



Shakespeare in Chinese Philosophy: Kings and Rectification of Names

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Abstract

Appeal for order and harmony permeated Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and it relied a lot on the monarch. This paper aims to analyze the images of three monarchs in *Henry IV* and *Richard II* to interpret Shakespeare's political philosophy from perspective of Confucius's thought of rectification of names. Richard II is the legal king, but he doesn't follow what a king should do; Henry IV is also not Shakespeare's ideal king for he takes the crown illegally, though he performed well as a king; with legal succession of the crown and Machiavellian tactics, Henry V is the perfect monarch for Shakespeare.

Key words: Monarch; Rectification of names; Political philosophy

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INTRODUCTION

History play is a very important art form in Britain at the end of the 16th century, for it is the innovation of British dramatists, the demands of national politics, and the cultural and artistic embodiment of the final formation of British national identity and national consciousness. In the long middle ages dominated by Roman Catholicism, the boundary among countries was not so strict. The Christian thought emphasizing universal care and the tribal tradition

of the Germanic kingdom made people's national consciousness stay in a vague and hazy state. Although the Hundred Year's War between Britain and France put the two countries in the shadow of endless war, this continuous war made the people of the two countries have a clearer understanding of national identity and national consciousness.¹ In the mutual attack and resistance, people's support for the Royal leadership was enhanced, and a stronger national monarchy was formed in the mid-15th century. Later, Henry VIII used religious reform to break away from the control of Roman Catholicism, successfully combined kingship and religious power, and laid a solid foundation for independence in a complete sense. Finally, in the Elizabethan period, due to the rise of national strength, the strengthening of national identity consciousness and the rise of national consciousness, the ever-growing pride of the British nation formed.

Based on historical data from *The Chronicles of England, Scotland, Ireland* by Raphael Holinshed and *The Union of the two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York* by Edward Hall, Shakespeare's 10 history plays outlines the historical picture of Britain from 1199 to 1547 for nearly 350 years. The ups and downs of British feudal society from the Plantagenet Dynasty to the Tudor Dynasty reflect the bloody fight between monarchs and aristocratic groups due to the competition for power, and show the different images of monarchs as well as the advantages and disadvantages of their rule. Shakespeare describes a wise monarch like Henry V, who led the British army to defeat the French. He also describes a tyrant like Richard II who just collected money and alienated the nobility and civilians. These history plays repose Shakespeare's

¹ The reason for the outbreak of the war was British King's demand for French territorial sovereignty, which ended with France's victory and England's dismal withdrawal from the European continent. Many patriotic heroes emerged in the war, reflecting the rising national pride of the two countries. Shakespeare's Henry V is also considered to be the embodiment of this national pride.

political philosophy and thoughts on the ideal monarch. In the monographs of Craig, Speikerman, Bloom and others, Shakespeare has been regarded as a great political thinker, and his profound political thought has been studied and excavated. In these history plays, Shakespeare focuses on social order and stability. Starting from Richard II, the bloody and conspiracy around the throne never stopped, showing a story of “crime and punishment” (Baker, p.801). In his consecutive history plays, it can be clearly seen that order has been constantly broken and then rebuilt. But Shaw points out that decay and destruction are hidden in the restoration of order (pp.61-67). The circular structure that regicide causes chaos and order is restored after the punishment of the crime appears repeatedly, which reflects the traditional Christian concept that sin destroys God’s order and the order can be finally restored only after the sin is repaid on the one hand; On the other hand, it shows a very important political view that illegal rule will continue to breed conspiracy and ambition as well as a lot of chaos, eventually lead to the collapse of social structure and plunge the country into a vicious circle of rebellion and tyranny. With this narrative structure of crime and punishment, Shakespeare in an extremely obscure way expressed his expectations for the ideal monarch and regime in the name of reproducing the image of the past monarch.

RICHARD II: A NOMINAL KING

According to the tradition of the Germanic Kingdom, although the leader (i.e. the later King) is the supreme head of the community, the implementation of his actions, orders and powers must follow the ancient traditions and customs, and should consult the people with higher status in the country on the important affairs of the country. This tradition was established in the form of law in *Magna Carta* in 1215. Its essence is to limit the royal power and establish the spirit that the law is higher than the king. Of course, because of the special historical background, *Magna Carta* did not stop the rise of British monarchy. From the 13th century to the 16th century, England experienced continuous wars. The people longed for a strong monarch to put the country in harmony and order. Coupled with the divine instruction of Christian monarchy, the rise of England’s monarchy was once a progressive manifestation in line with historical inevitability. Then, the late Elizabethan monarchy has turned into a negative force that hinders the development of society. The image of Richard II is a criticism of this kind of monarchy.

In shaping the image of Richard II, Shakespeare highlights his righteous position as a monarch jointly given by God, law and tradition, as well as the unjust behaviors that he did not fulfill his royal obligations while emphasizing his kingship. Confucius, the representative of Confucianism, put forward what he called “the rectification of names” on how to establish a well-ordered

society. That is, things in actual fact should be made to accord with the implication attached to them by names (Feng, p.41). As we all know, Confucius expressed his political ideas in *Analects*, which was a book recording the dialogues between him and his students. Once a disciple asked him what he would do first if he were to rule a state, whereupon Confucius replied: “The one thing needed first is the rectification of names.” That is to say, let people act according to their identities. The name of everything has a certain meaning, which inevitably implies the essence of such things, and the name in social relations has certain responsibilities and obligations. Confucius believed that the principle of governing the country is to “Let the ruler be ruler, the minister minister, the father father, and the son son” (Feng, p.42). That is to say, let the monarch act according to the monarch’s way, the minister act according to the minister’s way, the father act according to the father’s way, and the son act according to the son’s way. Monarch, minister, father and son are the names of such social relations, and those who bear these names must fulfill their responsibilities and obligations accordingly. If a ruler follows or acts in the way of a ruler, which makes an agreement between name and actuality, he is then truly a ruler, in fact as well as in name. But if he does not act as a ruler and makes conflict rather than agreement between name and reality, he is no ruler, even though he may popularly be regarded as such. Name and actuality represent the complementary and indispensable symbiotic relationship of things. “Name” stipulates the objective laws and social rules that things should follow, and “actuality” reflects the practical application and implementation of these laws and rules (Feng, 43).

Shakespeare compared the kingdom of England to a sea-walled garden (3.4.43). Although the vast sea protected England from all external disasters, it cannot prevent its internal destruction. Human beings cannot resist temptation because of their own stupidity and weakness. The lineage and custom made Richard become a holy king, who only saw the sacred origin of kingship, but ignored the obligations hidden under the surface of supreme power. He foolishly thought “he was born a king and made a mess of the Kingdom and himself” because “he accepts a role for which he does not know that he is not fitted” (Goddard, 149). In order to highlight Richard’s birthright and status, Shakespeare compared Richard sitting in the court to the sun surrounded by stars, describing his appearance in an gorgeous way to emphasized his majesty, and the streamer of the court set off the sanctity of his God-like face. All contrast sharply with Richard’s perverse behavior, lack of due respect for the country’s laws and traditional customs as well as his failure to rule in proper way. He only wanted to enjoy the lofty vanity brought by the name of the monarch, but he “had not so trimmed and dressed” (3.4.56). The monarch’s political garden. Thinking that he was as omniscient as God, Richard was indifferent to both loyal ministers and

evil enemies. He has no trusted confidants, and surrounded by only a group of “weeds seemed in eating him to hold him up” (3.4.52). Richard did not act like a king in the dispute between Mowbray and Bolingbroke, for he could not bear the responsibility of judging the right and wrong of both sides and rejected his duty. “we shall see Justice design the victor’s chivalry”(1.1.202-3). He was also indecisive, unable to stick to his decision, and reneged on his words. He canceled the duel arranged by him. According to the ancient tradition, such a duel ceremony is sacred, and the customs and order it represents are also the supporting force of Richard’s throne. However, “the king, the custodian of order, has himself broken the order of a formal occasion” (Leggatt, p.62).

What’s more unwise is that he gave his compassion to his enemy, Bolingbroke, who secretly hated him because of the death of his uncle Duke Gloucester while he exiled Mowbray, a person loyal to him, who finally drifted away and died under the sword in war. However, even in the danger of lifelong exile, Mowbray did not reveal the king’s involvement in the death of Duke Gloucester. Instead, he took responsibility for it. “For Gloucester’s death/ I slew him not/ but to my own disgrace/Neglected my sworn duty in that case” (1.1.132-5). However, this is almost a public secret and revealed by Gaunt, “His deputy anointed in His sight/Hath caused his death, the which if wrongfully/Let heaven revenge, for I may never lift / An angry arm against His minister.” (1.2.38-42). The abandonment and expulsion of Mowbray as a feedback to his strong loyalty to Richard II suggest the dilemma faced by nobles and civilians who want to serve the monarch: on the one hand, the ancient tradition requires them to be loyal to the monarch at all costs; on the other, injustice and misfortune may come at any time. The worst thing is that he prides that he was God’s minister, despises the laws of his subjects and the Kingdom, and has no mercy on the people of the kingdom. He always plunders their wealth for himself and his favorite ministers to squander and enjoy, which caused his loss of favor from both the civilians and nobles. Gaunt’s complaint that “landlord of England art thou now, not king” (2.1.113). Actually indicates his excessive and harsh levies damaged his throne. After the death of his uncle, Duke Gaunt of Lancaster, he ignored the legitimate inheritance of his cousin Bolingbroke and took the old Duke’s manor and property as his own, which is undoubtedly digging his own grave because he himself smashed the cornerstone of his throne. The blatant violation of Bolingbroke’s inheritance undoubtedly destroys the sanctity of natural rights carved by time. As Richard’s other uncle, the Duke of York, warned him “Take Hereford’s rights away, and take from Time/His charters and his customary rights/Let not to-morrow then ensue to-day/ Be not thyself... .for how art thou a king/ But by fair sequence and succession” (2.1.195-99).

This tradition handed down from generation to generation is the foundation for the survival of the hierarchy and order of the vassal system. It is also the stable umbrella of Richard’s throne. Originally tough as a rock, only the king can move, but it was broken by Richard II himself. What he did to Bolingbroke aroused the fear of other nobles, thus the nobles who could have helped him resist Bolingbroke, for fear of suffering the same fate as Bolingbroke, united to make up their minds to help Bolingbroke get back his own rights. Even his good friend Northumberland and beloved uncle fought with him. Richard gave Bolingbroke an excuse to start a rebellion, took the opportunity to seize the throne and become Henry IV, because he opposed himself to the interests of all nobles. He was no longer the guardian of the sacred order, but the destroyer of the foundation of the kingdom. Finally, Richard II came into isolation and desperation. His duel with his long-time enemy Bolingbroke was doomed to failure for he has nothing but himself while Bolingbroke was supported by English nobles. Richard II only held the name of a king, but did not follow the way of a king. He is a nominal king rather than an actual one. Even the gardeners in the garden of the palace mocked that if he ruled the kingdom like their working on the garden, he would not lose the crown on his head. Therefore, Richard caused chaos in Britain because he ignored the art of good governance. At the beginning of the play, Shakespeare described Richard’s appearance as extraordinary and holy, and emphasized Richard’s complacency with his inherent monarchy temperament. After the abolition of the throne, Richard looked himself in the mirror and lamented that the previous sacred monarchy temperament had disappeared. Richard’s fascination with appearance actually shows that “he lacks the spirit of a king, so he is just a monarch in name but not in deed.” (Liu 148).

HENRY VI: AN ACTUAL KING

In the first tetralogy, kingship was essentially the prize in a game of power. As we saw how Henry, Edward, and Richard failed at it in their different ways we may have thought about the demands of the office, but the characters themselves were more concerned to get or keep the crown than to understand what it meant (Leggatt, p.61). Henry IV racked his brain to covet Richard’s throne. In the first scene, he staged a good play called *Qing Junce* (which means rid the emperor of “evil” ministers). This is usually a part of a plot to stage an armed rebellion. Although Richard did not directly admit that he killed his uncle Duke Gloucester, he did not deny the accusations made against him before Gaunt died and it was also revealed in the conversation between Gaunt and Duchess in the scene 2, act 1. For the whole aristocracy, it was almost an open secret. But Henry pretended to know nothing about

it, pointed the spearhead at fierce Mowbray, a loyal noble to Richard, and successfully get rid of this supporter of Richard. Compared with Richard's boasting of himself as a divine king selected by God and dismissing the civilians, Henry condescended to hold the hearts of the people firmly in his hands. Richard failed to see the political significance of Henry's behaviors, but mocked his flattering of common people

Observed his courtship to the common people,
How he did seem to dive into their hearts,
With humble and familiar courtesy,
What reverence he did throw away on slaves,
Wooing poor craftsmen with the craft of smiles
And patient under bearing of his fortune,
As 'twere to banish their affects with him.
Off goes his bonnet to an oyster-wench,
A brace of draymen bid God speed him well,
And had the tribute of his supple knee,
With 'Thanks, my countrymen, my loving friends'—
As were our England in reversion his,
And he our subjects' next degree in hope (1.4.24-35).

No matter how ironic Richard's tone is, one thing is sure that Henry's common-friendly strategy was very successful in conquering the people all over the country. In fact, Henry exposed his hypocrisy when he taught his son prince Hal the way of gaining popular support: "And then I stole all courtesy from heaven/And dressed myself in such humility/That I did pluck allegiance from men's hearts/Loud shouts and salutations from their mouths/Even in the presence of the crowned king...." (*King Henry IV*, 3.2.50-54). Even when he was dying and his life came to an end, Henry IV still showed the foresight of a wise thinker and pointed out to Hal, the heir to the throne, that the best way to ensure peace at home was to transfer contradictions and bring the war to the soil abroad, so as to make the domestic aristocrats and people abandon their past grievances and unite together to fight with the outside world. "Therefore, my Harry, Be it thy course to busy giddy minds/with foreign quarrels; that action hence borne out/May waste the memory of the former days" (*King Henry IV*, 4.5.212-15). In the characterization of Henry, Shakespeare highlighted his skillful conspiracy everywhere, portraying him as a wise monarch advocated by Machiavelli, with both the ferocity and strength of the lion and the cunning and shrewdness of the fox.

Pierce sees the embarrassment of Henry, "Though he is in many ways a good ruler, he cannot be the hero-king who compels loyalty as well as submission." (Pierce, pp.171-172). Richard I's blood was a sin that he could not wash away. As a king, he is the center of order and a model of virtue, but at the same time, he is also a sinner who steals the crown. All pious prayers can't atone for him. When England needed a stable new order, he fell into the vortex of suppressing the rebellions everywhere. All his great talents and competence could not hide the fact that his crown was not given by God, but obtained by usurpation. For this, a deep sense of guilt and fear

had been hid deep in Henry's heart. At the beginning of *Henry IV*, it was revealed that Henry had hoped to go on an expedition to the holy land of Jerusalem to wash away Richard's blood on his hands. However, just when he decided to recruit, the news of the Welsh rebellion came, and the nobles stayed at home also challenged his usurped crown. What's more, the unbridled heir to the throne also worried him. Henry, with internal worries and external difficulties, couldn't help remembering what Richard II said "The time will come, that foul sin, gathering head/shall break into corruption" (*Henry IV*, 3.1.76-7). It seemed that God had carried out the punishment for his regicide. In Shakespeare's works, Henry IV is not a winner. The fundamental reason is that he is not a legitimate heir to the throne. He can only be a king of Youshiwuming, which means he rules the kingdom as a king is supposed to while he doesn't hold the legal status of a king. Henry's regicide and seizing the throne sowed the seeds of war in England, which not only filled his heart with guilt, but also made him a renegade bastard in the eyes of the nobles who helped him, but also an excuse for them to wage war to uphold justice and rebellion.

Henry IV is actually a tragic character. His attempt to win the crown did not bring him happiness, but an inevitable sense of guilt and endless rebellion, and his former friends became enemies. Deep in his heart, Henry always knew the harm of illegally seizing the throne, for fighting and rebellions run through his ruling. But he believe it would change when prince Hal takes the throne because he does it legally.

HENRY V: A NOMINAL AND ACTUAL KING

In *Henry IV*, "not only does the state pass through civil war to harmony, but Prince Hal develops into a king fit to lead his newly united states in war against France" (Pierce, 171). Prince Hal can be taken as the ideal monarch for Shakespeare. It's not because he is morally perfect, but because he has both the advantages of Richard II and his father Henry IV. He not only inherited legally, but also had his father's shrewdness and cunning. Sullivan called Hal "Machiavellian Prince" (Sullivan, 125). When his father and the people all over the country are worried about his debauchery and loose behavior, Harry's monologue reveals that everything is just his careful planning to consolidate the throne. "So, when this loose behavior I throw off.....Redeeming time when men think least I will" (*Henry IV*, 1.2.200-209). Henry's strategy was successful, and staying with Falstaff in the lower class gave a chance for both of him and civilians to get to know each other. Frye pointed out that Hal soaked himself in every social aspect of the kingdom he is going to rule, and he is becoming his entire nation in an individual form (78). After his father's death Hal became the king and listened to his father's advice and transferred domestic contradictions overseas in the form of war, successfully

rallying English people to consolidate his throne. Hal followed the Machiavellian principles, pretending to be a untrustworthy because “Princes, and especially those who are new, have discovered more loyalty and more utility in those men who, at the beginning of their rule, were considered suspect than in those who were at first trusted” (Machiavelli, 148). What’s more, Henry V managed to do something great to strengthen his kingship, for “nothing makes a prince more esteemed than great undertakings and examples of his unusual talents” (Machiavelli, 150). Taking Ferdinand, the monarch of Aragon, as an example, Machiavelli believed that the key to his success is quickly launching a war to attack neighboring countries, thus consolidate his position in the country at one stroke, and use the money of the church to support the army. Henry V adopted a similar strategy. Because of the bill to confiscate most of the church’s property, the Archbishop of Canterbury had to initiate help with France issue in exchange for Henry’s opposition to the bill. The Archbishop’s concession meant the church’s concession to kingship, which was obviously an achievement of Henry V. The Archbishop first provided Henry with a huge amount of money as military expenditure, and took the crime of waging war on him, supporting Henry’s claims on some French territories and then French throne. Finally, Henry got married to Catherine, princess of France, and successfully became the king of France. It seems acceptable for Shakespeare that a king could do everything to protect the national interests, even in foul ways.

Henry V’s reconciliation with the Chief Justice also has its profound meaning. The Renaissance is an important transitional period in western society. During the process of transforming to a secular society, the kingship of many countries has been strengthened. At the beginning, this centralization has a great driving force for improving national consciousness and developing national economic and military strength, and has also won the support of the people. But in the late Renaissance, the growing autocratic monarchy was resisted by the people and Parliament. Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth promulgated the Supreme Act in 1534 and 1559 respectively, emphasizing that the king was only under God and not bound by law. Therefore, “writers of the early modern period who, faithful to the equitable principles of the common law and the ancient constitution, opposed the increasing autocracy of government during the 1590s, expressing a preference instead for limited monarchy”² (Raffield, 205-6). Henry V had been resolutely punished for his misdeeds by the Chief Justice according to law, regardless of his crown

² The first extensive treatise on the benefits to English subjects of limited monarchy was Sir John Fortescue, *Difference between an Absolute and Limited Monarchy* (c 1471), published as *The Governance of England* (C Plummer (ed), Oxford, Clarendon, 1885).

prince’s identity. Thus Henry had a grudge against him. However, after his ascension to the throne, Henry changed his attitude dramatically and expresses the willing to obey the Chief Justice. This change may be another strategy of Henry to grab the hearts of the people, but it is more likely to be Shakespeare’s expectation that the monarch is no longer above the law, but subject to the constraints of the law. This is also the Renaissance humanists’ rational thinking on the legal system. Henry V’s “bow” to the law is an embodiment of his political wisdom and means. Deep in his mind he clearly knew the image of the monarch expected by the people and used it to create his own appearance. He successfully won the support of the whole country and took the throne handed down by Henry IV.

CONCLUSION

It is no accident that Shakespeare and history play appeared in England rather than any other country, because there was never a kingdom where the various factors in national life are in opposition and struggle with each other like England. Shakespeare’s history plays came into being as the products of the strengthening of national consciousness and national identity, the appeal of national order and ideal monarch. The ultimate purpose of Shakespeare’s history plays is actually to explore the relationship between the monarch and the law, which is the foundation of order and harmony. Should a monarch’s will be constrained by the law? Do the people have the right to depose the monarch? Since the transformation of the Roman Republic into the Roman Empire, jurists and Christian theologians had been thinking about these problems. When the Roman Empire moved towards dictatorship in AD 200, a scholar put forward the will of an emperor has the force of law, because people give all their authority and power to the emperor, which can no longer be withdrawn. The basis and reason for the king to control the royal power lies in the contract with the people, that is, while he enjoys the power to the people, he also has the obligation of protection and care. Later at the Coronation medieval kings usually swore that they would do justice and respect the law, and his subjects also swore allegiance to him. This ceremony is regarded as a standard contract signing, which provides a legal basis for people to overthrow the tyrant and terminate the contract, because people have the right to take back their transferred power. Another opposing view holds that God gives people a good monarch out of kindness and a bad monarch out of anger. Therefore, even a tyrant is given by God as the consequence of human sin. All that people can do is endure silently and hope to be forgiven by God.

The two contradictory views were debated in the Christian world, and it’s particularly complicated in Shakespeare’s England. National identity and national consciousness have been formed. Kings connected

themselves with the kingdoms and thus love for the homeland is identical to the love for the king to some degree. The religious tension, war, poverty and anxiety of succession to the throne in British political life are becoming more and more obvious. The deterioration of economy is accompanied by increasing pessimism and anxiety in politics. Shakespeare's plays are exploratory, not prescriptive. Shakespeare is not a propagandist of the myth of order, nor a cynic who only sees deception and oppression in society. He just realistically examines power and its influence and presents it in the theater stage and drama text. A nominal king like Richard II did not follow the way a king is supposed to rule the kingdom failed to take his duty; an actual king like Henry IV was also unable to get rid of domestic conflicts and the other's ambition for illegal ruling just breed conspiracy and ambition as well as a lot of chaos. Religious beliefs, traditions and customs from generation to generation, and the realistic needs of social harmony all required a wise, resourceful England king who was willing to perform his sovereign duties. He respected the parliament composed of important national figures and British national laws. Of course, his subjects would obey the king chosen by God for them and swear allegiance to him. Therefore, only Henry V was the "ideal king" for Shakespeare (Wells, p.255). He inherited the throne legally and knew the tactics of ruling a kingdom. He was both a nominal and actual king who successful made agreement between name and actuality.

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