

Theoretical Innovation, Academic Contribution, and International Communication of Ethical Literary Criticism: An Interview with Su Hui

Li Mengyu & Su Hui

Abstract: Su Hui is a professor of Chinese Language and Literature and the director of the International Center for Ethical Literary Criticism at Central China Normal University. She is the chief editor of *Foreign Literature Studies* and has authored, edited or co-edited more than ten books. *The Development and Variations of Western Comic Aesthetics* (2005), *Black Humor and the Humor Tradition of American Novel* (2013), and *Ethical Literary Criticism of American Literature* (2020) are among her best-known works. Her extensive research ranges from European and American literature, Ethical Literary Criticism, the aesthetics of drama to comparative literature. In this interview, Prof. Su starts off by sharing her insights on theoretical innovation, academic contribution, and international communication of Ethical Literary Criticism. She then comments on the scholarly achievements made by Prof. Nie Zhenzhao and other Chinese and international scholars in this field. She believes that Ethical Literary Criticism poses bold questions to existing literary theories while significantly enriching them. With its unique theoretical and discourse systems, Ethical Literary Criticism provides a significant guidance for practice. Under the leadership of Prof. Nie Zhenzhao, Chinese scholars have been committed to the spread of Ethical Literary Criticism worldwide by forging international collaboration, publishing scholarly articles in international journals, founding international academic associations and organizing international conferences.

Keywords: Ethical Literary Criticism; theoretical innovation; academic contribution; international communication

Authors: **Li Mengyu** is Professor of Comparative Literature at the College of Liberal Arts, Journalism and Communication, Ocean University of China (Qingdao 266100, China). Her research interests include William Faulkner and Chinese literature, ethical literary criticism, and intercultural communication (Email:li-mengyu2016@163.com); **Su Hui** is Professor of the School of Chinese Language and Literature and the director of the International Center for Ethical Literary Criticism at Central China Normal University. Her research mainly focuses on European

and American literature, Ethical Literary Criticism, the aesthetics of drama, and comparative literature (Email: suhuichina@163.com).

标题：文学伦理学批评的理论创新、学术贡献与国际传播：苏晖访谈

内容摘要：苏晖是华中师范大学文学院教授、国际文学伦理学批评研究中心主任，《外国文学研究》杂志主编，主要从事欧美文学、文学伦理学批评、戏剧美学和比较文学研究。苏晖教授独撰、主编或合编了十余部著作，包括《西方喜剧美学的现代发展与变异》（2005）、《黑色幽默与美国小说的幽默传统》（2013）、《美国文学的伦理学批评》（2020）等。在本次采访中，她分享了对文学伦理学批评的理论创新、学术贡献和国际传播的见解，特别介绍了聂珍钊教授和其他中外学者在此领域的贡献。她认为，文学伦理学批评对现有文学理论提出了大胆质疑与补充，独创性地建构了自己的理论体系和话语体系，具有很强的实践指导性。在聂珍钊教授的引领下，中国学者致力于拓展国际合作，通过在国际期刊上发表学术论文、建立国际学术组织、举办国际会议，促进了文学伦理学批评的国际传播。

关键词：文学伦理学批评；理论创新；学术贡献；国际传播

作者简介：李萌羽，中国海洋大学文学与新闻传播学院教授，主要从事福克纳与中国文学、文学伦理学批评、跨文化传播研究。苏晖，华中师范大学文学院教授、国际文学伦理学批评研究中心主任，主要从事欧美文学、文学伦理学批评、戏剧美学和比较文学研究。本文为国家社科基金重大项目“文学伦理学批评的理论资源与对外传播研究”【项目批准号：21&ZD264】的阶段性成果。

Theoretical Innovation of Ethical Literary Criticism

Li Mengyu: Prof. Su, as the secretary general of the International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism (IAELC), you have witnessed the discipline's entire course of development and made important contributions. You must have a unique understanding of the field. Today I'd like to have an interview with you and we shall discuss a number of key issues in Ethical Literary Criticism. Thanks for being here and I very much look forward to hearing your insights.

Su Hui: It is my pleasure. Thanks for your invitation. Last year, I published an article, "Academic Influence and the Construction of International Discourse Power: The Development of Ethical Literary Criticism in the Past Fifteen Years" in *Foreign Literature Studies* (2019/5), in which I concluded that "over the past fifteen years, Ethical Literary Criticism has been successfully constructed with its originality, timeliness and national characteristics. It has put in place a theoretical and discourse

system with Chinese characteristics and style, demonstrating the effort made by the Chinese scholars to fulfill their historical mission and academic responsibility” (36).

Li Mengyu: What is the significance of Ethical Literary Criticism? What are the features that distinguish it from Western ethical criticism?

Su Hui: Ethical Literary Criticism is a paradigm of literary criticism established by Chinese scholars in 2004. Although it has adopted ideas from Western ethical criticism, it is based on theoretical innovations with typical Chinese features. We can say that it is a unique contribution of Chinese scholars. Ethical Literary Criticism has gone through a long journey before reaching full maturity and gaining wide recognition. In the past 16 years, it has been developed from a preliminary idea to a sound paradigm with well-established theoretical structure. The paradigm has been promoted and enriched with the application of its critical approaches, the expansion and consolidation of its theoretic principles, and the systematization of its critical practice. So far, it has become an original paradigm of theory and discourse, boasting numerous achievements in the application of its critical approaches and an ever-growing academic influence. Meanwhile, in an active response to the nation’s strategic call of “going global,” scholars of Ethical Literary Criticism are dedicated to promoting this new theory and obtaining worldwide academic influence by publishing papers in international journals, founding international academic associations and organizing international conferences. Many scholars around the world have joined us and they speak highly of what we have accomplished (34-35).

Li Mengyu: As a critical theory and method with Chinese characteristics, Ethical Literary Criticism has made brilliant achievements both in theoretical development and practice, functioning effectively as a new critical paradigm for the study of literature. How would you comment on the academic value and practical significance of Ethical Literary Criticism?

Su Hui: I think its value and significance lie in the following aspects:

First, it poses bold questions and significantly enriches existing literary theories. It offers new explanations on the origin, medium, purpose and functions of literature, and sheds light on the relationship between literary aesthetics and ethics and other aspects. It enables us to fully understand the complexity of literature and examine literature from a new perspective.

Secondly, Ethical Literary Criticism has created its own theoretical and discourse systems, but it is still open to new ideas. Though adhering to the principles of literary criticism, it draws on and even absorbs the research findings

of other disciplines such as ethics, philosophy, psychology, sociology and history. It also integrates theories and methods of modern and contemporary literary criticism, such as narratology, ecocriticism, and post-colonial criticism. Furthermore, it inherits the Chinese tradition of moral criticism and the Western tradition of ethics and ethical criticism. It has developed important theories of ethical expression, textual variation, ethical selection, Sphinx factor, three stages of human civilization, and discourse system, along with dozens of new terms.

Thirdly, Ethical Literary Criticism has the potential to be applied to the studies of ancient and modern Chinese and foreign literary works. Its application will encourage more innovative literary endeavors and insert great momentum to the world's academic research.

Academic Contribution of Chinese Scholars to Ethical Literary Criticism

Li Mengyu: To be more specific, how would you comment on Chinese scholars' contribution to the study of Ethical Literary Criticism, especially that of Prof. Nie Zhenzhao?

Su Hui: Ethical Literary Criticism was first proposed by Prof. Nie Zhenzhao at two academic conferences in 2004, in which he presented his two papers "Ethical Approach to Literary Studies: A New Perspective" and "On Cambridge Tradition of Criticism: With Leavis as an Example." Both were published in *Foreign Literature Studies* (the 5th and 6th issues of 2004 respectively). The former, for the first time in our country, clearly put forward the methodology, theoretical foundation, origin of thought, content, and value of Ethical Literary Criticism; the latter further expounded the significance of Ethical Literary Criticism by discussing the features of Leavis criticism and the Cambridge Tradition of Criticism. From then on, Prof. Nie has published numerous articles on the topic in core domestic and international journals such as *Social Sciences in China*, *Literary Review*, *Foreign Literature Studies*, *Foreign Literature*, and *Literature & Art Studies*. He published "Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory" (the 2nd issue of 2021), "Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection" (the 3rd issue of 2021), "Value Choice and the Theoretical Construction of Ethical Literary Criticism" in *Social Sciences in China* (the 10th issue of 2020) and "On the Theoretical Value and Teaching Function of Literature in Literary Review" (the 2nd issue of 2014). His articles published in *Foreign Literature Studies* include "On Ethical Literary Criticism and Moral Criticism" (the 2nd issue of 2006), "Ethical Literary Criticism: Its Fundamentals and Terms" (the 1st issue of 2010), "Ethical Literary Criticism: Ethical Choice and Sphinx Factor" (the 6th issue of 2011), "Ethical Literary

Criticism: Oral Literature and Brain Text” (the 6th issue of 2013), “Ethical Literary Criticism: On Fundamental Function and Core Value of Literature” (the 4th issue of 2014), “Ethical Literary Criticism: The Exposition and Textual Research on the Definition of Human Nature” (the 6th issue of 2015), “From Anthropocentrism to Human Subjectivity: A Possible Solution to Ecological Crises” (the 1st issue of 2020). According to the Web of Science, among the 16,235 A&HCI articles published worldwide from 2010 to 2014, Nie’s two articles, “Ethical Literary Criticism: Its Fundaments” and “Terms and Ethical Literary Criticism: Ethical Choice and Sphinx Factor,” were the 19th and 40th most cited. Clearly, his articles on the theory and discourse of Ethical Literary Criticism have exerted a great influence at home and abroad.

In the meantime, Prof. Nie has published many articles in the United States, Germany, South Korea, Malaysia, and other countries or regions. For instance, he published “Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism” in the renowned international journal *Arcadia* (the 1st issue of 2015), “Ethical Literary Criticism: A New Choice of Literary Criticism” in Taiwan’s journal *Philosophy and Culture* (the 4th issue of 2015), and “Ethical Literary Criticism: Basic Theory and Terminology” in the Korean journal *Diaspora and Cultural Criticism* (the 1st issue of 2015).

Prof. Nie’s book *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* was included in the National Philosophy and Social Science Achievement Library in 2013. The book details the first comprehensive and in-depth study on the topic. It is a guiding work, which has solved basic academic issues in the theoretical construction and practical application of Ethical Literary Criticism.

Prof. Nie has also presided over “Ethical Literary Criticism: Theoretical System Construction and the Practice of Criticism,” a major project of the National Social Science Fund. His research has further expanded the theoretical system of Ethical Literary Criticism and gradually systematized the practice of criticism. The project consists of five sub-projects, the first of which, “A Study on the Theory of Ethical Literary Criticism,” traces the origin and development of the subject and broadens its boundaries. Its theoretical system constitutes a research paradigm that integrates ethics, aesthetics, psychology, linguistics, history, culture, anthropology, biology, morphology, politics, and narratology.

The other four sub-projects are “Ethical Literary Criticism of American Literature,” “Ethical Literary Criticism of English Literature,” “Ethical Literary Criticism of Japanese Literature,” and “Ethical Literary Criticism of Chinese Literature.” The sub-projects adopt the approach and terminology of Ethical Literary Criticism in analyzing important literary trends, literary schools, classical writers

and their works in American, British, Japanese and Chinese literature. I worked on the “Ethical Literary Criticism of American Literature,” and edited a book with the same title. Other concluding achievements of the project include *A Study on the Theory of Ethical Literary Criticism* edited by Nie Zhenzhao and Wang Songlin, *Ethical Literary Criticism of English Literature* edited by Xu Bin, *Ethical Literary Criticism of Japanese Literature* edited by Li Exian, and *Ethical Literary Criticism of Chinese Literature* edited by Huang Hui.

Li Mengyu: Prof. Nie has made great contributions to the field and we all benefit from his marvelous achievements. Can you give us an overview of the innovative ideas that he has put forth?

Su Hui: Prof. Nie is good at theoretical innovation, and he has put forth many valuable, creative ideas of Ethical Literary Criticism.

On the origin of literature, Prof. Nie questions the view that literature originates from labor and puts forward the theory of ethical expression, arguing that literature finds its origin in human beings’ needs of ethical expression.

As for the medium of literature, Prof. Nie defines literature as an art of texts consisting of characters, challenging the conventional idea that literature is an art of languages.

Regarding the purpose of literature, Prof. Nie does not see literature as a kind of aesthetic ideology. Instead, he argues that teaching or instruction is the essential attribute and the primary function of literature. Aesthetic appreciation is secondary and serves the main purpose.

Besides, Prof. Nie proposes the brain text theory, asserting that each literary genre has its text. Brain text is the textual form used before writing symbols is created, which still exists after the birth of writing symbols. Written and electronic texts are the other two types. Brain text constitutes the medium of thought. The nature of a person’s brain text determines the way he/she thinks and acts, and most importantly determines one’s self identity.

Li Mengyu: Prof. Nie has invented many terms of Ethical Literary Criticism, such as ethical environment, ethical order, ethical identity, ethical selection, ethical dilemma, ethical taboo, ethical line, ethical conclusion, ethical consciousness, Sphinx factor, human factor, animal factor, rational will, free will, irrational will, moral emotion, the discourse system and brain text. These terms are frequently used by scholars in their studies of literary works.

Su Hui: Yes, his *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* has two appendices. The

first includes all the key terms of the subject, while the second defines 53 of them for the purpose of constructing a discourse system. The terminology has laid a solid foundation for the subject and has been widely used in the interpretation of ancient and modern literary works.

Li Mengyu: Recently Prof. Nie published “Value Choice and the Theoretical Construction of Ethical Literary Criticism” in *Social Sciences in China*. In this article, he underscored the significance of the rise of Ethical Literary Criticism in China: “At the beginning of the 21st century, ethical criticism as an ideological trend declined in the United States, but Ethical Literary Criticism as a critical theory has since developed rapidly in China. Over the past decade and more, Ethical Literary Criticism has constructed the theory of ethical selection on the basis of Darwin’s natural selection theory. It has also formed its own discourse system by putting forth new terms such as ethical choice, ethical identity, ethical environment, ethical context, animal factor, human factor, free will, rational will, ethical taboo and moral education. It has transformed from an ideological trend into a theory and method, which has been applied effectively to the analysis and study of literary texts.” The paragraph I just quoted summarizes the major achievements of Ethical Literary Criticism in China.

Su Hui: I think Prof. Nie’s new article further expounds the innovative value of Ethical Literary Criticism as a theory and method of literary criticism. It points out that Western theories, such as feminist criticism, ecological criticism, cultural criticism, and ethical criticism, which have great influence on Contemporary China, are not literary criticism, but, more accurately speaking, they are historical, political, social or cultural thoughts, for almost all of these thoughts have not constructed a systematic theoretical system and discourse system, nor have their own unique methodology. It’s a pity that we often confuse theory with trend of thought, instead of distinguishing them.

Prof. Nie points out that trend of thought is not a theory, but it can facilitate the generation of theory. Ethical Literary Criticism is founded on the basis of tradition of Chinese moral criticism and draws lessons from Western ethical criticism, which also promotes the innovation of Chinese literary theory. The theoretical construction of Ethical Literary Criticism in China reflects the efforts of Chinese scholars in putting forward original literary theories and methods, which is essential to expanding the influence of Chinese literary theory around the world.

Li Mengyu: Obviously, what we can see in this article is that prof. Nie places great

emphasizes on ethical selection, because he believes that “ethical selection is not only the core term, and it’s the basis for all the other terms” (77).

Su Hui: Yes, ethical selection is a key term that Nie put forth. As he stated in this article, “Ethical selection refers to the process in which human beings acquired human nature after they obtained human form through natural selection. It is the second selection that human beings experienced at a certain point in the history of their civilization. Human beings acquired human form and went through natural selection, or the first selection that was essentially biological. Natural selection only distinguished man from beast in form, but ethical selection made man different from beast in nature. Ethical selection is completely different from natural selection. Human nature is what had come out of the former while human form was what mattered in the latter. Through ethical selection, human beings formed their understanding of good and evil and cultivated their human nature, finally becoming people with morality. Therefore, ethical selection is about learning to be a person, and it is the process of becoming a moral person through education and learning” (73).

Thus the article has expounded Prof. Nie’s Ethical Literary Criticism theory thoroughly, with a further emphasis on the core position of ethical selection in the theoretical construction of Ethical Literary Criticism. He underscores that “ethical selection is a new stage of human moral civilization after natural selection was completed. It is a process that human beings must go through to obtain human morality by making specific ethical choices on their own. By ethical selection, human beings awake from ignorance and stay away from barbarism. Ethical selection is exclusive to humans. Natural selection concerns the form, determining what a person looks like. Ethical selection is about human nature and learning to be human. It is through ethical selection that we adopt moral standards and cultivate ourselves accordingly to be the kind of people we want to be. Ethical selection is made in accordance with certain social requirements and moral norms in a specific ethical environment and context according to the moral goal of a person, and the selection is carried out in the process of education and learning” (75).

Li Mengyu: Yes, according to Prof. Nie, a person under the influences of social norms and moral standards makes his or her ethical selection in a particular ethical environment, and it determines a person’s ethical identity and value orientation. Since the literary works record and comment on the ethical selections of the protagonists, in literary criticism, he stresses, “The focus of attention should be shifted to the analysis of specific ethical selection activities and the classification

of ethical selection activities should be combined with critical terms such as ethical identity and ethical environment” (77). This reminds me of Sartre’s existentialist philosophy, as Sartre believed that free choice determines a person’s nature and identity. However, I think Prof. Nie appeals for rational choice.

Su Hui: As you said, ethical selection, the core category of Ethical Literary Criticism, is related to Sartre’s notion of free choice, for Sartrean existentialism has always been as much concerned about moral issues in literature and social life as Ethical Literary Criticism is. But the two theories are essentially different. For Sartre, the self is conjectured as an absolutely solitary being, which results in his preference for the authenticity of the self, rather than ethical responsibility. From the perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism, however, the essence of ethical selection is the relationship between the self and others, which means not only ethical responsibility for each other, but also mutual understanding, sympathy, and forgiveness.

Li Mengyu: I have read another article of his, “From Anthropocentrism to Human Subjectivity: A Possible Solution to Ecological Crises.” Prof. Nie states that there has appeared a discursive turn from anthropocentrism to nature-centrism in the second half of the 20th century. He points out that too much blame has been put on anthropocentrism for the ecological crisis. For instance, in *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson reminds the readers that humankind should be responsible for the worsening ecological crises, but Prof. Nie thinks that human beings should clearly understand their subjective identities and fulfill their responsibilities as the subjects. By making ethical choices wisely, human beings can find solutions to the ecological crises.

Su Hui: Prof. Nie is quite open-minded. He believes that we should avoid the anthropocentric tendency while pointing out the subjective role that humans can play in nature.

Li Mengyu: You have made remarkable achievements in the study of Ethical Literary Criticism. Your application of the theories to drama analysis is especially noteworthy.

Su Hui: I have done some research on drama by employing the theory of Ethical Literary Criticism. I published “The Teaching Function of Ethical Choice in Shakespeare’s Comedy” in China’s Taiwan journal *Philosophy and Culture* (the 4th issue of 2015). The article discusses the teaching function of comedies by analyzing their ethical displacements, the characters’ ethical selections as well as those of the writers, as exemplified by Shakespearean comedies such as *The Twelfth Night*. The

article also expounds how the teaching function of comedies is achieved from the reader's perspective. In Shakespearean comedies such as *The Twelfth Night*, there is a classical plot of a woman disguised as a man to show the displacement of the character's ethical identities, thus setting up comedic conflicts. In such conflicts, the good and the evil usually make different ethical selections: the latter chases worthless things under the guise of ornate and sacred outfits, whereas the former pursues truth, kindness and beauty, wisely dealing with opponents and prudently disclosing the hideous features of tyrants and hypocrites with talents. The two types of characters reveal their respective teaching values through contrast. A comedy usually ends like this: the good defeats the evil. The vicious ones are doomed to be punished severely, which may not always be the case in real life, but such endings adequately demonstrate the ethical selections and moral ideas of the playwright. The teaching function of comedies is realized in laughter. Comedy readers will relate to the characters who share similar ethical preferences, thus generating "sudden glory" when appreciating the lofty words and deeds or mocking the immoral words and deeds of the characters, hence strengthening their moral consciousness.

Li Mengyu: We usually analyze Shakespearean comedies from the angles of themes, characters and comic effects. Your article discusses the characters' ethical identities, selections and preferences in light of Ethical Literary Criticism, which not only provides the readers with new insights, but also probes into deep moral revelations. Your recent article "From Brain Text to the Final Draft: On Ibsen's Ethical Choices in *Pillars of Society*" analyzes the "brain texts" in Ibsen's play, *Pillars of Society*. As we have discussed above, "brain text" is a very important term in Ethical Literary Criticism. How do you apply the concept to the study of Ibsen's play?

Su Hui: My article examines the four drafts of *Pillars of Society*, as his "brain texts." Through discussing the revisions in each draft, I investigate Ibsen's ethical selections by looking at how he "decodes" his brain texts into written texts. The dynamic interconnection between ethical selections and brain texts is also embodied in the characters' development, such as the inner conflict that Kasten Bernick experiences when he chooses between his rational irrational wills. My purpose is to sort out Ibsen's ethical concerns in each revision, including the relationship between individuals and the society, the concept of the public, and the status of women in gender relations.

Li Mengyu: You have published articles abroad. For instance, "Perspectives

of Ethical Identity in Ng's *Steer toward Rock* and Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*" was collected in *Comparative Literature and Culture* (Volume 17, Issue 5), published by Purdue University Press. The novels were written by two contemporary Chinese American women writers, Fae Myenne Ng and Gish Jen. The way you handled the comparative study of the novels from the ethical identity perspective is quite illuminating. Could you please share the main points in this article?

Su Hui: In the two novels, the protagonists make different decisions. In *Steer toward Rock*, Jack adopts an American identity after his displacement in China, while Mona, a second-generation Chinese American, in *Mona in the Promised Land*, selects a Jewish identity. Owing to their different situations, both protagonists experience challenges in the forming of their self identities, being seen as the "other" in American culture and society. Due to their different ethical environments, the two characters have taken on different ethical identities, reflecting the transformation of ethical identity consciousness in two generations of Chinese Americans and the change from dualism to diversity in their ideas on ethical identity.

Li Mengyu: Inspired by Prof. Nie, many Chinese scholars show great interests towards Ethical Literary Criticism, which has led to an upsurge of related research. What do you think of their contributions to the field?

Su Hui: Many Chinese scholars are devoted to Ethical Literary Criticism research, and they have published a large number of articles. For instance, Yang Jincai's "Realms of Ethical Literary Criticism in China: A Review of Nie Zhenzhao's Scholarship" and Shang Biwu's "'The Rise of a Critical Theory: Reading Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism'" are papers written in English and published in *Foreign Literature Studies*, which provide English references for foreign scholars. Other scholars have defined Ethical Literary Criticism from different perspectives in their writings, such as "Ethical Literary Criticism: Construction of Academic Discourse with Chinese Characteristics" by Liu Jianjun, "Environmental Ethics of Literature: The Significance of Ecocriticism" by Wang Ning, "My Opinion on Literary Ethics Criticism" by Qiao Guoqiang, "Ethical Literary Criticism and the Construction of Humanistic Spirit" by Li Dingqing, "Interpretation of the Ethical Literary Criticism from the Perspective of Pluralism" by Zhang Jie and Liu Zengmei, "Ethical Literary Criticism in China" by Zhu Zhenwu and Zhu Xiaoya, "Ethical Literary Criticism as a Cultural Poetics" by Wang Lixin and "Paradigm and Discourse: The Rise, and Influence of Ethical Literary Criticism in China" by Zhang Lianqiao.

We can tell from these publications that the scholars involved in Ethical Literary Criticism study are scattered across universities and research institutions in China, and they are of all age groups. It is fair to say that Ethical Literary Criticism has an extensive influence within the academia.

International Communication of Ethical Literary Criticism

Li Mengyu: In addition to its popularity with Chinese scholars, Ethical Literary Criticism has also been well received internationally. Why is it drawing attention from more and more international scholars?

Su Hui: After 17 years of development, Ethical Literary Criticism has constructed a new theoretical system and formed a unique discourse system. It aims at narrowing the gap between theory and practice, and fixing the moral absence in contemporary Chinese literary criticism. In the meantime, it also solves the problem of commonness in world literature. Therefore, it has laid a solid foundation for Chinese scholars to present their research to the world and find their voices on the international arena.

Li Mengyu: Could you please share with us the achievements of Chinese scholars in promoting Ethical Literary Criticism in the international academic circle?

Su Hui: Chinese scholars of Ethical Literary Criticism have made remarkable achievements in their cooperation and exchanges with scholars from other countries.

Disseminating Ethical Literary Criticism by publishing in international academic journals is an imperative step to take. Academic journals are important platforms for exhibiting scholarly findings, spreading innovative ideas, and facilitating academic exchanges and intercultural dialogues.

Publishing in international academic journals and organizing dialogues between Chinese and foreign scholars have turned out to be effective ways of promoting Ethical Literary Criticism beyond the borders of China. Some academic journals with international influence in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Estonia, South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia, China's Taiwan, China's Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland have set up special columns on Ethical Literary Criticism.

A variety of A&HCI and SCOPUS journals have delivered special issues on Ethical Literary Criticism along with articles by world-renowned scholars, attracting much attention from the international academic circle. *Arcadia* (the 1st of 2015), a prestigious international journal for intercultural and interdisciplinary studies, has offered a special issue, "Ethical Literary Criticism: East and West," in which

Chinese and German scholars including Nie Zhenzhao, Shang Biwu, Wolfgang G. Muller and Vera Nunning shared their views on literary ethics. It is also worth mentioning that *The Times Literary Supplement* published a commentary on Ethical Literary Criticism by William Baker, a distinguished professor of Northern Illinois University in the United States, in collaboration with the Chinese scholar Shang Biwu in 2015.

The well-established American journal, *Comparative Literature and Culture* did a special column in its 5th issue of 2015. *Fiction and Ethics in the Twenty-first Century* collected 13 articles by Chinese and international scholars, discussing Ethical Literary Criticism from different aspects. *The Philosophy and Culture* (the 4th issue of 2015, an A&HCI journal in Taiwan, China) ran a special issue on Ethical Literary Criticism with 8 articles by the Chinese scholars including Prof. Nie, Prof. Li Yinbo and myself, along with some international scholars from Malaysia and South Korea.

Foreign Literature Studies (included in SCOPUS and, from 2005 to 2016, also included in A&HCI), recently recognized as “the most influential Chinese journal of foreign literature studies in 2020,” has run nearly 40 columns on Ethical Literary Criticism since 2005. In its 5th issue of 2017, it launched a column, “Dialogue between Chinese and Foreign Scholars: Studies on Ethical Literary Criticism.”

Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature (included in A&HCI), a journal in Hong Kong, China, has published a large number of articles on literary ethics by Chinese and international scholars. In its 1st and 2nd issues of 2016, *Forum for World Literature Studies* (a journal included in SCOPUS) ran the special column “Transnational Ethical Literary Criticism Studies” consecutively, which published 12 articles by Chinese scholars and scholars from the United States, Hungary, Germany, Italy, Australia, South Korea, and Japan. The fact that Chinese and international scholars engage themselves in academic exchange, discussion, dialogue and debate on Ethical Literary Criticism via top-notch international journals shows its fast-growing influence in the world.

In addition to those mentioned above, journals from other countries have also introduced Ethical Literary Criticism to their readers, such as *Border Crossing*, *The Journal of Modern Chinese Literature, Diaspora and Cultural Criticism*, and *The Journal of English Language and Literature* in South Korea, *The Journal of Science and Education* in Vietnam, *Kyudai Nichibun* in Japan, *Contemporary China Studies* in Malaysia, and *Interlitteraria* in Estonia. So many international scholars have demonstrated in their articles not only their ample knowledge and deep understanding of the theory and discourse system of China’s Ethical Literary Criticism, but also

their constructive reflections and new approaches in practice.

Li Mengyu: The International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism (IAELC) is a very important international organization. What role has it played in promoting Ethical Literary Criticism worldwide?

Su Hui: IAELC was formally established during the Second International Conference on Ethical Literary Criticism in December 2012. Its founding indicates that for the first time, an academic association sponsored by Chinese scholars has taken on a leading role in facilitating continuous dialogues and exchanges among scholars from around the world on the theory and practice of a new literary criticism originating in China. The purpose of this association is to make theoretical innovations in Ethical Literary Criticism, improve on the subject's methodology and further raise the awareness of the importance of literary writing, literary criticism and cultural values.

IAELC has been recognized and accepted by the international academic community. As *The Times Literary Supplement* pointed out in its commentary, "The establishment of IAELC is a major event that is worth mentioning" (William Baker and Biwu Shang 15).

Prof. Wu Yuanmai, honorary member of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, served as president of IAELC's first executive committee. The current committee, established on Aug. 9, 2017, is headed by Prof. Claude Rawson of Yale University, fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Prof. Nie Zhenzhao of Zhejiang University was elected executive vice president. Prof. Knut Brynhildsvoll of the University of Oslo (Norway), Prof. Youngmin Kim of Dongguk University (Korea), Prof. Jüri Talvet of the University of Tartu (Estonia), Prof. Wolfgang G. Müller of the University of Jena (Germany) and Prof. Igor Shaytanov of Russian State University for the Humanities (Russia) were elected vice presidents. Prof. Su Hui of Central China Normal University (China) is in the capacity of secretary general. Prof. Wang Songlin of Ningbo University (China), Prof. Shang Biwu of Shanghai Jiao Tong University (China), Prof. Lim DaeGeun of Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (Korea), Prof. Fan PikWah of the University of Malaya (Malaysia) and Prof. Peter Hajdu of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (Hungary) are acting as deputy secretary generals. The 45 members of the executive committee are eminent scholars from countries and regions including China's mainland, China's Hong Kong, China's Taiwan, the US, Canada, the UK, Germany, Austria, Italy, Spain, Denmark, Poland, Slovenia, Korea, Japan and South Africa.

So far, IAELC has held nine annual conferences while making steady

progress in its internationalization. The annual conferences were held in Central China Normal University (2005), China Three Gorges University (2012), Ningbo University (2013), Shanghai Jiao Tong University (2014), Dongguk University (2015), Tartu University (2016), Queen Mary University of London (2017), Kyushu University of Japan (2018) and Zhejiang University (2019). It is worth noting that the 5th through 8th conferences were held abroad and attracted a large number of scholars from China and dozens of other countries.

We appreciate the hard work of Prof. Youngmin Kim, Prof. Jüri Talvet, Prof. Galin Tihanov of Queen Mary University of London and Prof. Namigata Tsuyoshi of Kyushu University of Japan in preparing and organizing these meetings. Their efforts are highly meaningful to the spread of Ethical Literary Criticism worldwide and to the exchanges of international scholars in this field. All this signifies an ever-growing influence of Ethical Literary Criticism at home and abroad.

Li Mengyu: As the president of the International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism, Claude Rawson once stated in an interview, “I have the highest expectations of the success of Ethical Literary Criticism in restoring to literary study a sense of its intellectual seriousness. Nie Zhenzhao’s personal activism as a promoter of international conferences and professional journals is the surest guarantor of this promise” (391). Prof. Nie and many other scholars have made great efforts in spreading Ethical Literary Criticism internationally.

Su Hui: Yes, Prof. Nie and a large number of scholars have been contributing to this endeavor. We see the assessment of the international academic community as the touchstone for whether China’s academic findings are recognized and accepted. An important part of this assessment is constituted by what experts in the field say. Comments of experts with a great influence from different countries and regions are especially important, as they indicate the potential of an academic theory to be accepted across the board. In its course of going global, Ethical Literary Criticism has been positively spoken of by a multitude of renowned scholars from many countries and regions.

As the president of IAELC, Prof. Claude Rawson always has on his mind the development of the association. He seeks time out of his busy schedule to be part of the annual meetings. In rare cases when he was unable to participate, he would send along letters of warm congratulations, in which he fully recognized and sang high praise for the achievements in Ethical Literary Criticism. In the opening ceremony of the 8th annual meeting, for example, he addressed Prof. Nie as “the founder of IAELC and the conceptual father of Ethical Literary Criticism,” and stressed the

significance of the achievements and contributions of Prof. Nie's team.

Prof. Marjorie Perloff of Stanford University, fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, once said, "ethical and moral values are among the most important values of literature. In light of this, Ethical Literary Criticism proposed by Chinese scholars is highly meaningful, for it captures the essence of literature in addition to reviving the methodology of literary criticism. In other words, Ethical Literary Criticism helps readers rediscover and uncover the ethical values of literature, and awakens its moral responsibilities" (Deng Younv 1).

Prof. Ansgar Nünning of the University of Giessen in Germany, fellow of the Academy of Europe, spoke highly of Ethical Literary Criticism: "Ethical criticism has been on a waning tide in the West since the 1990s, while ethical literary criticism, with a different conceptual system, is now on a surprising rise in China. Ethical literary criticism has more or less revived an ethical approach to literature, which is perhaps one of the most recent contributions to the studies of literature done by Chinese scholars" (Lin Yuzhen 165).

The famous poet and expert of poetic theory Hank Lazer, professor of English at the University of Alabama, referred to Prof. Nie as the "leading figure in Ethical Literary Criticism," believing that "the achievements made in Ethical Literary Criticism have drawn international attention and wide recognition." He wrote in his article, "Ethical criticism is important for at least two reasons: (1) it is a Chinese theory of literary criticism, and thus it alters, challenges, and enlivens from a very particular cultural and historical perspective the range of international conversations and writings about literature and the value of literary study at a time, perhaps, when the practicality of literary study is being treated by the public and by university planners and administrators somewhat skeptically and (2) it inevitably returns us to a fundamental set of questions (often bypassed as our critical considerations become more 'sophisticated' and specialized and professionalized?) about why we read, and about the value of studying literature and reading literature, particularly so-called difficult literature intensely and carefully" (Lazer 4).

In the 1st UCI Critical Theory Conference in 2015, which centered around the question "Is theory critical?", Prof. Georges Van Den Abbeele of the University of California, Irvine, fellow of the European Academy of Sciences, commented on the methodology of Ethical Literary Criticism proposed and continuously improved by Prof. Nie in recent years. According to Abbeele, "At present when Western literary theories rely too much on political discourse, Ethical Literary Criticism drives literary criticism back to its functions of moral education and aesthetics, forming an interactive and mutually supplementary relationship with the mainstream discourse

for criticism in the West. As a result, Ethical Literary Criticism will be accepted and used by an increasing number of Western scholars, and its systems will be further improved with the joint effort of Chinese and Western scholars” (Xia Yanhua and Abbeele 172).

The famous Slovenian scholar Tomo Virk, professor of comparative literature and literary theory at the University of Ljubljana, holds that a large part of contemporary literary criticism has basically broken away from close reading, hermeneutics and the anthropologic perspective. In Ethical Literary Criticism, the theory of Prof. Nie is the most systematic, complete and human-oriented method to date. It is not only a new theory, but also a new paradigm for literary research. In December 2018, Virk published a new book, *The Ethical Turn in Literary Research*, written in Slovenian. He dedicated the third chapter to Ethical Literary Criticism, naming it “Nie Zhenzhao and Ethical Literary Criticism” (Virk 299).

Prof. Shin Inseop of Konkuk University said, “Ethical Literary Criticism, as a new approach proposed by Chinese scholars, is rooted in the unique context of Chinese literary criticism and resolves the issues in contemporary Chinese literary research. At the same time, it also looks at the development and progress of the world literature. This fully demonstrates the Chinese scholars’ sense of mission and academic responsibility. It not only constitutes a unique branch of literary criticism, but also generates a trend of thought in the society. Looking back on its development, I can’t help feeling excited for Eastern scholars. By studying Ethical Literary Criticism, the Eastern scholarship, which had been weak in contemporary literary criticism and theory, has regained its confidence and assured its place in this area which used to be dominated by the West” (Shen Yinxie 197).

Prof. Youngmin Kim of Dongguk University, vice president of IAELC believes that Ethical Literary Criticism “offers a new approach to literature studies both in China and abroad” (Kim 397), and that Nie’s *An Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* is “the trailblazing piece for the future of Asian literary critical discourse” (Kim 400).

The foreign experts I quoted have made fair and objective comments on the theory created by Chinese scholars. It is clear that the pursuit of truth in academic research is a shared goal for scholars around the world. We can see that China’s theories are going out to the world and heading towards prosperity.

What’s more, the high-level Forum on Ethical Literary Criticism has been held five times, respectively in Jinan University (2016), Korea University (2017 and 2018, South Korea), Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (2019) and the University of St. Thomas (2019, Philippines). In the context of world literature, the

forums have expanded the theory and practice of Ethical Literary Criticism from different perspectives, and highlighted the distinct consciousness of problems and the spirit of exploration.

The 24th World Congress of Philosophy was held at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on August 13-20, 2018. This was the first time for the world's largest philosophical conference with more than 100 years of history to be held in China. The conference arranged a symposium with the theme of "Ethical Philosophy of Nie Zhenzhao," in which nearly 20 keynote speeches were delivered. Participants discussed the philosophical basis, discourse system, areas of application and international influence of Ethical Literary Criticism. This conference had a massive turnout, attracting scholars from China, the United States, Britain, France, Italy, Hungary, Japan, South Korea and other countries. According to *People's Daily Overseas Edition*, "China's Ethical Literary Criticism has attracted much attention at the 24th World Congress of Philosophy. Brilliant speeches were delivered, proving that Ethical Literary Criticism has become a literary theory with academic cohesion.¹ This fully reflects China's discourse power in humanities."

In addition, the 21st and 22nd congresses of the International Comparative Literature Association, held at the University of Vienna and the University of Macau, hosted a special session on Ethical Literary Criticism. At the 21st annual conference, which focused on the theme of "The Teaching Function of Literature and Its Aesthetic: Ethical Literary Criticism," scholars from China, the United States, the United Kingdom, Austria, South Korea, and Norway delivered insightful speeches, speaking to the charm of the academic discourse of Ethical Literary Criticism. The 22nd annual conference set up two sub-forums: "Ethical Literary Criticism and Interdisciplinary Studies and across the Genre" and "Ethical Selection and Literary Classics Re-Reading." More than 30 scholars from well-known universities at home and abroad shared illuminating ideas in their presentations. This illustrates the important role that the discourse system of Ethical Literary Criticism constructed by Chinese scholars plays in the study of comparative literature and the subject's increasing impact on the international arena of comparative literature.

What happened at these international conferences clearly tells us that China's Ethical Literary Criticism has been recognized not only in literature but also in philosophy. It is another convincing proof that this new theory of literary criticism has successfully reached out to the international community of scholars.

1 "The World Philosophy Congress was Held in Beijing, Literary Ethical Criticism Has Become the Subject of Growing Concern", *People's Daily Overseas Edition*, August 21, 2018, 9:36, m.haiwainet.cn/middle/3543190/2018/0821/content_31379582_1.html

Li Mengyu: Do you have any suggestions for the future development of Ethical Literary Criticism?

Su Hui: In order to further promote the development of its theory and practice, it is necessary to consider and explore the following issues:

First, we should figure out a new research direction among diverse theories and find a way to integrate new theoretical resources. By compiling and sorting ethical-moral criticism documents in Chinese and foreign literature in a systematic manner, we can comb through the history of ethical-moral criticism, especially its development since the 1980s when various concepts of ethics emerged with the revival of ethical criticism. Also, we should carry on with the dialogue and debate between Chinese and international scholars, and conduct interdisciplinary studies that cover literary ethical criticism and philosophy, aesthetics, ethics, sociology, psychology and natural sciences, in order to promote the development of Ethical Literary Criticism in greater depth.

Second, while practicing Ethical Literary Criticism in textual criticism, we should vigorously develop the Eastern literary ethics, including a probe into Chinese literature. In addition to the ethical connotation in texts, we should also emphasize in our analysis texts that reflect specific times, ethnic groups and national ethical concepts. We should try our best to construct discourse systems of ethical criticism for different genres, such as poetry, novel, and drama. Furthermore, we should conduct in-depth study of the ethical connotations conveyed by various artistic devices in the texts.

Third, we should sort out the development of Ethical Literary Criticism, exploring its critical paradigms, figuring out viable strategies for its internationalization, and maximizing its contribution to contemporary literary criticism and academic research. Meanwhile, we should probe into various possibilities of integrating Ethical Literary Criticism into the teaching of literature, such as compiling teaching and reading materials, providing corresponding teaching and learning guides, and offering training opportunities (“General Preface” 43).

Li Mengyu: Over the past few years, Ethical Literary Criticism has seen new development in China. For example, criticism of literary ethics in a science-based manner has contributed to literary theory and criticism as a whole. Much progress has been made in interdisciplinary studies. For example, studies on the generation of language and brain texts. What do you think of the prospects of Ethical Literary Criticism in China’s interdisciplinary research?

Su Hui: Indeed, Prof. Nie has published a number of articles in recent years. In addition to the aforementioned “Value Choice and the Theoretical Construction of Ethical Literary Criticism,” he also wrote “On Brain Texts and the Generation of Language,” “On the Ethical Mechanism in the Generation of Language” and “On Human Cognition and Awareness.” In his articles and conference presentations, Prof. Nie emphasized the necessity of reshaping fundamental theories of literature and put forward specific ideas for research. He believes that this reshaping is, in essence, the innovation of literary theories. This necessity is driven by the fact that current literary theories are no longer able to adapt to the changing landscape of literature. Nor are they able to answer the call of integrating with science and technology. In reshaping the fundamental theories of literature, we need to explore the possibilities of literary research with an open and innovative mind. We can also pursue the path of interdisciplinary research by drawing strengths from the theories and methodologies of other disciplines. As we reshape and restructure literary theories, we must adopt science-based ideas, theories and methods. Main topics of research are as follows:

1. New cognitive research in literature. It studies human cognition with computer simulation technology. It innovates philosophical cognition theory based on computer technology and lays a scientific and philosophical foundation for literary theory.

2. Research on the theory of human nature. Ethics has yet to fully unravel the concept of human nature, which significantly affects literature research based on human beings. This research will focus on three core concepts: human beings, human instincts and human nature. Human beings, as subjects, possess human instincts, which are essentially animalistic, and human nature. Animalistic instincts and human nature, combined in different proportions, make up human morality, while the binary opposition of the two eliminates confusion about the definition of human nature.

3. Theory on the generation of literary language. The study of literary theory cannot exclude the study of language, but current definitions of language, words and texts, which lay the foundation of language studies, remain unclear. The underlying logic of the generation of language is that language is not a pre-existing entity. Instead it is generated real time as a form of sound and a conversion of brain texts into sounds.

4. Research on the neural mechanism of literary theory and brain texts. Literary texts are the objects of literary theory research. Brain texts play a dominating role in the relationships among texts, language, cognition, mindset, behavior and morality.

They either transform into written and electronic texts or generate language. The neural mechanism for the formation of brain texts and principles of the brain texts' transformation into written and electronic texts or language will be emphasized in this research. Elon Musk recently announced the discovery of brain-computer interfaces, providing inspiration for the research on the neural mechanism of literary theory.

Li Mengyu: Your suggestions are very enlightening. On one hand, there is a great necessity to integrate Ethical Literary Criticism with other theories. Just as the Japanese scholar Tsuoshi Namigata argued, "Ethical Literary Criticism needs to be further discussed with current theories of literary criticism, postcolonial criticism, gender criticism, cultural studies, etc." (411). On the other hand, Eastern literary ethics needs further research. As Chinese scholars, it is our duty to explore our cultural and literary resources. In this regard, Prof. Nie has set a good example. In his recent article "Value Choice and the Theoretical Construction of Ethical Literary Criticism," published in *Social Sciences in China*, Nie not only analyzes many works of world literature, but also explores the richness of Chinese cultural, historical, and literary texts, including *Oracle Inscription of Shang Dynasty*, *Poetry*, *Chu ci*, Confucian classics, and many famous Chinese poems.

Su Hui: Yes, we need to have an international vision in this global era, but as Chinese scholars, we should also fully explore our own cultural and literary resources.

Li Mengyu: Prof. Su, many thanks for your brilliant insights. I am sure the readers will benefit a lot from what you've shared.

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