

Tasan's Choice: Yi Yin or Yan Yuan?

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The question of whether Tasan Chŏng Yagyong was a scholar of “advancing to government offices (*ch'ul*)” or “staying in satisfaction (*ch'ö*)” is bound to cause controversy and confusion. Despite his experience of exile, Tasan gravitated towards “advancing.” In his discussion of King Wu, Guan Zhong, and other rulers who were the subjects of Neo-Confucian deontological criticism, Tasan consistently advocated these political leaders, emphasizing their social merits. Tasan defined “scholars” as those who wanted to take government offices. In his view, learning the Way remained instrumental, and the “study for others” was more important than the “study for self.” Since the trends of prioritizing “advancing to government offices” over “staying in satisfaction” and vice-versa alternated throughout the history of Chosŏn Confucianism, this lends support to the theory that Practical Learning was inheritor to the Confucian tradition, and thus as an intellectual movement displayed continuity rather than rupture. In fact, Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism and the Practical Learning school are equally expressive of the Confucian spirit, which aims to achieve the contradictory goals of inner virtue and outer merits, regardless of their differences in emphasis.

Keywords: Tasan Chŏng Yagyong, Practical Learning, *ch'ulch'ö*, deontology, utilitarianism

Two Stereotypes of Confucian Scholars

The question of whether Tasan 茶山 Chŏng Yagyong 丁若鏞 (1762-1836),¹ a

1. Primary references in English to Tasan's life and thought include: Michael Kalton, “Chŏng Tasan's Philosophy of Man: A Radical Critique of the Neo-Confucian World View,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 3 (1981): 3-37; Keum Jang-tae, “Tasan's Thought on Western Learning and

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representative of the school of Practical Learning (*sirhak* 實學) in the Chosŏn dynasty, was prone to self-cultivation or to participation in the political process is potentially controversial and may easily confound scholars. Confucianism sees these two values as harmonious because each is a necessary complement to the other, but they contradict each other so frequently in practical circumstances that all Confucians face the dilemma of maintaining a balance between the two. The initial discussion of this topic appears in the *Mencius*:

Boyi 伯夷 neither saw bad colors with his eyes nor listened to bad sounds with his ears. He neither served the lords who did not deserve to be served nor instructed the people who did not deserve to be instructed. He advanced when the states were well governed and retired when the states were in disorder ... [Y]i Yin 伊尹 said, "No matter whom we serve they are the lords; no matter whom we instruct they are the people." He always advanced regardless of whether the states were in order or disorder ... [L]iuxia Hui 柳下惠 was not ashamed of serving filthy lords, and did not decline even a minor position [L]eaving quickly when it was right to leave quickly, remaining long when it was right to remain long, staying when it was right to stay, and taking office when it was right to take office, this was what Confucius did.²

Mencius initially seemed to portray the four sages mentioned here as respectively representing the virtues of purity, responsibility, harmony, and timeliness. However, he conclusively saw Confucius as integrating all the virtues of other sages, the one who realized the virtue of moderation or the mean: Mencius confessed, "Despite my incapability of accomplishing it, what I want to do is to learn from Confucius."³ By contrast, Mencius found the attitudes of Boyi and Liuxia Hui extreme: "Boyi was too constrained, and Liuxia was not discreet."⁴ His evaluation of Yi Yin was more complicated. As

Confucianism," *Korea Journal* 26:2 (1986): 4-15; Mark Setton, "Tasan's 'Practical Learning,'" *Philosophy East and West* 39. 4 (1989): 377-391; Gregory Henderson, "Chong Tasan: A Study in Korea's Intellectual History," *Tasan hakpo* 12 (1992:12): 305-314; Mark Setton, *Chŏng Yagyong: Korea's Challenge to Orthodox Neo-Confucianism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1997); Lee Eul-ho, "Tasan's View of Man," in Korean National Commission for UNESCO ed., *Korean Philosophy: Its Tradition and Modern Transformation* (Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym, 2004), 357-372; and Han Yeong-u, "Jeong Yak-yong: The Man and His Thought," in *Korean Philosophy: Its Tradition and Modern Transformation*, 357-372.

2. Meng Ke 孟軻; Zhu Xi, *Mengzi jizhu* 孟子集注, vol. 197 of *Wenyuange siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書 (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan 商務印書館, 1983), 5B: 1. A similar passage appears in 2A: 2 in the same book. In this article, all the translations of the passages from the classic texts are mine. Division of passages in the Four Books is based on Zhu Xi's works: *Daxue zhangju* 大學章句, *Lunyu jizhu* 論語集注, *Mengzi jizhu* 孟子集注, and *Zhongyong zhangju* 中庸章句.

3. *Ibid.*, 2A: 2.

4. *Ibid.*, 2A: 9.

a minister in charge, Yi Yin boldly dared to reject and later accept Taijia 太甲, the grandson of the sage king Tang 湯, disloyalty that could only be offset by his political contribution to the Shang dynasty. Mencius consequently sanctioned Yi Yin's boldness, but only on the condition that he kept his selfless intentions and heroic devotion: "It can be sanctioned when there are intentions like Yi Yin's; if there are no intentions like Yi Yin's, it is usurpation."⁵ As the decision on whether to "advance to government offices" (*ch'ul* 出) or "stay in satisfaction" (*ch'ö* 處) is delicate and susceptible to criticism, Mencius here compared sages and concluded that only Confucius' decisions were impeccable; Yi Yin's followed as the second most preferable.

The counterpart of Yi Yin in the matter of "advancing to government offices or staying in satisfaction" is thus neither Boyi nor Liuxia Hui but Yan Yuan 顏淵, one of Confucius' most beloved disciples. A passage from the *Analects* vouches for a parallel between him and Yi Yin, whose conspicuously different orientation makes the comparison categorical in the Confucian tradition: "Living on a shabby street with a bamboo bowl of rice and a gourd of water – most people would not even be able to endure this kind of hardship, but Hui 回 (Yan Yuan) remained joyful. How virtuous Hui is!"⁶ Thanks to Confucius' words of praise, Yan Yuan has become symbolic of virtuous sages while Yi Yin has become the example of a meritorious minister. Thus later Confucians who aspired to achieve both outer kingly merits (*waiwang* 外王) and inner virtue of sagehood (*neisheng* 內聖), the two wings in the Confucian axiology, created a motto which implicitly expressed their devotion to Confucius: "Intend what Yi Yin intended, and learn what Yan Yuan learnt."⁷ In spite of this ideal, the dilemma remained in reality, as political circumstances compelled Confucians to take sides. This is a contentious issue in Confucianism, so pervasive that the entire history of Confucianism can be interpreted through this criterion. For example, the history of Korean Confucianism features incessant tensions and strife between groups of scholars who were oriented toward either "advancing to government offices" or "staying in satisfaction": the "Scholars of the forest" (*sarim* 士林) vs. the "Meritorious elite" (*hungu* 勳舊) in the fifteenth century; Yi Hwang 李滉

5. *Ibid.*, 7A: 31.

6. Kong Qiu 孔丘; Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Lunyu jizhu* 論語集注, vol. 197 of *Wenyuange siku quanshu* 6: 9.

7. Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤, one of the founders of the Neo-Confucian tradition, created this motto for the first time. See *Zhou Yuangong ji* 周元公集, vol. 1101 of *Wenyuanke Siku quanshu*, 425c. Following Zhou Dunyi, many Confucian scholars have used this motto for displaying their resolution to achieve both inner virtue and outer merits.

(1501-1570) or Cho Sik 曹植 (1501-1572) vs. Yi I 李珥 (1536-1584) in the sixteenth century; the Yŏngnam 嶺南 Confucians vs. the Ki-Ho 畿湖 Confucians in the seventeenth century; the Orthodox Neo-Confucians vs. the scholars of Practical Learning in the eighteenth century; and the Confucians for “protecting correctness against perversion” vs. the young radicals for international cooperation in the nineteenth century.

Confusion over ascertaining Tasan’s stance on this issue probably stems from the fact that his eighteen-year exile is a trial typical of those scholars who were “staying in satisfaction” rather than “advancing to government office.” To delineate Tasan’s thought clearly, however, we must distinguish between his personal life experience and his socio-political agenda.

Emphasis on merits

I would assert that despite his experience of exile, Tasan was a scholar of “advancing” who chose the Yi Yin option. This becomes obvious through an exploration of Tasan’s view of the Confucian sages who were at the heart of this discussion. First of all, he did not take the story of Boyi literally; Boyi allegedly died of starvation after declining food produced in the soil of the Zhou 周 dynasty, thereby expressing his disapproval of King Wu’s 武 revolution and his loyalty to the Shang dynasty. Tasan writes about the story as follows:

Now, a scrupulous examination of all Boyi’s stories discussed in the *Analects* and the *Mencius* leads us to conclude that they are all omitted in the *Shiji* 史記 [Records of the Historian]. Stories like the one where Boyi interfered with King Wu’s procession by holding the reins of his horse, or the one where he only ate brackens, do not appear at all in the sayings of Confucius and Mencius. Thus, they should not be taken as records of factual events. Even Weizi 微子 was not embarrassed at being enfeoffed by the Zhou, and Jizi 箕子 clarified the Way to King Wu without hesitation. How could Boyi alone remonstrate against King Wu by holding the reins of his horse and eating brackens until he died of starvation?⁸

Tasan based this argument on a meticulous investigation of the textual sources related to the story. After investigating them, he found Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 narration in the “Biography of Boyi” dubious, because it contained the critical mistake of saying that “As the Duke of the West (King Wen 文: the father of

8. Chŏng Yagyong, *Maengja yoyŏi* 孟子要義 (Essential Meaning of the *Mencius*), vol. 282 of *Han’guk munjip ch’onggan* 韓國文集叢刊 (Seoul: Han’guk kojŏn pŏnyŏg’wŏn 韓國古典編譯院, 1990-2001), 108.

King Wu) died, King Wu enshrined the wooden tablet of his father on a cart, granted him the posthumous title of King Wen, and made an eastward expedition to punish King Zhou 紂 of the Shang dynasty.”⁹ Tasan pointed out that this account was inconsistent: “Enshrining a tablet before the completion of a funeral does not conform to principle (*li*). The *Shiji* earlier noted that ‘The father died and the funeral was not finished yet,’ but also said, ‘King Wu enshrined the wooden tablet of his father on a cart and granted him the posthumous title of King Wen.’ How can this be reasonable? Stories like ‘holding the reins’ may originally have been forged.”¹⁰ Confident of his arguments, Tasan further referred to Zhao Qi’s 趙岐 comment on the passage related to this discussion in the *Mencius*. Zhao Qi, the primary commentator on the *Mencius*, explained that “Boyi is the eldest son of the lord of the state of Guzhu 孤竹. He went into retirement after entrusting the state to his younger brother [A]t the time the Yin 殷 (Shang 商) dynasty was in decline, and most lords betrayed righteousness, so he did not proceed in the world. Later, he submitted to the Duke of the West.”¹¹ Tasan underlined the fact that in Zhao’s comment Boyi eventually submitted to the Duke of the West, hinting at his tacit acknowledgement of the Zhou. If Boyi acknowledged the Zhou, Tasan contended, he would surely not have refused food grown in Zhou soil and died of starvation.

Similar to other commentators, Tasan also admitted that Boyi and his younger brother Shuqi 叔齊 died of starvation as it is recorded not only in the *Shiji* but also in the *Analects*: “Boyi and Shuqi starved to death at the foot of Mt. Shouyang 首陽.”¹² However, the reason Tasan gave for their starvation was creative and unique: he said Boyi starved because he did not have a means of living after he retired as crown prince. Tasan seemed to allege this because in his view protesting against the Zhou’s rule was neither just nor right. The context of Tasan’s reference to Zhao Qi’s comment becomes obvious at this point, because Zhao Qi did not mention that Boyi starved to die in protest against King Wu’s revolution.

As a matter of fact, Confucianism traditionally sees King Wu’s revolution as a polemical issue. King Wu actually founded the Zhou dynasty in which most

9. Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Historian) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 61:2143.

10. Chǒng Yagyong, *Maengja yoŏi*, 108b.

11. Meng Ke; Zhao Qi; Sun Shi, *Mengzi zhushu*, vol. 13 of *Sbisanjing zhushu* (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1955), 67.

12. Kong Qiu; Zhu Xi, *Lunyu jizhu*, 16: 12.

archetypal Confucian culture and rituals were created, but he achieved that by “revolution,” becoming disloyal to his lord King Zhou of the Shang. In terms of merits, he outstripped many Confucian sages, but in terms of following the moral principle he was not exemplary. He was a brilliant leader to the utilitarians, who emphasized an ethics of consequences, but to the deontologists he violated the ethical code, which they interpreted in terms of duties and rights. Tasan apparently favored King Wu, and should thus be considered a utilitarian in this regard.

When examining the history of the Chosŏn dynasty, the implication of Tasan’s stance in this issue becomes evident. The first king of Chosŏn overthrew the Koryŏ dynasty that he had served; the third king frustrated his father, the first king T’aejo, and killed his younger brother in order to ascend the throne; the seventh king usurped the throne from his young nephew, King Tanjong 端宗, whom he eventually put to death; the seventeenth king came to power by virtue of a coup maneuvered by the pro-Ming bureaucrats; and even the twenty-first king Yŏngjo, under whose reign Tasan was born, had to plot some conspiracies to overcome his inferior birth status and become king. These kings, like King Wu, alarmed the Confucian deontologists of the Chosŏn period, who saw it as their moral obligation to keep the purity of inborn nature safe from the polluting influence of politics. However, as the achievements of these kings truly contributed to the continuation of the dynasty, they were uniformly honored by the utilitarians, who valued social merits more than purity.

Therefore, conflicts between the two camps were foreseeable. Neither camp was completely annihilated, however; power fluctuated between the two depending on the historical circumstances. Those who either explicitly or implicitly criticized the Chosŏn kings listed above and King Wu of the Zhou, established a tradition of “staying in satisfaction,” whereas those who favored social merits over preserving the moral principle cooperated with the state by “advancing to government offices.” Tasan was among the Confucians who were eager to “advance.”

Tasan’s understanding of Guan Zhong 管仲 reaffirms this point. Guan Zhong is also a debatable figure in the Confucian tradition. He surrendered to Prince Xiaobai 小白, who killed his lord Prince Jiu 糾 after a series of bloody struggles over the throne of the state of Qi 齊 and finally took the throne for himself as Duke Huan 桓. Guan Zhong was appointed as Prime Minister of the state, and thanks to his devotion and statesmanship, Duke Huan was regarded as one of the five powerful and meritorious lords of the Spring and Autumn period. In many senses, Guan Zhong’s case is analogous to that of King Wu.

Aware of Guan Zhong's disloyalty to his lord, Confucius' disciples Zilu 子路 and Zigong 子貢 blamed Guan Zhong for undermining Confucian virtues. However, Confucius rebuked them and praised Guan Zhong for his merits: "Duke Huan could convoke nine meetings of the lords of the various states without relying on weapons and chariots. This was due to Guan Zhong's contributions. What can be paralleled with his humaneness? What can be paralleled with his humaneness?"¹³ "Guan Zhong helped Duke Huan rule over the lords and rectify the order of all under heaven. The people still benefit from his merits today. If there were no Guan Zhong we would have to wear our hair loose and to fold our robes to the left [as the barbarians do]. How can his merits be considered the same as what those common people do, who strangle themselves in an irrigation ditch for a mere belief without letting the world recognize their actions?"¹⁴

Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107) and Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), the two greatest masters of Neo-Confucianism, did not agree with Confucius' endorsement of Guan Zhong. Zhu Xi was reluctant to recognize Guan Zhong: "Although Guan Zhong was not a person of humaneness, he practiced the merit of humaneness as he benefitted human beings."¹⁵ Cheng Yi took a more rigid stance and declined to accept him at all: "Let's assume that Duke Huan was a younger brother and Prince Jiu was an older brother. Then, Guan Zhong's initial support for Prince Jiu was right, and Duke Huan should be regarded as having usurped the state and killed his older brother. If so, Duke Huan and Guan Zhong would be mortal enemies. If [Confucius] endorsed his service for Duke Huan only in consideration of his later merits, would not this endorsement from Confucius be the same as thoroughly damaging righteousness and thus leaving widely open the possibility of disloyal riots, which would be repeated through one thousand generations?"¹⁶ Cheng Yi here makes his judgment conditional upon Prince Jiu's seniority, even though he knew, like Zhu Xi, that in reality Duke Huan was older than Prince Jiu. However, Gu Yanwu 顧炎武, Mao Qiling 毛奇齡, and Tasan together understood that this postulation was purposely created, since in doing so they could avoid contradicting Confucius' evaluation of Guan Zhong.¹⁷

13. *Ibid.*, 14: 17.

14. *Ibid.*, 14: 18.

15. See Zhu Xi's comment on 14: 17 of the *Lunyu jizhu*.

16. See Cheng Yi's comment on 14: 18 of the *Lunyu jizhu*.

17. See Chǒng Yagyong, *Nonǒ kogŏmchu* 論語古今註 (Ancient and Contemporary Commentaries of the Analects), vol. 282 of *Hanguk munjip ch'onggan*, 300a and 301b.

It was about this issue that Tasan criticized Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi most severely in his extensive commentary of the *Analects*, *Nonŏ kogŭmchu* 論語古今註 (*The Ancient and Contemporary Commentaries of the Analects*):

In such revolutionary periods, this is the way things tend to go. In addition, Jiu and Xiaobai [Huan] are equally the sons of Lord Li from the state of Qi. Guan Zhong had sincerely been loyal in his service to Jiu, whom he was supposed to serve, and only after Jiu's death did he enter Duke Huan's court to help him rule the state of Qi and protect the Zhou dynasty. How can this be called "damaging righteousness?" What should be valued in the holy classics is in general to see what is compatible or incompatible with the moral principle, and in this matter one should refer to the words of the sage (Confucius). If one insists on his views regardless of the sage's words, what on earth is he going to do with them? I cannot help but venture to point this out.¹⁸

To Tasan, the deontological views of Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi were neither reasonable nor reflective of Confucius' thought: if they regarded King Wu as a Confucian sage and revered Weizi and Jizi as Confucian worthies, they should treat Guan Zhong in the same manner, he reasoned.

Tasan's challenge to Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy here should not be seen as an expression of favoritism: it is a strategic assertion to manifest his utilitarian thought. Tasan says, "Humaneness is not the integral virtue in our original mind-heart (as proposed by Neo-Confucianism) but what one's merits have accomplished. Therefore, I am afraid that it is unreasonable not to regard [Guan Zhong] as a person of humaneness while at the same time admitting his merit of humaneness."¹⁹ As seen here, Tasan maintained that virtues were not *a priori* but *a posteriori* and consequential, an assertion typical for an utilitarian ethics of consequences. His criticism of the Neo-Confucian evaluation of Guan Zhong drew on this utilitarian definition of humaneness, of which the completion hinges on building social merits.

To bolster his approval of Guan Zhong, Tasan tried a fresh interpretation of a key passage in the *Analects*: "Duke Huan could convoke nine meetings of the lords of the various states without relying on weapons and chariots. This is because of Guan Zhong's contributions. The humaneness of Guan Zhong is the same as that of Zhao Hu 召忽! The humaneness of Guan Zhong is the same as that of Zhao Hu!"²⁰ In this passage, the last two repeating exclamations come from Tasan's creative reading, which he thought was closer to the original

18. Ibid., 301c-d.

19. Ibid., 300d.

20. Refer to *Nonŏ kogŭmchu*, 299d.

meaning. Zhao Hu is a role model for the Confucian virtue of loyalty because he, unlike Guan Zhong, committed suicide when Prince Jiu was killed by Duke Huan. By comparing Guan Zhong with Zhao Hu in this unprecedented interpretation, Tasan upheld Guan Zhong's choice to join Duke Huan's political project, a choice that seemed opportunistic to the Confucian deontologists but moderate to the Confucian utilitarians. This is because Tasan valued social merits over the moral principle of loyalty.

Neo-Confucians' disinclination to endorse King Wu's revolution is frequently exhibited in their interpretation of related passages in the classic texts. For example, in an explanation of a passage in the *Analects* that may lead readers to wonder whether King Shun 舜 or King Wu is a better ruler, Zhu Xi's reading prefers King Shun: "King Shun had five ministers and brought order to all under heaven. King Wu said, 'I have ten governing ministers.' Confucius said, 'This indicates the difficulty of obtaining the able. Isn't it true? Only during the transition from King Yao 堯 to King Shun were the able ministers greater in number than this [the period of King Wu].'"²¹ Although Huang Kan 皇侃 (488-545) said that this interpretation was originally suggested by Ji Biao 季彪 (?-d. ca. 510),²² it did not represent the major commentaries of the *Analects* prior to Zhu Xi, such as *Lunyu jijie* 論語集解 by He Yan 何晏 (?-249), *Lunyu yishu* 論語義疏 by Huang Kan, and *Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義 by Xing Bing 邢昺 (931-1010). In contrast to Zhu Xi's rendition, they previously read the same passage as follows: "... Isn't that true? During the transition from King Yao to King Shun the tradition has become more flourishing than during the reign of King Wu."²³ Tasan's opinion was clear: having ten able ministers was better than having five. "What this classic tells us is that King Shun had no more than five people while the Zhou had as many as ten people. Thus, it is not appropriate to say that [King Shun] had more abundance than this [King Wu] [A]lthough the old interpretations are also problematic, they found that the Zhou was in the greatest abundance. This is true because five is not equivalent to ten."²⁴ While adopting the basic interpretation of the old commentaries, Tasan also attempted to solve what he found "problematic" in them by reading *ji* 際 ("transition" in the commentaries) as meaning "the relationship between

21. Kong Qiu; Zhu Xi, *Lunyu jizhu*, 8: 20.

22. Kong Qiu; Huang Kan 皇侃, *Lunyu jijie yishu* 論語集解義疏, vol. 164 of *Congshu jicheng jianbian* 叢書集成簡編, ed. Wang Yunwu 王雲五 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1966), 112.

23. See Kong Qiu; He Yan 何晏; Xing Bing 邢昺, *Lunyu zhushu* 論語注疏, vol. 21 of *Sibu beiyao* 四部備要 (Taipei: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 8: 4-5 and *Lunyu jijie yishu* 111-2.

24. Chǒng Yagyong, *Nonǒ kogŭmchu*, 230d.

the lords and ministers.”²⁵ Such elastic reading of the classics, which is not overawed by authoritative views, persists in Tasan’s interpretation of the *Analects*.

Tasan’s attack on the Neo-Confucian implicit criticism of King Wu continued in a bolder manner when he pointed out their imbalanced approach to King Wen and King Wu:

In my view, this theory [of Fan Zuyu 范祖禹] that Confucius frequently honored the great virtue of Taibo 泰伯 and King Wen was intended to implicitly satirize King Wu [W]hen it comes to the matter of moral duty, can even King Wen be said to sincerely abide by it? According to the law during the period of King Yao, King Shun, and the Three Dynasties, only the Son of Heaven held a capital area as large as one thousand square *li*, whereas the dukes in the upper ranks were allowed to possess only one hundred square *li*. However, King Wen [as a duke of the Shang dynasty] possessed two thirds of all under heaven. How is this said to abide by the moral duty? [C]onfucius must have had no intention to deprecate King Wen and the Duke of Zhou: is there a reason for only deprecating King Wu?²⁶

Tasan here reveals the Neo-Confucian bias against King Wu, which he thought had no reasonable ground.²⁷ Tasan never denied the importance of following moral obligations; like other Neo-Confucian scholars, he believed that social merits could only be accomplished on the basis of one’s morality. However, his view differed from that of the orthodox Neo-Confucians when he was faced with an axiological contradiction between social merits and moral obligations, which made it impossible to fulfill both. The orthodox Neo-Confucians sided with the moral obligations, whereas Tasan opted for social merits. To him, the

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, 231a-b. Taibo relinquished the throne of the state of Zhou for his younger brother, the father of King Wen, because he perceived the kingly personality of the young King Wen: this story is similar to that of Boyi and Shuqi. Like Boyi, Taibo hid himself in the region of the states of Wu and Yue, then barbarian lands.

27. In the same context, Tasan affirmed the revolution of King Tang, the founder of the Shang dynasty: “In the ancient times, decisions were made by people in the lower positions and reached those in the upper positions. Thus, having the voices of the lower reach the upper was allowed in this tradition. Today, decisions are made by those in the upper positions and reached people in the lower positions, so that having the voices of the lower reach the upper is considered as treachery. Therefore, Wang Mang, Cao Cao, Sima Yi, Liu Yu, and Xiao Yan are the traitors; however, King Wu, King Tang, and Yellow Emperor are the brilliant kings and the sage emperor. People frequently want to degrade King Tang and King Wu and thus see them as inferior to Yao and Shun. How can these people be said to understand the changes in the past and the present?” See Tasan’s “T’angnon” (Exposition of King Tang), *Yöyudang chönsö* 1 in vol. 281 of *Han’guk munjip ch’onggan*, 243d.

merits of King Wen and King Wu were so enormous that in the matter of abiding by the moral duty, they compensated for their minor blemishes.

This gravitation toward social merits eventually results in Tasan's refutation of Mencius' classification of the sages, in particular the classification of Confucius and Yi Yin. While commenting on the initial discussion of the matter of "advancing to government offices" and "staying in satisfaction" in the *Mencius*, Tasan advocated Yi Yin:

To say that these three people [Boyi, Liuxia Hui, and Yi Yin] played only one sound while Confucius integrally played the eight sounds (see *Lunyu jizhu*), or to say that the three people had power but lacked proper skills while Confucius was skillful and moderate (see *Zhuzi daquan* 朱子大全), does not reflect the original meaning at all. When it comes to Boyi and Liuxia Hui, it is occasionally possible to say that they played only one sound. As to such a person as Yi Yin, however, how can one say that he did not integrate the eight sounds? The sentences [in the *Mencius*] from "Confucius gathered together all that was good" are not necessarily recorded for comparing Confucius with these three people. What we have to compare is only to see whether one's achievement is great or little.²⁸

This approach is comparable to the Neo-Confucian perception because their tradition does not praise Yi Yin in the same way it praises Yan Yuan, not to mention Confucius. Although Zhou Dunyi aspired to "intend what Yi Yin intended, and learn what Yan Yuan learnt," his utmost aspiration lay in understanding "the dimension where Confucius and Yan Yuan became delightful" (*Kong Yan lechu* 孔顏樂處).²⁹ Yi Hwang and Cho Sik, two representatives of Korean Neo-Confucianism, wanted to remove from their funeral banner all official titles given to them and be remembered as "a recluse who belatedly retired to Tosan 陶山" (*T'oedo manūn* 退陶晚隱: Yi Hwang)³⁰ and "a scholar who stayed in satisfaction" (*Ch'ōsa* 處士: Cho Sik). This is because they were attracted more to Yan Yuan's spirit than to Yi Yin's merits. When a disciple asked Cheng Yi why Yi Yin was not recognized as "the sage of the mean" like Confucius even though there was affinity between them, he replied, "Eventually Yi Yin had a self-assertive attitude."³¹ This is a degradation of Yi Yin. In contrast, Tasan said, "The only thing we have to compare is whether one's achievement is great or little," expressing a utilitarian point of

28. *Ibid.*, 133b.

29. Zhou Dunyi, *Zhou Yuangong ji*, 431a.

30. "T'oedo" is Yi Hwang's pen name, which means "a person who retired to Tosan."

31. See Cheng Yi's comment on 5B: 1 of *Mengzi jizhu*.

view. Although it is incorrect to label the entire structure of Tasan's thought utilitarian due to the undercurrent of deep concern about morality in his writings, it would be safe to say that in case of a conflict between the two positions, he was inclined toward accomplishing actual and social merits by "advancing" rather than "staying."³²

Tasan's Definition of Scholars: People Seeking Government Posts

Tasan is consistent in reevaluating those who were castigated by Neo-Confucians due to their violation of the moral principle. Kuaikui 蒯聩 killed his own son Zhe 辄, then the lord of the state of Wei, because Zhe had rejected his entry to the state from exile. Zhe justified his decision because it was his grandfather who had banished his father. When explaining the father's inhumanity toward his own son, Tasan attempted to dissipate Kuaikui's guilt: "Such things as this are uncountable. Why should only Kuaikui from the state of Wei, due to his scheme of assassinating his stepmother that was not put into action, be singled out as guilty and be considered to deserve his son's rebuffing and his subjects' besieging?"³³ Zichan 子產, the distinguished minister from the state of Zheng 鄭, was also not palatable to the taste of Neo-Confucians because he was a utilitarian. Even though Confucius affirmed that "he has the way of the noble person (*junzi* 君子) in four respects,"³⁴ the Neo-Confucian commentator Wu Yu 吳棫 (fl. 1118-1130) twisted Confucius' saying to undermine his reputation: "Praising a person on a certain number of points implies that he is deficient in other areas."³⁵ Tasan responded to Wu Yu's cynicism as follows: "Zichan from the state of Zheng cultivated himself and accomplished things so that the points [praised by Confucius] are as many as four. He is a person of consummate virtue. Aren't Wu's likes and dislikes in his theory a reversal of the constant principle?"³⁶

32. To display the balance between self-cultivation and political contributions that he strived after, Tasan said, "The Six Classics and the Four Books are for self-cultivation and the one Exposition and the two Books (*Mongmin simsŏ*, *Kyŏngse yup'yo*, and *Hŭnhiŭm simsŏ*) are for governing all under heaven and the state. Through these, both foundation and application are prepared." Chŏng Yagyong, *Yŏyudang chŏnsŏ* 1, in vol. 281 of *Hanguk munjip ch'onggan*, 347c. However, I believe that my claim is still valid, because one's axiological orientation becomes clearer by seeing which value is prioritized when values are in conflict.

33. Chŏng Yagyong, *Nonŏ kogŭmchu*, 281c.

34. Kong Qiu; Zhu Xi, *Lunyu jizhu*, 5: 15.

35. See Wu Yue's comment on 5: 15 of *Lunyu jizhu*.

Tasan's definition of scholars is fundamental in his preference for "advancing" and his counter-criticism of Neo-Confucian moral fundamentalism:

In my view, there are four categories of people: scholars, peasants, artisans, and merchants. The meaning of the character *shi* 士 (scholar) is to take government offices; the meaning of "to learn" [in the passage of the *Analects*] is to learn how to serve in those offices.³⁷

[...]

Xing Bing said, "'Scholar' is the name given to a person of virtue." I refute it. The four people refer to scholars, peasants, artisans, and merchants. The meaning of "scholars" is to take government offices, and those who take government offices are those who govern people. Therefore, those who learn how to govern people are also called scholars.³⁸

[...]

Learning the Way is for taking government posts in the future.³⁹

[...]

Those who have devotion to the Way are to take government offices in the future. Therefore, although they have no government office at the moment, they can be called scholars.⁴⁰

In his view, therefore, Yan Yuan's satisfaction with "a bamboo bowl of rice and a gourd of water" is by no means admirable. To Tasan, learning the Way remained instrumental: he saw no value in the Way if it was only preserved in a small hermitage. Charmed by the substantiality of social merits, Tasan again refuted the Neo-Confucian interpretation of Confucius' praise of Qidiao Kai 漆雕開, who declined his master's suggestion to take a government office. The passage in the *Analects* related to this story reads, "The Master was to have Qidiao Kai take a government post. Kai replied, 'I am not able to be confident about this.' The Master was delighted."⁴¹ The debatable part in this passage, of course, is what "this" in Qidiao's reply refers to. Cheng Yi explained, "The ancient people comprehended the Way with such lucidity that he could formulate it this way."⁴² Adopting Cheng Yi's interpretation, Zhu Xi asserted that "'This' refers to the moral principle."⁴³ They uniformly linked Qidiao's

36. Chǒng Yagyong, *Nonǒ kogŭmchu*, 197c.

37. *Ibid.*, 367d.

38. *Ibid.*, 287c.

39. *Ibid.*, 289d.

40. *Ibid.*, 190a.

41. Kong Qiu; Zhu Xi, *Lunyu jizhu*, 5: 5.

42. See Cheng Yi's comment on 5: 5 of *Lunyu jizhu*.

43. See Zhu Xi's comment on 5: 5 of *Lunyu jizhu*.

reluctance to “advance” with their assumption that the Way or the moral principle necessitated a lifetime of investigation. Following the two masters, Xie Liangzuo 謝良佐 (fl. 1078-94) more aggressively differentiated Qidiao’s choice from mediocre scholars’ wish for “advancing:” “Though able to take the government post with his talent, personally he was not satisfied with a minor accomplishment. What he will achieve in the future is beyond our imagination.”⁴⁴ These Neo-Confucian interpretations absolutize the Way or the moral principle at the expense of a hermeneutic recension. The major commentaries before Neo-Confucianism had traditionally said “this” meant taking government offices. Tasan saw the Neo-Confucian interpretations as far-fetched: “‘This’ means taking a government post. Kai suspected that his capability and knowledge were not enough to take the post.”⁴⁵ According to Tasan, Confucius’ delight upon hearing Qidiao’s unwillingness was simply due to the display of humility.

Thus, in another discussion, Tasan did not agree that Zeng Xi 曾皙 outshone Confucius’ other disciples in showing spiritual joy when he replied to the Master’s question about his lifelong hope. In a dialogue between Confucius and his four disciples, Zeng Xi professed that he had a small dream: “At the end of spring, after the spring clothes have been prepared, I wish, in the company of five or six young men and six or seven children, to bathe in the Yi 沂 river, to enjoy the breeze under a tree at Wuyu 舞雩, and then to return home singing.”⁴⁶ Contrary to this reclusive dream, the other disciples proposed political visions. Stressing the transcendental simplicity implied in his remark, the Song Neo-Confucians highly valued Zeng Xi’s spirit. Tasan did not accept this evaluation:

The Song Confucians finally said that he united with heaven and earth, that he showed the spirit of Yao and Shun, and that he totally purified his human desires. Now, uniting with heaven and earth or showing the spirit of Yao and Shun can only be seen in the Master’s hope of comforting the old people and embracing the young people. When it comes to enjoying a picnic in late spring, it is no more than appreciating wind, flirting with the moon, and being satisfied with what he was satisfied with.⁴⁷

In the passage of the *Analects* discussed above, Confucius approved of only

44. See Xie Liangzuo’s comment on 5: 5 of *Lunyu jizhu*.

45. Chǒng Yagyong, *Nonǒ kogŭmchu*, 194d.

46. Kong Qiu; Zhu Xi, *Lunyu jizhu*, 11: 25.

47. Chǒng Yagyong, *Nonǒ kogŭmchu*, 266d. Liu Huayan 劉華崑 initially mentioned this view.

Zeng Xi's hope, showing some reservations about the other disciples' ambitions. Zhu Xi interpreted this approval as indicative of Zeng Xi's spiritual superiority over the others. Tasan again disagreed with Zhu Xi: "The Way of those people, who preserve unrecognized virtue in a reclusive place while turning their back from the world and severing themselves from everything, is narrow and rigid. So, the noble person dislikes it."⁴⁸ Correspondingly, Tasan defended the other three disciples, saying, "Considering that Confucius initially asked about the affairs of governing states, the three disciples did not give any wrong responses to Confucius' question."⁴⁹

A more notable feature of Tasan's thought, which confirms his sympathy for Yi Yin and "advancing," is found in his espousal of the "study for others." After Xunzi's initial argument, the "study for others" has been considered in the Confucian tradition as inferior to the "study for self," and sometimes even as immoral. However, Tasan interpreted these in a different manner.

"For self" means being beneficial to me, while "for others" means being beneficial to people. Aiming at being recognized by people [Neo-Confucian criticism of the study of others] is beneficial neither to me nor to people. How can it be called "for others?" The Way of noble persons teaches people to have no resentment even when going unrecognized by others and to have no anguish even when not being rightly evaluated by others: there are indeed such teachings as these in the *Analects*. However, the noble person also dislikes it when his name is not mentioned among people towards the end of his life. Thus, how can honorable reputation and epithets be something that the noble person dislikes? [C]onfucius certainly wanted to be recognized by people.⁵⁰

In Tasan's view, although it is immoral to be motivated by fame and honor, they should not be shunned when they derive from one's social merits. Neo-Confucianism's exclusive interest in inner virtue of sagehood has shifted in Tasan's thought to concerns about real merits for others. This perspective is conclusively summarized in a saying by Tasan: "Although the Way of the noble person can either extend or retract depending on times, there is no rightness without taking government offices and no humaneness without connecting to real affairs."⁵¹

48. *Ibid.*, 306a.

49. *Ibid.*, 265c.

50. *Ibid.*, 304b.

51. *Ibid.*, 306a.

Conclusion: Awareness of the Responsibilities of the Time

It was in 1936, the year of the one hundredth anniversary of Tasan's death, that a new recognition and conceptualization of the intellectual movement of the late Chosŏn emerged and was initially named *Sirhak*, or Practical Learning. Since then, disputes have continued over its precise definition, nature, and contribution to the development of Korean philosophy. Underlining Tasan's evident preference for "advancing" over "staying" in satisfaction, a complementary definition of the Practical Learning movement can now be introduced, that is, an intellectual movement of Confucian scholars in the mold of Yi Yin who were more concerned about political agendas and social merits than self-cultivation of moral virtue, as the majority of neo-Confucian scholars had been. Since the trends of prioritizing "advancing to government offices" over "staying in satisfaction" alternated throughout the history of Chosŏn Confucianism, this may further imply that the Practical Learning school was an inheritor to the Confucian tradition and represents an intellectual movement of continuity.

Like many Confucians before him who were in favor of "advancing," Tasan was also motivated to choose "advancing" based on his diagnosis of his times as the historical juncture in which political and social projects were needed. In fact, orthodox Neo-Confucian scholars of the Chosŏn period were like Tasan in that they acted upon what they saw as urgent tasks in their time. In other words, Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism and Practical Learning are equally expressive of the Confucian spirit, which aims to achieve the practically contradictory goals of inner virtue and outer merits, regardless of the differences in their priorities. Thus, the value of Tasan's thought lies in his timely awareness of the historical tasks necessary for the development of the Chosŏn dynasty, not in its theoretical uniqueness. Tasan knew that the success or failure of the dynasty hinged on the right perception of the responsibilities of the time.

Since it is a time of decline and disorder, we cannot fastidiously criticize immoral deeds such as lords not acting like lords, subjects not acting like subjects, parents not acting like parents, and children not acting like children, in the same way as we might do in an age of purity and peace. Therefore, when the noble person chooses to act, he naturally considers the responsibilities of the time. These days, people always say that the sages were inclined to neither yes nor no, and thus they want to blindly practice the Way regardless of the circumstances. How can this be deemed as the words from those who understand the time?⁵²

I believe that this remark succinctly presents the gist of Tasan's thought. As he said, in a time when "the Confucian scholars replied to the kings, who talked to us with a sense of urgency, only with the great principles and the great laws,"⁵³ he attempted to respond to the responsibilities of his time. Considering that Confucius was honored as the sage of timeliness by Mencius, Tasan was truly a Confucian who emulated Confucius' way of sagehood.

52. *Ibid.*, 347a-b.

53. *Ibid.*, 272b.