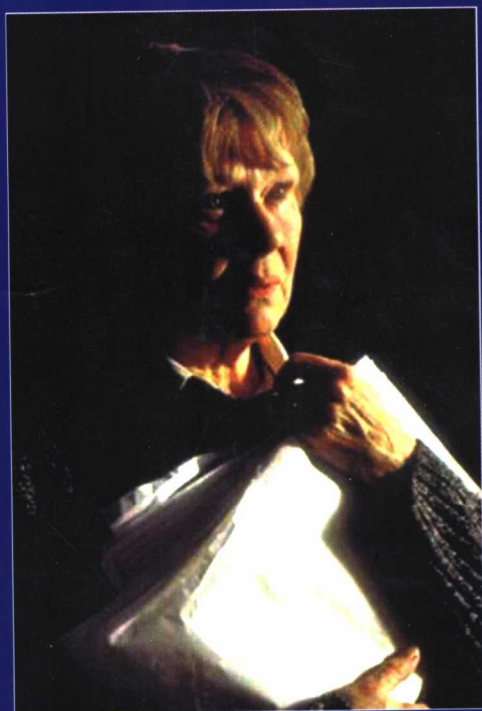


# Decoding Contemporary Britain:

*Essays in British Literary and  
Cultural Studies*

Edited by MAO Sihui

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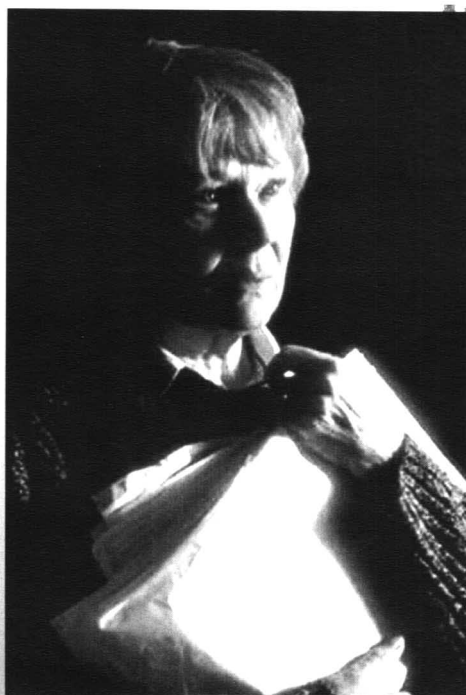


Peking University Press  
Beijing

# Decoding Contemporary Britain

## ***Essays in British Literary and Cultural Studies***

Edited by MAO Sihui



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## Editor

**MAO Sihui** received his B. A. and M. A. in English Language and Literature from the Guangzhou Institute of Foreign Languages (GIFL), his second M.A. in Contemporary Literary Studies from the University of Lancaster, and his PhD in Comparative Literature (Film Culture) from the University of Hong Kong. He taught "Modern British and American Drama," "Comparative Culture," "Film Culture" courses in the Department of English at GIFL (now Guangdong University of Foreign Studies [GDUFS]) from 1982 to 2001. Before joining the Department of Translation, HK Lingnan University, he was Professor of English and Cultural Studies and dean of Faculty of English Language and Culture, GDUFS and Vice President of China-America Comparative Culture Association. He was the coordinator for the Sino-British Project "British Studies" from 1989-1994. He is presently teaching "Translating Cultures," "Translation of Texts in Popular Culture" and "Translating Media." His publications include *American Feminine Humor* (trans. & ed. 1989), *Technologising the Male Body: British Cinema 1957-1987* (1999), *New Perspectives: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Studies* (ed. 2000) and *Highlights of European Culture* (forthcoming). He has also published some papers in literary and cultural studies, and culture and translation studies. He is currently working on *Literary Transformations in Postmodern Cultural Contexts and Chinese in Hollywood*. His current research interests are: culture and translation, comparative culture and film studies.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to all those friends, colleagues and students who have helped both in the organization of the conference Decoding Contemporary Britain (March 16-19, 2001) and in the production of this book. My thanks should go to the British Council (Guangzhou), CHINATION.NET, the Garden Hotel (Guangzhou), Yuehaifeng Magazine and the various departments at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies for their valuable support, be it financial, material, administrative or moral.

I would particularly like to thank the following individuals for their generosity in giving their precious time and wisdom and for sharing this great experience with us: Prof. Xu Zhenhua, Prof. Fang Fanquan, Prof. Chen Jianping, Prof. Mo Huocai, Prof. Luo Xingjian, Mr. Li Huadeng, Prof. Zhong Weihe, Mr. Justin Gilbert, Mr. Nick Wadham-Smith, Prof. Xiao Huiyun, Mr. Rod Laurence, Ms Hazel Medd, Prof. Fang Jianzhuang, Prof. Ye Zhenqiang, Mr. Ru Binrong, Mr. Chen Zirui, Mr. Zhou Dusheng, Ms Erica Chen, Miss Jenny Peng, Ms Li Yan, Ms Wang Dan, Ms Pan Xiangning, Ms Liang Jianrong, Mr. Lie Jianxi, Mr. Yang Si and many of his fellow graduate students and all the staff from the office of the Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies.

I also wish to acknowledge thanks to Ms Guo Li, Mr. Fan Yiting, Ms Zhang Hong and their colleagues at Peking University Press whose professionalism in and dedication to the publication of new academic research in China has truly been an inspiration to us all working arduously in the vineyard.

## **Preface**

It was in late 1999 that Dr. Mao Sihui and his colleagues from Guangdong University of Foreign Studies approached us at the British Council (the Cultural and Education Section of the British Consulate General in Guangzhou) to propose that we co-organize a large-scale conference on British literary and cultural studies. We were immediately interested. One of the most important roles of the British Council is to give people around the world a true picture of contemporary Britain and its often complex society: multi-ethnic and diverse, its writing and culture reflecting a rapidly changing nation. To know more about a country is, after all, to be able to engage with it more fruitfully. Britain has been foremost in developing the field of cultural studies, and the British Council has long supported British Studies as a discipline.

A little over a year after that initial meeting, and a great deal of work later, the conference *Decoding Contemporary Britain* finally came together; and was an outstanding success. I myself found it a heady and slightly unnerving experience; as the weekend unfolded the many scholars present displayed an extraordinary depth and range of knowledge about the UK and its literatures and cultures. Their comments, on and off the lecture platform, provided an unexpected perspective on British life; friendly, but alert to its nuances.

The quality of the keynote speakers particularly contributed to the success of the conference. Those from the UK—who included several outstanding academics, one of our best young playwrights and one of our finest political journalists—were joined by a dazzling line-up of some of the most important Chinese experts in the field. Bringing them together was only one of the many achievements of our partners at GDUFS, whose imagination, organisational skills and sheer panache made of the conference a memorable occasion. I am delighted that its achievements have been preserved through this collection of papers.

Justin Gilbert  
Consul (Cultural and Education)  
British Council Director Guangzhou



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**An International Conference in China on  
British Literary and Cultural Studies: March 16-19, 2001**

*Guangdong University of Foreign Studies  
Guangzhou, China*

**Decoding Contemporary Britain: An Overview**

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**Mao Sihui and Rod Laurence**

This conference was held about a year ago and we find it very hard to truly re-live and re-capture everything that happened during that wonderful weekend in March 2001. We have chosen to leave this piece of writing as it was originally delivered at the conference and sincerely hope that this collection of papers may bring back some of your memories and provide those who were not there with the joy of thinking and sharing. At the same time, we wish to apologise to those whose papers had been reviewed but had to be excluded from this collection by the Conference Academic Committee.

**Dear Colleagues and Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen:**

Since this conference covers such a wide range of themes and topics on which so many ideas and views have been shared as well as challenged, the very idea of doing an overview for such a conference (with 120 participants, over 50 of whom presented papers) should therefore be vigorously avoided. However, "international common practice" demands one and now we take the risk in offering our version of a summary which we sincerely hope would be a bit more than simply ritualistic.

The screening of the critically acclaimed British film *Shakespeare in Love* on the registration night already convinced some of the participants that one of the most repeated

names during the conference would be Shakespeare the Bard whose "Merry England" and its neighbours were to be "decoded" by scholars from China and abroad. At the very first plenary session, the chairman of this conference, Dr. Mao Sihui read a faxed message from Paris from Prof. Xu Zhenhua (President of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies who was on an official visit to France and Britain) to this conference on British Literary and Cultural Studies, sponsored by Chination.net. This message, together with the welcome speech by Prof. Fang Fanquan, Vice President of GDUS, contextualized our proceedings in a globalized, high-tech environment which was also to be personal and full of warmth and mutual respect and appreciation. The British Consul General, Mr. Stephen Lillie expressed his confidence that rather than being lost in the fog of Dickensian London this conference would address the complexities of post-Diana Britain. Through understanding our real differences and similarities, British and Chinese would grow in sympathy with each other. Through learning more of Chinese perspectives on their culture, the British would perhaps understand themselves better.

Prof. Richard Dutton from Lancaster University explored how the film *Shakespeare in Love* demonstrated modern British humour, heritage and sexual conventions as much as historical accuracy. His own research into the life of Edmund Tilney showed clearly how the Master of the Revels had to be more concerned with political censorship than the control of sexual allusions. He also pointed out that though "Shakespeare in Love with Money" might have been a more accurate title, it would not have achieved such a large audience (except perhaps in Guangdong). After such a brilliant and scholarly start, we were sure this conference would, like a well-crafted play, work out well in the end — if you don't think so, come next year to a conference on American literary and cultural studies for an alternative ending.

Starting from the cosmic patterns on Achilles' Shield in *The Iliad*, Prof. Hu Jialuan from Peking University took us from time to eternity and back through a library of British poets such as Yeats, Eliot, Dylan Thomas who resorted to images and metaphors derived from traditional cosmology, demonstrating that the British can think in circles too. Prof. Wang Ning from Tsinghua University succeeded in squaring the circle of globalisation by laying the foundations of a theoretically enriched study of comparative literature. In the age of globalization, he pointed out, the boundary between center

and periphery has been more and more obscured, so doing Chinese-Western comparative literature studies could enable one to have a broad cross-cultural perspective. Having deconstructed postmodernism he opened the door to Chinese culture going out to engage in dialogue with rather than simply influence the outside world.

Prof. Wang Shouren from Nanjing University brought vividly alive a range of historically inspired novels and showed that both what might have been and what has been are very much present in contemporary British literature. These works remind us to see historical evidence as incomplete, fragmentary and subjective. This was a point taken up by Mr. Neil Ascherson in his lecture questioning the authenticity of "Britain" as continuous historical reality, which perhaps gives an urgency to the development of British studies before its subject matter disintegrates. We were encouraged to move on from the age of English expansion and the fading English Gentleman to the issues of devolved political power and the English search for a new cultural identity.

The parallel sessions (in three groups) explored cultural images of Britain on film, the differences between American, British and Chinese cultures and whether teaching English in China colonises the minds of Chinese students or stimulates them to understand and share their own culture. Many scholarly studies and analyses (18 presentations) of British poetry, fiction, travel writing, drama and cultural products such as films and TV programmes were shared, discussion only being limited by time.

The evening performances took us back to the future in dance and drama by students of the English Faculty. In *Macbeth* we saw the rough nature of Scottish politics before they were ruled from Westminster and in *Romeo and Juliet* the chaotic state of Italian life before the calming effects of the European Union. *Exodus* took us through the sea of postmodern doubt to remind our postcolonial world of the joy of liberation from slavery. Today we started off by seeing a very nice representation of our conference on Guangdong Satellite TV. Unfortunately it was too short.

Prof. He Qixin from Beijing Foreign Studies University analysed the main trends in British drama in the 20th century, showing its essential responsiveness to the social conditions of the audience, arguing that the great diversity in theme, subject matter and dramaturgy of modern British drama is a rather faithful reflection of the multipolar world. Dr. Scott Wilson from Lancaster University showed us the beginning of the film *Trainspotting* and gave us a theoretical analysis of the relationship between desire and

addiction in the context of commodity culture. As well as being a critique of Thatcherite economics, the film raises questions about the choice of life as the acquisition of products or as the pursuit of addictive pleasure. It also exemplifies the incorporation of a critique of society into popular culture.

Further parallel! sessions (three groups with 21 presentations in the morning and 12 in the afternoon) explored the two-way influences between Britain and China and the application of a range of critical theoretical perspectives on film, fiction, drama and poetry.

Mr. Biyi Bandele, with the cooperation of first-year students from the Faculty of English Language and Culture, GDUFS, gave us samples of his own work and demonstrated how meanings in the dramatic text could be brought out on the stage simply through voice. From that session, most of us had a better idea of how authentic or rather how artificial theatre can be and particularly how theatre can work for students, for the classroom of English language and literature.

There were further condensed presentations from Dr. Joanne Collie (Warwick University) on the meaning of being English today, Dr. Wang Yougui (GDUFS) on James Joyce's use of Chinese culture and history, Prof. Sun Jianqiu (University of International Business and Economics) on the works of Caryl Churchill and Tom Stoppard. These condensed presentations have further proved not only the wide scope but also the outstanding quality of British literary and cultural studies by scholars, whether British, Chinese, Indonesian, American or otherwise.

The final panel discussion has just given us a taste of the lively debate that has been going on over the past two days, stimulated by the excellent presentations. Finally, if "C" is for "Conference", it also stands for "Co-operation" and "Continuity". Let us work together towards a future of more in-depth research in British literary and cultural studies.

Thank you all for your valuable participation. Enjoy the Pearl River Night Cruise tonight and the Guangzhou Cultural Tour tomorrow!

Rather unconventionally, we have chosen not to write a "standard" introduction which, if we do, would mean saying something "nice and proper" and

also quite likely something boring, about each paper collected here. This might be a disservice since we strongly believe that most of the papers in this book are fairly straightforward and therefore will naturally speak for themselves. This, too, implies that each individual author will be held responsible for whatever s/he has to say on the subject and however s/he pronounces it.

Have a good day in the vineyard!



