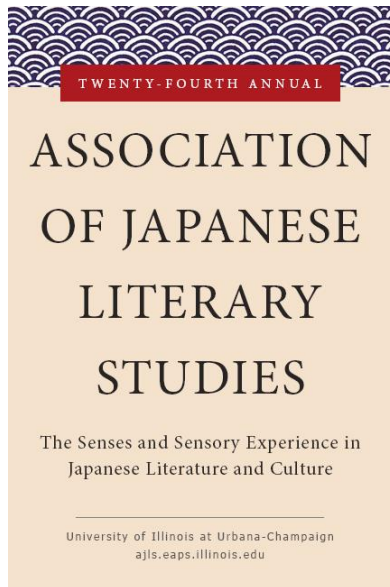


“On the Tip of His Tongue: Hail Kim’s Braille Experiences as Described in His Texts”

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Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 17 (2016): 21–25.



PAJLS 17:
The Senses and Sensory Experience in Japanese Literature and Culture.
Ed. Robert Tierney and Elizabeth Oyler

**ON THE TIP OF HIS TONGUE:
HAIL KIM'S BRAILLE EXPERIENCES AS DESCRIBED IN HIS TEXTS**

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In this article, I introduce a Korean diaspora poet, Kim Hail, a leprosy patient who became blind and lost his fingers, but gained literacy in Braille by mastering tongue reading. First, I would like to recite a short poet, or *tanka* that Hail composed.

Without fingers / to make a fingerprint / My resident card /
without a fingerprint¹

The poet Kim Hail is a Zainichi Korean (an ethnic Korean who resides in Japan) who lives in Rakusen'en, the leprosarium in Gumma prefecture. In this *tanka*, Hail says that his certification as a foreign resident lacks his fingerprint because he has no fingers, as a result of his illness. After the Second World War, many Koreans who had previously been living in Japan were compelled to register themselves as foreign residents and to impress their fingerprints on the alien registration card. Since that time, fingerprinting became a symbol of discrimination against Zainichi Koreans until 1993, when this legislation was abolished.² However, in this poem, Hail said that he did not even have fingers to make a fingerprint. It seems to tell us symbolically about his doubly marginalized position in Japanese society: first as a colonial subject living in the nation of the former colonial ruler, and then as a leprosy patient who had been forced to be quarantined in a leprosarium.

As I have mentioned, Hail suffered from leprosy, and he is still under medical care in a leprosarium. I might add that leprosy is generally called Hansen's disease today, so I would like to use that term, or abbreviated to HD, in this article.

First I will introduce his life.³ Kim Hail was born as the youngest son of a poor farming family in Kyoungsangbukdo province of Korea in 1926. Growing up in Korea until he was 13 years of age, he did not learn how to read or write because he did not go to school due to economic reasons. In that period, Korea was colonized by Japan, so he might not have gained literacy in the Korean language even if he had attended school, because it was forbidden to teach in Korean at this time. In 1939, Hail moved to Japan with other members of his family to accompany their father. Right after immigrating to Japan proper, he started to work as a factory hand in a confectionary company during the daytime, and commuted to school to attend classes in the evening. He learned Japanese at school, and that was the first time he received literacy education. For him, going to school meant not only acquiring

¹Kim Hail, *Yayoi* (Tokyo: Tankashinbunsha, 1993), p.15.

²Kim Takaaki, "Shimon ōnatsu seido no enkaku to Zainichi Chōsenjin," *Zainichi Chōsenjinshi kenkyū*, No.34 (2004), pp.133-52.

³Kim's life and background in this paper are from Kim Hail, *Tenji to tomoni* (Tokyo: Kōseisha, 2003). See also Muramatsu Takeshi, "Rai no Kajin," in *Harukanaru kokyō: rai to chōsen no bungaku* (Tokyo: Kōseisha, 1979), pp.107-26.

knowledge but also being Japanese. From this period onward, he was known by his Japanese name Kanemoto Mitsuo, not by his birth name Kim Hail.

Tragically, one day in 1941, Hail found that he had lost sensation in his hand. Soon he was diagnosed with HD and forced to live in Zensei Hospital, a leprosarium located in a suburb of Tokyo. After 1931, the empire of Japan had adopted a policy enforcing compulsory segregation of HD patients through the Leprosy Prevention Law. Under the law, all HD patients had to be quarantined in a public leprosarium. This often meant that they would be quarantined for the remainder of their lives, because HD was considered to be an incurable illness during that time, and an effective treatment had not yet been developed. Soon, the segregation policy toward HD patients was transplanted to colonies such as Taiwan and Korea.⁴ The segregation continued well into the postwar period until it was finally abolished in 1996.

Though life-long segregation was the rule, during the Second World War, Hail actually lived outside of the hospital to help support his family in place of his older brother, who was drafted into the navy. On May 25, 1945, when a U.S. air raid destroyed most of Tokyo, Hail was digging shelters to help his father earn an income. During the air attack, he injured his eyes, and about eight years later, he completely lost his sense of sight. Hail ascribes his blindness to damage from the war, as follows:

A blanket / the flames of Tokyo air raid left unburnt/ I cover
myself with it / even today⁵

Five years after / the fires of war had burnt my eyes all night
long / I lost my sight⁶

After the war ended, Hail tried to return to Zensei Hospital to have his eyes treated, but he was not admitted to the hospital because Korea was no longer a colony of Japan. Japanese post- or neo-colonial violence deprived him even of his right to be treated in a leprosy hospital. Eventually, in 1946, he entered Kuryū Rakusen'en.

In 1949, Hail began to compose *tanka* as a member of Chōsekikai, the *tanka* group in the hospital, and even today, at 90 years of age, he is still creating *tanka* poetry. His poems are mostly about his everyday life in the hospital, his longing for his hometown and the family that he had to leave in his early life, and the discrimination he suffered because of his ethnicity and Hansen's disease. For instance, in one poem, he cites a dialogue with a director of the hospital who recommended that he change his nationality to Japanese in order to get a pension benefit. In 1959, HD patients were finally allowed to receive a pension, as a result of the constant demands that patients made to the government. However, it turned out that this new pension rule would only be applied to those with Japanese citizenship,

⁴For more on the history of HD discrimination and segregation policy, see Fujino Yutaka, *Nihon fashizumu to iryō: Hansenbyō o meguru jissōteki kenkyū* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2015).

⁵Kim Hail, "Tokyo ni nokorishi chichi," in *Mugunghwa* (Tokyo: Kōfūsha, 1971), p.17.

⁶Ibid.

which caused internal divisions among inmates of leprosarium, between those who had Japanese citizenship and those who did not.⁷

I become silent / before the director / who suggests I receive a
pension / by renouncing my Korean nationality⁸

Although Hail's *tanka* are seldom indignant in tone, they have the power of resistance and social criticism against colonial HD discrimination. Since the prewar period, *tanka* was a genre that was encouraged by the hospital authorities to promote images of leprosarium as an ideal place where patients can develop their talents in literature.⁹ However, for Hail, *tanka* was a means to express his dissidence against such a state-sponsored idealized image of leprosarium. Furthermore, he chose to use his Korean name Kim Hail, instead of his Japanese name Kanemoto Mitsuo, when he published his first book of poetry, *Mugunghwa (The Rose of Sharon)*, which is Korea's national flower) in 1971.

More importantly, Hail documented his experience of learning to read Braille by using his tongue rather than his fingers in his poetry and essays. When Hail decided to learn Japanese Braille in 1952, he had already lost the sensation in his fingertips, so he started to learn Braille with his tongue. He recalled the experience as follows:

At the first moment I tried to lick the paper on which the Japanese alphabets had been printed, but I couldn't make out anything. As I kept trying, my shoulders grew stiff, my eyes became bloodshot, tears ran from my eyes, water flowed from my mouth, and finally the paper got soaking wet. So I requested one of my colleagues to print Braille types on the thicker paper, such as postcards or covers of calendar, thinking that if it were printed on this type of paper, the printed dots would not become unreadable so easily. And for a while I could read smoothly, but not after some time, the Braille became unreadable. If I kept trying like this regardless of the circumstances --- He moved his head and stuck out his tongue ---, the paper became wet again. While I thought that it was saliva as usual, someone who was watching me suddenly told me "Oh, you are bleeding." Then I recognized it was the blood running from the tip of my tongue. Anyway, it was tough experience.¹⁰

As we can see from the above passage, learning to read by tongue in Braille involved a lot of pain. Hail even underwent orthopedic surgery to write Braille more correctly. Although he had already lost sensation in his fingertips, he eventually

⁷Hail, "Nenkin," in *Tenji to tomoni*, pp.160-64. See also Kunimoto Mamoru, "Nenkinhō kara haijo sareru zainichi Korean," in *Ikiru hi, moeru hi* (Tokyo: Mainichi Shinbunsha, 2003), pp.165-76.

⁸Hail, "Byōsha ni kaeru," in *Mugunghwa*, p.81.

⁹See Arai Yūki, "Kakuri suru bungaku: 'Raiyobōkyōkai' to kanjabungaku no shosō," in *Kakuri no bungaku* (Tokyo: Shoshi arusu, 2011), pp.35-66.

¹⁰Hail, "Zettoku," in *Tenji to tomoni*, p.107.

mastered Japanese Braille by using his tongue. Following the same steps, he also educated himself in Korean Braille starting from 1955—and that was how he became literate in Korean for the first time. While Korean was Hail’s mother tongue, he had almost completely forgotten it for a long time. He gained Korean literacy by using his tongue with great difficulty.

This morning / the spring sun streams into the room / I read
the Braille poetry / in front of the camera¹¹
I wonder / how I can deliver my Braille learning experience /
to the blind people / in my faraway homeland¹²

After writing these poems, he began studying Korean in 1961 in a class held in the Rakusen Hospital. From a series of poems composed around that time, we can see the process in which Hail gained or re-gained his identity as “Zainichi Chōsenjin” (Korean):

I press on my way / to Korean class / carrying a Braillewriter /
tied around my hip¹³
We / Zainichi Chōsenjin are learning / supported by the small
aid / from the homeland¹⁴
We are finally reading / Korean literature / that we were not
allowed to read / under Japanese control¹⁵
We / who may not be able to recover from leprosy and return
to our homeland / are learning Korean / encouraging each other¹⁶

It is interesting that he started to write about his experience of reading with his tongue around the same time that he identified himself as one of the Zainichi Koreans living with Hansen’s disease. We can regard Kim Hail’s experience of reading and writing in Braille as another case of learning his “mother tongue” literally by using his tongue. Hail is an exemplary member of a minority group who was forced to live under the colonial circumstances, which continued long after imperial rule of Korea ended.

To conclude: In this article, I explored the symbolic meaning of Kim Hail’s tongue reading. Stricken with Hansen’s disease and quarantined during the colonial period, Kim lost his senses of sight and touch during the imperialistic war. However, he finally re-identified with his ethnicity and gained literacy in the language of his homeland by using his tongue to read braille, the only sensation that remained with him. When we think of the life histories described in his texts, Kim Hail’s Braille reading with his tongue can be understood as a performative linguistic practice against colonial and neo-colonial rules that discriminate against him because of his

¹¹Hail, “Tenji zettoku,” in *Mugunghwa*, p.42.

¹²Hail, “Chōsenjo no tenji o manabu,” in *Mugunghwa*, p.49.

¹³Hail, “Ryōin ni chōsenjo gakkō hiraku,” in *Mugunghwa*, p.55.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., p.59.

ethnicity and illness. Most importantly, he is a survivor of colonial and neo-colonial violence—he lived on and he lives creating his *tanka* in Braille, never giving up a chance to raise his own voice and be heard.