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An Alternative Approach to History: A Review of *British Drama of the Twentieth Century*

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Abstract: The publication of *British Drama of the Twentieth Century* marks a milestone breakthrough in the exploration of British drama within Chinese academia. It demonstrates the scholarly initiative and innovative accomplishments of domestic scholars in actively constructing knowledge systems within the global intellectual arena. Professors Liu Hongwei and Li Jing take an approach that combines diachronic and synchronic perspectives, moving beyond traditional Western thematic paradigms. With a firm stance on Chinese academic subjectivity and methodological confidence, they offer an original reconstruction of the historical logic and intellectual-cultural genealogy of twentieth-century British drama. By conducting an in-depth investigation into the historical contexts of dramatic creation, the study clearly delineates five core threads in the development of British drama, presenting a comprehensive map of its century-long transformation. Notably, the work goes beyond mere historical documentation, engaging deeply with international scholarly discourse through a distinctive narrative framework and critical theory. It provides an essential Chinese perspective and a unique interpretive framework for re-evaluating twentieth-century British drama. This achievement not only expands the academic boundaries of international British drama studies, but also opens up new spaces for dialogue, fostering more equal intellectual exchanges between China and the West.

Keywords: *British Drama of the Twentieth Century*; Liu Hongwei; Li Jing; Chinese perspective

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题目: 历史的另一种解法——刘红卫教授、李晶教授新著《英国 20 世纪戏剧研究》述评

摘要: 《英国 20 世纪戏剧研究》一书的问世，标志着中国学界在英国戏剧研究领域实现了具有里程碑意义的突破性进展，彰显出本土学者在全球场域中主动构建知识体系的学术自觉与创新实绩。刘红卫教授与李晶教授以历时与共时相结合的研究路径，突破西方主题研究的既定范式，立足中国学术的主体立场与方法论自信，对英国 20 世纪戏剧的历史演进逻辑与思想文化谱系进行了富有原创性的重构。通过深入考察戏剧创作的历史语境，研究清晰勾勒出英国戏剧发展的五条核心脉络，完整呈现了百年变革的整体图景。尤为可贵的是，该著并未止步于史料梳理，而是以独特的叙事框架与批评理论深度介入国际学术讨论，为重新审视英国 20 世纪戏剧提供了重要的中国视角与独到的阐释方案。此项成果不仅拓展了国际英国戏剧研究的学术边界，更为中西之间的平等交流开辟了新的对话空间。

关键词: 英国 20 世纪戏剧研究；刘红卫；李晶；中国视角

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Throughout the history of British drama, few periods can rival the splendor and vitality of the Elizabethan era; yet the twentieth century undoubtedly stands out as one of the rare peaks of comparable significance. As the contemporary British playwright David Edgar (1948–) observes, while every era has witnessed the emergence of ambitious new writers eager to take centre stage, “New writing has not always been central to our [the British] theatrical culture.” In Edgar’s view, the defining criterion for identifying a “golden age” of drama lies in whether “new writing” occupies a central position within theatrical culture. Historically, only three periods in Britain have achieved such a level of creative renewal driven by “new writing”: The “Elizabethan-Jacobean period” (ca. 1590–1620), the “Restoration period” (the late 1670s–1707), and “the period between 1890 and 1914” (Edgar, 1998, p152). For Edgar, “new writing” refers not merely to formal or thematic innovation but to an intellectual awakening that dares to question the spirit of the age and challenge established authority. It embodies a playwright’s conscious engagement with social realities and a pioneering exploration of the human condition. This pursuit of new ideas enables twentieth-century British drama to “produce a wider range of plays than any previous era”, and allows “playwrights [to achieve] a public voice” (Innes, 2002, p1). In other words, drama during this period transcends the boundaries of pure art to become a vital means of understanding the cultural consciousness and public politics of modern Britain.

The systematic delineation and understanding of the intricately complex dramatic landscape of this century-long period has long been a major concern in academia. Among the foundational achievements in

Western scholarship, the work of Christopher Innes (1941–2017) is considered the most influential. His two landmark monographs—*Modern British Drama, 1890–1990* (1992) and *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century* (2002)—published successively at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, present an almost encyclopedic account of the development and intellectual evolution of modern British drama throughout the twentieth century. Critics have hailed his works as the most authoritative and valuable handbooks in the field at the time (Knowles, 1993, p969). However, precisely because of his macro-level approach, Innes inevitably has to make compromises in structure and depth. In order to depict the broadest possible historical picture, his discussion of certain playwrights and works necessarily appears rather brief. This “overview” approach has drawn some criticism. For instance, Elaine Aston points out that contemporary women playwrights are confined to a “brief final chapter” in the book, which is “disappointing” (1992, p292). Despite such limitations, Innes’s research remains groundbreaking in both methodology and academic vision, exerting a lasting influence in Western academia and attracting significant attention from Chinese scholars.

In China, Professor Liu Hongwei, a leading scholar in British drama studies, was the first to initiate an academic dialogue with Innes in 2010. In her book review, Professor Liu highly praises Innes’s scholarly achievements, particularly his contribution to “rewriting the history of British drama” and his “accurate grasp of the dynamic trends in the development of British drama” (2010, p162–163). Furthermore, Professor Liu, in an effort to enhance intellectual exchange and interaction between Chinese and Western scholars, together with Professor Li Jing, also an expert in drama studies, co-authored a new seminal work—*British Drama of the Twentieth Century* (Wuhan University Press, 2022, hereafter referred to as *British Drama*)^①. Engaging deeply with international academic discourse from a distinctive critical perspective, *British Drama* exemplifies the frontier innovation and critical insight of Chinese scholarship.

The publication of *British Drama* marks a milestone for British drama studies in China. The book reflects the ongoing efforts of Chinese scholars to develop an independent intellectual framework within the global academic context. Drawing upon their own cultural standpoint, Professors Liu and Li offer a thorough and insightful analysis of twentieth-century British drama. Apart from the introduction and conclusion, the book comprises ten core chapters that explore major events, significant playwrights, and representative works of British drama in the twentieth century. Building upon existing Western research, the authors seek to identify areas of insufficiency and propose solutions informed by Chinese wisdom. This promotes a dual development of globalization and localization in British drama studies.

The most distinctive feature of *British Drama* lies in its narrative framework, which deliberately adopts an approach that diverges from the dominant structures of Western scholarship, thus constructing a unique intellectual system of its own. More than two decades ago, Christopher Innes asserted that the historical progression of twentieth-century British drama cannot be easily organized along a chronological line, since it lacks “clear temporal signposts” (2002, p8). Yet is Innes’s “temporal problem” truly unsolvable? Two decades later, two scholars from China offered a different perspective on this issue. They re-examined the development

^① All citations in this article refer to the following work: Liu Hongwei & Li Jing (2022). *British Drama of the Twentieth Century*. Wuhan University Press. Subsequent in-text citations include only the publication year and page number.

of twentieth-century British drama along a temporal axis and proposed a new approach to the linear narrative framework that Innes had avoided. This methodological shift enables *British Drama* to establish a distinctive intellectual space within the field of global British drama studies.

According to Professor Liu, the study of British drama should not be confined to “intra-dramatic” dimensions such as “playwrights, dramatic texts, criticism, dramatic history, dramatic forms, stage performance, directorial concepts, and audience relations”. Rather, they should also incorporate an examination of the various of “extra-dramatic” factors, including “the historical context of dramatic creation, cultural tradition, political background, ethical environment, ideology, economic policy, and market demand (2022, p1). She emphasizes that the history of dramatic transformation is, in essence, isomorphic with the history of social transformation. To fully capture the comprehensive picture of British drama, “one must first conduct a macroscopic examination of its century-long development, with particular attention to its social dimensions, analyzing and interpreting the documentary evidence of its evolution” (2022, p2). This proposition reflects the authors’ profound insight into the intertextual relationship between theatre and society, while also revealing the historical materialist tendencies inherent in their research methodology. Guided by this theoretical perspective, the entire work establishes a coherent and rigorous narrative framework: it seeks to reconstruct the internal historical logic and intellectual genealogy of twentieth-century British drama by tracing its temporal trajectory.

Through a systematic restoration of the historical contexts in which dramas were created, Professors Liu and Li skillfully divide the century into the following five major stages: (1) the period of the New Drama Movement, which was grounded in realism (1890s–early twentieth century); (2) the Workers’ Theatre Movement (1920s–1930s); (3) the Revival of Poetic Drama (1930s–1950s); (4) the Golden Age (mid-1950s–late 1970s); and (5) the period of dramatic innovation by new generation of playwrights (1980s–late twentieth century). Beyond presenting a clear and coherent chronological outline of dramatic development, the authors pinpoint key moments of creative practice and institutional transformation across different stages, offering in-depth analyses of influential playwrights and their representative works.

The first stage discusses the origins of modern British drama. In Chapters One and Two, the authors start by studying the New Drama Movement that arose in the 1880s, concentrating on the creative practices of George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950), John Galsworthy (1867–1933), and W. Somerset Maugham (1874–1965). They explore the modernizing transformation that British drama underwent at the turn of the century. As Professor Liu notes, this drama movement, which originated in the late nineteenth century, not only successfully restored drama to its classical position in British literary culture but, more importantly, reaffirmed the central role of dramatic writing in cultural production (2022, p2). Professor Li further points out that, with the success of the “Shavian Comedy of Idea”—*Arms and the Man* (1894), *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* (1894), *Major Barbara* (1905), *Heartbreak House: A Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes* (1919), and *Saint Joan* (1923)—the “problem play” and “new drama” gradually converged, tightly integrating social critique with dramatic art. By exposing the hypocritical nature and moral dilemmas of capitalist society, Shaw and his contemporaries turned drama into a weapon for social criticism. From both thematic and formal

dimensions, these playwrights wove a modern core into British drama, creating an organic resonance and interaction between text, stage, and the era. It can be said that the dramatic creations of this period, on one hand, achieved an industrial revival on an artistic level, and on the other hand, established a new tradition for British drama—engaging directly with reality and caring for society—on an ideological level.

In the subsequent discussion of the second and third stages, the authors provide a detailed exploration of the growth of modern British drama before and after the wars. Their research encompasses rigorous theoretical analyses of dramatic texts and aesthetic forms, as well as meticulous documentation of the interaction between evolving dramatic movements and their broader sociocultural contexts. The depth of their material is impressive. In Chapter Three, Professor Liu focuses on Noël Coward (1899–1973), one of the most celebrated commercial playwrights of London’s West End, re-evaluating and reclaiming his work from long-standing critical misreadings. As an icon of the “Bright Young Things” generation, Coward has often been dismissed by critics for his flamboyant stage style. However, the research of Professor Liu reveals that beneath the seemingly “cynical” surface of Coward’s dramas lies a profound rebellion against traditional moral norms and a contemplation of ethical crises, ultimately serving to mirror the spiritual wasteland of a diseased modern society. To further broaden the analytical scope, Professor Liu situates both the Workers’ Theatre Movement and the Revival of Poetic Drama within the framework of the British dramatic ecosystem surrounding World War II. She then constructs a three-dimensional analytical pattern characterized as “commercial leadership – leftist resistance – traditional reconstruction”. For left-wing theatre practitioners such as Ewan McColl (1915–1989) and Joan Littlewood (1914–2002), establishing socially engaged theatre collectives represented a means to respond to the urgencies of the time, voicing class demands and political ideals through performance. By contrast, poetic dramatists such as T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) and Christopher Fry (1907–2005) sought to restore postwar moral order and create a new theatre appealing to elite and popular audiences alike by reviving classical traditions. The authors argue that, despite arising from different ideological and artistic backgrounds, these forms of dramatic innovation collectively laid the artistic foundations and social groundwork that paved the way for the “Golden Age” of British drama in the mid-1950s.

The fourth stage is the section that has been discussed the most extensively in the book. Here, the authors catalogue the artistic achievements of the period and turn their attention to the two core pillars supporting Britain’s theatrical ecology: the theatre system and the censorship regime. From Chapter Four to Chapter Eight, the narrative intertwines macro-level institutional reform and micro-level artistic practice, tracing the trajectory through which British theatre evolved from postwar dormancy to its “Golden Age”. Notably, the study does not isolate institutions from artistic creation, but rather highlights their dynamic interplay. The institutional reform of the Royal Court Theatre expanded opportunities for playwrights to voice new ideas, while the abolition of outdated censorship laws liberated their creative expression. Together, these developments formed a virtuous cycle of platform support and institutional protection. Through a retrospective analysis of the creative journeys of key playwrights, including John Osborne (1929–1994), Edward Bond (1934–), Harold Pinter (1930–2008), Sir Tom Stoppard (1937–), Agatha Christie (1890–1976), Ann Jellicoe (1927–2017), Shelagh Delaney (1938–2011), Caryl Churchill (1938–), etc., the authors integrate institutional

analysis with detailed case studies. This offers a valuable model for balancing “external contexts” and “internal artistry” in drama research. For instance, in Chapter Seven, the authors demonstrate the crucial role of systemic transformation in amplifying marginalized voices by examining institutional change and creative practice in tandem. Their research shows that, from the 1950s to the 1960s, the Royal Court Theatre—long regarded as an “experimental ground for new writers”—had cultivated a generation of outstanding female dramatists. As stated in the book: “There is no doubt that without the Royal Court Theatre’s strong support for new writing, the advances made by women writers in the theatre would have largely vanished”. Furthermore, the British Arts Council’s policies and financial sponsorship broke through the male-dominated barriers of the theatre world, granting female theatre groups unprecedented opportunities for development (2022, p221). By situating the progress of women playwrights within the broader public context of the “Golden Age” of British drama, the authors redefine the crucial role of women in stage narratives and the cultural agenda of modern Britain.

The final part of twentieth-century British drama is the focus of the authors’ exploration in the fifth stage. In Chapters Nine and Ten, the authors shift their attention to a new generation of playwrights, including Martin Crimp (1956–), Patrick Marber (1964–), Sarah Kane (1971–1999) and so on. They investigate how these dramatists respond to the challenges of political upheaval, moral decline, and existential anxiety in an age characterized by globalization, digitalization, and consumerism through theatrical experimentation. Professor Li points out that, compared to earlier stages, the late-twentieth-century British drama witnessed groundbreaking progress in linguistic experimentation and stage performance. To illustrate these innovations concretely, the author conducts a multidimensional analysis of three representative new dramatic forms: Intercultural Theatre, In-Yer-Face Theatre, and Verbatim Theatre. Each is scrutinised from the perspectives of script creation and performance practice, academic critical reception, and socio-cultural impact. For example, when interpreting the shocking stage performances characteristic of In-Yer-Face Theatre, Professor Li delves into themes of violence, love, desire, death, and power within the on-stage content of twentieth-century works. At the same time, she considers the off-stage academic debates and audience responses, striving to capture the full range of its cultural resonance and contemporary relevance. This approach aims to fully illuminate the era-specific characteristics and cultural effects of this theatrical form. In such resounding artistic reverberations, the authors powerfully and thoughtfully conclude their study of twentieth-century British drama.

Attentive readers must have noticed that, in addition to reconstructing the traditional paradigms of Western drama studies within its overall narrative framework, *British Drama* also transcends the limits of a single geographical framework. The book extends its scope to examine the century-long trajectory of the dissemination and reception of British drama in China. Adopting a longitudinal historical lens, the authors provide a comprehensive review of the sustained efforts of Chinese scholars in the reception, translation, criticism and localization of British drama, spanning the May Fourth/New Culture Movement, the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the Reform and Opening Up era, and the age of globalization in the twenty-first century. As the researchers note, after several generations of continuous academic endeavor, China has developed a research system and paradigm “with distinct Chinese characteristics in areas such as drama

reading and textual interpretation” (2022, p362), achieving full integration with the international academic community. This attention to the history of academic interaction elevates the book beyond national drama history, placing it within the broader context of cross-cultural exchange.

It is important to note that the “Chinese standpoint” presented in the book is not based on self-centred cultural essentialism. Nor does it aim to create new academic barriers. Instead, it is a rational choice based on indigenous literary theory, seeking to deepen academic understanding and engage in global dialogue on an equal footing. The intention is to break free from a closed, self-referential intellectual loop and encourage authentic two-way interaction. Upholding a Chinese standpoint is valuable because it can interpret Western works through the lens of local theory, presenting the unique perspectives of Chinese scholarship to the world. At the same time, this approach allows Chinese theoretical frameworks to be tested and refined through international exchange.

Specifically speaking, in the chapter dedicated to the “Pinteresque” drama, the authors do not rely solely on Western theoretical paradigms. Instead, they innovatively draw on the Ethical Literary Criticism proposed by Professor Nie Zhenzhao, a theory independently developed within China. According to Professor Nie, “literature is a form of ethical expression of human experiences in historical times...The task of literature is to describe the issues related to the ethical relationships and their moral orders, with an aim to provide guidance and instruction for human civilization” (2024, p13). Therefore, “only by viewing Pinter’s works as unique expressions of ethical concepts and moral life in a specific historical context can we truly appreciate their distinctive artistic charm and profound ethical connotations and interpret them objectively” (2022, p137). Guided by the framework of Ethical Literary Criticism, the authors analyze Pinter’s works in terms of core concepts such as “ethical environment,” “ethical identity,” “ethical choice,” and the “Sphinx factor”. In doing so, they correct several common misreadings of *The Homecoming* (1964), *Betrayal* (1978), *One for the Road* (1984), and *Moonlight* (1993), etc., opening up new interpretative dimensions and dialogic possibilities for international Pinter studies.

British Drama is a work of expansive vision and intellectual inclusiveness. It is of exceptional scholarly significance, whether in terms of innovation in narrative paradigms or contributions to academic theory. This extensive monograph engages with over a dozen distinguished British playwrights and more than forty dramatic works across a substantive length exceeding 300,000 words. It provides in-depth analyses of the key contributions of renowned dramatists, while also incorporating studies of the innovative practices of marginalized groups. Through a linear, macro-historical narrative framework, the authors reconstruct the intellectual genealogy and historical logic of twentieth-century British drama, offering fresh Chinese insights to Western scholarly discourse. Meanwhile, they accurately identify and deal with gaps in domestic scholarship on British drama, effectively remedying issues, including the scarcity of comprehensive studies and the limited number of specialized monographs, as well as the overreliance on single critical methodologies.

Though challenges remain, such as the underdevelopment of theatre-based studies and the need for methodological innovation and awareness of theoretical frontiers, we believe that ongoing research advancement will lead to a stronger academic collaboration network. This will promote the transnational

dissemination of high-quality research outcomes and increase the participation of Chinese scholars in the international field of British drama studies. In the foreseeable future, Chinese academic influence is set to play a proactive and leading role in shaping research agendas and theoretical discourse in this field. With an independent yet open scholarly stance, Chinese scholars will make a significant and enduring contribution to the pluralistic coexistence and sustainable development of world drama research.

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