

# Ethical Literary Criticism in Vietnam: Situation and Prospects

Anh Dan Nguyen & Van Thuan Nguyen

**Abstract:** Vietnam is witness to the indispensable relationship between literature and moral issues in the influential area of Chinese culture and literature. In the medieval period, “prose carries morality” (文以载道) was even one of the primary principles of literary creation and aesthetics in Vietnamese literature. However, criticism that contained ideological ethics in the revolutionary literature (1945-1975) created a specific allergy among writers and critics to criticisms based on morals after the Vietnam war. This has become a significant reason why local academia is not interested in the ethical turn of world literary criticism. Despite being introduced to Vietnam in 2016, ethical literary criticism (ELC) has not flourished as expected. Although there are some achievements, the dissemination of the method has shown some limitations. Nevertheless, given the indigenous characteristics of Vietnamese literature, the context of interdisciplinary studies, the usability and, particularly, the humanity of ELC, the method has excellent prospects to blossom in Vietnam. The development of ELC in Vietnam represents achievements of the school’s “go global” strategy and dedicates Vietnamese voices to the popularity of ELC worldwide.

**Keywords:** Vietnam; ethical turn; ethical literary criticism; prospect; subsidised literature

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**标题：**文学伦理学批评在越南——现状与前景

**内容摘要：**在中国文化和文学的深远影响下，越南见证了文学与道德问题之

间不可或缺的关系。在古代时期，“文以载道”甚至成为越南文学创作和审美的首要原则之一。但是，革命文学（1945-1975）中包含意识形态伦理的批评在越南战争后引起了作家和批评家对基于道德的批评的特殊敏感。这也成为越南学界对世界文学批评的伦理转向不感兴趣的一个重要原因。尽管文学伦理学批评（ELC）于2016年被引入越南，但它并没有像预期的那样蓬勃发展。虽然取得了一些成果，但该理论在越南的推广也呈现出一定的局限性。然而，鉴于越南文学的本土特色、跨学科研究的背景、ELC的实用性，特别是其人文性，文学伦理学批评在越南会有良好的发展前景。ELC在越南的发展是其“走出去”战略的成果，为ELC在世界范围内的普及发出了越南的声音。

**关键词：**越南；伦理转向；文学伦理学批评；前景；补贴文学

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## Introduction

Oriental literatures—such as those of Vietnam, Korea and Japan—historical influenced by Chinese culture and literature are often closely related to categories of morality (道), in which “poetry expressing will, prose carrying morality” (诗以言志，文以载道) is the command that practitioners of literary art need to remember by heart. Vietnamese written literature over the past ten centuries has thus always been inseparably associated with ethical and moral issues. For example, medieval literary life required writings to contain moral and ethical values; writers must be the ones who “express will” and “carry morality.” This was long the core principle of the local literature. However, since 1930, especially since 1975, this tradition has faded in both literary creation and literary criticism. Contemporary scholars no longer seem to be interested in identifying, analysing and evaluating moral lessons and ethical models in literary works. Sometimes they even express scepticism of and alienation from the moral tendency in literary criticism and desire to separate literature from ethics. Although deeply influenced by Marxist sociological criticism, Vietnamese critics currently tend to take Western literary criticisms as the centre, and they are particularly fond of formal-structural tendencies. Literary criticism also tends to lack the indigenous consciousness of Vietnam and ignores the inheritance of Eastern theoretical systems. This reality raises the question of re-examining the relationship between ethics and literature, as well as the role of literary-critical

methods that promote the development of the relationship, including ethical literary criticism (ELC).

### Dissemination of ELC in Vietnam

The 2016 essay “The Potentiality of Ethical Literary Criticism in Vietnam Nowadays” by scholar Do Van Hieu<sup>1</sup> marked the debut of ELC in Vietnam. The study deals with the ethical turn in world literature, points out the specificity of the ELC method and analyses the opportunity to apply ELC in Vietnamese literature. Do Van Hieu is highly appreciative of Nie Zhenzhao’s significant contributions in inventing and spreading ELC in his own country and worldwide, and he considers the publication of Professor Nie’s treatise *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* in 2014 as an event marking a striking achievement in “conducting to redefine towards perfect the concept of Ethical Literary Criticism” (“The Potentiality” 55). According to Do, ELC restores the author’s position in literary creation, acknowledges the sociality of literary texts and discovers the moral purpose in the formal structure, genre model and discourse form of literature.<sup>2</sup>

One year later, Nguyen Anh Dan became the leading researcher to apply this method to the study of literature with the essay “Tu Cham A and the Vietnamese Translator’s Ethical Choice,” in which the author investigates the translation and reception of romantic novels by Chinese writer Xu Zhenya (徐枕亚) in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> By embracing the ELC method, Nguyen looks back on the formation and development of the “Tu Cham A phenomenon” in Vietnam; it is both a literary and an ethical affair that creates many predicaments for Vietnamese translators, writers and readers. Its complexity is not new, but analysing it from the lens of ELC provides opportunity for discovery. Nguyen tries to indicate the “misunderstanding” of the phenomenon and the ethical dilemmas of Vietnamese translators in translating Tu’s works, dilemmas which arose from the struggle between the new and the old, tradition and modernity, development and stagnation, Western and Vietnamese culture. The local translators’ choices occurred within the ethical environment of modernising Vietnamese literature. From any ethical angle,

1 Unlike the English-speaking culture, Vietnamese names are presented as last name before first name. For example: Vietnamese = Do Van Hieu. English = Van Hieu Do. In this case, “Do” is surname. “Van Hieu” is first name (including the middle name).

2 See Van Hieu Do, “The Potentiality of Ethical Literary Criticism in Vietnam Nowadays,” *Journal of Science of Hanoi National University of Education* 5 (2016): 56.

3 See Anh Dan Nguyen, “Tu Cham A and the Vietnamese Translator’s Ethical Choice,” *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature* 4 (2017): 44-60.

their choices are a specific response to the calls for national renovation movements.<sup>1</sup> One of the obvious creative points of the essay is that if Chinese ELC primarily studies the ethical choices of literary characters, then Nguyen considers the choice to translate Tu Cham A's novels into the local language as the translators' ethical choice. This remarkable milestone marks Nguyen's endeavour to spread ELC to Vietnamese readers. He has since continued to publish many noticeable papers in prestigious domestic and international forums.

During the fifth International Conference on Language, Society and Culture in Asian Contexts (LSCAC 2018), Nguyen presented the study "Ethical Literary Criticism: Retrospect and Prospect." The presentation demonstrates the definition, history, basic features and terms of ELC quite fully. For the first time, essential terms and connotations—such as ethical selection/choice, natural selection/choice, ethical taboo, ethical environment/context, ethical identity, ethical confusion, ethical knots, ethical order, brain text, rational will and natural will—were introduced to a large number of scholars. If Do's essay laid the foundation for the emergence of ELC in Vietnamese academia, Nguyen's paper provides a significant overview of the theory in his country.<sup>2</sup> Again, in 2018, Nguyen published another essay, "Nie Zhenzhao and Theory of Ethical Literary Criticism," which emphasises the vital role of Professor Nie in the Chinese literary circle and his major contributions in the field of scholarly research, especially his origination of ELC. In Nguyen's opinion, ELC has an incredible humanism, which is not only useful for literary criticism but also dedicated to constructing a perfect world.<sup>3</sup> In the same year, Nguyen released the article "Adam, Eva, the Forbidden Fruit in the Garden of Eden, and Ethical Literary Criticism," which is essentially a re-introduction of Professor Nie's unique analysis related to some of the core terms in ELC. The article describes the story of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit and being expelled from Eden in the Bible from an ethical standpoint. Nguyen correctly learns from Nie, which helps his readers deeply understand natural and ethical selection, ethical taboo and ethical choice.

Along with his interpretation of the theory of ELC, Nguyen also applies it to specific literary cases. His essay "'Picture Brides' and Japanese Women's American Dream: An Ethical Studies on *The Buddha in the Attic* by Julie Otsuka" is one such

1 See Anh Dan Nguyen, "Tu Cham A and the Vietnamese Translator's Ethical Choice," *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature* 4 (2017): 53.

2 See Prabhakara Roa et al., editor. *The 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Language, Society, and Culture in Asian Contexts (LSCAC 2018)*, Hue City: Media Nusa Creative, 2019.

3 See Anh Dan Nguyen, "Nie Zhenzhao and Theory of Ethical Literary Criticism," *Journal of Science of University of Education, Hue University* 2 (2018): 22.

application. Nguyen uses the ELC method to explore the tragic ethical fate of “picture brides” in the novel and dissects characters’ ethical dilemmas when they nearly give up everything in their homeland to immigrate to America. Through the perspective of ethical identity, Nguyen describes the tragedy of Japanese immigrants in a strange culture, which is a tragedy that is passed on from generation to generation. He highlights the ethical lessons for contemporary people, including Vietnamese women. Whoever admires changing their life in another culture needs to make accurate ethical choices, because it is possible that the so-called “new horizons” will only result in ethical dilemmas and moral tragedies.<sup>1</sup> In general, Nguyen uses aspects of ethical identities, dilemmas and choices to investigate Julie Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the Attic*, which makes it a useful example of the application of ELC to specific literary case studies for local researchers.

Another of Nguyen’s article spreading ELC theory, “Ethical Literary Criticism: A Voice from East Asia,” was published in 2019. It is worth noting that the study takes an awe-inspiring approach to the matter, as the author looks back at the famous German Sinologist Wolfgang Kubin’s opinions on Chinese literature, in which the scholar called contemporary Chinese literature “trash”.<sup>2</sup> His judgement caused a wave of intense debate in China about the value of the literature. Nguyen connects this debate with the driving motivation of the creation of ELC, and parts of the so-called “trash” are the harmful effects of the market economy (after reform and opening up) on literature. These impacts led to ethical defects in literature and literary criticism. Nguyen asserts that “One of the sensitive scholars who recognises the nature of the ‘trash’ of Chinese literature circle is Nie Zhenzhao” (“Ethical Literary Criticism” 52). The invention of ELC is thus the way to solve this phenomenon thoroughly. The establishment of a new critical school that binds writers and critics to moral and ethical values shows both China’s creative and discourse rights in particular and those of Asia in general.<sup>3</sup> This is the basis for Nguyen to confirm that the birth of ELC contains an evident right to an Eastern literary discourse: “Nie Zhenzhao’s viewpoint expresses the desire for equal academic dialogue between the East and the West. It shows the great stature of the

1 See Anh Dan Nguyen, “‘Picture Brides’ and Japanese Women’s American Dream: An Ethical Studies on *The Buddha in the Attic* by Julie Otsuka,” *Hue University Journal of Science: Social Sciences and Humanities* 6B (2018): 84-85.

2 See Ben Davey, “Trash or Treasure? Wolfgang Weighs in,” *China Daily*. 10 Apr. 2007. Available at: [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2007-04/10/content\\_846626.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2007-04/10/content_846626.htm).

3 See HCMC University of Education, editor, *The International Conference on Eastern Asia: Issues on Literary Research and Education*, 3 Aug. 2019, Ho Chi Minh City, Ho Chi Minh City Culture—Literature and Arts Publishing House, 2019.

creator. His aspiration has been realised by initiating Ethical Literary Criticism.” (56) Here, Nguyen Anh Dan does not hide his great admiration for Nie Zhenzhao and ELC.

In 2019, Nguyen’s challenging paper “Women and Ethics in Land Reform: Why?” was also in the limelight. This paper is impressive because he chose a “taboo” topic in Vietnamese culture, politics and literature: land reform (or land revolution). In doing so, however, he indicates the mistakes of local critics in discussing the problems of the reform. Some studies on the topic are not supported by an appropriate ethical stance, which tends to blacken history, express hostility towards the past and attack politics. Critics perhaps exploit the flaws of the agrarian revolution and use literary names to overturn the ideology and indisputable achievements of the campaign. Deeply aware of the requirement to bring literature back to its ethical environments through ELC,<sup>1</sup> Nguyen has a moral standpoint to analyse with precision the many moral issues related to the local women in land reform that are portrayed in contemporary novels. By utilising the terms of ELC—such as ethical environment, ethical dilemma, ethical taboo, ethical identity and ethical confusion—Nguyen investigates in detail the outstanding ethical problems in these works. He also persuasively uses the Sphinx factor theory to explain women’s moral tragedies in agrarian reform, and his paper illustrates matters connected with female characters from an ethical perspective instead of a simple sociological or political one.<sup>2</sup> It is thus a detailed and suggestive study of the application of ELC in Vietnamese academics.

Based on this study, Nguyen germinated a further essay, “The Ethical Choice in Vietnamese Pastoral Novels after 1986,” which no longer emphasises only the ethical issues about women in land reform but also examines the wider range of the case in pastoral novels. Nguyen starts from the features of and changes in ethical environments after the Vietnam war to consider the moral attitude and ethical viewpoint of local writers. Ethical contexts are the primary element affecting some of the sensitive, inherent and familiar problems in rural society and the fate of farmers as described in these writings. The reform in northern Vietnam in the 1950s–60s was a “world-shaking” movement, and people’s ethical identity often changed suddenly. The period combined violence, sex, power, personal hatred and greed, causing farmers to make unethical choices that betrayed the moral virtues of

1 See Nie Zhenzhao, *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2014, 14.

2 See Hue University of Education, editor, *The National Scientific Conference on Literature and Gender*, 26 Oct. 2019, Hue City, Hue University Publishing House, 2019.

the community and led to the collapse of the ethical order. The core reason affecting farmers' unethical choices, according to these novels, is the ethical environment to which they belong: "Most of the sinners who have fallen into the ethical taboo were influenced by the ethical context or the ethical environment. In other words, the environment of pastoral communities had a severe impact on the development of people's personality and quality" ("Ethical Choice in Vietnamese Pastoral Novels" 57). On the contrary, though, many characters defend ethical orders at all costs, and they become the last bastion of morality and ethics. Nguyen also roundly studies the conflicts among pastoral families related to honour, power and interests in rural communities. The contradiction pushes farmers into ethical dilemmas and moral tragedies. By surveying other matters—such as traditions, beliefs, gender and sexuality—Nguyen highlights the didactic function that writers want to convey to readers.

In another experiment, encouraged by the desire to enhance the dissemination of ELC in Vietnamese literature, Nguyen uses the method to criticise contemporary poetry. In the essay "Ethical Choices in Do Thanh Dong's Poetry" (2020), he enlarges the scope of a "local" poet rather than considering a famous representative. Nguyen would like to reassert the usability of ELC in literary research and criticism, regardless of whether it is ancient or contemporary literature, prose or poetry, renowned or minor writers. He uncovers many ethical aspects in the poet's verses, and from the analysis of his poetic themes, for example, Nguyen demonstrates that the poet's ethical choices are returning to the traditional world, folklore culture, hiding in religions and seeking salvation in supernatural forces. Although Do bravely exposes the negative aspects of human morality, he shows the type of a "halfway" ethical choice. Do does not give a thorough answer to the ethical matters he has described, although he illuminates the ethical crisis and the moral deficiency in Vietnamese society, thereby alerting people to make the right ethical choices.<sup>1</sup>

In another study, "Talks on Ethical Taboos," Nguyen relies on the ELC theory of the ethical taboo to analyse the novel *Storm of the Tran Dynasty* by Hoang Quoc Hai.<sup>2</sup> Nguyen clarifies the concept of moral taboo and provides an analytical model using Hoang's multi-volume works. There are two primary taboos in the novels:

1 See Anh Dan Nguyen, "Ethical Choices in Do Thanh Dong's Poetry," *Journal of Science of University of Education, Hue University* 1 (2020): 22.

2 This study is developed from and supplemented supplements the presentation titled "King Characters and Their Ethical Taboos in *Storms of Tran Dynasty* by Hoang Quoc Hai," which was published in the *Proceedings of the 8<sup>th</sup> Scientific Conference of Young Researchers of National Pedagogical Universities* 2020, edited by Hue University of Education, Hue City, Hue University Publishing House, 2020: 64-76.



incest (or the Tran's endogamous marriage) and patricide. Based on the theory of ethical taboo, Nguyen engages in a fascinating interpretation of the story of Tran Thu Do (1194-1264) usurping the Ly dynasty (1009-1225) to establish the Tran dynasty (1225-1400). To consolidate their power and avoid losing the kingship to outsiders, Tran Thu Do paved the way for the "tradition" of inter-ethnic marriage, which is essentially incestuous, among the members of the Tran clan. Under the desire to maintain their power, the clan also repeatedly committed another great ethical taboo: killing relatives. According to Nguyen, the dynasty's downfall had many causes, but one of the striking reasons was that they committed ethical taboos. The two taboos devastated the Tran dynasty, in terms both of biology and social ethics, and this eventually, along with other political mistakes, drove them to extinction.<sup>1</sup> Nguyen demonstrates the ethical taboos associated with the theory of Sphinx factors, which is critical to displaying the failure of the rational will in the battle with the natural will. As Professor Nie states: "In an ethical sense, mankind is the outcome of the Sphinx factor, which can be seen as the combination of the human and animal factors" ("Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection" 398). If we consider the Tran dynasty as a "moral body," animal factors have destroyed human factors and led to the demise of an entire dynasty. Finally, in the spirit of ELC's didactic function, Nguyen advocates that the characters' violations of ethical taboos are necessary for moral enlightenment, so every person is aware of the importance of the rational will: "As a result, the human being must always pay attention to controlling the natural/free will. Only then can they truly maintain their humanity before the encroachment of the animal factors" (110).

Besides Do Van Hieu and Nguyen Anh Dan, some literary studies and criticisms applying the method of ELC have also recently appeared in Vietnam. The most notable are the treatise *Travelling Among Texts—Nguyen Huy Thiep and Vietnamese Society after 1975* by Nguyen Van Thuan and the essay "Traditional Culture in Contemporary Vietnamese Poetry: A Perspective from Nie Zhenzhao's Ethical Literary Criticism" by Hoang Thi Hue and Nguyen Hoang Nguyen. The treatise dissects one of the most famous and controversial contemporary Vietnamese writers, Nguyen Huy Thiep (1950-2021). The book consists of nine chapters and uses many different research approaches to uncover the writer's profound values of artistic thought and his multifaceted contributions to the local literature after *Doi moi* (i.e., the renovation of Vietnam that was officially implemented after 1986). Particularly, in Chapter 2 and Chapter 5, the author quite subtly applies the complex ethical thought of the French philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin (1921–)

1 See Anh Dan Nguyen, "Talks on Ethical Taboos," *Văn Nghe Quan Doi* 7 (2021): 107.



and uses the terminology and methodology of ELC to analyse ethical dilemmas, ethical choices, benevolent resources, the relationship between kindness and faith and the theme of birth-death and impermanence in Nguyen Huy Thiep's writings. Following, in particular, the appropriate moral vision and Professor Nie's methods, Nguyen Van Thuan points out the writer's talent in depicting complicated characters. He places his characters in complex ethical contexts to present their "ironic" ethical choices in their ethical plights. Nguyen Huy Thiep thus raises questions about the relationship between individuals and communities, men and women, good and evil, literature and politics in the intricacy of an ethical environment of Vietnam after 1975. Nguyen Van Thuan reveals the mystery and erases many of the prejudices and doubts about Nguyen Huy Thiep's writings with suitable critical methods: he is not a writer who likes to insult and be cruel to humans. Going beyond the classic dualism of good and evil and a simplified view of reality, Nguyen Huy Thiep helps readers soberly realise the complexity of life and soul. "The aesthetic ethics of Nguyen Huy Thiep helps readers clarify their simple thinking about good and evil, the illusion of a perfect human being, and contributes to an appropriate and humane view of and for humanity." (*Travelling Among Texts* 92) Nguyen Huy Thiep inspires readers to bravely face severe social upheavals, fight against evil, keep their faith and desire to live honestly and kindly in life. Nguyen Van Thuan convincingly analyses and affirms that Nguyen Huy Thiep is a writer who is always consistent in praising and preserving national moral values and stimulating people to be kind-hearted.

Hoang Thi Hue and Nguyen Hoang Nguyen, meanwhile, mention many theories of ELC, such as the origin of art, natural selection, ethical identity, ethical choice and the ethical environment. These categories are viewed in reference to Vietnamese society, culture and poetry. The authors put the local traditional culture in the context of globalisation to recognise the risks to that culture, and their essay emphasises clarifying ethical selection, ethical identity and the preservation of local cultural traditions, as well as matters of ethical choice, ethical identity in the contemporary poetry of Vietnam. They believe that the local poetry from *Doi moi* is a journey that involves searching for and discovering the nature of society. This poetry thus possesses a kind of ethical choice and ethical environment to form "a moral human model," which has multi-dimensional contemporary cultural characteristics.<sup>1</sup> They examine the works of some renowned contemporary poets—

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1 See Thi Hue Hoang and Hoang Nguyen Nguyen, "Traditional Culture in Contemporary Vietnamese Poetry: A Perspective from Nie Zhenzhao's Ethical Literary Criticism," *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature* 1 (2020): 59.

including Hoang Hung (1942–), Truong Dang Dung (1954–), Tran Anh Thai (1955–), and Nguyen Quang Thieu (1957–)—and they try to apply the ELC method to study Vietnamese poetry while glorifying the great role of Nie Zhenzhao.

The spread of ELC in Vietnam is also supported by several Vietnamese international students studying at Central China Normal University, Wuhan, China, which is considered the cradle of ELC. By receiving ELC and applying it to issues of Vietnamese literature, researchers such as Nguyen Anh Dan and Tran Dinh Nhan have provided examples of the application of ELC to literary cases for local readers. In 2021, for instance, Nguyen Anh Dan successfully defended the doctoral thesis “A Study on Ethical Choices in Vietnamese Novels Since Reform and Opening Up,” which was supervised by Professor Nie Zhenzhao. In his dissertation, Nguyen applies one of the central terms of ELC, ethical choice, to study the pastoral, urban, war and historical novels of Vietnam after 1986. The issue is, in turn, examined in two aspects: characters’ ethical choices in the stories and writers’ ethical choices in the creative process. Ethical choice is associated with other categories, such as the ethical environment, ethical identity, ethical confusion, ethical dilemma, brain text and teaching function to interpret Vietnamese literary works from an ethical standpoint. It thus avoids the political, social or moral criticism that is often dominated by ideology. At more than 300,000 words, Nguyen’s doctoral thesis is an enormous exemplar of the application of ELC in Vietnamese academia. In 2022, Tran Dinh Nhan also passed the thesis “Research on Ethical Choices in Drama by Contemporary Vietnamese Playwright Luu Quang Vu” under the supervision of Professor Su Hui. Tran’s study is the first application of ELC in Vietnamese drama studies, further affirming the method’s usability. The thesis opens up a new way for his local readers to interpret Vietnamese plays in general and Luu Quang Vu’s works in particular—that is, reading way from an ethical perspective.

In recent years, the highlights of the ELC journey in Vietnam have involved Nguyen Anh Dan’s academic activities. First, in 2022, his essay “The Ethical Environment after the Vietnam War and Novel Creation Since Renovation” was published in the journal *Forum for World Literature Studies*. It analyses the sociocultural and political-economic changes, and especially the moral crisis after the Vietnam War, as a particular ethical environment. Novels written after 1975 thus have a close relationship with their ethical context. Based on the democratisation and literary innovation movements called for and supported by the Communist Party of Vietnam, local writers have created a fruitful harvest of novels. These achievements are primarily reflected in four aspects: the apparent renovation of thinking about fiction, the expansion of themes in fiction, the diversification of styles and the

specialisation of novel-writing skills. The moral crisis that emerged in the post-war period produced a severe impact on fiction writing, however; the ethical environment led to the phenomenon of “không tải”—novels with no educational function.<sup>1</sup> In the latest update, in early 2023, Nguyen’s research project “Ethical Literary Criticism: Theory and Application” was approved by Hue University, Vietnam. The project will be implemented over the course of two years, becoming the country’s first in-depth and large-scale research on ELC. Last but not least, ELC, as an academic discipline for literary masters, has appeared in the graduate training programme of the Faculty of Linguistics and Literature, Hue University of Education, which is a virtual channel to popularise ELC in Vietnam, starting from schools and academies, which would follow a path similar to that taken by ELC in China.

### Limitations in Spreading of ELC in Vietnam

The history of the dissemination of ELC in Vietnam makes it clear that the school is still developing. Its achievements are, however, marked both in the theoretical transmission and practical experiments. Vietnamese scholars tend to be interdisciplinary in utilising ELC, by, for example, using it in combination with feminist criticism, cultural criticism and intertextual theory. This does not mean, however, that the dissemination of ELC in Vietnam has no limitations that need to be addressed. Overall, the history of ELC in Vietnam shows a few typical limits: the weak team of ELC researchers, the remarkable gaps in ELC theory, the lack of a comprehensive range of study objects and scope for ELC, the trend of a lack of diversity in ELC research and the faint voice of ELC academic influence in Vietnam.

Regarding the team of researchers, there are not many representatives of Vietnamese academia who are ready to adopt and take part in disseminating ELC. The ambition to establish a branch of ELC in Vietnam remains challenging in reality. The lack of scholars who study and propagate ELC theories makes significant obstacles for the school in accessing Vietnamese researchers and readers. The limitation of the team is more severe because some scholars who have encountered ELC have not truly invested time in studying the method. Do Van Hieu, for example, laid the foundation for ELC in Vietnam, but Do has not made any further developments related to the school. This is apparent even in the case of Do’s newly published book in 2021, *Modern Literary Theory: Trends and Receptions*, in which the scholar classifies ELC in the section “Reception of modern literary theory in Vietnam” (Section II, Part II). The content about ELC is the same as in the essay

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1 See Anh Dan Nguyen, “The Ethical Environment after the Vietnam War and Novel Creation Since Renovation,” *Forum for World Literature Studies* 5 (2022): 939-940.

published in 2016. However, despite changes in the field, Do does not provide the necessary updates. The information about the number of International Association of Ethical Literary Criticism (IAELC) conferences, for example, is not accurate.<sup>1</sup> He also does not illustrate the situation of ELC research and application in Vietnam after 2016 (i.e. the year he published his introductory essay).

Even so, the history of ELC in Vietnam could not have flourished without the path paved by Do Van Hieu. From Do's opening, several domestic researchers have followed and tried to create a life for ELC in Vietnam. The most persistent and optimistic among these inheritors is Nguyen Anh Dan, who became one of the most serious contributors to the spread of ELC in his country with a doctoral dissertation and a series of essays. His dedication in terms of both introducing the theory and in providing models for method application is credible. Besides Do and Nguyen, the remaining scholars—such as Nguyen Van Thuan, Hoang Thi Hue, Nguyen Hoang Nguyen, and Tran Dinh Nhan—do not truly participate actively in developing ELC. Except for Tran, it is worth mentioning that ELC is not the primary method used in their works: it is only a part or is used in combination with other methods. Indeed, Nguyen Van Thuan's treatise is an intertextual study, and ELC is only one technical manipulation integrated among others. ELC itself is thus not a core method of the book. Similarly, although Hoang and Nguyen's essay uses many ELC terms, it remains, in essence, a study in the direction of cultural-literary criticism. Their passivity is also reflected in the fact that, after these two studies, they have not published any works related to ELC at home or abroad. The force of scholars who receive, research and propagate ELC in Vietnam is thus not sufficiently vigorous enough. This is a significant reason why the achievement of ELC in the country in recent years has not prospered much. Despite this grim reality, Vietnamese academia has the opportunity to change this tragic situation thanks to many Vietnamese students studying in China. Through the guidance of outstanding ELC scholars such as Professor Su Hui, Professor Shang Biwu, Professor Yang Jian, Professor Li Exian, Professor Yang Gexin, Professor Chi Shuiyong, Professor Luo Liangong, Professor Huang Hui and many others, young Vietnamese researchers will have favourable conditions to study the ELC method and apply it effectively. They should therefore contribute to the development of ELC in their homeland, and local academics have the right to hope for a return or continuation of engagement in

1 In Do's argument, from 2004 to 2021, Professor Nie Zhenzhao has chaired five international conferences on ELC (*Modern Literary Theory: Trends and Receptions* 253), but this figure is only accurate as of 2016. A total of nine international conferences on ELC have been held annually from 2012 to the present (2023). See Van Hieu Do, *Modern Literary Theory: Trends and Receptions*, Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House, 2021.

the ELC field by familiar pioneers.

Up to 2023, there have been roughly twenty works on ELC in Vietnam. Fortunately, these works cover both the theoretical and applied fields of ELC. After Do Van Hieu introduced ELC in the country, Nguyen Anh Dan's published studies have attempted to account for ELC's theoretical system, while also using it to research and criticise literature. In terms of theoretical aspects, Nguyen's essays explain most (but not all) of ELC's key terms; his papers introduce the inventor of ELC, Professor Nie Zhenzhao, and review the founding background, study objects, scope and research tasks of ELC, as well as making the distinction between ELC and other schools. Regrettably, existing works about ELC by the two local scholars are incomplete compared to other achievements of the method. In particular, Nguyen's articles have duplicate content, and other articles are reprints or further developments from conference papers. Many essential issues of ELC have not been fully introduced and evaluated in Vietnam. One of the significant theories of ELC is that the brain text (脑文本), for example, has not been fully conveyed to Vietnamese academia. Professor Nie attaches a momentous role of brain text in literary formation. He argues: "Without brain texts, there would not be texts produced by writers, and thus there would not be written texts or digital texts." ("Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory" 194) In other words, brain text is the foundation for all other types of texts, including literary texts. Without brain text, there are no literary works. It is a pity that the ELC creator's unique theory has not been disseminated to Vietnamese readers. Not only brain text but also the local academia has not had access to many other vital aspects of ELC, such as its formation, development, academic results, and the relationship between words, the brain text, and written text. Besides, the interrelationships and interdisciplinary nature of ELC and other schools, ideologies, theories, methods, and sciences have also not been discussed in detail. In addition, except for Nie Zhenzhao, Vietnamese readers are not acquainted with other typical representatives of ELC inside and outside China. These are the current theoretical gaps of ELC in Vietnam.

In relation to the study objects and scope, the research by some of the Vietnamese scholars mentioned above shows the broad and effective range of application for ELC, which includes translation, novels, poetry, plays and literature cases, among others. There are still many opportunities to use ELC. Existing works on ELC in Vietnam have primarily concentrated on Vietnamese writings. Except for Nguyen's essay on Julie Otsuka's novel, domestic critics have rarely studied world classics or foreign literature. This means that, in terms of theory, Vietnamese scholars' introductions to and research on ELC are insufficient. Application has not

been comprehensive. Because of the narrowness of the study objects and scope, the tendency for Vietnamese ELC research is not diverse, as scholars have only focused on reintroducing the theory or presenting in other words Professor Nie's concept from some of his well-known essays and, particularly, his great treatise *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*. More specifically, articles by Nguyen and Do chiefly introduce the theory of ELC. Notably, there is almost no scepticism present in these introductions; instead, the common feature is praise and acceptance of Professor Nie's views and ideas. Studies that fall under this trend include Nguyen Anh Dan's "Ethical Literary Criticism: Retrospect and Prospect" (2018), "Adam, Eva, the Forbidden Fruit in the Garden of Eden, and Ethical Literary Criticism" (2018), "Nie Zhenzhao and Theory of Ethical Literary Criticism" (2018) and "Ethical Literary Criticism: A Voice from East Asia" (2019).

The application of ELC by local scholars also displays some remarkable trends with respect to method. The first is the application of ELC independently, such as in Nguyen's "Tu Cham A and the Vietnamese Translator's Ethical Choice" (2017), "'Picture Brides' and Japanese Women's American Dream: An Ethical Studies on *The Buddha in the Attic* by Julie Otsuka" (2018), "Women and Ethics in Land Reform: Why?" (2019) "Ethical Choices in Do Thanh Dong's Poetry" (2020) and "The Ethical Environment after the Vietnam War and Novel Creation Since Renovation" (2022). The second is the combination of theoretical explanation and practical experiment, including Nguyen Anh Dan's "The Role of Literary Storytelling and Preschool Violence from the Teaching Theory of Ethical Literary Criticism" (2020) and "Talks on Ethical Taboos" (2021). Finally, there are the interdisciplinary studies, which integrate the ELC method with other critical approaches, such as Nguyen's essay "The Ethical Choice in Vietnamese Pastoral Novels after 1986" (2020) and his doctoral thesis (2021); Hoang Thi Hue and Nguyen Hoang Nguyen's paper and Nguyen Van Thuan's book (2020); and Tran Dinh Nhan's dissertation "Research on Ethical Choices in Drama by Contemporary Vietnamese Playwright Luu Quang Vu" (2022). Even with such works, it is difficult to say that the current trend of ELC research in Vietnam is diverse.

Last but not least, it seems that the most concerning matter is the degree of scholarly influence published works on ELC have in Vietnam. This is a crucial limitation preventing the school from being more attractive to the local readers. For the roughly twenty existing works on ELC, there are four essays published in A&HCI journals, two chapters in one treatise, two doctoral dissertations, five articles in academic journals published by local universities, one presentation at an international conference, three presentations at national forums, two articles

in domestic art magazines and one translation.<sup>1</sup> Regarding language, eight works are written in foreign languages (two dissertations, one paper in Chinese and five essays in English). Publishing research in non-Vietnamese languages makes it more difficult for domestic writers and most readers to read these works, and this language barrier prevents knowledge of these studies from disseminating to the local literary circle. Many studies on ELC are also published in scientific journals run by universities, but this is not an influential channel for the spread of ELC in Vietnam. These journals are primarily intended for their members, doctoral or master's candidates, seeking "scientific marks" to meet graduation requirements. University journals are hardly an academic bridge between researchers and readers across the country. It is not easy to spread information outside the community. A more effective approach for the dissemination of ELC seems to be national and international conferences. By presenting papers at the event and publishing them afterwards in proceedings, studies on ELC have a chance to reach a wider audience. Unfortunately, the current state of research suggests that the number of scholars who attend such conferences to study and publish essays on ELC in Vietnam today is still rather dismal. This situation has limited the scope and spread of ELC to the broader literature-loving public. Therefore, Vietnam therefore needs a professional academic forum for ELC. The influence of ELC in Vietnam also stems from a fact that needs to change related to the research team: local researchers are not yet affiliated with a research group nor have they developed a sense of international cooperation in spreading ELC to Vietnam. There are few ELC scholars in Vietnam, and they still tend to work individual, lack strong links to a team and have yet to engage in close contact with foreign scholars.

All of the analysed reasons leave room for improvements in the career of ELC. Despite what has been achieved thus far and the efforts of pioneers such as Do Van Hieu and Nguyen Anh Dan, the fate of ELC in Vietnam remains an open question. These limitations seem less critical, however, than the internal barrier from the local literary critics themselves. Vietnamese critics have experienced the "consequences" of literary criticism closely related to ideological ethics, called "subsidised literary criticism," which has become a powerful obstacle preventing the development of ELC in Vietnam.

### **"Subsidised Criticism" and Barriers to ELC in Vietnam**

In the essay that introduced ELC to Vietnam, Do Van Hieu designates the

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1 See Nie Zhenzhao, "Talks on Ethical Literary Criticism," translated by Anh Dan Nguyen, *Tap Chi Cua Viet* 12 (2018): 73-80.



opportunities of the method that come from the outside (the ethical turn in world literary studies) and the inside (based on Vietnamese literary life itself). However, ELC research and application in Vietnam did not blossom as expected after Do's paper. Some queries need to be answered thoroughly: Where is ELC on the contemporary map of literary criticism in Vietnam? What is its future going to be? How will ELC compete with the current system of literary approaches in the country? Regarding reception, a significant matter that requires a response is why ELC, which was founded in 2004, only had its first debut in Vietnam twelve years later? Behind these questions are a set of problems that needs to be solved for ELC to flourish. The answers will reveal a causal connection between the consequences of Vietnam's subsidised literary criticism and the ideas of ELC.

The year when Do Van Hieu published the essay that marked the emergence of ELC in Vietnam (2016) corresponds to the third stage in the development of the approach. According to Professor Su Hui, from 2004-2009, Professor Nie and his colleagues researched issues such as the theoretical basis, study objects, value and meaning of ELC. The second stage of ELC emerged in the years 2010-2013, when "The essays published by Nie Zhenzhao and other scholars not only expound the theory of Ethical Literary Criticism but also devote themselves to constructing its discourse system" ("Academic Influence" 36-37). In 2013, Professor Nie's treatise *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* was selected for the "National Achievements Library of Philosophy and Social Sciences," and a year later, Peking University Press published the book. Up to now, this book still is a beacon for worldwide readers and ELC practitioners. It devotes to affirming Professor Nie's incredible talent and merit for the destiny of ELC, as Galin Tihanov once asserted: "The author of this book, Nie Zhenzhao, is undoubtedly a preeminent literary scholar who has gained international prominence and has been instrumental, through his publications, editorial work, and numerous doctoral students, in initiating a new version of ethical literary criticism, powerful in China and increasingly visible abroad." ("On the Significance and Originality" 560) The third stage of ELC emerged after 2013, when Nie Zhenzhao continued to delve into its fundamental theories and provide many in-depth critiques of its practice. This is the moment when ELC achieved many accomplishments and gained significant academic resonance at home and abroad.

During its invention and development, ELC has constantly improved its theory, expanded its application and constructed academic influence in China and worldwide. ELC strives to build its own right to the international discourse in literature and to spread abroad actively according to the strategy of going global.

The first Vietnamese scholar who responded to the call of ELC was Do Van Hieu, who had been an international student in China.<sup>1</sup> Do studied in China from 2009 to 2013, during the second stage of ELC, with the advantage of the academic environment—and especially his knowledge of Mandarin—he received and introduced this theory to the Vietnamese literary circle. Even so, Do's essay on ELC was still quite a late “pioneering” step. The reason for this lateness lies in the twelve years mentioned above.

One must wonder whether, if Do Van Hieu had not been in China at that time, ELC would have come to Vietnam. The answer is still likely to be yes, but the delay, as mentioned earlier, would have extended even further. Besides Do, many other Vietnamese students pursue literature majors in China, particularly in Central China Normal University, Wuhan. Nguyen Anh Dan approached ELC through Professor Nie Zhenzhao and a team of Chinese scholars, rather than through Do Van Hieu (This fact makes it even more understandable that the influence of Do's introductory article on ELC is relatively modest). Without Do, however, ELC would have arrived in Vietnam even later, and the later it comes, the more unfortunate it is for both ELC and the Vietnamese literary community. Another question that must be answered is if Do had not known Chinese, would he have received and introduced ELC into Vietnam? The answer depends on the Vietnamese scholars themselves. As of 2016, there have been six conferences on ELC held in China, of which five were international.<sup>2</sup> Notably, the statistics indicate that Vietnamese scholars seem to be absent from these activities.<sup>3</sup> The foreign language barrier, scientific enthusiasm, spirit of learning and international integration of Vietnamese scholars are reasons for this absence that should not be ignored. It is possible, however, that the indifference

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1 From 2009 to 2010, Do studied Mandarin at Beijing Normal University, and during the period 2010-2013, he was a PhD candidate at Renmin University in China.

2 The first conference, a national one, took place from 31 October to 2 November 2005, at Central China Normal University (Wuhan city, Hubei province) with the theme “Ethical Literary Criticism: A New Approach to Literary Studies” (文学伦理学批评: 文学研究方法新探讨). The conferences organised after this event were all international conferences.

3 See Su Xi, “A Review of the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Symposium on Ethical Literary Criticism,” *Foreign Literature Studies* 1 (2013): 173-175; Xu Yan and Xi Yun, “Ethical Literary Criticism: Its Openness, Inclusiveness and Vitality,” *Foreign Literature Studies* 6 (2013): 171-176; Lin Yuzhen, “A New Monument in Ethical Literary Criticism: A Review of the 4<sup>th</sup> International Symposium on Ethical Literary Criticism,” *Foreign Literature Studies* 1 (2015): 161-167; Huang Hui and Zhang Lianqiao, “Ethical Literary Criticism and New Construction of International Academic Discourse,” *Foreign Literature Studies* 6 (2015): 165-169; Liu Xiying, “Ethical Literary Criticism and Trans-National Culture Dialogue: A Review of ‘The 6<sup>th</sup> International Symposium on Ethical Literary Criticism’,” *Foreign Literature Studies* 6 (2016): 169-171.

of the Vietnamese literary community towards ELC depends on its nature.

ELC is a particular method of literary criticism. Even if it distinguishes itself from Western ethical criticism and moral criticism, it still involves ethical and moral categories. This is one of the most striking reasons why Vietnamese literary critics are not keen on ELC. Their attitude may stem from the weighty effects of a one-sided and erroneous period of moral judgment of literary works and writers in revolutionary literature (1945-1975)—in other words, a “subsidised literary criticism.” The term “subsidised” here should be understood as a form of ideological and moral manipulation. Due to the characteristics of the wartime ethical environment, the most vital goal of the time was national liberation and independence for the country. Vietnamese literature and art during this period emphasised militancy, class character, the Communist Party spirit, nationalism and popularity. A list of epochal requirements forced literature to observe this ideological direction. This can be considered as a moral standard that Vietnamese writers must follow. If they betrayed these norms, they would be violating the ethical taboo created by the wartime ethical context. Because of these strict ethical requirements, Vietnamese revolutionary literature is formulaic, clichéd and ideological, and there is not much innovation in terms of form. This literature confined writers to strict moral rules, which may be the primary reason why the local literature after the Vietnam war, especially after *Doi moi*, is no longer interested in ethical and moral content.

Such literary criticism, oriented by the moral norms of the mainstream ideology, constitutes a mechanism for an “allergic” reaction among many Vietnamese critics, who ignore moral criticism in general and ELC in particular. Vietnamese literature and its literary criticism before 1986 tended to be a matter of literature serving politics, and literary criticism carried dense political nuances and did not pay proper attention to aesthetic characteristics. On the other side, due to the specific requirements of the wartime ethical environment, it was thought that writers ought to conform to the revolutionary spirit and communist moral standards. From a methodological point of view, the norms of the socialist realistic method of literary composition put rigid demands on writers, who, along with their products, became “combat weapons.” If they violated these standards, they broke the ethical taboo. Even more remarkable, the inertia of “ideological ethics” continued weigh heavily on Vietnamese literature and literary criticism after the war. Since *Doi moi*, the ethical environment has changed, the spirit of democracy has been opened and the academic circle seems to have lost interest in the socialist realistic method and quickly embraced Western literary criticism. But the “literary scandals” related to

ideological ethics have not stopped. This criticism involving ideological morality is an obstacle to many writers and seeks to separate the relationship between literature and ethics. This does not mean that Vietnamese literary critics do not care about the moral and ethical content of literature. On the contrary, it is still their great concern. Their writings still convey the didactic function as a desideratum of real works.<sup>1</sup> However, they do not want to go back to a state “akin” to a literature of “ideological ethics.” This is the popular response among writers to all methods of criticisms based on ethics, not just ELC. It is also why Vietnamese literature has not undergone the same ethical turn as world literary criticism. In short, although ELC has been established and flourished inside and outside China for two decades, it has not yet created a worthy position in Vietnam, where the local academia currently favours Western schools such as narratology, psychoanalysis, structuralism, receptionism, postmodernism, feminism, ecocriticism, intertextuality, archetypal criticism and post-colonial criticism.

It is undeniable that some Vietnamese scholars are trying to put ELC on the country’s literary criticism map, but it needs more time to gain a prominent position. The Vietnamese scholarly community also makes itself less valuable by not paying enough attention or ignoring this “made in China” school of literary criticism, and it may lose the opportunity to renew and enrich itself. Therefore, to develop ELC in Vietnam, it is also necessary to remove the barriers created by the consequences of subsidised literary criticism in addition to solving the limitations of scholars, research objects and scope and improving the level of academic influence of ELC.

### **The Prospects of ELC in Vietnam**

Vietnamese culture attaches great importance to morality and ethics, and the country’s literature is closely linked with ethical and moral issues. Accordingly, ELC has the potential to grow in the country. Do Van Hieu believes that Vietnamese literary criticism after 1986 is trying to break away from the form of ideological-moral criticism, which is a somewhat extreme view, and at the same time, to broaden chances for foreign literary theories, including ELC. In Do’s opinion, the probability of success for ELC in Vietnam originates in two sources. First, it comes from the reality of literary creation. Vietnamese literature contains profound moral and ethical connotations, and this is the essential basis for the development of ELC in the country. Second, ELC can provide new methods and new horizons for

<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of the essay, the author mentions that contemporary Vietnamese scholars are not interested in discovering moral values and ethical models in the literature. It is necessary to distinguish between the writer’s moral sense in literary works and the manipulation of revealing edificatory functions, ethical and moral values in the writings of literary critics.

literary research and criticism in the country. Similar to the ethical turn in world literary criticism in the 1980s, contemporary Vietnamese literature also needs a “blood change” to promote its rejuvenation. According to Do, this period is thus an opportunity for a so-called “ethical turn” in Vietnamese literary criticism. In other words, this is an opportunity to apply ELC to study literature in the country: “Therefore, developing Ethical Literary Criticism is also building and applying a critical method. It can help researchers more favourable find out characteristics of Vietnamese literature in comparison with other literature around the world, especially Western literature” (“The Potentiality” 58).

Do’s belief is entirely reasonable. Creating space for ELC to grow in Vietnam is both an opportunity and a necessity for the country’s literary life. It is important to note that Do’s comments appeared more than five years ago. At present, the prospect of ELC in Vietnam is still linked to Do’s two reasons, but it also resonates with other sources. For example, there are representatives in Vietnam who are following Do’s footsteps. They continue to introduce, apply and disseminate ELC to local readers. Although this team is not populous, they have the advantage of being very young, good at foreign languages and very dynamic. These scholars will be a significant bridge to connect ELC with Vietnam.

The most outstanding reason why ELC is likely to prosper in Vietnam is its usability and its human values. From a cultural perspective, Hoang Thi Hue and Nguyen Hoang Nguyen believe that ELC meets the requirements of choosing cultural identities to preserve the Vietnamese nation’s traditional culture. The method also identifies the role of literature and art in conserving and promoting the values of traditional culture in the context of the industrialisation and commercialisation that Vietnam is pursuing.<sup>1</sup> In their view, ELC is merely a literary tool and a cultural approach—albeit a universal one—that possesses measures to cope with many problems in contemporary life. Hoang and Nguyen’s concept is consistent with the interdisciplinary nature and ethical foundation of ELC. This illustrates the depth of humanism that ELC nourishes in its missions. Nguyen Anh Dan has noted this essence of ELC and considers it a reliable basis for the method to flourish in Vietnam:

As a humanistic method of literary studies, ELC not only enters the vast literature but also improves human life and society. In the case of the

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<sup>1</sup> See Thi Hue Hoang and Hoang Nguyen Nguyen, “Traditional Culture in Contemporary Vietnamese Poetry: A Perspective from Nie Zhenzhao’s Ethical Literary Criticism,” *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature* 1 (2020): 58.

contemporary world, where we witness lots of violence, wars, conflicts, bombings, and killings around the world, the teaching function of literature invented by Nie Zhenzhao and ELC is more and more useful. Literary studies can play an essential role in making peaceful dialogues among countries and nations, religions and communities, and further creating an ideal world for humankind. (“Ethical Literary Criticism” 270)

Nguyen’s statement shows faith in ELC’s universal humanity, and in the context of the contemporary world, this is necessary not only for Vietnamese academics but also for world literature.

The prospects of ELC, however, will not materialise and the project will fall into ruin if Vietnamese scholars cannot change or improve the situation of ELC in the country. It is thus vital to actively study theories, apply the practice and propagate ELC. The study team should include theoreticians, reputable literary critics and professors at institutes, universities and colleges. It is indispensable to establish a research centre for ELC in Vietnam. This team also needs to spread ELC energetically through effective means, such as translation. There is only one essay by Nie Zhenzhao, “Talks on Ethical Literary Criticism,” that has been translated into Vietnamese. At the same time, the classic works by this and other ELC scholars have not yet reached a large audience in Vietnam, because most of their writings are in Chinese and English, which makes it hard to disseminate ELC into the local community without Vietnamese translations. Celebrated works by scholars of ELC and essays by Vietnamese researchers written in foreign languages should certainly be translated into Vietnamese.

It is also essential to organise more academic activities related to ELC. Vietnamese literary circles should participate in international symposiums organised by IAELC. They also need to manage their own seminars, forums, symposiums and conferences on ELC in Vietnam, especially at universities and colleges, to help students—graduate students in general and the vast community in particular—approach this method. Those who study ELC in Vietnam should also publish articles, supervise master’s and doctoral theses and conduct research projects that use ELC as the dominant method. These publications must “go abroad” to contribute a global voice to the development of ELC and affirm the Vietnamese identity on the international academic map. Local researchers should publish more writings on ELC in prestigious domestic journals to amplify the popularity of ELC within Vietnam.

Vietnamese scholars must also study the theoretical issues of ELC more

deeply. Besides presenting its central theories—including natural selection/choice, ethical selection/choice, ethical environment, ethical dilemma, ethical taboo and teaching function—other terms also need to be clarified, such as moral emotion (道德情感), brain text (脑文本), rational will (理性意志), irrational will (非理性意志), scientific selection (科学选择), ethical paradox (伦理悖论), ethical confusion (伦理混乱), ethical knots (伦理结), ethical structure (伦理结构), ethical enlightenment (伦理启蒙) and so forth. It is particularly significant to repeat and indicate the distinction between ELC and moral criticism and ethical criticism to help Vietnamese critics stop the anticipation of “subsidised literary criticism”.

In terms of the application of ELC, it is essential to expand the study objects and scope to cover Vietnamese and foreign literature, classical and contemporary works, literary fields and interdisciplinary categories. In both theoretical research and practical application, it is fundamental to enhance the interdisciplinary and humanistic nature of ELC. The development of the method in Vietnam cannot proceed without the IAELC’s support and direction in terms of professional references, academic exchanges, research sponsors and cooperative projects. Last but not least, Vietnamese scholars must illustrate their own identity and creative personality in the field of ELC, thus making ELC more colourful and more diverse, while devoting their contributions to the field in Vietnam.

### Conclusion

Since 2004, global academia has seen the step-by-step development of ELC year after year. As a local experience in studying literature, this approach to criticism, which was founded in China, gradually became a global instrument that has received wide-ranging reception and application, including among Vietnamese scholars. International academia is attempting to re-read literary canons from an ethical view to expose the ethical nature of literature, and they are thus developing a new humanism in studying literature. With its outstanding theoretical and practical contributions, ELC is an influential voice that responds positively to world literary theory, and its presence in Vietnam manifests the response of the country to ELC. The reception of ELC by Vietnamese scholars took place during a period when the school was flourishing, and they had many advantages in developing ELC. Unfortunately, the history of the reception of ELC in Vietnam is not as impressive as expected. Although its situation in the local literature is not particularly bright, through the current efforts of young researchers who are diligently pursuing ELC, the future of ELC in the country is very hopeful. This prospect is the impetus for Vietnamese academics to dispel preconceptions about literary criticism related



to ethics. Contemporary Vietnamese literature survives in a dynamic ethical environment that is witnessing openness, freedom, democracy and modernity in literary life. This ethical context also draws attention to many negative elements in the moral life of people and literature. ELC thus deserves and needs to be promoted in Vietnam.

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