

# From “Brain Text” to “Digital Text”: The Paradigm Shift of Ethical Literary Criticism in the Era of AI

**Tsuyoshi Namigata & Zhang Limin**

**Abstract:** Against the backdrop of the The 14<sup>th</sup> Convention of the International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism, this paper explores the theoretical frontiers and paradigm shifts in ethical literary criticism in the age of artificial intelligence. As AI profoundly intervenes in literary creation, reading, and critical practices, the traditional critical theory centered on “brain text” is undergoing a transformation. Its object of study has expanded from the externalized products of the human mind to algorithm-generated “digital text,” thereby advancing the critical field from “natural mind” to “artificial mind.” This paradigm shift raises three core ethical considerations: first, the dissolution of creative subjectivity and the ambiguity of responsibility attribution; second, the ethical dimensions of human-machine relationships and their prospective exploration in literature; third, the erosion of traditional ethical boundaries and the reconfiguration of the critical domain. Confronted with the complex ethical landscape of the AI era, the paper proposes a creative integration of “distant reading” and “close reading”: on the one hand, leveraging computational perspectives for macro-level analysis of vast texts to uncover latent patterns and trends; on the other hand, maintaining a commitment to delving into the textual fabric to scrutinize its ethical implications and the depth of humanity. Building on this, the paper further envisions the future trajectory of ethical literary criticism in Japanese literature, emphasizing the need to construct a comprehensive critical system that balances theoretical insight with forward-looking perspectives, all within the creative tension between the humanities and technology.

**Keywords:** ethical literary criticism; artificial intelligence; Japanese literature; computational literary criticism

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**标题：**从“脑文本”到“数字文本”：人工智能时代文学伦理学批评的范式转换

**内容摘要：**论文以第十四届国际文学伦理学批评研究会年会为背景，探讨人工智能时代文学伦理学批评的理论前沿与范式转型。随着人工智能深度介入文学创作、阅读与批评实践，传统以“脑文本”为核心的批评理论正经历重塑，其研究对象由人类心智的外化产物扩展至算法生成的“数字文本”，由此推动批评场域实现从“自然心智”向“人工心智”的跨越。这一范式革新引发三重核心伦理思考：其一，创作主体性的消解与责任归属的模糊；其二，人机关系的伦理维度及其在文学中的前瞻性探索；其三，传统伦理边界的消解与批评疆域的重构。面对AI时代的复杂伦理环境，论文提出“远读”与“细读”的融合路径：一方面借助计算视野对海量文本进行宏观分析，揭示潜在模式与趋势；另一方面坚持深入文本肌理，细析其中的伦理意涵与人性深度。在此基础上，论文进一步展望日本文学伦理学批评的未来走向，强调应在人文与科技的创造性张力中，构建兼具理论洞察力与时代前瞻性的综合性批评体系。

**关键词：**文学伦理学批评；人工智能；日本文学；计算批评

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## Introduction

In the summer of 2025, the 14<sup>th</sup> Convention of the International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism convened on Jeju Island, South Korea. Building upon the previous year's thematic framework, this conference continued its focus on "Ethical Literary Criticism in the Era of AI," with the objective of guiding scholarly discourse toward profound engagement with questions concerning human ideals, beliefs, the value of life, and moral responsibility within the context of artificial intelligence. The conference further sought to investigate avenues for integrating the humanities with emerging technologies, thereby elucidating the theoretical potential and practical significance of ethical literary criticism in addressing technological transformation and social change. More than two hundred scholars from over ten

countries and regions—including China, South Korea, the United Kingdom, the United States, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Bangladesh—convened for this significant academic gathering. I was privileged to participate as a member of the ethical literary criticism research community and served as a discussant in a parallel session, where I engaged in substantive academic exchange and discussion.

My initial encounter with ethical literary criticism was marked by the compelling originality of its “brain-text” theory, which conceptualizes literary works as externalized manifestations of the complex ethical consciousness embedded within the human brain. Its pronounced interdisciplinary character prompted me to consider whether textual analysis might enable the reverse-engineering of the neural foundations underlying ethical cognition. This prospect initially instilled in me considerable optimism regarding the future trajectory of literary studies. However, following comprehensive participation in the conference proceedings, I observed that the scope of ethical literary criticism has transcended its focus on the human brain as a biological substrate and is now actively extending into the domain of artificial intelligence. As AI increasingly permeates creative production, reading practices, and critical discourse, we are compelled to reexamine a series of fundamental questions: How should the theoretical paradigms and methodological pathways of ethical literary criticism be reconstructed within the context of human-machine symbiosis?

The conference comprised 23 parallel sessions, with discussion topics encompassing ethical literary criticism and civilizational dialogue, cross-media studies, computational literary criticism, world literature studies, AI-generated literature, science fiction studies, and ethical critical practices in national literatures. It is evident that while consolidating its foundational Chinese theoretical framework, ethical literary criticism is actively dismantling disciplinary boundaries and responding dynamically to an emergent era in which algorithms are fundamentally redefining narrative structure, creative production, and reception. My participation confirmed that ethical literary criticism is evolving in response to contemporary challenges. In the subsequent section, I will offer reflections informed by my research on the Japanese writer Kobo Abe.

### **I. From “Brain Text” to “Digital Text”**

To fully appreciate the theoretical significance of this conference, it is essential to revisit one of the foundational concepts of ethical literary criticism—the “brain text.” Proposed by Professor Nie Zhenzhao, this theory conceptualizes literary works as the externalized manifestation and experimental domain of the complex ethical consciousness residing within the human brain. Specifically, the brain text

denotes a textual form that preserved information prior to the invention of writing systems and material substrates such as paper. It constitutes a unique biological construct—a cognitive repository within the human brain that retains, through memory, perceptions, cognitions, understandings, and reflections pertaining to objective phenomena in the external world.<sup>1</sup> This intrinsic and dynamic “text” functions as the generative source of literary creation and furnishes the primordial context for analyzing characters’ ethical choices and axiological conflicts. The innovative contribution of this theory resides in establishing an epistemological foundation for literary studies that integrates both biological substrates and ethical significance, thereby orienting textual analysis toward a rigorous exploration of the operations of the human mind.

The most noteworthy theoretical advancement demonstrated at this conference is the explicit paradigmatic expansion of this foundational framework. Scholarly discourse is no longer circumscribed by the biological human brain but actively extends into the domain of textual production mediated by artificial intelligence. This development signifies that the objects of inquiry confronting ethical literary criticism now encompass not only “brain texts” originating from human cognition but also algorithmically generated “digital texts.” Consequently, the critical field has undergone a transition from the “natural mind” to the “artificial mind.” In my assessment, this shift represents more than a mere extensional expansion of the research object; it constitutes a profound disciplinary paradigm transformation—one in which the investigation of ethical questions is no longer confined to traditional humanistic speculation but is instead situated within a complex intellectual landscape interwoven with the philosophy of technology and digital humanities.

When AI-generated texts—whether novels, poems, or critical essays—enter the purview of literary criticism, they represent not merely a novel mode of creative production but a fundamental epistemological challenge. As the creative subject ceases to be exclusively “human,” and as narrative logic derives from statistical patterns embedded in datasets rather than from individual lived experience, the foundational operational mechanisms of literature conceived as an “ethical laboratory” are inevitably subject to profound transformation. The “authorial intention” upon which traditional criticism has long relied becomes indeterminate when confronted with

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1 See Nie Zhenzhao, “Ethical Literary Criticism: Oral Literature and Brain Text,” *Foreign Literature Studies* 3 (2013): 8-15; for a more detailed discussion, see Nie Zhenzhao and Ren Jie, *Language, Symbols, and Brain Texts: An Introduction*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2024; Nie Zhenzhao, “Ethical Literary Criticism: Oral Literature and Brain Text,” translated by Si Fengming, *Border Crossings: The Journal of Japanese-Language Literature Studies* 3 (2016): 4-8.

algorithmic processes, and the attribution of ethical responsibility for texts has entered an unprecedented state of complexity. For the first time, ethical literary criticism—a theoretical framework fundamentally oriented toward the exploration of human ethical choices—must systematically engage with a “non-human” creative agent. This emergent condition compels us to reconsider several fundamental questions: Within the context of human-machine symbiosis, how should the ethical function of literature be reconceptualized? How might an efficacious critical discourse be constructed that mediates between human values and machine logic? These are precisely the central questions that this conference endeavored to address.

## II. Ethical Reflections Arising from the Paradigm Shift

The paradigmatic shift in theory operates much like a stone cast into water, generating ripples that propagate in all directions. As the scope of ethical literary criticism expands from “brain text” to “digital text,” a constellation of ethical considerations naturally emerges.

Foremost among these is the dissolution of subjectivity in literary creation and the attendant challenge of responsibility attribution. Within the traditional literary field, the “author” typically designates an individual possessing clear creative intentionality and autonomous will, whose identity and boundaries of responsibility remain relatively well-defined. However, with the advent and proliferation of AI-generated content (AIGC), this conventional conception of authorship is being fundamentally destabilized. When a work’s narrative trajectory, axiological orientations, and even stylistic registers are largely determined by algorithmic models, the ontological question of “who is the author?” assumes increasing salience. The resultant ambiguity in ethical accountability further complicates the practical application of literary criticism. Throughout the conference proceedings, scholars repeatedly posed the following question: if an AI-generated work exhibits ethical transgressions, perpetuates bias, or engenders adverse social consequences, who should bear responsibility? Is it the programmer who designed the algorithmic architecture, the user who furnished the training data and configured the parameters, or the algorithmic model itself qua generative agent? This line of inquiry not only prompts profound reflection on the very concept of “creation” but also necessitates a redefinition of its ethical implications and boundaries of responsibility within the continuously evolving technological milieu.

A second consideration concerns the ethical dimensions of human-machine relations and their exploration within literary discourse. In my previous research employing ethical literary criticism, I analyzed Abe’s novel *The Face of Another*

(1964). Although Abe is celebrated as a “pure literature” (*junbungaku*) author of the post-World War II era, when viewed through the lens of science fiction (SF), he also emerges as one of the pivotal figures in the emergence of modern Japanese SF. It is generally acknowledged that genre-based SF literature in Japan became established in the late 1950s, and it was precisely during this period that Abe commenced experimentation not only with short stories but also with full-length SF novels. In his SF work *Inter Ice Age 4*<sup>1</sup>, the protagonist’s fate is predicted by a “prophecy machine”—which may be regarded as a prototype of artificial intelligence—and he ultimately meets his demise as a consequence. This plot device carries profound symbolic resonance: it functions not merely as a science fiction trope but as a literary prefiguration of an ethical tragedy wherein instrumental rationality supersedes and ultimately consumes human subjective value. At a historical moment when AI had not yet materialized as a technological reality, Abe, through literary fiction, had already apprehended the core of what would subsequently be termed the “singularity”—the fundamental existential crisis that may arise when artificial intelligence comprehensively surpasses human intelligence. Abe characterized SF as “the literature of hypothesis,” explicitly asserting that “fiction, like hypothesis in science, is a general method constitutive of art” (“Proposal for a New Documentalism” 179). This perspective exhibits strong consonance with the core function of ethical literary criticism, which conceptualizes literature as an “ethical laboratory.” In Abe’s view, literature continuously interrogates, through the “hypothesis” of fiction, whether various prognostications concerning the future, technology, and humanity itself are appropriate and logically coherent. This concept of deploying literary fiction to test ethical hypotheses embodies one of the essential principles of ethical literary criticism.<sup>2</sup>

A third consideration pertains to the dissolution of traditional ethical boundaries and the reconstruction of the critical domain. This tendency is likewise reflected in the thematic configuration of this conference—most notably in the marked increase in panels dedicated to science fiction and cross-media studies. The recent publication

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1 See Kobo Abe, *Inter Ice Age 4*, Tokyo: Kodansha, 1959.

2 While my own research has not delved deeply into this area, for those interested in the history of Japanese SF and wishing to explore further, I recommend reading *A History of Debates in Japanese SF: 1957-1997* (『日本 SF 論争史: 1957-1997』, 2000) by Takayuki Tatsumi. The first section, “The Hard Core of SF Theory” (SF 理論のハードコア), discusses Kobo Abe and Sakyo Komatsu, tracing the debates surrounding the New Wave, cyberpunk, gender politics, and more that emerged after a period of frequent contention. This book not only elucidates the circumstances surrounding the establishment of SF criticism but also points toward broader directions for positioning Japanese SF within literary and cultural history.

in Japanese academia of works such as *Learning Ethics Through SF Manga: What Is Good and What Is Evil*<sup>1</sup> suggests that popular culture is increasingly positioning SF fiction—this “literature of hypothesis”—as a significant discursive space for exploring cutting-edge ethical issues encompassing human cloning, environmental justice, and governance by artificial intelligence. This trend is, of course, not confined to Japan but represents a global cultural phenomenon, reflecting how contemporary ethical discourse is progressively expanding from traditional literary texts to an increasingly diverse array of narrative media. Within this context, ethical literary criticism may consider extending its traditional textual boundaries to encompass diverse narrative forms—including animation, comics, and video games—within its critical purview. Confronted with the reality that identical ethical questions are continuously retold and recontextualized across different media, critics face an urgent imperative to develop more flexible and transmedially inclusive analytical frameworks capable of navigating an increasingly complex critical landscape.

### III. The Creative Integration of “Distant Reading” and “Close Reading”

Confronted with the complex ethical dilemmas engendered by the AI era, the methodology of literary studies is itself undergoing profound transformation. This conference clearly demonstrated two significant approaches emerging in contemporary literary research—seemingly antithetical yet fundamentally complementary—each offering a key to addressing these challenges. The first is “distant reading” as advanced by the digital humanities. This method harnesses AI technology to conduct macroscopic pattern recognition, trend analysis, and quantitative investigation across vast corpora, capable of discerning macro-level configurations and latent biases that transcend individual reading experiences. The second is the “close reading” at which ethical literary criticism excels. Deeply grounded in Professor Nie Zhenzhao’s theoretical system, this approach emphasizes the analysis and interpretive evaluation of specific ethical identities, choices, and dilemmas within texts. At a moment when AI-generated content is proliferating exponentially, a critical practice that insists on attending to textual nuances and plumbing the depths of human experience assumes particular value. However, the crux of the matter resides not in adjudicating between “distant” and “close” reading, but in determining how to creatively synthesize these two ostensibly opposing methodologies. In the age of AI, the genuine challenge and opportunity lie precisely here: we may need to construct a critical framework capacious enough to accommodate both. This entails the capacity to deploy AI tools

<sup>1</sup> See Hiroyuki Yorozuya, *Learning Ethics Through SF Manga: What Is Good and What Is Evil*, Tokyo: Sakura-sha, 2024.

for macroscopic analysis of large-scale textual corpora to uncover underlying patterns and trends, while simultaneously maintaining hermeneutic sensitivity to individual texts and conducting rigorous analysis of their ethical implications. For instance, one might employ “distant reading” to identify ethically significant phenomena warranting deeper exploration, subsequently applying “close reading” for detailed interpretation. Alternatively, key analytical categories established through “close reading” could be tested for their prevalence via “distant reading” methodologies.

Taking Abe’s *Inter Ice Age 4* as an illustrative case, the method of “close reading” enables us to analyze in depth the complex relational network between humans and the “prophecy machine” in the novel. It facilitates exploration of core ethical issues such as the dynamics between creator and creation, control and counter-control, as well as the manner in which Abe deploys literary fiction to test ethical hypotheses concerning the future. Concurrently, Abe’s concept of “the literature of hypothesis” opens up an intellectual avenue for “distant reading.” One might construct a corpus encompassing science fiction works from the same period worldwide and employ algorithms to quantitatively analyze recurring narrative patterns of “human-machine relationships,” thereby revealing, at a macro level, the collective imagination and ethical anxieties of humanity regarding technological civilization within a specific historical conjuncture. Such “distant reading” does not seek to supplant in-depth interpretation of individual works but rather to furnish “close reading” with a broader historical frame of reference and comparative perspective. When we comprehend where the narrative of “the prophecy machine turning against its human creators” in *Inter Ice Age 4* is situated among science fiction works from the late 1950s, our appreciation of Abe’s singular contribution becomes correspondingly more profound.

Indeed, during the conference panel on “Computational Literary Criticism,” scholars presented preliminary practices of such methodological integration. Furthermore, I have learned that following the conference, the journal *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature*, under the editorship of Professor Nie Zhenzhao, published a special issue devoted to the literary works and intellectual world of the Chinese writer Tie Ning. The contributions are organized into three categories, offering a multi-perspectival and comprehensive interpretation of her creative practice and ideational dimensions: (1) In-depth scholarly studies: senior scholars trace the evolution of Tie Ning’s creative trajectory and analyze the expansion of her literary thought from a gendered perspective to the representation of universal human predicaments. (2) Interdisciplinary innovative research: scholars from fields such as law, sociology, and linguistics apply specialized theoretical frameworks to analyze

the interdisciplinary significance of her works, encompassing power ethics, folk social order, and linguistic artistry. (3) Computational literary analysis: utilizing AI tools for textual data analysis—including keyword frequency statistics and character relationship mapping—to reveal distinctive features of her literary production. Scholars possessing long-term expertise in contemporary Chinese literature can accurately apprehend the Chinese context and literary traditions inherent in Tie Ning’s oeuvre, thereby providing a reliable foundation of textual interpretation for all related investigations. Interdisciplinary research dismantles barriers between fields and serves as a methodology for expanding academic horizons. The participation of disciplines such as law, sociology, and linguistics, in particular, integrates diverse research methodologies, enabling the value of Tie Ning’s works to be illuminated within a broader multi-disciplinary purview. Notably, the application of artificial intelligence research methods represents a promising future direction for the field. With the accumulation of textual data and the optimization of algorithmic models, AI technology is poised to provide novel instruments for multiple dimensions of literary criticism—including thematic exploration, character interpretation, and sentiment analysis—thereby enabling comprehensive and systematic analysis of literary creation at a macroscopic scale and quantitative precision difficult to achieve through conventional manual research alone. The curation of this special issue constitutes a robust response to and a successful instantiation of the conference’s thematic concerns. It signals the emergence of a comprehensive critical paradigm that both honors humanistic depth and embraces technological breadth.

### Conclusion

Theoretical self-renewal continuously generates new problematics, which in turn impose demands for methodological innovation. This dynamic process clearly demonstrates that ethical literary criticism does not merely respond passively to technological transformation but actively participates in shaping the future literary landscape through its inherent theoretical sensitivity and intellectual agency. Looking ahead, ethical criticism in Japanese literary studies might productively advance the following lines of inquiry: First, conducting systematic genealogical investigation to excavate the distinctive technological ethics and futuristic imaginaries embedded in works spanning from Abe to contemporary Japanese science fiction and SF manga. Second, expanding the media scope of criticism to encompass emergent forms such as animation, video games, and interactive narratives, tracing the variations and reconfiguration of ethical motifs across diverse narrative vehicles. Third, constructing integrative analytical frameworks that enact dialectical complementarity and circular

argumentation between “distant reading” and “close reading” in concrete textual interpretations. Ultimately, the core mission incumbent upon literary criticism in the AI era is not to make binary choices between the humanities and technology, or between tradition and innovation, but rather to explore and construct a more inclusive, perspicacious, and forward-looking critical paradigm within the generative tension these polarities produce. This endeavor requires us to attend to the micro-textural fabric of texts, discerning their unique ethical resonances and affective structures, while simultaneously leveraging computational perspectives to ascend to a macroscopic vantage point, surveying the implicit patterns and tendencies within the broader cultural topography. Throughout this process, we must engage in cross-disciplinary dialogue while continually reflecting upon our own positionality and limitations as theories circulate across contexts, thereby persistently expanding the boundaries and depths of criticism through sustained dialogue and critical self-reflection.

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