

Cultural adaptation of Koreans in Australia: overseas research at The University of Western Australia

LOVELY Esther

My doctoral research was an investigation into the communication and cultural adaptation experiences of young Korean migrants living in Australia. During the project, and after its completion, I hoped that one day I would be able to reconnect with my participants and discover where their adaptation journeys had taken them. After moving to Japan, I shifted my focus to exploring the experiences of Japanese people who had lived overseas, including returnees and international students. However, when I was given the opportunity to apply for Kanagawa University's overseas research program, I saw it as the perfect opportunity to fulfil my earlier goal. In the search for a host institution for the year, I reached out to an acquaintance, Dr. Laura Dales, who is a Senior Lecturer of Japanese in the School of Social Sciences at The University of Western Australia, Perth.

The university, established in 1911, is the 6th-oldest university in Australia, and the oldest university in the state, which qualifies it as a so-



Above: Perth's iconic "Blue Boat House", a popular tourist landmark on the Swan River. Built in the 1930s, it has been featured in Singapore Airlines advertising materials. (photo credit: Esther Lovely)

called "sandstone university." The beautiful main campus, located just 5kms from the city centre, overlooks the Swan River and boasts several heritage-listed landmarks. Its centrepiece is Winthrop Hall, a cathedral-like auditorium built in 1932.

Dr. Dales, who researches gender, feminism, and family structures in contemporary Japan, kindly agreed to sponsor me, and she, along with her colleagues in the School of Social Sciences were



Above: Winthrop Hall (photo credit: Esther Lovely)

friendly and welcoming. I was able to attend research seminars by faculty members and post-graduate students in the School, which were very interesting and inspiring. I also had the pleasure of sharing my current investigation of Japanese returnees with Dr. Dales' 3rd year Asian Studies students. Added to Perth itself, with its fine weather, pristine beaches, and relaxed but lively atmosphere, it was the perfect environment to collect my thoughts and re-familiarise myself with Australia's multicultural landscape and the Korean community within it.

I discovered that the decade during which my research participants arrived in Australia (2000-2010) saw the highest numbers thus far of Korean immigration into the country. This was likely due to the strength of the Korean currency at the time, which helped make Australia an affordable and attractive destination for "study families". These "study families", consisting of various configurations (children accompanied by mother,

children staying with relatives, both parents accompanying children), came to Australia ostensibly in pursuit of English language proficiency via immersion. Similar to Japanese returnee families, sometimes the whole family would return to their home country after two or three years in the Australian school system. In other cases, what might have been intended to be a temporary move turned into a pathway to permanent residency and a long-term future in Australia.

Along the way, the children of these families experienced journeys of cultural adaptation that bear similarities to the reported experiences of international students and Japanese returnees, such as language barriers causing difficulty with schoolwork and forming friendships with local people. I was keen to discover how my participants' lives had changed, what kinds of personal connections they had made, and how



Above: View of Perth city from King's Park and Botanic Garden (photo credit: Esther Lovely)

these had influenced their values and attitudes. It had been several years since I last contacted some of them, but I was fortunate enough to get in touch with a few who were happy to speak with me and update me on their adaptation journeys during the intervening years. It was invaluable to be able to meet with participants in-person at familiar local cafes and public spaces, sharing small talk about the weather (warm and sunny) and traffic (getting worse) – helping to re-establish the rapport I built with them years ago in our original interviews.

Fascinating stories emerged during the process. There was the participant with whom I had last spoken when she was a university student on the cusp of completing her education degree. At the time she had felt discouraged by negative feedback from a senior teacher, and had even considered returning to South Korea to look for work. Years later, she is a qualified high school teacher of Japanese language in Australia, and works hard to encourage new teachers in their careers. One young man had been studying a Master's degree in fine arts, but was struggling with direction in his life. Now a married father of two young children, he teaches music at a local high school. Despite living in Australia with his family since an early age, his main social connections are within the local ethnic Korean church, and he plans to do all he can to ensure his children maintain a connection to their Korean identity. These stories and others show the varied



Above: Asian cuisine is popular in Australia. This delicious Japanese curry chain restaurant opened in Perth in 2023. (photo credit: Esther Lovely)

paths that these young immigrants' lives have taken, and the different ways of belonging they carve out for themselves in Australia.

In the past several years, the Korean immigrant community in Australia has begun to draw more attention from researchers, and I hope that my study will add depth and detailed insight to the perspectives being formed about this group.