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Osaka University
From Zainichi Literature to the World:  
The Universality of Tal-Su Kim  
With the Translation of Tal-Su Kim’s Leaving It Behind

Laura Fumiko Keehn

Keywords: Korean Diaspora / Minority / Zainichi Literature /  
Minority Literature / Border Narrative

In the world’s stage, stories of a minority ethnic Korean population in the  
small island nation of Japan more than half a century ago may seem far too re- 
moved and esoteric. Why should these stories even be translated into English?  

All joking aside, one reason is that the very cramped nature of a “minor literature”¹) causes it to represent the greater world outside of it.²) In other words,  
there is something intrinsically universal about such work, even the work of a  
Zainichi (resident Korean minority with communal roots in the colonial era of  
the Japanese Empire) author writing in Japanese fifty years ago.  

Repressed minorities always make vast contributions to the greater soci- 
ety, and are highly overrepresented in visible areas given their inferior numbers.  
Zainichi Koreans make up a surprisingly significant portion of Japan’s greatest  
athletes, entertainers, and writers. African Americans historically dominated  
most American sports. Jewish entertainers built Hollywood. Without the con- 
tributions of minorities, any country’s tapestry of accomplishments would be  
infinity less complex, evolved, and beautiful.  

Every society needs its minorities to see things that can only be seen from  
the fringes, because it’s our borders that define who we are.  

Tal-Su Kim himself believed in the power he had as a Zainichi author in  
revealing realities to the greater majority. He explained his motivation for writ- 
ing in the following way. “I will write about (the common human truth) through  
writing about us, Koreans. And I’ll aim it at the human truth in Japanese peo- 
ple.” (1977:170)³)
It follows that his writing can also be aimed at the “human truth” in all people. And at the very least, for that reason alone, his work deserves to be translated.

When choosing one short story out of the many that he wrote to be published here, I chose Nihon ni Nokosu Torokusho, which I translated into Leaving It Behind. On one hand, the struggles of an earnest young man with dubious legal citizenship are instantly recognizable and accessible to English language readers today. On the other hand, the historical background to the story is complicated and confusing. Why is there an established Korean minority in Japan? And why are some of them “repatriating” to North Korea when their actual roots are in the South? Though the struggles faced by minority populations are universal, the details are anything but.

And the details are far too complex and distracting for what I believe is the power of Tal-Su Kim’s short stories, and of this particular short story itself. Unlike his more researched and detailed novels and historical writing, most of his short stories feel immediate. Leaving It Behind captures a peak moment in Zainichi consciousness when after decades of struggle, a nexus of idealism, identity, and the dream of a “home” away from the hardships and discrimination of life in postwar Japan came together in the form of “repatriation” to North Korea. Leaving It Behind was published the same year that the first “repatriation” ships left Japan. The dream would be dead less than three years later, when “repatriation” all but stopped as the reality of life in an impoverished dictatorship set in.⁴)

Yet even without knowing the specific history of what came before and what was the follow, Tal-Su Kim clearly defines that moment common to any established minority community, when the “dream” of a home away from here ultimately dies, replaced by an awareness that this straddling of the border is one’s home.

Despite the details, it is universal.
All kinds of people come to see me. I’m not surprised when a complete stranger walks through my door. I do live in a pretty inconvenient place that’s far from the station though, and these people have to ask for directions when making their way to my hard to find home. So unless I’m really, really busy, I make an effort to welcome them whenever I can.

Especially if they’re compatriots, Koreans. I meet them even if I have to go out of my way. They have that “compatriot attitude” you get from living in a foreign land, and they’re insistent. You can’t shake them by telling them you’re a little busy.

Sometimes I’ll have some guy tell me, “I did you a favor and fixed your work for you.” And he’ll pull out a thick manuscript all marked up in pencil. But not Song-Gil Oh, he definitely wasn’t a literature buff. Of course I’d never laid eyes on him before, but I could see that at a glance.

Like I always did, I led him into my office/drawing room/whatever room, but where most visitors immediately started gawking around at everything in the room, he just kept to himself, and kept his eyes down.

Which was fine, but that left me in an awkward position. I’m not really good at small talk. I couldn’t just ask him, “What do you want?” Maybe I should have started by asking him where he lived and what he did, but that didn’t feel right either, more like a police interrogation or something.

Song-Gil Oh kept staring at the floor. Nothing was happening, so my wife brought in some tea, and I broke the silence with a question.

“So, the repatriation ships are finally leaving in November. What about you, are you going back too?”

Everyone in our community was talking about that right now. It was just something we’d bring up, the way you might say something like, “say, that Socialist Convention was really something, huh?” But Song-Gil Oh immediately perked up, looked up, and answered.
“Yes. Actually, that’s why I came to see you... I’ll probably miss the first ship, but I think I’ll make it onto the second or third one.”

“Well, is that so? And...?” I asked, urging him on.

“Uh, that’s why I came, because you’re the only one among us who can speak to the Japanese people...”

He was repeating himself, like he was having trouble saying what he wanted to say.

“Well, what do you mean by that? Actually, not to be rude, but what do you do, and where do you come from?”

He looked about twenty-five or twenty-six, probably not a student. From his sunburned features and rugged hands, he looked to be a laborer of some sort.

And judging from his fluent Korean, which I heard as soon as he started to speak, he wasn’t Second Generation, he wasn’t born here. He spoke like me, with a Gyeongsangnam-do/Masan region accent.

“I’m sorry. I should have introduced myself without you having to ask. I work for a ‘compatriot’ forwarding agency in F City in C Prefecture. I’m a truck rider.”

“A truck rider, what does that involve? You have gone to school, yes?”

“Yes, I finally graduated from H University’s night school this spring. A truck rider...” he started, before flashing his white teeth and smiling. His smile was infectious and I found myself also breaking into a grin.

Song-Gil Oh kept smiling as he explained what a truck rider did. As he did so, he seemed to remind himself of another story, and he started talking about something that happened to him recently at work.

C Prefecture is located next to Tokyo, and the F City “compatriot” forwarding agency was nothing more than a ramshackle truck, which was subcontracted out for gravel transportation. And that was the truck he worked on. They called this work “truck riding,” and it sounded pretty fun. Riding on the back of a truck full of riverbed gravel made him feel like he was on top of the world.

He felt high above the people walking on the streets, who looked even comical to him, and that in turn made him feel even more superior, but he didn’t have time to let his mind wander. If he wasn’t careful, he could get his neck caught on a hanging power line, or a sudden turn could send him flying off the truck.

Then one day. Song-Gil Oh was riding the truck as usual, standing on the
back of the truck and gazing ahead. He wasn’t feeling superior or anything, he was just staring into space. He might have even been thinking about the home he had left, so far away.

When suddenly the truck came to an abrupt stop, throwing him backwards. He didn’t get tossed onto the street, but he did slam his back hard into the handle of a shovel in the back of the truck. Slammed it so hard he couldn’t get up.

When the dust settled, he realized they’d hit a three-wheeler that had jumped out of an alley to their left. Thank god no one was really hurt, but the back of the three-wheeler was totaled, and the front of their truck was pretty wrecked too. They were in a busy part of town and they’d attracted quite a crowd. Someone must have called the cops because he heard sirens, followed by cop bikes, and as if that wasn’t enough, even an ambulance.

The cops and the ambulance looked deflated when they realized there were no injuries, so they started looking around and headed for the back of the truck. Seeing Song-Gil Oh splayed out on the loaded gravel, one of the cops asked,

“Hey, you alright? Are you hurt?”

Song-Gil Oh opened his eyes and looked right into the white helmeted face of a cop. And when he did, he forgot whatever pain he was in and sprang to his feet, leapt off the other side of the truck, and ran as fast as his legs could carry him.

“Dali nalsallyeola (legs, save me),” laughed Song-Gil Oh. He kept running for a while before he realized he didn’t need to. In fact he probably made those cops suspicious by running away in the first place.

Song-Gil Oh switched to walking and trudged back to the truck. The cops were looking at him suspiciously so he had to say something.

“As you can see, I’m totally fine. I’m not hurt at all,” said Oh Song Gil, smiling at them. They kept looking at him, still suspicious.

“Ha haha, ‘As you can see,’ that’s a good one. And then what happened?” I asked.

“I went home and rested my back for about two days.”

“Yes, that must have been tough.”

“Do you...?” started Song-Gil Oh, somewhat formally.

“...understand why I ran away like that?”

“Yes I do. I’ve heard stories like this before. You are a “recent,” that is to say, you are an illegal immigrant. And you don’t have an alien registration card.”
“Yes, that’s right, that’s exactly right, but actually I do have an alien registration card.”

“Yes. Because even though you ran away, you went back, so you didn’t even need to run in the first place.”

“I know. But I was just used to running. Even with an alien registration card, I still get scared when I see a cop.”

“Hm. Yes.”

I felt sad. Even more so when I thought of how there were so many other young men like him here in Japan. I couldn’t help but think of how the relationship between the two countries of Korea and Japan dictated our fates.

“But I don’t care about any of that anymore. It’s all water under the bridge for me,” said Song-Gil Oh with a cheerful smile, as if reading my thoughts.

“I’m about to repatriate, so that story’s just another memory I’ll leave behind here in Japan. I went through a lot of pain and hardship, but thinking about it all now, they’re all good memories.”

“…”

“And actually, I came here to tell you one of those stories. Specifically, a story about my alien registration card…”

Song-Gil Oh had come to Japan in the fall almost exactly six years ago. The Korean War cease-fire was reached in July of that year, 1953. The ink had barely dried on the Armistice Agreement when he left South Korea, choosing to illegally enter Japan.

His mother’s death closely followed his father’s, and it was his father’s death that motivated him to come to Japan. He hadn’t just died. Syngman Rhee’s military police had killed him. Song-Gil Oh, now painted as part of a “red family,” couldn’t in good conscious stay in South Korea when Syngman Rhee was alive and well there.

Which didn’t mean he held any affection for Japan or the Japanese. It was just that he had nowhere else to go, and he had an uncle who had been in Japan since before 8/15. When the Pacific War ended and they were liberated on 8/15, Song-Gil Oh was a twelve-year-old in fifth grade.

The Japanese rulers were holding his father, Yang-Tek Oh, in a prison in Masan. He was released with the 8/15 liberation, but for some reason he was quickly thrown right back into prison. With the start of the Korean War in Au-
gust, 1948, the Syngman Rhee administration sent the military police to drag his
teacher out of prison, and he was buried alive in the mountains, along with other
political prisoners and thought crime offenders.

Song-Gil Oh was a junior high school student. Though his family was now
considered “red,” his father had owned a fair bit of land, so they managed to live
comfortably. The People’s Army⁹, who were on his father’s side, had come al-
most all the way down to Gyeongsangnam-do/Masan, but the U.S. military kept
them at bay. His mother never recovered from the shock of his father’s death,
and she took to her bed, dying soon after.

When the smuggling boat that brought him to Japan dropped him off some-
where around the coast of Shimonoseki (he still doesn’t know where), Song-Gil
Oh was wearing a Masan High School uniform and cap. He had gone to a fully
Japanese language elementary school up to fifth grade,¹⁰ but had completely for-
gotten his Japanese in the almost ten years since. It would come back to him
once he heard it again, but at the time he could barely say the name of the train
station his father’s younger brother, Yang-Dal Oh, lived in, apparently some-
where on the Tokaido line.

Thinking about it later, he must have looked so suspicious, it’s a miracle he
wasn’t arrested, but Song-Gil Oh managed to get to a station somewhere near
Shimonoseki (he doesn’t remember where) and board a Tokyo bound train. He
even got a window seat, and he lost himself completely in the Japanese land-
scape, which he saw for the first time. The first thing that surprises any Korean
who comes to Japan is how green and lush the mountains are, and he was fixated
by them.

Then, the man who was eating his lunch next to him stood up, pointed at
his seat, and said something to him. He realized later that he must have said
something like, “I’ll be right back, can you watch my seat?” but Song-Gil Oh
didn’t understand a single word. He just nodded his head, “uh-huh, uh-huh.”

But then, the train pulled into a station, and a man with luggage came up
to him and said something while pointing at the empty seat. Song-Gil Oh knew
that the other man had asked him to watch his seat, but he couldn’t tell him so in
Japanese. All he could do was nod again, “uh-huh, uh-huh.” The man sat down.

What’s going to happen? He waited nervously until the man from before
came back. He started arguing with the man who was sitting in his seat, and
they both kept asking Song-Gil Oh for support, but he couldn’t speak a single word. All he could do was reluctantly ignore them.

Eventually the seated man ended up keeping his seat, and he was justifiably angry. All Song-Gil Oh could do was feel guilty and sorry.

His uncle Yang-Dal Oh, who lived in S on the Tokaido line, was of course surprised to see him. His aunt, who had coddled Song-Gil as a child, welcomed him by patting him all over his body. But his uncle and his family, like so many other Zainichi Koreans, were very poor.

His uncle was always changing jobs. At the time he worked for a laundry in town serving mostly “compatriots.” He barely made enough to feed his family of five, including their three children. Song-Gil Oh was another mouth to feed, but everything was so new to him, he spent his days as if in a dream.

The first shocker was that here in Japan, there was a Communist Party. When he first saw the word “Communist Party” in the newspaper, his heart jumped up into his throat and he quickly looked around, but it was nothing. The Communist Party wasn’t anything remarkable here.

Having said that, he was just as surprised to learn about pachinko, bicycle races, proud sumo matches, and baseball night games. To his eyes, it all looked like the bloated fruits of their extended colonization of Korea. If such large crowds could gather in stadiums at night to cheer for a baseball team, it was because they had the money and time to spare.

And Japan was now speeding up its post-war recovery through the Korean War. As the son of a man who had resisted the Japanese rulers, Song-Gil Oh believed that there was so much he needed to study and think about. But there were more pressing matters. Namely, how to help his uncle, who rode his bicycle all over town every day delivering laundry until he was exhausted just to support his family, or shikku in Korean.

But he was an illegal immigrant. He didn’t have an alien registration card – the very thing they’d created to control illegal immigration and monitor Zainichi Koreans. Every Zainichi Korean hated it, said they felt like tagged dogs, but not carrying one was a one-way ticket to Omura Detention.

Song-Gil Oh couldn’t leave the house, he had to stay inside most of the time. But staying inside too much would make the neighbors suspicious. They might end up drawing attention to themselves and actually bringing the cops to
their door. Uncle Yang-Dal Oh knew this only too well.

After trying for a really long time, Yang-Dal Oh came home one day with a ghost registration card in his hand.

“This is better than not having one,” he said, and handed it over to Song-Gil. It may not have been much, but his uncle still had to fork over twenty thousand yen for it.

He looked and saw that it was the alien registration card of a young man named Jye-Shik Li. He had no idea who this man was. He was two years younger than him, and he was from a different part of Korea. But the problem wasn’t that he was two years younger and from a different place. The problem wasn’t even that his name was different.

The problem was the picture, plastered right on the card. The picture was even engraved with a pattern, and even had a seal stamped right onto it. There was no way you could pull that picture off and replace it with another one. The picture of that thin man (who knew what he was doing and where he was) obviously hadn’t been taken professionally, because it was blurry and out of focus. Even so, the more he looked at it, the more Song-Gil Oh could see that this man looked nothing like him at all.

But too bad. He decided he would carry that ghost registration card and go by Jye-Shik Li when he had to. They called it a ghost registration card, but the man was probably still alive somewhere.

It didn’t mean he was dead, it just meant that he wasn’t in Japan anymore. Just like there were illegal immigrants and illegal entrants from Korea, there were also illegal emigrants. And they had no reason to bring their alien registration cards with them back to Korea, so they’d just leave them behind, and these became ghost registration cards. They were rare and hard to come by, and even I, the author, wasn’t aware that they were sold for twenty and thirty thousand yen.

Of course Song-Gil Oh wasn’t in the clear with this card. A ghost registration card may be better than no card, but he was just as jumpy and scared when going into town with it in his breast pocket as he was before.

He wasn’t just scared of cops either, even seeing men in railway uniforms made his heart skip a beat, and he’d duck behind whatever was close. He did eventually calm down though, and stopped worrying so much.
By law, we Zainichi Koreans have to carry our alien registration cards with us wherever we go, even if it’s just to the bathhouse in a pair of shorts. As stated in Article One of the card, “This registration card must be carried at all times and shown to any authority that requests it.” Though in actual fact, requests didn’t really happen all that often. Which was why he eventually calmed down and stopped worrying so much. But these stop-and-searches usually happened right when you forgot all about them and let your guard down the most.

It was about a year later. Song-Gil Oh’s Japanese was finally starting to improve. His pronunciation was still pretty bad, but not enough to cause him any problems. He helped his uncle at the laundry and kept his head down, though he yearned to support himself and get into a school in Tokyo.

There was a university in S City. Wanting an education, he would gaze at it as he delivered laundry on his bicycle, yet this S University did not have what was called a secondary night school. He heard that they had these night schools out in Tokyo somewhere.

Right around then, in the fall, Song-Gil Oh saw a poster for an “Anti-Conscription, Pledge Against Student Mobilization” rally at S University. That evening, he rode his bike to have a look. At this point he was no longer amazed that students in Japan held these kinds of rallies, and it didn’t surprise him when he was handed a flyer at the entrance written by “The Communist Party of Japan, S University Cell.”

He was handed many more flyers. He held them in his hands and took part in the rally, feeling like a student too. Students and teachers stood up one after the other and gave speeches about “preserving peace” and “anti-war” this and that, and Song-Gil Oh listened and agreed with them all. It was exciting enough for him to be a part of these youthful gatherings, he was impressed that there were people like this in Japan, and he felt a deep connection with all of it.

It was after nine o’clock when the rally came to an end. His heart on fire, Song-Gil Oh got on his bike and quickly headed home. He couldn’t wait to get to his house outside of town and re-read the flyers he had in his pocket. He was a young man just like them, he wanted to ponder the ideas these Japanese students had.

But while riding his bike, he suddenly started to panic. He noticed a cop walking towards him. Song-Gil Oh went right back to being an illegal immi-
grant, and not only that, he remembered that he had accidentally left his house on a bicycle without a light. He slammed on his brakes and jumped off of his bike, almost crashing into the cop.

When he thought about it later, he realized that most cops wouldn’t bother you about not having a light, so he really didn’t need to jump off his bike like that. He could have just said “Good day” and kept riding; but Song-Gil Oh, an illegal immigrant, couldn’t manage to do that.

Even so, the young cop walked right past him. But then, he seemed to realize something and turned around.

“Excuse me, where are you headed?” He started questioning him.

“Uh …” Song-Gil Oh suddenly lost his ability to speak Japanese. “To the coast…”

He finally managed to answer, but was trying so hard to speak naturally, he ended up having an even stranger accent. Hearing himself and realizing this, he got even more flustered.

“Okay, and where did you come from?” asked the cop, holding onto his handlebars.

“Uh… From the inside of that town over there…”

“I see, from the inside of that town. You’re from another country, you’re not Japanese, are you?” asked the cop.

“No, yes I am. I’m not like that.”

Song-Gil Oh vehemently denied the policeman’s line of questioning. But he clearly wasn’t speaking like a native Japanese speaker.

“Are you joking?” laughed the cop. “You have an alien registration card, don’t you? Could you show it to me?”

And that’s when it happened. Song-Gil Oh heard the words “alien registration card,” and completely lost his head. He pushed the cop’s hands off of his handlebars, jumped on his bike, and pedaled away.

Which made things so much worse. He pedaled for his life, twisting and turning randomly through the streets, but he was immediately caught in the dragnet that had been sent out for him (he really did bring it all on himself), and this time he was apprehended by a different cop. The cop cuffed him, hauled him into the police box, frisked him, and found not only his alien registration card, but also the flyers from the rally at S University.
This cop looked about thirty-five or thirty-six. He got on the phone and made a phone call, looked over all the flyers he had found on Song-Gil Oh, picked up the alien registration card and compared the face on it with his face. The cop then slowly looked up at Song-Gil Oh's face and gave a knowing smile.

“Is this your registration card?” asked the cop.

“Yeah, of course, of course it’s mine,” answered Song-Gil Oh. But all he could think of was, it's all over now. He could see the bars of Omura Detention already. And deportation to Syngman Rhee's dark, South Korea ...

“Oh really. What’s your name?”

“Jye-Shik Li.”

“Where are you from?”

“Jeollanam-do, Haenam-gun, R Ri, U Dong”

“You memorized that well. How about your Head of Household?”

“Li ...” Song-Gil Oh was stuck.

He remembered Jye-Shik Li’s hometown, but couldn’t remember his father's name. He'd seen it on the registration card, but just couldn’t remember.

“Seng-U Li,” he said, remembering the name of a classmate's father and just saying it.

“Seng-U? No. How do you write that?” asked the cop, catching him out.

“Like this,” said Song-Gil Oh, holding out his cuffed hands and writing out the characters on the desk with his pinky. He tried to get a look at the registration card the cop had open in front of him, but the cop quickly knocked it shut.

“No, that’s not it. What do you think you’re doing, how can you not know your own father’s name?”

“No. I don't know what name he's registered under, but his name is definitely Seng-U Li.”

Registered under, that was pretty slick, he thought. But just as he was feeling proud of himself, the young cop from before came rushing up angrily on his bike and slapped Song-Gil Oh on the face – bam, bam!

“You bastard, causing trouble!” The cop then turned around to the policeman from this police box.

“I’m sorry for causing you trouble.”

“Nah. Look at this. He's Korean alright, I was just looking at his registration card,” said the police box cop, pointing at the flyers he found on Song-Gil Oh.
“I’m so sorry about everything. May I borrow your phone?”

The young cop immediately got on the phone and reported to his superiors. And then, for some reason, the police box cop suddenly tossed the registration card he had been holding over to Song-Gil Oh.

Song-Gil Oh took it and looked at the “Name of Householder.” Jye-Shik Li’s father’s name was Kap-In Li. Song-Gil Oh put the registration card down and looked at the cop’s face. The police box cop looked away.

The young cop was just finishing his phone call. He then gave a formal thank you to this police box policeman, who was from a different jurisdiction than his own, and hauled Song-Gil Oh over to his police station. Song-Gil Oh had to push his own bike, so the cop took his handcuffs off, but the cop also took his handgun from his hip and held it in his right hand and said,

“Just try running away again. I’ll shoot you with this gun!”

It was the middle of the night and T Police Station was completely empty. Entering it made him feel one step closer to Omura Detention. If that was how it was going to be, he didn’t care what happened anymore.

The cop sat at a desk in the interrogation room and laid out Song-Gil Oh’s registration card and flyers. Like the other cop before him, he looked over it all before starting his questioning.

This cop did look at his registration card, but he wasn’t really interested in it. He started interrogating him over the flyers from the S University students. He seemed to find the “Communist Party of Japan, S University Cell” flyer to be of particular interest.

“What were you doing at that rally, huh!?”

“I was just checking it out. That’s all.”

Which was true. And because it was true, Song-Gil Oh had no problem answering. The Communist Party wasn’t illegal in Japan, there was nothing wrong with saying he was just checking it out.

“Then why did you run away!?”

“Because, ...I was scared.”

“What, you were scared? I’m not putting up with your stupid answers. I know everything that you’re up to.”

From his line of questioning, it seemed that this cop thought Song-Gil Oh was some kind of liaison for the Communist Party. Much to Song-Gil Oh’s relief. If
nothing else, he definitely had nothing to do with the Communist Party.

But the cop’s hand sometimes passed over the registration card on the desk, giving Song-Gil Oh a heart attack every time. He was just waiting for him to say, “Wait a second, this registration card’s fake.”

Basically, the cop was worried about the S University flyers, while Song-Gil Oh was worried about his registration card, and by the time he submitted a written apology for riding a bike without a light, it was two in the morning. Song-Gil Oh was definitely a very lucky man.

But that wasn’t the end of it. Another adventure was in store for Song-Gil Oh. And this time, there was no getting out of it.

He had to renew his alien registration card. He couldn’t count on anyone missing any details like that cop from before. Luck had nothing to do with it anymore. The whole point of the alien registration renewal, which happened every two years, was to flush out these fake ghost registration cards.

To renew your card, you had to bring three photographs of yourself to City Hall, and you had to submit them yourself, no agents or proxies. Even if you could send an agent, it’s not like Song-Gil Oh had any pictures of Jye-Shik Li. And even if he did have a picture of him, why on earth would he bring in a picture of another person’s face?

But if he just left it, Song-Gil Oh’s registration card would become completely useless. Not only was the picture and information updated with the renewal, but the little booklet itself was even printed on different colored paper. The government was real smart, they made it so the color gave it away.

There was only one option left. Song-Gil Oh had to find a way to replace the picture of Jye-Shik Li with a picture of his own face, but how on earth was he going to do that? This made that story about the mouse tying a bell around the cat sound like child’s play.

Anyway, Song-Gil Oh had his picture taken. He did his best to look as much like Jye-Shik Li as he could, but to no avail. They just looked too different. Why couldn’t this guy have been just a little fatter, he thought hopelessly.

The fateful day drew near. All his compatriots in town, including his uncle and aunt, had already renewed their cards. This was the last day.

Though he was no drinker, Song-Gil Oh drank. He needed liquid courage. But no matter how many drinks he knocked back, he couldn’t get drunk. Evening
came. The city hall branch was closing at five p.m. That was just one hour away.

But he just couldn’t make himself go. His worried aunt followed him out. She couldn’t tell him what to do. Going there could mean going to Omura Detention. And deportation. Well, deportation if he was lucky. Once incarcerated, he’d be used as a pawn between Syngman Rhee and the Japanese government, who knows when he’d be let out. He could lose the best years of his life.

But what else could he do? Not doing anything would also send him to Omura Detention. If he risked it all and took a chance right now, and if he could get his picture in the new registration card, he’d be free of this never ending worry, he wouldn’t be scared even if he did get stopped by the police.

Song-Gil Oh walked up to the branch office and walked back, hesitating. It was five minutes to five. He lifted his head and looked at his aunt, who was leaning sadly against a telegraph pole. Tears trickled out of the corner of her eyes.

Song-Gil Oh marched into the branch office and walked straight up to the window. One clerk was still sitting there. Behind him was what looked like the chief clerk, also alone. He was getting ready to go home. Song-Gil Oh stood tall and handed over his registration card and picture to the clerk.

The clerk compared his picture with the picture on the registration card, and then looked at Song-Gil Oh’s face. Then he asked, “Is this a picture of you? I know this is, but what about the registration card...”

“Of course it is. Of course it’s a picture of me.”

Song-Gil Oh answered rudely, angrily. He didn’t care anymore, he didn’t need to waste any energy trying to be polite.

“But this looks quite different.”

“What do you mean different, I mean, of course I look different. It was taken a few years ago, people change.”

“Yes but...”

“But nothing, hurry up! I can’t believe we’re treated like tagged dogs...” and he couldn’t finish his sentence.

“Yes but this is really...”

The clerk stood up and brought the picture and the registration card over to the chief clerk. The chief clerk had finished getting ready to leave, and had just stood up with his bag in his hand.

They stood there and compared the picture with the one on the registration
card, the clerk kept pointing at Song-Gil Oh and talking. Song-Gil Oh got ready to run for his life if he had to.

Finally, the chief clerk, who looked to be about forty, took the picture and registration card from the clerk and came walking over. Song-Gil Oh felt like his chest was about to explode, he was this close to running away.

“I see,” said the chief clerk, looking from the old registration card picture to Song-Gil Oh. “You’ve gotten very handsome over the years.”

The chief clerk placed the card and picture on the clerk’s desk, turned around, and left. Five minutes later, Song-Gil Oh practically fell out of the branch office. The alcohol he drank from that morning hit him all at once.

Song-Gil Oh fell into his aunt who came running over to him, and collapsed onto the main street. His aunt let out a cry of joy and began to weep.

“That’s the story I wanted to tell you,” said Song-Gil Oh.
“That chief officer knew everything, didn’t he?” I said.
“Yes. So did the police officer from the police box.”
“Yes, that’s right.”
“I’ll leave this alien registration card in Japan next month, but it’s full of so many memories. And I wanted these memories to..., I mean, ha ha ha,” Song-Gil Oh let out a sudden, hollow laugh.

“It’s strange. Now that I’ve told you, I don’t know why I went out of my way to come tell you this story when you’re so busy,” said Song-Gil Oh, standing up.
“Thank you so very much for taking the time to listen to my story, I’m sorry for taking up your time. That’s all I wanted to say.”
“No, I understand completely. I understand how you feel all too well,” I said, also standing up. I then shook his hand and saw him off.

I don’t think I’ll ever see him in Japan again. And so, I wrote this story.

Note on the translation: This text was originally published as Nihon ni Nokosu Torokusho (direct translation, “The Registration Card I Leave Behind in Japan.”). This English translation is based on the version published in Kim Tal-Su Shōsetsu Zenshu 2 (“The Complete Stories of Tal-Su Kim 2.”)
[Notes]

1) “A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language: it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language.” (Deleuze, Gauttari, 16). In the simplest of terms, Tal-Su Kim is a Zainichi author who writes in Japanese, therefore I believe his work qualifies as “minor literature.”

2) “Minor literature is completely different; its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it.” (Deleuze, Gauttari, 17).

3) From his first memoir, Waga Arirang no Uta. In this passage he sought to answer the question of why he was moved by the works of Dostoyevsky and Naoya Shiga, when they wrote of a bourgeois world he could not relate to.

4) The 70,000 Zainichi Koreans who took the repatriation ships through 1961 dropped to half in 1962 and declined drastically from there (Lie, 45).

5) A “repatriation” campaign in which Zainichi were sent to North Korea, led by the North Korean government and Zainichi organizations such as Chosen Soren (General Association of Korean Residents in Japan), and with the full support of the Japanese government as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross, took place in the late 1950s, with ships leaving from 1959.

6) The constant flow of new immigrants from Korea stemmed after the end of the Pacific War. Also, the official status of “new” immigrants who came after the colonial era differed from previous immigrants.

7) Starting in 1947, all foreigners, including resident Koreans who had hitherto been imperial subjects, were required to be registered as “Aliens,” and were also required to carry an Alien Registration Card on their person at all times.

8) The end of the Pacific War, August 15, 1945 is the day of surrender for Japan, and the day of liberation from Japanese colonial rule for Korea.


10) Japanese education was enforced in the Korean colonies, with schools taught in the Japanese language from the 1930s.

11) Omura Immigration Detention Center, where deportees were incarcerated. Conditions were said to be particularly harsh, and the threat of Omura hung heavily over the Zainichi population at this time.

[Reference]


（大学院修士課程修了）
SUMMARY

From Zainichi Literature to the World:
The Universality of Tal-Su Kim

Laura Fumiko Keehn

This is the story of an illegal immigrant fleeing his war torn native land to live precariously amongst an established minority population in a new country that, in many ways, was responsible for the destruction of his home country.

It could have been written today by any number of immigrants in many countries around the world. The protagonist’s illegal resident status is particularly reminiscent of the struggles of those labeled “The Dreamers” – young men and women brought up in the U.S.A. who know no other country, yet have no legal status and face deportation.

This story just happens to have been written in late 1950s Japan by a “Zainichi,” or resident Korean author.

The author of this work, Tal-Su Kim, left his native Korea and arrived in Japan in 1930 as an illiterate ten-year old boy with no Japanese language ability, yet he became one of the most prominent first generation Zainichi writers and a major contributor to Japanese literature.

Though better known for his longer novels and especially his historical work, he wrote a number of short stories in the beginning of his literary career that struck me as particularly universal, resonant with border narratives around the world. The details of Zainichi history are complicated. Though the Zainichi genre is robust and influential, it is nonetheless generally neglected outside of Japan, and hardly ever translated. This perceived “complexity” and “esoteric” nature is often cited for its neglect.

Though a deeper knowledge is important in understanding the depth of Kim’s work and of Zainichi literature in general, stripping away these historical details reveals just how accessible and universal these short stories are.

Moreover, the story of any country cannot be told without telling the story of its minorities. Those who straddle the borders. After all, a circle can only be identified by its edges.