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

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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’) \(^1\) 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.

In the Confucian tradition, the notion of sŏng 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\(^2\) proposed sŏng to be the basis of any human act, some Chosŏn scholars of

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\(^1\) ‘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.

\(^2\) ‘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.
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 Chǒng 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’oe 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: 170–1).

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 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 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, 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

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3 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.