



CONFUCIUS THOUGHT OF RULING A NATION

Nguyen Thi Quyet

PhD, Ho Chi Minh City University of
Technology and Education,
Vietnam

Abstract:

Spring-Autumn - The Warring States period was a period of dramatic political-social transformation. There was a chaotic society with an incessant war in which ethics was decadent as well as morality, social order and ethical values were despised. That social reality had raised an urgent issue that required the solutions which were how to unify the country on one unit as well as to end the conflict in order to "*manage a family, rule a nation, and conquer the world*". In this context, many ideological ideas were emerged in turn with the desires to transform the contemporary social reality which was chaotic into being ruled. It can be said that the idea of Confucius's ruling a nation was one of the outstanding ideas of this period. Within the scope of the article, the author focuses on analyzing Confucius's ideas of ruling the nation in order to contribute to deepening the ideas of ruling a nation in particular and the philosophical system of Confucius in general.

Keywords: Confucius, ruling the nation, name rectification, Spring-Autumn-the Warring States period

1. Introduction

Confucian thought of ruling a nation in particular and Confucianism's ideology in general are the combination of the views of "*virtue*", "*name rectification-name and reality*", the thought of the personal qualities of rulers and the relationship between the state and the people, in which he considers ethics to be a significant factor to regulate human behavior in social relationships.

2. The "rectification of names" doctrine

In the Spring -Autumn period - the Warring States period, morality was corrupted, the society was chaotic, the war was continuously taking place. Confucius said that the origin of the chaos originated from depravity of rulers who made the "name" not

"right", which means that "name" does not fit with its "reality". Therefore, in order to make "name" in accordance with "reality" as well as to educate people and stabilize the society plus to cope with the turbulence at that time, Confucius laid down a policy of "*rectification of names*" to advise each person to know how to behave as their right position in society" [7, 309]. The reason that Confucius advocated "*name rectification-name and its reality*" due to the fact that (1) the social order in the Spring -Autumn period - The Warring States Period was reversed. (2) rituals were corrupted, in which ritual rites, community rituals, the discipline of human's way of life and ethical behavior were degraded, the treatment and communication among human were lost, the regulations of cultural and political activities were increasingly disobedient. (3) morality and ethical order were decadent, but the new moral norms and order of morality were fragile, unformed and people were immoral. Therefore, Confucius put forward the doctrine of "*rectification of names*" in order to restore Zhou's order of etiquette and socio-political institution.

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.

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. "*If the name is unrighteous, then the words will be incorrect, which leads to wrongdoing. When people in their society will no longer respect each other, no longer be in harmony and the law is lax, so people will lose their hope and support. "For the King, implementing his "rectification of name" is to strengthen his ruling status. Because "when the people have no hope and support, they will no longer believe in the King, then collapsing the society is unavoidable whatever happens"* [1:47].

Confucius divides society into five main relationships (Five Key Relationships): King – subject, father – son, husband – wife, brother – brother, friend – friend. In Five Key Relationships, there are three most basic relationship called "*three moral bonds*" (king - subject, father - son, husband - wife). Especially in term of morality, Confucius' ethics always emphasize two relationships: the relationship of King - subject and father – son.

According to Confucius, in order to perform "*name rectification*", it must be carried out through "*rituals*". People are born, live and grow up in complex types of relationships, and rituals play a significant role to ensure these relationships to be maintained. Rituals are one of the principles of "*restraint*" for human behavior, which aims at harmonizing social relationships. Rituals help people overcome ethical

violations whenever they are not implemented. For Confucius, rituals actually are a kind of social contract defining the rights and obligations of each member of society. An orderly society is the one with etiquettes, rituals, and obvious hierarchy between elders and youngsters, in which it stipulates specific criteria for each relationship such as the King must be generous and tolerant and behave as right rituals; subjects (servants) must respect and be absolutely loyal to the King; parents must be humane and vice versa children must always be filial.

He sets out the ethical standards and norms in the father-son relationship in order to maintain the order and respect in family as well as contribute to consolidating hierarchy, discipline, social stability and binding responsibilities among people. In this relationship, he demands "*a humane father - a filial son*"; husband and wife must love and take care of each other. The husband is the breadwinner in his family, always keeps his responsibilities as loving and caring for his wife. However, the wife assists her husband in all fields, has to be chaste, listen to her husband by all her heart and soul and focus on taking care of family; Brothers who have siblings born by the same parents have to love each other, take care of each other like their arms and legs as well as live harmoniously and be united to help each other. Friendships are people who are not related by blood but make friends to "*create relationships of various purposes*" [6, 287]. Being friends, you must sympathize, understand, care and help each other, respect each other in the spirit of equality, friendship and solidarity. Achieving that level means that you have a mutually caring and trusted friendship. In making friends, sincerely trusting each other is the top standard. Not being friends with unkind people means that you have to choose friends among those who are moral and united with you.

Thus, name rectification is not only a political line of Confucius but also a moral principle and requirement of human. When being born and growing up in a chaotic society in which ethics was decadent as well as morality, social order and ethical values were despised, the King was not a real King, subjects were not real subjects, a father was not a real father... moral values are overshadowed, Confucius introduced the theory of "*rectification of name- name and its reality*" aiming at turning the society from being "*disordered*" to being "*ruled*". Therefore, "*rectification of name*" is one of the most important contents in his nationalist ideology.

3. The method of building society by "*virtue*"

In order to implement policy of building society by "*virtue*", Confucius said that the ruler must first train himself, diligently study and cultivate moral qualities. The morality of the governor will become a shining example for the people to follow and become a motivation for the achievement of political goals. From there, he demanded that the King has to respect and preserve the lives of the people. He criticized those Kings who only tried to achieve their political goals through violent ways. Confucius said that "*utilizing politics to control the country and using law to punish the people can prevent them from committing crimes but it is shameless to do so*" [8, 32]. To his way of thinking, the brutal and barbaric implementation of policies does not make the people

obey voluntarily but only make them fear and follow forcefully, all of which make the people hold the grudges. Therefore, in order to make people believe in the ruler, the King needs to educate the people by his virtue, through which it only can create a strong belief in them and that will bring success to the King's power. According to him: *"If the King who merely uses the law to lead the people and only uses punishment to rule the people, then the people will be fearsome of not committing crimes, but if the King leads the people by his virtue, he can use the rituals to rule them. not only are the people ashamed of themselves but now and then they have been inspired"* [3, 14-15].

Confucius emphasizes the role of consciousness, morality, and the exemplar of the ruler. The ruling class at all levels must be moral models, specific realistic models in social life to educate and charm the people. On that basis, everyone's relationships are based on an emotional basis in principle. Therefore, there is no need for the presence of law, but the social order is also maintained and stabilized.

Thus, the King must cultivate his morality to set an example for the people, because the ruler must be virtuous for the people to follow as well as make the people happy. The duty of ruler is to educate the people to be kind ones so that the country can be prosperous. That is the reason why Confucius called for *"virtue"* which means to rule the nation with virtue, also known as *"humane"*, which is inseparable between morality and politics and rules the people by virtue not by violence. This is the viewpoint that is consistent throughout his entire ideology of ruling the nation.

With the line of building society by *"virtue"*, when selecting officials, Confucius advocated using people to learn rituals first and then become to be mandarin, but not choosing people to be mandarins first and then studying rituals. Confucius demanded that *"Those people who learn rituals first before becoming mandarins are yokel (not be ordained yet); Those who have the status of an official before learning rituals are the children of monks and ministers. If we choose talented people in state management, we will choose the ones who first study rituals"* [4, 280-281]. During that social chaotic period, morality was decadent, rituals were corrupted, people treated each other with no courtesy; so, the ruling class used courtesy as a means to deceive the people. According to Confucius, if Celestial Son treats the vassals without courtesy, the vassals will treat ministers without courtesy, and then the ministers will treat the people without courtesy, too. Thus, the King must take the rituals to be exemplar and virtue to rule the people. Once again, the thought of ruling a nation with virtue in Confucius's thought is affirmed. After all, morality is the root and political basis of gentlemen.

4. The personal qualities of authorities

In the way of building society in the spirit of *"virtue"*, it is indispensable to train virtuous people to entrust politics, which Confucius calls them gentlemen. According to him, the gentlemen must have certain qualities of a ruler. *"He is an idealistic person who is ambitious with a noble personality and an image of those who wholeheartedly support the nation for the people as well as know how to suffer the misery before the people and be happy after the people"* [10, 47]. A gentleman, according to Confucius, must have all the qualities

including *humanity, justice, sacrifice, wisdom and faith*; he must pay attention to study rituals to foster his x humanity, wisdom and bravery. It can be said that these criteria were the basic standards for becoming a gentleman and the measure for the rulers in society at that time.

In Confucius' conceptions, rulers must have both morality and political capacity. He always upholds way of building society by "*virtue*" and take the morality of the rulers to educate the people. According to Confucius, "*humanity*" is an expression of human morality, which represents the great virtue of the heaven and the earth. However, the society in the Confucius period had dramatic changes in which "*people became immoral, people became inhumane*", so he thought that it was a period in which "*the King is not a real king, officials are not real officials, a father is not a real father, son is not a real son*" [4, 483]. In order to stabilize the social order and reform people, he used the word "*humanity*" to educate human morality and carry out social transformation. In his mind, "*humanity*" is the central category of other moral categories, and mankind need to have the ethical qualities in accordance with "*Five Key Relationship*", in which "*humanity*" is put at first. The rulers must be "*humane*" and believe in "*humanity*", which become a powerful inner impulse for all their actions. From that steady ethical belief, it can turn into a force for them to make the set political goals become real.

However, there has not been an official definition of the word "*humanity*" but according to Confucius, the main content of the "*humanity*" is as follows:

- for oneself, "*humanity*" is to constantly study, cultivate and train himself to overcome personal desires and return to the morality and rituals, "*modifying oneself back to the rituals is humanity*" [8, 398]. Humanity is the basic moral quality of every human being.
- to other people, "*humanity*" means loving other people. Humanity means loving someone, but not love someone abstractly and unconditionally. Loving people must be built on the basis of morality and intellect. Confucius; therefore, desires that the rulers must have a deep understanding of morality because it is the source of all goodness. The rulers need to consider the study of morality to be the highest purpose of their lives: "*In the morning, when listening to the lectures about morality, death is also pleasing in the evening even*" (8, 106). Humanity does not only love people but also has to know "to hate people" who do evil things.

Beside "*humanity*", the rulers must be wise. "*Wisdom*" is the understanding of people about the world in general, from which they have recognition and common assessment of the nature of things and phenomena taking place. The purpose of "*wisdom*" or understanding does not stop at being aware of the true nature of the phenomena that are taking place, in order to reach the "*kindness*", and the ultimate purpose of learning from the perspective of Confucius is to "*rule the nation*" and "*conquer the world*". He said that "*in the old days, those who want to show their virtue in the world first have to rule their country*" [4, 15]. Thus, the "*wisdom*" of rulers is the power of morality, ruling the nation by humanity makes people in the country enjoy peaceful life and they live together with kindness.

According to Confucius, "*wisdom*" is understood as the general intelligence to distinguish and evaluate people and situations, thereby determine themselves the way

to behave properly. Those who are wise will know how to help people without harming people and themselves. The wise men have to know many kinds of people to distinguish between kind people and unkind people. He said that "*The wise man does not doubt, the humane person does not worry, the brave person does not fear*" [4, 418].

In addition to humanity, wisdom, the rulers must be brave and resilient to overcome challenges in their life. For gentlemen, bravery is the action that comes from the understanding that loving people and loving animals have positive values. Brave men accept sacrifices and loss, but those sacrifice and loss are useful for the society, people and the ethics, as a saying "*Anyone who know that these jobs are kind but without doing them is not a brave man*" [8, 61]. A brave man can "*kill himself to become a humane man.*" Even when knowing that advising the King not to make mistakes is insulting him but bravery men are not afraid of authority and violence. Therefore, Confucius affirmed that "*humane man must be a brave man*" [8, 498].

In short, the rulers must be humane to train their emotions, be wisdom to train their intelligence and be brave to train their fortitude. These three qualities are inextricably linked to each other, in which the humanity plays a decisive role. A humane man will be wise and brave, but the person who is either wise or brave will not definitely be humane "*The wise man knows everything, but if he does not hold his humanity, no matter what he has known, everything must be lost* [8, 578]. "*The humane man must be brave, the brave man is not definitely humane*" [8, 498]. These are the noble qualities of the rulers. In addition, Confucius said that the rulers must be virtuous and talented without regard to their background.

5. The relationship between the state and the people

Before the tragedy of society falling into chaos because the Chu King had only hook-ups, indulged in alcohol and women as well as harassed the people, all of which led to the people's revolution to overthrow Chu regime. That became the impetus for the schools to put forward their ideological ideas. Confucianists solved the problem from a moral point of view, which takes the morality of the government to inspire the people; thereby they can strengthen the relationship between the state and the people.

According to Confucius, in order to make people have a better life, the King must build a complete government apparatus. If the King "*wants to be trusted by the people, which means ruling the nation for peace and prosperity, the governor should recruit the righteous and virtuous officials and dismiss the flattering and wicked ones*" [3, 25]. If a King desires the people to respect him, he must first be serious and strict with himself. The King must set an example for everyone to follow such as showing the filial piety to his parents, getting along with his siblings, doing political affairs from his home to the world.

In politics, the King must respect the people who are virtuous, talented and generous and their fellows. Confucius said that the ruler needed to practice these three things: (1) the ruler had to assign the work to the officials and check them when they finished their work; (2) anyone who made minor mistakes would be forgiven; (3) the

ruler needed to appoint humane and talented people because employing humane and talented people played a very important role in the construction and defense of a country. Thus, the ruler must employ relatives and aristocrats who were still working since these people were still in the same families and blood: *"Do not leave relatives behind, do not make court officials hostile to the King for not being employed: some old friends without making major errors should not be abandoned; and the ruler should not blame for anyone"* [8, 679]. However, through cultivation and learning process in the society, talented people can appear among ordinary people. These people, if they are employed, will become effective assistants to help the King lead the people. Therefore, the King needs to know how to discover and utilize talents (talented people); at the same time, the King must base on the ability and level of each person to assign suitable jobs for them.

When treating the people, the King must keep his dignity in an appropriate manner. If he would like someone to respect them, he must respect the people first. In order to make people to follow and support the authorities, the governor must first love his father and mother, love and care for the people. Confucius said that *"if the Celestial Son loves his parents and relatives wholeheartedly, then the people will be touching to emerge their humanity"* [3, 121]. It is easy to rule the nation when the governor knows how to use the rituals properly.

On the contrary, the relationship among the people and their servants to the King must be like their parents: *"if you are a celestial Son, you are parents of your thanes"* [9, 121]. Also, the people must show their loyalty to the King. That is *"name rectification"* and *"treating other people accordance with rituals"*. In the relationship between the people and the King, the people must be loyal to the King and the King is also loyal to his people. So, the *"loyalty"* in Confucius thought is a two-way relationship between the people and the King, which requires wholeheartedness and sincerity in the relationship with each other.

Confucius also recognized the role of the masses, particularly he emphasized *"what the people like, the King likes it; what the people hate, the Kings also hates it because he knows what to do according with the people, who is called parents of the people"* [3, 27]. Whether the governor can maintain his status or not depends on the people, which can be understood that gaining the popularity of the people can rule the nation; on the contrary, not gaining the people's popularity cannot rule the nation. Therefore, *"the King needs to be popular by the people, make the people obey him and attract other people from remote areas"* [3, 207]. Confucius made demands on the leader of a nation, which most implies that he must have humanity and celestial piety. The King must ensure that his people are well-fed and prosperous. He has to build a strong military force and especially win the people's trust, in which winning the people's trust is the most basic and important requirement for the King. Confucius said that *"a country must be full of food, full of troops and the King is trusted by the people."* Of those three things, if it is reluctant to skip one thing, then the military can be skipped; if it is reluctant to add one more thing, then food can be skipped; if lack of the people's trust, the government will sooner or later collapse since the rule of the nation, which can win the people's trust, will create the

strength that no enemy can break. Also, the King must know how to make people have prosperous lives and educate the people.

In order to fully understand the people's aspirations, Confucius said that it was necessary to set up a mandarin system. To mandarins, " *they have to be humble to the people, be respectful to the King and must often do charity for the people*" [3, 73]. When there is a task to command the people, they must follow the rituals. A mandarin is considered to be a father of the people and they must put ethics into practice. If an official exploits the people, the King must oust his position and power. When treating the people, officials must keep their promise; otherwise, they will lose the people's faith into the King. Thus, Confucius found out that the King who would like to retain his throne had to rely on the people.

In the King-subject relationship, Confucius always upheld the "*name rectification*" in this relationship as the King must be a real King and subjects must be real subjects, "*The King must order his servants to be respectful; the servants also must be faithful to the King*" [2, 42 - 43]. "*Name rectification*" is "*The King has to be a real King, servants must be real servants*". [2, 188 - 189]. Confucius condemned the maintenance of the throne in the style of hereditary lineage and advocated "*humane and talented people*" regardless of their background. However, he still upheld "*to employ relatives*" and distinguish the order of hierarchy in society. Confucius said that between the King and the people, there is an intimate relationship which is inseparable and called "*collaborative interests*". The King who wants to show his authority must rely on the people; on the contrary, the people who want to live in peace, prosperity and happiness must depend on the regulation of the King.

According to Confucius, politics has three important things including population economy and intellectual development. Therefore, as the man who "*substitutes the Earth to rule the people*" or "*father and mother of the people*", the main tasks of the King are to nurture and educate the people; the duty of the King is to take care of the people to have sustenance and covering, which mean he has to satisfy the basic material needs of the people ...etc. For the people, the state creates good conditions for them to be secure. Also, the state has to set suitable tax rates to encourage them to actively take part in production. Especially, in the years of natural disasters, droughts, wars, chaos and crop failures, there must be a tax reduction policy for supporting and rescuing the people. In addition, people should only be employed for any kinds of job that is beneficial for everyone not just for the King. If smartly nurturing and educating the people, the King will win the people's trust and strengthen his position. On the contrary, if the people are hungry, the society is chaotic, the government will be overthrown sooner or later.

Thus, the relationship between the King and the people is a two-way one. The King must love, care for and educate the people. In contrast, the people must respect and love the King as their parents. Thus, their nation will be prosperous.

6. Conclusion

In the thought of ruling a nation, Confucius takes the humanity as the root, take the filial piety – harmony among siblings and rituals as the basis for educating the people, take the "virtue" as the basis for the way to rule a nation, take the exemplar ruler to set an example in the line of ruling the nation to create an orderly and stable society, all of which are the desires that Confucius spent most of his life searching. Although there are many limitations due to historical conditions and class position, if we remove those restrictions, his ideas have been still valid up to now. As an inheritance in thought, his good values always shine so that today we continue to build an orderly and stable society, in which take the people as the root and officials must show their responsibilities to their people, etc., all of which are for the purposes of "*prosperous people and a strong, democratic, equitable, and civilized country*".

References

- Doan Chinh (chief editor, 2004). *General history of Chinese philosophy*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi.
- Doan Trung Con (1950). *The Analects*, Tri Duc Tong Tho Publishing House, Saigon.
- Doan Trung Con (2006). *Confucian Four Books* (full set), Thuan Hoa Publishing House.
- Chu Hy (1998), *Four Books of notes* (Nguyen Duc Lan translated and annotated), Cultural information Publishing House.
- Pham Van Khoai (2004). *Scholar Kong and the Analects*, National politics Publishing House, Hanoi.
- Ho Phi (2011). *Talking with Confucius*, Publishing House of Police.
- Chiem Te (2000). *History of ancient world, volume 1*, National University Publishing House, Hanoi.
- Le Phuc Thien (1992). *The Analects*, Cultural Publishing House, Hanoi.
- Hoang Van Thu (2003). *Confucius Four Books*, Information Culture Publishing House, Hanoi.
- Confucius Four Books* (2003). People's Army Publishing House, Hanoi (Translated by Duong Hong, Vuong Thanh Trung, Nhiem Dai Vien, Luu Phong).

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/).