Chŏng Tasan and the "kogaku"

by

Mark Setton (Oxford)

In a thought-provoking paper entitled "Korea's Role in the History of East Asian Philosophy", Fred Sturm of the University of New Mexico underlines the need to examine further international "influences and consequences" in East Asian intellectual history.¹ This need is brought into sharp relief by the lack of materials on the interaction between Korean and Japanese Confucianism. The impact of the T'oegye¹¹ school on Japanese Neo-Confucianism is the only angle from which this relationship has been explored in any detail.² In this context it is significant that at least three Korean-language articles have been published during the last five years which discuss the views held by Korean "Sirhak"²² thinkers — and in particular Chŏng Tasan³³ (1762–1836) — on Japanese culture, politics, and Confucian thought.³

Kang Chae-ŭn⁴⁴ points out that Tasan, the so-called chip-dae-song-chā⁵⁵ (complete or synthesizer) of "Sirhak" thought, discussed various aspects of Japanese culture as well as literature on Japan in at least eight different works, including Ilbon-ron⁶⁶ (an essay on Japan), where he speculated on the decline of Japanese militarism and its implications for future relations with Korea.⁴

Previous to Tasan, Yi Ik⁷⁷ (1681–1763), whose work on institutional reform he greatly admired, had shown an interest in Japanese Confucianism, and in particular an appreciation of the social and political impact of the work of Yamazaki

---


Anzai[8] and his followers. This marked a departure from the indifference or disdain showed by Yi Ik’s Neo-Confucian predecessors toward Japanese scholarship. Although it is not known on which particular sources Yi Ik’s information was based, we do know that his disciple An Chong-bok[9] (1712–1791) had studied the work of Itô Jinsai[10] (1627–1705), first introduced to Korea through the embassy to Japan in 1719, and had read of Japanese reactions to Itô Jinsai’s scholarship in the report of Yu Hu[11], a secretary who had accompanied the Korean emissaries to Japan in 1748. 5 An Chong-bok appeared especially impressed by Itô Jinsai’s Dōjimon[12] and the epilogue to the same work written by Hayashi Keihan[13], commenting that

"On the whole, he deeply respects Mencius, while at times he disparages Chu Hsi. His writings are excellent and contain many valuable sayings. It is unexpected that such a man of letters should exist in an uncultivated island nation."6

In view of his mentors’ interests in Japanese scholarship it is hardly surprising that, half a century later, Tasan had obtained, among other Japanese works, Jinsai’s Rongokōgi[14], Sorai’s Rongochō[15], and Shundai’s Rongokokun gaiden[16]. 7 Chong Chong[17] has made a detailed study of the structure and content of Tasan’s Nonō kogūmyu[18], a voluminous commentary on the Analects. In a statistical analysis of previous commentaries quoted in this work, Chong noted that a commentator named "Sun"[19], or Dazai Shundai[20], is quoted 82 times, making him the ninth most frequently quoted. Another commentator referred to as "Chok"[21], or Ogyū Sorai[22], is quoted 37 times, putting him in twelfth place, whereas "Tūng"[23] – Itô Jinsai – is quoted twice. 8 The most quoted of all commentators is Chu Hsi with 398 passages. Curiously, the number of quotations attributed to these Japanese scholars appears to be inversely proportional to the amount of sympathy Tasan felt for their views. One possible reason is that he often quoted glosses he disagreed with to highlight his own contrasting interpretations.

In an article dealing principally with Tasan’s Ilbon-ron, Yi Ul-ho[24] also brings to our attention the fact that he praised the works of Jinsai, Sorai and Shundai in the opening lines of the same essay. Yi defines four trends characterising the

---

5 Ibid., pp. 148, 154.
8 Chong Chong, "Chong Tasan cho’ Nonō kogūmyu’ ǔ kuju chŏk punsŏk kwa kū kongja sasang (ki il)\", Tasan Hakbo 3 (1980):25,27, and "Chong Tasan cho’ Nonō kogūmyu’ ǔ kuju chŏk punsŏk kwa kū kongja sasang (ki i)\", Tasan Hakbo 4 (1982): 99. These figures are somewhat lower than those previously given by Imamura Yoshiio in "Tei Jaku-yo to Nihon no jusha".

58
thought of these Tokugawa scholars which are also found in the work of Tasan.

Firstly, Yi maintains that their veneration of the "Way of the Early Kings" is reflected in Tasan's advocacy of a return to the teachings of Yao, Shun, the Duke of Chou, and Confucius.

Secondly, they opposed a "rationalistic" tendency exhibited by the Ch'eng-Chu\textsuperscript{[25]} school and attempted to reinvest the emotions (C: \textit{ch'ing}\textsuperscript{[26]}) with the more elevated status they had enjoyed in the Classical Confucian teachings. This trend is apparent in Tasan's theory of natural inclinations (sōng kiho sōll\textsuperscript{[27]}), his "dynamic" interpretation of human nature as psychological tendencies.

Thirdly, they rejected Neo-Confucian quietistic tendencies and the principle/vital force (C: \textit{li-ch'i}\textsuperscript{[28]}) dualism, focusing instead on practical ethics and the more substantial issues of Rites, Music, and Politics. This tendency is reminiscent of the Korean Sirhak school's emphasis on ethical practicality and social utility in administration.

Fourth, a tendency to – in Yi's terminology – \textit{kyŏnghŏmnon chŏk kwahaksha-san}\textsuperscript{[29]} or empirical, scientific thinking, and a sympathy for the concerns of the urban professionals and merchants, which was a manifestation of a utilitarian attitude.\textsuperscript{9}

Such attempts to draw concise parallels between the approaches of "Kogaku\textsuperscript{[30]} and "Sirhak" thinkers may provide thought-provoking frameworks for comparative research, but they can be misleading. This is due not least to the very divergent forms of social practicality advocated by the Kogaku and Sirhak schools – if such broad spectrums of thought can be called schools – that grew out of the reaction to political realities as well as perceived quietistic and introspective tendencies within the Ch'eng-Chu school. On the one hand Jinsai, in his later works, concentrated on practical ethics as the basis of self-cultivation, whereas Sorai and Shundai were more involved in political philosophy and institutions. I would further qualify the above comparison by adding that, although the scholarship of both Tasan and the Kogaku proponents was marked by philological inquiry and exegetical research of a more methodical and rigorous nature than that of their Neo-Confucian predecessors, none of them were empiricists in a strictly philosophical or scientific sense.

With this in mind I have attempted to outline several common themes in the work of Tasan on the one hand, and Jinsai and Sorai on the other:

Firstly, they studied the "ancient meanings" of terms in order to rediscover the teachings of the early sages which were considered to have been obscured by Sung and Ming "speculative" philosophy, by means of thorough exegesis and

philological research. This trend was accompanied by a rejection of any reliance on the authority of particular commentaries. Tasan and Sorai criticized the usage of certain philosophical categories, for example, the *li-ch'i* metaphysical framework and *ti-yung* (substance-function) dualism, imposed by the Ch'eng-Chu school proponents in their attempt to systematize the Classical teachings.

Secondly, on the basis of the above-mentioned empirical approach and the resulting insight they claimed to have gained into the pristine Confucian message, they emphasized the practical spirit of Pre-Ch'ın Confucianism in its various manifestations. This was accompanied by a criticism of the emphasis on the mind and quietistic introspection they attributed to Neo-Confucian techniques of self-cultivation, and considered to have originated from Buddhism and Taoism.

Thirdly, they rejected dualistic tendencies in the Ch'eng-Chu *li-ch'i* cosmology and their application to the human condition in the theories of "original nature" (C: *pen-chan chih hsing*) and "physical nature" (C: *ch'i-chih chih hsing*), especially the resulting contraposition of "principle" and "human desires" (C: *jen-yu*). Instead, they emphasised the positive role the feelings could play in self-cultivation, or the capacity of the feelings and desires to reflect principle, insofar as they formed the basis of man's potential to do good.

Not surprisingly, these are themes that had previously emerged in the work of Ming and Early Ch'ìn Confucian thinkers. Their empirical methodology, their affirmation of the positive role of the emotions and desires, and their emphasis on the practical value of scholarship was preceded by the work of Ming thinkers such as Lo Ch'ìn-shun and Wang T'ing-hsiang, and early Ch'ìn thinkers such as Ku Yen-wu, the pioneer of the *k'ao-cheng* (lit.: "examination of evidence") philological tradition.

It was on the basis of the *k'ao-cheng* methodology, used by Ch'ìn scholars to formulate their critiques of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, that Tasan introduced certain novel perspectives which echoed developments in the Jinsai-Sorai schools:

Firstly, Tasan, Jinsai and Sorai drew from the religious orientation of the Shang and Early Chou to develop a more personalised, dynamic conception of Heaven. A focal point of Tasan's criticism of Ch'eng-Chu metaphysics was the identification of Heaven with principle, which he considered one of the greatest impediments to the attainment of sagehood.

Tasan classified the "Heaven" (C: *t'ien*) mentioned in the classics into two main categories, the "boundless, substantial firmament" or universe, and the "sublime, spiritual ruler", the former being a natural manifestation and the latter a

---

10 *Taehak kang'ei*, 2: 40a, YC, 2: 2.
personal supreme being.\textsuperscript{11} This latter he referred to as Sangjae\textsuperscript{40} (C: shang-t’i) or "supreme ruler", a term in common use prior to the late Chou, as indicated by mentions in the Book of Odes, Book of Documents and Rites of Chou. The Sangjae that was sacrificed to by the rulers of the early Chou is depicted by Tasan as a transcendent being, distinct from man, the spirits, and the myriad things and yet ruling them as their source of harmony and growth.\textsuperscript{12} As Michael Kalton has pointed out, Tasan did not accept the innate pattern of the universe, i.e., principle, as an ultimate explanation of purposeful order in the universe, and considered Sangjae to be the overseer of the cosmic interactions between um and yang\textsuperscript{41} (C: Yin and Yang).\textsuperscript{13} Sangjae came to be referred to as "Heaven" just as the ruler of a state (kukgun\textsuperscript{42}) was referred to simply as "state" (kuk\textsuperscript{43}), the impersonal nature of the appellation Heaven eventually becoming attributed to its ruler.\textsuperscript{14}

Similarly, a prominent characteristic of the thought of Sorai and Jinsai was their opposition to the Sung view that Heaven was principle.\textsuperscript{15} Jinsai replaced the idea of an impassive principle with his idea of Heaven’s Way (tendo) as a living and active entity (katsubutsu\textsuperscript{44}), arguing that

"Heaven and earth is one great living thing. How could the term li be enough to be the source for the endless changes of this living organism? Li is in fact a term of death. It is within things, but does not rule things..."\textsuperscript{16}

The two points of contention raised here are that the term li conveys the idea of inanimacy, being simply the inner pattern of the conglomeration and dispersion of ki, and furthermore that being intrinsic it cannot play the role of ruler or overseer of things ascribed to Heaven by writers of the Chou. In contrast, Jinsai referred to the Way of Heaven as the constant flux of the cosmos, and to the Heavenly Mandate as the command of an entity who responded to the human order and took an active role in human affairs, "observing the good and evil, integrity and corruption of men."\textsuperscript{17} He also compared Heaven to a ruling prince, and its mandate

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Chunhyang ch’ae, 30a, YC, 1: 8.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ch’unch’u kojing, 4: 24a, YC, 2: 36.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Maengja yo-ui, 2: 38b, YC, 2: 6.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Gomö jigi, NRI 5: 16.
\end{itemize}
to his command.\(^{18}\)

This idea of Heaven as an entity responsive to, and involved in, human affairs, is given only passing mention in Jinsai’s criticism of the Ch'eng-Chu depiction of principle and his discussion of the distinction between the Way of Heaven and the Mandate of Heaven. On the other hand the conception of a transcendent, active Heaven played a central part in the philosophy of Sorai, who censured Ch'eng Hao\(^{45}\) for claiming that Heaven and Earth did not have a mind. The Way of the Early Kings was the ultimate standard to be followed, and this was "entirely based on reverence for Heaven".\(^{19}\)

Tasan and Jinsai’s personalization of Heaven as an entity with ethical predilections served as – in the terminology of modern Western ethics – a deontological justification for their emphasis on self-realization through ethical practice. Conversely, Sorai’s depiction of Heaven as an unfathomable object of reverence external to man, and the basis of the authority of the Early Kings, had decidedly political implications.\(^{20}\)

On the one hand, explicitly in the case of Tasan, the potential of man to "communicate directly" with Heaven and "attain the virtue of Heaven" signified a subjective, creative role in the interpretation and application of ethical norms.\(^{21}\) But in the case of Sorai, the separation of man from an unknowable, transcendent Heaven, and his advocacy of the Rites and Music as a creation of the Early Kings, implied a reliance on the objective standards set up by a secular authority rather than on the autonomous interpretation of norms. This is one reason why he rejected Jinsai’s adoption of "filial piety, brotherly love, benevolence and righteousness" as the means to bring "peace and contentment to the world" in favor of the more precise delimitations on behaviour required by the Rites.\(^{22}\)

Tasan’s depiction of the supreme ruler Sangjae as an object of reverence has generally been ascribed to the influence of "Western Learning", to which he and many other members of the Southerner (Namim\(^{46}\)) faction in the 18th Century were undoubtedly attracted. But one cannot discount the possibility that the writings of Jinsai and Sorai also played a significant part in the formulation of his monotheistic brand of Confucianism. At the very least, the work of these two Toku-

\(^{18}\) *Gomô jigi*, NRI 5: 15.


\(^{21}\) *Chungyong chajam*, 5b, YC, 2: 3; *Nonô kogûmji*, 1: 24b, YC, 2: 7.

gawa scholars must have encouraged him to look back to the Book of Documents and Book of Odes for canonical justification for his rejection of the Ch'eng-Chu school's conception of Heaven as principle.

Secondly, Jinsai's adoption, and Tasan's elaboration, of the early Chou conception of Heaven as a sentient being actively involved in human affairs, provided the ontological foundation of their interpretation of human nature as essentially dynamic.\(^{23}\) Human nature was the moral tendency to "love goodness" and "hate evil" endowed by Heaven, and consequently the Sung conception of an "unmanifested" (wei-fa\(^{[47]}\)) state of nature existing prior to contact with things was rendered meaningless.\(^{24}\) This affective interpretation of nature, particularly in the form of Tasan's theory of propensities, represented the philosophical expression of a tendency already present in Ming scholarship to interpret nature dynamically, as a reaction to quietism within the Ch'eng-Chu school. Lo Ch'in-shun's philosophy, for example, exemplified a monistic tendency to interpret the human nature imparted by the Heavenly Mandate as an expression of ch'i as well as normative li, and consequently to envisage feelings as qualities of the Heaven-endowed nature.\(^{25}\)

Thirdly, Jinsai and Tasan's interpretation of human nature as moral tendencies, in terms of the innate movement of the mind (C: hsin\(^{[48]}\)) towards goodness, in turn provided the basis for a rigorous philosophy of practical ethics, characterized by a thoroughly outward-looking approach to self-cultivation. This approach drew strength from the argument that self-realization could only be attained if the moral tendencies characterizing the nature could be objectified in ethical conduct.\(^{26}\) Both of them took upon themselves the task of clarifying a pre-Ch'in emphasis on ethical practice they perceived to have been obscured by an inward trend in the Ch'eng-Chu school. Pointing out that Confucius and Mencius gave greater weight to the nourishment of the moral tendencies rather than introspection, Jinsai sought to unfold the hidden import of the Confucian ethical teachings – and in the process unravel Neo-Confucian metaphysics – through a systematic philology he ingeniously developed well before the Japanese had even set eyes on the works of the k'ao-cheng pioneers Ku Yen-wu and Yen Jo-chi. One and a half centuries later, Tasan harnessed the incisive power of a now mature kao-ch'eng scholarship.

---


\(^{24}\) *Gomô jigi*, NRI 5: 33, Chungyoung chajam, 2b, YC, 2: 3.


\(^{26}\) *Gomô jigi*, NRI 5: 33, Tachak kang'üi, 2.31b.
in his attempt to "pierce the veil" the Han, Tang and Sung commentaries had cast over the practical ethics of Confucius and Mencius, and unfold their philosophical import.

A fourth characteristic evident in the philosophy of both Tasan and Jinsai was the sharp distinction they drew between the Way of Heaven and the Way of Man. The concept of the Way of Heaven, they argued, had originated in the Book of Changes and indicated purely natural processes such as the fluctuations between Yin and Yang. It had nothing to do with the Way Confucius had spoken of in the Analects, which was the Way of Man, that is, the path of moral duty that man should follow in his daily existence. In making this distinction they severed the link between cosmology and ethics that had served as the linchpin of Chu Hsi's entire system, and rebuilt a frame of reference for self-cultivation that was entirely based on practical ethics. This objectification of norms— the Way of Man— did not signify, however, that their ethical theories were teleological, let alone utilitarian. Jinsai held that the Way existed irrespective of the existence of man, and Tasan believed that man's moral inclinations were endowed by a virtue-loving Heaven, Heaven in this context being Sangjae. This distinction between a natural Way and the Way of Man also served, in the case of Tasan, to bring into relief an alternative vision of man standing before God as a unique being, endowed with a freedom to make moral decisions that distinguished him from the "birds and the beasts."

As we have mentioned, a common theme to be found in the very diverse approaches taken by Jinsai and Tasan on the one hand, and Sorai on the other, is the spirit of "social practicability" as a reaction to an inward-looking orientation and subjectivism in Sung and Ming Neo-Confucianism. Jinsai and Tasan emphasised that self-cultivation was only attainable within the medium of human relations. Their mutual opposition to Chu Hsi's theory of the extension of knowledge (as a step prior to the sincerity of the will described in the Great Learning) was derived from a conviction that internal and external should be taken care of simultaneously, a view not unrelated to Yang-Ming's theory of the unity of knowledge and action. Tasan took this form of ethical activism a step further by reversing Ch'eng I's emphasis on "straightening the internal life" to "square the external life" with the concept of "regulating the exterior to bring peace and order to the interior."

---

27 Gomó jigi, NRI 5: 19, Maengja yo-úi, 39a.
28 Dójimon, NRI 5: 83, Chach'an myojimyón, 16a, YC, 1.16.
29 Maengja yo-úi, 2: 19a.
30 Gomó jigi, NRI 5: 87, Tachak kong'úi, 20b, YC, 2: 1.
32 T'achak kung'úi, 2: 31b.
Tasan’s radical form of ethical practicality was based on the idea that virtue was only realized a *posteriori* through upright deeds, a view echoing the standpoint taken by Sorai in his criticism (albeit unsubstantiated) of Jinsai’s interpretation of virtue as referring "merely to what exists before virtue is achieved." Furthermore his conception of "regulating the exterior to bring peace and order to the interior" is curiously reminiscent of Sorai’s constant emphasis on the realization of virtue through the practice of Rites and Music. Although Sorai advocated the practice of ceremonial forms principally in the context of "pacifying the world", he simultaneously presented it as the classical approach to self-cultivation in contrast to the idealistic, subjective Neo-Confucian theories of "plumbing principle and extending knowledge", which were nothing more than efforts to "control the mind by means of the mind". I would hesitate to speculate whether Sorai’s depiction of Rites and Music as a means of self-cultivation was entirely a tactical justification in the pursuit of political goals. In view of this, instead of characterizing the transition from the Jinsai to the Sorai school primarily as the increasing separation of inner and outer, or moral cultivation and politics, I would rather stress a tendency toward the objectification and externalization of norms – as a means of self-cultivation as well as social control – in response to subjective trends in the Sung and Ming. To attack the route of inner cultivation as a method for attaining correct ethical and political action is not equivalent to attacking the union of inner and outer.

Tasan’s conception of virtue as acquisition marked a similar transition in late Chosŏn Dynasty thought, though Sorai took the trend towards externalization much further, criticizing the practical ethics championed by Jinsai as representing "a foot without inches, and a measuring beam without notches." Indeed, Tasan and Jinsai left plenty of room for subjective interpretation in their ethical systems, since they were very much concerned with the individual’s capacity, as an independent agent, to reinterpret and internalize norms. The fine balance between self-control or motivation on the one hand and social sanction on the other was a perennial concern of Confucians. Mencius vividly exemplified this concern in his disparagement of the "good careful villager" who followed all the conventions and yet remained far from the Way. Sorai’s inclination to the social side of the balance was inherited by Shundai, whom Tasan bitterly attacked for considering the common people incapable of the initiative required to become a *chun-tzu*.

---


35 *Mencius* 7b: 37.
Enlarging on an enigmatic remark by Confucius that "the common people may be made to follow it (the Way) but may not be made to understand it," Shundai had claimed that,

"Among the people of the world, there are superior men (chun-tzu) and petty-minded men. Only when certain superior men rule the masses is the world put in order. If all individuals and families in the world were enlightened, and all the common people became superior men, then there would be no common people left. And without common people, there can be no nation. Consequently even in the age of Yao and Shun the common people were simply common people. Those who are not superior cannot be enlightened. The rulers of the Ch'in treated the common people as ignorant for the same reason."

Claiming that Confucius' remark was simply about the difficulties inherent in conveying abstract truth, Tasan retorted,

"Confucius himself said that 'in education there should be no class distinction'... The mind of a sage is highly impartial, having no self-interest. Therefore Mencius said that all men can become a Yao or Shun. How could one be so intolerant as to treat the common people as ignorant and obstinately bar them from the way of Yao and Shun out of selfish desire?"

Behind Shundai's rather transparent defence of feudal mores Tasan saw the self-interests of a privileged class at work. He contrasted this with the egalitarian spirit of Confucian education, at the heart of which lay Mencius' conception of the universal attainability of sagehood. Tasan's faith in the moral initiative of individuals and his resulting disdain for Shundai's elitism was not the expression of a particularly modern form of populism; it reflected the fierce contention that had long raged between Mencian idealists and legalistically inclined Confucians since the establishment of the Ch'in autocracy.

In terms of the relative emphasis placed on the demands of self-cultivation on the one hand, and the political goal of "pacifying the state" on the other, Tasan could be said to take the middle ground between Jinsai and Sorai. He shared Jinsai's intense concern with practical ethics and the nourishment of the moral disposition, and at the same time attempted to develop the implications of these ideas in his political thought. He was very much involved in the business of

36 Analects 8: 9.
37 Quoted in: Nonō kōgū, 4: 4a.
38 Analects 15:38.
39 Nonō kōgū, 4: 4b.
40 Mark Setton, "Tasan's 'Practical Learning'", Philosophy East and West 39.4 (October 1989)
government, having served under King Jŏngjo[^51] for eleven years before he was exiled to South Chŏlla Province. During this period of service he was shocked by the indifference of many literati towards the affairs of state in a period rife with social unrest. He ascribed this to a tension existing in their minds between the demands of self-cultivation and their duty to the state, which he attributed in turn to Taoist and Buddhist influences on Neo-Confucian learning. Consequently he became very much preoccupied with the problem of reconciling the two great themes of the Great Learning, "self-cultivation" and the "ordering of society", and built his philosophical system around the idea of their interrelatedness.


[^51]: It should be pointed out that despite his emphasis on ethical rather than political thought, Jinsai also censured the Neo-Confucians for only being interested in self-improvement and forgetting that "the superior man cultivates himself so as to give peace to all the people."
Glossar

[1] 退溪
[2] 実學
[3] 丁茶山
[4] 嵐在彦
[5] 集大成者
[6] 日本論
[7] 李瀋
[8] 山崎暗齋
[9] 安鼎福
[10] 伊藤仁齋
[12] 薙子問
[13] 林景范
[14] 論語古義
[15] 論語徵
[16] 論語古訓外傳
[17] 鄭鬆
[18] 論語古今註
[19] 純
[20] 太宰春台
[21] 莊
[22] 莊生徂徠
[23] 藤
[24] 李乙浩
[25] 程朱
[26] 情
[27] 性嗜好説
[28] 理気
[29] 經驗論的科學思想
[30] 古學
[31] 体用
[32] 本然之性
[33] 氣質之性
[34] 人欲
[35] 羅順
[36] 王廷相
[37] 顧炎武
[38] 考証
[39] 天
[40] 上宰
[41] 陰陽
[42] 國君
[43] 國
[44] 生物
[45] 程顥
[46] 南人
[47] 未發
[48] 心
[49] 程頤
[50] 君子
[51] 正祖