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# REVIVING THE CONFUCIAN SPIRIT OF ETHICAL PRACTICALITY: TASAN'S NOTIONS OF *SŎNG* ('NATURE') AND *SIM* ('HEART/MIND') AND THEIR POLITICAL IMPLICATION

Daeyeol Kim

## Introduction

Chŏng Yagyong (1762-1836), or Tasan, one of the representative figures from the late Chosŏn period who criticized the idealism of Chosŏn Neo-Confucian learning, looked forward to re-establishing a Confucian worldview that would be inseparably united with life and action. His deist interpretation of *Sangje* or 'Lord on High' as being moral and sensitive to human affairs provides an ontological basis to his theory on original human nature. He defines human nature, which everyone is granted, as *myŏng* ('decree'), in terms of *kiho* ('moral inclination'). It is the latter that gives human beings the impulse necessary to self-realization. To the Neo-Confucian theory that aims at understanding and developing *li* ('pattern')<sup>1</sup> inherent in the universe and to the human being, he substitutes a theory that, according to him, allows us to act and realize the Confucian ideal through practices and human relations.

This paper aims to present some broad outlines of Tasan's Confucian thought around the concepts of *sŏng* ('nature') and *sim* ('heart/mind'). His deistic interpretation of the Lord on High as being sensitive to moral and human affairs allows him to give an ontological foundation to his theory on *sŏng*, or the original 'nature' of the human being.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Li is the pattern or principle connecting the natural and social worlds, the foundation for unity between Heaven and human. Li became the keynote of the philosophical, cultural and spiritual revival known in East Asia as *li xue* and in English as Neo-Confucianism.' See Xinzhong Yao 2003: 354.

In the Confucian tradition, the notion of *sǒng* is constantly related to the way we understand the fundamental character of the human being, on which the theory of self-perfection depends. While the Cheng-Zhu school<sup>2</sup> proposed *sǒng* to be the basis of any human act, some Chosŏn scholars of the second half of the dynasty doubted that the *li* of human action is *a priori* provided, and that any human act is already programmed in an innate nature. Here are some examples. According to Hong Taeyong (1731-1783), a unique basis for action cannot be commonly transmitted to humans, and human nature differs from one culture to another. For Tasan Chŏng Yagyong), human nature is simply given as an orientation or an inclination, and is then fine-tuned through practices and social actions. As for Ch'ŏe Hangi (1803-1879), he considers that the basis of action is neither directly nor *a priori* given, but acquired through the repetitive process of awareness (Ahn 2002, 170-171).

Tasan's position on this subject in particular encapsulates some interesting points, not only for its challenging originality against the Neo-Confucian orthodox cosmology of the Cheng-Zhu school, but also in its reflection of the intellectual current and the political turmoil in which he was engaged.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, which was the dominant ideology of the Chosŏn dynasty, was challenged in intellectual circles. The world of the literati was divided into several factions according to their political interests and their ideological and exegetic positions. Chosŏn society additionally underwent significant social and economic changes on a regional level as well as a central level, although most of the literati were engaged in political conflicts related to debates on exegetic matters, ritual problems or moral duties. Moreover, it seems that a number of people from the yangban class

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<sup>2</sup> 'The School of the Cheng Brothers and Zhu Xi: the group of Neo-Confucian scholars who developed the Learning of the Way of Zhou Dunyi (1017-1073), and the Learning of Principle of the Cheng Brothers and found its full articulation in Zhu Xi.' See Xinzhong Yao 2003: 63.

cared only about preserving their authority and social privileges and about getting richer at the expense of the people at the other end of the social scale, who were being exploited by corrupt regional magistrates and civil servants. For some literati, a dissident minority, it was a period of disillusionment with the Chosŏn Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, but also one which marked the first encounter with western sciences and religion. In this context some new intellectual currents, subsequently named as Practical Learning, appeared.

At that time, therefore, the Chosŏn literati society was marked by the polarization of philosophical orientation and the monopolization of political power, which revolved around the well-known Rites Disputes,<sup>3</sup> in particular between the Noron (the Old Doctrine) and the Namin (the Southerners). Several new currents of thought such as the so-called Northern Learning, the Chosŏn Yangming school and the Southerners faction became embroiled in controversies, and struggled against ideological dogmatism and their estrangement from the everyday affairs of the Chosŏn Cheng-Zhu school, bureaucratic orthodoxy, rigidity and political monopoly of the faction in power and corruption of the ruling class.

In particular, the Noron, often in power, and the Namin, often excluded from the political sphere, differed in their views on the status of the monarchy in relation to the class of scholar-bureaucrats. In the spirit of primitive Confucianism, the greatest wisdom is innate and monarchical authority is given by heavenly decree. When a scholar agrees with his monarch's political orientation, he serves as a minister or an adviser. Otherwise, he leaves the government or even the country. But Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism provided the literati class with another worldview. According to this new system of thought, it is the scholars who come to understand *li*, hence the *myŏng*, through study. Therefore the monarch should be able to point out excellent scholars and put them in charge of decision-making posts within the

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<sup>3</sup> The Rites Dispute of 1659 and 1674 erupted over the degree of mourning that should be held for one Chosŏn king. For further details, see Haboush 1999.

government. And if the monarch has strayed from the Way,<sup>4</sup> his legitimacy can be questioned and the scholar group may consider a radical method to re-establish the correct way of governing. This means that monarchical status is no longer absolute and the crown's authority must submit to *li*. Following Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian ideology, the Noron did not grant the king a special status even within a ritual system, while the Namin, who attempted to regain the original Confucian spirit, recognized the royal special status.

During the seventeenth century the Noron were often in power, and the autocratic government by one party resulted in the weakening of royal power. Since the beginning of his reign, King Yǒngjo (r: 1724-1776) had initiated his Policy of Impartiality (T'angp'yǒng ch'aek) to reinforce the king's authority and to suppress inter-factional disputes. However, the logic of his policy was based on the problematic situation of that time, and lacked the power or foresight to change fundamental visions concerning royal authority. It was his successor, Chǒngjo (r.1776-1800), who applied himself to providing a theoretical base to his own Policy of Impartiality, which had a new orientation. His stance on the matter of monarchical authority was that the ideal ruler is one who is at once a sovereign prince and an accomplished scholar, because such a person is in proper position for governing and has the necessary wisdom, like the sage kings of Ancient China. If he established a special lecture programme in which young scholar-bureaucrats answered questions on Confucian classics set by the king himself, it could be used for the purpose of convincing his subjects of his theories.

It was during this period that Tasan was a student at the Sǒnggyungwan (National Confucian Academy); this was before he became a young scholar-bureaucrat favoured by the

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<sup>4</sup> 'Way' here translates the term 'to' which means literally 'road' or 'path', and can also indicate metaphorically a way of thought, conduct, governance, and so on. The 'Way' refers more expansively to a way of ultimate concern or the way the univers itself operates. See Xinzhong Yao 2003: 177.

king, who encouraged him in his learning and had political and academic influence on him. This initial orientation of Tasan's thought would remain in place right up to his last work on Classics.

### Tasan

Tasan was born in 1762 into a family that lived by the upper reaches of the Han River in Kwangju County, Kyōnggi Province. In his childhood, he studied historical writings and the Confucian classics with his father, who held positions as a regional magistrate. By the time he had reached the age of twenty-one (1783), he was a student at Sōnggyungwan, he had already attracted King Chōngjo's attention and had been granted special favours for his talents and knowledge of the classics.

Tasan spent eleven years of his life in various public offices, eighteen years in exile and another eighteen years in retirement. From twenty-seven to thirty-eight, he held several key posts in central government and was responsible for various assignments. His entourage was part of the Namin faction. This group enjoyed the protection of King Chōngjo during his reign, and the king showed a special friendship to Tasan until his last days. But after the death of Chōngjo, the Noron returned to power and Tasan was then sent into exile because of his involvement in scandals related to the spread of Catholicism. Despite the royal protection he had enjoyed throughout his life, Tasan was victim of political manoeuvring by some literati from the opposite faction, who prevented his promotion and opposed his recall to the court after his exile.

Tasan considered that the society of his time had serious problems but the greatest of these were the tyranny and corruption of officials and the famine that was raging among the people. In several poems he wrote while living in direct contact with the people, particularly on the absurdity generated by an unjust social system and a corrupt, incompetent and weak

ruling class, he expressed his compassion for the suffering people. Faced with a situation he considered hopeless, Tasan developed a reformist way of thinking.

During his eighteen years of exile, Tasan devoted all his time to study and wrote many books. His works focus essentially on the exegesis of the Confucian classics and on the close examination and study of the political system.

His research on a theory of self-perfection was based on exegesis of the classics as well as their interpretation of the concepts of *sǒng* and *sim*. The first phase of study was for him to regain the spirit that permeated the classics in order to regain the Way. The latter served as a *li* for the control of *sim*. He also put particular emphasis on the need to return to the spirit of the classics of the pre-imperial period. Priority was thus given to the Six Classics and not to the Four Books.<sup>5</sup>

Tasan sought to restore a worldview that was closely united to life and action. Under the influence of various contemporaneous currents of thought, and by differing from the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucian school in some respects, he reinterpreted the concept of *sǒng* and *sim* with an approach based on the concrete and real social needs of his time. For Neo-Confucian theory, which aimed to understand and develop *li* inherent to the universe and the human being, he had substituted a theory that would allow man to act and achieve the Confucian ideal through practice and human relations.

### The Lord on High and the origin of ethics

In an era of disillusionment with the ideology of Neo-Confucian Chosŏn, and first encounters

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<sup>5</sup> The 'Six Classics' include the *Book of Poetry* (*Sigyǒng*), the *Book of Documents* (*Sangsǒ*), the *Book of Changes* (*Yǒkkyǒng*), the *Book of Rites* (*Yegi*), the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Ch'unch'u*) and the *Book of Music* (*Akkyǒng*). The 'Four Books' (*Sasǒ*) include the *Great Learning* (*Taehak*) and *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Chungyong*), chapters of the *Book of Rites*, with the *Analects* (*Nonǒ*) and *Mencius* (*Maengja*). Altogether, these books are considered to contain the cornerstones of Chinese Confucian philosophy. See Xinzhong Yao 2003: 382 and 573.

with sciences and religion of the west (from the seventeenth century onwards), some scholars sought to regain the spirit of Confucian origins. They criticized the philosophy and outlook of the Korean Cheng-Zhu school, which they considered too speculative and dogmatic. They sought new interpretations of the classics and new systems of socio-political organization. Among them, some were stimulated by the criticism of Neo-Confucianism by western missionaries - Christianity had been known by the Korean scholars since the early seventeenth century. Under the influence of the theory advanced by the missionaries in China that Christianity helped complete Confucianism, these scholars developed a Confucian deism. They modernised a concept and ethos based on religious respect to the Lord on High of ancient China, partly because of the influence they received from a monotheistic theology, and partly because they believed that the veneration of a god could create moral practice.

In their thinking and cosmological notion of the Lord on High (*Sangje*), they restored the piety and religious veneration of the Lord on High of Confucianism in ancient China, while differentiating it from the Christian God taught in the books of the Jesuits in China. Yi Ik (1681-1763) assigned a status of divinity to 'that by which everything is so', that is, *li* or *t'aegŭk* (Supreme Ultimate), and made it an object of worship. In other words, he advocated a deistic interpretation of Lord on High, which was a synthesis of the concepts of Heaven from primitive Confucianism on one hand and from Neo-Confucianism on the other. The resurgence of the concept of Lord on High made it possible to associate the religious piety of primitive Confucianism to the ethic of the Neo-Confucianism of the Cheng-Zhu school. Yi Ik restored meaning to the belief in Lord on High, placing it at the origin of the human moral sense. For him, moral acts were rooted in religious piety. He highlighted religious practice, which according to him postulated the respect due to a deity. Thus he attributed the origin of the moral sense to Lord on High, i.e. a personal god, not *li* or *t'aegŭk* which is an impersonal principle, because people would find an impersonal principle less convincing and compelling.



Following in Yi Ik's wake, and thus turning to a deistic view of the world based on a primitive Confucianism, Tasan also revived the god of Chinese Antiquity to bring pious men face to face with an omnipotent and omniscient god, a god who judged the good and evil committed by mankind, which in turn is filled with fear and respect. 'Li,' he wrote, 'has neither consciousness nor power, for what reason might we be fearful and reverential towards him?' (YC (4) 2:3, 'Chungyong chajam' (1) 5a:7-8).<sup>6</sup> *Sangje* was a term commonly used before the end of the Zhou dynasty, as seen in the *Book of Odes*, the *Book of Documents* and the *Ritual of Zhou*. Man meets, said Tasan, the Lord on High in sacrificial rites, and he feels inside himself the divine presence and illumination. The Lord on High was seen as both a transcendent and internal being to the universe. Tasan highlighted two important features. Firstly, the deity is not simply a cosmic principle, but reigns over the universe. The deity does not share this feature with human beings. Secondly he is of such perspicacity that he is able to penetrate the heart and mind of man. This character he shares with man and the spirits. The perspicacity of the Lord on High is immanent in human beings and contributes to shape their *sŏngmyŏng* ('original nature').

The spiritual perceptiveness of Heaven penetrates straight man's heart/mind. There is nothing subtle it couldn't observe, there is nothing tenuous it couldn't illuminate. It lights up the room and keeps watch over us here every day. By being aware, even a bold man could not fail to be fearful and reverential [towards Heaven].

(YC (4) 2:3, 'Chungyong chajam' (1) 5b:4-6).

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<sup>6</sup> YC (4) 2:3, 'Chungyong chajam' (1) 5a:7-8, which stands for: *Yŏyudang chŏnsŏ* 與猶堂全書 (vol. 4), *che 2 chip* 第2集, *che 3 kwŏn* 第3卷, 'Chungyong chajam' 中庸自箴, *kwŏn 1* 卷1, 5a.7-8.

The perception of the Lord on High was in his omniscience; that of man in his morality. The Lord on High was the supreme good, and therefore the model and foundation of any moral value. He was also the one who urged man to good and punished evil. So he was a being that allowed a moral awareness, which in turn allowed people to recognize the Lord on High.

What [the Lord on High] attributes to the nature of the heart/mind so that man turns to good and away from evil, it is the heavenly decree. When [he] observes here and now to reward good and punish evil, it is also the heavenly decree.

(YC (6) 2:14, 'Nonŏ kogŭmju' (8) 39a:10-11).

When man is conceived in the embryo, the Heaven gives him a clear-sighted and formless body. Its nature is to take pleasure in doing good and in having an aversion to evil, to love the virtue and to feel ashamed of vice.

(YC (4) 2:3 'Chungyong chajam'(1) 2b:7-8).

Tasan stressed the importance of 'knowing Heaven' and 'serving Heaven' through human relationships, in other words by the fulfillment of moral responsibilities (YC (4) 2:3, 'Chungyong chajam' (1) 19b:9-20a:3.) This can be clearly seen in this statement: 'To search for the heavenly decree in the original heart/mind, is the study of the sage who serves the Heaven.' (YC (4) 2:3, 'Chungyong chajam'(1) 4a:1-2.)

#### The 'original human nature decreed by Heaven' (*sŏng*)

The founders of Neo-Confucianism such as Zhu Xi associated this 'nature' with Heaven and *li* (here it can be understood as 'principle') and claimed that the 'nature' and the Way are fundamentally the same (Xinzhong Yao 2003: 697.) For Tasan, the 'original nature of

humanity as decreed by Heaven' was defined by the inclination of the moral 'heart/mind' of the Way (YC (4) 2:6, 'Maengja yoŭi' (2) 39a:7-8).

Let's first see how Tasan justified this notion through classical texts. He noticed that the ancients spoke of a desiring nature. Mencius had already put this argument forward when speaking about the original goodness of human nature. Just as the mouth likes tasting delicious flavors, the ears hearing pleasant sounds and the eyes seeing beautiful colors, the basic nature of humanity loves doing good. Just as the preferences of these organs are the same in every human being, the moral inclination of the heart is also the same. And yet,

It is said in the Book of Odes: The Heaven gives all beings the principles of their being and the moral law with the existence. The human being, thanks to this law, loves and cultivates the virtue. Confucius said: 'The author of this ode, didn't he know the Way?' Thus man receives always the moral law with the principles of his being, and because he has this law, he loves and cultivates the virtue. When the author of the poem and Confucius discussed nature, they spoke of what ordinary people liked or disliked (*The Works of Mencius*, 403. YC (4) 2:6, 'Maengja yoŭi' (2) 23b: 5-6.)

'Original nature' is thus a moral inclination. And among all inclinations, it exists at the most fundamental level. Tasan indeed distinguishes three levels of inclination, namely: 'desire' (*yok*), 'joy' (*nak*), and 'nature' (*sŏng*), based on the distinction made by Mencius in the following passage: 'A vast territory, a great number of people are the things being in accordance with the desire of the man of virtue, but this is not what causes him great joy. To be at the head of the empire and achieve peace for all peoples, is for the man of virtue a great joy, but what he has received from the original nature does not consist in this.' (*The Works of Mencius*: 459.) Tasan wrote:

Mencius distinguished three characters and made them correspond to three levels. The least profound level reflects desire, and then comes joy. Original nature is at the deepest level where the passions of Man take root. When we say that the good man follows his nature, this means that he follows his inclination. But ‘nature’ (*sǒng*) is a designation for the ‘natural’ (*chayǒn*), while the ‘inclination’ (*kiho*) evokes something shallow. [However,] if the nature was not a kind of inclination, the expression ‘follow nature’ (*sosǒng*) would not be possible. As desire, joy and nature are parts of the same kind, nature is an inclination

(YC (4) 2: 6, ‘Maengja yoüi’ (2) 42b: 10-43a:1).

Thus Tasan did not see original ‘nature’ in the same way as the scholars of the Cheng-Zhu school. He refuted the notion of *li* set down as the principle by the Cheng-Zhu school and he also refuted the idea that ‘nature is principle’ (*sǒng chük li*). According to this school, what is formless is *li* (‘principle’) and what has a form and substance is *ki* (‘breath’), so ‘nature’ decreed by Heaven is ‘principle’ and the ‘seven emotions’ are the ‘breath’. For Tasan, Cheng Yi (1033-1107) was wrong to think that ‘heart/mind’, ‘nature’ and ‘heaven’ are only a single ‘principle’ (*sim sǒng ch’ǒn il li*). He doubted that there would be any ancient written proof that could have lent credibility to this assertion.

If we tie up ten thousand differences to identify them in one and then [we separate them] to form a chaos, it would be impossible to think and discuss, divide and distinguish things and affairs of the world. We might consider as a supreme prodigious way the practice that consists in resting the ‘heart/mind’ in the dark and indistinct, and keeping it quiet and still. Was this Confucius’ way of thinking?

(YC (4) 2:6, 'Maengja yoŭi'(2) 38a:12-38b:1).

Moreover, he stressed that *li* could not be the foundation that provided man with his original *sŏng*. For him, it was impossible to speak of morality based on an impersonal cosmic principle. On the interpretation of the following passage from the *Zhongyong* or *Doctrine of the mean*: 'What Heaven has decreed is called *sŏng*', Tasan rejected Zhang Zai's (1020 - 1077) notion of Heaven that defined the *ch'ŏn* ('Heaven') as *t'aehŏ* or the 'Supreme Empty'. Similarly, *li* or 'the reason something is what it is' (*so i yŏn*) that was for Zhu Xi the foundation of ethics, this impersonal 'principle' without conscience and sense could not judge human thoughts and behaviour. Therefore, it could be neither a model nor a foundation of morality. For Tasan, the *ch'ŏnmyŏng* ('Heavenly Decree') was the command of the Lord on High and the *sŏng* ('original nature') specific to man was not *li* ('principle') imparted to every human being but the gift of a moral potentiality, an inclination towards goodness.

What is '*li*'? It has neither affection nor hatred, nor joy nor anger. It is empty, without name, without body. Although we received *sŏng* from this, it will be hard to see it as the Way

(YC (4) 2:6, 'Maengja yoŭi' (2) 38b:1-2).

However, as desire and joy are *chŏng* ('emotions'), one might wonder if *sŏng* ('nature') can also be interpreted as a part of *chŏng*. On this issue, Tasan separated *sŏng* from *chŏng* because their origins are different. For him, they differed from one another because *sŏng* is received from Heaven and *chŏng* comes from the human being.

Emotion is a product of humanity. Therefore it can be good or bad. The inclination of

*sǒng* is received from Heaven and there is only good without evil. How can we put them in the same category?

(YC (4) 2:6, ‘Maengja yoŭi’ (2) 21b: 7-8.)

For Tasan only moral inclination, which every human being was invariably and impartially granted by the Heaven, could be deemed *sǒng* (‘nature’). Once the moral inclination was limited to and dependent on *myǒng* (‘The fate of individuals’), then it was no longer *sǒng* (‘original nature,’ YC (4) 2:6, ‘Maengja yoŭi’ (2) 50b: 3-5.). While moral values and powers were, by nature, desired by everyone, there may be circumstances or social positions that did not facilitate their implementation. Yet Tasan encouraged not using particular situations as a pretext to relinquish one’s moral vocations.

Man cannot dare not to stake all his heart on the pretext of not falling at the right time, or not being in the right situation. Moral duties to be observed between father and son, and between sovereign and subject, the way to be followed in respecting guests and appreciating sages, and the rectitude of heart venerating the Way of Heaven, all come from the *chǒnsǒng* (‘original nature decreed by the Heaven’). We cannot change it on the pretext of not having the same fate. Therefore a good man does not refer to his fate (YC (4) 2:6, ‘Maengja yoŭi’ (2) 51a:4-7).

### The ‘heart/mind’ (*sim*)

As to the concept of *sim* (‘heart/mind’), Tasan generally adhered to the broad outlines of the Zhuxist tradition. The *sim* is the ‘original self’ (*pon yu chi ki*); it governs the body and provides the ability to think. It consists of two separate components: *tosim* or the ‘heart/mind of the Way’ and *insim* or the ‘human heart/mind’. The first corresponds to ‘what is great’

(*taech'e*) in the human constitution, linked to the idea of *sōng* as decreed by Heaven. It represents desire to stay on the Way and follow its inclination toward good. The second covers 'what is lesser' (*soch'e*) in human being's constitution, linked to the 'breath of life and matter.' It is carnal desire, selfish desires like self-interest and the self-esteem, and follows the natural inclinations every man has to survive.

Desire is both dangerous and powerful. Man acts according to his desires, without which he would accomplish nothing in the world. When a human being feels inside himself two opposing desires, when a conflict between the 'heart/mind' of the Way and the human heart/mind occurs, it is the harbinger of the separation of good and evil. At this moment, thanks to the 'heart/mind' of the Way, man can distinguish right from wrong, love virtue and succeed in sacrificing his life to keep intact his moral virtue. What the 'lesser constitution' desires and the 'greater constitution' prohibits, and when that which prohibits controls that which desires, we call it self-discipline. But the 'greater constitution' and the 'lesser constitution' form together the self. Therefore, the question of value judgments and moral responsibility becomes deeply and vitally important.

If Song and Ming scholars emphasized more the moral nature of the 'heart/mind', its original goodness, and its cosmological valences whereby it was associated with the 'Supreme Ultimate' (*t'aegŭk*) and the movement of *yin* and *yang*, Tasan's original approach to the concept may have rested in the fact that he put a particular emphasis on the moral responsibility that he placed on the 'heart/mind' (Xinzhong Yao 2003, 687.). He stressed in his philosophical works that it is neither in 'nature' nor in the body but in the 'heart/mind' that the origin of moral responsibility must be sought. For if man were programmed to do nothing but good, he could achieve no merit for the good he did; if he were programmed to do only evil, he might receive no criticism for the evil that he committed (YC (6) 2:15, 'Nonŏ kogŭmju'(9) 12a:4-11.).

For Tasan, a moral question arose which could be settled in the 'heart/mind'. Heaven has invested man not only with a 'nature' that prefers good but also with the ability to choose it. The human 'heart/mind' is given a right to decide independently. Man can do good with his original 'nature', but he can also set out in another way. Given his capacity to judge and his freedom to choose between good and evil, moral responsibility is incumbent upon him. Tasan dwelt on the following idea: virtue is not contained in original 'nature'; good is not realized automatically by 'nature'; instead they are commands from Heaven; and man can have his merits or commit misconduct, according to his decision to follow or disobey this command.

Tasan reminded all of us about the moral responsibility of our 'heart/mind', which is master of thought and able to judge, to want and to act. He blamed evil on the 'heart/mind' that sinks into 'vice' (*hamyak*) or succumbs to carnal or selfish desire. He put emphasis on man's will and autonomy in relation to virtue, and on the human relationship understood as a way by which man realizes virtue (YC (4) 2:6, 'Maengja yoŭi'(2) 21a:11-23b:6).

This freedom of choice and of action, the possibility to be good or bad, reflects the instability and the anxiety that inhabit the human 'heart/mind'. In the eyes of Tasan, man in his human condition could only poorly know 'nature as decreed by Heaven'. Because of this, a thinking subject 'reflects strongly and makes every effort to overcome the self' (*maeng sŏng i yŏk kŭk*). However, it is possible that man is not aware of the evil he commits, because his moral thought, even though supported by original 'nature', may not be properly operating because he has been plunged into a state of selfish desire. This gives him reason 'to be careful and fearful' (*kye sin kong ku*) and 'to exalt morality' (*chon tŏksŏng*). For a human being who has the right to decide for himself, what is important is 'moral thought' (*sa*), which is a faculty of the 'heart/mind'.



## Virtue and self-perfection

Almost every moral reflection in Tasan converged on matters of ‘action and conduct’ (*haengsa*) which was for him as important as those of successful self-perfection. According to him, self-perfection aimed to ‘serve Heaven’ and ‘attain the heavenly virtue’, and it was realized only with the accomplishment of ethical responsibilities through human relations. This effort for self-perfection consisted of several phases: coincidence of the ‘human heart/mind’ and the ‘heart/mind of the Way’ on a concrete event, awareness of the conflict of these two hearts/minds, and choice made through moral reflection and then put into practice.

With Tasan, who on this subject followed the interpretation of Yun Hyu (1617-1680), the notion of virtue was diametrically displaced in relation to other concepts in the structure of Neo-Confucian moral theory. Pivoting upon the concept of original ‘nature’ that we saw earlier, the theoretical schema on self-perfection was inverted, virtue was no longer at the level of ‘principle’ or of the original ‘nature’ of the ‘heart/mind’, but at the level of actions and their consequences. If Tasan rejected the concept that embodies virtue in original ‘nature’, it was also because for him the distinction between good and evil could be done only in the context of human relationships. Following the interpretation of his predecessor Yun Hyu, he considered virtue as the fruit of the development of moral inclinations, acquired *a posteriori*. What exists in the ‘heart/mind’ is the moral desire as potential virtue. Virtue presupposes action and involves all of the following constituent phases: the original ‘nature’ of the ‘heart/mind’, its manifestation through the ‘heart/mind of the Way’, and its choice and action. What might be called ‘virtue’ was a fulfillment, a realization or externalization of probity that was obtained through moral action. In its classical sense, the term of virtue meant nothing other than the practice of social norms, such as filial piety or fraternal respect. Confucius and Mencius frequently compared the attainment of virtue to the task of self-perfection. Similarly, Tasan only admitted performed virtue, thus restricting the method for

self-perfection to moral practice.

Initially there is no virtue in the ‘heart/mind’, if not the nature of righteousness (or honesty). We refer to ‘virtue’ when we put into practice what the right ‘heart/mind’ decides. [The constitution of the character *tōk* shows that it is a matter of implementing the right ‘heart/mind’]. The word virtue only can apply to good acts done. Before acting, how can we have our moral force shining?

(YC (4) 2:1, ‘Taehak kongŭi’(1) 8a:1-2).

For Tasan, *li* (‘moral principles’) was not *a priori* included in *sōng* (‘the human original nature’). Where were then the notions of *sadan* or ‘four sprouts’ placed – or ‘four beginnings’: compassion, shame at evil, respect, discerning right and wrong - which were expressions of *li*? He interpreted the expression ‘four sprouts’ as follows: a ‘germ’ (*tan*) corresponds to the departure of the ‘heart/mind’ toward the implementation of the virtues; a thinker chooses good for himself and puts it into practice; from that point one can speak of the virtues. To highlight the effort to be made to achieve the decision of the ‘heart/mind’, Tasan distinguished moral decision from moral action, and recalled that the four Confucian virtues, *in* (‘humaneness/humanity’), *ŭi* (‘rightness/righteousness’), *ye* (‘ritual/property’), and *chi* (‘wisdom’), designate achievements, acts of good, as mentioned above. In the expression from the *Great Learning*, ‘causing to shine’ is achieved not by linguistic explanation but by actions and conduct (YC (3)1 *Simunjip*18, ‘Sang Kamwŏn sŏ’, 40a:6-7).

Tasan also redefined the idea of self-perfection in terms of social engagement through moral practice. An ancient interpretation of the character *in*, which is defined as the relationship between two people, allowed him to advance the idea that virtue *in* is achieved only in the meeting of people and it is only thanks to interpersonal relationships that one can

improve oneself.

The ancient Confucian disciples – disciples of the school Cheng- Zhu, said Tasan, considered the Classic – Great Learning – as a [treaty on] the method to regulate the ‘heart/mind’ and the nature. But the ancient Sages had considered the regulation of ‘heart/mind’ and the nature as a matter of practice, and it cannot be out of human relationships

(YC (4) 2:1 *kwŏn*, ‘Taehak kongŭi’ (1) 13a:9-10.).

What does our Way consist of? This is nothing more than to excel in between us  
(*sŏn ō che*, YC (5) 2: 13, ‘Nonŏ kogŭmju’ (7) 43b:9).

He also replaced Cheng Yi’s formula: ‘strengthen the inner life to rectify the outer life’ by this formula: ‘regulate the outside to bring peace and order inside’  
(YC (4) 2: 2, ‘Taehak kangŭi’ (2), ‘Simgyŏng milhŏm’, 31b:8-10).

### Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we can reflect on how these concepts we have just considered in Tasan affect the Confucian ideal. Echoing Zhu Xi’s formulation, Tasan described the learning of a man of virtue as ‘nothing more than to improve himself and order the state.’ According to the classical idea of Confucianism, the task of ordering the state could be accomplished only through the moral strength of political leaders. The art of governing in a way that is worthy of the name of Sage, is acquired by the exemplary practice of virtues, which encourages men to love each other. Tasan was very committed to this idea, which is argued strongly in his interpretation of the term of *ch’inmin* or *sinmin* of the *Great Learning*. Following Cheng Yi’s

exegesis, Zhu Xi replaced the term *ch'in* by the *sin* in *ch'inmin* to interpret it as 'bringing the people to a state of renewal'. But this interpretation could only emphasize the charismatic side of leadership. Wang Yangming, on the other hand, insisted on keeping the term *ch'inmin* in its original formulation. He understood it as 'love the people', which allowed him to highlight the idea of practical commitment of a sovereign who has not only to fulfill the needs of the people but also to educate them. Tasan distinguished himself from these two great figures of neo-Confucianism, by interpreting the expression *ch'inmin* as 'ensuring that the people love each other'. For him, it was a natural result arising from the virtuous behavior of a ruler who applies himself to his own self-perfection (YC (4) 2:1, 'Taehak kongŭi' (1) 11a.)

In this way Tasan emphasized the interdependence of these two poles of the Confucian ideal: that self-perfection of a man of honor is not possible beyond the art of ordering the state, because self-perfection is completed only through the fulfillment of moral responsibilities. Both tasks must be carried out simultaneously to meet these two requirements of the Confucian ideal. This idea could provide a theoretical logic to reinforce the king's power, allowing them to claim not only that the sovereign prince who cultivates his morals has the ability to govern but also that only the one who, directly from the seat of government, puts in practice an act of the state can really cultivate morals. However, King Chŏngjo died too early to fully comprehend this idea.

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## Glossary

*Akkyǒng* 樂經

*ch'inmin* 親民

*ch'ǒn* (heaven) 天

*ch'ǒnmyǒng* (Heavenly Decree) 天命

*Ch'unch'u* 春秋

*chayǒn* (natural) 自然

Cheng Yi 程頤

Cheng-Zhu 程朱

*chi* (wisdom) 智

*ch'in* 親

*chip* 集

Ch'ŏe Han-gi 崔漢綺

*chon tŏksŏng* (to exalt morality) 尊德性

*chŏng* (emotions) 情

Chŏng Yag-yong 丁若鏞

Chŏngjo 正祖

*chŏnsŏng* (original nature decreed by the Heaven) 天性

Chungyong chajam 中庸自箴

*Chungyong* 中庸

*haengsa* (matters of action and conduct) 行事

*hamyak* (to sink into vice) 陷溺

Hong Tae-yong 洪大容

*in* (humaneness/humanity) 仁,

*insim* (human heart-mind) 人心

*ki* (breath) 氣

*kiho* (inclination) 嗜好

*kwŏn* 卷

*kye sin kong ku* (to be careful and fearful) 戒慎恐懼

*li* (pattern, principle) 理

*li xue* 理學

*maeng sŏng i yŏk kŭk* (to reflect strongly and make every effort to overcome the self)

猛省而力克

Maengja yoŏi 孟子要義

Maengja 孟子

Ming 明

myǒng (decree) 命

nak (joy) 樂

Namin (the Southerners) 南人

Nonǒ kogŭmju 論語古今註

Nonǒ 論語

Noron (the Old Doctrine) 老論

pon yu chi ki (original self) 本有之己

sa (moral thought) 思

sadan (four sprouts) 四端

Sang Kamwǒn sǒ 上彘園書

Sangje 上帝

Sangsǒ 尙書

Sasǒ 四書

Sigyǒng 詩經

sim (heart-mind) 心

sim sǒng ch'ǒn il li (heart-mind, nature and heaven are only a single principle) 心性天一理

sin 新

sinmin 新民

so i yǒn (the reason something is what it is) 所以然

soch'e (what is lesser) 小体



*sŏn ǒ che* (to excel in between us) 善於際

*sŏng* (nature, human nature) 性

*sŏng chŭk li* (nature is principle) 性卽理

Song 宋

Sŏnggyungwan (National Confucian Academy) 成均館

*sŏngmyŏng* (original nature) 性命

*sosŏng* (follow nature) 所性

*t'aegŭk* (Supreme Ultimate) 太極

*t'aehŏ* (Supreme Empty) 太虛

T'angp'yŏng ch'aek (Policy of Impartiality) 蕩平策

*taech'e* (what is great) 大体

Taehak kangŭi 大學講義

Taehak kongŭi 大學公議

*Taehak* 大學

*tan* (germ) 端

Tasan 茶山

*to* 道

*tosim* (heart-mind of the Way) 道心

*ŭi* (rightness/righteousness) 義

*ye* (ritual/property) 禮

*Yegi* 禮記

Yi Ik 李瀾

*yok* (desire) 欲

*Yōkkyōng* 易經

*Yōngjo* 英祖

*Yun Hyu* 尹鑄

*Zhang Zai* (1020 -1077) 張載 or *Hengqu* 橫渠

*Zhongyong* (*Doctrine of the mean*) 中庸

