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Outpouring of International Support for Japan　日本を支える声、各国よりほとばしる

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-- By Matthew Penney -- The exceptions can be brutal, such as the Twitter comments by Alec Sulkin and Gilbert Godfried, but overall, online and print media have conveyed an incredible outpouring of sympathy for Japan in the aftermath of the March 11 earthquake. This trend seems particularly pronounced among Japan's neighbors, many of whom have often been at odds with it over historical and territorial issues.

A three hour fundraising telethon on Taiwan's TBS network saw top local stars raise nearly $4,000,000 US for quake relief. The opposition DPP has also raised millions. An incredible outpouring of support in Korea, led by local stars such as Yong-joon Bae, Lee Byung-hun and Choi Ji-woo, who rode the "Korea Wave" to popularity in Japan, has raised nearly $10,000,000 dollars (10.5 billion won).

Online, user-generated content is spreading awareness of the suffering in Tohoku. This powerful Korean video combines shocking images of the aftermath of the quake with a moving score - "The Thorn Tree":

The Thorn Tree in Korean, Japanese and English

가시나무 – The Thorn Tree – とげの木

내속엔 내가 너무도 많아 당신에 쉴곳 없네

僕の中に僕があまりにも多くて　あなたの休むところがない

There's so much of me inside me, there's no place for you to rest

내속엔 헛된바람들로 당신에 편할곳 없네

僕の中には古い望みで　あなたの落ち着くところがない

My own tired hopes leave no room for you to find comfort

내속엔 내가 어쩔수 없는 어둠

僕の中には僕がどうすることもできない暗闇

Inside me there's darkness beyond my control

당신에 쉴자리를 뺏고

あなたの休む場を奪い

I robbed you of your resting place

내속엔 내가 이길수 없는 슬픔

僕の中には僕が勝てない悲しみ

Inside me is sadness I cannot overpower

무성한 가시나무숲 같네 生い茂った茨の森のよう

Like a forest thick with thorn trees

바람만 불면 그 메마른 가지

風が吹けばその干からびた枝

When the wind blows the barren branches

서로 부대끼며 울어대고

互いに苦しめられながら泣いて

rustle against each other, crying in agony

쉴곳을 찾아 지쳐날아온

休むところを求めて疲れ飛んできた

Young birds in desperate flight for a resting place,

어린 새들도 가시에 찔려 날아가고

幼い鳥たちもとげに刺されて飛んで行き

fly away, pricked by the thorns

바람만 불면 외롭고 또 괴로워

風が吹けば寂しくも辛く

When the wind blows, loneliness stings me

슬픈노래를 부르던 날이 많았는대

悲しい歌を歌っていた日が多かったのに

Though there were so many days when I sang of sadness,

내속엔 내가 너무도 많아서 당신에 쉴곳 없네

僕の中には僕があまりにも多くて　あなたの休むところがない

There's so much of me inside me, there's no place for you to rest

Other clips are designed not only to elicit sympathy for Japanese quake and tsunami victims, but also to translate messages of support from the #prayforjapan Twitter tag, which has collected countless messages from all over the world. The video's creators have translated prayers and words of support into Japanese and set them to music:

Blog China Smack reports respect, admiration, and kind words from Chinese netizens as Chinese businesses are offer aid. The change in tone is particularly striking in the Chinese case, just months after the territorial conflict over disputed islands resulting in the arrest of a Chinese fishing boat captain produced harsh criticism of Japan at both the state and societal levels. As Foreign Policy reported on March 11, within hours of the quake, it had become the third ranking topic on Baidu, the nation's leading internet portal with 2.5 million searches for "Japan earthquake." A number of early comments included the likes of "Warmly welcome the Japanese quake." But these views were overwhelmed by expressions of sympathy. More significant was the reaction against patently nationalistic sentiment taking advantage of tragedy. Weibo, a Chinese equivalent of Twitter, posted on its homepage this comment: "How many Japanese would write, 'Congratulations on the Wenchuan earthquake?'"The Epoch Times likewise reports rumors that some Chinese were "jumping for joy" on first hearing about Japan's misfortune. It suggests that such comments may have been scrubbed from Baidu in favor of numerous sympathetic and even admiring statements in the following days.

Stage and screen stars as well as corporate icons across Asia have pledged sums in the hundreds of thousands to over a million dollars. Donations from diverse sources are also reported in the United States. Celebrities such as actress Sandra Bullock have led the way with huge donations. Yet as in other countries, there are mixed messages. Glenn Beck, perhaps the most-influential radio commentator in the US, commented of the quake that "a message [is] being sent from God." Others were quick to "remember Pearl Harbor."

In an article in the Japan Times, Roger Pulvers describes Japan's "unlikely sympathizers" China and Russia. "... one story emerging from the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami has touched the hearts of the Chinese public." He recounts the story of a Japanese fish plant manager who died helping to save Chinese trainees from the tsunami:

It just so happens that a group of 20 young Chinese women were resident trainees at Sato Suisan on March 11. When the earthquake struck, they took refuge near their dormitory. Managing director Mitsuru Sato immediately realized that these young women were in great danger. He ran to them and rushed them up the hill to the shrine, then returned to the dormitory to make sure that no one was left behind. Some of the young women watched from the hill as Sato was swallowed up by the incoming tsunami. Sometimes a single kind and selfless act can move an entire nation; and the Chinese media has run the story of Mr. Sato's altruism with these words that recognize a universal truth: "Love knows no national boundaries."

Pulvers also describes the outpouring of sympathy in Russia:

Following the earthquake, a call went out to Muscovites on Twitter to demonstrate sympathy for the Japanese people in front of the Japanese embassy in the Russian capital. This is a place, I might add, that has often seen Russians burning the Japanese national flag and hurling eggs. On the evening of March 19, however, answering the call, a group of mostly young people gathered in front of the embassy. They placed flowers, stuffed toys and origami cranes against the wall. They lit candles and left messages, largely in English. One message that I saw on television said, "Pray for Japan." Above it was a picture of a boy sitting cross-legged with his hands clasped together.

The quake and tsunami have taken a horrific toll across the Tohoku region, but the aftermath may not only allow Japan to rethink elements of its development trajectory, including its heavy reliance on nuclear power, but also turn a new page in regional relations.

UPDATE - March 30

Fundraising at the popular level has grabbed attention, but Japan is benefiting from high level support from regional governments as well. The Asahi reports that

China has dispatched tankers loaded with 10,000 tons of gasoline and 10,000 tons of diesel fuel, provided free to help alleviate Japan's energy woes. The fuel is worth approximately 17 million US dollars. They are expected to arrive in Japan on April 1st. In addition, 96 tons of relief materials including 60,000 bottles of water and millions of rubber gloves were sent by air from Beijing and arrived at Narita airport on the 28th.

The Thai government announced on the 28th that to help alleviate the Kanto area energy deficit, they will lend two gas turbines and necessary facilities to Japan for three to five years. Each unit weighs over 450 tons and will be transported by ship. They are expected to be operational by August. Mitsubishi Heavy Industry representatives are quoted as saying that overseas transportation of such units is "unheard of anywhere in the world." The Thai Minister of Energy stated in a press conference that "Japan and Thailand have maintained cooperative relations for 120 years, and that includes 40 years of cooperation regarding electric power as well."

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