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The Century-long Evolution of the Concept of “Theatricality” and the Return of the Essence of Drama: A Review of Fang Guilin’s *Research on the Concept of “Theatricality” in Chinese Drama*

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Abstract: This book focuses on the concept of “theatricality” and presents an in-depth study based on the century-long history of Chinese drama. Throughout the book, theories such as semiotics, cultural geography, and Gestalt psychology are used to interpret the concept of the “theatrical field” from three dimensions: the “architectural field,” the “performance field,” and the “ritual communication field.” On this basis, the framework of the “three-field theory” is constructed, and two core principles are clarified: “identifying the mainstream through the comparison of history and the present” and “seeking integration of subjectivity and objectivity.” This research is of great academic significance for interpreting the concept of “theatricality” and for the development of contemporary theatre.

Keywords: Theatrical; modern drama; concept; field

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题目：“剧场性”观念的百年流变和戏剧本体的回归——评方桂林《中国话剧的“剧场性”观念研究》

摘要：《中国话剧的“剧场性”观念研究》一书以中国话剧的百年历史梳理为基础，聚焦于“剧场性”观念研究。全书运用符号学批评、文化地理学、格式塔心理学等理论，以“场”概念为解读视角，从“建筑场”“演出场”“仪式传播场”三个维度阐述“剧场性”观念，构建了“三场理论”框架，明确了“在历史与当下的对比中把握主流”和“在主观与客观中寻求融合”两个阐述原则，对“剧场性”观念解读和当代戏剧艺术发展具有重要意义。

关键词：剧场性；话剧；观念；场

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Whether in terms of dramatic texts or stage performances, theatricality constitutes the essential attribute of drama (Liu Jiasi, 2011, p.33). The notion of theatricality “embodies the evolution of Western dramatic theory, alongside the contextual scrutiny and cultural reinterpretation of the concept following its introduction into China via theoretical translation. As a core terminology in drama studies, theatricality has kept expanding its connotations amid shifting historical and theoretical contexts” (Fang Guilin, 2025, p.57). Scholars across distinct historical eras and from divergent theoretical standpoints have developed disparate yet overlapping understandings of theatricality, which has led to pluralistic interpretations of the concept. Meanwhile, debates surrounding theatricality have spawned inquiries into its correlations with literariness, fictionality and drama proper respectively. Such conceptual deliberations have further produced a butterfly effect spanning multiple domains including dramatic criticism, theoretical systematization, playwriting and theatrical performance practice. Fang Guilin’s book *Research on the Concept of “Theatricality” in Chinese Drama* focuses on the concept of “theatricality.” By tracing the historical evolution of the concept and interpreting it from multiple perspectives at the same time, the book presents the ambiguity of “theatricality.” From the angles of translation and local cultural context, it explores the differentiation and interpretation of the concept, and constructs a triple interpretive framework—the “architectural field,” the “performance field,” and the “ritual communication field”—using the concept of the “theatrical field.” It seeks a “correct” understanding of “theatricality” through the organic integration of grasping the mainstream in both historical and contemporary contexts, as well as subjective and objective perspectives, forming a logical discourse of “concept differentiation—framework construction—practical response.” Standing from the standpoint of Chinese cultural subjectivity and closely focusing on the theme of interpreting “theatricality,” *Research on the Concept of “Theatricality” in Chinese Drama* provides theoretical tools for dramatic art practice, dramatic theory research, and dramatic criticism. As Zhu Yitian argues, the concluding chapter of the book offers a dynamic theoretical perspective: the so-called “theatricality” bears no fixed, essentialist and eternal form of truth; instead, a legitimate conception of theatricality is continuously verified, revised and reconstructed within specific historical contexts and theatrical practices, gradually moving toward a context-bound dynamic equilibrium among the “three domains” shaped by temporal and spatial conditions (2025, p.127).

1. Analysis: A Local Interpretation Perspective of the Concept of “Theatricality”

The multidimensional interpretation of “theatricality” has evolved throughout the history of Chinese drama and has also expanded within the integration of drama, art, and social sciences during the same period. The vertical historical evolution and horizontal comparison across different periods together construct the overall development of the concept of “theatricality” in Chinese drama, and present a multidimensional interpretive perspective. This provides theoretical inspiration and case support for the interpretive framework of “theatricality” in Fang Guilin’s book *Research on the Concept of “Theatricality” in Chinese Drama*, which is grounded in the local Chinese context. In the development trend of “post-theatrical theatre,” the connotation of “theatricality” has expanded, and the concept has been interpreted within the local context after translation. As Fang Guilin (p.57) notes, “The Chinese ‘theatricality’ corresponds to foreign terms such as ‘Theatrical/Theatricality’ in English, ‘Театральный/Театральность’ in Russian, and ‘Theatralität’ in German.” Fuzzy conceptual boundaries and unclear referents can easily lead to misunderstandings, ineffective dialogue, and other research problems. It remains to be examined whether the above foreign vocabulary fully corresponds to the term “theatricality” in the local context. Therefore, Fang Guilin proposes in his book that “to clarify the concept of ‘theatricality,’ the first thing to sort out is the issue of its translation: which vocabulary is translated as ‘theatricality’ under what circumstances” (p.45). The theatrical theories of Vakhtangov and Stanislavski first attracted the attention of domestic translators. Both have their own views on the concept of “theatricality,” but both elaborate on it from the perspective of stage creation, thereby advancing the discussion of the concept. Afterwards, the annotations of Dan Qinke, George Baker, Kawagoe Dengzhi, and others enriched the connotation of “theatricality.” The concept became related to script creation, anti-realism, viewing relationships, symbolic language, and other content. At the same time, translation issues also arose, such as the distinction between “Dramatic” and “Theatrical,” semantic changes in “Theatrical,” and the appropriation of “Theatricality.” Regarding the criteria for determining whether foreign vocabulary can be equated with the word “theatricality” in the Chinese context, Fang Guilin believes there are two points: first, the evolution of words such as “Theatrical/Theatricality” in their own context; second, whether there are any other translated names for words like “Theatrical/Theatricality” besides “theatricality” (p.58). However, the translation and introduction of Western theories have not fully covered the scope of Chinese scholars’ exploration of the concept of “theatricality.” The current state of Chinese drama art and the inherent needs of drama theory have given a strong local character to the study of “theatricality” in China.

The multidimensional interpretive perspective provides diversified vitality for the development of the connotation of “theatricality,” but it also increases the difficulty of understanding. Choosing a suitable entry point has become the only way to localize the interpretation of “theatricality.” From the perspective of the history of Chinese drama, the ways and dimensions of interpreting “theatricality” within the Chinese cultural context have varied greatly. Inspired by the Chinese context and Western modern theory, Fang Guilin chose to use the concept of “field” as the starting point to explain “theatricality.” On the one hand, “field” has rich explanatory space in both Eastern and Western cultural contexts, which aligns with the developmental path

of “theatricality” as a concept translated from the West and integrated into the Chinese cultural context. On the other hand, the exposition of the theatrical “field” by figures such as He Zhudeng Zhifu, Gerhard Maletsk, and Chen Jide provides a theoretical direction for selecting an entry point for the study of “theatricality.” Thus, the basic idea in *Research on the Concept of “Theatricality” in Chinese Drama* is to use the meaning of the Chinese “stage” as a benchmark and the Western perspectives of “theatricality” and “stage” theory as a reference (p.66).

2. Construction: Framework of the “Three Field Theory” under the Concept of “Field”

Based on the above research ideas, Fang Guilin takes the concept of “field” as the core, breaks down the notion of “theatricality” into the “architectural field,” the “performance field,” and the “ritual communication field” for detailed elaboration, and further constructs a systematic theoretical framework called the “Three-Field Theory.”

2.1 Construction field

Theater architecture is a physical space that accommodates audiences for theatrical performances. At the macro level, it forms part of urban public space, reflecting traces of historical development and the planning and layout of urban construction. At the micro level, the scale and type of theater space are closely linked to performance effects. Different seating configurations, such as the proscenium stage, thrust stage, and arena stage, are shaped by factors including theatrical concepts, artistic styles, and historical material conditions, and in turn exert an active influence on both audiences and performers. In addition, theater architecture constitutes a theatrical space endowed with aesthetic attributes. On the one hand, audiences form aesthetic expectations before the formal performance and gain aesthetic experience during the viewing process. On the other hand, both Eastern and Western drama originated from ritual activities, in which people construct collective memories through communal gatherings in a specific space, thereby strengthening their sense of belonging and identification with that place. This spiritual quality persists to the present day and is defined as the “spirit of place” in *Research on the Concept of “Theatricality” in Chinese Drama*. Simply put, “theater space” is physical in nature and serves as the foundational point leading toward “theatricality”; it encompasses performance venues, theater buildings themselves, and corresponding geographical and cultural factors (p.71). Furthermore, *Research on the Concept of “Theatricality” in Chinese Drama* offers an in-depth interpretation of theater spaces in civilized drama, outdoor performances, small theaters, and contemporary drama. It reveals the diverse forms of theater space that have emerged during the century-long development of Chinese drama through the integration of social and cultural customs, as well as the localized performance styles derived from them. For instance, outdoor theater in the 1930s emerged from the wave of “theatrical popularization.” The open spatial layout and new performance practices of outdoor theaters fulfilled a dual function of cultural education and aesthetic entertainment, advancing the modernization of Chinese theater. Street theater, meanwhile, drew on such spatial conditions and real-life themes to exert theatrical power in the arena of anti-Japanese propaganda.

2.2 Performance field

In the early stages of Chinese drama development, civilized drama lacked professional theaters and was characterized by “lively scenes and curious themes” in order to attract audiences and ensure its survival. The “theatricality” exhibited in civilized drama was mostly evaluated negatively, and the term was even used to criticize plays that featured spectacular scenes but lacked substantial ideas. Clearly, by this period, “theatricality” had already become a criterion for assessing the quality of dramatic performances. Fang Guilin points out in *Research on the Concept of “Theatricality” in Chinese Drama* that “the concept of ‘tension’ may help explain the intensity of theatricality in performance works.” This argument offers a measurable standard for evaluating the expressiveness and appeal of drama, while refining its analytical dimensions by linking the generation of artistic tension, its starting point, and its foundation. Based on a functional exploration of “tension,” Fang Guilin further examines the connection between field theory and tension, concluding that the “psychophysical field” in Gestalt psychology reflects the essence of theatricality and also resonates with the concept of “qi field” in Chinese philosophy. Taking the psychophysical field as an overarching framework, and focusing on theatrical elements such as dramatic texts, visual symbols, and audience psychology, the study interprets how artistic tension is generated during the theatrical experience, and enhances the perception of theatricality through the mediating function of tension. The claim that “text” constitutes the starting point of artistic tension responds to the long-running academic debate between “literariness” and “theatricality.” Yet the boundary between literariness and theatricality remains ambiguous. Fang Guilin therefore defines “text” narrowly as “complete scripts and unadjusted, unorganized literary materials,” and confines “theatricality” to “secondary creation on stage,” thereby opening up a new approach to exploring the relationship between the two. His pursuit of a middle ground and his commitment to concrete analysis of specific issues not only represent his response to the dispute over literariness and theatricality, but also reflect the applied orientation of the book. Clarifying the relationship between theatricality and hypotheticity from a translational perspective expands the inquiry into the foundational tension of theatrical art. By distinguishing theatricality from hypotheticity, the study establishes that hypotheticity serves as a creative technique for constructing theatricality, and identifies “the organization of stage action,” “the manipulation of stage space,” and “the viewing relationship” as effective means of creating theatricality (pp. 182–195).

2.3 Ceremony dissemination venue

Rituals originated from sacrificial activities, and drama in turn emerged from rituals; both possess symbolic and social educational functions. However, drama has undergone a process of secularization and acquired stronger entertainment and aesthetic qualities. Therefore, ritual and drama are not interchangeable concepts. In his exploration of the connotation of “theatricality,” Fang Guilin introduced the core concept of the “communication field” as well as ritualized elements, investigating the “ritualized viewing process” and “ritualized stage presentation” within performance (p. 202). On the one hand, a ritual is a collective activity involving multiple participants, and communication constitutes its basic attribute. In theatrical performance, this manifests as interaction between the audience and performers, as well as mutual exchange among

individuals who share a common identity. On the other hand, drama inherits the symbolic nature of ritual and becomes an important medium for constructing theatrical elements. The archetypal imagery of ritual serves as the source of tension in theatrical expression. The “human form” of the performer’s body and “physical forms” such as stage design, lighting, and costumes carry the power of archetypal imagery. They not only mirror human society and culture but also act as an effective channel for generating dramatic tension. Through the combined effect of the ritualized viewing process and ritualized stage presentation, drama fulfills a formative function, a consolidating function, a therapeutic function, and an entertainment function. The audience acquires collective experience and perceives the artistic appeal of drama throughout the viewing process.

3. Searching for “Correct” and “Theatrical”

“Whether viewed from dramatic texts or stage performances, be they dramatic or comprehensive, performative or stagial, or hypothetical attributes, these elements undoubtedly constitute prominent traits of drama yet not its essential properties. They fail to demarcate the precise conceptual boundaries required for rigorous scholarly definition, nor can they delineate the normative criteria governing interactive and affective empathy as demanded by the intrinsic properties of live theatrical performance. Only theatricality encapsulates drama’s inherent essence and differentiates it from other literary genres.” (Liu Jiasi, 2011, p.48).

An investigation into dramatic texts demonstrates that the accurate interpretation of theatricality remains necessary and valuable in the contemporary era. Based on an analysis of interpretations of normative theatricality proposed by George Baker, Vakhtangov, Yu Shangyuan and other scholars, Fang Guilin argues: “The so-called ‘normative’ essentially means identifying what is suited to its own context; in short, grasping the mainstream via comparisons between historical experience and present reality, and pursuing integration between subjectivity and objectivity.” (p.258) Throughout the century-long development of Chinese spoken drama, persistent problems including formulaic and conceptualized performing styles, the institutional shackles of realistic drama, the marginalization of literariness and the collapse of artistic benchmarks have drawn criticism from all quarters across different historical periods and sparked fierce debates marked by distinctive features. These controversies paved the practical groundwork for exploring the definition of normative theatricality. This precisely corroborates Fang Guilin’s assertion: “For mainstream drama, the crux is not how we analyse theatricality, but which form of theatricality we actually need.” (p.266) Furthermore, integrating one’s subjective understanding of the historical evolution and current landscape of drama with the objective inherent attributes of theatricality embodied in dramatic works, and absorbing strengths from both dimensions, constitutes the indispensable approach to defining normative theatricality.

In summary, *Research on the Concept of “Theatricality” in Chinese Drama* focuses on the exploration of the concept of “theatricality” as its central theme. It constructs an interpretive framework based on the “Three-Field Theory” and practice-oriented principles of exposition, forming a complete discourse logic.

The definition of “theatricality” in this book is grounded in the hundred-year history of Chinese drama. It not only examines the different styles, spaces, and archetypal images of drama across different periods, but also addresses the tension between “theatricality” and “literariness,” as well as such developmental phenomena as decentering and pan-literariness in drama. At the same time, theories from audience psychology and cultural geography have expanded the research perspective of this book, offering drama researchers a more comprehensive angle of study. In short, *Research on the Concept of “Theatricality” in Chinese Drama* is a systematic study of the concept of “theatricality” and is worth reading and researching.

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