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The Sounds of Zhèngmíng: Setting Names Straight in Early Chinese Texts

Jane Geaney

In early Chinese texts, straightness often indicates correctness, hence many things are said to be zhèng 正.¹ But among them, only zhèngmíng 正名 emerged as a rhetorical slogan promising the production of order and elimination of human confusion and fakeness.² In scholarship on Chinese ethics, the slogan is usually understood as working toward these goals by making behavior accord with names or by making “names” (norms or social roles) accord with behavior. By contrast, on the assumption that uses of the term “míng” (name/title/fame) involved what something is called or what is heard about it, the chapter focuses on interpreting zhèngmíng in light of ideas about speech, music, tones, and sound in general — items that are distinct from, but related to, míng 名.³ The chapter considers zhèngmíng as part of a textual tradition wherein recurring poetic “sound-effects” appear in a variety of genres. In light of this context, it argues that the power of the sovereign’s zhèngmíng stems from participating in such effects.

The “zhèngmíng” chapter of the Xúnzǐ 荀子 provides a useful starting point for this investigation, with its claim that míng have “certain goodness” (yǒugūshàn 有固善). The chapter notes that míng that are good (and presumably “straight”) are, among other things, non-contrary (bùfù 不拂).⁴ Because the same chapter also asserts that the relation of names to their shí 實 is based on conventions — rather than some “certain” (gù) relation (wúgūshí 無固實) — it is not possible to interpret this as a claim that names’ goodness consists of not being contrary to shí.⁵ Moreover, mere compliance with conventions cannot be what makes names good, because the text calls for the rejection of some (presumably conventional) names on the grounds that they were not authorized (shàn 擅).⁶ Hence this chapter explores the unanswered puzzle:
What makes names good or straight? It argues that the factors that make names straight include being limited in sonorous quantity (in relation to their visible counterparts) and being in accord with other name-sounds. As a result, much as sovereigns concern themselves with selecting the music to which they expose their subjects, so too they must choose suitable ming that can be readily heard and obeyed. This interpretation of zhèngmíng makes the slogan part of the obligation to rule, not through active force but through harmonious “influences of air” — songs, winds, and virtue (dé 德) — that penetrate human subjects through hearing and smelling (wén 闻). This apparently forceless, yet commanding, form of governance is the context in which a good ruler might hope to use zhèngmíng to eradicate falseness and confusion, thereby producing an orderly society.

Míng and Writing

This interpretation builds on the idea that early Chinese texts tend to use the term “ming” for something that is spoken or heard, a position that I argue for elsewhere. In addition, this chapter presupposes arguments I have made elsewhere regarding balanced aural/visual contrasts as being a constant and crucial feature of early Chinese conceptions about the world. Thus, assuming that ming is aural means that it is aligned with other aural aspects of the cosmos in the context of a powerful tendency to seek aural/visual balance. Interpreters since Zhèng Xuán (127–200 CE) have sometimes taken early uses of zhèngmíng as pertaining to writing per se, with the result that zhèngmíng is understood to mean doing something to graphs. If indeed uses of zhèngmíng in early Chinese texts can be interpreted as being about graphs, then the slogan could concern establishing appropriate orthography, i.e., writing the standardized graphs might be zhèngmíng. Currently that interpretation of zhèngmíng is rarely applied specifically to the Analects, but it is employed for understanding the slogan generally in early Chinese texts. In the interests of brevity, I will introduce a single, but decisive, piece of evidence that the term “ming” was normally understood in early China to be oral/aural. This evidence comes from among references to the physical process of writing, which are uncommon in early texts but emerged with the greater expansion of literacy. (As later texts indicate, straightening out writing is one thing; straightening out names [zhèngmíng] is another.) The example occurs in the Kōngcōngzǐ’s memorial of Jī Yàn (d. 124 CE), the ideal descendant of Confucius. As soon as Jī Yàn lets his brush drop to the page, his writing achieves form, falling into a state of completion. So, too, what he “spews” (so to speak) into speech are míng that are zhèng.
The very moment he lowered his brush, his writing took shape in perfectly formed injunction and the speech he uttered could not but straighten out names and embody principles.¹⁵ (Kǒngcóngrž 7.2, ch. 23)

In this physical description, zhèngmíng does not involve writing. That is, the movements by which the brush drops do not produce mǐng in this passage.¹⁶ On the contrary, these mǐng spring from the genuineness of “spit out” speech. With such evidence in mind, this chapter proceeds with one assumption about uses of “zhèngmíng”: the term is understood to be oral/aural and does not concern doing anything to graphs.

Overlaps in Discursive and Musical Sonority

The prestige with which early Chinese texts regard music is well known, but it is less often noted that the potency of yuè 樂 (“music”) is rooted in the way sound enters the body. In other words, the transformative power of music stems from its peculiarly penetrative capacity, which belongs to sound in general.¹⁷ As Roel Sterckx argues, the “performative effects of music” are part of a cosmology centered on reciprocal reactions, wherein music moves on air to transform the wilds into civilization (2000, 30). In this conception, all sound moves on air and penetrates bodies. As Sterckx puts it, early Chinese texts “associate human sagacity with the ability to penetrate (tōng 通) the masses through the medium of sound, an idea also reflected in the occurrence of the term shēng 聲 (‘sound,’ ‘reputation,’ or ‘aura’) as a paronomastic gloss for shèng 聖 ‘human sage’” (2000, 4). This power of sonority explains why in some cases animals are described as transformed by music (yuè), even though they only “know” sounds (shēng), according to the “Yuējǐ” 業記. This general feature of sound also explains why the repeated claims about sound “entering” and “penetrating” are not limited to claims about yuè. For example, the Xīngzīmǐngchū 性自命出 notes that sound (shēng) enters and stirs people’s heartminds “thickly” (hòu 厚). The Xūnzi 言子 argues that “sound and music” (shēngyuè 聲樂) enter deeply, while the Shuō Yuàn 説苑 contends that “sound and tones” (shēngyīn 聲音) enter more deeply than anything else.¹⁸ If these graphs from the Xūnzi and the Shuō Yuàn were reversed, we might conclude that the subject is only “musical sound” or “tonal sound,” but instead it seems deliberately broader. Hence when Confucius advocates banishing the music of Zhèng 鄭, it is not yuè per se but sounds that he inds as “overflowing” (yín 淫).¹⁹
As for music (yue), adopt the Shao 賂 and the Wu 舞. Banish the sounds (sheng) of the Zheng and keep glib people at a distance. The sounds of Zheng are overflowing (yin 淫) and glib people are dangerous. (Analects 15:11)

Steven Van Zoeren interprets this criticism as aimed at the musical performance itself, as opposed to the lyrics. 20 Indeed, the passage’s denunciation is explicitly directed at sound (sheng). But one need not posit that “sound” excludes lyrics or discursive sound in this context, since the use of the graph sheng can encompass both the sound of speech and that of music. Moreover, the passage’s shift in topic from the sheng of the Zheng to the danger of glibness — a shift that recurs in the condemnation of Zheng sounds in Analects 17:18 — indicates that the target of Confucius’s concern is sound in a broad sense. Improper sonority in general is damaging to human character because of its penetrative capacity. A series of semantic overlaps in the use of terminology related to hearing reinforces the breadth of this concern: yin 音 and sheng 聲, as both “music” and “voice”; feng 風, as both “wind” and “song”; and wen 聞, as both “hear” and “smell.” That is, in a general way, music, voice, and song are all items that travel on air or wind to penetrate deeply through the body’s holes by means of hearing and smelling. A rigid demarcation between musical and discursive sound is not likely, since both of them penetrate bodies through the same means.

Moreover, insofar as comments in early Chinese texts about sonorous penetration reflect a general pattern of aural/visual couplets, they do not exclude discursive sound. In the case of sound penetration, the relevant aural/visual pattern is that sound operates on the inside of the person as distinct from visual items, like ritual, operating on the outside. The Liji 禮記 makes this claim about music (yuè), which it contrasts to ritual emerging from a person’s inside. 21 But the claim in the Shuo Yuan is more expansive: “sounds and tones” (shengyin) are best for straightening out the inside. As the aural/visual contrast entails, the Shuo Yuan also mentions that ritual is appropriate for straightening the outside.

Of the things that enter from outside, none penetrates more deeply than sounds and tones, and none affects people more extremely . . . Therefore the gentleman uses ritual to straighten the outside and music to straighten the inside (以禮正外，以樂正內). 22 (Shuo Yuan 19:43)

The logic of this passage seems to be that, because sounds and tones in general penetrate deeply, musical sound is useful for transforming human interiors. In other words, the reason music is associated with the inside is that it operates aurally. This is borne out by the aural/visual contrast in the Fa Yan 法言. In its explanation of the nature of seeing and hearing, the Fa Yan says:
In giving birth to people, heaven makes their eyes and ears able to see and hear. Thus, what people look at is ritual and what people listen to is music.23 (Fā Yán 4)

In light of the contrasts between interiority and exteriority discussed above, the implication of this statement that music epitomizes sounds sensed by the ears helps clarify that it is specifically because it is audible that music pertains to interiority. Thus the contrast that the texts seem to emphasize is between (inwardly operative) sound and (outwardly operative) vision, not between music and some other form of sound.

It is because sound pertains to interiority that early Chinese texts present moral instruction as a matter of aural internalization. Learning is a process of hearing, internalizing, and embodying in action. For example, the Shuo Yuan (16:179) and the Xunzi (Book 1) describe instruction as something entering the ears, being stored in the heartmind, and then manifested in action. While such passages are vague about the extent to which the sonorous education entering the ears is musical, the instruction is explicitly musical when rulers initiate music-making in early Chinese texts. Rulers take an exceptional interest in the socially regulative function of music, installing music directors and commanding that music be created. According to Kenneth DeWoskin, in early China, the five tones required a fixed pitch, and “control over the moment and pitch at which music began was control of the entire performance” (1982, 44, 48). Hence, ethical rulers authorized music and thereby metaphorically established the pitch (Lǎshì Chūnqīu 呂氏春秋 22.6, 5.4). It is not surprising that their instruction was musical since, as Michael Nylan points out, the visual pun connecting music (yuè 樂) to joy (lè 樂) is a reminder that studying through music is a most palatable way of imbibing instruction (2001, 100). But this means that, even if the ethical learning described as entering the ears in the Shuo Yuan and the Xunzi is best understood as discursive or argument-based, it was likely to have capitalized on the benefits of sonorous rhetorical devices. With internalizing sound as the optimal method for moral instruction, it would be neither necessary nor useful to posit any firm distinction between musical and discursive instruction.

The odes (shī 詩) are a compelling example of the difficulty of positing a rigid distinction between discursive and musical sonority.24 As implied by Confucius’s “refined speaking” (yǎyán 雅言) of the odes, their sonorous effects were important. Indeed, Van Zoeren argues that, at an early stage, Chinese texts understood the odes primarily in terms of their sonority (1991, 28–35). This is plausible not only because the odes were metered and rhythmic but also because they were performed to music and perhaps even sung with special pronunciation and in a special key (Nylan 2001, 91). Moreover, the claim in the Shu Jìnng 書經 that, from its very inception, the sovereign’s music (yuè) involved shī,
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counters any presumption that early Chinese texts strictly differentiate yuè from sound that involves speech. In the Shū Jìng’s story of the appointment of Kūi 健 as music master, it is metered, rhymed, and sung speech that is at issue. The passage emphasizes the role of speaking by noting that the music master will operate via the method of making shī “speak” (yán 言) the heartmind’s aims:

Kūi! I appoint you Overseer of Music (yuè) and to teach our sons. . . .

The odes speak (yán 言) of aims, singing elongates this speech (yán), sound (shēng 聲) relies on that elongation, and pitch-pipes harmonize sound (shēng). (Shū Jìng 2)

Thus, the odes, as “measured songs,” are inextricably linked to “music” (Picken 1977, 88–89). Moreover, “musical conversation” is part of what the Zhōu lǐ 周禮 presents as the task of the Music Master:

[The Grand Music Master shall] employ “musical dé” (yuèdé 樂德 musical virtue? musical charisma?) to instruct the sons of people of rank in uprightness, harmoniousness, respect, constancy, filial piety, and friendship. [He shall] use “musical conversation” (yuèyǔ 樂語) to teach them stimulus (xīng 興), exposition (dào 道), admonition (fēng 諫), praise (sòng 誦), speech (yán 言), and conversation (yǔ 語). 25 (Zhōu lǐ 3)

The passage attests that musical conversation is a technology that can be used to teach a variety of other discursive skills: speaking (yán) being only the most obvious.26 Thus, as these uses of the odes indicate, moral instruction appears likely to include a combination of musical and discursive aspects.

The freedom with which early Chinese texts interpret the odes also indirectly points to the importance of their sound. When excavated texts cite the odes, they frequently use homophonous sounds but different graphs, which leads Martin Kern to conclude that “the highly archaic and poetic language of the Odes was . . . open to numerous possibilities of understanding” (2007, 783). Because the writing system was unstable, while the sounds of the words were not, the auditory aspects of the words could easily have seemed more important than any particular semantic aspect. This could explain why specific semantic content does not seem to have been the criterion for appropriate usage of the odes. Many early Chinese texts show the odes being interpreted in ways that are suited to whatever point needed to be made.27 In spite of stories about the odes originating in folk songs and being adapted by blind musicians in the service of rulers, there seems to be no presumption that successful use of them required reconstructing those “original meanings.” As Haun Saussy puts it, the odes served as a “poetics of quotation” — a means by which to express one’s own intent by properly reciting the words of others (1993, 64). Thus, to the extent
that early Chinese texts seem unperturbed by attributing varying semantic content to the odes, it does not appear that a lot hinged on any specific semantic content. Perhaps what mattered more was how they were, in Van Zoeren’s words, “crooned or chanted in a rhythmic and singsong fashion” (1991, 40), which contributed to whatever they were thought to express (or betray).  

The “Musical” Aspects of Míng

Taking this a step further, sonority might have been important in other genres besides shī 詩. If, as the Zhōulì puts it, “musical conversation” facilitates teaching both speech (yán 言) and conversation (yǔ 言), then it does not seem far-fetched to posit that sound would be relevant in ostensibly argument-based texts. Wolfgang Behr contends that “aurally effective devices” figure heavily in pre-Qin philosophical prose. While “rhyming nets” and “assonance chains” characterize earlier texts, he notes that, by the fourth century BCE, texts like the Lūshì Chūnqīū also began to feature “paronomastic cadence” and “symmetrical arrangements of lexical roots” (2005a, 26). Behr describes paronomasia as becoming “extremely popular in late Warring States and Han philosophical discourse” (2005a, 28). He even sees a link between the use of paronomasia and musical metaphors for rulership:

Musical metaphors such as the pitch pipe standards (lù 律) for the rule of law or the notes on the pentatonic scale for the basic social relationships abound. But it is not only through metaphors and more commonly, metonymy, that such arguments [about music as a means of appropriate rulership] are enhanced. Equally frequent is the device of paronomasia. (2005a, 28)

If, as Behr argues, rhymes, assonances, and paronomastic cadences appear in all sorts of texts that are not, strictly speaking, “musical,” sonorous techniques of rulership need not be limited to music per se.

Indeed, wherever aurally effective devices appear in early Chinese texts, there is no reason to expect they were not seen as pertaining to the míng in the text. Meaningful utterances were seen as containing míng (although it is not clear whether every minimal signifying unit of an utterance was understood to be a míng). Insofar as míng are relatively short, by themselves they cannot be described as having rhythm or creating rhyme, assonance, or paronomastic cadences, but through their use in sound-correlated figures they can echo other míng. (For example, the slogan “zhēngmíng” itself is used to resonate through associations of that sort. The Analects 12:17 explicates zhēng 政 through zhēng 正, and míng 名 is often written with míng 命, while the Zhuàngzī 4 and
This may shed light on the recommendation of Analects 17:9 to study the odes for greater knowledge of the ming of birds, animals, grasses, and trees. Since the odes were in an archaic language, it is unlikely that they would be employed to teach students the current names of entities with which they were unfamiliar. Instead, learning ming by reciting the odes would foster acquisition of refined pronunciation. Such knowledge would enhance one’s ability to manipulate the poetic devices required to incisively “cap” a situation (whether in official service or at home, as the passage notes). Thus, it would be important to listen and reproduce proper ancient ming in order to enhance one’s skill in wielding resonant sounds.

Implied in this phenomenon of learning ancient pronunciations is the possibility that actual features of linguistic usage might help to account for the texts’ repeated suggestion that sounds that were once zhèng in ages past have now become confused. This declension narrative applies to ming as well as to music — an impression reinforced by a shared use of terminology to describe them. For instance, Xúnzǐ 20 explains that “corrupt tones” (xìyīn 邪音) have made refined sounds “chaotic” (luàn 亂), just as Xúnzǐ 22 notes that “corrupt spoken explanations” (xiéshuō 邪說) have made zhèngming “chaotic.” Lūshì Chānqìū 6.3 contrasts the gentleman’s emission of music through zhèngdé (正德以出樂) with “music that has overflowed” (yuèyín 樂淫), which it associates with the sounds of Zhèng and Wèi (鄭衛之聲). Using similar rhetoric, the Lūshì Chānqìū employs the term “yín” 淪 to depict the form of speech that has destroyed zhèngming. If ming are zhèng then there is order.

If ming are destroyed then there is chaos. What causes ming to become lost is overflowing (yín) “spoken explanations” (shuō 說). With overflowing spoken explanations, the acceptable can be unacceptable, what is so can become not so, and what is this can become not this.

In the contexts of both music and ming, the perception is that overflowing sound blurs proper boundaries — a concern that might reflect historical changes in the use of sound. Laurence Picken speculates that the new repertory of Zhèng exhibited greater than usual irregularity in line rhythms (1977, 107), while DeWoskin, working with more recent archeological evidence, hypothesizes that Zhèng music featured a new scale that exceeded five tones (1982, 45). Like these musical innovations, the sound changes that occurred in linguistic usage in early China were not insignificant. The Lūshì Chānqìū indirectly notes this in its complaint that between the past and the present, speech has become different and legal statutes have diverged. Hence it adds:
The ming 命 (commands? terminology?) of old mostly do not communicate (不通) in the speech (言) of today. (15.8)

Indeed, such linguistic confusion may have occurred. Analysis of phonological reconstructions, phonetic series, and Shi Jing 詩經 rhymes have led historical linguists to posit that Old Chinese featured derivational morphologies wherein grammatical morphemes combined with lexical morphemes to convey certain aspects of meaning. Although it is impossible to determine when exactly the derivational affixes of Old Chinese disappeared from the language, Behr suggests that at least some would have still existed in the Warring States period and a memory of them would have persisted up to the Western Han. Thus what might have been felt to be disappearing from the language were sounds that to some degree contributed to understanding ming. Moreover, the increasing use of paronomasia observed by Behr might constitute one attempt to compensate for this change in linguistic sound. While puns in the Zhuangzi seem to celebrate the slippery play of meaningful sound, the puns in most early Chinese texts are generally presented as if they confirm its reliability. In light of this history, the ming that appeared to be “non-contrary” (不拂) could have been those that resonated with other ming used in similar ways.

Another factor that might have been perceived as causing a decline into acoustic confusion was the mere proliferation of sound. In terms of confusion in music, whereas Picken’s and DeWoskin’s accounts focus on irregular rhythm and tone, the Zuozhuan 左傳 (B10.1) implicates a quantitative form of sonorous excess: its example of yīnshēng (淫聲) is playing the same music more than five times. Something like this quantitative type of sonorous excess might be the target of the choice of “directness” (徑) as a criterion for goodness in names in Xunzi 22. In fact, both the discussions of zhèngming in the Xunzi and the Lushi Chünqiu imply that the production of ming should be limited. This limit appears to be set by adherence to the visual shí 视 that they are supposed to match. Xunzi 22 addresses the application of ming to appearance (狀) and location (所), both of which pertain to visual perception. The number of names to be used depends on what the visual elements indicate about how many entities should be counted, as if for every (visible) action, event, or thing, there should be one ming and no more. The discussion of zhèngming in Lushi Chünqiu 16.8 also notes that ming match “forms” (形) another visual term. Since the Lushi Chünqiu discussion of zhèngming also emphasizes limiting the extension of ming (providing “only enough” [足以] speech to accomplish particular goals), the concern seems to be that, unless otherwise checked, the number of ming tends to exceed that of their visual counterparts. From this perspective, keeping in mind that zhèngming’s failure is caused by an “overflowing” (淫) form of speech, a ming that is zhèng is one that is “direct,” that is, restrained by the count of visible entities. In its depiction of zhèngming
as saying little while having one’s orders enacted (言寡而今行，正名也). Shi zì 1.5 is a variation on this. (Since Xúnzǐ 27 describes xíng 行, in contrast to sound, as that which can be seen, Shi zì 1.5 can be read as an assertion that mìng are zhèng when orders consisting of concise sounds produce visible actions.) But it is worth noting that an emphasis on brevity in zhèngmìng need not imply a preference for silence. For instance, when Lǔshī Chūnqū 16.8 presents zhèngmìng as the opposite of the ruler’s inclination to use the name “shì 士” (gentleman) without knowing its “referent” (所謂士), his ignorance about how to use “shì” is exposed no less by his repeated silence in “response” (yìngh 應) to questions about “shì” than by his misuse of it. Thus, zhèngmìng implies responsive brevity, not silence, reflecting a tendency toward parallelism of aural and visual things. The required restraint in the apparently ever-proliferating amount of sound is supposed to be achieved through zhèngmìng being “direct” in relation to their visual correlates.

This analysis of mìng as sound is equally applicable to its use as “fame.” The fact that both shēng 音 (sound) and mìng are employed to mean “fame” signals that fame entails hearing sound. In this sense, the ruler’s mìng is expected to be as broadly audible as possible. References to a virtuous person’s widespread mìng rarely bother to qualify it with mention of its ethical status: the assumption is that it matches virtuous deeds. When mìng functions in this way as “long-distance sound,” the implication is that it has power to create positive transformations in those who hear it. This feature of sound is epitomized by the sympathetic resonance in stringed instruments, which DeWoskin calls “a splendid example of accomplishment through nonaction” (1982, 74). As the initiator of sound, in setting the pitch, the ruler’s reputation causes responsive actions. Being the source of his own mìng (fame), he “sets the tone” that implicitly informs the world of his virtue and thereby transforms it.

These ways in which mìng 名 participate in “sound effects” also help explain the role of mìng 名 (command, fate) in discussions of zhèngmìng. The interchanging of mìng 名 and mìng 命 emphasizes that, in the process of instituting names and titles, the ruler also performatively commands. The “Zhèngmìng” chapter of the Xúnzǐ elaborates on this, both by asserting that the ruler’s aims and intentions must be made clear so that his mìng 命 can be obeyed, and by suggesting that mìngcí 名辭 (mìng in conjunction with phrases) are capable of conveying these commands. Hearing is a fitting metaphor for how such commands operate, because one cannot shut or even tighten one’s ears. The penetration of sound through the ears suggests inescapable obedience. One might say that the commanding tones of the ruler’s naming penetrate the ears deeply enough so that the hearers must “listen” (tíng 聽) and obey their fate (mìng 命). (Perhaps this explains the otherwise puzzling portrait in Mencius 7B:33 of the ideal “gentleman” as simply awaiting orders/fate.)
the same way that rhythm, melody, rhyme, and paronomasia create harmonious and orderly patterns, so too a tone of voice that is suitable for giving commands might facilitate rulership. Indeed, there are repeated references to the ruler himself being “quiet” (jìng 靜) as he issues zhèngmìng.40 The implication might be that the ruler needs to avoid, for example, the impression of vehemence or brashness. Speaking his commands from tonal quietude might allow greater control of how his intentions are heard.

In a context where music is valued precisely because humans are susceptible to the sway of airs/winds, there is no reason to expect the resonant power of what enters the ears to be limited to non-discursive sounds. Sound in general penetrates human inwardness deeply. The degree to which early Chinese texts are structured by means of sound-based rhetorical devices suggests the measure of their awareness of these aspects of speech as sound. In such a context, the “straightening out” of discursive sound would be a potent force for prompting responses in both speech and action. Thus, the ethical ruler might simply be still and straighten out míng, because instruction that penetrates the body through air has the effect of gentle inevitability, like the wind bending the grass, or like fate itself.

NOTES

1. I am not proposing the “core meaning” of zhèngmìng in early Chinese texts, since that notion implies that meanings exist independent of the context of use and interpretation. Nevertheless, focusing on one consistent thread from early Chinese texts — the transformative potency of resonant sound — highlights something that is part of the relevant background for our (necessarily limited) attempts to reconstruct tendencies in the use of the slogan in the early Chinese period. The appropriateness of “straight” as a tentative translational equivalent of zhèng is suggested by the spatial metaphors for zhèngmìng and zhèngyǎn that emphasize the difference between direct fit and indirection through “leaning” (yǐ 倚) and “crookedness” (wāng 桿). For the implications of standard translations of zhèngmìng, see Defoor! (1997, 168–77). For other discussions of zhèngmìng, see Im (2008), Moeller (2000, 91–107), Makeham (1994), Defoor! (1998, 111–18; 2003, 217–42), Creel (1974, 106–24), and Loy (2008).

The source for my analysis is passages in early Chinese texts predominantly dating from the fourth century BCE to the first century BCE. Unless otherwise noted, all chapter numbers for Chinese texts in the original follow the Chinese University of Hong Kong CHinese ANcient Texts “CHANT” database. Unidentified translations are my own.

2. The significance of zhèngmìng for Confucius’s own thought might be exaggerated, as Bryan Van Norden (2007, 82–96) argues, but these claims occur outside the Analects. Examples of such assertions about order include: “If names are straight, there is order” (名正則治, Lǎoshi Chūnqìu 16.8); “straighten the names and [thereby?] order the things” (正名治物, Sīmǎfǔ
“if names are straight and portions are clear, the masses will not be confused about the way” (名正分明則民不惑於道, Guānzhī 管子 10); “Huángdí straightened the names of the hundred things to enlighten the masses to share the wealth” (黃帝正名百物以明民共財, Lìji 24); “Therefore in making the laws, the sages needed to render them clear and easy to understand, and with names straightened, the stupid and the knowledgeable were all able to understand them” (故聖人為法, 必使之明白易知, 名正, 愚知竅能知之, Shāngjūnshā 商君書 26); “with preservation of attentiveness and straightening out of names, falsity and deceit will cease” (守慎正名, 僞詐自止, Guānzhī 15).

3. Given the broad range of understandings of “word,” it is important to avoid using it as a translation of míng. It would be surprising if míng had been employed in early China in a way that resembles any understanding of “word” in modern linguistic theory or even in ordinary parlance. Moreover, uses of  yi yán 一言 (“one unit of speech”) as what we might call “one word” also complicate that reading. Hence, instead of treating “zhèngmíng” as something done to “words,” this chapter approaches the slogan from a perspective that foregrounds míng’s most common uses: name, fame, and title. In addition to its use as names of persons broadly (including xìng 姓 and hào 號), and its use as “title” and “fame,” “míng” is used to talk about names in the sense of special “terminology” or “technical terms.” Evidence that zhèngmíng has implications for speech is famously apparent in the Analects 13:3, where it results in smooth speech.

4. The other things are “directness” (jíng 疾), which is discussed below, and “easiness” (yì 易), which I do not discuss because it is not specific enough to be informative about what constitutes goodness in names.

5. Standard translations of shí (實 (objects, actuality, reality, stuff) inevitably seem to present misleading implications about what it is that names name. They invoke what Bruno Latour (2004) calls “matters of fact,” whose composition is unaffected by the very power of naming that this chapter explores. Hence I leave shí 実 untranslated.

6. Xūnzhī 22 also notes that the appropriateness of naming conventions is not “certain” (wúgùyí 無固宜), so the conventions alone seem unlikely to produce “certain” goodness.

7. Roger Ames (2008) argues that, insofar as the production of meaning involves non-referential associations among names, zhèngmíng is a matter of regulating the way meaning operates through the associative power of language. In ethics, such an interpretation of zhèngmíng is an affirmation of relationality: just as the “meaning” of míng emerges through the context of echoed relationships with other míng, so too “meaningful” lives are created through particular relationships in resonance with their discursive communities.


9. My argument is that the few uses of “míng” as meaning “graph” in early Chinese texts are aberrations that occurred as a result of the need to develop a term to indicate a single graph. See Geaney (2010).

11. See Geaney (2010) for the limitations of Zheng Xuăn’s interpretation of mìng as “graph.”

12. For instance, Chad Hansen maintains that what Confucian philosophers called the “rectification of names” was “following the sage’s instructions, which were written in ... characters” (1993, 393). Henry Rosemont reaches a similar conclusion regarding the use of mìng to mean “graph” in the “Zhèngmìng” chapter of the Xünzī on the basis of the idea that “good” names are graphs that look like what they signify (personal communication, Spring 2006).

13. See Geaney (2010) for a more detailed version of this argument.

14. The phrase “zhèngzī 正字” is not common, but it does occur in the first century Hânsâ 漢書 and the second century Tâipîng Jîng 太平經, meaning something like “standard graphs.”


16. This is not to claim that mìng cannot be written, but the fact that mìng are recorded does not mean that mìng are graphs, any more than the graph for “action” refers to writing because “actions” can be written about.

17. The conception of music in the “Yuèjì,” while not necessarily characteristic of the whole of the early Chinese period, seems to fit the broad definition proposed by John Blacking (1973, 3): “humanly organized sound.” The “Yuèjì” explains that yuè is the first level in a hierarchy of sound that appears to be based on degrees of complexity — higher than yīn 音 (tone or tone) and shēng 聲 (sound or voice). Nevertheless, my interpretation of yuè as the highest form of humanly organized sound might need to be supplemented by the suggestion in the “Yuèjì” that visual elements that emerge after sound (shields, axes, plumes and ox tails) are also part of the technical requirements of yuè.

18. For the Xìngzìmìngchâ examples, see Guōdîàn Chūmù Zháijiàn (Beijing: Wenwu, 1998), strips 23, 30–31, and 36; 180. See also Xùnźì 20 and Shuo Yüăn 19.43.

19. I gloss the term yīn 淫 in note 33.

20. Van Zoeren (1991, 31). See also Nylan (2001, 90). Van Zoeren’s claim is part of a thesis about the historical development from an early treatment of the odes as music to the Hân 漢 habit of interpreting the Odes through textual exegesis. Although the development is undeniable, his argument does not notice the ways in which the term yán (which he calls “language”) is presented as if its qualities were similar to, rather than opposed to, those of music.

21. The Lîji says, “Music emerges from the inside; ritual acts from the outside” (樂由中出, 禮自外作). It also says, “Therefore music is something that acts on the inside; ritual is something that acts on the outside” (故樂也者, 動於內者也; 禮也者, 動於外者也) (Lîji 19.1, Shîjì 3.2).

22. My choice of a male-gendered translation for júnzǐ is a deliberate historical reminder that the focus of concern about the júnzǐ in early Chinese texts is generally not on female-bodied persons.

23. See also a slightly different comment in Huâinánzî 淮南子 1: “[His] eyes have never seen ritual and etiquette, and his ears have never heard the ancients or the past” (目未嘗見禮節, 耳未嘗聞先古).
24. I use the formula “the odes” to mean their pre-canonical state, as distinct from their later form as “The Odes.”


26. A number of factors related to how yán 言 (“speech”) functions make plausible the idea that speech and music intersect. The fact that animals are credited with the ability to speak (yán) is one hint that a fairly wide range of sonorous communication must count as yán. (See Li ji 1.6 and Zhōulǐ 5.24 and 5.26.) Moreover, that which yán seems to communicate — yì 意 — appears to involve something like the sounds of the heartmind (as suggested by its entry in the Shuōwēn Jiezi and by the fact that it interchanges with yīn 音 [“tone”] in excavated manuscripts). As Chad Hansen argues, yì does not resemble mental concepts (1992, 76). The use of yì as well as zhì 志 in relation to yán makes speech resemble other means of expression, suggesting something along the lines of an overall “intent” or “aim,” such as can be said of music and dance.

27. While the hermeneutic principles implied in Mencius 5A:4 and 5B:8 might be an exception, for the most part the interpretation of odes in the Mencius also seems fitted to suit the occasion. Moreover, in spite of calling the Odes a “classic,” the Xūnzi treats determining their meaning as requiring little effort, with an attitude that suggests that questions about how to interpret them are not particularly complex or pressing. For the Xūnzi, it is a problem that the writings and rhythms of the very ancient sages are lost. Nevertheless, the contemporary gentleman seems to have no trouble manifesting the way of the Zhōu 周 through what he prizes in his behavior (Xūnzi 5).

28. Through an interpretation of Zuǒzhūàn B9.27.5 and B9.29.13, Martin Svensson Ekström posits that the difference between an iteration of the odes qua music and qua coded message is this:

As music, the Odes are transparent, non-manipulatable and reveal the corruption or virtue of their makers like a Freudian slip reveals the innermost secret of the neurotic. By contrast, when a person recites the Odes to “express his intentions” (言志 yánzhì), he is in full control of both himself and the poems that serve both to veil and disclose, whereas music presents him “warts and all.” (2006, 84–85)

29. See note 3. In early Chinese texts, surnames, personal names, nicknames, and titles (not to mention reputations and terminology) are not necessarily monosyllabic. Still, “míng” generally seems to refer to smaller units of discursive sound than “yán,” except perhaps some uses of “one yán” (yī yán 一言).

30. For a listing of some early Confucian uses of paronomasia, see Ames (2008, 37–43).

31. As DeWoskin notes (1982, 92), this corruptive “influence of airs” might account for the analogy in Analects 17:18 between the sounds of Zhēng and the way the color purple robs from vermillion.

32. However, Behr maintains that consciousness of language change is only a rare undercurrent in pre-Qīn discourse about zhèngmíng (2005b, 17, 20–21).

33. These observations from Picken and DeWoskin are helpful because, while in the context of music, “yín 涕” has often been taken to mean licentious sexuality, that
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reading is not plausible for explaining its effects on discursive sound. Indeed, it probably is not apt for music either. In Zuòchūn B10.1, yínshēng (overflowing sound) is not sexual excess, but it fosters that excess through something like contagion.

34. “Speech can be heard and action can be seen” (言為可聞 行為可見) (Xünzi 27).

35. The modification of míng by yín 淫 in Guóyǔ 7.7 is a rare and illuminating exception. The yínmíng 淫名 that is heard (wén 間) throughout the world belongs to a power­ usurping ruler who oversteps boundaries.

36. The chapter’s distinction between míng 名 and cí 謂 is similar to that of the “Neo-Mohist Canons” 11.2 (“With names, pick shì; with cí, sift intentions” 以名舉實，以訓抒意), as well as that of Lǎshì Chūnqǐ 18.4.

37. By contrast, it might have been thought that even the pores can be tightened. See Kuriyama (1994, 37).

38. According to post-phenomenologist Don Ihde, such assessments of sound as penetrating appear in other languages, in which they are also linked to the notion of sound-as-command. Ihde writes:

[H]earing and obeying are often united in root terms. The Latin obaudire is literally meant as a listening “from below.” It stands as a root source of the English obey. Sound in its commanding presence in­vades our experience . . . one’s train of thought is likely to be upset by the “command” of the sound which is so penetrating or loud that he can’t “hear” himself think. (1976, 81)

39. “Speech and conversation must be trustworthy, but not for the sake of correcting actions. The jüzǐ enacts models in order to await orders/fate, and that is all” (言語必信，非以正行也。君子行法，以侯命而已矣) (Mencius 7B:33).

40. Hánfeìzǐ 韓非子 5, Hánfeìzǐ 8, and Shìzǐ 1. See also Jiàyì Xinshū 賈誼新書 8.3. The term jīng 靜 is used to mean both “quiet” and “still,” but, in light of the interchange of yì 意 with “tone” (yǐn 音, see note 26), its use in conjunction with “empty” (xù 虛) in this formula also evokes the quiet tone of an empty heartmind.

References


