

# Sea Change in Literary Theory and Criticism in Asia: A Review on Zhenzhao Nie's *An Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*

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**Abstract** After deconstruction and postmodernism which had been engaging the confrontation with the Other, literary theory and criticism have been encountering the “Ethical Turn.” After the famous Paul de Man’s downfall, a new argument of ethical reconsideration appeared in the forefront of the literary discourse against deconstructionist and postmodernist assumptions that human beings are the unconscious and social construct. Martha Nussbaum and Wayne are initiating trailblazers, initiating present insightful renderings of what’s at stake in ethical criticism. In this context, one thing I noticed intriguing in Prof. Nie Zhenzhao’s book, *An Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* (2014), is that an economic and cultural sea change in China anticipates the future anterior of the critical exchange in the field of critical theory in Asia at large.

**Key words** ethics; ethical turn; ethical literary criticism; critical theory; ethical criticism; critical exchange

Human subject comes to exist as an authentic subject in the region where the subject and the Other become involved in the negotiations and dialogues, the so-called mutual communicative exchange. “I” do not exist or the impersonality or the Other exists, where the speaking subject does not perform thinking activity, that is, without will and intention. In that case, the speaking subject is positioned in the region of the unconscious by being “the plaything of my thought.” Then, language and the unconscious constitute the space of the Other. The nature of the Other is two-fold: internally “the radical heteronomy” opens within man beyond his control and consciousness, and externally “the radical ex-centricity” with which man is confronted. From the radical heteronomy, the irrecoverable lack originates within man, while from the radical ex-centricity, both the speaking/writing subject and the

hearing/reading subject constitute and participate the space of speech, the space which is both oral and written in the literature of the multiple, chaotic, but dynamic knots of symbolic discourse.

In writing, the discourse of the Other is constructed in the unconscious space of the writer. As a result, the external Other in writing becomes the space within the subject, which inheres in temporality or historicity. Thus, the speaking or writing subject is always already positioned within the structure of discourse. The tradition of discourse is the fundamental structure which regulates culture and simultaneously the order which gives unconscious impact upon the subject. Therefore, as far as the Other is situated within the self, the linguistic structure has always already existed in the form of the unconscious. The nature of the Other is structured like Moebius strip without distinctive borderline between the inside and the outside.

When the Other performs "other-ing" in the literary discourse, it creates the symbolic signifying chains. One can create a cut which breaks and sutures the gaps simultaneously by means of the wedges of the form of the suturing tangential point. In this context, literary criticism has been engaging with the potential ethics of Othering to construct an "ethical literary criticism."

After deconstruction and postmodernism which had been engaging the confrontation with the Other, literary theory and criticism have been encountering the "Ethical Turn," as the titles of books and journal special issues demonstrate: Peter Nicholas Baker's *Deconstruction and the Ethical Turn* (1995), Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack's edited collection *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory* (2001), and Bárbara Arizti and Silvia Martínez-Falquina's edited volume *On the Turn: The Ethics of Fiction in Contemporary Narrative in English* (2007), "Literature and Ethics" (*Poetics Today* 25.4, Winter 2004) and "The Ethical Turn in Canadian Literature and Criticism" (*University of Toronto Quarterly* 76.3, Summer 2007), to name a few. After the famous Paul de Man's downfall, a new argument of ethical reconsideration appeared in the forefront of the literary discourse against deconstructionist and postmodernist assumptions that human beings are the unconscious and social construct. Martha Nussbaum's *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (1986), and Wayne Booth's *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988) are initiating trailblazers, followed by a brilliant horde of ethical criticism by Frederick Crews, Mark Johnson, Richard Eldridge, Robert Louden, James Q. Wilson, Steven Mithen, E.O. Wilson, Geoffrey Galt Harpham, and Marshall W. Gregory.

Marshall W. Gregory, in his essay "Redefining Ethical Criticism," presents an insightful rendering of what's at stake in ethical criticism:

What's at stake in ethical criticism is the centrality of both ethics and literary art to human beings' lives as morally deliberative, socially embedded, imaginatively fertile, and persistently emotional creatures who are capable, even if frequently unwilling and clumsy about doing so, of submitting their moral deliberations, their social relations, their imaginative constructions, and their emotional impulses to rational inspection, intellectual analysis, and ethical evaluation.

In this context of Gregory's stakes of ethical criticism, one can encounter a Chinese version of ethical criticism, Prof. Nie Zhenzhao's *An Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* (2014), the result of the ten-year painstaking and indefatigable project of ethical literary criticism in the era of the "Ethical Turn." Biwu Shang's "Ethical Criticism and Literary Studies: A Book Review Article about Nie's Work" and GexinYang's "Ethical Turn in Literary Studies and the Revival of American Ethical Criticism" have been tracing Professor Nie's project development.

*An Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* (2014) by Professor Nie, the founder of ethical literary criticism in China, is an award-winning book selected by the National Humanities and Social Sciences of China, and offers a new approach to literature studies both in China and abroad. The book is composed of two parts and appendixes, including glossary and definition of ethical literary criticism, and attempts to illuminate the working hypotheses and principles of ethical literary criticism as well as to apply the methodological terms to the close reading of the western canonical texts. The first part provides basic theories of ethical literary criticism as well as the methodology for engaging these theories in tandem with practical close readings. The second part discusses how ethical literary criticism deals with classic and modern literature. The appendixes include the list of terms and their definitions.

In attempts to deconstruct/reconstruct the ethical literary criticism from the Chinese perspective, Prof. Nie redefines the important key terms such as ethical selection, natural selection, ethical taboo, ethical environment, ethical knot, ethical line, ethical identity, ethical confusion, Sphinx factor, human factor, animal factor, rational will, irrational will, natural will, and free will. The purpose of these keywords is to avoid the negative cluster of the "theoretical complex," "preordained theme complex," and "term complex" (4) which had been bogged down in the traditional discourse.

One can overview Nie's book and visualize his conceptual map as follows:

1. There have been two kinds of selections in human civilizations: natural selection and ethical selection.
2. On the basis of Darwin's theory of evolution, man achieved his form as the result of natural selection. Natural selection is hence the first selection undergone by

man. However, due to his lack of knowledge about ethics (good and evil), man did not differentiate himself from other animals.

3. Man got the human essence (human nature) from ethical selection, which he underwent after natural selection. Ethical selection is hence the second selection necessary for man to obtain knowledge of good and evil. It is only after ethical selection that man can differentiate himself from other animals. While natural selection made man into a formal being, it was ethical selection that made man into a being end owed with reason.

4. Natural selection is the result of evolution, whereas ethical selection is the result of teaching and education (or cultivation mainly coming from literature).

5. Teaching and education come mainly from literature not only in early human civilization but also in modern times. The basic function of literature is instruction and education to teach man to be a moral being.

6. Ethical literary criticism intends to study, analyze and interpret literature by foregrounding its instruction and education: they constitute the ethical core which ethical literary critics aim to reveal.

7. The value of literature is to cultivate man to be a moral being through the teaching stemming from moral examples.

8. The goal of ethical literary criticism is to interpret and comment literary works by analyzing literary characters, actions, events, narratives and descriptions on the basis of literature's ethical teaching, moral instruction and revelation as well as ethical warning. This goal is hence distinct from other methodologies that have hitherto informed literary criticism and theory — namely the American school of ethical criticism that appeared in the 1980s.

9. In this critical practice, terms such as human nature (many scholars have tended to confuse human nature and animality, when in fact animality is human instinct), animality, ethical identity, ethical selection, ethical situation and context, ethical taboos, reasonable consciousness, reasonable judgment, reasonable will, and free will (natural will) are the conceptual tools available to critics to interpret and critique literature.

One thing I noticed intriguing in this book is the discussion about natural selection and ethical section. Prof. Nie sees that the biggest problem for mankind is to make a selection between the identities of animals and human beings (32). Darwin's theory of natural selection and Friedrich Engels's theory of labor are effective tools for making a distinction between human beings and animals. Prof. Nie argues that "both Darwin and Engels failed to make a fundamental distinction between man and animals though explained where human beings have come from" (34), and proposes natural selection is only initiating the step to help human being find out who they are

in a biological sense, by articulating: “What truly differentiates human beings from animals is the second step, ethical selection” (35). Then he supports his argument by turning to the story of Adam and Eve from Bible. In short, his argument is that “The consequential ability acquired to tell good from evil from eating the forbidden fruit helps Adam and Eve to complete their ethical selection and become human beings not only in biological sense but also in ethical sense” (35). To Prof. Nie, the story of Adam and Eve represents the vital role of ethical selection: “The nature of ethical selection lies in man’s decision to be a human or an animal, and the precondition of this decision is the knowledge about man’s self or about what distinguishes human beings from animals” (36).

Prof. Nie further elaborates his proposal for ethical literary criticism by providing Sphinx factor, which represents “an exploration of the mystery of why a man is such a being” (36) and “is composed of two parts — human factor and animal factor” (38). Prof. Nie explains that “the various combinations and alternations of human factor and animal factor generate a variety of ethical events and ethical conflicts in literary works, thus conveying different moral implications” (38). Human factor equals to “ethical consciousness embodied by the human head,” while animal factor is human being’s “animal instinct, which is mainly controlled by their primitive desires” (39). In short, Sphinx Riddle represents the ethical selection in that it refers to the after-step of the natural selection for the human beings to ruminate over what they have done during the natural selection.

In the second part, Prof. Nie provides the practical close readings of the literary classics, such as *Hamlet*, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, and *The Old Man and The Sea*. In reading *Hamlet*, Nie uses “incest taboo” and “ethical identity” for revealing Hamlet’s reasoning concerning the postponement of revenge, winding up his discussion to redefine the famous Hamlet’s monologue “To be or not to be” in terms of not a question about life and death but about ethical dilemma. In reading *Oedipus Tyrannos*, Nie employs the concepts of “predestination” and “Oedipus complex,” and redefines the classic tragedy as “an ethical tragedy resulted from the conflict between ethical taboo and Oedipus’ intensifying ethical consciousness”(177). Prof. Nie’s reading of *The Old Man and The Sea* and employs the “Jungle Law” to analyze the character of the old man from the perspective of ethical chaos (214).

One of the interesting aspects of this book is that it provides the contemporary Chinese trends in the fields of theory and criticism. Since the opening up of China after the Cultural Revolution, China has been importing Western critical discourses, including comparative literature, psychoanalysis, Russian Formalism, structuralism, narratology, reception theory, postcolonialism, feminism, new historicism, cultural criticism, ecocriticism, and what not. Western critical theories, in particular, contribute

to the flourishing of literary studies in China, although they generated some basic problems during the process of importing, as Biwu Shang articulates succinctly: “First, scholars tend to move away from literature in the name of theory (33); second, scholars are too much engrossed in the so-called 理论自恋 (theoretical complex), 术语自恋 (thematic complex), and 命题自恋 (terminology complex) (44); third, there is an inadequacy of ethical engagement in all these theories (3), and fourth, there is a serious shortage of Chinese scholars’ engagement with literary criticism--as opposed to literary scholarship” (2).

To my understanding, what is happening in China in the field of critical theory as well as in an economic and cultural sea change anticipates the future anterior of the critical exchange in Korea as well as in Asia at large. I would like to conclude that Prof. Nie’s book, *An Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism: An Introduction* (2014) is the trailblazing piece for the future of Asian literary critical discourse.

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