

Article

Yanagita Kunio and the Culture Film: Discovering Everydayness and Creating/Imagining a National Community, 1935–1945 [†]

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[†] Translated by Michael Raine, Marcos P. Centeno-Martín, and Maiko Kodaka. This article was originally published as Fujii Jinshi. 2003. Yanagita Kunio to bunka eiga: Shōwa jyūnendai niokeru nichijōseikatsu no hakken to kokumin no sōzō. In *The Politics of Cinema* (Eiga no seijigaku). Edited by Hase Masato and Nakamura Hideyuki. Tokyo: Seikyūsha, pp. 265–301. This translation is printed by permission of the original publisher. The author discusses the conflicted definition of “culture film” (*bunka eiga*) in relation to Japanese folklore studies (*minzokugaku*). Those fields are referred to by their English translations throughout this article. All names in the text are given in Japanese order (family name first) with the exception of the author attribution above.

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Abstract: In wartime Japan, folklore studies (*minzokugaku*) as an academic discipline emerged at the same time as the rise of the culture film (*bunka eiga*). Both helped mobilize peripheral areas and firmly created the image of a unitary nation. This paper focuses on *Living by the Earth* (*Tsuchi ni ikiru*, 1941), directed by Miki Shigeru, and its spinoff photo album titled *People of the Snow Country* (*Yukiguni no minzoku*, 1944). Miki filmed rural life and ordinary people in the Tohoku region under the strong influence of Yanagita Kunio, a founder of Japanese folklore studies, and published the photo album in collaboration with Yanagita. In this project, vanishing customs were paradoxically regarded as objects impossible to photograph. However, that paradox enhanced the value of the project and made it easier to construct an imagined national community through the discourse of folklore studies.

Keywords: documentary film; the culture film; folklore studies; documentary photography

No one dies so poor that he does not leave something behind.

Blaise Pascal¹

1. The Culture Film and Folklore Studies

1.1. The “Discovery” of Rural Japan

Japanese folklore studies, as an academic discipline, emerged at the same time as the rise of the culture film. I do not think this was a coincidence. The discourses on folklore studies and the culture film had formal similarities, and moreover, they formed archetypal expressions of an *inversion* that they shared with the hegemonic discourse following the “China Incident” that led to the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937.

First, let us focus on folklore studies. As an academic discipline, it was established during the 1930s, with Yanagita Kunio at its center. Yanagita was already in his sixties when he published two books of methodology, *Folklore Theory* (*Minkan denshō ron*) in 1934 and *Methodology for the Study of*

¹ Quoted in (Benjamin 1996, p. 313).

Regional Ways of Life (Kyōdo seikatsu no kenkyū-hō) in 1935.² In addition to those books, in 1935, Yanagita created a study circle, the Association of Folklore (*Minkan denshō no kai*), at his home and published the journal known as *Folklore (Minkan denshō)*, through which his students started their systematic studies. This sequence of events, driven by the force of Yanagita's personality, established folklore studies as an academic discipline and gained it wide recognition in Japanese society.³ However, it is important to note that Yanagita resisted the label of folklore studies, because his comprehensive oeuvre expanded beyond existing disciplinary boundaries.⁴ Despite Yanagita's concerns, it cannot be ignored that his work circulated as the "Yanagita School" of folklore studies, and he became an authority in the field. The aim of this article is neither to clarify Yanagita Kunio's true purpose nor to explore the contemporary validity of his texts. Even if the image of his work is superficial, it has had enormous social influence, so there is still value in carefully analyzing its functions and effects. That is the sense in which this paper treats "Yanagita Kunio" and folklore studies.

So, what about the culture film? What was the culture film after all? I have already discussed this question elsewhere (Fuji 2001a)⁵ and can summarize my argument as follows. The term "culture film" is usually considered to be a synonym for a "documentary film" (*kiroku eiga*) made during wartime, but this common understanding was only possible in retrospect. Culture film was an empty sign that could be discussed endlessly precisely because it had no fixed definition. In fact, references to the culture film circulated widely in the discursive space of the second decade of the Shōwa period (1926–1989), appearing in various print media. The background to that was the "discovery" of the commercial value of non-fiction films with the popularity of newsreels after the China Incident in 1937 and the start of the compulsory exhibition of culture films in film programs one year after the enactment of the Film Law in 1939. Additionally, it cannot be overlooked that the discourse on culture films made it possible to ignore the twisted "reality" in Japan that was a consequence of the China Incident.⁶

While folklore studies and the culture film developed in their own way between 1935 and 1945, they became decisively intertwined after the China Incident. The film critic Tsumura Hideo, who participated in the "Overcoming Modernity" symposium, stated in an article published in 1941:

The impact of the China Incident on the politics and culture of Japan was profound in many respects. But the most significant is the nation's interest in the "rural" (*chihō*) and "rural people". In the context of total war and the creation of the military state, the problem is how to understand the particularity of rural Japan and develop it appropriately, with a view to the destiny of the nation as a whole, in an organic relation to the urban.

Tsumura (1941, pp. 21–22)

According to Tsumura, the total war system following the China Incident caused the nation to turn its gaze toward rural areas, and indeed, the number of films featuring villages suddenly increased in this period. As the editor of the bulletin of Fumin Kyōkai (Association for Enriching Japanese Nationals), Kimura Taijirō, stated:

Recently, a particular cinematic genre of "peasant film" has appeared. As a critique of films that until now were too focused on the city, and for social reasons to do with the increased interest in rural villagers and farmers in the current circumstances, it is a clear step forward

² The former reprinted in (Yanagita 1998), the latter in (Yanagita 1998). The advertisement when the first book was published by Kyōritsusha read: "The first systematic study of folklore" in *Tabi to densetsu* (Travel and Folklore), October, 1934.

³ It is also significant that many introductory texts on "folklore" were translated in the 1920s. See (Makita 1972, pp. 131–32).

⁴ *Folklore Theory* begins: "It seems a little early to use the word Folklore Studies as a common noun in Japan". See also (Karatani 1993, pp. 258–80).

⁵ This was translated by Jeffrey Isaacs as "Films That Do Culture—A Discursive Analysis of Bunka Eiga, 1935–1945" in *Iconics* 6 (2002).

⁶ In a narrow definition, culture films were only films that had been authorized by the Ministry of Education according to the Film Law criteria. However, it was clear from the discourse on culture films at the time that the definition was more inclusive than that.

for Japanese cinema, which has finally developed into a cinema based on a comprehensive sense of the masses that includes rural villages and people.

Kimura (1939)⁷

Kimura mentioned films such as *Earth* (Tsuchi, 1939), *Airplane Roar* (Bakuon, 1939), *Nightingale* (Uguisu, 1939), and later *Horse* (Uma, 1941) as good examples. Those are all feature films, but culture films were also subject to the same phenomenon. According to Aihara Shūji's research, between January and June 1941, 58 of the 135 authorized culture films (43% of the total) were "related to domestic production and culture". Within this category, films about "agriculture and farming" numbered 38, comprising 28% of the total (Aihara 1942).⁸ As Aihara argues, many of the 18 "natural science related" films could also be categorized as "agriculture and farming", which indicates the rapidly growing interest in rural villages in culture films of the time (although this chaotic categorization also illustrates the confusion about this concept). Therefore, the culture film and folklore studies shared an overlapping interest in rural areas.⁹ Filmmakers were aware of this intimate relationship between culture films and folklore studies.¹⁰ As the cameraman Midorikawa Michio stated, addressing young filmmakers in the manual of the state-controlled Film Association of Imperial Japan:

The Japanese study of traditions and ethnology is limited to an extremely specific group of researchers, a state of affairs that we feel sure is closely linked to the current state of our lives. We put too much value on individualism due to our excessively open connection with the world.

However, in the current situation I am happy to see an important new movement that emphasizes Japanese cultural awareness. In fact, the leaders of this movement have never been asleep *and good results will come from their example* (. . .) We have come to the time when we should look back on tradition. We are becoming aware of the chaos which emerges if our lives do not take root in tradition.

Midorikawa (1940, pp. 69–71)

As the emphasis in the quotation shows, what had been "discovered" was not something that had appeared recently. It had been there all along, but it did not attract any attention since it was too quotidian.

A sense of loss was necessary to "discover" rural life, which had become so familiar that no one noticed its importance. After the First World War, the migration to cities to serve in heavy industry triggered a sudden population crisis in rural areas, and the military enlistment of the younger generations after the China Incident added to the pressures on farming and fishing villages. Those accelerated changes threatened traditional life with extinction. As a direct result, the everyday life of rural Japan came to be retrospectively held dear. Borrowing Midorikawa's expression, this was discovered by those who "looked back" and became aware of the chaotic situation. As Tsumura Hideo wrote: "I have been

⁷ The ideal peasant film mentioned in this article was the American film *Our Daily Bread* (1934), which shows that the concern was not limited to Japan. For instance, the first International Agrarian Film Competition was held at the 15th general meeting of the International Institute of Agriculture in Rome in 1940. See (Donini 1941).

⁸ The background to this phenomenon was a letter from the Home Office that stated, "films about production, especially agriculture, should be encouraged", printed in *Kinema Junpō*, January in 1941, and quoted in (Kinema Junpō Sha 1976, p. 83); the promotion of rural lives was encouraged in (Cultural Department of the Imperial Rule Assistance Association 1985).

⁹ The interest in rural Japan was thematized in literature earlier than film. For instance, *Before the Dawn* (Yoakemae) by Shimazaki Tōson was completed in 1935, followed immediately by the serialization of Kawabata Yasunari's *Snow Country* (Yukiguni). Uchida Tomu's *Earth* was also based on the original novel by Nagatsuka Takashi published in 1910, though it was influenced by the success of an adaptation by the Shin Tsukiji troupe in the Tsukiji little theatre. Shikiba Ryūsaburō, who joined Yanagi Sōtetsu's Mingei movement, stated that it was literature that first found value in rural Japan, and this "literature of the soil" (distinguished from proletarian literature) was inherited by the culture film (Shikiba 1941).

¹⁰ Reflecting on the culture films of 1940, Tsumura Hideo pointed out an impasse in their production. Since "relying only on culture film producers might limit the range of expression (. . .) a way forward for exploring rural lives would be to get advice from Yanagita's Association of Folklore. Understanding folklore studies is also necessary" (Tsumura 1941, p. 145).

thinking of various things since the emergence of the culture film in Japan. Most importantly, that these films allowed us to see the ‘faces’ of rural areas and rural people” (Tsumura 1941, p. 21). This statement does not mean Tsumura never saw faces of people from the countryside. It simply highlights the fact that without this discovery, Tsumura would not have noticed the value of those “faces”, which sparked “a certain emotional impression” when they were seen. This “discovery” was made at the historical crossroads/crisis situation (conjuncture) in which everyday rural life was vanishing by virtue of being ignored, retroactively bestowing value on that life precisely because of the urgency of the crisis that threatened it.

1.2. Created/Imagined Japan

The southern and northern parts of Japan provide extreme examples of the situation described above. The former is Okinawa and the latter is the Tohoku region, which has very snowy winters. Although it has been widely argued that Okinawa played a key role for Yanagita Kunio and the establishment of folklore studies,¹¹ the relationship between the culture film and Okinawa shall be discussed in a separate paper, since films featuring the snow country were the core of this film genre. The following section will focus on some culture films which were clearly produced from an ethnographic interest in the snow country, but before that, it is worth taking a glance at a film on the subject that was not created from such an ethnographic approach. This will help us understand the image of the snow country in the context of contemporary culture films.

Culture films were considered boring until the release of Ishimoto Tōkichi’s *Snow Country* (*Yukiguni*, 1939), which was the first masterpiece of the genre.¹² It was not only commercially successful but also had a warm reception among critics and won a prize from the Ministry of Education.¹³ The film was produced by Omura Einosuke’s Geijutsu eigasha, a studio that also published the journal *Folklore Research* (*Minzokugaku Kenkyū*). Geijutsu eigasha was as important as the Tōhō studio in the production of culture films. The entire shoot took three years and was edited from footage taken in various areas such as Yamagata and other places in Tohoku, Hokkaido, and Hokuriku.

The film begins with a scene of a running steam train. First, we see black soil farms, white mountains appearing gradually from the distance, and a man removing snow alongside the tracks when the train enters the snow country. This introduction, getting gradually closer to the destination, functions as a stereotypical “story of arrival” that often conceals estrangement in the encounter with the other.¹⁴ It could be argued that the film is quite literally passing through Kawabata Yasunari’s “tunnel” in his novel *Snow Country* (Karatani 1997, pp. 42–44). Here, the chain of short shots emphasizes the feeling of movement and the beauty of the remaining machinery from the 1920s, while, at the same time, the locomotive breaking explosively through the heavy snow suggests the ultimate victory of human beings over nature.

After the opening sequence, “the fight of man against snow” in the snow country can be read in different ways, but it shows the influence of a tendency toward social reformism found in Paul Rotha’s theory of documentary (Rotha 1938). The portrayal of postmen on snowshoes, the scenes of removing snow and the renovated housing with roofs of a fifty-degree incline on which the snow cannot stick are like a “triumph” over the snow. The voiceover explaining that it is only Japan among the countries of the developed world that suffers from such heavy snow conveys a foreign (Euro-American) perspective

¹¹ See (Murai 1995; Koyasu 1996, pp. 1–54).

¹² See (Fujii 2001a).

¹³ *Yukiguni*, first screened at the Hibiya Theatre, which specialized in Western films, was unexpectedly successful (it was rare to screen Japanese films in cinemas for Western films). The award from the Ministry of Education was accompanied by the citation: “depicting snow in Japan’s coastal area, it succeeded not only as documentation but also as an indication of the proper way to make culture films” (Advertisement for *Yukiguni* in *Nihon Eiga* 5.6, 1940, p. 117). There must also have been pressure from the letter from the Home Office, mentioned in note 8 (*Earth* was also given an award at the same time).

¹⁴ See (Kitakouji 2003).

on the snow country that was internalized among Japanese people.¹⁵ In fact, *Snow Country* was not sent to the Venice Film Festival despite its popularity. According to Hasegawa Nyōzekan's report, although *Snow Country* was widely recognized as a good culture film, "it was not chosen because of a potentially misleading interpretation of the 'uncivilised' Orient by Western people" (Hasegawa 1939, p. 5). However, Kamei Fumio, a prominent filmmaker in the culture film section of the Tōhō studio, praised the film:

Among the films I have seen this year, although it is strange to say it in front of Mr. Ishimoto, *Snow Country* is one of the best. There is room for discussion in terms of technical aspects; however, I think it is a groundbreaking film because it raises the problem of rural Japan, though many people believe that the value of documentary films lies in showing exotic places, such as *Umi no seimeisen* [*Lifeline on the Sea*, 1933] produced by Yoko-cine and *Dotō wo kette* [*Through the Angry Waves*, 1937], *Shanghai* [1937], *Nanjing* [1938], and *Beijing* [1938] produced by Tōhō.

Kamei et al. (1940, p. 21)

According to Kamei, the value of the film was the "discovery" of everyday life, and *Snow Country* played a decisive role in the process through which the culture film discovered everyday life. *Snow Country* contains scenery from various locations. Through this structure, the individual uniqueness of each place is removed. It neglects the diversity of the nation and creates/imagines a general image of "Japan". For example, the film never focuses on poverty in the countryside or intense agrarian disputes. These views of rural Japan produced under the wartime totalitarian order concealed the harsh "reality" as well as contradictions between people in the nation.¹⁶ Following the remark on the turn to rural subjects quoted earlier, Tsumura Hideo went on to mention this deception hidden in the "discovery" of rural Japan:

The concept of the national people (*kokumin*) should acquire a new interpretation in modern Japanese society. When considering the systematic idea of *nation*, it is essential to look differently at rural areas and their people than we have in the past. Rural areas and rural people will gain new value and meaning, which will give birth to a new idea of a *Japanese nation*.

Tsumura (1941, p. 25)

2. Miki Shigeru and Yanagita Kunio

2.1. *Living by the Earth* (*Tsuchi ni ikiru*, 1941)

In the autumn of 1939, a cameraman and a producer visited Yanagita Kunio's home in Seijō, Tokyo. Their goal was to ask Yanagita for advice on shooting and directing a film about a village in Tohoku. According to the producer from the Tōhō Culture Film Department, while Yanagita seemed confused by the sudden visit at first, he was eventually swept up in the enthusiasm of this cameraman, who had a reputation for his unique persuasiveness. This cameraman was Miki Shigeru. He had originally started his career in fiction film and gained a strong reputation with films such as Mizoguchi Kenji's *The Water Magician* (*Taki no shiraito*, 1933). However, this was not enough to satisfy Miki, and he sought to explore his subjectivity by jumping into the newly flourishing field of the culture film.

¹⁵ Regarding this point, the architect Bruno Taut, who stayed in Japan during the 1930s and taught the idea of Japanese beauty, is significant here. His widely read *Nihon no bi no saihakken* (*The Rediscovery of Japanese Beauty*) was published by Iwanami Shoten in 1939 and included a reference to snow country (Akita in winter) (Taut 1939).

¹⁶ It is interesting to note that the perspective on rural Japan at that time seemed to avoid Hokkaido. The difference of its indigenous people was violently erased as a result of the assimilation policies of the Japanese empire. Under the nationalist regime, Hokkaido was probably too problematic a subject. In fact, this land had dairy farms with vast fields that did not fit within the generalized image of the "Japanese countryside" of the time.

His work *The Black Sun* (Kuroi taiyō, 1936) received international accolades for his successful shooting of a total solar eclipse. In addition, his work on Kamei Fumio's films, which depicted battlefields on the continent such as *Shanghai* (1938) and *Fighting Soldiers* (Tatakau heitai, 1939) was highly regarded.¹⁷ Miki, who was eager to take control of the films he worked on, attempted to persuade studio managers to let him take responsibility for directing and shooting; however, he surprisingly chose Yanagita Kunio as general supervisor even though they had never met before.

The proposal that Miki put to Yanagita was to bring a camera to a village in the Tohoku region and to document the lives of its people, capturing the spirit of the farmers who lived and died on that land. Since Miki had been impressed by two books by Yoshida Saburō, *Notes of an Oga Kanpū Farmer* (*Oga Kanpū sanroku nōmin shuki*) (Yoshida Saburō 1935) and *Journal of an Oga Kanpu Farmer* (*Oga Kanpū sanroku nōmin nichiroku*) (Yoshida Saburō 1938), he wanted to film the location where they were written, Wakimoto village in Akita prefecture. Yanagita was moved by Miki's enthusiasm and introduced him to Nara Kannosuke, a renowned ethnologist from southern Akita. As a result, Miki wandered around Akita alongside Nara shooting footage with a Rolleicord twin lens camera and eventually constructed a narrative around that material (Mura 1963).

The film was entitled *Living by the Earth* (*Tsuchi ni ikiru*, 1941). As the producer Mura Haruo recalls, spending a long time shooting a culture film on location was a reckless idea, because its commercial success was unlikely. "The customs in the village were about to vanish due to the worsening of the wartime situation. In those conditions, Miki attempted to portray customs that were rapidly disappearing like snow in early spring" (ibid., p. 179). It was precisely because they were on the point of vanishing that they gained aesthetic value when recorded on film.¹⁸ Of course, Miki put a strong emphasis on the "ordinariness" of the locations (Miki 1941b) because his point of view was one that gave retrospective value to absolutely ordinary things.

Given the exceptional nature of this work, film magazines paid great attention to the filming of *Living by the Earth* and anticipated its completion. In January 1941, *Bunka Eiga* published three pages of snapshots of the film locations and an essay by Miki. The first page features a huge portrait of Miki holding a small-format handheld camera (Figure 1). It presented the film as a work of art and Miki Shigeru as an "author". Miki also appears in four out of the total eight snapshots. In one featuring the director on location, the caption states "Miki working hard, wearing a beret".

As has already been noted, there was no cameraman at the time whose face was as familiar in the media as Miki (Fujii 2001b). He took on the role of representing all the cameramen of culture films after the "cameraman-viewfinder debate" with Kamei Fumio, published in *Bunka Eiga Kenkyū* in 1940.¹⁹ So, when Miki shot *Living by the Earth* with the authority of an "author", the film gained great prestige within the world of the culture film. On the one hand, Miki represented himself as a cameraman looking through the viewfinder and, on the other hand, as a director standing next to the camera. Kamei had started the "cameraman-viewfinder debate" by stating that "a cameraman only looking through the viewfinder is like a blinkered horse" (Kamei et al. 1940, p. 24). In contrast to Kamei's claim, Miki acted as a director of culture films who also looked through the viewfinder.²⁰

The shoot for *Living by the Earth* lasted for a whole year, starting in the summer of 1940, and the film was released on 28 October 1941 at feature length with a voiceover by Tokugawa Musei. The last locations were filmed around Honjō village, Yuri-gun area in Akita prefecture, including Wakimoto

¹⁷ See (Fujii 2001b).

¹⁸ Miki stated his motive for making *Living by the Earth* in the following way: "peasant customs have changed dramatically in recent years. From straw sandals to rubber shoes, straw rain coats to rubber rain coats, sedge hats to service caps. Women are influenced by the cities and in the summer wear lightweight clothes. They eat curry and rice, ice lollies, Chinese ramen and dumplings. Villages are changing and it is difficult to find peasants like those of the old days" (Miki 1941a, p. 54).

¹⁹ Editors' note: see Dsuke Miyao. "What's the Use of Culture? Cinematographers and the Culture Film in Japan in the Early 1940s" in this issue for a discussion of the debate.

²⁰ The journal *Bunka eiga* features photogravures entitled "Tsuchi ni ikiru hitobito" (People Who Live by the Earth). Additionally, a Special Issue on *Living by the Earth* was published before the completion of the film.

and Oiwake villages in the south, as well as Katanishi and Yonaizawa villages in the north. The film depicts the process of rice farming, the Namahage festival, the reclaimed land of Hachirōgata Lake, emigration to Manchuria, and the reclamation of land for vacation spots (Miki 1941a). However, *Living by the Earth* was not commercially successful and did not have a warm reception among critics either. Ishimoto Tōkichi criticized the film, arguing that it ended up with a simplistic portrayal of superficial beauty (Ishimoto 1942). Considering that Shigeno Tatsuhiko had a similar opinion, this was probably a common impression of the film (Shigeno 1941).



Figure 1. “Miki working hard, wearing a beret”, *Bunka Eiga*, 1941, vol. 1, issue 1, p. 7. In public domain.

Although the film cannot be said to have met expectations, I would like to discuss the two works by Yoshida Saburō that inspired Miki Shigeru, *Notes of an Oga Kanpū Farmer* and *Journal of an Oga Kanpū Farmer*, which had been published as a bulletin of the Attic Museum (later restructured as the Institute for the Study of Japanese Folk Culture) established by Shibusawa Keizo.²¹ Yoshida was a peasant who had lived in the foothills of Mt. Kanpū, Oga peninsula in Akita. As the name suggests, *Notes of an Oga Kanpū Farmer* was a collection of Yoshida’s jottings made during his farm work. Ōnishi Goichi who worked at the Nippon Seinen kai (Association of Japanese Youth) recommended Yoshida’s writings to Shibusawa. As soon as Shibusawa read them, he decided to publish them. Then, he visited Yoshida’s village with other ethnologists in order to take pictures.²² Publishing *Notes of an Oga Kanpū Farmer* was also encouraged by Yanagita; however, the question is what motivated a peasant such as Yoshida to write these notes. It was the urgent sense of a crisis brought about by sudden changes in village life taking place in front of his eyes. “The village today is affected by modern culture and has almost lost the traces of the past (. . .) villagers favor theatres and motion pictures rather than monotonous traditional dance” (Yoshida Saburō 1935, p. 73).

²¹ For more information on Keizo Shibusawa, see (Satō 1987).

²² *Notes of an Oga Kanpū Farmer* included many pictures taken with a 16-mm film camera that Shibusawa had bought in London. It is said that Shibusawa used to bring this camera on his travels to produce ethnographic visual materials (Kawasaki and Harada 2002, p. 22). As I will discuss later, this use of images was unusual in contemporary Folklore Studies.

Journal of an Oga Kanpu Farmer, published three years later, was more interesting. It was a photo diary of farming during the entire year, starting on 13 March 1935, with 370 pages of text. A map of farming fields, graphs of incomes and expenses, and records of daily meals were included in the appendix. However, these notes on the daily life of a peasant family, unusual only for its scrupulousness, were regarded as a highly valuable ethnographic record. It is astonishing that it was published in such an expansive format.

Why was Miki prompted by these books to take a camera and document everyday life in the provinces? Yoshida Saburō's work contained rich visual resources. The images became very popular in the media of the time and were later regarded as blazing a trail for "ethnographic photography" (*minzoku shashin*). The reason behind this popularity can be traced to the growth of "new photography" (*shinkō shashin*) since the 1920s; the rise of mass production; the reduction in prices of equipment; the spread of small-format, lighter cameras; and the development of transportation, which facilitated an increase in tourism.²³ To sum up, Miki's interest in the Tohoku region was born from his contact with Yoshida Saburō's books, but as we can see from the fact that Yoshida's writing was given value by the already-existing system of folklore studies and that "ethnographic photography" was established by the contemporary conditions of media circulation, the gaze turned toward rural Japan in this period was mediated in multiple ways, made possible by the fact that the desiring relation toward rural Japan at the time was profoundly socially constructed. To understand the prominence of a single peasant's life portrayed in Yoshida's voluminous *Journal of an Oga Kanpu Farmer*, we must take into account that it was the result of a collaboration between culture film and folklore studies, complemented by the discovery of the value of rural life in the "ethnographic photography" published by the mass media of the time. Kumagai Motoichi also documented the countryside by combining graphs with drawings and text in *Photographic Document of Kaichi Rural Village (Kaichi mura: Nōson no shashin kiroku)* published in 1938 with the support of Itagaki Takao, an art historian and advocate for "machine aesthetics" who had a big impact on Kumagai. The publication caused a sensation and marked a period in which the daily lives of the common people could be widely transmitted and commoditized through the media.²⁴

This is the context in which *Living by the Earth* was produced. Unfortunately, only 15 minutes of footage are left now, so it is impossible to assess the entire film. However, the legacy of the encounter between Miki Shigeru and Yanagita Kunio fortunately remains in another form.

2.2. *The People of the Snow Country (Yukiguni no minzoku, 1944)*

While he was shooting *Living by the Earth*, Miki took more than two thousand photographs. Some of them were of fast-vanishing customs so they became precious documents from an ethnographic perspective.²⁵ The pictures were to be published as a single photo album. However, the publication was unexpectedly delayed because Miki moved to Southeast Asia as a member of a Military Information Corps, and Mura Haruo took over all the responsibilities of composition and editing. It is said that Mura sought advice from Yanagita Kunio about the selection of photographs and the content of the captions. The completed photo album was titled *Yukiguni no minzoku (People of the Snow Country)* and published as a joint work of Miki and Yanagita in 1944. Despite its high price during wartime of 13.10 JPY, five thousand copies of the first edition sold out immediately (Mura 1963).²⁶

²³ See (Kikuchi 2001, pp. 149–51).

²⁴ Later regarded as a pioneering work of folklore studies, Suzuki Bokushi's *Hokuetsu Seppū* (1936–1942) was revised by the meteorologist Okada Takematsu, Yanagita's childhood friend, and published in 1936 by Iwanami Bunko. The development of the Life Composition Movement (*seikatsu tsuzurikata undō*) and "amateur writing" (*shirōto bungaku*) should be considered in the same context. For an account of amateur writing, see (Fujii 2002).

²⁵ Miki pointed out that the popularization of the solar calendar in Japanese society after the China Incident changed annual customs in rural areas dramatically (Yanagita and Shigeru 1944, p. 31). The solar calendar in Japan was adopted in 1873; however, there were some areas that still used the old lunar calendar in the 1930s.

²⁶ According to Murai Osamu, the publication of *Folklore Studies* was exempted from the suppression of speech under the militaristic government (Murai 1999, p. 263). In that respect, folklore studies accommodated itself to the wartime system.

The photo album consists of 367 photographs taken by Miki with captions depicting daily life in snow country villages, and the essays “Stories of the Snow Country” (*Yukiguni no hanashi*, pp. 1–23), written by Yanagita and “The Annual Events and Customs of Southern Akita” (*Shu to shite Akita-ken Minami Akita chihō ni okeru nenjū gyōji to shūzoku*, pp. 25–58) by Miki. Apart from the focus on images, the album was similar to Yoshida Saburō’s books, and so could clearly be categorized as ethnographic material with photographs. In the afterword, Miki states, “the photographs in this book are nothing like so-called “reportage photography” or “art photography”; therefore, if someone expects beautiful things they will be disappointed” (Yanagita and Shigeru 1944, p. 60). The way Miki emphasized “ordinariness” in his pictures marks his discovery of the value of the quotidian, supporting the value of photographing the world “as it is” (*ari no mama*) (Yanagita and Shigeru 1944, p. 60). While this is a common idea, photographs that present an object “as it is” do not exist. The impression of representing reality “as it is” is created under specific conditions. Keeping this in mind, how can the photos of *People of the Snow Country* be viewed?

The album begins with a series of pictures of peasants titled “People Living by the Earth” (*Tsuchi ni ikiru hitobito*) (Figure 2). The series of photographs begins with standing figures of the farmers, moves on to close-ups of faces, and then ends with a mix of group photographs and close-ups of hands. This structure guides the reader naturally through their everyday lives. The first photo stands as an emblem of the entire book. Its caption includes a quotation from Miyazawa Kenji, “Ame ni mo makezu” (undefeated by the rain) and continues as follows:

Stone-like taciturnity, not sociable, but eyes overflowing with warmth, mouths hinting at quiet pleasure, a cow-like tenaciousness inscribed in wrinkles; the skin of their faces shines with a sturdy vitality inherited from their ancestors. These people still strongly and deeply possess what city people have long since lost. This is the true face of the Japanese people. (no page number).

This caption strips the idiosyncratic and individualistic characteristics of the countryside and its people and clearly intends to provide a general image of “Japan” and the “Japanese”. The method of navigating towards a certain interpretation through a combination of photographs was originally developed by Natori Yōnosuke’s *hōdō shashin* (his translation of “reportage photography”) exhibited throughout the 1930s.²⁷ The shock function of the best reportage photography is of course removed here, and the photographs are to a great extent shaped in accordance with the wartime system. However, because camera perception is fundamentally different from human perception, the intention of those who apply the caption is always shadowed by the possibility of being betrayed by the photograph itself. Therefore, when a photograph is used for a specific purpose, captions become obligatory (Benjamin 1995, pp. 559–600).

As discussed when analyzing Ishimoto Tōkichi’s *Snow Country*, attention towards the snow country in this period was not aimed at discovering differences within a standardized nation, but at imagining and creating a generalized image of “Japan”. The album *People of the Snow Country* surely shared this perspective on the snow country, inviting the audience to adopt a similar perspective. Of course, we cannot equate the claims for modernization to “improve” rural life in the film *Snow Country* and the attempt to document a vanishing everyday life in the album *People of the Snow Country*. Nonetheless, we cannot ignore the fact that Social Reformism and folklore studies, which seem to be opposed, shared a deep connection and a common purpose of creating a national people (*kokuminka suru*).²⁸

²⁷ On reportage photography, see Chapter 11 in (Kawasaki and Harada 2002). Also (Kaneko 2000).

²⁸ Iwasaki Masaya makes the important argument that agrarianism, originally a purely modernist movement, had a fantasy of modern materiality and was not accepted by peasants engaged in a traditional way of life. Eventually, in order to gain support from the peasants, agrarianism performed an about-face (*tenkō*) and was assimilated into fascism and imperialism (Iwasaki 1997).



Figure 2. Page from “People Living by the Earth”, *People of the Snow Country* (*Yukiguni no minzoku*, Yanagita and Shigeru 1944). In public domain.

Yanagita Kunio appears at the end of this series of images in *People of the Snow Country*. As Kikuchi Akira also points out (Kikuchi 2001, p. 56), it is very strange that Yanagita’s text, titled “Stories of the Snow Country”, does not connect to the images in any way. There are references to ethnographic images in general but no references to any specific photograph, which seems to show Yanagita’s strong desire to avoid making a direct connection between text and image. Yanagita begins by mentioning the “discovery” of the countryside: “by entering the era when train tracks criss-cross the country, we came to understand a new meaning of the snow country” (p. 4). In the following passage he mentions “photographs”:

In any case, many delicate customs remain in the Tohoku area, rescued from oblivion because they are connected to the memory of previous generations. To put it another way, I think that compared to other regions there is a strong sense of taking customary activities seriously, and feeling unsatisfied when those customs are abandoned. But the time is coming when we can no longer say that is true. Now, at last, it is time to say goodbye. It is a great shame that so many of those scenes take place inside gloomy households that cannot even be recorded on photographs. Moreover, it cannot be said that the people of the snow country are satisfied with the feeling of somehow looking down on the lifestyle of their previous world.

The “delicate customs” of the remote region of Tohoku vanish, and those “customs” unfortunately cannot be captured in photographs. Of course, in this quotation, Yanagita may simply be referring to the problem of low light levels. There may not be sufficient light in the peasants’ houses, hidden under the deep snow in Tohoku, to capture those customs with a camera. However, this was not the first time

that Yanagita made this kind of claim. In “Ethnic Art and the Culture Film” (Yanagita 2003),²⁹ Yanagita asserts: “the difficulty of documenting the uniqueness of ethnic art is a common problem among those engaged in folklore studies. The idea of films as a solution is something everyone comes up with”. By “ethnic art”, here Yanagita meant folk arts that fall into the category of song and dance practices (*kabu shōyō*), which cannot be preserved in the way that sculptures and drawings are. Moreover, they often embrace religious purposes and have a certain value when performed at night in a dark setting. Thus, even if one attempts to film it “as it is” with a camera, inevitably one has to move it to a bright place due to lighting issues. As a consequence, the putative essence of that “ethnic art” is lost:

Especially nuances, colors or something special in ethnic art cannot be represented well enough with the current Japanese film technology. For instance, solemn acts such as a small vow to the mask before putting it and the purification of one’s body by pouring cold water upon oneself before dancing are missed. Foreign films are better at depicting the atmosphere of churches because the centrality of musical instruments and hymns in Christianity creates a certain atmosphere.

From this point of view, pessimistically, I think Japanese ethnic art will go extinct.

Yanagita and Shigeru (1944, p. 24)

What is clear here is that Yanagita sees the peculiarity of Japanese ethnic art as the impossibility of capturing it in a photographic image³⁰ and that the inability to be recorded as a photographic image would lead to the “vanishing” (*shōmetsu*) of “ethnic art”. Japanese “ethnic art” manifests itself as a tragic evanescence that announces its own death.³¹ In that case, perhaps Yanagita’s words gain a special privilege, as he attends to Japan’s dying ethnic art. Images cannot fully represent that dying form; only Yanagita’s words can record them. Perhaps in this way, Yanagita’s text became unshakeable canon for Japanese folklore studies.³²

According to Kikuchi Akira, the discourse of folklore studies originally structured the visual components on an abstract surface (Kikuchi 2001, pp. 191–92). Even though photography started to be used in folklore studies from the postwar period, the visual image was only used to strengthen a pre-existing written frame of reference. Each student of folklore studies could easily imagine Yanagita’s version of “Japan” through the “rich visuality of his prose” (and not through visual images themselves).

As mentioned above, photographic images are always shadowed by the possibility of betraying the cameraman’s intentions, because the camera brings a non-human perspective. If folklore studies rendered visual images abstract, perhaps this is the reason why. Perhaps for the same reason, Yanagita and traditional folklore studies did not actively engage with the ethnographic photography mentioned earlier. Just as strict monotheism bans idolatry, folklore studies rejected visual images in order to guarantee its authority.³³ In *Stories of the Snow Country*, Yanagita asserts the following, which is nothing

²⁹ In *Nihon Eiga* 4.13. At that time, Yanagita often published in film and photographic magazines and attended meetings associated with visual arts. Those publications were not included in *Teihon Yanagita Kunio shū geppō* (Monthly Report on the Revised Collected Works of Yanagita Kunio) so this material is not easily available for reference.

³⁰ This impossibility of recording corresponds to Yanagita’s category of spiritual phenomena, as opposed to tangible culture and linguistic arts, in his classification of the materials of folklore studies (Yanagita 1998).

³¹ Mishima Yukio states, “Even in the beginning, folklore studies smelled like death”, in (Mishima 1976). For the idea of extinction (*metsubō*) in Yanagita, see (Murai 1999) and also (Ivy 1995).

³² The distrust that Yanagita had for photography was based on the assumption that people tended to perform in front of cameras (Yanagita et al. 1943, pp. 40–41; Kikuchi 2001, pp. 151–64). In fact, Yanagita felt dissatisfied by the images of the peasants in *Living by the Earth*, which he thought betrayed an awkwardness caused by a consciousness of the camera (Mura 1963). Although Yanagita’s distrust was understandable, such an attitude is connected to the process by which his written texts were canonized, and visual materials that could contradict them were suppressed.

³³ H.D. Harootunian (1988) sees a connection between Yanagita the ethnologist and his youthful rejection of photographic realism when he was active as a romantic poet and denied the value of the genre of literary sketch (*shaseibun*).

other than a declaration of victory for folklore studies: “A great task remains to be undertaken. Japan is a country truly worth the undertaking” (p. 21).³⁴

3. “Tunnel” into Snow Country

Let us return to the discussion on the film *Living by the Earth* in relation to Miki Shigeru. Miki fought against director Kamei Fumio in the shooting of *Fighting Soldiers* (Tatakau Heitai, 1939) made during the war in China. The direct cause was that he did not film a Chinese boy whom Kamei had come across and wanted to film. The boy could not understand the situation and so got scared and ran away. Kamei caught him, holding him with a rope, and asked Miki to film him. However, Miki, looking at the boy’s fearful face, could not do it.

As I have discussed elsewhere (Fuji 2001b), this rivalry between Miki and Kamei was historically significant because it was the first time a director had accompanied the shoot for this kind of war documentary. Before, the “director’s job” was in the studio, editing footage that a cameraman had shot on location according to certain production plans. However, now, the director would join the shooting, and filmmaking was no longer the visualization of a preexisting plan—filming what the director wanted. The filmmaker was now exposed to a “reality” that developed in ways that could not be anticipated. In the case of the aforementioned fearful Chinese boy, the intention of a director became powerless in front of a “reality” that was constantly rewritten. Kamei, who experienced this as a documentary filmmaker for the first time, decided to impose by force his intentions over “reality”, while Miki recoiled at that “reality”. In other words, Kamei was assured that he could handle the “reality” as if it was in an editing room, while Miki lost his words in front of a “reality” that was beyond human intention.

What made Miki incline toward ethnographic studies was perhaps this sense of fear or reverence toward “reality”. As a consequence, external elements appear not as objects of manipulation but rather as objects of emotional attachment. This was Miki’s motivation to document a constantly renewed reality “as it is”.³⁵ Nonetheless, I have argued here that the discourse of folklore studies was a system for avoiding “reality”. Images themselves are just representations; however, the discourse on photography in the 1930s, as we see in “reportage photography”, praised the image’s role in both documenting and, at the same time, intervening in the world. This was supported by the series of pictures that were regarded as pioneering “ethnographic photography” and in some ways by the culture film. However, the function of photography in both documenting and intervening in “reality” was threatening for the discourse of folklore studies, which attempted to systematize itself in this period by canonizing Yanagita’s texts. On the other hand, even though the discourse on the culture film tended to mimic reportage photography in praising the essential recording function of the camera, it indulged in a “speech without speaking”, a deceptive attention to technique that avoided the reality that could threaten it (Fuji 2001a). Both folklore studies and the culture film pretended to engage with reality, but they were nothing more than forms to escape from it. Perhaps Miki Shigeru hoped to find in folklore studies a new field in which to engage his artistic subjectivity, but, in fact, he simply oscillated between two similar systems.³⁶

³⁴ The meaning of this declaration of victory was made clear in (Yanagita 2003). Yanagita, who avoided any systematic theorization, fell into certain contradictions. For instance, at the end of his “Stories of the Snow Country” article, Yanagita hoped that visual materials would record the expansion of the Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, but even that was due to a specificity of Japan that had no parallel: “We Japanese have a capacity to sense things with the eyes more than in words, which is very rare among the rest of the world” (p. 20). Yanagita in another discussion also mentions the possibility of visual materials for recording intangible culture; however, he seems not to be satisfied with the technology of the time (Yanagita et al. 1943, p. 40).

³⁵ The following statement by Miki should be understood in this context: “culture films should not be ‘directed’. Preparing scripts and directing according to the scenario ... this method is not appropriate for documentary films” (Tanaka et al. 1941, p. 41).

³⁶ Culture films and folklore studies were also similar in that they functioned refuges for Marxists during the war (Fuji 2001a; Tsurumi 1998).

Koyasu Nobukuni argues that the regional folk songs and diet of common people that folklore studies took as its object of study were absorbed as the material of a “One National Ethnography” (*Ichikoku minzokugaku*) with the “nation” as its subject (Koyasu 1996). Surely, this reminds us of Kamei Fumio’s montage: the newly discovered details of everyday life are freely cut together, without ever leaving the editing room, in a “montage” that gives them a particular significance.³⁷ In fact, the first time Yanagita saw the scenery of the snow country that he had written of so many times was when he watched Ishimoto Tōkichi’s *Snow Country*:

I feel empathetic toward the snow country. It was my first time to actually see it in a film, although I had heard a lot of stories. It was profoundly moving to see adults with snowshoes creating a path over the deep snow and leading a group of children to school.³⁸

I have to confess is that I was never able to travel during winter due to my work. After getting old, it was even more difficult to enter the life of the snow country due to my physical condition. Therefore, until now I have only been to hot and tropical places.

Yanagita and Shigeru (1944, p. 22)

So, the film was a “tunnel” into the snow country. Yanagita was already charmed by this tunnel: all he had to do was go through it to see a landscape that had already been prepared. A “tunnel” that makes it possible for us to avoid reality—the discourses on the culture film and folklore studies from 1935 to 1945 constituted such a tunnel.

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³⁷ It is also significant that Yanagita compared a central principle of folklore studies, the method of “substantiation by multiple occurrence” (*jūshutsu risshōhō*) to composite photography (*kasane dori shashin*) (Yanagita 1998, p. 62).

³⁸ Advertisement for *Yukiguni* in *Bunka Eiga*, 1939, vol. 2, issue 4, no page number.

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