

# Universality: Ethical Literary Criticism (Nie Zhenzhao) and the Advocacy Theory of Aesthetics (Alain Locke)—Ethical Literary Criticism between China and America<sup>1\*</sup>

Leonard Harris

**Abstract:** I argue for the universal value of Zhenzhao Nie's ethical literary criticism and contend that Alain Locke's advocacy theory of aesthetics is compatible with Nie's theory. The meaning of "ethical," however, differs radically between different populations. In addition, dissimilar populations define ethical virtues and behaviors in incongruous and conflicting ways. Spitting in public, for example, and being unfilial is considered unethical by populations in Shanghai, but not Melbourne; some populations are anthropocentric and thus killing animals is not considered unethical. There is no consensus about what substantively counts as "ethical." Locke promoted the value of tolerance, respect and reciprocity as general value attitudes. I suggest that these value attitudes are warranted for the whole of humanity as it reads, creates, and appreciates radically different literary histories with their sometime hidden, sometimes open, ethical content and thereby will universally benefit from Nie's and Locke's ethical literary criticism.

**Key Words:** ethical literary criticism; advocacy theory of aesthetics; value pluralism; Locke; Zhenzhao

**Author:** Leonard Harris, is Professor of philosophy at Purdue University (Indiana

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47906, America). His scholarly interests include aesthetics, social and political philosophy and ethics (Email: harrisl@purdue.edu).

**标题：**普适性：文学伦理学批评（聂珍钊）和美学倡导理论（阿兰·洛克）——中美文学伦理学批评

**内容摘要：**本文试图阐释聂珍钊创立的文学伦理学批评的普适价值，并认为阿兰·洛克的美学倡导理论与聂氏理论相容。然而“伦理”的含义在不同人群之间存在根本差异。此外，不同的人群以不协调和相互冲突的方式界定伦理美德和行为。例如，在上海，人们认为当众吐痰以及不孝的行为是不道德的，然而在墨尔本却非如此；一些地方奉行人类中心主义，因而认为杀戮动物是不道德的。人们对于“伦理”的本质含义莫衷一是。洛克将宽容，尊重和互惠的价值提升为普遍价值态度。本文认为，对于整个人类而言，这些价值态度是必要的，因为借助其中或隐藏、或开放的伦理内容，它审阅、创造和欣赏完全不同的文学历史，因此将普遍受益于聂氏以及洛克的文学伦理学批评。

**关键词：**文学伦理学批评；美学倡导理论；价值多元论；洛克；聂珍钊

**作者简介：**伦纳德·哈里斯，普渡大学哲学教授，主要研究美学、社会和政治哲学以及伦理。

Alain Locke (1886-1954) was the first African American Rhodes Scholar, Oxford University (1907-1910); first graduate with a Ph.D. in Philosophy, Harvard University (1918) and famous for interpreting the art and literary works of the Harlem Renaissance (1925-1939). Locke assiduously promoted art and literature that evinced well formal aesthetic properties such as balance and coherence. He also emphasized values of human dignity and self-respect, particularly in the context of African American artistic creation. Against literature that used demeaning stereotypes that humiliated African Americans, Locke promoted literature that expressed the humanity of African Americans. He encouraged the portrayal of African Americans with complex stories and a wide range of character traits such as honesty, filial dedication, courage, envy or hypocrisy in counterdistinction to degrading stereotypes of persons as slovenly or lazy. Locke's advocacy aesthetics encouraged the use of artistic resources to encourage an ethics of self-realization and to combat prejudice.<sup>1</sup> Locke's literary criticism, for example, his *Annual Reviews of Negro Literature*, was a response to racist representations of African Americans in American literature and an earnest evaluation of the efficacy

1 See Leonard Harris, Ed., *The Critical Pragmatism of Alain Locke* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 1999): 357; Richard Shusterman, *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture* (New York: Cornell UP 2002): 123-138.

and merit of literary works by African Americans.<sup>1</sup>

Zhenzhao Nie, Professor of Foreign Languages and Literature, School of International Studies, and Director, Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies of World Literature, Zhejiang University. He is the Editor-in-Chief for *Forum for World Literature Studies* and *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature*; recipient of the British Academy K.C. Wong Fellowship and grants from the Central Government and National Social Sciences Foundation and Ministry of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences Awards; Vice-President of China National Foreign Literature Association, the International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism (IAELC), and Chinese/American Association for Poetry and Poetics (CAAP). He is the founder of the ethical literary criticism movement in China and author of numerous influential publications including *Ethical Literary Criticism and Others: An Anthology and Introduction to Ethical Literary*. Nie's theory "...came as a response to *theory aphasia* in contemporary Chinese Literary Studies." (Shang, "Ethical Criticism" 494) *Theory aphasia*, in this context, was the propensity to import Western literary theory into Chinese Studies no matter their misguided character. Nie's response included presenting his own theory.

Nie's and Locke's approaches to literature are responses to different social conditions. Locke is from a different historical era than Nie. Not only are their native languages different, but they do not offer an interpretation a single identical text, nor pose a single identical question for which they offer a definitive answer. In addition, many of the concepts they use are not identical. Locke used the term "value" to encompass desires, cognitive categories, moral virtues, aspirations and experiences. Locke never published articles or books on artistic or literary theory. He published a massive corpus of interpretive books and articles on art and literature. Nie tends to use the term "ethical" to mean rule governed behavior and what is often considered moral behavior (virtues and other-regarding concerns). Nie has published extensively on theory and literature and his works are increasingly being appreciated in many countries and through many languages.<sup>2</sup>

Locke does not offer view of the origin of literature nor a view of human nature. Nie offers both. The origin of literature, according to Nie, is nestled in the human desirer so share experience and human nature is intrinsically concerned

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1 See Leonard Harris, and C. Molesworth, *Biography of a Philosopher: Alain L. Locke*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008.

2 See Gexin Yang, "Ethical Turn in Literary Studies and the Revival of American Ethical Criticism." *Foreign Literature Studies* 6(2013):16-25. Shuxin Xiu, Liu, Jianjun, "Current Situation and Future Trend of Ethical Literary Criticism." *Foreign Literature Studies* 4(2008): 165-170.

with ethical perspectives. Nie also points to the existential choosing situation of deciding the identity of animals (ethical selection; Sphinx: factors).<sup>1</sup> For Locke, ethical creations are a feature of valuation. Valuation is perspectival. That is, one feature of our always evolving historical being is constant cauterization and valuations that entail ethical considerations (that which is in some way considered obligatory, due special approbation or rejections) as well as non-moral goods (that is a function of choice or accident, e.g., enjoyment of exercise, tasteful foods, hair styling, etc.).

Nie and Locke both promoted the importance of looking at the ethical content of literature. Both considered the way identities of characters in literature, ethical and ethnic identities, influence ethical choices. The value of Nie's approach extends beyond Chinese scholars. The value of Locke's approach extends beyond its usefulness for African Americans. It is long past time that scholars, whether Western, Eastern or otherwise, consider the warrant of theories with their origin in locations from populations that have suffered denigration by racial and ethnic prejudice. I have argued previously that universal principles often have their historic origins in struggles to confront unique ethnic, cultural or national problems (Harris, "The Great Debate" 13-37).

I will argue that several important common features of Nie's and Locke's views should be applied to all literature because they offer universally warranted concepts. I contend that Nie's and Locke's approach to literature, which includes believing that literary texts are embedded with value oriented ethical significance, is of universal value.

Nie's Ethical Literary Criticism "... argues that literature is a unique expression of ethics 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 secondary to it." (Nie, "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism" 83-101) Through this approach Nie places emphasis on how ethical values are encoded in the text. It is mistaken to believe that ethical voices are no longer embodied in literature and that literature has been reduced to a mode of consumption. Nie's emphasis on uncovering the ethical component of literature can be extended to include the ethical component of literature in all forms. The existence of literature in digital form is only one of many expansions

1 See Biwu Shang. "The Rise of a Critical Theory: Reading *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*." *Foreign Literature Studies* 36.5 (2014):26-36; Marshall Gregory. "Ethical Criticism: What It Is and Why It Matters." *Style* 32.2 (1998): 194- 220.

into new ways of communicating ethical matters. One way to think about this is to consider Nie's approach to the Labor Theory of literature.

The Labor Theory of literature contends that the origin of human production of literature is rooted in how and why people labor. Nie argues, contrary to the Labor Theory, that "...literature is produced out of the need of humans to express their views of morality or the desire to share their ethical experience." (*Ethical Literary Criticism* 14) The expression of ethical concerns and sharing those concerns is a substantive feature of what it is to be human. The salience of such concerns and expressions is debatable, but their existence is constant. Given radically different views of ethics and types of literatures, in the following I offer a defense of the universal value of Nie's thesis that literature convey ethical values.

Different populations, let alone different philosophers, proffer incompatible meanings of "ethical" and those meanings exist in association with a complex web of valuations. I have meant in this article by "ethical" rules and principles of conduct, rule governed behavior and moral virtue character traits. However, a given population may distinguish between ethics as rules and morals as character traits, assigning distinct values to each. And there can be significant differences between the features of what is considered "moral" and "immoral." Even the word "immoral" has significantly different meanings for different populations. The meaning of "immoral," based on some studies of Austrians and Canadians, means behavior that is harmful such as stealing or killing but for persons in Shanghai or Beijing, breaking laws/public civility, being unfilial and spitting in the street also registers as "immoral." These infractions do not have the same salience for Austrians and Canadians. Values endorsed by Austrians and Canadians which are different than values endorsed by some Chinese include significant contrast: "...the greatest cultural contrasts occur on behaviors that are very harmful (termed immoral by Westerners) versus uncivilized (termed immoral by Mainland Chinese). Perhaps for Westerners immoral behaviors are typically seen to cause serious harm, whereas for Chinese, a different prototype — such as incivility — may be used." (Buchtel et.al. 1388) Despite the overgeneration of "Western" versus "Eastern" in the above quote because Austrian and Canadian cultures are not identical to the cultures of Yugoslavia, Croatia or Jamaica — all considered "Western" — and Chinese culture is not identical to the cultures of Indonesia, Malaysia, or India — all considered "Eastern"— what "immorality" means let alone what it is to be moral, differs between highly developed societies.

In one case study what was considered moral revealed important subtle differences between urban populations. In "Melbourne (255 examples) [asked



what was moral], Stealing (14%); harming others (10%); adultery/two-time (8%); lying/deceiving others (7%); sexual promiscuity or indecency (7%)....Beijing (280 examples), Being unfilial (6%); breaking laws/regulations/rules of public civility (6%); betraying/selling-out others (6%); adultery/two-time (6%)....”<sup>1</sup> 7% of a sample considered “spiting in public” as unethical Shanghai; spiting was not reported as unethical in Melbourne. Ethical valuations, despite differences, were registered in all surveys — somethings were considered ethically right or wrong and due special approbation or rejection. Ethical rights and wrongs were always distinct from appropriate, but non-obligatory, civility and disgusting behaviors due disdain.

The salience of any given text depends on the texts’ readers, *ipso facto*, the ethical message. The *Legend of the White Snake* may have sagacious merit in one culture and at best a good secular entertaining love story in another culture. The *Romance of the Song Dynasty* performance spectacle may evince feelings of national pride in Hangzhou, China and any only a curious fictional historical tale to foreigners. There is no world of “ethics” that exists outside the world of actual readers in a given place, at a given time. Even the title of a text can reveal pejorative assumptions. “Evil,” for example, entails the connotation of a reality made possible by transcendental, if not anthropocentric, types of supernatural beings. “Evil” in Colin McGinn’s *Ethics, Evil and Fiction*, for example, *eo ipso*, links “evil” to “ethics” such that the implication in the title is that there is such a link. The title itself entails a conception that differs from conceptions that make sense for religious and cultural orientations that deny the existence of evil or a conception of “evil” as a phenomenon caused by more than one supernatural being.

The “Ethics” and values Newton describes in *Narrative Ethics* are narratives tied to cultural values that encode particular transgressions and virtues as misbehaviors or appropriate behaviors.<sup>2</sup>

We should expect values to change. Valuation is always tied to transvaluation and transposition. We should expect literature to convey different values when

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1 Buchhtel, Emm E., Yanjun Guan, Qin Peng, Yanjie Su, Bio Sang, Sylvia Xiaohua Chen, and Michael Harris Bond, “Immorality East and West: Are Immoral Behaviors Especially Harmful, or Especially Uncivilized.” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41.10(2015):1385. Also see for examples of changes in aesthetic preferences and the role of ugliness, chaos, sin, and conflict, Stephen Bayley, *Ugly: The Aesthetics of Everything*. New York: FIELL Publishing Limited, 2011; for contemporary changing valuations in technology see Heinz C. Luegenbiehl, and Rockwell Clancy, *Global Engineering Ethics*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2017.

2 Newton, Adam Z., *Narrative Ethics*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997.

produced by different communities. What, exactly, should be the meaning of “ethical;” what should be the content of virtues; and what should be considered non-moral properties? Approaching such questions with an attitude of tolerance, respect and cultural reciprocity, I will suggest later, should be constant.

The salience of ancient forms of literature has waned. And it is arguable that the desire to express moral views and share experience has changed. The role of literature in every society has significantly changed since the invention of writing. Previously literature was commonly considered sacred because it expressed sacred meanings and thereby the authors of sacred scrip were treated with reverence. Literature has often been restricted in its’ production and use to a privileged few. As a secular product, literature was commonly considered a mysterious, if not a magical, mode of communication. Prior to the expansion of public education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century no region of the world could boast a large percentage of literate members; reading and writing has always been the province of a small privileged group. As with any product, whether ice cream, silk or literature, once a rare and precious commodity becomes commonly available because it can be produced in massive quantities at relatively inexpensive costs and can be appreciated and used by persons from numerous classes, the product loses its mystique. At least a rudimentary ability to read for a significant number of persons in most communities is completely modern; simultaneously, the salience of literature has waned as a form of sacred writing. The product, however, remains as a kind of thing, e.g., ice cream, silk and literature each has their own unique features. Consequently, mimetic or cathartic theory may help us understand some features of literature, but they fail to direct us to look at its ethical value content. Ethical literary criticism requires that we consider the ethical content and import of literature, not as a tangential feature, but as an integral feature of literature, given that there are radically different types, structures and saliences of literature.

Ludwig Wittgenstein and Michel Foucault argued that literature, at best, can be enlightening even though it can never convey a stable truth or represent innate beauty. Wittgenstein and Foucault represent philosophers that treated literature as a vehicle of indeterminate, undiscernible, visceral, shifting, and complex valuations that can be self-referential or especially for Foucault vehicles, for the utility controlling readers. The ethical properties of literature for Wittgenstein was only important as a linguistic facet and for Foucault ethical properties are features of power struggles and misguided representations.

Karl Popper and Noam Chomsky conceived of literature as a source of truth and beauty. Popper and Chomsky represent philosophers that treat literature as

a source of propositions and sentences that refer to claims subject to warrant by evidence and reasoned judgment. “Realists about aesthetic properties emphasized agreements in judgments that ascribe them; antirealists emphasize disagreements or differences in taste.” (Goldman 31) Nie’s and Locke’s approach requires us to consider the import of values, integral to all texts, as at least one feature of their import. Thus values, whether moral or non-moral, are conveyed by expressions of theme, idiom, style, content, structure and form, not separately, but conjointly.

Locke’s advocacy theory contends that aesthetic creations, in their best manifestation, function to promoting human uplift and self-defined realization.<sup>1</sup> It is not the disinterested, dispassionate, unconnected, third-person observer of artistic form, structure, idiom, and theme that determine the beautiful. Rather, it is formal aesthetic properties in living relationship to valuations, content, context, function and expression that contribute to human uplift. Such literature represents the best traditions of artistic creations. As I read Locke, this approach does not overly romanticize formal aesthetic properties.

Formal aesthetic properties can be a feature of ethically untoward literary works. Formal properties such as coherence of images, consistency of narrative or vividness of images are features of literary works that help make them vehicles for conveying meaning. Literature that conveys hatred, discrimination, pedophilia or necrophilia can also use formal aesthetic properties. Formal aesthetic properties do not invariably convey virtues. I have argued elsewhere that the unity theory of virtue is wrong, namely, that particular traits such as honesty or kindness are traits expressed consistently. They are not. In addition, the correspondence theory of truths’ metaphysical thesis is misguided, namely, that an abstraction such as consistency does not neatly map to or invariably support any particular virtue.<sup>2</sup> Rationally consistent arguments do not invariably support defensible virtues.

If both the majority of the Indian and Indonesian populations believe that sentient lives should not suffer gratuitous suffering by humanity, it does not follow that they are both non-anthropocentric. One population can be anthropocentric and believe that only human lives are sacred, but not animals, and the other can believe that all sentients are sacred. Arguments for either approach can be equally rational.

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1 See Jacoby A. Carter, “Alain LeRoy Locke.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. < <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/alain-locke/>>. Also see op. cit., Shusterman, *Surface and Depth*.

2 See Leonard Harris, “Can a Pragmatist Recite a *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*? Or Insurrectionist Challenges to Pragmatism — Walker, Child, and Locke.” *The Pluralist* 13.1(2018):1–25; “Necro-Being: An Actuarial Account of Racism.” *Res Philosophica* 95.2(2018): 273–302.



In addition, there is no necessary correspondence from general ethical principles to particular ethical choices. Any derivation manual that provides instructions on how to go from general ethical principle to particular choices will be itself value laden. *Mutatis mutandis*, aesthetic properties and objects do not inherently incite or promote ethical fairness; every desire to preserve such properties or objects can also incite debilitating conservatism or justify oppression and genocide. Nearly all contemporary art and literature would be considered sacrilegious and profane if judged by popular criteria of the first century.<sup>1</sup>

Aesthetic properties are simply structures available for any use. However, structures are not value neutral; they provide cadence, timing and tense arrangement. As self-conscious cognitive language users and producers of literature, humanity is invariably entombed conveyers of ethical valuations. Thus, assuming subjective relativism is not warranted, there should be some criteria for approaching competing ethical and moral content that would be useful. “To my thinking, the gravest problem of contemporary philosophy is how to ground some normative principle or criterion of objective validity for values without resort to dogmatism and absolutism on the intellectual plane, and without falling into their corollaries, on the plane of social behavior and action, of intolerance and mass coercion. This calls for a functional analysis of value norms and a search for normative principles in the immediate context of valuation.” (Locke, “Values and Imperatives” 36) We are arguably compelled to decide what values we should use to approach competing ethics. If we are to be honest, pristine non-revisable objective principles are not consonant with the reality of human diversity, let alone philosophically defensible.

A major criterion for evaluating aesthetic value for Locke was whether it helped to ameliorate social conflicts. Demeaning and racist stereotypes, for example, not only hurt, they prevent the possibility of communication and conflict amelioration. “Value assertion would thus be a tolerant assertion of preference, not an intolerant insistence on agreement and finality...Now such a rationale is needed for the effective implementation of the practical corollaries of value pluralism—tolerance and value reciprocity, and one might add, as a sturdier intellectual base for democracy. We know, of course, that we cannot get tolerance from a fanatic or reciprocity from a fundamentalist of any stripe, religious, philosophical, cultural,

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1 In this regard, see for a misguided view that properties incline toward fairness, lacking a meaning of “fairness,” Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1998; for an argument to suppress demeaning stereotypes, see Leonard Harris, “Against Minstrelsy.” *Black Diaspora Review* 3.2(2012/2013): 1-13.

political or ideological.” (Locke, “Pluralism and Intellectual Democracy” 57) Locke thus offered the ethical attitude of tolerance, respect and reciprocity.<sup>1</sup>

Propaganda, according to Locke, has quite a few traits that prevent it from ascending to the level of significant aesthetic value: Its monotony and disproportion make it “too extroverted for balance or poise or inner dignity and self-respect.” It is defensive, strident, and self-contained. It is “one-sided and pre-judging.” The most egregious cognitive feature of propaganda is its “literal mindedness.” (Locke, “Art or Propaganda?” 12-13.) Art and literature for Locke is at its best when expressing defensible values, e.g., poise, inner dignity and self-respect.

Locke believed that value categories shape the way we understand the world. For Locke, artistic expressions convey relationships, attitudes, untried expressions, images, desires and provide ways to cross cultural boundaries. If value pluralism were accepted, then “Cultural difference, surely, would be purged of most of its invidiousness, and much cultural divergence would on deeper inspection turn out to be functionally similar. We would be more prone to respect the organic integrity of the weaker cultures.” (Locke, “Cultural Relativism and Ideological Peace” 57) Locke’s expressionism is a feature of his advocacy theory of aesthetics. Locke’s expressionism, namely, the view that aesthetic dimensions arise from experience and are often an expression or reflection of feelings and needs intricate to cultural realities, motivated his argument that African American folk culture revealed a complex web of valuations, not stereotypical persons.

Locke rejected the traditional distinction between folk art and high art in which high art was the product of independent intellects uninfluenced by folk culture. High culture, for Locke, best existed as an expression of the sophisticated results of select folk expressions. The Harlem Renaissance for Locke recovered the classical, not as a return to a pristine past, but as a recovery of, and creation of, universalizable formal aesthetic properties.

I have focused on Nie’s and Locke’s promotion of the importance of looking at the ethical content of literature. There are, however, significant differences between what virtues and behaviors are considered ethical and what ethical content is considered warranted. I use Locke’s advocacy aesthetic theory to recommend the values of self-respect, self-realization and dignity. The orientations of tolerance, respect and reciprocity are values arguably warranted for the whole of humanity

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1 See Alain Locke, “Cultural Relativism and Ideological Peace” (1944), *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*. L. Harris (ed.), Philadelphia: Temple UP, 69–78; “A Functional View of Value Ultimates” (1945), *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*. L. Harris (ed.), Philadelphia: Temple UP, 81–93.

as it reads, creates and appreciates radically different literary contents, structures, histories and the sometime hidden, sometimes open, ethical reality embedded in literature as emphasized by Nie's ethical literary criticism.

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