

CONFUCIUS'S DOCTRINE OF THE RECTIFICATION OF NAMES

[A DOCTRINA DA RETIFICAÇÃO DE NOMES, EM CONFÚCIO]

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ABSTRACT: Confucius (551 BC - 479 BC) - was a well-known and influential philosopher, teacher, and statesman during China's Spring-Autumn and Warring States periods. Specifically, he was a thinker who imparted to humanity numerous insightful concepts, one of which is the "rectification of names" (正名 - *zhèng míng*) doctrine. This deep, comprehensive, and methodical philosophy seeks to bring society back from a state of chaos to order through the application of the principles of benign governance and rule by virtue. Today, if we can see past its flaws and embrace its values, Confucius' thought on the rectification of names still proves its significance and serves as a useful lesson in advancing national development.

KEYWORDS: Confucius; Confucian thought; Rectification of names; History of Chinese philosophy

RESUMO: Confúcio (551 aC - 479 aC) - foi um filósofo, professor e estadista bem conhecido, bastante influente durante os períodos de Primavera-Outono dos Estados Combatentes na China. Somados a esses atributos, destaca-se o fato de ele ter sido um pensador que transmitiu à humanidade numerosos conceitos perspicazes, dentre os quais a doutrina da "retificação de nomes" (正名 - *zhèng míng*). Esta doutrina, que tem caráter profundo, abrangente e metódico, procura resgatar a sociedade de um estado de caos para um estado de ordem através da aplicação dos princípios da governabilidade benigna e através das virtudes. Nos tempos atuais, teríamos grandes ganhos humanos se conseguíssemos enxergar para além das suas falhas e encampar seus valores. Passado o tempo, nota-se que o pensamento de Confúcio sobre a retificação de nomes ainda ostenta sua importância e serve como uma lição útil no avanço do desenvolvimento nacional das gentes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Confúcio; Pensamento confucionista; Retificação de nomes; História da filosofia chinesa

1. INTRODUCTION

During China's turbulent Spring-Autumn and Warring States periods, how to bring society back to order from a state of chaos was an essential challenge. Confucius (551–479 BC) was a well-known scholar and the father of Confucianism. He developed a distinctive system of benevolent and virtuous government to address the socio-historical demands of the day. President

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Ho Chi Minh once said: "All Chinese emperors honored Confucius as the sage of sages and presented honorary titles to his successors" (*Ho Chi Minh*, 2002, p.452).

Confucius believed that social changes result in chaos, anarchy, and corrupt morals, all of which are caused by the depravity of the ruling class and, as a result, what is said does not always match what is intended. He therefore suggested rectification of names as a means of reestablishing social order. "In response to the political upheavals of the time, Confucius promoted to "rectify names and set distinctions", meaning that people should act and behave in accordance with their responsibilities in society" (Chiem Te, 1978, p.309.). This idea was intended to serve as a tool and a means of moral teaching, stabilizing social order and mending the gap between actions and words.

This article is composed on the basis of the principles of dialectical materialism; holistic principle; principle of historical specificity; development principles, and other particular techniques, such as the analysis of texts and literature, with the aim of systematizing Confucius' theory of the rectification of names, from which its benefits, constraints, and historical significances are derived.

2. DISCUSSION

2.1. About the rectification of names: Depending on the perspective taken, Confucius offered numerous interpretations of this idea that have sociopolitical, moral, and cognitive significance. He defined "rectification" as setting things right, and "rectification of names" as "Each man must fulfill his duties: A ruler must be a ruler, minister be a minister, father be a father, and son be a son" (Doan Trung Con (translation), 1996, pp.188-189). For everything and everyone in society has a name that corresponds to a specific use, status, and responsibility, they are all required to carry out their responsibilities in line with these names. Therefore, in order to be worthy of a name, a person must continually work on developing the qualities necessary to carry out the responsibilities attached to it. "A ruler must be a ruler, minister be a minister, father be a father, and son be a son" - that maxim pertains to every individual in society, reminding them to be in line with their social position and status. That's why Confucius said: "If you don't have the official position, you can't plan the affairs of government" (Le Phuc Thien (translation), 1992, p.518). To do this means to rectify names. Conversely, if a person fails to meet the moral and ethical requirements associated with his position, then he will no longer be associated with that position. Confucius believed that if what is said is not in concord with what is done, the social order will collapse. Then, "if the ruler is not a ruler, the ministers not ministers, fathers not fathers and sons not sons, even if there is food, will I still be able to get some to eat?" (Doan Trung Con (translation), 1996, pp.88-89). Therefore, in order to create the kind of good and stable society that he envisioned, Confucius promoted moral education and rectification of names. When Ji Kang Zi asked Confucius about governance, he

replied: "To 'govern' means to 'rectify.' If you were to lead the people with correctness, who would not be rectified?" (Doan Trung Con (translation), 1996, pp.90-91). In his opinion: "If the words are not corrected, then what is said cannot be followed. If what is said cannot be followed, then work cannot be accomplished" (Doan Trung Con (translation), 1996, pp.198-199). Consequently, mankind must first and foremost agree on the meaning of words in order to precisely define standards; at the same time, the right words will identify values and steer human behavior in the proper direction. Only then can names be rectified.

2.2. Content and method to achieve rectification of names: Confucius was the first to develop the rectification of names doctrine and to put it into practice via his words, deeds, and way of life. He had a high regard for order, propriety and etiquette. In the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, Confucius was extremely cautious in his choice of words to distinguish things. For example: "Referring to the departure from life, Confucius used the word 崩 (*bēng*) for an emperor, 薨 (*hōng*) for a vassal state monarch, 弑 (*cú*) for a usurper, 卒 (*zú*) for an incorruptible and upright royal court official, and 死 (*sǐ*) for a fawning official (all of those words mean "to die") (Nguyen Hien Le, 1996, p.83). For Confucius, the essence and purpose of political activities, as well as the duties of a ruler, are to bring everyone and everything into line with what they should be. Men live in society to further their own interests as well as to establish their own reputation and social standing. Confucius believed that rectifying someone's name meant requiring them to carry out the duties and obligations that come with their position—neither more nor less. Such rectification is the foundation of rule of virtue. In order for virtuous governance measures to be carried out, all individuals must act in concordance with their social status and positions. Confucius referred to the concept of 伦 (*lún*), or human relationships, as based on the respect for status, etiquette, law and order. Accordingly, his doctrine of rectification of names asserts that the foundation of society consists of five fundamental relationships (五 伦 - *wǔ lún*): the ruler - subject relationship, the father - son relationship, the elder brother - younger brother relationship, the husband - wife relationship, and the friend - friend relationship. In particular, each relationship has its own standards and regulations. For example:

Ruler-subject relationship: this is identified as the primary relationship in society. Confucius criticized the hereditary succession to the throne, i.e. the transfer of the throne from one member of the ruling family to another member of that same family - which is a common phenomenon in the feudal era. His strong criticism stemmed from the fact that this type of succession makes it difficult to choose a leader who is qualified to lead a nation. Confucius believed that a ruler should be both gifted and moral, and that no matter what his background is or the social class he is from, he is worthy of authority once he fulfills those two requirements. Therefore, when Zhong Gong asks about government, he said: "First get some officers, then assign works to them and review after they are done. Grant pardon to all the petty offenses and then put virtuous and able men into positions of responsibility." (Doan Chinh, 2009, pp.196-197). In addition, Confucius required that the monarch provide a tranquil

and prosperous life for the populace, assist and look out for them, and lead by example. He said: "The ruler himself should do good and set an example of himself for the people; he also has to take pains to provide for the people" (Doan Trung Con (translation), 1950, pp.196-197). To do that, the ruler must win the people's trust, so that his government will have "enough food, enough weapons and the confidence of the people" (Tran Le Sang (Chief Editor), 2002, p.424). These are the three fundamental things that a ruler must ensure to take care of his subjects and earn their trust. Ensuring a good and prosperous life for people has a great impact on those in positions of authority. Still, it is insufficient to stop there. Social unrest may stem from a situation in which individuals have access to food and clothing but lack education. Confucius therefore held that the ruler must "teach the people" in addition to providing for their needs. (Le Phuc Thien (translation), 1992, p.456). For Confucius, educating people is the first priority. To teach people is to impart knowledge, manners, and integrity to them. No other philosopher of the era could match the amount of work that Confucius accomplished on this subject, which he dedicated the most of his life to.

Confucius focused a great deal of care on teaching the populace, believing that this was just as vital as providing for them. In his opinion, if people are educated, it is easier to command them, and political work will be less strenuous: "If regular people learn the Way, they become easy to employ" (Le Phuc Thien (translation), 1992, p.623). An increased level of education would relieve the government of the need to impose punishments, which would make their job less taxing. Confucius believed that teaching the people means caring for them. He said. "[A virtuous man] wishing himself to be established, sees that others are established, and, wishing himself to be successful, sees that others are successful" (Le Phuc Thien (translation), 1992, p.211). One may argue that Confucius had revolutionary ideas about how to educate people. The ruler and the subject have a reciprocal connection. The people will demonstrate their allegiance to the ruler if he upholds moral principles and gives them a fulfilling life. They will see him as their parent, remain devoted to him, and give him their all, so that they can be worthy of his care. When the ruler and his subject fulfill their respective responsibilities, the ruler-subject relationship is then complete, i.e. the names are rectified.

Father-son relationship: According to Confucius, a father must treat his son with affection. As for the son, he needs to particularly pay attention to filial piety, i.e to love, respect and take care of his parents. In Confucius' opinion, a filial son is first of all one who always respects and takes care of his parents wholeheartedly. He believed that filial piety was the most important attribute that everyone should possess. When Zi Xia asked about filial piety, Confucius said: "What is important is the expression you show in your face. To always be happy and respectful towards your parents is a challenge of filial piety" (Doan Trung Con (translation), 1996, p.19). Another time, when Zi You asked about filial piety, he said: "Nowadays filial piety means being able to feed your parents. But everyone does this for even horses and dogs. Without respect, what's the difference?" (Doan Trung Con (translation), 1996, p.19). According to

Confucius, being filial to one's parents involves more than just providing for them—it also entails showing them respect and love. Nonetheless, a person cannot be referred to as filial if all he does is feeding their parents without showing them any love or respect. Because in our world, humans are not the only animals that need caretakers - dogs and horse also do. Therefore, one's parents are no different from animals if they are treated disrespectfully, and thus there can be no filial piety.

Furthermore, according to Confucius, a filial son ought to retain his parents' ages in memory. His idea originated from his belief that children should be aware of their parents' ages in order for them to first celebrate their long lifespan and then worry for and tend to them when they get older. He said: "Your parents' age should not be ignored. Sometimes it will be a source of joy, and sometimes it will be a source of apprehension" (Doan Trung Con (translation), 1950, pp.60-61). It is a blessing that parents live long with their children. Children must, then, learn to cherish the times while their parents are still with them and live in a way that doesn't upset them. When parents pass away, their children have a responsibility to arrange a fitting funeral that strikes a balance between being lavish and thrifty. Above all, since genuine love is priceless, they must grieve their parents' loss in a sincere way. This is also an act of filial piety. Confucius did, however, also remind us that funeral arrangements should be adequate rather than extravagant. He said: "In funerals, it is better to be frugal than extravagant; deep sorrow is better than ease" (Doan Trung Con (translation), 1950, pp.32-33). So, it is a sign of filial piety to grieve for one's parents upon their passing; nonetheless, this act ought to be carried out in a sensible manner.

In particular, Confucius stated that a dutiful son needs to be able to gently correct his parents when they make mistakes. Although it is the son's responsibility to obey his parents, this duty should not be constant: "When you serve your mother and father it is okay to try to correct them once in a while. But if you see that they are not going to listen to you, keep your respect for them and don't distance yourself from them. Work without complaining" (Doan Trung Con (translation), 1996, pp.58-59). On the contrary, if the parents' actions are right, their children should emulate them. Confucius explained: "When your father is alive, observe his will. When your father is dead, observe his former actions. If, for three years you do not change from the ways of your father, you can be called a 'real filial son'" (Doan Trung Con (translation), 1996, p. 9).

Thus, when a father is a father and a son is a son, that is when names are rectified. Confucius believed that rectification of names could only occur when reciprocity was present in every social interaction. In the ruler-subject relationship: When the ruler is kind to those who are close to him, the people will be moved toward benevolence. In the father-son relationship: If the father treats his son with affection, then his son will be filial to him. Confucius constantly emphasized the importance of morality and supported moral education as a means of implementing rectification of names. In the family, beside the father-son relationship, there is also the husband-wife relationship.

In the husband-wife relationship: Confucius believed that a husband and

wife had to learn how to care for and love one another. As the family's primary provider, the husband bears the financial responsibility, with the wife providing all-around support to enable him to carry out his honorable duties. A happy, content and prosperous family is guaranteed by such a relationship. In addition to the husband-wife relationship, the one between elder brother and younger brother is no less important. As a result, each person is responsible for maintaining both marital and fraternal relationships.

Elder brother - younger brother relationship: Because brothers are related by blood, they owe it to one another respect, affection and care. Thus, their family will be at peace. Talking about this relationship, Confucius said: "Brothers should get along with and be gentle to each other". In addition to family relationships, social relationships also exist, with friendship being one of the most important.

Friend - friend relationship: Although there are many other kinds of interpersonal interactions in society, friendship is one that is essential to every individual's existence. Friendships are not based on blood ties; rather, they are characterized by a strong bond, mutual respect, caring, and self-improvement. "The noble man uses his refinement to meet his friends, and through his friends develops his benevolence" (Doan Trung Con (translation), 1950, pp.194-195). If we hope to create wonderful and fulfilling friendships, we need to fully comprehend the people we plan to attach ourselves to. Confucius said that: "Take loyalty and good faith to be of primary importance. And have no friends who are not of equal moral capacity. When you make a mistake, don't hesitate to correct it" (Doan Trung Con (translation), 1950, pp.194-195). Respect and mutual support for each other's success in life are qualities of a good friendship. Trust, honesty, and loyalty are always the most crucial components of a wonderful connection. In a friendship, each partner needs to show the other genuine love and morals, using them as a premise to build their relationship. When our friends face hardships in life, it is desirable that we help them to overcome such challenges. Speaking of friendship, Confucius made a good example of himself: "When a friend died, if there was no one to handle the funeral, he would say, "I will take care of it." (Doan Trung Con (translation), 1950, pp.156-157). Friends need to look out for one another. When a friend makes a mistake, you have to gently and skillfully help him to recognize and fix it. But during this procedure, you need also use caution. Proceed if your friend pays attention to what you are saying; if not, discontinue the conversation immediately to preserve your friendship. Confucius said: "Speak to your friends honestly, and skillfully show them the right path. If you cannot, then stop. Don't humiliate yourself" (Doan Trung Con (translation), 1950, pp.194-195). It embodies the idea of working together to better one another. According to Confucius: "There are three kinds of friendship which are beneficial and three kinds of friendship which are harmful. Friendship with the honest, friendship with the sincere, and friendship with the learned are all beneficial. Friendship with the deceptive, friendship with the unprincipled, and friendship with smooth talkers are harmful" (Doan Trung Con (translation), 1950, tr.260-261). Confucius told his students that friendship has a significant impact on everyone

and advised them to "associate with good friends and stay away from bad friends" (Yu Dan, 2011, p.95).

Confucius therefore holds that rectification of names means meeting the standards established by various relationships. A man has also done a good job of being a man when he firmly maintains all five relationships mentioned above.

2.3. Rectification of names: The doctrine has a great role in social life as well as in governance. It serves as a tool and a means for people to carry out their responsibilities as well as to create a wealthy and peaceful society. According to Confucius, during the turbulent Spring - Autumn and Warring States periods in China, as slavery disintegrated and early feudalism was formed, social order was completely upended, morality was severely corrupted, order and propriety vanished, and "a ruler is not a ruler, the ministers not ministers, fathers not fathers, and sons not sons". Men had lost their moral character for the sake of fame and interest, and as a result, society had become immoral and disordered due to the corruption of music and propriety. Social life's conventions and rules were progressively disappearing. Moral customs and behaviors were severely diminished. Discipline and order were vanishing from social life. For the aforementioned reasons, Confucius proposed the doctrine of rectification of names in order to save lives and revive the Zhou culture. This would allow every man to live and carry out his responsibilities, and thus "a ruler (will) be a ruler, minister be a minister, father be a father, son be a son," as well as bring everyone back to the correct path, cultivate their benevolence, and encourage them to live in accordance with their statuses and positions in order to create a stable and developed society.

3. CONCLUSION

From the viewpoints in Confucius' thought on rectification of names, the following conclusions can be drawn:

First, through his philosophy of rectification of names, Confucius established a system of procedures and methods for rectifying names based on moral standards like goodness, righteousness, propriety, knowledge, bravery, etc., which contains profound humanism and supports the stabilization of social order. Furthermore, the Confucian rectification of names doctrine contributes to the moral education of all social classes, raising each person's responsibility in interpersonal interactions and the national construction. With such great values, rectification of names has evolved into one of the fundamental pillars of Chinese rulers' government. It also has a significant impact on the moral and cultural lives of many other nations, particularly those in the East.

Second, while full of enormous benefits, Confucius' rectification of names doctrine is also susceptible to various restrictions resulting from both objective and subjective factors. The core shortcoming of the philosophy is that it employs an idealistic and conservative viewpoint to explain how political difficulties came to be. Due to the influence of class positions and socio-historical

circumstances, these constraints were not surmounted. Nevertheless, if we can look past those limitations and selectively absorb the essence of it, the doctrine still has a lot to offer in terms of how nations develop their national identities today.

Third, Confucius' rectification of names doctrine has significant theoretical and practical implications for national administration. It offers a wealth of practical materials and methods that are beneficial to social life, in order to address historical issues raised both throughout the Spring-Autumn and Warring States periods and in the current era. Particularly, the moral principles found in Confucius's teaching of the rectification of names ought to be passed down and utilized in the process of nation-building and moral development for every member of society. In the development process, each nation must distill and absorb moral standards and values. At the same time, it must educate its citizens in accordance with these standards and values, ensuring that the next generation is born with all the qualities and skills required to construct a perfect and well-ordered society. Specifically, each individual must, in accordance with their standing and position, elevate their sense of accountability and appropriately carry out their obligations in order to support the advancement of society.

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