

**MISLEADING YANAGITA KUNIO:  
A NEGLECTED INTELLECTUAL LINEAGE BETWEEN  
ENLIGHTENMENT THOUGHT AND JAPANESE FOLKLORE<sup>1</sup>**

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The purpose of the article is twofold. The first aim is to offer an unconventional interpretation of the texts of Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962), an influential Japanese intellectual popularly known as the founder of the discipline of folklore (*minzokugaku*). I argue that, notwithstanding the popular conception of Yanagita as a chief advocate of Japanese exceptionalism, he can be characterized as an intellectual heir to the European—especially British and French—Enlightenment tradition. Such a suggestion certainly sounds either mistaken or banal. It seems mistaken because Yanagita is often conceived of as one of the conservative nationalists with Romantic inclination who emerged precisely in reaction to tendentious claims of Enlightenment universalism. It appears banal because no serious modern Japanese thinker, regardless of his or her ideological orientation, is totally free from the sway of the Enlightenment tradition that profoundly transformed the global intellectual landscape. However, I believe that the influence of Enlightenment thought on his intellectual project is substantial and consequential to the extent that, without taking the former into consideration the nature of the latter cannot be fully grasped.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was originally presented as “Misreading Yanagita Kunio: A Neglected Intellectual Lineage between Enlightenment Thought and Japanese Folklore” at the Southern Japan Seminar and Midwest Japan Seminar Joint Meeting, February 18, 2012. I changed the part of the title from “Misreading” to “Misleading” at the suggestion of Steven Heine to capture the double sense of the latter term—that is, Yanagita’s texts are misleading, which results in many misleading interpretations of his intellectual project. The revised manuscript was finalized in April of the same year, but my further research has revealed a less straightforward intellectual lineage from the Enlightenment idea of human sciences to Yanagita’s *minzokugaku*, mediated by the philosophies of science and history underlying Victorian anthropology and German cultural sciences that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Not only the methodology but also the substance of Yanagita's *minzokugaku* reveals an influence, direct or indirect, from the thoughts of such Enlightenment luminaries as Montesquieu, Rousseau, Adam Smith, Malthus, John Stuart Mill, and Marx. That is not to say that his thought is merely a reflection or refraction of European Enlightenment thought. Rather, it is noteworthy that Yanagita critically and selectively appropriates those thinkers' ideas and weaves them into his own.<sup>2</sup>

The second aim of this article is to consider, if the connection indeed exists between Yanagita and Enlightenment thought, the question as to why it has long been underemphasized, if not entirely missed, by his followers and critics alike. The lapse is even more perplexing, given the fact that probably few Japanese thinkers' texts are so meticulously, if somewhat uncritically, studied by their followers and are constantly subjected to critical scrutiny by critics, both Japanese and international. The second purpose, therefore, is to give a plausible answer to the question. To anticipate the answer, it is because both his followers and critics often read his texts *partially* in both senses of the term. In other words, it may be the case that the vast body of his texts have been selectively read and interpreted to cram his equivocal voice into neatly demarcated but interconnected geocultural ("Japanese"), ideological ("conservative" or "nationalist"), and disciplinary ("folklore" or "ethnology") categories. As a result, a dialectical aspect of his thought tends to be underappreciated. In fact, one can plausibly argue that his *minzokugaku* is precisely a self-conscious attempt to relativize various boundaries that divide humanity, human life, and human science into discrete compartments. Many of his followers and critics alike misread his texts, partly in an attempt to suppress his equivocal voice. This is done for the sake of shielding their own privileged subjectivity from the serious challenge that the equivocality of Yanagita's texts may pose.

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<sup>2</sup> Kazuko Tsurumi, "Sōzōsei wo dō yatte sodateruka," *Korekushon Tsurumi Kazuko Mandara IV, Tsuchi no maki Yanagita Kunio ron* (Tokyo: Fujiwara Shoten, 1998), p. 35. Yanagita's intellectual debt is not limited to the Enlightenment tradition. As Tsurumi points out, he weaves an assortment of thoughts, ranging from European literary works, folklore, and ethnography to Japanese classics such as Motoori Norinaga and Hirata Atsutane, into "a seamless patchwork" with "fuzzy boundaries."

I have used the word “misread,” but probably that is too strong a word because it suggests that there is another, correct way to read his texts and retrieve the authentic meaning of them. After all, any text is open to multiple interpretations, and each reader has to make sense out of it. My own interpretation is but another attempt to make sense of Yanagita’s texts, and I do not claim it to be a more authentic one, however authenticity may be defined. My claim is that it has always been possible to read Yanagita in a different but equally plausible way, but both his followers and critics overlooked such a possibility for some reason that is not trivial to those of us who face the difficult task of navigating the Scylla of Western universalism and the Charybdis of cultural particularism. Such partial reading certainly reflects inevitable difficulty common to any interpretation of such a complex thinker as Yanagita, but it may also be related to the very problem he himself tackled almost one century ago—the division of the world into “progressive” and “stagnant” spaces and of humanity into the subject and object of knowledge/politics. In that sense, I hope, the misreading of Yanagita’s texts, as much as the texts themselves, constitutes an interesting topic even for those who are not familiar with his work.

The remainder of the article is divided into three sections. The first section reviews competing interpretations of Yanagita’s intellectual legacy. Although there is general acknowledgment about his academic contribution to Japanese folklore studies, the political or ideological aspect of his intellectual project has been a matter of substantial controversy. In particular, his complicity with Japanese nationalism and fascism has been at the center of recent literature on him and *minzokugaku*. The second section offers a broad picture of a possible intellectual lineage connecting Yanagita and Enlightenment thinkers, such as Rousseau, Adam Smith, Malthus, and John Stuart Mill. The section is followed by brief speculation on why such a lineage is consistently neglected by both his followers and critics.

### **Yanagita and Japanese Nationalism**

To appreciate fully the significance of Yanagita’s intellectual lineage extending from the Enlightenment, it is necessary to situate this in the context of longstanding debates on his legacy. Yanagita is a complex thinker and his ambivalent attitude toward modernity haunts both his career and writings, which verge precariously on the boundaries between literature and science, Romanticism and rationalism, aesthetics and politics, conservatism and progressivism, obscurantism and enlightenment, and poetic imagination and scientific rigor. As a result, it is difficult to classify

his thought into any preexisting category. Not surprisingly, the legacy of his intellectual project has been the subject of substantial controversy, and in Japan the interpretation of his texts has become a sort of cottage industry. Furthermore, the past two and a half decades witnessed a renewed interest in his writings among Anglophone scholars. Unlike previous scholarship in Yanagita that largely focused on his achievement as the founder of Japanese folklore, the new scholarship turns a critical eye to the ideological dimension of his thought, especially its complicity with Japanese nationalism and fascism.

It seems to be Peter N. Dale's *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness* (1986) that set this tone. In this penetrating but excessively dismissive study of the so-called *nihonjinron* (theory of the Japanese), Yanagita appears, along with Nishida Kitarō and his other contemporaries, as one of "[t]he next generation of thinkers [who] enters on centre stage in the years around 1910, which were a watershed for what might be called, by adapting a phrase from Thomas Mann, 'the intellectualization of Japanese conservatism.'"<sup>3</sup> In an analysis that spans no more than one page and relies almost exclusively on a selective and dismissive reading of Tsurumi Kazuko's comments on Yanagita's concept of modernization, Dale characterizes Yanagita's *minzokugaku* as a "nostalgic return to the uncomplicated world of an earlier age."<sup>4</sup> Yanagita, in his view, belongs to:

a significant wing of the intelligentsia [who], in relatively unconstrained autonomy, defected from the modern by a theoretical regression to archaic or feudal consciousness, and thus inadvertently supplied a sophisticated armoury of ideological ammunition to the very state from which they themselves often felt estranged.<sup>5</sup>

In H. D. Harootunian's *Things Seen and Unseen* (1988), in turn, Yanagita appears as an intellectual heir to the nativist thought (*kokugaku*) of the late Edo period, especially that of Hirata Atsutane. While recognizing a critical potential of nativist thought, Harootunian suggests that the twentieth-

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<sup>3</sup> Peter N. Dale, *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), p. 206.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

century *kokugaku* of Yanagita and his fellow and rival folklorist Origuchi Shinobu is emptied of its critical potential vis-à-vis the modern state capitalist reality because:

...in the formulation of *minzokugaku*, discourse itself became place—that is to say, the former discourse on place was inverted into the place of discourse. Hence, daily life as the lived experience of the folk, which nativists consistently centered indistinguishably from the content of discourse, existed in ethnology only as an effect of a constructed discourse called folklore. What apparently had authorized the constitution of a discourse comprising native knowledge became in the discussions of the twentieth century a discourse that constituted the ordinary folk as its object. If earlier the figure of the archaic was fulfilled in the renarrativization of the countryside, fulfillment was later realized simply in the *description* of the figure of the folk life.<sup>6</sup>

One consequence is that, “the critique Yanagita launched [at the Shrine Merger Act of 1908] was directed less toward political policy than toward conserving the true content of cultural form by defining it.”<sup>7</sup>

In her *Re-Inventing Japan* (1998), Tessa Morris-Suzuki engages more directly with Yanagita’s intellectual biography and original texts, but arrives at a similar conclusion. Along with Nishida and ethnologist Ishida Eiichirō, a former student of Yanagita, he is characterized as one of the key figures who contributed to the emergence of an organic concept of culture around the 1930s. She partly attributes the well-known midlife shift in his attention from the internal diversity of rural Japan to the mainstream culture of flat-land peasantry and from “rather eclectic research techniques [to] a more well-defined methodology [of *minzokugaku*”<sup>8</sup> to his status of “an eminent scholar whose comments were sought on a wide range of issues,

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<sup>6</sup> H. D. Harootunian, *Things Seen and Unseen: Discourse and Ideology in Tokugawa Nativism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 414.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 416.

<sup>8</sup> Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *Re-inventing Japan: Time, Space, Nation* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe), p. 71.

including the ethnography of Japan's expanding empire."<sup>9</sup> However, the main reason for the shift, she speculates more cogently, may be that "[t]he organic image of culture is...appealing (as Yanagita's writings suggest) because it offers a way of counteracting fears of social disintegration and also because...it provides a coherent and respectably 'scientific' way of analyzing society."<sup>10</sup> This is, however, a misplaced effort because "it imposes a particular utopian vision of integration and harmony on the protean and fluid forms of social existence."<sup>11</sup>

On the surface, Yanagita's *minzokugaku* seems to share the same assumptions that Dale attributes to the *nihonjinron*—namely, the cultural homogeneity of Japan preserved intact from the immemorial past, the uniqueness and distinctiveness of anything Japanese, and its non-amenability to foreign concepts and modes of analysis.<sup>12</sup> As for the first assumption, one stated objective of his *minzokugaku* is to discover the national character of the Japanese. In his own words, the national character<sup>13</sup> is "the binding force exercised by the environment from which we can never escape no matter how modernized/Westernized (*haikara*) the village youth may become, [and] natural fortuities much older than human history, [such as] the borders of a country or the size of its territory, [and hence] not a product of the so-called politics..."<sup>14</sup> As for the second assumption, in order to justify the need for *minzokugaku*, he repeatedly emphasizes that Japanese experience is different from that of the West and knowledge of and from the West does not necessarily apply to the case of

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Dale, *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness*, "Introduction," para. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Yanagita characteristically avoids *kokuminsei*, the more popular Chinese-derived terms for national character and instead uses the more Japanese-sounding *kunigara*. The preference for Japanese words over Chinese-derived words is a characteristic of the *nihonjinron* as well. See Dale, *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness*, Chapter 6.

<sup>14</sup> *Teihon Yanagita Kunio shū* (*TYKS* hereafter) 16: 166–167. All the references to Yanagita's texts in this article are to this official anthology. 31 volumes and 5 supplementary volumes (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1962–1971). The number after the abbreviation stands for the volume number, followed by the page numbers. All the translations are mine.

Japan. As for the third assumption, he rubs ethnologists and anthropologists the wrong way by suggesting that the inner meaning of visible social institutions and practices is not accessible to foreigners.<sup>15</sup> Then, perhaps it is not surprising that his *minzokugaku* is identified as the single most important source of ingredients for the *nihonjinron*.<sup>16</sup>

It is undeniable that Yanagita's texts can be, and have been, read in a way that contributes to the discourse of Japanese exceptionalism and cultural essentialism. I even think the renewed critiques of Yanagita are healthy reactions against the conversion of his texts into a national icon during the so-called "Yanagita boom" of the 1970s. At the same time, I do not believe that lumping him together with a variety of prewar thinkers under the broad label of nationalist or proto-fascist is the most interesting or productive way to engage with his texts. An issue here is the failure to pay due attention to the individuality of an original thinker, a privilege that tends to be denied those from non-Western societies. Lumping, say, John Stuart Mill together with other mid-nineteenth century British thinkers under the broad label of liberalism is not necessarily an interesting or productive way to read Mill's texts, although without any doubt such an approach yields some interesting insights into his thought. I myself initially approached Yanagita's writings in search of a representative or paradigmatic nationalist discourse, but I was surprised to find the long cast of the shadow of the British and French Enlightenment and Marx's historical materialism,<sup>17</sup> although Yanagita himself never acknowledges an intellectual debt to any Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers.

As I read through the secondary literature on Yanagita, I was again surprised that the existing scholarship on Yanagita has rarely paid systematic attention to this possible intellectual lineage. Of course, the fact that Yanagita is influenced by Enlightenment thinkers does not necessarily

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<sup>15</sup> For example, *TYKS* 25: 336–337.

<sup>16</sup> Befu, Harumi, *Hegemony of Homogeneity: An Anthropological Analysis of "Nihonjinron"* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2001), pp. 16–17.

<sup>17</sup> It is worth emphasizing here that Marx's historical materialism is inspired by the British and French political economy as much as by Hegelian philosophy.

negate his characterization as a nationalist or cultural essentialist.<sup>18</sup> However, the systematic presence of Enlightenment thought, at least, adds an intriguing complexion to his thought that reveals a tortuous trajectory of the Enlightenment legacy in a non-Western society.

### **Yanagita and the Enlightenment Tradition**

The connection between the Western intellectual tradition and Yanagita is not entirely missed in previous literature. Yanagita is often characterized as a conservative in the vein of Edmund Burke, who viewed rapid social changes with skeptical eyes and favored gradual and moderate reform over radical and revolutionary paths to progress. This view also pays a tribute to the individuality of his thought to some degree by distinguishing him from a more common type of reactionary conservatives whose major tenet is a Romanticized version of nationalism.<sup>19</sup> In this view, he is a rare example of “pure conservatism”<sup>20</sup> in Japan that is “always willing to converse with progressivism.”<sup>21</sup> Yanagita himself sometimes characterizes his project as conservative in this sense.<sup>22</sup> However, although this characterization is not totally off the mark, it does not capture the dialectical thrust and, hence, a progressive aspect of his intellectual project. It is more plausible to think that it is through a critical engagement with the Enlightenment tradition that he became appreciative of Burkean conservatism.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> In *Myth of Japanese Uniqueness*, Dale points out that many *nihonjinron* writers often (mis)appropriate foreign concepts and theories and used them in their defense of the uniqueness and distinctiveness of Japanese culture.

<sup>19</sup> Bunzō Hashikawa, “Hoshushugi to tenkō—Yanagita Kunio·Shiratori Yoshichiyo no baai,” *Yanagita Kunio ron shūsei* (Tokyo: Sakuhinsha, 2002), pp. 160–171; and Hikaru Satō, *Yanagita Kunio no seijikeizaigaku, Nihon hoshushugi no genryū wo motomete* (Tokyo: Sekai shisōsha, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Hashikawa, *Yanagita Kunio ron shūsei*, p. 158.

<sup>21</sup> Shunsuke Tsurumi, “Yanagita Kunio no gakufū,” Jirō Kamishima, ed., *Yanagita Kunio kenkyū* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1973), p. 154.

<sup>22</sup> For example, *TYKS* 16: 167–168.

<sup>23</sup> As far as I know, there is no evidence, either textual or biographical, that shows the direct influence of Burke’s thought on Yanagita. Apparently, it is based on similarities between the ways the two understood history and political community. I do not deny that Burkean elements in Yanagita’s



There is nothing extraordinary in the claim that the Enlightenment tradition forms an important part of Yanagita's educational background. He was a graduate of the Law Department of Tokyo Imperial University and belonged to the first generation of bureaucrat-intellectuals.<sup>24</sup> Although German Social Policy School and Young Historical School of Economics had become influential in Japanese universities and some ministries, by the time he studied agricultural policy science at the Imperial University of Tokyo British political economy was still part of the curriculum.<sup>25</sup> Also, he spent a substantial portion of his youth exploring and devouring Western literature, and it would be surprising if he was not familiar with at least

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thought is substantial enough to warrant the possibility of either direct or indirect influence of Burke, but want to emphasize the equally plausible influence of progressive thinkers.

<sup>24</sup> Victor J. Koschmann, "Folklore Studies and the Conservative Anti-Establishment in Modern Japan," *International Perspective on Yanagita Kunio and Japanese Folklore Studies*, eds., J. Victor Koschmann, Ōiwa Keibō, and Yamashita Shinji (Ithaca: East Asia Program and Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 137–139. For the bureaucrat-intellectual, see Kenneth B. Pyle, "Advantages of Followership: German Economics and Japanese Bureaucrats, 1890–1925," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 1/1 (1974): 127–164.

<sup>25</sup> For the influence of the Social Policy School in Japan, see Kenneth B. Pyle, "The Technology of Japanese Nationalism: The Local Improvement Movement, 1900–1918," *Journal of Asian Studies* 33 (1973): 51–65. For the German Social Policy School and Young Historical School of Economics, see Erik Grimmer-Solem, *The Rise of Historical Economics and Social Reform in Germany, 1864–1894* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003). Although the labels of the Social Policy School and the Young Historical School of Economics are vaguely defined and are often used interchangeably, it seems appropriate to distinguish two rival camps within the German Social Policy Association: the state socialist camp represented by Adolf Wagner and the Young Historical School represented by Gustav Schmoller, Lujo Brentano, and others. The latter was directly influenced by British reformist movements and was opposed to Wagner's state socialism as well as *laissez faire*. The influence of the Social Policy School is discernible in Yanagita's early writings on political economy, but his position is closer to that of Schmoller and Brentano.

some texts of Montesquieu, Rousseau, and John Stuart Mill that had been translated into Japanese in the early Meiji period and had become must-reads for the Japanese urban literati. Moreover, he could read English, French, and German and had access to texts in these original languages.

Therefore, it is surprising that one finds few references to Enlightenment thinkers in his texts, even when his discourses seem to draw on their ideas.<sup>26</sup> Mill's and Rousseau's names are mentioned several times in the early texts on agricultural policy science, but there is no substantial engagement with their political theory. We could think of various plausible reasons for Yanagita's reticence on his intellectual debt to Enlightenment thinkers, but given the lack of evidence, the exercise would remain purely speculative. Here, I concentrate my efforts on assembling fragmented episodes of what seem to be Yanagita's engagement with Enlightenment thought, scattered throughout the vast sea of his texts, into more or less coherent clusters of theoretical problems. The list is by no means intended to be exhaustive or definitive, but it gives, I hope, a fair picture of the intellectual lineage at issue.

*Transition from Agrarian to Commercial Society*

The first and perhaps most visible cluster of problems is the transition from agrarian to commercial society and its moral and political implications. The key Enlightenment texts here seem to be Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiment* and *The Wealth of Nations*. As Smith did one century and half before him, Yanagita embraced the commercialization and industrialization of society as something inevitable and overall beneficial, but potentially dangerous to social cohesion. Whereas commercialization brings about material and aesthetic benefits and makes social life more pleasant, comfortable, and beautiful,<sup>27</sup> it disintegrates traditional communities and social groups into egoistic individuals who meet and part just to satisfy their respective private desire. Therefore, instead of uniting a people into a nation, commercialization saps society of

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<sup>26</sup> An example of the silence on the intellectual debt occurs in his very intriguing discussion of the divine vehicle (*mikoshi*) and the popular will in *Sairei to seken* (TYKS 10: 422–423). Yanagita seems to draw on Rousseau's distinction between the general will and the will of all, but did not mention his name.

<sup>27</sup> TYKS 16: 167–168.

any source of horizontal solidarity, whose deficit must be compensated by the centralized bureaucratic state. To contain negative impacts of individualization, a new form of public morality must be developed in commercial society. Like Smith, Yanagita emphasizes the role of sympathy (*dōjō*), a common feeling toward humankind cutting across the boundaries of particular groups, whether traditional communities, social classes, and... nations!<sup>28</sup> He explains *dōjō* as “an inclination to see old times imagining oneself to be in that particular time and place... One cannot understand, not only what one’s own ancestors’ life was like but also how contemporary *ethnos* [*minzoku*] other than one’s own are living today, without suspending the egocentric view [*onore wo munashiku suru*]...”<sup>29</sup> He made the empathetic understanding of the temporal and spatial others and the gradual expansion of the object of sympathy, from the local to the global level, both the methodological requirement and ultimate objective of *minzokugaku*.

In light of this interpretation, Yanagita’s *minzokugaku* may be accused of being apologist for capitalist development, but certainly not a “nostalgic return to the uncomplicated world of an earlier age.”<sup>30</sup> It is true that he tried to preserve or restore the traditional institutions and practices such as ancestor worship, the household, and Imperial House, but his defense of those institutions and practices is essentially utilitarian in the sense that he values them to the extent that they help generate sympathy that cuts across parochial groups and social classes dividing the nation. Arguably, the trinity of the household, ancestor worship, and Imperial House is “civil religion” in the Rousseauian sense,<sup>31</sup> which fills the chronic deficit of communal bonds in commercial society.

#### *Progress and Its Limits*

The second cluster concerns the causes that drive the transition of society from one developmental stage to another. Here, the relevant texts seem, among others, Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* and Malthus’ *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. What Ronald Meek denominates “four

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>30</sup> Dale, *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness*, p. 209.

<sup>31</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract, with Geneva Manuscript and Political Economy*, ed. and trans. Roger D. Masters (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1978), pp. 124–132.

stages theory,” perfected by Adam Smith and Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot in the 1750s, formulated social progress in terms of the succession of four modes of subsistence—hunting, pasturage, agriculture, and commerce, with each stage having its corresponding institutions and ideas.<sup>32</sup> The idea that the mode of subsistence is the base upon which a particular mode of politics and culture is built, laid the groundwork for the development of modern anthropology and sociology and became a direct precursor of Marx’s historical materialism.<sup>33</sup> Smith and many others suggested that demographic pressure was the main driving force of the historical development of human society. However, he complained that in Europe the natural succession of developmental stages—which he calls “the natural progress of opulence”<sup>34</sup>—had been distorted by perverse incentives created by artificial institutions. In particular, Smith, in Book III of *The Wealth of Nations*, singled out primogeniture and the resulting concentration of land in the hand of the few as a hindrance to the full exploitation of land and gave impetus to the development of cities and foreign commerce even before the potential of agrarian economy was exhausted.<sup>35</sup>

Yanagita seems to subscribe to the four stages theory and closely follows in Smith’s footsteps when he gives industry and commerce a complementary and somewhat subordinate position in the national economy, largely as an absorber of surplus labor in agriculture. His agrarianism, in other words, may be a curious relic of the eighteenth-century liberal political economy as much as reactionary backlash against rapid industrialization and urbanization under way in early-twentieth century Japan.<sup>36</sup> According to this understanding, Japan’s transition from

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<sup>32</sup> Ronald Meek, *Social Science and Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

<sup>33</sup> Meek, *Social Science and Ignoble Savage*, p. 229.

<sup>34</sup> Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (New York: Modern Library, 2000), p. 407.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, p. 413.

<sup>36</sup> I thank Clement Fatovic for pointing out the similarity between Smith’s and Yanagita’s agrarianism. It is worth mentioning interesting similarities and differences between Smith and Yanagita with respect to primogeniture. Smith traced back its origin to the period when property rights were insecure. The best way to defend properties from external threats was to concentrate them in one person, who, in turn, provided security to other

agrarian to commercial society is “a natural progress of opulence,”<sup>37</sup> given the demographic pressure found in rural Japan at the turn of the twentieth century.

Equally important is Malthus’ more pessimistic view of the limited possibility of progress because it introduces a certain kind of wariness toward modernity in Yanagita’s thought and tilts it toward political conservatism and ecological conservationism. According to Malthus, “the increase of population is necessarily limited by the means of subsistence,”<sup>38</sup> and the improvement of material conditions will at some point reach its limit. When that point is reached, the population growth is checked by famine, disease, and war. A famous passage from Malthus’ *An Essay on the Principle of Population* reads:

Famine seems to be the last, the most dreadful resource of nature. The power of population is so superior to the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man that, unless arrested by the preventive check, premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race. The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of depopulation. They are the precursors in the great army of destruction, and often finish the dreadful work themselves. But should they fail in this war of extermination, sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague, advance in terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and ten thousands. Should success be still incomplete, gigantic inevitable famine stalks in the rear, and with one mighty blow, levels the population with the food of the world.<sup>39</sup>

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members of the community. Yanagita’s explanation of the origin of primogeniture in Japan in his early writings almost faithfully reproduces Smith’s (*TYKS* 28: 227–228; 237). However, unlike Smith, he refused to discard the institution of the household (*ie*), if not primogeniture itself, as institutional inertia rendered meaningless in the modern age.

<sup>37</sup> Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, p. 407.

<sup>38</sup> T. R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, ed. Donald Winch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 43.

<sup>39</sup> Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, pp. 42–43.

Yanagita's diagnosis of persistent poverty, recurrent famines, and the practice of granny-dumping and infanticide in rural Japan is essentially Malthusian. Moreover, he later extended the same logic to the global struggle among colonial powers over limited space and suggests that the phenomenon is not new but common to entire human history.<sup>40</sup> The Malthusian wariness remains a persistent and consequential theme throughout Yanagita's writings.

Nevertheless, Yanagita does not accept Malthus' diagnosis uncritically. In his own diagnosis, the scarcity of arable land and hence the means of subsistence, observed in some localities, is attributable to artificial spatial divisions hindering the movement of labor. In an essay titled "Japan's Population Problem" (1925), he criticizes Malthusian theory in the following terms:

A scholar by the name of Malthus who lived one hundred years ago was so aggrieved to witness this kind of scarcity before his eyes that he even tried to predict that people would eventually be forced to reduce their number by one means or another because of the limited means of subsistence. Given that the earth's surface is finite, it is mathematically correct to say that there is a limit to population growth. However, scarcity observed until today is not an outcome after a new way of production and distribution was attempted. Way before reaching that point, the anxiety of scarcity and competition emerged within one narrow class or region, and that produced enough misery among people. When nations only harbor animosity toward each other and cannot taste their own happiness but by comparison with the suffering of others, this misery torments us even more easily.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, in his diagnosis, the enclosure of global open space by sovereign states and colonial powers artificially hastens the advent of the Malthusian limit to human progress in some localities. In other words, the immediate

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<sup>40</sup> For example, see Yanagita's historical narratives of Okinawa islands (*TYKS* 1: 283-284; *TYKS* 25: 151-156)

<sup>41</sup> *TYKS* 29: 107.

barrier to further progress is not natural, as Malthusian theory suggests, but man-made. As such, it can be changed by human agency.

Thus, Yanagita's progressivism is tempered by Malthusian wariness, and as a result, a cyclical motion is introduced into progressive time, as the linear accumulation of human time in a particular place, when having exhausted the limited gift of nature therein, results in a setback or even a complete reversal. Spatial limit means that today's prosperity may be purchased at the expense of future progress. Although he does not presuppose a complete trade-off between present and future gains, because some resources are renewable by human agency, he does fear that the prosperity in today's urban space is built upon the sacrifice of spatial and temporal others. Not only the current productive class in the rural area is footing the bill of the extravagance of the urban unproductive class, but also the future generations of entire humanity will end up paying back the debt accumulated by the preceding generation.

#### *Human Agency and Culture*

One of the basic tenets of the Enlightenment is its belief in human agency in determining our own fate. Especially, it is understood in terms of increasing control over nature. Progress or civilization is often defined as the gradual conquest of nature by human will. Yanagita's understanding of civilization conforms to this conception, as indicated in the passage below:

In the distant past, there was little difference in living conditions between animals and human beings, as natural agents constraining them were so powerful. However, as a result of cooperative life [*kyōdō seikatsu*], humans alone improved their life constantly and, as time progressed, were able to conquer nature gradually. From this point of view, the so-called civilization of a country means the conquest of nature by human agents—that is, the progressive victory of human agents over natural agents.<sup>42</sup>

Two points are worth emphasizing in this passage. First, in spite of the popular association of Yanagita with the German notion of organic and spiritual *Kultur*, his conception of progress is much closer to the British and

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<sup>42</sup> TYKS 28: 292.

French notion of civilization (and Marx's).<sup>43</sup> Second, he explicitly associates human agency with social cooperation and, by implication, collective liberty with social progress. This emphasis is in sync with the overall intellectual trend in Western societies of moving from individualism and competition to collectivism and cooperation (e.g., Fabian socialism in UK, Progressivism in US). The passage above is taken from one of his earliest texts published in 1902 and there is no indication in his later texts that he fundamentally revised this conception of civilization and his commitment to it.

However, Yanagita's credential as an heir to the Enlightenment tradition would be seriously compromised if he considered culture to be immune to human agency, as if it were part of natural order. After all, the Enlightenment tradition prides itself in not considering inherited traditions to be something sacred and beyond contestation, but many critics claim that is exactly what he did. I do not think their claim is particularly convincing. At least, it is difficult to draw such a conclusion from the texts alone without relying on some extra sources of information. Quite tellingly, in one of the earliest texts titled *Nōseigaku*, Yanagita treated race (*jinsū*) and customs (*minzoku*) as natural agents along with climate and geographical topology on the ground that they are "permanent (*jōzai*)" conditions.<sup>44</sup> However, he silently dropped them as examples of natural agents in a subsequent text, *Nōgyō seisakugaku*.<sup>45</sup> Although he did not offer any explanation as to why he did so, it is consistent with his later conception of racial distinctions as a product of politics.<sup>46</sup> As for customs, one of the premises of his *minzokugaku* is precisely to recognize customs as the sedimentation of ancestors' practical attempts to control and tame natural agents.

Even Yanagita's criticism against the wholesale renunciation of customs would be unthinkable without the influence of the Enlightenment.

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<sup>43</sup> For the history and meaning of the terms *culture* and *civilization*, see Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 48–50, 76–82; and Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 11–20.

<sup>44</sup> *TYKS* 28: 189.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291.

<sup>46</sup> *TYKS* 25: 92.



Here, the important source of inspiration seems to be John Stuart Mill. In spite of his general antipathy toward customs, Mill readily admits that it is neither possible nor desirable for a new generation to renounce completely what is inherited from the preceding generations and to start from scratch.<sup>47</sup> “[E]ven in revolution of opinion,” he concedes, “one part of the truth usually sets while another rises. Even progress, which ought to superadd, for the most part only substitutes, one partial and incomplete truth for another; improvement consisting chiefly in this, that the new fragment of truth is more wanted, more adapted to the needs of the time, than that which it displaces.”<sup>48</sup> Therefore, both wholesale denunciation of the old and uncritical embracement of the new are equally dogmatic. What is important is to keep open the possibility for each generation to consciously choose which customs are to be kept and which are not on the basis of utility for their own purposes. A passage from Mill’s *On Liberty* reads:

It is the privilege and proper condition of a human being, arrived at the maturity of his faculties, to use and interpret experience in his own way. It is for him to find out what part of recorded experience is properly applicable to his own circumstances and character. The traditions and customs of other people are, to a certain extent, evidence of what their experience has taught *them*; presumptive evidence, and as such, have a claim to his deference: but, in the first place, their experience may be too narrow; or they may not have interpreted it rightly. Secondly, their interpretation of experience may be correct, but unsuitable to him. Customs are made for customary circumstances, and customary characters; and his circumstances or his character may be uncustomary. Thirdly, though the customs be both good as custom, and suitable to him, yet to conform to custom, merely *as* custom, does not educate or develop in him any of the qualities which are the distinctive endowment of a human being.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. John Gray (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 64.

<sup>48</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 52.

<sup>49</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, pp. 64–65.

Yanagita seems to have applied Mill's injunction to collectivities, and his critique of the uncritical acceptance of imported ideas and the wholesale renunciation of indigenous customs closely resonates with this passage. *Minzokugaku* is against both the dogmatic affirmation and the blind denunciation of customs. Its purpose is to encourage the current generation, first, to know the meaning of inherited traditions and customs, then, to critically examine their contemporary relevance and utility, and, finally, to consciously select what is to be preserved and what is to be abandoned.

Thus, for Yanagita, culture is not an organic entity that exists independent of human practice. He analogizes culture as a silk brocade in which innumerable threads of different colors are constantly being weaved into a whole. Morris-Suzuki<sup>50</sup> rightly points out the integrationist and assimilationist thrust of the analogy, but she underestimates Yanagita's emphasis on human agency in weaving such a brocade. It is the *political* construction of national culture in which not only a cultural elite but also the majority of the nation—i.e., laboring classes—participate in a self-reflective manner.

*Diversity and Theoretical Knowledge*<sup>51</sup>

The fourth cluster is the question of diversity and the production of theoretical knowledge. Diverse historical expressions of common humanity, in term of spatial and temporal variations, have long been a puzzle for modern theoretical knowledge, and theorizing activities in the Enlightenment period were, to a substantial degree, motivated by the explicit recognition of such diversity. Dugald Stewart, in his *Biographical Memoir of Adam Smith* (1811), succinctly put the theoretical question Smith grappled with in *the Wealth of Nations* as follows: "An historical view of the different forms under which human affairs have appeared in different ages and nations, naturally suggests the question, Whether the experience of

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<sup>50</sup> Morris-Suzuki, *Re-Inventing Japan*, pp. 69–72.

<sup>51</sup> The argument presented in this section is discussed in detail in my dissertation, "Diversity and Knowledge in the Age of Nation-Building: Space and Time in the Thought of Yanagita Kunio" (PhD diss., Florida International University, 2011).

former times may not now furnish some general principles to enlighten and direct the policy of future legislators?"<sup>52</sup>

In the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau suggests that the current mode of knowledge production is deficient in comparison, because what we know about non-European peoples is systematically skewed by ethnocentric prejudices against unfamiliar others. For example, a passage from note X to the *Discourse* reads:

Although the inhabitants of Europe have for the past three or four hundred years overrun the other parts of the world and are constantly publishing new collections of travels and reports, I am convinced that the only men we know are the Europeans; what is more, it would seem that, judging by the ridiculous prejudices that have not died out even among Men of Letters, very nearly all anyone does under the pompous heading of the study of man is to study the men of his country. Regardless of how much individuals may come and go, it would seem that Philosophy does not travel, and indeed each People's Philosophy is ill-suited for another.<sup>53</sup>

Specifically, knowledge about unfamiliar places and peoples mostly relies on observations by four classes of people—"Sailors, Merchants, Soldiers and Missionaries"<sup>54</sup>—who are all ill-prepared for objective observation. In order to overcome the problem, Rousseau proposes that travel should be recognized, not as an appendix to other businesses, but as an intellectual activity in its own right:

Let us suppose a Montesquieu, a Buffon, a Diderot, a Duclos, a d'Alembert, a Condillac, or men of that stamp, traveling with a view to instruct their compatriots,

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<sup>52</sup> Dugald Stewart, *Biographical Memoirs, of Adam Smith, LL. D., of William Robertson, D. D. and of Thomas Reid, D. D.* (Edinburgh: George Ramsay and Company, 1811), p. 44.

<sup>53</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 211.

<sup>54</sup> Rousseau, *The Discourses*, p. 209.

observing and describing as they do so well, Turkey, Egypt, Barbary, the Empire of Morocco, Guinea...and all the Wild regions, this being the most important voyage of all and the one that should be undertaken with the greatest care; let us suppose that on their return from these memorable travels, these new Hercules set down at leisure the natural, moral and political history of what they had seen, then we would ourselves see a new world issue from their pen, and would thus learn to know our own.<sup>55</sup>

However, Rousseau's dream of a new philosophy—an empirical “science of man”—remains elusive even today. The way modern knowledge incorporates diversity into its fold can be called, at least with hindsight, imperialistic in a double sense of the term: It unilaterally incorporates the unfamiliar into preconceived spatial or temporal categories, and it has intimate connections with imperialistic practices exercised by coercive power. Instead of having existing theories bear the full weight of empirical diversity, it often resorts to the method called “conjectural or theoretical history.”

Dugald Stewart describes Smith's approach to history as “conjectural or theoretical history.”<sup>56</sup> It is conjectural because it supplements the lack of empirical evidence by the deductive application of certain principles to infer what human actor *would* behave under certain conditions.

In this want of direct evidence, we are under a necessity of supplying the place of fact by conjecture; and when we are unable to ascertain how men have actually conducted themselves upon particular occasions, of considering in what manner they are likely to have proceeded, from the principles of their nature, and the circumstances of their external situation. In such inquiries, the detached facts which travels and voyages afford us, may frequently serve as land-marks to our speculations; and sometimes our

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<sup>55</sup> Rousseau, *The Discourses*, p. 211.

<sup>56</sup> Stewart, *Biographical Memoirs*, p. 49.

conclusions *a priori*, may tend to confirm the credibility of facts, which, on a superficial view, appeared to be doubtful or incredible.<sup>57</sup>

Yet, those principles of human nature utilized by Smith and other Enlightenment thinkers are not entirely culturally neutral and national or civilizational prejudices were brought back in from the backdoor, so to speak, and vitiate the conjectural history of humanity.<sup>58</sup>

In contrast, Yanagita insists in an inductive approach to historiography, and his insistence on inductive methods seems to derive, at least partially, from his dissatisfaction with conjectural grand historical narratives offered by Western thinkers and historians. For example, in reference to H. G. Wells popular *The Outline of History* (1920), he complains:

I suppose many people have read world history by Englishman Wells. The white people, since when they finally realized that the earth is round, have often wanted to write books of human history or world history. That is partly their habits dating back to ancient Greece—namely, they tend to think that it is okay to write as much as they know from their ethnocentric perspectives under such

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 48. Also see the discussion of the text in Meek, *Social Science*, pp. 231–234. Stewart here is referring to Smith’s *The First Formation of Language*, but he points out that the same approach is used in all his other works. He suggests that “inquiries perfectly analogous to these may be applied to the modes of government, and to the municipal institutions which have obtained among different nations” and hints that that is exactly what Smith did in *The Wealth of Nations*. Stewart, *Biographical Memoir*, p. 50.

<sup>58</sup> Meek is somewhat skeptical of the view that the “four stages theory” is conjectural history and argues that it was intended as “a broad generalization of the historical facts as they saw them.” Meek, *Social Science*, p. 238. However, he admits that Smith and other proponents of the four stages theory may have unwarrantedly presupposed that the life of contemporary “savage” peoples was comparable to that of ancient barbarians and may have unwarrantedly translated temporal order into cultural hierarchy (pp. 240–241).

grandiose titles. Yet, they have no excuse when someone objects that theirs is not true world history. Then, when they start afresh and attempt to write how entire humanity has lived and what changes they have undergone, the best thing they can get is something like the book by Wells.<sup>59</sup>

In spite of his dissatisfaction with modern knowledge constructed through conjectural history, however, Yanagita remains committed to the idea of world history and the possibility of a universal science of humanity. Like Rousseau before him, he interprets the historical and particular expressions of humanity, not as antithetical to universal knowledge, but as a rich reservoir of empirical evidence from which a universal history of humanity and science of man can be inductively reconstructed. He also firmly believes that only by the discovery of genuinely universal knowledge on the basis of particular historical experiences can humanity get rid of prejudices and parochialism and lift itself to a higher stage of human civilization.

In this sense, his *minzokugaku* can be said to be a legitimate heir and a necessary corrective to “conjectural history,” pioneered by eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau and Adam Smith and elaborated by Mill and Marx. Yanagita would argue that, while conjectural history could fill a huge lacuna in human history, left by the lack of empirical evidence *minzokugaku* offers a much more scientific method to fill the gap and write a more comprehensive and accurate history of human progress.

#### **Partial Reading of Yanagita’s Texts**

If Yanagita’s positions in the four clusters of theoretical problems described above are not entirely off the mark, we should seriously consider the seemingly impossible possibility that he is indeed a quite ingenuous heir to the Enlightenment tradition. Furthermore, if a non-Western, conservative, nationalist thinker like Yanagita can be counted as such, the Enlightenment tradition itself may be much richer in its internal contradiction and, hence, contains much wider potential yet to be redeemed. In a sense, Yanagita’s equivocal voice itself is a reflection of the equivocality of the Enlightenment tradition. Much more extensive and complex cross-cultural exchanges than conventionally supposed seem to be

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<sup>59</sup> TYKS 25: 168.

involved in the intellectual lineage at issue. Then, why has such a possibility been so persistently overlooked both by his followers and critics? I conclude the article with some speculative comments on that question.

Without doubt, the problem is partly attributable to the nature of Yanagita's writings. Throughout his long intellectual career, he has produced a body of texts that is too voluminous and diverse to be digested by a historian in a short period of time. Moreover, his style of writing is often circumlocutory and raises a substantial barrier for not only international, but also many contemporary Japanese readers. Inevitably, many scholars read only a portion of his texts and draw a conclusion from the partial reading. Although this problem is by no means unique to studies of Yanagita, his texts, if only partially read, are especially vulnerable to misleading interpretations for various reasons. First, his intellectual career is punctuated by several ruptures marked by self-criticism and his thought kept evolving throughout his lifetime. As a result, it is difficult to single out one definitive work that represents the totality of his thought. None of his best-known works, such as *Tōno monogatari*, *Meiji Taishō shi: Sesō hen*, *Senzo no hanashi*, or *Kaijō no michi*, is his *magnum opus* in the conventional sense, and reading one or two of them is not likely to reveal the full extent of his intellectual lineage. Second, Yanagita is not a systematic writer and the bulk of his texts are not theoretical. His writings are often so saturated with the endless minutiae of particular facts that any casual perusal of his texts easily misleads the reader from broader theoretical concerns underpinning his intellectual project.

However, I suspect that partiality in the other sense of the term is also at work. As a matter of fact, not a small number of scholars have gone further than a casual perusal in an attempt to understand his texts, but the intellectual lineage at issue tends to be marginalized, if not totally missed, by them as well. For some reasons, the idea of a substantial and consequential influence of the Enlightenment on a Japanese folklorist does not fit well with the subjectivities of his followers and critics alike. One reason may be that intellectual history itself is not totally free from the problem Yanagita grappled with a century ago, that is, the division of the global space into progressive and stagnant spheres and of humanity into the subject and object of knowledge/politics. In the modern spatiotemporal imaginary, various labels used to characterize his intellectual project, such as "Japanese," "folklore," "ethnology," "traditional," or "rural," connote its attachment to the stagnant past, probably noble or aesthetically appealing

but doomed to be swept away by the inexorable force of modernity. Such a project cannot be but “nostalgic,” “conservative,” or “reactionary.” Thus, on the one hand, his critics too quickly dismiss Yanagita’s thought as a mere reflection of Japan’s deficient modernity. His followers, on the other hand, tend to retreat into the fortress of cultural exceptionalism and unwarrantedly sever his thought from the global discursive field in which it was bred in the first place.

Admittedly, given his reticence on the intellectual debt to Western thinkers, Yanagita himself may be held partly responsible for this unfortunate polarization. However, quite ironically, his texts can also be used to diagnose the predicament and reimagine intellectual history in a way that remedies the prejudice inherent in the modern spatiotemporal imaginary. European Enlightenment thinkers’ engagement with the question of human diversity resulted in a rich and complex theoretical knowledge. Yet, such knowledge is still vitiated by ethnocentric historical narratives that privilege the subjectivity of the urban West, and it has been contested by many European and non-European thinkers, who, in direct confrontation with various counter-narratives of non-urban, non-Western experience of modernity, partially appropriated the language of the Enlightenment and turned it into a weapon to fight against it. Yanagita’s critical engagement with the Enlightenment tradition is an illustrative instance of such cross-cultural exchange. As such, reading his texts enriches our understanding not only of an interesting non-European thinker but also Western thought itself. Here is, I think, one reason the neglected intellectual lineage discussed in this article is not merely a historical curiosity but a subject of contemporary relevance.