The Paradox of Learning to become a Sage: Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 Reintegration of Sagehood and Governing the World

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Abstract

This article explains how Zhu Xi attempted to reintegrate sagehood and governing the world, one of the most serious political questions in the Confucian tradition. Facing the gap between moral authority and actual political power, Zhu Xi presented a new alternative for integrating sagehood and ideal governance. This article explores his idea of sagehood in connection to his new approach to governance. I pay particular attention to the paradox of “learning to become a sage,” since Zhu Xi’s teaching included a seemingly self-contradictory promise. For Zhu Xi, every human being has the universal potential to become a sage and anyone can be a sage through learning. However, Zhu Xi also held that in physical and historical reality it is impossible for humans to become a sage through learning. This contradiction shifts the focus of learning from the result of learning to the process of learning. Zhu Xi emphasized learning as a lifelong project and argued that individuals seeking sagehood should engage in the processes of right learning throughout their lives without interruption. According to him, the importance of learning to become a sage lies in following a path of moral learning rather than the possibility of realizing its ultimate goal. The most crucial notions of Zhu Xi’s philosophical system are also described through the metaphor of process. The investigation of things, the most fundamental basis of his learning, has the same contradiction as learning to become a

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sage. With such a philosophical system, Zhu Xi also claimed that the sagely governance prepared by Confucius was his learning *per se*. As a result, he attempted to reintegrate sagehood and statecraft by presenting the learning process as analogous to or identical with the governing process. One consequence of this, I argue, is that Zhu Xi’s learning process can also be seen as the process of governing the world in which it is a group of people with a shared purpose, rather than a single sage, who participate by committing to the lifelong project of learning to become a sage.

**Keywords:** Zhu Xi, sagehood, governing the world, process, paradox of learning to become a sage, reintegration of sagehood and governing the world
1. Sagehood as a Political Question

Tension between the ideal world ruled by sage-rulers and the real world ruled by secular political power has always cast a long shadow on the considerable history of the Confucian tradition.\(^1\) In the ideal world order the Confucian Classics envision, the rulers of all under heaven were also sages. The Three Dynasties (sandai 三代) are often regarded as the Golden Age in this tradition because of the perception that sagehood and real political power were in unity at that time.\(^2\) However, since the desirable unity of sagehood and political power quickly vanished from the actual world and became entrenched in legend, Confucian scholars have faced serious questions about the practical relationship between Confucian sagehood and governing the world, namely: In the real world, how can we reintegrate these two realms which were initially indivisible? Should we redefine the relationship between sagehood and the secular political power? If so, how? To answer these politically sensitive questions, we must begin with the question of how to define sagehood.

Zhu Xi’s (1130-1200) learning is often referred to as “learning to become a sage (shengxue 聖學),” largely because his learning is based on the assumption that every human being is born with the full potential to become a sage through learning. Because Zhi Xi posits a universal human potential for achieving sagehood, the tension between sagehood and the real political power of governing the world became more complicated in his learning: If everyone can become a sage through learning, should those who pursue sagehood also be entitled to govern the world? In other words, if someone were to achieve sagehood through learning, should they by virtue of this fact become a political ruler too? It should not be surprising that questions such as these would have been very uncomfortable questions for a monarchical system where rulers were decided by hereditary blood line rather than by claims of sagehood. The idea of “abdication to the worthiest” (shanrang 禪讓) rooted in the

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1) Concerning the tension in the history of Confucian tradition, see Ching, “Neo-Confucian Utopian Theories and Political Ethics”; and Bol, Neo-Confucianism in History.

2) Regardless of the historical reality of the three dynasties, Xia 菽, Shang 商, and Zhou 周, Confucian tradition believed in and supported the idealized image of the Three Dynasties in which the most desirable human state, one which integrated both morality and power, was realized.
Confucian Classics could lead to doubts about political legitimacy in the real world where a ruling family monopolized political power and the ruler was not necessarily a sage (and thus the worthiest to rule). 3) Zhu Xi’s task, in part, was to tackle these sensitive questions by redefining sagehood and governance without abandoning the ideal that sages should have actual political power to govern the real world. It is not a simple enterprise to resolve such contradictions between the ideal and reality by proposing a compelling and practical alternative. However, Zhu Xi provided both a novel and persuasive solution to this potentially thorny problem. I would argue that his approach has exerted a significant impact not only on Chinese history but also on human history in general. 4)

Recent studies on Zhu Xi’s views on political governance have shown that his ideas regarding governing were quite novel. 5) Zhu Xi tried to build up a larger community and networks of literati as the basis of social and political reform instead of relying only on the emperor or government. 6) He also believed that the improvement of society should have its ground in moral cultivation rather than institutional reform. However, the moral self-cultivation proposed in Zhu Xi’s learning is not cast simply as a private and personal enterprise of an isolated self. For Zhu Xi, self-cultivation should be pursued through participating in the right learning process, which is also a social and political process.

This article attempts to explain Zhu Xi’s idea of sagehood in connection with his new approach to governing the world. Zhu Xi’s idea of sagehood is much more complicated and paradoxical than expected. I

3) With regard to the idea of the abdication to the worthiest and the tension between the ideal and reality in Chinese history, see Allan, The Heir and the Sage: Dynastic Legend in Early China.

4) Accounts of Zhu Xi’s significance in the history of Chinese philosophy that emphasizes his role as an architect of Neo-Confucianism often attenuates his important role in presenting a new alternative to the way of governing the world. However, East Asian societies since Zhu Xi have been seriously influenced by his novel approach to governance, which is one significant reason why his philosophical system had been so appealing to many literati. In fact, his philosophical system cannot be separated from his idea of governance, and this article tries to explain the relationship between two realms.

5) Refer to Hymes and Schirokauer, Ordering the World: Approaches to State and Society in Sung Dynasty China; and Bol, “Neo-Confucianism and Local Society, Twelfth to Sixteenth Century: A Case Study,” “The ‘Localist Turn’ and ‘Local Identity’ in Later Imperial China,” and Neo-Confucianism in History; and Min, “The Republic of the Mind: Zhu Xi’s Learning (Xue) as a Sociopolitical Agenda and the Construction of Literati Society.”

6) The studies of Tsuyuhiko Ichiiki, Min Byounghee, and Peter Bol (2010) present the structure of the approach and offer several concrete examples.
pay particular attention to the paradox of “learning to become a sage,” a notion which has recently received detailed attention from several scholars writing about Zhu Xi’s learning.\(^7\) Although “learning to become a sage” is claimed as the primary purpose of Zhu Xi’s learning, a close examination of Zhu Xi’s texts reveals that he asserted both that in human history no one has ever become a sage through learning and that no one will do so in the future either. How can we explain this paradox of sagehood and learning? If it is impossible for anybody to become a sage through learning, why should we make an effort to become a sage through his learning? What does “learning to become a sage” really mean? What can learning do for us? Why do we still have to learn? As we shall see, the questions surrounding the paradox of “learning to become a sage” are, in fact, closely related to Zhu Xi’s concern with how to govern the world.

2. Zhu Xi’s Paradoxical Position on “Learning to become a sage”

The ultimate purpose of Zhu Xi’s learning is becoming a sage. “If one pursues learning to its ultimate,” he writes, “then one can become a sage. If one does not learn, then one cannot avoid remaining a simple villager. Can one afford not to make an effort?\(^8\) Daoxue 道學 is premised on the idea that all human beings can become a sage through learning because they are endowed with li 理 as their nature. However, to our surprise, Zhu Xi also implies that thus far in human history, no one has yet become a sage through learning. Furthermore, his logic suggests that becoming a sage through learning will never happen either.

Zhu Xi’s commentary on the Analects separated Confucius’ learning into two categories: Learning of li 理 and learning of concrete affairs like “the names of the objects used in ceremonial and music and the details of historical change.”\(^9\) Zhu Xi claimed that Confucius did not need to learn in order to understand li and that he simply needed “to use unity to connect all things (yi yi guan zhi 一以貫之).”\(^10\) The

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8) This paragraph is Zhu Xi’s commentary on Lunyu jizhu 5:28, Zhuzi quanshu 6, 108: “學之至則可以為聖人，不學則不免為鄉人而已。”

9) Zhu Xi’s commentary on Lunyu jizhu 7:20 reveals the idea. Zhuzi quanshu 6, 126: “蓋生而可知者義理爾，若夫禮樂名物古今事變，亦必待學而後有以騐其實也。”
The implication of this position is that Confucius must have been born with a preexistent apprehension of *li* and applied it to concrete affairs. Since the final goal of learning in *daoxue* is to apprehend *li* and those who realize *li* are sages, within this view it follows that although Confucius would have needed to learn practical knowledge such as details of rituals and institutions, the sagehood he achieved was not through learning but by virtue of inborn capability.

In his commentary on the famous account in the *Analects* of Confucius’ six life stages, Zhu Xi describes a sage as one who “has an innate knowledge and being at ease in realizing them in practice (sheng zhi an xing 生知安行)” and argues that no one can become a sage merely through efforts:

> I maintained that the sage [Confucius] had an innate knowledge and was at ease in realizing them in practice and everything came without gradual or cumulative advancement. Despite this he never believed that he had already reached this stage. In daily life Confucius alone was able to realize his own advancement which other people could not reach. Accordingly it appeared that he was gradually accumulating learning so that he described himself that way. It was because he wanted students to follow his example as their model for self-motivation and make efforts for learning. It was not the case that he regarded himself as a sage but temporarily showed modesty. All subsequent examples of modesty on Confucius’ part are motivated by the same intention.11

In the above passage, Zhu Xi claims that Confucius modestly described himself as one who made progress through learning because he wished to inspire others’ learning with his example, not because he felt that it was accurate to explain his own experience of sagehood. Zhu Xi’s claim that Confucius was born as a sage and he did not need to attain sagehood through learning follows a view advanced previously by Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107). Cheng Yi also described Confucius as one who was born with innate knowledge and explained Confucius’ claim to have reached his stage through learning as designed to encourage later generations to advance their own learning.12 According to both Cheng

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10) See the context of the idea, see Zhuzi yulei 45, Zhuzi quanshu 15, 1548: “問 子貢一貫章，曰 聖人也不是不學會博學多識，只是聖人所以聖，卻不在博學多識，而在以一貫之。今人有博学多識而不能至於聖者，只是無一以貫之。然只是一以貫之，而不博學多識，則又無物可貫。”

11) Zhu Xi’s commentary on Lunyu jizhu 2:4, Zhuzi quanshu 6, 76: “愚謂聖人生知安行固無積累之漸，然其心未嘗自為已至此也。是其日用之間，必有獨覺其進而人不及知者。故因其近似以自名，欲學者以是為因而自勉，非心自聖而姑為是退託也。後凡言謙辭之屬，意皆放此。”

12) Zhu Xi’s commentary on Lunyu jizhu 2:4, Zhuzi quanshu 6, 75-76. Zhu Xi quoted Cheng Yi’s explanation of why Confucius pretended to learn.
and Zhu, although learning was effortless for Confucius, he never stopped exhibiting the incremental and cumulative learning process, since he wished to provide a role model for his students and encourage them to make ceaseless efforts.\(^{13}\)

When scholars posed the question of why Confucius would pursue learning if he was born with innate knowledge, Zhu Xi consistently explained that Confucius “pretended” to learn for other people. Zhu Xi thought that sages have an inborn qi 氣 component which is undefiled and inherently different from that of an ordinary human.\(^{14}\) In his conversation on the Analects with students, Zhu Xi made a clear distinction between sages and those who engage in learning (xuezhe 學者).

Question: “Exhausting one’s own utmost sincerity (zhong 忠), this is the utmost sincerity of those who engage in learning. Then do sages also always make commitment to such utmost sincerity?” Answer: “Those who engage in learning (xuezhe) are those who emulate sages but have not reached sagehood yet. Sages are those whose learning reaches the utmost stage. Whereas sages are only [the product of] their nature, those who engage in learning (xuezhe) are [through] making efforts. If something is in one’s nature, it lasts long and does not change. If it is achieved through making efforts, sometimes it could be lost and missed.” And he continues quoting Master Cheng’s words: “Mencius was doing what Confucius did, and exhaustively did that. But yet he had not been able to do just like the sage was doing.” Yang Shi 楊時 (1053-1135) said, “Confucius is similar to a Prefect, and Mencius is similar to an Inspector (tongpan quanzhou 通判權州).” This analogy is really good. One can conduct affairs as an Inspector, but it is not as long-lasting as a Prefect.”\(^{15}\)

Zhu Xi believed that even though Mencius was the crucial link in the transmission of dao 道, he did not reach the stage of Confucius. Master Cheng, Yang Shi, and Zhu Xi all maintained that Mencius cannot be considered as a sage. Therefore, judging from the gap between ordinary scholars who were far behind Mencius in their learning and born with more defiled qi 氣, sagehood should be impossible to achieve. To use John Makeham’s term, Zhu Xi took an “exclusivist” position concerning sagehood.\(^{16}\)

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14) Makeham, Transmitters and Creators, 249.
15) Zhu zi quanshu 14, 724 (Zhuzi yulei 21): “問 畢己之忠，此是學者之忠，聖人莫便是此忠否？曰 為是者是學聖人而未至者，聖人是為學而極至者。只是一箇自然，一箇勉強爾。惟自然，故久而不變，惟勉強，故有時而放失。因論程子說 孟子若做孔子事，儘做得，只是未能如聖人。龜山言 孔子似知州，孟子似通判權州，此喻甚好。通判權州，也做得，只是不久矣。”
16) Makeham, Transmitters and Creators, 214-220.
Recently Kakiuchi Keiko 坪内景子 and John Makeham 等 analyzed Zhu Xi’s view on learning, an issue which plays a very important role in Zhu’s commentaries on the Analects. Both scholars concluded that Zhu Xi did not believe that sagehood can be achieved through learning. For example, Zhu Xi implied that even the best student of Confucius, Yan Yuan 顏淵, could not achieve sagehood even through diligent study. Although Zhu Xi thought highly of Yan Yuan, he felt that there was still a huge gap between Confucius and Yan Yuan. In his commentaries on the Analects, Zhu Xi constantly maintained the same view on sagehood.

Fujii Michiaki’s 藤井倫明 study on the dao xue 道學 ideas of sagehood among Song 宋 (960-1279) thinkers also confirmed that dao xue thinkers such as Zhang Zai 張載 (1020-1077), Cheng Yi, and Zhu Xi all revealed paradoxical views on sagehood. They all placed sagehood in the realm of “nothing (wu 無),” “no intention (wuyi 無意),” and “non-doing (wuwei 無為).” This seems contradictory, since dao xue always emphasized “real existence (you 有)” and “doing (youwei 有為)” in contrast to the Buddhist and Daoist positions. Fujii interprets this contradiction by arguing that among dao xue thinkers “wu” of sages’, in fact, presented a strong longing for something constant, unchanging, timeless, and eternal. However, he explains that putting sages in the realms of the eternal and timeless also creates an insurmountable gap between sages and ordinary people. Dao xue thinkers placed sagehood in the unreachable realm and at the same time expected all of their students to set sagehood as their final goal for learning. In the long run, this contradictory demand required students to exert unceasing efforts for

17) Kakiuchi, Shu Kijon shūdan keisei no kenkyū, 28-49.
18) See Makeham, Transmitters and Creators.
19) See Zhu Xi’s commentary on Lunyu jizhu 6:7. Zahi quanshu 6, 111.
20) Zhu Xi’s commentary on Lunyu jizhu 6:7. Zahi quanshu 6, 111: “尹氏曰 此 胃顏子於聖人未達一間者也 若聖人則渾然無間斷矣.” Makeham quotes the similar passage: “Although Confucius was completely selfless (wuwo 無我), Yan Yuan merely stopped using “self” to suppress “other”; indeed he still entertained the relative distinction of self and other. Confucius, however, was completely without either self or other” (Makeham, Transmitters and Creators, 246).
learning throughout their lifetime even though such efforts were bound to fail in accomplishing their purported goal.

Zhu Xi clearly claimed that the purpose of learning is to become a sage. However, he simultaneously denied the possibility of being a sage through learning with references to physical and historical realities. For pedagogic and heuristic reasons, Confucius pretended to learn but he did not become a sage through learning. What does this paradox of learning to become a sage mean in the system of the *daoxue* philosophy and what kind of political implication does it have in regard to the relationship between sagehood and governing the world in the *daoxue* agenda? Makeham argues that what legitimated Zhu Xi’s project of learning to become a sage was “the pragmatic import of following a path of moral learning rather than the possibility of realizing its ultimate goal.” ⁴²) Zhu Xi himself explained this as follows: “These days the important thing in learning is to see how the sages taught people to make an effort.” ⁴³) In *daoxue*, encouraging people make a constant effort is the goal of learning. In reality, the closest a person can arrive to sagehood is being “always in process” of learning. This means that the goal of learning to become a sage is not to enable people to actually become sages but to teach people to emulate sagehood. If the goal of learning is to make people learn, this sounds redundant and tautological. However, it shifts the focus of learning and sagehood into a very different direction as it relates to the accomplishment of sagehood. If the significance of learning does not lie in its result but in its process, the meaning of sagehood in the world has also changed. Sagehood, then, is no longer a goal which one can realistically achieve, but an eternal and changeless standard which everyone should make a ceaseless effort to emulate for the duration of their life. Learning thus becomes an all-encompassing and extensive enterprise. If nobody can actually acquire sagehood in the world, the only way to transform the world into one which possesses sagely governance is to make the learning process similar to sagely governance. The shift of the focus of learning onto the importance of its “process” is thus crucial to understanding Zhu Xi’s philosophical system.

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⁴³) I re-quote from Makeham, ibid. which is originally the paragraph in *Zhuzi yulei*. 
3. Learning to become a sage as an Ongoing Process

For Zhu Xi, the importance of learning lies in the process instead of the result. Zhu Xi emphasized learning as an ongoing lifelong project. As long as one is alive, one should be always engaged in the learning process. Thus, what really matters is not whether one achieves sagehood or not but whether one is in the process of learning or not. In other words, what matters is whether or not they are engaged in the “right” processes. Zhu Xi’s learning to become a sage is actually learning to be “in the process of becoming a sage.” He argued that only his learning could provide the right process for those who aspired to become a sage.

Zhu Xi consistently adopted images of process or processing in order to describe the most crucial concepts in his philosophical system. Furthermore, he resolved many conflicts and contradictions in his philosophical system through defining something as a process in practice instead of a fixed entity. Because human consciousness can be described as something more akin to a flowing stream than to a fixed structure and human cognition is generally treated as a collection of cognitive “processes” rather than a set of components, it seems that thinking in terms of process is a natural derivative of the idea system which deals most seriously with human mind, perception, and cognition.

Adopting the image of process as a major metaphor is closely related to another major idea in Zhu Xi’ learning system: the dynamism of life. Zhu Xi’s system is full of images and notions of being alive, living, generating, regenerating and producing. Such images and notions are used for explanations of the core concepts in his philosophical system such as the mind (xin 心), li, the Supreme Ultimate (taiji 太極), and benevolence (ren 仁). In Zhu Xi’s thought, the mind is incessantly generating and regenerating (shengsheng bu qiong 生生不窮). The Supreme Ultimate (taiji) is also generating and regenerating (shengsheng 生生), and the Supreme Ultimate (taiji) is li. Ren is the Principle of generating and regenerating (shengsheng zhi li 生生之理). For Zhu Xi, the world never stops generating, producing, and nurturing life.

26) *Zhuzi yulei* 1: “太極只是一箇理字.”
27) *Zhu Xi ji* 6, 3542-3544: “Renshuo 仁說.” When Zhu Xi explained “Renshuo” in the part in which he accounted for his own works (*Lun zizhushu 論自注書*) in *Zhuzi yulei*, he also expressed the same idea. “仁者天地生物之心.”
Everything is always in process. It is no wonder that many students were puzzled by Zhu Xi’s remark that things which are withered and dead (枯槁 朽木) also have li.28) The predominant image of li in Zhu Xi is alive, living and generating in a dynamic process. Therefore, many questions were raised when Zhu Xi stated that the dead tree also has the same li. The major concepts of Zhu Xi’s philosophy can be defined as a processes and he emphasized that the process should not be interrupted for one moment. It is very plausible that Zhu Xi’s idea of learning to become a sage can also be defined as a process of becoming a sage. One function of this is that the learning process itself must be regarded as meaningful and the process of learning ought not to be ceased for one moment either.

It is also fair to say that for Zhu Xi, learning means employing the correct processes which lead to becoming a sage, even though nobody ever becomes a sage in their lifetime through these processes. However, it follows from this that what can be shared by a society is not the result of a sage’s moral decisions but things which emerge from the process of being moral. The result of moral decisions could be expressed in the form of institutions or moral judgments. Once good judgments or decisions have been made, they can be observed by others in a more concrete form. In Zhu Xi’s system, however, judgments and decisions cannot be imposed from outside oneself. In this case, the way in which sharable norms can be provided for society is by sharing the “process” of becoming a sage rather than through sharing the result of the embodiment of sagehood. The process of becoming a sage is learning. Now the crucial question for how to provide sharable norms for society leads to the question of how we can share the process of learning and produce some common ground in the learning process. The answer to this question determines whether or not Zhu Xi’s system can be sustained.

In Zhu Xi’s learning process, the “investigation of things” (gewu 格物) provides the common ground upon which people can share objective norms. The notion of the investigation of things can be viewed as underpinning the whole system of Zhu Xi’s learning. Zhu Xi held that if people cannot find any way to share the processes of their mind, society

28) *Zhuzi yulei 4 (Zhuzi quanshu 14)* shows many examples: “問 曾見答余方叔書，以為枯槁有理，不知枯槁瓦礫，如何有理，曰 且如大黃附子，亦是枯槁，然大黃不可為附子，附子不可為大黃。”問枯槁之物亦有性，是何也，曰 是他合下有此理，故云天下無性外之物。因行窮，云階磚便有理之理。因坐，云 竹椅便有竹椅之理。枯槁之物，謂之無生意，則可 謂之無生理。則不可，如朽木 無所用，正可付之焚燬，是無生意矣。然燒甚麼木，則是甚麼氣，亦各不同，這是理元如此。”“問 枯槁有理否，曰 才有物，便有理。天不曾生箇筆，人把兔毫來做筆。才有筆，便有理。”
tends toward anarchy. In order to avoid total anarchy, Zhu Xi suggested that we recognize that the *li* in our minds and the *li* in things in the world are one and the same. The unity, however, cannot be reached at one moment and endure for long because we continuously come into contact with new things as long as we are alive. That is why the investigation of things is more like the “method” of learning rather than the theoretical explanation of the unity. It serves as the foundation for all the steps in the Great Learning (*Daxue* 大學) and eventually leads to bringing peace to all under heaven. The “thorough penetration” (*huoran guantong* 豁然貫通) which the investigation of things pursues has a paradoxical problem congruent with that of sagehood. The ultimate goal of the investigation of things, furthermore, of the entire enterprise of Zhu Xi’s learning, is to reach the state of “thorough penetration (*huoran guantong*)”.

When one encounters a situation, one takes up the situation and examines its *li* to the very end. After while there are many [such *li* that one has examined thus], and spontaneously, one can “penetrate thoroughly.”

This idea of ‘thorough penetration’ is, admittedly, a confusing notion, particularly since it seems to resemble the notion of “sudden enlightenment (*dunwu* 頓悟)” in Chan Buddhism, which is precisely what Zhu Xi argued against. However, Zhu Xi’s “thorough penetration” can be achieved only after gradual accumulation (*jixi* 積習). That makes the idea of “thorough penetration” much more puzzling.

Today this one item is understood thoroughly and tomorrow that one item is also understood thoroughly. When many [such items] have been accumulated, then one can “penetrate thoroughly.”

To reach the ultimate state of penetration, one continuously investigates the *li* of many particular things. However, the *li* that is pursued as the ultimate goal of the thorough penetration is the one universal *li* which all the things in the universe share.

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29) Concerning the discussion on the investigation of things and “thorough penetration,” see Kim, The Natural Philosophy of Chu Hsi: Kim, ““Analogical Extension” (*leitui*) in Zhu Xi’s Methodology of “Investigation of Things” (*gewu*) and “Extension of Knowledge” (*zhizhi*),” 41-58. I refer to them for the translation in this chapter.

30) *Zhuzi quanshu* 14, 603 (*Zhuzi yulei* 18): “只是才遇一事，即就一事究討其理，少間多了，自然貫通.”


32) *Zhuzi quanshu* 14, 598 (*Zhuzi yulei* 18): “今日格一件，明日又格一件，積習既多，然後豁然有貫通處.”
Although the myriad li are simply one li, scholars still need to proceed to understand all the thousand ends and hundred beginnings inside the myriad lis.\(^{34}\)

It is true that for Zhu Xi, thorough penetration requires a moment in which our understanding undergoes a sudden leap, a process which bears at least a superficial similarity to the notion of sudden enlightenment in Chan Buddhism. However, what Zhu Xi advocated was enhancing the achievement of learning through cumulative, incremental effort, a gradual process made up of many smaller realizations. In fact, Zhu Xi explained the investigation of things with reference to probabilities many times:

Now let us talk about it with ten cases. If one can understand seven or eight cases then those two or three cases can be penetrated by means of [their being of the same] kind.\(^{35}\)

[Suppose] Dao and li of one thing has ten portions. If one only sees two or three portions, then one has not seen exhaustively. One must keep extending and must try to see [all] ten portions exhaustively. Only then can it be the investigation of the thing. If one has seen [all] ten portions exhaustively, only then on knows [that one can] stop.\(^{36}\)

This view of “thorough penetration,” the ultimate goal of the investigation of things, reminds us of the paradox connected with learning to become a sage examined earlier. Both the promise of being able to become a sage and also reaching the state of thorough penetration empower those who engage in the learning and legitimize the process of learning. Furthermore, for Zhu Xi, the goal of the investigation of things in practice is gradual accumulation (jixi). Therefore, our ability to find a way to share norms is tied to the process rather than the result of learning.

For Zhu Xi, thorough penetration refers to the moment of the leap from understanding particular principles of things to one universal principle, but is also predicated on the accomplishment of perfect unity between the li in things and the li in our mind. In Zhu Xi’s idea of the relationship between external world and self, there does not exist a

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34) Zhuzi quanshu 18, 3691 (Zhuzi yulei 117): “萬理雖只是一理，學者且要去萬理中千頭百緒都理會．”
35) Zhuzi quanshu 14, 604 (Zhuzi yulei 18): “今以十事言之，若理會得七八件，則那兩三件觸類可通．”
36) Zhuzi quanshu 18, 475 (Zhuzi yulei 15): “一物有十分道理，若只見三二分，便是見不盡，須是推來推去，要見盡十分，方是格．既見盡十分，便是知止．”
moment that human beings do not come into contact with the external world. Since human beings cannot be separated from the external world, we must begin anew the process of investigating and understanding a particular thing whenever encountering a new thing, even after one has already experienced the moment of “thorough penetration” in relation to other particular things. Therefore, an instance of thorough penetration cannot be the end of all the endeavors of apprehending li. One should start the process anew every time a new object is encountered. Thus the learning based on the investigation of things becomes a never-ending process and lifelong project, as the number of new things to investigate or encounter always exceeds our prior experience.

The paradox of learning to become a sage leads to an emphasis on the process of learning. As I have explained, Zhu Xi’s philosophical system also supports the same conclusion. The crucial notions like the mind, li, the Supreme Ultimate, and benevolence in his system are all explicated by images of processes. The investigation of things, the most important theory of learning in his system, has at its core a paradox similar to the one present in learning to become a sage. For Zhu Xi, thorough penetration, the ultimate goal of the investigation of things, cannot be achieved once and for all things as a consequence of learning and must be renewed incessantly. Therefore the learning which is fundamentally based on the investigation of things should be, like the process of becoming a sage, a lifelong process without any moment in which the task has been fully completed. Since the notion of sagehood and learning are both closely related to governing the world in the dao xue system, the idea that learning to become a sage is a lifelong process which can never be wholly completed should change the way of governing the world too. In the next section, I will explain how Zhu Xi reintegrated sagehood and statecraft and how sagely governance was presented within this paradoxical learning system.

4. Reintegration of Sagehood and Governing the World Prepared by Confucius

Zhu Xi depicted the antiquity as an ideal world where sages were also rulers, presenting his version of the lineage of dao 道 (the Way) in the “Preface to the Doctrine of the Mean” as below:

Yao 禹, Shun 顓, and Yu 稷 were great sages among all under heaven, and for them to pass on succession to [rulership of] the world was a major
matter for all under heaven. As great sages performing a major undertaking for all under heaven, on such momentous occasions their repeated admonitions still consisted only of these few words. How then could anything more be added to this from among all the principles under heaven? Subsequently sages upon sages succeeded one another: King Tang Shun, King Wen 文, and King Wu 武 as rulers, Gao Yao 謙陶, Yi Yin 伊尹, Fu Yue 傅說, the Duke of Zhou 周, and Duke Shao 召 as ministers, received and passed on the succession to dao. As for our master Confucius, though he did not attain a position of authority, nevertheless his resuming the learning of the past sages and imparting it to later scholars was a contribution even more worthy than that of Yao and Shun. Still, in his own time those who recognized him were only Yang Hui 雲 回 and Zeng Shen 曾參, who grasped and passed on his essential meaning.37)

With the exception of Confucius, Zhu Xi’s list of sages who passed dao includes only rulers and ministers. In antiquity, they received and passed rulership and dao simultaneously. Sages governed the world and learning and governance were integrated. Because the world was ruled by sage-rulers and they implemented a perfect system, the institutions that the government employed guaranteed good governance in antiquity. A reason why the world deteriorated into an undesirable situation is difficult to discern in Zhu Xi’s texts, but his narrative asserts that the perfect order maintained by the unity of sagehood and political power eventually disappeared. In a world where rulers were no longer sages, a new type of sage appeared. Zhu Xi pointed out that Confucius was different from the other ancient rulers and ministers in that he did not hold an influential governing position during his lifetime. However, Zhu Xi claimed that Confucius’ contribution was “even more worthy than that of Yao and Shun” because Confucius provided an alternative for future scholars. Confucius did not hold the deserved position so that “he took the way of the former kings, recited and passed them on to his disciples, to proclaim them to later generations.” As Confucius was often regarded as an uncrowned king (sunwang 素王), Zhu Xi believed that he should have attained the position of a ruler in the world as well. Zhu Xi argued that Confucius should be regarded as a sage not only because he had moral superiority but also because he prepared (or more properly, preserved) knowledge about the proper way to govern the world for later scholars.

In the “Personal Proposals for Schools and Official Recruitment” (xuexiao gongju siyi 學校貢舉私議), his famous discussion on the reform

37) Zhuzi quanshu 6, 29-30: “Zhonggong Zhangju xu 中庸章句序.” “夫堯舜禹天下之大聖也, 以天下相傅, 天下之事也。 以天下之大聖, 行天下之事而其授受之際, 丁寧告戒, 不過如此。則天下之理, 豈有加於此哉! 自是以來, 聖聖相承若成湯文武之為君, 皋陶伊傅周召之為臣, 既皆以此而接夫道統之傳, 若非天子, 則雖不得其位, 而所以繼往聖開來學, 其功沒有有於堯舜者。然當是時, 見而知之者惟顏氏, 曾氏之傳得其宗.”
of the educational and examination system, Zhu Xi portrayed literati (shi士) of the Golden Ages as follows:

In antiquity the method of selecting officials from the schools began with [school] in the villages and communities and reached up to [the Imperial College] at the capital. Students were taught moral conduct and the [six] arts, and those who were worthy and capable were promoted [to become officials.] There was just one place where students were educated, just one means by which they were made officials, and just one method by which they were selected. Therefore, literati (shi) had a fixed purpose and suffered no distractions. They made diligent efforts from morning to night and were only concerned about failing in moral cultivation rather than possible failure in attaining office or emoluments … As a systematic process this could help people to cultivate their minds and nourish their qi. Consequently people were able to make progress toward the goal of virtuous conduct. It was for this reason that the ancient system could develop human talents, enrich culture, regulate society's affairs, and bring about great peace. This is not so, however, of the present system.38)

According to Zhu Xi’s view of the ideal system of antiquity, education, selection of officials, and bureaucracy in the system should all be selected from one source. He states that “there was just one place where students were educated, just one means by which they were made officials, and just one method by which they were selected.” There was no other way to attain official positions. Everything was integrated into one perfect system. Through their employment of systematic processes, the ancient institutions could help people to cultivate their minds and nourish their qi. Therefore, literati in antiquity would naturally participate in governance; in fact, their participation was guaranteed in part by the government’s very system and institutions.

Zhu Xi claimed that governance and learning had ceased to be properly integrated during the dynasties between Confucius and the Cheng brothers. Although government and learning had been united in antiquity, he felt that government failed to provide learning in later times, and claimed that no subsequent periods could equal the Three Dynasties, which he saw as exceptional.39) The exceptional standing of the Three

38) Zhu Xi ji, 6, 3632: “古者學校選舉之法，始於鄉選而達於國都，教之以德行道藝，而興其賢者，能者，蓋其所以居之者無異處，所以官之者無異術，所以取之者無異路，是以士有定志而無外慕，蚤夜孜孜，唯懼德業之不脩，而不憂爵祿之未至……其為法制之密，又足以治心養氣之助，而進於道德之歸此古之為法所以能，人才而厚風俗，濟世務而興太平也，今之為法不然。”

39) Concerning the topic, Zhu Xi’s position is well expressed in the debate between Zhu Xi and Chen Liang 陳亮 (1143-1194) with regard to the unique status of the Three Dynasties and its difference from the later dynasties, see Tillman, Utilitarian Confucianism: Ch’en Liang’s Challenge to Chu Hsi, 203-206.
Dynasties did not, however, prompt him to propose simply attempting to recover its political institutions and structures. Unlike many daoxue thinkers in the Song periods, Zhu Xi believed that such a recovery would be impossible, stating that we cannot achieve good governance simply by recovering the institutional formats of the Three Dynasties and implementing them in the contemporary world. Even as he expressed his admiration and showed great respect for ancient institutions and idealized them, Zhu Xi basically disagreed with proposals made by other of his daoxue contemporaries to “recover” them. He was not a part of the institutional “returning to the antiquity” (fugu 復古) movement in the Song period, for example. Instead, what Zhu Xi idealized in his portrayal of the Three Dynasties was the way in which the society of the Three Dynasties operated as an organic whole. He felt that the utopian mechanism which antiquity exercised could not be explained simply by the sum of its institutions. By bracketing the Three Dynasties as an inimitable exception to the historical pattern, Zhu Xi liberated Confucian tradition from history and created a new beginning. Furthermore, he foreclosed the possibility of reintegrating sagehood and governing the world as part of a method to recover ancient ideal institutions. Although Zhu Xi never denied the institutional features and functions of governments, he thought that the state was merely a part of the bigger system. He did not believe that institutional approaches alone could successfully reintegrate sagehood and governance.

Zhu Xi insisted that governance (zheng 政) and learning (xue) should be unified. While he held that no institution can guarantee good governance by itself, he did not oppose the idea that sages should govern the world, however. He believed that if Confucius had lived in the right time, he should have been able to enact governance and teaching together. Although Confucius did not achieve the way in his own life time, Zhu Xi thought that later generations would be able to resume the way through his teachings. Therefore, the way to reintegrate sagehood and governing the world is the “learning” per se prepared by Confucius. Since learning to become a sage is a lifelong process, governing the world is achieved not through the implementation of institutions or emergence of sage-rulers but through a process actively and voluntarily participated in by those who commit to learning to become a sage as their lifelong project.

5. Concluding Remarks: Governance in/as the Learning Process and Paths Untaken
The problem of how sagehood and governing the world could be reintegrated in a real society where political power was clearly separated from sagehood remained a fundamental question for Zhu Xi. There were some easy ways to evade this troublesome question: declaring the present ruler to be a sage-king, enabling those who pursue sagehood to become government officials and exercise power as a minister, or simply by redefining “governing the world” as the practice of moral self-cultivation.

Although many have argued that Zhu Xi realized his political vision through governance by a sagely emperor who cultivates his mind,\textsuperscript{40} I would argue that in fact Zhu Xi does not recommend any of the aforementioned ways to reintegrate sagehood and governing the world. While it is true that Zhu Xi emphasized that rulers should participate in the only “right learning” (meaning the dao xue learning), and the self-cultivation of rulers did have enormous implications in governing the world for him, he never relied exclusively on sagely emperors for the enacting of sagely governance.\textsuperscript{41} Although a minister-centered governance (zaixiang zhengzhi 宰相政治) in which a minister who attempts to embody the dao xue vision in real politics and has power to check and control the absolute power of the monarch is also often referred to as the way to reintegrate sagehood and governing the world,\textsuperscript{42} Zhu Xi’s vision encompasses more than just minister-centered governance. Though Zhu Xi argued that governing the world should be based on moral self-cultivation, this does not mean that he advocated a naive moralist vision which failed to present any actual means to govern the world in the real society.\textsuperscript{43} This is, in fact, one of the many paths that Zhu Xi did not take.

Rather, Zhu Xi adopted a brand new approach, one which sought to integrate learning and governing the world into a unified process. In so doing, those who participate in his learning could also participate in governance. He designed his learning program as the way in which those who pursue his learning channel their aspiration for political participation into the public realm. Zhu Xi promoted an institutional basis for his

\textsuperscript{40} For the representative study of this type of perspective, see Yu, Zhu Xi de lishi shijie: Songdai shidafu zhengzhi wenhua de yanjiu.

\textsuperscript{41} See Bol, “On the Problem of Contextualizing Ideas” for a refutation of perspectives like those put forward by Yu Yingshi.

\textsuperscript{42} For an example of this perspective, see Wang, Sōdai no kötei kenryoku to shitaifu seiji.

\textsuperscript{43} Min argued against this view.
learning via such organizations as academies, community granaries, and community compacts through which the learning process could be closely related to both public social activity and the political realm.\(^{44}\) However, the single most important feature of Zhu Xi’s learning process as the way of governing the world was his effort to build powerful networks of literati and to influence public opinion (gonglun 从业者) through the learning process.

This article examines Zhu Xi’s idea of sagehood by focusing on the paradox of learning to become a sage. Zhu Xi’s teaching contained a self-contradictory promise: on the one hand, he insisted that every human being has the universal potential to become a sage through learning. On the other, he admitted that in physical and historical reality it is impossible for human being to become a sage through learning, since sages have innate knowledge and their sagehood is an inborn trait (Confucius, for example, was born as a sage). Although the sagehood of Confucius was not achieved through learning, Zhu Xi claimed that Confucius pretended to learn so that other people might emulate his model. The effect of Zhu Xi’s resolution of this seeming contradiction is a shift of the emphasis of learning from result to process. In other words, Zhu Xi emphasized learning to be a sage as a lifelong project that should be pursued even though it was impossible to achieve, since the importance of learning to become a sage lies in following a path of moral learning rather than the realizing its ultimate goal. Because learning to become a sage is, in fact, learning to be always in the process of being sage, the functional impact of having sagehood as the goal of his learning is to bind its followers to remaining continually in its process. Other crucial notions within Zhu Xi’s philosophical system (such as li and the Supreme Ultimate) are also described using the metaphor of process. The investigation of things, the most fundamental basis of his learning, embodied many of the same contradiction as learning to become a sage. The ultimate goal of the investigation of things is perfect penetration, which can never be achieved once and for all, but must be renewed every moment and continually in relation to different things. As with sagehood, what is emphasized most heavily is the learning process. Zhu Xi also claimed that the sagely governance prepared by Confucius is

\(^{44}\) Concerning community compacts, see Übelhör, “The Community Compact (Hsiang-yüeh) of the Sung and Its Educational Significance.” In regard to academies, see Walton, “The Institutional Context of Neo-Confucianism: Scholars, Schools, and Shu-yüan in Sung-Yuan China”; Walton, Academies and Society in Southern Sung China.
his learning *per se*. As a consequence, reintegrating sagehood and governing the world is nothing other than making the learning process coterminous with the governing process. Because it is functionally impossible for any person to actually achieve sagehood through learning, sagehood cannot be practiced as a result of the learning to become a sage. For Zhu Xi, then, there is no other way to reveal sageliness than by performing it in the process of making efforts to become a sage. Because no single person, no matter he is an emperor or minister, can be expected to govern the world as a sage, the world must be governed not by a single individual who has already become a sage but a group of people who have committed to the lifelong project of learning to become a sage. In this way, the paradox of learning to become a sage underpins Zhu Xi’s significant new idea for how the world ought to be governed.

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中文摘要

本文討論說明的是朱熹針對儒家政治思想中最重要的內容之一的“如何將‘聖人之治’與現實的‘經世’再結合”這一問題所提出的解決方法。針對現實中道德權威與政治權力乖離的問題，朱熹提出了將“聖人之治”與現實“經世”相結合的新的對策。本論文將朱熹新的“經世”觀點及其對聖人的思考結合起來進行了說明，並特別注意到朱熹所提出的“聖學”中所包含的悖論。朱熹一方面認為所有人都具備成聖的普遍潛力，通過“學”都能成聖。但同時另一方面他又指出在現實中與曆史上，從來都沒有人通過“學”而到達過聖人的境界，而且那也是不可能實現的。可見朱熹對於“學”其實持著自相矛盾的觀點。盡管如此，朱熹事實上是通過這一矛盾來啟發人們不要執著於“學”的結果而應該關注“學”的過程。朱熹強調說“學”是一個應當一生不斷追求的，哪怕是一個時間也不應該放棄的正確的“學”的過程。為了成聖而堅持“學”之所以重要，並不是因為“學”就真的有可能實現成聖這一最終目的，而是因為參與到遵循倫理的正確的學的過程本身才是最重要的。

朱熹哲學體系的主要概念和理論中也有很多可以用表現過程的比喻來予以說明的。而且他關於“學”的理論體系中處於最根本地位的“格物”也存在與“聖學”悖論類似的矛盾。在這樣的哲學體系基礎上，朱熹對他關於“經世”構想的說明繼承了孔子的思想，指的是準備好了的“聖王”的“經世”事實上就是“學”本身。朱熹對於“如何才能重新像三代理想時期一樣由聖人來治理天下”這一問題提出了將“學”與“經世”的過程同一化的方法。他認為，不是由一個完美無缺的聖人來治理天下，而是通過讓更多的人參與到為了成聖而終身獻身於“學”的過程中來這一辦法才能夠真正參與到“經世”的過程中。

關鍵詞：朱熹, 聖人, 經世, 過程, 聖學的悖論, 聖人之治與經世的再結合