

Yanagita Kunio and Agricultural Policy: Finding the Man Behind the Mythology

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Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962) was arguably Japan’s most influential intellectual in the twentieth century, but what drove Yanagita, what was important to him, and ultimately, how can we best understand his life and legacy today? Using writings translated here for the first time from Yanagita’s most significant and revealing works (gleaned from a lifetime of “Yanagita studies” by Iwamoto Yoshiteru), we attempt to uncover his intellectual and ideological foundations, and to argue that Yanagita’s formative education and experiences in agricultural policy shaped the aims, nature, and theoretical development of his folklore studies. Moreover, in exploring such themes as the village, family, rural poverty, urban migration, and pastoral romanticism, we recontextualize Yanagita’s thoughts and actions, and ultimately reevaluate the man mythologized as Japan’s pioneering folklorist.

Keywords: agricultural cooperative, agricultural policy, agronomy, anthropology, ethnology, folklore studies, political economy, village, family, parasitic landlordism

As an agronomist, bureaucrat, editorialist, writer, part-time academic, the founder of Japanese folklore studies, and a loyal and highly decorated servant of Japan, Yanagita Kunio’s 柳田國男 (1875–1962) numerous writings—originally released in a definitive thirty-six volume collection with five appended volumes and recently reedited as a thirty-five volume series with four appended volumes—continue to be reprinted to this day.¹ In addition to Yanagita’s voluminous books, articles, reports, and speeches, there is also a tremendous amount of secondary literature on his life and work widely circulating in Japan. Although only a fraction of this huge body of work has been translated into European

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1 TYKS, YKZA, and YKZZ.

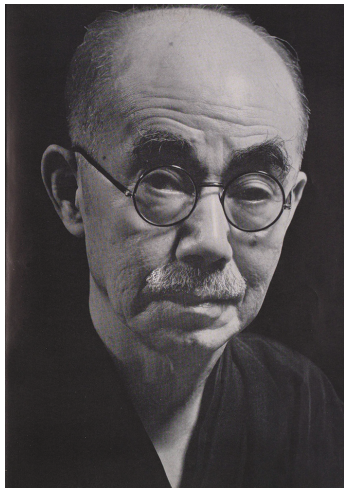


Figure 1. Yanagita Kunio, photographed for the magazine *Fūbō* 風貌 in 1953. Courtesy of Portraits of Modern Japanese Historical Figures, National Diet Library, Japan.

languages, Yanagita has the rare distinction of being proudly referred to as an “intellectual giant” of modern Japan.²

Yanagita’s popularity grew during Japan’s imperial heyday (1894–1945), when he started collecting folklore to gain an insight into the world and thoughts of the “original” Japanese people.³ He traveled widely throughout the various parts of the archipelago and the colonial territories of that time, seeking answers to the question: “Who are the Japanese?” The three pioneering works that initially emerged from these efforts, *Nochi no kari kotoba no ki* 後狩詞記 (Hunting terminology, 1909), *Ishigami mondō* 石神問答 (A dialogue with ishigami, 1910), and *Tōno Monogatari* 遠野物語 (Legends of Tōno, 1910) are all now considered classics.⁴ Their publication is said to herald the establishment of the new science of “Yanagita ethnology” (*Yanagita minzokugaku* 柳田民俗学).⁵ During the postwar period, anthropologists, ethnologists, ethnographers, linguists, oral historians, philologists, sociologists, and others combined critical aspects of Yanagita’s thinking and pioneering methodology into “folkloristics” or in more neutral, contemporary terms: Japanese (or native) folklore studies (*Nihon/genchi minzokugaku* 日本・現地民俗学).⁶

2 Kuwayama 2004, p. 64. For more perspective, see also Morse 2012; Koschmann et al. 2010.

3 Yanagita’s involvement in the formulation of colonial policy is explored in Iwamoto and Bytheway 2015c. Regarding how his career intersected, colluded, and collided with Japanese imperialism, see Christy 2012, pp. 236–246; also Iwamoto 1992; Murai 1992 and Kawamura 1996.

4 These were all initially self-published by Yanagita for distribution among his acquaintances. For the backstory on Yanagita and his time in Tōno, see Iwamoto 1983b; Iwamoto 1992. On the *Tōno Monogatari*, see Ortobasi 2009; also available in English as *The Legends of Tono*, trans. Ronald Morse (Lexington Books, 2008 [1975]).

5 Privileging spoken over written language, Yanagita used two different Chinese ideograms for *zoku*—族 and 俗—in *minzokugaku*, allowing his work to be translated as both anthropology and/or ethnology. As Alan Christy rightly notes, and we note below in different contexts, Yanagita was inconsistent and undisciplined in his use of terminology. He used the English terms “rural economy” and “folklore” together with “anthropology” and “ethnology,” all alongside the Japanese “national language studies” (*kokugakugo* 国学語), “new national studies (nativism)” (*shinkokugaku* 新国学), “popular traditions” (*minkan denshō* 民間伝承), “native place studies” (*kyōdo kenkyū* 郷土研究), and “native ethnology” (*genchi minzokugaku* 現地民俗学), while arguing for the use of “Yanagita ethnology” (*Yanagita minzokugaku* 柳田民俗学・民族学) inside Japan. See Christy 2012, pp. 6–8.

6 Kawade Shobō Shinsha Henshūbu 2014; Iwamoto and Bytheway 2015c, p. 73.

In the postwar period, Yanagita found a wide variety of new admirers across Japan's political spectrum, from orthodox Marxists on the left to liberal intellectuals on the right. His scholarly investigations into the philology of Japan's early classical literature (*kokugaku* 国学), which sought to ascertain Japan's indigenous values before the introduction of Chinese civilization, dovetailed into the emerging and very popular *Nihonjin-ron* 日本人論 boom of the 1970s. *Nihonjin-ron*, literally the “theory of being Japanese,” is a curious genre of study that discusses—often at great length—issues surrounding Japanese national and cultural identity. Serendipitously, Yanagita's earlier works, such as *Yama no jinsei* 山の人生 (Mountain life, 1925), were viewed as prototypical *Nihonjin-ron*, and his own authoritative *Nihonjin* 日本人 (The Japanese, 1954) was republished in 1976 as a “special edition” while the boom was cresting.⁷ Following Yanagita's death in 1962, his extraordinary influence and popularity extended towards the younger dynamic of Japan's disaffected and radical student movements.⁸ Tellingly, non-Japanese scholars, such as Kevin Doak, Marilyn Ivy, Gerald Figal, and Harry Harootunian, “discovered” Yanagita in the decade or so from 1990 (just after Japan's long period of high-speed, economic growth had peaked).⁹ Today, his Japanese readership extends from social progressives to cultural conservatives, and further right, finding particular favor among nationalist scholars. Almost uniquely, it seems, Yanagita is a man for all political seasons.

The origins of the present article reside in the summation of a presentation on “Yanagita Kunio and Agricultural Policy” prepared by Iwamoto Yoshiteru for symposia related to the one-hundred-year anniversary of Yanagita's birth. Iwamoto's intention was to present Yanagita critically as a man, rather than as a prophet or as the “founder” (*sōritsusha* 創立者) of a new science.¹⁰ The paper sought to reveal the true “student of agricultural policy” (*nōseigakusha* 農政学者) behind the mythic “folklorist/ethnologist” (*minzokugakusha* 民俗学者). Iwamoto rejects the dialectic notion of Yanagita as a young bureaucrat and an old folklorist, which privileges what he became and dismisses what he was, and instead emphasizes the intellectual constancies and continuities in Yanagita's writings.¹¹ Yanagita was attempting to effect profound changes in the rural life of the Japanese people throughout his entire life, initially as a bureaucrat and ultimately as a folklorist, however decontextualized and deified he later became. Seen in this light, “Yanagita ethnology” was his new way of working within agricultural policy, albeit in a range of new and pragmatic guises that were appropriate for their times.

Bytheway was first asked to translate this project into English sometime in the late 1990s but was unable to pin down the distinctive writing styles of both Yanagita and Iwamoto. Thus, what started out as a straight, uninterrupted translation of Iwamoto and Yanagita's Japanese-language writings necessarily changed over time owing to the needs of its English-language readers.¹² Moreover, making the work more accessible to a non-Japanese

7 Like much of Yanagita's work in the 1920s, the pieces that became *Yama no jinsei* were initially published serially in *Asahi Newspaper* publications, in this case *Asahi Graph* アサヒグラフ 4:2–5:7 in 1925, and then reprinted as a single volume, see Yanagita 1926. For *Nihonjin*, see Yanagita 1954; Yanagita 1976a.

8 Takayanagi 1974, pp. 329–335.

9 Doak 1994; Ivy 1995; Figal 1999; Harootunian 2000.

10 See Kawade Shobō Shinsha Henshūbu 2014.

11 Iwamoto 1985; Iwamoto 1990.

12 Specifically, the introduction, subtitles, conclusion, references, and footnotes were all added by Bytheway in consultation with Iwamoto.

audience required additional research, explanation, and contextual information: in short, an English-language channeling of Iwamoto's original ideas and thesis. The result is a unique insight into the intellectual formation and socioeconomic underpinnings of the enigmatic Yanagita Kunio, a synthesis hitherto unavailable in any language.

We begin here by discussing Yanagita's endearing conviction that learning reveals powers by which the world may be saved and how rural Japan, with its "vast unknown history" of poverty, was the world that he felt compelled to save. Naturally, Yanagita's personal experience of profound socioeconomic transformation in rural Japan colored his career as an agronomist, bureaucrat, diplomat, and editorialist. We consider how Yanagita's leaning towards the German historical school of political economy shaped his thoughts on the role of agricultural policy in Japan's modern, nation-building endeavors. We also investigate Yanagita's ideological promotion of a "healthy" middle-class peasantry, paying particular attention to how his concept of the village and the family intersected with his spirited belief in the importance of an "everlasting" transgenerational, rural family. We then delve into Yanagita's own experience of childhood to reveal the source of his concern with rural poverty, the "disease of the nation," parasitic landlordism, and the breakup of peasant families. Finally, we address Yanagita's romantic turn, and comment on the present-day relevance of his most used and misconstrued quotes in the coda. Each section stands alone thematically, which entails some chronological cycling. Many of Yanagita's most important insights gleaned from his childhood came to him in middle age. Nevertheless, the order of the sections is presented broadly in sequential, historical order, and our work starts out with a young Yanagita who was patently not afraid to ask, and answer, big questions.

Yanagita as Agronomist and "Learning is the Salvation of the World" (1897–1902)

Yanagita's iconic phrase, "learning is the salvation of the world" (*gakumon kyūsei* 学問救世) captures his practical attitude toward learning.¹³ Against a backdrop of rapid industrialization—and attendant Westernization—threatening to destroy the very basis of traditional Japanese culture, Yanagita declared that it was his lifework to answer the question, "Why are peasants so poor?"¹⁴ The first thing that we must grasp, therefore, is that for Yanagita the study of folklore does not imply some kind of intellectual escape from reality. On the contrary, as the founder of folklore studies in Japan, Yanagita proudly claimed that his new discipline had a practical, useful purpose which set it apart from all its intellectual predecessors and competitors. Moreover, Yanagita believed that research undertaken in such a practical spirit was substantially more useful and meaningful than those studies that originated without it.¹⁵

13 The phrase echoes "govern the people for the sake of the country" (*keisei saimin* 經世濟民), from which the modern Japanese word for economy (*keizai* 經濟) is derived. The *keisei saimin* ideology of statecraft was deeply inculcated in Yanagita during his studies at Tokyo Imperial University, as noted throughout Yanagita Kenkyūkai 1988, see for example p. 1054. The first clause of the Imperial University Order (1886) clearly stated their aim as being "to teach the arts and sciences in accordance with the priorities of the State."

14 The questions, "Who are the Japanese?" or "What is it to be Japanese?" were not commensurate in Yanagita's priorities. See Kawada 1993, p. 111; also Iwamoto 1976, pp. 6–12, 106–108; Gotō 1976, pp. 57–60.

15 Yanagita knew that such research might *in reality* provide only the mildest of relief to the poor or indigent; nevertheless, the fact that the research had been done with practical intentions made it substantially more useful and meaningful than it would have been otherwise. See Yanagita 1976a, pp. 33–57.

It is of fundamental importance that Yanagita began his university studies and career as a “hands-on” agronomist, one dedicated to the socially useful study of plant genetics, plant physiology, ethnobotany, and soil science.¹⁶ None of Yanagita’s followers had the same engagement with this deeply humanitarian and scientific calling. Intriguingly, Yanagita did not promote folklore studies as having a specifically agricultural orientation when he laid down its founding principles. Being the only agronomist in the group, however, he emphasized its grounding in agronomy in order to take sole credit for synthesizing folklore studies as a new discipline “born of the soil,” as it were. Consequently, Yanagita’s brand of Japanese folklore studies—conceived and promoted by him in the early 1930s as *Yanagita minzokugaku*—was pursued by his most ardent admirers and acolytes, evolving into the different and variegated schools of Yanagita-inspired studies, some of which are still active and influential today. Nevertheless, it must be said that Japanese folklore studies has devolved into an “unobtrusive interest” (*tōkai shumi* 韜晦趣味) and thus fallen some way short of Yanagita’s original goal of it being a useful and practical science. Moreover, Yanagita’s conception and definition of his ethnology, or folklore studies, was notoriously vague, elastic, and changed quite dramatically over time.¹⁷

Critical examination of Yanagita’s early career provides important new insights as to why he hoped to promote his new brand of practical folklore studies. Yanagita studied agricultural policy (*nōseigaku* 農政学) as a student of the law department at Tokyo Imperial University (present-day Tokyo University) from April 1897, and graduated ninth in his class of fifty-five students in March 1900.¹⁸ In July of that year he entered the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce (Nōshōmushō 農商務省), and was initially involved in the promotion of agricultural cooperatives in accordance with the Agricultural Cooperatives Act of 1900 (Sangyō Kumiai Hō 産業組合法).¹⁹ Right from the outset, Yanagita thought that he was eminently qualified to review and critique political decisions, especially as they related to agricultural and social policies, and he had his own firm opinions on what government policy ought to be.²⁰ Diagnosing agriculture as suffering from chronic underinvestment owing to the immense labor it entailed, and the low profits it generated, he contributed to the drafting of new legislation designed to foster its development.

The young Yanagita forcibly argued that Japan’s political leaders had to reconsider the old system of agriculture, where the subsistence and self-sufficiency of the peasantry (*nōmin* 農民) were the primary goals. Rather than treat agriculture as an independent industry, the main gist of Yanagita’s thinking—based on the principle of the division of labor—was that expert knowledge should be brought in from outside to introduce and improve new production methods. Critically, Yanagita believed that education was necessary to bring about a radical change in the peasants’ understanding of agriculture. The aim was to foster the growth of a prosperous middle-class peasantry who could make their living exclusively

16 For further discussion of the importance of early career experiences on Yanagita’s subsequent folklore studies, see Morse 1990, pp. 1–22.

17 Iwamoto 1976, pp. 6–10. *Tōkai shumi* may be a little harsh; see Iwamoto 1982 and Iwamoto 1983a.

18 Ishii 1998, p. 44.

19 Please note that Yanagita was inconsistent, contrarian, and permissive in his references to “agricultural policy” which he wrote in many different ways over his lifetime (*nōseigaku*, *nōgyō seisaku* 農業政策, *nōgyō seigaku* 農業政学, *nōgyō seisakugaku* 農業政策学, *nōgyō seisakugaku to kokka* 農業政策学と国家).

20 Nakamura 1967, p. 176.

by agriculture, educated in the latest and best agricultural practices. Henceforth, agriculture was to be regarded as a “vocation” (*shokugyō* 職業), not as an “occupation” (*seigyō/nariwai* 生業), one elevated in status as a *professional* calling. Yanagita’s ideas were formed by his own experience of meeting peasants all across Japan when he visited their villages in order to promote new “agricultural cooperative communities” (*kyōdōtai* 共同体). Most of the people he talked with were very poor, but their poverty was not caused by a lack of intelligence or hard work. Yanagita believed that the penetration of modern commercial agriculture into the villages had all too often led to financial destitution, and even though the rural people were aware of this, they had no way to save themselves from their awful predicament.²¹

The importance of agriculture to the economic life of Japan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century can hardly be overstated, as some two-thirds to four-fifths of Japanese people relied on agriculture for their livelihoods. Until around the time of Yanagita’s birth, rice (*koku* 石) was the standard of value, agricultural taxes were paid in kind, and all economics was essentially agricultural economics (*nōgyō keizai* 農業經濟). By the time Yanagita had reached adulthood, the rapidity of Japan’s industrial revolution was such that many flocked to the cities to find work, particularly to the six great cities of the Kantō and Kansai (Kinki 近畿) plains.²² Nevertheless, the number of “farm households” whose livelihood “was fully or partly depending on agricultural production (crop cultivation, livestock breeding, and sericulture)” remained remarkably stable from 1906 (when national statistical surveys began) to the mid-1960s, and peaked in 1950.²³ It was in these circumstances that the reform of agriculture—supporting agricultural production—thus became fundamental to Japan’s modern economic growth.

In the early twentieth century, parasitic landlordism had become so entrenched across Japan that Yanagita despaired for the prospects of agricultural development. The number of tenants unable to earn their living by working in agriculture would increase, and as a result, agriculture would become a national handicap, the “disease of the nation” (*kuni no yamai* 國の病). In order to avoid this dire situation, Yanagita saw the need for agrarian reform, arguing that proprietary rights in arable land “should belong to the peasants” if at all possible and that continued parasitic landlordism was socially corrosive and politically unsustainable.²⁴ Many decades later, something like these agrarian reforms—most critically the prohibition of absentee landlordism—were enacted, as a signature achievement of the postwar Allied Occupation of Japan.

Yanagita also pointed out the dire problems caused by rent being paid in kind. His opinions, however, were roundly ignored both in academic and bureaucratic circles owing to the prevailing physiocratic principles (*nōhonshugi* 農本主義) wholly focused on the conservation of the peasantry’s small-scale agriculture (*shōnōgyō hogoron* 小農業保護論). That is, in order to support the growth of Japan’s great cities it was imperative that the peasants

21 Iwamoto 1976, pp. 23–39. The source material is Yanagita’s “Nōseigaku” 農政学 in TYKS 28, pp. 187–285. Yanagita also wrote the similarly titled “Nōgyō seisakugaku” 農業政策学 in TYKS 28, pp. 287–421; and “Nōgyō seisaku” 農業政策 in TYKS 28, pp. 423–493.

22 The “six great cities” (*roku-dai toshi* 六大都市) of imperial Japan (from north to south) were Tokyo, Yokohama, Nagoya, Kyoto, Osaka, and Kobe.

23 Institute of Developing Economies 1969, pp. 109, 114–117.

24 Iwamoto 1976, pp. 35–39; Iwamoto 1978; and Iwamoto and Kunikata 1997.

perform their vital role in basic agricultural production.²⁵ Critically, the peasants did not share in, or even understand, Yanagita's intentions for them, although his efforts were meant to serve their interests (unrequited understanding was to be a reoccurring theme throughout Yanagita's life).²⁶ Thus, Yanagita seemingly abandoned his forays into agricultural policy and reform, experiencing a palpable, and self-publicized, awareness of his failures. Chastising himself later, the thirty-five-year-old Yanagita pointedly wrote in the preface of *Jidai to nōsei* 時代と農政 (Agricultural policy and the times, 1910), "How diligently and zealously a man must apply himself to his studies if he is to attain a greatness that can lead his generation or define a new age."²⁷

Yanagita as Bureaucrat, Diplomat, and Editorialist (1902–1930)

After working at the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce for just eighteen months, Yanagita was appointed as a Councilor of the Legislative Bureau on 12 February 1902. Distinguishing himself as both diligent and brilliant, he subsequently rose dramatically in rank and prestige, ultimately being appointed as Secretary-General of the House of Peers. Yanagita's decorated career as a bureaucrat, however, ended abruptly after he was accused of being "unenthusiastic in his duties" (*shokumu ni funesshin* 職務に不熱心) in April 1919 by Tokugawa Iesato 徳川家達 (1863–1940), the President of the House of Peers. Despite the (still murky) intervention of the "commoner" Prime Minister Hara Takashi 原敬 (1856–1921) on the "commoner" Secretary-General's behalf, Yanagita was forced to resign some eight months later, on 23 December 1919.²⁸

Seemingly unperturbed, Yanagita joined the Tokyo Asahi Newspaper Company in July 1920 as an "associate" (*kyakuin* 客員) or guest writer and devoted his spare time to promoting folklore studies. In May of the following year, Yanagita was appointed as Japan's representative to the League of Nations Permanent Mandates Committee and was dispatched to Geneva, with the glowing recommendation of another one-time agronomist, Nitobe Inazō 新渡戸稲造 (1862–1933). Following the Great Kantō earthquake on 1 September 1923, however, Yanagita returned anxiously to Japan on 8 November 1923 and formally resigned from his post in December of the same year. On 7 February 1924, he was appointed, along with the prominent Christian professor-turned-politician Yoshino Sakuzō 吉野作造 (1878–1933), as joint editor-in-chief to the Asahi Newspaper Company.²⁹

As Yanagita won fame in these new positions, people forgot that he had once been a specialist in agricultural policy. On returning from Europe in November 1923, Yanagita apparently thought that owing to the immense socioeconomic changes of the interwar

25 Iwamoto 1976, pp. 23–39.

26 See Iwamoto and Bytheway 2015c, pp. 72–73.

27 TYKS 16, p. 6, first published as Yanagita 1910.

28 Yanagita Kenkyūkai 1988, pp. 24–25. Being unenthusiastic in one's duties was a dire allegation and came at a cost. Apparently, Tokugawa Iesato disliked Yanagita's general dress sense and his penchant for long and frequent "business trips." Or was it simply that Yanagita once refused to carry Tokugawa's briefcase? For more on Yanagita, the "elite bureaucrat," see Ishii 1998, pp. 80–84.

29 Iwamoto and Bytheway 2015c, p. 74; also Burkman 2012. Yanagita was initially an "associate" at the Tokyo Asahi Newspaper Company, but quickly rose through the ranks to become a joint editor-in-chief to the Asahi Newspaper Company (Asahi Shinbunsha Henshūkyoku Komon Ronsetsu Tantō 朝日新聞社編集局顧問論説担当) in less than four years. While "editor-in-chief" was Yanagita's official English-language job title, there was a division of labor between him and Yoshino, and in reality he served as an editorial advisor, as the Japanese job title makes clear.

period, “my earlier study of agricultural policy was useless.”³⁰ Indeed, it was ostensibly for this reason that he left the bureaucracy to become a writer. With this in mind, however, we should pay attention to the editorials that Yanagita wrote for the *Asahi* newspaper, at a rate of between one and three a week from 7 February 1924 to 20 November 1930. By definition, a newspaper editorial should be topical and cover the major (often ongoing) issues of the day. Moreover, the company had specifically hired Yanagita as a legal and political insider to comment on the news of the nation’s capital and premier city. Nevertheless, of the 389 editorials that Yanagita wrote, 68 (approximately 20 percent) were concerned with agricultural policy, on topics such as mountain, fishing, and farming villages, methods of agriculture, the provision of foodstuffs, and, critically, rice and produce prices. Readers may not have thought too deeply about the author of these editorials, but it is clear that Yanagita retained his agronomy-based approach, or in more modern terms a socioeconomic viewpoint, and remained intensely interested in all things agricultural. Among the public at that time, these pastorally themed editorials contributed to the broad-minded, cosmopolitan, and progressive image of the *Asahi* newspaper.³¹

As an unnamed editorialist, Yanagita unstintingly criticized the promotion of monoculture and an agricultural policy which brought about “unnaturally purified agriculture” (*fushizen naru junnōka* 不自然なる純農化) or “simplified production” (*seisan no tanjunka* 生産の単純化). Yanagita thought that Japan’s historic (over) emphasis on sericulture and rice production, along with the rise of parasitic landlordism, meant that peasants were unable to depend solely on agriculture to earn a living, and consistently argued that agricultural policy should reduce the concentration of wealth held among landlords. While these ideas were coached in editorial rhetoric about “keeping a balance” and “the interests of the nation as a whole,” Yanagita should be considered a leading critic of the undue concentration of wealth brought about by absentee landlordism, for, “government policy aims to increase agricultural production, but it serves a still more important purpose, namely, the well-being of the nation as a whole. Production itself, therefore, should never be the ultimate goal for the individual, or the government.”³² Fine words from Yanagita for a daily newspaper, but with editorial freedoms chastened by the rise of militarism, the formal and informal imperialism that Yanagita had been so deeply enmeshed in now threatened to contain him. In the 1930s, he increasingly pursued new opportunities as a folklorist with his own distinctly “local, hometown” (*kyōdo* 郷土) focus on the village and the family, his days as the voice or conscience of a city newspaper now over.

Yanagita’s Inclination Towards Political Economy (1902–1949)

Even in his earliest days, when he was active as both an agronomist and bureaucrat, Yanagita consciously tried to avoid the indiscriminate or uncritical adoption of contemporary Western theories and theoretical constructs. Yanagita rejected *laissez-faire* capitalism, thought that distribution was more important than production (which “should never be the ultimate goal”), and emphasized the need for state intervention in the economy. Close study of his books, articles, speeches, and editorials show that Yanagita came to be deeply influenced by

30 Kawada 1993, p. 117.

31 Iwamoto 1976, p. 10.

32 Iwamoto 1976, pp. 108–109; 73–74.

the German historical school of political economy during his university education. That is, Yanagita believed in the importance of empirical and inductive reasoning, dynamic learnings contextualized in a nation's historical experience, rather than the ahistorical “laws” of economic science, deductively reasoned by the classical economists. Japan was a “late developing nation” (*kōshin koku* 後進国) like Germany, not a pioneer of the industrial revolution like Britain, Belgium, or France. Thus, the works of Friedrich List (1789–1846) were much more practical and useful to Yanagita than those of David Ricardo (1772–1823) or John Stuart Mill (1806–1873).³³ Indeed, accepting the German historical school's promotion of protectionist economic policy—as an instrument of nation-building—was an entirely sensible approach to the Japanese paradigm. In this respect, Yanagita was entirely a man of his time.³⁴

The “govern the people for sake of the country” ideology of Meiji statecraft was deeply ingrained into Yanagita as a young student, and the vital role played by politics in economic development was a key insight gained from the German historical school, but to this he added his own ideas about the importance of having a practical attitude toward learning. As Yanagita observed in these key quotes from 1929 to 1947:

Though studies are based on thorough research and knowledge, they typically lack a theoretical framework to unify them as a whole. Some people may doubt the existence of some such theoretical framework, but in truth it is indispensable. As evidence we can see that various studies cannot be harmonized [with each other] if they neglect having a theoretical framework to unify them. Theories derived from politics are essential.

Seinen to gakumon 青年と学問 (Young men and learning, 1929)³⁵

Studies must be directed towards contributing to the betterment of humanity. At present, each study occupies its own ground or field, but this is only a temporary trend, prevailing until studies can better contribute to one another [across disciplines]. Many of today's academics seem to have lost sight of this important goal.

Minkan denshōron 民間伝承論 (A treatise on traditional folklore, 1934)³⁶

Generally speaking, there is a tendency to think that studies devoted to supplying those things that the world demands are somehow a corruption of learning. Some academics feel that learning is demeaned by the requirement that it be useful in the present context. Frankly speaking, nothing is more ridiculous than this attitude. It is despicable if one has a position as an academic merely in order to earn a living, or to be called an “intellectual” and always be right, but how can one be despised for aspiring to use one's own learning for the well-being of our nation? Those who want to do so [be useful], but cannot, must feel rather guilty.

“Gendai kagaku to iu koto” 現代科学といふこと (Modern science, 1947)³⁷

33 Iwamoto 1976, pp. 40–48; Nakamura 1967, p. 212.

34 See Ericson 2016, pp. 106–109; Ericson 2020, pp. 46–47; Metzler 2006; and Pyle 1974.

35 TYKS 25, p. 184, later revised as Yanagita 1976b.

36 TYKS 25, p. 335, first published as Yanagita 1934. Partially available in English as “On Folklore Studies,” trans. Carol Gluck in *Sources of East Asian Tradition. Volume 2: The Modern Period*, ed. Wm. Theodore De Bary (Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 940–941.

37 TYKS 31, pp. 14–15, first published as Yanagita 1947.

Here we may sense something of Yanagita's prodigious drive. From the beginning of his reinvention—his reincarnation—as a folklorist, Yanagita criticized institutional academicism and sought to distance his new social science from other academic disciplines, such as anthropology, which were *in reality* closely related.³⁸ To put the matter simply, Yanagita believed that no study should be pursued without providing some practical benefit to humanity, for “learning is the salvation of the world.” Scholarship was good only if it was clearly useful, an unsettling and unwelcome thought for many of those who work at universities, then and now!

Yanagita's view of politics as a synthetic study which should contribute to the betterment of humanity seems to have run counter to those of the preeminent Marxist economist Uno Kōzō 宇野弘蔵 (1897–1977) in his discussion on the ideal formation of economic policy below:

The present-day discussion of economic policy seems to be really inadequate as it concentrates on immediate measures to fulfil practical purposes, and it draws on only very general rules derived from the history of economic policy and adopted in the development of capitalism ... this analysis does not help to achieve any immediate practical purpose in and of itself, but only provides as many scientific rules as possible for practical actions. Economic policy is distorted in the process, but, in fact, the social sciences cannot contribute to practical actions without using the above methodology.

Keizai seisaku ron 経済政策論 (Economic policy theory, 1954)³⁹

The difference between Yanagita and Uno on the usefulness, or practicality, of learning was more than a matter of approach. Yanagita professed to be an advocate of contemporary political economy, while Uno, following Marx's trenchant critique of the capitalist mode of production and classical political economy in *Das Kapital*, was highly critical of it.⁴⁰ Marxism represented high-level theory lacking low-level, concrete plans for the way forward. Dogmatically, Yanagita believed that there should be no study without practical instruction.

Moreover, Yanagita always aimed for his learning to be useful, not in the lowly manner of a government-sponsored scholar, but in the elevated manner of a loyal subject working tirelessly for “the wellbeing of our nation as a whole.” He wished to engage in a grand, long-term national project for the benefit of posterity. For that reason, even when he was in a position that allowed him to participate in the policy and planning decisions of the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce, he never yielded to the mainstream preoccupation with the conservation of small-scale agriculture so prevalent in contemporary academic and bureaucratic circles. As a result, very few people took any notice of him when he was a young man. In fact, Yanagita often remarked, and joked with his friends and acquaintances, that he was a failure as a politician.⁴¹ The disappointments of the unelectable agronomist and the frustrations of the middle-aged bureaucrat help explain why Yanagita reinvented himself

38 Oguma 2002, p. 200.

39 Uno 1954, p. 30.

40 See Marx 2013.

41 Muroi 2010, p. 267.

as a folklorist, and why his reputation was subsequently reevaluated so positively—as it continues to be even now.

In the wider context of the outbreak of financial and economic crises in the late 1920s, and the growing military encroachment on civilian government during the 1930s, Yanagita sought out long-term projects that he thought would be worthy of his talents and beneficial to the nation. The incidence of widespread rural poverty, in particular, caught his attention:

The great challenges of politics end with “the story of poverty.” The causes of poverty are quite complex, but many people have already found the basic reasons for it through exhaustive investigations. Although there is no debate over the truth of these findings, there is, as of yet, no conviction that poverty can be eradicated by eliminating its causes. The reason for this poverty can only be because there is a vast unknown history that remains around the subject.

Momen izen no koto 木綿以前の事 (Things before cotton, 1939)⁴²

The above quote indicates that Yanagita, with his belief that “learning is the salvation of the world,” recognized that he could not find the key to solving the problem of poverty without first making an exhaustive investigation of its “vast unknown history” (*bōbakutaru michi no rekishi* 茫漠たる未知の歴史). Yanagita plunged into folklore studies as a brand-new discipline in order to learn something of the pressing social phenomena of rural poverty. Indeed, Yanagita’s early brand of Japanese folklore studies staked its reputation on the “collection of empirical data” (*kisodēta no shūshū* 基礎データの収集) in order for it to be seen as being demonstrative and rational in nature.⁴³ Folklore studies was to be a science, not a mere collection of fragmentary knowledge. Thus, Yanagita made a sharp distinction between “those who gather” (*atsumaru mono* 集まる者) knowledge and those who, like himself, “think about it” (*kangaeru mono* 考える者), and constantly objected to what he felt were casual or offhand references to his research as being “folklore studies,” preferring for his works to be cited as part of his own special (if ill-defined) brand of “Yanagita ethnology.”⁴⁴ Yanagita also sought to unify political economy with original Japanese thought and culture through a “new study” of classical Japanese texts (*shin kokugaku* 新国学).⁴⁵ Yanagita’s long life of eighty-eight years was not, however, long enough for him to accomplish the work required to reach his aspirational goal. For this reason, Yanagita’s folklore studies are described as “unfinished” (*mikan* 未完) by friends and foes alike.⁴⁶

42 TYKS 14, pp. 196–197, revised forty years later as Yanagita 1979.

43 Kawada 1993, p. 111.

44 Iwamoto 1976, pp. 6–12. See earlier footnotes for discussions of Yanagita’s varied nomenclature.

45 The intellectual and political history of reenvisioning *kokugaku* is detailed in Fujiwara 2021, pp. 97–126.

46 Japanese-language studies also became another of Yanagita’s signature, long-term projects. From the latter part of the 1930s, and against a background of strenuous calls for the national language to be “protected and respected (*aigo to sonchō* 愛護と尊重) across the empire” as the war in China raged, Yanagita recognized that issues surrounding the development of the Japanese language, and especially how it was taught, were vital to the needs of Japan as an “advanced national defense nation” (*kōdo kokubō kokka* 高度国防国家). See Yanagita Kenkyūkai 1988, pp. 911–912. As memories of the war receded, Yanagita even went so far as to argue that failures in Japanese-language education, in how it was taught and specifically in “mouth imitation” (*kuchimane* 口真似), had been responsible for Japan’s loss in the war. See Iwamoto 1976, pp. 98–104, especially p. 102.

Tellingly, the phrase “the story of poverty” (*binbō monogatari* 貧乏物語) in the above quotation came from a famous book of the same title authored by Kawakami Hajime 河上肇 (1879–1946).⁴⁷ Yanagita’s observation that “many people have already found the basic reasons for [poverty] through exhaustive investigations” was a glib acknowledgement that Kawakami and other academics who had adopted Marxist approaches participated prominently in the controversies surrounding the introduction of capitalism in Japan. Kawakami, who had been two years junior to Yanagita at Tokyo Imperial University, became a celebrated professor and Dean of the School of Economics at Kyoto Imperial University. Incidentally, both of them had been intensively mentored in social policy by the same Professor of Political Economy and Finance, Matsuzaki Kuranosuke 松崎藏之助 (1866–1919). Nevertheless, when Kawakami published *Nippon sonnō ron* 日本尊農論 (The advocacy of agriculture in Japan, 1905), Yanagita doggedly criticized its “doctrine of the agricultural foundation of the country” (*sonnō kokka ron* 尊農国家論) in an article entitled “Jichi nōsei” 自治農政 (Self-governing agricultural policy, 1906).⁴⁸

Kawakami responded by publishing a revised edition of *Nippon sonnō ron*, making adjustments to accommodate his senior (*senpai* 先輩), especially in his definition of agriculture. Kawakami, in fact, quoted Yanagita extensively throughout the revised edition. Consequently, both Kawakami and Yanagita criticized not only the establishment of the Meiji state for its physiocratic principles (that all wealth flows from agriculture), but also for the agricultural basis of its commerce and industry. In its place they promoted a triangular model of agriculture, industry, and commerce. Before long, however, Kawakami and Yanagita parted ways. Even so, they shared much in common, both in their views of agriculture, and on the role of learning in the life of a nation, specifically the desirability of it having a practical application.

With respect to Marxism, Yanagita remained unimpressed by the application of Marxist analyses of Japanese society and was terse in his criticism:

It does not matter how courageously they argue; present-day communists are opposed to debate. Their theories are not only so unreasonable that they distress people, they are also impossible to realize. They cannot expect to elicit public support if they continue to deny that we Japanese have managed to survive by helping each other in villages for many ages [without communism].

Toshi to nōson 都市と農村 (Cities and villages, 1929)⁴⁹

Yanagita attempted to take his study of peasant history to another level when he explained community “spirit” in terms of the village (*mura*) and the family (*ie*), rejecting the use of Chinese ideograms to express what he claimed were essentially Japanese concepts with their own ancient etymologies, and instead employed the *katakana* script for writing village (ムラ) and family (イエ). Yanagita sought to express an essential truth of rural life when he wrote in 1935 that:

47 Kawakami 1917.

48 Kawakami 1905; YKZZ 23, pp. 423–426, originally in the *Nippon nōgyō zasshi* 日本農業雑誌 10 (1906).

49 TYKS 16, pp. 353–354.

It seems that the oldest forms for the organization of work were the village and the family. The words for village as well as family were synonymous with the organization of work.

Kyōdo seikatsu no kenkyū hō 郷土生活の研究法 (A study method of rural life, 1935)⁵⁰

We will discuss Yanagita's theories concerning the twin institutions of village and family below, but note here that *on this key point* Yanagita openly disagreed with the Marxist and communist positions. Significantly, while he worked at the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce, Yanagita took a keen interest in Fabianism, and discussed the works on public ownership of land by the American political economist Henry George (1839–1897), and Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) a polymath who, among other things, was a pioneering environmental and social activist.⁵¹ Yanagita was, however, critical of their ideas, on the grounds that he thought the private ownership of land impinged on the authority of the “law of the nation.” Greatly influenced by the German historical school of political economy, Yanagita privileged Japan's historical experience over the ahistorical theories of economic science and Marxism and supported the state's authority to shape appropriate and effective national policy. In a most intriguing quote, however, the young Yanagita seemed open to consideration of the issue:

It is quite another matter as to whether the theory of communism, or of the public ownership of land, is correct or not. There may be an argument that private property should be abolished—done away with—and it is not necessarily true that this is such a recklessly destructive discussion as some scholars seem to imagine.

Nōseigaku 農政学 (Agricultural policy, 1902)⁵²

Yanagita's criticism was particularly directed against those in academia who were intent on distancing themselves from party political communism for immediate personal gain. Coming from a bureaucrat during the Meiji era 明治 (1868–1912), the above remarks might be considered very liberal, perhaps uniquely so.

Agriculture as the “Disease of the Nation” (1900–1945)

As already mentioned, Yanagita disagreed with the conservation of the peasantry as presupposed by physiocratic principles of political economy, which was the dominant school of thought in the academic and bureaucratic circles of the Meiji era. He instead advocated policies designed to foster the growth of an independent, middle-class peasantry (*chūnō yōseisaku* 中農養成策). It is important to consider how Yanagita defined the middle-class peasantry. He pointed out that owing to the growth in parasitic landlordism, large-scale landowners no longer plowed their own fields, but rather chose to rent them out to tenants. As a result, the ranks of the landless tenants were increasing while middle-class peasants seemingly disappeared. Yanagita predicted that under these circumstances, where the countryside was dotted with many small, tenant-worked holdings of arable land, agriculture

50 YKZA 28, p. 289, first published as Yanagita 1935. See also Iwamoto 1978, p. 20.

51 See Barker 1955; Fichman 2003.

52 TYKS 28, p. 223, first published as Yanagita 1902a.

would never really develop or prosper. Yanagita thus argued for a sweeping, nationwide redistribution of land, one that could provide every rural household with propriety rights over “at least five acres of arable land.”⁵³ Under provisions in the Agricultural Cooperatives Act promulgated in 1900, Yanagita’s proposed agrarian reform was to be funded by the Hypothec Bank of Japan and the Agricultural Bank of Japan, established in 1897 by the imperial Japanese government expressly for the purposes of funding rural industry and promoting widespread agricultural development.⁵⁴ Of course, these financial institutions were part and parcel of an extraordinary network of parastatal, national policy “special banks” (*tokushu ginkō* 特殊銀行) that extended from Tokyo all the way out to Japan’s colonies and outposts.⁵⁵

While Yanagita’s proposed land redistribution would increase the land holdings of middle-class peasants, it also implied a sharp reduction in the numbers living on the land as commercialized tenant farmers. Using a proposed Land-Rent Purchasing Law (*Chidai Kaitori Hō* 地代買取法), progressive land-registration taxes (*ruishin tōroku zei* 累進登録税) and progressive land taxes (*ruishin chiso* 累進地租) as the main agents of change, Yanagita hoped to promote an equitable system of land ownership among the middle-class peasantry, and to put a stop to the “land consolidation” (*tochi no kenpei* 土地の兼併) which propelled and empowered absentee landlordism in rural Japan. These reforms, however, would not just redistribute the holdings of the landlords, but in doing so they would also deprive landless tenants of fields to rent, and force the poorest peasants out of the villages and off the land, most likely forever.⁵⁶

Here was the difference between Yanagita and those intent on the conservation and protection of the peasantry. The conservationists thought that migration to the cities would result in the collapse of rural villages, while Yanagita thought that this process was typical of an industrial revolution and not necessarily something to grieve over, especially given the lack of readily cultivable land in Japan. Moreover, Yanagita stressed that it was generally accepted that rural people had to find casual jobs on the side. As they could not live solely on the proceeds from agriculture, Yanagita thought that peasants should be encouraged to offer their surplus labor for employment elsewhere. A most suitable “side job” (*fukugyō* 副業) for peasants was one that allowed them to earn extra income by processing their own produce, thus reducing transport costs, and encouraging them to make good use of agricultural by-products generated from their fields. Off-season work related to sericulture, including silk spinning, along with tasks such as sandal-making and basket-weaving, were all, therefore, acceptable forms of side work. Yanagita, however, vehemently objected to the peasantry working in “secondary occupations” (*dainigyō* 第二業), especially those unrelated to agriculture. Yanagita believed that these secondary occupations, such as those in handicraft manufacturing, the retail and trading of non-agricultural products, and other miscellaneous business should not be done by members of families engaged in agriculture, but by others, because these secondary occupations dispersed and scattered labor, and

53 Iwamoto 1976, pp. 74–76, 296. Please note that Yanagita’s thinking on how much land peasant households needed to work and grow, as opposed to merely sustaining themselves, changed over time.

54 Iwamoto 1976, pp. 52–57.

55 See Bytheway 2019, pp. 85–90.

56 Iwamoto 1976, pp. 29–39; Fujii 1975, pp. 20–52.

distracted rural families from their vocation of agriculture, thus hindering Japan's overall agricultural development.⁵⁷

Yanagita pointedly criticized Yokoi Tokiyoshi 横井時敬 (1860–1927), a professor of agriculture from his alma mater at Tokyo Imperial University, who lamented the fact that peasants abandoned the land because of a “craze for urban life.” Yanagita charged that it was flippant and thoughtless to criticize peasants for “escaping” from rural life without first considering the reasons for their leaving, and without an understanding of the tremendous economic forces driving their migration to urban areas, the pace of which was “probably without historical parallel” in the world.⁵⁸ At that time, Yanagita thought that factory workers were in a “much better situation” than agricultural workers, and that something like 30 or 40 percent of the rural population ought to give up agriculture and move to the cities to find work.⁵⁹ The core of the middle-class peasantry, “from those families that had lived in the area for hundreds of years, maintained the land for generations, and were the backbone of the country as landowners,” however, had best stay in the villages. These were the “spirited” people of his “everlasting” Japan, the people whose stories and essence fascinated him, the people he would always fight for. Thus, Yanagita championed the protection, or retention, of a prosperous local peasantry in what came to be known as “resident landowner ideology” (*zaison jinushi ron* 在村地主論). Yanagita knew that as a result of parasitic landlordism, which went hand-in-hand with the alarming growth in rural tenancy, a great mass of long-exploited peasants had left the land in the last decades of the Meiji period. Nevertheless, he believed that these people could be brought back as independent landowners, cultivating the land as they had before as mainstays of a middle-class peasantry, providing that each household was able to cultivate approximately “five acres of land” apiece.⁶⁰

Yanagita's optimistic views were based on the assumption that Japan's early twentieth-century industrial growth and development would accommodate those unable to make a living from agriculture, and that the people who remained in the villages would subsequently become more educated and commercially minded in their operations.⁶¹ These views were diametrically opposed to those who wished to “protect and conserve” rural communities so that poor landless tenants and other agricultural workers were forced to offer their surplus labor to the burgeoning factories of the cities, and thus accept very low wages. Sakō Tsuneaki 酒匂常明 (1861–1909), a former superior of Yanagita's at the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce, who left government service to become president of the Great Japan Sugar Company (Dai Nippon Seitō 大日本製糖), was a leading advocate for the maintenance of a rural “status quo.” In fact, Sakō even gave a lecture at the second meeting of the Japan Social Policy Association (Nippon Shakai Seisaku Gakkai 日本社会政策学会) in December 1908 where the bureaucrat-turned-capitalist was highly critical of Yanagita's ideas and explicitly called for capital formation to be prioritized over the needs of agriculture. Yokoi (the storied Tokyo Imperial University professor mentioned above) was an altogether different type of opponent: a disparager of agrarian reform who refrained from addressing Yanagita's proposals head-on. Yokoi preferred to wear the camouflage of a moralist,

57 Iwamoto 1976, pp. 74–90. See also Iwamoto and Bytheway 2015b.

58 Harootunian 2000, p. 50; see also p. x.

59 See Iwamoto 1973.

60 Iwamoto 1976, pp. 76–77, 296.

61 See Yanagita 1945, pp. 63–74.

apparently anxious and worried about the fate of the healthy young people who left their villages to work in the cities, only to be irreparably harmed, both mentally and physically, by the decadence of the cities—the very same cities where men like Yokoi chose to live and raise their own families.⁶²

Yanagita consistently argued that any policy which used protectionism to coddle that part of the peasantry which could not survive independently—without government subsidies and political patronage—would become a cancer on the nation, a “national disease.”⁶³ That said, while Yanagita’s thinking on the matter was not taken up by, or discussed in, mainstream academic and bureaucratic circles, his ideal of agricultural self-sufficiency for rural Japan was not accepted by the peasants themselves either. It grated terribly on Yanagita that the very people he was fighting for “did not understand” his arguments, and often opposed him, with what he took for silent contempt. Consequently, he had to fight alone and without broad-based popular support during his last years in the bureaucracy.⁶⁴ Moreover, his efforts had failed to be socially useful in that they brought about much less practical change to the life of the peasantry, the rural life of Japanese people, than he had hoped for. Henceforth, Yanagita’s outstanding task was to promote agricultural self-sufficiency through different media and means, including a renewed interest in the publication of travelogues and his studies of folklore.

Yanagita on “Domicide,” “Everlastingness,” and Peasant Migration (1902–1935)

The above has shown that Yanagita championed the creation of a landowning, middle-class peasantry able to prosper from agriculture, and thus stay rooted to their villages. In comparison to his peers, Yanagita held a relatively optimistic view of outward peasant migration in the early part of the twentieth century. And yet a conflicted ambivalence is clearly evident in the introduction to his first book on the subject, published in 1902:

Although some spirited young people try to get ahead of others by leaving their hometown and parting from their relatives to work in a big city or a foreign country, they did not necessarily achieve more comfortable lives, even after a decade or so. In very rare cases, some have made their fortunes, returned home, and then taken up their ancestral occupations again. There has been a tendency for such outward migration to increase dramatically in recent years. Obviously, this is to the detriment of the local economy and disturbs the foundations of our national power. Moreover, most migrant families suffer a deterioration of morals from their reduced participation in traditional religious practices. This is a matter of both sadness and concern.

Saishin sangyō kumiai tsūkai 最新産業組合通解
(A new analysis of cooperative unions, 1902)⁶⁵

62 Iwamoto 1976, pp. 63–74. Much of Yokoi’s concern for the peasantry was driven by a fear of European-style socialism and communism: “We can only depend on the peasants. The city will forever be a factory of revolution, while the country will always be the protector of social order”; cited in Pyle 1974, p. 159.

63 TYKS 16, p. 159; see also Iwamoto 1976, pp. 34, 107.

64 See Iwamoto and Bytheway 2015c, pp. 72–73.

65 TYKS 28, pp. 3–4, first published as Yanagita 1902b.

Yanagita did not wish to stop poor people from leaving the village for the city if they could not feed themselves, or to make a living from their agricultural earnings, but he did worry, at length, about young adults who left the village never to return. For Yanagita this loss was not only detrimental to the rural economy and Japan's productive power, but it also weakened the core institutions of the family and the native Shinto religion. In the background was Yanagita's own bitter experience of poverty, of losing his family, his hometown, and his childhood identity. Yanagita's family of ten had been split up and separated, owing to their lack of means and material possessions, leaving him with a strong desire to protect the family as a core institution.

The most distinctive aspect of Yanagita's discussion of the family is his emphasis on "domicide" (*iegoroshi* 家殺し), that is, the breakdown of the family into separate individual units. Yanagita's concept of family is a system in which living people, in "contact" with their ancestors through Shinto rituals, feel a sense of responsibility towards their forebears, and are thus duty bound to make the family flourish for their descendants in order to pay homage to the "will of their ancestors" (*ishi* 遺志). Thus "domicide" occurs not only when a family breaks up, but also when the family's intergenerational bonds are disavowed or forgotten. An individual thus has a responsibility to preserve the will of the ancestors for the sake of future generations (posterity). Critically, Yanagita believed that the concept of a relationship between one's ancestors and posterity had become weaker among those who migrated to the cities, and those who no longer saw value in the inter or transgenerational connectedness of the family. This was a serious matter for Yanagita, who had publicly criticized the views of Yokoi and others as being "pessimistic," and constantly refuted the allegation that the "craze for urban life" implied the ruination of Japan's villages.⁶⁶

Yanagita did, however, draw a distinction between those who migrated out of economic necessity, and those "spirited young people" who he thought must stay behind to become the core of a middle-class peasantry. Although the sons of prosperous peasants had a better chance of gaining an education in the city, Yanagita did not want them to leave because of the karmic consequences it would have on the nation as a whole. As he wrote in 1905:

There is a difference in the lifespan of a nation and that of the individual. Human life has but a limited span. The nation, however, ideally has no limitation in time. Though the individual need not work toward a long-term plan to realize the benefits of posterity, the nation must aim to promote the greater well-being of its subjects for eternity. . . .

It must be said that a nation consists not only of those who are alive now, but also our ancestors who have died, and those of our descendants who are yet to be born. We should consider their hopes alongside those of our own. Since the life of the nation is eternal, we need to consider the will of those past generations, and we need to nurture and protect our compatriots in all future generations.

"Nōgyō seisakugaku" 農業政策学 (Agricultural policy studies, 1905)⁶⁷

66 Iwamoto 1976, pp. 400–410.

67 TYKS 28, pp. 292–295.

Here Yanagita reveals his spiritual conception of the nation, and his assumption about it being eternal and transgenerational in nature. The past, present, and future is a function of the “everlastingness” (*eiensei* 永遠性) of the family as an organizational unit in which the descendants have a responsibility to uphold the “will of their ancestors” through Shinto rituals, and to pass on these responsibilities to their own progeny. Once again, Yanagita proposed that the institution of the intergenerational family could best be maintained by a self-sufficient, middle-class peasantry that remained both economically and spiritually tied to their villages. Thus, Yanagita’s seemingly neutral concept of the family as being an eternal, transgenerational, and predominantly rural institution was, from the outset, intensely ideological in its social implications.⁶⁸

Over time, Yanagita’s views on the matter did soften as he studied the history of rural people more deeply, and eventually he formed a more realistic—or practical—concept of what functionally constituted a family in modern Japan.⁶⁹ Circumstances demanded as much. The collation of nationwide data during the twentieth century revealed that the number of “farm households” was ultimately in decline and that the demography of Japan was changing irrevocably. In 1920, 53.8 percent of Japan’s working population were engaged in primary agricultural production. Thirty years later in 1950, after the destruction of the great cities through aerial bombing at the latter stages of the Second World War, 48.5 percent were still engaged in agricultural production. The outbreak of war in the Korean Peninsula in late 1950, however, heralded a long and almost continuous period of high-speed economic growth which engendered rapid socioeconomic transformation across the length and breadth of Japan.⁷⁰ In 1970, just 19.3 percent of Japan’s working population were engaged in agricultural production. Ten years later in 1980 it had almost halved to 10.9 percent, and by 2000 it had more than halved again to 5.0 percent. That is, in the space of eighty years Japan experienced a 90.7 percent reduction in the percentage of workers employed in primary agricultural production.⁷¹ Arguably at more than at any other time or place in history, Japanese people were economically and spiritually breaking away—or drawn or wrenched away—from their rural identities.

Yanagita’s Childhood and his Concept of the Village and the Family (1910–1946)

In the process of establishing folklore studies, Yanagita developed his own particular understanding of community, in which, as already noted, “the words for the village (ムラ)

68 Muroi 2010, pp. 262–269; Karatani 1993, p. 163.

69 See Iwamoto 1976, pp. 286–367; and Karatani 1993, p. 134, where Karatani specifically notes Yanagita’s evolving historiography: “It has now occurred to me that Yanagita, rather than being an ethnologist or anthropologist, was a historian in the broad sense of the term and that his methodology as an ethnologist was that of the historian.”

70 For an overview of Japan’s rapid economic transformation since 1945, see Bytheway 2023.

71 Misono and Yoshinaga 2007, pp. 104–105. In the “postmodern” context, the importance of agriculture in the economic development of Japan came to be questioned and challenged, but not decisively until the last decade or so of Yanagita’s long life.

and the family (イエ) were synonymous with the organization of work.⁷² Moreover, investigation of the social bonds that exist between the village and the family was of critical importance to Yanagita's research, as highlighted by the publication of his *Meiji Taishōshi: Sesōhen* 明治大正史: 世相篇 (History of the Meiji and Taisho eras: Social conditions, 1931) where Yanagita ruminated, at great length, on the deep, pressing human need for Japanese people to perpetuate life through expanding their families.⁷³ Thus, in the immediate postwar period, with its attendant boom in marriages, Yanagita's *Senzo no hanashi* 先祖の話 (About our ancestors, 1946) was prioritized for publication as a topic that he and his publishers felt that contemporary Japanese people once more needed to read and understand.⁷⁴

Yanagita's view of the village, family, extended family, and the household were very subjective, and as a result his works on this subject are saturated with a sense of responsibility towards the imagined family of his ancestors and future descendants. Something of the passion with which he wrote is captured in the beautifully descriptive passage that follows:

When I looked down from the northeast edge of the cliff, I could see a common well in the village of Yako. Dozens of girls were working merrily together, heaping up stones behind an old tree, drawing water from the well, washing dishes or rinsing clothes in the spring water, or bathing the horses at the edge of the well. By a stream stood a hut, tiled in the *kanja* (冠者) style by a traveling craftsman. There was a bridge further downstream, and a watermill grinding away, which irrigated a few hectares of rice fields. It looked as if this well was the center of life in the village, designated as the only place from which to draw water in order to foster friendship among the people of the hamlet.

Kainan shōki 海南小記 (Notes on Kainan, 1925)⁷⁵

Seemingly accurate at first glance, Yanagita is painting the landscape as a “living legend” here, while glossing over its social relations in a rich, yet abstract manner.⁷⁶

Critically, Yanagita's conception of what constitutes a family was also the product of his formative experiences of rough living and poverty as a child. The sixth of eight sons, with apparently no sisters, his family of ten lost three of their brothers (dying at the young ages of 3, 4, and 19) before they reached adulthood. The young Yanagita Kunio thus strikes us as being undaunted and indefatigable: starting out from the mud of the village paths in

72 YKZA 28, p. 289, first published as Yanagita 1935; see Iwamoto 1978, pp. 3–20; Iwamoto and Ōtō 1996. Contemporary Japanese social anthropologists were more likely to translate the English words “village” (村) and “household” (家) using Chinese ideograms in preference to Yanagita's unorthodox use of “village” (ムラ) and the (extended) “family” (イエ). Yanagita's stress on domicile, ancestral will, and on the “everlastingness” (*eiensei* 永遠性) of the Japanese people's present-day obligations to future, unborn “family” and relatives (rather than more neutral expressions such as “transgenerational continuity”) are even more distinctive, idiosyncratic, and problematic. See Nakane 1990, pp. 216–226.

73 TYKS 24; YKZA 26. Available in English as *Japanese Manners and Customs in the Meiji Era*, trans. and adapt. Charles S. Terry (Toyo Bunko 1969 [1957]).

74 TYKS 10, first published as Yanagita 1946. Available in English as *About our Ancestors: The Japanese Family System*, trans. Fanny Hagin Mayer and Ishiwara Yasuyo (Greenwood Press, 1988 [1970]).

75 TYKS 1, pp. 306–307, first published as Yanagita 1925. See also Iwamoto 1978, pp. 10–11.

76 Ortabasi 2001, p. 89.



Figure 2. Yanagita's childhood home, "The smallest house in Japan." Courtesy of the Fukusaki Municipal Kunio Yanagita and Matsuoka-ke Family Memorial Museum, Fukusaki City, Hyogo Prefecture, where the house is now preserved.

Fukusaki-cho 福崎町, Hyogo Prefecture, to walk the corridors of the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce, and then serve the imperial Japanese government in the House of Peers.⁷⁷

How was Yanagita ever able to make his mark on the world? Perhaps the explanation lies with his eldest brother, the family's first star, who took the eleven-year-old "child genius" under his wing and away to live with him in Ibaraki.⁷⁸ Having graduated as a doctor from the prestigious medical faculty of Tokyo Imperial University, Yanagita's eldest brother set the stage for the young boy to follow in his educational footsteps.⁷⁹ Certainly, in his own time, Yanagita's readers would have been amazed to learn the dire truth of his family's predicament, of just how poor his parents had been during his childhood. For example, the reality—the particular intensity—of Yanagita's *Mukoiri kō* 婿入考 (The bridegroom who marries into the family of his bride, 1929) was widely questioned by his contemporaries: what could a man like *him* possibly know about the subject?⁸⁰ Somehow overlooked (or politely ignored) was that Yanagita Kunio had been Matsuoka Kunio before he married Yanagita Taka 柳田孝 (1886–1972).⁸¹ That is, following the precedent set by his second elder brother, Yanagita was adopted out from the Matsuoka family into the Yanagita family as a bridegroom, and through the process lost his own family's surname to become his father-in-law's male heir.⁸² Yanagita's passionate, lifelong investigation into the significance of the

77 Yanagita Kenkyūkai 1988, pp. 5–9, and oral communication with Nakamura Ayane 中村文音, Fukusaki Municipal Kunio Yanagita and Matsuoka-ke Family Memorial Museum, 10 June 2021.

78 Matsuoka Kanae 松岡鼎 (1860–1934); see Ishii 1998, pp. 25–42.

79 Iwamoto 1976, pp. 289–291.

80 TYKS 15, pp. 158–198. For background, also see Iwamoto 1976, pp. 319–322.

81 Yanagita Kenkyūkai 1988, p. 12, and oral communication with Nakamura Ayane, Fukusaki Municipal Kunio Yanagita and Matsuoka-ke Family Memorial Museum, 11 June 2021.

82 His second elder brother was Matsuoka Taizō 松岡泰蔵, but became Inoue Michiyasu 井上通泰 (1867–1941) after adoption. Yanagita's sensitivity regarding the question of his marriage was such that he kept "intentionally silent" (*koi no chinmoku* 故意の沈黙) on the subject, and frequently expressed great reserve and reticence if asked to discuss matters relating to his own adoption. See Gotō 1976, pp. 31–56, especially pp. 31–34.

village and the family, and indeed his idealized reimagining of these institutions, are surely those of a man attempting to come to terms with his own traumatic childhood.

Yanagita as the Romantic, Wandering Sage (1910–1962)

Returning to the public fascination with Yanagita's pastoral, idealized descriptions of the rural village, many undoubtedly, if uncritically, have imagined that life in Japan was much better in the past. Nevertheless, if we look at the actual state of agriculture, peasants, and rural villages that Yanagita researched as an agronomist in the early twentieth century, we can understand why he called for learning to become a means towards the salvation of the world, and earnestly tried to answer the perennial question: "Why are peasants so poor?" In *Jidai to nōsei* (1910), Yanagita had presciently written that, "In the future, tenant farming . . . will be divided into just two separate sizes: large and small."⁸³ Land-leasing absentee landlords would be able to live independently owing to agriculture, whereas small-scale, landless rural tenants would need to work in secondary occupations as day laborers, shop assistants, gardeners, or transport workers in order to simply support their families. Thus, Yanagita saw parasitic landlordism for the social calamity that it was, predicting it would end in disaster. Indeed, with the crop failures and famines of the 1930s, small-scale tenant agriculture came to be regarded as a blight on the nation, the "national disease" Yanagita had warned of.

Given Japan's modern predicament, its new material culture, and the relentless nature of its machine-driven, industrial civilization, perhaps it is only natural for Japanese people to imagine that things were "better in the old days," or to feel nostalgia for those things that they had collectively lost. In the latter half of the 1920s, Yanagita wrote several works, like *Kainan shōki* (1925) or *Yukiguni no haru* 雪国の春 (Springtime in snow country, 1928), which are replete with rich, scenic descriptions of pastoral villages, *despite* his deep understanding of persistent rural poverty.⁸⁴ Suddenly, the secluded villages depicted in these works lack any of the troubles or violence found in Yanagita's earlier works on rural life. In these beautiful and exotic hamlets, villagers now recast as Yanagita's "ordinary and abiding folk" (*jōmin* 常民) happily enjoy their lives together, unstintingly helping one another and living in a kind of quintessential Japanese utopia.⁸⁵ The travelogues, the folklore, and the learned investigations of the earnest agronomist attempted to valorize and transform the rural life of Japan in a way that compensated for Yanagita's earlier failings in agricultural policy.⁸⁶ An upshot of this popular fascination with these idealized villages, however, was that it contributed to a broader acceptance of the "renewal" or "restoration" manifestos of Japan's politicians, and for its people to be turned towards new forms of authoritarian

83 TYKS 16, p. 6.

84 TYKS 1 and 2, first published as Yanagita 1925 and Yanagita 1928. These accounts of "typical" villages in the near-distant past are still widely read, and remain among Yanagita's most popular works today.

85 The translation of *jōmin* here is from Harootunian 2000, p. 18.

86 As Oguma perceptively notes: "The Japan he depicted was a narrow world without alien peoples, where all were unified by an homogeneous culture, where a self-sufficient agriculture was practised, and where, as a result, there were no 'difficulties', no struggle, no invasion and no inter-cultural friction" (Oguma 2002, p. 202). In reference to Yanagita's "ideologically charged" use of romanticism, see Ortabasi 2014, p. 12, and especially chapter 2, "Translating Landscape, Rewriting the Travelogue," pp. 57–97; Hoshino 2015; and more broadly, Karatani 2013.

and corporatist rule.⁸⁷ The politics of nostalgia, and its attendant romanticization of the rural, has continued well past the postwar period and is still a troubling part of present-day Japan.⁸⁸

In light of Yanagita's reputation today as a fierce advocate of the village, an extraordinary knowledgeable spokesman for the common people, and his well-publicized role in the promotion of self-sustaining, rural communities, his turn towards the romantic and away from reality is puzzling. Yanagita had resigned as joint editor-in-chief to the Asahi Newspaper in November 1930, and thus never commented, even anonymously, on the misery of the famines brought about by unusually cold weather (*yamase* ヤマセ) across the seven prefectures of the Tohoku region during the summers of 1931 and 1934.⁸⁹ Indeed, it was exactly at this time that Yanagita established folklore studies in Japan, ploughing ahead with studies on such themes as local religious practices, animism, and ancestor veneration (or formal Shinto worship) while militarism radically transformed Japan's political trajectory. Perhaps his sudden turn towards the mystic meant that deep down Yanagita understood the limitations of his folklore studies as a practical tool for understanding agricultural policy and contemporary political economy.⁹⁰

In conclusion, the themes presented here, of learning to be the "salvation of the world," of Yanagita's preference for protectionist, Listian political economy of the German historical school; his long-held concern that agriculture was a national handicap or "disease;" and especially his belief in the importance of land ownership within the village to provide for the "everlasting" transgenerational family, have been explored with reference to his most revealing works. Our conviction is that without recognition of the fundamental importance of agricultural policy to Yanagita's concept of folklore studies, the rationale underlying it is lost. The historical context and personal background of Yanagita's early life thus help explain the motivations of the young agronomist who became a decorated bureaucrat, who, when obliged to resign from government service, tried his hand as a leading newspaper editorialist, only to read the wild winds of the early 1930s and turn to the promotion of his own, groundbreaking brand of folklore studies.

In Yanagita's later years, Japanese folklorists could not see how he made the connection between tenets of agricultural policy and the ethnology of his folklore studies. His own followers tended to discuss aspects of Yanagita's work in isolation, without reference to any

87 See for instance Tanaka Kakuei's *Building a New Japan* (1973); Ozawa Ichiro's *Blueprint for a New Japan: The Rethinking of a Nation* (1994), or Abe Shinzō's *Toward a Beautiful Country* (2006), all of which blithely ignore the progress achieved and the profundity of the changes that have taken place in Japan's rural communities. As Marilyn Ivy writes, "Dominant ideologies in Japan still depend on politics of nostalgia suitable for an advanced capitalist polity: a nostalgia for a Japan that is kept on the verge of vanishing, stable yet endangered (and thus open for desire)." See Ivy 1995, p. 65.

88 We should note that the present-day fears for the future of rural communities are not concerned with the organization of production and collective labor, but are instead wholly concerned with the maintenance of conservative political forces in rural areas.

89 The *yamase* are generally defined as cold winds, caused by the unseasonably violent ingress of cold air from the Eurasian land mass. Evidently, the north-south orientation of the Japanese archipelago allows cold polar jet streams to flow freely across northeastern Japan (Tōhoku 東北) that can seriously impede agricultural production. For more on the formation and study of the Tōhoku region, see Iwamoto 2003; and Iwamoto and Bytheway 2015a.

90 In a sense, the increasing militarism of the 1930s and the early 1940s was not so much formative, but rather represented yet another obstacle Yanagita had to work around. Of course, the significance of Japanese military adventurism, and the war that it engendered, cannot be easily dismissed.

overarching theories or grand framework. In fact, Japanese libraries, even those that hold large collections of Yanagita's works, tend to lack his earlier studies on agricultural policy. And yet, agricultural policy was the medium through which Yanagita developed his style of interdisciplinary folklore studies. It is a deep irony that only researchers who approach Yanagita from fields other than that of his own brand of folklore studies seem to recognize this, and having done so, are able to deliver genuinely new research and synthesize original theories.⁹¹

Coda: Yanagita and Lazy Intellectualism

Having grappled at length with Yanagita's intellectual proclivities through quoting from his relatively unknown, earlier works, finally something needs to be said in regard to Yanagita's relevance today. Yanagita's most important findings and popular quotations arguably coalesced during the last part of his life. For example, his general observation that in contrast to Japan, European folklore and traditional material culture had largely dissipated, or even disappeared, owing to more than a millennium of Christianity, inter-migration, and the Industrial Revolution, led him to write:

What I fear most is the immediate imposition of unilateral judgments made without consideration of the facts and the idea that only Western theories are suitable for the reality of Japan in common learning. That I am apprehensive about these trends has nothing to do with nationalism. As distinct from Germany, France, Italy, and other European countries, Japan has long had its own peculiar history, and so I do not think that theories born in Western societies adequately suit Japan. Things that we are unable to understand in the present circumstances should be left until later. I think the idea that humans are generally the same and that their problems can be resolved by the application of some universal theory is a most fruitless area of academic inquiry.

“Watashi no shigoto” 私の仕事 (My task, 1954)⁹²

The sentiment above, frequently expressed and in many different contexts, allowed Yanagita to become something of a patron saint of peculiar and curious nationalist research—even that which borders on being xenophobic, or racist—and is Japan-centric to the point that it is unable to offer insights into anything outside its immediate Japanese context. Scholarly research that, without wishing to be overly harsh, might be incredibly detailed in its analysis of say “Japanese feudalism,” but has no comparative elements, and has nothing to say about feudalism in other Asian or European contexts. Research that might be the absolute authority on J-pop, but does not reference Canto-pop, T-pop, or K-pop, or any other global, musical trends. Or Japanese education and research on the Chinese language, almost exclusively based on the reading of classical Chinese literature, but (having forsaken its communicative functions) is not used to allow Japanese students to communicate with fellow students in China, Southeast Asia, the international Chinese diaspora, or even with the Chinese students enrolled at their own Japanese universities. The devoted and practically minded super-scholar, proficient in both English and French, the insatiably intellectually

⁹¹ See for example Yamauchi 2009; Hasebe et al. 2022.

⁹² YKZA 32, p. 528, first published in 1954 in issue 98 of the journal *Sekai* 世界.

curious man-that-became Yanagita Kunio, however, never promoted uncritical isolationism or lazy, self-absorbed intellectualism.

Similarly, in a roundtable discussion where he was surrounded by his most devoted and fawning (or toadyish) followers,⁹³ Yanagita waxed lyrical on the Japanese fascination with living closely together in shared communities, of standing by the group, and of the individual's fear of isolation:

I think people were seriously worried about being excluded from their peers, especially on islands or in small agricultural communities. In fact, if you are excluded by other members of the community, all you can do is to go off to sea or leave the village. Human beings have an instinct just like birds, fish, and such like, and they know that they should not stray from their companions. They seem to know that there are fewer dangers when one is among company, although there will inevitably be tensions and incidents. Migratory birds always try to stick together because the bird that is separated from the others is most likely to be the first that falls prey to its predators.

Nihonjin (1954)⁹⁴

Devoid of thick context, comments like the above have in recent times made Yanagita an unlikely hero for those who swim in the troubled waters of Japanese uniqueness. Perhaps it is inevitable that people will refer to Yanagita's folklore studies to support their conservative ideas of life being somehow "better in the old days," or use Yanagita's comments to trumpet the necessity of the Japanese people "living together in shared communities," or for the "revival of Japan."⁹⁵ That said, Yanagita would loathe the use of his work to promote the idea of some kind of totalitarian rural "restoration." Indeed, Yanagita specifically established folklore studies as an introspective science, as a means of critical self-examination and awareness for all Japanese people, in the past, the present, and the future.

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YKZA *Yanagita Kunio zenshū* 柳田國男全集. 32 volumes. Chikuma Shobō, 1989–1991.

YKZZ *Yanagita Kunio zenshū*. 35 volumes, with 4 appendices. Chikuma Shobō, 1997–2019.

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93 There were many occasions where group discussions were held with Yanagita. See Yanagita 1964 for details.

94 Yanagita 1954, p. 273.

95 These are vague yet emblematic slogans from the renewal/restoration manifestos of Japanese politicians like Tanaka, Ozawa, and Abe, noted above.

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