

Confucius' "Rectification of Names and Higher Man" A Sine Qua Non For African Youths' Moral Formation and Reformation (Philosophical Insight)

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Abstract— There is a lacuna in the moral character of our contemporary African youths and this lack is fundamental or basic as they supposed to have learnt such in their families, basic or primary and elementary schools. As foundation knowledge, it ought to have stated from the family as family is the basic and unit of life. It's quite a pity that moral guidance has eluded so many African homes and families, instead of living as an African with African values and cultures, values of respect for life, respect for elders, value of honesty and truth among others. What one sees everyday in media are drug abuse, incessant killings, rape, kidnapping, etc. worst still is in some areas of life where the strength of youths are required, it's a pity a good number will never be seen. One of the Chinese earliest Philosopher, master K'ung or Confucius has laid down some fundamental lessons or teachings which anchor on many spheres of youth's formation, not only on religion as if he had done so the contemporary African youths, the youths of nowadays, may ignore it. However, it centers on politics and government, religion, finance, education and other sectors of life challenges. Employing analytic methodology, we analyze his teaching on the Higher Man and Rectification of Names/family/heart, and expose how useful they are to African youths for a successful today and tomorrow. One who follows the teachings of Confucius will always be great politically, morally, financially, educationally and the likes. This is a big opportunity for one who has no idea of Confucius institute that is worldwide, to theoretically imbibe the knowledge and be informed, formed and re-informed.

Keywords: Rectification of Names; Higher man; African youths; youths' formation.

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INTRODUCTION

Africans are traditionally known for their communal lifestyle—one rooted in brotherhood, hospitality, respect for elders, and reverence for life. However, with the advent of hyper-technology and modernization, many Africans have adopted individualistic lifestyles (Gregory, E., & Fruebi, 2024). These shifts have led to isolation from one's neighbors and a disconnection from the communal values once cherished. The emotional support that was previously offered through communal interactions is now often sought through electronic gadgets such as televisions, radios, and digital devices, as well as substance abuse. This alienation has resulted in a psychological and moral estrangement, dehumanizing interpersonal relationships.

When individuals begin to devalue others as ontological beings, they reduce them to mere objects—ontic entities—easily disposed of, kidnapped, or killed. This has become a grim reality in parts of Africa, particularly in Nigeria, where groups like Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen have perpetuated terrorism, ethnic cleansing, and widespread violence (International Crisis Group, 2021; Gregory & Adie, 2024). Many African youths, especially those who have never experienced the traditional communal life of earlier generations, have grown up in a fragmented society. Without adequate moral or home training, they adopt negative behaviors from their peers in markets, schools, workplaces, and social spaces.

As a result, many African youths today lack morality, discipline, and respect for life and elders. This moral vacuum manifests in homes, schools, and communities, leading to societal unrest and increasing rates of migration to Europe and Asia. In Nigeria, insecurity—particularly from Fulani herdsmen terrorist attacks—and the federal government's lack of effective response are major drivers of this migration (Amnesty International, 2022).

Disturbingly, this moral decay is evident in youth involvement in crimes such as ritual killings, cybercrime ("Yahoo Yahoo"), kidnapping, banditry, armed robbery, and terrorism (Oko & Mbey, 2025). Cases of youth raping children, including their own daughters, have been reported, as well as abductions and murders by young women and mothers. In schools, youth teachers, principals, and corps members have been implicated in harassment and child abuse. Even parents now attack teachers who discipline students caught cheating during examinations. These scenarios reflect the breakdown of moral structures and the failure of societal institutions in guiding youth.

In response to such moral degradation, ancient teachings—such as those of Confucius—become relevant. His doctrines, particularly the concept of the "Higher Man" and the "Rectification of Names," offer principles that can guide youth formation and ethical reorientation. Confucius (551–479 BCE), a Chinese philosopher and educator, lived during a time of social unrest and sought to restore order through ethical teachings that have shaped East Asian thought for centuries (Yao, 2000).

CONCEPT ANALYSIS

Morality and Moral Formation

Morality pertains to the conduct of human affairs and the regulation of relationships between individuals. According to Hare (1952), morality is “an active process which is the effort to guide one’s conduct by reason, that is, doing what there are justified reasons for doing while giving equal consideration to the interests of all those affected by what one does” (p. 24). It consists of personal or societal standards that help distinguish between right and wrong behaviors.

Moral formation refers to the education or training of children and youths to shape their character according to societal norms and ethical principles. It often involves the efforts of moral agents—parents, teachers, religious leaders—who draw from moral philosophy and Christian ethics to instill discipline, honesty, and responsibility.

Peschke (1996) explains that ethics—also referred to as moral philosophy—is “a branch of philosophy that studies morality and prudence. It deals with the rightness and wrongness of human conduct and attempts to establish guiding principles for moral life” (p. 12). The term ethics derives from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning habit, custom, or character.

Reformation, as defined by the *Oxford Learner’s Dictionary* (n.d.), is “an act of improving or changing someone or something for the better.” In this context, moral reformation refers to efforts to rebuild the moral character of African youths who have deviated into destructive behaviors due to hardship and other social challenges. This process underscores the importance of moral reorientation using Confucian principles such as the “Higher Man” and the “Rectification of Names.”

Africa

Africa is the world’s second-largest and second-most populous continent after Asia. It spans approximately 30.3 million km², including adjacent islands, accounting for 6% of the Earth’s total surface area and about 20% of its land area. As of 2025, Africa’s population stands at approximately 1.547 billion, representing 16% of the global human population (United Nations, 2023). Despite its immense natural resources, Africa remains the least wealthy continent per capita. This situation is largely due to the lingering effects of European colonization, which continues to impact political stability and economic development.

Nonetheless, Africa holds tremendous potential. According to the United Nations’ development indices, the continent can achieve sustainable development goals if its resources are managed effectively and equitably. Africa possesses about 30% of the world’s mineral reserves, including 40% of global gold, the largest known reserves of diamonds, and substantial deposits of chromium and platinum. It also holds vast

reserves of cobalt, uranium, oil, natural gas, copper, and other precious and industrial metals (African Development Bank Group [AfDB], 2022).

South Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Nigeria are among the continent's leading producers of minerals. Nigeria, for instance, is the largest oil producer in Africa and ranks 16th globally. It also holds the largest natural gas reserves in Africa (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries [OPEC], 2024). Africa's primary challenge lies in ensuring that resource wealth translates into sustainable benefits for all its citizens. Quality education and a strengthened informal business sector are key to reducing poverty and enabling sustainable development. However, issues of governance, accountability, and continued Western exploitation of Africa's resources remain significant obstacles. Western and French post-colonial economic influence still dominates, often benefiting foreign interests at the expense of African populations (Rodney, 1972).

Nigeria

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, located on the western coast of the continent. It shares borders with Niger to the north, Chad and Cameroon to the east, the Gulf of Guinea to the south, and Benin Republic to the west. Nigeria was formed in 1914 following the British amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates, orchestrated by Lord Frederick Lugard (Falola & Heaton, 2008). With over 250 ethnic groups, Nigeria is a multicultural nation. The three dominant ethnic groups are Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, with other notable groups including the Fulani, Ibibio, and Efik. Since gaining independence in 1960, the country has struggled with chronic challenges such as poor leadership, corruption, ethnic tensions, and insecurity, which have severely hindered its development.

Youths

Youth is generally defined as the transitional phase between childhood and adulthood, often encompassing individuals between the ages of 10 and 24 (World Health Organization [WHO], 2018). It is a crucial period for physical, psychological, and moral development. Youths are trained through formal education in schools, informal instruction at home and religious centers, and non-formal settings such as workshops and skill acquisition programs. African youths make up a significant proportion of the continent's population. However, many of them are caught in a cycle of poverty, unemployment, and moral crisis. Their upbringing is increasingly influenced by societal decay, lack of mentorship, and exposure to violence and corruption. Reforming this generation requires deliberate and sustained efforts at moral formation and value reorientation.

The Higher Man

Confucius described the ideal person as the *junzi*—translated as the “higher man,” “noble man,” or “superior man.” For one to attain this status, intellectual discipline and moral uprightness are essential. The *junzi* is marked by sincerity, responsibility, and compassion, and is deemed fit for leadership and social service (Yao, 2000). Confucius taught that the higher man practices self-cultivation with reverence and reflection. He illustrated this with the metaphor of an archer: when the archer misses the mark, he turns inward to examine himself for the cause of the failure (Confucius, trans. 1979). In contrast, the inferior man blames others for his shortcomings.

According to Confucius, the higher man reflects carefully on nine virtues:

1. He ensures clarity in his vision.
2. He strives for kindness in his expression.
3. He maintains respectful demeanor.
4. He speaks sincerely.
5. He handles tasks with cautious reverence.
6. He consults others when uncertain.
7. He manages anger with self-restraint.
8. He evaluates profit with a lens of righteousness.
9. He prioritizes moral responsibility in all decisions (Confucius, trans. 1979).

These qualities align closely with Christian moral teachings, particularly the commandments to love God and neighbor. Although African youths are aware of such moral virtues, they often lack role models due to widespread corruption and moral failure among the political elite and societal leaders. There is, therefore, a critical need for moral reformation and ethical reconstruction using universal principles such as those espoused in Confucian thought.

THE RECTIFICATION OF NAMES

This is the highest and most popular among Confucius doctrines, it is the substance of his philosophy, the essence of the matter and a complete guide to life. Asserting this, an author writes:

"However, the doctrine of the “Higher Man” is not all that Confucius was known for; more inspiring is the famous paragraph in his Great Learning, where he talked about “Rectification of Heart.” This was the substance of the Confucian Philosophy: the essence of the matter and a complete guide to life" (Obienyem, 2023, p. 11).

He emphasized the importance of this doctrine as a key element of good governance and social order. Thus the above author continues:

"The world is at war, says Confucius, because its constituent states are improperly governed, these are improperly governed because no amount

of legislation can take the place of natural social order provided by the family. We are in disorder and fail to provide the natural social order because men forget that they cannot regulate themselves because they have not rectified their hearts, that is, they have not cleansed their own souls of disordered desires. Their hearts are not rectified because their thinking is insincere. Wisdom to Confucius therefore begins at home, and the foundation of society is a disciplined followership and committed leadership. We therefore need to turn inwards and examine ourselves" (Obienyem, 2023, p. 11).

This doctrine is called the rectification of Names or Family or Heart. His core belief was that names should accurately reflect the reality they represent, promoting clarity and preventing confusion. This principle often interpreted as a call for sincerity and integrity in all aspects of life, aimed to restore harmony by ensuring that language, concepts and actions were aligned (Confucius / Biography, Teachings and Facts in Britannica, 2025).

The doctrine reads:

"The ancient who wished to illustrate the highest virtue throughout the empire, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their own selves. Wishing to cultivate their own selves, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge, such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things. Things being investigated, knowledge became complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified. Their own selves being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their states were rightly governed. Their state being rightly governed, the whole empire was made tranquil and happy" (Ikechukwu, 1999).

This is very educative. It is the philosophy that cures all manner of chaos and bad behaviors of his time, especially the evil of relativity of morals preached in his era by Teng Shih and others, just like Machiavelli who preached in his prince that morality be separated from politics, if the prince wished to stay long in his throne. It is this doctrine of rectification of name that will cure such Machiavellianism seen in contemporary politics. Elucidating on the above doctrine, one sees it centers on the order of the society and the family is the most important part of social and political structures.

The Family: this doctrine is essential and reasonable as it starts from the family. Family is the basic unit of life and society and once family is good, the citizens of the state will equally be good as well. Bandits, kidnappers, political tugs among others come or arise from families that are yet to rectify their names. Children are to be rectified starting from the family which is the first school and church children attend. In line with this Pope John Paul II emphasized the foundational role of the family in the society, viewing it as the first and fundamental structure for a human ecology. He highlighted its importance as a small scale church or domestic church (*ecclesial domestica*) where individual learn to live in communion and build a society, rooted in values like truth, freedom, justice and love. The encyclical also stressed the importance of the family's role in education and upbringing of children, preparing them for their unique destinies (John Paul II, 2025).

When this exercise of rectification of names is inculcated to the youths from childhood, they may not depart from it as the Holy Writ tells us (Proverb 22:6, 2025). And if they even depart from it, many even on their own still return back to that initial training. Family is the cornerstone of the society, playing an essential role in shaping who we are and how we navigate the world. Again, in Confucius lane of rectification, one sees that rectification of family is to be done by rectification of oneself through rectification of one's heart and this is very necessary and fundamental. This doctrine focuses on man and man lacks proper and exact definition owing to his attitudes or behaviors. Man is fickle. Man is an enigmatic being and he is "an impossible possible being" (Mondin, 1998, p. 19). Plato and Augustine hold that man is the soul; Aristotle and Aquinas hold that man is body and soul. And Christians hold the doctrine of body and soul (joined by the spirit). Man is mainly the heart as Catholics talks of the most sacred Heart of Jesus. They don't say the most sacred hand or feet and among others. However, not minding that Jesus' hands and feet are also holy or sacred, they keep mentioning only the heart. This is because the human heart is embracing, is encompassing, once the heart is mentioned, all others parts are included and the heart is the totality of man. Once the heart is bad, the man in question is bad, thus, the need for rectification of one's self through the rectification of African youths' hearts and this is done by the rectification of one's thoughts and desires. Rectification of one's thoughts and desire is not one day exercise, as this calls for practice of virtues and virtuous acts and one progress day by day in acquisition of virtues and good works through good knowledge and good company, as bad company corrupt good manners.

Martin Buber talked of Rectification of Others, though he used his core concept: I-Thou relationship, and its implication for human interaction and overcoming alienation (I-Thou as opposed to I-It relationship). Confucius holds that this problem of rectification arise because men are insincere and "all will be well if the father plays the

role of father assigned to him by name and leaders play the role of leaders” (Ikechukwu, 1999).

In broader analyzing, Confucius doctrine of rectification applies to formators in any sectors of live and leaders in all sectors and professions. Once a leader is living a scandalous life, scandalously lax in discipline, morals and manners, the person is not a leader properly so called until he has to examine himself/herself and rectify his/her heart. If one is elected in a public office and the person is not geared towards the good of the electorate, he or she needs to rectify his or her heart. African China, a music artist calling for good governance by rectification of leaders themselves in the year 2000 put up a song he calls “Mr. President.” This calls for rectification of oneself by leaders leading and governing well, senators doing well and even policemen policing well. Thus, the chorus reads:

Mr President ...Lead us well, If you be governor, ...governor us well, If you are the senator, ... senate am well, If you be police, police well well, no dey take bribe (African China, 2003).

In that music he addressed or mentioned many societal ills facing the country: hunger, recession, insecurity, nepotism, corruption, armed robbery, fuel scarcity, but now it's fuel price hike, bad roads, no electricity, youths unemployment, bribery and corruption on the part of policemen as they see white and call it black. Finally, he calls men in governance to lead us well. This is indeed a call for rectification of heart as with the present government, in Nigeria, the evils and challenges listed are now on their apex.

AFRICANS AND AFRICAN YOUTHS TODAY

Bad leadership and corruption have contributed immensely to the problem of African underdevelopment. The doctrine of rectification of names and the higher man are meant for everyone, especially the leaders of the nation, institutions, families, and the youths—the leaders of today and tomorrow. African leaders are often not accountable and are difficult to emulate. Year by year, African leaders borrow loans from foreign countries without productivity, owing to a lack of proper investment. In Nigeria, for instance, during Buhari's regime and especially in the present Tinubu administration, the president borrowed huge amounts of money in dollars from the Chinese government without evidence of national investment (UNEP, 2025). These funds are allegedly used for personal luxury, such as private jets and bulletproof vehicles for senators and house members, with the remaining funds distributed to them, including the judiciary whom the president appoints. This is corruption at its peak. Nigerian leaders are bereft of moral character and good examples (Ikechukwu, 1999).

In June 12, 2025 (Democracy Day), Nigerians celebrated 26 years of uninterrupted democracy. However, President Tinubu canceled the official celebration, suggesting a

recognition that there is little to celebrate. The real truth is that there is indeed almost nothing to celebrate, as many leaders have not understood that leadership requires service and sacrifice (John Paul II, 2025). Reflecting critically on Nigeria's current condition—poverty, recession, lack of food, water, good roads, infrastructure, hospitals, electricity, and education—one sees that corruption and bad leadership are the fundamental causes. The remote cause lies in a lack of patriotic spirit, qualities of the higher man, and non-rectification of family names by both political elites and citizens, who in one way or another contributed to electing such leaders (Obienyem, 2023).

The Fourth Republic Nigerian leaders, due to corruption and poor leadership, have failed to develop the nation despite its abundant human and natural resources (UNEP, 2025). Through Confucian doctrines, Nigerian citizens should demand accountability from their leaders and avoid complicity, as bad leaders cannot emerge or loot the treasury without popular support. With free and fair elections driven by patriotic and responsible voters, corrupt leaders would not be elected. Likewise, without collaboration from civil servants and other elites, looting would be difficult. A critical challenge is that the National Assembly, tasked with checks and balances, often acts as a rubber stamp for the president, endorsing questionable loans and budgets.

The task of nation-building across various sectors is the duty of every citizen, irrespective of tribe or ethnicity. Patriotism should aim at national development. The youths—the future African leaders—must imbibe these Confucian doctrines to make African leadership credible and progressive (Confucius, 1979).

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

Thus far, we have been examining Master Confucius' special thoughts on the rectification of names and the higher man, which are of great significance in the *Analects*—a sacred text containing Confucius' teachings. His emphasis on traditional customs is noteworthy, as he believed they were the key to peace. Confucius deserves special commendation for his contributions to the growth of philosophy, scientific inquiry, moral formation, and advancements in politics, religion, education, and other sectors of human life. His doctrines of the rectification of names and the higher man have left a great legacy for China and for humanity at large (Confucius, 1979).

The lessons derived from these teachings serve as an eye-opener for African citizens, urging them to demand accountability from their leaders. The tradition of visiting one's family during China's New Year celebration is inspired by Confucius' idea of filial piety, which relates to his doctrine of the rectification of names (Confucius, 1979). Confucianism serves as an ideological foundation in China, with rulers still relying on his teachings for guidance and legitimacy. China continues to recruit its bureaucracy based on Confucian-based examinations, and education remains rooted in the mastery of Confucian writings (Confucius, 1979).

Some critics may argue that despite his wealth of knowledge—especially in politics and leadership—Confucius failed to attain political office or rule his state. He was even exiled at one point in his hometown of Lu (Durant, 1935). However, although his political ambitions were not fulfilled, his ideological influence is undeniable. His success lies in the establishment of a Confucian school, where he trained disciples in leadership according to his ideals. Today, Confucian schools exist around the world and continue to teach his philosophy, cementing his legacy in global education and governance.

Ultimately, African youths, particularly Nigerian youths, have much to learn from these doctrines. By embodying the qualities of the higher man and practicing the rectification of names, they can help reshape African leadership and foster a better future for the continent.

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