

# The Study of Dong Zhongshu's Concept of Benevolence and Righteousness Focuses on "Zhengming"

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## Abstract

Benevolence and righteousness are important propositions of Chinese philosophy. Dong Zhongshu has made great achievements in collecting benevolence and righteousness thought of pre-Qin Confucianism. Dong Zhongshu inherited and developed Confucius' and pre-Qin's ideas of *zhengming* (正名 meaning rectifying names or the rectification of name), The relationship between *ming* (名 meaning 'name') and "reality" is used to expound his principle of benevolence and righteousness. Dong Zhongshu attaches significant importance to *zhengming*, elevating the importance of the "ming" to the first key to the governance of the country. The sound, meaning and form of *minghao* are consistent, and it is the expression of providence, so *minghao* must be true. Generic name (凡號) is the general name of things, and Second-level name is the name of all things, and generic name is simple and few, and Second-level name is numerous. *Minghao* goes straight to providence to distinguish all things. Dong Zhongshu analyzes the pronunciation, form and meaning of *ren* (仁 benevolence) and *yi* (義 righteousness) from the angle of name rectification and explores their internal consistency. Benevolence is how to treat others, love others, not love yourself; Righteousness is to be strict with self, to correct self, not to correct others (仁在愛人, 義在正我). Dong Zhongshu further regarded *ren* as "generic name", incorporated into the existence and operation of heaven, and "released *ren* with heaven". Heaven produces all things, there is benevolence. During moral practice, Dong Zhongshu used the idea of "*zhengming*" to determine the connotation and principle of benevolence and righteousness, clarified the ethical and moral norms, and guided people to better practice benevolence and righteousness.

**Keywords:** *Zhengming* (正名 - rectifying names), Dong Zhongshu, benevolence, righteousness.

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## Introduction

Dong Zhongshu, as the most important political philosopher in the Western Han Dynasty, made an in-depth investigation and analysis of the relationship between "name" and "reality" in the *Chunqiu fanlu* (春秋繁露) and expounded his thoughts of benevolence and righteousness systematically from the angle of "name" and "reality", which became an important theoretical

basis and component of constructing the social and political system of the Han Dynasty and maintaining and perfecting the social order. Most scholars believe that Dong Zhongshu's thought of "*zhengming*" is to achieve the political ethical purpose of "dividing the name into the correct politics" (Li, 2010). It accords with the characteristics of Dong Zhongshu's political philosophy (An, 2014). Some scholars believe that it is to promote the combination of the ethical and moral order of the "three principles and five permanent principles" with the political order (Ding, 2021). This paper discusses Dong Zhongshu's concept of benevolence and righteousness from the perspective of his thought of "*zhengming*", and probes into the theoretical construction method, connotation and practice of ethics.

Xu Shen explains "*ming*" in *Shuowen Jiezi* : It means going out at night and not seeing each other, calling yourself by your first name to identify yourself, to distinguish you from me (Xu, 1981). "*Zuo zhuan*" said: "*ming* is used to indicate the title and duty", Kong Yingda explained: "speak out is the *ming*" (Zuo, 2000). "*Fanlu*" said: "Make a sound to indicate the command, so as to impose the *ming*; *Ming* is a voice that expresses his mission". "*Ming*, is used to distinguish all things" (Su, 1992). "*Guliang Biography*" Fan Ning notes: "*Ming*, used to distinguish each other" (Cheng, 2004), Mutual identification, respectively. "*Guanzi*" said: "Things have their shape, and shapes have their name" (Guanzi, 2004). "*Ming*" is the name of something. Although "*ming*" is only a symbol, it has been given a certain substantial meaning since its emergence, and its most essential role is to refer to and distinguish people and things in social communication, to achieve the purpose of communication.

Since "*ming*" refers to people or things, the relationship between "name" and "reality" naturally arises. In ancient Chinese society, "*ming*" has a particularly prominent position and function. Gao You annotated *Huainan Zi*, said: "*Ming*, the name of the empty and real" (He, 1998). *Ming* represents the imaginary and real relationship between the object's body and the name. *Ming* is not only a simple name of things and objects, but also the great honor of the state power, losing the *ming* is equal to granting the government to others, and even the subjugation of the country. Therefore, "*ming*" is particularly important for the safety and survival of the country. There is such a passage in *Zuo zhuan*: Only the objects and *ming* are in the hands of the king and are the key to the political security of the country and cannot be taken away by others (Yang, 2009). *Ming* is the king's credit, the utensils carry rites and music, practice benevolence and righteousness with rites and music, obtain benefits with benevolence and righteousness, and stabilize the people with interests, which is the great festival of state power. If it is lost, it means that the regime is lost, and the country is destroyed. It can be seen from this that why to be a country and why to be a king depends on these names and rites, which is not only a simple name of things and objects, but also the great festival of state power. Therefore, "*ming*" is especially important for the safety and survival of the country and individuals.

Confucius's thought of *zhengming* was a political philosophy thought put forward under the background of the collapse of rites and music at that time, with the purpose of restoring and rebuilding a stable and harmonious social order (Gou, 2015). Confucius advocated that the king should follow the way of the king, the minister should follow the way of the minister, the father should follow the way of the father, and the son should follow the way of the son (Zhu, 1983). This "eight-character motto" is the biggest principle of humanity and the most important key to governing the country. Confucius said, "If *ming* is not regular, the speech will not be justified;

if the speech is not justified, the affairs will not be accomplished; if the affairs will not be accomplished, the system of rites and music of the state will not be revitalized; if the rites and music are not revitalized, the punishment will not be properly applied; if the reward and punishment are not appropriate, the people will not know what to do” (Zhu, 1983). Confucius revealed the profound core thought of “benevolence” contained in name, reality, propriety, and righteousness. Jade and silk bells and drums, rites, and music are one. If there is no benevolence from the heart, rites and music will lose their essential meaning (Zhu, 1983).

Since Confucius, from the pre-Qin Dynasty to the Han Dynasty, there have been many different schools of thought debate on the relationship between name and reality, and the idea of correcting name has become an important topic in the middle and later periods of the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States period, and then formed a school of Zhuzi - Famous School of thought. The thought of famous writers is characterized by focusing on debating the relationship between “name” and “reality”. Follow the name to the truth, it emphasizes the method of nominology or logic to investigate and deal with things, and the content of debate often has nothing to do with political reality, and is trapped in pure nominality and logical reasoning, which have an important influence on the “*zhengming*” thoughts of later generations, including Dong Zhongshu’s.

## Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach, specifically literature research. This paper focuses on the reflection of Dong Zhongshu’s *zhengming* in the concept of benevolence and righteousness. The main data of this study comes from Dong Zhongshu’s major work, *The principle of benevolence and righteousness in the Chunqiu fanlu*, which refers to the annotations of Su Yu in the Qing Dynasty as the main reference text. Through reading the relevant chapters in detail and collecting valuable views, the author studies Dong Zhongshu’s idea of *Zhengming* in his view of benevolence and righteousness. Specifically, it includes the following steps:

1. Find out the relevant chapters, explore Dong Zhongshu’s thought of attaching importance to *zhengming*, and widely apply it to many of his theories.
2. Dong Zhongshu’s concept of benevolence and justice embodies the thought of justifying the name through form, sound and meaning of benevolence, righteousness, analysis, interpretation of the connotation of benevolence and righteousness.
3. Interpretation and synthesis: Analysis of Dong Zhongshu’s views on benevolence and righteousness, how to implement the thought of benevolence and righteousness in practice.

By employing a qualitative literature-based approach, this research aims to reveal Dong Zhongshu’s *zhengming* thought reflected in his interpretation of benevolence and righteousness. This paper analyzes Dong Zhongshu’s definition and difference of benevolence and righteousness, the unity of benevolence and righteousness in moral practice, and the important enlightenment in dealing with the relationship between Other and Self.

## Findings and Discussion

### The determination of the sound, meaning, and form of "ming" is governed by providence

Dong Zhongshu's thought of "zhengming" is explained in the article *The deep investigation of the name of the Spring and Autumn Fandlu*. Dong Zhongshu said: The first step in governing the world is to examine the categories and schemas of things clearly; The first step in examining the categories and outlines of things is to examine in depth the true meaning of *ming* (Su, 1992). Using the "first chapter" to describe the importance of examining the *ming*, just like seeing the overall content of the book through the catalog, "*ming*" is the first link in the governance of the country.

The *ming* is based on "true", so it can be used as a criterion for judging right and wrong, and the key to distinguishing between right and wrong is "just like a craftsman drawing a straight line with rope and ink, if you want to distinguish the right and wrong of things, you must use the name as a judgment standard" (Su, 1992).

The pronunciation, meaning and font of the *ming* are highly consistent. The ancient saints imitated heaven and earth to give all things a name, the name is the "singing" of all things, the shape of all things, sound tangible. Heaven itself does not make a sound, heaven and earth make a sound through people, and create a shape to reflect and convey the will of Heaven, so the sound, meaning and shape of the *ming* come from the root of heaven and earth (Su, 1992). Dong Zhongshu further analyzed the words "*Tianzi*" (天子 meaning Son of heaven), "*Zhuhou*" (諸侯 meaning vassal), "*Dafu*" (大夫 meaning officer), "*Shi*" (士 meaning scholar) and "*Min*" (民 meaning people) from the aspects of sound, meaning and form. Dong Zhongshu is also good at spelling out meanings, By comparing the structure of "*Zhong*" (忠 meaning loyal) and "*Huan*" (患 meaning suffering), we can understand the different meanings of the two characters. Dong Zhongshu also made a unique explanation of the word "*Wang*" (王 king) from the font: The three horizontal strokes represent heaven, earth, and man, and the middle one firm indicates the way through heaven and earth and the clear relationship between heaven and man. All of these are from the pronunciation of the name, the font, and the meaning of the word, to reveal the connotation of the *Ming*.

There are differences between *fanhao* (凡號, meaning 'generic name') and *sanming* (散名 meaning 'Second-level name'), Dong Zhongshu made a detailed distinction. Everything has generic names, and every name has a Second-level name. The generic name refers to the broad category of things, few but slight; It's more Second-level name than generic name, It's detailed (Su, 1992), to be able to enumerate and distinguish everything.

Since the authenticity of *ming* comes from heaven, then "heaven" is the standard to evaluate whether the "*ming*" is correct, "*ming*" is the medium to communicate with heaven and man, and the "*ming*" in line with the will of heaven can be correct and reverse, distinguish right from wrong. Dong Zhongshu proposed "The boundary of heaven and man, becoming one" (Su, 1992). To study deeply the *ming* of things, to distinguish their reasons, and to act in accordance with their elucidated providence is to be in harmony with heaven in principle and not to deviate

from the truth of things. Only by mastering the truth of things and communicating the margin between heaven and man, can we complement and obey each other in doing things, and when heaven, nature and social ethical order can be integrated in name and reality, we can achieve the unity of heaven and man. By associating the heavenly way with humanity, it can also help people distinguish and correct human relations and ethical and moral order, so that social politics and ethics can operate in a normal and orderly manner, which is also the essential meaning of the *ming* (An, 2014).

Although the *ming* originates from the source of personnel, it must obey the way of heaven, otherwise it is unreasonable. From the formulation of *ming* we can examine the difference between heaven and man, and see the difference between heaven and human nature, which is also the significance of ritual. Therefore, the *ming* is to make people obey the rules of heaven, do not violate the will of Heaven, and act in accordance with etiquette, so that social politics and ethics can operate in a normal and orderly manner, which is also the essential meaning of *minghao*. At the level of ethics and morality, it is necessary to clarify the status of *ming*, determine the ideological connotation and principle of benevolence and righteousness according to “*ming*”, clarify the ethical and moral norms, expound his concept of benevolence and righteousness, and guide people to better practice benevolence and righteousness.

## Examining benevolence and righteousness through the perspective of *zhengming*

Dong Zhongshu systematically expounded his view of benevolence and righteousness in the “*Principle of Benevolence and Righteousness in the Chunqiu fanlu*”. benevolence, is to express how to treat others, let others at ease; Righteousness refers to how to treat oneself and make oneself right (An, 2014). Dong Zhongshu explains the basic contents and categories of benevolence and righteousness from the angle of *zhengming*.

From the pronunciation, “*Shuo Wen Jie Zi*” said: “benevolence, means cordial” (Xu, 1981), *Mencius* said: “*Ren* means people” (Zhu, 1983). As long as the word “benevolence” is spoken, it is inseparable from “people”, “dear people” and “crowd”. The pronunciations of “*ren*” 人 (meaning people), “*ren*” (仁 meaning benevolence), “*qin*” (親 meaning cordial) and “*qun*” (群 means “group”) are the same or similar. “*Zhouyi*” points out that “the way of man is benevolence and righteousness”, and benevolence and righteousness are the most fundamental laws of human beings. The *yin* (阴) and *yang* (阳) of heaven, the softness and hardness of the earth, and the benevolence and righteousness of man are called “three talents” (三才), which is the foundation of the way. From the relationship between name and reality, Dong Zhongshu explained that benevolence refers to “others” rather than “self” from the relationship between name and reality in the theory of *zhengming*.

“*Zhong Yong*” said: “righteousness is *Yi*” (宜, meaning appropriate). “Zhuxi said, “Appropriate” means suitable, ought, ought to mean” (Zhu, 1983). *Shuowen Jiezi Guelin*” explains: “*Yi*, indicating their appearance or behavior.” “*Yi*” (義), “*yi*” (儀) and “*yi*” (誼), the pronunciation of the three is the same, and the usage is similar, to show that one’s conduct is righteous, proper, and appropriate.

The character of *ren* (仁) indicates two people (二人), meaning that only one person cannot show “*ren*”. *Ren* is the embodiment of the relationship between people, *ren* must be shown in the interaction between people. It is the way people get along, Qian Mu said: “Benevolence is the way for people to get along” (Qianmu, 2011). Dong Zhongshu said, “benevolence” is to treat others, is to settle others, love others, rather than love yourself.

From the font, oracle “*yi*” (義) is the meaning of the word, above is the “sheep” (羊), below is “myself” (我). The shape of “I” represents the shape of a weapon or a knife, which means slaughtering cattle and sheep with a knife saw for sacrifice. Killing animals for sacrifice is a particularly important event that cannot be abandoned in ancient times, and later extended to mean fair, just, correct, appropriate and appropriate things or actions, ethical and moral principles. When the name “righteousness” is spoken, it means “Myself”, not “others”. (Su, 1992). Every act of man, whether righteous or unjust, is the gain and loss of the self, So Dong Zhongshu believes that righteousness is to express “myself.”

From the meaning of the word, *ren* has the meaning of love. The object and category of love for “people” mentioned by Dong Zhongshu broke through or weakened the restriction of blood kinship based on patriarchal system in pre-Qin Confucianism, and expanded to all “others” besides “myself”. Dong Zhongshu said: If people only love themselves, do not love others, then cannot be called “benevolence”. And the love of benevolence, throughout all things, even “Birds, beasts, worms, fish, and so on. Without love, one cannot be called benevolence (Su, 1992). This can also be called Dong Zhongshu’s thought of philanthropism. True benevolence is neither self-love, nor blind love and coddling, but benevolence and wisdom, and far-reaching love and wide love. True benevolence, with a deep sense of danger, knows how to prevent problems before they happen, far-reaching for the country’s people, its love to deep and wide, throughout the four corners, grace, and the world.

In addition, “*ren*” also has a meaning: the innermost part of the core or other hard shell can be eaten, in nature never stop life and growth (Zhurenjie, 2010). From the height of the relationship between heaven and man, Dong Zhongshu gave the *zhengming* of “benevolence” and endowed “benevolence” with richer connotation.

From the meaning of the word, “righteousness” has the meaning of just, appropriate, and just. “*The Analects of Confucius Liren*” said: “The gentleman for the world, nothing is necessary, nothing is unnecessary, moral is the only standard”. (Zhu, 1983) “*Mencius*” said: “The so-called virtuous people do not have to practice when they speak, and practice does not have to obtain results, only morality is the standard of words and deeds”. (Zhu, 1983) “Righteousness” is one of the core ideas of Confucianism, as “the regulator and safety valve of all values and virtues”. (Liuqiang, 2016) Confucius’ “killing oneself for benevolence” and Mencius’ “sacrificing one’s life for righteousness” all contain the Confucian pursuit of the highest moral standard of “benevolence and righteousness”.

Dong Zhongshu stressed that “righteousness” lies in correcting oneself with proper and appropriate moral standards, rather than correcting others (以義正我). “Righteousness” is closely related to “myself”, “righteousness” is based on me, is appropriate for me, not for others outside of me. To judge whether a person’s moral behavior conforms to the standards and laws required by justice depends on whether his words and deeds are correct and whether they conform to the criteria of justice. (Su, 1992) Dong Zhongshu combines righteousness and

myself into one, indicating that there is an intrinsic and closely related connection between them.

Dong Zhongshu explores the principle of benevolence and righteousness from *the Spring and Autumn Annals*. Duke Jin Ling did not abide by the way of being a king, his behavior is perverse, frivolous, stubborn, and cruel, killing at will. (SiMa, 1959) Dong Zhongshu believed that Duke Jin Ling only loved himself and did not love others, and could not be called “benevolence”. Under the banner of fighting against the rebels, the Chu army destroyed the State of Chen and the State of Cai successively, captured the prince of Chen and killed the prince of Cai. Although Chu could put down the rebellion, the Spring and Autumn Annals did not call it “righteousness”, because Chu himself was not right, and his motive was to destroy the state. Dong Zhongshu believed that even if the State of Chu and Duke QiHuan could correct the mistakes of others, they could not be called “righteous” if their own behavior were not correct.

### The distinction and unity of benevolence and righteousness in the generic name (凡號)

As the second-level names, “benevolence” and “righteousness” have a clear distinction, that is, other, self, inside, outside, and close, distant, far, near, to, give. Benevolence means to go, righteousness means to come; Benevolence is far, righteousness is near; Love in people, called benevolence; Righteousness is self. “Benevolence” points to others, and “righteousness” points to oneself. The gentleman seeks the distinction of benevolence and righteousness to distinguish others from himself, and then to distinguish the difference between inside and outside, right, and wrong. Therefore, we should cultivate ourselves according to morality and act according to etiquette and righteousness. Extend grace to others and be tolerant to all (Su, 1992). Dong Zhongshu pointed out that benevolence and righteousness are completely different in subject, object, category, function, and effect (Yang J. , 2018). The subject and object of benevolence are others rather than oneself, and the scope of benevolence is extended outward, far, and wider to others. On the contrary, the subject and object of righteousness is oneself, and to correct oneself by moral norms and social norms is to reflect and examine oneself close to oneself, inward and inward. The distinction between benevolence and righteousness is to spread benevolence and tolerance to others. Be strict within to govern oneself and regulate temperance. Confucianism has always been to “cultivate oneself”, emphasizing the correct behavior of self-morality and benevolence for others. It shows that benevolence and righteousness are treated differently in others and self. Dong Zhongshu pointed out that the “*Spring and Autumn Annals*” is the same in the way of writing records, pointing out the mistakes of the upper class without mercy, but sparing the pain of the lower class; The minor mistakes of countries other than the State of Lu can be ignored and not recorded, while the minor mistakes of the country are recorded and criticized. All of these illustrate the truth: “Be strict with yourself and tolerant of others” (躬自厚而薄責於人). As second-level names, “benevolence” is to benefit others, and “righteousness” is to correct oneself.

Dong Zhongshu incorporated the essence of benevolence into the existence and operation of the Heavenly Way. From the point of view of the name, “benevolence” thus has a

higher and deeper meaning. Dong Zhongshu affirmed that Heaven has the virtue of “benevolence”. “Yi” said: “the great virtue of heaven and earth is born”, born, refers to the creation of all things. The great virtue of heaven and earth lies in making all things live and prosper without encroaching on each other. Good benevolence in heaven, heaven is benevolent, life between heaven and earth, from where to obtain benevolence, cultivate benevolence, its valuable is to be able to imitate the way of heaven, according to the way of humanity, attributed to benevolence. “Benevolence” contains the power of endless life and spiritual growth. If there is no benevolence, there is no living, which is the Confucian outlook on life, death, and values. “According to heaven changes through movement, a gentleman should strive to become stronger constantly.”(天行健, 君子以自強不息) says that people should keep the spirit and life full and cultivate the strength of life and growth. “The achievement of benevolence lies in oneself, is it in others?” (為仁由己, 而由人乎哉?) (Zhu, 1983) The power of this growth comes from oneself, and it is always the growth and perfection of self-life and virtue, only in this way can the realm of benevolence be reached.

*Chunqiu fanlu* said: “The great beauty of benevolence lies in heaven. Heaven, it is benevolent”. The king must be kind and wise, and can eliminate disasters and correct mistakes in time, so that all people and all things in the world will be saved from disaster because of the love of the wise. In this sense, Dong Zhongshu broke through the meaning and principle of “benevolence and righteousness” as a second-level name to express the relationship between people and gave “benevolence” more extensive and far-reaching connotation and meaning of the generic names from the perspective of higher relationship between heaven and man.

## Conclusion

Dong Zhongshu's thought of *zhengming* inherited from Confucius and was further elevated to the philosophical category of heaven. Dong Zhongshu attaches foremost importance to the relationship between Name and Reality. *Zhengming* is the methodology of Dong Zhongshu's argumentation of benevolence and righteousness and is also the theoretical basis for in-depth analysis of the connotation of benevolence and righteousness. From the height of the relationship between heaven and man, Dong Zhongshu justified the name of benevolence and righteousness. “Benevolence”, as generic name, dominates “benevolence and righteousness”. “Benevolence” is the fundamental characteristic of the connection between heaven and man, and the core value of the communication between heaven and man. On the other hand, in dealing with the relationship between man and nature, other and self, benevolence and righteousness are different second-level name. Benevolence focuses on how to treat others, emphasizing the extrapolation of love to a wider range; the name of “righteousness” is internal governance, dealing with the self, focusing on how to regulate oneself. Although there are these differences when benevolence and righteousness are put together, in the link of second-level name, benevolence and righteousness are not two different things, but “the two are one”, that is, “benevolence and righteousness are one”. With benevolence to achieve others, with justice to cultivate themselves. Therefore, in the link of moral practice, to correct oneself with “righteousness” at all times is kindness to others. Only by “Be strict with oneself” can we call it “benevolence and righteousness”, otherwise it is “unkindness and injustice”.



Through elucidating the great meaning of *the Spring and Autumn Annals*, Dong Zhongshu shows his view of benevolence and justice from the angle of name rectification, which has particularly important practical significance. Dong Zhongshu attaches great importance to the investigation of “benevolence and righteousness”, the purpose is to let people see with their eyes, think carefully, meditate repeatedly, and deeply understand the difference between benevolence and righteousness, people and I (Su, 1992). At the same time, only by seeing the benevolence of heaven, appreciating the difference between benevolence and righteousness, and thoroughly identifying the difference between them, can we correctly handle the relationship between ourselves and the outside world, between ourselves and others, other things, and make the right choice, can we truly understand the truth of the highest wisdom of the sage.

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