

# Dasan's Approach to the Ultimate Reality\*

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## Abstract

*This study aims to provide a more balanced approach to Dasan Jeong Yak-yong's understanding of Sangje (Lord on High) as the ultimate reality by integrating the existing conflicting theories on Sangje in Dasan's tenets of Confucianism. It also attempts to make the best use of various views posited in previous studies, with an analytic focus on Dasan's personal reasons for placing the concept of Sangje at the core of his Confucian theoretical system. Research on a scholar should first deal with their formation of thought and background as an individual, and thus the content and direction of Dasan's thought, the context of his life that influenced his problem awareness and his thinking, and the mode of thinking embodied in him through his life experiences are included in the scope of this analysis. In particular, this article examines the transformation of the Confucian system Dasan sought through his concept of Sangje, the background of the formation of his view on Sangje, his conception of Sangje, the direction of his thought, and the significance of his approach to the ultimate reality.*

**Keywords:** Dasan, Jeong Yak-yong, Dasan's notion of Sangje, ultimate reality, Seohak (Western Learning)

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## Introduction

Dasan Jeong Yak-yong (1762-1836) is often regarded as the scholar who synthesized Silhak (Practical Learning) into a coherent system during the second half of the Joseon dynasty. He formulated a Confucian system, different from Neo-Confucianism, which had been heralded since the early Joseon period. What was the most notable in his theoretical system was a new notion of Heaven. Within the philosophical theory underlying Confucian classics, Heaven was the pinnacle of importance. It was the only ultimate reality for Joseon scholars who remained faithful to the standard form of realistic thought. While Neo-Confucian scholars looked upon Heaven as a normative reality or *이* 理 (principle; *li* in Chinese), Dasan viewed it as a reality with qualities of a personal god or Sangje 上帝 (Lord on High). He placed the utmost importance on Sangje, which he understood to mean “ultimate reality,” and by doing so he sought to negate and disintegrate the Neo-Confucian system and present a new perspective and approach to the conception of the world, humanity, and ethical practice. Thus, he created a new model of Confucian theory that was unprecedented in China and Joseon.

Scholars do not agree as to why Dasan took up Sangje as the ultimate reality and posit widely different views. At the two opposite ends of the spectrum are those who explain it as a recovery of primitive Confucianism and those who attribute it to his Catholic orientation.<sup>1</sup> Many others' views lie somewhere in between. Even today, there is ongoing discussion concerning whether or not it was due to his Catholic orientation, whether he was influenced by Catholicism, and if so, in what ways it was significant. What has also been extensively discussed is Dasan's intention and approach to rectifying existing Confucian (or Neo-Confucian) views on the world, humanity, as well as various methods of practice through the concept of Sangje, or ultimate reality.

However, the construction of Dasan's theories on Sangje has yet to be

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1. The view on his conversion to Catholicism or Catholic orientation is no longer deepened or further developed today.

finished. This is an indication that his approach to the concept of Sangje was not simple. One can only obtain a proper understanding of it through the careful consideration of many factors, such as his tumultuous life and complicated family history, the context of heated debate on Seohak (Western Studies) in the Namin (Southerners) faction based near Seoul during his lifetime, as well as his sense of social responsibility as a scholar, among other factors.

In terms of the main topics of interest, the existing discussions on the ultimate reality can be categorized as follows: first, discussions regarding the differences between the conceptions of Dasan and Neo-Confucianism; second, postulations on the origin and reasons for those differences; and third, evaluations of the meaning of the transformation achieved by Dasan and its significance in the history of Confucian theory. Of these, the second category has generated conflicting viewpoints and stances. This can be divided into two large subgroups: those who attribute Dasan's reinterpretation of the notion of Heaven to the influence of Catholicism (Choi 1986) and those who argue that Joseon Neo-Confucianism played a more central role (D. Yi 2005a, 2005b). Additionally, there is a third subgroup that tries to merge the two or explore a new approach to understanding the context surrounding Seohak (G. Yi 2003; Kim 2011). In addition to this, some studies are in progress, which, instead of taking either side, attempt to broaden the scope of the investigation and deepen the analysis (Son 2006; Song 1995; Baker 2004; Kim 2010; Chung 2009). The third category is not yet actively engaged, but is expected to further develop, as research accumulates in the second category. While this article draws attention to the theoretical background of the formation of the concept of Sangje as the ultimate reality in Dasan's Confucian thought, it has a more profound interest in what constituted his thinking and the direction of his thought. Thus, the context of his life that governed his thinking, and the mode of thinking embodied in him through his lived experiences, are included in this discussion.

## Dasan's Transformation of the Confucian System through the Concept of Sangje

The history of the study on Dasan's signature concept of Sangje in the field of Korean studies is quite long. Around Dasan's time, many Confucian scholars produced new ideas criticizing or rejecting classical studies, which followed the tradition of Zhu Xi's thought. Among these, Dasan's understanding of classical studies and his theoretical system are considered the most articulate, which is why he was regarded as the representative scholar who systematized Silhak (Practical Learning) during the late Joseon period and produced a new strand of Confucian theory. In particular, Dasan's notion of Sangje replaced the Confucian idea of Heaven with very clear and thorough reasoning. It constituted a key logical component at the core of the ontological hierarchy of all existence in the world, the methodology of human nature, cultivation and (moral) practice, and the reconstruction of rites. His new conception of Heaven is well illustrated in the following excerpt:

One great malady of today is that everyone misrecognizes sky as Heaven or Sangje, but for King Yao, King Shun, Duke of Zhou, and Confucius, there was not such a misunderstanding. Because of that, interpreting old classics in the present-day perspective has produced many misunderstandings. Who is Sangje? Sangje is the being who harmonizes, presides over, and lays to rest heaven, spirits on earth, humans, and other existences, while existing outside of sky, spirits on earth, and humans (*Chunchu gojing* [An Evidential Inquiry into the *Spring and Autumn Annals*], bk. 4).

In the passage above, an excerpt from the chapter “Seonyu nonbyeon ji i 先儒論辨之異” (Distinguishing the Disputes between the Ancient Confucians) in *Chunchu gojing* 春秋考徵 (An Evidential Inquiry into the *Spring and Autumn Annals*), Dasan expresses his viewpoint and stance on the rite for Heaven (*gyocheon* 郊天) while criticizing existing views. Some main characteristics of Sangje he notes in the work are as follows: first, Sangje should not be regarded as identical to sky, which is visible to the naked eye, i.e., sky

as a natural phenomenon; second, Heaven or *i* 理 as conceived by Neo-Confucians is inherent to this world, but Dasan's Sangje transcends it; and finally, Sangje has personal powers, such as harmonizing, presiding, and raising beings with stability.

Dasan negates and dissembles the *i-gi* theory, which is the metaphysical system of Confucianism. Arguing that *i*, which corresponds to the body (*che* 體) in the structure of a principal and its appliance (*cheyong* 體用) is of a dependent nature (*uibu ji pum* 依附之品), he rejects its qualification for constituting a reality and he even rejects the reality of *eum-yang* 陰陽 (*yin-yang* in Chinese) and the Five Elements (*Jungyong ganguibo* [Supplement to the Discussion on the *Doctrine of the Mean*], bk. 1). According to Dasan, *i*, being dependent on *gi*, is devoid of spiritual awareness and is incapable of presiding, or observing the good and evil of humans and rendering them fortune and misfortune (*Maengja youi* [Essential Meanings in the *Book of Mencius*], bk. 2). Only an existence of extraordinary sensing capability can monitor the good and evil of humans and regulate them. Therefore, Dasan believed that only Sangje, capable of spiritual awareness, is the ultimate reality.

Then, to what extent does Dasan's notion of Sangje change the understanding of human nature?<sup>2</sup> His conception of human beings presented a new model of understanding, which has unique characteristics, distinct from those of Seohak (Western Learning) and the Wang Yangming school of thought, which he references for its construction. Dasan endeavored, through classical studies, to establish a model of human existence or a cultivation method of serving Heaven with a sincere mind (*silsim sacheon* 實心事天), which is a method of pious faith in the transcendental being. Serving Heaven with a sincere mind is fundamentally different from the Neo-Confucian method of cultivation through tranquility (*jujeong hamyang* 主靜涵養).

A large bulk of research has been conducted on the human elements that Dasan proposed in his theories. Of them, some key elements are as

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2. Although many studies have been produced on this topic, only some major findings are listed here. See Yoo (1994, 2002).

follows. First of all, humans seek the capacity for spiritual awareness (*yeongmyeong* 靈明), which is absent in plants and animals, and communicate with Sangje through this spiritual awareness. Sangje, the transcendental being, issues order at the initiation of impregnation (*baetaecho* 胚胎初) assigns one's nature, and then gives order to the human inner mind in the form of moral mind (*dosim* 道心). A human is an earthly being of godly form and constitutes a realm in which inclinations (*giho* 嗜好) both from divine awareness and from the bodily form are intertwined in a complex relationship. The human mind coordinates these two kinds of inclinations and makes decisions. In this way, the human mind may be understood as a battle field where the two different types of inclinations and the desires engage in a struggle. In response, the human mind should use its independent power to select good and shut out evil (Yoo 2002, 15-19).

For the cultivation of human virtue, Dasan proposed keeping active in order to motivate self-reflection (*dongjon dongchal* 動存動察) and criticized the Neo-Confucian approach of staying still and motionless during self-reflection (*jeongjon jeongchal* 靜存靜察) (*Maengja youi*, bk. 2), i.e., the method of cultivation through tranquility (*jujeong hamyang* 主靜涵養). Dasan also rejected the idea of self-refinement for the recovery of the original state and claimed that virtue is acquired as a result of practice. In Philip J. Ivanhoe's (2000) classification, Neo-Confucianism presents a recovery model, whereas Dasan's approach is similar to Confucius' acquisition model. However, the emphasis on serving Heaven with a sincere mind appears to be Dasan's own idea. His conception of human beings developed as he worked on dissolving and deconstructing Buddhist logic and concepts through the interpretation of Confucian classics (Yoo 1994, 101-107). Using the thought model of Seohak for reference, he eventually invented his own unique Confucian model.

Dasan's notion of Sangje is related with the reshaping of rites. While Neo-Confucians believed that ritual was the model of good behavior, based on the principle of Heaven (*cheolli* 天理), which represents the relationship between *noumenon* (essence) and *phenomenon*, Dasan believed that it was the "product of the sage's imitation" of the presiding Sangje (Yoo 1994, 112-113). His *Sangnyesa jeon* 喪禮四箋 (Four Commentaries on

Funeral Rites), *Jerye gojeong* (An Analysis of Ancestor Worship Ceremonies), and *Chunchu gojing* (An Evidential Inquiry into the *Spring and Autumn Annals*) are the outcomes of reconstructing various rituals. The first two works criticized the forms and practices of rituals conducted in the style of *Zhuzi jiali* 朱子家禮 (Family Rituals of Zhu Xi), such as solemnizing the funeral ceremony and keeping ancestral instructions, and proposed new ceremonial procedures, an important basis of Sangje or spirit (Yoo 1991).<sup>3</sup> For ancestral rituals, Dasan employed the concept of “divine principle” (*silli* 神理) and was careful not to misidentify the ancestors to be commemorated or apply improper procedures for different classes of people (Yoo 2001, 181). A major characteristic of his system of mourning rituals and ancestral rites is that kings, officials, and commoners are clearly distinguished in terms of proper rituals to be offered, based on a hierarchical order defined by class.

### The Background for the Formation of Dasan's Conception of Sangje

Although Neo-Confucians also referred to the concept of Sangje, Dasan's conception of Sangje was considered new for several reasons. First, the former defined Sangje as a quality of *i*, the aspect of presiding, but Dasan defined Sangje from pre-Qin classical literature such as *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Odes) and *Shujing* 書經 (Book of Documents), and adopted it as the only ultimate reality. Secondly, he did not only recover the old conception but also took it a step further to create a new understanding and established it as the ultimate reality. The status of the ultimate reality can be conferred based on Dasan's stance to ensure a transcendental sphere of the existence for Sangje and assign to it the monopolistic power of harmonizing and presiding. This stance is a critical element in Dasan's new way of Confucian thinking.

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3. Dasan introduced many changes in ritual procedure, such as the resetting of the spirit-invoking ritual upon death and greater emphasis on the praying ritual. See Yoo (1991).

As previously mentioned, the academic world has been divided into two groups concerning the context of Dasan's conception of Sangje. One group attributes it to Confucianism and the other to Catholicism. Additionally, some also argue that Seohak is a more appropriate term than Catholicism (Kim 2010, 215-217). This section will attempt to examine these differing views.

Beginning in the 1960s, Yi Eul-ho named Dasan's studies "the study of Sage's serving Heaven" (*seongin sosa ji hak* 聖人昭事之學) (E. Yi 1981, 54) and argued that Dasan took the concept of Sangje, an object of faith, from pre-Qin classics. Yi Eul-ho's (1981) stance is essentially that this faith originated from the study of serving Heaven (*sacheonhak* 事天學), which had been stressed by Confucian scholars prior to Dasan. Since then, this view has been widely accepted, and recently Yi Dong-hwan (2005a, 2005b) echoed it by arguing that Dasan's notion of Sangje originated from the study of serving Heaven, which was initiated by Yi Hwang (1501-1570) and Yun Hyu (1617-1780) during the Joseon period.

Giving special attention to when Dasan adopted the idea of Sangje, Yi Dong-hwan (2005a) stressed that Dasan had been connected with the tradition of emphasizing Sangje even before his initial contact with Catholicism. In his view, Dasan inherited the tradition of academic schools that were critical of emphasizing the study of old classics in the manner of Zhu Xi's philosophy, represented by Yun Hyu, Yi Ik, and Kwon Cheol-sin, and also the trend of interpreting Heaven with personal qualities, represented by Yun Hyu and Kwon Cheol-sin (D. Yi 2005a, 380-384). D. Yi (2005a) did not deny the influence that Catholicism had on Dasan, nor did he actively explore it. Yi's research focuses instead on proving that Dasan anchored the notion of Sangje in the context of Confucianism, not Catholicism.

This view may be critiqued for several reasons. To begin with, emphasis on the tradition of serving Heaven is meaningful in that it reveals that Dasan adopted the undercurrent of Joseon Confucianism to some extent. However, this only partially explains the background of the formation of his concept of Sangje. In other words, even if that tradition might constitute a part of its formation, it does not explain major differences between



Dasan's conception of Sangje and previous scholars' conceptions of Heaven. The most critical difference concerns the transcendental status of Sangje and the faculty of spiritual awareness. While the study of serving Heaven, advocated by Neo-Confucian disciples before Dasan, did not define Heaven's ontological position of transcendence or faculties of Sangje, it was a major premise in Dasan's notion of Sangje. This begs questions regarding the philosophical framework of his reasoning and his assurance of Sangje's transcendental status and spiritual awareness.

Furthermore, the above view does not provide sufficient grounds to reject the scholarly claim that Dasan's view on Sangje was conceptualized under the influence of Catholicism. Many historical facts indicate that we cannot ignore the influence of Catholicism or Seohak on the formation and development of his thoughts on Sangje: that Dasan expressed deep empathy with the Catholic worldview in his encounter with Yi Byeok; that he adopted Catholic views and wrote about them in *Jungyong gangui* (Discussion on the *Doctrine of the Mean*) in reply to King Jeongjo's inquires; that he practiced Catholicism personally; and that he confessed his devotion to the Catholic faith and the study of Seohak in "Byeonbang sadongbuseung-ji so 辨謗辭同副承旨疏" (An Explanation for the Revilement and My Resignation as a Government Minister).

In order to answer such questions, it is necessary to accept the view that Dasan's idea of Sangje was influenced by Catholicism in content and logic, although the term itself was taken from pre-Qin classical texts (Song 2000; Yang 2009). Here, the Catholic logic refers to the logic employed in *Tianzhu shiyi* (The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven) by Matteo Ricci and it is, in fact, the same as that of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa theologica*, all of which originated from Aristotle's teleological thinking (Yang 2008). *Tianzhu shiyi* characteristically proves the presence of Heaven based on Aristotle's teleological thought. Dasan adopted this logic actively, making his brand of Confucian thought, the transcendence of Sangje as the ultimate reality, distinctive. Also, the spiritual awareness, which Dasan mentioned as a quality of Sangje, was a new concept that did not exist in Confucian literature or dictionaries of Confucian concepts. Actually, it came from *yanima* 亞尼馬 (soul)—a transliteration of the Latin word *anima*—

which had already appeared in Seohak texts such as *Lingyan lishao* 靈言蠡勺 (Humble Attempt at Discussing Matters Pertaining to the Soul) by Francesco Sambiasi (1582-1649) (Chung 2009, 219-220). It can be deduced that the core of Dasan's conception of Sangje, or the transcendental existence and the quality of spiritual awareness, did not exist in the academic tradition handed down to him but was rather created by him. Consequently, it seems appropriate to conclude that the emergence of the notion of Sangje was a result of his acceptance of either Seohak or Catholic reasoning.

Some scholars hold that it was Seohak, not Catholicism, which influenced Dasan's conception of Sangje. This view attempts to assess the influence of Seohak, based on the position through which Seohak was introduced to Confucianism and later found a place of its own in the Confucian academic or cultural context. According to this view, Seohak was not, in principle, anti-Confucian; rather, it had a strong tendency of complementing Confucianism, thus generating a move to develop a new academic or religious trend. Seohak was seen to compensate for the weaknesses of Confucianism with Catholicism and the Western academic tradition and to help strengthen the practical effects of Confucianism.

Indeed, Dasan viewed Seohak as a discipline that could offer new possibilities. Yi Byeok exercised a great influence on Dasan in the formation of his early thought. Yi Byeok studied Catholic creeds and was oriented to "the study of serving Sangje with a bright mind" (*sosa sangje ji hak* 昭事上帝之學) (Kim 2010, 238-241). It is presumed that, influenced by Yi Byeok, Dasan was convinced of the methodology of the study of serving Sangje with a bright mind (Kim 2010, 238-256). Taking this into account, it can be constructed that although Dasan's notion of Sangje was connected with the Neo-Confucian context of serving Heaven, he added Seohak's understanding of the existence of Heaven to this theory, and defined the transcendence and presiding power of Sangje.

As shown in the three types of existing research, various contexts interacted to create the background for the formation of Dasan's conception of Sangje. Despite the influence of Seohak or Catholicism, however, as we read Dasan's works, we can realize that he built a new understanding of the existence of Sangje within the Confucian system. There was no trace of

his belief in the afterlife, the core element of Catholic belief, nor any other practice of Catholicism. His Sangje was not the one and only god. And he placed Sangje's command within the structure of the human mind and the moral mind for the enhancement of self-refinement, leading us to believe that he pursued a reconstruction of Confucianism as practice.

Nonetheless, Sangje, as systematized by Dasan, was a very innovative concept in contrast to the conventional Neo-Confucian mode of thinking. First, he viewed the transcendence and presiding power of Sangje as steadfast faculties, which was not very clear in the work of previous Confucian scholars. Through this assertion, he clearly presented the transition from the Neo-Confucian model of thinking, in the form of a principle and its application, to that of causational thinking. In the former, the ultimate reality was inherent in all things and existences, as noted in the phrase, "a principal and its appliance have the same spring" (*cheyong irwon* 體用一源). This is a pantheistic mode of thinking and is also a basic form of Neo-Confucian thinking. In contrast, causational thinking deals with the relationships between causes and effects, which are not identical, as displayed in the conception that causes and results are separate entities (*ingwa byeolche* 因果別體).

Secondly, the concept of spiritual awareness, which is not found in Confucianism, takes a central place in explaining the innate ability of humans, as well as the power of Sangje. Especially, it illustrates both why and how to serve Heaven with a sincere mind.

Thirdly, the fact that Dasan criticized the existing funeral rites and ancestral offerings and established a new form of rite, based on the idea of Sangje, implies that he sought to reform Confucianism with practice-oriented norms and systematic rituals.

### **Sangje and the Direction of Dasan's Philosophy**

There is one question that requires more serious inquiry. What was Dasan trying to achieve with the establishment of the concept of Sangje? There has been a lot of debate on this, but in order to answer these questions, it

is necessary to discuss the contextual background that significantly influenced the formation of his thought, as well as critical turning points in the progression of his life.

There were two factors in Dasan's youth that exerted a determining influence on the formulation of his theoretical world. The first was his contact with Yi Ik's academic lineage through his association with the Yi Ik school. After moving to Seoul at the age of ten due to his father's appointment as a grade six officer at the Ministry of Taxation (Hojo 戶曹), he met Yi Ga-hwan, the eldest son of the head family of Yi Ik's clan, who was associated with his sister's husband Yi Seung-hun and his eldest brother's brother-in-law Yi Byeok. He read Yi Ik's posthumous manuscripts together with his other disciples from the age of sixteen. Holding a critical but eclectic attitude toward Seohak, Yi Ik opened up opportunities for Namin scholars based near Hanyang (present-day Seoul) to study Seohak and advance their work. According to Dasan's own confession, "My ambitious dreams had many awakenings while studying with the disciples of Seongho Yi Ik" (*Saam seonsaeng yeonbo* [Annals of Saam Jeong Yak-yong]), which implies that his life's journey as a scholar was greatly influenced by Yi Ik. Criticizing outdated theoretical trends of the day, which adhered to Zhu Xi's thought, Yi Ik stressed self-attainment in one's studies and took a selectively open stance towards Catholicism in his *Cheonju sirui bal* (*On The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*) and his translation of Didace de Pantoja's (1571-1618) *Qike* 七克 (The Seven Victories over the Seven Capital Sins). This provided Dasan with the essential intellectual foundation to break away from the blind acceptance of the authority of Zhu Xi's thought in classical studies and develop his own methodology of studying Confucian classical texts. It also helped him recognize the need to keep an open-minded approach to Catholicism or Seohak.

The second factor was his encounter with Seohak. Seohak referred to not only Catholicism but also included a wide gamut of areas of Western science and technology such as astronomy, calendar, mathematics, geography, agricultural administration, water management, etc. Of these areas, Dasan seems to have been deeply affected by the tenets of Catholicism. Returning on a boat from his hometown Majae to Hanyang, the

capital of Joseon, after a memorial ceremony for his oldest sister-in-law at 23, Dasan wrote about his feelings upon hearing about the Catholic doctrines from Yi Byeok, "Listening on the boat to the creation of Heaven and Earth in the beginning and the life and death of body and soul, I was swept in awe and amazement and felt as if I was seeing the galaxy arching across the sky with an infinite milky band" (*Saam seonsaeng yeonbo*). Some believe that this expression of his feelings was so extraordinarily strong that it certainly must have played a role in setting the trajectory of his thinking in his youth (Baker 2004, 56). After this, he followed Yi Byeok to his home, receiving Catholic books like Ricci's *Tianzhu shiyi* and de Pantoja's *Qike*. These books formed the foundation of his Catholic faith. Later, together with Yi Seung-hun, Yi Byeok, and Kwon Il-sin, he became a member of a Catholic religious group and practiced the religion.

After a temporary halt due to the first raid and arrest of Catholics during the Persecution of 1785 (Eulsa Bakhae), he regrouped with Yi Seung-hun upon Yi Byeok's death and practiced Catholicism again. Keum (1999, 38-39) presumes that Dasan left the Catholic religion between the ages of 27 (1788) and 29 (1790), as there is little evidence of his involvement in the Catholic faith after he passed the government service examination in the spring of 1789. One noticeable reason for his departure from Catholicism was the order to prohibit ancestral rituals (1790) issued to Joseon by Bishop Gouvea at the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Beijing. After that, when the Jinsan Incident broke out in 1791, Dasan took a very negative stance on Yun Ji-chung's act of refusing the Confucian mourning ceremony for his mother upon her death, instead burning her mortuary tablet and burying the ashes in Jinsan, Jeolla-do province ("Byeonbang sadongbuseungji so," in *Simunjip*, vol. 9). The ban on ancestral rituals, which resulted from the dispute over liturgy among Catholic missionaries in China, prompted many Korean scholars studying Seohak to change their eclectic attitude toward Catholicism (i.e., seeing the potential in Catholicism to complement Confucianism) to skepticism, and Dasan was among them. The Catholic church's implicit acquiescence of ancestral rites had been interpreted as a signal of the ability to form a complementary relationship between Seohak and Confucianism, but its

shift to ban the ancestral rites in 1790 caused a serious dilemma for Korean scholars, forcing them to choose either one.

There is another key factor that must also be taken into account the favorable consideration of Dasan by King Jeongjo, who acted as a staunch guardian of his academic endeavors and political life. During the time that Dasan held public office from the age of 28 (1789) to 39 (1800), King Jeongjo recognized his scholarly erudition and extraordinary talent and wanted to groom him to be the Premier of the next generation. Therefore, he tried to protect Dasan's political life from vilification by his opponents over his Catholic beliefs. To quiet the opponents' condemnation of Dasan, the King once even relegated Dasan to a defense inspector post in Geumjeong in 1795 and gave him the task of reforming Catholic believers. Dasan spent this period reading Yi Hwang's *Jaseongnok* 自省錄 (Records for Self-Reflection) and writing *Dosan sasungnok* 陶山私淑錄 (Notes for Emulating Yi Hwang), gaining a more profound understanding of Neo-Confucianism and core ideas and methodology of Confucianism.

Dasan achieved significant progress under the favorable consideration of King Jeongjo in various areas, such as the establishment of a solid conception of government, technological research and development in practical fields, and the study of Confucian classics. He crafted and consolidated the art of governance during a 12-year career in government office. However, it would be a passive interpretation of the relationship between Dasan and King Jeongjo to assume that he, as a member of the Namin faction, could avoid the attack of the Principle-Upholding Sect of the Noron (Old Doctrine) faction completely by merely being faithful to the King. It is instead more accurate to conclude that, through the King, Dasan was able to develop the perspective and horizon of study and governance and come to a more concrete belief and desire for realizing a Confucian ideal government, i.e., reign of virtue. King Jeongjo selected Dasan for further training at the Gyujanggak (Royal Library) and had him continue working on Confucian classics, such as *Zhongyong* (Doctrine of the Mean), *Daxue* (The Great Learning), and *Shijing* (Book of Odes), conferring with Dasan in regard to a host of questions (Keum 1999, 42-43). Thus, sharing experiences in the government with the King

and devoting himself to the study of classical texts, Dasan was able to lay a solid foundation in order to develop and expand his Confucian ideas of statecraft and horizon of classical studies.

Dasan collaborated with the King in regards to many areas of governance, such as research on the arrangement of boat-bridges over the Hangang river, the manufacturing and use of cranes, and cost-saving measures in the construction of the Hwaseong fortress in Suwon. These were the successful results of joint work by the wise king and the wise official. Working closely with the King, Dasan was able to watch his method of governing by example. It is believed that Dasan's commentary in the section on government in *Noneo gogeumju* (Ancient and Contemporary Commentaries on the *Analects of Confucius*), "to govern with virtue can be compared to the Pole Star; it turns in its place, then other stars turn to follow it," reflected his switch from Zhu Xi's model of a government of inaction to that of the king leading by example with diligence and sincerity. Dasan argued that the heaven and the earth move by the diligent governing of Sangje and the assistance of his officers, hundreds of deities (Baik 2007, 86-87), the essence of his ideal government. By highlighting the sense of responsibility of the dominant class, he asserts that power should be the pivotal force of industrious and sincere efforts to maintain and enhance the life of the community.

Although he stopped his practice of the Catholic faith in the wake of the Persecution of 1785 and the ban on ancestral rites, this does not necessarily mean that all traces of Catholicism evaporated from his thinking. The remnants of his religious activities offered a pretext for relentless rebuke by opposition factions, becoming an enormous fetter in his life. Furthermore, due to the martyrdom of his brother Jeong Yak-jong and the execution of Hwang Sa-yeong, young aristocrat and Catholic convert, over the Silk Letter Incident,<sup>4</sup> his life could never be entirely free from Catholicism, albeit his apostasy. For this reason, we can assume that

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4. In 1801, Hwang Sa-yeong wrote a secret letter on silk (*baekseo*) to the French bishop in Beijing, which reported the persecution of Catholics in Joseon in detail and petitioned the intervention of foreign forces, but the letter was intercepted and, as a result, Hwang was executed.

Dasan's mind worked in layers of double bind. His Confucian orientation due to the warm treatment he received from the King and the Catholic atmosphere within his family was one layer of the double bind; and the Principle-Upholding Sect's dogged denunciation and attack on his family and his academic lineage, and his will to defend the legitimacy of Catholic belief, which he had espoused with his own brothers from youth, made up the other layer. Dasan's notion of Sangje and his Confucianism was a great achievement that broke the shackle of this multilayered bind. Through the death of his brother and his long exile in remote places, he refined his study of Confucian classics, based on the idea of Sangje and produced an intricate Confucian theoretical system. However, researchers in the academy have yet to provide a comprehensive answer regarding the core nature of his intellectual prowess.

The basis of Dasan's studies is an orientation for the reform of government. One of the greatest problems of government at the time was moral impiety and the insincerity of the *yangban* class. In Dasan's view, Neo-Confucianism had the greatest responsibility for allowing this situation to happen and the Neo-Confucian theory and methodology for practice had become ineffectual, and thus unable to play a role in sound social integration. From a Confucian scholar's standpoint, social reform was necessary, the utmost of which was the reform of human mentality and attitude. Dasan, as a believer in Catholicism during his youth, rediscovered in Confucianism the concept of Sangje, which he considered an equivalent to Cheonju (Lord of Heaven) and was assured of its potential in Confucianism. He discovered Sangje's potential to change human mentality and attitude and present a new model of government. He found it difficult to accept some elements that did not fit Confucian rationality, such as the theory of heaven and hell in the afterlife. On *Sangnyesa jeon*, he said, "I wrote this book with a pious faith in the sage. I wanted to reroute the roaring currents and hampering streams and returned to the true origin of the waterway" (Keum 1999, 57). This illustrates that his idea of Sangje was clearly directed to the reform of the Confucian system, based on early Confucian thought.



### **Conclusion: The Significance of Dasan's Approach to the Study of Ultimate Reality**

It is believed that Dasan's approach to the study of ultimate reality was shaped during the process of confirming and refining his experiences in his youth through the study of Confucian classics. Sangje was established as the absolute and only ultimate reality in his Confucian system through the various phases such as emulating Yi Ik in his youth, practicing the Catholic faith and the subsequent apostasy of Catholicism in his early twenties, and then assuring and reconstructing the existence of Sangje in the Confucian worldview.

While establishing Sangje as the ultimate existence, he saw more than just weaknesses in Neo-Confucianism. Although he criticized and deconstructed the Neo-Confucian *li-qi* theory in his commentary on classical texts, he produced many writings that emulated Yi Hwang and also expressed great empathy with Zhu Xi's outstanding scholarship. Despite all that, why did he reject the Neo-Confucian *li-qi* theory and the *yin-yang* doctrine? It can be assumed that it was mainly because of his keen recognition that Neo-Confucianism was bound to produce ineffectiveness and impreciseness for its convoluted and rambling nature ("Ohangnon" [Critique of the Five Scholastic Methodologies], in *Simunjip*, vol. 11). This assessment was based on the fact that the debates on *li-qi* and mind-nature, which started in the sixteenth century, only continued spinning off different theories and failed to arrive at a clear conclusion. Dasan astutely defined it as the uselessness of the *li-qi* theory.

In *Jungyong ganguibo*, he notes that the Neo-Confucian metaphor explaining the human disposition as "motionless and calm until it responds with heaven and earth, when it then fulfills its reactions"<sup>5</sup> refers to the state of the Great Ultimate (*taiji* 太極) of being in divination (*yizhan* 易占); and therefore, it is improper to apply it to human mind (Yoo 1994, 104). This is an illustration of his recognition of the impreciseness of

5. "寂然不動 . . . 感而遂通" ("Xicizhuan shang" [Appended Statements, Part 1], in *Zhouyi* [Book of Changes]).

Neo-Confucian theory. For him, the Neo-Confucian metaphor of a “bright mirror and calm water” (*mingjing zhi shui* 明鏡止水) could not be applied to the inner state of human mind (Yoo 1994, 105). But in fact, metaphors lead to an understanding of the empirical world and in turn are shaped by it, the two being in a cyclical relationship. Therefore, one cannot say that Neo-Confucianism, or Buddhism for that matter, is wrong; one can only say that what Dasan experienced in his life could not be explained by such metaphors. This is exactly why this author argues that it was his experience of Catholic belief in his youth, which exercised a dominant influence on his lifetime scholarship, and that what was embodied in him through the experience of his Catholic faith laid the basis for his adherence to the notion of Sangje till the end of his life.

It has been assessed that a thorough study of Confucian classics influenced the formation of Dasan’s concept of Sangje and was an important approach employed in order to ensure its theoretical integrity. He distinguished the principles of classical texts from Neo-Confucian tenets and utilized both historical evidence and interpretation in a balanced and dedicated way (Yoo 1991). Particularly, setting up the principle of verifying a classic with another classic in one’s historical research, he commented on pre-Qin old texts from the standpoint of another and thus bolstered its persuasive power (Yoo 1991). The strength of his arguments contrasted with the Neo-Confucian weakness in respect to historical research and exegesis that placed excessive emphasis on doctrinal interpretation. He used the same method in “Seonyu nonbyeon ji i 先儒論辨之異” (Distinguishing the Disputes between the Ancient Confucians) in *Chuchugojing* (An Evidential Inquiry into the *Spring and Autumn Annals*), in which he clearly defined his idea of Sangje. Dasan’s method gave his argument a strong persuasive power in criticizing the position of Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127-200), Confucian scholar of the Later Han dynasty of China, and in clearly explicating the reality of his concept of Sangje.

The purpose of Dasan’s concept of Sangje had nothing to do with the pursuit of salvation by some external power through belief. Rather, he believed that Sangje, as the human moral mind, was harbored in the tongue and vocal cords. His goal was to recover the solemnity of a godly

existence presiding over humanity through a clear recognition of the existence of Sangje and a practice of ethics and morality through greater industriousness and sincerity. However, Dasan's notion of Sangje was not widely diffused or accepted by Neo-Confucians. As a matter of fact, his interpretation of Confucian classics and his conception of Sangje was largely a singular event in the history of Confucianism without real follow-up by other scholars. Dasan made strenuous efforts to return Confucianism, which had been closely attached to the Buddhist viewpoint and practice method, to its original state by stripping it of Buddhist reasoning and thinking. In a nutshell, he achieved a shift in the mode of thinking within Confucianism and the notion of Sangje was the axis of this great transformation. Although no serious assessment has been made concerning the direction and consequence of this change, it cannot be denied that the Catholic mode of thinking offered Dasan a turning point and the basic framework of the concept of Sangje came from Thomism and Aristotle's philosophical reasoning.

In this sense, the significance of Dasan's approach to the study of ultimate reality can be evaluated as follows: it sought to change the paradigm of thought by transplanting Catholicism or Western philosophical logic into Confucianism, in order to transform the approach to understanding the inner human mind and practice method. Whether he succeeded or not can be appraised through the aspects of theory and practice. From the dimension of practice, it was a partial success, judging from various verifications in his experiences as demonstrated in *Simgyeong milheom* 心經密驗 (Private Examination of the *Classic of the Mind-and-Heart*). But the fact that it was not accepted by other Confucian scholars indicates its failure to obtain the approval of his time, as well as illustrates the lack of persuasive power possessed by his theory and methodology. His experience and analysis would have been difficult to be shared among the milieu of his time.

In modern Korea, the legitimacy of Dasan's concept of Sangje has not been sufficiently assessed. Much of the discussion leans toward rejecting or verifying its connection with Catholicism. But whether the concept of Sangje contributed to the advancement of Confucianism in the trajectory

of its development should also be evaluated, particularly when we consider Dasan's academic stature in the history of Korean Confucianism. From a theoretical aspect, one may suspect that Dasan's view of Heaven, i.e., the concept of Sangje, is a logical retreat. This may be postulated under the view that the idea of Sangje was prevalent in primitive Confucianism but, through the development of reason, the conception of Heaven as a personal god declined and a rational way of understanding gained momentum. From this view, Dasan's conception of Heaven might be seen as a retrograde in the development of history.

Then, is his standpoint really regressive? The law of linear progression is often found in the history of development of thought and one can assume such a law in history and predict or evaluate the direction of a thinker's thought in accordance with the law. But such law does not always hold true in reality. Dasan located the root cause of many problems of the contemporary reality due to inadequate and ineffective elements of the Neo-Confucian *li-qi* theory and its practice, and proactively adopted Western Catholic reasoning in order to reconstruct the image of Sangje and reestablish the Confucian system of theory and practice. Future research should evaluate its theoretical completeness, but the fact that he produced an integrative theory through comprehensive studies of classical texts should be highly regarded in such an evaluation.

Dasan's interpretation method has received much praise, but it does not compare to the acclaims showered upon Chinese scholars of classical texts. The characteristics and strengths of his methodology are yet to be clearly laid out. Up until now, research has been limited to comparing it with Zhu Xi's study of classical texts. Future research should move beyond this and compare Dasan's studies of classical texts with those of Chinese scholars, which would help unveil the significance of his reconstruction of the concept of Sangje more clearly.

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