

# A Brief Survey of Contemporary American Drama Studies in China

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**Abstract** American drama researches in China have undergone roughly three stages — restoration in 1980s, initial prosperity in 1990s, and full prosperity and dynamism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century pacing towards integration and systematization on a scaled basis. The drama studies changed from thematic studies to formal and aesthetic studies carried out with pluralistic paradigms under the influence of Western literary theories. Researches have not only focused on issues of philosophy, religion, morality, and ethics in drama works but are also conducted from social, historic, political, and / or cultural perspectives. Not a few problems have appeared in American drama studies in the Chinese academic circle, yet opportunities co-exist with challenges.

**Key words** American Drama; Reflections; China

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## An Overview of Contemporary American Drama

Edward Albee passed away on September 16, 2016, and the theatrical circle is drenched with ample tributes in commemoration of this foremost playwright in America. What changes have occurred about American drama over the past century? What are the causes to those changes? What influences have the changes had on America and the world? Concerning American drama studies in China, what are the characteristics, and problems? What should the Chinese do next to avoid those problems in order to innovatively advance their own culture? These questions

initiate the author's survey of contemporary American drama studies in China.

Drama traces its origin to religion. At its initial stage, drama, from its creation to acting, was religiously bound. The secularization of drama is a gradual process. To a certain degree, the influence of drama on American society occurs, develops, declines and revives along with religion which, just like a mirror, reflects the whole course of American society. However, as a part of American culture, drama has not exerted a global impact as other forms of American arts and culture have. The causes to this failure can never be simple. Detachment from theatre audiences equals to the abandonment of traditions or even faiths. National American drama did not start until early 1900s when O'Neill established himself as a playwright. Later, O'Neill and other playwrights, like Lillian Hellman, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, Marsha Norman, etc., encouraged by O'Neill, together have ushered American drama into a new era.

Since 1950s, situations have changed around the world and in China. After the Second World War, a half-century, comprehensive antagonism between two ideological alliances in American society has enormously influenced in the nation the trends in sociology, literature and art, with the theater unexceptionally included. With great impact on American drama in the 1950s, and McCarthyism soon spread into politics, diplomacy, the press and other fields. It is in 1950s that American drama turned from modern drama into modernist drama.

While American mainstream playwrights maintain their advantageous influence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, new dramatists have appeared thanks to the pluralistic society. With the rise of regional theaters and ethnic minority drama, American drama has entered a new era of diversified development. Once-marginalized dramas, such as female drama, LGBT drama and ethnic minority plays have been brought onto the stage, expressing their own unique voices, artistic innovations and missions.

### **Studies of American Drama in China**

Due to the important status of U.S. in the world, American culture oftentimes spreads very instantly to the other parts of the world. Its considerable influence on China also leads in China to the studies on American drama among other things. In the immediate 17 years since the establishment of P. R. China in 1949, drama critics and scholars in China, adopting theories, methods, and patterns from the Soviet Union to conduct their studies on drama, adhered to Marxist approaches in their drama researches. However, the studies on drama came to a complete halt in 1966 due to a special historical event.

Researches on American drama began to regain its advancement in China in the 1980s, when relations between China and Western countries became normalized, which in turn boosted frequent cultural exchanges. During this period, the widely cold-shouldered studies related to U.S. were reversed to comprehensive attention in many fields. Such studies in China then focused mainly on classical authors and gradually became free of ideological influences. Drama studies then came to be comprehensive in scope, concrete and rational in perspectives.

With the post-WWII contemporary drama of U.K. and U.S. introduced to China since 1980s, important figures among mainstream playwrights, such as Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, and so forth, have become research focuses. Many of their works were brought onto the screen. Drama from U.K., and U.S. was often adapted and performed on Chinese stages. Benefited from English as the most influential international language, studies of American drama in China boomed dynamically in 1990s. The studies in China are becoming more "objective, more comprehensive and profound" (Guo 505). The first ten years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw a tendency of large-scaled development in drama researches. In those ten years, a growing number of papers and monographs on those playwrights demonstrated a tendency of "multidimensional, systematic and thorough studies" (Shen & Wang 16).

The drama studies in China have also changed from thematic studies to formal and aesthetic studies carried out with pluralistic paradigms from literary theories of the West. Researches not only focused on issues of philosophy, religion, morality, and ethics in drama works but were also conducted from social, historic, political, and/or cultural perspectives. Various methods were adopted in the studies, such as feminist criticism, ecocriticism, postcolonial criticism, Marxist criticism, cultural criticism and so forth. In addition, some interdisciplinary achievements were produced in drama studies, which were combined with cinema, music, media, and cultural studies.

The prime feature of the studies lies in the selection of concentrated subjects for the studies, i.e., mainly mainstream playwrights, in particular, prolific playwrights and playwrights popular among audiences and producers, including those granted the Pulitzer Prize, Tony Awards, Drama Desk Award, etc. The studies on those diversified subjects suggest the researches were exemplary and profound in nature.

Chinese scholars launched continuous studies on influential playwrights with results of certain influence. For example, in the field of O'Neill studies, after the establishment of Eugene O'Neill Research Center in 1986, regular academic

conferences are held biannually. There arise series of theses and monographs published in recent years as well as conference proceedings. There are also sporadic performances of O'Neill's plays. In general, O'Neill's researchers have formulated an active echelon comprising three generations.

Arthur Miller is another playwright receiving the early attention from the Chinese. Miller and Tsao Yu (1910-1996, a well-known Chinese playwright) knew each other and somehow influenced each other. Miller is well accepted in China for the ideological resemblance in his works to Chinese ideologies, especially in those works of critical realism. The studies on him are conducted on a certain scale with continuous publications of theses and researches. Themed symposiums also have promoted Miller researches and his popularity. In China, studies on Tennessee Williams are also of a scaled basis. Due to his unintelligible plays, changeable ideas, especially his homosexual identity, Williams has not received the deserved attention in China. However, there are indeed some scholars who evaluated his plays in terms of "identity issues and American South" (Zhou & Han 96). Most of his researches focus on the thematic issues in his works, but there are also a certain amount of theses and academic papers on his writing styles.

The researches on Albee, a controversial playwright in China, have increased. The works he acknowledged having published total 28 plays from the first performance on the stage at the end of 1950s till his death on September 16, 2016. Probably out of misunderstanding of his works, Albee is always regarded as an absurdist playwright. Personally speaking, the author of this paper holds Albee is not an absurdist but a realistic author, who, always the pioneer of his age, was exploring the awakening and resurgence of drama, humanity and living conditions of the humankind. Albee belied the American dream that prevailed from the top to the bottom of the American society, and faced directly the broken humanity and real life. Mirroring American drama, Albee reflected the trends and vicissitudes of American drama over half a century.

In China there are considerable studies on Albee. For example, Dr. Zhang Lianqiao, in his pioneering study, analyzes Albee from the perspective of ethical literary criticism. His study is of special significance for it is a pioneering contribution in both terms of the approach and subject matter.

The publication of Zhang Lianqiao's *Identity Confusion and Ethical Choices: A Study on Edward Albee's Drama* has advanced researches on Albee in China. Focusing on the ethical problems brought by identity confusion, Zhang's monograph expounds Albee's moral attitude and ethical ideology and reveals the complex ethical relationships among humans, humankind and animals as well as

humans and society. In the ingenious book, Zhang has also discussed the moral enlightenment and guidance brought by those ethical issues. This monograph is a study conducted from the perspective of ethical literary criticism initiated by Prof. Nie Zhenzhao. Ethical literary criticism is an approach to literary criticism developed by Chinese scholars on the basis of “ethical criticism and moral criticism” (Nie 1). With the perspective of ethics in literary reading, analysis, interpretation and assessment, this approach can be applied in the exploration of the didactic function of literature and the moral value entailed in literature so as to allow literature to fulfill its significant role in the construction of spiritual civilization.

Employing ethical literary criticism in his monograph, “Zhang explores the deficiency of rationality, destruction of order and lack of morality caused by evading ethical responsibilities in reference to the connection of identity confusion of characters in Albee’s plays with their ethical choices” (Zhang 143). In this way, Zhang expounds the ethical motifs implied in the drama and presents a vast ethical picture in Albee’s plays. From its genesis, ethical literary criticism views literature as a moral product instead of aesthetic. Literature is in nature ethical and an external manifestation of social ethics. The mission for literature is, in terms of ethics, to explain different phenomena of life and the moral reasons for their existence, to describe the changes of ethical orders, the results and problems caused by these changes, and further to make a value judgment in attempt to provide experience and instructions for the progress of human civilization. Zhang’s book is the first published monograph of Albee’s plays in China. It presents a comprehensive analysis about Albee’s plays from the perspective of ethical literary criticism, with the consequent results of promoting the translation and dissemination of Albee’s plays in China and of initiating discussion among scholars related to the research.

In general, the subjects selected by Chinese scholars for studies were relatively concentrated. However, with the advance of American drama, especially since the civil rights movement, American drama experienced significant changes. Scholars in China have begun to select a certain group of American playwrights as their subject for study, for example, the homosexual playwrights, African American playwrights, Asian American playwrights, and so forth. When the minorities, females and homosexual people made heard their voice for equality, the drama world echoed them to a certain extent. Since the 1990s, works by playwrights previously marginalized were tapped again. As a result, ethnic American drama and female drama have undergone their development. In China, a representative achievement of the researches is *A Study of Chinese American Drama* authored

by Xu Yingguo, who explores in the pioneering book the origin and development of Chinese American drama and the influence from Chinese culture and drama tradition. Zhang Shengzhen's *Drama of Their Own: A Study of Contemporary American Women Playwrights* is also a pioneering achievement. In the monograph a systematical analysis is conducted about the long-ignored women playwrights with the conclusion that women playwrights have contributed a great deal to "the revival of American drama" (Zhang 12).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more attention has been paid to the literature text itself, hence studies on editions and manuscripts. Comparative studies are expanding, resulting in the achievements in Chinese and foreign drama theories and works. In addition, these comparative researches have unprecedentedly stressed the cultural, ideological and philosophical differences among subjects. On the whole, the American drama studies in China have undergone a deepening process.

### **Some Reflections on the Research Situation in China**

Generally speaking, American drama researches in China have undergone three stages — restoration in 1980s, initial prosperity in 1990s, and full prosperity and dynamism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and are pacing toward integration and systematization on a scaled basis. There is a great development compared with previous years and a sound development momentum although the overall size of the researches is not big enough. The academic projects and organizations become flourished, and national-level research institutes and conferences also begin to give their attention to this field. On the whole, the studies have their focuses with abundant achievements.

However, problems exist. There are inadequate studies on the interaction between Chinese and foreign cultures in the field of drama. Although there are exemplary comparative studies on O'Neill and Oriental culture, Miller and Tsao Yu's drama, achievements in this kind of researches are not encouraging numerically. Drama translation and drama education have not formulated a force in China. In American drama studies, China's academic circle tend to base their researches mainly on the researches made by American and European scholars, usually with approving attitudes. The critical research and diverse research results are rare to see in China.

In terms of research results, weighty classic works are sparse. High-level results of classic study are relatively weak. The integrated and comprehensive studies on American drama as a whole are scanty. In the application of western literary theories, parroting and imitation are sometimes found turning a work to function as a verification of some theory instead of a deepened and adequate

analysis of the text *per se*. There are also repeated researches. Some studies, on different planes though, focus on the same question, short of novelty and originality. Led by foreign scholars, some Chinese scholars lack the sense of Chinese position and consciousness. For some reason, Chinese scholars have fallen considerably behind international scholars. To some key subjects, they pursue short-term effect and market effect instead of long-time thinking, planning and preparations for meticulous studies.

For Chinese scholars, how to make breakthroughs and surpass others in American drama studies, how to take the advantage of the native Chinese literature and cultural resources to explore American drama, how to absorb new theories from the West in order to gain new perspectives and new materials, and how to get rid of the flippancy and to create a typical or classical work rather than repeating old views, these are profound questions deserve serious contemplations in Chinese academic circle of American drama studies in the new century.

### **Conclusion**

On the one hand, the achievements and contributions of American drama researches in China should be acknowledged. On the other hand, more attention should be given to the problems and missions. The year 2016 is the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of both Shakespeare's decease and that of Tang Xianzu's<sup>2</sup> (1550-1616). Shakespeare is well known to the whole world. However, Tang Xianzu remains obscure. Is it caused by the decline of the drama or by the failure of the academic circle to put in efforts? In our view, the later one is likely the answer. To inherit is both a responsibility and an innovation. Surely drama will survive and progress in the future. China's academic circle of drama studies should be able to make due contributions to drama study and inheritance. More efforts should be exerted to the equal conversation between China and others countries in this long traditional field.

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2. The most gifted playwright of the Ming dynasty, best-known for his masterpiece Mudanting [The peony pavilion]. The Peony Pavilion, the intricate story of the love of Du Liniang and the scholar Liu Mengmei, features an intricate plot that includes the return to the land of the living of its heroine from the netherworld. The play demonstrates its author's belief in the power of emotion over reason, makes use of many symbolic devices, and reveals an exuberant word-play.

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