

A Chinese Perspective of a Century of British Drama: A Review of *British Drama of the Twentieth Century*

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Abstract Published in 2022, *British Drama of the Twentieth Century*, a collaborative effort by Chinese scholars Professor Liu Hongwei and Professor Li Jing, fills a gap in the field of British modern and contemporary drama research within China. Employing an innovative, multi-dimensional research model that integrates historical context, author studies, dramatic texts, and theatrical performance, the book effectively bridges the often-separated realms of “literariness” and “theatricality” in drama. Beyond offering a clear and comprehensive account of the historical evolution of twentieth-century British drama, the authors delve deeply into the most influential playwrights and their works of the era, enriching the field with a distinctive Chinese intellectual perspective. *British Drama of the Twentieth Century* exhibits significant innovation and cutting-edge thinking in its structural layout, content depth, and research methodologies. Accordingly, it is vital reading for British drama specialists and enthusiasts.

Keywords literariness; theatricality; Chinese wisdom; *British Drama of the Twentieth Century*

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In the vast world of drama studies, the British drama of the twentieth century, with its unique richness and complexity, has long captivated scholars worldwide, standing as a fascinating academic landscape. However, it is precisely this fascinating richness and complexity that has rendered the study of British drama of the twentieth century in China both challenging and in urgent need of further exploration. Despite

the numerous scholars who have dedicated themselves to this field and the prolific achievements they have produced, there remain shortcomings, such as insufficient comprehensive research, a lack of abundant specialized monographs, and a dearth of innovative and cutting-edge critical methodologies. Against this academic backdrop, *British Drama of the Twentieth Century*, co-authored by Prof. Liu Hongwei and Prof. Li Jing, stands out for its exceptional academic value within the research domain in China. Prof. Liu and Prof. Li both work at Zhongnan University of Economics and Law, where they have long been engaged in teaching and research on British and American drama, and have accumulated profound academic achievements in this field. The book they collaborated on, published in 2022, is not only the culmination of the research project “Studies on Twentieth-Century British Drama” supported by the National Social Science Fund of China, but also the crystallization of the wisdom accumulated by the two scholars over a decade of dedicated research on British drama. In the “Introduction,” the authors clarify the core vision of their research with concise and powerful strokes: “This book aims to conduct a comprehensive and focused study of the evolution of British drama throughout the twentieth century” (1). Driven by this academic pursuit, *British Drama of the Twentieth Century*, with its comprehensiveness and depth, presents readers with a magnificent panorama of the tumultuous trajectory of a century of British drama.

The book’s structural arrangement is meticulously crafted. Beyond the “Introduction” and “Conclusion,” it encompasses ten chapters. The authors ingeniously weave together a longitudinal historical thread with in-depth analyses of representative playwrights’ works, creating a tapestry that seamlessly integrates comprehensive coverage with focused highlights. Specifically, the authors adopt a chronological approach, dividing the century-long evolution of British drama into five distinct periods: the British drama at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries (Chapter 1), the British drama before and after World War II (Chapter 3), the “Golden Age” of the British drama from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s (Chapter 4), the British drama at the end of the 20th century (Chapter 9), and the British drama since the 21st century (primarily reflected in the selection of works by trans-century playwrights such as Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, and Caryl Churchill). This approach comprehensively and profoundly outlines the historical trajectory of the overall development of twentieth-century British drama. Throughout this process, the authors not only meticulously dissect key theatrical events, major theatrical movements, and their artistic characteristics during each historical stage, but they also profoundly reveal the intricate connections between twentieth-century British

drama and the social transformation, enabling readers to grasp the macro-framework and inherent logic behind the century-long development of British drama.

At the same time, the authors do not settle for merely outlining the history of the development of British drama over a century. Instead, they build upon this foundation, conducting profound and multi-faceted analyses of representative playwrights and their dramatic works from the five periods (over 10 British masters of modern and contemporary drama and more than 40 plays are analyzed in the book). Indeed, “since most British modern and contemporary plays were originally introduced to China in the form of texts, the study of dramatic texts and the interpretation of their literary nature have become a significant research paradigm with Chinese characteristics” (Liu Hongwei 117). The two professors inherit and cultivate this research tradition. Through meticulous textual analysis, they explore the social issues, philosophical inquiries, and human nature embedded in dramatic works, revealing a unique research characteristic of “historical context with textual focus.” What’s particularly commendable is that in the face of the vast ocean of theatrical history and numerous outstanding playwrights, the authors do not fall into the trap of superficial generalizations. Instead, they bravely make choices, selecting five representative playwrights (three male playwrights and two female playwrights): George Bernard Shaw (Chapter 2), Harold Pinter (Chapter 5), Tom Stoppard (Chapter 6), Caryl Churchill (Chapter 8), and Sarah Kane (Chapter 10), dedicating chapters to in-depth analyses of them and their representative works. These chapters, like brilliant pearls, are embedded within the grand historical narrative. They stand independently while also complementing the grand historical narrative, collectively illuminating the glorious journey of a century of British drama.

Chapter 7, “Contemporary British Female Playwrights,” is particularly noteworthy. It is not only a significant attempt by the authors to construct a genealogy of British women’s drama and challenge traditional gender biases, but also a bold innovation to the traditional writing of British drama history. Unlike previous practices that largely ignored the creative forces of women, the authors explicitly point out that “the emergence of a group of female playwrights has become a major highlight of contemporary British drama” (217). With vibrant vitality, these female playwrights, alongside the “new drama” playwrights and “left-wing” playwrights from the post-World War II era, collectively forged the “Golden Age” of contemporary British drama. The authors’ decision to dedicate a separate chapter to contemporary female playwrights stems from their profound insight and precise grasp of the trends in the development of British drama over a century, as

well as their high recognition of the unique contributions of female playwrights. In this chapter, the authors thoroughly examine the historical context of the feminist movement and feminist troupes in the 1960s and 1970s, analyzing the emergence of contemporary female playwrights and the close connection between their artistic creation and social transformation from a socio-historical perspective. At the same time, they also conduct in-depth discussions and analyses of the works of prominent contemporary female playwrights such as Agatha Christie, Ann Jellicoe, Sheila Delaney, and Timberlake Wertenbaker, from multiple dimensions including the writers' personal experiences, creative ideas, and dramatic language. Notably, during the specific research process, the authors not only adhere to the solid tradition of textual analysis, but also bravely innovate, actively introducing diversified research methods such as cross-cultural comparison, gender studies, and socio-historical criticism, providing new perspectives and insights for understanding the works of British female playwrights. This academic endeavor not only deepens people's understanding of contemporary British female playwrights and their works, but also legitimizes their position in the history of British drama and even in the world, allowing more women's voices to resonate in the long river of history.

The insightful content and profound perspectives are even more remarkable and impressive than the ingenious structure. In fact, throughout the exploration of various topics, the authors consistently demonstrate extraordinary academic acumen, innovation, and cutting-edge thinking. Within the work, the authors not only introduce novel concepts like "Shavian Comedy of Idea" and "Postmodern Humanist Play," but also present unique and profound insights on topics such as the profoundness of T. S. Eliot's verse drama, the unique charm of "Pinteresque drama," the bizarre appearance of "Crimpland" and the profound implications of the violent rituals in Kane's plays. The study of Stoppard and his works serves as a striking example. In Chapter 6, Prof. Li, with exceptional insight, skillfully situates Stoppard's theatrical art within the vast panorama of postmodern culture, creatively naming it "Postmodern Humanist Play." She explains, "'Postmodern Humanist Play' refers to Stoppard's use of relevant techniques and artistic qualities of postmodern drama in his dramatic creation to express the artistic pursuits and spiritual expression characteristic of 'humanist play'." (189) This innovative concept, like a key, unlocks the unique charm of Stoppard's works. Not only does it precisely capture the essence of Stoppard's artistic techniques, but it also profoundly reveals Stoppard's compassionate spirit and ambition to enlighten and save the world, offering a refined distillation of the external appearance and inner soul of Stoppard's dramatic works. Through in-depth analyses of seven landmark plays,

namely *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), *Jumpers* (1972), *Travesties* (1974), *Arcadia* (1993), *The Invention of Love* (1997), *The Coast of Utopia* (2003), and *Rock "n" Roll* (2006), the author further solidify the theoretical foundation of "Postmodern Humanist Play," revealing the irrepressible rebellious force in Stoppard's works and his profound philosophical reflections on the human condition and existential dilemmas. Such analysis not only constitutes a profound homage to Stoppard's artistic achievements but also provides invaluable academic inspiration for future generations.

In a profound sense, the most remarkable contribution of *British Drama of the Twentieth Century* lies in its ingenious integration of the essence of ethical literary criticism into the practice of British drama research. This move not only highlights the unique voice and profound wisdom of Chinese scholars in the academic field, but also provides a new paradigm for British drama research. Ethical literary criticism was first proposed by Professor Nie Zhenzhao, a Chinese scholar. It is "a critical methodology designed to interpret literature from the perspective of ethics, including a whole set of concepts, theories, and working mechanisms" (Nie Zhenzhao, "Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism"). This critical paradigm draws upon ideas from both Western ethical criticism and the Chinese tradition of moral criticism, injecting a unique ethical dimension into literary criticism and helping understand anew the ethical and social potency of literature.

In *British Drama of the Twentieth Century*, Prof. Liu's insightful analysis and profound insights into the plays of Pinter and Churchill not only fully demonstrate the extraordinary charm and vast potential of ethical literary criticism but also open up a novel critical dimension for the study of twentieth-century British drama. Particularly in Chapter 5, Prof. Liu, using ethical literary criticism as her theoretical foundation, delves into the ethical themes in Pinter's plays, providing a new path for interpreting "Pinteresque drama" and greatly enriching its artistic implications. She astutely recognizes that "the ethical direction and moral transformation of modern society are consistent underlying themes in Pinter's dramatic creation" (134). By focusing on some classic works like *The Homecoming* (1965), *Betrayal* (1978), *One for the Road* (1983), and *Moonlight* (1993), Prof. Liu integrates multiple methods, such as biographical studies, psychoanalytic criticism, and socio-historical criticism, to systematically examine and analyze the ethical imbalances reflected in the plays, such as family breakdown, marital betrayal, parental estrangement, and acts of violence. In her discussion, she explores the changing socio-cultural ethical environment in the process of both the creation and reception of drama, carefully dissects the ethical identities of the characters, the ethical environments they inhabit,

and the complex ethical relationships between them, thus revealing the unique dramatic strategies and artistic innovations in Pinter's plays and deeply excavating the ethical depth of the playwright's thoughts.

Chapter 8, focusing on Churchill's plays, similarly exemplifies the application of ethical literary criticism in the study of British dramatic texts. For example, through a deep interpretation of *Top Girls* (1979) Prof. Liu cleverly reveals the ethical choices behind the protagonist Marlene's dual ethical identities ("career woman" and "unmarried mother"), reflecting the real-life survival situation of working women in the 1970s and 1980s within a specific ethical environment. Additionally, analyses of plays like *A Number* (2002) and *Love and Information* (2012) offer unique insights into cutting-edge topics such as cloning technology and digital information from a literary ethics perspective too, showcasing Churchill's deep concern and reflection on the ethical problems of modern society. It is worth noting that Prof. Liu, while emphasizing the importance of studying ethical themes, consistently maintains an objective ethical interpretation of dramatic texts, avoiding abstract moral evaluations. By using a range of critical terms like ethical environment, ethical identity, ethical choice, ethical awareness, and the Sphinx factor, she effectively unearths and explicates the unique artistic charm and profound ethical implications in both Pinter and Churchill's plays, contributing valuable Chinese wisdom to British drama research and effectively promoting the deepening and diversification of academic research.

Undeniably, the book is a brilliant achievement of Professor Liu Hongwei and Professor Li Jing. However, its far-reaching significance lies in its deep reflection of the two Chinese scholars' pride in and inheritance of Chinese wisdom, which is vividly demonstrated in the book's "Introduction" and "Conclusion," especially in the latter. Unlike traditional concluding remarks, the authors don't limit themselves to summarizing their research findings, but instead turn their gaze towards the broader academic realm of "A Study of British Drama Criticism in the Twentieth Century in China," offering a profound analysis of the multifaceted reflections of modern society depicted by twentieth-century British playwrights from a unique Chinese perspective. Admittedly, research on twentieth-century British drama within the Chinese context has been influenced by Western academia to some extent. However, after over a century of development, it has carved out a path of reception criticism with Chinese characteristics. Based on this, Professor Liu Hongwei resolutely points out that the contributions of Chinese scholars "have undoubtedly greatly enriched and broadened the understanding and research of British modern and contemporary drama" (15). This statement not only demonstrates the confident

demeanor of Chinese scholars in global academic dialogues but also embodies their spirit of taking responsibility and relentlessly pursuing academic excellence.

Finally, it is also worth praising the book's highly innovative research methods. In meticulously retracing and analyzing the century-long, tumultuous journey of twentieth-century British drama, the authors deftly employ a multi-dimensional research paradigm that integrates author studies, dramatic texts, and theatrical performance. This approach effectively transcends disciplinary boundaries, forging a vital connection between literature and theater, as well as history and contemporary reality. In the specific research process, the authors delve deeply into the "literariness" of drama, examining playwrights, dramatic texts, criticism, and theatrical history. Yet, they also venture beyond traditional boundaries to explore stage practice, directorial philosophy, and audience interaction, thereby capturing the essence of drama's "theatricality" and highlighting its irreplaceable value. This move represents a profound transcendence of the longstanding opposition between "literariness" and "theatricality" within drama research, showcasing the authors' broad vision that embraces the comprehensive nature of dramatic art. While Chinese scholarship on British twentieth-century drama has yielded substantial results in analyzing dramatic texts and interpreting their literariness, research on the "theatricality" of British drama has been notably lacking. The publication of this book offers a potent response to this deficiency. By embracing the comprehensive nature of dramatic art, it undertakes a bold and fruitful exploration, filling, to a certain extent, the gaps in the research on British modern and contemporary drama in the domestic academia.

Such an exploration is obviously challenging. The challenge lies in the fact that the "theatricality" in drama, unlike the relatively stable "literariness," is inherently dynamic and susceptible to change. It is influenced by multiple factors such as economy, cultural policies, social trends, and aesthetic shifts, requiring researchers to possess a high degree of sensitivity and analytical ability. To fully reveal the unique charm and the driving forces behind the changes in twentieth-century British drama, the authors ingeniously weave together external factors such as historical changes, cultural accumulation, economic trends, political influences, and market forces into their analytical framework, thereby constructing a complex and vivid picture of the era. One key example is the in-depth examination of the factors contributing to the "Golden Age" of British drama following World War II. Through deep excavation of the funding policies of the Arts Council of England, a meticulous examination of the changes in the operating model of the Royal Court Theatre, and a precise interpretation of key events such as the abolition of theatrical

censorship in 1968, the authors reveal the profound interplay between drama and its historical context, showcasing their insightful observations and unique perspectives. This approach, replicated throughout the book, underscores its most notable characteristic: a balanced focus on both “literariness” and “theatricality,” a harmonious integration of internal and external elements, and a multi-dimensional research framework that seamlessly intertwines historical context, author studies, dramatic plays, and theatrical performance.

Overall, *British Drama of the Twentieth Century* stands as a testament to the innovative spirit of contemporary Chinese scholarship on British drama, showcasing its structural sophistication, depth of content, and methodological rigor. In an era of global cultural convergence and exchange, diverse academic perspectives are increasingly crucial. This book, deeply rooted in this broader context, boldly positions itself within the landscape of Chinese scholarship, offering a fresh examination and reevaluation of the genres, trends, and methodologies of twentieth-century British drama. It serves not only as a remarkable display of Chinese wisdom on the international stage but also presents a compelling new trajectory for global English drama research with its unique multi-dimensional research model. This work is comprehensive and profound in its content, clear and rigorous in its logic, and elegant and fluent in its language, making it vital reading for British drama specialists and enthusiasts.

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