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**Chong, Tasan (1762-1836)**

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The works of Chong Yak-yong (pen name: Tasan), one of the greatest scholars that Korea has ever produced, today, 153 years after his death, continues to fascinate not only Koreans, but also people from all over the world. Who was Tasan? He was a great scholar who wrote more books than any other scholar since the invention of Chinese characters. There is even an exclusive field of studies called “Tasanology.” I, a mere novelist, cannot but feel stupefied at his wide, profound, systematic, creative, innovative thoughts, his unbelievably extensive knowledge, his vast writings which range through more than five hundred books, and his incredible achievements. Therefore, I would like to point out that what I am writing is only an infinitesimal part of his achievements.

Tasan, who was a great sage and a Shilhak (pragmatism) scholar in the latter half of the Yi Dynasty, wrote books on philosophy, politics, science, economics, medicine, etc, and none of these subjects was dealt with negligently. He even left superb literary works, more than 2,500 poems and innumerable pieces of prose. Since I am a literary person, I would like to discuss him from a literary point of view, but before that I think I should briefly write something about his life.

The Yi Dynasty adopted as the national guiding principal Confucianism, which replaced the corrupt Buddhism of the end of the Koryo Dynasty and emerged as a fresh ideology. The Confucianism that the Yi Dynasty adopted was metaphysics, as perfected by Chu-tzu of Southern Sung. Studies were done and new depth added by Korean scholars, and in the latter half of the 16th century a theoretical climax was reached.

Metaphysics, however, tended to be excessively speculative, and dealt only with government administration, and the government authorities used it as a tool for their own self-defence. As the situation got worse, they suppressed their political enemies in the name of Chu-tzu. By this time, metaphysics had lost its historical function and had become medieval authoritarianism. During this period, the doctrines and ideology of Chu-[page 80] tzu supplied theoretical ground for maintaining and fortifying the feudal system of production because of its strong conservative nature. The dogmatic and authoritarian government authorities at the time had already lost the ability to rule over the country effectively. Moreover, after the Japanese invasion of 1592 and the Chinese invasion of 1636, the country was devastated, and the government had to levy heavy taxes on the people to supplement the dried up national treasury. On top of that, the government officials gave the wretched people a hard time with all sorts of wicked practices in the process of collecting taxes. The political strife among the political leaders reached a climax, and its evil consequences were enormous.

Against this background, there was a group of scholars who sincerely attempted to overcome the crisis the country and the people were faced with; they were none other than the Shilhak scholars, the pragmatists. These scholars were mainly those estranged from government posts, and though their status was that of the yangban (aristocrats), they actively supported the interests of the commoners.

Shilhak is divided into three schools: the government administration section, the promotion of public welfare section and Shilsagusa hakp’a. The government administration section was mainly interested in reforming the system and solving the problems of farmers, whilst the promotion of the public welfare section concerned themselves with technical reform for city merchants and handicraftsmen, and the third section contributed to modernising science through a thorough study of the Chinese classics of the Ch’ing Dynasty. Tasan, with his excellent scholastic ability, embraced all three sections, and he, therefore, is called the greatest Shilhak scholar.

Tasan lived in an age when new ideas and studies were emerging, but at the same time those in political power used bigoted and empty ideas as their theoretical shield to protect their power. At that time all was anarchy and strife caused by their tyranny, fierce political infighting and corrupt administration.

Tasan was born on June 16th, 1762,at Mayon-ri, Chobu-myon, Kwangju-gun, Kyonggi-do, and died in the same house on February 22nd, 1836. When discussing his 76 years of life, we normally divide it into three phases. He passed his state exam at the age of 28, but he had already passed his elementary state exam at 22 and had been admitted to Song- gyun’gwan, now a university, so his first phase is generally considered to be between 22 and 40. Those eighteen years were truly a period of recognition and prosperity for him, when he was favoured and appreciated by the[page 81]  great King Chongjo, who was fond of learning.

With the demise of King Chongjo, however, he was driven out by his political opponents, but somehow managed to save his neck, and was banished to Changgi, Kyongsang-do and Kangjin, Cholla-do, for the next 18 years. It was not until he was 57 that he was pardoned and allowed to return to his hometown, Mahyon. He lived for another 18 years there before he died.

To understand why he lived such an ill-fated life, it is necessary to understand something about the state of affairs at that time. The Yi Dynasty has often been called a period of factional strife. People of high birth were divided into four factions and hated, intrigued, plotted against and were generally antagonistic to one another, and also shed much blood in the pursuit of political power. Tasan’s family belonged to the Nam-in Party, which means “people in the south” —so named because the head of the original party, Mr. Woo Song, lived in the south of Seoul. They had long before lost power and had been estranged from government office. Though out of government service, they were nevertheless yangban, and devoted themselves to studies. Fed up with outdated, bigoted, empty metaphysics, they groped for new learning through the books obtained from the envoys to China. That is why there were overwhelmingly more Shilhak scholars belonging to the Nam-in Party than any other faction. These scholars naturally came into contact with Western ideas and science, which had already arrived in China. Since they could read and write Chinese like natives, they learned Western ideas through the Chinese translations and were fascinated with their rationality. In time they had opportunities to read the Catholic doctrines and were greatly impressed by their profound truth, and came to embrace the faith passionately. Thus a spontaneous church was born for the first time in history. Many illustrious Nam-in scholars joined the church, and Tasan was one of the first to be baptized.

Throughout the 500 years of Yi Dynasty history, the most gruesome affair was the murder of the only son and crown prince, Seja, by his father King Yongjo, in the year of Tasan’s birth. After the incident, people of high birth were divided into two parties: those who supported the King’s conduct as justified and those who sympathized with the crown prince, and these two parties were at one another’s throats. The king’s advocates were called the Pydkp’a, and the Crown Prince’s, the Ship’a. Most of the Namins, including Tasan’s family, belonged to the Ship’a.

After the death of King Yongjo, who had his own son killed, his [page 82] grandson Chongjo acceded to the throne. He was a great king, who loved learning and made a great effort to do away with factional wrangling. He witnessed the tragic death of his beloved father at a tender age, and ex-perienced at first hand all the evils of factionalism. He adopted his grand-father’s Tangp ydng-chaek, the policy of impartiality, and appointed talented people from all factions, including the Namin. Most of all, he recognized and cherished Tasan’s genius, and Tasan’s future appeared to be full of promise and glory, but the ruling party at the time, the Noron, were jealous, and hated and plotted against him.

The Yi Dynasty had a unique system, whereby anybody at court could express his opinions freely through direct written petitions to the king. Therefore, the political climate was more or less a case of a weak king and a strong court. King Chongjo covered up for Tasan through wrath, apologies and various pretexts, but could not ignore the fast and furious petitions of his ministers. To protect his life, he had no choice but to demote him and condemn him to exile.

Tasan suffered enough during the lifetime of the king who was his greatest protector, so one can imagine how precarious his position became after the sudden death of the king, who according to some was poisoned. Immediately afterwards, the Noron Party set out to kill all their political enemies, so King Yongjo, his son Seja and his grandson King Chongjo were all victims of the factional wrangling.

Queen Chongsun, whom King Yongjo married in his old age, was about the same age as his grandson King Chongjo. She came from a family, which belonged to the Pyokp’a King Yongjo’s advocates, and spent melancholy days after the death of the old king. She came to power after the sudden death of King Chongjo, ostensibly to help the eleven- year-old king by Suryomchongjong. Suryonchongjong was the Yi Dynasty system of regency whereby the queen mother carried out state affairs sitting behind a reed screen when the king was too young to rule the country.

The Queen, who married the sixty-odd-year-old king when she was only 16,had a lot of han, a frequently used Korean word which has no equivalent in English but which means something like a deep-rooted sorrow, grudge or grievance. She was widowed at a very young age, and moreover with the accession of King Ch6ngjo, her brother, the head of the Pyokp’a, who were responsible for influencing King Yongjo to kill the Crown Prince Seja, was banished and died in exile. Her allies, all belong- ing to the Pyokp9a, were purged, and she was obliged to lead a powerless[page 83] and lonely life. Immediately after the king’s funeral, she set about taking her revenge. She decided to use Catholicism, which had been causing a public outcry, as the means of her revenge. She had been observing the fact that most of the leading personalities in the Catholic church were scholars from the Nam in families.

In any age or any area, when a new heterogeneous culture or ideas are introduced, there is bound to be some friction and resistance before they are accepted, but the great persecution of the Catholics in Korea was caused directly by political reasons. Blood was shed everywhere in the name of uprooting the so-called evil religion, and the Catholics suffered extremely cruel tortures and death. The Pyokp’a Party accused all Namins of being believers of the evil religion, including those who were not Catholics. Moreover, the Namins themselves were divided into two groups: the Shin- sop’a, which means the believers in Western ideas, who were Catholics, and the Kongsop’a, which means those who reject Western ideas. The latter ostrasized and plotted against the former almost as vehemently as the Pyokp’a Party members. As a result, the Shinsop’a Party were almost exterminated.

Tasan’s family, who belonged to the Shinsop’a, could not avoid the disaster. His third brother was executed and his second brother and Tasan himself were banished: the former to Shinjido in early 1801 and the latter to Kyongsangdo in April, 1801. In October, 1801, the two brothers were imprisoned again, because of the famous Hwang Sa-yong’s White Letter Incident. However, they were proved innocent, and his brother Yak-jon was again banished to Huksando, and Tasan to Kangjin in Chollado. Therefore, these two brothers clearly became apostates.

That was not the first time Tasan had apostatized. While King Chongjo was alive, he had written an article entitled Chamyong-sol. which means self-explanation, and submitted it to the king to avoid persecution. He was relegated to a local government post through the thoughtful consideration of King Chongjo, and while there, he even persecuted the local Catholics. He also strongly tried to persuade them to abandon their faith. Thanks to his shameful apostasy, he managed to save his life, but important government posts were now beyond his reach, and he lived the life of an exiled culprit for the next eighteen years. The days of his prosperity and recognition were now over, and he was faced with a life of hardship and despair. Was this phase in his life really, however, a period of waste and devastation? I don’t think so. I think this was a blessed time when Divine Providence bestowed upon him a true victory as a human[page 84]  being. In Chach’onmyomyong, his personal epitaph—a sort of autobio-graphy, he wrote, ‘‘I am happy and contented now that I’ve finally acquired leisure,” in November, 1801, shortly after he arrived at Kang- jin, Cholla-nam-do, his second place of exile. November in the lunar calendar is in the middle of winter, and almost at the end of year. However, he started writing straight away, and as early as 1802, he had already finished several articles on etiquette. He continued to write in earnest, as well as educate his two sons, who had been left behind in his hometown, through letters.

Shilhak, pragmatism, was a new school of thought created by a group of scholars who tried to reform society democratically with deep love for the suppressed people, and Tasan is generally accepted to be its most prominent scholar. Until he was exiled, however, he was a man of prosperity who enjoyed the king’s greatest favours, and could not possibly have witnessed the corrupt government administration, devastated land, and the mass of people who suffered abuse and hunger. He had previously been relegated to a local government post a few times, but even in those days, he had been in a position to rule over people. It was not until he was thrown among them as an exiled, political prisoner that he witnessed with his own eyes the sufferings of the people, and as he wrote, “the society which is corrupt through and through.”

Tasan was only about forty then, but he could not read without his glasses, and he had been stricken with paralysis and could not use one arm. Despite the physical suffering and a constant fear of death, he read and studied books, classical and modern. Fortunately for him, his mother’s family lived not far away, and one of his ancestors on his mother’s side was a great scholar called Yun, Kosan, and his vast collection of books was readily available. He perused every one of them with his insight, broad vision and excellent scholastic ability, and wrote many books on them with footnotes to teach students. He also reported the cruel sufferings of the people in detail and presented concrete ideas about social reform. These eighteen years indeed afforded him an opportunity for on-the-spot surveying and uninterrupted research, and was a great period of ceaseless effort and splendid achievements. He wrote no less than five hundred books in his lifetime, and many of them were written during this period. With this first hand experience, living among the common people, his reform ideas were reconfirmed and a clear direction was shown in Shilhak. His basic viewpoint is also reflected in his literary work.

His literary achievement was as great as any in other fields. He made[page 85]  it very clear that he did not think much of the miscellaneous narrative historical stories of the Ming and Ch’ing Dynasties in China. Therefore, none of his writings can be called novels, but there are five biographies, and innumerable prefaces, footnotes and other pieces in his collection of writings. Nobody seems to agree as to whether these writings can be con-sidered literary works or simply practical pieces.

He also wrote many epitaphs, including his own, which were certainly ordinary practical writings, in so far as they described particular people’s life stories and achievements. They can, however, be considered as a sort of biographical literature, because they clearly depicted the people and their achievements in a style which is compact, lucid, well-arranged and refined.

Among his prose works, the most representative are said to be Kyongseyup’yo and Mongminshimso. In the former he presents ideas for reforming the entire government administration structure beyond the legal boundaries, and in the latter he suggests correcting the mistakes of local government administration within the legal limit. To understand his reform spirit, therefore, both Kydngseyup’yo and Mongminshimso have to be studied and correctly comprehended. When discussing his works, in the preface, one pyo and two so’s are often mentioned. This one pyo refers to the Kyongseyup’yo, and the two so’s, Mongminshimso and Humhumshimso. These three works were the result of his continuous painful search for improving the miserable conditions of the people of that time.

This reform spirit is also clearly reflected in the more than 2,500 poems included in his anthology, Book 1 to Book 7, so his innumerable social poems are a clinical report of Yi Dynasty society which was “diseased to the tips of its hairs,” and “one pyo and two so’s, prescriptions for its cure.

In the old days in Korea, politicians were engaged not only in politics, but also wrote poetry and prose. Most illustrious families have family anthologies, handed down through the generations. Looking at the world of these people’s poetry, it is very introspective and individualistic. The greatest task of metaphysics is to rule the human mind individually, which meant to set it right. Literature also had its raison d’etre only when it was related to controlling the human mind. Therefore, their poetry depicted the pain and hardship in the process of reforming the mind and sang of the sense of achievement and joy when they finally attained that state. No interest in society and its management ever appeared in their poetry.

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Tasan, however, never separated the position of a politician and that of a poet. He wrote to his two sons who had been left behind in his hometown, “Poetry only exists when the poet worries about the world, feels sorry for the suffering multitude, relieves the poor and feels their pain. If he is only concerned with his own self-interest, his works cannot possibly be poetry. He has to love his king and worry about his country. He must feel the pain of the turbulent age and lament the corrupt customs. He must glorify the righteousness, satirize the absurdities, encourage the good and reprimand the evil.”

He always wrote poetry with this spirit. Therefore, most of his repre-sentative poems contain an intense social consciousness. His poems of this type present and indict the fundamental realities of his time. In a poem entitled, “Choksong Village,” he descibed the miserable state of the village and its inhabitants. He wrote it whilst passing through the village as a powerful secret royal inspector at 33,still at the height of his prosperity. He already possessed social consciousness then, though he was living the life of the privileged.

When discussing Tasan’s poems, they can be divided into four categories: the aforementioned social poems, nature poems, fables and lyrics. In his social poems on behalf of the suppressed underdogs, he sharply and accurately indicted the evil, corruption and wrongdoings of those in power and the irrationality of society, which he witnessed at first hand. His nature poems also clearly reflect his own view of the real world, unlike other Korean poems written in Chinese characters which generally lacked individuality. He did not idealize nature, but viewed it as a whole. Nature did not always appear as something beautiful; it was life itself, it provided necessary products to maintain life, and it was full of joys and sorrows.

Passing by a reservoir with beautiful lotus blossoms, he marvelled at the human power of irrigation, as well as thinking that it would be perfect for boating there.

Thick bamboos make it difficult for horse riding,

Boating among lotus blossoms is befitting.

Great is the power of irrigation,

Thousands of rice paddies are dancing in the breeze.

There are those who think that his poems such as this are too full of practicality, but we cannot help being moved by his warm love for the poor people who were worn out by hardship and poverty, and his ardent[page 87] wish to reform the inconsistencies of the social system and the archaic and corrupt government admistration structure.

In his fables, he also satirized the contradictions of the system, the sufferings of the common people and the wrongdoings of the government officials. For example, there is a poem which describes a cat which is kept to catch mice, but instead of catching them it steals the master’s fo6d and causes several times more damage than the mice. These poems in the form of fables are witty, clever, full of imagination and extremely delightful.

I will fix large arrows in my red bow,

And shoot you all to death in a row.

If again the mice misbehave,

A fierce dog I’ll rather have.

Here again, his strong sense of justice and grim determination to reform all social evils are clearly shown. There are those who say that he lacked poetic technique, but reading his fables one is surprised to find so much poetic talent and technique.

Tasan was a cool-headed intellectual. He was also an affectionate man. Even whilst living the miserable life of an exile, he often wrote detailed letters to his wife and children. He was also a loving and meticulous husband, who painted irises on skirts and sent them to his wife. This tender side of him is reflected in his lyrics, which are impressive with overflowing feeling and excellent expressions. The poem he wrote on Tano, while thinking of his young daughter from far away, is so full of paternal love that it touches everybody’s heart.

I am neither a poet nor a connoisseur, but I love a poem

called Haeryuhwa.

I saw a branch of flame-red Haeryuhwa,

Abandoned one late spring day.

I took it away

To plant under my window.

This poem moves readers with the beauty of the lonely soul who did not lose a feeling for beauty despite his miserable circumstances. An abandoned criminal in exile whom everybody shuns for fear of repercussions picks up a branch of flowers deserted on the road to plant it under his window. Perhaps Tasan rather consoled himself by gathering the abandoned flowers. The abandoned flower which still blossoms, and the [page 88] lovely mind of exiled Tasan, who saves it, both touch readers’ hearts with their beauty mixed with pathos.

There is another important aspect to Tasan’s poems. He always emphasized the importance of the independence of Korean literature. He repeatedly wrote to his sons not to neglect the study of Korean history and literature. Though he wrote only in Chinese, his love for his country was very strong and he even put the pronunciations and phrases in Chinese, so his works still impress us more than any pieces written in Korean. Unfortunately, however, his works cannot frankly be called people’s literature, because they were written in Chinese.

In the autumn of 1817,when he was 57,he was pardoned and returned to his hometown. He lived another eighteen years in peace and quiet, rearranging his works and meditating, since his return to a government post was still out of the question.

According to Charles Dallet, the author of the History of the Korean Catholic Church, Tasan repented and returned to Catholicism in his later years, lived the life of a devout Catholic, and just before his death was given the last rites by a Chinese Catholic priest, Father Yu Pang-jae. He also states that the early history of the Korean Catholic Church was based on Tasan’s Pogumchollaesa. Unfortunately this precious book was burned during the cruel persecution and is no longer available. Confucian scholars vehemently claim that the books written by foreigners cannot be trusted. I do not think it is necessary to argue over whether Tasan really returned to the fold or not. Confucianism is not a religion, and therefore, the fact that Tasan converted back to Catholicism does not mean that he abandoned Confucianism. The former existed at the same level as the latter in Tasan’s case.

Whether he was a true Catholic or not, he was without a shadow of a doubt one of the greatest scholars that Korea has ever produced. As such, he lives among Koreans all the time, in love, respect, pride and admiration.