

International Lecture of the Eurasia Foundation, Fall Semester 2022
Series Lectures (3): “Asian Community: The Construction and Transformation of
East Asiaology”

Topic: Loyal to the Essence of Life: Chekhov’s Dramatic Life

The 3rd International Lecture of the Eurasia Foundation in the 2022 academic year of the Chinese Culture University invited Professor Chen Jaw-Lin, the Chair of the Department of Russian Language and Literature of our University, to give a lecture on entitled “Loyal to the Essence of Life: Chekhov’s Dramatic Life.” Before introducing Anton Chekhov, Professor Chen briefly introduced the famous writers and works of modern Russian literature, then introduced Chekhov’s life, representative works in different stages, and the contents and impacts of his four major plays.

Introduction to Russian Literature

Novels has become the mainstream of Russian literature in the 19th century after Aleksandr Pushkin’s lyric poems laid the foundation of modern Russian literature. World-renowned novelists such as Ivan Turgenev (“Sketches from a Hunter’s Album,” “Fathers and Sons”), Fyodor Dostoyevsky (“Crime and Punishment,” “The Brothers Karamazov”) and Leo Tolstoy (“War and Peace,” “Anna Karenina”) has published various realist literary works. The 19th century can be said to be the golden age of Russian literature.

In the 20th century, although literary creation was more and more restricted by the Soviet government, there were still many good works. Russian writers have won five Nobel Prizes in Literature, including poets Ivan Bunin and Joseph Brodsky, novelists Boris Pasternak (“Doctor Zhivago”), Mikhail Sholokhov (“And Quiet Flows the Don”), and Alexander Solzhenitsyn (“The Gulag Archipelago: An Experiment in Literary Investigation”).

Professor Chen suggests that we can start reading from these famous works to get to know the customs of Russia and the thoughts of the Russians.

The Life and Creations of Chekhov

Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) was a critical realist writer at the end of the 19th century and a master of humorous satire. His works included novels, short stories and plays. Chekhov’s family was originally serfs. After his grandfather worked hard to earn money and succeeded in redemption, the whole family was restored to freedom. His parents run a grocery store in Taganrog City to make a living, but the business did not go well. Accordingly, Chekhov had a hard life since he was a child. Later, his father’s shop went bankrupt, and his family fled to Moscow to run away from creditors. Chekhov tried to continue his studies, and he began to write and submit short stories for making a living. He published his works for the first time in 1880.

Chekhov’s works can be divided into three stages. In the early stage (1879-1886), he mainly focused on short stories (“The Death of a Government Clerk” and “Vanka”), and his humorous and ironic writing caught people’s attention. These works reflected the ugliness, hypocrisy and vulgarity of real life in the old society. In the second period (1886-1892), his short stories and novella (“The Steppe: The Story of a Journey,” “Ward

No. 6”) no longer wrote humorous stories, but used simple words and sincere emotions to describe the real life. The content reflected the hatred toward the old society and its sins. At the same time, he began to write plays, trying to improve the mediocre, gray, vulgar, and un instructive stage plays at that time. Chekhov advocated that life should be described according to its original appearance. No matter in his novels or plays, there are no climaxes or bizarre convolutions of the plot.

In the last period (1892-1904), he continued to engage in works that were faithful to the essence of life. In addition to writing short stories and novella (“Peasants,” “In the Ravine”), the focuses of his works were plays (“The Seagull,” “Uncle Vanya,” “Three Sisters,” “The Cherry Orchard”). The content depicts the vision of a beautiful society in the future, and the hope is pinned on the people’s life.

Four plays by Chekhov

Chekhov’s plays “The Seagull,” “Uncle Vanya,” “Three Sisters,” and “The Cherry Orchard” not only dominated the modern Russian stage, but also indirectly influenced the development of theater around the world. What he writes about is the daily life of ordinary people, while the important content of life hides in daily life. With these approaches, his works reveal the essence of life. The plot is simple but full of profound symbolic meaning.

The heroine of “The Seagull,” Zalekinaya, is a young actress who understands her mission as an artist and has the courage to accept the challenges of life, after experiencing the ruthless test of life. The play “Uncle Vanya” tells the tragic fate of intellectuals without lofty ideals and life goals. The protagonist begins to rethink his life path after encountering a spiritual crisis. The play is characteristic with its dramatic psychological content and life philosophy. “Three Sisters” describes an upper-class family, who live an old-fashioned Russian life, facing decline in life. Although the protagonist in the play has many beautiful longings for the future, after encountering all kinds of difficulties, she finally realizes the reality of life. “Cherry Orchard” reflects the decline of the landlord and the rise of the bourgeoisie through the disposal of a cherry orchard.

Chekhov’s literary creation is based on real life, and he advocates that literature should describe “the original appearance of life.” His depictions are known for their simplicity and unpretentiousness, with few climaxes or twists and turns in plots. He believes that life is the source of art. Although the reality is often dull and even dark, we can see from his works that the playwright was yearning for a bright future.

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