

## The Encounter between Cambridge Literary Criticism and China

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present paper is to study the impact of *Cambridge Literary Criticism (CLC)* on Chinese scholars, since the visit to Peking's *Tsinghua University* by Prof. Igor Armstrong Richards, the initiator of *CLC*, in 1929, until present times. That first encounter signed the beginning of a fruitful *intercultural communication* activity between the two countries, which lasted for a decennial. Those contacts between the British literary world, imbued with the scientific spirit that was the basis of '*Cambridge Criticism*', was very stimulating for the Chinese academic world, of that was being born. Unfortunately, those contacts were forcefully interrupted in 1939, in the raging of the anti-Japanese war. They resumed, with fruitful results, toward the end of last millennium, when the Chinese government issued a "*Program for Education's Reform and Development in China*". In present times the new movement of '*Ethical Literary Criticism*' is developing in China by initiative of Prof. Nie Zhenzhao, from Peking's '*Central China Normal University*', who took inspiration from the works of the Cambridge literary critic Frank Raymond Leavis.

### INTRODUCTION

An international meeting on "*Cambridge Criticism beyond Cambridge: F.R. Leavis and others*" was held at Tsinghua University, in Peking, from 29<sup>th</sup> June to 1<sup>st</sup> July, 2017: that initiative stimulated a debate among scholars concerning the first encounter between British and Chinese literary critics over one century ago. '*Cambridge Critics, was a group of critics who established an intellectually rigorous school of critical standards in the field of literature. The leaders were I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis of the University of Cambridge and Richards' pupil William Empson.*' (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2011). Those contacts ceased in 1939, owing to the raging of the '*Anti-Japanese War*'. They only resumed toward the end of last millennium, in 1993, when the Chinese government issued a "*Program for Education's Reform and Development in China*", stimulating students/academic staff mobility.

According to the author of this paper, the importance of that encounter did not lie so much in the introduction of '*Cambridge English*' in the newly established Department of English Studies at Tsinghua University in the academic year 1929/30, but in Richards' illustration to his Chinese audience of a very innovative method of textual analysis through the use of quantitative methods, contained in his "*Principles of Literary Criticism*" (Richards, 1924). That theory was at odds '*with the traditional Confucian notion of literature as a carrier of morality and means of education. The scientific nature of Richard's theory fitted well*

*into the prevailing mentality of taking science as a solution to the problems and defects of Chinese society*' (Cao, 2012).

As for present times, the academic contacts and cooperation between Cambridge and Tsinghua universities evidence the fact that desire of mutual knowledge and not the economic profit can be at the base of a fruitful intercultural communication between countries. The birth of the '*Ethical Literary Criticism*' in China at the beginning of the new millennium, by initiative of Prof. Nie Zhenzhao from Peking's '*Central China Normal University*', who took inspiration from the works of the Cambridge literary critic Frank Raymond Leavis, offers good reason of hope.

The purpose of this paper is to study the impact of the encounter of *Cambridge Criticism* with China by I. A. Richards and his followers. The paper is subdivided into Section 1 (*Introduction*), Section 2 (*The birth of Cambridge Criticism*), Section 3 (*Cambridge Criticism's encounter with China in the first half of the 20th century*), Section 4 (*Chinese Literary Criticism after the Liberation War*), Section 5 (*Conclusions*). A Reference section concludes the paper.

### THE BIRTH OF CAMBRIDGE LITERACY CRITICISM

The roots of *Cambridge Criticism* are very old: they go back to the '*scientific revolution*' which took place in western

Europe during the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Sir Isaac Newton, professor of Physics and Mathematics at Trinity College, in Cambridge, published in 1687 his “*Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*” (*Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*), completing the work initiated half a century before by Galileo Galilei (Heilbron, 2003).

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century science made great advancements in Europe: let us recall Albert Einstein’s “*Theory of Relativity*” (Einstein, 1916) and Max Planck’s “*Theory of Quantum Mechanics*” by Max Planck (Jammer, 1966). In the field of psychology, the “*The interpretation of dreams*” by Sigmund Freud in 1899 (Freud, 1999) and the “*Psychology of unconscious*” by Carl Gustav Jung in 1912 (Jung, 1916) exerted a noticeable influence on poets and novelists, stimulating the birth of the new art movement of ‘*Modernism*’, which broke with the literary movements that had dominated the scene in the previous century.

As for Cambridge, between 1910 and 1913 the mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell, professor at Trinity College, published in 1920, in cooperation with the Anglo-American mathematician Alfred A. Whitehead, his fundamental work entitled ‘*Principia Mathematica*’ (*Mathematical foundations*) (Russell & Whitehead, 1910-1913), which had a considerable influence on mathematics, cognitive science and the philosophy of language and, in 1921 his pupil Ludwig Wittgenstein published the “*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*” (*Treatise about Philosophy and Logic*) (Wittgenstein, 1922). With that work Wittgenstein developed a ‘*picture theory of language*’, providing new insights into the relations between thought and language, through a comparison of ‘*logical pictures*’ with ‘*spatial pictures*’.

With the end of the *World War*, a group of Cambridge professors of English studies, influenced by that scientific atmosphere and by the innovative literary works of *modernist* writers as Thomas S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Ezra Pound decided to transfer into the domain of literary critic the rigorous approach of science (Brown, 2000). In 1924 I. A. Richards published “*The Principles of Literary Criticism*” (Richards, 1924) and in 1929, in association with C.K. Ogden, creator of ‘*Basic English*’ (Ogden, 1937), “*The meaning of Meaning: a study on the influence of language upon thought and the Science of Symbolism*” (Ogden & Richards, 1929). In that book they provided new theories of ‘*metaphor*’, ‘*value*’, ‘*tone*’ and defined four kinds of ‘*meaning*’ in literature: *sense, feeling, tone, intention*. In 1930 Richards published “*Practical Criticism*” (Richards, 1930) and, in 1932, another Cambridge scholar, William Empson, published “*Seven Types of Ambiguity*” (Empson, 1967). In the same year William E. Leavis published ‘*New Bearings in English Poetry*’ (Leavis, 2008), where he attacked English late Victorian poetry and proclaimed the importance of the work of the *modernist* poets T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. In the same year he founded the literary journal “*Scrutiny*”, where he and his wife Queenie Dorothy gave several relevant contributions to *Cambridge Criticism*: she published in 1932 the essay “*Fiction and the Reading Public*” (Leavis, 1939), where she sought to promote a stringent and morally serious approach to literary criticism.

After the 2<sup>nd</sup> *World War* Raymond Henry Williams, Cambridge professor from 1961 to 1983, became an influential figure of *Cambridge Criticism*: he was the creator of ‘*Cultural Materialism Studies*’ and author of the essays “*Culture and Society*” (Williams, 1958) and “*The Country and the City*” (Williams, 1973).

## CAMBRIDGE CRITICISM’S ENCOUNTER WITH CHINA IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

As a result of the dramatic defeat of China by Japan in the *First Sino-Japanese war* (1894-95) and the fall of the imperial regime in 1911, the scholars Chen Duxiu, Cai Yuanpei, Li Dazhao, Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, He Dong, and Hu Shi lead a revolt against *Confucianism*, calling for the creation of a new Chinese culture, based on western standards. On May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1919, there was in Beijing a great students’ demonstration against the Peace Treaty of Versailles, which assigned part of the Chinese territory to Japan: that protest developed into the ‘*May Fourth movement*’ (五四运动). Those intellectuals asked, among others, a re-examination of Confucian texts and ancient classics through modern textual and critical methods, the use of vernacular in literature, an orientation to the future rather than the past and the end of the patriarchal family, in favor of individual freedom and women’s liberation (Fairbank, 1992).

The written language utilized in the past in China for literary works was the ‘*Wényán*’ (文言 *Classical Language*), born during the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC and evolved during the various Chinese imperial dynasties, until the late years of the *Qing* dynasty, in 1912. As for the spoken language, alongside a multiplicity of regional dialects, additional administrative languages had been in use, allowing communications between officials of the state coming from different geographic areas: they were based on the dialect spoken in the region where the capital of the ruling dynasty had settled. During the late Qing dynasty, the country’s capital was Beijing and the language spoken by imperial officials was the *Báihuà* (白话 *White speech*). Some of the “*Classical Novels*” from the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries AD were also written in *Báihuà*, but that language was not appreciated by the *literati* of the old school, because it lacked words to express delicate feelings (Abbiati, 1992).

The Chinese scholar and writer Lu Xun (pen name of Zhou Shuren) (Gao, 2014) was one of the principal supporters of the introduction of *Báihuà* in literature, greatly enriching its vocabulary through the production of several literary works and a great number of translations of foreign works of German, French and Russian masterworks of the 19<sup>th</sup> century into Chinese. As for the creation of a literary *Báihuà*, he, Hu Shi and other Chinese lexicographers began their work with a philological study of the “*Classic Chinese Novels*” (*Gǔdiǎn xiǎoshuō*), composed between the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and written in the vernacular languages of various Chinese areas, finally deciding that the ‘*classic novel*’ “*Dream of the Red Chamber*” (*Hónglóu Mèng*), written in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Cao Xueqin in the Peking’s vernacular (*Běijīng Báihuà*), was the proper model to establish the

vocabulary of the new standardized Chinese language. Hu Shi created in Peking the “*Doubting Antiquity School*” (*Yi gū pài*), to establish the authenticity of the 100 chapters of the text. Lu Xun expressed the opinion that the “*Dream of the red chamber*” allowed ‘to see reality through the red dust’ (Gray & Ferrara, 2009). Another famous book from the Ming Dynasty, “*The plum in the golden vase*” (金瓶梅) had been banned for most of its existence, but Lu Xun placed it among the top of Chinese novels (Plaks, 2015).

Chinese intellectuals greatly debated about the nature of ‘translation’: Liang Shiqiu and other colleagues supported a ‘free translation’ (*Ziyóu yì*), which should possess not only *faithfulness* with respect to the originals, but also *fluency* and *elegance*, according to the recommendations of the ancient Chinese translation schools of Buddhist texts from the *Sanskrit*. Lu Xun, on the contrary, was an advocate of the so called ‘hard translation’, i.e. a *word by word* translation. In 1919 he published his first novel in *Báihuà*, “The diary of a mad man”, an allegory of the state of Confucian culture in China written in the form of the diary of a madman and, in 1922, “*The true story of Ah. Q.*”, a satirical metaphor of Chinese contemporary society, in the form of the adventures and the tragic end of a peasant who was often victim of others but always persuaded himself to be spiritually superior to his oppressors (Lu, 1956). In the course of the years Lu Xun published a great number of other novels and literary critics.

A literary controversy arose at that time between Lu Xun and Hu Shi: while the first asserted that “*language is thought; to adopt a language means to accept a new way of thinking*”, the second considered the ‘vernacular movement’ exclusively a literary tool (Gao, 2018).

In the Twenties began the contacts of exponents of *Cambridge Criticism* with China, preceded by the visit of Bertrand Russell during the years 1920-21: he spent a year-long lecture tour in China under the invitation of the *Chinese Society for Lectures on the New Learning* (中国新学习讲座). On that occasion he declared that China should preserve its traditional cultural values, while integrating them with elements of western science. Bertrand Russell’s recommendation was appropriate, but he probably was not aware of the fact that modern science had already reached the Chinese Imperial Court during the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries by initiative of western mathematicians, physicists, astronomers, who were part of the ‘*Jesuit Mission*’ in Macao (Mungello, 2005).

After the visit of Bertrand Russell to China, the Chinese poet Xu Zhimo (徐志摩) (1897 – 1931) spent a year at King’s College, in Cambridge and, at his return to China in 1922, he began to write poems and essays in *Báihuā*.

From September 1929 till January 1931 the Cambridge scholar I. A. Richards went to China, where he taught English at Peking’s *Tsinghua University* and, later on, at *Yenching University*, in the same city. He introduced there the *Cambridge literary criticism*, utilizing *psychology*, *linguistics* and *logic* for the analytical study of literary works. Richards’ concept of ‘multiple definitions’, expressed in his books “*The meaning of meaning*” (Ogden & Richards, 1929) and “*Mencius of the Mind: Experiments in multiple definitions*” (Richards, 1997),

found an equivalent in the Chinese ‘*Shī wú dá gǔ*’ (诗无达诂 *Getting the meaning*). The scholar Qian Zhongshu (Qian, 1953) utilized this concept to analyze the varied metaphors and nuances of meaning in the poems of the *Song Dynasty* (960- 1279 AD). In “*Mencius of the Mind. Experiments in multiple definitions*”, Richards studied the problem of translation in conjunction with his theory of multiple definitions and the plurality of meanings in language, making use of sentences from the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius. He also promoted the use of ‘*Basic English*’, a simplified version of regular English, created by Charles Kay Ogden in 1925 with the aim of removing communication barriers between different cultures and languages.

Richards’s pupil William Epton went to China from 1937 to 1939, at the time of the *Anti-Japanese War*, sharing the academic exodus from Peking to Kunming, in Yunnan, where the Chinese Government had transferred his seat. He started teaching there about the modern English poets, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, W. B. Yeats and about the ambiguity in poetry. His theories of ‘value’ and ‘ambiguities of meaning’ were taught and disseminated. Many of his students became later, after the establishment of China’s People’s Republic, distinguished scholars of English literature in Chinese universities.

Unlike Richards and Empson, two other members of the ‘*Cambridge Criticism*’ group, Frank Raymond Leavis and Raymond Williams, did not have direct personal contacts with China, but their works were translated and studied there. F. R. Leavis was first introduced to Chinese scholars through Chang Fen’s paper “*Three books by Leavis*”, published in 1932 in the journal entitled “*Crescent Moon Monthly*”, where his books “*New Bearings in English Poetry*”, “*Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*” and “*D.H. Lawrence*” where discussed.

## LITERARY CRITICISM IN THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

### Chinese Literary Criticism during the Second Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1949, social and political engagement became relevant and the ‘*Socialist Realism*’ became the mainstream mode of Chinese literature and literary criticism. In 1956 came the period of ‘*Hundred Flowers*’ (百花齐放 *Bǎi huā qífàng*) and many articles appeared, which opposed the idea of a ‘*Socialist Realism*’ detached from historical and social conditions. Other authors opposed them, supporting the idea of the existence of a ‘*Revolutionary Romanticism*’. During the ‘*Cultural Revolution*’ (1966-1976) political interference in literature, denying the cultural and literary achievements obtained through the traditional *Chinese Classics*, became the norm.

In the *Eighties* there was a rebirth of literary theorization and criticism, partly due to the introduction of Western works in China: the scholar Kejia Yuan published in 1980 “*An Anthology of Foreign Modernist Authors*” (西方现代派文学研究 *Xīfāng xiàndài pài wénxué yán jiū*), where

poems of Paul Valery, Rainer M. Rilke, William B. Yeats, Thomas S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and others were included. At the same time, Western literary theories, *New Criticism*, *Structuralism*, *Postmodernism* and *Derrida's Deconstructionism*, were introduced, which inspired Chinese authors (Chen & Sheng, 2013).

Which was the impact of 'Cambridge Criticism' among the Chinese literati in these postwar years? Two British professors acquired a special relevance: one is Frank Raymond Leavis and the other Raymond Williams (1921-1988). As for the first, recent studies of Chinese scholars 'mainly centered around his lifelong treatment of literary criticism as a cornerstone of culture, his staunch resistance to the corrupting forces of mass civilization and technological advancement. In a society that is increasingly commercialized and disenchanting by a culture fabricated by technicians, manipulated by big business, controlled by the market, and promoted by consumerism through the mass media, Leavis and his radical cultural conservatism and persistent critical discrimination appear visionary and compelling.' (Cao, 2012).

As for Raymond Williams (1921-1988), he was elected as *Fellow* at 'Jesus College' in 1961, then became *Reader* from 1967 to 1974 and finally *Professor of Dramaturgy* from 1974 to 1983. Among his works there are the two essays "The Country and the City" (Williams, 1973), "Marxism and Literature" (Williams, 1978) and the novel "People of the Black Mountains" (Williams, 1990). His approach to cultural studies from the Eighties of 20<sup>th</sup> century until present times has aroused enthusiasm among Chinese scholars who have been educated in Marxist theories. One of the key words in "Marxism and Literature" are the following: 'cultural materialism' and 'structure of feelings' (Yin, 2012). 'Cultural materialism' is a theory where Williams views culture as a productive process, which concerns the social use of material means of production. In his words: "culture is a whole way of life, and the arts are part of a social organization which economic change clearly radically affects". As for the 'structure of feelings', Williams posits that "feelings are socially constituted and relate the lived relations that one experiences under a specific ideology within a historical moment."

As for the role of Chinese intellectuals during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the literary critics Chen Xiaoming and Sheng Anfeng (2013) wrote: "There is no doubt that Chinese literary theories have been influenced by Western thought and, in the twentieth century, particularly by Soviet Marxist literary scholarship, but questions arise as to how much of twentieth-century Chinese literary theory was Chinese and how much of it was originally created by Chinese scholars, how much of the theoretical landscape was constructed to meet the demands during their own time, and how did it help, influence, or channel the literary creation at that time. In the late 1980s and early 1990s new ways of literary theorization and criticism emerged, with the introduction of new themes such as post-colonialism, eco-criticism and cultural studies. The introduction of the Western Modernism and Post-Modernism had caused sensation and had enormous impact on literary writing, criticism and scholarship."

### Chinese Ethical Literary Criticism in the New Millennium

The large variety of western literary theories, such as *Structuralism*, *Deconstructionism*, *Ecocriticism*, *Feminism* deluged and dominated Chinese literary criticism. As a result, several Chinese critics suffered from 'theory aphasia', a term coined by the leading Chinese critic Cao Shunqing (Tian, 2019). Things changed at the beginning of the present millennium, when Nie Zhenzhao (聂珍钊), professor of Comparative Literature at Peking's 'Central China Normal University', on the occasion of the "Symposium on British-American Literature Studies: a new perspective" (held in Wuhan in 2004) brought to the fore a new line of literary research, the 'ethical literary criticism' (Nie, 2004), consisting of the analysis of the actions of the characters of a literary work on the base of the moral principles and taboos dominating in the epoch and place where the story evolves, making it quite clearly distinct from the 'moral literary criticism', a censorship of a literary work on the base of the moral principles and taboos to which the critic adheres. In his intervention Nie contended that his ethical criticism followed the tradition of the Cambridge professor F.L. Leavis, who focused on moral and political significance of literary works, enriching them with original contributions, derived from the Chinese tradition (Tian, 2019).

One of Nie's fundamental ideas is that "the essential step for human beings to emerge from the era of ethical ignorance is to undertake a process of 'ethical selection', which is totally different from Charles Darwin's 'biological selection' or Friedrich Engels theory of 'labor selection'." In order to explain this 'ethical selection', Nie coined a term – the *Sphinx factor*<sup>1</sup> – which he used as a metaphor of the fact that human beings are composed of a 'human factor' (the immaterial, spiritual part of ourselves) and an 'animal factor' (our body, our genetic heritage), which are inherently combined together. "When the human factor prevails, human beings are rational enough to do things that are ethically right. However, when the animal factor gains the upper hand, human beings will fall into ethical barbarism." (Nie, 2011).

Nie utilized this concept to analyze the classical Chinese novels "Journey to the West" (西游记 *Xī Yóu Jì*) and "Strange stories from a Chinese studio" (聊斋志异 *Liáozhāi zhì yì*). "In the first novel, the 'Monkey King' (孙悟空 *Sūn wùkōng*) transforms himself from a beast to a man until he has experienced 81 adventures and sufferings: ethical selection plays a critical role in the process of human being's understanding themselves and distinguishing themselves from animals".

Two important notions of Nie's theory are those of 'ethical lines', and 'ethical knots' or 'ethical complexes', which correspond to the 'narrative structure' of the text. In the words of Nie: "There always exist one or more ethical guidelines in a literary text, while 'ethical knots' can be regarded as the horizontal axis [time axis]" (Nie, 2014). In other words, an 'ethical line' is the main thread of a literary text dealing with certain ethical problems, while an 'ethical knot' is a concrete story that comes into being with the development of the 'ethical line'.

Nie reinterpreted the story of the first humans *Adam* and *Eve*, taken from the Bible (the Jewish Torah), according to his ethical model: “*Before eating the fruit from the ‘Tree of Knowledge’, they had no fundamental difference from animals, although they had the physical shapes of human beings. Eating the fruit from the ‘Tree of Knowledge’ symbolizes Adam and Eve’s ethical selection, through which they emerge from ethical ignorance and acquire the ethical knowledge of ‘Good’ and ‘Evil’.*”

Nie utilized his ethical model to successfully analyze the works of the British writer Thomas Hardy (Nie & Liu, 2014).

## CONCLUSIONS

The pre-war contacts between exponents of ‘*Cambridge Literary Criticism*’ and the *Tsinghua University* constitute a significant and fruitful example of ‘*Intercultural Communication*’ between the western world and China. As for Chinese literary critic in these last decennials, it seems that, after a period of cultural subjection to Western literary canons, things started changing with Nie’s ‘*Ethical Literary Criticism*’. It must be recalled that Nie’s ‘*ethical criticism*’ is clearly distinct from ‘*moral criticism*’ or any other form of censorship, and that it is rooted in Confucian tradition. The main critic that could be moved against this new approach is that *ethical values* do not exhaust the characters of a literary work. What about the aesthetical values? They should not be overlooked, because they constitute the fascination of a work of poetry, even in the presence of ethical messages expressed in verse, as Dante’s “*Divine Comedy*” demonstrates (Eliot, 1965).

## END NOTE

- 1 Sphinx: a mythical creature of ancient Aegyptian origin, with woman’s head and a lion’s body.

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