nostalgic strings of tourists, they are useful for promoting tourism in old towns and villages. Numerous examples include the Jiangnan riverside district museum of farming tools and utensils at the scenic spot of Shajiabang in Changshu; a farming tool museum in the old town of Louzhi in Suzhou; and a traditional craft center and traditional folk utensil center in Wuzhen, Zhejiang.

Thirdly, *minju* or folk implements, are gradually becoming popular among folklore scholars, and becoming synonymous with folk cultural relics and folklore articles in their usage. It is especially encouraging to see many academically significant results of studies on folk implements being reported recently in China. For instance: Professor Sung Zhaolin's study on ethnic and folklore cultural relics⁷; Professor Yin Shaoting's studies on material culture in Yunnan and various production tools⁸; Professor Xu Yungyi's research on folk commodities, tools and the Chinese tradition of artisan culture; Mr. Jin Xi's research on Jiangnan riverside district's farming and fishing tools⁹; Professor Fang Lili's studies on Jingdezhen's folklore ceramics¹⁰; and studies by Mr. Ye Dabing and others on footwear culture¹¹. Similar research on traditional farming tools, food utensils, tea utensils, toys and clothes have led to great achievements¹².

It is worth in this context mentioning a dictionary of Chinese ethnic and folklore culture relics¹³ compiled by the Chinese Folklore Society's ethnic and folklore museum panel, with Professor Sung Zhaolin as editor-in-chief. It is China's first dictionary to present the latest findings on the remarkable research on contemporary material culture and folk cultural relics. It boasts 8,175 entries on ethnic and folklore terms and more than 3,733 illustrations and photographs, representing a comprehensive summary of contemporary Chinese folk implements studies. There is no doubt that it will serve as an important basis for further studies in this field. It is worth stressing that the dictionary covers terms beyond what was traditionally defined as *wenwu*, or cultural relics, focusing on the minority material culture and folk cultural relics of the Han people. In particular, it has made a great contribution to the field by stressing the importance of ordinary commodities and folk implements in modern and contemporary societies.

Despite all the merits of the Chinese dictionary, however, several problems emerge when it is compared with Japanese dictionaries on folk implements¹⁴.

- No clear explanations about where and when the implements were used are given in many of entries
- The names of implements require revisions or further historical detail (in particular, the title system for implements should follow local people's practices and local languages.)
- Definitions for terms are supplemented by illustrations and photos but some minority folk implements lack photos and illustrations. Illustrations and photos are generally not accurate because no measurements and dimensions are provided.
- There is a general lack of explanation on how to make and use implements
- Entries in the dictionary are not accompanied by a detailed list of references.
- Some details are absent from entries, understandably because not enough field studies have been conducted. This is especially true with Han household tools.

It is not always appropriate to compare dictionaries of different nations compiled in different academic contexts. Still I believe that Chinese folklore researchers can learn the following points in their material culture studies from Japanese folk implements studies.

First, Chinese folklore scholars should fully understand the value and importance of material culture research, especially those of folk implements. They should drop their traditional emphasis on oral literature and folk literature, and reinforce their existing study of folklore crafts, folklore art, folk cultural relics with concepts and perspectives of folklore utensils, folklore handicraft and folk implements. They should acknowledge the historical, scientific, artistic and economic value of folklore material culture in terms of events and implements. At the same time, they should learn to fully understand the value and ingenuity of ordinary people as seen through their folk implements. They should certainly study the symbolic meanings of folk implements and their emotional implications and the way they are carried on in popular memory.

For years, Chinese folklore scholars have had an academic tendency to study the overall life culture of ordinary people rather than limiting their work to folk literature or oral tradition. In my view, the key to yielding some achievement in this area hinges on whether and how Chinese folklore studies can accommodate or integrate studies of folk implements – fundamental physical elements of ordinary people's lives.

Second, Chinese folklore studies should involve more field studies on material culture and folk implements. Based on the subsequent findings, researchers should compile more documents on folk implements and organize collected illustrations into reference books. They should then collect and categorize folk implements and combinations of such implements by region, ethnic group and research theme. Like the

Japanese government, which protects samples of folk implements by designating them as important folklore data or important tangible folk cultural properties, China's central and local governments should add similar artifacts to lists of protected cultural properties. China can learn a lot from Japanese folk implements in terms of field study methods: how to collect and categorize implements; how to measure, preserve, manage and display them, and study how they were used and how they can be reproduced.¹⁵ Above all, folklore scholars should add perspectives of and increase study themes about folk implements and material culture.

Third, comparative folklore studies in East Asian nations, including China, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and Mongolia, have rapidly developed in recent years. It is important for scholars in East Asia, where exchanges of people, technologies and implements have been extensive, to seek international academic exchanges in comparative folklore studies. Up until recently, many researchers in comparative folklore studies had concentrated on folk literature and folk religions and neglected comparative studies on folk cultural relics and folk implements. There is much room for exploring these areas. Some Japanese researchers have taken the initiative in the comparative study of folk implements.¹⁶ They made valuable attempts to compare specific farming tools such as sieves and ploughs from East Asia, while working on other themes in Chinese material culture.¹⁷ Chinese folklore scholars should do similar comparative studies before taking part in exchanges in East Asia. Chinese researchers should learn from Japanese and South Korean scholars about their achievements in folklore studies and their theories and methodology. They should also make more efforts to conduct field surveys and collect materials so that they can use their research findings in exchange and dialogues with their international counterparts.

Folk cultural relics and folk implements have many things in common in terms of their contemporariness and the fact that they are material embodiments of ordinary lived culture. More importantly, these implements are still in actual use today. Researchers can understand China's tradition of artisan culture to some extent by studying folk implements. Moreover, the study itself is the most fundamental research of people's lived culture. In other words, folk implements are one form of Chinese tradition, material evidence of an ever-developing resource: the experiences and ingenuity of ordinary people.

1 The author has once introduced the history, theories, methodology of Japanese researches on folk implements to Chinese folklore scholars to heighten their awareness of this important field of studies.

See "Research Theories and Methodology of Japanese Folk implements Studies (March, 2003)" by Zhou Xing

2 "The 58th issue of Weekly Folk Songs" (June 8, 1924)

3 The following are noteworthy achievements in this area:

- "Chinese Arts Vol.11 Arts and Crafts: Wares Made of Bamboos, Wood, Ivory and Horns" compiled by the Chinese Arts Compilation Committee (Wenwu Press, 1987).

- "Chinese Art Vol.12 Arts and Crafts: Folk Toys (paper cutter pictures and shadow dramas)" (People's Art Publishing House, 1988)

- The following volumes in "Chinese Folk Arts" (Hua-Yi Publishing House) compiled by Wang Chaowen,

— "Chinese Folk Arts Vol. 2 Rituals, Book on offerings" (1994)

- “Chinese Folk Arts Vol. 4 Living Furnishings” (1994)
 - “Chinese Folk Arts Vol. 7 Daily Utensils” (1994)
 - “Chinese Folk Arts Vol. 8 Utensils, Book on Tools” (1994)
 - “Chinese Folk Arts Vol. 13 Entertainment, Book on Toys” (1993)
- 4 “The Encyclopedia of China; Cultural Relics Museums” (588p.) of the Encyclopedia of China series (1993)
 - 5 The Chinese Folklore Society established an ethnic and folklore museum panel in 1996. See a list of Chinese ethnic and folklore museums included in the “Dictionary of Chinese Ethnic and Folk Cultural Relics.” (The list does not include museums set up by individual collectors.)
 - 6 “Collections of Folklore Articles in Shanghai Villages” by Qian Minquan (Shanghai People’s Publishing House, September 2000)
 - 7 “Discussions on Folk Cultural Relics” by Sung Zhaolin (Zijincheng (Forbidden City) Publishing House, September 2000) ; “Intensive Research on Material Culture” by Sung Zhaolin in “A miscellany of papers presented at the academic study meeting marking the 20th anniversary of the establishment of Chinese Folklore Society” (November 2003)
 - 8 “Material Culture in Yunnan: Agricultural articles (2-book series) by Yin Shaoting (Yunnan Education Publishing House, 1996) ; “Material Culture in Yunnan: Food-Gathering, Fishing and Hunting” by Luo Yu (Yunnan Education Publishing House, 1996)
 - 9 “Studies on Wooden Rice Farming Tools and Daily Things” by Jin Xi and Long Zhiming in Vol. 3 of “the 1993 Folklore Studies”
 - 10 “Tradition and Changes: Field Studies on Old and New Folk Ceramics in Jingdezhen” by Fang Lili (Jiangxi People’s Publishing House, October 2000)
 - 11 “Dictionary of Chinese Footwear Culture” compiled by Ye Dabing and Qian Jinbo (Shanghai Sanlian Publishing House, October 2001)
 - 12 The following is literature referred to by the author:
 - “Picture Book of Chinese Farming Utensils” Vol.1 compiled by Sung Shuyou (China Agricultural Publishing House, December 2001) ; “Chinese Traditional Farming Utensils Preserved by Chinese Agriculture Museum” (China Agricultural Publishing House, September 2002) ; “Chinese Chopstick Culture Outlook” by Liu Yun (Science Press, China, August 1996)
 - 13 “Dictionary of Ethnic and Folk Cultural Relics” compiled by Sung Zhaolin and Gao Ke (Shanxi People’s Publishing House, September 2004)
 - 14 “Pictorial Introduction to Folk Implements” by Keitaro Miyamoto (*Kashiwashobo*, February 1991) ; “Dictionary of Japanese Folk Implements” compiled by *Mingu-Gakkai* or Folk Implements Society of Japan (*Gyosei Shuppan*, May 1997) : “Dictionary of Tama Folk Implements” compiled by *Kanto Mingu Kenkyu-kai* or Folk implements Study Group in Kanto (*Keyaki* Publishing House, October 1997)
 - 15 See “Local Communities and Folklore Studies” by Kenji Sano translated by He Bin in the Vol.2 of “the 2005 *Minkan Bunka Rondan* (Folk Culture Discussion)”
 - 16 “Handbook for Folklore Implement Studies” (in Japanese) compiled by Hiromi Iwai, Takeharu Kawaoka and Tadashi Kinoshita (pp. 296-310) (*Yuzankaku*, November 1985)
 - 17 “Pictorial Records of Traditional Production Tools in Southwestern China” (in Japanese) by Takeshi Watabe and Junko Watabe (*Keiyusha*, 2000) ; “Studies on Clothes Culture of Han People in the 20th Century” by Chiemi Yamauchi (Northwest University Press, August 2000)