

# Confucius's Doctrine of the Rectification of Names

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**Abstract:** *Chinese social history in Spring and Autumn period was a time of turbulence and transition in all aspects of social life such as economy, politics, society, culture and ideology. The law regime of the Zhou Dynasty became obsolete. Vassal countries no longer submitted to the Zhou Dynasty, so they made wars to assert their position. Chinese society at that time fell into political turmoil and moral corruption. In that context, the doctrine of the rectification of names of Confucius was introduced, based on a combination of traditional elements and contemporary political and ethical factors that contributed to the movement of "Contention of a Hundred Schools of Thought". It was a political and ethical philosophy not only meaningful in contemporary Chinese society but also in later eras. This paper aims at analyzing the contents of the doctrine and the methods to implement "the rectification of names".*

**Keywords:** three fundamental bonds, five constant virtues, rectification of names, politics, morality

## 1. Introduction

Confucius (551-479 B.C) was fatherless at his early age. At the age of 51, he was appointed to a minor position of governor of a town. Then, he rose to the position of Minister of Justice. After being presented musical instruments by The King of Qi, the King of Lu paid much attention to music and dance and neglected the court work. Confucius had repeatedly dissuaded him but failed, so he resigned from the office. He left the state of Lu and wandered around the vassal countries. Witnessing the chaos of the Spring and Autumn period, Confucius complained that life no longer respected ethical values "the king is not a king, the minister is not a minister, the father is not a father, the son is not a son" (Zhu Xi, 1998, p.483). All wars were for the purpose of the supremacy and kingship. Things that seemed normal before, now they are considered as the wrongdoings "to worship the king wholeheartedly could be considered as ass-kissers" (Zhu Xi, 1998, p.254). In the context of turbulent historical reality, Confucius proposed the doctrine of the rectification of names with the aim to restore the rituals, political institutions of the Zhou Dynasty with the desire to find a really useful solution for stabilizing the society. Confucius said that the social crisis and the fact that the minister killed the king and the son killed his father were not the causes of an immediate incident. It stemmed from rulers' corruption which created the incorrect names, that is, names are not matched with the realities. In order for the names to conform to the realities, rulers must educate people and stabilize the society. "To deal with the political upheaval of that period, Confucius advocated for the rectification of names, that is, to advise people to behave in accordance with their position in society (Nguyen Duc Su, 2011, p.309). In society, there are many relationships in which five fundamental relationships are called "five constant virtues". "They are the five basic types of relationships of social tradition, that is the relationship between king and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder sibling and junior sibling, elder friend and junior friend" (Yin Zheng, 2009, p.425). Among these relationships, the relationship between "ruler and subject", "father and son" take the first place. When Duke Jing of Qi asked Confucius how to govern a state, Confucius said, "A monarch must be a monarch, a minister must be a minister, a father must be a father, and a son must be a son." (Zhu Xi, 1998, pp.483-484). He

explained that "the rectification of names" means to make everything upright, that is, the king must be a king, the father must be a father, the son must be a son, etc. Each person has a social standing and a social name, so they must behave in accordance with their responsibilities and duties. The nation will be prosperous when a clear social order and ethical values are maintained.

## 2. The Contents of the Doctrine of the Rectification of Names

"The rectification of name" means to make people keep their own titles and offices and not take others' titles and offices, which can cause chaos in social relationships. In other words, each person, each object has a certain position and correspondingly each person or each object has a certain name. People taking the name must comply with the standards of that name, otherwise, they must be called by other names. This rule makes people distinguish the right and the wrong as well as recognize the social order. For instance, the king must be a king, he must perform his role and responsibilities appropriately. The father must be a father, i.e. he must fulfil his duties to his children. The son must be a son, i.e. he must fulfil his duties to his parents. According to Zhu Xi (1998): "While a king needs to be merciful, a subject needs to honor his king. A son needs to honor his parents, and a father must love his children. We are in contact with fellow people by trust" (Zhu Xi, 1998, p.26). Therefore, the relationships of father-son and king-subject are bilateral: the king must be a wise king and the subjects must be loyal; the father must be merciful and the son needs to respect to his father. It is obvious that morality and politics are quite closely united in the binding relationship between king and subject, father and son. The relationship between king and subject is one of the fundamental relationships of feudal society" (Yin Zheng, 2009, p.557). It was mentioned by Confucius in the doctrine of the rectification of name attached to politics, directly related to the rule of the country, the people, and the rise and the fall of the dynasty and the regime. In this relationship, Confucius emphasized the role of the king - as the head of each nation. He considered the king as a son of heaven, having the great mission of ruling and educating the people. The Spring and Autumn period was a time of chaos with constant civil wars lasting up to five centuries between

vassals to fight for benefits. People will not fight against each other if there is a leader or a referee who does not allow people to do their own thing and fight for their own benefits. The king must be the master, the people must be his subjects. Considering the king-subject relationship, Confucius required each side to be responsible for each other. Each side must have proper treatment and the treatment of one side is a condition for the other side to have corresponding treatment. If the lord directs his minister with ritual institutions, the minister will serve his lord with loyalty. In contrast, if the king does not direct his minister with ritual institutions, the minister will not have to serve his lord with loyalty. As Zhu Xi (1998) stated that "If the King is upright, every issue will be solved easily without his giving orders. On the contrary, if he is not upright, even if he gives orders, his subjects will not obey" (Zhu Xi, 1998, p. 502).

Whether politics is good or bad is up to the rulers. According to Confucius, politics must take what the people believe to be the reference point of the judgment of virtue and talent of the ruler. The ruler who has people's confidence will have everything. The cause of the turmoil in Spring and Autumn period was due to the fact that the king is not a king, the minister is not a minister. This led to the situation that the king and the minister may competing each other's status or the minister encroach on the king's power. In order to have a peace society, the rectification of names must be done so that the king must be a king, the minister must be a minister. With the desire to build a prosperous and harmonious society motivated by a political motive founded on ethical principles, Confucius always emphasized the leading role of morality in establishing political principles.

In the relationship between father and son, Confucius set up ethical standards and norms in the father-son relationship to maintain order and respect in the family as well as contribute to consolidating order, discipline to stabilize the society and make people responsible for each other. In this relationship, he required "a gentle father - dutiful son". In his viewpoint system, Confucius asserted that morality is the starting point and the basis of the political line. According to him, if a subject does not meet the ethical standards, surely, they will not be able to achieve the political goals. As Zhu Xi (1998) wrote: "The Documents says, 'Filial, merely be filial, and friends to brothers young and old.' To apply this as one's governance is also to engage in government. Why must there be some purposeful effort to engage in governance?" (Zhu Xi, 1998, p.233).

Confucius repeated the words in the Book of Documents (Shūjīng) to affirm the role of filial piety. According to Confucius, the person who is respectful to his parents will behave well in relationships. The political subject does not need to become a mandarin or take part in state management activities. The most important thing is that he knows how to show filial piety towards his parents and create harmonious relationships. A family is the root of society. Therefore, building an orderly, disciplined family is contributing to building a stable society. A politician needs to implement the following steps: self-improving, managing his family, ruling his country and pacifying the world. In this regard, he said that the man in the family is the bread-winner, so he must perform the task of ensuring all aspects of the family

life, which is not different from the role of a king leading a country. Confucius said that loyalty toward the king and filial piety toward parents have the same root. He demanded that the subjects have to behave toward their ruler like their parents. To the ruler, he need to treat his subjects like parents' treatment to their children.

As Zhu Xi (1998) wrote:

Ji Kangzi asked "How would it be to use persuasion to make the people respectful and loyal?"

Confucius said "If you approach them with solemnity, they will be respectful. If you are filial and caring, they will be loyal. If you raise up the good and instruct those who lack ability, they will be persuaded" (Zhu Xi, 1998, p.231).

Therefore, in Confucius's view, dutiful children must depend on the circumstances to show their filial piety. According to Confucius, in order to rule a nation, first of all, one must know how to manage his family, love and respect his family members and show filial piety toward his parents. Therefore, the superior man (junzi) respects his brothers in order to treat the superiors appropriately, to be kind to his children in order to give commands to the people, to respect his parents in order to worship the king.

### 3. The methods to implement "the rectification of names"

"The rectification of names" is not only the political line of Confucius, but also a moral principle and a moral requirement for man.

Zi Lu said: "The monarch of the state of Wei wants you to govern the country, what is the first thing you plan on doing?" Confucius said: "First, it is necessary to rectify the names" (Zhu Xi, 1998, p. 498). According to Confucius, in order for society to be stable, everyone needs to do with the right name. Zhu Xi (1998) states that:

*If names are not correct, one cannot speak smoothly and reasonably, and if one cannot speak smoothly and reasonably, affairs cannot be managed successfully. If affairs cannot be managed successfully, rites and music will not be conducted. If rites and music are not conducted, punishments will not be suitable. And if punishments are not suitable, the common people will not know what to do. So, when the gentleman uses names, it is necessary to be able to speak so that people understand. If one can say it, one can definitely do it. A gentleman should not be careless with words" (Zhu Xi, 1998, pp. 498-499)*

In feudal society, the issues that the minister kill the king, the son kill his father, brothers, husband and wife discord happen frequently. In order to restore the social disorder, Confucius proposed the doctrine of the rectification of names to advise everyone to keep their names, praising the king worship to unify and maintain peace. Confucius said that: "If names are not correct, do not discuss the politics of that name" (Zhu Xi, 1998, p.564). He said that chaos in the society was caused by the fact that each person has behavior inappropriate with his position or the situation of usurpation. When Confucius was seriously ill, since Zilu and his

classmates wanted to show respect to him, they practiced his funeral in the style of a noble official. Confucius knew the incident and gave him a reprimand for doing the wrong thing and deceiving.

Confucius fell ill. Zilu had the disciples act towards him as though they were retainers. When the illness eased, Confucius said:

*Long has you practiced this deception! To have no retainers and pretend to have them, whom do I deceive? Do I deceive Tian (Heaven)? And moreover, rather than die in the hands of retainers, would I not prefer to die in your hands, my friends? Even though I may receive no great funeral, would I be dying by the side of the road? (Zhu Xi, 1998, pp. 405-406)*

According to Confucius, a politician must take the righteousness as the principle, make the names and the actualities unified. While names are the names of the positions of each person in society, actualities are the duties, responsibilities, rights and obligations associated with the names. The rectification of names can be done by the rites. Humans are born, live, and grow up in the complex types of relationships. Rite plays an important role to ensure that these relationships are maintained. Rite is one of the principles to restrain human behavior to maintain harmony in social relationships. Rite helps to deal with ethical violations. For Confucius, rite is a kind of social contract defining rights and obligations of each member in the community. An orderly society is a society with rites that stipulate specific criteria for each relationship. For instance, the king must be generous and tolerant to his subject; the subjects must respect and absolutely loyal to the king; parents must be kind to children, and vice versa children must always be filial toward their parents. Confucius set out the standards and ethical norms in the parent-child relationship to maintain the order and respect in the family as well as contribute to consolidating order, discipline, social stability and binding responsibilities between people. In this relationship, he commanded that the father must be gentle and the son must be filial. The husband and wife must love and take care of each other. The husband is the breadwinner of the family, so he must take his responsibility to love and care for his wife. The wife helps her husband in every aspect, keeps her virginity and pays attention to her family happiness. Siblings have the same parents, so they must love and take care of each other like hands and feet. They must live harmoniously and unite to help each other. As Zhu Xi (1998) wrote: "love one another intensely from the heart, advise one another sincerely, to be happy with others' joy, such person is called a scholar. For friends, love one another and advise one another sincerely. For siblings, enjoy a common joy (Zhu Xi, 1998, p.522).

Siblings are blood-related, so they must behave sincerely and respect to one another and create a harmonious atmosphere of a happy family. According to Confucius, the younger brother should respect the elder one and the elder brother should love and care for his younger one. Thus, in addition to affection, with his position, the brother must also be tolerant and generous with his younger brother. Moreover, in his view, the elder brother is the one who takes

the place of the father (when the father dies) to be the head of the family and runs everything in his home, so the younger brother must obey him. The younger brother must respect the elder one and follow all his arrangements, including personal affairs such as getting married, choosing a career.

Friends are not blood-related people. Friends come together for many purposes (Ho Phi, 2011, p. 278). Regardless of purposes, friendship is a reciprocal relationship, that is, friends must complement to perfect each other. Being friends, you must sympathize, understand, take care, help and respect each other in the spirit of equality, friendship and solidarity. Doing so, you will have a mutual friendship and mutual trust. "Being faithful is a key factor. You should not fight with people who are different from you. When you make errors, do not afraid to correct them (Zhu Xi, 1998, p.415). In friendship, "faithfulness" is always the standard of all behavior. In making friends, trusting each other is the top standard. You should not make friends with bad people. On the contrary, you should make friends with people who have good moral qualities and can understand you. In friendship, morality is also considered as a prerequisite. You should not calculate your gains and loss. If doing so, everyone will be sociable and friendly.

#### 4. Conclusion

In short, Confucius's doctrine of the rectification of names was introduced in Spring and Autumn period with a lot of upheavals and wars. In that context, Confucius always raised the question how to take the society from chaotic to peaceful situation and the answer was necessarily the rectifications of names. That means returning to the nature of humans with bilateral relationships between wise king and loyal subjects, gentle father and dutiful son and the harmony between husband and wife. If people's titles and offices correspond to their actual behavior, the social discipline will be maintained. Although Confucius's doctrine of the rectification of names was limited by the prescriptions of history, that is, it only aimed to maintain the order of feudal society, to some extent, it also provided us with lessons to consider and inherit. As President Ho Chi Minh said "While there are many things that are not true in Confucius's doctrine, the good things in his doctrine should be learned and inherited" (Ho Chi Minh, 2000, p.46)

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