

"THE BUNYIP AND THE DRAGON" - THE PSYCHODYNAMICS OF  
AUSTRALIAN AND SOUTH KOREAN BUSINESS ENCOUNTERS

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“The Bunyip and the Dragon” -  
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South Korean Business Encounters

The dreams of nations, as of individuals, are important,  
because they not only reflect, as in a distorting mirror,  
the real world, but may sometimes react upon and influence it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Russel Ward (1958) p211

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This thesis is original work and has not previously been submitted for a degree or similar award at another institution.

## ABSTRACT

This study attempts to identify and explore the psychodynamics of Australian and Korean business encounters in Seoul, Republic of Korea, by describing and discussing "Australian-ness" and "Korean-ness" as representations of what I will call "National character in-the-mind". A guiding hypothesis is that in highly charged emotional settings, like those associated with foreign business encounters, National character in-the-mind acts as a psychological and emotional container, and a protective screen to hide more intricate institutional anxieties and defences. The data supporting the study is drawn from my interviews with 12 Australian and 6 Korean business people conducted between 3 and 14 June 1996 in Seoul, Republic of Korea. The study also reflects my experience and role as *researcher in the research* as a source, creator and interpreter of data through the exploration of my own introspection. The findings demonstrate how Australian-ness and Korean-ness appear to represent projections of the human imagination, willed within the bounds of individual experience and perception. A model for evaluating *Cultural Misunderstanding and Defensive/Adaptive Behaviour* is proposed with the aim of seeking improved understanding of the Australian and Korean National character. The model applies learning from the research experience which emphasises the need for Australian and Korean business people to take a more adaptive approach to the contrary behaviours they encounter. The model also acknowledges the value of investing time to establish and maintain cross-cultural business relationships based on access, whereby Australian and Korean business people see themselves as resources of mutual gain, reducing the potential for misunderstanding, fear and mistrust and the subsequent invocation of defensive responses.

## **“The Bunyip and the Dragon” - The Psychodynamics of Australian and South Korean Business Encounters**

### ***Preface***

A 5.30am walk in the brisk Autumn air through the alleys and lanes behind the YMCA in Seoul, South Korea, reveals a different world to the hustle and bustle of the 7.30am peak. The sights and sounds of this part of the awakening capital reflect those of a different era. The delivery of bottled gas, kerosene and dusty black cylinders of coal to light stoves and warm households; of eggs in trays, two dozen deep, strapped to the pinion racks of motorcycles. The crying of an infant bound in blankets on mother’s back while she hastily sweeps the alley pavement with her lime green plastic broom; the clearing of congested throats; the washing of assorted leafy vegetables in large red tubs under the communal tap and the gurgling of wastes into communal drains; cooking smells wafting from spaces between rusty corrugated steel rooves and quickly erected shingle walls; these are the scenes of a regular day.

Business too begins early. The folding of beds on floors in small stores where in a moment’s time customers will queue for a breakfast snack; the collection of empty cardboard cartons and newsprint by old women pulling carts; the cutting of keys on a bench made from a block of wood with its vice - three strategically bent nails; the opening of a cabinet maker’s workshop, store, home 3 metres by 2 where the artisan’s well trained, gnarled, arthritic hands craft works of art from a stand of raw timber, still with its bark, guarding the narrow doorway. In the centre of his world stands a partly finished precision built cabinet: testament to the artisan’s dexterity.

As I wander I find myself reflecting on childhood experiences. The mid fifties in suburban Melbourne, Australia. The early morning, home delivery of ice, bread and milk by horse drawn carts along unmade roads; the expansive views across rural land from Box Hill to the Dandenong Ranges; the smell of Sunday lunchtime roasts; happy rows of carrots, beans and peas in the vegetable garden; my father fashioning a curtain rod from a scrap of wood using half a hacksaw blade and a piece of glass. He couldn’t

afford tools. I see the Korean artisan in his workshop, the key cutter in his, and Dad sitting on the kitchen floor, in his.

And here I am, a generation on, in Seoul. As I meander past the antique stores of Insa-dong toward Pagoda Park where, the previous night, fortune tellers told wondrous tales of future joy and sorrow, I catch myself, a voyeur on my past, absorbed in the present and musing wistfully of the future.

Why do I feel strangely comfortable here? Surely it is not the roar of diesel buses belching their stifling pollutants into the morning chill, nor taxis weaving defiantly in and out of lanes heading precariously, inevitably, toward the first morning traffic jam. Is it the exotic, the old world charm, the inexplicable, the arousal of memory; or the challenge of the emerging, developing nation; grasping for a world identity, at images of currency, modernity, McDonalds for breakfast, Chicago Pizza for lunch and prepared to pay a premium for the privilege.

I recall the old woman washing green vegetables and a dutiful child sitting next to her on an oft repaired bamboo stool, peeling onions over a chipped, blue enamel basin. A metaphor for understanding culture! The old guiding the young on how we do things here. The multi-layered onion, representing culture. As the layers are revealed we appreciate the core and receive true insight into people's reality. How desperately I wish to peel this onion. I see the outer layers all around me. The language, the food, the economic growth; slum reclamation, the high rise buildings, the Korean built cars, the contrasts - the historical, the traditional, the new, and attempts to meld them. Yet the vapours from within the unknown keep me distant.

I cross the threshold of a small book store, am offered tea by the proprietor and fumble my words for directions to the English language section. Enjoying the warm refreshment, I find a volume of Maxims and Proverbs of Old Korea and begin flicking the pages. A folk saying catches my eye... 'A loach (minnow) has become a dragon'. I ponder the explanation of it's significance -

“According to legend, the dragon, like the phoenix, is an emblem of nobility and power...Superstition has it that a giant golden carp from the deep ocean became metamorphosed into a yellow dragon...and rose into the sky on his chariot of clouds behind a veil of thick fog...and gave rain to the earth. Now a loach, a small ugly member of the carp family, can only become a dragon by a miracle. So this is said of an upstart, who suddenly rises to wealth and power.”<sup>2</sup>

My mind seizes the comparison of the Korean dragon with the Australian Rainbow Serpent (also known as the Bunyip) an integral part of the spirit life of the Aboriginal Dreamtime. A mythical monster inhabiting the rushy swamps and billabongs of the Australian interior; the spirit of water, rain and flood. In different Aboriginal legends the Rainbow Serpent plays the role of protector of land, life and sacred lore.<sup>3</sup> To the white Australian invaders the Bunyip represents a manifestation of our primordial imagination and fear associated with the ghostly, the macabre and the misfortune of being lost (or dying) in an unforgiving land.

These two myths reflect a common link in Australian and Korean folklore. Both mythic characters give life through water, yet are shrouded in mystery. As metaphors, they can be interpreted as contrasting the recent history of Australia and Korea's status in the global economic community - a ghostly story and the metamorphosis of a loach.

Like an awakening dragon, Korea has enjoyed a rapid rise in the global economy. It has averaged 8.2% real GDP growth per annum since 1961. The per capita income has grown from a mere US\$79 in 1960 to over US\$10,076 in 1995 and is forecast to rise to US\$19,000 by the year 2000. Indeed, between 1960 and 1995, Korea's per capita GDP rose a staggering 13,000%. South Korea is ranked as the world's 12th largest economy and is expected to be the seventh largest by 2020.<sup>4</sup>

So, the loach has become a dragon. Miraculous? Perhaps. Clearly, such rapid growth did not happen by accident. Indeed, the growth is characterised by a wilful

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<sup>2</sup> Tae Hung Ha (1970) pp.49-50

<sup>3</sup> Reed (1982) pp.79-81

<sup>4</sup> ASIALINE, July 1996, p1

Government's economic and development agenda coupled with a finely tuned implementation strategy. Paring this strategy to a daily business level, to the people who ply the trade and negotiate the deals, how do Koreans manage their business system and what can Australian managers learn from their Korean counterparts?

My reading and discussions with Korean academics in Australia and Australian and Korean businessmen in Seoul suggest Koreans are very cautious in their dealings with foreigners, arguably a legacy of their history of invasion. I find them outwardly generous and helpful.

Australians too are reticent in their willingness to recognise the value of a Korean business relationship. Only 5% of Australian business people surveyed at the National Trade and Investment Outlook Conference in 1995 considered Korea a major market for potential exports and only 7% saw it as a major market for investment. In view of the GDP figures already cited this conclusion is astounding. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade described this and other survey findings as "...a far cry from Korea's real economic importance and potential to Australia...While knowledge and interest in Korea is growing, the business community still has some way to go."<sup>5</sup>

This reticence to participate in matters associated with Korea is reflected still further in the blanket rejection of my endeavours to arrange interviews with Australian business people in Australia at Federal and State Government agency and private enterprise levels. The primary explanation was the potential for the inadvertent release (misuse) of material perceived as commercial-in-confidence.

It would be fair to say Australian and Korean business people have different images in-the-mind<sup>6</sup> of what Australia and Korea represent in commerce and industry. These institutional images may not be shared within the respective countries nor between the business people. But these images form the basis for the business people's

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<sup>5</sup> ASIALINE, July 1996, p3

<sup>6</sup> Turquet (1960), Armstrong (1991), Shapiro & Carr (1991) and Stokes (1993) [refer Jon Stokes, "Institutional chaos and personal stress" in Obholzer & Roberts, (1994) pp.121-128] have discussed how people carry idealised mental models or images of an organisation or institution in-the-mind, together with an associated emotional response. Refer Chapter 1, Section 1.3ff for its application in this thesis.

perceptions, and influence their behaviour. As a collective, these images provide a simultaneous concrete and fluid representation of a culture, values and people which influences the outcomes of their mutual interaction.

I contend in my thesis that the inherent confusion surrounding these images for all parties represents an amalgam of confusion about self identity; anxiety about the unknown; uncertainty about one's place in institutions or organisations; about how to communicate with foreigners and understand and make sense of their portrayed images of *National character in-the-mind*.

My main interest is in trying to interpret how Australian and Korean business people recognise, acknowledge and explain the differences in their images of *National character in-the-mind*. I suggest they have little understanding of the *what* and *why* behind their conceptual framework, nor their behaviour and emotions in response to it. I am convinced that only by exploring the territory (business encounters) where these images meet in some detail, processing the potential psychodynamics within these interpretations, can one begin to understand the communion within Australian and Korean business encounters. This study will contribute an interpretation of the *what* behind respective group behaviours and hypothesise *why*. It will contribute insights not formerly available.

By describing and discussing "Australian-ness" and "Korean-ness" as a means of exploring the psychodynamics of Australian and Korean business encounters in Seoul, Republic of Korea, I hope this thesis will contribute to how nationals of both countries might better perceive and make sense of each other in business, and provide insight which may foster and enhance future business encounters.

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