

Tasan's Pragmatic Approach to the Confucian Classics

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I. Introduction

We should all be grateful to the government of King Sunjo (1800-1834) for sending Tasan into exile at a relatively isolated site along the distant southeastern coast of the Korean peninsula. Tasan was forced to stay away from his family, and from the distractions of the exciting intellectual, social, and political life in the Seoul area, for almost seventeen years, from late 1801 until the summer of 1818. Even though he didn't have his family with him, he had his books. That gave him what a modern-day professor might call a very long sabbatical. It was during that enforced sabbatical that Tasan wrote the commentaries that attract so much attention these days.

It took Tasan a while to settle into a quiet scholarly life in Kangjin, but, once he did, he became quite productive. In 1803 he finished a lengthy discussion of mourning ritual, and followed that up with a study of the *Book of Changes* in 1808. One year later, in 1809, he put together his thoughts on the *Book of Odes*. Then in 1810 and 1811 he finished a couple of studies of the *Book of History* and then, in 1812, compiled a study of the Spring and Autumn Annals. Finally, he turned his attention to the Four Books, finishing his commentary on the *Analects* in 1813, and his commentaries on Mencius, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, and the *Great Learning* in 1814.¹⁾

At first those commentaries were read by few beyond the immediate members of his family, since he had been expelled from the respectable intellectual circles in Seoul. In fact, during his own lifetime, and for decades

1) Yi Kwangho, "Chungyong kangũibo wa Chungyong chajamũl t'onghayõ pon Tasan ũi sõng ũi ch'õrhak" [Tasan's philosophical understanding of Sincerity as seen through his Lectures on the Doctrine of the Mean, Supplemented and his "Admonitions for Myself Upon Reading the Doctrine of the Mean"], *Tasanhak* 7 (2005), pp. 51-52

after his death in 1836, he had almost no impact on what other Koreans were thinking. Tasan's philosophy didn't really come to public notice until the 1930s, a century after his death. That is when Koreans grappling with the struggle to adapt to the modernizing world discovered what appeared to be sprouts of modernity in Tasan's writings. His focus on the empirical more than the metaphysical, and his analysis of why it was so difficult for individuals to live moral lives, are seen as early manifestations of modern thought. Since Tasan did his thinking and writing decades before Western civilization began reshaping the culture of the peninsula, he came to be seen as proof that Korean modernity has Korean roots. Tasan has since become a cultural hero, with a major road named after him in Seoul and a statue of him on Namsan, the mountain that rises in the middle of Seoul.

I have been asked by the editors of this journal to both survey the work that has been done on Tasan's studies of the Confucian Classics and to discuss where we should go from here. That is not an easy task. Tasan wrote so much on so many subjects that, as soon as his writings became widely available, scholars began debating what Tasan really meant, and where he got his ideas. It would take a book to provide a comprehensive survey of the state of the study of Tasan's writings on the Classics today. However, let me at least provide an overview.

II. Western Language Studies of Tasan's Philosophy

I'll start with Western-language scholarship, since that is a lot less complicated. Understandably, there is a lot less written in English and other European languages on Tasan than there is in Korean, so the debates in

English over the nature and significance of Tasan's work have not been as robust as they have been in Korean. Tasan was first introduced to the West back in 1957, when Gregory Henderson published "Chǒng Tasan: A Study in Korea's Intellectual History" in the *Journal of Asian Studies*.²⁾ That article focused on Tasan's life and the politics of his day and did not provide readers much information on Tasan's philosophy as seen in his commentaries on the Classics. In 1971 the *Korea Journal* published an article in English by Han Yǒng-u entitled "Chǒng Yag-yong: The Man and His Thought," but that article as well focused more on Tasan's life and political reform ideas than it did on his philosophy.³⁾ English readers had to wait until the 1980s to learn about Tasan's philosophy in greater detail.

In 1981, Michael Kalton, an American philosopher trained at Harvard, published an article in the *Journal of Korean Studies* on Tasan's philosophical anthropology.⁴⁾ Kalton was the first person writing in English to take Tasan seriously as a philosopher. In this article, he declared that Tasan undermined one of the defining characteristics of Neo-Confucianism by "extricating man from the universe," denying the monism of Neo-Confucianism metaphysics in which everything is connected to everything else. Instead, Tasan, according to Kalton, focused on what distinguished human beings from other material entities, in particular the human consciousness of right and wrong and the human ability to choose between them. As Kalton

2) Gregory Henderson, "Chǒng Tasan: A Study in Korea's Intellectual History," *Journal of Asian Studies* 16: 3 (May, 1957), 377-386.

3) Han Yǒng-u, "Chǒng Yak-yong: The Man and His Thought," *Korea Journal* 11:8 (August, 1971), 24-35.

4) Kalton, Michael. 1981. "Chǒng Tasan's Philosophy of Man: A Radical Critique of the Neo-Confucian World View," *Journal of Korean Studies*. 3: 3-38

defines him, Tasan remained a Confucian, since he shared the Confucian concern for a morality focused on interpersonal relationships, but he should not be called a Neo-Confucian.

Kalton's article was followed in 1985 by an English translation of a short article in the *Korea Journal* by Lee Eul-ho on Tasan's understanding of human nature.⁵⁾ Lee agreed with Kalton that Tasan was not a Neo-Confucian. Instead, Yi argued, Tasan tried to restore what he called "Susa Learning," the original teachings of Confucius and Mencius before they were distorted by the Han, Tang, and Song dynasties. According to Lee, Tasan's primary concern was how to cultivate the proper moral character to both interact appropriately with his fellow human beings and to govern the people appropriately when given the opportunity. He warned that an overemphasis on Tasan's political writings can blind us to the moral concerns at the heart of everything he wrote, from his explications of the Confucian Classics to his suggestions for a just government.

The next year the *Korea Journal* published a translation of an article by Kŭm Changt'ae on the relationship between Tasan's philosophy and Christianity.⁶⁾ Rather than emphasizing the Confucian roots of Tasan's thought, Kŭm identified elements in Tasan's interpretation of the *Chungyong* [The Doctrine of the Mean], such as his understanding of Heaven as a transcendental being, that, in Kŭm's eyes, show clear Catholic influence. Kŭm, however, reserved judgment on whether Tasan was a believing Catholic when

5) Lee, Eul-ho. "Tasan's View of Man." *Korea Journal* 25:9 (September 1985): 4-16.

6) Kum Chang-t'ae. "Tasan on Western Learning and Confucianism." *Korea Journal* 26:2 (February 1986): 4-16.

he wrote the final versions of his theistic commentaries on the Confucian Classics, writing “it is better to wait for some more definite proof before we give a final answer to this question.”

Kŭm’s article was followed in 1988 by an article by Bang In on Tasan and the Book of Changes that adopted a different tack to Tasan’s relationship to Confucian tradition.⁷⁾ Bang sees in Tasan’s approach to the *Book of Changes* signs of influence by the School of Evidential Learning in vogue in China at that time, rather than Catholic influence. Though Bang recognizes that Tasan believes that a Lord on High (*Sangje*) exercises control over the universe, according to Bang Tasan reads the hexagrams in the *Book of Changes* as less a reflection of the will of the Lord on High than as a graphic representation of the patterns of change in the material world.

The next year, in 1989, *Philosophy East and West* published an article on Tasan’s “Practical Learning” by the British scholar Mark Setton.⁸⁾ Like Bang, Setton pushes questions of Catholic influence aside. Instead, he sees as Tasan driven to dismantle much of the elaborate metaphysics of Neo-Confucianism by his desire to pursue the traditional Confucian goals of “Moral practicality” and “social utility.” The practicality Setton sees in Tasan’s philosophy comes from Tasan’s advocacy of “moral cultivation through social involvement.” Setton sees these as traditional Confucian goals supported by a departure from what Tasan saw as the overly abstract Neo-Confucian approach to understanding human emotions and human na-

7) Bang In. “The Philosophy of Change in Chong Yak-yong’s Zhouyi Sijian.” *Korea Journal* 28:10 (October 1988): 21-33.

8) Setton, Mark. “Tasan’s ‘Practical Learning.’” *Philosophy East and West* 39:4 (October 1989): 377-392

ture.

In the 1990s, we find a couple more important articles in English on Tasan's philosophy.⁹⁾ As in previous studies of Tasan's philosophy, they don't agree on how to characterize the relationship between Tasan's ideas and the ideas found in the Catholic missionary publications that had penetrated Korea by Tasan's time. Yoo Tae Gun is primarily concerned with arguing against those who say that Tasan was such a practical thinker that he rejected metaphysics completely. Yoo points out that Tasan advocates a clear metaphysical position, that the universe is divided into material and spiritual realms. Similar to Lee Eul-ho, he portrays Tasan's break with orthodox Neo-Confucianism as a product of his desire to restore original Confucianism. Kim Sunghae, on the other hand, argues that we cannot understand Tasan's unique philosophy unless we take into account the influence of "Western Learning," Catholic ideas introduced through books from China. She doesn't argue that Tasan was a full-fledged Catholic, however. Instead, she argues that he "built a bridge" between the immanent and impersonal absolute of Neo-Confucianism and the transcendent personality that serves as the absolute in the West.

Into the twentieth-first century, we find even more articles on Tasan's philosophy, including an article by Choi Youngjin,¹⁰⁾ and three articles in

9) Yoo Tae Gun, "Metaphysical Grounds of Tasan Thought." *Korea Journal* 34:1 (Spring 1994): 5-19; Kim Sunghae, "Chǒng Yagyong (Tasan): Creative Bridge Between the East and the West," In *Confucian Philosophy in Korea*, edited by Haechang Choung and Han Hyong-jo, 213-291 (Seoul: Academy of Korean Studies, 1996)

10) Choi Young-jin. "The Historical Status of Dasan's Inseong mulseongnon: On the Horak School's Inmulseong-dongiron." *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 1:1 (August 2001), 131-152.

one issue alone of the *Review of Korean Studies*.¹¹⁾ Choi is a Confucian philosopher, so he approaches Tasan from a Confucian perspective. He is more interested in how Tasan fits into Korean Confucian tradition than he is in whether or not Tasan's thinking was influenced by external sources. In this article, he examines the stand Tasan adopted in the debate in Korean Confucian circles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries over whether humans and animals shared the same basic nature. (Tasan's answer was that human beings are significantly different from animals.)

Two of the three articles in the *Review of Korean Studies* similarly avoid linking Tasan's ideas to Christian influence. Bang In continues his analysis of Tasan's interpretation of the *Book of Changes* by focusing on what he calls Tasan's "external realism," his explanation of the symbols in that work as depictions of patterns of change in the material world. Jang focuses on Tasan's ethics as much more practical than mainstream Neo-Confucian ethics because, Jang argues, ethics for Tasan was not an abstraction. Instead, ethics could only be found in everyday human interactions. Nah is the only one of the three to take possible Christian influence on Tasan seriously but, even though he notes that many of Tasan's departures from mainstream Neo-Confucianism resemble ideas found in Catholic writings, he writes that it would be a mistake to call Tasan a Christian, or to call him a Confucian, for that matter, since "the nature of his scholarship transcends that type of parochialism."

11) *The Review of Korean Studies* 3:2 (December, 2000): Bang In, "A Semiotic Approach to Understanding Chŏng Yagyong's Philosophy of Ijing," 5-18; Jang Seungkoo "Tasan's Pragmatic View of Ethics," 19-33; Seoung Nah, "Tasan and Christianity: In Search of a New Order," 35-51.

Deeper into the first decade of the twentieth-first century we can find another study of Tasan and the *Book of Changes* by Bang In, as well as an analysis by Song Young-bae of the relationship between Catholicism and Tasan's philosophy.¹²⁾ Bang In continues his sophisticated analysis of Tasan's relationship with the *Book of Changes* by noting that Tasan learned from Chinese, not Western, scholarship. He argues that Tasan was most influenced by the Xiangshu [Images and Numbers] school but also shows signs of accepting some ideas of the Yili [Ethical Interpretation] school. Neither school of interpretation of the *Book of Changes* had any connection with Western Learning. Song Young-bae, on the other hand, focuses on the influence one particular Catholic missionary text, the *Tianzhu shiyi* [True Significance of the Lord of Heaven] by the missionary Matteo Ricci, had on Tasan's thinking. Song finds "striking structural similarities between Dasan's thought and the Western paradigm based on Aristotle and Thomism." Much as Kim Sung-hae did, Song concludes that Tasan combined Korea's traditional philosophy with Western philosophy.

Tasanhak has also published a few articles in English on Tasan. In the 2002 issue, there are articles by both Mark Setton and me. I argue that Tasan and Thomas Aquinas shared a common goal of restoring the primacy of the individual to philosophy, supplanting the emphasis on universals which they felt had characterized the mainstream philosophies dominant in their times. Setton focused our attention on similarities between Tasan's

12) Bang In. "The Aspect of Dialectic Philosophy in Dasan Jeong Yag-yong's Exposition of *Yijing*." *The Review of Korean Studies* 9:4 (December 2006): 169-188; Song Young-bae. "A Comparative Study of the Paradigms between Dasan's Philosophy and Matteo Ricci's *Tianzhu shiyi*." *Korea Journal* 41:3 (Autumn 2001): 57-99.

Confucianism and the Confucianism of some Japanese philosophers.¹³⁾

That same year Setton published another article in which he suggested that Tasan, along with Ito Jinsai in Japan and Qing philosophers such as Wang Fuzhi, signals a move toward a post-Neo-Confucian age.¹⁴⁾

In 2004 *Tasanhak* published three papers in English on Tasan's philosophy, drawn from among many more papers on a variety of subjects presented at a conference on Tasan held at Harvard University in 2003.¹⁵⁾ Michael Kalton and Song Tae Yong both point out that Catholic influence on Tasan's thinking is undeniable, though they also both insist that he remained closer to Confucianism than to Catholicism. Ro Youngchang, on the other hand, pays little attention to Catholic influence on Tasan, insisting that "his hermeneutical approach was much indebted to the basic spiritual and moral premises of the Neo-Confucian metaphysics," particularly the way he combined both intellectual and practical elements in his scholarship.

In 2010 *Acta Koreana* published an article in which I tried to place Tasan within the "School of Practical Learning" (*sirhak*) based on his moral psychology and what I labeled his "pragmatic theology."¹⁶⁾ Two years later, Kim

13) Don Baker, "Thomas Aquinas and Chŏng Yagyong: Rebels within Tradition," *Tasanhak*, no 3 (2002), 32-69; Mark Setton, "A Comparative Study of Chŏng Yayong's Classical Learning (*Susahak*) and Japanese Ancient Learning (*Kogaku*)," *Tasanhak*, no 3 (2002), 230-245.

14) Mark Setton, "Is there a Post-Neo-Confucianism: Jeong Yagyong, Ito Jinsais, and the Unraveling of *li-qi* metaphysics," *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 2:2 (August, 2002), 156-71.

15) *Tasanhak* no. 5 (2004): Michael Kalton, "Chŏng Tasan and Mencius: Toward a Contemporary East-West Interface," 7-53; Tae Yong Sung, "The Heavenly God without Revelation in Tasan's Philosophy," 87-102; Ro Youngchang, "Tasan's Concept of Learning as an Anthropocosmic Process" 169-190.

16) Don Baker, "Practical Ethics and Practical Learning: Tasan's Approach to Moral Cultivation," *Acta Koreana*, 13: 2 (December, 2010), 47-61.

Daeyeol presented a new perspective on Tasan's philosophical and religious orientation.¹⁷⁾ Challenging the emphasis some have given to Catholic influence on Tasan's thinking, Kim weaves a persuasive argument that, though Tasan remained publically a faithful Confucian, "In terms of his relationship with Buddhism, it would seem that he drew closer to it over the years. Towards the end of his life, he occasionally wrote as if he were a Buddhist himself."

There have been many more articles than books published in English on Tasan. In fact, I could find only two books in English that focused on Tasan's philosophy. In 1997 Mark Setton published a monograph in English in which he expanded on his argument that the evidential learning of Qing China as well as the school of Ancient Learning in Tokugawa Japan were major influences on Tasan's philosophy, not Catholicism.¹⁸⁾ Kim Shin-ja, in a work published first in German but later translated in English, is more ambivalent about Catholic influence.¹⁹⁾ She notes that Tasan's distinction between material and spiritual realms, as well as his understanding of human nature, were influenced by what he learned from Catholic publications. However, she also has an entire chapter on "the incompatibility of Catholicism with Tasan's philosophy." She concludes that, though there is no denying that Tasan was inspired by Catholic writings to redefine some core

17) Kim Daeyeol, "The Social and Cultural Presence of Buddhism in the Lives of Confucian Literati in Late Chosŏn: The Case of Tasan," *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 25:2 (December, 2012), 213-41.

18) Setton, Mark, *Chŏng Yagyong: Korea's Challenge to Orthodox Neo-Confucianism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997)

19) Kim Shin-Ja, *Das philosophische Denken von Tasan Chŏng*, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2006); in English as *The Philosophical Thought of Tasan Chong*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2010)

Confucian concepts, in his heart he remained a Confucian.

The study of Tasan has also spread beyond Korea and the Western world. Taiwan has published two monographs on Tasan in Chinese, one in 2006 and another in 2010.²⁰⁾ Unfortunately, I have not been able to read either monograph, so I cannot provide any information on how their authors treat Tasan's thought and the forces that shaped his thinking. Recently, however, Taiwan also published an article by Huang Chun-chieh in English on Tasan.²¹⁾ In that article, Huang argues that Tasan should be recognized as a major figure in the history of Confucianism in East Asia in general rather than be seen as just an important Korean philosopher. He writes that not only did Tasan give Confucian ethics a more practical turn, he also provided an example for the modern age of using shared cultural values to overcome too narrow a focus on the political boundaries separating nations.

III. Korean Language Scholarship on Tasan's Philosophy

In Korean, of course, there many more studies of Tasan available, more than I can possibly list. There are even more books dedicated to Tasan in Korean than I can discuss today, much less scholarly articles. I can point

20) Huang Chun-chieh 黃俊傑, *Dong Ya shi yu zhong de Chashan xue yu Chaoxian ru xue* 東亞視域中的茶山學與朝鮮儒學 [Tasan's Scholarship and Korean Confucianism in the context of Greater East Asia] Taipei: Taiwan University Press, 2006; Cai, Zhenfeng 蔡振豐, *Chaoxian ru zhe Ding Ruoyong de Si shu xue: yi Dong Ya wei shi ye de tao lun* 朝鮮儒者丁若鏞的四書學：以東亞為視野的討論 [The Study of the Four Classics by the Korean Confucian Chǒng Yagyong: a discussion from the perspective of East Asia] (Taipei: Taiwan University Press, 2010)

21) Huang Chun-chieh, "The Role of Tasan Learning in the Making of East Asian Confucianisms: A Twentieth-First Century Perspective," *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies* 9:2 (December, 2012), 153-68.

out, however, that the main focus of studies of Tasan's philosophy has been on his commentaries on the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, the *Great Learning*, and the *Doctrine of the Mean*, just as the English-language scholarship on Tasan's philosophy has been.²²⁾ There have been annotated Korean-language translations of his commentaries on those Four Books available since the late 1980s. Recently we also acquired, in 2007, an annotated translation of one of Tasan's commentaries on the Book of Changes.²³⁾ The next year an annotated Korean translation of his commentary on the *Book of Odes* appeared.²⁴⁾ Those translations may encourage scholars to draw on a broader range of Tasan's writings in analyzing his philosophy. I should add, though, that even though translations are useful, especially for their footnotes to proper names and allusions, we need to read Tasan in the original. His Chinese is very clear, especially since he often defines his terms. In translation, including translation into Korean, some of the nuances of his arguments are lost.

Just as we see in English-language scholarship, studies in Korean of his commentaries on the Classics have tended to concentrate on what he has to say about human nature and virtue, especially how he challenges the mainstream Neo-Confucian understanding of key terms such as as *li* [理], *sǒng* [性], *kyǒng* [敬], and *ch'ǒn* [天]. There are also some studies of his use of the

22) Chǒng Yagyong, *Kugyǒk yǒyudang chǒnso* 國譯與猶堂全書 [The Complete works of Yǒyudang, translated into Korean] (Chǒnju: Chǒnju Taehakkyo Ch'ulp'anbu, 1986-1989)

23) Chǒng, *Yǒkchu Chuyǒk sajǒn* 譯註周易四箋 [Annotated Translation of Four Methods of Exposition on the Book of Changes], translated by Pang In and Chang Chǒnguk (Seoul: Somyǒl Ch'ulp'an, 2007)

24) Chǒng, *Yǒkchu Sigyǒng kangŭi* 譯註詩經講義 [Annotated Translation of Lectures on the Book of Odes], translated by Silsi Haksa Kyǒnghak Yǒn'guhoe. (Seoul: Saam, 2008)

term *Sangje* [上帝]. Though there is general agreement on which aspects of Tasan's philosophy we need to pay attention to, there is much less agreement on how to situate him within the general history of Korean Confucianism.

For example, similar to scholars in the West, scholars in Korea disagree over how much of his originality can be ascribed to Catholic influence. As noted earlier, someone like Lee Eul-ho, for example, sees Tasan's ideas as drawn from the well of original Confucianism, before it was transformed by Neo-Confucians in Song China. To such scholars, Tasan is a Confucian fundamentalist, determined to recover the original meaning of the Classics. On the other hand, someone like Kŭm Changt'ae sees a lot of Catholic influence on Tasan's philosophy. Even within the large group that recognizes that, one, Tasan was a Catholic when he was in his 20s and, two, there are a few terms in his writings that appear closer to Catholic terminology than mainstream Neo-Confucian terminology, there is disagreement over whether Tasan remained a Catholic after 1790 or so (when he himself said he abandoned Catholicism) or whether he remained a secret Catholic until his death decades later. Some argue that he remained a theist, even a monotheist, but that doesn't make him a Catholic. Others say the fact that he continued to write of Sangje (the Lord on High) as a supernatural personality and the one and only supreme spirit means that he continued to hold Catholic beliefs.

Another debate that swirls around where to locate Tasan's philosophical roots is the question of his relationship to the two other giants of Korean Confucianism, T'oegye Yi Hwang (1501-1570) and Yulgok Yi I (1536-1584). This is a question non-Koreans have not paid much attention to but it is one

Korean scholars have returned to again and again. Often those who see him as strongly influenced by one or both of those pillars of Korean Neo-Confucianism insist that, even though he entertained some unorthodox ideas, Tasan remained within the broad parameters of the Neo-Confucian camp. They point out, for example, that he continued to write about *li* and *ki* [氣], though he gave those terms a more restricted range.

Those who place Tasan in the T'oegye camp point to his membership in the Namin faction, and to the fact that he noted in a letter he wrote in 1795 to a friend that "In the depth and breadth of his ideas, T'oegye surpasses everyone who has come after him. Reading him helps me forget about all the troubles I've been facing lately. When I am immersed in his writings, my whole body relaxes, and I feel at ease. Reading him is a wonderful medicine!"²⁵⁾ Tasan wrote that letter the year he wrote "Tosan sasungnok" [Notes on taking Yi Hwang as a model for self-cultivation], in which he tells us he started each day by waking up at dawn and, after washing up, reading from the letters of T'oegye. Only then would he begin his official duties for the day.²⁶⁾

However, others point out that Tasan denied *li* the generative power T'oegye awarded it. In fact, Tasan said *li* was totally dependent on material things, since they were more substantial. That resembles Yulgok's argument that *li* cannot move on its own but has to move along with *ki*. To make it more difficult to decide whom Tasan favored as a philosophical guide, he

25) Chŏng, "Tap Yi Kyesu" 答李季受 [A letter replying to Yi Kyesu] *Yöyudang chŏnsŏ* 與猶堂全書 [The Complete Works of Yöyudang Chŏng Yagyong], I:18, 24b.

26) Chŏng, "Tosan sasungnok" 陶山私淑錄 *Yöyudang chŏnsŏ*, I: 22, 1a-12a.

once wrote an essay in which he argued we should adopt Yulgok's understanding of the relationship between li and ki when we are studying the natural world, but we should follow T'oegye's interpretation of that relationship when we are engaged in self-cultivation to eradicate selfish thought and emotions from our mind.²⁷⁾

I am not going to try in this brief article to answer the question of whether Tasan was or was not a Catholic, whether he was a Confucian fundamentalist or a Neo-Confucian, and whether he was philosophically closer to T'oegye or to Yulgok. Such questions are interesting, but they are questions more relevant to the history of philosophy than to philosophy per se. I am a historian, so obviously I am interested in how to fit Tasan into the history of philosophy in Korea. But I am also a human being with concerns about how to best live my life today. As I see him, Tasan is much more than just a fascinating figure from Korea's past. He is also someone who still speaks to contemporary concerns, who offers advice useful to those of us who live in the twentieth-first century. In that vein, I would like to put historical issues aside and instead talk about Tasan as an ethical pragmatist who used the Classics to support his discovery of practical techniques useful for becoming a more moral person. I argue that much of what Tasan found useful in his own life is applicable to our lives as well, and therefore deserves further scholarly exploration on that ground alone.

IV. Recognizing the plurality of reality

27) Chŏng, "Ibal kibalbyŏn" 理發氣發辨 [a discussion of generation by li and generation by *ki*], *Yŏyudang chŏnsŏ*, I: 12, 17a-18a.

However, in trying to identify Tasan's relevance for the modern world, we have to be careful not to rip him out of his historical context. To do so would be to distort his insights and view him more as an abstraction than as a real human being who struggled within the constraints of his time to both become a better person and to make the world around him a better place for others. Moreover, Tasan's insights arose out of his frustrations with the philosophical assumptions that shaped thought in his day, and we can't understand his ideas and his moral concerns unless we situate them within the context from which they emerged and identify the assumptions he was arguing against.

In Tasan's day, as they had in preceding centuries, mainstream Neo-Confucians viewed the universe as an interconnected whole. Rather than focusing on the individual entities that fill the universe, they preferred to focus on how those things interacted such that everything was linked to everything else in an all-encompassing cosmic network of patterns of appropriate interactions. (Their name for such patterns was *li*.) Their assumption was that such interactions would normally go smoothly, except when a selfish concern for personal benefit, usually generated by irregularities in *ki*, interfered.

Tasan's own personal moral experience showed him that it wasn't quite that simple. Consistently acting morally was not nearly as easy as Neo-Confucianism made it sound like it should be. In fact, Tasan argued, consistently doing the right thing and sticking to the moral path is as difficult as climbing up a steep hill, but following our natural preference for physical pleasure is as easy as rolling down that same hill.²⁸⁾ Being virtuous, he

28) Chŏng, "Maengja yoŭi" 孟子要義 [The key points in the Mencius], *Yŏyudang chŏnsŏ*, II:5, 33a

believed, was hard work. Such an accurate observation of actual human tendencies is a prime example of Tasan's practical and realistic spirit. He insists on looking at human beings as they actually are rather than how we wish they were. When he did that, though, he shattered the cosmic unity that was at the core of Neo-Confucian philosophy.

We first see his preference for seeing the universe in terms of how we actually experience it in his challenge to the Neo-Confucian notion that all things share one *ch'e* (體). Tasan launched a frontal assault on the core Neo-Confucian notion that human beings form one body with the universe, a notion rooted in Zhang Zai's eleventh-century *Western Inscription* (西銘) and its call for us to see everything in the universe as connected to us in such a way that we should treat everyone and everything with the same reverence and respect we should show toward members of our own families. Often Zhang Zai's statement of the interconnectedness of everything is phrased as "the myriad things form one *ch'e*" (萬物一體). The term *ch'e* literally means "body," but in this phrase it is often translated as substance. That is a somewhat misleading translation, since *ch'e* refers to the unity resulting from the fact that everything in the universe shares in the productive potential of the cosmos and therefore everything is connected to everything else. In other words, *ch'e* in this phrase refers more to what things, including people, can do rather than what they are. *Ch'e* refers here more to function than to substance.

Tasan, however, chose to read *ch'e* in its literal meaning of "body." Tasan may have been influenced by his reading of Matteo Ricci's introduction to Catholicism, the *Tianzhu shiyi*. In that work, Ricci explicitly denounced the

Neo-Confucian notion that all things form one substance (which is how Ricci understood *ch'e*). Ricci argued that if there were no real substantial differences between fathers and sons, rulers and subjects, and elders and juniors, then Confucian moral principles were meaningless, since those principles consisted primarily of rules governing how human beings should interact with other human beings within a hierarchical social order.²⁹⁾ Tasan may also have interpreted the term *ch'e* in that context the way he did because he favored a literal reading of Sino-Korean characters when a literal reading appeared to him to be most appropriate in that particular context. Whatever his reason, Tasan rejected the mainstream Neo-Confucian assertion that all things were connected by a common *ch'e*.

Tasan argued that it is contrary to both the words of the Classics and the nature of the real world to assert that all the things in the universe share one "*ch'e*." "How can we possibly think that we share one body with plants, trees, and animals?" he asked. He notes that he never saw such an expression anywhere in the Classics. He adds it is acceptable to say that all men are brothers, as the *Western Inscription* says, but it is not acceptable to say we share the same substance as plants and animals.³⁰⁾

Tasan shared the Catholic focus on the world we live in and act in as composed of separate and distinct substances, rather than on an underlying unity, because of his own personal experience with self-cultivation. In

29) Matteo Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* [T'ian-chu Shih-i], translated by Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chen, S.J. (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1985), 229.

30) Chŏng, "Chungyong Kangŭibo" 中庸講義補 [Lectures on the Doctrine of the Mean, Supplemented], *Yŏyudang chŏnsŏ*, II, 4: 8b-9a.

mainstream Neo-Confucianism, since human beings, like everything else in the universe, are inextricably intertwined with the cosmic network of appropriate relationships that constitutes the universe, human nature is essentially good. In other words, it is our nature to act in accordance with the cosmic network in which we are embedded. However, Tasan, in reflecting on his own frustrating attempts to consistently adhere to the moral principles of Confucianism, realized that he interacted with people and the world around him as a separate and distinct individual. That was the only way he could explain his inability to live up to his own high moral standards. Tasan seized upon the notion of individual substance as a way to explain his own moral frailty and that of humanity in general.

Once he had adopted a perspective emphasizing differences and individuality rather than commonality, Tasan found that other Neo-Confucian terms also had to be re-defined. *Li* (理), for example, could not longer serve as the glue that kept everything in the universe connected to everything else. *Li* in classical Sino-Korean can be either singular (the one *li* that unites everything in the universe in an all-encompassing network of patterns of appropriate interactions) or plural (with each thing in the universe having its own *li* defining its particular role in that network). Tasan insisted on using *li* only with that second, plural meaning. He wrote that there is no one universal *li* for the entire cosmos. Rather, each and every distinct thing has its own *li*.³¹⁾ Such metaphysical pluralism has practical implications. It is much easier to find guidelines for how to act in particular situations if we have specific *li* to guide us rather than try to find guidance from *li* that are so general that they apply to every

31) Chǒng, “Maengja yoŭi,” *Yōyudang chōnsǒ*, II: 6, 38a-b.

possible situation.

Since he had come to the conclusion that human beings do not share the same *ch'e* or the same *li* with other things, Tasan is able to look at human nature and see that it, too, is best analyzed into different components rather than treated as a unified whole. He recognizes that we can talk about *sōng* (性) as simply one human nature but that can cause us to overlook the fact that there are contrary tendencies within us, and only if we recognize that there are contrary tendencies within us can we ensure that the correct tendency motivates our actions. Of course, mainstream Confucians recognized that we have both a “moral mind” (道心) and a “human mind” (人心), but they tended to treat the “moral mind” as the only true human nature. In Tasan’s view, that would mislead us into thinking that it was easier to be moral than it actually was. If we only had to act in accordance with our true nature, and our true nature was moral, than all we had to do to be moral was act naturally.

V. Recognizing Human Moral Frailty

However, Tasan’s own personal experience with the cultivation of a moral character convinced him that acting naturally, following our natural tendencies, was not always a good thing. After all, though it is correct to say that we naturally desire what is good, unfortunately we desire both what is morally good and what feels good.³²⁾ For example, he pointed out that if someone offers us a gift that could be interpreted as a bribe and therefore

32) Chōng, “Chungyong chajam” 中庸自箴[Admonitions for myself upon reading the Doctrine of the Mean], *Yōyudang chōnsō*, II:3, 2b.

we know it would be wrong to accept it, we are torn between the desire for the pleasure that gift would give us and the desire to act appropriately and decline it. Similarly, if we find ourselves in a difficult situation but we know we should deal with that situation, we nevertheless are tempted to simply flee and abdicate our responsibilities.³³⁾

Once Tasan recognized that we were often faced with two strong desires, one we should allow to dictate our actions and one we should not, he realized that we need to choose between those two desires. Here Tasan again broke with mainstream Neo-Confucian to assert that human beings have free will, the ability to choose to do the right thing or to do the wrong thing (自主之權).³⁴⁾ According to Tasan's own personal moral experience, it is not enough to simply be determined (立志) to act properly at all times, though that is what Neo-Confucians usually recommended. Every time we are faced with conflicting desires, we have to choose the moral one. And, even if we choose the moral course of action, Tasan found through his own personal moral experience, it is not always easy to act in accordance with that choice.

This realization led Tasan to reject the usual Neo-Confucian understanding of human beings as innately virtuous. Tasan argued that, if human beings were born virtuous, as Neo-Confucians claimed, then for people to act appropriately and morally would be as easy as it is for water to roll downhill and for fire to flame upwards. And if that were the case, then acting virtuously would be no great accomplishment. We would no more praise a

33) Chǒng, "Maengja yoŭi," *Yǒyudang chǒnsǒ*, II: 6, 19a.

34) Chǒng, "Maengja yoŭi," *Yǒyudang chǒnsǒ*, II: 5, 33b

person for being virtuous that we would praise a deer for living in a forest rather than in a village. However, Heaven has endowed human beings with the ability to make their own decisions, an ability a deer does not have. If human beings choose to do what is right, then they can do what is right. But if they choose to act in an immoral manner, they can do that as well. That is what makes human beings different from animals. And that is what makes living a moral life an accomplishment, and is the reason we condemn those who act immorally.³⁵⁾

Tasan believed that, even though his understanding of *li*, *ch'e*, and human nature was very different from what mainstream Neo-Confucians taught, he was actually more faithful to the true message of the Classics than Neo-Confucians were. He argued for his new approach to human moral psychology by insisting that it was not really new at all but instead was grounded in a careful reading of what the Classics, particularly the Four Books, actually said. That is why he laid out his moral philosophy in his commentaries on the *Great Learning*, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, the *Mencius*, and the *Analects*.

In those same commentaries, he argued for another, even greater, departure from what mainstream Neo-Confucians taught. He read God into the Classics, not just God as metaphor for impersonal *li* but an actual supernatural personality in the Heavens above watching what human beings do on the earth below. In other words, Tasan's practical moral psychology led him to propose a Confucian theism. However, he had a problem. The Four Books rarely mentioned a personal deity. They didn't mention Neo-

35) Chŏng, "Maengja yoŭi" *Yŏyudang chŏnsŏ*, II: 5, 34b-35

Confucian *li*, either. But, nevertheless, if he wanted to claim that his moral philosophy was drawn from the Classics, he had to find passages in those Classics that could be read as supporting belief in the existence of a God above.

That meant Tasan had to go beyond the Four Books and look at the Thirteen Classics. In the oldest Confucian Classics, there are several references to a Lord on High, *Sangje* (上帝). Tasan linked those explicit references to a Lord On High to explicit references to Heaven in the Four Books in order to argue that the Four Books as well speak of a Lord On High, though usually not as explicitly as the earlier Classics do. Tasan may have been pointed in that direction by Ricci, who used those same lines from the ancient Classics to argue that Chinese had once believed in a supernatural personality who reigned as the Lord On High. But he may also have reached that conclusion on his own, because there are cases of other Confucians who took those references to the Lord On High literally, even though they had not been exposed to Ricci's writings. For example, over a century before Tasan encouraged belief in *Sangje*, the respected Korean Confucian philosopher Yun Hyu (1617-1680) had written "ancient people experienced fear and trembling, and were uneasy in mind; they behaved prudently as if they were being watched from above on all sides, and used to speak of the 'Lord on High' in everything."³⁶⁾ There is no evidence that Yun Hyu ever read a Catholic

36) As cited in Miura Kunio. 1985. "Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy in Seventeenth-century Korea: Song Siyöl and Yun Hyu," *The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea*, edited by Wm Theodore de Bary and JaHyun Kim Haboush (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 430.

publication, or even glanced at one, yet the way he referred to *Sangje* was not very different from the way Tasan wrote about him.

We will never know the exact process by which Tasan became a theist, because Tasan doesn't tell us if his conclusion that the Lord On High was an actual God was a result of his own reasoning based on his own experiences with self-cultivation or if he became convinced that God existed when he encountered arguments for God's existence others had written. What we do know, however, is that Tasan definitely believed that a supernatural personality existed and oversaw human affairs. And we know how Tasan justified that conclusion.

Tasan did not rely on the traditional Catholic argument from order, that the existence of order in the universe tells us that there must be an external Orderer, that Ricci thought was such a persuasive argument. Tasan did not envision the universe as a structure that could not have created itself but instead must have been built by an external agent, much as the intricate mechanism of a clock is not made by the clock itself but is made by a watchmaker. Tasan was not particularly interested in such issues of cosmogony. Instead, Tasan put forward a pragmatic argument. He argued that we should believe that God exists and watches our every thought and deed because, if we believe that, then we are more likely to behave properly.

His justification for belief that Sangje (the Lord On High) is an actual supernatural personality observing our every thought and action provides further evidence of Tasan's preference for the practical, the applicable, and the concrete. We see that, for example, in the way he defines and used the term *Kyŏng* (敬).

Tasan wrote, “abiding in reverence is the foundation of morality. It is what makes it possible for us to act properly.”³⁷⁾ But reverence for what? In mainstream Neo-Confucianism, the character translated here as “reverence” is better translated as “mindfulness,” since it refers to an inner state of mind, a calm readiness to accept guidance from the *li* in the world around us. However, Tasan insisted that particular understanding of *kyōng* was not very helpful, since it doesn’t tell us where to direct our reverence. He insisted that reverence always requires an object of reverence. It can be reverence for Heaven, reverence of one’s ruler, reverence for one’s parents, reverence for one’s older reverence, reverence for elders, reverence for guests, or simply reverence manifest as respectful attention while dealing with matters at hand. In every instance, however, true reverence denotes a reverent attitude toward someone or something.³⁸⁾

That something is the Lord On High. Tasan recognizes that Confucians are sometimes told that they should show reverence for Heaven. However, he insists that, in that context, Heaven is just another way of referring to the Lord On High. He noted that we sometimes call the Lord Above “Heaven” instead of “the Lord On High” just as we sometimes refer to our king as the State because we don’t want to show disrespect by calling him by his proper name.³⁹⁾ However, we need to keep in mind that it is not the blue sky above we should revere. Instead, it is the Lord on high.

And why should we revere the Lord on High? Tasan gives a very prag-

37) Chōng, “Tosan sasungnok,” *Yōyudang chōnsō*, I: 22, 6a

38) Chōng, “Maengja yōi.” *Yōyudang chōnsō* II, 6: 23b.

39) Chōng, “Maengja yōi” *Yōyudang chōnsō* II: 6, 38b.

matic answer:

There is no human being born on this earth without base desires. What keeps us from following those desires and doing whatever we feel like doing? It is the fear that our misbehavior will be noticed. Noticed by whom? Whose gaze keeps us in a state of constant caution and apprehension? We are cautious and apprehensive because we know there are enforcement officers responsible for making sure rules are followed. We are cautious and apprehensive because we know our sovereign can punish us if we behave improperly. If we did not think there was someone watching us, would we not simply abandon all sense of moral responsibility and just do whatever we felt like doing?...

But what makes us behave properly even in the privacy of our own room and make sure that even our thoughts are proper thoughts? The only reason why a superior person is watchful over his thoughts and behavior even in the privacy of his own room is that he knows that there is a Lord On High (*Sangje*) watching him.⁴⁰⁾

In other words, Tasan argued we should believe in the Lord On High because such a belief will inspire us to exert the effort needed to always think and act the way we should think and act. In the world as he saw it, in which human beings are not integrated into the tightly-knit fabric of the universe but instead are autonomous individuals who are capable of knowing what

40) Chŏng, "Chungyong Chajam," *Yŏyudang chŏnsŏ*, II: 3, 4b-5a

is right but are also capable of acting contrary to that knowledge, we need a stimulus to push us in the right direction. That stimulus, he argued, is the belief that we cannot escape the gaze of the Lord On High. Such a belief is necessary if we are to overcome the natural human tendency to pursue the good of physical pleasure rather than the good of morality.

VI. Conclusion

Tasan was a pragmatic thinker. He was not a pragmatist in the modern philosophical meaning of pragmatism. He was not interested in defining truth in terms of applicability. Rather, he was interested in applicability alone. He was interested in what worked. He did not insist that it was true that the Lord on High existed. He simply argued that, if we believed that the Lord on High existed and watched us every minute of the day, we would be inspired to try harder to act morally.

Most of the scholarly discussion of Tasan's philosophy to date, both in English and in Korean, has treated Tasan's thought as an historical artifact. Scholars have been more concerned with whether Tasan was a Catholic or not, whether he was a follower of T'oegye or of Yulgok, and whether he remained within the Neo-Confucian camp or was trying to revive original Confucianism than they have with the contemporary applicability of Tasan's ideas. They have put Tasan on a museum shelf, to be admired rather than imitated. But Tasan himself wrote his commentaries on the Confucian Classics not to draw the attention of later generations or win praise for the profundity he displayed in his scholarship. He wrote them as a reflection of his own personal struggle to overcome human moral frailty and become a

better person. They were intended to serve as a guide for his own moral endeavors, and also as a guide for later generations who wanted to follow the same path to developing a moral character he was trying to follow.

Tasan searched the Confucian Classics for applicable insights into human psychology and what those insights told him about the most effective methods for cultivating the ability to consistently act appropriately in our interactions with our fellow human beings. Tasan used the fruitful ambiguity of some key terms in the Classics to link those insights to specific features he believed he found in human psychology as well as in the universe, both material and immaterial, in which human beings lived. Even though those Classics are ancient texts, and even though Tasan himself lived 200 years ago, what Tasan found in them can be very useful for us today.

We can confirm through our own experience that it is not easy to consistently act morally, to act the way we know we should act. We can also confirm that we have to choose how to act, and sometimes we make the wrong choices. Moreover, most of us recognize that we are more likely to make the right choice, and act on it, if we know that someone else is watching what we are doing, or will find out what we have done. Tasan's insights therefore coincide with what we, too, can discover if we look closely at our own lives. And his suggestions for how we can overcome the moral frailty that he, and our own experience, tells us are an inescapable condition of human existence will work as well for us as they did for him.

However, the practicality of Tasan's moral advice is not the only reason we should take Tasan's ideas seriously today. Another reason Tasan's philosophy is relevant in the modern world is that he straddled the community-

oriented Confucian world and the modern world of individualism. Tasan recognized that human beings are autonomous individuals, a belief that is at the core of modern civilization. However, at the same time, his morality was Confucian morality, a morality centered on harmonious interactions among human beings.⁴¹⁾ Individualism without a concern for the common good and for playing our proper role in society can lead to conflict and even chaos. However, a call for people to suppress their individuality in order to act as proper members of society can create a lot of unhappiness and also be inefficient, since it could cause us to ignore individual talents and skills. Tasan, by showing us a way individuals can be inspired to work together with other individuals as individuals to create a more harmonious society, has cleared away the brush for a path we can use to navigate between the need to recognize the rights and needs of individuals and the duty of individuals to recognize that they are not totally alone and self-sufficient but have to work with their fellow human beings to build a better human community.

What can we do to ensure that Tasan's advice is not overlooked today? I'm sure most of us agree that the world today is a great need of moral guidance. The self-centered pursuit of profit and pleasure is raising the levels of tension in society among both individuals and nations and creating various area of conflict. To counter this unhealthy trend, I suggest we do our best to let more people know about how Tasan would have dealt with this problem.

41) Chǒng, "Taehak kongŭi大學公議 [Objective lectures on the Great Learning], *Yōyudang chōnsǒ*, II: 1, 13a

There are already many good translations of Tasan's writings into Korean. However, Tasan is still little known outside of Korea. We need to address that problem. We need scholars who can read Tasan's writings in literary Sino-Korean and can then translate those writings into English, Chinese, and Japanese as eloquent as the original. In particular, I suggest we focus on translations of his commentaries on the Confucian Classics. However, we should not stop with his commentaries. We also need English, Chinese, and Japanese translations of his autobiographical writings (his自撰墓誌銘), his letters, and the epitaphs he wrote for his friends and relatives to show the world how his understanding of the Classics affected his everyday life and his relationships with those around him.

I am now retirement age and only have a few more years left of active academic life. In my remaining years as a professor, I will do my best to train scholars who can carry out the task of introducing Tasan to the English-speaking world. I hope that many others will join me in this project so that the entire world will come to recognize the name Chǒng Yagyong and will also recognize that there is much we can learn from this sage of nineteenth-century Korea.

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유교 경전에 대한 다산의 실용주의적 접근법

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다산 정약용의 철학은 서구에서는 아직도 높게 평가되지 않는다. 다산의 사상과 관련하여 영문의 학술논문 몇 편과 두 책 정도의 저술이 출판되었다. 그러나 한국어로 출간된 대부분의 다산 연구와 마찬가지로, 다산의 사상을 그냥 박물관에 있는 보물 같이 생각하는 것 같은데, 이것은 불행한 일이 아닐 수 없다. 그것은 다산이 오늘날 인간을 괴롭히는 문제를 다루는 데 매우 실용적인 조언을 제공해주기 때문이다. 특히 그는 우리가 도덕적 기준에 따라 사는 것이 그렇게 어려운지 그 이유에 대한 진단과 해답을 제공해 준다. 그의 설명에 의하면, 우리는 도덕적 선을 향한 바람과 육체적 쾌락의 이익을 위한 욕망간의 갈등으로 고민하며 그 중 하나를 선택할 수 있는 자유를 갖고 있다. 그러나 그는 또한 우리가 쾌락의 쉬운 길 보다는 더 어려운 도덕의 길을 따를 것이기 때문에 도덕적 나약함을 극복하는 방법을 제안하기도 하였다. 그는 인간이 그들의 모든 생각과 행동이 상제上帝에 의해 관찰된다고 믿는다면 적절하게 행동하기 위해 더욱 열심히 노력할 것이라는 실제적인 가정에 기초한, 도덕적 신학을 주장한다.

주제어 | 다산, 상제, 인성, 자주지권, 경전.

Abstract

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The Philosophy of Tasan Chǒng Yagyong is still underappreciated in the Western world. A few academic articles, and even a couple of books, introducing his ideas have appeared in English. However, like most of the scholarship on Tasan published in Korean, Tasan's philosophy is usually treated in those articles as an historical artifact, something to be viewed but not adopted. This is unfortunate, since Tasan offers much practical advice for dealing with problems that afflict human beings today. In particular, he offers a diagnosis of why we find it so difficult to live up to our own moral standards. He explains that we are torn by competing desires, a desire for the moral good and a desire for the good of physical pleasure, and have the freedom to choose one over the other. However, he also proposed a way to overcome our moral frailty so that we will choose to follow the more difficult path of morality rather than the easier path of pleasure. He advocates a moral theology, grounded in the pragmatic assumption that human beings will try harder to behave appropriately if they believe their every thought and action is observed by the Lord on High.

Key words | Tasan, Lord on High, human nature, reverence, free will, *Li, ch'e*.