

# Belonging on Condition: Ethnic Recognition and Staged Exclusion in South Korea's Treatment of Joseonjok

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<https://doi.org/10.26821/ijsrc.14.4.2026.140402>

## ABSTRACT

South Korea officially recognizes Joseonjok, ethnic Koreans who are Chinese nationals, as overseas Korean compatriots. Yet this recognition has consistently coexisted with discrimination, exclusion, and legal inequality. This paper argues that South Korea's co-ethnic recognition framework does not merely fail to prevent exclusion; it actively produces it, using the language of ethnic solidarity to manage incorporation rather than deliver genuine belonging. Drawing on sociological theory, policy analysis, and interview data, the paper traces a staged process of exclusion across five domains: ethnic appearance, which grants initial but unstable access; language, which marks the decisive moment of reclassification; structural conditions, which prevent meaningful integration even when proximity exists; public discourse, which pre-loads suspicion before direct contact occurs; and institutional hierarchies, which formalize unequal belonging through visa policy. Together, these domains reveal that conditional belonging is not a failure of the system; it is the system.

*Keywords:* Joseonjok; co-ethnic migration; hierarchical nationhood; Social Identity Theory; South Korea; ethnic discrimination

## INTRODUCTION

Joseonjok are referred to by the Korean government as overseas Korean compatriots, a co-ethnic category used for Koreans living abroad (Overseas Koreans Agency). The category of "co-ethnic Koreans" suggests a natural basis for belonging, yet the case of Joseonjok reveals how such recognition can coexist with systematic exclusion (Overseas Koreans Agency). Seol and Skrentny describe this contradiction as a form of hierarchical nationhood, in which shared ethnic ancestry does not translate into equal legal or social belonging (Seol and Skrentny).

Joseonjok are the descendants of Koreans who migrated mainly to Manchuria and northeast China at the end of the Joseon Dynasty and under Japanese colonial rule, before the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948. Driven by poverty, famine, displacement, and colonial pressure, these communities developed a dual identity of Korean ethnicity and Chinese nationality (Song).

South Korea's rapid industrialization generated acute labor shortages, particularly in 3D (dirty, dangerous, difficult) sectors, which the country lacked workers to fill from the late 1980s onward (Kang and Kim). The widespread aversion to these jobs intensified through the 1990s, and the government turned to foreign labor to address the shortfall (Lee and Botto). After the 1992 normalization of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea, Joseonjok workers began filling these vacancies, often through informal networks and short-term visas (Song). Overstays contributed to a rapid increase in arrivals by the late 1990s, prompting the 1999 Overseas Koreans Act, which initially excluded them from eligibility for the F-4 overseas Korean visa (Song). Although the law was revised in 2004 to broaden inclusion, and the later H-2 visa system, introduced in 2007, expanded labor access, Joseonjok continued to face hierarchical treatment (Song, Seol, and Skrentny). By 2023, about 532,000 Chinese nationals of Korean descent lived in South Korea, making them the largest foreign-national group (Statista). As Zeljana and Kim argue, Joseonjok's position in South Korea has long been marked by a contradiction: presumed

blood ties and linguistic familiarity gave them preferential legal treatment, yet they still faced persistent socioeconomic marginalization and sociocultural discrimination (Zeljana and Kim).

Despite the government's outward co-ethnic framing, Joseonjok consistently report discrimination, social distance, and economic exclusion (Seol and Skrentny; Yonhap News Agency, "Ethnic Koreans"). South Korea's co-ethnic recognition framework does not merely fail to prevent this exclusion; it actively produces it, using the language of ethnic solidarity to manage incorporation rather than deliver genuine belonging. Although Joseonjok share ethnic ties and physical similarities with native South Koreans, their belonging remains conditional: appearance grants initial access, but language triggers exclusion, public discourse fuels suspicion, and institutions ultimately entrench inequality.

### **Ethnic Appearance and the Limits of Visual Passing**

Because Joseonjok look Korean, they may initially receive the kind of favorable treatment extended to in-group members before their identity becomes known.

Research supports this pattern. One study shows that Koreans exhibit a clear ethnocentric bias, rating Korean-looking faces as more trustworthy and competent than those of other East Asian groups (Malak and Wallraven). This suggests that people who look Korean may receive better first impressions in low-information settings. Social Identity Theory helps explain why: individuals derive part of their self-concept from group membership, producing in-group favoritism (McLeod). Because Joseonjok shares Korean features, they may initially benefit from this bias, passing as in-group before any interaction reveals differences in accent or background.

A concrete example appears in caregiving. As of 2021, ethnic Koreans of Chinese nationality made up about 35% of caregivers in nursing homes in South Korea ("Gov't Urged"). A separate survey also estimated Chinese compatriots at 34.7% of hospital caregivers, while foreigners made up 46% of all caregivers in long-term care hospitals (Khan). These figures suggest that Joseonjok are concentrated in intimate service settings where familiarity and trust matter, which is consistent with the idea that visual similarity to native Koreans may ease early acceptance in close-contact roles, even if the data do not prove visual similarity is the sole factor.

However, this advantage remains fragile. The caregiving figures suggest a clear ceiling: Joseonjok may gain entry into intimate care settings, but their concentration in the lowest-status roles, rather than in professional or supervisory positions, suggests that visual similarity opens a door without granting access to the full room. Social Identity Theory helps explain both sides of this pattern. It accounts for initial inclusion based on perceived similarity, but also for sharper rejection once that similarity is revealed as incomplete (McLeod). Because Joseonjok initially appear to belong, their perceived deviation from expected in-group norms can trigger harsher rejection than if the difference had been apparent from the start.

Ultimately, early acceptance depends on the concealment of identity. It is through language that this concealment collapses, revealing the limits of inclusion and initiating the dynamics of exclusion.

### **Language as the Trigger of Exclusion**

Despite a similar appearance, Joseonjok speech is often the point where difference becomes socially visible. Joseonjok uses a form of Korean associated with Yanbian, which differs in accent and expression from standard Seoul Korean (Lan). Some studies and interviewees describe this accent as sounding slower, less standardized, or influenced by Chinese linguistic patterns, which contributes to how it is socially perceived rather than simply how it is linguistically structured (Lan).

Rather than being treated as a harmless regional variation, the accent is often heard as a sign of "Chineseness" or backwardness, making it a site of social judgment rather than merely linguistic distinction (Lan). South Korean interviewees in one recent study described the Korean-Chinese accent as "messy," "disorganized," or "low-bred," linking it to gangsters or Chineseness and prompting discrimination (La, Cui, and Gao). Joseonjok speech is therefore judged not simply as foreign, but as low-status and socially suspect.

Since China is increasingly framed as a cultural and security concern, individuals linguistically associated with China can come to be perceived through that lens. In this way, the Joseonjok accent functions as an audible marker

of broader national anxieties, making everyday interactions into sites where those anxieties are reproduced (Flohr; Park, "Violent Incidents").

Once the accent is recognized, treatment toward Joseonjok often changes in visible ways. A Korean-Chinese immigrant, Cho, reported that "people's attitudes change completely when they find out that I'm Joseonjok." Even in workplaces, he recognized that there is "a line that the Joseonjok can never cross" (Yonhap News Agency, "Ethnic Koreans").

This dynamic is not limited to immigrant workers. Even professionals in Korea face discrimination based on their accents and intentionally try to change them in order to blend in. In interviews with Korean-Chinese professionals who received at least a Master's degree in Korea, many reported adopting a standard Korean accent in public and even in private settings. One participant, Guang, reported that he "can't imagine communicating with clients using a Korean-Chinese accent, because that would be a disadvantage; clients would immediately doubt my abilities" (Cui and Gao).

Social Identity Theory thus explains both sides of the same dynamic: initial inclusion based on perceived similarity, and amplified rejection once that similarity is revealed as incomplete. Once Joseonjok are heard as "not quite Korean," they are reclassified from in-group to out-group. Because they initially appeared to belong, this perceived deviation from expected in-group norms can trigger harsher rejection than if the difference had been apparent from the start (McLeod, Chakraborty 2).

All of this shows that hiding or switching accents is not a neutral choice but rather a survival strategy. The act of concealment is itself evidence that being identified as Joseonjok through language carries real consequences. Language, especially accent, therefore marks the decisive moment when Joseonjok shift from seeming insiders to conditional outsiders.

### **Structural Conditions and the Failure of Contact**

After exclusion begins at first contact, continued engagement does not necessarily reduce it. Instead, structural conditions often reinforce separation between Joseonjok and native Koreans.

Many Joseonjok become concentrated in Daerim-dong, or "Little Yanbian," not simply by choice but because of structural constraints such as work networks, housing costs, and migrant community ties, which limit their daily contact with Koreans (Shin et al. 4). Based on interviews conducted by researchers at Korea University, Daerim is perceived as "fenced" or culturally impenetrable, highlighting that even when living in the same city, Joseonjok and Koreans remain socially separated rather than integrated (Shin et al.). Interviews also suggest a generational divide, with older residents often more rooted in Joseonjok communities like Daerim-dong and some younger residents expressing a desire to move elsewhere, though financial barriers can prevent them from doing so (Shin et al.). Physical proximity within Seoul does not lead to social integration because structural conditions continue to keep Joseonjok apart.

Intergroup Contact Theory suggests that contact can reduce prejudice, but only when certain conditions, such as equal status, cooperation, and institutional support, are present ("Intergroup Contact Theory"). In the case of Joseonjok migrants in South Korea, these conditions are largely absent. Rather than encountering Koreans on equal footing, Joseonjok workers are positioned within a visa-driven labor hierarchy that reinforces their subordinate status. This structural inequality, combined with occupational segregation and weak institutional support for integration, turns proximity into a condition of parallel lives rather than genuine inclusion (Shin et al.; "Intergroup Contact Theory").

Another important factor is labor concentration. Joseonjok are heavily concentrated in low-status, labor-intensive jobs such as construction, manufacturing, caregiving, and food service (Song). Because they are so visible in these occupations, their position in the labor market reinforces their marginal status and shapes how they are perceived by Koreans. This concentration is often read not as the result of structural limitation, but as evidence that Joseonjok do not fully embody the qualities associated with the ideal Korean.

Labor concentration also creates the structural conditions for economic competition. Because Joseonjok and low-income Korean workers often compete for the same jobs in the same sectors, their proximity tends to generate

tension rather than familiarity. Realistic Group Conflict Theory captures this dynamic: when two groups perceive themselves as competing for limited resources, prejudice tends to intensify rather than diminish (Davies). In this context, physical proximity does not bridge social distance; it deepens it.

Taken together, these patterns show that even with high ethnic similarity and physical proximity, meaningful integration does not occur. Belonging is shaped not by shared identity alone, but by broader structural conditions that keep Joseonjok socially separate even within the same urban space.

### **Public Discourse and Pre-Loaded Suspicion**

Even before direct interaction occurs, public discourse often frames Joseonjok negatively, shaping how they are perceived in advance. Korean media have repeatedly portrayed Joseonjok as criminals, and this pattern has become normalized within film and television rather than remaining an isolated trope. According to a Korea Times article summarizing a study by Han Hee-jung, an associate professor at Kookmin University, male Joseonjok characters appeared in 23 Korean dramas between 2002 and 2018, with most portrayed as gangsters or contract killers ("Why Are Contract Killers"). These portrayals were not random but became a recognizable template, especially after *The Yellow Sea* (2010), which helped fix the image of the Joseonjok man as a gangster, contract killer, or violent outsider in popular culture ("Why Are Contract Killers"). As a result, Joseonjok are repeatedly reduced to roles such as gangsters, contract killers, or members of criminal organizations, which fosters a narrow and violent public image. Shin, Son, and Yoon likewise show that media portrayals of Korean Chinese as illegal immigrants, sexual offenders, and outlaws have intensified antagonistic attitudes toward them, helping explain how representation hardens into social suspicion (Shin et al.).

This repeated portrayal helps turn fiction into a social assumption. In this media environment, danger, violence, and untrustworthiness are consistently associated with Joseonjok across films, dramas, and online discourse. Over time, such exposure encourages people to expect Joseonjok to be dangerous even before any firsthand experience. This pattern can be understood through scapegoating, in which broader social anxieties are displaced onto a visible minority rather than traced to their real structural causes ("Scapegoat Theory"; Waddell; Holland). In this way, Joseonjok are made into convenient targets for fears that originate elsewhere.

Another factor reinforcing this prejudice is the widespread anti-Chinese sentiment in Korean society, especially among younger generations. Because Joseonjok are often perceived as Chinese rather than Korean, due to nationality, language use, and accent, these negative attitudes are frequently transferred onto them. Anti-Chinese sentiment has intensified at various points through geopolitical tensions, cultural disputes, and historical disagreements, as well as during periods of heightened national anxiety (Lee, "Anti-China Sentiment"). In this context, Joseonjok are caught in a broader frame of suspicion despite their Korean ethnicity. This dynamic can also be understood through securitization, in which repeated political and media discourse frames certain groups as threats to national identity or social order (Sjöstedt). When China is treated as a threat, Joseonjok are often drawn into that same frame, even though they are ethnically Korean (Hutchinson; Frascini and Park; Park, "Violent Incidents").

However, available evidence does not support the level of fear directed at Joseonjok. A police officer working in Daerim-dong stated that "The reality in Daerim-dong is completely different from how it was depicted in the film" (Ock). Crime data similarly complicates the stereotype. Reported major crimes in Daerim fell from 624 in the first half of 2015 to 471 in 2017, while raw major-crime totals across several larger Seoul districts were considerably higher ("Gangnam Sees Most Crimes"; "Public Data Portal Dataset"). Moreover, foreign nationals, including Joseonjok, accounted for about 2.4% of recorded criminals in South Korea in 2020, which suggests a significant gap between public perception and actual data (Yonhap News Agency, "Average Crime Rate").

This gap between perception and reality has direct effects on everyday life. A Joseonjok restaurant owner in Daerim-dong, Yang, reported that his business lost Korean customers because films had portrayed the area as dangerous. Another resident, Choi, explained that he is treated "like a criminal just walking around," despite the relatively low crime statistics in the area (Ock). Public discourse, therefore, does not merely reflect prejudice; it pre-loads suspicion, so Joseonjok enter interactions already marked by distrust, which helps explain why contact often fails to reduce prejudice.

## **Institutional Hierarchies and Stratified Inclusion**

Institutional rules do not simply reflect prejudice against Joseonjok; they turn that prejudice into long-term inequality by defining how Joseonjok may enter, work, and remain in South Korea. Although the Korean government frames Joseonjok as overseas Koreans, that inclusion has always been conditional rather than equal. As Chulwoo Lee shows, South Korea did not simply admit co-ethnic migrants or keep them out. It created differentiated categories of membership, especially through the F-4 and H-2 visa tracks, that sorted them into unequal forms of legal belonging (Lee). The 1999 Overseas Koreans Act excluded Joseonjok and Goryeo saram from the visa and employment benefits granted to other overseas Koreans, and even after the 2004 revision, the state continued to control their entry and labor rights (Song). This shows that Joseonjok were not simply welcomed as co-ethnics; they were incorporated through a system of stratified inclusion, recognized as kin but governed as a more limited and lower-status category. As Seol and Skrentny argue, this is a form of hierarchical nationhood in which shared ancestry does not produce equal membership (Seol and Skrentny).

The clearest example of this hierarchy is the divide between the F-4 and H-2 visas. The F-4 visa offers broader residence and employment rights and is granted to overseas Koreans who can document their lineage and satisfy additional eligibility requirements (Korea Immigration Service). By contrast, the H-2 visa is far more restrictive. H-2 holders are mainly steered into general labor, may stay only up to four years and ten months, and lack many of the broader socioeconomic rights associated with F-4 status (Park, "Expanding"). In practice, this means that co-ethnic migrants from China who cannot meet the higher thresholds for F-4 are funneled into a more restricted labor track from the beginning. The persistence of this hierarchy became even clearer in 2026, when the Ministry of Justice introduced reforms expanding access to F-4 status and easing some job restrictions, effectively acknowledging that the earlier system had differentiated overseas Koreans by origin and legal status rather than treating them equally (Shon).

This visa hierarchy matters because it channels many Joseonjok into low-paid and unstable sectors such as construction, manufacturing, caregiving, and other labor-intensive work. Park shows that South Korea's less-skilled migration policy positions H-2 holders as a labor force for jobs that native Koreans tend to avoid, while limiting their ability to settle securely or move upward (Park, "Expanding"). Rather than treating Joseonjok as equal co-ethnics, the state treats many of them as a controlled labor force whose inclusion is tied to economic utility.

The divide between H-2 and F-4 also creates a self-reinforcing cycle. Many Joseonjok first enter Korea through H-2 and spend years working in restricted sectors while trying to qualify for a more stable status. Yet the very conditions of H-2 work often make upward mobility difficult. Even when broader inclusion becomes possible, visa rules continue to shape their movement through restriction and instability rather than equality. Taken together, these barriers operate less as separate disadvantages than as an interlocking system: visa categories, labor sorting, and mobility restrictions work together to keep many Joseonjok in precarious positions over time. In this sense, institutional inequality is not accidental; it is the formal mechanism through which conditional belonging is maintained. Joseonjok are included in South Korea, but they are included on unequal terms.

## **CONCLUSION**

The case of Joseonjok shows that shared ancestry does not guarantee belonging. Although Joseonjok may initially be recognized through ethnic similarity and familiar appearance, that recognition remains fragile. Once language reveals a difference, public discourse attaches suspicion, and institutions turn that suspicion into durable inequality. What emerges is not a simple story of failed adaptation, but a system in which belonging is conditional from the start.

Seen this way, South Korea's claim of ethnic solidarity does not collapse in the face of exclusion; it operates through exclusion, offering Joseonjok partial recognition while denying them equal membership. They are included as co-ethnics, but on terms that remain revocable, stratified, and closely tied to how well they fit dominant expectations of language, behavior, and economic role. The contradiction is therefore not accidental; it is the mechanism by which the boundary of the nation is maintained.

The Joseonjok case ultimately reveals that membership is shaped less by blood alone than by the social and institutional rules that decide who counts as fully Korean. Genuine inclusion would require more than asking Joseonjok to sound more standard, remain invisible, or adapt more completely to the majority. It would require rethinking the structures that make their belonging conditional in the first place and recognizing that a society built on revocable inclusion not only marginalizes migrants but also narrows its own definition of who can truly belong.

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