Border-Crossing of Taisho Vitalism
and Radical Theory of Individuality
in Colonial Korea

On Genealogy from Henri Bergson, Osugi Sakae to Yeom Sang-seop

Yeom Sang-seop’s discussion on how the aesthetic value of art lies in “the
impulse of individuality” and that art is “a revelation of life” in “Individuality
and Art” (1922) reflects an adoption of Bergson’s concept of “vital impulse.”
However, Bergsonian philosophy Yeom received was a reinterpreted version
by Japanese vitalism. In particular, it was the work of Osugi Sakae that greatly
influenced Yeom’s ideas, and a number of Yeom’s social critique from the early
1920s almost directly reflects Osugi’s ‘theory of life.’ For instance, his description
of realization of one’s individuality as “a path for self-revolution” reflects
Osugi’s view that true “rebellion” is “demolition” of everything that hinders
“expansion of life.” Yeom’s thoughts on individuality also provided his own
answers to the question on whether people of a colony without sovereignty
could truly become a ‘modern man.’ Yeom sought to leap toward ‘modern
culture’ through a lever of ‘the infinite potential of life-individuality,’ and
in this regard, rather than directly deriving from Japanese vitalism, Yeom’s ideas
on individuality was a way of the writer appropriating Taisho vitalism in more
radical way, discovered upon the ‘frustration’ of the March First Movement.

Keywords Individuality (個性), Taisho Vitalism (大正生命主義), Colonial Modernity (植民地
近代性), Yeom Sang-seop (廉想涉), Osugi Sakae (大杉栄)
1 Introduction

In 1920s colonial Korea, ‘life’ was the most popular term as well as the latest literature concept in the literacy circle. Naturally, this concept of ‘life’ was strongly influenced by Japanese ‘vitalism.’ However, vitalism in colonial Korea was not a mere imitation of the preceding trend in Japan. It was an ideological movement that developed upon the intellectual and historical base of Japanese vitalism but successfully established its original logic. Furthermore, the vitalism of colonial Korea in the 1920s was a radical transformation of Japanese vitalism. What gave rise to this transformation was the colonial youth’s intense interest in anarchism, which formed part of Taisho vitalism. In this respect, the vitalism of colonial Korea could be regarded as an example of how the mentality of the recipient changed the nature of knowledge in the transboundary movement of knowledge.

Although the vitalism of colonial Korea is indeed a special case involving transnational movements of modern knowledge, it is not necessary to limit the roles of colonial intellectuals as have been passive. This is because, for them, ‘life’ served as a comprehensive ‘predicate’ used to discuss the world, human, and art, rather than an object for ultimate understanding. To generally understand the vitalism of colonial Korea in that sense, it is necessary to consider not only the extrinsic effects of Japan but also the intrinsic motivations of the recipients. With this background, this article

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For a discussion of vitalism of colonial Korea in the 1920s, see Lee Chul-ho, Genealogy of Soul (Seoul: Changbi, 2013), Choi Ho-young, The Base of Modern Korean Literature and the Depths of Life (Seoul: Amh Books, 2018), and Kwon Junghee, Is it Life Force of Reason (Seoul: Somyung Books, 2020). These three works in particular have been an important reference for this article in that they all point out how Yeom Sang-seop, in his search for a way out of the frustrations of a colony who lost sovereignty to Japan, was fascinated by Osugi Sakae’s vitalist anarchism. In relation to these previous studies, I highlight that Yeom’s ideas of individualism that emphasizes the self or individuality are linked less to nationalism and more to the question of how an intellectual from a colony that lost its sovereignty can become a modern man.

2 The question of whether to translate seimei shugi (生命主義) as ‘vitalism’ or ‘life-ism’ was one of the most troubling issues I faced while writing this paper. My final decision was to use ‘vitalism’ in consideration that the seimei shugi discussed in here is not only distinguished from biocentrism or respect for life thoughts, but also an ideological current that emerged under the strong influence of Henry Bergson’s élan vital.

3 The radical transformation of Taisho vitalism is based on the so-called leftist culture that spread in colonial Joseon in the 1920s. Regarding this point, I gained insight from Park Sunyoung, The Proletarian Wave: Literature and Leftist Culture in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945 (London: Harvard University Press, 2015).
tries to clarify that the vitalism of colonial Korea was related to Japanese vitalism but ended up creating a unique discourse in the context of ‘colonialism’ by focusing on accepting and spreading of the concept of ‘life’ in the era of modern literature.

To achieve this purpose, this article focuses on a series of discourses on vitalism published in the 1920s by Yeom Sang-seop, a writer of colonial Korea. This choice was made because his vitalism discourse, with the keywords of ‘individuality’ and ‘ego,’ was written more systematically than any other articles from the same period, and it formed the foundation of a number of his novels and works of social criticism. Yeom Sang-seop is well known as a pioneer of Korean modern literature. He participated in the publication of Korea’s first literary magazine, Ruins (1920), and published novels during the colonial period such as “The Tree Frog in the Specimen Room” (1921), Before the Manse (1924), and Three Generations (1931). In these novels, he delicately describes the psychological conflicts faced by a young man who opened his eyes in the pursuit of personal freedom from the deeply-rooted feudal customs of a colonial society. Yeom Sang-seop had studied in Japan from 1914 to 1919, and he began his life as a writer in 1920. His vitalism discourse that this article focuses on was intensively written in the 1920s, when he was building up his career as a writer in earnest.

Yeom Sang-seop published an essay titled “Individuality and Art” in 1922. Here, he theoretically states his view on art as a professional writer. This work is therefore considered to be an important text in studies of not only his early literature but Korean modern literature in general. As its title indicates, it discusses the foundation of artistic beauty through an original definition of individuality. He raises an objection against the idea that artistic beauty is judged by aesthetic pleasure. He argues that artistic beauty is not generated by aesthetic emotions of the recipient but is judged from relationships between creators and their works of art. In other words, he considers art to be expressed by the writer’s individuality as follows: “An artistic beauty is the artist’s individuality, or the world of creative intuition seen through the artist’s unique life, and an artist’s expression is its projection.”

Here, Yeom is insisting that artistic beauty is determined not by the reader’s reactive senses, but through the unique view of the author. It is not difficult to understand that his opinion leans toward a romantic view of art that emphasizes the author’s ‘imagination’ over literary rules. However, I want to focus on why Yeom Sang-seop understood ‘individuality’ and ‘unique life’ as interchangeable concepts. Why did he relate a unique characteristic of the author, or individuality, to the word ‘life’? Is this just a rhetorical expression meant to emphasize the importance of the author’s individuality in art? Or is there any ideological horizon? If the latter is the case, it would be necessary to think about the intellectual influence where the idea sprouted from.

Yeom Sang-seop is not the only scholar to insinuate artistic creativity into unique life. Many writers who were active in the literacy circles of colonial Korea in the 1920s frequently used the word ‘life’ to explain their arts, as Yeom Sang-seop did. One example is Yi Kwang-su, another pioneer of Korean modern literature. In his work, “Intellectual and Training,” published in 1921, Yi criticized individualism that advocated the idea of ‘arts for art’s sake,’ and argued that arts should be something that contributes to the life of a nation rather than personal freedom, and thus insisted that the purpose of art must lie in ‘arts for life’s sake.’

Furthermore, many previous studies discussed the inundation of life discourse in the 1920s colonial Korea in terms of an artistic trend following the reception of Japanese vitalism. For example, Lee Chul-ho, a researcher of Korean literature, stated that Japanese vitalism developed as one of the main intellectual trends throughout the Taisho period (1912-1926) and played an important role in the formation of Korean modern literature by specifying discourses of spirit and life in colonial Korea as well as influencing Yi Kwang-su and Yeom Sang-seop. Suzuki Sadami, a researcher of Japanese literature, pointed out that the vitalism describing principles of the universe, society, and art with the word ‘life’ prevailed among Japanese intellectuals during the Taisho period, and named this phenomenon ‘Taisho vitalism.’ The abovementioned preceding studies themselves base on the discussions of Suzuki Sadami in their consideration of colonial Korea’s vitalism as a transformed case of ‘Taisho vitalism’ on colonial soil.

7 Yi Kwang-su, “Intellectual and Training” (Creation, Vol. 8., 1921), p.11.
8 Lee Chul-ho, Genealogy of Soul (Seoul : Changbi, 2013), pp.106-142.
10 For the further discussions of vitalism of colonial Korea, see Choi Ho-young, The Base of Modern Korean Literature and the Depths of Life (Seoul : Amb Books, 2018); Kwon Junghee, Is it Life Force of Reason (Seoul : Somyung Books, 2020); Kim Jinhee, Japanese Vitalism and Kim Eok’s Literary Idea:
This article follows the line of inquiry dealt with in previous studies listed above and answers following questions: First, what type of external intellectual trends specifically influenced the life discourse of Yeom Sang-seop published in the early 1920s? In answering this question, this study primarily focuses on the effect of Osugi Sakae’s idea of vitalist revolution, in which he combined the life philosophy of French philosopher Henri Bergson with a personal pursuit of anarchism. Second, considering that the vitalism of colonial Korea appeared after the frustration of the March First Movement which sought to recover sovereignty, and that Yeom Sang-seop’s own expansion of thought upon vitalism began after this day, how could one describe the Movement’s influence on the formation of colonial life discourse? This article will examine these questions in terms of knowledge reception mentioned earlier, in relation to internal motivations of recipients.

2 Intellectual Source of Yeom Sang-seop’s Concept of ‘Life’ : ‘Neo-idealism’ and ‘élan vital’

A keyword in Yeom Sang-seop’s “Individuality and Art” is ‘life.’ In this essay, Yeom argues that “art is an expression of individuality” and writes that “individuality” is a visualization of the author’s innate and “unique life.” What kind of meanings did Yeom grant in the term ‘life’ that is distinguished from those in biology? It is obvious that this term was not a mere rhetorical expression used to highlight the uniqueness of ‘individuality,’ because for Yeom, ‘life’ was related to the ultimate principles regulating artistic beauty. If so, how are life, individuality, and artistic beauty connected to each other in “Individuality and Art”?  

Here, Yeom Sang-seop states that an expression of individuality is a flow of life and no life can exist without individuality. In other words, he defines life as the factor determining the existence of individuality. As suggested by this definition, he mentions that there is no relationship between his life concept and ‘biological breeding.’ This only means that “life as a proliferation of life is a mere extension of superficial and material life, that is, the preservation of the species.” On the other hand, he describes life as “an expression of individuality from awakening of the ego” which has “profound meaning beyond material significance.” As can be seen in the following sections, Yeom

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Sang-seop defines life that signifies ‘an expression of individuality’ as something ‘spiritual.’

So, what does life as expressed individuality refer to? I will call it a ‘spiritual living,’ which can develop without limit. All living creatures demand and manifest material life. All creatures may advance toward emotional life, including happiness, anger, sadness, pleasure, love, and hatred. They may even pursue desire such as running an enterprise, possessing knowledge, and developing notions of freedom and human rights. One cannot say that this sense of material life is not partly a manifestation of the spiritual, or the expression of general humanity. However, it is still outside the boundaries of unique individuality, where profound life is manifested. [⋯] One can thus freely exhibit his inherent characteristics and put them into practice as spiritual living so as to make manifest his profound and unique life.\(^\text{11}\)

It is assumed that the idea of defining life as ‘spiritual living’ was affected by ‘neo-idealism’ of a German philosopher, Rudolf Christoph Eucken. He argued against positivism and materialism in the late nineteenth century and asserted the importance of spiritual living in terms of ‘neo-idealism.’ Eucken named his philosophy as ‘neo-idealism’ to imply his will to restore the values of ‘spirit,’ ‘internal,’ and ‘ideal’ that had lost popularity within scientific developments and spread of materialist thought. Yeom Sang-seop might have had an access to this when he was studying in Japan.\(^\text{12}\)

In the early 1910s, Japanese intellectuals displayed great interest in Eucken’s neo-idealism. For instance, Die Lebensanschauungen der großen Denker (1890), one of his representative works, was translated under the title of A Life View of a Great Thinker in 1911, followed by many other translated books on his neo-idealism published regularly in Japan until 1914.

Kaneko Chikusui, who was a professor at Waseda University at the time, was one of the scholars who drove the enthusiasm toward the philosophy of Rudolf Christoph Eucken in the 1910s Japanese world of thought. He interpreted Eucken’s ‘neo-idealism’ as follows: According to Kaneko, spiritual life noted by Eucken is “one’s true life itself, and therefore, the act of entering one’s spiritual life is to return to oneself and deepen one’s life.” Further, he states that ‘the power of the absolute’ exists at the center of this ego, which grants the self the ‘possibility to expand infinitely.’ That


is, Eucken’s ‘spiritual life’ for Kaneko was nothing but a realization of transcendental potential authorized by ‘the Absolute’ in real life. As described previously, Yeom Sang-seop regarded the spirit as engaging infinite potential and believed it to be congenital rather than acquired. However, his way of understanding this spiritual life was precisely identical to that of Eucken’s neo-idealism interpreted by Kaneko.

Kaneko Chikusui was not the only intermediary between neo-idealism and Yeom Sang-seop. We cannot overlook the existence of poet Noh Ja-young, who worked closely with Yeom in the serial magazine of *Gaebuk*. As many studies have already demonstrated, Noh Ja-young released several articles introducing the philosophy of Eucken from 1919 to 1920. In these articles, he discusses ‘spiritualism’ as a strong feature of Eucken’s philosophy. For example, he describes Eucken as representing a spiritual tendency of modern philosophy along with William James and Henri Bergson. He also mentions that these philosophers concern real life but have common points of “insisting free will in contrary to materialistic view of science, more accepting the value of spirit than material life.”

Yeom Sang-seop and Noh Ja-young, members of the literary coterie *Gaebuk*, pursued the modern man’s ideal life in ‘spiritual things’ under the influence of Eucken’s neo-idealism.

As shown in the case of Noh Ja-young, both Eucken and Bergson were received in colonial Korea as philosophers who insisted upon the infinite possibility of spirit. Yeom Sang-seop had also accepted Eucken’s neo-idealism as well as Bergsonian idea of life as important intellectual sources for establishing his own vitalism. He wrote that the aesthetic value of art is in the ‘impulse of individuality’ and that art means ‘a revelation of life.’ It makes no difference to say that individuality with a meaning similar to life is ‘impulsive spiritual activity’ when we recall his definition as an infinite spiritual life. The point that life is connected to ‘impulse’ reflects how he applied to his art theory the concept of ‘élan vital’ used by Henry Bergson in his art theory in *Creative Evolution* (1907).

Henry Bergson suggested ‘élan vital’ as an image to understand the moment of change generated when the ‘huge potential’ of life contacts the material. For example, he states “life is comparable to an impulsion or an impetus, regarded in itself it is

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an immensity of potentiality, a mutual encroachment of thousands and tendencies.”\(^\text{16}\)

However, he interestingly applies ‘individuation of potential’ from contacting life and material to the relationship between poetic emotion (inspiration) and language. The original life diverges to various living things through evolution, which is important because it reminds us that the human spirit can appear in as many various individualities as there are humans. With the fact that life can divide countless potential possibilities within internal spirit and externalize them to individuals, he believed that the relationship between this life and material can be applied to art works such as poems. In other words, he mentions that poetic emotions are displayed in various poetic words and simultaneously flowed through words and phrases in poems.\(^\text{17}\) In this part, we can find the origins of the images of ‘impulse’ and ‘flow’ that Yeom impressed on life, the source of artistic beauty.

In considering how Yeom Sang-seop first had access on Bergson’s philosophy, one cannot exclude the fact that his philosophy was definitely popular in Japan in the early 1910s. Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* was translated into Japanese in 1913 by the previously mentioned Kaneko Chikusui. Eucken and Bergson were regarded as philosophers of different schools in Europe, but they were recognized together in Japan in the early 1910s as those who advocated the infinity and creativity of spiritual living.\(^\text{18}\) This is why Kaneko, who introduced Eucken’s neo-idealism, also translated Bergson’s work. In addition, the publication of *Creative Evolution* in Japanese generated a boom in Japan on Bergsonian philosophy to the extent that many intellectuals published articles about Bergson’s ideas in magazines and newspapers.\(^\text{19}\)

In short, the Japanese world of thought in the 1910s showed a great interest in Henry Bergson, who inspired vitalism, and Rudolf Eucken, the creator of life philosophy in Germany. Although the heat was cooling down in the late 1910s when Yeom Sang-seop was staying in Japan for his studies, as Suzuki Sadami pointed out, heightened interest in life and spirit inspired by the works of the two philosophers

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established a trend of ‘vitalism.’ Therefore, it is difficult to consider that Yeom Sang-seop who studied in Japan through the 1910s was outside such intellectual ambience of Japanese world of philosophy.

### 3 Life and ‘Self-Revolution’: Vitalism of Osugi Sakae

Strictly speaking, Bergson’s philosophy accepted by Yeom Sang-seop was a reinterpreted version. In particular, Yeom Sang-seop mainly accepted vitalism through the writings of Osugi Sakae, who was a leader of the Japanese anarchism movement in the 1910s. Yeom’s multiple works of social criticisms published in the early 1920s display a direct influences of Osugi Sakae’s ‘vitalism.’ For instance, Yeom Sang-seop mentions that the realization of ‘individuality’ meaning ‘unique life’ is ‘a process of self-revolution,’ following the ideas of Osugi Sakae who asserted that a true ‘treason’ is ‘demolition’ for everything that stops ‘expansion of life.’ In fact, Yeom expressed deep solidarity with the author by printing the name of Osugi in a page of *Before the Manse* published in 1924. As shown in the idea of the ‘great cosmic life,’ Japanese vitalism in the 1910s had a strong religious nature, but Yeom Sang-seop’s vitalism displayed a radical color with the influence of Osugi Sakae.

The idea of ‘treason’ that he described in his writings was regarded as being influenced by *Der Einzige sein Eigentum (The Ego and Its Own)* of Max Stirner, a German Philosopher. Actually, he quoted a long introduction of the Japanese translation of *The Ego and Its Own* in his article, “For the Supreme Good,” and showed a great interest in Stirner’s ‘nihilistic individualism.’ If one views Yeom’s idea on ‘treason’ in terms of nihilistic individualism, the self seems to be a true antagonist of the existing system and authority; however, when viewed in terms of vital egoism, it becomes not the ego but life that confronts society. As mentioned previously, the ego in Yeom’s understanding is based not on individual freedom from everything but on life as infinite spirit. In addition, this is the key idea that Yeom received from Osugi Sakae’s idea of ‘treason.’


For example, Osugi Sakae insists in his article of “Gambling Instinct” (1914) that two instincts operate in the ‘personal attitude toward society.’ He diagnoses modern individuals as facing difficulties, pains, and dangers under a wrong social system that disregards and suppresses the development of individuality. An individual can act according to two types of instinct in this situation. One is ‘self-preservation instinct’ and the other is ‘self-transcendence instinct.’ He notes that self-preservation instinct only aims to preserve life and commands individuals to negotiate with the social system. Otherwise, the self-transcendence instinct is always ‘adventurous’ for society and is defined to ‘transcend’ modern life. Further, he says that true growth and creation of life is feasible when it follows this self-transcendence instinct. It even means a confrontation between an individual and society, and a deeper paradox can be a confrontation between the self-transcendence instinct which enables ‘life expansion’ and a social system suppressing the ‘development of individuality.’\(^\text{22}\) The composition of ‘life versus society’ is applied to not only Osugi’s idea of ‘treason’ but also the Yeom’s idea of ‘self-revolution.’ The life expression for Yeom Sang-seop is to realize ego, because being an egoist refusing all fixed ideas is regarded as being a true traitor in pursuit of the best good.\(^\text{23}\)

The claim that the true antagonist of society is not ‘the ego’ but ‘life’ and ‘individuality’ reminds one of the duality of Yeom Sang-seop’s life concept which belongs and at the same time transcends the ego. The recognition of individuality by Yeom Sang-seop is a kind of unique spirit and equal to irreplaceable ‘singularity.’ This is why individuality is unique life. From a view of life as infinite spirit, it displays another aspect: that life is the whole of countless unique lives waiting to be expressed. In addition, if unique life is to be seen in the eyes of those who recognized one’s individuality, it regards life to include not only those that are yet to be expressed but also those yet to be born. This allows for an understanding on why life as spirit is infinite. Therefore, life ‘belongs’ to an individual in that its existence is disclosed through an awaken ego, but also ‘transcends’ it in that it is a collection of countless individuals waiting for realization. In particular, according to the thinking compassion of Yeom Sang-seop for the vitalism of Osugi, there is no doubt that the ‘transcendence’ of this life is related to Osugi’s vitalism and ‘treason.’ Osugi considered life as ego


in “Life Expansion”(1913) and defined ego as ‘power’ prior to being an entity. He also noted that the ‘self-transcend instinct’ enables treason and creation of life in “Gambling Instinct.” The idea of life transcending the individual is something shared by Yeom and Osugi, and it serves as a proof showing their radical speculations.

They have a common awareness in the description about confrontation of life and society as well as hostile relationships throughout human history. Yeom Sang-seop describes that the world always sought for ‘innovation’ but no ‘liberation.’ In other words, human history experienced a continuous failure of the existing authority by another. However, this idea comes from the historical point of Osugi Sakae, who configured human history in terms of unchangeable hostile relationships of conquerors and the conquered. For example, Osugi Sakae states that all societies in human history are divided into the conqueror class and the conquered class, and that there have only been events of replacing conquerors. He says that this is the ‘fact of conquering’ that penetrates human history and is also the humanity’s biggest ‘mistake.’

Further, these two persons are not different in their ways of escaping from such unchangeable dominance. That is, Osugi stated that a real ego must recognize a forced ego by others like conquerors for true liberation, while Yeom agreed with Osugi and insisted that true ‘self-liberation’ may start from rejecting slavery customs and established ideas. Based on the notes of Louis Pierre Althusser, a French Marxist philosopher, these two persons had already recognized that a real ego is the subject consisted by ideology.

The vitalism anarchism of Osugi Sakae had a large effect on the critical social criticism of Yeom Sang-seop. However, it was not the only link between Yeom and Taisho vitalism. His individualism was also influenced by the vitalist theory of Yanagi Muneyoshi, who was a religious philosopher and a member of the Shirakaba—a group of intellectuals who introduced western religious ideas and artworks to Japan in the 1910s. A key aspect of Yanagi’s theory was that “the individual and art are greater than a nation,” because a nation is ‘limited’ but art that is rooted on incessant ‘vital impetus’ is ‘infinite.’ Both Yeom and Yanagi placed confidence in the ‘infinite

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possibility of spirit’ and believed that art contributes to changing a society. Another interesting fact is that Yanagi Muneyoshi led ‘treason’ against the existing system and regulation in ‘life expansion.’ After experiencing the Trial of High Treason in 1910, he said that Tolstoy’s life “shows a fact that today’s individuals devastated of their individuality are greater than a nation.” In other words, Yanagi criticized a contraction of the thought world caused by the high treason case, and he supported freedom of thought by referring to Tolstoy. These ideas were deepened in William Blake (1914), which was written about William Blake, a British Poet in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He stated the following: “It is a nonsense that nation encourages art. It is art that encourages art. Art and artists are spiritual entities and it only laughs at accidental things (like the nation that will become extinct someday).”

The following ideas were shared by Yeom Sang-seop, Osugi, and Yanagi. The ego with unique life has an infinite possibility spiritually. On the other hand, the reality somewhat restricts the full realization of this possibility. This is because the established system is limited, but the possibility of life is limitless. Therefore, advocating art that is an expression of unique life does not only signify a support for new arts but also a treason against a society that restricts realization of life (= individuality). In this way, vitalism of the three persons define the relationship between aesthetics and politics as something inseparable. Yeom Sang-seop’s publication of radical social critiques in the 1920s while also continuing to write novels could be understood in this context.

4 How Could the Youth of a Nation without sovereignty Become a Modern Man?

It was mentioned earlier that Yeom Sang-seop’s individualism was substantially inspired by the vitalism of Osugi Sakae and Yanagi Muneyoshi. However, we do not need to describe his position passively. In other words, it is not appropriate to regard Yeom’s individualism as an ‘imitation’ of Taisho vitalism basing on the effects of Osugi Sakae and Yanagi Muneyoshi. The explanation given by current studies on...
colonial modernity exposes an attitude that involves underestimating of the receivers basing on the fact that modern knowledge moved from the center to the periphery. In many cases, the motive for colonial intellectuals receiving knowledge was not sufficiently considered in the discussion of global movements of modern knowledge. This issue does not differ in describing the vitalism of colonial Korea. The influence of Japanese vitalism is treated as important in many studies, but the internal motivation of colonial elites as recipients has not attracted much attention. Their interests are focused on the two ways vitalism stimulated literary inspiration for the writer Yeom Sang-seop. To many colonial elites like Yeom, Japanese vitalism had obviously been regarded as the latest modern knowledge. However, did they have any chances to discover some intellectual advantages from it aside from the value of ‘modernity’?

When considering this issue, the role the condition of ‘being a colony’ in reception of modernity is worthy of attention.\textsuperscript{31} We obviously cannot discuss the colonial intellectuals’ perception of modernity apart from their identity as a member of the nation without sovereignty. For example, this identity issue appears in the way that Yeom Sang-seop attempted to understand ‘individuality’ or ‘ego.’ Even he thought of the individual as importantly as Japanese intellectuals did, and his deep depression regarding the circumstances of colonial Korea can be seen in his articles. For instance, he describes colonial Korea in \textit{Before the Manse} as a place lacking any possibility to realize individuality (life) due to its deeply-rooted convention and naked selfishness. In addition, the ethnic discrimination and military rule of Japan forced servile attitudes to those being colonized. The author expressed the reality of colonial Korea in the novel as “a cemetery crowded with maggots.”\textsuperscript{32} An interesting fact is that the title of the initial series in 1922 was in fact “cemetery.” The title was changed to \textit{Before the Manse} when the series had been suspended under the censorship of the Japanese Government General of Korea and thus had to be published in another magazine with different title.\textsuperscript{33}

It is clear that colonial Korea is depicted darkly in \textit{Before the Manse}. However, the future of the protagonist Lee In-wha was not so desperate. This novel ends with Lee In-wha returning to colonial Korea to see his sick wife, and finally leaving for

\textsuperscript{31} For a discussion of modernity of colonial Korea, see Shin Gi-Wook and Michael Robinson, eds., \textit{Colonial Modernity in Korea} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

\textsuperscript{32} Han Gi Hyeong and Lee Hye Ryoung eds., \textit{A Complete Works of Non-Fiction by Yeom Sang-seop 1: 1918-1928} (Seoul: Somyung Books, 2013), p.82.

Japan again after her funeral. As stated previously, Lee In-wha thought of colonial Korea as a cemetery wherein one cannot expect to realize individuality, but it insinuates to the readers that he still has a chance through an ending where he leaves for Tokyo. In addition, while Lee In-wha expressed his monologue of antipathy for the Japanese rule, Yeom Sang-seop intensely criticized global situations and the reality of colony through a number of social critiques. For example, he insisted that ‘liberation’ of individuals, laborers, and citizens from capitalism and autocracy can ‘innovate’ the world and construct an ‘ideal society.’ The manifestation of Yeom Sang-seop’s interest in ‘a logic of treason’ of Osugi Sakae and Yanagi Muneyoshi was based on this context.

The important thing is that these argument appeared after the March First Movement in 1919. With that point, the criticism and antipathy for reality shown in his novel and social criticism articles in the early 1920s cannot be separately understood from the results of after the March First Movement. This is not only because, chronologically, om’s main writing activities occurred after the frustration of the Movement. When the movement took place in Korea, Yeom Sang-seop who was in Osaka at the time also planned a manse movement centering on Korean students studying in Japan. In addition, he also published works in Japanese that criticized Japanese rule of Korea. That is, Yeom Sang-seop did not see the March First Movement as a political event that happened in colonial Korea, and had a strong will to take a part in this movement. When the Movement’s goal of restoring sovereignty was frustrated, Yeom returned to colonial Korea and began his life as a writer and a critic. It is therefore impossible to exclude the issue of the March First Movement’s aftermath in understanding Yeom Sang-seop’s vitalism.

What I want to pay attention to is that the March First Movement not only guided the writer to radical speculations but also changed his perception on the ways to become a modern man, something that was desired by many colonial elites. As can be seen from Yeom’s plan for manse movement in Osaka came under the influence of the principle of self-determination. For example, he writes in “Declaration of Independence”

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published in the period when he was preparing for the manse movement that, although Japan insist that Korea and Japan come from same ancestors, in actuality Korea is a completely different nation with a longer history than Japan. Therefore, he argues that Korea should be independent according to ‘the principle of self-determination.’ He also strongly criticized Japan’s discrimination against Koreans in another article. According to his criticisms, even though Koreans are not ‘inferior’ to Japanese people and there is no difference in mental capability, Japan blocked Korean access to modern knowledge. This indicates Japanese restriction of Korean students experiencing the modern culture of Japan. This points out the Japanese attitude for Korean students that “they don’t like student to study policy, laws and literature as well as they regard researching Russia literature as dangerous thought so tailed on purpose.” Likewise, the ‘national issue’ in 1919 was an important project for him, and the modernization of Korea was possible only when it overcome colonialism and discrimination.

However, after 1920, Yeom Sang-seop switched his intellectual interests from national independence and abolition of discrimination to total ‘innovation’ of institutions and consciousness. This transition is well indicated in the radically titled article of “Double Liberations”(1920). He writes the following: “Internal liberation and external liberation, spiritual liberation and physical liberation, liberation of political life and liberation of economic life, I don’t have anything to effort except for these liberations. The desire of liberation is an instinct and right of humanity.” Since the March First Movement, the change of perception for him was not only a transition from national independence to social innovation. A more fundamental change can be found in recognition of the relationship between modernity and the nation. As mentioned earlier, he pointed out that, in 1919, Japan stopped giving Korean youth access to modernity with the reasoning of racism, and he strongly criticized Japan’s discrimination. Otherwise, his articles after 1920 had reduced interest in national issues and more interest in individual and ego. “Individuality and Art” is the result of this transition. Now there is no obstructor between modernity and the individual like in Japan. Modernity is suggested to be the world that can be reached by individual awareness even without national independence. “A discovery of the self for a modern man is generally an awareness of humanity and is to discover and enhance individuality from

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37 Ibid. p.48.
38 Ibid. p.74.
personal point of views." Shortly speaking, this was a claim that one’s entrance to modernity no longer requires national independence or Japanese consideration. It was in fact a logic that even modern colonists could become a modern man when there is an awakening of the ego and individuality.

If so, why did this transition occur and what does this mean? Of course, we have to think of the frustration of the March First Movement. Its failure turned out to be disappointing for Yeom Sang-seop regarding ‘the principle of self-determination.’ For example, he indicates that the Treaty of Versailles was just incomplete ‘global innovation’ and says that a true innovation can be considered without ‘liberation.’ His complaint regarding the Treaty of Versailles is about the decision not applying the principle of self-determination to colonies of the victorious country. In addition, his new idea alternating the principle of self-determination was a social innovation. ‘Liberation’ here referred to the social independence of individual, woman, workingman, youth, and so on. Simultaneously, a transition from national independence to social innovation represents his agony regarding the situation wherein national independence paradoxically cannot be an absolute condition to access modernity. This is because access to modernity is his project which he cannot give up. He found that the solution to this problem was the individualism of vitalism, because an individual can enter modernity without passing through the nation as connected to life meaning the infinite spirit. This is why Yeom Sang-seop tried to find the ideal self-image of a modern man in the perception of individuality.

However, it is not necessary to interpret the fact that Yeom Sang-seop did not regard the relationship of nation and modernity as absolute since the March First Movement as him escaping from national issues. The concept of nation is significantly dealt with in “Individuality and Art” as well. He believed that personal individuality cannot be separated from the individuality of his/her nation. In other words, he believed artworks to be the expression of creators and that a national life flows at the bottom of its individuality. Nevertheless, a nation is not the essential media for the modernity. A nation is treated not in regard to ‘policy’ but to ‘art,’ and it is regulated not as an issue of restoring ‘sovereignty,’ but as transcendental ‘spirit.’ Further, an emphasis for this ‘spirit’ and ‘inside’ is already shown in “Double Liberations.” He describes that both ‘internal liberation’ and ‘external liberation’ are important but that the former

39 Ibid. p.193.
40 Ibid. pp.198-199.
is mentioned more as the ultimate project. Finally, the following are related to his modern perception transitioning from ‘sovereignty’ to ‘spirit.’ That is, true modernization is possible at the time that political and spiritual freedoms both existed. However, if the former is not enough, access to modernity is feasible via spiritual freedom.

After the March First Movement, the individualism suggested by Yeom Sang-seop was his answer to the question of how a member of a nation that lost sovereignty could still become a ‘modern man.’ In other words, we can say that Yeom dreamed of leaping toward ‘modern culture’ by means of the ‘infinite possibility of life=individuality.’ When understood in the respect, Japanese vitalism cannot be said to have yielded Yeom’s individualism. On the contrary, he discovered a possibility to radically appropriate Taisho vitalism through the frustration of the March First Movement. The acceptance of Japanese vitalism cannot be explained only by aspiration and desire toward modern knowledge. There was a more subjective motivation in operation, a will to response to a certain project left by the frustration of the March First Movement.

5 Conclusion

Vitalism in the 1920s Colonial Korea sprouted among a group of colonial elites who had experienced preceding Taisho vitalism. The colony’s vitalism was thus grounded in the intellectual soil of Henri Bergson’s theory on evolution reinterpreted by the 1910s Japanese intellectual circle, Rudolf Eucken’s idealism, William James’ psychology, and others. This study focused on these external influences as well as internal motives of colonial intellectuals for receiving Japanese vitalism. The primary concern for this group of intellectuals at the time was whether it was still possible for the colonized to experience a universal world of ‘the modern.’ This study examined the issue by looking into vitalist ‘theory of individuality’ of Yeom Sang-seop, a Korean writer who was active during the formative period of Korean modern literature. Yeom’s theory established on Bergson’s philosophy of life appropriated by Japanese anarchist Osugi Sakae. Moreover, Yeom adopted from Osugi the ideas of the absoluteness of the self and more universal concept of life, and searched for a way for a member

41 Ibid. p.74.
of a nation without sovereignty to become a modern man. Yeom Sang-seop believed that an individual, regardless of his or her colonial origin, could still enjoy modern culture, not via one’s nation, but by equipping oneself with an outstanding mind that enables one to understand ‘life,’ or infinite mind. While Yeom considered nation as the cultural matrix of the self, he did not see its relation to sovereignty a prerequisite for entering modernity. His theory on life that develops around the two axes of the self and the mind cannot be understood apart from such strong aspiration for the modern.

As displayed in Yeom Sang-seop’s case, vitalism in colonial Korea was closely related to the project of ‘becoming a modern man.’ Japanese vitalism on the other hand was fundamentally different from its Korean counterpart in its perception of the modern. Simply put, Japanese discourse of vitalism pursued not ‘the modern’ itself but ‘overcoming’ of it. That is, Japanese vitalism criticized European ‘material modernity’ and stressed to restore human spiritual values. It was in this context that Rudolf Eucken’s ‘neo-idealism’ was widely spread in Japan. Also, Henri Bergson’s idea of “vital impulse” (élan vital) was understood as a principle of spiritual creation rather than that of life’s evolution. Ikuta Choko who introduced Eucken’s idealist philosophy of life to Japan argued in his publication _Manifesto of Overcoming the Modern_ (1925) for overcoming the fetishism that bore Western modern civilization, and which could be achieved through a mindset that valued ‘quality over quantity.’ As has been pointed out by Suzuki Sadami who founded the concept of ‘Taisho vitalism,’ vitalism in Japan holds significance as a representative trend of thought that asserted in modern Japan ‘to overcome the modern,’ along with Marxism.⁴²

Different perceptions of the modern displayed by Korean and Japanese vitalism seems to have also affected the idea’s future paths in each region after the 1930s. In Colonial Korea, the view that associated the ideas of the self or individuality with the concept of life came to lose its vigor in the 1930s. It was inevitable for such pursuit of an individual as a universal subject to wither in face of Imperial Japan’s intense demand for the national identity of ‘Japan.’ In Japan, on the other hand, vitalism that had understood ‘life’ in terms of ‘overcoming Western modernity’ reemerged in the late 1930s as an important philosophical concept upon the outbreak of the war with the West. For instance, in his _The Problem of Japanese Culture_ (1940), the founder of the ‘Kyoto School’ of philosophy Nishida Kitaro defined Japanese emperor as a ‘historic life’ or a manifestation of universal life in history and claimed that here existed

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the originality of Japanese culture. He insisted that in that the emperor is a being that transcends power struggles, he is distinguished from ‘man in power’ imagined by the West. Philosophers of the Kyoto School went further to discuss on Japan’s ‘moralische energie’ while arguing for the justification of Japanese war with the West, that it was for the cause of building a moral world against Western hegemonism. It was within such ideology of war to fight against and overcome the Western modernity that the vitalism of ‘overcoming the modern’ reappeared. Unfortunately, as the comparative study of Korean and Japanese history of thought concerning vitalism require further analysis of greater number of discourses, I leave the question for future research.

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