

OTHERNESS THROUGH TIME IN KOREA: CASE STUDY OF ZAINICHI KOREAN RETURNEES¹

Nataša Visočnik Gerželj, Dr.

Department of Asian Studies, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Abstract

This study examines the evolution of the concept of the “Other” in Korean society and its reshaping of the experiences of Zainichi Korean returnees from Japan. The study aims to trace the historical and cultural construction of otherness, analyse how temporal frameworks mediate identity negotiations and ground these dynamics in a case study of Seoul in 2019. Drawing on literature analysis, policy review, and ethnographic data from interviews and participant observation, the research reveals that returnees navigate hybrid identities within intersecting temporal grammars – ritual, linear, networked, and existential. These frameworks influence institutional perceptions and self-fashioning, producing moments of dialogue and tension between tradition and modernity. The findings show that Korean society’s encounter with global interconnectedness fosters both the convergence and divergence of temporalities, reframing the “Other” as a dynamic relationship rather than a fixed category. This highlights how identities can change over time and how societal acceptance can evolve across generations.

Keywords: *Otherness in Korea, temporal frameworks, diaspora, Zainichi Koreans.*

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Introduction

This article examines how the concept of the “Other” (*taja*, 타자) evolves in Korean society through the lived experiences of Zainichi Korean returnees from Japan. Their identities – Korean, Japanese, or hybrid – are negotiated amid shifting historical, cultural, and temporal frames. These negotiations are situated and are part of a long-term pattern defined by three things: Confucian hierarchy, the break with colonial times and the rise of ethnic nationalism (*minjok*, 민족) in the aftermath of liberation. These three elements have shaped the boundaries of what it means to be the same or different from the Joseon dynasty to the present day [Em 1999: 298–301; Seth 2020: 45–49]. In parallel, recent scholarship on diasporic return and border politics in South Korea demonstrates how Zainichi mobility since the 1990s intersects with citizenship regimes and co-ethnic hierarchies in the “homeland”, thereby complicating essentialist notions of national belonging [Tsuda and Song 2019: 99–117].

The article has three goals. Firstly, it integrates historical, philosophical and cultural perspectives on alterity, from Confucian social ordering to colonial and postcolonial identity politics, to understand how the “Other” is produced and reproduced in Korea [Capener 2021: 130–33]. Secondly, it shows how temporal frameworks mediate these processes by shaping institutional perceptions and self-reform among returnees. Thirdly, it situates these discussions within the context of a 2019 Seoul case study of Zainichi returnees, emphasising how various “grammars of time” (recurring/ritual, linear/goal-oriented, emergent/networked, and existential/situational) influence everyday practices and communication as well as governance [Kim Wachutka 2023: 372–376].

Research on diasporic return emphasises the diversity of co-ethnics and the stratifications that returnees encounter within South Korea’s legal and social systems. It also documents the development of transnational and hybrid identities that challenge the concept of a singular “Korean” subjectivity [Tsuda and Song 2019: 101–105; González Lario 2017: 56–59]. Concurrently, the state’s discourse of multiculturalism (*tamunhwa*, 다문화), which is often centred on “multicultural families”, has been criticised for categorising difference in a narrow and uneven manner, thereby leaving certain migrants and returnees outside of its protective umbrella [Webster 2024: 14–16; Choi 2019: 850–852]. These contemporary debates are inseparable from the colonial legacy, including dual social structures and a difficult heritage, that continues to shape national narratives and institutional practice [Park 2010: 72–75; Lee 2019: 33–36].

Methodologically, the study combines a literature analysis on Zainichi return, *minjok* nationalism, Confucian sociality, and *tamunhwa* policy, with a threemonth

field study (June–August 2019)² in Seoul, employing twenty semistructured interviews³ with adult Zainichi returnees (ages 20s–50s) and participant observation in community settings, as well as a discursive analysis of policy and media framing. Sampling was purposive, diversifying factors such as age, gender, education, and citizenship histories (e.g. *chosen seki*⁴ and KR nationality), with snowball referrals.

Combining a temporal analysis with ethnographic evidence, the article demonstrates that multiple, coexisting temporalities – ritual, linear, networked, existential – converge and diverge across the life course, at times fostering intercultural dialogue and at others sharpening tensions between tradition and modernity. In doing so, it reframes the “Other” not as an external category but as a dynamic relation constantly (re)made at the intersection of history, policy, and lived time.

1. Temporal frameworks: towards polychronous lives

Using a temporal lens, the concept of othering and (re)belonging was reinterpreted, proposing that Zainichi returnees inhabit polychronous lives – coexisting and overlapping temporalities that shape identity.

- Recurrence/ritual time. Aligned with Confucian self-cultivation, ancestral continuity and seasonal practices (e.g. memorial rites), recurrence provides a cyclical moral framework against which returnees can narrate “coming home” as the recommencement of obligations and kinship roles [Chung 2015: 88–91; Seth 2020: 46–48].
- Linear/goal-oriented time. Reflecting modern developmentalism and externally regulated institutions (such as schools, the military and labour markets), linear time becomes the metric for “catching up” in terms of language proficiency, credentials or corporate seniority [Em 1999: 300–301; Tsuda and Song 2019: 104–105].
- Emergent/networked time: Technologically mediated rhythms (e.g. messaging platforms, flexible project cycles and transborder gigs) enable synchronous ties with Japan and Korea. This produces polychronicity in everyday life that defies a single national clock [Hall 1959: 90; Candidatu and Ponzanesi 2022: 263–65].

² The research was funded by Korean Foundation in 2019.

³ Participants were interviewed in Japanese, recorded with permission and anonymized through use of pseudonyms. Transcripts were thematically coded based on open coding (with an iterative approach informed by narrative and temporal analysis). We complied with the standard ethical guidelines (voluntary participation, right to withdraw, secure storing of data).

⁴ *Chosen-seki* 朝鮮籍 is a legal status assigned by the Japanese government to ethnic Koreans in Japan who neither have Japanese nor Korean nationality [see more in Visočnik 2019].

- Existential/situational time: Experiential, contingent horizons – moments of dissonance or recognition – allow returnees to replot life stories outside state calendars, sometimes embracing hybrid or post-national identities [Chapman 2004: 38–40; Kim Wachutka 2023: 380–83].

In his seminal work, *The Silent Language* (1959), Edward T. Hall introduced the distinction between monochronic and polychronic time orientations as cultural frameworks that shape behaviour and identity. Monochronic time is linear, segmented and scarce, prioritising schedules, punctuality and sequential task completion. In contrast, polychronic time is relational and fluid, with multiple activities occurring simultaneously and interpersonal relationships often taking precedence over rigid timetables [Hall 1959: 178].

Hall argued that these orientations are not merely practical, but are also deeply embedded in cultural values. Polychronicity emphasises contextual flexibility, where time is experienced as socially constructed rather than an abstract commodity. This insight has profound implications for migration and diaspora studies. Rather than inhabiting a single temporal regime, migrants and returnees navigate polychronous lives, synchronising institutional calendars, ancestral cycles, and digital networks.

For Zainichi Korean returnees in Seoul, for example, this means juggling national/institutional time (school schedules and bureaucratic deadlines), ancestral/ritual time (Confucian memorial rites) and networked time (real-time digital communication with Japan). These overlapping temporalities create hybrid identities that resist assimilation into a single national narrative. Rather than aligning with one “clock”, returnees exercise temporal agency by selectively prioritising different rhythms in order to maintain ties and negotiate belonging.

Hall’s framework thus illuminates why diaspora identities are inherently multi-temporal; they are shaped by simultaneity and relationality rather than linear progression. In a globalised, digitally mediated world, polychronicity becomes a structural condition of transnational life, producing flexible, layered and context-dependent identities [Candidatu and Ponzanesi 2022: 263–65].

2. Historical analysis of “Other”

The concept of the “Other” in Korean society – the individuals or groups deemed different from prevailing norms – has emerged and persisted across political eras, moral orders and temporal regimes. From the formation of the early state and the adoption of Confucianism to the era of colonial modernity, the rise of ethnic nationalism (*minjok*) and the recent discourse on multiculturalism (*tamunhwa*), Koreans have negotiated their identity within the hierarchies of the peninsula and in opposition to external powers. Two historical structuring grammars stand out: (1) Confucian relational ethics, which ranked persons and roles according to

the five relationships and three bonds; and (2) *Sadae* diplomacy, which inscribed Korea's subordination within a Sinocentric order while differentiating between non-Confucian "others". These grammars have persisted in modern institutions and etiquette, shaping the categories by which difference is recognised or stigmatised [Chung 2015: 284–296; Seth 2020: 27–52].

Below, we trace how alterity has been articulated over time, from ancient polities to the present day. We also provide a detailed explanation of *Sadae* ideology, including its moral logic, practices and legacies.

Origins of the concept (before 10th c.)

From the Three Kingdoms era (57 BCE–668 CE), Korean elites engaged with Chinese civilization as a prestigious model while asserting political distinctiveness. As Seth notes, "Korea's early states were deeply influenced by Chinese civilization, which they regarded as superior, even as they asserted their own distinctiveness" [Seth 2020: 33]. Early Confucian texts and academies [e.g., Goguryeo Taehak⁵, ca. 372] were primarily elite and administrative; they did not immediately supplant indigenous beliefs or social practices [Chung 2015: 284–287; Deuchler 2021: 28–29]. This dual optic, admiration and differentiation, created an enduring pattern of locating Korea between Sinitic "civilization" and local autonomy [Seth 2020: 33–35; Cartwright 2016].

At this stage, otherness was inter-polity: distinction from China and Japan, and boundary-making against steppe polities. These terms were political and ritual, not yet articulated as philosophical *taja*. The modern philosophical vocabulary of alterity arrived later via translation, as Lee Haeng Hoon's conceptual history of "philosophy" shows: pre-modern terms such as *gyeokchi*⁶, *gungni*⁷, and *seongn*⁸ were gradually refracted into modern academic categories in the early twentieth century [Lee 2011: 6–12].

Confucianism and the construction of "Other" in Goryeo and Early Joseon: Institutional Confucianisation (10th–15th c.)

Confucianism was introduced to Korea during the Three Kingdoms period and was institutionalised as the state ideology during the Joseon dynasty (1392–1897). It profoundly shaped Korean perceptions of identity and difference. At its core, Confucian thought emphasises hierarchical relationships (*oryun*, 오륜) – ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elder-younger, and friend-friend – which structured

⁵ National Confucian Academy.

⁶ "the investigation of things and the extension of knowledge".

⁷ "the exhaustive search for the principle".

⁸ "human nature and natural law".

Korean society into rigid social strata. This hierarchical worldview created internal forms of otherness, where individuals outside the yangban elite were considered socially inferior. Women, for instance, were confined to domestic roles, thereby reinforcing gendered otherness within the family system [Deuchler 2021: 7].

During Goryeo, Confucianism gained a foothold in state administration, including civil examinations and ritual reforms. However, it did not fully displace Buddhist and customary orders [Chung 2015: 287–289]. Following the establishment of the Joseon dynasty, Neo-Confucianism became the ideological basis for legislation, rites, family life, inheritance and gender roles. Deuchler’s seminal analysis shows how the “Confucian transformation” reorganised society into agnatic lineages centred on ancestor worship and mourning rites, thereby establishing patriliney and codifying gendered subordination in law and ritual [Deuchler 2021: 89–128, 129–202, 203–230, 231–281].

The Confucian transformation of Korea restructured society into rigid hierarchies, embedding status distinctions into law, ritual, and everyday life.

[Deuchler 2021: 7; cf. 231–281]

To disseminate relational ethics, the Joseon dynasty produced didactic compilations such as *Oryun haengsilto*⁹ (1797), which are illustrated tales of the five moral relationships (parent-child, husband-wife, elder-younger, ruler-subject, and friend-friend). These tales were used to provide common instruction [Hoh 2018]. By the 18th century, Korea had largely become a “Confucian normative society”, in which hierarchy and ritual propriety permeated daily life [Chung 2015: 291–295; Cawley 2021].

Internally, Confucian relational ethics in Joseon Korea mapped rank onto domestic and social spaces. This restricted women’s roles, replacing the matrilineal marriage norms of the Goryeo period with patrilineal ones, and codifying separate spheres for elite women. The concept of gendered otherness deepened within the lineage society through practices such as widow chastity, inheritance exclusions and ritual obligations, creating a moral-ritual stratification – an internal “other” within households and status groups [Deuchler 2021: 231–281; Koh 2003: 60–73]. Externally, Joseon diplomacy adopted the *sadae*¹⁰ ideology, positioning Korea as

⁹ 五倫行實圖 (*Illustrated Guide to the Five Relationships*). This Confucian text reflects the profound influence of Confucian ethics on Korean society, especially during the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), and across East Asian cultures shaped by Confucius’s teachings [Hoh 2018].

¹⁰ *Sadae* (사대), meaning “serving the great” was the foreign policy of the Joseon dynasty towards China. It was based on a moral-ritual hierarchy rooted in Confucian cosmology. According to this hierarchy, the Son of Heaven governed an ordered realm, while peripheral

a loyal vassal state of China and viewing nomadic tribes and Japan as culturally “barbaric”. This civilised (Confucian) versus uncivilised (non-Confucian) binary framed outsiders as moral and cultural “others”, thereby legitimising deference to the Chinese imperial order and distinguishing themselves from neighbouring peoples [Seth 2020: 33–35; Koh 2003: 60–65]. Pettid notes that the elites “saw themselves as guardians of Confucian civilisation”, contrasting ritual purity with the perceived disorder of their neighbours [Pettid 2023: 288].

These norms persisted into modernity, influencing collectivist attitudes and resistance to diversity.

Colonial rule and the transformation of Korean identity

The Japanese colonial period (1910–1945) was a significant turning point in the formation of Korea’s identity and its concept of otherness. During this period, Koreans were marginalised within their own land and subjected to assimilation policies (*hwang-gugsinminhwa*, 황국신화 or “becoming loyal subjects of the empire”) aimed at erasing their language, culture, and traditions. These strategies included the imposition of Japanese names, the suppression of Korean education and the enforcement of Shinto practices, all with the aim of transforming Koreans into loyal imperial subjects [Seth 2020: 211]. Colonial governance produced a “dual society”, with Koreans and Japanese being stratified across residence, health, education and law. This embedded racialised hierarchies into urban space and administration [Park 2010: 72–85; Lee 2019: 1–3].

In response, Korean intellectuals mobilised the concept of *minjok* (ethnic nation) as a counter-discourse. Em [1999: 336] argues that *minjok* was not an ancient essence, but rather a modern construct that was appropriated from Japanese and European thought and then used to rewrite history as the story of a single ethnic nation – a democratic imaginary that resisted colonial domination. This narrative unified Koreans under the umbrella of blood and culture, de-othering internal status groups while simultaneously hardening external boundaries and framing Japan and outsiders as threats to “Koreanness” [Em 1999: 353].

Minjok discourse served three functions: (1) unifying the colonised by asserting a shared ethnic identity; (2) opposing the coloniser by presenting Koreanness as morally superior to Japanese domination; and (3) ethnicising the belonging by

states displayed virtue through tribute, investiture requests, calendar adoption and literary norms. For Joseon elites, *sadae* affirmed Korea’s identity as a civilised Confucian polity, while defining non-Confucian peoples as “barbaric” [Seth 2020: 33–35; Koh 2003: 60–65]. Its grammar of *li* and ritual order legitimised vertical relations and civilised status. Although *sadae* collapsed in the 19th century, it left behind enduring hierarchies and honorific practices that continue to shape nationalist discourse to this day [Chung 2015: 292–296].

linking nationhood to bloodline and culture [Em 1999: 345]. The experience of enforced otherness fostered ethnic nationalism (*dan-il minjok juui*, 단일민족주의) as a form of resistance. Figures such as Yi Gwangsu emphasised cultural purity and unity, while the March First Movement (1919) catalysed nationalist discourse and reinforced the binary of “us” versus “them” [Shin 2018: 56].

Colonial modernity also introduced Western philosophical ideas, including existentialism and alterity, into Korean intellectual circles. These ideas influenced literature and philosophy, explicitly addressing the concept of “the Other” [Yi 2019: 4]. Ironically, however, modernisation under Japanese rule created a paradox: Korea adopted modern infrastructure and education, yet these were entwined with imperial domination, producing a hybrid identity; modern, yet colonised. After liberation, this legacy persisted as cultural trauma and an enduring emphasis on ethnic homogeneity, shaping Korea’s ambivalent stance towards globalisation and multiculturalism in the late 20th century [Park 2010: 72].

Post1945 nationhood: Homogeneity and multicultural turns

Following its liberation in 1945, South Korea adopted a monoethnic national identity as a foundation for state-building and modernisation. This emphasis on blood-based belonging was reinforced by nationality law (*jus sanguinis*) and popular narratives of the “single-blood nation” (*tan’il minjok*, 단일민족), becoming deeply embedded in education, the media and everyday discourse [Seth 2020: 45–49; Em 1999: 347]. During the period of rapid economic growth from the 1960s to the 1980s, developmental nationalism further reinforced the notion that cultural and ethnic homogeneity were vital for achieving economic success and social cohesion [Park 2010: 72–75].

From the early 2000s onwards, however, state discourse shifted towards multiculturalism (*tamunhwa*), in response to rising immigration and international norms. However, policy frameworks largely targeted “multicultural families” – typically Korean men married to foreign women and their children – while leaving other migrants and even diaspora returnees outside formal support systems [Webster 2024: 14–16; Lie 2014: 2–4]. This selective inclusion has produced what Webster terms “administrative recognition without cultural acceptance”, thereby maintaining Koreanness as the normative core [Webster 2024: 15].

Studies of education and social policy confirm that the norm of Koreanness – blood, language and culture – persists, reproducing symbolic hierarchies in which recognised “multicultural subjects” remain socially marginalised [Kim 2020: 77–80]. Park’s research on North Korean resettlers illustrates competing frames: “multicultural citizen” versus “global citizen”, which re-categorise certain migrants while re-inscribing ethnic nationalism [Park 2020: 124–129]. The tensions between administrative inclusion and cultural othering mirror earlier systems of order

and difference, such as Confucian hierarchies and ethnic nationalism, revealing a continuity beneath the rhetoric of diversity [Webster 2024: 14–16; Kim 2020: 76].

3. Time as a medium of Otherness: Polychrony in contemporary Korea

To understand the concept of the “Other” in Korean society, it is necessary to examine the temporal frameworks that shape identity and alterity. Time is not a neutral backdrop, but rather a cultural grammar that organises social relations, historical consciousness and moral expectations. The negotiation of otherness in Korean society, particularly for Zainichi Korean returnees, occurs within multiple temporal paradigms that converge and diverge across historical epochs. These paradigms include traditional cyclical notions rooted in Confucian ethics; modern linear-progressive models tied to industrialisation; and emergent hybrid temporalities shaped by globalisation and digital acceleration [Riotto 2024: 2]. Policies on multiculturalism and integration encode temporal assumptions, either privileging rapid adaptation to modern norms or gradual assimilation into Confucian hierarchies. For returnees, belonging means aligning with these temporal frameworks while sustaining ancestral continuity and global mobility. Inclusion is thus profoundly temporal; to belong is to share a society’s sense of time [Riotto 2024: 3; Cawley 2021].

Historically, Korean temporal frameworks were shaped by Confucian philosophy, which viewed time as a cyclical moral continuum rather than a linear trajectory towards material progress. Confucian ethics emphasised moral cultivation (*suyang*, 수양) and filial piety, orienting life towards ethical refinement that unfolded gradually across generations [Chung 2015: 42–45; Deuchler 2021: 7–10]. Seasonal ceremonies and ancestral rites (*jesa*, 제사) structured the year, binding the living to the dead and reaffirming social order through *sasije* and *gije* memorials¹¹ [Chung 2015: 118–119]. Each ritual cycle demanded renewed moral engagement, reinforcing hierarchical relationships and ethical propriety (*ye/li*, 예) as being essential to self-cultivation [Chung 2015: 120]. Within this framework, otherness was relational; foreigners or those who were not morally aligned were judged by their ability to conform to Confucian time, rituals, loyalty and moral improvement, rather than by their inherent differences [Chung 2015: 45; Deuchler 2021: 7–10].

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries introduced a rupture in Korean temporal consciousness. During the period of Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), a modernist conception of time – linear, goal-oriented and externally regulated – was

¹¹ *Gije* (기제), also called *gijesa* – household rites held the night before or morning of an ancestor’s death anniversary (기일). *Sije* (시제), also called *sasije* – ritual perform for up to seventh generation ancestor yearly as per lunar calendar.

imposed through bureaucratic governance, standardised education and industrial labour regimes. This displaced Confucian cyclical frameworks [Lie 2008: 33–36]. Time became commodified and measured by factory shifts and school timetables, thereby aligning Korea with Japan's imperial modernisation project. Following liberation in 1945, ethnic nationalism further entrenched this linear perception of time, framing development as a project with a predetermined end goal of “catching up” with the West [Shin 2019: 112–115]. Economic growth plans such as the Five-Year Development Programmes of the 1960s equated progress with industrial output and technological advancement. The past became something to be overcome, and the future became the ultimate horizon of aspiration. Zainichi Koreans who returned after decades in Japan found themselves in a society obsessed with modernisation, where a sense of belonging was determined by one's participation in national progress – education, urban employment and linguistic assimilation. Their hybrid identities, formed within Japan's modernist environment, often seemed temporally “out of sync” with South Korea's developmentalist ethos, further solidifying their position as outsiders [Lie 2008: 33–36; Shin 2019: 116].

Contemporary Korea navigates a plural temporal landscape where Confucian rhythms and modern linear frameworks intersect with global and digital grammars. Globalisation introduces flexible, networked conceptions of time through transnational migration, multicultural policies and the global circulation of Korean popular culture (Hallyu), thereby decentring the nation-state as the sole temporal reference point [Kim 2019: 1072–1075]. For Zainichi returnees, this hybrid order creates opportunities and tensions: discourses of multicultural inclusion coexist with Confucian hierarchies and nationalist legacies, producing ambivalent experiences of integration. Returnees must navigate competing expectations between cosmopolitan flexibility and developmentalist urgency, while their identities remain marked as temporally “different” [Kang 2021b: 120–123]. Digital technologies accelerate temporal experience, compressing horizons and fostering immediacy and simultaneity. Social media and algorithmic culture destabilise the gradual self-cultivation that is central to Confucian ethics, replacing it with fragmented, accelerated cycles that contrast sharply with the ritualised temporality and linear progress narratives of the past [Kim 2019: 1075; Kang 2021a: 8]. Korea thus embodies temporal hybridity, where Confucian continuity, nationalist linearity and global digital acceleration coexist in tension and shape new forms of belonging and otherness.

4. Zainichi Koreans and temporal negotiation

The lived experiences of Zainichi Koreans vividly illustrate the negotiation of multiple temporalities – ancestral continuity, linear modernisation and global digital acceleration; through which identity is formed and contested. Their narratives shift

between Korean ethnocultural heritage and Japanese civic norms, revealing paradoxical temporal positions. South Korea is imagined as both homeland and foreign land, a tension arising from the clash between linear nationalist time and diaspora-based, non-linear belonging. Interview accounts reveal that second-generation Zainichi Koreans feel “early” in the ritual calendar yet “late” in institutional milestones, highlighting that time, rather than space, mediates recognition and belonging [Hyun 2025: 101–104; Kweon 2019: 110–113; Lie 2008: 33–36].

Historically, Confucianism organised Korean life around cyclical renewal, such as seasonal rhythms and ancestral rites, binding individuals to lineage and moral continuity [Chung 2015: 88–91]. However, modernisation and nationalism have reoriented time towards linear progress, imposing standardised schedules through schooling, employment and bureaucratic governance [Shin 2019: 112–115; Lie 2008: 33–36]. Globalisation and digital media have introduced a third dimension – networked simultaneity – compressing horizons and enabling transnational, real-time connections that undermine the notion of gradual self-cultivation [Kim 2019: 1079; Kang 2021b: 120–123]. Across these regimes, being properly Korean often means inhabiting the right temporal rhythm: advancing on institutional timetables, participating in national development and aligning ritual practice with family continuity [Chung 2015: 90; Shin 2019: 112].

The case of the Zainichi – ethnic Koreans who migrated to Japan during the colonial period and their descendants – exposes how otherness can persist even within an ethnic homeland. After 1945, approximately 2.3 million Koreans lived in Japan, of whom around 600,000 remained, forming the Zainichi community. Their identities evolved amid assimilationist pressures and discrimination, resulting in a hybrid orientation that is neither fully Korean nor Japanese [Chapman 2007: 23; Lie 2008: 33–36] and the returnees come to think of themselves as “foreigners with legal nationality” in their homeland, or *chaeilgyop’o* (在日僑胞: overseas ethnic Koreans in Japan) who do not belong to the category of Korean [Kweon 2019: 100]. Interview narratives from Seoul (2019) confirm this hybridity. Kana, born in Osaka and raised in Korean weekend schools, explained:

In Korea, I’m asked to be more Korean than in Japan – yet my Korean is not native, and my school habits are Japanese. They are asking me, why I don’t speak Korean if I am a Korean.

From the late 1950s onwards, some Zainichi Koreans sought to “return” to South Korea, inspired by ethnic nationalism and the promise of belonging. Upon arrival, many were met with ambivalence: despite their legal nationality, they lacked fluency in Korean and had been deeply assimilated into Japanese institutions. South Korea’s one-blood ideology (*dan-ilminjokjuui*, 단일민족주의) often translates into

expectations of cultural conformity, and returnees who fail to meet these expectations are treated as outsiders [Hyun 2025: 88; Shin 2019: 110]. Jae Ho (32), who moved from Kobe to Seoul in 2018, recounted how he struggled to find white-collar work due to issues with credential recognition and language pragmatics: “My Japanese company record didn’t map neatly onto Korean HR cycles. It felt like I kept missing application windows – like I was out of sync with recruitment seasons”. The theme of double exclusion recurs: in Japan, Zainichi Koreans are seen as perpetual foreigners, while in South Korea, they are often viewed as “Japanese” or culturally diluted Koreans. Haru (28), a second-generation returnee, described downplaying her Osaka upbringing during job interviews, while emphasising it when applying to creative industries: “In agencies, my Japan network works in real time; elsewhere, it raises flags”.

Cold War politics exacerbated the situation. Some returnees were suspected of having ties to Chongryun (조총련), the pro-North Korean organisation in Japan. This triggered surveillance and discrimination under South Korea’s National Security Law. Even highly skilled Zainichi academics, scientists and engineers who migrated in the 1960s and later were met with mistrust; their contributions were overshadowed by ideological suspicion [Lie 2008: 33–36]. Cho Su-gi (35) is now a professor at the University in Seoul but she had problems with visa as her citizenship was North Koreans, even though her relatives were living in South Korea:

It was hard for me to find a job as a Zainichi even though I studied in Korea. As I came from family with a North Korean citizenship, as they opted for it for ideological reasons, I am constantly monitored by the South Korean Government not to be a spy. They call me in time to time and ask me some questions.

Globalisation has softened certain prejudices, yet ethnonationalism remains influential. Studies and interviews reveal persistent discrimination in the housing, employment and marriage markets, showing that shared ancestry does not guarantee equal acceptance [Kweon 2019: 115]. Soo Jin (40) recounted landlords requesting a Korean guarantor despite her citizenship and salary: “My Japanese schooling made them hesitate and they ask for a Korean to vouch for me even though I have Korean nationality.” Institutional legibility hinges on compliance with linear time – degrees earned within the Korean education system and service records within national systems – rather than blood alone [Tsuda and Song 2019: 35].

Following Hall’s concept of polychronicity, diasporic identities are multi-temporal; migrants and returnees seldom inhabit a single clock. Zainichi returnees navigate four intersecting temporal registers: national/institutional time (e.g. school calendars and career milestones) [Hall 1959: 177; Chung 2015: 88–91]; digital, networked time (e.g. real-time messaging and workflows) [Candidatu and Ponzanesi 2022: 263–265]; ancestral/ritual time (e.g. memorial rites and seasonal traditions);

and existential/situational time (e.g. moments of discrimination or acceptance. These overlapping clocks grant temporal agency – the ability to prioritise one frame over another – allowing counter-narratives to institutional legibility and resistance to mononational assimilation [Kim 2019: 1071].

Globalisation and digital acceleration further entrench hybrid temporalities. Hallyu industries recruit across transnational timelines, with collaborative work occurring across time zones and family obligations being managed via encrypted chats and shared calendars. These practices challenge ethnonational narratives by situating Korean identity within global flows, while also exposing persistent hierarchies at home [Kim 2019: 1078; Kang 2021: 125]. However, tensions persist as employers and universities often adhere to rigid schedules, favouring “local” credentials over transnational experience [Kweon 2019; Shin 2019]. This paradox – flexibility in global networks and rigidity in national institutions – keeps Zainichi returnees negotiating their identity across incongruent clocks, revealing the temporal politics of recognition [Tsuda and Song 2019: 37; Lie 2008: 36]. Interpreting these narratives reframes otherness as a time-sensitive relationship rather than a fixed attribute, demonstrating that identity is fluid and responsive, interwoven with ritual memory, digital immediacy and institutional timelines [Višočnik 2019]. This could be confirmed by Stuart Hall’s [1990: 225] argument:

Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that, in Korean society, the concept of the “Other” is not a static label, but rather a dynamic relationship structured through the grammar of time. Temporal frameworks – Confucian cycles, nationalist linearity and global digital acceleration; function as cultural grammars that organise social life, institutional expectations and moral hierarchies. Historically, belonging in Korea has meant synchronising with these dominant grammars, such as observing ritual calendars and advancing along developmental milestones. Now, it also means adapting

to the immediacy of digital networks. These temporal codes shape identity as much as language or space, defining who is considered “on time” with national narratives and who remains “out of sync”.

The case of Zainichi Korean returnees vividly illustrates this. Their experiences reveal that identity negotiations unfold across polychronous lives where multiple clocks coexist and rarely align. Ritual time sustains ancestral continuity and Confucian ideals of self-cultivation, while linear time governs institutional legibility through school calendars, career trajectories and bureaucratic deadlines. Networked time enables transnational ties and real-time collaboration, and existential time reframes identity through contingent encounters of recognition or exclusion. These overlapping registers create hybrid subjectivities that resist assimilation into a single national rhythm. For returnees, identity becomes a temporal balancing act; an ongoing negotiation between competing frameworks rather than a fixed essence.

This insight redefines otherness as a time-sensitive relationship. It demonstrates that integration policies based on linear adaptation, such as credential recognition or standardised recruitment cycles, overlook the layered temporality of diasporic lives. Institutional norms privilege monochronic schedules, measuring belonging through punctuality and sequential progress while ignoring relational and polychronic orientations that value simultaneity and flexibility. The result is a structural mismatch: returnees may excel in global networks and maintain ritual obligations, yet still be considered “late” by national standards. This temporal dissonance can reinforce their marginality, even when their legal status or ethnic heritage suggests inclusion.

Identity therefore emerges not as a singular narrative, but as a temporal assemblage. Zainichi Koreans construct a sense of belonging by selectively aligning with different temporal frameworks – foregrounding ritual proficiency within family settings, leveraging networked immediacy within professional environments, and navigating institutional calendars to ensure survival. This temporal agency enables them to create counter-narratives to the dominant scripts of Koreanness and challenges the assumption that national identity is linear, homogeneous and bounded. Instead, identity becomes fluid, layered and context-dependent; a polychronous construct shaped by the interplay of historical continuity, developmental urgency and digital simultaneity.

These findings have broader implications for migration and multicultural policy. Firstly, they emphasise that inclusion cannot be reduced to spatial relocation or linguistic proficiency; it requires the recognition of temporal diversity and the accommodation of multiple time regimes. Secondly, they encourage us to reconsider multicultural frameworks that assume uniform adjustment trajectories, overlooking the complexity of polychronic lives. Finally, they necessitate a conceptual shift in how we understand otherness; not as fixed cultural differences, but as relational positions produced through temporal grammars.

In summary, the evolution of otherness in Korea is inextricably linked to the evolution of time. From Confucian cycles to industrial schedules and algorithmic acceleration, temporal frameworks have determined who belongs and who remains marginalised. Zainichi Korean returnees, with their polychronous lives, expose the fragility of homogeneity myths and the limitations of nationalist clocks. Their stories remind us that belonging is not simply determined by place or blood, but is negotiated across multiple temporal horizons; a negotiation that will continue to redefine identity and otherness in the twenty-first century.

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