
Feature Book Review: *The Analects of Dasan*

The Analects of Dasan, Volume I: A Korean Syncretic Reading, by Hongkyung Kim. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016, 272 pages. \$85.00. Hardcover. ISBN 9780190624996.

Philip J. Ivanhoe

Professor Hongkyung Kim has made a tremendous contribution to our understanding not only of Korean Confucianism but of the greater tradition of which it is a part by producing an annotated translation of Dasan Jeong Yakyong's 茶山 丁若鏞 (1762–1836) monumental *Noneo gogeuim ju* 論語古今註 (Old and New Commentaries on the *Analects*) (hereafter *Old and New Commentaries*). Translating almost any work written in classical Chinese into English for the first time is very challenging but given the originality and complexity of Dasan's commentary and the scale of his work, Professor Kim's book is an historic accomplishment. I cannot do full justice to all that he has achieved nor will I be able to explore every question his work has inspired. My aim is much more modest: to give readers a sense of the work from the limited but I hope still valuable perspective of someone whose interests are primarily philosophical and often comparative, and that embrace both the history of philosophy and constructive philosophical endeavor. The *Old and New Commentaries* has a distinctive structure that reveals critically important aspects of Dasan's philosophy. I would like to begin by sketching this structure and how Professor

* Philip J. Ivanhoe is Director of the Sungkyun Institute for Confucian Studies and East Asian Philosophy at Sungkyunkwan University and Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture*. E-mail: aiwenhe1954@gmail.com

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Kim has chosen to treat certain parts of it and then proceed to describe the implications this structure has for understanding Dasan's philosophical project.

Dasan's work presents the different passages of the *Analects* in their traditional order. After each, he assembles a number of the most insightful and influential commentaries from the past and present (hence the name of his work) to describe and begin to analyze the issues in play. At times, once he has presented a point addressed by a commentary, he will move on to another commentary or point, but often he will add his own Supplemental Comments 補 to elaborate upon the ideas being discussed. While this opening part of Dasan's text is not marked off as a distinct section in the original, it presents his initial treatment of each passage from the *Analects*. In his English translation, Professor Kim separates this first part off and gives it a title of his own design, calling it the "Grounds." This is followed by a separate, second part, which he again assigns a name, calling it the "Arguments." It is important for readers to understand that the general form of both the Grounds and Arguments are quite similar in the original. Specifically, each contains numerous quotations of old and new commentaries followed by Dasan's elaborations and comments. The primary difference between them is that the Grounds contain Dasan's descriptions and amplifications on commentaries while the Arguments contain his criticisms or questions.

When, in the Arguments, he disagrees with an interpretation or idea, Dasan often makes this clear by presenting a Refutation 駁; when the disagreement is with an authoritative member of the orthodox school (e.g. Zhu Xi or Cheng Yi) he expresses his reservations in a milder form, as a Question or Query 質疑. Toward the end of making the case against the views he rejects and for his preferred interpretation, he often musters some additional Corroborating Textual Evidence 引證 drawn from the classics.

The structure of Dasan's work is an important clue to understanding some of his most important assumptions and his ultimate guiding aim. Among his most critical assumptions is that the authentic Confucian classics are, as Professor Kim puts it, without "errors" (p. 16). But much more than that, they are the sole repository of the

highest moral, social, and political truths. There is no way to understand how to live one's life, order one's family, or organize one's state except by studying, understanding, practicing, and internalizing the moral principles, norms, exemplars, practices, and institutions they describe. Just about every Confucian in history shared these same assumptions (and those who didn't, were almost certainly suspected of or denounced as heretics, as were thinkers like Wang Yangming or Li Zhi). This is why so many Confucians, throughout the ages, have felt the need to write commentaries on the classics and, most important for understanding Dasan, this is the reason he felt obliged to produce the *Old and New Commentaries*.

In the course of this work, Dasan reviews the best attempts of past and present authors to uncover the truths contained in the classics: citing commentators when they get things right, refuting those who fail to understand and therefore misrepresent the views of the sages, augmenting commentaries that need a bit more elaboration, and presenting the case for his—the *right*—interpretation. This looks like and often is confused with the approach of Evidential Learning 考證學 and indeed, like such scholars, Dasan regarded it as absolutely imperative to understand what the characters of the classics meant in their time and place. But there is a crucial difference: for Dasan, this was not an end in itself, it was instead the necessary and proper method for discovering philosophical truth. Similarly, Dasan's criticism of the elaborate speculative metaphysics of orthodox neo-Confucianism, his insistence on the need to practice and cultivate virtue, and his systematic, more objective approach to texts can be mistaken as the harbinger of a new approach that some describe as Practical Learning 實學. This too, though, misses the true nature and aim of Dasan's work. Professor Kim seems to share these reservations about ways one might misunderstand Dasan's method, aim, and project (p. 18), but unlike me he sees something truly revolutionary behind the *Old and New Commentaries*. He maintains that Dasan's novel contribution to the Confucian tradition lies in two distinctive features of his approach to the work of writing commentaries: first, his reliance on reason or "reasonability" and second, the "syncretic" aim of his philosophy. Though the two are related—the use of reason

is said to be critical for the achievement of syncretism—for the most part, I will discuss each of these issues separately.

Professor Kim claims Dasan embraced a new and distinctive epistemology in pursuing a synthesis of Confucian ideas that turned upon his reliance on “reason” or “reasonability”; for example, “[his opinion in this case] is primarily indebted to his judgment on reasonability, not to his philological investigation” (p. 107). While the Chinese character for reason 理 is the same as that which served as the fundamental grounds for neo-Confucian claims about the nature of reality (in their sense, it can be translated “pattern-principle”), according to Professor Kim, Dasan’s use of the term has more to do with a basic rational capacity and the “principles of nature, science, practical human relationships, and sociopolitical structures” (p. 49). This aspect of Dasan’s philosophy is what leads some to describe him as a pioneer of Practical Learning, and Professor Kim thinks there is at least some merit in such a view because he suggests Dasan’s philosophy should be called the “Learning of Practical Principle” 實理學.

Given what has been said above, there seems to be some tension between the view of Dasan as a “rationalist” (or at times apparently an empiricist or naturalist) and other claims that Professor Kim makes. For example, at times, he describes Dasan as a proponent of Evidential Learning, “the primary method Dasan adopts to prove the validity of his interpretations is to secure their grounds in the classics” (p. 86). What are we to make of this? I suggest there are virtually no good reasons to describe Dasan as any sort of rationalist or for saying that he should be understood as a pioneer of any conception of Practical Learning. His appeals to reason or common sense, as well as his appeals to uncontroversial features of the natural world, are fully consistent with the approach of Evidential Learning. Dasan is a practitioner and proponent of Evidential Learning, but like Dai Zhen 戴震 (1723–1777) in Qing dynasty, one who employs this method *as the one and only way to reach to and grasp the truths embodied in the classics*. Like all Evidential Learning scholars, Dasan’s approach resembles what one finds in a court of law and not a geometry class, the latter being what one would expect, were he a rationalist. Professor Kim is right to suggest there is something new and important about

the way Dasan sometimes argues his case, but what is new is the way he employs common sense to *form hypotheses* for his fundamentally philological method. In other words, Dasan reasons about what seems improbable or likely and guided by such reasoning seeks evidence and confirmation in the classics. This is not to reach conclusions about philosophical issues independently of the classics but rather to set hypotheses about what the classics actually say that one then seeks to confirm with direct or collateral evidence.

Now, this is importantly different from what earlier neo-Confucians tended to do, which is to ground their claims in views about “pattern-principle” 理, which they often asserted on the basis of intuitions or one kind or another. Dasan rejected this kind of appeal because he saw, as Dai Zhen had before him, that such appeals simply tend to confirm and solidify the status of the subjective or class opinions of elite members of society. But neither Dasan nor Dai believed that reason alone could lead one to substantial moral or even empirical truths. Neither of them was seeking to follow wherever reason and evidence might lead; both assumed that reason and evidence would lead to the *right reading of the classics*, which were the repository of all the most important truths.

We see a clear and powerful example of this in Dasan’s discussion of the right interpretation (i.e. the correct understanding) of *Analects* 3.16 (pp. 195–200), which describes and discusses the ethical implications of archery contests among the ancients. As Professor Kim makes clear through his translation and analysis, Dasan rejected interpretations that entail that archery contests did not concern hitting the mark. Why? Common sense tells us this, “according to common sense, archery consists of the act of hitting the target by shooting arrows” (p. 199). Of course, common sense is a combination of our rational abilities and our knowledge and experience: from all that we know about archery contests we expect them to be about hitting the target. *Reason alone*, though, will not yield this conclusion: traditional archery contests *could have been about* who shoots the farthest, whose arrows penetrate deepest into the target, who shows the most sportsmanship, who sings the best song while shooting, or any number of things. But common sense leads us to not even con-

sider such possibilities and to look instead for an interpretation that involves accuracy in aim and success in hitting the mark. This hypothesis then leads us to look for evidence that confirms the supposition and once we find it, we are confident we have the right interpretation of the classic. This is precisely what Dasan does. He *does not* simply *reason his way* to his interpretation; reason is a guide used to orient and control the search for philological evidence about how to read the classics. It leads us to focus upon the font of all true wisdom: the classics.

Accordingly, while I agree that there are novel and interesting aspects to Dasan's philosophy (some of them described above, others drawn from earlier strata of the tradition, from his study of Catholic philosophy, or born out his own creative genius) I do not see any clear evidence that he thought he was pursuing a new methodology grounded in reason or reasonability. And this is part of why I also do not believe Dasan thought of his work as or sought to craft a new, syncretic Confucian philosophy—as Professor Kim claims he did by saying, “[what Dasan] truly wished to achieve though his commentary on the *Analects* was a synthesis of all transmitted Confucian ideas (methodology) and thereby the creation of a new Confucian philosophy (goal)” (p. 14). After all, the *Old and New Commentaries* is a commentary and there is nothing methodologically new in that, nor in writing commentaries that assemble, review, criticize, augment, and extend existing commentaries. This is precisely what Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) does in his *Sishujizhu* 四書集注 (Collected Commentaries on the Four Books), as do many other commentators. I would say none does it better than Zhu Xi and only one comes close: Dasan. There is no clear attempt to synthesize different views—in the sense of engaging in some sort of dialectic across commentaries; Dasan follows the commentators who support what he sees as the truth and refutes those who diverge from what he sees as the one true Way. He did not have as his goal the creation of a new Confucian philosophy any more than Zhu Xi did. To have such an aim would require one to recognize that the sages and the classics they wrote were wrong or at least importantly incomplete, but, as noted earlier, Professor Kim makes clear that this was not Dasan's view which was

that “the Confucian classics contained no errors” (p. 16). Moreover, in the absence of a speculative historical theory about the evolution of the Way, a belief that each commentator in the course of history only grasped—or *could only* grasp—small parts of the Way, or some other enabling background assumption, it is not clear why anyone would set out to produce a synthesis of all the commentaries of the past. Someone who had such an aim, to produce a new, syncretic expression of Confucianism, would not feel the need to engage in the meticulous, demanding, and largely *critical* project that produced the *Old and New Commentaries*.

I now turn to a review of some selections from the translation before concluding with some comments about Professor Kim’s explanations of Dasan’s commentary on each passage of the *Analects*. The selections present a representative sample of the kinds of linguistic and philosophical issues one finds throughout the translation.

Page 38 presents a translation of *Analects* 1.2, which begins, “Those who are filial to their parents and compliant with their elders hardly defy their superiors.” The Chinese text is, 其爲人也孝弟, 而好犯上者, 鮮矣. The last part seems a bit off the mark. The way it stands, his translation says that filial and compliant people only defy their superiors *a little bit*, while the Chinese text is better understood as suggesting that they defy their superiors rarely. Perhaps Professor Kim meant to say not “hardly” but “hardly ever” for 鮮矣. He translates the same two characters naturally and correctly in the case of *Analects* 1.3 (p. 44) by rendering it “It is rare. . . .”

Page 96 contains some lines of Dasan’s commentary on *Analects* 2.5. The original Chinese is, 孟僖子將卒屬說與何忌於夫子, 使學禮焉. Professor Kim offers the following translation, “When Mengxizi was about to die, he asked Confucius for the caregiving of Yue and Heji so that they could learn about ritual propriety from him.” The primary problem here is minor but characteristic of infelicities in translation and word choice that appear quite regularly throughout the volume. In this case, somewhat awkward expression makes understanding more challenging than it should be. A more natural rendering would be, “When Mengxizi was about to die he entrusted Yue and Heji to Kongzi’s care, so they could study ritual under him.”

Page 98 contains some lines from Dasan's commentary on *Analects* 4.18. The original Chinese is, 子曰 事父母幾諫。見志不從，又敬不違，勞而不怨。 Professor Kim offers the following translation of the first part, "The Master said 'When serving your parents, remonstrate with them, but gently. This is to show that you intend not to follow their orders.'" He goes on to note that the passage is, "... usually translated '... When serving your parents, remonstrate with them, but gently. When they show their intention not to follow your advice.'" There is an obvious problem in the concluding line of the "usual" translation that leads to other interesting issues. In Professor Kim's translation, the second line, 見志不從, is presented as a full sentence and the translation of the usual or traditional interpretation is supposed to parallel it, though with a different sense. However, the English provided, "When they show their intention not to follow your advice" is not a sentence. A translation of the complete traditional interpretation shows how the problem arose, "In serving your parents, remonstrate with them, but gently. If they show their intention is to not follow your advice, remain reverent but do not turn from your purpose. If they punish you, do not murmur." As is clear, on this reading, the four characters of the second line are taken as a phrase.

But there is more to note in regard to this passage. The original Chinese of Dasan's complete commentary is, 幾諫者，不敢直諫，但以微意諷之使喻也。見讀作現，露也，示也。微示己志之不從親命，且須恭敬不違親命，以俟其自悟也。如是則勞矣，雖勞不怨。 I would translate as, "*Ji jian* means to not dare to remonstrate directly but only to subtly chide them in order to get them to understand. *Jian* should be read as *xian* and means to reveal or show. You should subtly show your intention is to not comply with your parents' directions, but you must be respectful and reverent and not act contrary to their directions, waiting for them to come around on their own. This will require hard work, but though you must work hard do not murmur." In light of these comments, Dasan's interpretation does indeed differ from the traditional reading but not as greatly or quite in the way the Professor Kim's translation suggests. A full rendering of it would be, "In serving your parents, remonstrate with them, but gently. [Subtly] show that your intention is to not comply with their directions; be respectful and reverent but

do not act contrary to their directions. Though you must make effort, do not murmur.”

Page 99 contains some lines of Dasan’s commentary on *Analects* 2.7. The original Chinese is, 子游問孝。子曰：“今之孝者，是謂能養。至於犬馬，皆能有養。不敬，何以別乎？” Professor Kim’s translation is, “Zi You asked about filial piety. The Master said, ‘Nowadays, filial piety refers to being able to attend one’s parents. However, even dogs and horses attend people. Without reverence, what is there to distinguish them?’” I can understand the motivation but am not persuaded that “attend” is the best choice for the word 養, which Dasan explains by saying it is “standing by and taking care of/providing for them (i.e. one’s parents)” 左右奉養. A more serious problem is how readers are to understand the last line and especially “what is there to distinguish them?” The most immediate reference of “them” is dogs and horses, but clearly that is not intended.

As Professor Kim notes in his discussion, *Analects* 2.7 generated two major lines of commentary. On the first, advanced by Bao Xian and Xing Bing, it goes something like, “Zi You asked about filial piety. The Master said, ‘Nowadays, filial piety refers to those who are able to take care of their parents. However, even dogs and horses are able to take care of [people]. If there is no reverence, how do we distinguish between [these two cases]?’” The text of the commentary that supports this reading is, 何曰：“犬以守禦，馬以代勞，皆養人者。” 邢云：“犬馬皆能養人，但畜獸無知，不能生敬，” which I translate as, “Bao [Xian] says, ‘Dogs are used to guard; horses are used for their labor; both of these take care of human beings.’ Xing [Bing] says, ‘Dogs and horses both are able to take care of human beings, but they are just domestic animals without any intelligence and are not able to generate feelings of reverence.’” The point is that even dogs and horses are able to take care of people. So taking care alone is not sufficient to be deemed filial. If we do not revere our parents as well as take care of them, *we act no better than* dogs or horses. The second line of interpretation, advanced by He Yan and others, understands the passage as saying, “Zi You asked about filial piety. The Master said, ‘Nowadays, filial piety refers to those who are able to take care of their parents. However, even dogs and horses are able to be taken care of. If there is no

reverence, how do we distinguish between the two cases?” The commentary supporting this reading, which we shall return to below, is 何曰: “人之所養, 乃至於犬馬, 不敬則無以別,” which I translate as, “He Yan says, ‘Among the things that human beings take care of are dogs and horses. If there is no feeling of reverence [in taking care of parents] there is nothing to distinguish it [from the case of dogs and horses].’” The point, on this reading, turns on the fact that we take care of not only our parents but domestic animals as well. If we don’t show reverence to the former, then we *treat them like* dogs or horses. Dasan follows the first line of interpretation; he is saying if we don’t revere our parents as well as take care of them then we are no different from dogs and horses. Of course, distinguishing between humans and non-human animals was an important theme for Dasan and a significant part of the eighteenth century Horak Debate. As Dasan puts it in regard to this passage, “If one takes care of (one’s parents) without feeling reverence, one has no way to distinguish oneself from dogs or horses.” 養而不敬, 無以自別於犬馬也。

A similar problem emerges later in the same section (p. 100) with the translation of the He Yan commentary cited above. Professor Kim offers as his translation, “People can nourish even dogs and horses. Without reverence, there is no way to distinguish this from that.” The problem is that the references of “this” and “that” are unclear. Something more along the lines of the translation provided above is in order. It is true that at times we need to provide more than what is in the text, but we should mark what we provide and offer what readers need to make sense of the Chinese.

Finally, in the same section we find a translation of part of Dasan’s commentary (the characters in square brackets are translated in footnotes in Professor Kim’s work), 犬馬能事人, 故曰能。[能者, 奇之也]。若人養犬馬, 何能之有? [事之常]。幾見有人而不能餵畜者乎? Professor Kim translates this as, “Since dogs and horses manage [能] to serve people, it is said that they ‘can.’ [The character *neng* (“can”) is here used because it leaves a strong impression.] If people nourish dogs and horses, how can it be said that they ‘can?’ [There is nothing special.] How many times do we see people who cannot breed domestic animals?” As it stands, the translation is difficult to comprehend (among other

things, if people are *able to* do something then of course they *can*). The following alternative eliminates what is obscure, “Dogs and horses are able to provide for human beings, and so it says they ‘are able.’ (To be ‘able’ implies [possessing] something special.) In the case of human beings providing for dogs and horses, what ‘ability’ is needed? (This is something quite ordinary.) How often have you seen a human being who is not able to feed domestic animals?”

On page 105, Dasan cites a line from the *Book of Changes* in the course of his commentary. Professor Kim translates this line as, “That which it keeps a beauty but should endure is for manifesting [發] it in due time.” The Chinese is, 含章可貞, 以時發也. As it stands, the translation is difficult to understand or to see quite how it is derived from the original text. A more straightforward rendering would be, “He keeps his excellence under restraint, but firmly maintains it; at the proper time he will manifest it.”

Page 166 concerns *Analects* 3.7, the last line of which Professor Kim translates as, “Even in competition, they are decent.” The Chinese is, 其爭也, 君子. I see no good reason from the text or ideas presented for translating the characters 君子 as “they are decent.” This term often is translated as “noble person” and this is how Professor Kim treats it a little later (p. 167) when he presents part of Dasan’s supplement as, “This is the competition of noble people.” The Chinese in this case is, 君子之爭也.

Pages 200-201 concern *Analects* 3.17, the last lines of which Professor Kim translates as, “Ci! Do you care for the sheep? I care for the ritual.” The Chinese is, 賜也! 爾愛其羊, 我愛其禮. I see no basis or good motive for translating the characters 爾愛其羊 as an interrogative. There is nothing that supports this in the text and it undermines the strong contrast Kongzi is drawing between the opposing declarations of what Zi Gong and he value. On the following page, Professor Kim translates the first line of Bao Xian’s commentary as “If the sheep still exist, the ritual will remain recognizable. If the sheep are removed, however, the ritual will eventually perish.” The Chinese for this is, 羊存, 猶以識其禮, 羊亡, 禮遂廢. The translation gets rather obscure here, partly because it seems to imply that the sacrifice involves more than one sheep and because of choosing to translate 存 as “exist” rather than

“kept” or “retained” (see below). I suggest we translate it as, “If the sheep is retained, [people] will continue to acknowledge the ritual; if the sheep is dispensed with, the ritual will subsequently be abandoned.”

Page 214 presents Dasan’s interpretation and comments on *Analects* 3.22, which begins, on Professor Kim’s apt translation, with the famous line “Guan Zhong’s capacity was small indeed!” The Chinese is, 管仲之器小哉! Dasan provides an explanatory supplement for this line, which Professor Kim presents as, “*qixiao*” (capacity is small) means that his receptiveness is limited.” The Chinese for the supplement is, 器小, 謂其所容受不大也. There are two minor issues here. First, it is not at all clear what is intended by “receptiveness.” It makes it sound as if Guan Zhong is lacking in open mindedness or sensitivity, which in my view would be mistaken. The problem arises primarily because Professor Kim offers a parenthetical translation of *qixiao*, which is the explanandum and should be left simply Romanized. To translate it not only begs the question of what it means but also deprives the translator of the right translation for the gloss that Dasan offers, which is precisely how Professor Kim translates the line from the *Analects*. The supplement would be better rendered, “*qixiao*” means that his capacity was not great.

The selective review of translations above is offered as representative of what can be found throughout much of Professor Kim’s translation. The kinds of issues explored in this selection reflect the general challenges associated with understanding and rendering classical Chinese philosophical texts into a modern language and would likely be found in any translation of a text as complex, subtle, and extensive as the *Old and New Commentaries*. To some extent, these matters may also reflect the exceptional challenge of translating from such a difficult classical language into a modern language that is not one’s native tongue. When considered in the light of these multiple challenges, the problems are not extensive or severe and the achievements are many and impressive.

Let me close with a few observations about another distinctive feature of this volume: Professor Kim’s commentaries on Dasan’s text. After translating each of the original *Analects* passages and Dasan’s commentary, Professor Kim provides his own explanations

of Dasan's explanations. These are always substantial and sometimes longer than the text they elucidate. They provide a wealth of additional sources and historical context and occasionally endeavour to explain why Dasan criticized or defended particular views because of his engagement with and commitment to important political and social issues of his time. Two things strike me as worthy of note and potentially of benefit to general readers in regard to Professor Kim's commentary. First, contemporary English readers should recognize that the book they are reading reproduces, to a remarkable extent, the book that is the object of study. I mean by this not only that it consists of an extensive, running commentary on a book that is an extensive, running commentary (on a collection of extensive running commentaries) but also, the modern commentary by Professor Kim, like Dasan's commentary, is primarily aimed at getting at the correct meaning of the text it takes as its explanandum. Second, the explanations offered by the modern running commentary contain almost no developed philosophical arguments, in the sense of attempts to justify the ethical or political claims made. This will disappoint readers who come to the text thinking it will offer a set of propositions and arguments of the type familiar to contemporary philosophers. Such an expectation is misguided in this case; it misconstrues the original format, structure, and aim of both the traditional (Dasan's) and modern work (Professor Kim's). Neither sets out to produce a constructive philosophical work based on claims about things like the good, the right, or the beautiful that it then defends by making clear its premises and mustering supporting argument and evidence nor do they seek to explain, analyze, and draw upon the commentarial tradition to contribute to or challenge contemporary philosophical views. Instead, both authors have sought to present a sustained and systematic interpretation of earlier works whose philosophical merit was not in question: their aim was clear and thorough explication. Once readers embrace this stance and perspective, they will see and appreciate the true nature and value of both this work of Dasan's and this work on Dasan.