

A Conceptual Map of Ethical Literary Criticism: An Interview with Nie Zhenzhao

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Abstract Nie Zhenzhao is professor of English literature and comparative literature at Central China Normal University, and editor of *Foreign Literature Studies*. Currently, he serves as Vice-President of such organizations as China National Foreign Literature Association, the International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism (IAELC), and Chinese/American Association for Poetry and Poetics (CAAP). As the founder of ethical literary criticism in China, Nie is mainly engaged in studies of literary theory, and ethical literary criticism in particular. His publications include *Ethical Literary Criticism and Others: An Anthology* and *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* among many others. In this interview, Nie elaborates the theoretical frameworks and core concepts of his ethical literary criticism, among which are natural selection and ethical selection. Natural selection, according to Nie, is a biological selection that differentiates human beings from other animals in their physical forms; while ethical selection helps human beings to be fundamentally different from other animals in the sense that they have acquired ethical consciousness. To better illustrate this point, Nie uses the Greek Sphinx and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as examples.

Key words Nie Zhenzhao; ethical literary criticism; natural selection; ethical selection; ethical natural selection; Sphinx factor

Interviewer Charles Ross, a former Fulbright-Hays Scholar in Italy, and a founding editor of *Forum for World Literature Studies*, is Professor of English and Director of the Comparative Literature Program at Purdue University. His books include the first English translation of Matteo Maria Boiardo's Italian romance *Orlando Innamorato* (1989), *The Custom of the Castle from Malory to Macbeth* (1997), *Elizabethan Literature and the Law of Fraudulent Conveyance: Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare* (2003), a verse translation of L. Paninius Statius's Latin

Thebaid (2004), and several edited collections of essays, including *Shakespeare in Hollywood, Asia, and Cyberspace* (2009).

Ross: In “Art of Poetry” Horace says the purpose of literature is to teach and delight, to which Sir Philip Sidney added that literature should also move readers to virtuous action. Is that how you define ethical literary criticism?

Nie: Ethical literary criticism is a theory and methodology for reading, interpreting, understanding, analyzing and evaluating literature from an ethical standpoint. It argues that literature is a historically contingent presentation of ethics and morality and that reading literature helps human beings to reap moral enlightenment and thus make better ethical choices. The mission of ethical literary criticism is to uncover the ethical value of literature.

Ross: Many people, including Nietzsche, believe literature retains its origins in the written contracts (records of debts) for which writing was first used, as in ancient Babylon. In what way does Chinese literature as a written form remind us of these beginnings?

Nie: Ethical literary criticism holds that human beings invented written language out of their ethical needs, and then used the written characters to document their life stories and their understandings of ethics. In this way texts were formed and literature came into being. Ancient literature such as Greek epics and Chinese oracles can be seen as the earliest literary texts which record human ethical life and the development of moral norms. With the establishment of human political institutions such as democratic government and the modernization of various social systems, literature, now often called “artistic expression of society”, continues to express social systems, moral norms, and legal rules. As a matter of fact, the ethical nature and teaching function of literature can be traced to its earliest beginnings.

Ross: I take it that because of your focus on the origins of literature, you view ethic and morality as interchangeable.

Nie: To some scholars, the terms of ethic and morality are considered interchangeable. However, to me, they are different. In my opinion, ethic is a general term encompassing both moral terms and immoral terms, while morality is a specific term excluding immoral terms. That said, ethic is a neutral word which can be interchangeable with morality only in some particular context. For example, we may use the term of ethical value or moral value to commend a person’s action when he saves the boy from drowning at the risk of his life, but we can’t use moral action to discommend someone who refuses to save the boy from drowning.

Therefore, the moral teaching function of literature is not just determined

by its moral value, yet, in a broad sense, by its ethical values. To me, literature is essentially a guidebook for the moral teaching of humanity. Its ethical nature and teaching function are derived from its earliest existence and original aims, which can be aptly demonstrated by a huge number of literary works. For instance, Homer's poetry conveys to the reader the ethics of living; Hesiod's "Theogony" helps the reader to know the world; Greek tragedy teaches the reader to abide by the ethical order and moral codes. The process of reading is closely related to the process of aesthetic appreciation, which serves as an important means of moral enlightenment. In short, moral teaching is the fundamental function of literature.

Ross: *In what way is literature a record of lived experience, a sort of guidebook to living based on the lessons of the past?*

Nie: In the beginning of human civilization, the basic problem for human beings to solve is how to tell human beings from the rest of the animals. In contemporary society, it is possible for us to live a harmonious life as we know what we should do and how we should practice the tenets of ethics or morality. However, it was rather difficult for primitive human beings, since they were just in the process of acquiring this knowledge from their life experience.

It was a very difficult and long process of exploration. At first, they related their own experience of morality in the form stories to their children, to their relatives of the tribe, and then to a wider society through the circulation of oral tales. In this way, people could learn how to live well by taking the experience of their forefathers and people of other tribes. In fact, what they told forms the early literature, which is now called *oral literature*. However, I should say that *oral literature* is an incorrect term, since it was narrated through memory. It can be better addressed as *brain text*. In other words, oral literature is not literature per se but the brain text related via oral narratives. Anyhow, just like written texts, oral literature aims to teach readers how to live a good and happy life, which is the earliest form of ethics. In this sense, literature is the imaginative presentation of ethics, which serves as a guidebook for living.

Ross: *That raises the question of how moral functions may change over time, as conditions change.*

Nie: In modern times, we abide by the existing social order which has been generally formulated on the basis of ethics. Literature, no matter it is in the written form or oral form, embodies social institutions, law and rules derived from ethics. Moral teaching function of literature remains unchanged despite the changes of conditions.

Ross: *Then there is a difference between morality and ethics.*

Nie: Unlike moral criticism, ethical literary criticism does not simply evaluate a given literary work as good or bad on the basis of today's moral principles. Instead, it emphasizes "historicism," that is, the examination of the ethical values in a given work with reference to a particular historical context or a period of time in which the text under discussion is written. The overarching aim 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 issues concerning the events, the characters and their actions from an ethical perspective, and to make an ethical evaluation accordingly. In this way, we could use literature to teach people and tell them how to learn with the help of literary criticism.

Though some traditional ethical critics have attempted to unpack ethical elements in literature, they have usually analyzed literature from their personal ethical values and moral principles or, at best, the moral principles of their contemporaries, which not only makes their critique unreliable but also causes a much more serious problem by inverting ends and means. Theoretically, their point of departure should have been to analyze literature from an ethical perspective, or to put it differently, the ethical value of the literary text should have been the target of their research, and their moral principles should have merely served as toolkits in that process. However, in practice, the analysis of literary texts ceases to be their target of investigation and their personal moral principles takes priority. By contrast, ethical literary criticism represents a particularly strong call for objectivity and historicism. Grounding itself in specific historical contexts or ethical environments, ethical literary criticism sees the contemporary value of literature as the rediscovery of its historical value.

Ross: *Yet literature is more than just a list of rules or suggestions. It is not a code, but a shaped presentation of ideas in attractive form.*

Nie: Here is a difference between ethical literary criticism and aesthetic criticism. The former takes literature as the tool for teaching people to be rational but the latter takes literature as the tool for getting aesthetic enjoyment of sensual pleasure. In short, ethical literary criticism sees literature significant in educating readers, while aesthetic criticism sees literature significant in bringing sensual pleasure.

However, ethical literary criticism does not deny the value of aesthetic criticism but takes it as one of the important means of understanding literature for ethical aims. Aesthetic criticism helps us to read and enjoy literature for receiving moral enlightenment. In other words, without any moral purpose, the aesthetics of literature would cease to exist. In ethical literary criticism, the primary purpose

of literature is not to provide entertainment but to offer moral examples for human beings to follow by way of literary enjoyment, to enrich their material and spiritual life with moral guidance, and to achieve their self-perfection with moral experience. In brief, only by working together with morality can the aesthetic value of literature be fully realized.

Ross: *Why not just have a list of rules handed down from generation to generation. Or is there such a group of basic ideas, a form of tao? What is the role of literature?*

Nie: Literature teaches by giving illustrations of ethical choices. It is a pedagogic tool for human beings to learn how to live responsibly. In fact, we cannot find other tools as effective as literature. Possibly, there might someone arguing against this by saying “we could learn from our parents, but not from literature.” Indeed we can learn from our parents and other members of our family, but how do they teach us? I think they mainly teach us by adopting literature.

In our childhood, we acquaint with literature from our parents as they sing cradlesongs and tell fairy tales to us. When we get older, we will learn more from literature in primary school and then in middle school. Even when we study in university or get a work after our graduation, not saying our work in the department of literature, we still learn from literary readings.

Literature is indispensable to us. Whenever we make choices by making value judgments about what sorts of lives worthy living, we almost always draw inspiration and guidance from our readings. It is almost impossible to make choices without evaluating events which we have already experienced or without the help of the guidance by literature.

Ross: *How does ethical literary criticism handle the difference of humans from animals after natural selection? What is your natural selection?*

Nie: It helps to think in terms of two ideas, natural selection and ethical selection. I will talk about natural selection first from ethical literary criticism. In my definition, natural selection is the process of evolving from ape to man. It is the selection of the form as man but not man as the civilized one. I mean that natural selection takes role only in human form evolving from ape but not in transformation of savages into civilized ones. Even though we have completed it in the history of evolution, everyone still must undertake it within context of ethical selection.

In the history of human civilization, if we can apply a Darwinian idea to the civilizing process, human beings have undergone natural selection and gradually begin ethical selection by their ethical consciousness and especially the awareness of their existence as humans. The Sphinx, a literary figure in ancient Greece, can be

taken as a symbolic outcome of natural selection. Though Sphinx has human's head evolved or some creature, she is still an animal because her animal factor plays a dominant role in her life before she becomes aware of her as a human being. That is to say, it is not natural selection that differentiates man from animal. At first, humans are animals in nature, just coming out of natural selection. Eventually humans could differentiate themselves by their ethical consciousness, which is embodied by the human head that, such as Sphinx has, makes it possible for us to lay the foundation to know our difference of the form as humans.

Ross: *And the second approach, ethical selection?*

Nie: Ethical selection is the second one after natural selection in the history of civilization. In my definition, it is the process of man to be moral one after he completes natural selection. For example, the birth of child is outcome of natural selection meanwhile it means the completion of natural selection. But how does the child become a real man? It is the ethical selection. Factually, it is not human but the reason contained in the human's head that makes himself out of animal. The natural selection will no longer work on the child after he was born. That is to say, it is only ethical selection that transforms him to be ethical one from biological one.

In this stage, human factor is the force to initiate man to make ethical choices during his whole life of ethical selection. It can differentiate himself from animal by the realization of human nature determined by human factor in Sphinx. It is human factor that differentiates man from animal, which means that man and animal are differentiated not by form but by human factor which becomes human nature in ethical selection.

There are two factors about Sphinx: animal factor and human factor. The animal factor is animal remains coming from ape or animal, but human factor is the new gain from ethical selection. It is animal factor and human factor that determine man to be animal man or ethical man. As the human factor of Sphinx is the major one, the ethical man is more human being than animal man. Therefore, it is the human factor that determines man to be human being with human nature.

Ross: *Do you see a clear moment of transition between natural selection and ethical thinking?*

Nie: Where is the point at which humans move from natural selection to ethical selection, or from animal beings into human beings? I think the point is that the self-confirmation of ethical identity as ethical man but not form of biological man after the completion of natural selection. It is only after ethical identity as ethical man confirmed by man himself that man can enter the process of ethical selection.

From the viewpoint of the history of civilization, the self-confirmation of

ethical identity is the self-confirmation of us as human beings. We are Oedipus' answer to the Sphinx Riddle (it is humans who walk on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening).

Therefore, a self-confirmation of ethical identity is the logical starting point of ethical selection. We first become human by selecting according to the determined rules of what an ethical person can or should do. We make choices that determine our ethical identity. We decide what and how to select whenever we determine to do anything.

Ross: *You mentioned the birth of child is natural selection. In your view did natural selection really end?*

Nie: Yes, it ended. The natural selection had completed when human began their ethical selection in the history of civilization. Even if the birth of child could be seen as natural selection only from biological point of view, it is not right to consider it as the fact to prove the incompleteness of natural selection because marriage, the kind of ethical choice, is the condition of child, the natural selection. So, the birth of child is the outcome of ethical choice after all, and we could call it ethical natural choice within the context of ethical selection. With the help of teaching and learning, a child begins the process of ethical selection that distinguishes him from animals. So we can say that natural selection is in the past tense while ethical selection is in the present continuous tense. This is also the difference between natural selection and ethical selection.

Ross: *Can you give us a literary example that illustrates this moment of transition from natural to ethical selection?*

Nie: Shakespeare's *Hamlet* offers a good illustration. Why does Hamlet become to hesitate to revenge his dead father? It is the self-confirmation of his ethical identity as the son of Cloudius because of his marriage with Gertrude. As the ethical identity of Cloudius' step-son, there would be a problem of patricide and regicide, which were originated from natural selection in blood, if he were to kill Cloudius. It is right for him to revenge but it is right not to revenge as well because of ethical taboos. In other words, it is right for him to revenge his ceased father but it is equally wrong to kill his step-father. We can say that Hamlet's ethical dilemma causes his hesitation, and therefore we can conclude that the well-known monologue "To be or not to be" is not about pondering over death and living but about Hamlet's ethical choices. From Hamlet's hesitation, we can see how he chooses to confirm his self-identity.

The ethical selection in civilized society is different from natural selection in the evolution of humans through history. In fact, we go through the ethical selection

by way of various choices initiated by the Sphinx factor consisting of human factor and animal factor. After natural selection, the human factor and animal factor, which are always combined together in humans, play a role in ethical choices. Those two factors can be changed into free will or rational one. The human factor turns into rational will, and animal factor turns into natural will and free will. Those different wills determine us as ethical beings.

Ross: *In other words, each process meets the test of our sense, what we normally think of as evolution and ethical choice.*

Nie: Yes, natural selection undergoes by way of evolution while ethical selection undergoes by way of teaching and learning. We make choices (that is our choice behaviors) throughout our lives but we can't make the right choice without teaching and learning. Through the instruction of literature, we could find models and excuses for our ethical choice. Ethical selection draws on literature for teaching, learning, education and instruction. For example, children can learn to tell good from bad by the enlightenment of fairy tales. Literature provides adults with models for making individual ethical choices.

Ross: *What is practical use of the theory you refer to as Ethical Literary Criticism?*

Nie: By teaching the function of literature, ethical literary criticism can be used to help readers and learners to get enlightenment, education, instruction, and guidance as they analyze, interpret, comment on, and evaluate literary texts. Ethical literary criticism is based on reading. It asks us to evaluate literature from an ethical perspective. It asks us to look for the moral rules at play in a given set of circumstances. This helps us understand morality.

Ethical literary criticism is therefore a method of interpreting literature. Using literary texts, it elaborates, analyzes, comments on, and evaluates the different motivations, actions, and processes of ethical selection. It uncovers moral models, both as examples and as warnings. It helps us develop the capacity to think about complex human interactions.

Ross: *In other words, it is literature that gives urgency to writing.*

Nie: In short, the aim of ethical literary criticism is to offer varied experiences, lessons, instructions and inspirations for our learning, teaching and enlightenment. Without those, I would even say, literature would be nothing; literary critics would be nothing; and ethical literary criticism would be nothing but marks on a page.

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