

Australian Perceptions of Korea:

Need for Korean Studies

O. Yul Kwon

Korea Foundation Chair in Korea Studies

Director, Australian Centre for Korean Studies

Griffith University, Brisbane, Queensland 4111, Australia

Gregory J. Trotman

School of International Business

University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia

Name of Presenter: **Professor O. Yul Kwon**

The Panel in which our paper be included: (6) Sociology/Anthropology

Fields of study of the authors: political economy, business and social culture.

1. Introduction

Why Korean studies? To this a typical answer would be to promote Korea. An ensuing question as to why Korea should then be promoted is not often pursued. Foreigners' perceptions of a country and its people are becoming increasingly important for the economic wellbeing of that country in this era of globalisation and rapid development of technology. As technology accelerates and generates new products rapidly in the international marketplace, consumers make their purchasing decisions based not on thorough analysis of the new products but on their perceptions of the producing countries. Because of different perceptions of Korea (Korea referring to South Korea hereafter unless otherwise noted) and Japan prevailing in western countries, Japanese products will fetch a higher value than Korean products of the same quality. The importance of perceptions or images of Korea has been recognised recently by the Korean government whereby it initiated a campaign to promote its national image (Korea Times, July 24, 2001).

It appears that the role of Korean studies in promoting Korea for the purpose of enhancing economic wellbeing has not been adequately recognized. There is a paucity of information or discussion in this respect. Fouser (2001) argues that Korean studies has made great progress over the last ten years because of two main sources: public support and market forces. It is understandable that public support from Korean government sources such as the Korea Foundation, Korea Research Foundation and the Academy of Korean Studies has contributed to the initiation of Korean studies in foreign countries. Fouser (2001) goes on to argue that to maintain and further develop Korean studies the demand for it has to exist. While Fouser (2001) alludes in his analysis that the demand for

Korea studies is given, this paper argues that the demand is not given; rather it is influenced by various variables including foreigners' perceptions of Korea which will in turn be affected by Korean studies. Anecdotal evidence is that the Seoul Olympic Games in 1988 and remarkable economic growth during the late 1980s, have obviously improved the image of Korea held by Australians. Korean studies has made the most impressive growth in Australia at the beginning of the 1990s. Then, all the publicity of the 1997 Korean financial crisis as well as Asian financial crisis has surely tarnished Australian perceptions of Korea, and the number of Australian students who took any subjects of Korean studies in 1998 plummeted to as much as half of the corresponding student number in 1997.

In order to promote Korean studies in a foreign country, a proper understanding of perceptions of Korea prevailing in that country is the first step to be taken. Then, the *modus operandi* of Korean studies should be developed with an eye on improving the image of Korea in the countries in question as well as the demand for Korean studies. In this context, a community survey of Australians was undertaken to determine the level of knowledge that Australians have of Korea, its people and its products, to assess the level of awareness of Korea among Australians, and to evaluate Australian attitudes to Korea and its people. From the understanding of Australian perceptions of Korea from the survey, the present study will draw some implications for Korean studies in Australia. Although the community survey was limited to the Australian public, the resulting gain in the knowledge and understanding that Australians have of Korea will be indicative of foreigners' perceptions of Korea and be helpful in promoting Korean studies in other western countries. Before doing this, recent Australia–Korea relations particularly in education will be examined as the background of the study.

2. Australia–Korea Relations in Education

Australia's relationship with Korea started with Australian missionary activities in Korea at the end of the 19th century. In the years that followed, Australian missionaries brought a small number of Koreans to Australia for vocational and religious training (Dupont, 1992: 1) up until the end of World War II. After World War II, Australia was a founding member of the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK) and its successor organisation, the United Nations Commission on Korea (UNCOK) established in 1948 (Trood and McNamara, 1996: 278 and Dupont, 1992: 1). Following the invasion of South Korea in 1950 by North Korea, Australia quickly dispatched 17,000 troops to support the United Nations' defence of South Korea. More than 300 Australians gave their lives in the conflict (Dupont, 1992: 1). Australia was also a prominent member of the United Nations Committee for Unification and Rehabilitation of Korea (UNCURK) from its establishment in 1953 to its dissolution in 1973. By opening its embassy in Seoul in 1962, Australia was one of the first countries to extend formal diplomatic support to the new Republic of Korea.

The bilateral relationship based predominantly on Australia's asymmetrical support for Korean security continued to the mid-1970s when both countries had come to recognise each other as an important economic partner, and the bilateral relationship had transformed towards a symmetry of interests between the two countries. Australia viewed Korea as an important export market for its minerals and agricultural products. Korea perceived Australia as a secure source of its essential mineral imports and a market for its manufactured consumer goods. As a result, the bilateral economic relationship has

expanded in leaps and bounds. Two-way trade amounted to A\$13.8 billion in 2000, compared to only \$176 million in 1975, recording a 19.1 per cent annual growth rate over the 25-year period. This compared with 10.7 per cent annual growth in Australia's world trade (ABS 2001). In 2000, Australia was Korea's eighth largest trading partner and Korea was Australia's fourth largest trading partner. In 1994, Korea became Australia's second largest export market. Although this ranking slipped during the economic crisis in 1998, Korea is still Australia's third largest export market after Japan and the United States.

Another area of rapid development in Australia-Korea relations is tourism. The relations have been again lopsided in favour of Australia. Korean tourists started to visit Australia from the late 1980s, and the number of Korean tourists to Australia rapidly increased from 14,100 in 1990 to 227,900 in 1996. After the financial crisis, the number plummeted to 66,600 in 1998, and started to recover gradually to be 180,600 in 2001 (DISR, 2002). However, the number of Australian tourists to Korea has been quite limited.

Parallel with recent developments in trade and tourism between Australia and Korea, education has become one of the most prominent areas of growth in the bilateral relationship since the mid-1980s. Australia quickly became the third major destination for Koreans studying abroad, trailing behind only the United States and Japan by the end of the 1980s. The number of Korean students in Australia increased from 573 in 1987 to 20,229 in 1996, a 50 per cent annual increase compared to the 19.5 per cent annual increase in Australia's foreign student population from the rest of the world (DEETYA, 1997). The Korean student population of 20,229 in 1996, which accounted for 14.2 per cent of all fee-paying overseas students in Australia, made Korea the largest source of overseas students, with the second highest figure of 16,654 from Indonesia (DEETYA, 1999). After the 1997 financial crisis, the number of Korean students decreased drastically for two consecutive years and started to recover from 1999 with 9,633 students in that year and increased to 11,485 in 2000 (DEETYA, 2002).

Education relations between Australia and Korea have been lopsided in favour of Australia. The number of Australian students in Korea with student visa has been quite limited. Korean studies at universities in Australia started at the beginning of the 1990s, and the number of Australian students who took Korean languages and other Korea-related courses increased quite rapidly until 1997. Since 1997, probably due to the negative publicity following the financial crisis of East Asia and of Korea, the number of Australian students who have been taking Korean studies courses has decreased remarkably. For instance, the numbers of students who took the Korean language for the first time and Korea business and economics courses at Griffith University in 1998 decreased more than 50 percent below the 1997 numbers.

In summary, economic relations including trade, tourism and education have expanded rapidly since the mid-1970s until the 1997 financial crisis. They all suffered a major setback following the crisis and are gradually recovering. Likewise, Korean studies in Australia that started in the early 1990s made impressive growth until 1997, but fell to be a victim of the crisis. The Korean economic setback after the crisis directly affected Korean imports from Australia, the numbers of its students in Australia and its tourists to Australia. However, the Australia economy did not suffer much from the Asian or Korean financial crisis and continued to grow throughout the Asian crisis period. Thus, the direct cause of the adverse impacts on Korean studies in Australia could be found not in the

economic area but in some other areas. It is premised that an important cause of the setback is related to Australian perceptions of Korea. In this respect, it is attempted in the following section to assess the knowledge and awareness that Australians have of Korea and its people.

3. A Nationwide Survey of the Australian Public

The survey was undertaken in late April 1997. The Telemarketing Division of the

Australian Kidney Foundation was used to collect data. These data are based on the results

of a telephone survey of residents in the six states and the Northern Territory of Australia. Overall, 800 people were contacted, with a total of 418 useable responses obtained. This represents a response rate of 52 per cent. Details of response rates by State are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 - Response Rate by State

	Number contacted	Useable responses	Response Rate
Victoria	146	70	48.0
New South Wales	153	73	47.7
Queensland	100	50	50.0
South Australia	99	48	48.5
Western Australia	103	67	65.0
Northern Territory	99	66	66.6
Tasmania	100	44	44.0
TOTAL	800	418	52.3

To reduce the potential for bias, the survey was conducted during a period in which Korea did not receive significant media coverage. A review of media sources over the week prior to the survey revealed that nothing significant (either positive or negative) concerning Korea had been reported in the newspapers or on television or radio. Thus, around the time of the survey there was nothing that would have distorted general public perceptions of Korea.

The questionnaires indicate that most of the people who did not wish to be interviewed knew very little about Korea. Therefore, one of the limitations of this research approach may be that the responses reflect an overestimation, as more knowledgeable Australians agreed to be interviewed. This is suggested by the fact that 51 per cent of the sample had tertiary-level education, a percentage significantly above the national average. However, this should not be seen as detrimental to the research as it provides a clearer picture of the perceptions of Korea held by Australians who have thought about or been consciously exposed to information and imagery about the country and its people.

The sample consisted of approximately equal numbers of males and females, 197 and 221 respectively, with ages ranging from 15 to over 55 years with the 25–55 age group accounting for 83 per cent. The majority of the sample were Australian-born (76 per cent) with 14 per cent born in Europe and 7 per cent born in Asia. However, almost 20 per cent of the sample spoke an Asian language, 71 per cent spoke a European language and 9 per cent spoke a language other than English as their first language.

Around half the sample was in full-time work, with 10 per cent in part-time work and 40 per cent not in employment outside the home. Occupational categories of the survey participants ranged from professional to student. Out of the six occupational categories: professional, technical, unemployed, student, retired and home duties, the first three took just over two-thirds.

3.1 Findings from the Survey

Significant differences were found between sub-groups in the sample. All differences were tested using the Chi-Squared test, with the level for a significant result of $p < .05$. Hence, in essence, the statistics and inferences are made with a 95 per cent level of confidence. Statistical findings outside this level are not discussed, as their validity may be questionable. To ascertain respondents' knowledge of Korea they were presented with a set of possibilities from which to choose.

Impressions of Korea

Respondents were asked for their impressions of Korea and Korean people. The results of these open-ended questions are shown in Tables 2 and 3. More than 25 per cent of the respondents had no particular impression of Korea and its people. A significant portion (12 per cent) of the respondents looked at Korea (South) as a country with problems with North Korea. It should be noted that 11 per cent of the respondents still maintained their image of Korea reflected in the TV drama series, *M*A*S*H*, which was based on the Korean War (Table 2). About 16 per cent of the respondents perceived Koreans like other Asian people, and a substantial portion of them had image of Koreans as friendly and hardworking people (Table 3).

Significant differences were apparent in the comments according to respondents' gender, age, education level, income level, and occupational status. It was found that females were significantly more likely to make comments relating to the hardships of the people and television images of the people. Less-educated respondents (those with primary or secondary education only) were significantly more likely to

have no comment to make, and less likely to perceive Korea as industrial and economically developed.

Comments	% respondents
Problems with North Korea	11.5
M*A*S*H, China Beach, War	11.0
Beautiful, Mountainous, Climate	10.0
Industry, Car Maker, Strong Economy	8.9
Hard life, Feel sorry for people	7.2
Comment	% respondents
A part of Asia	5.7
Like Asian people	15.8
Student riots	5.5
Friendly, gentle, polite people	9.3
Backward country but developing	5.0
Hard working, industrious	8.1
Overpopulated	4.1
Feel sorry for, poor	7.7
Olympics or Sport	1.0
Warring and social protesting people	7.4
No impression	25.1
Normal, nice, just like us	6.5
Other comments	5.0
Women in National dress, national dress	3.6
TOTAL	100.0
Traditional or village people	2.6
Clever people	2.4
No comments	31.8
Other comments	4.8
TOTAL	100.0

Male comments were significantly more along the lines of the people being hard working and clever. Respondents' ethnic backgrounds also influenced their responses; as people born overseas were less inclined to perceive Koreans as Asians, and more likely to comment on their hard working nature.

When asked to nominate the statement that best described Korea, the majority of respondents (77 percent) said that Korea was a developing or underdeveloped nation, and nine per cent answered that it was fully developed (Table 4). Fourteen per cent were unsure or did not know. Again, there were significant differences among respondents according to their gender, education level, occupational status and income level. Women were less likely to answer this question correctly and therefore less likely to believe that Korea was developed. Further, 20 per cent of those with only high school or primary school education were unsure or did not know, compared with only seven per cent of those with tertiary education. It was

found that the higher the income level, the more knowledgeable the respondent. These differences are also reflected in the occupational data; unemployed, retired and those

who engaged in home duties were predominately those who were unsure or did not know about Korea's development stage (Table 4).

Knowledge of the Australia–Korea Trade Relationship

The main aspect of the relationship between Australia and Korea that was commonly recognised by respondents was the trade relationship (46 per cent), followed by the importance of Korean imports to Australia (20 per cent). The main differences between groups again depended on gender and educational level, with females and less-educated respondents stating that they did not know or were unsure of the relationship. In addition, respondents who were in retirement mentioned more frequently than other respondents that Australia assisted Korea in the Korean War.

Statement	Profess- ional	Technical	Un-employed	Student	Retired	Home duties	TOTAL
Fully Developed	13.7	9.5	4.8	11.1	3.0	0.0	9.0
Developing Country	51.0	55.8	57.1	44.4	46.2	52.0	51.1
Undeveloped - developed	28.1	25.0	14.3	27.8	26.9	24.0	25.6
Unsure or don't know	7.2	10.7	23.8	16.7	23.9	24.0	14.3
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

When asked where Korea ranked as a trading partner with Australia, 14 per cent of respondents ranked Korea as between 1 and 3, with 59 per cent of respondents ranking it as in the top 10. Around 30 per cent of females and those respondents without tertiary qualifications were unsure or did not know, compared with about 20 per cent of other respondents. Those who were better educated, male and those in full-time employment had greater knowledge, with 18 per cent or so answering that Korea ranked between 1 and 3, as compared with about 11 per cent of others. Nine per cent of people correctly identified the ranking as third.

Contrary to Korea's chronic trade deficit with Australia, the majority of respondents stated that it is Australia that had a trade deficit in the bilateral trade, although 20 per cent believed that Australia had a surplus. Approximately 30 per cent of those not in full-time work, female or educated to primary- or high-school level did not know or were unsure, compared to about 20 per cent of the other respondents.

Knowledge and Purchase of Korean Products

The sample varied in their knowledge of Korean products imported. Nine per cent of the sample did not answer the question. The rest of the sample believed that Australia imported cars, clothing and home entertainment products in that order. Less than half of the sample (44 per cent) had seen advertisements about Korean products, and the vast majority of these were television advertisements. Newspapers were the only other source of any note.

The types of products purchased are shown in Table 5. Clothing was the most commonly purchased item, followed by home entertainment products and footwear. Even though the majority of the respondents knew that Korean cars were imported, only six per cent purchase Korean cars.

As shown in Table 6, the main reason for buying Korean products was given as ‘exactly what I wanted’, accounting for 42 per cent. Thirty-eight per cent claimed that lower price was their reason. Only six per cent purchased Korean products because of better quality. Significant differences in male and female responses were found, as shown in Table 6. Female respondents estimated quality of Korean products significantly lower than male respondents did.

Cultural and General Knowledge of Korea

General knowledge of Korea was limited. When asked to gauge their knowledge of Korea on a scale from ‘nothing’ to ‘a lot’, the majority (57 per cent) of respondents claimed they knew nothing.

Differences were found between subgroups of the sample that were also found in other sections of this report. Females believed they knew significantly less about Korea than males. Data relating to

Type of product	% responses			
Reason	Male	Female	TOTAL	
Cars		5.9		
Home Entertainment	33.0	15.8	41.2	37.6
Lower price		4.5		
Computers				
Better Quality	8.3		3.3	5.5
Clothing		33.4		
Price and Quality	20.7	14.8	11.1	15.3
Footwear				
Whitegoods		7.1	44.4	41.6
Exactly What I Wanted	38.0			
Processed Food		3.5		
TOTAL	100.0		100.0	100.0
Electrical Goods		1.6		
Toys, “Nik Naks”, China, Glass etc.		13.4		

respondents’ age presented interesting contrasts, with those aged 40–54 years the most knowledgeable group as Table 7 details. When asked if they had ever watched Korean arts, cultural or sporting events, 40 per cent of the sample answered in the affirmative. The majority were males in full-time employment. Possibly the reason for the male dominance in this area is that most had watched a sporting

event.

Summary of findings from the Survey

Analysis of the responses to the survey led to a number of conclusions. These conclusions can be considered in terms of knowledge, awareness and attitudes. General knowledge that the respondents held of Korea was limited and their impressions of the country and its people were to some degree incorrect and outdated. The majority of the respondents had perceptions that Korea was still a developing or underdeveloped country. What was known about the country and its people seemed to be derived from a superficial understanding of historical events and media coverage. There were significant differences in the level of knowledge of Korea according to respondents' gender, age, education level, occupational status. Females believed they knew significantly less about Korea than males. The higher the income and education levels, the more knowledgeable the respondents were about Korea. Unemployed, retired and female respondents were more likely to have inadequate knowledge of Korea.

It seems that Australians generally have a low awareness of Korea as a nation. Although Australians have perceptions that Korea offers good opportunities for mutual benefits from trade, many of the respondents seemed to be unaware of Korea's relationship with Australia in terms of trade and its importance as one of Australia's major trading partners. Many Australians seemed ignorant of the fact that Australia has a persistent trade surplus with Korea and the significance of this fact for their economy.

Attitudes towards Koreans were difficult to determine, given that many people had limited knowledge. Australians seemed ambivalent towards Koreans, believing that Koreans were similar to their Asian neighbours. However, nurturing the trade relationship between the two countries was perceived as important, particularly by the better educated and those in full-time employment. Many are willing to learn more about Korea and suggested ways of promoting Korea such as sporting events, cultural performances and advertising Korean products.

The purchasing behaviour of Australians in relation to Korean products seems to be consistent with their perceptions. Price and suitability appear to be the main determinants for the purchase of Korean products, while quality of Korea products is not regarded highly; little has been purchased because of high quality. Although many respondents had purchased something made in Korea, it was difficult for them to articulate their brand names, indicating that the brand image of Korean-made products is low in Australia. This may be attributable to the lack of promotion of Korean products. Less than half of the respondents had seen advertisements about Korean products through media sources.

4. Conclusions

It was found from this sample survey that Australian perceptions of Korea and its people are to some degree incorrect and outdated. It was also evidenced following the 1997 Korean financial crisis that Korean studies could not make progress due to the poor perceptions of Korea held by Australians or foreigners. Poor perceptions of Korea will also hurt its economy, as reflected in Australians' purchasing behaviour of Korean products which was identified in the survey. Concerted efforts are therefore required to improve foreigners' perceptions of Korea not only by Korean studies programs but also the

government, business people and the general public in Korea. Improved perceptions of Korea will improve not only Korea studies but also economic wellbeing by attaching higher values on Korean products.

Once one accepts that the demand for Korean studies is not given but affected by

the perceptions of Korea prevailing in foreign countries, the Korean studies programs should be set up accordingly. It appears that Korean studies programs and supports by Korean organisations have focused mainly on the Korean language and history. However, in order to promote Korea and make it appeal to the broad community of a foreign country, other subjects such as business and economics should also be emphasised. At the same time, conferences related to Korean studies that could attract media attention should be promoted in foreign countries.

References

- ABS (Australia Bureau of Statistics) (2001), *International Merchandise Trade*, August 18.
- DEETYA (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs) 1997. *Overseas Student Statistics*, 1996. Canberra: DEETYA.
- DISR(Department of Industry, Science and Resources) (2002), *Impact*, February 2002, Canberra, Department of Industry, Science and Resources.
- Dupont, A. 1992. *Australia's Relations with the Republic of Korea: An Emerging Partnership*. Brisbane: Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations, Griffith University.
- Fouser, Robert J. (2001), 'Korea Booms and Korean Studies' , The Korea Herald, December 19, 2001.
- Korea Times (2001). 'Plan Mapped out to Promote National Image' , *the Korea Times*, July 24, 2001.
- Kwon, O. Y. 1997. 'Australia-Korea Relations: Issues and Prospects' , *Korea Observer* 28: 527-559.
- Kwon, O.Y. and G.J. Trotman (1999), *Australian Perceptions of Korea*, Brisbane: Australian Centre for Korean Studies, Griffith University.
- Kwon, O. Y. and S. G. Park (2000), *Australia-Korea Relations in Education: Issues and Prospects*, Brisbane, Australian Centre for Korean Studies, Griffith University.
- Trood, R. and McNamara, D. 1996. *The Australia-Asia Survey, 1996-97*. Brisbane: Centre for Australia-Asia Relations, Griffith University