

Tasan's Intellectual Heritage

No discussion of Tasan's intellectual pedigree would be complete without a mention of the so-called *Sirhakup'a* (lit., "School of Genuine Learning" or "School of Practical Learning") of which he is widely considered to be a leading member. Many historians have eulogized Tasan as being the *chiptaesongga* or "synthesizer" of this school, claiming that he weaved together various strands of thought within "Practical Learning" to form his own extensive system.¹

Consequently this chapter begins with an overview of the most widely accepted theories on Korean "Practical Learning" followed by a discussion of the significant weaknesses inherent in them. Then we provide an alternative framework for the historical context of Tasan's thought, including an overview of Korean Neo-Confucianism prior to Tasan, the emergence of critical attitudes toward Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, and the impact of factional politics, including the influential Rites Disputes of 1659 and 1674, on developments in this area.

It is widely recognized that factionalism had a profound impact on the politics of the late Chosŏn. Furthermore, nearly all the outstanding thinkers of this period belonged to factions representing the political opposition. In spite of this, very little work has been done on the relationship between intellectual trends and factional associations. Many contemporary Korean students and scholars express distaste or even embarrassment at the influential role of factionalism in their history. It is generally maintained that Japanese scholarship underscored the pervasiveness of Chosŏn factionalism to illustrate the inability of the Koreans to govern themselves, thereby lending a hint of legitimacy to the Japanese colonial rule of Korea. This focus on factionalism is generally regarded by Korean scholars as an essential theme in the

"colonial view of (Korean) history."² This may explain why the most widely acclaimed Korean treatments of intellectual developments during the period in question, including Tasan's thought, avoid any detailed treatment of the impact of factionalism.³

It is, of course, regrettable that factionalism was used to legitimize the colonial rule of Korea, but it would also be regrettable to leave factionalism out of the picture in any historical discussion of Korean Confucianism. A large portion of the Confucian teachings is devoted to political ethics, as Confucius himself spent most of his time grooming conscientious young people for morally enlightened political leadership. Seeing that Confucianism became enormously influential as a political ideology, it is only natural that there should be close links between the Korean political order, which during the late Chosŏn was largely influenced by factional considerations, and the development of Korean Confucian thought. This was a two-way street, with the Confucian teachings providing the ideological framework for the political order while they were simultaneously adapted to suit the needs of the same order.

Consequently, this chapter begins with a discussion of the inadequacy of popular categorizations of late Chosŏn dynasty intellectual trends which do not take factionalism into account.

The Sirhakup'a: Myth or Reality?

During the last several decades few papers or books have been written on the history of the Chosŏn period without mention of the *Sirhakup'a* (School of Practical Learning) and its various subschools.⁴ This term generally refers to a very diverse group of late-Chosŏn dynasty scholars who nonetheless were considered to have shared a dissatisfaction with the general political inertia or apathy of the ruling elite, and to have made concrete proposals for political, economic, or social reform.

In recognition of the broad spectrum of interests and ideological inclinations shown by the Sirhak or Practical Learning proponents, continual efforts have been made to classify their diverse approaches into subcategories. One of the most popular analyses, made by Lee Woosung, subdivided Sirhak thought into three schools: The School

of Administration and Practical Usage (*kyōngse ch'iyongp'a*), which was founded by Yi Ik (1681–1763), concentrated on institutional reform with particular emphasis on government administration and the land system; the School of Profitable Usage and Popular Benefit (*iyong husaengp'a*) centering on Pak Chiwŏn (1737–1805), which focused on technological reform, advocated the expansion of commercial activities and improvement of the means of production; and the School of Verification Based on Actual Facts (*silsa kusip'a*), which became a fully-fledged movement through the influence of Kim Chŏnghŭi's (1786–1856) scholarship, used Ch'ing evidential methodology in epigraphy and the study of the classics.⁵

A principle flaw of the above schema is that the first two categories are based on fields of study, whereas the third is based on a methodology, and it is precisely this philological methodology, derived from the *k'ao-cheng hsüeh* or Evidential Learning movement of Ch'ing-dynasty China, that thinkers in all three categories relied upon to varying extents in their studies. The weakness of this categorization becomes evident when we apply it to the case of Tasan, who was strongly influenced both by Yi Ik's work on institutional reform and the critical approach of Ch'ing Evidential Learning.

A number of attempts have been made at classification of Sirhak scholars on the basis of historical periods. Among the earliest and most influential of these has been Ch'ŏn Kwanu's analysis of Sirhak development into three periods: The Preparation Period, which began in the mid-sixteenth century and lasted for one century, saw the introduction of Western Learning from China by the scholar-official and encyclopedist Yi Sugwang (1563–1627) as well as Kim Yuk's (1580–1658) ideas in the fields of administrative reform and technology. The Development Period which began in the mid-seventeenth century and lasted for the following century, was characterized by the evidential learning of Yu Hyŏngwŏn (1622–73) and later Yi Ik, who adopted the same methodology and combined it with the systematic study of Western Learning. Other outstanding figures of this period included Pak Sedang (1629–1703) and An Chŏngbok (1712–91), a close disciple of Yi Ik. The Flourishing Period, which extended from the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century, according to Chŏn, marks the final stage in the maturation of Sirhak. It was in this period that the study of the Chinese and Korean classics,

"Northern Learning" or Ch'ing scholarship, as well as the natural sciences, reached a new peak in the writings of such representative figures as Pak Chiwǒn, Hong Taeyong (1731–83), Pak Chega (1750–?), Chǒng Yagyong, and Kim Chǒnghŭi. It was also in this period that Catholicism became influential and fueled politically revolutionary ideas. At the end of this period Sirhak was finally replaced as a main intellectual current by the modern thought of the *kaehwa* movement introduced from Europe.⁶

One problem with this analysis is the difficulty of determining in what way the diverse scholarship of the "Flourishing Period" represented a maturation of the scholarship in the "Development Period." Pak Sedang, for example, used methods akin to those of Ch'ing scholarship to analyze the language of the Chinese classics well before the Northern Learning of the "Flourishing Period." Furthermore, it is now broadly recognized that figures who played a major role in laying the intellectual foundation of the *kaehwa* or "enlightenment" movement, including Pak Kyusu (1807–76) and O Kyǒngsǒk (1831–79), built on the ideas of previous thinkers such as Pak Chiwǒn and Chǒng Yagyong rather than simply replacing them with European concepts.⁷

The usage of the concept "Sirhakup'a" itself presents considerable problems. Recently, scholars in Korea and the United States have pointed out that the character *p'a* (school) appearing in the term "Sirhakup'a" is a misnomer, since the so-called Sirhak proponents did not share a particular doctrine or comprise a single lineage of scholars bound by master-disciple relationships. None of them referred to themselves as members of a "Sirhak" school. Indeed, it was only in the 1930s that these late-Chosǒn would-be reformers were grouped together under the rubric "Sirhakup'a," to indicate a common concern they were perceived to have had in the down-to-earth problems faced by late-Chosǒn society, as opposed to the preoccupation shown by orthodox Neo-Confucians in metaphysical questions.

Even if one loosely defines "school" as a body of scholars adhering to similar doctrines and involved in some form of regular academic exchange, there were, at the most, only two schools within the Sirhakup'a. As discussed at the end of the chapter, these can be referred to as the School of Yi Ik and the School of Northern Learning (*Pukhakup'a*), although even within these "schools" there was a great deal of diversity. Members of the School of Yi Ik, or in Yi Usǒng's

terminology, the School of Administration and Practical Usage, were indeed very interested in institutional reform, about which they had gleaned many ideas from the work of Ch'ing as well as Korean scholars such as Yu Hyŏng-wŏn and Yi Yulgok. On the other hand, the School of Northern Learning was so named because all of its proponents had personally visited the Ch'ing, and had consequently written a great deal about the various facets of Ch'ing culture that had so impressed them. The title "School of Profitable Usage and Popular Benefit" conferred on them by Yi Usŏng is somewhat misleading as their interests in economic and technological development were shared by members of the School of Yi Ik.

Regardless of whether it is referred to as a school or not, there are other problems presented by the usage of the term *Sirhak* or "practical learning" itself.

The main problem is that the same expression was used long before—in a more philosophical, ethical sense—by Chu Hsi and other orthodox Neo-Confucians, referring to the relevancy of their teachings for the task of self-cultivation (*hsiu-shen*).⁸ Chu Hsi and generations of his Confucian predecessors, following the lead of Confucius himself, took pride in their emphasis on practical ethics, comparing themselves with the Buddhists whom they considered to be flouting a cardinal principle: the attainment of self-realization through proper conduct in human relationships. It has since been demonstrated that the so-called *Sirhak* scholar Yun Chŭng (1629–1714), who used the term *Sirhak* more often than most, saw the relevancy of his teachings in these terms rather than in an overtly political or practical sense.⁹ In addition to their keen interest in the concrete business of improving the people's livelihood, many other *Sirhak* thinkers, particularly Pak Sedang and Chŏng Yagyong, were intent on reviving the spirit of ethical practicality which they regarded to be the essence of Confucian thought, and which they considered to have been obscured by the introspective approach of their Neo-Confucian contemporaries. In effect, they were accusing these Neo-Confucians of the same weaknesses the Neo-Confucians had once accused the Buddhists of.

Most *Sirhak* thinkers could indeed be referred to as "practical" in both the ethical and more concrete senses of the term. In spite of this, many popular writers and even historians, misled by the modern, more material connotations of the term "*Sirhak*," have conveyed the

impression that its proponents were utilitarians or even pragmatists who had little time for ethics and other branches of philosophy in their quest to improve the conditions of their society. There is no question that most of the "Sirhak" thinkers were very practically minded individuals, but none of them went as far as rejecting the Confucian assumption that moral renewal was an essential ingredient of social harmony.

The distinction between Sirhak thinkers and their predecessors is further obscured by the fact that the Neo-Confucian reformers of the late Koryŏ and early Chosŏn were also galvanized by dynastic decline and the need for a new order to involve themselves in "practical affairs," including the cultivation of the ruler's virtue as well as proposals for concrete institutional reform. Indeed, the sought-after status of a "scholar of the Sirhakp'a" has understandably been claimed for Korean Neo-Confucians as early as Yi Yulgok, who was practically minded in both senses.

Furthermore, the reform-minded "Sirhak" proponents lived over a span of almost three centuries, and were inspired by a variety of contrasting if not incompatible worldviews, from the orthodox cosmology of the Ch'eng brothers and Chu Hsi to the moral activism of Wang Yang-ming and the Evidential Learning of the Ch'ing.

Recognising the inadequacies inherent in treatments of the Sirhakp'a as a particular school of thought, including the diversity of the thinkers it has traditionally included, Ch'ŏn nonetheless has made an attempt to define three tendencies characteristic of the Sirhak spirit.

The first is the spirit of criticism, particularly directed at the excessive dependence of the literati on the nearly absolute authority of the Ch'eng-Chu school. The members of the School of Northern Learning, referred to as the "School of Profitable Usage and Popular Benefit" by Yi Usŏng, criticized the tendency to adulate the Ming, and advocated the study of Ch'ing culture and scholarship. Not a few intellectuals attacked political attitudes and institutions, and among these many surreptitiously turned to the forbidden study of Yang-ming's philosophy and Catholicism. Another phenomenon issuing from critical attitudes toward established authority was the advocacy of Confucian political humanism or *minbonjuŭi*, which gave primacy to the welfare of the people and national consciousness, both

of which formed the backbone of the increasingly popular National Studies (*kukhak*).

Secondly, the spirit of verification, symbolized by the expression *silsa kusi*, "the pursuit of truth based on actual fact."¹⁰ This was the approach of the evidential research movement of the Ch'ing, and it was vigorously applied by Sirhak scholars not only in the examination of the classics but also in such fields as history, geography, and linguistics, as well as proposals for political and economic reform.

A third characteristic of Sirhak, Ch'ön maintains, is the spirit of practicality. This constituted a reaction to the idealism of Chosön Neo-Confucian learning, which treated administrative concerns as "the province of petty officials" and productive technique as "artfulness." Sirhak thinkers rejected this traditional disdain for practical affairs and instead highlighted the importance of scholarship for the sake of the people and technology for productivity.¹¹

It should be pointed out that the "practicality" singled out by Ch'ön took the contrasting forms previously discussed. The great majority of "Sirhak" figures did indeed pay unprecedented attention to such concrete issues as administrative reform and technological development, areas that had been neglected by their fellow scholar-bureaucrats. On the other hand, many of them also called for a return to the practical ethics of Confucius and Mencius in reaction to what they saw as the excessive involvement of their contemporaries in metaphysical issues. Although Tasan has become a household name in Korea on account of his detailed work on administrative reform, it is in this other branch of practicality, particularly his development of an innovative worldview based on the practical ethics of classical Confucianism, that his work merits much greater attention. It is this contribution of Tasan's to the development of Confucian philosophy that is a primary focus of this book.

The spirit of criticism which Ch'ön refers to also has a particularly important bearing on the subject matter of this book. It is clear that many reform-minded thinkers of the late Chosön criticized the ruling scholar bureaucrats and their policies, including the various aspects of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy that symbolized their authority.¹²

Consequently there is a widespread tendency to depict Sirhak thinkers as a breed apart from orthodox Neo-Confucians who represented literally "ex-Chu Hsi learning," or were generally "anti-

Chu Hsi learning," (*p'an chujahak*). These misconceptions are often associated with, or result from, the depiction of "Sirhak" as a discrete new stage in Korean thought following the supposed decline of Neo-Confucianism.

This depiction is misleading for two reasons.

To begin with, attitudes toward Neo-Confucian orthodoxy shown by the would-be reformers of the late Chosŏn showed great diversity. An Chŏngbok, a follower of Yi Ik who is associated with the Sirhak movement, was a vigorous defender of Chu Hsi's doctrines. On the other hand, many criticized what they saw as dogmatic attitudes toward orthodox Neo-Confucian teachings. For example, the outstanding proponents of institutional reform including Yu Hyŏngwŏn, Yi Ik, and Tasan, as well as the scholars of Northern Learning, frowned on the narrow-minded attitudes of literati who sought to discourage alternative interpretations of the classics, or who became excessively involved in the more metaphysical side of Neo-Confucianism to the neglect of practical affairs.

A much smaller group of scholars criticized certain aspects of the orthodox Neo-Confucian teachings themselves. For example, Pak Sedang and Yun Hyu challenged the validity of Chu Hsi's edition of the so-called Four Books, the philosophical core of the Confucian classics, and particularly his suggested amendments to the order and content of certain passages. Criticisms were also made of certain key philosophical concepts developed by Chu Hsi. At the same time most critics, in varying degrees, continued to use the metaphysical framework and terminology introduced by Ch'eng I and Chu Hsi to discuss philosophical issues. A prominent exception is Tasan, who, inspired by previous critiques as well as new schools of thought imported from abroad, directly assailed the foundations of Chu Hsi's cosmology.

The second reason why it would be misleading to label all members of the so-called Sirhak movement as "anti-Chu Hsi," or as being disillusioned with Chu Hsi, is that the expressions of orthodox Neo-Confucianism itself were very broad, a measure of the enormous impact Neo-Confucian values had on Chinese and Korean culture. As implied in the introduction, a great deal of confusion has resulted from a failure to distinguish between the various manifestations of Neo-Confucianism that late Chosŏn figures were reacting against,

including Sung Neo-Confucian philosophy per se, the multitude of ways this philosophy was reflected, and indeed refracted, in the political ideology of the ruling scholar bureaucrats, the educational system and curricula tailored toward success in the civil service examinations, and the philosophies of the literati who were out of power.

Consequently, before taking a closer look at critical attitudes toward Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, we should begin by briefly exploring the origins of Neo-Confucianism and various facets of its impact on Korea.

Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy in Korea

Without exception all the figures traditionally associated with the so-called Sirhak movement, including Tasan, were descended from the families of scholar-bureaucrats. From an early age they were immersed in the traditional Neo-Confucian teachings, being rigorously groomed for government service by means of a thorough indoctrination in the Confucian canon, that is, the Four Books and Five Classics, presented almost entirely through the eyes of the Sung dynasty Neo-Confucians Chu Hsi and his predecessors the Ch'eng brothers. Even prior to their study of the Confucian classics the sons of the aristocracy were exposed to Chu Hsi's view of the world at an early age, through such essential primers as the *Hsiao-hsüeh* or "Lesser Learning," a collection of passages on ethics drawn from the classics by Chu Hsi's student Liu Tzu-ch'eng.

The extent of this immersion in the Neo-Confucian teachings is not surprising seeing that the Chosŏn had become the most orthodox Neo-Confucian dynasty in the history of East Asia. In the early years of the new dynasty the architects of the Chosŏn, including Chŏng Tojŏn (1337-98), the close confidant of the dynastic founder, made good use of recently imported Neo-Confucian critiques of Buddhism to chip away at the legitimacy of the Buddhist establishment, which presented a formidable challenge to the power of the new dynastic order.

Politics was not the only reason why Chu Hsi's Neo-Confucianism came to exert such a powerful grip on the Korean intelligentsia of the late Koryŏ and early Chosŏn periods. Unlike Buddhism, classical

Confucianism, for reasons which will appear more evident in chapter 3, lacked a sophisticated metaphysics that systematically dealt with the relationship between human beings and the rest of the cosmos. Furthermore, although Confucius and Mencius strongly emphasized the cultivation of virtue, their recorded teachings did not provide a clear program of self-cultivation that could compete with the Buddhist promise of enlightenment that had enticed so many to the temples. It was only in the Sung dynasty that Chu Hsi, building on the work of such pioneering metaphysicians as Chou Tun-I (1017-73), Chang Tsai (1020-77) and the Ch'eng brothers (Ch'eng Hao, 1032-85; Ch'eng I, 1033-1107), synthesized a new philosophical system that addressed both of these areas. Using two metaphysical concepts, *li* or "principle" and *ch'i* or "material force," Chu Hsi formulated a new explanation of human nature that integrated it within a sophisticated cosmological framework.¹³ Furthermore, he drew attention to the *Great Learning*, a chapter of the *Record of Rites* that provided a clear program of self-cultivation, and enlarged on it in terms of his unique cosmology, placing unprecedented emphasis on the accessibility of sagehood through profound reflection and moral effort.

These two developments strongly appealed to succeeding generations of literati. By the Yüan dynasty Chu Hsi's edition of the Four Books, which included his voluminous commentaries on them, became core subject matter of the civil service examinations.

Although Chu Hsi's philosophy reigned supreme in official circles, a strong critic of his approach, Wang Yang-ming (1472-1529), became extremely influential during the Ming dynasty. Yang-ming, who was inspired by the work of a similarly iconoclastic philosopher Lu Hsiang-shan (1139-93), sharply criticized what he considered to be Chu Hsi's bookish attitude and strongly exhorted his followers to rely on their "innate knowledge" as their true guide on the path to sagehood, warning against passive dependence on the prescriptions of the classics. Yang-ming's moral activism spoke directly to the consciences of many literati who felt that the Ch'eng-Chu school had become bogged down in introspection and intellectual triviality. As a result, the two contrasting schools of Neo-Confucianism, the Ch'eng-Chu school and the Lu-Wang school, competed for attention from the Ming dynasty onwards.

Although the teachings of Chu Hsi retained their great influence in government circles as the officially recognized interpretations of the Confucian classics in the curricula of the civil service examinations, in both Ming China and late Tokugawa Japan the teachings of the Lu-Wang school continued to be widely, and openly, studied and respected.

On the other hand, the intellectual climate of the Chosŏn dynasty left little room for the spread and development of alternative schools.

As this chapter indicates, not only did the Chosŏn scholar-bureaucrats adopt the teachings of the Ch'eng-Chu school as their ruling ideology, but they vigorously championed it to the exclusion of rival Confucian schools. The dynasty had founded its legitimacy on the orthodoxy of the Ch'eng-Chu teachings, which had been used as a spearhead in the successful attempt to challenge and weaken the authority of Buddhism. Consequently the scholar-bureaucrats saw it as their *raison d'être* to ensure that Ch'eng-Chu Neo-Confucianism remained supreme. Once the "external" threat from Buddhism had been removed, or at least subdued, they showed even more sensitivity toward challenges from within, that is, challenges from rival schools within the Confucian camp.

Why was the new orthodoxy promoted even more aggressively in Korea than in China? The vigorous adoption and defense of a Chinese orthodoxy by Korea may well have been an expression of a "survival instinct" to transform itself, in the eyes of its powerful neighbor China, from a potentially threatening "barbarian" border state to a "younger brother" in the extended family of the Chinese cultural sphere. The success of this transformation became reflected in the special tributary status it had gained in its relations with China.¹⁴

Thus the vigilance against ideological "infiltration" continued, and by the sixteenth century such eminent Korean scholars as T'oegyŏ were warning against the insidious attractions of heterodox teachings, and particularly those of Yang-ming, whose writings had recently been introduced to Korea. Naturally a focus of criticism was the supposed affinity of these doctrines with Buddhism.

Throughout the dynasty, philosophical development and dialogue largely revolved within the basic framework set out by Chu Hsi and the Ch'eng brothers. This is particularly understandable

given the pride which such influential scholars as T'oegyë, and later, Song Siyöl (1607–89), took in their identity as defenders of the "orthodox" Confucian way. As discussed in this chapter, the boundaries of orthodoxy became even more clearly defined following severe ideological conflict between Chosön dynasty factions during the seventeenth century, especially in the wake of the momentous "Rites Disputes" of 1659 and 1674.

This is far from saying that the creativity of the Korean literati was stifled. For example, the two most well-known debates in the history of Korean philosophy, the so-called "Four-Seven" and "Horak" debates, which focused on Chu Hsi's interpretation of human nature, drew out its implications, and fathomed its ambiguities, with unprecedented detail and ingenuity.¹⁵ Furthermore, many scholars continued to surreptitiously study "heterodox doctrines," and a small number of these—inspired by these alternative worldviews, and dissatisfied with dogmatic, unquestioning attitudes toward Chu Hsi's teachings—began to voice their doubts.

There were political as well as philosophical reasons for the growing dissatisfaction with the prevailing worldview. The behavior and policies of the Neo-Confucian ruling elite came under question during a period of social and economic upheaval following the Japanese (1592, 1597) and Manchu (1636) invasions, when the need for political and social reform was keenly felt. Many of the would-be reformers in the political opposition pointed to the unproductive nature of the speculative discussions on metaphysics indulged in by the Neo-Confucian bureaucrats. They felt the balance between the two great poles of Confucian learning, "self-cultivation" (*hsiu-chi*) and the "ordering of society" (*chih-jen*, which referred to ideal government), as defined by Chu Hsi, had been lost.¹⁶

At the same time, most of them did not overtly challenge the relevancy or orthodoxy of Chu Hsi's learning itself, still less question its conceptual foundations. But we shall focus our attention on a more limited group of late-Chosön Confucian thinkers particularly Yun Hyu (1617–80), Pak Sedang, and of course, the reform-minded Tasan, who criticized Chu Hsi's worldview itself based on their reevaluations of the spirit and letter of the classics.

The Challenge to Orthodox Neo-Confucianism

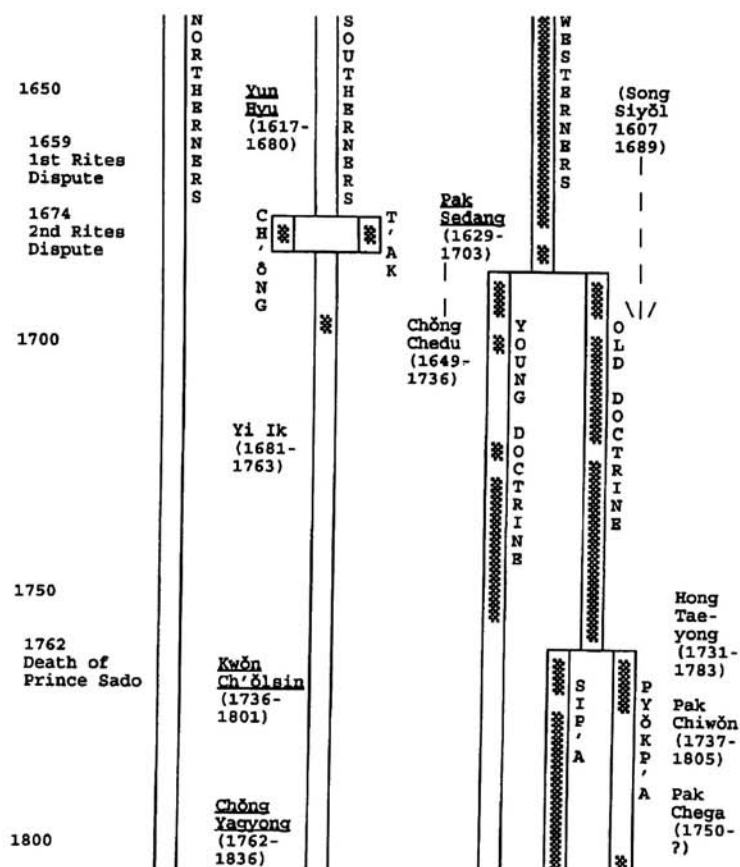
The Impact of Factionalism

The concern of the "Sirhak" proponents for the soundness of the national economy and the plight of the peasantry has been given prominence—and often exclusively so—in treatments of their intellectual orientations.¹⁷ But one would be hard put to explain the work of these scholars, and especially critical attitudes toward Ch'eng-Chu orthodoxy exhibited by many of them, solely in these terms. One can hardly overlook the fact that the majority of them belonged to factions that formed the political opposition in their respective ages, and particularly to the Southerners (Namin), who through most of their history had been excluded from government on account of the maneuvering of the powerful Old Doctrine (Noron) faction. Not surprisingly their opposition was aimed mainly at members of the Old Doctrine faction, who, after ousting them in 1694, succeeded in playing most of the leading roles on the political stage by controlling the civil service examination system and appointments process.¹⁸

In an article on the intellectual genealogy of the "Southerners school" Hong Isŏp has stressed the fact that the majority of Sirhak thinkers were from the Southerners faction.¹⁹ Although this claim is debatable, it can certainly be said that they were almost all members of the political opposition in their respective ages. Indeed, any characterizations of the approaches of these scholars and of the formative socioeconomic factors at work during this period must take into account factional alignments, or else run the risk of becoming exercises in abstraction. This is because, since the late sixteenth century, a number of factors such as the weakening of monarchical power and the scramble for a limited number of government posts led to the outbreak of factional strife that exerted increasing influence not only on the political life of the country but also on intellectual orientations.²⁰ Factional schisms originated primarily in disagreements over issues related to the delegation of political power, such as the appointment of officials to key positions, the designation of heirs to

FIGURE 1.1

Factional Affiliation of Critics of Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy
in the Late Chosŏn Period



(Critics of orthodox Neo-Confucian thought underlined)

(Politically dominant factions shaded)

the throne, and the related problem of mourning rites. For a brief period after such schisms, when the controversies that had spawned them revolved around contemporary issues, allegiance to the nascent factions was to a certain extent changeable and subject to personal opinions and values. With the passage of time, however, current controversies became historical *faits accomplis*. As the factions took on a multi-generational dimension and the views to defend became those expressed by factional predecessors, the forces of such powerful norms as filial piety and loyalty came into play. Marriage as well as intellectual and social ties became increasingly endogamous, resulting in the association of certain lineages with particular factions. Factional associations became further ossified through accumulated hostilities that resurfaced during successive struggles for power, particularly after the Rites Disputes of 1659 and 1674. In consequence, by the end of the seventeenth century, changes of factional affiliation by dissenting individuals, and marriage between members of opposing factions, especially the Southerner and Old Doctrine factions, were much rarer.²¹

These trends resulted in the emergence of sharply distinct "factional cultures," as vividly depicted by Yi Ik in the early eighteenth century:

These [factional divisions] were passed on from generation to generation. Their distant descendants remain enemies and slaughter one another. There are those who, serving in the same court and living in the same village, do not associate with each other to the end of their days.

Therefore, when fortune or misfortune bring them together, they whisper in secret. When there is a case of intermarriage, they gang together and drive the offenders away. So different are their language, demeanor, and dress, that one can tell them apart on the street. They come from different regions and have different customs. The extent [of these differences] is so remarkable that they can be traced and identified.²²

Since teacher-student relationships were also largely forged along factional lines, limitations were also set on ideological affiliations. Vindication of the positions of factional predecessors took

on an important role in the diachronically oriented Confucian psyche, where the self-image of individuals was intimately bound to the public image not only of self but also of lineage, factional as well as ancestral.²³ These two kinds of lineage were closely linked due to the prevalence of intermarriage among the families of literati within particular factions.

Factional Alignment and Philosophical Orientations

From the time they were traditionally regarded to have been formed in 1575, the two rival factions of literati, the Westerners (Sǒin) and Easterners (Tongin), were loosely affiliated with the two main schools of Ch'eng-Chu Neo-Confucianism championed by Yulgok and T'oegye respectively.²⁴

As time went by, factional, and with them geographical, associations with schools of thought further polarized. The followers of Yulgok came to be known as the *Kiho* (Kyǒnggi and Ch'ungh'ǒng provinces) school, as leading figures of the Westerners such as Kim Changsaeng (1548–1631) Song Siyǒl and Kwǒn Sangha (1641–1721) came from that area, and the followers of T'oegye came to be known as the *Yǒngnam* (Kyǒngsang province) school, as influential figures of the Southerners, a subfaction of the Easterners, such as Yi Hyǒnil (1627–1704) and Yi Sangjǒng (1710–81), were all from the Kyǒngsang region. Nonetheless, certain members of the Westerners did incline toward the views of T'oegye, and there were also exceptions among the Southerners. In the tradition of T'oegye the *Yǒngnam* school insisted on the primacy of principle (*li/i*) whereas their opponents from the *Kiho* school tended to emphasize the interdependence between principle and material force (*ch'i/ki*).²⁵ It was not only in the realm of metaphysics that the factions displayed distinct ideological trends, for, as we shall see, in consequent periods they also aligned themselves with distinct schools in ritual studies, literary styles, and research methods.

The Southerners

This is not to say, as some prominent historians have implied, that factional considerations stifled intellectual development and inhibited potentially creative individuals from transcending the

frames of reference set by the orthodox Neo-Confucian teachings, within which the Yŏngnam-Kiho debate revolved. On the contrary, as this study suggests, critical attitudes toward Neo-Confucian dogmatism, and doctrines, that developed within the Southerners faction during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, particularly in the work of Yi Ik and his followers Kwŏn Ch'ŏlsin (1736–1801) and Tasan, were catalyzed, if not prompted by, factional tensions rather than appearing in spite of them. These critiques were double-edged, since they represented not only an attack on the perceived ideological roots of socioeconomic problems, but also an attack on the legitimating ideology of the faction in power, the Old Doctrine faction, a subfaction of the Westerners. Furthermore, these critiques are of philosophical as well as political significance, for dissatisfaction with the accepted orthodoxy led to curiosity about other worldviews, and provided a springboard for the development of alternative ideas. These "unorthodox" tendencies came to philosophical fruition in the work of Tasan, who not only challenged Chu Hsi's metaphysics, but went on to develop an alternative philosophical system that rivalled it in terms of internal consistency and breadth of scope.

It is no coincidence that Yun Hyu, one of the earliest critics of Neo-Confucian dogmatism, became associated with the Southerners faction, an opposition group through most of its history. One and a half centuries after Yun Hyu, Tasan, who gave critiques of Chu Hsi's learning their most systematic expression, rose to prominence from among the ranks of the Southerners, and drew a great deal of his inspiration from its members. In order to gain even a superficial understanding of the formative influences on Tasan's thought it is essential to understand the history of the Southerners and particularly the current of reaction to orthodox Neo-Confucianism with which it became closely associated. In addition, we should also explore the thought of the highly controversial Young Doctrine thinker Pak Sedang, who it seems, was more of a formative influence on Tasan than he was ready to openly admit.

The Southerners, together with the Northerners (Pugin) came into being in 1591 as a result of a split within their parent faction, the Tongin (Easterners) over the issue of succession to the throne of Sŏnjo (1567–1608). King Sŏnjo had no legitimate son, and Chŏng Ch'ŏl, a leading member of the Westerners, proposed that a son by one of

Sǒnjo's concubines succeed to the throne. The rival faction of the Westerners, the Easterners, consequently split into two subfactions, the Northerners, who urged the king to strongly denounce the proposal and deal harshly with its supporters, and the Southerners, who took a conciliatory position. It was the Pugin who had their way, and they succeeded in replacing the Westerners as the dominant faction when Kwanghaegun (1608–23), whom they had supported, took the throne. But after Kwanghaegun, they were ousted by the Westerners, who dominated the political scene most of the time thereafter. Through the Rites Disputes of 1569 and 1674, which we will discuss in more detail later, the Southerners managed to wrest power from the Old Doctrine faction for two brief periods during the reign of Sukchong (1674–1720). But for the following two centuries, from 1694 till 1863, the Southerners generally remained in opposition with little or no representation in government.²⁶ During this time the Old Doctrine faction assumed a tight grip on political power, especially by means of manipulating the appointments process and the civil service examination system.²⁷ This created particular difficulties for the Southerners. The literati in general were dependent for their livelihood on employment as government officials, but the Southerners more so than others. When high officials from the three southern provinces were excluded from government, they were nonetheless able to maintain themselves through income generated by land that their families owned. On the other hand, most members of the Southerners were from the vicinity of the capital and Kyǒnggi Province, where the quality of land was relatively poor and the population dense. Although some members of the Southerners had benefited from the wealth accrued by their ancestors' service in government, they were nonetheless exposed to the hardships of rural life in a region which was particularly exploited by the capital.²⁸

Yun Hyu's Critique of Chu Hsi

Yun Hyu, a Confucian philosopher who rose to prominence on account of his markedly independent thinking, became directly involved in the factional turmoil revolving around the Southerners' second brief ascendancy to power during the reign of Sukchong. He is most well known for his role in the mourning rites controversies of

this period, when he openly expressed disagreement with the views of the influential leader of the Westerners, Song Siyŏl. He also stands out sharply as the first to openly question the absolute authority of Chu Hsi's interpretations of the classics, and particularly for the outspoken manner in which he did so.

Yun Hyu was born during the reign of Kwanghaegun, just two decades after Hideyoshi's second invasion of Korea. His father, who was serving as a local official in Kyŏngju at the time, had studied the classics under Min Sŭpchŏng. Min was in turn a disciple of Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk, the great Neo-Confucian metaphysician known for his cosmological theories based on Chang Tsai's monism of material force. In his youth, Yun Hyu himself had been taught for a time by Yi Min'gu (1589–1670), a son of Yi Sugwang (1563–1628), whose encyclopedic scholarship is widely regarded as a precursor to Sirhak.²⁹ Yi Sugwang was one of the first to explore literature dealing with "Western Learning" introduced to Korea by Chosŏn emissaries returning from the Ming, and in his work we find the first references to Matteo Ricci's writings on Catholicism, in which he took a great interest.

In 1636, when Yun was twenty-one, the Manchus invaded Korea for the second time, took the royal family hostage in its refuge at Kanghwa Island, and forced King Injo to capitulate. Although the destruction wrought was on a scale far smaller than that incurred by Hideyoshi's troops, the blow to national pride was considerable. Yun met the prominent Neo-Confucian Song Siyŏl, who was serving as the king's tutor, and other scholars in the mountain retreat of Songnisan, and together they lamented over the tragedy and shame of King Injo's subjugation at Namhansan fortress. From this time on he resolved not to take the civil service examinations, and to concentrate on study in seclusion. Before long he was well known for his thorough grasp of the classics and histories, and became regularly involved in friendly and scholarly exchange with the outstanding Neo-Confucian scholars of his day.³⁰ Such was his standing that Min Chŏngjung and Kim Kŭkhyŏng, both leading members of the Westerners, affectionately called him "Yulgok," after the great Neo-Confucian scholar whom their faction in particular regarded with unquestioning respect. Yun became involved in such frequent exchanges with Song and other

leaders of the Westerners faction, that he came to be regarded as one of them.³¹

From 1656, the seventh year of King Hyojong (r. 1649–59), Yun was repeatedly requested to serve in a number of important government positions which he consistently declined. This prompted Song Siyöl to exclaim, "How fortunate it is that a man of such lofty ideals should treat secular affairs with the respect due to a worm," a mild but thinly-veiled jibe at Yun's notoriously high self-esteem.³² Nevertheless, it was such idealism as well as scholarship that won him the respect and patronage of Song Siyöl himself, who, in 1658, recommended him to yet another high government office which he again declined.³³

But the cordial relations between Yun and Song had already started to sour on account of sharp differences in their approach to Chu Hsi's commentaries and learning in general. Yun Hyu was not timid about expressing his distinctive philosophical views, even when they clearly departed from Chu Hsi's interpretations.

Yun Hyu attempted to improve on Chu Hsi's commentary on the *Mean*, in two works entitled *Chungyong changgu ch'aje* (*Order of The Mean, in Chapters and Verses*) and *Chungyong Chuja changgu porok* (*Supplement to Master Chu's The Mean, in Chapters and Verses*). Song, in a letter to a colleague, accused him of being a *samun nanjök*, "a traitor of the Confucian Way," and of implying that his interpretations were more authoritative than those of Chu Hsi himself.³⁴

We do not know what it was about these works specifically that Song may have taken issue with. The title *Supplement to Master Chu's The Mean, in Chapters and Verses* alone indicates that Yun considered Chu Hsi's interpretation of the *Mean* to be incomplete, and that, at least, he intended that his own interpretations should be considered together with Chu Hsi's. As its title indicates, in the *Order of The Mean, in Chapters and Verses* he had made emendations to the layout of the *Mean* as it had been published in Chu Hsi's commentary on the same work, *Chung-yung chang-chü* (*The Mean, in Chapters and Verses*), by rearranging the chapter divisions.

Furthermore Yun's perception of Heaven (*Ch'ön*), a concept which referred to the metaphysical foundation of existence in Confucianism, was very different from Chu Hsi's. This difference was thrown into focus in his exposition of the *Mean*. According to his chronological biography,