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Australian Visibility In The Korean Media

Following is a summary comment from an ongoing qualitative study of the changing visibility of Australia in the Korean media since the economic crisis in 1997-98. The comments are extracted from a longer paper presented at the international education conference on "The Manipulated Message: Australia and Asia Before and After the Crisis" held at the Australia National University, Canberra, September 29, 1998.

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From the Korean perspective, there has been no significant issue, apart from the Korean War, that has fostered friendly ties between Korea and Australia. Nor has there been any media-related disputes between the two countries such as had occurred between Australia and Indonesia/Malaysia. Given that Australia's two international media organisations - Australian Television (International) and Radio Australia, do not broadcast in Korea, the local media have been the major information source about Australia for the general Korean public.

The relative insignificance of Australia to Korean media is reflected in the fact that no Korean television/radio broadcasters or newspapers and magazines have a permanent correspondent in Australia. Thus, when the Korean media needs information for their programs or articles, they would either dispatch their staff to Australia for a short period of time, or rely on local Koreans living in Australia, as well as foreign media, to provide the information. While successive Korean Governments since the 1960s until the early 1990s have exerted rigid control over international news content, and imposed strict censorship on the stories which, from the Korean Government's perspective, have sensitive/conflicting interests, Australia has never been seen as a significant source of international news.

The public perception of Australia in Korea can be addressed at two levels; unofficial (the perceptions of Koreans in general) and official (the Korean Government's perception). Koreans' positive perceptions of Australia have mainly been

associated with Australia's physical and environmental features (Frank Small & Associates, 1993), while the negative image has been defined by Australia's past White immigration policy (Kwak, 1998). The Korean Government's perception of Australia, however, has been more positive judging from past statements acknowledging Australia's involvement in the Korean war and contribution to IMF's bailout of Korea during the recent economic crisis in Asia.

From the 1960s, when bilateral diplomatic relations were established between the two countries, to the mid-1980s, the overall image of Australia in Korea was that of 'a continent country composed of White Europeans, and a major provider of wool and raw commodities' (Lee et. al., 1985; Kukminsugwan, 1973). This perception persists until today. The bulk of coverage of Australia tend to highlight the differences between the countries' size and environment ('a big country full of mystery'), in society ('a society where still racism exists and where anything unthinkable in Korean way can happen'), and to a lesser extent in culture ('European culture with short history').

One of the most reported topic about Australia in 1997 and 1998 was racism, discrimination, and Aboriginal issues vis-a-vis Pauline Hanson. The major Australian federal election issues in October 1998 and pledges made by both the ruling Coalition Party and other opposition parties were regarded as less important than the emergence of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party. Even after the election, a local Korean newspaper devoted stories to Pauline Hanson even though she failed to retain her seat, in its 'news-focus' section, which introduces the news-making persons of the week (ChoongAng Daily, 7/10/1998).

Indeed, there is little indepth representation of Australia as a society, culture and people. Few stories which address the reality of Australian society, such as crime and drug problems, or which provide an in-depth explanation of Australians' value system and lifestyle.

It is worth noting that Australia has always been judged according to Korean cultural values (Confucian vs Western), Korean history, past and present contacts between the two countries (as a popular tourist and education destination), and future aspirations (as a future trade and security partner). In this respect, the representation of Australia has been at most, superficial, and is primarily confined to exceptional and curious 'marginalia' - something which Koreans would find extraordinary if the situation were reversed (Kwak, 1998).

Despite the media stereotypes, Australia is gradually being re-defined by the Korean media as a country that understands the current economic situation in Korea. Australia's flexible and

understanding approach to the crisis has often been contrasted with the strong and harsh measures adopted by the US. This positive perception emerged when the Australian Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer promised Australia's financial contribution to IMF bailout funds for Korea (Chosun Ilbo, 17/ March/1998). When the Deputy Prime Minister, Tim Fisher, expressed his view on the economic crisis in Korea during his visit to Korea in mid-1998, the Korean media interpreted his positive comments as endorsing Korea's capability in overcoming the crisis.

Australia's financial contribution to the IMF bailout for Korea has had positive ramifications on the overall coverage of Australia in the Korean media. Australia is seen as a country that promotes world peace through measures, such as environment, disarmament and arms control, nuclear non-proliferation, and human rights. Also, Australia is seen as a favourable destination for Korean migrants, especially for those who lost their jobs in the economic crisis.

Since the crisis, there has been prominent coverage of Australian culture (performing and visual arts) and popular music (Natalie Imbruglia), literature (Andrew Mateus), opera music (ensemble 'Potpourri'), film and dance, thus redefining Australia as a nation. While this has been largely attributed to Australia's contribution to the IMF bailout for Korea, another possible reason for this perceptual shift can be understood in terms of Korean cultural predilection to maintaining harmonious relationships with other cultures. ■

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