

Bibliometric Explorations on Studies of Ethical Literary Criticism: Progress, Frontiers, and Prospects

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to examine the development of Ethical Literary Criticism with the help of Citespace, a tool for document visualization and metrological analysis, and to promote the deepening development of Ethical Literary Criticism research by using Chinese CSSCI core journal papers and foreign SSCI and A&HCI core journal papers as the corpus. The study found that: 1. more articles were published in Chinese core journals than in international core journals; 2. Chinese research hotspots and frontiers are “ethical identity”, “brain text”, and “ethical criticism”, while international research hotspots are “ethical criticism”, “ethical identity”, “ethical teaching”, “ethical dilemmas”, and “interpersonal relationships. 3 Nie Zhenzhao leads the development of Ethical Literary Criticism at home and abroad. 4. Chinese scholars dominate the field of Ethical Literary Criticism in the world. The study concludes that the future development of Ethical Literary Criticism should focus on three aspects: strengthening the construction of a theoretical discourse system, deepening interdisciplinary research, and promoting international cooperation.

Keywords:

Ethical Literary Criticism, CSSCI Journal, SSCI Journal, A&HCI Journal; Bibliometric Analysis

1. Introduction

Ethical Literary Criticism is a new methodology of literary criticism proposed by Prof. Nie Zhenzhao in 2004. In the article “Ethical Literary Criticism: a new exploration of literary criticism methods” published in the CSSCI core journal *Foreign Literature Research* in 2004, Professor Nie Zhenzhao, on the basis of summarizing and reviewing the theories and methodologies of literary criticism in China, discusses the theoretical foundations, objects of criticism, contents and ideas, and literary origins of Ethical

Literary Criticism, taking ancient Greek and Roman literature as examples. And it is proposed that “literature, as an art form, typically and centrally reflects the moral phenomena of human society and depicts the moral contradictions and conflicts that

exist in society, and therefore literature can necessarily become the object of ethical studies.” [1] Ethical Literary Criticism focuses on analyzing different examples of ethical choices in texts in a specific historical environment from an ethical perspective, making an objective and fair evaluation of the social ethical and moral phenomena reflected in literature, and revealing their moral inspiration and teaching value. Since its introduction, Ethical Literary Criticism has aroused heated discussions in academic circles. According to Harris, a scholar at Purdue University, “Professor Nie Zhenzhao’s theory of Ethical Literary Criticism has universal value, and the theory coincides with Locke’s aesthetic thought. [2] Similarly, Geun argues that “the moral and educational functions of literature are established through literary ethical criticism and will be applied to the practical criticism of world literature. [3] Mr. Chen Zhongyi, president of the Chinese Society of Foreign Literature and a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, suggested in his opening speech at the Forum on Ethical Literary Criticism and World Literature Studies that “ethics has indeed become and will become more and more prominent, mainly because, first, Chinese culture has a deep ethical tradition; second, today’s literary criticism is caught in a dilemma; and third, the development of science and technology also forces us to face various ethical issues directly.” [4] The successful holding of the International Conference on Ethical Literary Criticism year by year fully reflects the attention and importance of this theory in the academic community, so it is highly necessary to systematically sort out and analyze the study of Ethical Literary Criticism. Based on this, this study intends to conduct a comprehensive survey of the research papers on Ethical Literary Criticism published in Chinese CSSCI and foreign SSCI/A&HCI journals with the help of CiteSpace, a knowledge graph visualization and analysis software developed by Professor Chaomei Chen of Drexel University, and analyze the current situation of Ethical Literary Criticism research in China and abroad in order to clarify the history and frontiers of Ethical Literary Criticism research and provide some reference for the development and in-depth research of this theory. The aim is to provide some reference for the development and in-depth research of this theory.

2. Bibliometric analysis of Ethical Literary Criticism

2.1. Research Questions

This study aims to explore the following questions: (1) what the similarities and differences between Chinese and international studies on Ethical Literary Criticism are; and (2) what insights and references the similarities and differences between Chinese and international studies bring to future studies on Ethical Literary Criticism.

2.2. Research Methodology

Academic papers can demonstrate the nature and level of their disciplines [5] The Chinese corpus selected for the study comes from academic papers published in CSSCI (Chinese Social Science Citation Index) journals, which has a high recognition in China. The English corpus was selected from academic papers published in internationally recognized SSCI (Social Science Citation Index) and A&HCI (Arts and Humanities Citation Index) journals.

The steps of the study are as follows: First, we searched the CSSCI website and CNKI website with the keyword “Ethical Literary Criticism”, selected “unlimited” as the time range, and selected “CSSCI” as the literature source and acquired 330 papers on the CSSCI website and CNKI website with “Ethical Literary Criticism” as the

keyword, “unlimited” as the time range, and “CSSCI” as the source. The second step is to select the database “Web of Science Core Collection” on the official website of WoS, use “Ethical Literary Criticism” as the keyword in the subject field, and check the citation index Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) - 1970 to present” and “Arts & Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI) - 1975 to present”, add the date range “all years”, select “English” as the language, and select “Article” as the document type for the search, and 93 papers were obtained. In the third step, we used Citespace (software version 6.1.R3), a widely recognized tool for bibliometric analysis in China and abroad, to analyze the obtained corpus visually. Finally, on the basis of the bibliometric analysis combined with the text reading analysis, the paths and inspirations for the future deepening and development of Ethical Literary Criticism research are discussed.

2.3. Research findings

2.3.1. Number of Articles Issued

Figure 1 counts the number of Chinese and foreign core journal publications over time. First of all, from the perspective of Chinese publication volume, the Chinese research on Ethical Literary Criticism has roughly gone through three stages. The first stage is from 2004 to 2010, with an average annual publication volume of 7.3 articles, and the annual publication volume is fluctuating and increasing, indicating that Chinese research on Ethical Literary Criticism is still emerging and is gradually attracting the attention of Chinese scholars. The second stage is from 2011 to 2016, with an average annual publication volume of 27.5 articles and a rapid and steady increase, reaching a peak of 37 articles between 2015 and 2016, which shows that the theory of Ethical Literary Criticism has attracted widespread attention from scholars and aroused high research enthusiasm in China. The third stage is from 2017 to 2022, and the average annual number of articles published in this stage is 19, with an overall decreasing trend in the annual number of articles published, and Ethical Literary Criticism still has more research and development space in the future. The first Chinese CSSCI paper is the article *Ethical Approach to Literary Studies: A New Perspective* by Professor Nie Zhenzhao, a foreign member of the Academia Europaea and a scholar from Zhejiang University. The paper can be regarded as a seminal work in the study of Ethical Literary Criticism. The paper proposes a new approach to literary criticism by studying literary works from the perspective of ethics and morality, as well as the relationship between literature and writers, literature and readers, and literature and society, etc. Through this criticism, the excellent literary works are affirmed in terms of ethical and moral values, and the progress of human civilization is promoted. [1] Secondly, in terms of the number of international publications, international Ethical Literary Criticism research started only slightly later than Chinese research, with the first paper published in 2005. The overall number of publications is relatively low, with an annual average of only 8.2, and only surpasses the annual number of Chinese publications in 2021, reaching its peak of 28, reflecting that the research strength and interest of international Ethical Literary Criticism research are inferior to those of Chinese research. The first international core paper is Professor Nie Zhenzhao's paper *Ibsen's plays in China and their ethical value: A speech at the closing ceremony of the Third International Ibsen Conference in China*. The paper takes an Ethical Literary Criticism perspective, pointing out that *A Doll's House* is an ethical and moral play, and argues that the greatest value of Ibsen's plays lies in raising a series of moral and ethical issues and making efforts to solve them. [7]

Comparing the number of articles published in Chinese and international Ethical Literary Criticism studies over time, we can see that although Chinese and international research have gone through almost the same initial stage and development, since 2012, the average annual and total number of articles published in China have far exceeded that of international research, and the research results are abundant. This may reflect the higher research enthusiasm of Chinese scholars for original Chinese literary theories on the one hand, and the lack of international influence of Ethical Literary Criticism theories on the other. In addition, the fact that the authors of both the first Chinese and international core papers are Prof. Nie Zhenzhao fully reflects Prof. Nie's high leadership and frontier in the field of Ethical Literary Criticism studies.

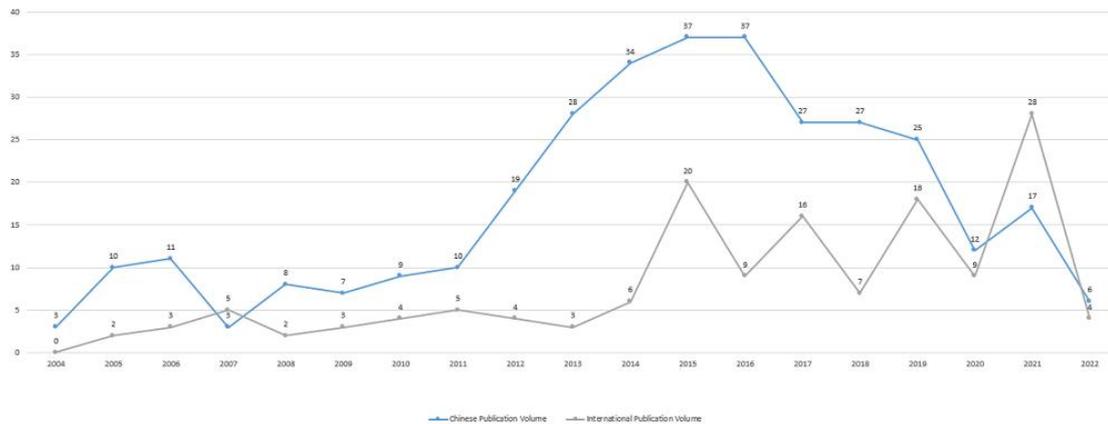


Figure 1. Chinese and international historical publication volume.

2.3.2. Keyword Co-occurrence

In Citespace visual analysis images, count and centrality are important indicators of keywords. Keywords with higher count and intermediary centrality have higher significance and are a popular topic for Ethical Literary Criticism studies in the academic community. By analyzing the data of Chinese core papers through Citespace, the top 20 cited keywords in China can be obtained after removing the duplicate or identical entries with the same meaning as the topic of this study (Table 1).

Table 1. Chinese total cited high-count keywords.

No.	Keyword	English Translation	No.	Keyword	English Translation
1	伦理选择	Ethical choice	11	脑文本	Brain text
2	聂珍钊	Nie Zhenzhao	12	文学批评	Literary criticism
3	伦理身份	Ethical identity	13	当代外国文学	Contemporary foreign literature
4	伦理学	Ethics	14	外国文学研究	Foreign literature studies
5	伦理批评	Ethical criticism	15	唯美主义	Aestheticism
6	斯芬克斯因子	Sphinx factor	16	伦理意识	Ethical consciousness
7	学术研讨会	Academic Seminars	17	伦理结	Ethical complex
8	伦理环境	Ethical environment	18	人性因子	Human factor
9	伦理困境	Ethical predicament	19	伦理价值	Ethical value
10	伦理两难	Ethical dilemma	20	伦理转向	Ethical turn

Ethical choice is the core concept of Ethical Literary Criticism Theory, which is the process of acquiring human essence that human beings go through after acquiring human form through nature selection.[6] Based on this concept, Ethical Literary Criticism gradually builds up a literary criticism discourse system with the concepts of ethical identity, ethical environment, free will, and Sphinx factor as its core, laying a solid foundation for the practical application of Ethical Literary Criticism. In addition, brain text is another important term in Ethical Literary Criticism Theory, meaning the results of perceiving, cognizing, understanding and thinking about things preserved by the human brain in the form of memory. [7] Ethical Literary Criticism believes that different ethical choices result in different brain texts, which in turn are constructed into different forms of literary texts. Therefore, brain texts are an important prerequisite for literature to achieve its didactic function.

The keywords with high intermediary centrality can be obtained as the following keywords after eliminating overlapping terms (Table 2).

Table 2. Chinese co-cited high intermediary centrality keywords.

No.	Keyword	English Translation	No.	Keyword	English Translation
1	唯美主义	Aestheticism	11	伦理选择	Ethical choice
2	列维纳斯	Levinas	12	《慈悲》	<i>Mercy</i>
3	文学理论	Literary theory	13	伦理环境	Ethical environment
4	文学批评方法	Literary criticism methods	14	伦理意识	Ethical consciousness
5	伦理结	Ethical complex	15	外国文学	Foreign literature
6	伦理身份	Ethical identity	16	新探讨	New discussion
7	《哈姆莱特》	<i>Hamlet</i>	17	聂珍钊	Nie Zhenzhao
8	亚里士多德	Aristotle	18	伦理拯救	Ethical rescue
9	伦理学	Ethics	19	《专使》	<i>The Ambassadors</i>
10	斯芬克斯因子	Sphinx factor	20	伦理困境	Ethical predicament

Comparing the two sets of data, we can find that the high count and high centrality keywords actually have a certain degree of overlap, indicating that the above keywords are actually the hot topics and research focuses of Chinese Ethical Literary Criticism studies. In addition, the use of Ethical Literary Criticism to reinterpret classical texts and the comparative study with other literary theories is also a hot research topic in this field. By using the “Cluster” function in Citespace, it is possible to analyze the leading topics of Chinese research, namely: “ethical identity”, “ethical criticism”, “ethical complex”, “brain text”, “animal factor”, “aestheticism”, and “moral ethics”. By comparing popular themes and cutting-edge themes, we can see that there are overlaps between them, such as “ethical identity,” “brain text,” and “ethical criticism,” which are popular themes that also have the potential to become cutting-edge themes.

By the same method, we can get international research high count keywords (Table 3) and high mediated centrality keywords (Table 4).

Comparing Table 3 and Table 4, it is found that the keywords ranked at the top of both tables have both high co-citation counts and centrality, i.e., they are hot topics and focuses of studies in this field. It can be inferred that the hot topics of international Ethical Literary Criticism studies are: “ethical criticism”, “ethical

identity”, “brain text”, “ethical choice”. Although the term “ethical choice” is used in the same Chinese expression, it actually refers to two concepts in Ethical Literary Criticism theory, namely “ethical selection” and “ethical choice” respectively. Ethical selection is a new stage of human moral civilization after the completion of natural selection, and it is a process that human beings must go through to acquire their moral essence through specific ethical choice activities.[6] The results of the “clustering themes” show that the frontier topics of international research are: “ethical identity”, “ethical criticism”, “moral teaching”, “ethics”, “ethical turn”, “Nie Zhenzhao”, “ethical predicament” and “interpersonal relationship” .

Table 3. International co-cited high-count keywords.

No.	Keyword	No.	Keyword
1	Ethical choice	11	Ethical consciousness
2	Ethical identity	12	Ethical turn
3	Ethical criticism	13	Criticism
4	Literary criticism	14	Literary and ethics
5	Nie Zhenzhao	15	Ian McEwan
6	Brain text	16	Ethical value
7	Ethical selection	17	Ethical predicament
8	Ethical dilemma	18	Ethics and morality
9	Sphinx factor	19	Animal factor
10	Ethical environment	20	Ethical teaching

Table 4. International co-cited high intermediary centrality keywords

No.	Keyword	No.	Keyword
1	Ethical criticism	11	Ethical dilemma
2	Literary criticism	12	Ethical value
3	Ethical choice	13	interview
4	Ethical identity	14	Literary theory
5	Nie Zhenzhao	15	Literature and ethics
6	Brain text	16	Sphinx factor
7	Criticism	17	Art
8	Ethical environment	18	Bernard Shaw play
9	Ethical selection	19	Comparative literature
10	Animal factor	20	Cultural identity

By comparing Chinese and international research hotspots, we can find that: first, Chinese scholars focus more on the theory of Ethical Literary Criticism itself and the application of its core concepts in critical practice, while international scholars tend to combine the theory of Ethical Literary Criticism and the theory of moral criticism, a tendency that probably stems from the long-standing tradition of moralism in Western literature and literary criticism. Second, Chinese scholars’ research is relatively concentrated, focusing on several themes such as “ethical identity,” “ethical criticism,” and “ethical complex,” while international research is more scattered and has a higher degree of diversity. Thirdly, there is a certain overlap between Chinese and foreign scholars’ research, and the popular topics of both include “ethical criticism,” “ethical identity,” “brain text,” and “ethical choice. Fourth, in terms of research frontiers, there are some differences between the frontiers of Chinese and foreign studies. Chinese studies focus more on the improvement and construction of the theory itself, while international research covers a wide range of disciplines and focuses on the application of Ethical Literary Criticism theory in the real world.

2.3.3. Co-cited Articles

Co-citation analysis of articles can help identify important literature that has played a key role in the research history of Ethical Literary Criticism. By selecting the “cited literature” function in the “node type” of the Citespace, the articles with both high co-citation count and intermediary centrality were analyzed. Among them, the top seven are all papers by Zhenzhao Nie, namely, Ethical Literary Criticism: Its Fundamentals and Terms, On Ethical Literary Criticism and Moral Criticism, Ethical Approach to Literary Studies: A New Perspective, The Old Man and the Sea and the Law of the Jungle, Ethical Literary Criticism: Ethical Choice and Sphinx Factor, Ethical Literary Criticism: On Fundamental Function and Core Value of Literature, Talks on Literary Ethical Criticism. In the article Ethical Literary Criticism: Its Fundamentals and Terms, Prof. Nie Zhenzhao discusses the basic position, domain, and value of Ethical Literary Criticism, and explains in detail the core concepts of “ethical choice”, “ethical identity” and “ethical complex” in the context of Shakespeare’s plays, Ba Jin’s novels and other literary classics in the East and West. In his 2011 article Ethical Literary Criticism: Ethical Choice and Sphinx Factor, he further discussed the concept of “ethical choice” and innovatively introduced the term “Sphinx Factor” . In the paper, Prof. Nie Zhenzhao analyzes the important role of the “Sphinx factor” in the process of ethical choice, taking Sophocles’ tragedy Oedipus Rex as a model. The remaining papers are, in order, Theoretical Construction of Ethical Literary Criticism: An Interview with Nie Zhenzhao by Ross, a scholar at Purdue University, The Art of Unease: An Ethical Literary Criticism Interpretation of McEwan s’ Butterflies by Shang Biwu, a professor at Shanghai Jiaotong University, and Review of Wang Lixin s’ Literary Studies of Hebrew Bible in the Context of Ancient Jewish History and Culture by Liu Jian, a professor at Northeast Normal University. Among them, Charles Ross, a scholar from Purdue University, published a paper in Chinese in the journal Foreign Languages and Their Teaching. The paper Theoretical Construction of Ethical Literary Criticism: An Interview with Nie Zhenzhao, in the form of a conversation with Nie Zhenzhao, discussed in depth the origin and function of literature, the value of Ethical Literary Criticism, and the relationship between Ethical Literary Criticism and Aestheticism. The article argues that “Ethical Literary Criticism does not deny the value of Aesthetic Criticism but sees Aesthetic Criticism as an important method for understanding literature to achieve ethical goals. Thus, Aesthetic Criticism helps us to read and appreciate literature and to gain moral enlightenment from it.[8] The analysis of clustering themes shows that the current frontier themes of Chinese academic research are “literary criticism”, “current situation”, “theory construction and development”.

Using the same methodology to analyze the international core literature, the top ten international papers with strong impact can be concluded (Table 5).

In terms of research directions, the above papers can be broadly classified into the following four categories:

- a. Theoretical studies: No. 1, No. 2, No. 4, No. 10.
- b. Textual studies: No. 8, No. 9.
- c. Review: No. 3, No. 6, No. 7.
- d. Overview papers: No. 5.

The cluster theme analysis revealed that the current themes at the forefront of international studies are: “ethical dilemma,” “ethical preoccupation,” “artificial intelligence”.

From the above analysis, it can be inferred that, firstly, both Chinese and international highly co-cited literature are dominated by Chinese literature, revealing that Chinese scholars have strong academic ability and fruitful academic achievements in the field of Ethical Literary Criticism studies and dominate the research on Ethical Literary Criticism in the global academic community. Second, the papers of Prof. Nie Zhenzhao occupy more than the average number of high international and Chinese co-citations, indicating that Prof. Nie Zhenzhao has demonstrated high academic leadership and frontier in this field, leading the development of international and Chinese Ethical Literary Criticism studies. Again, the number of clustered themes in international research versus Chinese research proves that both Chinese and international scholars possess a broad academic vision and interdisciplinary spirit, as shown by the number of clustered themes.

Table 5. International co-cited high-count papers.

No.	Paper Title	Author
1	Ethical Literary Criticism: Its Fundamentals and Terms	Nie Zhenzhao
2	Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism	Nie Zhenzhao
3	Ethical Criticism and Literary Studies: A Book Review Article about Nie's Work	Shang Biwu
4	Ethical Literary Criticism: On Fundamental Function and Core Value of Literature	Nie Zhenzhao
5	Academic Influence and the Construction of International Discourse Power: The Development of Ethical Literary Criticism in the Past Fifteen Years	Su Hui
6	Rejuvenation and Innovation: The Past, Present and Future of Ethical Literary Criticism	Chen Lizhen
7	Nie Zhenzhao and the Genesis of Chinese Ethical Literary Criticism	Tian Junwu
8	The Conflict between Scientific Selection and Ethical Selection: Artificial Intelligence and Brain Text in Ian McEwan's <i>Machines Like Me</i>	Shang Biwu
9	Innovation in the Study of Bernard Shaw's Plays: A Review of The Ethical Expressions of Society and Politics: A Study on George Bernard Shaw's Plays	Nie Zhenzhao
10	The Forming Mechanism of Brain Text and Brain Concept in Theory of Ethical Literary Criticism	Nie Zhenzhao

2.3.4. Co-cited Authors

Co-cited author analysis can help screen out authors with strong influence in the field of Ethical Literary Criticism studies on the one hand, and also help us discover the research directions and interests that scholars share. High citation count proves that authors achieve far-reaching social influence, and high centrality confirm that authors contribute to the rapid translation of research results.[9] The data analysis reveals that the top ten high-cited count authors in China are, in order, Nie Zhenzhao, Wayne, Shang Biwu, Eagleton, Liu Jianjun, Bloom, Head, Miller, Liu Xiaofeng, and Zhou Xian, indicating that they are extremely influential in the Chinese Ethical Literary Criticism studies community. The top ten authors with high intermediary centrality are, in order, Nie Zhenzhao, Wayne, Eagleton, Liu Jianjun, Li Dingqing, Liu Xiaofeng, Yang Jincai, Zhao Li, Head, and Nussbaum, and the analysis shows that they have strong research output ability. The authors belonging to the same two groups include Nie Zhenzhao, Liu Jianjun, Liu Xiaofeng, Wayne, Eagleton and Head, and this result highlights their simultaneous academic influence and output power. In

addition, the theme clustering analysis revealed that Chinese scholars focused on several different topics (Table 6).

Table 6. Clustering themes of Chinese co-cited authors.

No.	Clustering theme	English Translation	Author
1	道德观念	Moral values	Wang Ning, Liu Xiaofeng, Yang Gexin
2	伦理转向	Ethical turn	Nie Zhenzhao, Liu, Wang
3	伊恩·麦克尤恩	Ian McEwan	Shang Biwu, Yang Jincai, Du Juan
4	审美	Aesthetics	Tang Lan, Liao Changyin, Huang Hui
5	英美现代主义诗歌	Anglo-American Modernist Poetry	Zhang Shaokang, Cao Shunqing
6	进化论文学批评	Evolutionary Literary Criticism	Nazar, Bloom

The top ten scholars in terms of international academic influence are: Nie, Shang, Wayne, Liu, Baker, Ross, Chen, Bloom, Miller, Hannah, and the top ten scholars in terms of translatability are: Nie, Wayne, Buell, Nussbaum, Carroll, Boym, Adamson, Ross, Bloom, Bauman. The scholars with strong influence and output that lead the research development are: Nie, Wayne, Nussbaum, Ross, Bloom. The cluster theme analysis reveals that the international scholars focus on several different research themes (Table 7).

Table 7. International co-cited author clustering themes.

No.	Clustering theme	Author
1	Ethical choice	Nie, Baker, Ross
2	Mobility	Richard, Claudio, Khan
3	Ethical criticism	Elizabeth, Hillis, Roland
4	Moralism	Samuel, Beckett, Anderson
5	Literature and politics	Kim, Chen, Yang
6	Avant-garde narrative	Dostokvsky, Burt, Boym
7	Theory of literature	Blake, Jiang, Brooks

Comparing the above analysis, we can find that, firstly, the research themes of Chinese scholars are the same as those of international scholars, which indicates that Chinese scholars have a better sense of frontier and academic merit in the selection of research topics. Secondly, international scholars' research topics are relatively diversified and have a strong sense of interdisciplinary research, such as the study of Ethical Literary Criticism through "politics" and "mobility". Third, the number of Chinese and international research topics is almost the same, which indicates that Chinese scholars have a broad vision and horizon in selecting topics.

2.3.5. Co-cited Journals

According to the results of Citespace analysis, the 10 Chinese journals with the highest co-citation count and intermediary centrality are: *Foreign Literature Studies*, *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, *Foreign Literature Review*, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, *Forum for World Literature Studies*, *Literary Controversy*, *English and American Literary Studies*, *Foreign Literature*, *Arcadia*, and *Critical Inquiry*. From 2005 to 2009, the CSSCI core journal *Foreign Literature Studies*, sponsored by Huazhong Normal University, published ten columns on Ethical Literary

Criticism and published more than 30 papers. Lu Yaodong, in *Issues Concerning Ethical Literary Criticism*, evaluates the relevant research: “With a large number of historical facts of foreign literature, it argues the basis and the practical importance and necessity of the present proposal of this issue, among which, especially the object and content of Ethical Literary Criticism can be said to be the first time, the crystallization of comprehensive, systematic, and thoughtful thinking is admirable.” [10] The cluster analysis shows that the journals that focus on the theme of “brain text” in China include *Journal of PLA University of Foreign Languages*, *Journal of Central South University (Social Sciences)*, The “ethical turn” is the focus of *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, *Foreign Languages and Literature* and *Foreign Language Education*. *Journal of Tsinghua University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* and *Foreign Literature* are concerned with “realism”.

The top ten journals in terms of high count and intermediary centrality of international co-cited literature are *Foreign Literature Studies*, *Forum for World Literature Studies*, *Arcadia*, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, *TLS-The Times Literary Supplement*, *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature*, *Comparative Literature Studies*, *Critique-Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, *Contemporary Literature Studies*, *Critical Inquiry*, and *Foreign Literature*. The A&HCI journal *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, sponsored by Purdue University, had a special issue in December 2015 to discuss the theoretical research and application of Ethical Literary Criticism with the theme of “21st century fiction and ethics”. Nearly 20 papers by Chinese and international scholars are included. The analysis found that journals that emphasized the cluster theme “Nie Zhenzhao” include *Foreign Literature Studies*, *Arcadia*, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, *TLS-The Times Literary Supplement*, and *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature*.

It can be seen that, firstly, the fact that Chinese highly cited journals include both Chinese and a certain number of international journals indicates that the Chinese academic community has a more ambitious academic vision and reflects a strong international academic awareness. Secondly, the presence of Chinese journals among the top international co-cited journals in Ethical Literary Criticism studies indicates that the results of Chinese Ethical Literary Criticism studies are widely recognized by the international academic community on the one hand and affirms the solid journal quality of Chinese journals on the other. Finally, the number of clustered themes in both Chinese and international journals is small, indicating that there is still more room for both Chinese and international journals in terms of the scope of selected topics.

2.3.6. Collaborative Scholar Groups

By selecting “author” and “institution” in the “node type” option and importing the data of Chinese core journal papers for analysis, we can find that the top ten authors and institutions of Ethical Literary Criticism studies in China are: Nie Zhenzhao, Shang Biwu, Liu Jianjun, Zhang Lianqiao, Liu Maosheng, Yang Renmin, Wu Mingyue, Ding Bingwei, Yang Jincai, and Liu Hongwei. The top ten research institutions are: Central China Normal University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Zhejiang University, Northeast Normal University, Zhongnan University of Economics and Law, Nanjing Normal University, Dalian University of Foreign Languages, Jiangxi Normal University, Xiamen University, and Beihang University. The results of the clustering analysis show that the scholars who focus on the theme of “brain text” include Nie Zhenzhao, Wang Songlin and Huang Kaihong, and the institutions include Central China Normal University, Hangzhou Normal University, Ningbo University and

Guangzhou University. Scholars interested in the theme of “ethical criticism” include Liu Jianjun, Yang Jincai, Wu Di, Zhou Yi and Li Zhuo, and institutions include Nanjing University, Huazhong Agricultural University and Northeast Normal University. Scholars focusing on the theme of “World Literature” include Liu Hongwei, Wu Mingyue, Li Xiangge, Zhang Jie, Liu Zengmei, Li Jing, and institutions include Nanjing Normal University, Jinan University, and Zhongnan University of Economics and Law. Scholars concerned about “aestheticism” include Shang Biwu, Xu Bin, and Liu Tian, and institutions include Zhejiang University, Hunan University, and Dalian University of Foreign Languages. The software did not detect any scholars or research institutions with academic contacts.

Using the same methodology as above to analyze the international core journal literature data, it can be concluded that the top ten scholars in terms of intermediation centrality among the international group of collaborating scholars in Ethical Literary Criticism studies are Nie, Shang, Liu, Ren, Li, Tian, Virk, Zou, Huang, Fak. Top ten institution are Central China Normal University, Zhejiang University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, Konkuk University, Ningbo University, Beihang University, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Jinan University, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Nanjing Normal University. The results of the cluster theme analysis show that the scholars who focus on the theme of “ethical choice” are Nguyen and Su, and the institutions are Central China Normal University, and the software also did not detect any scholars or research institutions with academic contacts.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that Chinese and international Ethical Literary Criticism studies is mainly concentrated in China, which may be due to the fact that Ethical Literary Criticism theory is the original literary criticism theory of Chinese scholars, and Chinese scholars have natural geographical advantages and higher academic interests in conducting research. In addition, Chinese research institutions also occupy a pivotal leadership position in international Ethical Literary Criticism studies, which fully proves the profound academic merit of Chinese research institutions and their important position in the field of Ethical Literary Criticism studies. Thirdly, the scope of themes selected by international and Chinese scholars and research institutions still has much room for improvement. Finally, the density of cooperation between Chinese and foreign scholars and research institutions still needs to be strengthened.

2.4. Discussion

2.4.1. Strengthen The Construction Of Theoretical Discourse System

Cao Shunqing argues that for a long time, contemporary Chinese literary theory has basically borrowed a set of Western discourses and has long been in a state of “aphasia” in literary expression, communication and interpretation.[11] As an important breakthrough in the theoretical discourse of literary criticism with Chinese characteristics, the theory of Ethical Literary Criticism has undoubtedly played a role in the field of literary criticism and theoretical research in China and the world as a pamphlet. Theory has a basic characteristic that it is a system.[12] As a nascent theoretical system, Ethical Literary Criticism still has great potential for the construction of its theoretical framework. The academic community should try to build a complete, systematic and professional theoretical discourse system centering on the core concepts of Ethical Literary Criticism. For example, Professor Su Hui of Central China Normal University innovatively proposed the concept of “ethical

wisdom” from the concept of “ethical choice”. This concept refers to the ability to recognize, discern and judge when dealing with various ethical relationships and making ethical choices in ethical practice, as well as the ability to contribute to the realization of moral values [12], aiming to discover the factors that govern the criteria of judgment and principles of choice in the process of ethical choices.

2.4.2. Deepening Interdisciplinary Research

Since its inception, the Ethical Literary Criticism has been strongly interdisciplinary, serving as a methodological approach to literary criticism that advocates the interpretation of literary works from an ethical perspective. *While ethics is an important Western theory on moral issues, it is also a method of thinking and knowing and has been applied in the fields of philosophy, sociology, history, psychology, economics, as well as natural sciences and medicine.* [1] Therefore, when trying to solve literary problems through ethics, the academic community should try to combine Ethical Literary Criticism with other disciplines and explore what kind of research content and results can be produced by intersection with disciplines such as politics, philosophy and even ecology. For example, Shang Biwu’s paper *From Alan Turing to Ian McEwan: Artificial Intelligence, Lies and Ethics in “Machines Like Me”* [13]. The article explores the image of AI robots in McEwan’s novel from Turing’s concept of “mimicry game”, and further considers the ethical responsibility of humans towards robots in the real world and the relationship between humans and machines in the new era. At present, scholars mainly use the Ethical Literary Criticism as a tool for textual literary criticism, trying to address ethical issues within literary works. At the same time, scholars should strengthen cooperation with scholars from other disciplines and try to apply Ethical Literary Criticism theory to other art forms such as drama and music, as well as other disciplines, and at the same time use the knowledge of other disciplines to feed Ethical Literary Criticism theory and promote theoretical development and the construction of a discourse system.

2.4.3. Promote International Cooperation

After fifteen years of development, Ethical Literary Criticism, with its original, contemporary, and national characteristics, has successfully constructed a theoretical system and discourse system with Chinese characteristics and Chinese style, demonstrating the sense of historical mission and academic responsibility of Chinese scholars. [14] While striving to construct a theoretical system, the scholars, represented by Prof. Nie Zhenzhao, are also striving to implement the call of the *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues of Comprehensively Deepening Reform* to “strengthen the construction of international communication capacity and foreign discourse system, and promote Chinese culture to the world”. In the process of cooperation and exchange with international scholars, the Ethical Literary Criticism has gradually aroused heated discussions in the international academic community. On the one hand, it further develops the theoretical system of Ethical Literary Criticism through exchanges with international scholars; on the other hand, it enhances the international academic discourse of Ethical Literary Criticism theory through academic dialogues.

3. Conclusions

Ethical Literary Criticism is a model of literary criticism with Chinese characteristics, based on Western ethical criticism theory and Chinese moral criticism methods, proposed by Chinese scholars, with its own academic position, theoretical foundation and special critical terminology, which is of strategic importance in breaking the domination of Western literary criticism methods in Chinese academia. [15] After fifteen years of development, Ethical Literary Criticism has become a highly forward-looking and practical literary criticism methodology widely recognized by Chinese and foreign academics and occupies a pivotal position in the world of literary criticism research. Based on the big data of core journal papers at home and abroad, this study systematically examines the history and current status of Chinese and international literary ethics research in six aspects: number of articles issued, keyword co-occurrence, co-cited articles, co-cited authors, co-cited journal, and collaborative scholar groups with the help of Citespace, a literature visualization and measurement analysis tool. The study found that: a. the common hotspots of international and Chinese research are “ethical identity” and “ethical criticism”; b. Prof. Zhenzhao Nie leads the development of Chinese and international literary ethics research; c. Chinese scholars are widely recognized by Chinese and international academic circles; d. Chinese journals and research institutions have leading research strengths. This study only includes papers published in core journals at home and abroad, while dissertations, conference papers, and general journal papers are not included in the research corpus, therefore the conclusions may not be objective. Through this study, we hope to bring some insights to the future research and development of Ethical Literary Criticism.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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