Hsun Tzu's theory on "Rectification of Names"

The rectification of names was a common topic of discussion among the philosophical schools in the pre-Chin Period. Hsun Tzu inevitably accepted this influence but developed it into a theory which possesses logical as well as ethical interest. The purpose of this academic exercise is to examine Hsun Tzu's logical thinking from his essay "On the Rectification of Names", to see only his theory is so prominent and different from those of other Confucianists.

The most important point in Hsun Tzu's theory on rectification of names is that there is no 'one to me correspondence' between a name and actuality. For him name expresses form (形) directly and actuality indirectly. The source of three fallacies, according to him, is that the other philosophers believed that names is a direct expression of actuality.

Hsun Tzu also insisted that names have no correctness of their own and have no corresponding actualities by themselves. The correctness and the actualities ascribed to them are given by convention. That means there is necessarily no relation between names and actualities. It is through convention that the necessary relation between names and actualities is derived.

Hsun Tzu also established three fundamental principles to create new names, they are: the reason for having names; the causes for the similarities and differences in names; and the fundamental principles on which names are instituted. He used these criteria to criticise
the ideas of other schools and grouped them into three classes of fallacies: "the fallacy of corrupting names with names", "the fallacy of corrupting names with actualities", and "the fallacy of corrupting actualities with names." Further, he talked about simple name, compound name, great general name, great classifying name and quality name, which shows that his way of thinking is similar to the Western intellectual philosophical system. Therefore, his theory of rectified names contains logical interest which is different from traditional Chinese philosophy.

Judging from the Western philosophical viewpoint, Hsun Tzu's logical theory is superficial and commonplace, but his abstract reasoning, his highly analytical ability and his purely intellectual activity which bring forth such thinking must be recognised. His logical theory shows that he releases himself from the bondage of traditional Chinese philosophy, which is mainly concerned with 'man' and 'his society', and developed towards a new line. This new trend towards intellectualism and the outer objects was neglected in Chinese philosophy, if properly developed by the followers, can remedy the imperfections of Chinese philosophy and make it a dualistic one.