

## Tasan and his Sons: The Philosopher as Family Man

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Tasan Chŏng Yagyong is one of the most studied and written about Confucian philosophers in all Korean history. In addition to dozens of books with his name in their titles, there are literally hundreds of academic articles discussing his contributions to Korean intellectual history. He even has a journal dedicated to research on this thought, the Tasan Hakpo. And he has served as the main figure in at least two best-selling novels, Mannam by Han Moo-sook and Sosŏl Mongmin simsŏ by Hwang In'gyŏng.

Not surprisingly, this abundance of scholarship does not all hew to one interpretive line. On the contrary, there are almost as many arguments about what Tasan really believed as there are scholarly articles dissecting his life and thought. For example, there are those who see him as a proto-Marxist for his early advocacy of communal land ownership while others portray him instead of advocating a return to pre-Sung dynasty Confucianism. Trying to place him within the 4/7 debate, some see him as a follower of Yulgok Yi I, while others insist that Tasan is a dedicated disciple of T'oegye Yi Hwang.

Perhaps the most hotly debated question is that of his religious faith---or lack thereof. Catholic scholars tend to claim Tasan as one of their own, pointing to Tasan's own admitted youthful involvement in the founding of a Catholic Church in Korea and to the martyrdom of his older brother Yakchong. Non-Catholic scholars tend to scoff at that claim, insisting that Tasan quickly abandoned Catholicism once it was clear how dangerous a profession of Catholic faith was and returned permanently to his original more secular Confucian orientation. To support their respective positions in this academic debate, both sides have relied on Tasan's philosophical writings, primarily his commentaries on the Confucian Classics, as well as his self-authored obituary and the obituaries he wrote for many of his friends,

some of whom were also implicated in first appearance of Catholicism on Korean soil. Few have looked at Tasan's letters to his two sons to see what those letters reveal about Tasan's true beliefs. In hope that I can shed new light on this still contested facet of Tasan's thought, I have been examining those letters, along with some other material such as two studies of the Book of Odes, one by Tasan's youngest son and another by a grandson, which I found in the UC Berkeley library, to see if Tasan tried to pass on any Catholic ideas and values to his direct descendants.

Tasan was married at the age of 14, to a 15-year-old girl from the P'ungsan Hong clan.<sup>1</sup> His wife gave birth to nine children (6 boys and 3 girls), but only three survived beyond the age of five. In other words, two out of three of Tasan's children died in their infancy.<sup>2</sup> Though such a high mortality rate was not unusual for a pre-industrial society such as Chosŏn dynasty Korea, it was painful nonetheless. After he recounted this tragic history in his self-authored obituary, Tasan asked rhetorically, "What have I done to offend heaven so that I would lose two out of every three of my children?"<sup>3</sup>

In that autobiography, Tasan noted that his friend Yi Kiyang had suggested that he write down the date of birth, name, and date of death of all his children who had died young so that they would not be forgotten. Tasan then proceeded to list all the children he had lost.<sup>4</sup>

According to that list, four years after their marriage Tasan's wife became pregnant for the first time but suffered a miscarriage. The next year, 1781, his wife became pregnant again and was able to carry the child to term but, according to

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<sup>1</sup> Ko Sŭngje, Tasanŭl ch'ajasŏ [Searching for Tasan] (Seoul: Chungang Ilbosa, 1995), p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Chŏng Tasan chŏnsŏ, I, 16, 18b.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, I, 17, 5a.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

Tasan, because his wife suffered an attack of malaria while she was pregnant, the daughter she gave birth to only lived for four days. In 1783, however, Hakyŏn, Tasan's first son, was born and lived to the age of 76, dying in 1859. In 1786, a second son, Hakyu was born and he too was healthy enough to enjoy a longer than normal life span, dying at the age of 69 in 1855.

Then two more children died young, a son named Kujang, born in 1789, and a daughter named Hyosun, born in 1792. Of Kujang, Tasan tells us that Kujang was born on Dec. 25, 1789, and died at the age of one and a half in April of 1791 after developing an infection on his skin. Years later Tasan recalled that Kujang used to cry when he was left alone as though he were afraid, so his brothers gave him his childhood name of "scaredy-cat" (Kujang).<sup>5</sup> Tasan blamed himself for his young son's death, saying that the son suffered for the father's sin lack of virtue. Tasan confessed that instead of spending more time with his son, he had erred by fooling around with kisaeng and getting drunk.<sup>6</sup>

Hyosun lived a little longer than Kujang lasting for a full 24 months. Tasan recalled she had a beautiful head of hair, as soft, he notes, "as the hair on a crab's claws." She was named Hyosun because her mother thought she would be an exceptionally filial daughter.<sup>7</sup>

Next, however, his wife gave birth to a daughter who was as hardy as Hakyŏn and Hakyu, though by the age of ten, Tasan notes, she had already suffered from a attack of a rash disease (measles, smallpox, scarlet fever, etc) which almost killed her twice. The children who followed her were not as hardy.

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<sup>5</sup> Chŏng Tasan chŏnsŏ, I, 17, 3b-4a. "Yu-ja Kujang gwangmyŏng"

<sup>6</sup> Ko Sŭngje, pp 29-30.

<sup>7</sup> Chŏng Tasan chŏnsŏ, I, 17, 4a. "Yunyŏ Gwangji "

Samdong was conceived after Tasan returned from his first banishment, in 1785, and was born in 1796. However, he was not a normal child. He had a deformity, an exposed bone which ran from the top of his head to his forehead, like a horn. In 1798 he came down with smallpox and died shortly thereafter.<sup>8</sup>

When Samdong died, his mother was pregnant with yet another boy, but, according to Tasan, her sadness over the death of Samdong resulted in that child being so weak at birth that he too died of smallpox, after living for only ten days. Finally, a son named Nong-a was born, in December, 1799, but he too died within a couple of years of smallpox. That was perhaps the hardest death for Tasan, because, exiled from his family for his involvement with Catholicism, he could not be even attend his own son's funeral.. In the obituary Tasan wrote for Nong-a, he noted that he had to ask his eldest son to stand in for him as the principal male mourner. After learning of the death of this, the youngest and last of his children, Tasan wrote, " Alas, you were only with me for two years. Human beings are supposed to live for 60 years, and they are supposed to spend 40 of those years with their parents." Tasan noted that he called that young boy "Nong-a" [farm child], because Nong-a was born after Tasan had been forced to retire from public life, and he assumed his children would have to spend their lives working the land. Tasan went on to write that, according to letters he had received in exile from his exile, when little Nong-a took sick he was wont to say "Even if my father were here, I would still be sick, wouldn't I?" Tasan commented that that it was sad to recall that Nong-a was right, that even as he lay dying, his father could not do anything for you. Tasan finished his obituary for Nong-a by recalling that, as he was leaving home and going into exile in 1801, Nong-a's mother brought him out to a little shop along the side of the road to say good-bye to his father. Tasan writes, " Your mom pointed

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<sup>8</sup> Chǒng Tasan chǒnsǒ, I, 17, 4a-b, "Yuja samdong yemyǒng"

at me and said "that's your father." Imitating her, you also pointed your finger in my direction and repeated, "that's my father." I still feel sad when I remember that you had to have your father pointed out to you."<sup>9</sup>

At the end of his autobiography, Tasan lamented the fact that he lost so many of his children because he had not been as good a person as he should have been. He noted that his obituary should read "I claimed to know the Four Books and the Six Classics, but when I think of how far I have been from living in accordance with them, I am ashamed."<sup>10</sup>

Tasan had more than just sons and daughters to mourn. He had become quite close to one of his nephews, Hakch'o, the son of Tasan's older brother Yakchŏn. In his obituary for Hakch'o, who died at the early age of seventeen, Tasan noted that Hakch'o had been really important to his father because, after several sons died in infancy, Hakch'o came along and brought joy into his life. Moreover, Hakch'o was an exceptionally intelligent child. He was already reading books at the age of 6 or 7. When he was in his teens, Tasan writes, little Hakch'o immersed himself in reading the Analects and the Mencius and was able to answer any question about those books.

On learning of Hakch'o's death through a letter from home, Tسان recalled that, in 1801, when both Yakchŏn and Tسان were sent off into exile, Hakch'o went as far as a shop called Yuch'ŏn south of Suwŏn to say good-bye to them. He was 11 years old at the time. He was crying as he said good-bye and he gave his father a stone (a "Snake-eye pearl) he had picked up which was supposed to be able to ward off snakes, saying "father, take this since there are a lot of snakes on Hŭksan-do." Afterwards, whenever Tسان received letters from his sons, they always contained a mention of Hakch'o and reported that Hakch'o he was still

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* I, 17, 4b-5a, "Nonga gwangji "

<sup>10</sup> Chŏng Tسان chŏnsŏ, I, 16, 18b.

studying well. Later, after Hakch'o reached adulthood (gotten married), Tasan asked his sons to bring Hakch'o with them down to Kangjin to visit and, Tasan promised, he would find a way for Hakch'o to sail to Hŭksan-do. Unfortunately, before Hakch'o could make that trip, he died. Tasan mourned Hakcho's death as though he were his own son, writing "While I was in exile, I wrote those 240 volumes on the Four Books and the Six Classics intended to give them to Hakch'o. Now all that work is wasted."<sup>11</sup>

Tasan was an unusual Korean Confucian parent. I know of no other Korean Neo-Confucian whose tombstone inscriptions for children and nephews, especially of those who died young, are included in their complete works. Tasan appears to have taken fatherhood more seriously than did many of his fellow Confucians. I am sure they all loved their children. But only Tasan considered them important enough to include their tombstone inscriptions alongside his poetry, his commentaries on the Classics, and his guides to correct ritual behavior. Another way that Tasan stood apart from his fellow Confucians was his relatively high regard for women and motherhood. At least, that is the impression a reader can gain from a letter Tasan wrote to brother Yakchŏn. In that letter, Tasan wrote

One day, I was chatting with an old lady who ran a roadside restaurant when she asked me, "You have read a lot of books, so maybe you can explain something to me. Though both the mother and the father contribute to the creation of a family, the mother has to work much harder than the father. Why is that so? Why did the sages of old teach that the father was to be given more respect than the mother? Why do children take their father's family name rather than their mother's? Why do the fathers get to wear nicer clothes than the

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<sup>11</sup> Chŏng Tasan chŏnsŏ, I, 16, 35b-36b. "Hyŏngja Hakch'o myojimyŏng"

mothers? Why are the father's relatives considered part of family but the mother's relatives are all considered outsiders? This is all quite unfair!"

I replied, "It is my father who is responsible for my birth. That is why the Classics give priority to fathers. The mother does contribute as well, but the contribution of my father, as the one who initiated the whole process that led to my birth, is more important."

The old lady responded, "You've got it all wrong. Here is the way I see it. Let's look at how plants or trees come into existence. The father is like a seed. The mother is like the fertile ground on which the seed falls. That seed is really small when it hits the ground, but, as it absorbs water and other nutrients from the ground, it grows into a full-size plant or tree. That is how a chestnut becomes a chestnut tree and how a grain of rice becomes a rice plant. By absorbing energy from the ground, these small seeds are able to grow into large trees or plants. The sages must have been aware of this simple biological fact when they were drawing up the rules of ritual and etiquette long ago."

At first, I was taken aback by what she said and then I realized that there was something to her point of view. Who could have expected an old shop-keeper like this old lady to understand the finer points of philosophy? It was really strange! <sup>12</sup>

There are other brief notes in Tasan's complete works which provide additional evidence that he may have had more respect for women than Confucian

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<sup>12</sup> Chǒng Tāsān chǒnsǒ, I, 20: 19a-b

scholars of his day usually showed. For example, he wrote a tombstone inscription for a certain Ch'oe-ssi, the "chaste widow" of one of his cousins who had died from a sudden illness in 1801. After her husband died, Ch'oe-ssi hung herself to show her fidelity to him. Her husband's family then asked Tasan to write a eulogy praising her for her faithfulness unto death, but Tasan refused, saying that he did not approve of widows killing themselves.<sup>13</sup> Apparently, Tasan believed that a woman did not exist only in the shadow of her husband but had a right to live in her own right.

Tasan wrote obituaries and tombstone inscriptions for several other women who were important in his life: his mother-in-law; his step-mother; his paternal aunt; his sister-in-law, the wife of his brother Yakhyŏn (Yi-ssi); and his daughter-in-law, the wife of his son Hak-yu. It is unusual to find so much about women relatives in the collected works of a Chosŏn dynasty Confucian scholar.

It is also unusual for a man of his generation and social status to have one wife, and one wife only. However, if Tasan had any concubines, he never mentions them. It is unlikely he would have refrained from mentioning a concubine out of shame, for he proudly writes at one point that when his brother Yakch'ŏn's only legitimate son died, he and Yakch'ŏn decided that Yakch'ŏn's grandson by the son of his concubine would be his lawful heir.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, if he had had any children by a concubine, he surely would have mentioned them, but he mentions no such children. So we can safely assume that Tasan never took a concubine.

What makes Tasan even more unusual is that his wife was as long-lived as he was, and on the day that he died they were celebrating, in 1836, they were celebrating sixty years of married life together. We don't know much about his relationship with his wife. Since she was still alive when he died, he didn't write a

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<sup>13</sup> Ko Sŭngje, p. 63-64, .Chŏng Tasan chŏnsŏ., 17:1b-2a.

<sup>14</sup> Chŏng Tasan chŏnsŏ, I, 16,36a-b.

tombstone inscription biography for her like he wrote for so many other people who meant a lot to him. Nor do we have any of his letters to her. All of the letters which have come down to us in his complete works are in Chinese, and we can assume that he wrote his wife in han'gŭl and thus those letters weren't deemed worthy of inclusion in his complete works. So we don't know if Tasan found his wife as admirable as he found many of the other women he wrote about, such as his daughter-in-law and his step-mother. However, it is probably a safe assumption that, since they lasted over half a century together, he probably respected her, and it may be his respect for her which taught him apparently to respect women more than many of his contemporaries did.

We know a lot more about his relationship with his sons than we do about his relationship with his wife. We have copies of 21 letters from Tasan to his sons. We also have copies of 18 additional messages to his sons, which are listed under the category of "family injunctions [Kagye]". By examining Tasan's relationship with his sons we can gather evidence which can help us determine if his personal life, his family life, indicates in any way that he continued to believe in Catholicism after his admitted youthful flirtation with that forbidden religion.

We know from the lives of the first generations of Korean Catholics that religious belief was often a family matter. If a mother or father were Catholic, it is likely that their children and grandchildren would also be Catholic. That was true in the case of Tasan's brother Yakchong. Not only was he executed in 1801, along with his eldest son, for professing belief in Catholicism, his wife and youngest son joined him in martyrdom almost four decades later, in 1839. Yet none of Tasan's children suffered such a fate. Hak-yŏn lived until 1859 and worked for the government for a while in the lower-level civil service position of construction supervisor (rank of jr. 9). Hak-yu lived until 1855 and shows no evidence of

Catholicism in his well-known poem Nongga wŏllyŏng-ga, translated by Peter Lee as "The Farmer's Works and Days".<sup>15</sup>

Not only do their long and uneventful lives fail to show any involvement with the underground Catholic Church, none of the letters their father wrote them give any hints of belief in Catholic ideas or values. We have no letters from them to their father, nor do we have all the letters he wrote them (assuming that he wrote them more than 40 times during the 18 years he was in exile). However, from the letters we do have, we can make the reasonable assumption that, if Tasan was a Catholic, he did not let his own sons know so.

There are some traces of Tasan's early encounters with Catholic writings in those letters. For example, in one letter, Tasan tells his sons how the world began. He relates the creation story found in the Book of Changes in which the Great Ultimate, which he defines as the embryonic stage of the universe, gives birth to the Two Forms, which he identifies as heaven and earth. There is no God in this tale. But Tasan does go on to say that the four fundamental components of the cosmos resulting from this creation of the cosmos are heaven, earth, fire and water. This sounds suspiciously like the Catholic four elements of air, earth, fire and water. Moreover, he says that these four are the independent substances from which all other substances are formed. With that line, he sounds a lot like Matteo Ricci when Ricci introduced Scholastic cosmology to Chinese readers, except that Tasan omits the Divine Creator so important to Ricci and other Catholic missionaries.<sup>16</sup>

Later on in the same letter to his sons, Tasan borrows another idea from Ricci's catechism of Catholic doctrine, the Ch'ŏnju silŭi. He tells his son that, contrary to the traditional Neo-Confucian explanation, virtue is not innate. Rather,

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<sup>15</sup> Ko, p. 61. Peter Lee, *Anthology of Korean Literature: From Early Times to the Nineteenth Century* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1981), pp.202-211.

<sup>16</sup> Chŏnsŏ, I, 21, 19a-b.

the Four Virtues (Benevolence, Righteousness, politeness, and wisdom) must be earned. We are not born virtuous, but merely with the potential to be virtuous. That potential Tasan labels the Four Fonts, which are the virtuous instincts that can lead us to true virtue if we act in accordance with them.<sup>17</sup>

On a more practical subject, in a letter to Hak-yu providing "family regulations," Tasan hints at the trouble he ran into because of his early involvement with Catholicism, and seems to be warning Hak-yu against making the same mistake. Tasan writes "if you don't want people to find out that you have done something wrong, then don't do anything wrong. If you don't want people to hear you say something they shouldn't hear, then don't say anything you don't want overheard by others. Basically, all the troubles we human beings encounter, whether natural disasters or a fall in family fortunes, all come from such secrets being exposed." Tasan goes on to warn his youngest son, "we should always ask ourselves, when we write a letter, what would happen if an enemy of mine saw this letter, or what will generations hence think of what I wrote here. When I was young, I just wrote quickly without worrying about such things, but then I got into trouble. Now I am always careful about what I write."<sup>18</sup>

Though Tasan, as least as far as we can tell from these letters, was not a Catholic, he may have been a Confucian theist. Both in these letters, and in his commentaries on the Confucian Classic, he does indicate that he believes that there is a heavenly personality who provides a personal foundation for morality. However, the language he uses is Confucian, not Catholic, so it is not clear how far he has strayed from mainstream Confucianism. For example, in 1816, with no end to his exile in sight, he wrote that whether he would be allowed to return home before

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 19b.

<sup>18</sup> Pak Sŏngmu, Yubeiji-esŏ ponein pyŏnji [Letters from an Banished Man] (Seoul: Siinsa, 1979), pp. 228-27.

he died or not was all up to the Will of Heaven (ch'ŏnmyŏng). However, he said, "people can't just sit around and let Heaven decide everything for them without cultivating a moral character. That would be contrary to *li*." <sup>19</sup> Tasan also warned his sons to beware of cheating or deceiving heaven. That is the greatest offense against morality, he told them, even worse than deceiving one's king or one's parents.<sup>20</sup>

This weak evidence for Catholic influence on Tasan is countered by stronger evidence that he wanted his sons to stay firmly within the boundaries of orthodox Confucianism. Soon after he arrived in exile, he wrote his two teenage sons to encourage them to keep studying the Confucian Classics, though, he notes, as the sons of a criminal they have no hope of ever holding a government appointment. Actually, he tells them, they have an advantage in that they can dedicate themselves to real scholarship since they don't have to let the exams determine what they study.<sup>21</sup>

What should they look for in those classics? Tasan tells his teenage boys that filial piety and fraternal affection are the foundation of scholarship.<sup>22</sup> He even encouraged them to write a "Classic of Fraternal Affection," to complement the already existing Classic of Filial Piety.<sup>23</sup>

What should they be reading in addition to the Classics? Did Tasan recommend any books by Matteo Ricci or any other Catholic missionaries? No, he didn't. Instead, he recommended that his sons read the Pan'gye surok of Yu Hyŏng-wŏn and the writings of Yi Ik.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ko, p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> Ko, p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> Pak, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> Pak, p. 285

<sup>23</sup> Pak, p. 262.

<sup>24</sup> Pak, p. 275

He also told his sons to post on the walls of their rooms the section from the Great Learning on making the mind sincere and the section from the Doctrine of the Mean on making oneself sincere.<sup>25</sup> Those are standard Neo-Confucian texts which any orthodox Neo-Confucian father would want his sons to read and reveal no signs that Tasan was trying to get his sons to follow the Catholic path to morality.

In fact, it is quite clear that Tasan is actually warning his sons against following their cousins into that dangerous heterodoxy. In one letter, he tells his sons to read and extract useful passages from Chu Hsi's writings. He wants them to copy those selections under 12 headings, one of which (the 12th) is to keep far away from heterodoxy.<sup>26</sup>

One touchstone of belief in Catholicism in the Korea of Tasan's day was what attitude a possible Catholic adopted toward Confucian ritual. The first Catholic martyrs, one of them a cousin of Tasan's, were killed because they obeyed the edict of the pope in Rome that they not perform the traditional ancestor memorial service. When the government wanted to find out if someone was a Catholic or not, they would raid their house looking for an ancestral tablet used in chesa. If they found such a tablet, that would be evidence that the occupant of that house was not a Catholic.

Did Tasan believe in chesa? Did he follow orthodox Confucian ritual procedures? It appears that he did. The earliest evidence that he was more Confucian than Catholic appears long before he began writing the letters to his son which provide most of the data for this paper. In 1792, one year after Tasan's cousin was executed for refusing to follow proper Confucian mourning procedures,

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<sup>25</sup> Pak. 280.

<sup>26</sup> Pak, p. 264

Tasan' father died. Tasan buried him without incident.<sup>27</sup> That can only mean that he followed the usual Confucian funeral procedures. If he had not, if he had not established an ancestral spirit tablet, he would have been reported to the authorities and suffered the same fate as his cousin Paul Yun Chich'ung.

Further evidence for his lack of commitment to Catholic rules and regulations can be found in one of the letters of family instructions he sent his sons while he was in exile. He wrote that after he died, no matter how good the food and drink his sons offered him during chesa, it wouldn't please him as much as knowing that they continued to read from his books and also copied down some of his writings.

He added that they should pay special attention to his Chuyŏk sajan (his notes on the Book of Changes) and his Sangnye sajan (his notes on mourning rituals). Even if the rest of his writings are lost, he noted, these two works must be preserved. He wrote that since going into exile in 1801 he had done nothing but study and write. Why had he strained himself so, making his shoulders sore and harming his eyes so that he had to use reading glasses, if his sons were going to ignore what he wrote? <sup>28</sup>

There are two points to note in this particular family injunction. First of all, Tasan assumes his sons will honor him after death with a proper chesa, something no Catholic father would want. Secondly, he emphasizes the importance of following proper Confucian mourning procedures, as spelled out in his notes to Confucian ritual texts, and that is again something no Catholic of his day would do.

In other letters as well, we find Tasan telling his sons that even in exile he never let a day go by without some time spend studying ritual.<sup>29</sup> He also sent them a copy of another book he wrote on ritual, the chanye kojŏng (An examination of

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<sup>27</sup> Ko, p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> Park, p. 243.

<sup>29</sup> Pak, p. 23

classical references to ancestor memorial services), and ordered his sons to be to sure to follow the directions for proper ritual he has included in that book.<sup>30</sup>

By the way, I have been to Tasan's tomb in Maje, east of Seoul. In front of his grave, there is a stone table, just the sort of altar used to hold the food and drink offered to an ancestral spirit during chesa. That, too, would indicate that traditional Confucian mourning ritual was part of the Chǒng Yakyong family tradition, and thus his was not a Catholic family.

We can find additional evidence to support this supposition in the Asami collection in the library of the University of California at Berkeley. That collection contains a manuscript by Chǒng Hak-yu called the Simyǒng tashik. It is a study of the Book of Odes, identifying contemporary names for the fauna and flora named in the Odes. There is absolutely no evidence of Catholic influence in that manuscript, just as there is no evidence of Catholic influence in Hak-yu's more famous work, his poem on a farmer's works and days. That manuscript does, however, show the same sort of meticulous attention to detail and to unraveling the literal meaning of the language of the Confucian Classics that characterizes so much of the writing of Tasan. Hak-yu shows that his father influenced his thinking, and that that influence channeled Hak-yu's studies in a Confucian rather than a Catholic direction.

The Asami collection also contains a manuscript by one of Tasan's grandsons, Yun Chǒng-gi. That manuscript, the Sigyong kangŭi sokchip (additions to the lectures on the Book of Odes), is further evidence of Tasan's influence on the thinking of his descendants, and that that influence was Confucian rather than Catholic.

Yun wrote this particular work late in his life, when he was fondly recalling the time he spent with his grandfather when he was a young child. In the preface to this

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<sup>30</sup> Pak, p. 253-52.

work, Yun writes that when he was a child, grandfather Tasan used to pick him up and bounce him on his knees. He added that Tasan guided his studies until Yun was 23 and Tasan died. Over thirty years later, Yun writes, he picked up a copy of Tasan's lectures on the Odes and was delighted and surprised by what he found there. He writes that he decided to write this addendum to Tasan's commentaries on the Odes to give future generations a glimpse of how Tasan thought. There is nothing startling in this manuscript. Instead, it provided a confirmation that Tasan believed in a personal deity and was probably influenced in doing so by his youthful immersion in Catholicism, but that in his mature years (Tasan wrote his commentary on the Odes at the age of 30) his God was a Confucian God, not a Christian God.

For example, Yun noted, following Tasan's lead, that people of old prayed to Heaven indirectly rather than directly. That is why, he wrote, that they prayed to other spirits, such as ancestral spirits, to have them carry messages to Heaven for them. (vol 9)

At another point, he makes this same point in even more explicit language. Yun writes that the people of old didn't pray to their ancestors or to the various spirits to bless them or to keep them from disaster themselves but to ask those spirits to intercede with God on their behalf. (vol. 14)

At first this may seem like a Catholic idea. Praying to ancestors to intercede with God seems similar to praying to saints to intercede with God. But the God in Yun's commentary on the Odes, just like the God in Tasan's commentaries on various classics, is not a creator of the universe. He is not a judge who can send us to heaven or hell after we die. He does, however, watch over the affairs of this world, just like the T'ien of later Confucian texts does. The main difference is that Tasan's heaven is a personal overseer of affairs on earth, while the usual Confucian God is an impersonal moral force that ensures that our thought and

actions are reflected in what happens in the world around us. The fact that Tasan's supreme overseer is a personal being rather than an impersonal principle may a sign of Catholic influence, but that alone does not make Tasan Catholic.

If Tasan were truly a Catholic, he would have refrained from Confucian mourning ritual and he would have ensured that his sons refrained as well. He would also not have emphasized Confucian ritual in his letters to his sons as much as he did. And his letters probably would have talked a lot more about Sangdi and Ch'ŏn than they do. Though the evidence from Tasan's correspondence with his sons is not definitive and conclusive, it provides no support for those who claim that Tasan remained Catholic, at least in his heart, until his death in 1836. When the documents are silent, so also must the historian. If the documents do not provide positive signs that Tasan was a Catholic, then we are not justified in claiming that he was. My conclusion, therefore, based not only on a reading of Tasan's letters to his sons but on much of his other writings as well, is that Tasan Chŏng Yagyong was a Confucian and a theist, but, after 1791, he was no longer a Catholic, and the Catholic Church in Korea has no grounds for claiming him as one of their own.