

Standardizing the Artistic Evaluation of Foreign Literature in Higher Education Textbooks

Ming Mao*

Lingnan Normal University, Zhanjiang 524048, Guangdong, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

Copyright: © 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: Different higher education textbooks make different artistic evaluations of the same foreign literature, which brings difficulties to students and teachers. The main reasons are as follows: Firstly, there is confusion between “artwork” and “artistic process”; Secondly, there is a shift between personalized appreciation and scientific evaluation. Given that the institutionalization of literary research is a development trend, it is necessary to standardize artistic evaluations.

Keywords: Higher education textbook; Foreign literature; Artistic evaluation; Literary criticism; Literary history

Online publication: October 16, 2025

1. Introduction

Different higher education textbooks have made varying artistic evaluations of the same foreign literature, causing confusion in studying and researching, especially in examinations and grading^[1]. It is essential to identify the causes and propose appropriate solutions.

2. Different artistic evaluations

Different textbooks offer varying artistic evaluations of the same foreign literature, with a prime example being the divergent evaluations for classic works^[2]. It appears that Chinese scholars and textbook compilers still hold conflicting views. This inconsistency, though surprising, is a reality. For instance, the evaluation of Shakespeare’s dramatic artistic achievements is a crucial matter concerning the understanding of the artistic essence of Western literature^[3]. However, prevalent textbooks still present a range of conflicting perspectives on this issue, failing to reach a unanimous conclusion.

The “Key Textbook of Marxist Theory Research and Construction Project” (MTRCP), published in 2015, discusses this issue as follows:

Shakespeare stands as a preeminent master of dramatic art. He achieved unparalleled accomplishments, including historical plays, comedies, and tragedies. The gallery of stage characters he created transcends

mere mouthpieces for authorial ideology or “zeitgeist manifestations,” instead emerging as vivid characters with complex personalities rooted in real lives ^[4]. His dramatic plots demonstrate innovative adaptation from conventional structures, flexibly orchestrated to serve thematic requirements rather than rigid doctrines, embodying what Friedrich Engels praised as “vividness and richness of plot.” Renowned for their linguistic diversity and vivid imagery, Shakespeare’s dramatic language not only significantly enhanced theatrical expressiveness but also made exceptional contributions to the maturation and refinement of the English language ^[5]. These artistic achievements were concisely conceptualized by Karl Marx as “Shakespeareanization,” establishing an exemplary model for writers. Shakespeare’s enduring prominence through the centuries proves his immortal literary value.

The above content discusses the artistic characteristics of Shakespeare’s plays from three aspects: character, plot, and language, which are in line with convention ^[6]. Specifically, the characterization is defined through three aspects: “vivid characters,” “complex personalities,” and “rooted in real lives.” The plots are articulated through three aspects: “vividness and richness,” “innovative adaptation from conventional structures,” and “flexibly orchestrated to serve thematic requirements rather than rigid doctrines” ^[7]. Regarding linguistic artistry, the analysis employs definitive parameters such as “lexical opulence” and “imagistic vividness,” emphasizing the qualities that “make pioneering contributions to the evolution and perfection of the English.”

Given that the MTRCP series of textbooks is mandated by the Ministry of Education as the standardized textbooks for higher education institutions nationwide ^[8], it is reasonable to employ them as the model for evaluating the others.

The MTRCP History of Foreign Literature designates Professors Nie Zhenzhao, Zheng Kelu, and Jiang Chengyong as its principal academic experts. Professor Nie Zhenzhao, positioned as the primary authority, previously spearheaded the compilation of the “2014 History of Foreign Literature—a National-Level Elite Course textbook certified by China’s Ministry of Education” ^[9].

Compared with the MTRCP edition, the 2014 textbook has the following differences:

(1) Additions

“Organic synthesis of realism and romanticism” and “skilled at expressing life relationships in a broad range.”

(2) Enrichments

(A) Evolutionary reformulation of MTRCP’s “innovative adaptation of conventional forms” into “Transmutation of ‘pure theatrical structure’ into ‘epic architectural composition’.”

(B) “Strategic interlacing of multiple narrative threads within intensified dramatic conflicts, culminating in thematic convergence.”

(C) Protagonists situated in dual conflicts: environmental determinism vs. existential agency ^[10].

(D) Developmental dynamism (“evolutionary mutability”) as the core characterization principle.

(E) Soliloquy is identified as the quintessential device for manifesting such psychodynamic progression.

(F) Methodologically noteworthy quantification: The lexical inventory reaches 17,000 distinct terms substantiating qualitative descriptors like “lexical opulence”; Statistical verification enhances traditional evaluative parameters of linguistic “abundance.”

The remaining principal academic experts, Professor Zheng Kelu and Professor Jiang Chengyong, demonstrated their scholarly stewardship in 2006 by orchestrating the “History of Foreign Literature (Revised Edition),” a “Twenty-First Century-Oriented Curriculum” textbook, where Zheng served as the chief editor and

Jiang as the associate editor ^[11]. This textbook evaluates Shakespearean artistry through “Hamlet.” Compared with the MTRCP edition, it adds the artistic device of Shakespeare and the dichotomy approach in depicting the personalities.

The “History of Foreign Literature” designated for the Chinese Language and Literature major (undergraduate level) under China’s National Higher Education Self-Taught Examinations, published in 2001, retains substantial referential significance ^[12]. Compared with the MTRCP, it adds “documenting protagonists’ developmental trajectories” and “interior monologue.”

Commissioned by the State Education Commission, the 1985 edition of “History of Foreign Literature: Euro-American Volume,” authored by chief editors Zhu Weizhi and Zhao Li with contributions from seventeen faculty members across seven institutions in Beijing and Tianjin, received the Ministry of Education’s First-Class Outstanding Textbook Award and underwent multiple revisions, establishing its canonical status ^[13]. Compare with MTRCP, it reveals that Shakespeare’s dramas were composed in unrhymed iambic pentameter (blank verse).

3. Reasons and solutions

The main reasons are as follows: Firstly, there is confusion between “artwork” and “artistic process”. According to Abrams’ opinion, “art” in “art evaluation” generally refers to the ways and methods of handling the subject matter, that is, the process, methods, and techniques of “artisticization” with the goal of “artistic quality”. Subjects, themes, etc., should not be the objects of art evaluation ^[14]. Secondly, there is a shift between personalized appreciation and scientific evaluation. Traditional literary criticism encourages “personalized” appreciation of works, while modern literary history pursues “scientific” evaluation of works. There is a contradiction between the two approaches.

Standardizing the artistic evaluation of writers’ works faces many challenges and is extremely tricky. Due to the seriousness of this matter, this article provides some guiding opinions and suggestions in order to seek guidance from experts ^[15]. Firstly, it is necessary to clarify the concepts of five literary terms: subject matter (material), content (preliminary procedures such as selection and arrangement of material), characters (theme), ideas, and art, and to handle the overlapping content of the above five concepts as much as possible. Art (techniques/characteristics) should be understood and expressed in three main aspects: One refers to all “artistic” treatments that have a significant impact on the theme of the work and make the work itself an organic whole. Secondly, it refers to the significance and value of the aforementioned artistic techniques in all of the author’s creations. The third refers to the significance and value of the aforementioned artistic techniques in literary history. Given that the institutionalization of literary research is a development trend, it is necessary to standardize artistic evaluations. This mainly refers to the need to eliminate non-standard and arbitrary evaluations on one hand, and to establish some standards for art evaluation on the other hand, such as defining the scope of evaluation, and evaluation standards.

4. Conclusion

In summary, the issue of differentiation in the evaluation of foreign literature and art in current higher education textbooks is significantly present. Its root lies in the confusion between the concepts of ‘artwork’ and ‘art process,’ as well as the conflicting positions of personalized appreciation and scientific evaluation. A comparison of multiple versions of textbooks on the evaluation of Shakespeare’s plays shows that there are notable discrepancies in the interpretive frameworks and parameter choices of different evaluation systems

regarding core dimensions such as character development, plot structure, and linguistic artistry. This not only affects the unity of teaching research but also reflects the ambiguity of literary evaluation standards. Given the institutional development trend of literary research, the normalization of art evaluation needs to start from clarifying the terminology categories of ‘theme-content-character-thought-art,’ defining the triple connotation of artistic techniques (organic handling of the artwork, value of the author’s creative lineage, significance of literary historical positioning), and establishing evaluation scope and criteria to eliminate non-normative evaluations. Ultimately, this aims to construct a scientifically unified evaluation system to promote the standardization and in-depth development of foreign literature teaching research.

Funding

Lingnan Normal University's 2022 University-level Teaching Quality and Teaching Reform Project, “Offline First-class Course ‘History of Foreign Literature’”

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Compilation Team of “History of Foreign Literature”, 2015, History of Foreign Literature. Higher Education Press, Beijing: 180.
- [2] Nie Z, 2014, History of Foreign Literature. Central China Normal University Press, Wuhan: 296–297.
- [3] Zheng K, 2006, History of Foreign Literature (Revised Edition). Higher Education Press, Beijing: 83–87.
- [4] Guo X, Qi Y, 2009, Development and Significance of Foreign Literature Teaching in the Context of Globalization. Journal of Adult Education College of Hebei University, 11(2): 99–101.
- [5] Jin Y, 2000, History of Foreign Literature. East China Normal University Press, Shanghai: 71–72.
- [6] Zhu W, Zhao L, 2014, History of Foreign Literature (Euro American Volume) (Fifth Edition). Nankai University Press, Tianjin: 97–99.
- [7] Zhu Y, Xiang L, 2016, Pluralistic Integration of Writer Evaluation View and Teaching of Foreign Literary History—Taking D. H. Lawrence as an Example. Journal of Shenyang University (Social Science Edition), 18(2): 194–198.
- [8] Yang W, 2004, Cultural Evaluation and Foreign Literature Teaching. Journal of Jiangsu Second Normal University, 20(6): 111–112.
- [9] Nie Z, 2014, History of Foreign Literature. Central China Normal University Press, Wuhan: 296–297.
- [10] Wei J, 2020, Research on Foreign Literature Teaching in Colleges of Higher Art. Course Education Research (Study on Learning and Teaching Methods), 2020(2): 2.
- [11] Fu X, Chen Y, 2009, Selected Masterpieces of Foreign Literature (3rd Edition)(Volume 1). Higher Education Press, Beijing.
- [12] Jin Y, 2000, History of Foreign Literature. East China Normal University Press, Shanghai: 71–72.
- [13] Chen Z, Review of Several Issues in Current Foreign Literature Studies [J]. Evaluation of Social Sciences in China, 2015(2): 6.
- [14] Wang S, 2010, On the Current Situation and Reform of Foreign Literature Teaching in Chinese Universities. China

Adult Education, 2010(14): 186–187.

[15] Zhang X, 2023, The Linguistic Artistry in English Literature. *Writers' World*, 2023(10): 126–128.

Publisher's note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.