

THE SYDNEY KOREAN COMMUNITY AND 'THE IMF DRIFTING PEOPLE'

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Most Korean immigrants in Australia live in Sydney. Many run small businesses and a large proportion depend on tourism from Korea or on providing services to international students from Korea. The Korean economic crisis has therefore had a serious effect on the viability of many businesses within Sydney's Korean-Australian community. These economic difficulties have been compounded by job competition from Korean nationals who have come to Australia on temporary visas since the crisis and who look for work within the Korean community in Sydney and on Australian farms. (Many of these temporary immigrants appear to be working illegally.) The locals call them 'the IMF drifting people'; their working and living conditions are grim and their presence appears to be causing tensions within the established Korean community.

THE KOREAN ECONOMIC CRISIS AND SYDNEY'S KOREAN COMMUNITY

Recently, the Korean economy has experienced a serious economic crisis. This began with a collapse in the rate of exchange for the currency (the won) and led to intervention from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on 23 November 1997. Korea's economy, after being about one year on the brink of financial insolvency, is on its way toward recovery.¹ Nonetheless, it is still too early to pop open the champagne when we consider the reality that nearly two million Koreans are still unemployed as of May 1999.

The economic crisis in Korea is relevant to Korean immigrant societies overseas because of their emotional, social and economic relationships with their mother country. Most Korean-Australians live in Sydney. Hence, it is not difficult to imagine that the Korean ethnic community in Sydney has also suffered from the social and economic pain being experienced in Korea. On the one hand, many Korean small businesses in Sydney are dependent on tourists and overseas students from the homeland and thus have confronted depressed conditions since the

breakdown. On the other hand, many Koreans have come to Australia on working holiday visas or on temporary visitors' visas since the economic crisis. Once here, they tend to look for work in the same labour markets as Korean-Australians and this job competition adds to the difficulties of the local community.

Almost all the temporary migrants are men. Younger Koreans have entered on working holiday visas,² while older men (who may have left wives and children behind) tend to arrive on visitors' visas. The Sydney Korean community terms these new arrivals 'the IMF drifting people'. They have come here because of job loss or bankruptcy resulting from the economic crisis in Korea. Almost all are doing construction (or cleaning) work where Korean sub-contractors are involved or are engaged in service-related economic activities in the local community. A few are working at Australian-owned farms.

There are around 2,000 'drifting people' in Sydney, out of an overall Korean community of up to 35,000. Information from two Working Holiday Associations in the local community, indicates that, as of June 1999, 600-700 Korean working holiday makers are

employed in Sydney. Though the numbers of working holiday makers from Korea have dropped since the 1997 IMF crisis, the characteristics of those taking up these visas have changed. Before the crisis most of the working holiday makers were university students. More recently, many have come from the ranks of younger workers displaced by the economic crisis. Another major source of 'drifting people' is those on visitors visas. According to knowledgeable sources in the ethnic community, by June 1999 more than 500 Koreans on visitors visas are involved in economic activities. Most are working illegally. In addition, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) overstay statistics as of April 1999 show that there are some 2,000 Koreans in Australia who have overstayed their visas, including 507 who arrived in 1997-98 and 567 who arrived between July and December of 1998. Most of these people would be located in Sydney. Around one-third of these 'drifting' people are living in Campsie, which is part of the municipality of Canterbury which contains the largest Korean community in Sydney.³

Not surprisingly, since the emergence of these new arrivals, new social and economic problems have developed within Sydney's Korean community. This study explores the social and economic situation of the local community since the economic crisis in Korea and considers some of the community's prospects for the future.

METHODOLOGY

The data used for this article are based on three different stages of research which I carried out in Sydney between 1996 and 1999: (1) early to mid-December in 1996; (2) early November to early December in 1997; and (3) mid-February to mid-April

in 1999. The last stage was particularly very useful for understanding the local community under the influence of the economic crisis in Korea. 'Snowball sampling' was used to select key-informants and respondents. Relevant ethnic newspapers and magazines were also gathered for this study.

SHORT HISTORY OF THE SYDNEY KOREAN COMMUNITY

Australian-Protestant missionaries have worked in Korea since 1885. This resulted in the entrance of a small number of Koreans to Australia up to the 1950s. After the Korean War, some Koreans (mainly females) entered Australia as war brides or as orphans adopted by Australian families.⁴

After the relaxation of the White Australian policy in 1966, the first 37 Korean immigrants arrived in Sydney under the provision of the skilled migration program in 1969.⁵ Prior to 1970, around 100 Koreans lived in Sydney. Their ranks included university academics, geologists, helicopter pilots, *Tae-kwondo* masters, students on scholarships provided by the Australian government and employees of Sydney branches of Korean companies. At the 1971 Census there were 468 Korea-born persons in Australia.⁶

During the 1970s a high proportion of ethnic Koreans arrived as visitors from Vietnam, the Middle East, and Latin America. They subsequently changed their status to permanent residence via successive amnesties available in 1976 and 1980.⁷ These earlier arrivals then sponsored their families from Korea (or other countries) through the family-reunion program. In the 1980s an increasing proportion of Korean settlers entered Australia under the skilled component of the immigration program

(including the business migration program).⁸

At the time of the 1991 Census, 15,109 Korea-born people were dwelling in Sydney.⁹ In 1996, there were 30,129 Korea-born people in Australia, and 20,734 of these were living in Sydney.¹⁰ By April of 1999, the Korean Society of Sydney and the Korean Consulate General estimated that about 35,000 Koreans were living in Sydney.

THE ECONOMIC CRISIS IN KOREA AND ITS EFFECTS ON KOREAN SMALL BUSINESSES IN SYDNEY

Between November 1997 and April 1999, the total number of Korean small businesses in Sydney increased slightly, growing from 1,626 to 1,736.¹¹ But, the sector dependent on tourism and businesses related to overseas students decreased sharply from 546 firms to 480. Many Koreans, including Mr. Choi, a travel agent, maintain that approximately half of the total Korean-Australian population in Sydney worked in this sector if other related economic activities, such as providing guardianship services for Korean overseas students or home-stays or work as informal tour guides or gift manufacturers, are included.

As shown in Table 1, there was a noticeable increase in the number of Korean temporary residents between 1995-96 and 1996-97. However, the number of temporary entrants fell by nearly half in 1997-98. There has been a

further decline during 1998-99 in both visitor and student arrivals. This has critically affected ethnic business activity in Sydney.

The economic crisis in Korea and businesses dependent on tourism or overseas students

Travel agencies and tour guides

The Korean travel agency industry operates in an atmosphere of cut-throat competition among co-ethnic businessmen. Mr. Park, a travel agent, says, 'The basic problems of our business stem from the imbalance between demand and supply which is connected to bloody competition and dumping. ...[A]nother problem of this industry results from the fact that the vast majority of these businesses are small in terms of capital and workers. This means that they can easily be bankrupted when they are faced with financial difficulties'.

This sector has also had to struggle with out-bound travel agencies in Korea. Mr. Chang, a travel agent, says, 'Out-bound travel agencies in Korea are not our friends but our enemies. They have made worse our business activities through practices such as dumping and delayed payment'. This sector is the most badly affected victim of the economic crisis in Korea and almost half of the local travel agencies and tour guide businesses here have closed down.

Some of those affected, such as Mr. Kim, an ex-tour guide, have already found

Table 1. Temporary entrants from Korea

	Visitor	Student	Temporary resident	Transit	Others	Unknown	Total
1995-96	188,340	13,152	2,038	158	120	54	203,862
1996-97	239,802	16,888	3,291	187	176	26	260,370
1997-98	119,450	12,701	3,068	117	110	12	135,458

Source: DIMA, unpublished data

new jobs. Mr. Kim says, 'I acted as a tour guide for several years. At that time, my income was very good. I earned a considerable amount of money from Korean golf-tour clients. I was able to make a whole year's income with the income from only two months work. But, after the economic crisis my business suddenly collapsed. I couldn't run it any longer. In the end, I gave it up and became a tiler'.

On the other hand, another half of the travel agents and tour guides kept their businesses going. Many of them are, however, suffering from serious recession. Another tour guide interviewed stated that, 'After the economic crisis my business has shrunken more and more as time passes. In fact, now I am in semi-unemployment. I am not sure of the recovery of the Korean economy. So I may have to dispose of my business before long'.

Restaurants

Like other travel-related business people, restaurant owners also mentioned their hard situation. The situation of Korean restaurants in Kings Cross, which have been most heavily dependent on Korean tourists, is serious. Mrs. Choi, a restaurant owner in King Cross, says, 'In a word, the condition of my restaurant is desperate after the economic crisis. ...[R]ecently, the vast majority of Korean restaurants have changed their working hours. What I am saying is...that before the economic crisis many of them were open from early morning because Korean tourists started various tours after breakfast. Some used to be opened 24 hours per day. However, since the crisis my restaurant is the only one in this area which is opened from early morning. Many other Korean restaurants are opened at 10-11 am and closed at 1-2 am'.

A similar phenomenon is also found in the Korean restaurants located in

Campsie. Mr. Kang, in Campsie, says, 'My restaurant was very busy dealing with Korean tourists from the homeland before the economic collapse. But, lately my business is in serious depression resulting from the economic crisis'.

Gift-related businesses

Gift shops in Kings Cross and other areas have been badly affected. Mrs. Yoon, a duty-free shop owner in Kings Cross, says, 'Gift-related shops have been the most serious victims since the economic crisis. We have had to reduce the number of workers in order to save labor costs. In the case of my shop, the number of customers decreased by 30 per cent, compared to before the crisis. This phenomenon has occurred in other shops of the same kind'.

Not only has the number of Korean tourists declined, the purchasing power of those still making the trip has also dropped. Miss. Jang, who works in a health food shop in Campsie, says, 'Compared to those Korean tourists who came to Sydney before the economic crisis, present Korean tourists tend to save as much money in purchasing gift-related goods as they can. Sales in my shop have dropped by around 20 per cent compared with before the crisis'.

Statements of this kind were confirmed by my observations in Korean stores over several days. I found few Korean tourists in Kings Cross and other main Korean business districts, unlike before the economic crisis. Most gift shops did not have a single Korean tourist for several hours at a stretch.

Overseas education agencies

The Korean ethnic community witnessed a dramatic increase in agencies and businesses providing services to overseas students during and after the early 1990s.

Many are now struggling.

Some 30 per cent of these agencies have closed since the economic crisis. One overseas education agent told me that 'The vast majority of the agencies are under the influence of the economic breakdown. ...[F]rankly speaking, problems of this business basically lie in the oversupply of agencies and the small scale of both work-force and capital. After the crisis, a lot of agencies closed down or were faced with intense management difficulties. ...[T]he future of our business is very dark. Nobody can claim that our business will improve'.

Accommodation-related businesses and guardian services

Accommodation services in the form of 'home-stay' and 'guardian' arrangements are provided to many Korean visitors, particularly students. These activities, too, have been hard hit by the fall in Korean arrivals since the crisis.

To summarise, since the economic crisis, Korean-Australian businesses in Sydney catering to Korean tourists and overseas students have been seriously affected. Evidence for this can be found in the absolute decreases in their numbers and in the difficulties experienced by those which are still trading. Nearly half of the Korean-Australian population in Sydney used to depend on these businesses, including restaurants, overseas education agencies and other businesses. Their present hardship is intensified by harsh competition among co-ethnic businessmen.

Collective efforts for problem-solution and their limitations

On 9 September 1997 the Korean Education Agents Association in Australia was established in Sydney. The association aimed to foster co-operation among

Korean-Australian agencies catering for overseas students in Sydney and to make a contribution to the economy of the ethnic community. Since its foundation, however, the organisation has done little. The different economic interests of its members have made co-operation difficult. Recently, more serious instances of illegal and improper business activities by the agencies have come to light and the association was re-organised on 26 February 1999. The intention is that it should be a self-regulating organisation designed to establish and maintain a sound and specialised business environment.¹² The organisation has 32 agencies as members. It has decided to deprive a member agency of its membership and to make the fact public to schools and media outlets when a member agency breaks one of its rules.¹³

The Tourism Industry Organisation of Australia association was also established in 1997 to restore tourism industry through fair and reasonable cost competition among travel agencies. The organisation included representatives of restaurants, travel agencies and duty-free shops. On 19 September 1997 members proclaimed their solidarity and announced an all-out war against out-bound travel agencies in Korea.¹⁴ The Free Travel Agency in Korea, however, sold cheaper travel packages. Besides, some member agencies withdrew from the association. Lately, the association has come to a deadlock because of the absolute decrease of Korean tourists.

In brief, though these two business sectors have made an effort to solve some of their problems through organised self-help and to provide higher quality of services to their clients, their endeavours seem not to have been effective because of conflicting economic interests.

THE ECONOMIC CRISIS AND ITS EFFECTS ON OTHER ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

As stated, many of the new Koreans who arrived in Australia after the economic crisis are working in construction or cleaning where Korean sub-contractors are involved or in service-related economic activities in the local community. In January 1999 a Korean magazine reported that more than half of the handy-men on construction sites in Sydney where Koreans are involved arrived since the economic collapse.¹⁵ In the following section I will examine problems which are occurring at these workplaces.

Conflicts between old and new labourers

Conflicts between Korean-Australian labourers in Sydney and new labourers from the home country are more noticeable at workplaces after the economic crisis. So is a fall in wages. In interviews with me several labourers pointed to the drop in wages which has resulted from the oversupply of labourers. Mr. Park (aged 40), a tiler, says, 'A lot of Koreans came to Sydney to earn money after the economic crisis. But they know very little English and thus flock to manual work. The oversupply of labour brings down wages. Lately, my wage fell from ten dollars per hour to eight dollars per hour'.

Similarly, Mr. Yoon (aged 38), a cleaner, says, 'Many Koreans have arrived in Sydney since the economic crisis. However, they are faced with many problems in getting jobs because of insufficient or false information acquired in Korea or their poor command of English. As a result, almost all of these people can only get manual work, such as cleaning. Lately, there has been a wage decrease of two to three dollars per hour in this job'.

Others described the conflict between old and new labourers at workplaces in more concrete terms. Mr. Kang (aged 39), a tiler, says, 'One of the most serious problems at my workplace comes from different work styles between established and new labourers. As you know, a disposition to finish a given task as soon as possible is one of the Korean working styles. Hence, these new workers tend to finish their tasks hastily. Yet, with the Australian working style, tasks seem to be dealt with slowly and meticulously. Under this situation, there is always friction between the old and new workers'.

Mr. Jeong (aged 33), a tiler, also mentions the conflict with a new foreman and other labourers from Korea. 'After working with several new labourers who came here last year, I have confronted new problems at work. The foreman is a friend of my boss. He was a president of a small corporation in Korea, but went bankrupt because of the economic crisis. He's working as a foreman here owing to his friend, but in fact he's not used to manual work. Other new labourers also have feelings of obstinacy and pride because of their working career in Korea and because their previous work experience usually has nothing to do with the present job. This means that there are too many bosses on the shop-floor!'

The new labourers also have complaints about the locals. Newcomers resent the lack of sympathy shown to them by the established residents. Mr. Jang, an ex-white collar worker, in his mid-thirties, says, 'I had to come here because my company was bankrupt last year. Since I came to Sydney I've had several jobs, including cleaning and tiling. But I've felt I wasn't welcomed by my old compatriots when I was at work. They are not really interested in sharing

the emotional pain of the IMF drifting people like me. I have found few compatriots who will take care of me on the shop-floor. Rather, the majority of them tend to ignore new comers and lord it over them’.

Mr. Pak, in his mid forties, says, ‘I arrived in Sydney last year when my small business in Seoul was bankrupt. Since then I’ve had a couple of jobs. The present construction work is my third job here. It was very hard for me to gain any co-operation from the established Koreans at the places where I’ve worked. In my view, they tend to think that the newcomers are their enemies’.

Conflicts between the new labourer and the employer

Conflicts between employers and the new employees is also widespread. The new workers tend to think that they are exploited by Korean business owners through low wages and delays in payment. Mr. Shim, a tiler, in his mid-forties, says, ‘I came here in November of 1998 because I was driven out of my company. ...[S]ince then I’ve worked at a construction site as a handyman. In my opinion, I’ve been exploited by the Korean owner. I mean...the normal wage for this job is ten dollars per hour, but I’ve received just eight dollars per hour. My employer said to me that “you only get eight dollars per hour because you haven’t got a tax file number and your English is poor”. But his explanation is only a pretext for paying a low wage. Actually, my job does not need a good command of English. He will get some advantages by hiring labourers who have no tax file number’.

Delay in payments is one of the most shameful and serious occurrences in the ethnic economy, especially for the ‘drifting’ people who have left families

behind. First, many families in the homeland can scarcely manage to support themselves and depend on remittances from husbands and fathers abroad. Furthermore, unlike regular Korean immigrants, they are temporary visitors, the majority of them on short-term (three month visitors) visas. Joon-Shik Shin, the manager of the Industrial Relations Information Centre in Canterbury, Sydney, says, ‘In effect, some Korean business owners have abused the legal status of temporary visitors. They have taken some advantages from temporary labourers through delays in payment. I mean...some visitors had to go back to Korea without receipt of their wages because of their visas’ expiration’.

The following case also shows how Korean-Australian employers have exploited the legal status of temporary visitors. Mr. Park, in his mid-twenties, tells his own story. ‘I came to Australia on a working holiday visa. I worked at a Korean-run cleaning job. My boss said to me that “if you receive wages each week, then you won’t save any money. So I’ll give you your total wage in a lump sum later”. I believed him. ...[S]ince then, three months passed and the total wages owing to me reached around \$5,000. I asked him to pay but he refused. I began to worry because my visa’s expiration date was approaching. At last, I had to go to the cleaning union and the problem was solved with the union’s help. In my view, the owner would have had two motives in postponing the payment: my return to Korea without receipt of the wage and gaining bank interest on the money’.

On the other hand, Korean employers see the situation differently. Mr. Peter Jeong, a construction-related sub-contractor, says, ‘The working hours on our construction site are 7 am to 5 pm. I pay workers 50 dollars per day after

deducting their tax. Because they have no tax file number, I have to pay a lot of tax. Besides, many handymen have communication problems. So I have to follow them all the time at the workplace. The builder cannot tell them what to do. I have to interpret all the directions of the builder for them. ...[T]hey may think that their wages are low and that they are exploited, but the employer thinks the opposite'.¹⁶

Other employers maintain that they cannot trust labourers from Korea. Mr. Jung-Young Ko, a tiling sub-contractor, says, 'I have worked in the tiling business for eight years. I have committed blunders many times because I trusted labourers from Korea with tiling jobs without checking their skills. [These new labourers in general tend not to state their working abilities honestly — author's comment.] ...[B]esides, they swiftly move on to new jobs where higher wages are provided. Such cases have been frequent, and thus I have a lot of trouble in recruiting labourers who will observe work schedules strictly'.¹⁷

There are acute conflicts between the new labourers and their employers stemming from their different economic interests and these conflicts militate against good interpersonal relationships.

MISERABLE SITUATION OF THE IMF DRIFTING PEOPLE

Tragic stories of the Korean IMF drifting people reach beyond their places of work. Their wretched circumstances are found in other aspects of their lives within the local ethnic community. In the Campsie business district I observed the following scene in early 1999. One afternoon during my research I came across a Korean labourer who seemed to be an IMF 'refugee'. There were traces of cement on his face, hair, shoes and

clothes. He had already drunk too much. I watched him carefully. Several minutes later he began to vomit into the drain-outlet of a road. Then he turned his face upward to the sky, muttering in Korean. After, he moved towards the Campsie station with tears in his eyes. During this performance several bystanders looked on coldly or with derisive smiles though others threw him a sympathetic glance.

The following scene comes from my field notes made in a Korean restaurant in Campsie. Three Korean temporary immigrants were drinking together.

Mr. Lee: I am sick of life. I don't know where my life is going.

Mr. Park: What's wrong with you?

Mr. Lee: It's six months since I arrived in Sydney but I still haven't been able to send any money to my family in Korea.

Mr. Choi: I haven't sent anything back for the last four months either. My wife and children are living on money borrowed from brothers. I know I can't expect them to keep on doing this for ever.

Mr. Lee: I rang up my wife yesterday. She said, 'Don't come back unless you've managed to earn some money'. I'm such a failure as a breadwinner, I expect I'll never be able to be with my family again.

Mr. Park: My wife and three children back home are also waiting for me to send them something. My children have not been able to take part in any extracurricular activity for several months now.

Mr. Lee: How can we make enough money to support our families? The cost of living is expensive, job opportunities are few, and often employers delay paying us. It's impossible to save money. We work very hard just keeping ourselves alive. It was a mistake to come here without understanding the situation fully. But at that time it seemed to be the best thing to do.

Mr. Kim: The Korean economy seems to be

picking up a bit but it doesn't seem as if the living standards of ordinary Koreans have improved. We need more time and effort for the economy to really get back on its feet.

Mr. Choi: I wonder when we'll be able to go back?

Everybody: (Silence)

The men in the Campsie restaurant were preoccupied with worries about their families. The theme of family breakdown runs through another case reported in *The Weekly Korean Live Review*.

Mr. Kim was a tiler in Korea. He came to Sydney with some borrowed money in December of 1997 when he could not endure the economic hardship after the crisis. He left a wife and two sons in Korea. He is working at a construction site. He is living with seven Koreans who are in similar situations with him. All groceries and kitchen utensils have their respective owners. Each man has his meals separately. To share something at this house cannot be expected because of their poverty. Mr. Kim's meals are very simple—just rice, boiled soup and *Kimchi*. At the rented-house he reads and re-reads letters from his sons in Korea. Their letters help him forget his daily fatigue. When he left for Sydney he promised his second son to send a game machine. But so far Mr. Kim has not kept his promise. His family in Korea can barely survive on around 200,000 won [about A\$ 250] a month from his wife's income. He goes to a telephone booth in order to make an international call. His wife is sobbing. She says, 'It's so hard for us to keep going here. Don't ring us. Don't try to see us either'. He cannot sleep. He feels guilty because he still hasn't been able to send any money home. Because of this he cannot go back.¹⁸

Different responses in the local community to the IMF drifting people

Though there are many different or ambivalent responses to the IMF drifting people in the ethnic community, they can largely be grouped into two categories—sympathy and blame. Mr. Jeong speaks for many of the Korean-Australians whom I interviewed when he says, 'So far many Koreans have come here to make their livelihood since the economic crisis. Many of them have left families behind. Despite the fact they are experiencing painful family lives, their suffering doesn't seem likely to be over very soon. I feel very sad about their lives because they are my compatriots'.

Some established immigrants have endeavoured to help the IMF drifting people in more practical ways. For example, one established immigrant heard of a bankrupted businessman's family who had come to Sydney after the economic breakdown and were living at a rented-flat. He is trying to help this family by finding them a cheaper place to live.¹⁹

On the other hand, there are also many Korean immigrants who reveal a negative attitude to the IMF drifting people. One businessman told me that, 'As with many other Korean immigrants, I have worried about the new distrust in the ethnic community derived from Koreans arriving here after the economic breakdown. In addition to problems at workplaces, other social problems are also being noticed in the community. Some of the newcomers have absconded after swindling money out of local Korean residents. Others have gone to Korea without paying their rent or lodging charges. In a word, the IMF drifting people have made the ethnic community more disturbed and desolate'.

Other people, such as Mrs. Ha, a grocery runner, assert that the new

labourers have had a bad effect on the reputation of the ethnic community in Australian society. She speaks for many when she says, 'Since the appearance of these new arrivals, the reputation and prestige of the Korean community have been degraded. This is because they do not understand at all how to conduct their lives according to Australian ways'.

CONCLUSION

By May 1999, Korea's economy was improving somewhat.²⁰ But more jobless people still seem to be being produced and GNP is still low compared to what it was before the crisis.

The situation in Korea is still affecting Sydney's Korean community significantly — economically, socially and psychologically. Many ethnic businesses related to Korean tourists and students have already gone bankrupt or are experiencing serious difficulty. Proprietors worry about when the Korean economy and their businesses will change for better, but they are also making a collective effort to improve the business environment. However, such endeavours have had limited success due to conflicting economic interests.

With the appearance of the IMF drift-ing people new conflicts and problems have been produced in other economic sectors—especially, construction and cleaning. It goes without saying that economic interests between old and new workers have had an adverse effect on social and emotional solidarity in Sydney's Korean community. Furthermore, the social mood of the community has become more dreary and pessimistic since the appearance of these newcomers.

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THE END

Following article begins here in print journal.