

Pyŏn Yŏngman (San'gang; 1889-1954) – Colonial Korea's Alternative Modernity?

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1. Introduction: lost in categorization?

One of the questions that often baffle a student of Korea's modern thought is why what one can call "the modern canon" – as formed principally by South Korean scholarship of the 1950s-80s – 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 pon Han'guk munhwasa. Kŭndaep'yŏn* (1984) – on which well-acclaimed *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization* (ed. by P.Lee, Columbia University Press, 1993) is based, – takes the essays by Pak Ŭnsik (1859-1925), Sin Ch'aeho (1880-1936), Chang Chiyŏn (1864-1920), and Chu Sigyŏng (1876-1914) as the representative specimens of Korea's "patriotic enlightenment thought" before 1910, and then once again makes Pak, Sin, and several others, mostly either religious thinkers (Han Yongun, Kim Kyosin, etc.) or nationalist historians and linguists (Mun Ilp'yŏng, Yi Yunjae, etc.), into the representatives of the "ideology of the nationalist movement under the Japanese imperialism" (Yi & Sin 1984). While some others – prodigious translator and textbooks' writer Hyŏn Ch'ae (1886-1925) or one of the founders of the discipline of cultural history, An Hwak (1886-1946), for example – are, at least, briefly mentioned, many personalities who were thought to belong to the leading literary figures by their contemporaries, are not even given a single notice. And even among those who used to be conventionally ignored by the scholars, Pyŏn Yŏngman's case is somewhat extreme. He was the man who was thought by many of the 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 Ch'oe Namsŏn (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 spirits' work.
But I won't call [your] *Sisaejŏn* 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 amusement?

Widang is gone, but you, San'gang, 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?

Much of this text looks enigmatic for these unfamiliar with Pyŏn Yŏngman's literary production, the knowledge of which was obviously *de rigueur* for the part of the intellectual public Ch'oe Namsŏn was addressing. It will be explained further in this presentation. What catches a reader's eye here immediately, is equating of Pyŏn Yŏngman with Widang – that is, Chŏng Inbo (1893-1950), the last rightful heir to later Chosŏn's Kanghwa lineage of Wang Yangming philosophy, who 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 Ch'oe Namsŏn's stature could easily mention Pyŏn Yŏngman as Widang's equal, shows quite well what Pyŏn's

perceived standing was in his own days. Then, how should the almost complete silence on Pyŏn in South Korean scholarship before the 1990s be explained¹?

One of the reasons for Pyŏn's "low visibility" was probably that, for Korea's humanitarian scholarship notoriously obsessed with *undongsa* ("movement history")-style descriptions of the organized activities, Pyŏn's social behaviour might have looked intolerably anarchic. It is not that Pyŏn totally eschewed any participation in institutionalized social or political movements. In his self-imposed, temporary exile in Shanghai in the 1910s, he was an activist of *Tongjesa* – an independence movement organization founded in July 1912 by Korean émigré intellectuals under the leadership of such senior figures as Pak Ŭnsik and a Korean friend of China's republican movement, Sin Kyusik (1879-1922) – and collaborated there closely with his contemporaries who were then to stand in the centre of Korea's intellectual and social life – Hong Myŏnghŭi (1888-1968), Cho Soang (1887-1958), the above-mentioned Chŏng Inbo, and young day's friend Sin Ch'aeho among them (Kang 1999, 91-121). Then, Pyŏn participated in several literary groups after 1945, and was among the first generation of the newly established Sŏnggyun'gwan University teachers – and, for several months in 1946, even the headmaster of Myŏngnyun College (*chŏnmun hakkyo*), which was Sŏnggyun'gwan University's predecessor (Kim 2004, 42). And last but not least – Pyŏn Yŏngman's two famed brothers, scholar of English turned South Korea's Prime Minister (1954-56) Pyŏn Yŏngt'ae (1892-1969) and poet and translator (of Balzac and other European authors) Pyŏn Yŏngno (1897-1961) also might have added some weight to his name. Still, unlike Sin Ch'aeho – the man whose friendship he cherished and whose integrity he adored – Pyŏn was no real political activist; and, in contrast to his two towering contemporaries, Ch'oe Namsŏn and Chŏng Inbo, he was never really interested in lofty musings on Tan'gun, "national spirit" and the greatness of Korea's antiquity. Tan'gun, for one example, was mentioned passingly and just several times in the whole corps of Pyŏn's writings, although Pyŏn also wrote a sacrificial text for a Taejonggyo shrine in 1953 (PYMCJ vol. 1, 113, 136, 457, 593, vol. 3, 304, 306-307). He was certainly a nationalist thinker in a broader meaning of the word – a literatus striving to define "Korea" as an "imagined community" possessing its own, essentialized "spiritual character" – but his way of defining the eternal "essence of the nation" hardly tied in with more conventional lines of national imagination. In an essay in classical Chinese, "Kwangsaeŋnok" ("Records of [my] Observations of Life", presumed to be written in 1910-20s), Pyŏn defines, for example, Koreans, Jews and India's peoples as "the peoples of the spirit (*yŏng*) and heart (*sim*)", contrasting "Christ's, Buddha's and Wŏnhyo's philosophy of the heart" to the "moralism" of the Chinese and "material rationality" of the 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" (*pugukkangbyŏng*) method of fulfilling Korea's great mission in the future is explicitly rejected, thus making Pyŏn's prophesies of Korea's future centrality sound rather abstract (PYMCJ vol. 1, 106-121). A mystical thinker who was going "to take spirit, and not a [given] geographic region as the criterion" (PYMCJ vol. 1, 119), hardly could expect a place in the nationalist pantheon. Another, and deeper trouble with Pyŏn for the modern scholars may be the fact that, in the humanitarian studies' universe so neatly divided into the realms of "national literature" (*kungmunhak*) and "Chinese literature and Chinese classics' scholarship" (*hanmunhak*), into the fields of the research upon "Communist/socialist", "anarchist", and "nationalist" movements and ideologies, Pyŏn'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 favourite pieces from one language into another – *Sisaejŏn*, mentioned above by Ch'oe Namsŏn in a depreciating way, was, for example, written in 1931 in classical Chinese and then translated with certain textual changes by Pyŏn himself to be serialized in monthly *Tonggwang* (October 1932, January-February 1933) entitled "Isanghan tongmu" ("Strange Comrades") – Pyŏn freely traversed boundaries between what was supposed to be "national" Korean literature, and what was often disparagingly referred to as "leftover of Chosŏn Dynasty's Sinophilia". Unrelated to the orthodox academic lineages dating back to the Chosŏn times, and polemizing actively against his good friends in the established world of classical Chinese scholarship, such as Cho Kŭngsŏp (1873-1933), who reduced the realm of the literature to simply

¹ First academic articles on Pyŏn emerged only in early 1990s (Ch'oe 1992), and the translation of his "Collected Works" (hereafter referred to as PYMCJ) into modern Korean was completed and published very recently, in July 2006 (Sŏnggyun'gwan University, Daedong Institute for Korean Studies 2006).

“representing Tao in the letters”, Pyŏn still believed in the validity of the “old” as an antidote to the unparalleled barbarity of the “new world” – and at the same time mastered European literature and thought to a degree rarely seen in the intellectual world of colonial Korea (Sin 2003, 428-429). While today’s scholarship on colonial Korea is structured along the precisely defined ideological and political boundaries, Pyŏn 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 not also develop into “the art for art’s sake”. Pyŏn’s avowed ideal was “the art for life – life itself becoming an art”, and it evidently had its background in Buddhist or Taoist views on life’s ideals, as Pyŏn’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 (PYMCJ vol. 3, 242-243). Just as Pyŏn’s civilizational or political orientation, the genre belonging of many of his works defies any attempt at classification by “modern” standards. Depreciated by Ch’oe Namsŏn as “mere amusement”, *Sisaejŏn* 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, the other having self-sacrificially tried to save the unlucky friend from prison (PYMCJ vol. 1, 471-478). The tale, 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 manoeuvring between ostensibly pre-modern forms and definitely modernity-informed content, Pyŏn represents a challenge for the established canons of Korea’s post-colonial humanitarian scholarship. In this presentation, I will limit myself primarily to the socio-political aspect of Pyŏn’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 Bolshevik version of socialism included. I hope that shedding new light on Pyŏn’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 Pyŏn 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, engaged in learning and sports (Pak 1997). But, as Pyŏn’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 Pyŏn’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.

2. Fighting the Monsters: Pyŏn’s debut in the late 1900s.

Pyŏn was born in what is central Seoul (Sunhwadong, near the Legation Quarters in Chŏngdong) now (Pak & Im 1966, 293), into a relatively obscure *yangban* (gentry) family, which owned some land in Puch’ŏn, to the south-west from Seoul. His father Pyŏn Chŏngsang (1861-1935), a self-made man in late Chosŏn Dynasty style, managed not only to obtain some lucrative magisterial (*kunsu*) positions in the province (including, for example, the post of the magistrate in Kyŏnghŭng, an important trade centre near both Chinese and Russian borders) and climb up to the section head (*ch’amsŏgwan*) level at the prestigious Foreign Ministry (*Oebu*), but also to cultivate close friendship with some prominent Neo-Confucian literati of much higher standing by Korean nobility’s standards (Kuksa p’yŏnch’an wiwŏnhoe 1984, 400; Kim 2004, 10-11). One of Pyŏn Chŏngsang’s distinguished friends, relatively conservative Neo-Confucian scholar Yi Namgyu (1855-1907), known also as Sin Ch’aeho’s mentor

and an ardent patriot murdered in the end by the Japanese troops, took care of Pyŏn Yŏngman's basic training in classical Chinese. Then, as many other children of the "enlightened" officialdom of the 1900s, Pyŏn entered the modernized school system, and, after a one year stint at the Law Officers' Training School (*Pŏpkwan Yangsŏngso*; graduated on January 14, 1906), entered Posŏng College's Law Department, to graduate in approximately two years (on January 29, 1908). What followed then were a brief secretarial employment with Kyŏngsŏng (Seoul) District Court, a year of working as a judge (*p'ansa*) in Mokp'o (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 into a voluntary, self-imposed exile to China (Ch'oe 2003, 59-63). During less than three years of receiving legal training and working with the modernized legal institutions, that is, between March 1907 and August 1909, Pyŏn published two translated monographs and made 17 contributions, mainly to less-known journals published by students' voluntary academic associations. This, rather prodigious, output, albeit more of polemical than of academic sort, made Pyŏn, an obscure young lawyer, into a minor public intellectual already in his early twenties.

The two foreign books on imperialism he translated in an abridged form being a somewhat special case, Pyŏn's pronouncements on the things modern in late 1900s hardly exhibited much of 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 *Kiho Hŭnghakhoe Wŏlbo* (*Monthly of Kiho Society for the Promotion of Learning*; Vol. 1, August 1908), entitled "Oh, How Great Education is!" ("Taehokyoyuk"), 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 predominance 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' 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 (*kukhon*) (PYMCJ vol. 3, 91).

Admiration of the nationalist (*kuksujŏk*), spiritual (*chŏngsinjŏk* – of course, "nation's spirit" is meant), and warlike (*musajŏk*) ways of educating modern citizenry perceived as the main secret of European and Japanese "wealth and power", and ardent wish to have the Korean citizenry too educated in statist (*kukkajŏk*), militaristic (*sangmujŏk*) ways conducive to a success in the international struggles (*segyejŏk punt'u*) (PYMCJ vol. 3, 92) – all this 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 Ŭnsik, who even entitled his editorial for the inaugural issue of the monthly *Sŏu* (*Friends from the West[ern Region]*; first published in December 1906) "Once Education is not Encouraged, the Survival Cannot be Achieved" ("Kyoyuk i puhŭng imyŏn saengjon ŭl pudŭk"), and his friend Sin Ch'aeho, who envisioned the "new" education as both patriotic and militaristic (Yun 2001, 86-158), Pyŏn viewed the modern education as a method of "transforming the weak literati of Korea living in a sweet dream" into nationalist and physically strong modern citizens.

Pyŏn's early views on the capitalist development are hardly original as well. In an article entitled "Commercial vigour" ("Sangŏpchŏk punt'u") and published in June 1908 in the 13th issue of *Pŏpchŏng hakkye* (*World of Legal and Political Studies*, a small journal published by Posŏng College's students), he assured that the "commercial wars" were taking place of the battlefield warfare of Napoleonic and Bismarckian kind and that the human vigour, "the saintly [quality] which civilizes the world" should assume the commercial character in the "epoch of commerce" (*sangŏp sidae*), 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” will be to nurture East’s infantile industries under the state protection, ensure the favourable balance of trade in the industrial goods, and inculcate the merchants with patriotic, nationalist ideas (PYMCJ vol. 3, 76-80). Another article, “On industry” (“Kongöp e ch’wihayö nonham”), in the 16th issue of the same journal (September 1908), against stated that the only way to a successful commerce was protection of the fledgling industrial production by the state able to extricate itself from the ties of political dependency upon the foreign commercial forces (PYMCJ vol. 3, 93-95). This appeal to state interventionism and protectionism in spirit of Friedrich List (1789-1946) 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 Korean “protectorate” state in 1908 lacked any real abilities to conduct an economical policy independent of the Japanese power. Pyön’s protectionism probably suited 1900s Korea better than, for example, the attitudes of his father’s good acquaintance Yu Kiljun (1856-1914), who, while maintaining that the state was duty bound to protect and educate the traders, abstained, however, from appeals to the direct state intervention aimed at boosting the emerging industrial economy (Kim 1998, 210-265). But the criticism of the *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 Kyokashö (Economy Textbook)*, Tokyo: Bungakusha, 1901) by Wadakagi Kenzo (1860-1919), which was translated into Korean twice, first by Kim Ugyun in 1907 (as *Kyöngje wöllon*) and then by Yi Byöngt’ae in 1908 (as *Kyöngjehak kyogwasö*, Taegu: Kwangmunsa, 1908), contained explicit and strong criticism of the “extremes of the economical freedom” (Yi 1985, 51-125). Editorials criticising 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 *Taehan Maeil Sinbo* (Korean Daily News) which was the strongest proponent of industrial protectionism in late 1900s Korea (O 2002, 391-395, 412-417). Pyön’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 Pyön’s vision of modernity in the late 1900s, it was the ferocity with which he castigated imperialism – the Western imperialism, first and foremost. When Ch’oe Namsön wrote in his funeral poem that Pyön “has dragged the three monsters of our times into everybody’s sight”, he was alluding to what should be considered Pyön’s first real claim for fame – an anti-imperialist book by a Westerner, whose name was translated in Chinese characters as “Samil Kadöngmun” (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: <http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=41197>), which Pyön translated and published in visibly adapted form in March 1908 with Kwanghak söp’o Publishers in Seoul, under the title *Segye samkwemul (World’s Three Monsters)*. The book was obviously out of sync with Pyön’s otherwise protectionist and interventionist beliefs, as Goldwin Smith was an passionate free trader and cited Adam Smith’s well-known views on the economical inefficiency of the military expansion and colonialism (costs of maintaining the colonial monopolistic arrangements exceeding their benefits) as an argument in his attack on the late 19th Century imperialism (PYMCJ vol. 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 legitimation of the “extermination of the different races” “a barbarity” (PYMCJ vol. 3, 38-39), Pyön himself was elsewhere (for example, in his essay “On industry”) still upholding the then fashionable Social Darwinist understanding of the world as arena of the “struggle for survival”. In another translated monograph, *Isipsegi chi taech’amgük chegukchuüi (The Great Tragedy of the 20th Century, Imperialism)*; printed by Kwanghak söp’o Publishers in September 1908), loosely based upon the *World Politics at the End of the Nineteenth Century as Influenced by the Oriental Situation* (New York & London, Macmillan and Co., 1900) by Paul Reinsch (this book was already translated into Japanese as *Rekkoku Shinsei Shina Seijiron* by Suzuki Toraö; Taihoku: Taiwan Nichinichi Shinposha, 1904), Pyön added a separate concluding section, which mostly dealt with was Pyön 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, as militarism placed heavy burden of the military expenses upon the citizenry and undermined the democratic governance, it had to be checked through strengthening of the democratic institutions. However, from this fragment it does not appear that Pyŏn 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 for, 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” (PYMCJ vol. 3, 71). So, unlike Goldwin Smith, Pyŏn 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 human realms.

But, despite all these contradictions in views, Pyŏn still was enthusiastic about Goldwin Smith’s polemical piece against the “three monsters” of plutocracy (*kŭmnyŏk chŏngch’i*), expansion of military expenses (*kunbi chŏngch’aek*) and territorial imperialism (*chegukchuŭi*), as he needed arguments for buttressing his own belief, well expressed in his *Pŏpchŏng hakkye* article entitled “General View of Imperialism” (“Chegukchuŭi p’yesŏl”: 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 (*minjokchuŭi*). As Pyŏn’s own foreword to *Isipsegi chi taech’amgŭk chegukchuŭi* reveals, both imperialism and nationalism were understood by him as indispensable expedient means for making a country rich, 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, Russian, 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 own cherished dream that our own, Korean (*Taehan*), 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 (*kungminchuŭi*). To elaborate about what civic nationalism is, it is the principle, which will guarantee Korean nation’s survival. If the principle of Korean nation’s survival will daily acquire strength, it will surreptitiously melt away [the influence of] the alien imperialisms. And if the principle of 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. (PYMCJ vol. 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 Ch’aeho in the last years of the 1900s (Sin 1981, 56-94), seems to have convinced Pyŏn 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 on the fact that, by its own intrinsic logic, nationalism develops into imperialism at a certain point. In the editorial entitled “Imperialism and Nationalism” (“Chegukchuŭi wa minjokchuŭi”: *Taehan Maeil Sinbo*, May 28, 1909) and purportedly written by Sin Ch’aeho, the desirable form of nationalism is described as “expansive” (*p’aengch’angjŏk*), but any concrete appeals to the “offensive as the best form of defence” are lacking (Tanjae Sin Ch’aeho *sŏnsaeng kinyŏm saŏphoe* 1998 vol. 3, 108-109), although Sin Ch’aeho spared no efforts to emphasize and praise the truly “imperial” territorial greatness (possession of “Manchuria”) and military prowess of Korea’s ancient states (Tanjae Sin Ch’aeho *sŏnsaeng kinyŏm saŏphoe* 1998 vol. 4, 232-243). However, Pyŏn’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. Ch'oe Namsŏn, for example, in his first-ever piece of socio-political writing entitled “The Sacrificial Spirit” (“Hönsinjök chöngsin”: *T'aekük Hakpo*, 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 (Ch'oe 1906).

However paradoxically it might seem to a 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, Pyön'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 (Lew Young Ick et al. 2006, 125-170) and readily applied the racist criteria to the 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” (Pak 2003, 31-43), Pyön, although obviously not being fully immune himself from the attitude of admiration towards the “civilized powers”, remarked in a way suggestive of 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”. Below, he put together the views of Theodore Roosevelt and Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855-1927) on the special role of the “Anglo-Saxon race” in the world, French doctrine of its *mission civilisatrice* in the colonies, Keiser 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 – obviously showing 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 (PYMCJ vol. 3, 69-70). It is unclear to which degree Pyön managed to extricate himself by 1910 from the racist Social Darwinist beliefs so characteristic of his milieu, but it is quite clear that his original writings and translations contained ample material usable for criticising 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 (PYMCJ vol. 3, 102-103), attempting to strike a balance between “English individualism and German statism (*kukkajuŭi*)” (PYMCJ vol. 3, 74-75) in the time when “individualism” was considered a bad word and “statism” was universally praised in the “progressive” milieu (Pak 2003, 72-95), Pyön 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.

3. *Übermensch* in Confucian Scholarly Attire? Pyön Yöngman as a “Cultural Nationalist” in the 1920-30s.

The final complete demise of the Korean monarchy in 1910 came to Pyön as a major shock on socio-political and intellectual level, and as a personal blow as well. Anecdotal evidences suggest that, as a practicing advocate, he felt constantly humiliated by the discriminatory attitudes and arrogance of his Japanese colleagues (Pak & Im 1966, 291-296). His attempt to participate in the defence of An Chunggün (1879-1910) in January-February was thwarted by the Japanese (Ch'oe 2003, 61-62), and both his younger brother Yöngt'ae and best friend Sin Ch'aeho left Korea for self-imposed exile in China (Ch'oe 2003, 63). Bitterly disappointed in his erstwhile optimism on the prospects of Korean nationalism as a solution to the imperialist threat, Pyön turned to writing private essays in classical Chinese – without thinking about publication for the time being. A typical one among them, “On Death” (“Wönsa”), written in August 1910 (and published 13 years later, in weekly *Tongmyöng*, Issue 38, May 1923), concomitantly with Korea's forcible annexation, exhibits a turn towards a sort of “spiritualism”, traditional way of expression without much tangible presence of modern ideas and concepts being its hallmark. Obviously trying to mobilise all the strength of deeply cherished personal

beliefs in order to overcome the shock after the loss of the country, Pyŏn 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 (PYMCJ vol. 1, 89-91).

In this pantheistic piece, human “I”, identified also with the essence of the imperishable Tao, takes truly cosmic features. The “spiritualism” of the unpublished texts of the early 1910s is hard to discover in the published, vernacular Korean writings of the 1920-30s in its pure form, but the emphasis upon individual’s “character”, 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 6 years of itinerant life in China and South East Asia (1912-1918: he travelled to Singapore and Malaysia in 1914-1917 together with his new friend, Hong Myŏnghŭi), Pyŏn, obviously disappointed about the prospects of the émigré independence movement, returned to Kyŏngsŏng, 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 Cho Kŭngsŏp and his disciples, lots of poetizing both in Chinese and vernacular Korean (in the form of *sijo* poems in particular), and occasional contributions to Ch’oe Namsŏn’s *Tongmyŏng*, Ch’ŏndogyo’s *Kaebŏk*, Pang Ŭngmo’s *Chogwang* and some other journals, as well as to newspapers – basically, *Tonga Ilbo* and *Chosŏn 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 the Western imperialism. An avid student of the world affairs who made himself a name in the late 1900s by translating two foreign monographs apparently from their English originals, Pyŏn continued to search outside of Korea – and East Asian region – for some blueprints of the solutions for Korea’s problems. In an essay on Gandhi’s non-collaboration (translated as *murhyŏp*) evidently written in the 1920s, 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 the 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.

But, despite writing a private piece, which be called “proto-environmentalist” from today’s positions and which visibly took issue with the nature of the 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" (PYMCJ vol. 1, 102-105), Pyön was also stating explicitly that non-cooperation in the Indian manner would not work in Korea under the prevalent circumstances of the day (PYMCJ vol. 3, 126). In an ambitious opus entitled "In the End, the Emphasis upon the Personal Character – if we are to revive ourselves" ("Kyölguk ün inkyök ponwi – uri ga saranajamyön", - *Tongmyöng*, 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", Pyön 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 the "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" (PYMCJ vol. 3, 126-129). In a word, Pyön was hoping for a "moral regeneration" of the whole Chosön society – a well-known topic for the modern nationalisms, which tend to conceive of societies as "moral communities".

Pyön's piece entitled "First of All, Reconstruction of our Character" ("Muöt poda uri üi p'umsöng kaejo", - *Tongmyöng*, Issue 38, May 1923), concretized his thoughts on what kind of "moral individual" he considered a "prerequisite for our national existence". In comparison with much more famous piece on the "national reconstruction" (*minjok kaejo*) Yi Kwangsu (1892-1950) published a year earlier (monthly *Kaebiyök*, Issue 23, May 1922), Pyön appears to be a relatively liberal nationalist thinker. While Yi asserted from the beginning that a "reconstructed" individual should eschew the private (*sa*) in favour of the public (*kong*), should exhaust him/herself in the service of the society and should "love" the organization (*tanch'e*) he or she belonged to (be it state or religious group) and obey its leader (*chidoja*), Pyön put a somewhat more moderate demand – just to transcend the personal, provincial, and regional loyalties in favour of the national "unity" (*hwahap*) (PYMCJ vol. 3, 135; Yi 1962, 206-209). While Yi was envisioning a strong, cohesive (*tan'gyöltoen*) civic association based upon "sacred precepts" of morality (Yi 1962, 190-202), Pyön listed "discipline" (*kyuyul*) among the qualities Koreans supposedly "lacked", but also added that he preferred the liberal ways of the German post-war reconstruction under the Weimar Republic to what he called the "procrustean methods of Bolshevik Russia" (PYMCJ vol. 3, 135-136). Then, similar to Yi's appeal to "nurture industriousness, thriftiness and spirit of professionalism" (Yi 1962, 202-203, 205), Pyön was urging his readers to cultivate "diligence" (*künmyön*) – but at the same time, in a manner today's critic may judge to be almost anti-Semitic, 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" (PYMCJ vol. 3, 126). In an intellectual milieu which strongly tended to privilege the demand of the "collective" over the freedoms and needs of the individual (Pak 2003, 137-140) Pyön was stubbornly preaching the classical liberal maxim: "collective discipline should be applied only to the degree it does not infringe upon the freedom of collective's every member" (PYMCJ vol. 3, 135).

A literary man to the very marrow of his bones, Pyön attempted to buttress his liberal individualism by the reference to the role of the individuality in literature. In the last chapter, entitled "Expression of the Individuality" ("Kaesöng üi p'yohyön") of his "Five Lectures on Literature" ("Munhak ogang", - *Yömyöng munye sönjip*, Kyöngsöng: Yömyöngsa, 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 plagiarist 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 [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 (PYMCJ vol. 3, 155-156).

Pyŏn 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, the peculiar. Only a harmonic unity between necessarily different individualities produces “national literature”, according to Pyŏn; and those, whose individuality is “childishly” underdeveloped, do not have to overcome the non-existent differences, but are also unable to produce anything creatively (PYMCJ vol. 3, 157).

Once creativity is rooted in the ability of the individual 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 beyond Pyŏn’s deep interest in Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) – “great mad genius, perverse artist of originality, sharpness, mysteriousness and sorrow, who ventured into the previously uncharted waters” (PYMCJ vol. 3, 170), and whose “spirit” (*hondam*) Pyŏn identified in the stormy life and uncompromising character of Sin Ch’aeho (PYMCJ vol. 3, 222). In his *Tonga Ilbo* article, “A Typical Madman” (“Chŏnhyŏngjŏk kwangin”, - the 4th article in the series *Saegangyŏng*, 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 fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1887), *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* (1886) and *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1883-85)². The quotes were mostly dealing with the superior individuals – *Übermenschen* – of the future – manly, self-disciplined, able to overcome their imperfections and to “love the peace as a way of preparing to the new battles”, free from the lower instincts of pity and naive beliefs in the coming of a better, more humanistic society (PYMCJ vol. 3, 170-171). 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 (PYMCJ vol. 3, 202-218) – Nietzsche’s challenge to the herd collectivity and modern conventions appeared to Pyŏn 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, Pyŏn was not a great fan of Kropotkin, his behaviour 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” (PYMCJ vol. 3, 277) and was consistently critical about the activity of Korea’s Communists, both before and after 1945 (PYMCJ vol. 3, 303-305), but at the same time the anecdotal evidences suggest that he was

² A pioneering Korean translation by Pae Sangha of some fragments from *Also Sprach Zarathustra* appeared in the 1st issue of *Sinhŭng* in 1929. Nietzsche was mentioned by some Korean authors, who apparently discovered him while studying in Japan, already in the early 1920s (for example, by Pak Talsŏng in his piece “Kŭpkyŏkhi hyangsangtoe nŭn Chosŏn ch’ŏngnyŏn ŭi sasanggye” in the Issue 2 of *Kaebŏk*, July 1920) and sometimes cited as a proponent of “superhuman” individualism, but otherwise paid relatively little attention to (Kim 1980, 533-536). Only in the 1930s, Kim Hyŏngjun (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 Pak Hŏnyŏng (1900-1955), wrote several articles on Nietzsche’s philosophy in the monthly journal *Nongmin* he was editing (for example, “Nich’e ch’ŏrhak esŏ pon ch’oin’gwan” – Vol. 3, No.1, January 1932). Pyŏn Yŏngman was thus one of those colonial Korean thinkers who may be credited with “discovering” Nietzsche on a relatively early stage.

scathingly critical of Syngman Rhee's dictatorial rule as well, and of his brother Yŏngt'ae's decision to join Syngman Rhee's camp (Pak & Im 1966, 282-290). As an "anarchist outside of anarchism", he might have seen in Nietzsche a theory that made sense of his own behavioural practice – and became one of the very few Korean colonial interpreters of the German philosopher.

A staunch believer in the individuality of the persons, Pyŏn extended the same logic to the peoples and cultures as well. As most nationalists elsewhere, Pyŏn believed in the existence of essentialised "national characters". That does not mean that he was fond of writing laudatory accounts of "Koreanness" – on the contrary, not dissimilar to Yi Kwangsu, he defined "Korean national character" in its contemporary manifestation as a combination of "transcendent purity" with brutality, lack of critical abilities, failure to submit oneself to an authority or a cause, and weakness, Koreans "remaining prisoners of Hong Kildong-like utopian visions and worshippers of [rebels like] Hong Kyŏngnae" (PYMCJ vol. 3, 174). In contrast to this, Pyŏn emphasized "vitality" of the people of his "another motherland", China, - the people, who "are already the financial masters in the British Malaysia and who are succeeding in New York in the same way they are succeeding in home" (PYMCJ vol. 3, 187-188). But, despite all the criticism, Pyŏn 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" (PYMCJ vol. 3, 111) and enjoyed the "earthly flavour" of Du Fu (712-770) poems just like he enjoyed the "sorrowful beauty" of Turgenev's novels (PYMCJ vol. 3, 160) – and of its Korean version. Pyŏn's Korea was that of classical high culture: "Pak Chiwŏn's literature, Kim Chŏnghŭi's calligraphy, Kim T'aegyŏng's poetry, Sin Ch'aeho's historiography" (PYMCJ vol. 3, 161), as he succinctly put it. Korea's high culture was treasured by Pyŏn 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 T'aegyŏng (1850-1927), for one example, Pyŏn extolled Kim's friends Yi Namgyu, Yi Kŏnch'ang (1852-1898) and Hwang Hyŏn (1855-1910) for their ability to "extricate themselves from the flow of the current mundane life" (PYMCJ vol. 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" ("Tokkaebi t'aryŏng", - *Tonggwang*, Issue 37, September 1932), he lamented the "extinction" of Korean folklore's goblins, the *tokkaebi*, which, according to Pyŏn, 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 *tokkaebi*'s place, depresses Pyŏn to the utmost – "gamblers, cafe girls, failing water service, senseless police of thoughts, the 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" (PYMCJ vol. 3, 250-252).

4. In place of conclusion: 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 Pyŏn's poem in memory of Sin Ch'aeho (PYMCJ vol. 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, had also its modern Western underpinnings – Western non-conformists from the literary and philosophical worlds, Blake and Nietzsche among them, took their places of honour in Pyŏn's personal pantheon. Pyŏn did not reach these conclusions overnight. It took him more 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 (PYMCJ vol. 3, 126). Then, what system should Korea aspire to in the new, modern world? Not being a systematic socio-

political thinker, Pyŏn never seriously undertook to answer this question. He was quite clear about what he disliked – and bitterly criticised 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” (PYMCJ vol. 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” (PYMCJ vol. 3, 139). But, if the regimented modernity of the 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” (PYMCJ vol. 3, 138), Pyŏn 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, Pyŏn 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” (PYMCJ vol. 3, 232-233), he was at the same time refuting Cho Kŭngsŏp’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 hardly was accidental that Ch’oe Namsŏn in his memorial poem cited above compared Pyŏn to Chŏng Inbo, as both were trying, with only a partial success, to fill up the enormous gap between the “old” regional 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 the cultural circles, Pyŏn 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 the South Korean scholarship until the 1990s. He was an odd bird for more mainstream “cultural nationalists” on the right, such as Ch’oe Namsŏn, who condemned him for “scribbling the letters for simple amusement” even on such an occasion as Pyŏn’s funerals, and 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 the modern realities are attracting more interest both from scholars and from the wider public, it remains to be hoped that Pyŏn’s voice, tragically solemn when he spoke on the fate of those 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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