

Traditional Culture in Contemporary Vietnamese Poetry: A Perspective from Nie Zhenzhao's Ethical Literary Criticism¹

Hue Hoang Thi & Nguyen Nguyen Hoang

Abstract: Nowadays, the preservation of the national cultural tradition is becoming an urgent issue for many countries around the world. However, the specification of traditional cultural values is often hindered by the diversity of perspectives and schools of studies. This research confirms the significance of Prof. Nie Zhenzhao's theory of ethical literary criticism in studying the retention of cultural values in contemporary Vietnamese poetry. Through the perspective of ethical literary criticism, this research shows the presence of traditional cultural elements in words, sentences, stanzas and archetypes, etc. in contemporary Vietnamese poetry. The research results show the interpretive potential of ethical literary criticism not only for analyzing literature in general, but also for understanding contemporary Vietnamese poetry in particular, thus confirming the values of Vietnamese poetry and ethical literary criticism.

Key words: ethical literary criticism; ethical choice; Nie Zhenzhao; traditional culture; cultural identity; contemporary Vietnamese poetry.

Authors: **Hue Hoang Thi**, is Associate Professor, Lecturer, Science Technology and International Cooperation Affair, University of Education, Hue University (Hue 530000, Vietnam). Her research interests are in Vietnamese Literature, in the relation with cultural, and comparative literature. She earned her Ph.D. from Institute of Literature, National Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam, and a member of Editor Board of Hue University Academic Journals, International Journal Global research in Higher Education, USA, Asian Pacific Journal of Higher Education USA, International Journal Frontiers of Contemporary Education, USA (Email: hoangthihue@hueuni.edu.vn); **Nguyen Nguyen Hoang**, University of Foreign Language, Hue University, Vietnam (Email: warlocknguyen@gmail.com).

¹ This article science was sponsored by NAFOSTED FUND (National Foundation for Science and Technology Development Fund)- Ministry of Science and Technology, Vietnam. Code project: 602.05-2016.01.

标题：文学伦理学批评视角下当代越南诗歌中的传统文化

内容提要：在全球化趋势下保存维护本土的传统文化为每个国家的关键问题。但是各学派间的传统文化维护观的碰撞又阻碍了传统文化价值观的具体化。我们的论文以越南诗歌为例，在理论上向其提出一种解难之道。笔者将聂珍钊 Nie Zhenzhao 所创新的文学伦理学批评的原理就越南当代诗歌进行多方面的论述，具体将越南当代诗歌的代表作中的句法，词法以及诗中的原型 (cổ mẫu) 形象创造揭示越南传统文化中的思维方式和本色之处。本文同时指出聂珍钊 Nie Zhenzhao 的文学伦理学批评观对越南当代诗歌的研究及读者接受活动各方面的效果和可能性。

关键词：文学伦理学批评；伦理选择；聂珍钊；传统文化；文化认识；越南当代诗歌

作者简介：黄氏顺化，越南翰林科学院文学博士，越南顺化师范大学副教授，顺化师范大学的首席专家。现任顺化师范大学的国际科研合作所副所长。兼任多种国际性以及国家性文科类刊物编辑部的委员。主要研究方向为越南文学，比较文学和文学与其他艺术类型关系研究；阮黄原，顺化外语学院研究员。

Introduction

Nowadays, the trend of globalization and international economic integration is overwhelming on a large scale. Along with the stormy development of modern science and technology revolution and global information network, the world seems to become “smaller”. “While creating opportunities for development, economic globalization also brings forth many inequalities, causing great problems and challenges for many countries, especially for developing countries” (Communist Party of Vietnam 206). In addition to economic and social challenges, Vietnam also faces cultural challenges. The possibility of losing national cultural identity is a particular common threat for many developing countries. For every nation, cultural tradition is the most important and valuable thing, and literature is the expression and products of culture. As a form of spiritual culture, literature is a place to store, preserve and create cultural identities of the nation. National cultural identity is the unique core of a cultural community in the history of existence and development, which can help to distinguish one ethnic group from another. It is widely acknowledged that Nie Zhenzhao’s school of ethical literary criticism is very inspiring, because he has not only shown the development trend of literature, but also helped the writers and critics to appreciate their roles, positions and tasks in the fourth era of industrial revolution, as he writes: “Ethical literary criticism reads, interprets and analyzes literature from an ethical perspective. It argues that literature is a unique expression of ethic and morality within a certain historical period, and that literature is

not just an art of language but rather an art of text. In light of ethical literary criticism, moral enlightenment and education are literature's primary function, while aesthetic appreciation is merely second to it" (Nie 83). The more a society becomes modernized, the more it needs to protect and preserve its ethical and cultural values, because only ethics "distinguishes human from animals spiritually" (Nie 83).

Methodology of the Study

In this essay, I will apply Nie Zhenzhao's theory of ethical literary criticism to the study of contemporary Vietnamese poetry, so as to understand the interactivity between culture, history and society, because literature is the most vivid picture of real life, and it carries the general breath of the era. Using the theory of ethical literary criticism, with some instrumental concepts such as: "Ethical taboo, ethical identity, ethical choice, ethical environment, ethical knot, ethical line, ethical confusion, the Sphinx factor, the human factor, the animal factor, rational will, irrational will, natural will, and free will" (Nie 84), this study will help to explain the practical bases and the cause of the aesthetic changes in contemporary Vietnamese poetry, hence to demonstrate the inevitable rule to preserve and promote national cultural values, ethics, as well as to apply the ethical literary criticism in writing and interpreting literature.

To clarify the typical features in content of contemporary Vietnamese poetry, it is impossible to be accomplished without textual analysis. By textual analysis of the features of contemporary Vietnamese poetry, it will be possible to discover the latent meaning hidden within it.

On the other hand, literature is directly and strongly influenced by social circumstances. By comparing differences between moral values and ethical values in literary works, the transformation of literature is associated with the ongoing movement of innovation throughout the society. In Professor Nie Zhenzhao: "Grounding itself on specific historical contexts or ethical environments, ethical literary criticism sees the contemporary value of literature as its historical value rediscovered" (Nie 85).

Hence, the use of comparative methods helps us compare ethical values in the poetry of "Doi moi" period, as well as specific points in the expression of ethical values among authors at the same time.

Results and Discussion

1. "Ethic as the Origin of Literature": The Similarities of the Preservation of National Literature, Culture and Moral Values Under the Impact of Globalization

Since 1986, Vietnam has begun to open and integrate into regional and world economies. With the policy of renovation and opening, in nearly 20 years, Vietnam has made great achievements on all aspects of social life. The rapid development of the scientific revolution—especially in modern technology and the global information network—creates many development opportunities as well as inequalities, causing difficulties and great challenges for the developing countries particularly. Cultures of each ethnic group must contact and interact with other cultures in the world. In the national culture, including knowledge, ideology, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, practices, traditions etc., the ethical and moral issues are the most concerned, “Sediment” of affection and national consciousness in the past, both the crystallization of the spirit of the era and the orientation of the nation’s moral values.

The Tenth Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam pointed out the inheritance, promotion and development of cultural values in the context of international economic integration: “We will build up and perfect the values and moral character of the Vietnamese people, protect and promote our national cultural identity in the period of industrialization, modernization and international economic integration. We will foster cultural values in young people, especially the ideal of life, intellectual capacity, morality and cultural character of the Vietnamese people” (Communist Party of Vietnam 106).

People are the subject in all cultural activities. In the trend of globalization, citizens of the countries participating in this process are all influenced by it in many ways, and globalization has opened to individuals many opportunities to pursue their own goals and make achievements according to different value systems.

Professor Nie Zhenzhao predicted the loss of cultural identities of many countries: “On the other hand, we feel that something is regrettably lost in this process, for our contribution to the development of literary theories is seriously limited” (Nie 84).

And young people, a dynamic social force, a large human resource of each country, is the most impacted. The shift in thinking, the lifestyle of society in the period of integration with the world, as well as ethical, moral, and harmonious social benefits need to be considered, so as to avoid undermining the moral tradition of the nation. Because of reasons mentioned above, Vietnamese literature and culture in the new period aim to build human character with traditional Vietnamese moral values, and at the same time have access to the values of the present times, the sense of respect, protection and pride in the source of national cultural heritage, preserving and promoting the fine traditions, promoting the moral tradition of filial piety. They also aim to perform civilized activities in communication, food, ac-

commodation, travel etc., so as to promote neighborhood love, solidarity, mutual support, mutual support and support in the community, cultural family standards, ethical and moral rules, helping each other to find inspirations to properly handle relationships between family members.

Therefore, ethical literary criticism with the theoretical system of Nie Zhenzhao, when “elaborated on the relationships between literature and society, the relations between writers and their works, and the relations between readers and works from said ethical perspective” (Biwu 2), had oriented for the preservation of traditional moral values are the basis for us to increase more investment in education, training and fostering human resources, strengthening ethics, community, promoting the foundation of social morality and cultural diversification to prepare to move to a new economy, knowledge-based economy.

2. “Ethical Selection,” “Ethical Identities” and the Preserving the Cultural Traditions in Contemporary Vietnamese Poetry

The study of the relationship between literature and morality, ethics has been noticed even since the ancient times, but only by the second half of the nineteenth century, ethical literary studies has really appeared. For example, *Literary Ethics* in Dartmouth College, July 24, 1838 by Ralph Waldo Emerson (Ralph 2019), *Ethics* by Baruch de Spinoza, *Ethics and literature*, by Maurice Thompson, 1893, *Religion in Public and Private Life* by Clarke E. Cochran, 1986, etc. But it is necessary to affirm the important role of Prof. Nie Zhenzhao, whose theory about ethical literary criticism has developed into a worldwide research trend today. From 2004 up to now, he has chaired five international conferences on ethical literary criticism to attract the participation of hundreds of national and international universities each time, and also has published extensively on the topic of literary ethics (Nie 2014). With the general capacity and ability to detect the key issues of the moral criticism, to “distinguish human from animals spiritually”, he points out the important role of ethical literary criticism in human and cultural, ethical and moral survival. He writes: “The biological choice of human beings does not distinguish human beings from other animals; it is through ethical choice that human beings really distinguish themselves from animals. ... Human biological choice and ethical choice are two essentially different choices, the former being the choice of human form, the latter the choice of human nature” (Nie 83).

With *Ethical Literary Criticism: An Introduction* (《文学伦理学批评导论》) (Peiking University Press, 2014), Prof. Nie a leading scholar in ethical literary criti-

cism. “Internationally regarded as the father of ethical literary criticism (as called by Claude Rawson, co-founder and former chair of Warwick English Department and Maynard Mack Professor Emeritus of English at Yale), Prof. Nie writes and publishes extensively on this emerging critical theory, which has been featured by a full-page commentary in *Times Literary Supplement* (31 July 2015) as well as special issues of leading literary journals such as Germany’s *Arcadia: International Journal of Literary Studies*, Purdue’s *CLC Web: Comparative Literature and Culture*, and Taiwan-based *Universitas - Monthly Review of Philosophy and Culture*, culminating to an emerging literary movement with the establishment of the International Association of Ethical Literary Criticism. IAELC’s annual conventions have been hosted by many leading universities, including Shanghai Jiaotong University (2014, China), Dongguk University (2015, Korea), Tartu University (2016, Estonia), Queen Mary University of London (2017, U.K.), Kyushu University (2018, Japan), etc.

He establishes the direction of studying literature from the text itself in relation to cultural values, raising literary moral criticism to a broad, human value. Because of human literature, the ultimate goal is for people to better understand themselves and others. Professor Nie’s concepts are compatible and effective in the study of Vietnamese culture, in contemporary poetry, because, scientific bases such as: “literature is a unique expression of ethic and morality within a certain historical period, and that literature is not just an art of language but rather an art of text (Nie 83). Grounding itself on specific historical contexts or ethical environments, ethical literary criticism sees the contemporary value of literature as its historical value rediscovered” (Nie 83).

This concept meets the requirements of choosing ethical identities in preserving the cultural traditions of the nation, confirming the role of literature and art in preserving and promoting the traditional cultural values in period of industrialization and commercialization of Vietnam.

The life of Vietnamese and literary culture has been deeply influenced by Confucian moral ethics. Since the “Renovation” movement of 1986, focusing largely on economic reforms, moral and ethical issues in this new era have become more and more urgent. Ethical issues related to the family and social morality, and on the behavior of people toward nature, are predominant among both those who produce literature and those who receive it.

Applying Ethical literary criticism, which is fitted to the research community, is a new approach, which has the advantage of being more efficient and better able to point out the characteristics of Vietnam’s literature. At the same time, it also

helps the artist to have a general view, with useful directions in the composition and significance of his work. Ethical literary criticism is also a basis for interpretation to help readers receive literature from basic cultural values of people, thereby determining responsibility for cultural as well as moral issues, ethics and society, and environment ... to preserve and promote those good moral values.

3. “Ethical Choice, Ethical Environment”: A Sense of Ethic Humanity in Contemporary Vietnamese Poetry from the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism

Vietnamese literature and poetry in particular since 1986 have made a lot of achievements, and in many ways have caught up with world literature. A prominent topic in contemporary poetry is still a matter of humanity. The transformation of ethical values in the context of a globalized society requires establishing new values and new cultural identities. Exploring and building the ethics, modern, radical and ethical human model of Vietnamese culture on the basis of refining and adapting the quintessence of foreign culture is a requirement of art and literature, and in general, contemporary poetry in particular.

Along with contemporary Vietnamese prose and poetry on the journey of renovation and integration, there are many names that are highly appreciated in the academy and also by public opinion, such as Tran Dan, Le Dat, Duong Tuong, Hoang Cam, Phung Cung, Hoang Hung, Tran Anh Thai, Luu Quang Vu, Nguyen Quang Thieu, Truong Đang Dung, Nguyen Viet Chien, Mai Van Phan, Inrasara, Nguyen Binh Phuong, Nguyen Linh Khieu, Pham Đuong, Tran Tuan, Van Cam Hai, Vi Thuy Linh, Da Thao Phuong, Ly Hoang Ly, and many others.

Contemporary poetry, in the process of searching for and discovering the nature of society, had a “ethical choice, ethical environment” to building a moral human model with multi-dimensional contemporary cultural characteristics, has raised individuals into philosophical expression centers. The concept of individuality has only really been born in the great industrial production, which is late but it has gone beyond the traditional limits to reach the universal level. Individuals become key factors for self—assembly to create society—a consortium of individuals. In the modern society, the more economic development, the greater the individual role, each individual is an independent entity, capable of outstanding labor to assert itself as a complete unit. The more outstanding the individual, the greater the impact on society. “Individual culture in contemporary society manifests itself in dealing with reality. More specifically, individual culture manifests in words, gestures, ac-

tions, costumes ... immediate behaviors of every human being. The source of this cultural behavior is the philosophy of life and personal labor” (Many authors 363). Approaching the Vietnamese contemporary poetry from the perspective of ethical literary criticism, “we see the essential differences between human beings and other animals in a new light” (Baker, W. and Biwu, S. 15).

Ethics and talents are two important factors that make up the nature of cultural personality. Therefore, contemporary poetry always aims to build a bright symbol of personality, fully converging moral values combined with talent, wisdom, emotion—optimism, solidarity, mutual love and grateful birth origins, the roots nourished: “I went out in the morning to the flesh-and-blood angel of the day and returned to where I was waiting for the night before. The Awakened Man / The Bloody People flowed in me through the seasons, the dreams of the night. tired” (Opening day of the morning - Tran Anh Thai). “...the text is both the material form of language and the material form of thoughts, which allow their becoming the carrier of literature. In contrast to text, language cannot directly contribute to the existence of literature; it must go in a round- about way, that is, language must be converted into letters and text before it is used as a material form to convey meanings (Nie 86).

In Professor Nie Zhenzhao’s opinion, the Vietnamese contemporary poets’ ethical consciousness represented an acceptance of an ethical standard order “Ethical consciousness requires human beings to write down ethical experience and share it with others (Nie 89).

The moral subject in contemporary poetry is characterized by his homeland, as a source of nourishment for the spiritual life of man—the inspiration of the artist’s infinite creativity, the place to return whenever he is enjoying success or suffering from failure: “I sang the song about my homeland / By the bowel I buried there,” wishing “Lifelong being a small dog / To guard the sadness / Treasure of my country” (Song about the homeland - Nguyen Quang Thieu). Drinking water to remember the source is also a good quality of modern people to know to keep: “How many years Dad returned with white hair .”

Or, in the Hoang Hung’s poetry: “Burning torch words/ Poetry help looking for face hey poetry!/ I went to find my face/ go find my face/ looking for face” (Looking for face - Hoang Hung; (Temporarily translate meaning). Find human own face like looking for our homeland, find the homeland identity, ethical identity. That is the need to assert essence.

Contemporary poetry preserves and promotes the traditional cultural values of the nation, building the human personality with sound moral qualities such as hard

work and diligence in labor, mothers, sisters, brothers ... always early in the morning: “The end of the day is full of mist / My sister gets into the sky and into the earth” (The day is open morning - Tran Anh Thai). The image of women suffering from such hardships exists as symbols of traditional cultural people in contemporary poetry.

Besides building a human model with traditional moral values, contemporary poetry also focus on portraying a moral subject with new cultural features. It is the type of person who harmonizes with the traditional and modern cultural elements, the postmodern, the individual person with the changed, elusive and recognizable internal structure, if from the criteria before. Modern individuals, in dealing with themselves and their surrounding, both self-adjusting and adapting to culture. A market economy with a desire to get rich, a pragmatic lifestyle is also at risk of corrupting personality. People may be sacrificed by economic power, noble moral values, love, vitality that will be exhausted if the economy is unified. Modern individual people assert themselves not only in ethics but also in talent and intellect. Modern human culture respects, promotes personal dignity and democratic thought. Because the individual is an important factor that creates community power, but traditional Eastern culture does not accept selfish individuals. The intellect and intuition of each individual are important factors, but the position of the people in endless life is even more important. Because “In human beings there is nothing eternal and permanent ... we are not the owners of life flowing into us, just as the light bulb is not the owner of the electricity making the light bulb bright” (Nie 11).

According to the evaluation of Professors William Baker and Shang Biwu in “Fruitful collaborations”: “In Nie’s opinion, literature is fundamentally an art of ethics, and the primary function of literature is to offer readers moral enlightenment and moral lessons for the progression of human civilization” (William Baker and Shang Biwu 14), is completely objective, accurate and scientific. It shows the effectiveness when properly determining the literary nature of ethical literary criticism. Contemporary Vietnamese poetry with a moral choice has oriented towards building a good culture “by conveying the values of truth, goodness and beauty, literature and the arts enable people to improve their moral sensibility, shoulder their due ethical responsibility, and pursue an ethical life” (Baker, W. and Biwu, S. 14).

Modern moral people are conscious of personal rights but are also very aware of their obligations and responsibilities to the community, as a counterbalance for that individual to balance. “Dissenting child” is the way to affirm personal dignity in modern society with oriental cultural colors: “I returned to the old river wharf,/ You do not remember the time of running water/ I don’t know those childhood

days./ Drops of water through the cheeks, through the lips/ falling down on the warm hand of the person./ We shine./ The river is still peaceful singing songs impartially” (Maybe—Truong Dang Dung). Discovering and establishing the type of contemporary culture in poetry helps people to discover themselves more profoundly and comprehensively, on the basis of comparing traditional cultural values, to establish the right to life, freedom and democracy ... enrich the human spiritual life. The spirit of democratization and globalization of society creates conditions for Vietnamese poets to selectively acquire new philosophies of humanity, combining knowledge, culture and personal experience to build human models. In other words, contemporary culture contributes to enrich Vietnamese cultural capital in the trend of world integration.

Adopting the approach of the ethical literary criticism, focusing on the educational / teaching function of poetry, from the text of poems and moral scenes typical of contemporary Vietnamese poetry, a new critical school has been created. From there, we can see the lessons and revelations of ethical and moral clarity about contemporary individuals in the need to express themselves, affirming morality, talent and sense of self-worth, present in poetry in many ways: in life, in love, and in art work, etc. All of them aim to discover and build a model of individuals with contemporary cultural colors in the era of globalization, integration and development. It is a type of cultural people with a new value system: both inheriting the traditional values of the nation such as drinking water, remembering the source, loving, protecting, sharing, living for everyone ... combined with new values of modern society such as personal autonomy, creativity, consciously rise up to assert themselves, etc.

Conclusion

Ethical literary criticism, in particular with Prof. Nie Zhenzhao's findings, has provided an effective approach, a set of tools to reproduce, build and store cultural values that characterize the cultural period, from the beginning of the twentieth century till the present. From the manipulation of decoding the literary values of the theory of ethical literary criticism, it can be affirmed that contemporary Vietnamese poetry has contributed to create a model of modern moral humanity. Because, as Nie Zhenzhao argued, literature is not the product of labor, but “a product of morality,” or “a unique expression of morality in a given historical period” and it is “fundamentally an art of ethics.” He, then defines ethical literary criticism as “a critical theory that approaches literary works on the basis of their ethical essence and educational function from the perspective of ethics” (Nie 84).

People know how to put themselves in the middle of the operation of society, being an organic part of society, knowing how to catalyze their position, their ability to society, creating the values that promote the society assembly development. It is the type of people who respect the love of their homeland, their families, believing in life, yearning to affirm their dignity, talents, longing for life, love to the end of life, ready to burn in their lives. Living and experiencing art are labors that assert that essence. The contemporary individual in poetry, however manifest in any form, is always a cultural value that resonates with the echo of all that belongs to mankind, time and nation. Because “the historical lesson that the American people have is that: a meaningful, great life is more than personal freedom and material adequacy, a happy life also includes the promotion. community relations and taking care of social concerns” (Bill 124).

We can see that, the ethical literary criticism is a comprehensive theory, with sets of concepts and arguments core, Professor Nie Zhenzhao confirms the truth that: “literature is fundamentally an art of ethics, and the primary function of literature is to offer readers moral enlightenment and moral lessons for the progression of human civilization.” “To a large extent, in the field of literature, this slogan was a timely response to problems provoked by industrialization, commercialization and materialism, which had contributed to the betrayal or abandonment of ethical concerns and moral values” (Baker, W. and Biwu, S. 14).

Works Cited

- Baruch de Spinoza. (24/2/1633-21/2/1677). “Ethics.” <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics_\(Spinoza\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics_(Spinoza))> (accessed January 21,2018).
- Baker, W. and Biwu, S. Fruitful collaborations—Ethical literary criticism in Chinese academe. *Forum for World literature studies, TLS*, JULY 31 2015.
- Biwu, Shang., Ethical Criticism and Literary Studies: A Book Review Article about Nie’s Work, CLC-Web: Comparative Literature and Culture. *Purdue University Press* ©Purdue University, 6, Article 19. 2013
- . “The Rise of a Critical Theory: Reading Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism.” *Foreign Literature Studies* 36.5 (2014): 26-36.
- Bill, Clinton. *Between hope and history - the face of the United States against the challenges of the 21st century*. Political Publishing House Country, Hanoi, 1997.
- Chinese Edition. “Ethical Literary Criticism and the Other: NieZhenzhao of Selected”. *Central China Normal University Press*, 2000.
- Communist Party of Vietnam. *Document of the 10th National Congress*. National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 2006.

Charles, Ross. "A Conceptual Map of Ethical Literary Criticism: An Interview with Nie Zhenzhao".
Comparative Literature Program. Purdue University, 500 Oval Drive, West Lafayette, IN 47907,
USA

Many authors. *A view of intellectuals*. Hanoi Youth Publishing House. 2001.

Nie, Zhenzhao. Introduction of Ethics Literary Criticism (文学伦理学批评导论). *Publishing House of
Hoa Trung University of Education*, 2007.

———. "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism." *International Journal of Literary Culture* 1(January,
2015): 83-101,

———. "Ethics Literary Criticism and Moral Criticism." *Foreign Literature Studies* 2 (2006): 8-17.

———. *Ethical Literature Criticism*. Peking UP. 2014.

———. "Ethical Literary Criticism: Its Basic Theory and Terms." *Foreign Literature Studies* 1 (2010):
14-44

Ralph, Waldo Emerson. "Literary Ethics." <[https://emersoncentral.com/texts/nature-addresses lectures/
addresses/literary-ethics/](https://emersoncentral.com/texts/nature-addresses%20lectures/addresses/literary-ethics/). > (accessed January 5, 2019).