

On Correcting Naming:

A Re-interpretation of *zheng ming* in the *Analects* as *demanding carefulness*¹

Chong-Ming Lim, National University of Singapore

§1. Introduction

Passage 13.3 has always been a puzzle in the *Analects*, with commentators being uncertain as to where and how it fits in with the projects of the *Analects*. In this essay, I propose that focusing on the attitude of carefulness that is fundamental to speaking allows us to reconceptualize *zheng ming* (正名) as presented in 13.3 as part of a Confucian concern with the carefulness with speaking. Through this, I hope to point the way towards future work on the connection between *zheng ming*, speaking, and the bigger enterprise of *li*, in addition to the relevance of passage 13.3 to politics and governance, *zheng** (政).

§2. *Zheng ming* as an aspect of *li*

There is a clear sense in which the idea of *zheng ming* that it is presented in shares a relationship to speaking (we shall examine the reasons for thinking this in detail in section 3.1), and this is the thesis that I will field and defend. And if it is so, then we would expect it to at least call for a certain kind of carefulness that is at least *not dissimilar* to that which is called for in the other passages in the *Analects* that concern speaking.

Let us take a look at the passage in concern.

¹ Note on translation and romanization: The pinyin method of romanization for Chinese characters is used throughout the essay. However, the spellings used in the citation of secondary works have been preserved, and so have some of the scholars' names. All references to the *Analects*, unless otherwise stated, are made in accordance with the bilingual edition of D. C. Lau. The division of the text of the *Analects* will also be from that said edition. Other translations of the *Analects* will be noted, as will my own translations.

13.3:

[1] 子路曰：「衛君待子而為政，子將奚先？」

[2] 子曰：「必也正名乎！」

[3] 子路曰：「有是哉，于之迂也！奚其正？」

[4] 子曰：「野哉，由也！君子于其所不知，蓋闕如也。」

[5] 名不正，則言不順；言不順，則事不成；事不成，則禮樂不興；禮樂不興，則刑罰不中，刑罰不中，則民無所措手足。

[6] 故君子名之必可言也，言之必可行也。君子于其言，無所苟而已矣。」

[1] Zi Lu said, “If the Lord of Wei left the administration of his state to you, what would you put first?”

[2] Confucius said, “If something has to be put first, it is, perhaps, the *correction of naming*.”

[3] Zi Lu said, “Is that so? What a roundabout way you take! Why bring correction [*of naming*] in at all?”

[4] Confucius said, “Yu, how boorish you are. Where a gentleman is ignorant, one would expect him not to offer any opinion.”

[5] When *naming* is not correct, then the *enterprise of speaking will not be in accordance*; when the *enterprise of speaking is not in accordance*, *doings* will not *complete*; when *doings* do not *complete*, rites and music will not flourish; when rites and music do not flourish, punishments will not fit the crimes; when punishments do not fit the crimes, the common people will not know where to put hand and foot.

[6] Thus when the gentleman names something, the name is sure to be usable in *speaking*, and when he says something this is sure to be practicable. The thing about the gentleman is that he is anything but casual where *speaking* is concerned.”²

As a preliminary note, naming and speaking are to be differentiated from names and speech. I have translated *zheng ming* as “correcting naming” to draw attention to what I think is a fundamental component of the doctrine—the attitudes and dispositions involved in naming and speaking. Translating *zheng ming* as “correcting names” (as we shall see later) is not immediately wrong, but lends itself to being read as a project to correct “faulty” names that are out there in the world instead of focusing on the act of naming and speaking itself. Therefore, the translation of *zheng ming* as “correcting naming” serves our purposes better, for it allows an easy foregrounding of the internality of the act of naming and speaking.

² Translation mine, adapted from D.C. Lau’s translation; the relevant changes have been italicised. The passage has been divided into segments corresponding to Loy’s division of them (following the traditional zhangju organisation of the text). See Loy, “Analects”, 224.

Hereafter, I will argue that reading passage 13.3 as demanding an attitude of carefulness will shed light on the fact that the doctrine of *zheng ming* concerns being careful when naming and speaking. I will propose that instead of understanding *zheng ming* as a separate set of teachings, we can locate it within existent Confucian themes.

2.1. A reinterpretation of *zheng ming* as demanding care/carefulness.

In this section, I will show that this concern with careful speaking is not alien to the *Analects* as it occurs in other passages. Rather, it is the attitude of carefulness. I will argue that it is in this light of being careful about speech that 13.3 ought to be read. There are two reasons for thinking that *zheng ming* is concerned with speaking. Primarily, it appears first in [4] as a response on Confucius's part in chiding Zi Lu for being careless about speaking. Secondly, Confucius concludes in [6] (as a rehashing of what is said in [4]) with a remark on speaking and is evidence that what he was saying in [5] is to be read as working towards the conclusion of [6].³

Let us take a look at [6] of passage 13.3.

[6] 故君子名之必可言也，言之必可行也。君子于其言，無所苟而已矣。
Thus when the gentleman names something, the name is sure to be usable in *speaking*, and when he says something this is sure to be practicable. The thing about the gentleman is that he is anything but casual where *speaking* is concerned.

What is important here is the second sentence where Confucius says that the gentleman is *anything but casual where speaking is concerned*. The key-phrase being the word *wu suo gou* (無所苟). Of the word *gou*, Feng-Yang Wang writes that they have the connotation of being superficial, sloppy, of muddling along,⁴ and that it is a state of being careless.⁵ In this case, that which the gentleman should not be careless about is with regards to speaking. Also of

³ The assumption here is that Confucius is coherent – a point which we can grant.

⁴ Wang, 871: 這組詞都有應循□敷衍□馬虎□對付□得過且過之類的意思。

⁵ Wang, 871: “苟”... 是苟且，草率的意思。

note is that Confucius starts [6] with the conclusion-indicator, *gu* (故) – “thus.” Given this, the phrases immediately preceding [6] call to be read as steps in establishing the conclusion that the gentleman is not careless about speaking. In light of this, [4] then is seen as a different formulation of the conclusion that is established in [6].

Together, these two reasons indicate a concern on Confucius’s part with speaking.⁶ More specifically, it is a concern with not being negligent or careless about speaking. With this connection between 13.3 and carefulness with speaking, we can examine 13.3 in detail to see if we can give a coherent and consistent reading of it through the lens of the attitude of carefulness. It is also important to note that Confucius’s concern with speaking in 13.3 is not an isolated incidence, but rather something that occurs across several passages in the *Analects*. For example, the word *yan* (言) occurs in 72 different passages. Of these, 44 of them are concerned with having to be careful with speaking, or how a lack of care in (or being loose or flippant with) speech is not desirable. 11 other passages, while not containing the word *yan*, can also be read as indicating a need for care when it comes to speaking. Table 1 below indicates the relevant passages in the *Analects*, which are grouped according to their concerns. Table 1: A concern with being careful in speaking.⁷ Passages without the word *yan* will be indicated by an asterisk (*).

#	Passage(s)	Concern(s)
1	1.3, 5.25, 15.27, 17.17	That “glib talking” ⁸ spoils one’s endeavour towards <i>ren</i> and <i>de</i> (德), and

⁶ Cui, 116: [孔丘]十分重视言语，在他评价弟子能力的四科之中，言语仅次于德行，位居第二。

⁷ It is obvious that the passages of the *Analects* offer themselves much more flexibility in interpretation than the apparently strict categories that I have drawn up. However, this broad categorization of the concerns of the passages will be sufficient to make my point that there are various aspects in which Confucius can be read as having a concern with speaking. Where there is more than one concern in a passage, it will be classified according to what I have taken to be the most important concern.

		is shameful.
2	1.14, 2.18, 3.9, 4.22, 5.13, 9.1, 9.24, 10.1, 10.2, 10.4, 10.10, 11.26, 12.1, 12.3, 14.3, 14.13, 14.20, 14.27, 14.37, 14.40, 15.6, 15.8, 16.6, 16.10, 17.4, 17.19, 19.25	That one has to be careful with speaking and his manner of speaking, especially in certain circumstances; where it is inappropriate or when one is ill-equipped to speak (due to lack of evidence or knowledge, or when it is difficult for actions to match up to what is said), one should not speak.
3	11.14, 15.17, 16.1	When one speaks, it is best that one gets straight to the point.
4	2.7*, 2.14, 6.30*, 11.24*, 12.20, 13.14*, 13.23*, 13.26*, 14.1*, 14.12, 15.22*, 16.14*	One should use the appropriate word to describe people or events (Confucius correcting his students' use of terms); definitions about specific terms.
5	7.18, 7.29, ⁹ 16.8, ¹⁰ 16.13, 17.11,* 19.9	One requires learning to speak meaningfully, and in a correct manner.
6	5.10, 12.12, ¹¹ 15.23	That one should not judge a man simply by what he says, but have to see if his actions match what he says.

⁸巧言 has been rendered as “glib talking” in accordance with what I take to be its concern with appearing “smooth”; c.f. Zhu Xi, 48: 好其言，善其色，致飾於外，務以悅人 (emphasis mine).

⁹ The people of Hu Hsiang were probably uneducated people with whom it was difficult to have meaningful conversations about; this presupposes that the term *yan* 言 in this context is a loaded term, instead of referring simply to ordinary speech.

¹⁰ Where one conducts oneself appropriately in response to what the sages have said; what the sages have said is meaningful because of their cultivation.

¹¹ While it is not exactly clear what Confucius was trying to say here, we can nevertheless read it as a snide remark about Zi Lu's rashness.

What can be gleaned from these passages, at the very least, is Confucius's concern with being careful about one's manner and context of speaking, and with what speaking achieves.

Passage 13.3 and its concern for being careful when speaking are thus well in sync with a significant portion of the *Analects*. Let us now turn to the passage in concern.

In [1], Zi Lu poses a hypothetical question to Confucius, asking him what he would do first if he were put into a position of administrative power. Zi Lu is actually asking for what is the fundamental step on which all others can (and should) follow. Confucius replies in [2] that it would be *zheng ming* (the correction of naming). Zi Lu criticizes Confucius in [3], saying that he is far off the mark. But Confucius (in [4]) retorts by saying that Zi Lu is boorish, and that he is boorish because he gives his opinion even as he is ignorant about the affair in concern. Confucius's reply echoes the concerns of the passage in #2 of Table 1 that stresses one should be loath to speak where one is ignorant or is ill-equipped. Part [5] can be seen as Confucius's attempt to explain why it is the case that the correction of naming has to come first in the administration of a state like Wei.¹² It can also be seen as working towards the conclusion in [6] that it is important that one should not be careless in speech. Let us examine [5] more closely.

[5/1]¹³ 名不正，則言不順

When naming is not correct, then the enterprise of speaking will not be in accordance

Two questions immediately arise: (1) what does it mean to name appropriately and (2) what is the enterprise of speaking supposed to be in accordance with?

We can say this in response to the first question: naming is inappropriate when the words that are used do not reflect the appropriate attitude that one should have towards things or events. Underscoring this claim is the basic idea that our choice and use of one word

¹² *Zheng ming* may not be the first step that Confucius might choose for the governance of other states, given how different states have different needs for governance. This is a possibility that we have to keep open for the moment.

¹³ My separation of [5] into different sections, [5/1] to [5/5], is for convenience of reference.

instead of another betrays or reveals our attitudes towards the matter in concern. To see this in context, let us take a look at the following passage:

13.14: 冉子退朝。子曰：「何晏也？」對曰：「有政。」子曰：「其事也。如有政，雖不吾以，吾其與聞之。」

Jan Tzu returned from court. The Master said, “Why so late? ‘There were affairs of state.’” The Master said, “They could only have been routine matters. Were there affairs of state, I would get to hear of them, even though I am no longer given any office.”

To Confucius’s question about why he returned late, Ran Zi replied that he was involved in *zheng** (政)—affairs of state. Confucius immediately corrected him, saying that it could not have been *zheng**, but was in fact *shi* (事)—private affairs. If there were indeed affairs of state, he would have heard about them. Supplying additional context to the passage is necessary. Ran Zi was employed by the Ji family, a faction of the administration in the state of Wei. Their activities were not “affairs of the state,” but rather more of partisan undertakings. The Ji family once overstepped traditional boundaries by implementing a dance that was reserved and only appropriate for the emperor (c.f. 3.11). The family was also involved in undesirable doings (11.17, 16.1).¹⁴ What is important to note here is that Ran Zi uses the word *zheng** (affairs of the state) to refer to what is actually private, partisan business. It can be seen as an attempt to legitimize the actions of the Ji family by raising them to the status of “affairs of the *state*.” However, Confucius is quick to pick up on that and implies to Ran Zi that the affairs of the state are open and aboveboard (which is why he would hear of them even though he is not in office), whereas the doings of the Ji family were behind closed doors and he would not know of them. Hence, Confucius is correcting Ran Zi’s choice of words where his naming the business of the Ji family as *zheng** instead of *shi* is not appropriate for the circumstance because the attitude expressed by the word *zheng** towards the doings of the Ji family.

¹⁴ Context of the Ji family’s doings taken from Loy, “On Correcting Names”, 69.

The passages in #4 of Table 1 shall also show similar corrections that Confucius makes regarding the choice of words of his disciples and the attitudes expressed by them. In particular, passages 2.14, 13.23, 13.26 and 15.22 illustrate the point particularly well. They are instances where Confucius makes explicit remarks regarding what appears to be the same thing are in fact different and implies that they ought to be treated different. For example, the difference between a *qun* (群) and a *dang* (黨) in 15.22 is not a difference that is discernible from the point-of-view of an outsider; the difference lies in the evaluative attitude that a gentleman ought to have towards particular types of association between people. To call a *dang* (a clique) as *qun* would be to commit the same mistake that Ran Zi did in 13.14, which was to call *shi* as *zheng*.* It is a mistake of expressing the wrong evaluative attitude towards a particular thing.

A contemporary example may also shed light on this issue. For example, the choice of words between “female circumcision” and “genital mutilation” to describe what is essentially the same practice reveals the attitude of the speaker. Using the latter term indicates attitudes of disgust and disagreement that are not immediately apparent should one use the former. In this circumstance, if a person who was trying to abolish this practice calls it “female circumcision,” she could be chastised for naming the practice inappropriately. A distinction would, of course, imply that there is a standard of what is appropriate that her attitude is measured against, but this is not ruled out in the *Analects*. In fact, that some associations of men are called *dang* and given a negative connotation in the *Analects* presupposes the existence of such a standard. It is in this light that I propose we look at what “naming is not correct” means.

In the second question (2), that which the enterprise of speaking has to be in accordance with is the appropriate attitudes of the persons towards things and events. Given that naming is loaded with and expresses the attitudes of the speakers, then speaking (the

scope of which goes beyond naming) must be similarly structured as well. If the act of naming does not express the appropriate attitudes that one should have towards things and events, then there is little hope that the enterprise of speaking will be in accordance with the appropriate attitudes. This is because improper naming *already* indicates that inappropriate attitudes are absent. Given that, it is clear that the enterprise of speaking cannot accord (*shun* 順) with something that is absent. It would fall out of accordance with the appropriate attitudes that the speaker ought to have.¹⁵ Let us return to 13.3.

[5/2] 言不順，則事不成

when the enterprise of speaking is not in accordance, doings¹⁶ will not complete

The word *cheng** (成) appears 25 times in 20 different passages in the *Analects*.¹⁷

Throughout these passages, *cheng** is used predominantly as a verb, in the sense of to complete or to attain, or as an adjective describing a completed state of affairs. Instances where *cheng** is used as a noun or adverb are rare. I have translated 則事不成 as “then doings will not complete.” Given that the enterprise of speaking is not in accordance with the appropriate attitudes of the speaker, what he sets out to do (his “doings”) will not be complete, as having the wrong or inappropriate attitudes means that he will not reach a completion (or, he will not complete in a way) that is desirable. It is immediately clear that the sense of the word “complete” here is not used in its common sense manner (which means to be finished), but in the same value-loaded sense as that of *cheng** *ren* (成人), the complete man, or as *cheng** *ming* (成名), attaining a name or reputation. It is value-loaded in the sense that it is a particular kind of “completion,” one that is (ethically) desirable. Interpreting *cheng** in this

¹⁵ In this case, one could even say that it is a state of *ni* (逆) – the antonym of *shun*, meaning “in opposition” – to the appropriate attitudes.

¹⁶ The word *shi* (事) is generally used to describe doings or activities. It also can be used to mean “affairs” in general. I have translated it as “doings.”

¹⁷ Excluding the two times it was used as part of the names of people, and including passage 13.3. These passages are: 3.21, 3.23, 4.5, 5.22, 7.11, 8.8, 8.19, 9.2, 9.19, 11.26, 12.16, 13.3, 13.10, 13.17, 14.12, 14.44, 15.9, 15.18, 19.7, and 20.2.

sense assumes that Confucius value-loaded his use of the term. However, given the other instances in which he has done so,¹⁸ there is reason for us to grant the plausibility of this reading. Using *cheng** in this sense, we see that one's doings would not be considered *cheng** in the case where one holds inappropriate attitudes towards things, people, and events.

[5/3] 事不成，則禮樂不興
when doings do not complete, rites and music will not flourish

The word *xing* (興) appears in seven passages¹⁹ in the *Analects* and all are used in the sense of “raising to a higher level.” It may be a higher level of intellectual or emotional activity (8.2 and 8.8), or it may be simply a physical act of rising to one's feet (15.2). It is this sense that 禮樂不興 is translated as “the rites and music will not flourish.” That is, they will not reach a state in which they are in prevalent practice.

If what people set out to do does not reach (the value-loaded sense of) completion, then the rites and music will not prosper. This is because a fundamental aspect of *li* (禮) is that it has to be able to express the dispositions that people have towards each other in social situations.²⁰ If the appropriate attitudes of people are not expressed by their naming and speaking and the doings they endeavor do not reach a value-loaded sense of completion, then their practice of *li* and *yue* (which are doings) will also not reach completion. The consequence is that *li* and *yue* fail to express the requisite and appropriate internal states of the actors. They become lacking in an internal dimension. Lacking internality, *li* and *yue* are then reduced to mere mechanical motions and repetitions, which are carried out without significance to the participants. When such a state occurs, *li* and *yue* might eventually fall out of practice, as they might be seen as coercive that people have endure.

¹⁸ The instance when he tries to “reclaim” the use of the word *xiao* (孝) in passage 2.7 being a particularly good example.

¹⁹ These passages are: 8.2, 8.8, 13.3, 13.15, 15.2, 17.9 and 20.1.

²⁰ I will assume that music is structured similarly as *li*. This is because music can be read as the expression of (emotional) dispositions, with the dispositions being fundamental. The arguments for this reading, however, are beyond the scope of this paper.

Another possibility here is that *li* and *yue* do not fall out of practice, but that they are just enacted without holding much significance to the agents that are involved. I suspect this is also a state where *li* and *yue* are not “flourishing.” The sense of the word “flourishing” is loaded. It allows for one to say that *li* and *yue* are not flourishing even if they are being practiced widely throughout the society. Rather, what does not flourish is a value-loaded sense of *li* and *yue*, one which is achieved when *li* and *yue* are carried out with the (normatively) requisite attitudes.

A reference to two passages (3.8 and 17.11) will show this connection between the internal states of the actor and the aspects of *li* that are concerned with behavior.

3.8: 子夏問曰：「『巧笑倩兮，美目盼兮，素以為絢兮』何謂也？」子曰：「繪事後素。」曰：「理後乎？」子曰：「起予者商也！始可與言詩已矣。」

Tzu-hsia asked, “Her entrancing smile dimpling, Her beautiful eyes glancing, Patterns of color upon plain silk. What is the meaning of these lines?” The Master said, “There is first the plain silk. The colours come afterwards.” “Does the practice of the rites likewise come afterwards?” The Master said, “It is you, Shang, who have thrown light on the text for me. Only with a man like you can one discuss the Odes.”

To Zi Xia’s question about a particular line in the Odes, Confucius replies that the plain silk comes before the colors. Zi Xia immediately sees the connection between that answer and the practice of *li*—certain things are requisite and fundamental (like the plain silk) and others come later (the colors). For the practice of *li*, the appropriate attitudes are fundamental and need to come first, while the expression of them through the physical aspects of the rites (those that concern behavior) come later. And what is required of the physical aspects of the rites is that they bring out the fundamental, appropriate attitudes of the person as how color ought to bring out the qualities of the silk. Should there not be the requisite attitudes (the plain silk), the practice of the physical aspects of *li* (the colors) will be meaningless and have no place in the picture. This sentiment is echoed in 17.11 when Confucius makes an exasperated remark that he is not simply talking about bells and drums when he talks about *li*,

which is indicating, minimally, that there is something that goes deeper than the physical aspects of *li*.

[5/4] 禮樂不興，則刑罰不中
when rites and music do not flourish, punishments will not fit the crimes

The sense of the word *zhong* (中) is to be read in the same context as that in passage 11.14, i.e., “to the point.” Where punishment (*xing*fa* 刑罰) does not get to the point, the situation will be, as Lau has translated, one where the punishments do not fit the crimes. Given that *li* and *yue* fail to stimulate people and do not flourish, then punishment (which ought to be regulated by *li* (c.f. 2.3)) will not be appropriate for the crimes that they are supposed to be applied to.

[5/5] 刑罰不中，則民無所措手足
when punishments do not fit the crimes, the common people will not know where to put hand and foot

On a literal level, the second part of this passage means that people do not know where to put their hands and feet in accordance with the physical aspects of the rites (which, if naming is inappropriate, will not flourish), or how to put their hands and feet in order to best express their attitudes and dispositions towards things, people, and events. Yet, this passage must also go beyond being literal to mean that the people may not be able to express themselves appropriately in their in general doings and activities. This interpretation of this line is in sync with what we have been discussing so far.

[6] 故君子名之必可言也，言之必可行也。君子于其言，無所苟而已矣。
Thus when the gentleman names something, the name is sure to be usable in *speaking*, and when he says something this is sure to be practicable. The thing about the gentleman is that he is anything but casual where *speaking* is concerned.

In light of the previous discussion of [5], we see how it is important that the *junzi* takes care with his speaking, that he is “anything but casual” where speaking is concerned.

§3. Concluding remarks

A concern for the doctrine of the *zheng ming* passage that appears in 13.3 is that of the attitude of carefulness. This same attitude of carefulness is a familiar theme in the *Analects*, especially when it comes to speaking. In light of this, we can plausibly take *zheng ming* to fall within the same ambit as Confucius's concern with speaking. The significance of this is that the doctrine of *zheng ming* is placed very firmly in the context of a substantial Confucian theme and that is a relation to *li*. What is taken to be appropriately careful or not when it comes to speaking has to be measured against a set of norms (*li*). This direction is pointed to by Cui Qing Tian, who has developed Confucius' “無所苟” as not only being careful about speaking, but also as being careful about speaking insofar as one has to make sure that what one says does not stray from what is demanded of oneself by *li*.²¹ Hence, speaking is very closely related to *li* and it is also important to examine the relationship between speaking and *li* in the *Analects*.

It is in this way that I think that reading *zheng ming* as demanding carefulness, and showing that its concern (the attitude of carefulness) recurs through the *Analects*, can put it in the domain of *li* and allows *zheng ming* to cease to be a puzzling anomaly in the *Analects*. Rather than jumping directly to examining the connection between *zheng ming* and *zheng** upon reading the passage (in an attempt to understand it), we now have reason to think that what is perhaps more important is to examine the relationship between *li* and *zheng** in the *Analects*. And it is perhaps in this way that we can understand the relationship between *zheng ming* and *zheng** indirectly.

²¹ Cui, 117-120.

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