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The Spread of Otogibanashi in Modern Japan – With Focus on Otogi storytelling

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Even in Japan, the tendency to rewrite stories grounded in the folktales of common people that were told by one person to another and intimately connected with local lives can be noted. In Europe, writers such as the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen and Charles Perreault are well known as authors who rewrote stories based on widely-told folktales. One author who may be cited as a writer of fairy tales in Japan is Sazanami Iwaya (referred to below as Sazanami). Because Otogibanashi have always been regarded as a kind of story, until now they have only been discussed in fields such as contemporary Japanese children's literature or children's culture, primarily as material to be read. The Meiji period (1868-1912), when Otogibanashi were in vogue, also was a time when modernization of the Japanese nation was promoted. Otogibanashi were seen as a convenient vehicle for modern Japanese education policy, in which the prevailing trend was to improve reading and writing ability as necessary conditions for the independent Japanese citizens of the future. As such, Otogibanashi were welcomed as supplementary materials to augment school textbooks.

Because Otogibanashi have mainly been perceived in textual form, research on fairy tales until now has mostly taken forms such as textual research or research on authors. No studies have been made of the nature of activities linked to Otogibanashi, and the relationship between such activities and the creation of the modern state, Meiji educational policy, politics, society and culture remains unclear.

As one aspect of Japan's modernization process, the various activities related to Otogibanashi can be categorized into the following four fields.

The first is Otogi storytelling. Otogi storytelling refers to the activity by which Otogibanashi that had existed entirely as reading were recast in the form of “Tales.” The second is drama, in which Otogibanashi were developed as “performance” pieces such as skits or plays. The third was creation of fairy tales in song form. This refers to activities by which the world of folklore familiar to Japanese through Otogibanashi was reworked for use in school education in the Meiji period, by borrowing the forms of well-known songs, writing lyrics and composing melodies. The fourth was events for juveniles in the form of Otogibanashi boats. Otogibanashi boats were one type of cruise operated during children’s summer vacations, using regular passenger boats. These events, which enabled children to enjoy fairy tales along with songs, plays and other activities over a period of about five days, were begun in 1910 and continued for over 30 years.

Based primarily on reference literature from the Meiji period, this paper examines Japanese fairy tales during that period, then traces the process by which the oral narration of such tales was begun and became established among the Japanese people.