

Fruitful collaborations

Ethical literary criticism in Chinese academe

Sometimes, the way things are done in another culture can cast interesting light on things one has been accustomed to taking for granted. Recent developments in China raise just this possibility. Political movements that shaped the nation have also shaped literary criticism. After its isolation from the outside world during the Cultural Revolution, the country reopened to the Western world – and, in tandem, to Western critical theories – in the 1970s and 80s. On the one hand, this importing of Western critical theories contributed to the overall progression and flourishing of literary studies in China; on the other, large-scale translating and applying of Western literary theories brought complications. For example, scholars either tended to move away from literary texts in the name of theory or became too engrossed in theoretical, thematic and terminological complexity. In short, Western literary theories were found wanting.

Later, another political influence came into play: in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Chinese government called for the construction of a harmonious society and a striving for the “Chinese Dream”. This drew attention to moral and ethical issues created by rapid industrialization, population movements to rapidly expanding urban areas, and resulting problems such as, for example, pollution. Such factors created the backdrop against which Zhenzhao Nie, a professor of English literature and comparative literature from Central China Normal University in the city of Wuhan, proposed a fresh critical approach: ethical literary criticism.

In Nie’s words, ethical literary criticism refers to

an approach that reads, analyzes and interprets literature from an ethical perspective. It takes literary texts as its very object of analysis, and aims to shed a new light on a variety of relationships depicted by literature such as man/woman and him/herself, humans and others, humans and nature, and humans and society, from an ethical perspective.

In Nie’s opinion, literature is fundamentally an art of ethics, and the primary function of literature is to offer readers moral enlightenment and moral lessons for the progression of human civilization. Specifically, ethical literary criticism embraces the following five aspects: (1) it investigates the moral values of writers and their historical backgrounds and the connections between writers’ own moral values and those ethical values projected in their creative output; (2) it investigates the relations between moral phenomena existing in a writer’s work and in reality, the moral inclinations, and the social and moral values of that work; (3) it examines the effects of that work’s moral values as exerted on readers and society, and readers’ evaluations of the moral thoughts of writers and their works; (4) it evaluates the influence of writers’ and their works’ moral inclinations on other contemporary writers and literature; and (5) it uncovers

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the moral features of writers and their works and aims to explore various issues concerning the relations between literature and society or literature and writer from an ethical perspective.

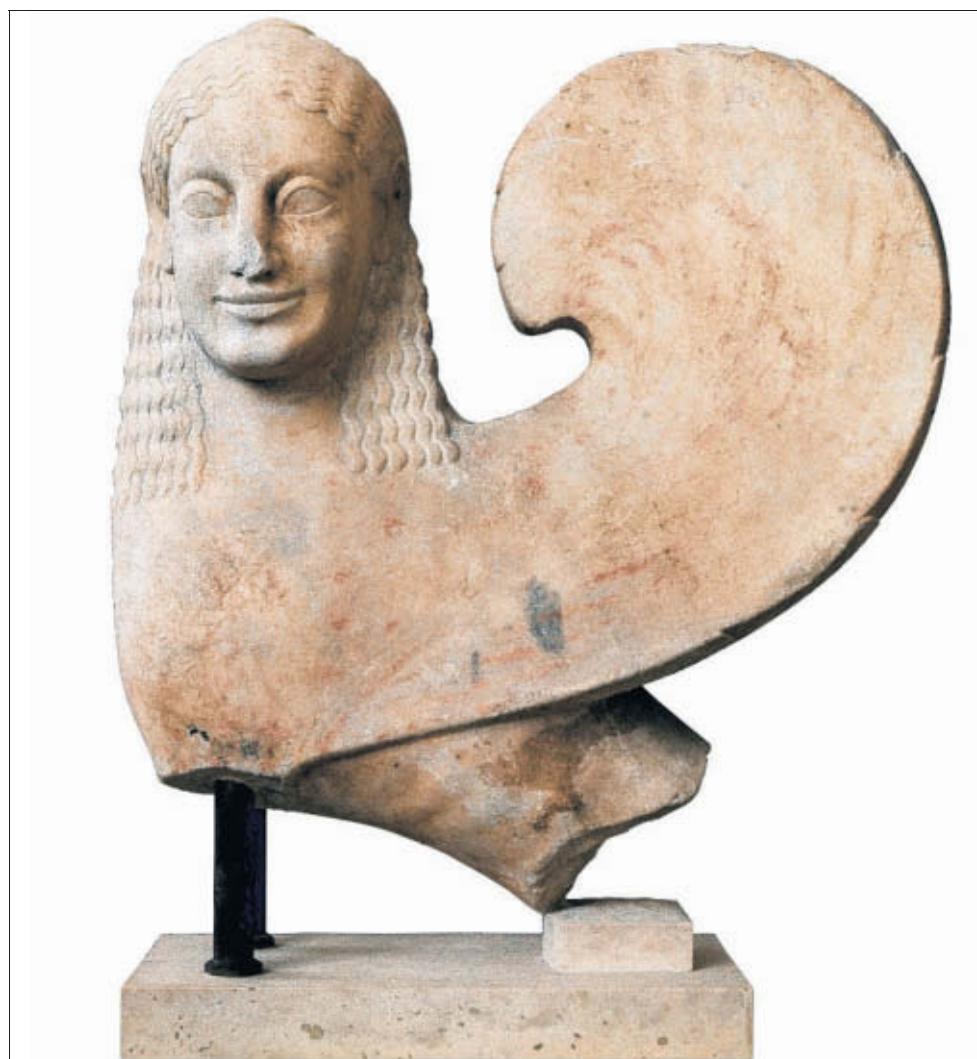
According to Professor Luo Lianggong of Central China Normal University, this theory is quite different from moral criticism and Western ethical criticism in many ways. One of those is its standpoint, not in the present but in historical materialism. Unlike moral criticism, ethical literary criticism does not simply evaluate a given work as good or bad from the vantage of today’s moral principles. Instead, it

cal criticism in 2004, it met the demands of Chinese critics who sought their own theoretical discourse. A theoretical turn had taken place in China, away from following the West, back towards China’s own traditions and theoretical productions. In his essay “The Rise of a Critical Theory: Introduction to ethical literary criticism” in *Foreign Literature Studies* (October 2014), Professor Shang Biwu of Shanghai Jiao Tong University explained that South Korea, Malaysia and other East Asian countries and regions had become more aware of the same issues and begun to turn to their own cultural traditions for theoretical inspiration and authority. This contributed to the development of ethical criticism. Further, ethical criticism met the demands of social

To a large extent, in the field of literature, this slogan was a timely response to problems provoked by industrialization, commercialization and materialism, which had contributed to the betrayal or abandonment of ethical concerns and moral values. Classical Chinese intellectuals cherished a spirit of humanism and morality that originated in Confucius, whose ideas are central to the Chinese moral tradition, according to Luo. So President Xi’s slogan could be regarded as a call for a return to traditional Chinese ethical values. In this context, Nie’s ethical literary criticism offered an intellectual response, not only to a political call but also to an era dominated by industrialization and commercialization. For nearly a decade, Nie and his colleagues have been striving to develop ethical literary criticism into a fully fledged discipline. Their efforts have yielded a comprehensive theoretical framework and a set of core concepts and arguments, among which are the ethical origin of literature, ethical selection and the Sphinx factor.

Regarding the origin of literature, a number of critical theories have emerged – the mimetic theory, the cathartic theory and so on. Ethical literary criticism argues that literature is produced out of the need of humans to express their views on ethics or the desire to share ethical experience. Specifically, ethical criticism claims that when primitive human beings identified the need for collaboration and co-operation, they learned to deal with others, which gradually brought them to recognize the importance of order. This recognition of collaboration, co-operation and order marked the initial form of ethical relations. In turn, human beings created scripts and written characters out of their desire to express those ethical relations and ethical values, so that they could document the incidents of their collaboration coupled with their own understanding. “In doing so”, Nie argues, “primitive human beings turned abstract life stories into written texts made of letters and words, which in turn served as references or guides for them as well as for their descendants to pursue a worthy life. The texts generated in this manner can be considered as the earliest form of literature.”

With reference to Darwin’s concept of biological selection, ethical literary criticism places much emphasis on its counterpart: ethical selection. Questions of why and how human beings have come into existence are always central to ethical criticism. Ethical literary critics argue that, in the history of human civilization, human beings have undergone a two-step selection procedure: natural selection and ethical selection. It is through natural selection, as Darwin disclosed, that mankind is able to differentiate itself from other species of animals. Later, Friedrich Engels, relying on Darwin’s theory, went a step further to argue that it is labour which differentiates human beings from other animals. Both Darwin and Engels succeed in accounting for where human beings have



Winged sphinx, 570–540 BC, Attica

emphasizes “historicism” – that is, the examination of the ethical values expressed or embodied in a given work with reference to the particular historical context in which it was written. The overarching goal of ethical literary criticism is to uncover ethical factors that bring literature into existence and the ethical elements that affect characters and events in literary works. It seeks to illuminate events, characters and their actions from an ethical perspective, and to make an ethical judgement about them accordingly.

When Professor Nie initially advanced ethi-

reshaping. President Xi Jinping and his administration advanced “The Chinese Dream”, described as “national rejuvenation, improvement of people’s livelihoods, prosperity, the making of a better society and a strengthened military”. More significantly, President Xi lays much emphasis on the role played by literature and the arts in realizing that dream. In his view, by conveying the values of truth, goodness and beauty, literature and the arts enable people to improve their moral sensibility, shoulder their due ethical responsibility, and pursue an ethical life.

come from in a biological sense. In other words, this differentiation occurs only in physical forms. But what truly distinguishes humans from other animals is the second selection: ethical selection, which helps to endow human beings with reason and ethical consciousness. This eventually turns them into ethical beings.

To illustrate the differences between biological and ethical selection, Nie uses the biblical story of Adam and Eve, who are physically different from other living creatures created by God. However, so far as knowledge is concerned, they remain basically the same as other animals, being naked with no sense of shame, taking fruit from trees when hungry, and drinking water from streams when thirsty. What really matters is their act of eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. They consequently acquire the knowledge of good and evil, which accounts for their belated sense of feeling ashamed of their nakedness and looking for leaves to cover their bodies. With reference to this biblical tale, Nie argues that

eating the forbidden fruit and the consequential ability acquired to tell good from evil helps Adam and Eve to complete their ethical selection and become human beings not only in a biological sense, but also in an ethical sense. In other words, the ability to tell good and evil sets up a criterion for distinguishing human beings from animals. The notion of good and evil emerges along with ethical consciousness and is used to evaluate human beings only. In this sense, good and evil constitute the basis of ethics.

It should be pointed out that human beings are products of both natural and ethical selection. Given that, human beings typically demonstrate their mixed animal and human nature. This can be better explained by using another concept of ethical literary criticism: the Sphinx factor. In Greek mythology, the Sphinx is depicted as a monster with a woman's head, a lion's body, an eagle's wings, and a snake's tail. Is she a human being or an animal? The human head seems to imply that the Sphinx is a human being, while the lion body and snake tail suggest an animal. The Sphinx seems to be very much troubled by the question concerning her identity, and that accounts for why she raises her notorious riddle to the citizens of Thebes, devouring those who fail to solve it. The riddle is: what walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs at night?

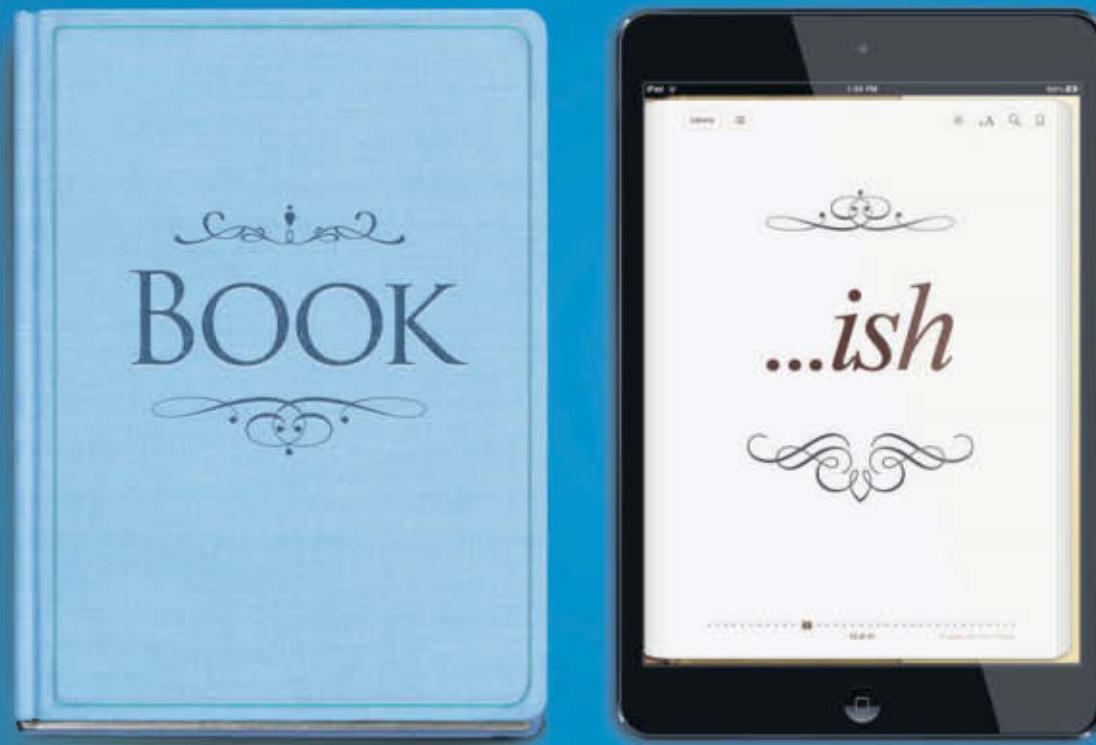
Approaching this ancient mythology from the perspective of ethical literary criticism, we see the essential differences between human beings and other animals in a new light. With regard to the features on her head, the Sphinx is certainly a human being – more precisely, she is a woman (though the Egyptian sphinx was more typically male); as for her lion body, she is not a human being but an animal; as for her snake-shaped tail, she can be seen as an emblem of animal lust. The Sphinx's combination of a human head and an animal body suggests, first of all, that the most important feature of a human image lies in its head, which stands for reason as a result of the evolutionary

process, and reason is a decisive factor that enables human beings to be human beings. Secondly, it indicates that human beings have evolved from animals yet still contain some features belonging to them. This combination of human and animal can thus be called the "Sphinx Factor". Normally, the human factor is superior to the animal factor, and hence the former can take control of the latter, which explains why humans can become persons with ethical consciousness. In the fictional worlds created by literature, character typically consists of both good and evil elements. The task of critics is to uncover the process of ethical selection experienced by characters through disclosing and interpreting the combination of and interplay of the Sphinx factor.

According to this line of thinking, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* can be interpreted not as a tragedy of human beings' unchangeable fates or of downfall caused by a fatal flaw. In ethical theory, it is a tale of ethical selection, revealing the difficulties and hardships that human beings encounter as a consequence of natural selection. Oedipus offers the correct answer to the Sphinx's riddle (the answer is man, which crawls on all fours in the morning of its life, walks on two legs in the afternoon of its life, and walks on three legs – that is, with the aid of a cane – in the night of its life), which can be seen as an ancient version of human beings' pursuit of the definition of humankind. In a sense, Oedipus' answer reveals that the human head is the determinant factor that makes the human being what it is. According to ethical

literary criticism, the human head stands for reason, which in turn is embodied in the ethical taboo that Oedipus breaks in committing patricide and having incestuous relations with his mother.

Besides ethical selection and the Sphinx factor, many other useful tools are offered by ethical literary criticism, such as ethical identity, the ethical knot, ethical consciousness, ethical taboos and ethical dilemmas. Zhenzhao Nie and his colleagues have adopted these tools to interpret a large number of literary works, from the East and West, classical, contemporary and modern. In the past few years, ethical literary criticism has become one of the most vibrant and productive critical theories in China. It has received increasing recognition from eminent scholars including Marjorie Perloff, Charles Bernstein, Ansgar Nünning, Vera Nünning, Geoff Hall, James Phelan, Peter Hajdu and others. Noteworthy is the establishment of the International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism, which has organized four international symposia on the theory. The most recent conference was held in Shanghai Jiao Tong University in December 2014, and was attended by nearly 300 scholars from over ten countries. The 5th International Symposium on Ethical Literary Criticism is planned for Seoul and Busan, South Korea, from October 1–7 of this year. Interest in ethical theory is growing, along with the exploration of mostly Anglo-American literature that continues to flourish in China and elsewhere in the Far East.



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