



**Melek Ortabasi.** *The Undiscovered Country: Text, Translation, and Modernity in the Work of Yanagita Kunio.* Harvard East Asian Monographs Series. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014. Illustrations, map. 344 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-49200-4.



**Reviewed by** Noriaki Hoshino (NYU-Shanghai)

**Published on** H-Asia (September, 2015)

**Commissioned by** Douglas Slaymaker (University of Kentucky)

## A Folklorist as Translator

Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962) is one of the intellectual giants of modern Japan, known best as the founder of *minzokugaku* (æ°äçã, folk studies) and often regarded as the Japanese counterpart of the Grimm brothers in Germany or James G. Frazer in Britain. Meanwhile, as his vast body of scholarship has come to be called *Yanagita-gaku* (literally, Yanagita studies), his broad knowledge of historical/literary texts and folkloric cultures in Japan and the wide variety of topics he covered makes it impossible to limit the impact of his writing to a specific academic discipline. Many historians, literary scholars, philosophers, and sociologists have been influenced by his work and have provided interpretations of its significance. Melek Ortabasi's *The Undiscovered Country* is among the latest examinations of Yanagita's oeuvre, a book whose author attempts to shed new light on Yanagita's work via her literary theory of *translation*.

To situate Ortabasi's analysis within the wide range of interpretations of Yanagita, we must understand the general tendencies of Yanagita scholarship. Whether praised or criticized, his work has been an important

point of reference for scholars and intellectuals who are interested in the experience of modernity in Japan, not to mention Japanese folklorists. Even during Yanagita's lifetime, his work was read critically by Marxists who interpreted it as a reflection of a particular class ideology, at the same time drawing the interest of Japanese Marxists who embraced *tenkô* (ideological conversion). Meanwhile, the literary critic Hanada Kiyoteru identified in Yanagita's work a possible attempt to overcome modernity through recourse to the mediation of the premodern. Also, in the 1960s, influential intellectual Yoshimoto Takaaki and people's history (*minshôshi*) scholars discovered the significance of Yanagita's analysis of *common people* (*jûmin*). However, in the late twentieth century, Yanagita's work was critically examined in the context of the rise of cultural/postcolonial studies. Many argued that he was engaged in a sort of homogeneous nation-building exercise (Oguma Eiji), Japanese imperialism (Murai Osamu), immanent communitarianism in reaction to the reification induced by capitalism (Harry Harootyan), or cultural nationalism as a recuperation of

vanishing cultures under the impact of capitalist modernity (Marilyn Ivy). Nevertheless, such criticism has not discouraged intellectual attempts to draw out the critical potential of Yanagita's work, well exemplified by the recent analysis of the utopian aspect of nomadology (*yÅ«dÅsei*) in his thought by the famous literary critic and philosopher Karatani KÅjin (*YÅ«dÅron*, 2014). It is in this broader context of scholarship that Ortabasi stages an intervention.

Ortabasi emphasizes that there is still something compelling about Yanagita's work, which cannot be underestimated even in light of recent critical discussion of it. She finds the root of her fascination with Yanagita's work in the way his individual texts express their ideas, rather than in the ideas themselves.[1] She argues that Yanagita's texts work to complicate the dominant ideologies that address modern Japanese identity (p. 2). In articulating this aspect of Yanagita's texts, she relies on what she calls "translation." According to Ortabasi, an act of translation does not produce simply a "flattening and domesticating difference," but has subversive potential for "introducing the new and foreign" (p. 19). Here she does not mean that Yanagita was actually involved in inter-lingual translation; rather, she draws an analogy between translation and the process involved in his intellectual attempt to "make the past relevant to the present" or to decode unspoken/unwritten cultural texts (p. 12). Thus, unlike more recent critical evaluations of Yanagita's study, Ortabasi's book explores the radical potential in his work, which she calls a "method of resistance to the homogenizing national narrative" (p. 2).

Following such an agenda, *The Undiscovered Country* approaches a variety of Yanagita's texts. The book comprises five chapters, organized roughly in chronological order of Yanagita's work. She starts her exploration by analyzing *TÅno monogatari* (Tales of TÅno, 1910), one of Yanagita's earliest publications and arguably his best-known work. This book collects fragments of local legends, anecdotes, and songs from Sasaki Kizen, a native of the rural town of TÅno in northern Japan. Against the conventional reputation of the text as a seminal work of Japanese folk studies, Ortabasi reads it as a literary text that critically intervenes in the ongoing process of literary modernization. By linking Yanagita's earlier literary background to his folk studies, Ortabasi argues that the use of such techniques as classical literary style (*bungotai*), auxiliary verbs, and a "flowing conception of consciousness" constitute Yanagita's "deep exploration of the intersection between self and community" (p. 56). Ortabasi contrasts this approach in particular to the on-

going development of *genbun itchi* style (the unification of writing and speech), which contributed to the formation of the modern subject with its pure inner self correlated with an exterior landscape. Thus she finds in Yanagita's creative appropriation of local narratives a critical translational process.

In chapter 2, Ortabasi finds another translational process in Yanagita's travel writing. A "traveler" figure appears throughout Yanagita's text, but he is not a simple tourist. He is unlike other tourists from the period who sought pleasure and spectacle. Ortabasi emphasizes that Yanagita evaluated the negotiatory process of reading landscape in travel. Examining his travelogue *Kainan shÅki* (South sea notes, 1925), she reveals a "tension between the contemporary landscape and its previous cultural/historical layers" in the text, indicating that Yanagita defamiliarized the hegemonic landscape as a text by setting it in dialogue with its diverse historical contexts (p. 89).

Chapter 3 focuses on Yanagita's discourse during the formative years of folk studies as a rising discipline in the 1930s. Examining his methodological texts *Minkan denshÅron* (A study of popular oral transmission, 1934) and *KyÅdo seikatsu no kenkyÅ« hÅ* (Methods for researching everyday homeplace life, 1935), the author traces how Yanagita struggled to name his work and delineate its discipline. Instead of simply applying disciplinary categories that were current in Europe at the time in order to define his own work, he challenged them and rearticulated their boundaries. In addition to examining Yanagita's efforts to redefine disciplinary boundaries, Ortabasi identifies the virtue of self-translation in his "intuiting of a hidden cultural subtext" through language in an intra-lingual context (p. 131).

This concern with self-translation is related to Yanagita's claim to be recovering the agency of word making for the speaker. In chapter 4, Ortabasi explores this claim by analyzing Yanagita's study of dialect, including his representative work on dialectology, *KagyÅ«kÅ* (Thoughts on the snail, 1930). In Yanagita's view, the word making that we find in dialect demonstrates rural creativity and local autonomy. This insight allowed him to criticize any policy of top-down language standardization. Instead of mimicking the official language, he hoped that each speaker recovered an authentic relationship with language through translation of his or her own thoughts. The final chapter of Ortabasi's book examines a similar issue in the exploration of autonomous and critical subjects in Yanagita's discourse on education. Echo-

ing his view of language standardization, he criticized an education system that made students merely reproduce prescribed knowledge. In books written for young audiences, such as *Hi no mukashi* (A history of fire, 1944) and *Mura no sugata* (Village forms, 1945), Yanagita encouraged youth to engage in critical dialogue with cultural history. Such discourse represents, Ortabasi argues, an important distinction from other wartime ideological texts targeted at youth.

Thus, tracing Yanagita's discourse across several time periods, Ortabasi reads his consistent effort to introduce the new and foreign to the dominant homogenizing discourse and policies as a form of critical intervention. Ortabasi importantly articulates the critical potential of a wide range of Yanagita's work through the single theoretical concept of translation.

Although Ortabasi's achievement is quite impressive, her book would have benefited from a deeper and more detailed examination of the role of translation in the existing social system. This would have helped readers better understand the critical aspect of Yanagita's work. As I have mentioned, this book tries to supersede decades of critique of Yanagita's work by carefully examining the *method* or *process* of his intellectual practices. It is true that Yanagita's method exhibits an interventional aspect, which Ortabasi explains with the idea of translation as the introduction of the foreign. However, it remains important to ask whether such practices of complicating the dominant ideology could contribute to a more sophisticated power formation. For example, as is well known, Yanagita's early work addresses the heterogeneous nature of the Japanese nation and even a critic such as Åtsuka Eiji regarded his work as an expression of the logic of a multi-ethnic empire.[2] Whether or not we agree with such an interpretation, it is worth examining the extent to which Yanagita's translational project desta-

bilizes the dominant regime or differs from an attempt to maintain the existing power structure within a relatively more flexible communal boundary. Since diversity and creativity now also seem to be appropriated as tools of hegemony by a dominant social regime and there are scholars who still criticize Yanagita's complacency with the emperor system, imperialism, and capitalism, it remains important to articulate the quality of Yanagita's "resistance" when evaluating his method.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Ortabasi's work offers us an important tool for understanding the critical potential of Yanagita's work. As a possible further exploration, we might extend the framework of translation proposed by Ortabasi to Yanagita's other studies, such as his discourse on God and agricultural history. Also, other fascinating aspects of this book include its comparative references to a variety of works in diverse cultural contexts. For example, the author briefly introduces the Bulgarian Turkish folklorist, Petrev Naili Boratav, and reminds us of the importance of comparing Yanagita's work transnationally with other "non-Western" folkloric studies.

Thus, Ortabasi's book is an interesting work for scholars of modern Japanese culture and history. As an original work on the role of translation in folkloric studies, it is also an inspirational source for those who are interested in theoretically examining the experience of modernity.

#### Notes

[1]. For a previous attempt to draw out Yanagita's "method," see SatÅ Kenji, *Dokusho kÅkan no kindai* (Tokyo: KÅbundÅ, 1987).

[2]. Åtsuka Eiji, *KÅmin no minzokugaku* (Tokyo: Sakuhinsha, 2007), 73-93.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-asia>

**Citation:** Noriaki Hoshino. Review of Ortabasi, Melek, *The Undiscovered Country: Text, Translation, and Modernity in the Work of Yanagita Kunio*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. September, 2015.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43343>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.