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# Regarding the News “Japan-China Relations Improved”

By KATO Takanori

Amid a rich diplomatic calendar including Foreign Minister Kono Taro's recent visit to China, and Premier Li Keqiang's scheduled visit to Japan within this year, both Japanese and Chinese governments are busy playing up “signs of improvement” in their bilateral relations. Media easily believe the story and help spread the propaganda. This is the nonsense we have seen over and over, but because the reporters in charge change every so often, the media keep reporting in the same way, copying the old stories. This is a huge loss of public goods. Although, people no longer regard the media agencies so much as the responsible public goods, the responsibility is on each individual's shoulder how to construct public commons now that there is a new discussion sphere mainly on the internet. If each of us do not keep our eyes open, the internet sphere would lose the given value of freedom, equality, and openness, so the majority would lose their foothold, and be a refugee controlled by the small number of people who are in power and with interests. Our imagination utilizing our full body skills is tested.

In Fall 2012, the media were saying “the Japan-China relations is at its worst since the end of the World War II” based on the territorial dispute over Senkaku Islands. The general public were hurt, mentally and physically, by the collision caused by the political failure. No politicians have ever expressed apology, refusing to explain their responsibility on that case. Meanwhile, the Japanese media were obsessed with lip reading of Xi Jinping, the president of China, guessing whether he is mad or happy, some absurd analyses. And all the sudden it's said “improved,” it is nothing more than a confusion for us. Because there is no explanation of what was improved how, giving what effect on relations on personal levels.

Let me show you an example of a political opportunism. The Japan-China Summit Meeting was held between Prime Minister Abe, who was on his visit to Beijing to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit, and President Xi Jinping, for the first time in two and a half years. For the preparation, the two governments had exchanged the

agreement note on 4 issues including Senkaku Island issue behind the scene, and the real topic was avoided during the Summit meeting. This was cunningly arranged. And the accompanying Japanese media reported the “success” of the diplomacy against China, without a doubt. Immediately after that, PM Abe decided to dissolve the House of the Representatives. It was an obvious election plan appealing to the business communities which hopes the improvement of the Japan-China relations.

The most important among the 4 points agreed, the territorial issue, states that “the both sides recognize there are different opinions over the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands that has been causing a tension in the East China Sea ...” How many of the general public in the both countries would understand this bureaucratic ambiguity? The politically motivated decision without people’s will would leave a source of deeper calamity in the future, as seen in the Comfort Women issue with South Korea.

When it was said “the Japan-China relations are at its worst” in 2012, I was a correspondent in Beijing, and thought something about such media expression was not right, which other Japanese expats stationed there were saying the same. So we decided to write and publish books of which titled (in Japanese, but if translated in English) “The Communicativity that Transcends the Japan-China Confrontation: The Voices of Correspondents at the Frontline of China News” (The Duan Press, 2013) with those who are in newspaper, news agencies, TV business, and share the same view; and “Is Japan-China Relations Really at Its Worst?: The Economic Communicativity under the Political Friction” (The Duan Press, 2014) with some 30 people who are doing business in China. The latter was also translated in Chinese.

People imagine the inter-governmental relations when they hear Japan-China relations, but for us who are on-site, the relation is what we see every day. The virtual relations of countries are nothing but the virtual game, but the real relations happen in people’s lives. The wall of nation imaged in our mind is thick and high, but if one must not place its base in their life, they will not be able to escape from the consequences of being used, betrayed, and controlled by politics.

I have not felt once that my life was changed by the “worsening” or “improved” relations of the governments, during my life in China for 13 years and on. Rather, I have had many opposite experiences: I would encounter a kindness while it is said “worsening,” or face negativity towards Japanese during the “improved” period. I think we can build a

real relationship only by overcoming each issues step by step. The “Japan-China relations” that pops up out of nowhere every once in a while is nothing but an imagination. It won’t last in people’s memory if it doesn’t sound well.

Many Chinese people, on the contrary to the widely believed Japanese perspective of them, put higher value on individual relationships rather than on state or organizations. They are smart to distinguish official and private relationships. They are different from the people who only can behave like a companyman. That’s why they value the small stories of individuals of which liberated from the bigger stories of the country. What I mean is that it is important to think what you can do, and not be an observant in a small and safe place. The countries’ relationship cannot be changed by pandas or the interest of politicians. I really wish the relations with the neighbor would be like that. Then at last, cheap expressions like “worsening” or “improved” will no longer be used.

**(This is an English translation of the article written by KATO Takanori, Professor, the Cheung Kong School of Journalism and Communication, Shantou University, which originally appeared on the e-forum “Hyakka-Somei (Hundred Ducks in Full Voice)” of CEAC on March 9, 2018.)**