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Study as Identity:

Some Characteristics of Tasan and his Entourage

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As much as their originality, the important volume and variety of subjects dealt with in Tasan's works are an object of admiration. If these remarkable accomplishments are at times attributed to his genius or the time available to him during his eighteen-year exile, it is nonetheless pertinent to also investigate his practice of study for an explanation. An intellectual tradition is not only summed up by its contents, but is also equally constituted, among other things, of its approaches, methodologies, and work and production methods. Moreover, the practice of learning (or method of work) can also serve to set parameters in order to characterise an individual or a group in the same scholarly social milieu. In the writings classified as "miscellanies" (雜文), Tasan lays out concrete propositions and teachings concerning what study, reading, writing, and editing should be. The aim of this paper is to bring together the relevant elements contained in his writings connected to this subject and make a preliminary synthesis of studies already completed on this question.

Let us begin with the kind of study that he adhered to. Tasan is commonly known as a thinker who opposed Zhu Xi Neo-Confucianism and who succeeded in breaking through the limits that were apparent in this tradition in his time. However, the most recent studies are agreed that Tasan did not resist, but on the contrary, attempted to renovate tradition by restoring its fundamental spirit. If scholars at the threshold of the 20th century invented the « Sirhak » (實學) stream in Korean intellectual history through positing a dichotomy between the real/practical (實) and the abstract/empty (虛) in order to distinguish the present from the past, or modernity from pre-modernity, Tasan used this same dichotomy not to break with tradition, but rather to criticise the present and reclaim the past. He distinguished in particular five types of learning in his time.

More exactly, he criticises five groups of scholars. Scholars engaged in the study of Nature and Principle (性理之學) come first, because, according to him, they retire from public life and refuse to serve in official posts, or are only interested in the posts of

commentators or presenters at the colloquia on the Classics or as teachers of the Crown Prince. The second group were those who studied the Han period commentaries (誥訓之學) who boasted of their vast knowledge of etymology, but neglected to distinguish between what was true and false and the means of practical application. As for the third group, those who study literature (文章之學), they follow vain pleasures and cause to forget the source of human nature and the affairs of the people and the state. As for those who only study to prepare for the civil service examinations (科舉之學), they have a formalist and ambitious spirit and in reality, are incompetent in their work. He accuses the fifth group, those who study divination techniques (術數之學), of deceiving the people.

What kind of learning then does Tasan consider valid? Tasan scrupulously adheres to Confucian ideology with regard to the ends and objectives of Confucian learning: self-perfection and administration of society. Concerning this, it seems that he was able to find a fine balance between these opposing poles that in the history of Confucianism had led to the causes and debates of factional and scholarly division. Morality, study, and politics were all intimately linked. Tasan bases learning on Confucian morality, notably filial piety and brotherly love (孝悌), and underlines the aspirations and duties of scholars to promote the prosperity of the people¹. “ [...] It is in this way that one can cultivate oneself in the world, manage the household and govern the state and the world, and in relation to Heaven, know the celestial virtue and recover the Mandate of Heaven”².

Basic learning therefore remained the study of the Classics, history, and writings on the economy of the country³. The learned of his day should, according to him, probe the meaning of the ancient texts by consulting the Han commentaries and finding their meaning through Zhu Xi's commentaries. He states that “the original meaning of the Six Classics and Four Books are linked one with another. Consequently, if one distinguishes truth from error and profit from loss by referring to the Classics and the commentaries, one ends up certain even if there was a doubt in the beginning; we end up knowing everything even if we stray in the beginning». It is after all this that one can make the fruits of learning one's own, put it into practice and action, and verify it⁴. He also proposes a concrete order of reading texts: first of

¹ ‘Ki Yia’ 寄二兒 ; ‘Si Hagyon kagye’ 示學淵家誠.

² ‘Ohangnon Yi’ 五學論二.

³ ‘Ki Yia’ 寄二兒 ; ‘Wi Yi Inyong Chugon’ 爲李仁榮贈言 ;

⁴ ‘Ohangnon yi’ 五學論二

all the Classics and histories, and thereafter works on administration and the economy⁵. From what remains from among around 500 works that he produced, there are 232 *kwon* of studies on the classics and 260 *kwon* of various other works⁶.

As to the kind of attitude to adopt towards study and learning, Tasan evokes the study of the ancients, which according to him “consists of having a vast knowledge, minutely questioning and scrupulously reflecting, distinguishing with clarity and putting into practice with sincerity”. He finds that his contemporaries aspire only to have a vast knowledge and are not interested in the rest. He is particularly concerned with action, at least as much as with theoretical considerations. It is this pragmatic spirit that underscores his reformist ideas and his criticisms of the irrationality and ineffectiveness of contemporary society, as well as his thought concerning practical morality which was designed to refute the discussions of his time on metaphysical subjects. The learning of a « true scholar » (眞儒之學), he says, does not merely consist of «writing, commenting, and training in etiquette»; it also has to contribute to «administering the country, helping the people live in peace, repelling the barbarians, making the economy prosper, and being in possession of literary knowledge and military strategy»^{7, 8}. In the same vein, he recommends bringing together in one’s writing the quotation of classical texts and examples taken from historical texts. « A scholar (士) is an official (仕) »⁹.

One of the unique features of Tasan’s methodology of study and learning is first of all the technique of « prompt note-taking » (疾書). Yi Ik 李穡 (1681 – 1763) had already advocated this method and according to him, Zhang Zai 張載 (1020 – 1077) had practised it in his work, the *Zhengmeng* 正蒙. The first step in this method consisted of asking questions about the Classical texts and the commentaries and reflecting on their meaning. This would be followed by immediately writing down the ideas that came to mind thanks to multiple periods of reflection. Questioning and note-taking needed to continue until one arrived at a satisfactory understanding of the meaning. The aim of this method was not to criticise the

⁵ ‘Si yija kagye’ 示二子家誠 ; ‘Wi Pansan Chŏng Such’il chŭngŏn’ 爲盤山丁修七贈言 : par exemple, un programme de lecture dans l’ordre : 禮記, 詩經 國風, 論語, 大學, 中庸, 孟子, 禮記, 左傳, 詩經 雅頌, 周易 繫辭, 尚書, 史記, 漢書, 資治通鑑, 通鑑綱目.

⁶ ‘Chach’an myojimyŏng’ 自撰墓誌銘.

⁷ ‘Sogyuron’ 俗儒論 : 眞儒之學。本欲治國安民。攘夷狄裕財用。能文能武。無所不當。豈尋章摘句注蟲釋魚。衣掖習拜揖而已哉。

⁸ ‘Mun yu Koksambu hyanggyo si sa’ 問儒谷山府鄉校試士 : 譚經說禮。抱道修行。尚矣毋論。甚至功令末藝。詩賦小技。雖俗儒陋儒。蓋莫不誠心向前。

⁹ ‘Ohangnon yi’ 五學論一.

opinions of the ancients in a spirit of systematic scepticism, but rather to form a solid personal opinion through perfect understanding¹⁰. Yi furthermore denounces the attitude of scholars who exactly copy the opinion of others without questioning and who do not come up with new ideas. He recommends questioning oneself even on the commentaries of Zhu Xi so as to arrive to a satisfactory understanding for oneself, since this would be following Master Zhu's own attitude of subjective commentary. This method was appreciated and followed by the disciples of Yi Ik's school,¹¹ who considered Zhu Xi's commentaries as one of the possible interpretations. Tasan recommends the same thing in several of his writings: a careful reading of the Classics should be followed by research and reflection in order to find the meaning. Moreover, this work would not be fruitful were it not for « quick note-taking » of one's train of thought (隨所思卽行筭錄)¹². It is not difficult to imagine that this kind of reading would permit the reader to attain a personal understanding, a creative appropriation of the text, and an open reflection on oneself and the society in which the reader would find himself¹³. Apart from this, Tasan often underlined the necessity of having his own authentic and subjective opinions and refused to renounce his will and intelligence in order to only follow the ancient commentaries¹⁴. He was so faithfully associated with this method that he was often noted or even reproached by his colleagues for questioning ideas that had been viewed as authoritative and bases of reference.

Another point that characterises Tasan's study and learning and that of the school to which he belonged to was frank and free discussion and exchange between colleagues. Before Tasan's time, Yi Ik already considered that the practice known as “mutual enrichment” (麗澤) was one of the teachings of the ancient masters and was a way of learning that should be followed by his disciples. The practice consisted of encouraging learning between master and disciple and between colleagues through presentations and discussions. It was recommended to ask questions concerning that which was found in the text and was considered a useful, even necessary way of resolving problems when a scholar alone could not find a solution. According to Yi Pyŏngnyu (1711 – 1776), in their study meetings, Yi Ik's disciples did not hesitate to bring forth their questions and did not make valueless concessions in order to submit themselves to another opinion. These were therefore not conferences

¹⁰ ‘Tosan sasungnok’ 陶山私淑錄.

¹¹ Wŏn Chaerin, 159 – 166.

¹² ‘Wi Pansan Chŏng Such’il chŭngŏn’ 爲盤山丁修七贈言：唯易書詩禮論孟等當熟讀。然須講究考索。得其精義。隨所思卽行筭錄。方有實得。

¹³ Chartier 1989, 157.

¹⁴ ‘Tosan sasungnok’ 陶山私淑錄.

where disciples would learn and approve “orthodox” doctrines, but rather they were exchanges by which they helped each other to advance their personal understanding of the subject in question. The mutual re-reading of writings also seems to have been common in the milieu surrounding Tasan.

This exchange was done in two different ways: exchanges of letters and face-to-face discussion. According to Yi Ik, Yi Hwang apparently considered the first method as an excellent way to exchange developed ideas. In a letter addressed to Yi Samhwan, Yi Ik’s great-grandson and one of his own direct disciples, Tasan reiterated that it was necessary to write letters to ask questions and discuss points on which doubts had not been dissipated, even after investigation¹⁵. He even advocated discussion between three or even more people (大夫相訟); he asked the opinion of a third person concerning a debate that he had already had with another colleague. In a large part of his correspondence, Tasan applies this practice or recommends it to his colleagues or sons. As to face-to-face discussions, we are aware of two representative cases. In the meeting at Chuŏ monastery at Ch’ŏnjinam in 1779, Tasan got acquainted with Catholicism through Yi Pyŏk. In the discussion at Sŏk’am in Onyang in 1795, Tasan put forth a different opinion from that of Yi Samhwan in defence of Yi Pyŏk’s ideas¹⁶.

For Tasan, the task of writing was an organised development of knowledge that was useful to humanity and society. The work starts with the choice of a subject to undertake. The criteria for this did not differ from that he placed on reading¹⁷. Once a subject was chosen, a plan for writing was necessary. This was done by laying out an outline or provisional table of contents, followed up by research into sources and references¹⁸. This was followed by the collection of works and documents, the examination of studies already completed on the subject, the determination of the content to be addressed in each part of the outline, and determining the size of the work. This needs to be adapted to the proposed audience and use of the work¹⁹. After this comes reading and copying quotations from texts (鈔書)²⁰, the usefulness of which he repeatedly underlines. In the course of reading, Tasan would have in this way accumulated small files on which he rapidly noted passages. In works of exegesis, it is necessary to make vast etymological investigation on words of uncertain meaning and

¹⁵ ‘Sang Mokchae sŏ’ 上木齋書

¹⁶ An Chaerin, 166 – 173.

¹⁷ ‘Sang Chungssi’ 上仲氏 : 孝悌, 禮樂, 鑑衡, 財賦, 軍旅, 刑獄, 農圃, 醫藥, 曆象, 算數, 工作.

¹⁸ ‘Ki Yanga’ 寄兩兒

¹⁹ ‘Sang Chungssi’ 上仲氏

²⁰ ‘Ki Yia’ 答二兒

embark on a daily task of explaining these one by one and writing up texts²¹. In historiographical works, cross-referencing with documents from China is indispensable²². After this, it is needful to rationally organise the information and data by a system of classification and organisation²³.

Tasan's works are marked by a concern for clarity, a refined organisation of material, and distinctions on the nature of his works. In his *Ancient Exegesis of the Book of Documents* 尚書古訓, for example, he classifies the different texts and commentaries he cites as follows: differing characters and texts (考異), erroneous texts (考誤), texts cited with reference to another work (考證), points for discussion (考訂), controversial points (考辨), etc. He distinguishes his works by specifying whether they are overviews of his own opinions (著), commentaries on the Classics (述), rationalisations of incoherent or complex materials (編), collections of other's ideas and miscellaneous materials (輯), and editions and classifications of materials according to subject (編次). He was concerned with the rationalisation of his work: he insisted on establishing rules for composition and for captions, recapitulating general content by tables, facilitating the understanding of essential points, and the basic outlines and the differing importance of the contents.

On first observation, the factors which characterise Tasan's study and learning and which can explain his prolific and original work come from the tradition to which he is attached to, the cultural and intellectual context of his period, and his own personality.

Tasan's ideas of study and learning remain within the Confucian and Neo-Confucian tradition. The spirit that underlies learning is rooted in the moral value of this tradition and in the authenticity that he gives to its basic Classics. Certain modern elements that we can find in his pragmatic spirit, his sceptical and critical attitude towards established authority, his research into subjective thought and his responses to his own questions already exist in his predecessors such as Zhang Zai, Zhu Xi, Yi Hwang, Yi Yi, Yi Ik, to mention but the most famous names. These qualities must have also been known, appreciated and followed by some of Tasan's contemporaries, such as the disciples of Yi Ik. He is an heir of this tradition and he has the merit of consecrating his whole life to applying it and going far with it.

²¹ 'Ki Yua' 寄游兒

²² 'Che Kangyŏggo kwŏndan' 題疆域考卷端.

²³ 'Tap chungssi' 答仲氏; 'Magwa hoit'ong sŏ' 麻科會通序; 'Tap Yip'ansŏ sisu' 答李判書時秀; 'Tap mangye' 答蔓溪; 'Chŭng hakyŏng kagye' 贈學游家誠; 'Mongmin simsŏ sŏ' 牧民心書序.

However, his study and learning is set apart from the other streams of the same tradition that rested on « orthodoxy » and who accepted ideas on the basis of ancient authoritative ideas rather than the spirit and methodology of learning residing in the tradition.

Besides this, the second half of the Chosŏn period manifested in both the philosophical and literary spheres a tendency towards a personalisation and freedom of thought and style that criticised the old ways that were seen as too rigid and empty of content. The autobiography for his epitaph (自撰墓誌銘) written by Tasan reflected this tendency.

Moreover, this period was marked by an abundant flow of information and materials in the realm of knowledge, in particular the publication and circulation of encyclopaedic works and the mass introduction and importation of Chinese, Japanese and Western works. In the face of this abundance of accumulated information and material, it seems that Tasan had a particular talent for bringing together, classifying, organising, and rationalising data so as to render it useful and understandable through his vast documentation, exhaustive research, and innumerable methodical and rigorous works.

This paper has attempted to establish, from explicit and descriptive details, a survey of the characteristics of Tasan and his entourage's practice of study and learning. There remains a need to deepen this research by going into more detailed analyses and comparisons, applying them to the internal elements of learning such as questioning and debate, as well as to the external factors such as social and material conditions and human relations.

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