The 'body politic' in ancient China

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Abstract. The 'body politic' occupies the core position in traditional Chinese political thinking. This is strongly supported by the fact that, for most ancient Chinese philosophers, self-cultivation was taken as the starting point of a programmatic way leading to the management of the world. The aim of this essay is to analyze the meaning and significance of the prevailing 'body politic' of ancient China.

In section two, the Chinese 'body politic' is placed within a comparative frame with the ideas of Plato (428–347 BCE) and Hobbes (1588–1679). It is argued that the 'body politic' in China is far from an abstract or theoretical discourse; the state was epistemologically taken as an extension of the human body, which is integral and organic in itself. Thus the body served as a metaphor or symbol to explain the organization and functionality of the state.

Section three details the 'body politic' in three ways. First, due to the comparability between the state and the body, the ruling of the state, as that of the body, should also commence with a kind of inside-out, morality-concerned self-cultivation. Second, there is a complicated interdependency between state functions, which are similar to those of the body. Third, if there is a center of dominancy gathered through the interactive process of the body, then a kind of political autocracy can thus be extrapolated in by the 'body politic'.

The conclusion points out that, in ancient Chinese body-thinking, the mind-heart had its socio-political dimensions, and the 'body' is no less than a psychosomatic one. Since the unification of China in 221 BCE, Confucianism had gradually gained the political vantage and become the imperial ideology. However, the ancient ideal of the 'Confucianization of politics' was thus transformed to the reality of the 'politicization of Confucianism'.

Introduction

That Chinese political thought is primarily a sort of 'body politic' is nowhere more evident than the fact that Chinese thinkers take the *cultivation of the body* (*xiushen* 修身) as the starting step to and the basis of the management of the state and the world. In the Chinese tradition, the transformation of the world starts from the transformation of one's self that begins with the moral cultivation of one's body. It is not far-fetched to say that the Chinese body is a political one, while politics in the Chinese tradition is a sort of body politics. This is a theme that has not been explored thoroughly by current scholarship on the philosophy of the body in East Asia.[1]

[1] Ames 1993; Yang Ju-pin 1998; Wu Kuang-ming 1997; Yuasa Tadao 1977.

This article aims to explain the peculiarities of the understanding of political organization through the body in ancient China. We shall compare the Chinese, especially the Confucian, notions of body with two classical political theorists in the West who used the body image to understand political organization. Then, the article pursues three ideal implications of such political understanding of the body and in this light discusses how far from political ideals the Chinese political world had fallen.

The idea of 'body politic' in classical China: a comparative perspective

Significantly, many thinkers all over the world have usually understood political organization in the image of the body; classical Chinese thinkers are no exception. But close observation reveals some important differences in emphasis and perspective between the Chinese political theories and the Western ones. This article brings out some Chinese peculiarities in the bodily understanding of political organization by comparing the concepts with those of Plato (428–347 B.C.) and of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), two classical political theorists in the West.

Classical Chinese political theories are entirely in the perspective of the human body, which includes the entirety of human life, be it physical, emotional, intellectual or social. As demonstrated in the *Analects* X (*xiangdang pian* 鄉黨篇), Confucius (551–479 B.C.), who behaved appropriately in accord with the changes in the socio-political circumstances, was the best performer of the 'body politic'. Confucius was reported to become submissive and inarticulate when he was in the local community.[2] In case of being summoned by his lord to act as usher, Confucius' face took on a serious expression and his step became brisk.[3] Confucius 'performed' and baptized his own body in the context and spirit of the political milieu. This is the reason why Confucius scolded his old friend Yuanrang 原壤 for his sitting with legs spread wide, and said: 'to refuse to die when old, that is what I call a pest',[4] because Yuanrang's gesture was against the rituals of Zhou 周 (1056?–256 B.C.), to which Confucius conformed himself strictly.[5] This is exactly 'body politic' in action. Moreover, the ideal of political organization was proclaimed in the *Li Ji* (the *Classic of Rites* 禮記) to be that 'the people take the ruler as their heart; the ruler takes the people as his body (*min yi jun wei xin, jun yi min wei ti* 民以君為心，君以民為體)'.[6] The 'heart'

[2] Lau 1992, 87 (BK X, 1).
[3] Ibid., 87 (BK X, 2).
[4] Ibid., 147 (BK XIV, 43).
[5] Li Ji 1953.
[6] Sun Xidan 1989, 2: 1329.

here is literally the bodily heart, as well as the so-called 'mind-heart', with the mind and the will. Specifically, for the ancient Chinese thinkers reason resides in the heart of our being, not in a transcendent Platonic heaven of ideal Forms beyond body.

Furthermore, the way to success in politics was proclaimed by Confucius to be 'rectifying one's body (*zheng qi shen* 正其身)';[7] without bodily rectification not even human integrity is possible. Politics starts from human, especially royal, bodily life and is patterned after the functions of the human body. In ancient China, the ruler's body was regarded as the state. In the *Gongyang* 公羊 commentaries on the *Chunqiu* (*Spring and Autumn Annals* 春秋), we read, 'the ruler takes the state as his body… therefore, the state and the ruler form one body'.[8] Given an animated understanding of our own bodily life, by extrapolation we are to understand the political community.

In contrast, Plato, in the persona of Socrates (470–399 B.C.), confessed in the *Republic* an ignorance of justice in personal life and proposed to understand it 'on the bigger scale' of the 'community'.[9] Justice in a state is easy to see; by analogy we see personal justice. According to Plato, the state was justice 'because three natural kinds existing in it performed each its own function'. The three powers were sober, brave, and wise, under the rulership of the power of sobriety, which was connected to the ideal Forms beyond this world of senses and opinions.[10]

Thus, for Plato, the field of politics was an indicator and directive for our understanding of human nature; from justice as social harmony we can infer personal virtue as happiness, as the health of an individual. However, for the classical Confucians, the the human body is the model after which the political body is patterned; both the human and the political body are cast in a highly symbolic 'body', that is, as the norm and model for our socio-political understanding and behaviour.

The same sort of contrast occurs between the classical Chinese thinkers and Thomas Hobbes. For Hobbes the empiricist, our body is just a material entity performing machine-like operations. Applying this view to political theory, Hobbes started with human individuals, the parts without the whole, to ponder over the body politic. The bodily parts taken apart from the mechanism of the natural whole are reduced to the insignificant nothing; similarly, selfish individuals in a hypothetical 'state of nature', deprived of an organized political community, are 'brutish, nasty, and solitary' and under threat of becoming extinct by 'a war of all men against all men'. Hobbes thus argued for the ineluctable necessity of 'social contract' under a single political authority; only the totalitarian Leviathan ensures individual survival.[11]

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[7] Lau 1992, 125 (BK XIII, 13). Lau renders '正其身' as *to make himself correct*.

[8] Chen Li 1927, juan 18, 126.

[9] Plato 1961, 677.

[10] Plato 1961, 677 (*Res.* 4, 425b–c).

[11] Hobbes 1964, 1967, xxvii–xxiv, 115–9.

Immediately, three points of contrast manifest themselves. First, for Hobbes, individuals as mechanical parts drew his overall concern. His astute observation about the necessity of social totality for individual survival spelt only an authoritarian control. In short, Hobbes' system has no room for social solidarity other than outside coercion. In contrast, the classical Chinese thinkers derived social cohesion from the life of the human body as organic interrelations, which was a *sine qua non* for bodily unity.

Secondly, Hobbes was an empiricist of a mechanistic sort; for him, the social togetherness of human 'parts' is to be effected externally, by the coolest of prudential calculation. Compared with Hobbes, the classical Chinese thinkers based their political thoughts on the organic oneness of the human body, and interpreted political solidarity in terms of bodily organic interdependence. Political community has an innate propensity as natural as bodily unity does.

Finally, Hobbes' unqualified endorsement of totalitarianism ultimately resulted in the total suppression of nasty impulsive individuals by total rational control. For him, impulsiveness ought to be separated from and controlled by Reason that partakes of eternal Forms. This is a derivation of the transcendent Platonism.

In the Chinese tradition which classical Confucianism promoted, however, the rulership of the mind-heart over the five senses is inherently organic. The mind-heart is at the heart of the human body as the author of the *Guan Zi* 管子 declared: 'as the mind-heart resides in the body, so the ruler resides in the state'.[12] As the mind-heart is to the body, so the ruler is to the subjects; 'four limbs and six channels are the body of the human body; four ministers and five administrators are the body of the state'.[13] Thus the ruler is described as the 'heart' ruling over the subjects as the 'legs and thighs', of a single political 'body'.[14] Xun Zi (fl. 298–38 B.C.) might be the first major Confucian philosopher in pre-Qin China who articulated the domination of the mind-heart as the ruler over the five organs as the subjects in the clearest way. Xun Zi said,[15]

> The eye, ear, nose, mouth, and body each has the capacity to provide sense contact, but their capacities are not interchangeable—these are termed 'the faculties given us by nature'. The heart/mind that dwells within the central cavity is used to control the five faculties—it is called 'the lord provided by nature'.
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> 耳、目、口、鼻、形，能各有接而不相能也，夫是之謂天官；心居中虛，以治五官，夫是之謂天君。

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[12] *Guan Zi*, juan 11: 'Jun chen, 2' 君臣下, 67a.

[13] Ibid., 67b.

[14] Cf. Yang Bojun 1982, especially the ninth year of Duke Xi 僖公 (Vol. 1, p. 328), the seventh year of Duke Wen 文公 (Vol. 1, p. 557), the fourteenth year of Duke Xiang 襄公 (Vol. 2, p. 1016), and the ninth year of Duke Zhao (Vol. 2, p. 1311).

[15] Knoblock 1990, 2: 16 (BK 17).

In Xun Zi's argumentation, it was the mind-heart that 'controlled'[16] the independent functions of the five organs, just as the king directed his ministers. The Han (206 B.C.–A.D. 220) Confucian Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 B.C.) inherited this tradition of 'body politic' in classical China when he powerfully announced: 'The ruler of the state is like the heart. He stays hid deep in his palace as the heart is hid in the chest'.[17]

In sum, in the understanding of political organization, the human body as the predominant functional model is taken seriously in China and especially in classical Confucianism, but not in the West. Three points stand out in this context of comparison.

First, Plato had already had a whiff of abstraction as he divided the human nature into three theoretical parts of sobriety, brevity, and wisdom.[18] In contrast, the classical Chinese thinkers looked at the human bodily constitution in general concrete terms such as eyes, ears, etc., submitted to head and mind-heart. This is a typical manifestation of the concrete mode of thinking in Chinese civilization. In traditional China, political theorization and philosophical argumentation were made possible on the basis of concrete entities such as the human body and historical events and personages.[19]

In the concrete understanding of the relation between the mind-heart and the six organs, a passage of a silk scroll excavated in December, 1973, from Tomb No. 3 of the Han dynasty (202 B.C.–A.D. 220) at Mawangdui 馬王堆, Changsha City, Hunan Province, is a very revealing one. The Jing 經 No. 22 of the *On Five Activities* (Wuxing pian 五行篇) says:[20]

> Ears, eyes, nose, mouth, hands, feet—those six are servants of the mind-heart. [When] the mind-heart says, Yes, none would dare [say] no [Yes: the mind-heart having said, alright, none] would dare [say] not [Alright. The mind-heart] having said, Go, none would dare not go. The mind-heart says, Not that far, none would dare not go not that far (Jing No. 22).
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> 〈經 22〉耳目鼻口手足六者，心之役也。心曰唯，莫敢不〔唯，心曰諾，莫〕敢不諾。心〕曰進，莫敢不進。心曰淺，莫敢不淺。

In *On Five Activities*, the mind-heart was personified as a general who ordered the six organs to act as soldiers. This is a typical concrete mode of thinking.

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[16] Both Joseph Needham and Benjamin Schwartz characterize Chinese thinking as a sort of 'correlative' mode of thinking. Cf. Needham (1985), Vol. 2, p. 350, and Benjamin I. Schwartz (1985), p. 350.

[17] Su Yu 1974, juan 17: Taindi zhi xing 天地之行 (The Course of Heaven and Earth), 324b–325b.

[18] Plato 1961, 677.

[19] Huang 2004, 107–20. Kung-chuan Hsiao had aptly indicated, 'A practical emphasis that does not esteem abstruse theorizing is the most obvious of the special characteristics of Chinese political thought'. See Hsiao, 1979, 7.

[20] Pang Pu 1980, 61.

Secondly, Hobbes looked at the human bodily relation mechanically, empirically, and externally, while the classical Chinese thinkers took various bodily relations to be organic, internal, and inherent to our nature. The classical Confucians, especially Mencius (371?–289? B.C.), insisted that the moral senses such as propriety (*li* 禮) and righteousness (*yi* 義) were intrinsic in everyone, and therefore the mind-heart is capable of generating value judgments. The Jing No. 1 of *On Five Activities* reads as follows:[21]

> [*Ren* (benevolence) formed within] is called conduct of virtue; not formed [within is called mere conduct. *Yi* (righteousness) formed within is called conduct of virtue; not formed within is called mere conduct. *Zhi* (wisdom)] formed within is called conduct of virtue; not formed within [is] called mere conduct. *Li* (decorum) formed within is called conduct of virtue; not formed within is called mere conduct. *Sheng* (sageliness) formed within [is called conduct of virtue; not formed within] is [called] mere conduct. Conduct of virtue, five in harmony, is called virtue; four types of conduct in harmony is called goodness. Goodness is the way of man; virtue is the way of heaven.
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> 〔人形于內，〕胃（謂）之德之行；不刑（形）于〔內，謂之行。義形于內，謂之德之行；不形于內，謂之行。智〕刑（形）于內，胃（謂）之德之行；不刑（形）于內，胃（謂）〔之〕行。禮刑（形）于內，胃（謂）之德之行；不刑（形）于內，胃（謂）之德之行。聖刑（形）于內，〔謂之德之行；不形于內，謂〕之行。德之行，五和胃（謂）之德；四行和，胃（謂）之善。善，人道也；德，天道也。

The author(s) of the above text insisted that only the conduct that comes out of the inside formation of these five virtues can be called good behaviour. The expression of 'formed within' (*xingyunei* 刑于內) presupposed an organic view of body as a metaphor of socio-political organization.

Finally, both Plato and Hobbes tried to explain the human body in the light of something else, some external perspective such as social community as Plato argued or machine as Hobbes upheld. Conversely, the classical Confucian thinkers took the human body as the root metaphor explaining the state in terms of the human body. Mencius said to King Xuan of Qi (齊宣王, r. 319–301 B.C.):[22]

> If a prince treats his subjects as his hands and feet, they will treat him as their belly and heart. If he treats them as his horses and hounds, they will treat him as a mere fellow-countryman. If he treats them as mud and weeds, they will treat him as an enemy.
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> 君之視臣如手足，則臣視君如腹心；君之視臣如犬馬，則臣是君如國人；君知視臣如土芥，則臣視君如寇讎。

Mencius used the hands, feet, belly and heart of human body as metaphors to carry the meaning of 'inter-subjectivity' in politics. From another angle, Xun Zi metaphorized the human body in a different political proposal when he said,[23]

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[21] Ibid., 23.

[22] *Mencius* IVB, 3. Cited from Lau 1992, 159.

[23] Knoblock 1990, 2: 185.

> The Son of Heaven does not look yet sees, does not listen yet hears, does not think yet knows, does not move yet accomplishes; rather like a clod of earth he sits alone on his mat, and the world follows him as though it were of a single body with him, just as the four limbs follow the dictates of the mind. This may indeed be described as the Grand Embodiment.
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> 故天子不視而見，不聽而聰，不慮而知，不動而功，塊然獨坐而天下從之如一體，如四肢之從心，夫是之謂大形。（《荀子．君道》）

Quite opposite to Mencius, Xun Zi used the human body to endorse his argument for autocracy.

In all these contrasts, the important contribution made by the classical Confucians concerning socio-political organization or the state comes out in their understanding of what rulership is through the body. To them, political rulership is not something transcendent, administering over the ruled populace from outside. Rather, it is just as the mind-heart governs the six organs of the human body. In classical Confucian political theories, rulership is a kind of internal governance that is inherent to the nature of the body itself. This crucial point has two significant implications.

To begin with, the ruling reason of the head and mind-heart comes from the same organic bodily unity as the other sensory organs. This is why Mencius called the head and the mind-heart the Great Bodies (*dati* 大體), as distinct from other sensory organs and emotions which he dubbed the Small Bodies (*xiaoti* 小體). Anyone can and should develop the Small Bodies into the Great Bodies, meaning that the perspective of the Great Body should be developed to pervade and encompass all the functions of the Small Bodies. *Mencius* IV: A, 15, reads as follows:[24]

> Kung-tu Tzu asked, 'Though equally human, why are some men greater than others?' 'He who is guided by the interests of the parts of his person that are of greater importance is a great man; he who is guided by the interests of the part of his person that are of smaller importance is a small man.' 'Though equally human, why are some men guided one way and others guided another way?' 'The organs of hearing and sight are unable to think and can be misled by external things. When one thing acts on another, all it does is to attract it. The organ of the heart can think. But it will find the answer only if it does think; otherwise, it will not find the answer. This is what Heaven has given me. If one makes one's stand on what is of greater importance in the first instance, what is of smaller importance cannot displace it. In this way, one cannot but be a great man.'
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> 公都子問曰：「鈞是人也，或為大人，或為小人，何也？」孟子曰：「從其大體為大人，從其小體為小人。」曰：「均是人也，或從其大體，或從其小體，何也？」曰：「耳目之官不思，而避於物。物交物。則引之而已矣。心之官則思，思則得之，不思則不得也，此天之所與我者。先立乎其大者，則其小者不能奪也。此為大人而已矣。」（《孟子·告子上·15》）

Mencius' words above clearly confirmed the importance of bodily cultivation, which leads to educative growth in both moral and political virtue.

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[24] *Mencius* BK IV, A, 15. Cited from Lau 1992, 238–9.

In this connection, we can perhaps understand *li* 禮 (religious rites, social decorum) as accumulated cultural wisdom[25] concerning how to behave socially to effect communal concord. This is exactly what the 17th century Tokugawa Japanese Confucian Ogyū Sorai's 荻生徂徠 (1666–1728) proposal of 'accommodation of one's body in ritual' (*nashenyuli* 納身於禮) means.[26] To be trained in *li* is to be initiated in proper communal living, both in religious and the socio-political lives. All the other subjects (those Six Arts 六藝 *liuyi*) in the curriculum of Confucius are set for the same purpose.

The second implication of inherent bodily rulership is that the rulership of the head and mind-heart is the administration of the senses. What makes the eyes is that they administer sight; the same holds for the ears, etc., as they administer hearing, etc. Analogously, the head and mind-heart administer the various senses to fulfil them. Concretely speaking, the head and the mind-heart administer the senses to render the senses sensible and their perceptions perceptive. Mencius' saying, 'if a prince treats his subject as his hands and feet, they will treat him as their belly and heart' can be interpreted in this light.

All this amounts to saying that the bodily rulership of the head and mind-heart is never forced from outside but always sprouting within, always in the best interests of the bodily organs.

Implications of the classical Chinese philosophy of 'body politic'

In view of the 'body politic' in ancient China, the inherent derivation of political organization from the organic unity of the human body carries with it three important implications.

First, as any concrete living being, the human body has its intrinsic limitations in senescence and death. In the Golden Era of the mythical Three Dynasties of Xia 夏, Shang 商, and Zhou 周, when everything was perfectly in order, the bodily limitation of rulership was supposed to have been creatively remedied by the famous institution of ceding the throne to the wise young (shanrang 禪讓). The cession of the throne to the wise was practiced on the assumption that the ruler's body is coterminous both with the historical continuity of everyone's offspring and with the territory of the state.

Later however, this bodily limitation came to be a serious threat to the rulers whose overriding concern was to perpetuate their positions eternally. And so the rulers

[25] Ogyū Sorai 1973, 236.

[26] *Mencius* BK IV, B, 3. Cited from Lau 1992, 159.

changed the previous practices of ceding the throne to their advantage. The historical continuity was conferred on their royal offspring; the ruler therefore *ceded* the throne to his own royal son. Hence the institution of hereditary continuity was born.

The second implication of bodily rulership is that the head depends as much on the five senses for its existence as the senses depend on the head and mind-heart for their existence. Likewise, a ruler depends as much on his subjects for his existence as the subjects depends on him for theirs.

Mencius took this parity of bodily interdependence between the Small Bodies and the Great seriously and promulgated the doctrine of ruler-subject reciprocity. Rulership legitimately lasted and subjects gave their allegiance to the ruler as long as he fulfilled his part of the contract to promote popular welfare. 'If a prince treats his subjects as his hands and feet', Mencius insisted, 'they will treat him as their belly and heart'.[27] The condition and qualification for staying on the throne is serving the people. As the bodily interdependence between the mind-heart and the senses is natural and 'heavenly', so is the legitimization of rulership heavenly. Even Mencius' opponent Xun Zi proclaimed:[28]

> The heart/mind that dwells within the central cavity is used to control the five faculties—it is called 'the lord provided by nature'. The mind takes advantage of things not belonging to the human species and uses them for the nourishment of humans—these are termed 'the nourishment provided by nature'. The mind calls what conforms to the properties of its category 'fortunate' and what is against the properties of its category 'cursed'—this is called the 'rule of order in nature'.
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> 心居中虛，以治五官，夫是之謂天君。財非其類，以養其類，夫是之謂天養；順其類者謂之福，逆其類者謂之禍，夫是之謂天政。（《荀子•天論》）

By 'rule of order in nature', Xun Zi was virtually arguing for the heavenly duty of the ruler. This sort of cosmic legitimisation of the imperial power is no less than a double-edged sword. On one hand it upholds the power of the ruler, but on the other hand it justifies the people's right to revolution if the ruler fails to perform his heavenly duty.

The final implication is a negative connotation of such rulership through body; that is, autocratic government could originate from a severing of the inherent bodily interdependence between the subject and their ruler. Hanfei Zi 韓非子 (?–233 B.C.), who was a disciple of the Confucian philosopher Xun Zi, in his eagerness to promote the sovereignty of the ruler, urged the rulers to use the eyes and ears of his subjects in his service.[29] This argumentation leads to the breaking up of the ruler's dependence

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[27] *Mencius* BK IV, B, 3. Cited from Lau 1992, 159.

[28] *Xunzi*, Book 17: 'Discourse on Nature'. Cited from Knoblock 1994, 3: 10.

[29] *Han Fei Tzu*, 'On Having Standards'. Cited from Watson 1964, 25.

on the subjects. In fact, rulers in imperial China were eager to follow Hanfei Zi's saying.

This legalistic severing led to an abstraction from the concrete interdependence between the ruler and the subjects and a transcendence of the head, the ruling rationality, over the populace who, as hands and feet, must depend on the ruler to exist. Hence followed the royal legitimization of the subjects' blind unilateral obedience to the ruler followed. Subjects should never be selfish for their private gain, yet scheming for the royal gain was justified on the grounds that what was good for the royal family was also good for the state. In this way, the state became the exclusive property of the ruler. And the autocratic state was born.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the understanding of the state, rulership, and the entire political organization through the human body was the bulwark of legitimacy of rulership in classical China, particularly in Confucianism. Any slippage to autocracy was made possible by discarding the assumptions of the 'body politic'. Such was the political theory pervading classical Chinese thought. In the classical Chinese philosophy of body, the mind-heart had its socio-political dimension while the body is psychosomatic and 'meso-physical' (*xingerzhong* 形而中).[30]

The concrete history of China rendered a Hegelian 'cunning of history' to the Chinese theory of 'body politic', however. After the establishment of the Han Empire, when Confucianism was designated the orthodox state ideology, the Confucianization of politics in the ideal of Confucians was soon turned into the politicization of Confucianism. All the Confucian theories of 'body politic' served the imperial oppression of the daily details of the lives of common people. This is a sad story in Chinese history.

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[30] Xu Fuguan 1975, 243. Xu Fuguan perceptively coined '[w]hat is in the middle of all forms, we call the mind-heart (xingerzhong zhe weizhi Xin 形而中者謂之心)' to parody '[w]hat is above all forms, we call the *Dao* (xingershang zhe weizhe Dao 形而上者謂之道' in the *Classic of Changes*, to stress that China's culture of mind-heart and philosophy of mind-heart should be called 'meso-physics 形而中學', not 'metaphysics 形而上學'.

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