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A comic book called “Ken Kanryu” (loosely meaning “I am sick of the South Korean boom”) has recently become a big hit. From the name, it is easy to tell that it is a challenge against the flood of favourable opinions with regard to South Korea that conquered Japan last year. It is a work that tries to spread negative views about South Korea. It is said that 360,000 copies have already been sold. It is no match for the 1.2 million copies of the Japanese translation of “Winter Sonata”, which is the symbol of the South Korean boom. But it is nevertheless a hit. The importance of “Ken Kanryu” does not stop there. If one looks at a Japanese bookstore, one can easily see that all kinds of books criticizing South Korea and also China are selling well.

These books have several common characteristics. Most of them are about South or North Korea, or China. There are also books lambasting the United States. But they fail to attract many people, unlike “Ken Kanryu”. While there are mainly books that criticize China and the Korean peninsula, yet in the case of Taiwan, comics that encourage its independence movement sell well.

Another major characteristic is that all these books employ manga or other visual techniques to send their messages. In other words, not only do they develop sensational and easily understood stereotypical arguments, they also shut out anything that differs from their opinions, except to make fun of them. This reflects the origin of these works and who they target. Most of these works are based on the various debates that are conducted over the Internet. Moreover, they are written for people in their 20s or younger.

The characteristic of such Internet debates is that they are limited in terms of

the number of words they use, so that they can be easily read on a computer screen. They are also written with extensive references to all kinds of resources available on the Internet. Because of this, at first sight, they look like they are based on solid evidence. But in fact they systematically do not touch on the actual texts. They tend to be arbitrarily structured in order to fit into a simple story line determined by the author.

The question is why do such works now attract so much attention in Japan. Firstly, these works are obsessed with South Korea and China. The background to them is the huge body of favourable opinion that resulted from the vast amount of exchanges that exist between Japan and China and between Japan and South Korea. In other words, the reason for the popularity of works that spread anti-Korean and anti-Chinese sentiments is the huge presence of these countries in Japan. The situation closely resembles those countries where the influence from America is very strong, yet anti-American feelings are very deep.

However, one more thing should be pointed out. The books that bad-mouth South Korea and China sharply criticize and make fun of these two countries, but rather than see these two countries as enemies, they are calling for relations with them to be reduced or even cut completely. The message of Ken Kanryu is not “we want you to be tired of South Korea” but “there is no need to be friends with South Korea”. Behind these books, we begin to see a Japan that is becoming more isolated.

What is the reason for this development? In the late 19th century, Japan strove to attain an honourable position in international society. However, once it reached a certain level, it could not go any higher. International society refused to allow Japan to get what it wanted and left it at an unfair position. This is how the Japanese people have continued to think about their situation and they feel dissatisfied.

This is why some Japanese are disappointed with international society and they want to withdraw again into their shell. So books such as “Ken Kanryu” are not trying to promote an expansionary policy but rather, they reflect the tendency towards holding inward-looking debates and the introversion of the Japanese people. To be more accurate, we should say that those books contain messages muttered to oneself and targeted at one’s inner selves

No matter what the dissatisfaction with South Korea or China may be, Japan cannot possibly sever all relations with these two very influential neighbours. This is something all Japanese understand very well. However, those Japanese who believe that Japan is a great power are not used to having to compromise with other countries for the sake of one’s own survival in this increasingly globalized world. To the Japanese, America is so important that they cannot even imagine surviving without relations with America. This is because the Japanese think that America is more influential than Japan. However, they do not see China and South Korea in the same light. There are many Japanese who think that, though they cannot complain about Americans, they can freely do so about Koreans and Chinese.

But in an increasingly globalizing world, this of course is not only impossible, but debate itself cannot step beyond the bounds of exciting discussion that is only temporary in nature. However, we must be cautious of one thing. What the Japanese think of as “muttering to oneself” is actually being heard by the world world. What are the costs involved? Are we really ready to bear those costs? The biggest danger, I believe, is the irresponsibility behind such “muttering”.

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