

Vocabulary and Culture in Japanese Folk Tales in Asian Community

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Courses on Asian Community, One Asia Foundation

For the 7th lecture, we invited Professor Lin Li-Ping from Department of Japanese Language and Literature at National Taiwan University. She is also the director of Center for Japanese Studies at National Taiwan University. The theme of lecture is “Vocabulary and Culture in Japanese Folk Tales in Asian Community.” The summary of the lecture is as follow:

Language is not only a product of social culture, but also plays an important role in recording culture. It is inseparable with mental movements which supporting human mind and emotional activities. Thus, it is an important tool in composing society. There are mutual influence relations among “heart, language, and society.”

Within three dimensions including phone, grammar, and vocabulary in language, vocabulary can best reflect the thinking style of language users' culture and nation. Language is a mirror to observe culture or society and thus observing the characteristics of vocabulary helps us to understand the thinking style of the particular nation.

This lecture focuses on vocabulary in language and culture. Through introducing the understanding of Japanese folk tales, we may understand Japan and its culture in Asian Community.

From the observation of current stage, vocabulary in folk tales may reflect two things.

1. The amounts of vocabulary related to Buddhism and which of vocabulary related to Shinto, which is Japanese traditional nature belief, is about the same. This reflects the social appearance of syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism.
2. Among the vocabulary of characters, men are usually seniors, while women are younger girl, or daughter in law. This reflects the family system of patriarchy.

Keywords like “upright, honest, wise, filial, diligent, and brave” can reflect the ideal character images that common people expected. Keywords like “happiness, stability, delightness” can reflect the ideal lift style that common people expected. Moreover, from vocabulary that express kinship like how to address grandfather, grandmother, father and mother, we can observe life styles in modern Edo era.

Professor Lin shared her recent research thoughts and results concerning vocabulary in

Japanese folk tales with our class. At first, Professor Lin asked the class about the relations between vocabulary and culture. Then as the opening line of her lecture, she started with a quote from Japanese famous social linguist Takao Suzuki, “Culture can be expressed through vocabulary and vocabulary expresses culture. Different cultures have different vocabulary expression,” excerpted from his book *ことばと文化 [Vocabulary and Culture]*. Professor Lin later defined Japanese folk tale. “むかしばなし [Folk tale]” is a Japanese vocabulary meaning story that pass through centuries down to this day, for example, Japanese well-known folk tales like “Momotaro (Peach Tarō)” and “Urashima Taro” that Taiwanese are also familiar with. We used to call it fairy tale. Professor Lin also explained the differences between folk tale and fair tale.

Professor Lin compared vocabulary in Japanese folk tales and those appeared in Japanese-Language Proficiency Test, about which students from Department of Japanese Language and Literature are concerned. She found out the repeating rate of vocabulary used in folk tales and Japanese education is that elementary level has higher repeating rate than intermediate level and intermediate level has higher repeating rate than advanced level. Although 36% of vocabulary does not appear in the folk tales, the vocabulary of elementary level still has high repeating rate with those in folk tales. Thus, she suggested students, who is in elementary level, can try to read them.

Professor Lin also analyzed a huge amount of texts of Japanese folk tales and animations. She found out the characteristics of vocabulary. Vocabulary words appeared most frequently are those words like name of characters (hero of the stories), name of places, god and buddha, ghosts and monsters, animals, and first-person pronoun. Among those words regarding god, buddha, ghosts, and monsters, except those words related to Japanese Shinto like 荒神 [Koujin, meaning the god of the stove], 氏神 [Ujigami, meaning a guardian god or spirit of a place], 稻荷 [Inari, meaning the god of foxes], there are lots of words related to Buddhism like 觀世音 [Kannon, Avalokiteshvara], 大日如來 [Dainichi Buddha, Vairocana], 地藏菩薩 [Jizo, Kshitigarbha], 釋迦 [Shakka, Gautama Buddha], 阿彌陀 [Amida, Amitabha], 和尚 [Oshou, Buddhist priest], 餓鬼 [Gaki, Hungry ghost]. What is interesting is that why there are so many characters like ghost, apparition, and monsters, of which children might be scared, in Children's reading materials. Professor Lin cited the explanation of Professor Komatsu Kazuhiko, who is Japanese famous cultural anthropologist and Director of International Research Center for Japanese Studies, that although monsters are scaring, they have entertaining effects as they appeared in the stories. This unexpected result is impressive.

At last, Professor Lin concluded that “folk tales are not completed by particular poet or

literature writer. Heros of stories and scenes that occurred are people and places that people of the nation are familiar with. The contents of stories are closely related to common people's daily lives and are full of that the nation's interpretations of and interactions with elements like people, love, and nature. Thus, they are full of strong national culture color. Although folk tales might have shortcoming like lacking characters and not artistic enough, for certain perspective we can understand the culture thinking of that nation to some extent through reading folk tales and it may serve as a way to understand world and cultivate international view. In other word, folk tales are an important reference to discuss and understand the culture characteristics of certain region.”

When learning a foreign language, except basic vocabulary and those vocabulary that needed for future profession, if we want to grasp the essence of the language, we need to intensify the understanding of literature and culture that recorded by that language. For example, whoever had the experience of living in Japan knows that the age 42 is the most unlucky age of life and must go to shrine to remove ill fortune. However, Japanese learning people not necessarily know why. It is because that the Japanese pronunciation of age 42 sounds like “死年 [Shinitoshi, meaning year of death].” For both Japanese and Taiwanese, 4 is a taboo word. Nevertheless, the usages of culture and custom are not necessarily appeared in the textbooks of the general class.

Japanese children learn their culture from Japanese folk tales. At the same time, if we can apply folk tales in Japanese language education flexibly, we can learn vocabulary other than textbook and understand Japanese history thought and culture from group of characters in the stories. This lecture started from an interesting open line and topic to very insightful thought. It was very interesting and I believe that students must learn a lot from the lecture.