The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

'Koreans, Go Home!' Internet Nationalism in Contemporary Japan as a Digitally Mediated Subculture

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Introduction

Tsushima Island

On 18 September 2009, a person using the online name of 'xegnojw' posted a four-minute video on YouTube entitled 'Japanese Racists Hoot Down Korean Tourists in Tsushima'.[1] It depicted members of a Japanese nationalist group harassing Korean tourists on Tsushima, a Japanese island 138 km from Fukuoka and 50km from Busan.[2] This island has been attracting attention from Japanese nationalists because of the increasing presence of Korean tourists and Korean investment since the 2002 opening of high-speed ferry service between Busan and Tsushima. Nationalist campaigns over the island intensified when Korea's Masan City adopted the 'Tsushima Day' bill in 2005, claiming that Tsushima should be a Korean territory, thereby countering Shimane prefecture's 'Takeshima Day', establishing Japanese claim to Korea's Dokdo island.[3] The YouTube video in question captured several flag-holding Japanese men and women yelling: 'Go home, Koreans!' and 'We won't allow a Korean invasion!' at tourists fresh off the ferry from Busan. Though not physically violent, the atmosphere was tense and disturbing.

This episode is just one expression of Japan's new grassroots nationalism, which has gained force over the last decade against the backdrop of increasingly vociferous historical revisionism and neonationalism.[4] As seen in the recent conflict over the Senkaku Islands[5] as well as Japan's hard-line response to the North Korean attack on South Korea, nationalistic sentiments seem to be increasingly dictating Japan's foreign policy and public opinion. Contrary to what is sometimes assumed, contemporary Japanese nationalism is not a monolithic entity, for it is produced by multiple participants and groups with different ideas and modes of communication. The kind of blatant jingoism and narrow-minded xenophobia seen above, though still largely marginalised in the official discourses of the state and public media, has found a niche in Japan, especially in cyberspace. New groups such as *Zaitokukai* (Citizens' Group against Special Rights for Korean residents in Japan)[6] and *Shuken kaifuku o mezasu kai* (Citizens' Group that seeks Recovery of Sovereignty),[7] however outlandish their stances, have successfully extended influence through effective use of the Internet, incorporating YouTube and its Japanese equivalents such as *Niko-niko dōga* ('smiley videos') and PeeVee TV to spread their messages and publicise their activities. Channeru Sakura (2004-), which distributes conservative and nationalistic content via satellite TV and Internet, also provides a significant virtual space for neonationalist perspectives. Without the Internet, it is doubtful that an extreme nationalist group's foray into direct action on the peripheral island of Tsushima would have reached an audience beyond the group itself. As it happened, however, the video clip was immediately taken up by Japan's largest online forum, *2-channeru*, prompting a barrage of nationalistic responses there. A site 'not for the faint of heart',[8] this unmoderated forum is known to be the main outlet for revisionism and xenophobic neo-nationalism of the internet generation.[9]

Zaitokukai on YouTube: 'Kick out Koreans from Tsushima!'

This article offers an analysis of the online discourse of anti-Korean nationalism sparked by the aforementioned YouTube video on *2-channeru*. It aims to examine the characteristics of the nationalistic postings and the online construction of Korea as Japan's other.[10] The case offers insight into contemporary Japan's so-called *netto-uyo* (net right-wingers . . . uyoku) phenomenon, which has rarely been discussed in English language scholarship.[11] It is often pointed out that today's Japanese youths are increasingly nationalistic and that the Internet is playing a part in this trend.[12] In considering how the technology and culture of the Internet influenced the formation of nationalism in cyberspace, this article engages with the idea of a 'cyber public sphere'. What internet-specific elements have contributed to the particular *netto-uyo* shape of nationalism? How might we understand the paradox of the borderless technology of the Internet producing an insular community and xenophobic nationalism?

To answer these questions, after a brief look at *2-channeru* and the *netto-uyo* phenomenon, this article offers a content analysis of nationalism in the Tsushima threads, focusing on the construction of 'Korea' as Japan's other. It then considers this case's implication for the notion of a 'cyber public sphere,' and discusses some Internet-dependent factors relevant to the *netto-uyo* formation of the nation as an imagined community before finally considering some unique characteristics of Internet nationalism in contemporary Japan. But first, let us briefly look at some existing approaches to nationalisms in cyberspace to put this study into a context.

Nationalisms in Cyberspace

In the early days of the Internet, some predicted that, as a global and borderless technology, the Internet would become a homogenising force that challenged and eliminated chauvinism and narrow-mindedness. Today's optimistic observers also emphasise the potential of cyberspace to provide something akin to Habermas' 'ideal speech situation' and 'autonomous public sphere,'[13] in which citizens/individuals communicate rationally and democratically, without the constraints of ethnic, gender, class or other real-life inequalities. If we follow these insights that the Internet provides an 'autonomous public sphere' and 'eradicates differences,' then we may conclude that the Internet challenges, and might even eventually end, sectarian nationalisms. Nicholas Negroponte in *Being Digital*, for one, famously stated that with the Internet 'there will be no more room for nationalism than there is for smallpox'.[14]

Such a prediction, however, seems, at best, decidedly premature. While the Internet has certainly created an extensive global network and promoted the exchange of ideas, it has hardly created a global democratic consciousness. Even a cursory survey reveals that nationalistic and xenophobic commentaries thrive on the Internet. And yet, in contrast to the abundant scholarship on nation and nationalism, Internet nationalism remains an understudied phenomenon. In particular, the important question of how the Internet as a new medium affects the nature of nationalism and national imaginary deserves further investigation.

One strand of current scholarship on Internet nationalism focuses on the diasporic communities' online 'long distance' nationalism.[15] Such studies look at how, for example, the Palestinians, Kurds, or overseas Chinese maintain and reinforce their national identities through the Internet. As Thomas Eriksen points out, the aims of 'virtual nations' are 'of a classic nation-building kind'.[16] In other words, they aim to create and sustain the nation as a unified entity in the context of geographical dispersion of the population beyond national borders. Japanese *netto-uyo* internet nationalism, on the other hand, has no agenda for creating a transnational national identity among the overseas Japanese. It is much more inward-looking and far less inclusive. *Netto-uyo*'s 'we the Japanese' does not even include all ethnic Japanese, as those who do not share their values (liberals, left-wingers, feminists, supporters of non-Japanese residents' rights, Korean TV drama fans etc.) are all considered potential enemies of the nation.

Another relatively well-publicised and studied case of Internet nationalism is Chinese online nationalism that emerged around the 2005 anti-Japanese movement.[17] Japanese Internet nationalism is quite different from the Chinese counterpart. First, while Chinese online nationalism has been widely viewed as supporting or enabling on-street nationalism, the *netto-uyo* variety of Japanese Internet nationalism this article addresses has largely stayed within Cyberspace, rarely spilling out onto the street. Secondly, scholars of Chinese online nationalism have (in somewhat Habermasean spirit) typically located it within the framework of civil society and citizens' activism, reading online activities as a sign of Chinese civil society as an independent sphere from the

communist state. As one scholar put it, 'civil society and the Internet energise each other in their co-evolutionary development in China'.[18]

As we will see, however, one can hardly suggest that Japanese internet nationalism embodies a democratic civil society. Not only does it fall short of producing on-street politics, but it is also confined within niche online communities, hardly representative of civil society. Perhaps for these reasons, Japanese Internet nationalism has received much less attention than Chinese 'civil' nationalism has done in English-language scholarship. Though less visible than the Chinese examples and definitely not mainstream, Japanese Internet nationalism is a significant recent phenomenon that indicates the formation of a shared space where people engage with xenophobic nationalism and offers an opportunity for exploring the interface between the Internet and nationalism. Besides, even though much scholarship on Chinese online nationalism focuses on its role in offline activism, it is quite conceivable that there also exist a large number of Chinese Internet users who participates in, for example, online anti-Japanese discussions without ever taking to the street. If so, this study could offer a framework for comparison with such phenomenon.

2-channeru and *Netto-uyo*

2-channeru, or *2-chan* for short, is Japan's most popular online community, with around ten million users accessing it each day.[19] In this community the majority of posters post as 'anonymous'.[20] *2-chan* does not require user registration or email verification – a standard practice for many English-language online forums. There is hardly any moderation, either. The forum consists of about 700 'boards' such as 'cooking,' 'business news,' or 'hacking'. Each 'board' contains several hundred 'threads,' with a maximum of 1,000 posts per thread. Once the number of posts reaches 1,000, a new thread is created, and the old thread is archived. Some discussions are serious; many aren't. Depending on the board, posts can be utterly banal, discriminatory or extreme, hence *2-chan*'s nickname as 'public toilet graffiti'. At the same time, with more users than any other single media site in Japan,[21] *2-chan* is an important medium, with considerable social influence. It has had impact on mass media, too, as mainstream journalists sometimes use *2-chan* as a news source.

Since its establishment 10 years ago, *2-chan* has developed an idiosyncratic online culture, vocabularies and styles of interaction. Racism and nationalism have been part of this *2-chan* culture; participants of certain boards have developed an explicitly nationalistic discourse (in particular, 'World History,' 'East Asia News,' 'News Far East' and 'Hangul'), earning themselves the collective name of *netto-uyo*, or 'net right-wingers'. While this does not mean that the majority of the users share such sentiments, there is a clearly noticeable subculture within this site shared by those who gather on specific boards. Mirroring the post-1990s historical revisionism, *netto-uyo* exhibit xenophobia towards immigrants, depict Korea and China negatively, and uphold revisionist history, justifying and glorifying Japan's wartime actions. They also support political leaders' official visits to Yasukuni Shrine, revision of Article 9 of the constitution, and patriotic education. Although *netto-uyo* is not exclusive to *2-chan*, *2-chan* is the main playground for *netto-uyo*, where this phenomenon developed.[22] They became visible through a number of Internet-generated controversies that erupted around 2002-2004 such as those over the World Cup Soccer hosted by Korea and Japan, 'Hate-Korea' comic books, the so-called 'Nanjing Massacre comic book'[23] and Dokdo/Takeshima, to name just a few.

Though it is hard to establish who they really are, *netto-uyo* are generally thought to be individual 'heavy' net users who are sympathetic to right-wing/nationalist views, but few are real-life activists or members of right-wing/nationalist organisations.[24] While they are extremely vocal online and clearly identifiable as a discursive group, when it comes to real-life political actions, *netto-uyo*'s involvement is limited to occasional net-driven phenomena such as *dentotsu* ('phone attack' – organised phone complaints on specific issues to government offices, left-leaning media etc.), *matsuri* (sudden and extreme concentration of postings in a specific thread for a limited time) and *enjō* (rush of critical or accusatory comments and trackbacks to a specific blog or SNS site) targeting left/liberal opinions and sites. *Netto-uyo* essentially remain *genron-uyoku* ['right-wing by speech'][25] in cyberspace; in fact, some action-oriented right-wingers have criticised *netto-uyo* for their lack of action and hiding behind anonymity.[26]

Netto-uyo as an Expression of Social Anxiety of Post-recession Japan

Since the emergence of *netto-uyo* coincided with the marked lowering of the average age of *2-chan* users in 2003-2004[27] as well as the deepening of social problems related to Japanese youth (e.g. NEET, freeter, *hikikomori* [withdrawal from society]), *netto-uyo* nationalism has often been associated with unemployed, low-income or reclusive youths.[28] Linking *netto-uyo* and young unemployed people is common among Japanese commentators. For example, a Japanese sociologist, Takahara Motoaki, has suggested that recent youth nationalism – including Internet nationalism – is an expression of the social anxiety of marginalised and discontent youths who are struggling in the recession and the resultant social marginalisation.[29] According to him, nationalistic youths displace their anxiety onto imaginary external enemies, while identifying with the fantasy of strong Japan temporarily relieves their anxiety.[30]

During the 1970s and 1980s, when the Japanese economy was strong and life-time employment and seniority systems were widespread, 'company' identity served as a reservoir for Japanese men's national identity, as loyalty to the company was conflated with loyalty to the state as the protector of the prosperity of the companies they worked for.[31] The majority of today's youths, however, are denied secure 'company' membership because of the new norms brought by the recession. Downsizing, restructuring, outsourcing, flexible employment systems – these strategies that companies have introduced in response to the recession that followed the bursting of the bubble have meant that many young people fail to obtain stable jobs on completion of their education. They have come to constitute a large 'new lower class' sector notable for casual service labour, which is unstable and badly paid.[32] Under such circumstances, constructing and attacking the external enemy figure in cyberspace seems to offer one way of dealing with social frustration and anxiety. I would, however, add that the 'nationalistic' identity of *netto-uyo* is not a direct or necessary consequence of the forum participants' economic circumstances or their pre-constituted identity as the 'new underclass'. Rather, I believe that their *netto-uyo* identity is constructed discursively, by engaging in the types of practice I will describe in the following.

The Tsushima Threads

Consider the nationalistic postings on the threads that started with the YouTube video mentioned earlier. These threads appeared in September 2009 on the 'East Asia News+' board, one of several *netto-uyo* boards. At the time of the research, most of the threads on these boards were on Korea-related topics. The Tsushima thread in question started with a posting on a Korean-language site Kukinews report on a Youtube clip of the aforementioned incident as the increasing number of Korean tourists agitated right-wingers. Normally insignificant in Japanese minds, this small island came to attract the attention of some popular media and the netto-uyo especially following a report on the Korean territorial claim on the island in reaction to Shimane prefecture's 'Takeshima Day' and continuing conflict over Dokdo/Takeshima issues.[33]

The thread I examined attracted 7,000 postings extended over seven threads in 4 days. The usual limit for postings per thread is

1,000 and the majority of topics stays well within this limit; so 7,000 reflects a significant level of interest. In many ways, these postings were typical *netto-uyo* chatters. First, the thread started with a report of *minor* news that involved Korea, rather than any major international news widely reported on national mass media such as TV and newspaper. *2-chan* 'news' boards often have a different pattern of framing and agenda setting from those of TV and newspaper news, partly because of its self-awareness as an 'alternative media' that challenges mainstream media and their 'hypocrisy'. Typically, a small 'news item' like this one is found in a Korean, Chinese or sometimes an English language source,[34] and is translated into Japanese and posted. The preferred source is popular global media, in this case the YouTube video clip. This particular clip was uploaded with an introduction in three languages: Japanese, English, and Korean. Secondly, the discussion quickly turned into a repetition of well-rehearsed *netto-uyo* stances, issues and concerns, not necessarily related to the original posting. This is exactly what happened with the Tsushima thread, as we will see. Certain vocabularies, enunciation patterns and discursive structures define *netto-uyo* chatters, and we can find them regardless of the thread. The presence of visual content that points to emotionally potent issues (in this case theYoutube clip of a xenophobic protest), is also very common.

'Us' and 'Them'

Netto-uyo postings on this thread were intense, many exhibiting unrestrained hostility towards Korea and Koreans. Given *2-chan*'s lack of regulation and total anonymity, the tone is often extreme. Taboo derogatory terms are routinely used. Koreans are associated with excrement, rubbish, public urination, stealing, prostitution, violence, illegal activity and obscenity. Vulgar and callous statements that would not be found in the mass media and other public spaces abound. Typical postings read: 'Koreans are cancer of Japan and should leave Japan'; 'Koreans are the world's shame; 'parasite rubbish race Koreans should die', and even 'let's massacre the stupid Koreans now'. Such virulent statements were abundant throughout the 4 days I observed this particular thread, and are commonplace in *netto-uyo* chatter in general.

Collectively, the 7,000 postings produced and reinforced the negative image of Korea and Koreans far beyond the Tsushima issue. Forum participants brought up a multitude of Korea-related issues which had nothing to do with Korean tourists on Tsushima: the 'special tax and welfare privileges' that *zainichi* Koreans allegedly enjoy, the 'illegal occupation' of Takeshima Island', *kimchi* with parasite eggs, or crimes by Koreans in Japan and overseas. Links were made to a TV news item about a Japanese boy who was attacked in Korea, snapshots of anti-Japanese artwork by Korean school children, a Youtube clip on a rape by a *zainichi* Korean, *2-chan* threads on *zainichi* pension entitlement and welfare benefits, shocking images of anti-Japanese demonstrators slaughtering pheasants (Japan's national bird) in front of the Japanese Embassy, and many more. These and other unrelated events and images are linked together under the unifying but empty sign of the 'Koreans'.

The result is to depict Koreans as violent, unethical, overly emotional and irrational people, who are a 'threat' to Japan. In comparison, 'we Japanese' are portrayed as a moral, rational, polite and too tolerant people who are being taken advantage of—and victimised by—the Other's aggression, slyness and lack of morality. There is a certain irony here, of course, that while accusing the Other of lacking morality, such posts are rife with crude xenophobic verbal abuse of the Korean Other that is hardly moral. 'Koreans' in this forum are a symbol of negativity and a repository for its participants' hostility, rather than real 'Koreans' in the sense of the citizens of South Korea. Its function is to construct antagonisms between 'us' and 'them'. The 'Korea' or 'Koreans' simply operate as a sign that carries negative values such as 'inferior', 'dirty', 'shameless', 'primitive', 'violent', and 'irrational'. The posts served as triggers for invoking and repeating a clear and antagonistic us/them relationship.

In reality, this 'us' and 'them' boundary is a product of rewriting history, for Japan and Korea have a deeply intertwined history dating back to ancient times; Tsushima Island itself is a repository of numerous traces of extensive Korea-Japan relations.[35]

As Oguma Eiji has emphasized, Korea was part of the Japanese Empire until 1945.[36] But the *netto-uyo* posts conveniently forget the colonial history, favouring ahistorical and essentialised representations of homogeneous 'Koreans' as Japan's inferior Other. This is consistent with the postwar myth of homogeneity and general hostility towards Koreans and *zainichi* Koreans. It is also consistent with recent revisionist-neo-nationalist promotion of anti-Korean xenophobia.

The participants typically blurred distinctions between South Koreans, North Koreans and *zainichi* Koreans (Korean residents in Japan, mostly second, third, and even fourth generation). Just eight minutes after the original posting about the YouTube video, someone wrote: '*Zainichi* Koreans should get out of Tsushima Island'. This is an odd thing to say because the Korean tourists captured in the Youtube video stepping off the ferry are most likely South Koreans, not *zainichi* Koreans. The right-wing activists on the video themselves certainly seem to think so, judging from what they are screaming. But no one points this out. Far from it, people join in accusing *zainichi* of heinous crimes. As the days pass and comments accumulate, more and more postings assert *zainichi* should leave Japan and go back to their 'homeland'.

Over the course of the four days, the forum's participants extended the target of xenophobic commentaries from Koreans to foreigners in general. Some postings criticised North Koreans. Even 'Chinese' were attacked a few times. They repeated crude messages like 'Japan belongs to the Japanese. Korea belongs to the Koreans. Koreans, go home' and 'foreigners should stay out of Japan'. Some pointed out how European nations that had accepted immigrants are now suffering the consequences. Others argued against granting suffrage to non-Japanese residents.[37]

Of course, the threads were not entirely homogeneous. Some marginal minorities did attempt to insert different views. For example, one participant says of the rightist activity: 'Japan's shame; I cannot accept such a stupid action that will lower Japan's international standing'. But this kind of statement is curtly dismissed, ignored, or identified as intrusion by a 'Korean spy'. The conversation then goes on as if they did not exist. There is no engagement, no argument, and no discussion. This partly has to do with 2-chan's culture of cynicism, where taking other posters' opposing views seriously and engaging them is considered uncool. Engaging or taking things seriously is a common 'mistake' novice participants are often caught making. In this forum participants are expected to 'read the air' and carry on by adding to the existing conversation with slight variation of themes. To use a *2-chan* net slang, the quality of *mattari*—or being laid back, slow, and not causing trouble—is valued.

'Race'

Interestingly, although racism and xenophobia characterise *2-chan*'s *netto-uyo* discourse, its construction of 'us' and 'them' contains very few comments on racial traits of Korans or Japanese. Race is assumed but not argued for. This is noteworthy in light of the fact that historically, Japanese nationalism and national unity have been conceptualised around the notion of 'racial' homogeneity and purity, in particular, stressing the notion of blood.

Even though Japanese and Koreans are both 'Asians' and therefore racial markers are less clear than those for 'whites' and 'blacks', for example, historically speaking, attempts to decipher and articulate subtle 'racial' differences between Japanese and Koreans have not been uncommon. It is always possible to read differences into real or imagined slight shades of skin colour or the shape of

A stone monument for Korean embassies to Japan during the Edo period in Tsushima. The bilingual explanation board says that the Korean visits brought Japan sophisticated knowledge, art and culture, and talks of deep respect towards the Koreans. (Author's photographs)

eyes and essentialise them into racial differences. Indeed one might argue, as with Freud's "narcissism of small differences", that the desire and obsession for locating subtle differences could even be stronger when two groups are apparently alike. *2-chan* posters, however, do not seem interested in discussing 'racial' features, possibly because their 'Koreans' are largely symbolic, and not real-life flesh and blood 'Koreans'.

Being an online community, *2-chan* lacks corporeality and any physical marker of racial differences. This means that there is no way of knowing for certain whether participants are in fact racially 'Japanese'. What's on the screen, ultimately, is digitised data and text, not flesh and blood. It is impossible to identify the participants' 'racial' or 'ethnic' identities. The posters to the Tsushima threads showed considerable suspicion and paranoia over cyber 'racial passing'. They seemed particularly vigilant toward trolling—anonymous non-Japanese participants planting provocative postings to stir up and disrupt online discussion—and other identity deceptions along racial lines. For example, fear over the Other's seeping into the online community was expressed in their speculations that some posters were pretending to be Japanese, to be Koreans or even to be Japanese pretending to be Koreans pretending to be Japanese.

In their attempt to identify the infiltrating Other, participants sometimes said to the suspected posters: 'What's your passport number? [a non-Japanese, passport number would look different]' 'Your grammar is a bit funny [therefore you must be non-Japanese]'. 'No Japanese would specially claim that to be Japanese [since you say you are Japanese you must be non-Japanese]' and so on. There was even a posting suggesting that the original YouTube clip was planted by *zainichi* Koreans, thus rendering the whole thing a kind of joke played on the Japanese.

Such suspicions on one level reflect the fact that the Internet is a deterritorialised space that is open to the whole (IT-literate) world; information, images, and participants themselves can come from anywhere, their origin and identity blurred, hidden or unknown. Unlike the physical world, 'Japanese' identity online is easy to perform and assume, as long as linguistic competency exists. In addition, the anxiety over the 'true' identities of the participants is further promoted by the aforementioned *2-chan* culture of anonymity and cynicism, which makes pretending and other identity plays an accepted practice in this particular online community. The use of 'Korean' voice and stance by Japanese users to achieve an ironical and mocking effect (say, by inserting Korean words like *uri nara*[38] or *nida*[39] here and there) for example, is fairly common in *netto-uyo* postings. Uncertainty of 'Japanese' identity thus plagues the seemingly confident nationalist voice.

Does History Matter?

While the posters regularly refer to historical and political issues between Japan and Korea, many do not seem to have much interest in actual history or politics. For example: 'Korea is an enemy country that is invading Takeshima; Japan is at war with Korea'; 'In Tsushima Koreans are doing every evil thing imaginable, including raping Tsushima women', 'Koreans have a history of massacring Tsushima people … Historically you Koreans owe Tsushima Islanders more than you can ever repay'. Clearly, accuracy is not a major concern for these participants; it seems that these statements are not even meant to be a representation of reality. Strong words like 'evil', 'war', 'massacre', 'rape', and 'invasion' are exchanged as empty signs without any historical or evidential basis. Disturbing visual images are also circulated, for example, bleeding pheasants laid on a rising-sun flag, Korean children's 'fuck Japan' art exhibition, or a YouTube clip of 'a Korean attacking a Japanese boy'. However, it is unclear which war, which invasion, or which massacre these postings refer to. In many cases they have no referent to reality and no one seems to mind. The comments are discursively productive, consolidating the 'us'/'them' antagonism and maintaining the moral superiority of the Japanese who are constructed as a victim.

It seems that dehistoricised and decontextualised images and symbols are gathered together not to represent reality but to produce new humiliation, new trauma, and new victimhood for Japan. In this sense they are similar to Baudrillard's 'simulations' or 'self-referential signs', which are 'objects and discourses that have no firm origin, no referent, no ground or foundation' other than their own.[40] They operate outside the logic of representation, and hence are immune to rationalist critique.[41] Baudrillard's point was that simulation proliferated as a result of the new media like TV, but the Internet as a participatory medium carried this trend even further. *2-chan* users are not just passive consumers of such signs provided by the mass media but are producing, performing, and exchanging referentless, decontexualised signs to generate a sense of belonging to a cyber community and a fantasy 'Japan'.

With the Internet, gathering and producing information and images is easy, fast and cheap. We can access far more information far more quickly than we could before, and we do not have to rely on mass media. If one wants to find out how "terrible" Koreans (or any other group) are, such information is only clicks away, within seconds. Information is available for 'superdistribution' to anyone interested, where the content spreads quickly and effortlessly via digital technology without being limited by national borders, defamation laws or distribution costs.

Not Quite a Public Sphere

As briefly mentioned earlier, advocates of the so-called 'virtual public sphere' have emphasised the Internet's potential to promote liberatory practices.[42] Building on Habermas's notion of public sphere, defined as a network for communicating information and points of view, they have argued that electronic communication media have 'unique capacities to create democratic, participatory realms in cyberspace devoted to information and debates'.[43] Many studies of cyberactivism around human rights, peace movements, racial equality and so on, seem to suggest the democratic potential of the Internet technology.

Our example from *2-chan*, however, makes clear that the technology and culture of the Internet, far from promoting public value or mutual understanding, sometimes contributes to the formation of a unique expression of nationalism. As we have seen, *2-chan* online exchanges appeared highly regulated and patterned, allowing little room for democratic discussion. On the one hand, the potential for democratic communication certainly seems to be there, as the *2-chan* forum clearly provides an infrastructure for an information network and open communication, and it has a large number of participants who speak anonymously, free of class, gender and other constraints. The participants seemingly have political interest and intent, too. And yet *2-chan* is a far cry from a 'virtual public sphere'. It does not function as a communication network for exchanging information and viewpoints to promote democratic values. If anything, what goes on there resembles private in-group gossiping, insulated from competing views and reinforces insiders' identity by excluding/ostracising outsiders. It seems similar to what Rheingold has called 'single-niche colonies of people who share intolerances'.[44]

2-chan's xenophobic nationalism could be a product of a phenomenon known as 'group polarisation', which refers to a pattern where discussion among people who share similar views tend to radicalise each individual's original position, leading the group as a whole to thinking the same thoughts in a more extreme fashion. According to one study, group polarisation is especially strong with anonymous online communication.[45] This may at least partially explain what we have observed: that *netto-uyo* are individuals with xenophobic and racist sentiments who gather on specific online forums, where their views are reinforced via interacting with others of the same persuasion.

At the same time, we need to caution against seeing *2-chan* nationalism merely as a more intense version of pre-existing, real-life[46] nationalism. Human behaviour is influenced by the environment in which it occurs, and the Internet offers a unique environment, where people often behave differently from the way they do in the real world. Correspondingly, discourses that develop on the Internet may exhibit different characteristics from those that form outside the Internet. In the following I look at how internet-related elements have contributed to the specific articulation of *2-chan* nationalism and point out that online nationalism challenges us to rethink our standard understanding of nationalism.

The Internet's Role in the Formation of *2-chan* Nationalism

Nationalism is usually associated with modernity and nation-states.[47] The collective identity of national 'we' emerged with industrialisation to support the newly unified nation-states in Europe, and this model spread to the rest of the world from the late 19th century onwards. In this process, modern national media has played a significant role. Benedict Anderson's classic study of modern nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, for example, analyses nationalism in terms of the national and territorial imagination supported by nation-wide print capitalism. Reading a newspaper each morning, Anderson suggests, is an (imagined) shared experience, which contributes to the formation of national consciousness.[48]

In contrast, the nation imagined via the subculture of online *netto-uyo* community is deterritorialised and does not exactly coincide with the national boundary. And the media content *2-chan* users consume can be quite different from that of national media. As mentioned earlier, *2-chan* users are highly critical of mass media, and tend to gravitate towards alternative and extreme perspectives that have little place in national newspapers or TV.

Today's digitised media environment means that we are no longer reading the same newspaper in the same way. As Cass Sunstein suggested with concepts such as the 'Daily Me' and 'customisation',[49] with the Internet and portable digital devices such as mobile phones, laptops and iPhones, each of us is constantly clicking away to 'filter in' what we want to see and 'filter out' what we do not want to see. Every time we access the Internet we are customising and personalising our exposure to topics and viewpoints that fit our interests and proclivities. This is a different activity from the ritual of reading the same 'national' newspaper with everyone else, every morning. With the personalised media of 'Daily Me', we are unlikely to be creating a single imagined community for a single nation-state. Chances are, by accessing a customised and personalised set of news and information each day, we are producing many, partially overlapping—but never identical—imagined communities both within and without the physical border of a single nation-state.

As Yoshimi and Kan have argued,[50] digital media have eroded the national imaginary maintained by national media such as TV and newspaper. Mobile phone, laptop, iPod and other portable devices let people constantly access information of their choice and encourages non-territorial and/or deterritorialised imagination. Further to this, the new digital environment means that we are no longer passive consumers of media; unlike mass national print media, which offers one-way communication, the Internet allows each of us to create our own set of information and even feed it back to the public space of the Internet for others to consume, process, and pass on, all in bite-size. And unlike the national newspaper, in which we inevitably encounter news that we did not intend to read, or ideas we do not agree with, each of our 'own set of information' we collect online can be highly personalized, narrow and fragmented.

2-chan nationalism can be seen as one such technologically mediated small-scale site of imagination. It is not a nation-wide imaginary that is supported by national media and stretches as wide as the national territory. Rather it is a fragmented and customised 'Daily We' nationalism, representing a small sector and an extreme view. With the Tsushima threads, by constantly monitoring, gathering and consuming Korean news of an anti-Japanese nature, its participants were customising their information so as to reinforce the view that 'they' hate 'us', in turn justifying that 'we' hate 'them'. The Internet's role here is crucial, because without digitised electronic communication, it is difficult to efficiently access and distribute the small, in many ways insignificant, news articles and images that have become central to *netto-uyo* chats.

***2-chan* Nationalism as Postmodern and Subcultural Nationalism**

Implicit to many theories of nationalism is the existence of the modern subject who voluntarily identifies with and commits to the nation. For example, one of Japan's most influential political thinkers, Maruyama Masao, asserted that 'modern nationalism is characterised by its members' autonomy and subjectivity'.[51] When Anderson talked about the 'will to kill and die for the nation,'[52] he was alluding to the same point that nationalism arises out of a modern subject with a commitment to national solidarity.

In contrast, what we find on *2-chan* is a postmodern subject characterised by fragmentation and cynicism. Even though the *netto-uyo* discourse has a strong affinity with revisionist politics, there is little sense of *netto-uyo* commitment collectively to any fixed

position (that is, beyond the basic xenophobia discussed earlier), including nationalist and right-wing positions. In fact, the posters in the Tsushima threads tended to distance themselves from the existing right-wingers and nationalist organisations. The occasional attempts of such organisations to recruit *netto-uyo* via *2-chan* were largely ignored. Announcements of right-wing demonstrations did occasionally appear in Tsushima threads; but they never produced enthusiastic responses. *Netto-uyo* are far too cynical. In response to invitations to join right-wing activities outside cyberspace, they suggested things like 'right-wingers are in fact *zainichi* Koreans' and 'right-wingers and Koreans should both leave Japan', maintaining a distance from real-life nationalists.[53] *Netto-uyo*'s anti-Korean sentiments do not necessarily mean they identify with nationalist political activists, as is seen, for example, in the following comment on the original YouTube video of the right-wing demonstration on Tsushima: 'There go the bloody right-wingers again. They are no different from the crazy Korean guy who set a rising-sun flag alight'.

Overall, the Tsushima threads were dominated by fragmented, decontextualised and bite-sized images and statements. Despite the abundant nationalistic vocabulary and sentiments that positioned 'Japan' over 'Korea', these fragmented postings did not develop into a coherent narrative that legitimates and promotes the modern nation-state.[54] There was a strong undercurrent that everyone and everything be relativised rather than committed to or taken seriously, which renders *2-chan* nationalism postmodern. The historical lack of a modern subject in Japan has often been pointed out. Masao Miyoshi, for example, has observed that 'the dispersal and demise of modern subjectivity … have long been evident in Japan, where intellectuals have chronically complained about the absence of selfhood'.[55] It is possible that *2-chan* nationalism is simply reproducing this 'Japanese' tendency online. It is also likely that this is combined with the Internet's tendency to promote a postmodern subject. Mark Poster's work, which examines the link between postmodern subject and electronic media, for example, suggests that 'electronic communications constitute the subject in ways other than that of the major modern institutions,'[56] rendering them 'unstable, multiple, and diffuse' (Poster 1995). In Cyberspace, markers of social belonging such as ethnicity and gender are invisible and irrelevant (as they say, 'On the Internet nobody knows you are a dog'). Subjects are virtual and disembodied. One can assume and experiment with multiple subjectivities, and Cyberspace has become a 'significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterise postmodern life', where one could try on different identities and personalities.[57] Such an environment encourages speaking from a position without full commitment and without letting that position subsume one's sense of identity and belonging. With *2-chan*, too, the possibility that some of the posters are 'experimenting' with nationalist subjectivities there, while trying out other types of subjectivities on other sites, cannot be entirely rejected.

The lack of modernist commitment and weak sense of subjectivity means that perhaps we can see *2-chan* nationalism as a 'subcultural' and 'apolitical' nationalism that is akin to a leisure pursuit, hobby or style that functions to create an in-group feeling of belonging to this online community. The obsession and attachment to the fantasy Japan in this discourse, I suspect, is not the real, existing nation-state, Japan, but 'nation as a fetish,'[58] which is highly media-led, and image-oriented. It is not the classic kind of nationalism based on national pride and belonging to the imaginary community of fellow Japanese. Rather, the driving force behind it is the failure to enter the mainstream resulting in frustration and anxiety, which is then projected on the 'enemy' figure and imaginary fictionalised and idealised Japan.

Conclusion

To conclude, *netto-uyo* nationalism is aggressive and shrill, but fragmentary. Its coherence mainly comes from the symbol of the 'Koreans' as Japan's detested Other. While the hostility towards Korea, as well as towards China and North Korea is a shared trend among all variants of neo-nationalism and revisionism in post-1990s Japan, there are some elements that are unique to *netto-uyo* nationalism: it is a postmodern and subcultural nationalism aided by digital media and global accessibility to information. A product of borderless Internet technology, *2-chan* nationalism also exhibits parochial principles of nationalism. Rather than a virtual public sphere, the global and transnational electronic network has in this case produced an inward-looking and xenophobic nationalism with little awareness of the outside world. The oft-pointed out democratic potential of the Internet has, in this instance, been aborted.

While I am hardly suggesting that the Internet 'caused' nationalism, I hope to have shown that certain Internet-specific elements (such as anonymity, speedy information exchange, easy monitoring of global news) have contributed to the particular style of online neonationalism. *Netto-uyo* nationalism is not the archetypal unifying ideology of the nation-state that is reproduced through a different channel and challenges us to rethink our understanding of nationalism in the age of global electronic media. As electronic media and the global information network is turning the imagination into a global affair, Japan as an 'imagined' community is also being deeply affected.

Of course, the bigger questions of if, and how, such a subcultural, postmodern and online neonationalism is linked with more directly political nationalist ideas and movements outside cyberspace, needs to be examined further to assess its political efficacy. Although *netto-uyo* nationalism currently remains largely within cyberspace, and although cynicism seems to prevail over modernist commitment to a fixed meaning, the potential for its politicisation and mobilisation exists. As Slavoj Zizek argued in his work on ideology and postmodern cynicism, the lack of conscious commitment does not stop one from acting as if there is such a commitment: 'even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*.' As one of the many strands of nationalisms that constitute contemporary Japan's neonationalist landscape, *2-chan* online nationalism should not be dismissed as mere chatter.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Matt Allen, Stephen Epstein, Manying Ip, Matthew Penney and Mark Selden for their valuable feedback on the earlier versions of this paper.

Appendix: typical *netto-uyo* chats – from a thread about the rejection of Korean rescue team to enter New Zealand following an earthquake in February 2011.

1 : [—{}@{}@{}-] **Korean Monkeys** φ ★ : 2011/02/25(Fri)

ID: ???

Earthquake-hit New Zealand rejects Korean rescue team due to a concern with foot and mouth disease.

660 : **Rokudaimhamadadenzaemon**◆AKUMA/.c.o : 2011/02/27(Sun) 10:22:22.44 ID:Cg4n2goz

This shows that today's Korea is a real source of trouble.

661 : (´・ω・`) (`ハ´) : 2011/02/27(Sun) 10:24:56.64

ID:H4GeBAxG

The Japanese are ostracising us Koreans. (partially written in mock Korean)

662 : (´・ω・`) (`ﾊ\´) : 2011/02/27(Sun) 13:12:29.58

ID:FqpSFRYw

> Koreans will behave disgustingly to get praise, which will only lead to their bad reputation. If accepted help from Korean, NZ will forever demanded to thank Korea. New Zealand knew this and that's why they rejected Korean team.
>
> Korean monkeys have vanity, but not sincerity, modesty, respect towards others.
>
> Even though half of Korean population are Christians, their Christianity has produced evil Christians who are totally different from Christianity.
>
> There are no other shameful people like this.

663 : (´・ω・`) (`ﾊ\´) : 2011/02/27(Sun) 13:20:48.40 ID:iYOJxnTz

No country wants Koreans to come.

664 : (´・ω・`) (`ﾊ\´) : 2011/02/27(sun) 14:02:23.53 ID:TXghT97S

Concern with looting, rape, rescue dog eaten, using pet medication.

665 : (´・ω・`) (`ﾊ\´) : 2011/02/27(Sun) 14:04:39.41 ID:xKeHh4np

Japan should ban Koreans.

666 : (´・ω・`) (`ﾊ\´) : 2011/02/27(Sun) 14:17:39.64 ID:H4GeBAxG

>>664

You exposed us. (in mock Korean)

(￣∀￣)

667 : (´・ω・`) (`ﾊ\´) : 2011/02/27(Sun) 17:51:41.19 ID:6t+ujcZr

Let's ban Koreans from Japan.

668 : (´・ω・`) (`ﾊ\´) : 2011/02/27(Sun) 18:22:48.49

>>660

No, now just now but also the past.

669 : **Asahiruyasuzakijouha@FREE TIBET** ◆giKoK4gH6I : 2011/02/27(Sun) 19:23:12.80 ID:IHRyVVDZ

>>662

There was a Korean who died in trying to save a Japanese person at a train station. I have not intention to speak badly of him.

670 : (´・ω・`) (`ﾊ\´) : 2011/02/27(Sun) 19:43:02.18

We don't need looters.

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Recommended citation: Rumi Sakamoto, 'Koreans, Go Home!' Internet Nationalism in Contemporary Japan as a Digitally Mediated Subculture, The Asia-Pacific Journal Vol 9, Issue 10 No 2, March 7, 2011.

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Notes

[1] Link (Accessed on 19th Feb 2010; this video has since been removed due to a copyright claim by the nationalist group that organised the Tsushima campaign.)

[2] Tsushima is about 700 square kilometres in area, and has a population of about 30,000 (as of 2010). It is the closest Japanese territory to any foreign country; on a fine day, one can actually see Busan from Tsushima (it is, in fact, the only place in Japan one can see a foreign territory with the naked eye.). For an example of recent conservative/nationalist take on Tsushima as a 'national defense issue', see Miyamoto (2009); Yamamoto (2010)

[3] The city council in Masan passed the 'Tsushima Day' bill, commemorating June 19 as the day when a 15th century general led forces to take over Tsushima.

[4] See Oguma and Ueno (2003) for Japan's grass-roots nationalism; for Japan's historical revisionism, see Iwasaki et al. (2008).

[5] McCormack 2011.

[6] *Zaitokukai* was established in 2007 and now boasts several thousand members (according to its website) and many branches throughout Japan. Its original focus was the so-called 'special privileges' of Korean residents in Japan; but their target has now expanded to foreigners in Japan.

[7] *Shuken kaifuku o mezasu kai* was established in 2006, with a stated goal of 'fighting against the attempts of China and communism to invade and colonise Japan' (from the group's website).

[8] Tanimichi 2005.

[9] In Appendix I have provided a short translation from a typical anti-Korean thread on another topic, to show 2-channeru's style, visual quality and subcultural mode of expression.

[10] While China and North Korea, too, are routinely othered and demonized, Korea is *2-channeru*'s favourite other. Responses to Korea-related topics are almost guaranteed on *2-channeru*. This focus on South Korea in contrast with offline neo-nationalists' focus on China and North Korea (and the US) as Japan's threat, is likely to be a product of the earlier context for the emergence and crystallization of *netto-uyo*. Examples include *2-channeru* users' heated online indignations at South Korea's rough play and the referee's bias towards South Korea in the 2002 World Cup Soccer, Korean netizens' 2004 cyber 'attack' on *2-channeru* over Dokdo/Takeshima in 2004, the phenomenon of the 'Hate-Korea' web comic in 2005 which was largely about *2-channeru* users' backlash against the extreme popularity of Korean TV drama and other cultural imports in early 2000s (Sakamoto and Allen 2007).

[11] An important exception is Mark McLelland (2008), who challenges the 'Anglophone' understanding of the online discourse of 'race' by closely examining the *2-channeru* discussions on Korea and Koreans. He concludes that *2-chan* racial thinking is more preoccupied with the link between 'blood' and 'cultural competence' than that in multicultural societies like the US or Australia, where 'Asian race' is conceptualised as a single category.

[12] Sasada (2006); Honda (2007).

[13] Habermas (1984).

[14] Negroponte (1996: 236).

[15] For example, Bakker (2001); Chan (2006); Eriksen (2007); Candan and Hunger (2008).

[16] Erikson (2006: 6).

[17] Gries (2005); Zhou et al. (2005); Liu (2006).

[18] Yang (2003: 405-406). Another view is that the Chinese government manipulates cyber nationalism to put pressure on Japan without letting anti-Japanese demonstrations get out of hand.

[19] For example, Mixi, Japan's most popular social networking service has about 5 million users, which is about half the number of *2-chan* users. It is also the case that while *2-chan* has been described as the world's largest BBS, the number of YouTube or Twitter users exceeds *2-chan* users. See Net Rating/Nielsen Online (Nov 2008) [online] Available here [Accessed 7 Oct 2009].

[20] From 2003 IP addresses of the users have been recorded, so strictly speaking 2-chan is no longer entirely anonymous. A vast majority still post as 'anonymous', while some choose to use pseudonyms.

[21] McLelland (2008: 821).

[22] Tsuji (2008: 11).

[23] Motomiya Hiroshi's historical comic, *Kuni ga moeru* (The Country is Burning), which included depiction of the Nanjing Massacre, became a target of criticisms from *netto-uyo* and some conservative politicians, ending with an apology, termination of the series and deletion of references to the Nanjing Massacre when the comic was published in book form.

[24] Seto (2008); Tsuji (2008).

[25] Kondo and Tanizaki (2007: 156).

[26] Seto (2008: 76); Kimura (2008: 129-30).

[27] *2-channeru* (2006: 177). A majority of *2-chan* users are said to be youth and young adults (Sasada 2006: 119; Nimiya 2003: 5); but this view has been challenged by one recent survey that found that the largest age group of the users has gone up to 33-44. See J-cast News (2009).

[28] Nimiya (2003: 11-13).

[29] Takahara (2006).

[30] Kondo and Tanizaki hold a similar view (2007: 156-165). For a general discussion of youth employment problem, freeters and NEETs in Japan, see Kosugi (2006) and Slater (2010).

[31] Ogura (2005: 188).

[32] These are examples of jobs often taken by immigrant workers in countries like Europe, USA, UK, New Zealand and Australia.

[33] A city council in Masan passed the 'Tsushima Day' bill in 2005, commemorating June 19 as the day when a 15th century general led forces to take over Tsushima (Card 2006). For an overview of the Takeshima-Dokdo issue, see Wada (2005). Following the nationalists-right wing campaigns and publicity via right-leaning media, there have been mainstream reports about the Korean presence on the island, too.

[34] Often minor news starts the *netto-uyo* conversation. Examples include an anti-Japanese statement made by a Korean blogger; a Korean media's critique of a YouTube video of Korean 'foul play' in the 2002 World Cup; or someone crossing out 'Japan Sea' and writing 'East Sea' on a world map exhibited in a museum in Berlin.

[35] In this respect it is interesting to note that the Korean presence in Tsushima is regarded as external pollution and invasion, despite the historical Korean presence in Tsushima. Contemporary nationalist discourse seems to be attempting to purge the historical presence of Korea and the islands' memory of it by newly reconstructing Korea as an external figure.

[36] Oguma (1995). War-time multiculturalism was quickly forgotten after the war. See Morris-Suzuki (2011), for example, for Japan's postwar border control against illegal Korean entry in the immediate postwar period. Even though many such Koreans were former residents returning to Japan after decolonisation, they were treated as problematic outsiders and foreigners.

[37] If indeed *netto-uyo* are economically and socially disadvantaged young people, as has been suggested, this type of anti-Korean sentiment may share something with the well-documented pattern of the underprivileged national self blaming the immigrant Other – 'they' are stealing 'our' jobs.

[38] A Korean word for 'my country'.

[39] A Korean word to mark a polite ending of a sentence.

[40] Poster (2001: 1).

[41] Poster (2001: 7).

[42] Rheingold (2003); Langman (2005).

[43] Langman (2005: 44).

[44] Rheingold (1993: 207).

[45] Sia et al., 2002.

[46] In this article by 'real-life' I simply refer to non-electronic environments outside cyberspace.

[47] Gellner (1983); Anderson (1991); Breuilly (1994).

[48] Anderson (1991).

[49] Sunstein (2001).

[50] Yoshimi and Kan (2001).

[51] Maruyama (1964).

[52] Anderson (1991).

[53] This attitude is reciprocated by the traditional neonationalists, who tend to be dismissive of *netto-uyo* for their lack of rigorous ideology as well as their hiding behind anonymity, which they consider to be a sign of *netto-uyo*'s lack of commitment.

[54] A number of core posters attempted to do this, but they failed to define the overall discourse.

[55] Miyoshi (1989).

[56] Poster (1995).

[57] Turkle (1995: 180).

[58] Iida (2003: 93).

[59] While Korea is constructed as Japan's Other in the Tsushima threads discussed here, 'China' and '*tokutei-ajia* ('certain Asia'; a *2-chan* slang that refers to China, South Korea and North Korea) appear similarly othered in *netto-uyo* discourse in general.

[60] Zizek (1989: 33).

Created by Datamomentum