



## DOCTRINES OF HUMANITY (REN) AND NAME RECTIFICATION (ZHENGMING) IN SOCIO-POLITICAL THOUGHT OF CONFUCIUS

**Nguyen Duong Thanh Nhan**

University of Social Sciences and Humanities,  
Vietnam  
Vietnam National University,  
Hochiminh City, Vietnam

### **Abstract:**

The Spring-Autumn and The Warring States period were the historic time when there were many changes in all aspects including economy, politics, culture, society. The regime of slavery was declining and feudalism was gradually created. Therefore, many thinkers appeared with many different points of view. The doctrines of humanity (Ren) and rectification of names (Zhengming) in the socio-political thought of Confucius, which were one of many theories was born at that time. In this article, we will have 2 main tasks. The first one is to study the content of the doctrines of humanity (Ren) and rectification of names (Zhengming) in the socio-political thought of Confucius. The second task is to make objective discussions about it.

**Keywords:** Spring-Autumn and The Warring States period, doctrines of humanity (Ren), rectification of names (Zhengming), Confucius

### **1. Introduction**

In the history of Chinese philosophy, it can be said that Confucius was the first person who mentioned a lot about the status of the rulers whose duties were to reflect themselves so as to set an example for the people and to educate the people. In his political-social thought, morality and politics were not separate, but they were united with each other or he moralized politics in other words. The political philosophy of Confucius can be condensed into two words: "Humanity" and "rectification of names – name and reality". In order to conduct a research of the above contents, we would like to approach the basic methodological principle of political history science. The methods used in the article include the following ones:

First, the historical-logical method. We use the historical method to study the conditions of thought formation as well as review and assess the doctrines of "humanity" and "rectification of names" in Confucius' socio-political ideology in specific historical terms. Basing on the historical method, we can study facts and

scientific issues that the topic raises. On the basis of historical data, rules of movement and development of points of view and ideas have been extracted.

Second, the methodology of academic writing. We will be faithful to the writing of works to inquire and study scientific issues. At the same time, we will find out the origin of the text, then contrast the text to clarify the contents.

Third, in the method of collecting information and documents. We will collect domestic and oversea resources such as books, newspapers, magazines etc. about the political thought of Confucius. We will then categorize those resources to use them during the research of the topic.

Fourth, methods of analysis and synthesis. We utilize this method to analyze some issues such as origin, nature of the political thought of Confucius. On that basis, we can generalize, synthesize and discuss the doctrines of "humanity" and "rectification of names" in Confucian political-social thought.

## 2. Content

### 2.1. The doctrine of "humanity" in the political-social thought of Confucius

In term of "humanity", we can say that "human" plays a leading role in the whole doctrine of Confucius. Coping with the messed-up society at that time, Confucius advocated that human was the governor. He said that only the human knew how to love, hate, and govern properly. Confucius considered "benevolence" as the supreme moral principle, the root of the human morality, the virtue that generates or implies other virtues. *"Humanity consists of the letter" 仁 "and the letter" 二, which means that morality of man is one of the most significant and immerse concepts in Chinese history philosophy*" (Doan Chinh, 2009, p.45).

In Confucius' doctrine, "humanity" or "benevolence" in another word is not only a single moral quality but only all human qualities and characteristics ...etc. A person with "humaneness" is synonymous with the most perfect person, so "humanity" is the broadest sense of the human fundamentals. Human fundamentals consist of many factors but come down to one thing that is things for ourselves and for others, so "benevolence" can be understood that how to treat ourselves and how to treat other people. For ourselves, the greatest of a virtuous person is his virtue, *"...unkind people cannot endure the poverty, or they cannot enjoy the peacefulness. Kind people are happy with their kindness, in any cases they are comfortable; intelligent people are pleased to their benevolence, depending on the opportunities they can make their virtues increase"* (Confucian Four Books, 2006, Analects, p.51) and because of virtue, people will be able to control themselves to follow social rituals.

From Confucius' point of view, a king who is kind is the person who walks out of his palace must always be respectful and serious as if he was meeting an extremely important person. In addition, when commanding other people to do anything, he must be extremely cautious as he is performing national rituals. Also, in his kingdom, all the citizens love him and no one blames the king nor his apparatus. And in the end, the

king must always consider citizens' affairs as his own, so what he would not choose for himself, never impose on others. On the contrary, people must control their words and avoid speaking in anger because when they are unable to control their emotions, they will easily hurt others. When speaking out, they must carry out what they said in case the words do not match the action, which will lead people not to obey and not follow the king. When the king restrains his emotions then his words will be carried out and the people will believe and honor the king. Confucius emphasized that virtuous people must go from hard work to easy work; their words must go along with their action. And humane people must be responsible for their actions, not to blame others when their affairs fail. The last result is the best evidence for a virtuous person rather than a fancy word. On the contrary, while virtuous people who talk less but do much, unkind people often talk much but do less and cannot stand hardship. Confucius said that "*inhumane people cannot endure poverty, Unkind people cannot endure the poverty, or they cannot enjoy the peacefulness. Kind people are happy with their kindness, in any cases they are comfortable*" (Confucius Four Books, 2006, Analects, p.2). Inhuman people always put their own interests above the interests of others; they would not do anything but only would rather enjoy the fruits of others. Inhumane people whose words often refer to humanity but their actions are completely converse to their words. When facing difficulties, inhumane people often seek the ways to blame others, and when they get favorable, they will take all the credit. Whereas, virtuous people they always keep calm whether in advantages or difficulty. Thus, virtue is the perfection of human, so human virtue is virtue of being human. The human morality of life is very plentiful and complicated, but in general, it consists of two sides that are not separate from each other, which is living for ourselves and living for others as well as loving ourselves as loving others, do not do unto others what you do not want done to yourself. That is the Doctrine of the Mean (or Doctrine of Zhongyong), expression of the centrist and neutral doctrine in the morality of human life. From that point of view, Confucius emphasized that the development of each person is always associated with the development of society. Individuals cannot be separated from society because people exist in a variety of different and separate relationships. Therefore, virtuous people always associate their personal development with the development of other individuals, individuals with the community and individuals with the whole society. With the view of going alone, people can go fast in a period, but if they would like to go far, they must go together, which is a highly new perspective in the thought of Confucius.

Confucius said that a virtuous person is different from an intellectual person. Intelligent people like water while virtuous people like mountain. Intelligent people are proactive while virtuous people are quiet. Therefore, "*the wise people are often happy and virtuous people are stable*" (Confucian Four Books, 2006, Analects, p. 21). Intellectual people always handle their work in a flexible way, which aims to get the best result. In order to achieve the ultimate goal, intellectuals can defy everything, including tell the untruth and even harm the lives of others. On the contrary, virtuous people are always careful when dealing with their business. In their viewpoint, the last result is not the

highest goal but the result of a process. In their action, virtuous people always place the interests of everyone first and foremost. By considering the interests of people and community uppermost, virtuous people have peace of mind. Confucius said that people who are honest and determined are close to virtuous people, and people who speak splendidly, whose faces are well made-up or body shapes are stylish, their clothes are gaudy, all of which mean that they must be poor in kindness "...he who utters sweet talk and pretentious words does not have much benevolence." (Analects, Pediatrics, p.3). According to Confucius, talented people may not be virtuous, because gifted people are the ones who are so brilliant and can do anything to achieve the highest goal. In order to stabilize the society at that time talented people when wielding troops in battle could wipe out a small country to achieve the feat toward the King. Talented people can control the Army of a large country or become a patriarch of a country, but they may not be virtuous people.

Confucius assumed that "virtue" is the root of human, thanks to virtue, people become perfect as well as the society is peaceful and prosperous. Thus, he opposed the governor who used the law and punishments for their populace, but they must use "humanity" – which means that "the human's benevolence" need to be used to inspire the people so that the people will honor their governor. The "humanity" takes the laity into account, laws and punishments only support the practice of morality and ceremonies. The governors should use laws or punishments when and only when moral norms are violated and there is no way to educate the people anymore.

The best way for educating the people is to set an example for them, but before nurturing them, the governor has to make their populace have bountiful lives, then they know the difference between kindness and evil, right and wrong. Even if the people who are "impoverished" are taught with respect, they do not follow the King. Also, how strict are punishments, however, they still become "thieves". Therefore, nurturing the people is the first thing to do before educating them. When Nhiem Huu asked the authorities what they should do for the people, Confucius replied "*to help them become rich*", Nhiem Huu then asked "*if they are rich, what else should the governor do for them?*" Confucius responded, "*educating them is a must*" (Confucian Four Books, 2006, Analects, p. 202).

But Confucius was just a philosopher and a politician not an economist, so he only oriented to what to do, not directly discussed economic development guidelines. According to Confucius, educating the people consists of two ways: inspiring and breeding them. First, inspiring means that is the King and officials set good examples for the people, by which they have to take action, do first and then say, saying must go along with doing, "*If governor would like to rule the people, does he need to kill people? If the governor himself wants to do good things, the people will become all good*" (Confucian Four Books, 2006, Analects, p.190), this issue is clearly shown in his principle of "name rectification". The second way of teaching the people is to use music ceremonies to educate people so that they know what should they do and do not commit crimes, and they can do right jobs which are assigned by their superiors.

In the thought of "humanity", Confucius reminded everyone from ordinary people to officials, especially the authorities that they must "self-improve themselves" at first. Confucius advised everyone that "*Did the Bible talk about filial piety? Do you know?*" The Bible says: "*only those who are filial with their parents and in agreement with their siblings can perform politics from their home. That is also political work. Why don't you wait until you become an official to work in politics?*" (Confucian Four Books, 2006, Analects, p. 26). People just need to keep their filial piety to help the country get out of turmoil, and the governor must also set an example for the people by keeping his filial piety. Filial piety is the root of patriotism; filial piety creates an invisible but strong bond that ties affectionately relationships among family members, lineage, and kinship. The community relationship from which can be formed in villages, in the society then becomes the foundation of patriotism. Five Key Relationships of Confucius also have a dialectic relationship in which people at the lower level also affect upper people but not a one-sided dimension, kind parents will have filial children, and those filial and gentle people will be loyal officials, then those loyal officials can give the right advice, the King will also follow. Thus, it can be seen that self-improving themselves from ordinary people to Emperor is very significant. It is the basic issue not only of individuals, families but also of the country. Everyone who insists on cultivating themselves no longer has a separation from individuals, families, and the society; there is no opposition between people, between love and great love, between aristocracy and common people. Although the feudal society divided the hierarchy and class, cultivating oneself of each person is equally important toward the responsibility for the survival of their nation, in which moral equality is higher than legal equality. Those ideas were later summarized by Zeng Zi at the beginning of the University book as following:

*"The ancient holy Kings would like to make their virtues spread in the world, he had to rule his country first. In order to rule his country, he must first arrange his home to be groomed. If he wanted to arrange his own home, he must cultivate himself first. In order to cultivate oneself, first he must keep his heart righteous. If he wanted to keep the heart righteous, first of all his mind must be honest "and "from a Prince to ordinary people, everyone must take their own cultivation as the root. If the root is damaged, the top is not good."* (Confucius Four Book, 2006, college 8).

If you are deserved to be a ruler, you have to cultivate yourself, but to be able to cultivate yourself, you have to learn. If a person would like to become virtuous but he does not study, he will be obscured by the foolishness. If he would like to be intelligent but he would not desire to learn, he will be covered by the lecherousness. If he would like to be honored without acquiring knowledge, he will be obscured by unrighteousness; if he wants integrity without studying, he will be blinded by defiance; if he wants to be brave without learning, he will be obstructed by disorder; if he wants to be tough without being eager to learn, his eyes will be covered by madness (Analects,

Duong Hoa 8). Humanity, wisdom, faith, integrity, courage, and virtue are all moral ethics that need to be trained but if man just wants to have those virtues but does not want to learn to figure out the reason, the root of those virtues, they will easily make mistakes.

## **2.2. The doctrine of rectification of names in the political-social thought of Confucius**

In terms of "rectification of names – name and reality", this is the most important principle in the socio-political viewpoints of Confucius. According to the Chinese Philosophical Dictionary, "rectification of names" is a category of Chinese philosophy, whereby every human being or creature is born with a certain ability and usage, which are called reality; corresponding to each ability, each person or each object has a certain nomination, which is called name. It is true that any reality corresponds to its own name, and which name refers to that reality. Name and reality which are in harmony are right name while name and reality do not match each other is not official, which is called anonymity.

The "rectification of names" theory of Confucius was born to reform the society in the Spring - Autumn period, to restore the social and political order of the Zhou Dynasty, while the Zhou Dynasty's apostolic regime was no longer respected by other vassal states, the feudal regime was being formed and chaotic classes were divided; when music ceremony was ruined; morality, ceremony and ethics were turned upside down and depraved. According to Confucius, the social cause of chaos was due to the "name and reality disordered", the society is strayed from moral qualities. In order to stabilize social order, he advocated that morality must be educated for the people and implemented the policy of "rectification of names – name and reality".

Each name has its internal meaning, that inner function shows us that each name refers to an object, or in other words, the name is the concept of things. For example, the name "King" is both used to refer to the real person and also to the ideal concept of a true King; other names such as "subject", "father", "child" are similar. If the name rectification is taken, the King must act like a King, the father acts as a father, the child acts as a child. Once everyone understood and acted out the proper ritual forms for each social role they occupied, the world would return to order. But in the time of Confucius, he witnessed the chaotic names that caused chaotic society, then he borrowed the image of a wine pottery cup (*cô*) to criticize contemporary society: "*Cô băt cô, cô tai! Cô tai!*" - "*Not a cup of wine, but also called a cup! Why is it called a cup!*" (Confucian Four Books, 2006, Analects, p. 23). From the Shang dynasty to the Western Zhou dynasty, series of wine cup with angular edges called "*cô*" were popular. In the time of Confucius, people changed its shape, discarded the edges but still called it "*cô*". Confucius borrowed the image of "*cô*" to say that the status of the name is not true to the reality, to metaphor that the King who was wrong at moralities of a King was not a King, the person who was inhumane is not a person, the country which was not prosperous was not a country.

According to Confucius, "rectification of names" is when the order between King – his subjects, father – son were definite, whoever takes the name must comply with that name. That is a prosperous country with respect, ethical values, virtue and perfect names and reality. Confucius said that in order to rule the country, first a King had to rectify his own name for himself. If his name is not correct, his language will not be in accordance with the truth of things. If language is not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success. When affairs cannot be carried on to success, proprieties and music do not flourish. According to the "rectification of names" doctrine, Confucius divided the society into basic relationships, in which each relationship is a "moral quality". In a society, according to Confucius, there are 5 basic relationships, known as the five moral circles: King to subject, father to son, husband to wife, elder to younger and friend to friend. Especially in morality and ethics, Confucius always emphasized the relationship of King to subject and father to son. Regarding "king to subject" relationship, Confucius opposed to maintaining the royal throne by lineage and advocated policy of "appointing talented and virtuous people" which was irrespective of people's class or origin. In politics, the King must know how to distribute the work to his subordinates, forgive their little mistakes and promote talented people. He also suggested the ways how to govern the state as "*the King must do good things, and he must do that before the people to set an example and he had to take care and help his populaces*" (Confucian Four Books, 2006, Analects, p. 196).

He also said that the authorities need to do three things: "*Ensuring enough food for the people to be well-fed, having to build a strong army force to protect the people, and building up the trust of the people to the King. If it is reluctant to abolish the above conditions, first stop military, then to give up food, but the King cannot drop the people's trust to the King, otherwise, the government will collapse*". (Confucian Four Books, 2006, Analects, p.184). In contrast, the people and subjects towards the King must be like their parents, and they must show their "loyalty" to the King. Regarding his father and son's religion, Confucius said that for a son, he must take "filial piety" as the most significant morality and a father should take "narcissism" into consideration.

Facing that upheaval social situation in which seizing the right to confiscate happened, Confucius who appealed everyone to live for their rectification of names, especially in the field of politics, "*not in the right position, let's not discuss the politics of that position*" (Confucian Four Books, 2006, Analects, p.387). Each individual must know his own name and live in accordance with his real name according to the strict social organization and the religious status of the Zhou Dynasty, then the society will be moral and the country will be prosperous.

Confucius said that in term of politics as well as society, the corruption of the classes was due to upper class. When the aristocracy failed to maintain their righteousness, the subordinates abused upper's class power for their own sake. "*Taxes had not been held into the treasury of the King for five years. The government had been in the hands of the mandarins for four generations. So, the descendants of Tam Hoan were now in decline*" (Confucian Four Books, 2006, Analects, p.598). In that situation, Confucius said

that if the King would like to “*put down the chaos to return to the right religion*”, then it was compulsory to do as: If a prince would like to be called a prince, he must act like on, vassal must act like vassal, macho men must act like macho men and common people must act like common people. This “rectification of names” policy must be carried out from a top-down perspective to make the reality correspondent to its own name, so that the state would be peaceful.

The success or failure of politics depends on a ruler. The ruler who knows how to live with his rectified name and position can solve everything. If the authorities were righteous, then officials and common people would be righteous too. On the contrary, if the authorities were not righteous, they would not be able to intimidate people into submission.

### 3. Discussion

From the study of the doctrines of “Humanity” and “rectification of names” in the political-social thought of Confucius, we would like to make some following assessments:

It can be seen that any thoughts that were born more or less is governed by historical conditions, Confucius' thought was no exception. Firstly, Confucius thought was dominated by destiny theory, so he forced man to accept the rule of the King, because the King was a son of Heaven. Confucius said that at first heaven gave birth to humans and regulated social orders, but the process of existence later changed. He advised everyone to submit to the King's will absolutely, otherwise it would be disastrous. In society, he divided it into two ranks that were “gentlemen” and “mean men”. Two types of those people exist in tandem with no position reversion. Confucius dignified so much the role of the governor but demeaned the role of the people. He combined “theocracy” and “kingship” to form an invisible force that imposed people and eliminated people’s willpower to struggle; Next, Confucius highly valued “humanity” without paying attention to the methods of governance and social management. From the view of a righteous person, he advocated using morality to educate people. In order to breed people, he built a “static model” for people to follow but without putting them in a “dynamic” state, which led to the subjectivity of a typical man. In addition, when living in a chaotic society, he could not see that the root cause of it was conflicts of classes, but he blamed those conflicts on the conversion of Heaven; Finally, Confucius' doctrine was dominated by the slave-owner aristocracy. In the position of the slave-owner aristocracy, Confucius divided society into two classes of men: “gentlemen” and “mean men”<sup>ii</sup>. A gentleman is a man who understands heaven's destiny; he deposes the Heaven to rule people on the ground. In contrast, mean men are people who are under rule of gentlemen; they have no right other than

---

<sup>i</sup> Rulers.

<sup>ii</sup> People who are ruled by others.

labor production and social support. Confucian ideology of virtue in some extents is a factor that inhibited the development of society and bound the people.

If those limitations mentioned above were skipped, it could be seen that the doctrines of "Humanity" and "rectification of names" in The socio-political thought of Confucius still have some rational key points; Confucius thought expressed the spirit of pro-the people, he saw the role of the people in protecting the country. He said that in order to rule the country, the authorities need to cultivate their morality to set an example for the people to follow. The governor must be talented and virtuous, who does not mistreat the helpless, nor abandon the poor, he has to love and respect the people. Through those viewpoints, he advocated building social order in the spirit of "virtue" which was carried out through "rectification of names", then it showed great improvement; with the "rectification of names" doctrine, Confucius showed the progress in constructing a social order. Confucius said that all things existing in nature and society have a certain name. Also, doctors must figure out the diagnosis and treatment of illnesses; People must know how to do farming; the ruler must know how to make the people well-off...etc. Thus, whoever takes the name must fulfill their obligation of each name, then the society will be peaceful. In the view of social construction and development, he asked the rulers to take the people seriously as well as to treat the people like parents treat their children. From that point of view, he made the request that the rulers should make their policies consistent with the aspirations and interests of the people, which could make the people well-off and happy. When the people's lives were prosperous, they would not fight against the King or officials so that the King's status would be long-lasting; in term of policy of employing talented people to run the state, it is a very progressive thought of Confucius. Confucius said that the highest criteria for recruiting officials are people who must first be moral, intellectual and know how to take care of the people. According to him, a truly powerful state is one that highly values and promotes talents to supplement the governance system.

Doctrines of "Humanity" and "rectification of names" of Confucius' political and social ideology has been greatly significant, which was further supplemented and developed by the later Confucian generations into a political-ethical doctrine which has influenced profoundly on Chinese society and dominated the political and spiritual life of Chinese society for centuries. Since today, that impact more or less has still existed. Not only that, it has had a strong impact on neighboring countries such as Japan, Vietnam in the past and at present.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The doctrines of "Humanity" and "rectification of names" in the socio-political thought of Confucius were born in an upheaval period of Chinese history. The thinkers in this period always yearned for a doctrine to stabilize the society. However, due to the influence of the class standpoint, certain restrictions cannot be avoided. If we know how to remove the limitations imposed by the history, we will find out some logical key

points. With erudite thinking, Confucius initially established the right political views and had a great influence on the history of China and neighboring countries.

### **References**

- Doan Chinh (2009), *Chinese philosophy dictionary*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi.
- Vo Van Dung (2019), *Political thought in Pre-Qin Dynasty and its values*, Political Theory Publishing House, Hanoi.
- Confucius (2006), *Four Books*, Thuan Hoa Publisher, Hue.

Nguyen Duong Thanh Nhan  
DOCTRINES OF HUMANITY (REN) AND NAME RECTIFICATION (ZHENGMIN)  
IN SOCIO-POLITICAL THOUGHT OF CONFUCIUS

---

Creative Commons licensing terms

Author(s) will retain the copyright of their published articles agreeing that a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0) terms will be applied to their work. Under the terms of this license, no permission is required from the author(s) or publisher for members of the community to copy, distribute, transmit or adapt the article content, providing a proper, prominent and unambiguous attribution to the authors in a manner that makes clear that the materials are being reused under permission of a Creative Commons License. Views, opinions and conclusions expressed in this research article are views, opinions and conclusions of the author(s). Open Access Publishing Group and European Journal of Social Sciences Studies shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability caused in relation to/arising out of conflicts of interest, copyright violations and inappropriate or inaccurate use of any kind content related or integrated into the research work. All the published works are meeting the Open Access Publishing requirements and can be freely accessed, shared, modified, distributed and used in educational, commercial and non-commercial purposes under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).