

Byeon Yeongman: Colonial Korea's Alternative Modernity?

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The article deals with Byeon Yeongman (1889-1954), a man who had the reputation of being one of the sharpest critics of Western modernity in early modern Korea and one of the brightest literati, well-versed both in traditional Sino-Korean and Western learning, during the colonial period. However, after his death he was mostly ignored by South Korean scholarship, partly because he consciously positioned himself outside of the main political and cultural fractions of the day and was consequently alienated from them. He was an odd bird for more mainstream “cultural nationalists” on the right who condemned him for “writing for simple amusement,” and he was completely ignored by both Communists and anarchists on the left, his visible sympathy towards more egalitarian ways of distributing wealth notwithstanding. However, he managed to develop a consistent logic of criticism against the modern life from a position which may be characterized as a sort of “spiritual individualism” and which drew both on Nietzsche’s ideas and on age-old “moral individualism” of the Confucian tradition.

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Introduction: Lost in Categorization?

One question that often baffles students of modern Korean thought is why what one can call “the modern canon,” as formed principally by South Korean scholarship of the 1950s-1980s, frequently ignores some personages while overemphasizing the importance of others. A good indicator of what was thought to belong to the mainstream “modern national thought” by no less mainstream later

scholarship, *Saryo ro bon Hanguk munhwasa. Geundaepyeon* (1984) — on which well-acclaimed *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization* (Lee 1993) is based — takes the essays by Bak Eunsik (1859-1925), Sin Chaeho (1880-1936), Jang Jiyeon (1864-1920), and Ju Sigyeong (1876-1914) as the representative specimens of Korea's "patriotic enlightenment thought" before 1910, and then once again makes Bak, Sin, and several others, mostly either religious thinkers (Han Yongun and Kim Gyosin) or nationalist historians and linguists (Mun Ilpyeong and Yi Yunjae), into the representatives of the "ideology of the nationalist movement under the Japanese imperialism" (Yi and Sin 1984). While some others, such as prodigious translator and textbook writer Hyeon Chae (1886-1925) or An Hwak (1886-1946), one of the founders of the discipline of cultural history, are at least briefly mentioned, many personalities who were thought to be leading literary figures by their contemporaries are not even given a single acknowledgement. And even among those who used to be conventionally ignored by scholars, ByeonYeongman's case is somewhat extreme. He was the man who was considered by many prominent contemporaries to be Korea's most outstanding literatus of the first half of the 20th century, as is well indicated by the poem written by Choe Namseon (1890-1957) on the occasion of his death:

You have dragged the three monsters of our times into everybody's sight
Tossed them over, turned them about, and exposed their bowels and
intestines.

When you, just a boy, [worked] with your arms and head [to enter] the
literary society, it was as miraculous as if it was the spirits' work.

But I won't call [your] *Sisaejeon* a great work.

Albeit you never mastered the great skills of the Blossoming Country,
China,

How could you fall to the level of scribbling the letters for simple amuse-
ment?

Widang is gone, but you, Sangang, remained with us.

That meant that those wishing to obtain some [worthy] pieces of writing
did not have to roam about in vain.

And now — where shall we find a great ray of rainbow-like light? (Bak
& Im 1966, 292-293)

Much of this text looks enigmatic for those unfamiliar with Byeon Yeongman's

literary production, the knowledge of which was obviously *de rigueur* for the part of the intellectual public Choe Namseon was addressing. It will be explained further in this presentation. What catches the reader's eye is the equating of Byeon Yeongman with Widang. Widang, or Jeong Inbo (1893-1950), was the last rightful heir to later Joseon's Ganghwa lineage of Wang Yangming philosophy and was universally acclaimed as colonial Korea's most representative scholar of both Chinese and Korean classics and also achieved prominence as a nationalist historian (Hwang 1996). That somebody of Choe Namseon's stature could easily mention Byeon Yeongman as Widang's equal shows quite well what Byeon's perceived standing was in his own days. It is also important to mention that Byeon, Choe's editorial associate for his journal *Dongmyeong* (*Eastern Light*: 1922-1923), was denouncing Choe after 1945 for Choe's pro-Japanese collaboration during colonial times and the lack of sincere atonement after Liberation (BYMJJ 3: 297). The personal relationship between the two men appears to have been almost completely broken by the early 1950s. Thus, Choe's appreciation of Byeon's importance for Korea's intellectual history was hardly dictated by any sort of personal sympathy; it seems to have been a reflection of the consensus about Byeon's talent among Korean literary men of the early 1950s. Then, how should the almost complete silence on Byeon in South Korean scholarship before the 1990s be explained?¹

One of the reasons for Byeon's "low visibility" was probably that, for Korea's humanitarian scholarship notoriously obsessed with *undongsa* ("movement history")-style descriptions of organized activities, Byeon's social behavior might have looked intolerably anarchic. The famous calligrapher An Bungeon (1904-1976), one of Byeon's closest disciples, succinctly put it in his 1955 foreword to Byeon's handwritten *Collected Works* (*Sangangjae muncho*), "although my teacher, Byeon Sangang, was talented as nobody in the world (...) and brought together the writing of the East and the West (...), his lonely sorrows and noble thoughts were all far detached from ordinary folks. Aloof, unconcerned [about worldly matters] and lonely in his intentions, he was incessantly seeking the refreshing, spiritual things, not being content with the old things even for a single moment" (BYMJJ 2: 19). It is not that Byeon totally eschewed any par-

1. The first academic articles on Byeon emerged only in the early 1990s (Choe 1992), and the translation of his "Collected Works" (hereafter referred to as BYMJJ) into modern Korean was completed and published very recently, in July 2006 (Sungkyunkwan University, Daedong Institute for Korean Studies 2006).

ticipation in institutionalized social or political movements. In his self-imposed temporary exile in Beijing and Shanghai in the 1910s, he was likely to have been connected to *Dongjesa*, an independence movement organization founded in July 1912 by Shanghai-based Korean émigré intellectuals under the leadership of such senior figures as Bak Eunsik and a Korean friend of China's republican movement, Sin Gyusik (1879-1922). He collaborated there closely with his contemporaries who were then to stand in the centre of Korea's intellectual and social life — Hong Myeonghui (1888-1968), Jo Soang (1887-1958), the above-mentioned Jeong Inbo, and Sin Chaeho among them (Gang 1999, 91-121). Byeon participated in several literary groups after 1945 and was among the first generation of teachers at the newly established Sungkyunkwan University, even serving as headmaster of Myeongnyun College (*jeonmun hakkyo*), Sungkyunkwan University's predecessor, for several months in 1946 (Kim 2004, 42). And lastly Byeon Yeongman's two famed brothers, the English scholar who became South Korea's Prime Minister (1954-56) Byeon Yeongtae (1892-1969) and the poet and translator Byeon Yeongno (1897-1961), also could have added some weight to his name. Still, unlike Sin Chaeho whose friendship he cherished and whose integrity he adored, Byeon was not a real political activist and certainly not a martyr of the national independence struggle. In contrast to his two towering contemporaries, Choe Namseon and Jeong Inbo, he was never really interested in lofty musings on Dangun, "national spirit" and the greatness of Korea's antiquity. Dangun, for example, was mentioned passingly and just several times in all of Byeon's writings, although Byeon wrote a sacrificial text for a shrine belonging to Daejonggyo, a Dangun-worshipping confession, in 1953 (BYMJJ 1: 113, 136, 457, 593; 3: 304, 306-7).

He was certainly a nationalist thinker in the broader meaning of the word: a literatus striving to define "Korea" as an "imagined community" possessing its own, essentialized "spiritual character," and a citizen who confessed in 1931 that he was preparing himself for participation in the politics of "future Korea" (BYMJJ 3: 457). However, his way of defining the eternal "essence of the nation" hardly tied in with the more conventional lines of national imagination. In an essay in classical Chinese entitled "Gwangsangnok" ("Records of [my] Observations of Life," presumably written in the 1910-20s and first published in 1936), Byeon defines, for example, Koreans, Jews and India's peoples as "the peoples of the spirit (*yeong*) and heart (*sim*)," contrasting "Christ's, Buddha's and Weonhyo's philosophy of the heart" to the "moralism" of the Chinese and "material rationality" of European thinkers. The problem with this otherwise

very flattering definition of “Koreanness” is that Korea is not elevated to the “land of the heart” alone, and that the “rich country, strong army” (*bugukkang-byeong*) method of fulfilling Korea’s great mission in the future is explicitly rejected, thus making Byeon’s prophecies of Korea’s future centrality sound rather abstract (BYMJJ 1: 106-21). Moreover, Byeon suggested that in the future, “the alien races are not to be excluded and refused — all those who share our voice and sympathize with us, even if they are insignificant fellows with tattooed foreheads and pierced noses (possible allusion to the Africans — V.T.), will be treated [by us] in beautiful brotherly spirit in the future” (BYMJJ 1: 118), thus adding a certain cosmopolitan dimension to his vision of ideal “Koreanness.” A mystical thinker who was going “to take spirit, and not a [given] geographic region as the criterion” (BYMJJ 1: 119), hardly could expect a place in the nationalist pantheon. For the nationalist or socialist intellectuals affiliated with various fractions of the pro-democracy movement of the 1970s-1980s, Byeon’s individualist sensitiveness or spiritualist inclinations could well look like escapism of little relevance and appeal.

Another, and deeper trouble with Byeon for modern scholars may be the fact that, in the humanitarian studies’ universe so neatly divided into the realms of “national literature” (*gungmunhak*) and “Chinese literature and Chinese classics scholarship” (*hanmunhak*), into the fields of research upon “Communist/socialist,” “anarchist,” and “nationalist” movements and ideologies, Byeon’s legacy is too elusive of any precise, unambiguous categorization. Writing in both vernacular Korean and classical Chinese and even auto-translating some of his favorite pieces from one language into another,² Byeon freely traversed boundaries between what was supposed to be “national” Korean literature and what was often disparagingly referred to as “leftover of Joseon dynasty’s Sinophilia.” Unrelated to the orthodox academic lineages dating back to the Joseon times, and polemizing actively against his good friends in the established world of classical Chinese scholarship, such as Jo Geungseop (Simjae: 1873-1933), who reduced the realm of the literature to simply “representing the Way in the letters,” Byeon still believed in the validity of the “old” as an antidote to the unparalleled barbarity of the “new world.” At the same time he mastered European lit-

2. *Sisaejeon*, mentioned above by Choe Namseon in a depreciating way, was, for example, written in 1931 in classical Chinese and then translated with certain textual changes by Byeon himself to be serialized in the monthly *Donggwang* (October 1932, January-February 1933) entitled “Isanghan dongmu” (“Strange Comrades”).

erature and thought to a degree rarely seen in the intellectual world of colonial Korea (Sin 2003, 428-9). While today's scholarship on colonial Korea is structured along precisely defined ideological and political boundaries, Byeon unambiguously declared in 1931 that the art should be "permanently neutral" in the relation to the realm of the political, "subservient neither to the capitalists nor to the anarchists," but should also not develop into "art for art's sake." Byeon's avowed ideal was "art for life — life itself becoming an art," and it evidently had its background in Buddhist and Taoist views on life's ideals, as Byeon's ideal artist was "to obtain everything and to eschew everything simultaneously," a close parallel to what was known as "non-duality" in the language of the tradition (BYMJJ 3: 242-3).

Another expression of Byeon's ambition to transcend the modern language of class and ideology was his avowed intention "to be neither a manual laborer nor a ruler" but "a strict man seeking self-perfection only — the key to the perfection of everything else" (BYMJJ 1: 111) and his ambiguous declaration that "although the abolition of the private landholding rights is the right thing, the recent Communist talks about giving both wise and stupid people an equal share of property is too extreme" (BYMJJ 1: 110). Just like Byeon's civilizational or political orientation, the genre of many of his works defies any attempt at classification by "modern" standards. Depreciated by Choe Namseon as "mere amusement," *Sisaejeon* was, for one example, a satirical fable about two widowers, one of whom was karmically punished by being poisoned by a female fellow convict for having earlier killed his wife, and the other having self-sacrificially tried to save the unlucky friend from prison (BYMJJ 1: 471-8). The tale, fully consistent with Byeon's deeply cherished personal Buddhist belief in the "iron law of karmic retribution" (BYMJJ 3: 457) and well-understandable as a part of the established classical tradition of showing the variety of human characters through the "biographies" of fictitious personages, hardly fits well into the modern scheme of literary genres. Looking almost post-modern in his artful maneuvering between ostensibly pre-modern forms and definitely modernity-informed content, Byeon represents a challenge for the established canons of Korea's post-colonial humanitarian scholarship.

In this article, I will limit myself primarily to the socio-political and philosophical aspects of Byeon's writings, beginning with his public debut in the late 1900s and including both his work during the colonial period and the fragmentary notes he wrote but mostly did not publish after 1945. I will try to show how he evolved from being a rather ordinary, although unconventionally radical in

his anti-imperialist rhetoric, participant in the late 1900s westernizing “enlightenment” movement and a firm believer in the potential of capitalist development and modern nation-building to becoming an acute critic of most modern institutions and ideologies, both Western capitalism and the Bolshevik version of socialism included. I hope that shedding new light on Byeon’s evolution between the 1900s and the 1950s will help to nuance and complicate the existing picture of Korea’s modern ideological development, by highlighting the diversity of the colonial time visions of nation and nationhood, and the degree to which subversive views upon modernity, its conventions and institutions, were common among prominent and influential thinkers of the colonial time. There is no denial, of course, that the “nationalist” (as distinguished from “leftist”) part of the colonial spectrum of socio-political beliefs, with which Byeon was loosely associated both personally and ideologically, in general coalesced around the Social Darwinism-based vision of building up “national strength” by accelerating the development of “national” industrial capitalism and “reconstructing the nationals” into being good bourgeois — thrifty, industrious, public-minded, and engaged in learning and sports (Bak 1997). But, as Byeon’s case convincingly shows, this mainstream right-wing vision of the “national” and the “modern” also had its discontents “from within” — that is, outside of the rival ‘leftist’ camp. And the fact that Byeon’s discontent was based upon a very original attempt to combine the classic East Asian tradition with the “new” learning is important for understanding how diverse and non-conventional the constructions of the “traditional” might be in early modern times.

Fighting the Monsters: Byeon’s Debut in the Late 1900s.

Byeon was born in what is now central Seoul (Chadong, or Sunhwadong, near the Legation Quarters in Cheongdong) (Bak & Im 1966, 293),³ into a relatively obscure *yangban* family belonging to the Chogye Byeon clan, known to others as producing the mother (1515-1597) of the illustrious admiral Yi Sunsin (1545-1598). His family owned some land in Bucheon, south-west of Seoul. His father

3. This quarter was outside of Seoul’s smaller western gate (*Seosomun*) and was not considered a part of Seoul proper in the days of Byeon’s childhood. However, Byeon proudly mentioned in his later autobiographical notes that the house he spent his childhood days in was close to the old family nest of Korea’s great non-orthodox Confucian and iconoclastic literatus, Bak Jiweon

Byeon Jeongsang (1861-1935), a self-made man in late Joseon dynasty style, managed not only to obtain some lucrative magisterial (*gunsu*) positions in the province (including the post of the magistrate in Gyeongheung, an important trade centre near both the Chinese and Russian borders) and to climb up to the section head (*chamseogwan*) level at the prestigious foreign ministry (*Oebu*), but also to cultivate close friendships with some prominent Neo-Confucian literati of much higher standing by Korean nobility's standards (Guksa pyeonchan wiweonhoe 1984, 400; Kim 2004, 10-1).⁴

One of Byeon Jeongsang's distinguished friends, the relatively conservative Neo-Confucian scholar Yi Namgyu (1855-1907), known also as Sin Chae-ho's mentor and an ardent patriot murdered by Japanese troops, took care of Byeon Yeongman's basic training in classical Chinese. Then, like many other children of the "enlightened" officialdom of the 1900s, Byeon entered the modernized school system, and after a one year stint at the Law Officers' Training School (*Beopkwan Yangseongso*; graduated January 14, 1906), he entered Boseong College's Law Department, graduating in approximately two years (on January 29, 1908). What followed then was a brief secretarial employment with Gyeongseong (Seoul) District Court, a year of working as a judge (*pansa*) in Mokpo (December 17, 1908 — October 1909), resignation in protest against the Japanese encroachment upon the juridical rights of its Korean "protectorate," and around two years of living as a practicing advocate, before heading in 1912 to China into a voluntary, self-imposed exile (Choe 2003, 59-63). While receiving legal training and working with the modernized legal institutions, that is, between March 1907 and August 1909, Byeon published two translated monographs and made seventeen contributions to mainly less-known journals published by students' voluntary academic associations. This rather prodigious output, albeit more polemical than academic, made Byeon, an obscure young lawyer, into a minor public intellectual in his early twenties.

The two foreign books on imperialism he translated in an abridged form

(1737-1805). One of Byeon's neighbours was the great contemporary literati and a friend of Byeon's, Kim Taegyong (1850-1927), whom Byeon later met during a brief trip to China in 1911, and whose biography he posthumously wrote (BYMJJ 1: 479-83). It was also one of the places preferred by the Western advisors to old Korea's government for their private residences in the 1890s-1900s — for example, by the British Chief Commissioner of Korea's Customs from 1896-1905, John McLeavy Brown (1835-1926) (BYMJJ 1: 312-3).

4. Byeon's mother was reported to be a devout Christian (Han 2006, 280), a fact which may be an additional explanation for Byeon's early interest toward Western things.

being a somewhat special case, Byeon's pronouncements on the things modern in late 1900s hardly exhibited much conceptual originality, if seen in the context of the period's dominant visions of modernity. For example, one of his two contributions to the prestigious monthly *Giho Heunghakhoe Weolbo* (*Monthly of Giho Society for the Promotion of Learning*; Vol. 1, August 1908), entitled "Oh, How Great Education is!" ("Daehogyoyuk"), gives the following picture of the contemporary world:

Let us try to look! Should we say that the revival and reappearance on the world stage of once weakened, divided Italy, raised from its half-dead state, was based upon the internationally arbitrated political measures by Cavour or famed sword-brandishing by Garibaldi? In fact, it was driven by Mazzini's nationalistic education.

Let us try to look! Should we say that the reunification and European pre-dominance of once ruined Germany was based simply upon the iron-and-blood strategies by Bismarck and his ability to prevail over his enemies on the battlefield? In fact, the spiritual education in the primary schools has laid the fundament of the German success at an earlier point

Let us try to look! Should we say that Japan's vigorous reform of the old institution, its Restoration, its success in joining the club of the civilized and becoming one of the powers, and its ability to prevail upon Russia's strength were simply brought by 2-3 party politicians? In fact, it was nothing else but the so-called warlike education forming the spirit of the nation (*gukhon*) (BYMJJ 3: 91).

Admiration of the nationalist (*guksujeok*), spiritual (*jeongsinjeok* — of course, "nation's spirit" is meant), and warlike (*musajeok*) ways of educating modern citizenry perceived as the main secret of European and Japanese "wealth and power," and an ardent wish to have the Korean citizenry also educated in statist (*gukkajeok*) and militaristic (*sangmujeok*) ways conducive to a success in the international struggles (*segyejeok buntu*) (BYMJJ 3: 92) did not differ much from the conventions of the Social Darwinism-informed views on the desirable trajectory of "national self-regeneration" and "catching-up with the powers" prevalent in the nationalist milieu in that period. Following the dean of the nationalistic "enlightenment" Pak Eunsik who entitled his editorial for the inaugural issue of the monthly *Seou* (*Friends from the West[ern Region]*; first published in December 1906) "Once Education is not Encouraged, the Survival

Cannot be Achieved” (“Gyoyuk i buheung imyeon saengjon eul budeuk”) and his friend Sin Chaeho who envisioned the “new” education as both patriotic and militaristic (Han 2001), Byeon viewed modern education as a method of “transforming the weak literati of Korea living in a sweet dream” into nationalist and physically strong modern citizens.

Byeon’s early views on capitalist development are hardly original as well. In an article entitled “Commercial vigor” (“Sangeopjeok buntu”) and published in June 1908 in *Beopcheong hakkye* (*World of Legal and Political Studies*, a small journal published by Boseong College students), he assured that the “commercial wars” were taking place using the battlefield warfare of a Napoleonic and Bismarckian kind and that the human vigor, “the saintly [quality] which civilizes the world,” should assume the commercial character in the “epoch of commerce” (*sangeop sidae*). He then praised the “blue-eyed Westerners” for concentrating their “mighty brain power and brave spirit” upon the commercial enterprises, and stated that the only way to turn the tables upon the Western invaders and begin the “westward expansion of the East” would be to nurture the East’s infantile industries under state protection, ensure the favorable balance of trade of industrial goods, and inculcate the merchants with patriotic, nationalist ideas (BYMJJ 3: 76-80). Another article, “On industry” (“Gonggeop e chwhihayeo nonham”), in the 16th issue of the same journal (September 1908), again stated that the only way to a successful commerce was protection of the fledgling industrial production by a state able to extricate itself from the ties of political dependency upon the foreign commercial forces (BYMJJ 3: 93-5).

This appeal for state interventionism and protectionism in the spirit of Friedrich List (1789-1846) might be deemed quite reasonable given Korea’s lack of industrial perspective under a free trade system with no tariff protection for Korea’s fledgling industrial enterprises, if only too late, as the Korean “protectorate” state in 1908 lacked any real ability to conduct an economical policy independent of the Japanese power. Byeon’s protectionism probably suited 1900s Korea better than the attitudes of his father’s good acquaintance Yu Giljun (1856-1914), who while maintaining that the state was duty bound to protect and educate the traders, abstained from appeals for direct state intervention aimed at boosting the emerging industrial economy (Kim 1998, 210-65). But the criticism of *laissez faire* economical liberalism as such was not something totally unknown in late 1900s Korea. It was an organic part of the Meiji economic thought which was being transplanted onto the Korean soil during those years. For example, *Keizai Kyokashō* (*Economy Textbook*, Tokyo: Bungakusha, 1901)

by Wadakagi Kenzo (1860-1919), which was translated into Korean twice, first by Kim Ugyun in 1907 (as *Gyeongje wonron*) and then by Yi Byeongtae in 1908 (as *Gyeongjehak gyogwaseo*, Daegu: Gwangmunsa, 1908), contained explicit and strong criticism of the “extremes of the economical freedom” (Yi 1985, 51-125). Editorials criticizing the almost complete absence of national protection of and encouragement for the nascent industries in Korea, in contrast to most “civilized powers,” appeared from time to time in *Daehan maeil sinbo* (Korean Daily News) which was the strongest proponent of industrial protectionism in late 1900s Korea (O 2002, 391-5, 412-7). Byeon's developmentalist logic, however acute and inspiring, was following one of the beaten tracks of the late 1900s Korean nationalistic thought.

If we are to point out to a somewhat uncommon feature of Byeon's vision of modernity in the late 1900s, it was the ferocity with which he castigated imperialism, Western imperialism first and foremost. When Choe Namseon wrote in his funeral poem that Byeon “has dragged the three monsters of our times into everybody's sight,” he was alluding to what should be considered Byeon's first real claim to fame — an anti-imperialist book by a Westerner whose name was translated into Chinese characters as “Samil Gadeongmun”⁵ which Byeon translated and published in a visibly adapted form in March 1908 with Gwanghak seopo Publishers in Seoul, under the title *Segye samgoemul* (*The World's Three Monsters*). The book was obviously out of sync with Byeon's otherwise protectionist and interventionist beliefs since Goldwin Smith was a passionate free trader and cited Adam Smith's well-known views on the economical inefficiency of military expansion and colonialism (costs of maintaining the colonial monopolistic arrangements exceeding their benefits) as an argument in his attack against late 19th century imperialism (BYMJJ 3: 39). Then, while Goldwin Smith, a proponent of Christian charity and moral philosophy, was polemizing against Spenserian Social Darwinism from a moralistic position, calling the identification of the “stronger” with “the fittest” and the legitimization of the “extermination of the different races” “a barbarity” (BYMJJ 3: 38-9), Byeon himself was elsewhere (for example, in his essay “On industry”), still upholding the then fashionable Social Darwinist understanding of the world as an arena of

5. It was very possibly Goldwin Smith (1823-1910), a classical Victorian liberal and opponent of imperialism and Social Darwinism, who lived in Canada after 1871 and died there. A biographical account on him is accessible at <http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=41197> (accessed February 2, 2007).

the “struggle for survival.”

In another translated monograph, *Isipsegi ji daechamgeuk jegukchueui* (*The Great Tragedy of the 20th Century, Imperialism*; printed by Gwanghak seopo Publishers in September 1908), loosely based upon *World Politics at the End of the Nineteenth Century as Influenced by the Oriental Situation* by Paul Reinsch (Reinsch 1900),⁶ Byeon faithfully translated Reinsch’s passage which showed that both the Hegelian teleological view of the historical mission of the state and the evolutionary theory were simply used for legitimating the *Machtpolitik* of the European powers (BYMJJ 3: 47-8)⁷ and added a separate concluding section which dealt mostly with what Byeon aptly characterized as “imperialism’s scientific basis” — that is, the Social Darwinist theory. He wrote with palpable indignation that such scholars as Karl Pearson (1857-1936) who considered interracial competition “the only way to produce high-level civilization” were in fact saying that humanism was a deterrent to progress, as it checked the interpersonal and intergroup competition. Then, he suggested that since militarism placed a heavy burden of the military expenses upon the citizenry and undermined the democratic governance, it had to be checked through the strengthening of democratic institutions.

However, from this fragment it does not appear that Byeon was either able or willing at that point to challenge the view that “struggle for survival” was an objective “scientific truth;” all he was claiming was caution in “applying what might have been needed by the primitive humanity (“competition for survival” — V.T.) to the situation of the humanity of today and tomorrow” (BYMJJ 3: 71). So, unlike Goldwin Smith, Byeon remained a Social Darwinist to a certain extent in the late 1900s, if only because he was lacking any systematic, coherent alternative to the Spenserian view of explaining the laws of the biological and

6. This book was already translated into Japanese as *Rekkoku Shinsei Shina Seijiron* by Suzuki Toraō (Taihoku : Taiwan Nichinichi Shinposha, 1904). Another, rather abridged translation, was published even earlier, in December 1901, under the title *Teikokushugiron (On Imperialism)*, by Tokyo Senmon Gakko’s (Tokyo Specialist School; to become Waseda University the following year) Publishing Department. The translators were Takata Sanae (1860-1938), Waseda University’s future President (1923-1931), and Satō Saburō.

7. In fact, Reinsch mentioned Social Darwinist legitimation for imperialism only after having elaborated on more than three pages on the Machiavellian influences in modern international politics (Reinsch 1900, 14-7). As Machiavelli was relatively unknown in late 1900s Korea while Social Darwinism was high on the intellectual agenda, Byeon simply omitted the part on Machiavelli from his translation, while at the same time translating the Social Darwinism-related passages with a high degree of accuracy.

human realms.

But, despite all these contradictory views, Byeon still was enthusiastic about Goldwin Smith's polemical piece against the "three monsters" of plutocracy (*geumnyeok jeongchi*), expansion of military expenses (*gunbi jeongchaek*), and territorial imperialism (*jegukchueui*), as he needed arguments for buttressing his own belief, well expressed in his *Beopcheong hakkye* article entitled "General View of Imperialism" ("Jegukchueui pyeseol": Issue 20, January 1909), that imperialism represented the gravest danger for Korean people's survival in the 20th century and had to be opposed by boosting Korea's nationalism (*min-jokchueui*). As Byeon's own foreword to *Isipsegi ji daechamgeuk jegukchueui reveals*, both imperialism and nationalism were understood by him as indispensable expedient means for making a country rich and strong and thus capable to survive in modernity's jungles; but developing Korea's own imperialism, albeit an attractive dream, might require resources Korea did not possess:

Was my intention in translating this book to push our country onto the same imperialistic road Great Britain, Russia, Germany and USA are all walking by today? There is a perfect analogy between the actions by the individuals and by the states. If, while bound and trapped by somebody else's imperialism, you engage in arrogant self-aggrandizing and proclaim an imperialism of your own, it only means that you do not know [the limitations] of your resources. Generally, it is our own cherished dream that our own, Korean (*Daehan*), imperialism would enter the world's stage. Not for a day did my fantasies leave this magnificent pavilion of Korea's splendid, solemn, and dazzlingly bright [imperial] glory [of the future]. But now the moment is not opportune. What we have to proclaim now in a loud voice in great hurry, is civic nationalism (*gunghminjueui*). To elaborate about what civic nationalism is, it is the principle which will guarantee the Korean nation's survival. If the principle of the Korean nation's survival will daily acquire strength, it will surreptitiously melt away [the influence of] the alien imperialisms. And if the principle of the Korean nation's survival will reach its peak, it will give birth to the imperialism of our own. In a word, civic nationalism is the great Tao of fending off the enemies, the great ground for advancing forward in an enterprising, adventurous way. If the rulers and the ruled will diligently collaborate with each other, the future happiness of our country will be as long as a river and as deep as a sea (BYMJJ 3: 44).

The vision of “the nationalism of the weak” as a method of both fending off the foreign imperialisms and gradually nurturing one’s own, pioneered by Liang Qichao (1873-1929) and then forcefully advocated in Korea by Sin Chaeho in the last years of the 1900s (Sin 1981, 56-94), seems to have convinced Byeon and made him a strong proponent of the “national unity for the sake of survival.” He seemed, however, to differ with Sin in being much more explicit in the fact that, by its own intrinsic logic, nationalism develops into imperialism at a certain point. In an editorial entitled “Imperialism and Nationalism” (“Jegukchueui wa minjokchueui” *Daehan maeil sinbo*, May 28, 1909) and purportedly written by Sin Chaeho, the desirable form of nationalism is described as “expansive” (*paengchangjeok*), but any concrete appeals to the “offensive as the best form of defense” are lacking (Danjae Sin Chaeho seonsaeng ginyeom saeophoe 3: 108-9), although Sin Chaeho spared no efforts to emphasize and praise the truly “imperial” territorial greatness (possession of “Manchuria”) and military prowess of Korea’s ancient states (Danjae Sin Chaeho seonsaeng ginyeom saeophoe 4: 232-43). However, Byeon’s rather careful approach to the issue of Korea’s future “imperial” perspectives still contrasts with the unabashed imperialist rhetoric of many of his contemporaries. Choe Namseon, for example, in his first-ever piece of socio-political writing entitled “The Sacrificial Spirit” (“Heonsinjeok jeongsin” *Taegeuk hakbo*, issue 1-2, August-September 1906) was solemnly writing about the days when “we will fly the sacred Korean flag above the eight regions of the world, its wind blowing in four directions, the people of all the states on five continents kneeling down before its majestic power and all the living beings in the three worlds bathing in its glory” and appealed, in full seriousness, to his readers to “exert yourselves” in order to realize this noble purpose (Choe 1906).

However paradoxically it might seem to the modern reader, 1900s Korea, itself a victim of Japanese and Russian imperialisms, regularly bullied and pressurized also by all the other signatories to the infamous “unequal treaties,” had its younger generation of modernizing intellectuals sharing with their Japanese and Western kindred spirits the belief in the necessity and glory of expansion and conquests. The Social Darwinist logic of the imperialist world system was dutifully internalized by the majority of Korea’s “enlightenment” intellectuals. Seen against this backdrop, Byeon’s views, albeit hardly principally different from the conventions of the period, appear to contain some unconventional nuances. For example, in the time when “progressives” were tending to perceive the USA in a rather uncritically positive light, as a mighty industrial power and a

model of democracy and rule of the law (Ryu Yeongik et al. 2006, 125-70) and readily applied the racialist criteria to contemporary events, perceiving, for example, the Russo-Japanese War as a war of races and the “extermination of the weaker races” as a consequence of their own “racial inferiority” (Bak 2003, 31-43), Byeon, although obviously not being fully immune himself from the attitude of admiration towards the “civilized powers,” remarked in a way suggestive of a somewhat critical attitude that “the European social scholars consider the white race to be highly civilized and take it for granted that it leads all other races.” By he putting together the views of Theodore Roosevelt and Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855-1927) on the special role of the “Anglo-Saxon race” in the world, the French doctrine of its *mission civilisatrice* in the colonies, Kaiser Wilhelm II's conviction about the divine nature of Germany's world mission, Konstantin Pobedonostsev's (1827-1907) Pan-Slavism and American belief in the “manifest destiny” together, he showed in this way that America's fledgling imperialism and its deeply racist underpinning did not differ at all from the “imperialist monsters” of the Old Continent (BYMJJ 3: 69-70).

Summarizing the remarks of Reinsch about America's shift to the imperialist mode of international behavior after the Spanish-American War in 1898 (Reinsch 1900, 309-36), Byeon wrote that “although the number of those who think that America had given up its natural social and political role [by engaging in the imperialist wars] is not small, the majority of Americans regard such opinions as unpatriotic, enthusiastically supports the execution of the imperialist policies and considers the acquisition of Hawaii and Philippines America's national honor” (BYMJJ 3: 67) - a remarkably realistic portrayal of America's mainstream opinion in the beginning of the 20th century. It is unclear to what degree Byeon managed to extricate himself by 1910 from the racialist Social Darwinist beliefs so characteristic of his milieu, but it is quite clear that his original writings and translations contained ample material usable for criticizing both imperialism's “scientific theory” and its actions worldwide. Unwilling, unlike many other younger Korean intellectuals exposed to Western languages and cultures, to accept Christianity (BYMJJ 3: 102-3), attempting to strike a balance between “English individualism and German statism (*gukkajueui*)” (BYMJJ 3: 74-5) at a time when “individualism” was considered a bad word and “statism” was universally praised in the “progressive” milieu (Bak 2003, 72-95), Byeon should have looked to some degree unconventional to his circle, although the gap between him and the nationalistic mainstream was narrower in the late 1900s than in the 1920-30s.

Übermensch in Confucian Scholarly Attire? Byeon Yeongman as a “Cultural Nationalist” in the 1920-30s.

The complete demise of the Korean monarchy in 1910 came to Byeon as a major shock on socio-political and intellectual levels and as a personal blow as well. As he confirmed in a letter to Jo Geungseop in 1923, in the immediate aftermath of the 1910 annexation of Korea he “felt depressed and worn out, unable to understand in what sort of human world we live, unable to write anything in harmony with my intentions” (BYMJJ 1: 280). Anecdotal evidence suggests that, as a practicing advocate, he felt constantly humiliated by the discriminatory attitudes and arrogance of his Japanese colleagues (Bak and Im 1966, 291-6). His attempt to participate in the defense of An Junggeun (1879-1910) was thwarted by the Japanese (Choe 2003, 61-2), and both his younger brother Yeongtae and best friend Sin Chaeho left Korea for self-imposed exile in China (Choe 2003, 63). Bitterly disappointed in his erstwhile optimism on the prospects of Korean nationalism as a solution to the imperialist threat, Byeon turned to writing private essays in classical Chinese — without thinking about publication for the time being. Typical among them, “On Death” (“Weonsa”), written in August 1910 and published 13 years later in *Dongmyeong*, concomitantly with Korea’s forcible annexation, exhibits a turn towards a sort of “spiritualism,” a traditional way of expression without much tangible presence of modern ideas and concepts being its hallmark. Obviously trying to mobilize all the strength of deeply cherished personal beliefs in order to overcome the shock after the loss of the country, Byeon asserts the relativity of death in his small treatise:

If I die singing — the echo of my songs will be spread around by the spring winds

If I will be buried into the earth in anger — the remnants of my indignation will survive hanged upon the eagles’ claws

The mountains standing in silence with their arms folded — are my reverent, reticent appearance

The waves on the waters and the whistle of the winds — all show me gushing forth to the heaven.

The twinkling stars on the evening sky — are my meditating look

And is not the sun rising every morning my virtuous face? (...)

I do not have to mention the Buddhist theory of incarnations into snakes

and cattle to explain that I never die — not for a moment. So, I do not have to lament death (BYMJJ 1: 89-91).

In this pantheistic piece, the human “I” identified also with the essence of the imperishable Tao takes truly cosmic features. In yet another philosophical essay, “I see it this way” (“Yeosigwan,” 1909, first published in 1923), Byeon adopted a pantheistic position on the metaphysical issues claiming that everything in the universe, including its divine, spiritual substance (*yeong*), is created from the primeval cosmic energy (*inon*), and death means just a reconfiguration of this energy. On ethical issues, he took an eudaemonical stand, considering altruism a logical consequence of humans’ desire to guarantee a more stable sort of happiness for themselves by sharing it with the others (BYMJJ 1: 646-58). The “spiritualism” of the unpublished texts of the early 1910s is hard to discover in his published, vernacular Korean writings of the 1920-30s in its pure form, although it is largely preserved in private letters to his friends. But the emphasis upon an individual’s “character,” and spiritual efforts and abilities to transcend the mundane remained and developed into a particular sort of secular personalism based on a synthesis of “modern” and traditional views of the individuality.

After approximately six years of itinerant life in China and Southeast Asia (1913-1919),⁸ Byeon, obviously disappointed about the prospects of the émigré independence movement, returned to Gyeongseong to an emphatically apolitical life, which combined private tutoring in classical Chinese, close ties of friendship and exchange of polemical correspondence in classical Chinese with Jo Geungseop and his disciples, lots of poetizing both in Chinese and vernacular Korean (in the form of *sijo* poems in particular), and occasional contributions to Choe Namseon’s *Dongmyeong*, Cheondogyo’s *Gaebyeok*, Bang Eungmo’s *Jogwang* and some other journals, as well as to newspapers — typically *Donga ilbo* and *Joseon ilbo* (Kim 2004, 22-38). Together with classical Chinese essays written for a small circle of friends and circulated privately, these sporadic media contributions give us an interesting portrait of the ideological evolution of the erstwhile denouncer of Western imperialism.

An avid student of world affairs who made himself a name in the late 1900s by translating two foreign monographs apparently from their English originals,

8. He worked successively in two pro-Yuan Shikai Beijing newspapers, *Huangzhong Ribao* and *Beijing Riri Sinbao*, from 1913-1917 and then traveled to Singapore and Malaysia in 1917-1918 together with his new friend Hong Myeongheui (Choe 2006, 199-220)[0].

Byeon continued to search outside of Korea and the East Asian region for some blueprints of the solutions for Korea's problems. In an essay evidently written in the 1920s on Gandhi's non-collaboration (translated as *mulhyeop*), he praisingly described Gandhi's appeal "not to work for Britain, not to wear British-made clothes, not to take the British-made foods to the mouth, not to use British machines, not to receive British education, not to take lawsuits to the British courts, and not to receive treatment from the British doctors," and then made it clear that Gandhi's non-cooperation was not simply about rejecting British colonialism.

Westernization is spreading throughout the whole world, with its exclusive worship of the things material, and we Asians already began to feel disgust about those calamitous developments and feel ill due to their harmful effects. Those Europeans cut down the mountains, bore tunnels through the hills, and search for the precious metals, iron and coal everywhere they reach, thus damaging the surface of the earth to the extent that no part of earth is left intact any longer. They also build their steam-powered factories everywhere and gather men and women there to work day and night, so that the sooty smoke covers all the four directions and the thunder-like roar reaches heaven. What are they going to do in such a manner? If we observe their schemes attentively, we will understand that they simply wish to strengthen themselves and oppress the others, so that to prevail over everybody else in the whole world, without a thought given to the well-being of the ordinary folks. If we really wish to stop the flow of their violent domination and practice our upright ways, there is nothing better than refusing to help them and simply doing whatever suits us. (BYMJJ 1: 102-103)

But, despite writing this private piece which he called "proto-environmentalist" from today's position and which visibly took issue with the nature of industrial modernity as such and not simply with its colonialist extension, and despite calling Gandhi's intentions "bright, brilliant and great, certainly of enormous help to his motherland" (BYMJJ 1: 103-5), Byeon was also stating explicitly that non-cooperation in the Indian manner would not work in Korea under the prevalent circumstances of the day (BYMJJ 3: 126). In an ambitious opus entitled "In the End, the Emphasis upon the Personal Character — if we are to revive ourselves" ("Gyeolguk eun ingyeok bonwi — uri ga saranajamyeon" *Dongmyeong*, Issue

34, April 1923), he somewhat belittlingly characterized all the efforts of the contemporary nationalist movement at the encouragement of Korean factory production, improvement of education, and development of the national arts as “superficial,” and then stated that to encourage, improve, and develop anything, Korea first needed “real men” — not the physical “creatures of hair, bones and flesh” but “the hot-blooded, spirited, really brave people, prepared to sacrifice themselves to the very last moment for the sake of what is really good and true, (...) prepared to take the heavy burden and persistently go their way, if somewhat slowly, (...) prepared to live the life under the national consciousness, discovering themselves inside the nation and the nation inside themselves.” Apprehensive of being “mistaken for a follower of Thomas Carlyle’s hero worship theory,” Byeon immediately qualifies his paean to the “real men” saying that their “diligence, righteous indignation, compassion, euphoric joy, ecstasy, prayers and activities will give birth to manifold people of equal character” and that the advent of “real men” is possible “only among the people who do not mistake obedience for disgrace and understand that overcoming oneself is a golden opportunity to set the course on freedom” (BYMJJ 3: 126-9). In other words, Byeon was hoping for a “moral regeneration” of the whole Joseon society, a well-known topic for modern nationalisms which tend to conceive of societies as “moral communities.”

Byeon’s piece entitled “First of All, Reconstruction of our Character” (“Mueotpoda uri eui pumseong gaejo” *Dongmyeong*, Issue 38, May 1923) concretized his thoughts on what kind of “moral individual” he considered a “prerequisite for our national existence.” In comparison with the much more famous piece on “national reconstruction” (*minjok gaejo*) that Yi Gwangsu (1892-1950) published a year earlier (*Gaebyeok*, Issue 23, May 1922), Byeon appears to be a relatively liberal nationalist thinker. While Yi asserted from the beginning that a “reconstructed” individual should eschew the private (*sa*) in favor of the public (*gong*), should exhaust him/herself in the service of the society, and should “love” the organization (*danche*) he or she belonged to (be it state or religious group) and obey its leader (*jidoja*), Byeon put a somewhat more moderate demand of just transcending the personal, provincial, and regional loyalties in favor of the national “unity” (*hwahap*) (BYMJJ 3: 135; Yi 1962, 206-9). While Yi was envisioning a strong, cohesive (*dangyeoltoen*) civic association based upon “sacred precepts” of morality (Yi 1962, 190-202), Byeon listed “discipline” (*gyuyul*) among the qualities Koreans supposedly “lacked,” but also added that he preferred the liberal ways of the German post-war reconstruc-

tion under the Weimar Republic to what he called the “procrustean methods of Bolshevik Russia” (BYMJJ 3: 135-6). Then, similar to Yi’s appeal to “nurture industriousness, thriftiness and spirit of professionalism” (Yi 1962, 202-3, 205), Byeon was urging his readers to cultivate “diligence” (*geunmyeon*), but at the same time, in a manner today’s critic may judge to be almost anti-Semitic, he was writing elsewhere that Koreans should not model themselves after “the Jews who worship Mammon as their God and work to increase their wealth day and night without having a thought about decency or good reputation” (BYMJJ 3: 126). In an intellectual milieu which strongly tended to privilege the demand of the “collective” over the freedoms and needs of the individual (Bak 2003, 137-40) Byeon was stubbornly preaching the classical liberal maxim: “collective discipline should be applied only to the degree it does not infringe upon the freedom of the collective’s every member” (BYMJJ 3: 135).

A literary man to the very marrow of his bones, Byeon attempted to buttress his liberal individualism through references to the role of individuality in literature. In the last chapter entitled “Expression of the Individuality” (“Gaeseong eui pyohyeon”) of his “Five Lectures on Literature” (“Munhak ogang,” - *Yeomyeong munye seonjip*, Gyeongseong: Yeomyeongsa, 1928), he takes a large citation from William Blake’s (1757-1827) *Descriptive Catalogue* (Erdman 1988, 550):

The great and golden rule of art, as well as of life, is this: That the more distinct, sharp, and wirey the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art; and the less keen and sharp, the greater is the evidence of weak imitation, plagiarism, and bungling. Great inventors, in all ages, knew this (...). The want of this determinate and bounding form evidences the want of idea in the artist’s mind, and the pretence of the plagiary in all its branches. How do we distinguish the oak from the beech, the horse from the ox, but by the bounding outline? How do we distinguish one face or countenance from another, but by the bounding line and its infinite inflexions and movements? What is it that builds a house and plants a garden, but the definite and determinate? What is it that distinguishes honesty from knavery, but the hard and wirey line of rectitude and certainty in the actions and intentions? Leave out this l[i]ne and you leave out life itself; all is chaos again, and the line of the almighty must be drawn out upon it before man or beast can exist (BYMJJ 3: 155-156).

Byeon explains that “line” here should be understood also in a more abstract, general sense: as a boundary between different individualities and also as an attempt to visualize the individual, the personal, and the peculiar. Only a harmonic unity between necessarily different individualities produces “national literature” according to Byeon; and those whose individuality is “childishly” underdeveloped do not have to overcome the non-existent differences but are also unable to produce anything creatively (BYMJJ 3: 157). In addition to this, Byeon translated and published in 1923 in *Dongmyeong* (Issue 29) Blake’s paean to human as a “thinking reed,” *The Fly*:

(...) If thought is life
 And strength and breath,
 And the want
 Of thought is death;

Then am I
 A happy fly.
 If I live,
 Or if I die. (BYMJJ 3: 441)

Once creativity is rooted in the ability of the individual to think independently, to defend his or her peculiarity from being leveled off by the “common standard,” then genial outsiders, even if seen as insane by the crowd, should be treasured for their innovative uncommonness. That seems to be the logic behind Byeon’s deep interest in Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) whom he described as a “great mad genius, perverse artist of originality, sharpness, mysteriousness and sorrow, who ventured into previously uncharted waters” (BYMJJ 3: 170) and whose “spirit” (*hondam*) Byeon identified in the stormy life and uncompromising character of Sin Chaeho (BYMJJ 3: 222). In his *Donga ilbo* article, “A Typical Madman” (“Jeonhyeongjeok gwangin” - the fourth article in the series *Saegangyeong*, serialized between March 24-May 19, 1931), he wrote down by memory, in a rather imprecise form, several quotes from (apparently Chinese or Japanese translations of) *Die frohliche Wissenschaft* (1887), *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* (1886) and *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1883-85).⁹ The quotes

9. A pioneering Korean translation by Bae Sangha of some fragments from *Also Sprach*

mostly dealt with the superior individuals, or *Übermenschen*, of the future - manly, self-disciplined, able to overcome their imperfections and to “love the peace as a way of preparing for the new battles,” free from the lower instincts of pity and naive beliefs in the coming of a better, more humanistic society (BYMJJ 3: 170-1).

It looks as if in the world of colonial modernity — the world of boring, inhuman discipline, systemized humiliation and daily battles for physical survival, where teachers were reduced to being “school policemen,” controlling and beating the children, and repressing those with stronger personalities and uncommon desires, where overproduced school graduates were reduced to “slavishly” begging for scarce jobs, where Christian preachers and elders used to indulge in womanizing or interest themselves more in saving money than in following Christ’s “revolutionary teachings,” and where the rich were completely alien to any sort of social concerns (BYMJJ 3: 202-18) — Nietzsche’s challenge to the herd collectivity and modern conventions appeared to Byeon a personal spiritual cure, if not a way of saving those few who could be saved, from the oppression of Korea’s quotidian life. Although, unlike many other intellectuals of colonial Korea, Byeon was not a great fan of Kropotkin, his behavior suggests a deep-seated animosity to any externally imposed organizational discipline. He criticized Stalin’s USSR in 1936 for “subjecting even the literature and arts to the full state control after having liberated the masses from the yoke of the tradition” (BYMJJ 3: 277) and was consistently critical about the activity of Korea’s Communists, both before and after 1945 (BYMJJ 3: 303-5). But at the same time the anecdotal evidence suggests that he was scathingly critical of Syngman Rhee’s dictatorial rule as well, and of his brother Yeongtae’s decision to join Syngman Rhee’s camp (Bak and Im 1966, 282-90). As an “anarchist outside of anarchism,” he might have seen in Nietzsche a theory that made sense of his

Zarathustra appeared in the 1st issue of *Sinheung* in 1929. In the early 1920s Nietzsche was mentioned by some Korean authors who apparently discovered him while studying in Japan. He was sometimes cited as a proponent of “superhuman” individualism, but otherwise paid relatively little attention to: for example, Bak Dalseong’s piece “Geupkyeokhi hyangsangtoe neun Joseon cheongnyeon eui sasanggye” in the Issue 2 of *Gaebyeok*, July 1920 (Kim 1980, 533-6). Only in the 1930s, Kim Hyeongjun (1908-?), a socialist activist who afterwards became North Korea’s Vice-Minister of Culture and Propaganda in the early 1950s and then was purged together with Bak Heonyeong (1900-1955), wrote several articles on Nietzsche’s philosophy in the monthly journal *Nongmin* he was editing (for example, “Niche cheorhak eseo pon choingwan” — Vol. 3, No.1, January 1932). Byeon Yeongman was thus one of those colonial Korean thinkers who may be credited with “discovering” Nietzsche on a relatively early stage.

own behavioral practice and became one of the very few Korean colonial interpreters of the German philosopher.

A staunch believer in the individuality of the person, Byeon extended the same logic to the peoples and cultures as well. Like most nationalists elsewhere, Byeon believed in the existence of essentialized “national characters.” That does not mean that he was fond of writing laudatory accounts of “Koreanness.” On the contrary, not dissimilar to Yi Gwangsu, he defined the “Korean national character” in its contemporary manifestation as a combination of “transcendent purity” with brutality, a lack of critical abilities, a failure to submit oneself to an authority or a cause, and a weakness, and Koreans “remaining prisoners of Hong Gildong-like utopian visions and worshippers of [rebels like] Hong Gyeongnae” (BYMJJ 3: 174). In contrast to this, Byeon emphasized the “vitality” of the people of his “other motherland,” China, - people who “are already the financial masters in British Malaysia and who are succeeding in New York in the same way they are succeeding in home” (BYMJJ 3: 187-8). But, despite all the criticism, Byeon remained a patriot, both of the regional tradition — he considered the Confucian belief in the “Great Unity” (*datong*) to be superior to the “extremities of the modern communism” (BYMJJ 3: 111) and enjoyed the “earthly flavor” of Du Fu (712-770) poems just like he enjoyed the “sorrowful beauty” of Turgenev’s novels (BYMJJ 3: 160) — and of its Korean version.

Byeon’s Korea was that of classical high culture: “Bak Jiweon’s literature, Kim Jeongheui’s calligraphy, Kim Taegyeong’s poetry, and Sin Chaeho’s historiography” (BYMJJ 3: 161), as he succinctly put it. Korea’s high culture was treasured by Byeon the individualist; first and foremost, for the strength to preserve a person’s integrity from the violence of the times it gave to its truthful adepts. In his classical Chinese biography of Kim Taegyeong (1850-1927), for example, Byeon extolled Kim’s friends Yi Namgyu, Yi Geonchang (1852-1898), and Hwang Hyeon (1855-1910) for their ability to “extricate themselves from the flow of the current mundane life” (BYMJJ 1: 483). But he was not completely alien to the “lower” layers of Korea’s tradition either. In a humorous piece, “Lamentations about the Goblins” (“Dokkaebi taryeong” *Donggwang, Issue 37*, September 1932), he lamented the “extinction” of Korean folklore’s goblins (*dokkaebi*) which, according to Byeon, were, before 1910, even able to haunt the resident Western missionaries and force them to compromise their principles and send for a shaman in order to conduct an exorcism. What came in *dokkaebi*’s place, depressed Byeon to the utmost — “gamblers, cafe girls, failing water service, senseless police of thoughts, bridges which collapse as soon as

they are built, reminders on the payment of taxes,” and manifold other symbols of Korea’s colonial “modern civilization” (BYMJJ 3: 250-2).

Concluding Thoughts: Colonial Korea’s Liberal, Individualist “Cultural Nationalism”?

Amidst darkness of the day, manifold sparrows are chirping,
 On a white night, a crane is singing.
 Exhausting yourself, you went your lonely way,
 Why will you bother yourself with the thoughts of your posthumous
 repute?

The above lines from Byeon’s poem in memory of Sin Chaeho (BYMJJ 1: 490) show quite well his view of what a worthy individuality should be: ability to plod the lonely, difficult path without concerning oneself with whatever the “sparrows” around might be thinking. This view, solidly grounded in the Confucian understanding of individual dignity and freedom (Chan 2002, 290), had also its modern Western underpinnings — Western non-conformists from the literary and philosophical worlds, Blake and Nietzsche among them, took their places of honor in Byeon’s personal pantheon. Byeon did not reach these conclusions overnight. It took him more than a decade of witnessing old Korea’s demise, Japan’s “sabre rule” in its new colony, and the vicissitudes of China’s revolution to reflect critically on his own admiration of German and Italian nationalisms in the late 1900s and understand that “Spartan discipline or German military glory” hardly were a desirable future for Korea (BYMJJ 3: 126).

Then, what system should Korea aspire to in the new, modern world? Not being a systematic socio-political thinker, Byeon never seriously undertook to answer this question. He was quite clear about what he disliked and bitterly criticized not only Korea’s colonial modernity which “degraded school teachers into school policemen” but also the “Philistine American society, which takes Mammon for its God, possesses no critical abilities and uncultured to the extent of organizing trials against Darwinian evolutionists” (BYMJJ 3: 232), as well as the Bolshevik manner of reforming society “as violently as if they plane a board,” although he simultaneously agreed that “Communism as such contains much of the truth, and abolishing private ownership of the land is a measure

which should be introduced in other countries too, although not in such a violent way” (BYMJJ 3: 139). Moreover, while being critical about both American capitalism and Soviet communism, Byeon managed to stay aloof of the hysterical anti-Westernism and anti-Communism of Japan's wartime propaganda in the late 1930s-early 1940s, owing, first and foremost, to his aversion towards all sort of totalizing collectivity, including the Japanese “total mobilization society” and also to the breadth and inclusiveness of his cultural interests.

But, if the police-state “modernity” of Japanese colonialism, “extremist capitalism” of the American type, and “extremist revolution” in Bolshevik style are all rejected, then whither Korea? Adoring Blake's aphorism that “the fool shall not enter into heaven, let him be ever so holy” (BYMJJ 3: 138), Byeon seemingly aspired for a balanced liberal system which would allow the majority of Koreans what neither traditional socio-political settings nor the authoritarian colonial state ever allowed them, namely the benefit of free, unrestrained criticism, and would fully tolerate those who refuse to “play fools” along with the (inescapably conformist) majority. But it is hard to find in his writings any concrete indication of how he envisioned this sort of transformation. For the cultural elite, Byeon preached the value of cultural tolerance, of rationally, selectively adopting both traditional and Western cultural elements. Being sarcastic about the blind worshippers of things American who were “only good in chattering with each other in America's first-rate provincial accent, and only in the places where no Americans were in sight” (BYMJJ 3: 232-3), he was at the same time refuting Jo Geungseop's traditionalist claim that the writings were to simply function as “tools of moral influence,” and clearly stated that we wished to create the writings which would be authentically his own, and that pressurizing oneself to follow the externally imposed norms amounted to accepting falsehood (Kim 2004, 74-105). It was hardly accidental that Choe Namseon in his memorial poem cited above compared Byeon to Jeong Inbo, as both were trying with only limited success to fill up the enormous gap between the “old” regional East Asian culture and the “new” global one.

While having earned, already from the time of translating into Korean the two Western books on imperialism in 1908, quite a formidable reputation in cultural circles, Byeon was a marginal man in the political sense of the world: his lack of close connections with any significant political grouping being one explanation for the fact that he had been ignored by South Korean scholarship until the 1990s. He was an odd bird for more mainstream “cultural nationalists” on the right, such as Choe Namseon, who condemned him for “scribbling the

letters for simple amusement” even on such an occasion as Byeon’s funeral. He was completely ignored by both Communists and anarchists on the left, his visible sympathy towards more egalitarian ways of distributing wealth notwithstanding. But now, as the marginal critics of modern realities are attracting more interest both from scholars and from the wider public, it remains to be hoped that Byeon’s voice, tragically solemn when he spoke on the fate of those few who “extricated themselves from the flow of the current mundane life” and paid a price for this, and acrimoniously ironic when he talked about the unbearable vulgarity of conventional life in colonial Korea, will be heard at last.

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