

AN ACCIDENT IN PARADISE: EXERIENCES OF KOREAN IMMIGRANTS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Abstract

My partner is a welder: he is very good in his profession. I am an academic and sometimes I doubt if I am as good as him in my field. At first I felt somewhat self-conscious to admit this to my friends and colleagues. Now I feel embarrassed for not introducing him earlier and for feeling this way at first. I dearly love him, because his mind is focused, pure and lacks selfishness. These are qualities I could not find in my academic ex-partner. But here, I would like to share with you his experience and those of other recent migrants in Australia, a country claimed to be from the “first world”. This is a hearty story, but that is the only way to talk about their lives of those who come to Australia in search for a better life. The reason why I decided to write this up is to shed a light on the lived realms of those who sustain the Australian economy and whose every-day experiences rarely become known.

I have been living for about one year with two Korean welders and this is how I got to know their stories and those of other Korean workers. I combine a feminist standpoint approach (Butler and Scott 1992; Portes 1995) with ethnomethodology (Schneider 2002) to conduct this study. This means that I use a feminist theory to reflect on the nature of the study and I use my knowledge of the participants obtained through every-day observations and conversations.

In addition, I am also applying a self-reflexive perspective (Woelfel and Haller 1971; Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000) on the events and historical facts which I am describing. I am a migrant, myself, and have lived outside the country I was born for about 12 years now, and English is my fourth language.

Setting the Scene

The background of this paper utilises the metaphor “*An accident in paradise*” by contrasting the widely perceived image of Australia as a dream destination with the actual experiences of contemporary Korean migrants.

There are two recognised dimensions of the power structure discussed in the paper: that is external and internal. The external is concerned with the State as a regulator of the labour market and (b)order control, while the internal power structures are associated with the social hierarchy within the Korean migrant society.

The discussion part of the paper converses the theoretical framework of three “R”: **Resistance**, **Resilience** and **Reconstruction** which proves useful in discussing the responses to the challenges of Korean migrants in their new territory. A large part of this discussion revolves around shifting of traditional and modern values, which underpin the lives of Korean community in the socio-cultural landscapes of Australia.

Methodology

The methodology applied to the research relies heavily on ethnography (Schneider 2002) employing numerous of conversations and observations (Norrick 2000). Conversational story telling includes carrying conversations with speakers on a range of different topics, while looking for common themes on the same topic amongst different speakers who verbalise it in a unique way (Norrick 2000). Thus when using this method for research, apart from talking about the main topic of interest, conversational story telling may well include conversations on family stories, anecdotes, dreams and so on, which add an extra and necessary aspect of creating a mosaic picture of a specific topic. The role of narrative analysis is not only descriptive (mimesis) but above all serve a discursive model. That is to say: the listener and the speaker interpret each word in their own meaning, and this meaning takes different forms because of that interaction.

I have followed the lives of about eight to ten Korean migrant workers for a period of 12 months from the time of their arrival to the time of their departure of Australia or the granting of a long-term working visa. Most of them arrived on a working holiday visa initially, and only some of them came as tourists. Some of them changed their visa status a few times during the course of the research. All of the participants in the research were employed at the same Labour Hire Company for the entire duration of the research and only a few shifted away from it in exceptional circumstances. A wider circle of participants involved were managerial and administrative employees in the labour hire company, including Korean, American and Australian residents. The majority of the participants are young men around 30 years. Two of the employees of the labour hire company are females in their late 20-ties. The data was analysed using a thematic and structural analysis.

Structure

This paper consists of four parts. The first one gives an overview of the economic, socio-political and cultural landscapes where as the background of the story; the second one will examine the existing

power-dimensions in two scales: external and internal; and the third one will discuss the responses of Korean migrant workers to the challenges in forming their own socio-economic and cultural territories. And the last one draws some appropriate conclusion in real events and facts as well as provide a self-reflexive perspective on those events.

Part I

1. The paradise

Australia: a country of unlimited opportunities; the new “America”; the country with tropical and sub-tropical climate providing sunshine, adventure and outdoor living all year round. The longest beaches in the world, coral reefs, forests and unique biodiversity attract millions of tourists, students, workers and permanent residents every year (Australian Official Tourism Website 2012).

Economically, Australia offers a very favourable climate, too. The country emerged after the GFC virtually untouched, with steady resource sector due to its secure trading partner China (Shu, Andressen et al.). The GFC did question the current migration policies, posing the question whether the number of skilled migrants contributes to softening of the effects of the crisis (Meredith, Dyster et al. 1999). Currently, the Australian currency is stronger than the U.S. dollar (Moze 2012). With a lot of opportunities, relatively small population compare to its land size and compare to other Asian cities and a shortage of labour ever since its colonisation, Australia with a very little surprise eludes people from other mega-cities, especially from its neighbouring Asia. Offering some of the highest wages in trades in the world, Australia becomes a favourable destination for workers with a trade-profession in recent times.

Welding is in high demand, because of the ever-expanding resource sector, which is in a constant need to satisfy its hunger for skilled and semi-skilled workers. Korean welders are regarded as some of “the best” in the Australian labour market¹. The welding sector in Korea proves to be ranking high in country’s top industries largely because of the well-developed ship-building industry concentrated in the area of Pusan in South Korea (Kim, Kang et al. 2009 Kim, Kang et al. 2009). It is little surprising that skilled workers are looking for better opportunities for themselves and their families in the faraway continent.

There are, however, a few obstacles on their way. The more practical obstacles (on an external level) are speaking English and obtaining a visa. The more subtle obstacles (on an internal level) are the sense of isolation, accommodating to cultural differences and forming a sense of belonging to their new territory.

2. The Accident

“It is difficult for me like this....I want to give up. I have only my company here. I thought that I have people close to me in this house, but now I realise I don’t have

¹ Personal conversation with the Korean welders’ supervisors.

any friends. Why continue? [Placing both hands on his face to try and hide his tears].”JK

I am speechless. It is true. I feel the same way, but the time spent with this feeling has numbed the pain, like uncomfortable shoes, which you wear all the time until finally become unaware of the pain, purposefully. There is no way to explain this to him, except to say: “*This is normal. I have been there. You are not alone.*” Every time I come across the reality of the pain when someone close to me is being affected by this migrant “syndrome”, which is so painful, yet so typical, it inevitable affects me again.

This outburst came somewhat expectedly. This same Sunday, a couple of hours ago, the manager of the labour hire company he is working for, paid a surprise visit to our house. The manager told JK that he was fired, unless he accepts his “sponsorship” for an employer-sponsored visa, known legendary as a category 457 visa. This happened a few times before, and always on Sunday: this is the time when the manager, referred to as “*the boss*” or “*Shrimp*”² get drunk and fires his employees only to wake up on the following day with complete amnesia and the employees are told by his most patient and polite secretary, that they should not take him seriously and go to work as if nothing happened. The difference this time was that JK told him to leave before he listened to him, and didn’t even invite him inside the house.

The last time *Shrimp* visited our house was about four months ago, when he came unexpectedly at 8 a.m. on Sunday and *went* into our rooms, while we were sleeping (the door was left open) to find out that his best and most reliable employee, his Secretary, had an affair with one of his workers, (who is also one of my housemates). In fury, he fired everyone, including JK and another Korean welder, who was staying with us at the time. The couple was made to go officially explain their relationship in front of the “seniority” of the company a few times, only to be publically humiliated and embarrassed. They came back crying every time after such a visit³.

This is the background under which this story unfolds, and what welder-workers from “Mercury” take for granted as a basic baseline of their work life in Western Australia. Their work involved 10-11 hours’ work every day except Sunday in the hot climate of WA, where the summer temperatures reach well over 40 degrees Celsius. Their pay is usually reduced (sometimes *halved*) because they are affiliated with a labour hire company not on a one-off basis, but continuously, as long as they work for the company which found them a placement.

As I illustrate below the Korean migrant workers are subjected to two scales of power-dimensions where they are presented with a few choice. Before I go on to elaborate on those choices, I will first lay down the foundations of the external and internal power dimensions.

Part II

Two scales of power dimensions: External and Internal

There are two scales of power dimensions that I have identified so far: external and internal scales. The external scale of power considers the State as a global agent exercising maximum control over

²All actual nicknames have been replaced to preserve anonymity.

³ Since that ‘accident’ our house was called ‘No Shrimp Zone’ with a sign on the fridge, which most visitors take as a joke to mean that we don’t like Shrimp. They could not be farther away from the truth: Shrimp is the favourite food of Korean welders who work for the Labour Hire company called “Mercury”.

its citizens and residents; a strong player in the international arena of exercising political and economic power, particularly through its mechanisms of regulating the labour market and border control. Additionally, the State, as a formation of institutional agencies channelling policy implementing serves as a powerful social agent. For example, the setting of language standards for virtually all types of visa (except tourist and humanitarian visas) sets social expectations that migrants, whether they are short-term or long-term must be able to acquire a certain degree of proficiency in the command of English.

Internal scale of power is considered to have the effects of influencing individual behaviour of migrants through social hierarchical systems. Internal scales of power can rely on shame, on social pressure between employer-employee, younger-older persons, but also between people in the same position, such as employees in the same company. A key aspect of this scale is the power of a mentor, or a person whom one trusts, whether it is because of personal qualities, age or an established hierarchical or personal relationship.

External Scale: State-Influenced power

The Government of Western Australia is in a desperate demand of skilled and semi-skilled labour (Government of Western Australia 2011). The need for people to sustain the Australian economy has been recognised ever since the slogan “*Populate or Perish*” was erected by the Minister for Immigration, Arthur Calwell, in the post-second world war period (see for example Peters 2001). Nowadays the need for skilled workers is evident more than ever. Western Australia, alone, currently has over \$225 billion worth of resource and infrastructure projects under (Government of Western Australia 2011). The department of training and workforce estimates that the Western Australian economy will require nearly an additional half a million workers over the next 10 years; furthermore it has also been projected that even with the current strong rates of population growth, there will still be a shortage of more than 210,000 workers in Western Australia by 2020 (Government of Western Australia 2011).

There is not only a need for people, to fill in the shortage of labour, but also as people who bring with them their unique set of values, norms and beliefs. The syndrome of Australia-ness is widely spread in Australia. In historical terms, since the nineteenth century, Australia has promoted a certain trends in their immigration politics, known controversially as the White Australian Policy (Castles 1992). This had a tremendous effect on the ethnic and cultural background of people migrating to Australia. The number of non-European migrants was kept low up until mid-sixties, when the Government allowed a proportionally small number of middle class non-Europeans. Castles and Miller (1993) claims that the numbers of those migrants were kept low in order to make them socially invisible with the preferred white immigrant groups (Castles and Miller 1993).

The terms “Australian” and a “migrant” remain a highly problematic issue even nowadays. Who is considered an Australian? And who has the rightful claims to belonging to the country’s rich cultural mosaic? There are still large cultural and language barriers, which fence migrants from blending with the rest of the society. As I will discuss later in details, some of those fences are the high requirement of the English language and the costly affair of acquiring a working visa.

Internal Scale of Power Dimensions

The internal scale of power-dimensions consider two main aspects: that is (1) the social expectations by others in the wider community and (2) the different social hierarchy structures within the Korean community in Western Australia. It is often evident that expectations set up on a Governmental level

perpetuate on a wider social scale within the local community.

The section below examines some of the challenges posed by the cultural differences and language barriers. In terms of the second dimension of internal power, I provide some examples in the Korean community of social relations between employer-employee, employee-employer and within employees themselves. The effects and the implications of those relationships are later discussed in this paper.

Cultural Differences and language barriers

“Speak English!”

It is *expected* that migrants speak, or should be able to require the ability to speak English language when they arrive, live and work in Australia. The Government sets very clear requirements for new (and existing) migrants: a score of the International English Testing System, or commonly known as IELTS, is the benchmark in this expectations. For an employer-sponsored visa, the score of the General IELTS is 5.0 points⁴, for an independent-skilled migrant, the required score is 7.0 – an increase by a crucial 0.5 points from previous years; in other visa categories there are also various requirements for new migrants. Exceptions are tourists’ visitors and those who came here under the humanitarian programme.

Because the Australian Government largely poses the need for international migrants to pass the English Proficiency Test, there are also wide-spread public expectations from the Australian society for new comers, i.e. people who were born elsewhere. It is common even nowadays, in 2012, to hear an Australian-born resident saying over an informal, friendly gathering over BBQ party: “Speak English!”

While migrants who came to Australia after WWII from Italy, Poland and other European countries, rarely though of “multiculturalism” – a term coined much later - when were subjected to the frequent “Speak English” coined by strangers passing on the footpaths and street and accepted it as part of the harsh reality of living in the Australian continent, recent migrants are presumably better aware of their rights as “citizens” in the wider sense of its meaning: to participate freely in the public life and to be able to adhere to their own cultural believes, rather than give up under the pressure of “assimilation” forced by the “assimilation policy” in the period 1950-1970s of white Australians (Haebich 2008).

Even so, there is little a recent female migrant from South Korea can say or do, when her own boyfriend, Jack, born in Australia with very strong Scottish background tells her: “Excuse me, speak English in front of me!” and abruptly interrupts his own conversation in English as well as others’ chat in Korean. As if a little embarrassed by the silence, which followed up his remark, he tries to justify his comment, which left speechless most of the guests:

*“**They**⁵ come here to learn English. So we have to encourage them to speak English, and not let them speak their own language with their friends.”*

The irony of such attitude is that this person was still proud with his Scottish heritage or his “otherness” in the same way that other ethnic groups, including Korean migrants, are proud with

⁴ As of July 2012

⁵ Emphasis his; quote from November 2011, Waikiki, Western Australia.

their own heritage. The main difference, of course, was that their first language was other than English⁶.

When expectations are set from the people very close to us and on whom we rely on the most, it is difficult to get the bigger picture. So here we will provide some of the context for those people, to help them better understand their own place in the multi-cultural mosaic of Australian society.

A few words about the use and the social construction of the English language are necessary to reveal the context of Australia, as an English-speaking country, after its colonisation by the British. Firstly, English is the dominant language in the world: the number of English users around the world suggests a probable 2 billion (Liu 1999)⁷. However, English language is spoken mostly by people who are born outside English-speaking countries. Some have used the term 'language murder' and 'language suicide', suggesting that languages do not die natural deaths.

"They [local languages] are instead murdered" (Nettle and Romaine 2000)

The implications of using the English language as a migrant are deeply rooted within modern cultural imperialism. Bradley and Bradley (2002) compare the spread of the English language to the spread of genetically modified crops in the way it unifies and diminished diversity and minority groups.

"The globalization of English and the spread of other languages is not different from the spread of new genetically modified plant varieties controlled by multinational companies" (Bradley and Bradley 2002 xii).

Another way to describe the English language is with the embodiment of 'cultural imperialism' (Phillipson 1992) since learning a new language means adopting a new, 'alien' culture, becoming the victim of cultural and language imperialism.⁸ That also has severe implication on identity, with some authors insisting that the loss of language is a loss of identity.

Some writers (Widdowson 1994) insist that since English language is wide-spread, it serves the communal needs and the community from different countries, it is only logical that it must be diverse. So in order to accept its growth and its development, native speakers need to embrace these changes.

Secondly, although there are strict Government negotiations on the ability of new migrants to speak English (including a recently introduced English test for those who wish to become Australian citizens), there is no such law that states that in public places, informal gathering and so on, one must speak English. In this sense, imposing the English language in such circumstances is illegal.

Thirdly, the wider public is largely unaware of the experiences which migrants need to go through when learning English to obtain or renew their visa. IELTS is a very difficult test: there is a certain proportion of questions, which are ambiguous and vague, to such extend that even a native English-speaking person cannot fully and adequately answer. There a certain percent of the questions which is ambiguous enabling a better control over the score of the candidate. An extra 0.5 point

⁶ The same person, who insisted that one (his own girlfriend, to be more precise) need to speak the local language only, is planning to live and work in Seoul, South Korea next month with his girlfriend and to teach English. The author is wondering if he would still express the same beliefs there and then.

⁷ Even now, in this paper, I find myself writing in English, although I speak and write in several languages.

⁸ Core spiritual concepts framed in the heritage language of the group can be difficult or impossible to express with equal clarity or depth is inescapably diminished or lost when a people replaces its ancestral language with another.' Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic Imperialism* New York, Oxford University Press.

requirement means that a candidate needs to pay another \$330 AUD for another attempt to pass. IELTS is like everything else, a business, and a profitable one, too. As a result of 0.5 point increase of requirements, a lot of new and recent migrants need to re-sit the same exam they have passed before.

In a careful manner, preserving the symbolic possession of certain community, values and identity, the custodians of English are the gatekeepers of the Standard English and subsequently of their own security for their community and institutions (Widdowson, 1994). It is an entry point to the privileges of membership, to the community of English speakers and the tools are its lexis and grammar, most carefully and vigorously preserved. The chances are that if one cannot express themselves in a grammatically correct way, their ideas or their words are not going to be regarded as important.

Costly Affair

The tuition fees are expensive, too. At present⁹, the rate for a single IELTS lesson is around \$60 AUD. One must bear in mind that most people who need to undertake IELTS are new or recent migrants and their earnings are not the highest one either. The alternative expenses are even higher: a week off full time employment can easily amount to \$ 1000-2000 AUD per week (in the case of a welder, for example).

The largest cost, however, is paying the price for the right of “sponsorship” by their prospective employer. As we will see below, such cases very common. In fact, it is out-of-the-norm not to accept an offer of “sponsorship”. Such refusal may lead to severe negative consequences to the person who rejected the offer, forcing to eventually leave the country under psychological and peer pressure, or out of a necessity. Consider the following example.

“Shrimp” asked each one of his employees to pay him \$30,000 to sponsor them with the notorious 457 visa. His company, “Mercury” has been struggling for a while to get approval from the Government to be able to offer sponsorship for foreign worker. Under the Australian Law a company can request such approval as long as it satisfies certain conditions. It is then able to offer employer-sponsorship for migrants, who are working on other types of temporary visas, a four year sponsorship.

The word “sponsorship” is somewhat misleading: it implies certain type of generosity and in-kind contribution and in most cases even brings connotation to providing someone with monetary benefits. In reality, there is nothing like that. If anything, the employees are paying the employer, governmental and various other services and agencies, dotted across the path to living and working legally in Australia. And I will explain why.

Migrants, who have worked for the labour hire company, are generally paid less than those do the same job independently. The reason is clear: they are hired to do the job via an intermediary agency, and therefore are expected to forego some proportion of their earnings for the labour hire company, securing them the employment. The problem, however, arises when the migrants are deprived of nearly *half* of their wages on a continuous basis, as long as they are working for the same labour hire company.

JK received 17 dollars per hour while his labour hire company Mercury received twice that amount. His remuneration was cut even further by one or two dollars per hour in the final months of his

⁹Beginning 2012 in Perth, Western Australia

employment. This was done because the boss of the company could afford to cut the payment of workers, who did not have a proper visa and the rights to work in Australia, whom he still employed. At any one time, there were at least half a dozen employees who did not hold appropriate visa, but this information was not made available for the larger companies they were placed. Such a small deduction of payment of 1 or 2 dollars may not make a lot of difference, but it hurt the pride of the workers and added extra tension between them and the labour hire company: they saw their employer as being dishonest, greedy and with a “small mind”. JK said:

“Do you know that Shrimp has cut down my wage by 2 dollars per hour? It must be because he needs to pay all of these new people he employed for the office. Even his own nephew is now working for him, but he has no idea what to do whatsoever...I don't know what he does, but he is definitely not working. And all of the brand new cars that Shrimp bought... I really can't wait to get away from him! “

Secondly, the migrants are required to bear the cost of English exam and medical tests. It is their responsibility to pay for IELTS test (including all the cost associated with private lessons, study materials and bear the alternative cost of time off work), and for the application to Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC). They are also required to undergo a full medical examination, including chest X-ray.

The health check is not straightforward, either. There is only one place¹⁰ in Perth Central Business District (CSD) where one can take the examination. There is a queue. There is always a queue in “those places”. Usually it is a mixture of recent migrants from a diverse cultural and ethnic background. Some of them are not there for the first time, like me. I have taken this health check twice. The first time I forgot my glasses and had to re-schedule it for after 2 weeks. The second time, I re-applied for the renewal of my visa, I remember the waiting time, easily 30-40 minutes (with an appointment beforehand), so this time I come prepared and brought along some reading materials along. The Korean migrant, whom I was accompanying, however, did not. He waited silently, fidgeting surely, but not a single word of complaint came out of his mouth. He is used to waiting, even though, his work start in less than an hour.

The process is extremely efficient and streamlined. Taking off your clothes and staying in front of the X-ray machine is quick: it only takes seconds to be blasted (unnecessarily) with radioactive radiation. You don't even need to wait for the results, and they offer to send it directly to the DIAC in a sealed envelope should you prefer.

Back to the issue of “sponsorship”. The point is that migrants (legal or illegal) are paying in dollars a lot more than their employer, who is supposing “sponsoring” them. But the main reason is yet to be discussed: it is the \$ 30,000 that Shrimp required for this “sponsorship”. The question is: Who is the real sponsor? The company, which pays some \$ 1000 to the DIAC in order to lodge a nomination for sponsorship, or the migrant- worker, who pays with sweat on his forehead?

Social Hierarchy

Some of the power-structures were exercised by the hierarchical systems within the Korean community itself. Above I have discussed some of the perspectives of employer-employee relationship. Now I will continue to discuss other types of social hierarchy within the Korean migrant community and their influence on the behaviour of the participants in the research.

¹⁰Which I am aware of as of March 2012.

In Korean culture, it is regarded that the boss is not a mere figure of employer, but also someone that should be seen as a mentor, as an example of good behaviour showing qualities of trust, cooperation and justice. They are almost like a teacher, whom an employee should follow in example of trustworthiness, good moral norms and a prime example of success. This, however, could not be farther away from reality with Mercury and Shrimp as the sole director and manager at that company. Consider even his nickname, given to him by his employees: Shrimp. When I asked what is his name, this was the answer I was given and the explanation was that he looks like an Shrimp with a bold head and long tentacles reaching in the private matter of his employees.

Secondly, he is not the prime example of qualities, relevant to his position of a director, because he lacks any communication and managerial skills. For example, when one of his workers got an eye injury at his workplace, Shrimp ordered his secretary to immediately take him to a hospital (this was around 6 pm on Sunday, at which time she was dining at an Italian restaurant in Fremantle) and to escort him to the Shrimp as soon as his shift finished. On her response, that he wasn't that badly injured, since he was able to work and drive himself to the hospital, he simply replied that probably the reason was her own "laziness" and "uncaring". Touched by his display of care for the injured worker, she organised to go to the Royal Perth Hospital after his work finished in a few hours and she informed Shrimp via a text message, thinking that this would be a satisfactory action on her part. Nothing of the kind: he replied in writing, saying:

"After you go to the hospital, he is fired."

Unable to comprehend the situation, she tried to explain and to find why, but her guess was as good as mine. Half-laughing in dismay, she shares with me:

"If that was a few months ago, I would be so worried, I would not be even finish my meal. But now, I don't care. As my boss, he should be someone I respect and be able to follow. But now I am stronger than him, so he has to follow me." (Julia)

The above example illustrates the employee-employer relationship: the breaking down of the traditional way of seeing the paternal figure of the boss to the modern Western image of a boss, who is often confronted with his employees. It is widely considered in the West, for example, that once a person moves on to become a manager, they would often lose their social circle of friends, because it has been replaced by employees, rather than friends. Therefore, it is not unusual for the employees to lose their personal connection with the new figure of higher social hierarchy.

In terms of employee-employee relationship, there are certain power structures identified as well.

There are some figures of elderly who bear a special significance to the employer himself. One such paternal figure is Mr. G. who pays rare visits to Shrimp. According to the words of his secretary in the company, he has the ability to influence his behaviour, like no one else:

"... He [Mr.G.] came to our workshop this morning to talk to me and Shrimp. He is the only person who can stop Shrimp from doing wrong. Because he is older and he has more experience and Shrimp would listen to him...I told him that we are hiring workers without visa and I hope he talks to my boss. "

The lessons for the Mercury are still not clear. But the end of its corrupted practices is something worth betting on. With its total lack of management skills, with very little acknowledgment of the migrants' laws and with his totalitarian style of management, the end of Mercury is easily foreseen. Who would benefit from it? And who would be the people who would ultimately pay the price for it?

Effects

Health

What is really under-estimated and too often omitted is the stress and the health problems associated with obtaining a visa. For example, a South Korean migrant, JK, whose employer is extremely satisfied with his skills and experience and is willing to sponsor him on the notorious 457 visa (a number, which meaning every migrant to Australia knows far too well, but it is virtually unknown to anyone “lucky enough to be born in Australia) was required to undertake IELTS test with a month in advance notice. A private tutor and time off his busy schedule was arranged: now instead of working until 2 a.m. (or sometimes 3 or 4 a.m. because the “workshop was busy”), he was allowed to finish work at 6 p.m. two days per week in order to go to his lessons with an Italian-born teacher, who was an IELTS examiner and therefore considered by the company as a suitable private tutor.

The stress, however, was enormous. To learn to perform up to the standards of all four modules of the test: reading, listening, writing and speaking in less than a month is a daunting task. On some days, when he studied until 3 a.m. he would be so tired that his nose would bleed and would have a severe headache. I could not answer some of the questions satisfactory, when I tried to help.

The stress and anxiety does not end with sitting the IELTS test. This is only the beginning of the recognition of the powerful role of the English language has, as a tool of asserting class, power and identity. In fact, it is not until a recent migrant sits in front of an examiner, after they have been waiting for hours on end (the listening part of the IELTS is not held until late in the afternoon on the same the day of the exam)¹¹ when they realise that English is not only a tool of communication, but also a privilege, a power and a class status. There is nothing more strikingly different than seeing the proud self-confident custodians of the English Language going for an examination and those who sits the test. I must note, however, that on an individual level, examiners are extremely approachable, professional and friendly. Most of people who need an IELTS score are young and hurdle together in groups; they follow the examiners to the room of speaking test silently, overwhelmed by their own humbleness, ready to take orders and talk about any subject that are asked in the examination room. The only matter of subject which is missing from the curriculum of the speaking test is the ownership and rights of English.

In addition to the physical health effects of learning English and dealing with the competitions of other employees and employers, there are also additional nuances of Korean immigrants ‘mental health, presented by the sense of isolation and alienation.

Sense of alienation and isolation

The differentiation between long-term Anglo-Saxon settlers and contemporary migrants continues to be felt even now. A particular sense of isolation was felt even after some length of stay in Australia. Who is considered an “Australian” and a “migrant” are still very problematic questions. After 25 years of living in Australia, there is still a strong feeling of being “other” and alienated from the rest of the Australian society.

¹¹This is a wide-spread practice in Western Australia (see for example Edith Cowen University), and possibly in other parts of the world, since IELTS is highly standardised and therefore it employs highly efficient methods.

“Mr G., an older welder in his 60 and 70s, who was the first one to come to Perth [in recent times] is also one of the mentors for Shrimp told me that even after living in Perth for 25 years, he still does not feel Australian. I can feel it in the way he talks about it... “these people want you to do things a certain way- he-says- you need to do in a way others are doing it”. So he considers the Australian ways of work, of practicing and of regulations, but he still does not think of himself as an Australian. Even after 25 years! It was very interesting to listen to him...!” (Julia on her conversation with Mr G.)

Other people, who have spent more time in Australia, some quite a few years, still feel a sense of isolation in their every-day experience. A young girl from Hong Kong, Olivia, who works in a legal firm, decided to have private lessons in English after she felt that she was unable to participate fully in the conversations around her, despite the fact she spent more than 2 years in Perth, and her boyfriend was Australian –born.

Part III

Actual Experiences of Korean Migrants: Social and Cultural Narratives

The actual experiences of Korean migrants were mostly shaped by the decision they made in terms of choosing what kind of sponsorship they chose in order to obtain a 457 visa. The price of the sponsorship came down in half, because of the “generosity” of Mercury, since not many people were able to afford it. Currently three of the participants of this study are undergoing a visa sponsorship under the 457 category. They had largely only two choices

Choice 1:

The first choice presented to Korean migrant workers is to accept the Mercury’s sponsorship. That means that they need to pay the nominated amount and to commit in working for the company for the next four years. There are certain challenges in choosing this path.

For a migrant-worker to be able to pay \$ 30, 000 usually within less than a year, it means only one thing: hard work. JJ, another one of my Korean friends, decided to keep the good faith in his boss (despite of his display of paranoiac-maniac behaviour) and to pay the price. He normally works from 6 am to 5 pm every day, except weekends, and now he would need to work on Saturdays also. He has less than 6 months to collect the money; otherwise he would not have a legal way of staying in Australia. His current visa – working holiday visa – is valid for only 12 months and he is not able to renew it, because he is now over 30 years old.¹² There is a little choice.

JJ was successful in getting a 457, accepting Shrimp’s sponsorship, accepting Mercury’s sponsorship.

Choice 2:

The other choice is to reject this “sponsorship” and to go your own way. This has its challenges, too. JK chose this path. He broke all relationship with Shrimp, his boss of the labour hire company Mercury, where he “belongs”, and refused to accept his help. This did not happen overnight. It is a long process which end is still not foreseen. On his last visit to our house, he came drunk to “offer to help”, but JK simply asked him to leave and did not invite him inside. Although a short encounter, surely, it left an enormous effect on him. JK busted into tears and all evening drank soju¹³ with very little words to express his overwhelming stress and anxiety for the past weeks, which included sitting the IELTS test.

¹² This visa is designed for young people under 30 years only.

¹³ Korean alcoholic beverage

The stress of saying “No” to his employer, on whom his stay in Australia is dependent, is huge. Last time, when he spoke to Shrimp about the same issue was when he was on his way to Margaret River¹⁴ and he felt so stressed, that he fell sick. We needed to stop the car a few times for him to recover.

JK’s position on the issue of sponsorship, as I mentioned earlier is different. He is an excellent worker, performs over and above what is expected of him, he is never late and often works until 3-4 am if required; but most importantly, he never complains. He is the perfect employee for any welding company.

It doesn’t come as a surprise that MDG has an interest in keeping one of their best workers and is willing to offer him a 457 nomination for sponsorship directly and not via Mercury. This means that would be free to break his tens relationship with Shrimp to get twice as much salary and finally being able to think about other things, apart from satisfying the mood swings of his boss, worrying about the future. Great plan! Except that Shrimp was not ready to give up his worker so easily. As soon as the news about JK wanting to accept nomination for sponsorship from someone else, regular pursuits and even threats over the phone followed.

“You belong to Mercury”. You cannot accept sponsorship from another company...I gave you a job, I gave you this job with MDG. You have the responsibility to stay loyal to me and not accept anyone else’s...you are disloyal and immoral!”

The tirade would continue endlessly if JK didn’t just end the phone call.

Other source of anxiety is presented from the attitudes of other employees within his workshop MDG, which is willing to sponsor him.

“I am under a lot of stress. Other Korean workers are envying me” –Why? –“Because the company does a lot for me.”

The company, in reality, has not more than allowing JK to have Thursday off for him to go to English classes. But even this seems to be significant enough in the eyes of other migrant-workers. What is seen by other Korean (as well as Chinese, Singaporean, and Indonesian) workers a reason to be envious is the willingness of MDG to “sponsor” JK to stay in Australia, thus liberating him from the chains of “Shrimp”. This is quite a reason to be envious giving that half of their wage goes directly to his own bank account (or in the purchase of another 4 wheel drive vehicle).

The outcome of his application came on the same day as JJ’s: but he was refused such a visa. It was the evening of the 1st June. JK was working until 2 a.m. as always and he sent me a message saying: *“Reject my application...I don’t know what to do...Officer changed. And then reject”*.

¹⁴ An internationally acclaimed resort in the South West of Australia, popular with its wineries and surfing beaches.

Part IV

Discussion: Shifting Power dimension and Shifting of Traditional Asian values and norms

The metaphor of “Accident in Paradise” has served as a useful tool to illustrate the experiences of Korean migrants which were not meant to happen when arriving in Australia, a country of the so-called first world.

I will next discuss the resilience of the Korean migrant workers, their attitudes, strives and dreams in pursuing the future they dream of. I will interrogate the strength which emerges as a key factor in continuing their employment and their lives despite the difficulties patched on their roads.

In the discussion part, I have identified strong resistance to power, a unique sense of resilience and a reconstruction of traditions and modernities.

Resistance to Power

The resistance to existing and well established external and internal power structures were seen in the attitudes to the employer (“ I am now stronger than him”), in the opposing of wasting money (“He has too much staff that he does not need”) and to cutting down unnecessarily wages (“He took away another \$2 from my hourly pay”).

Another identified area of resistance to power was the opposition to the illegal activities that were taking place in Mercury:

“I always tell my boss not to hire workers without visa, but he never listen to me.” (Julia)

The frustration of Korean migrant-workers took the form of a letter to the Government, raising awareness of the fact that Labour Hire companies hired illegal (non-regular) migrants without the rights to work. This letter, although anonymous, clearly displayed traces of Korean grammar and work order, and was directed at the competition company of Mercury.

Another form of resistance against the external structures of power is the operation of the labour hire companies in the shady area of the law.

“There a lot of illegal things happening at Mercury. If the Government finds out we will be in a lot of trouble. For example, as labour hire company, we are not allowed to nominate workers for sponsorship for 457 visa. Yet our migration lawyer made the case that Mercury is a company with its own grounds and welding workshop, and not a labour hire company. Because of this we had to hire a workshop. So if the Government is to check we can prove that we also have a welding workshop.” (Julia)

This workshop is planned to be used mainly as a training ground for other welders, rather as a primary workplace.

However, perhaps the strongest resistance to power was choosing not to accept “sponsorship” for the labour hire company. Despite the health problems, the stress and the uncertain future, it is a stand for independence for asserting one’s position.

Resilience

The resilience of the Korean migrants was the most remarkable aspects of the story of their lives. Simply asserting “*I really cannot wait to get away from him*” while accepting the reality was a valuable lesson to learn not only for the migrants themselves, for the researcher as well.

All of the Korean migrants who took part in the research do like Australia, despite all the difficulties. They *never* complain about the obstacles on their way. In Buddhism, (historically, the longest prevailing religion in Korea) difficulties are seen as a way to grow stronger.¹⁵ A famous saying in Buddhism is that one is not afraid of the difficulties, but only wishes to have the strengths to overcome them and carry on. They love Australian landscape, climate, lifestyle, and biodiversity. Every Sunday, JK would go for recreational fishing with just a single rod and cook lovely Korean dinner [Meotang Sudjebi] if he catches fish. Connecting with nature is the one way to make this new place his own, to build a sense of belonging and form his own territory within the Australian cultural and ethnic background and landscapes (Lozeva 2012). Fishing is his way of meditating and contemplating over his own life, time just for himself, and it is deeply meaningful time. I respect this.

JK' loyalty for the MDG Company was revealed again when he went to visit his workshop and to pay a visit to his supervisor just before going to the airport at about 8 p.m. His workshop was closely located to the airport and JK and myself went there bringing a couple of bottles of soju for Sean, his supervisor, who has never tried Korean alcohol before. It was a short but meaningful get-together. Steve joked and also said that he will be expecting him back in about 8 weeks' time after he pass the test, which time frame is apparently normal judging on other workers.

JK coped with the situation of being refused a visa with his usual dignity, bordering with nobility. He radiated self-possession, calmness and firmness. Seeing him, I believe that there is nothing that can break down his spirit and inner strength. In a way, he even indirectly was expressing that the visa situation was not his problem. It was the problem of the Australian Government, the company, and the English tutor. He showed such confidence and grace in every one of his word and action that every royalty could be envy of him. I should also remind the reader that his profession was welder.

If JK is successful in passing the test in Korea, and apply for employer-sponsorship visa directly with his workshop MDG, he would be the first and the only one of the Korean migrant-workers involved with Mercury to receive such a visa. It will mark the point, the threshold, which points to the ability of recent migrants to insist on other working rights and to be able to openly reject unfavourable conditions offered to them as by labour hire companies. Despite the difficulties – the stress, the nosebleed, the anxiety, uncertainty, and confrontation with the authoritative boss and the struggle with a foreign language – this example would show that pursuing fair working rights and the affirmation of the strong spirit, which sustain recent migrants. The strong spirit of the Korean people shines again: this time not in the post-war struggle for re-developing their nation and economy, but in completely different historical settings: the unfamiliar grounds of a distant of a distant continent and the multicultural city, Perth, WA. There is also another important finding that comes out of that research: that is the resilience of the Korean migrant community to sustain their own believes and identity despite making some compromises.

¹⁵I must note that the religious views of the Korean welders Christian. Given that Christianity was relatively recent introduction to the Korean society, compare to Buddhism, which was spread for centuries, here I make a broad historical link with the collective consciousness and national mindset.

Reconstruction: Braking traditional Asian values and norms

The traditional Asian values, if such thing exists beyond purely a conceptualisation, if anything already suggest a deep dichotomy with its obvious rival: the “Western” values. To accept such a proposition, on the first place is to accept that such thing as Western values exist and our task becomes easier in a way, since defining what “Non-Western values” are will surely answer the question of the essence of Asian values. Or is that so?

The traditional values, which I have witnessed during the last 12 months, have had both a positive as well a negative impact on the Korean migrant community in Western Australia. While respect to the elderly and obliging to the strict social hierarchy has produced some of the most remarkable examples of loyalty and co-operation, they have also eroded in a way the social structure of the community. This is a painful experience, which Julia expresses in a heartbreaking way:

“I have never had this kind of experience in Korea. I never had to hide my identification, or break the law or do anything illegal, but here I have to do this every day! Who would expect it!?”

The traditional way of comparing old and new in the Asian context has been to compare the Confucianism with the individualistic neo-liberal ideas of freedom. This approach, however, poses the danger of falling into the political sphere of arguments and shifts the focus of discussion (Sheridan 1999). It is easy to get distracted with what is happening on the surface by analysing the latest political development and not paying enough attention to the deeper under layers of Asian societies (now and the past). The unique political system in place in a lot of Asian countries is no doubt influenced by neo-liberal politics and ideas. Such examples are the dragons and tigers of Asia, some of the fastest growing economies on Earth and certainly South Korea has given an example of the quickest expansion of economy anywhere in the world (Weightman 2002). China, on the other hand, is a unique blend of nationalism and capitalism displaying not only modern neo-liberal values but also a strong emphasis on traditional Confucian values.

In order to escape from the political spheres, which I feel is necessary in order to construct a wider frame of understanding, here it is suggested that a radical new proposition is put forward: the idea that the point of reference is neither the West, not the politics of the West, but Asia itself. The Asian societies are in the tremendous path of re-developing themselves, on a faster scale than we, the Westerners can imagine. The Asian societies are strong enough to produce not only some of the most powerful political economies (Shim, Kim et al. 2008), but also highly influential cultural industries and therefore re-form their own identities. None of this would be possible without the values they hold: both modern and traditional and the mix in between the two. The author believes that it is the values in Asia that have sustained the cultural and economic rise of Asia as a whole. Therefore, these values are present in everyday life and they should appear evident in a deeper research in the area. It is my goal, here, to identify those values and to answer the question: What meanings do Asian values take in 21-st century?

Where to now? A Personal Perspective

On a personal level, the inability to obtain a visa because of the IELTS test resulted in a breakdown of our relationship. JK had to leave Western Australia to go to Korea where after a few weeks, he felt the pressure from family and friends to find a Korean girlfriend and generally to re-think his whole

life. This came as a big shock to me. Unwillingly, but firmly he made the decision to end our relationship in the light of uncertainty about the future, cultural differences and oceans of distance.

As a woman researcher I am overwhelmed with the feeling of compassion and gratitude to him and to the opportunity to get an insight into the experiences of Korean migrant workers. As a migrant, I understand the pressures imposed on our lives from living overseas and the demands placed on preserving and cultivating our own heritage and the feeling of alienation in unfamiliar cultural grounds. Keeping in one's ethnic group provides a sense of security and continuation which cannot be replaced with anything else.

Self-reflecting on what I have learnt so far, I realise that JK was more than a pillar of strength, he has shown me how to "live well", a phrase often used when saying farewell in Korean society. Even the way he broke up our relationship was graceful, dignifying and firm, a lesson for anyone who needs to end a relationship.

I cannot provide however a perspective from the Korean cultural point of view. I will leave to the next researcher to answer.

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