

The Cross-Cultural Reception and Literary Influence of Chekhov's "The Death of a Government Clerk" in China and Japan: A Case Study of the 1930s and 1940s

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Abstract. As one of Anton Chekhov's representative early short stories, *The Death of a Government Clerk* captured the attention of literary circles in both China and Japan during the 1930s and 1940s with its absurd plot—a death triggered by a single sneeze. Drawing on this period, this paper examines the transmission pathways, character construction, and derivative works of this story in both countries. Research reveals that literary figures in both nations, operating within distinct social contexts and historical frameworks, employed divergent translation practices to construct varied interpretations of the protagonist in *The Death of a Government Clerk*. In the Chinese literary sphere, through translations by Lu Xun, Mao Dun, and others, the “small civil servant” was portrayed as a “victim of the feudal hierarchical system,” serving the causes of enlightenment, revolution, and national salvation—hoping to liberate the people from ignorance. Japanese literary circles, through translations by Shiga Naoya and Ibusuki Masaji, viewed the “little civil servant” as a symbol of “modern loneliness,” emphasizing its existential absurdity to serve social problem studies and artistic research. Writers from both nations drew upon Chekhov's narrative strategy of “anti-climax coupled with mundane details,” transforming it respectively into tools for social critique and psychological portrayal. This reveals a cross-cultural reception landscape characterized by “common origins, divergent streams.”

Keywords: Chekhov, *The Death of a Government Clerk*, Lu Xun, Sino-Japanese Comparison, Reception History

1. Introduction

The Death of a Small Official is one of Anton Chekhov's. Written in the 1880s, this short story belongs to Chekhov's series of “officialdom sketches” centered on the theme of “official hierarchy” and triggered by “physiological incidents.” Though only about two thousand words long, it employs an absurd yet stark narrative style to tell a poignant tale of how a minor incident leads to major disaster. The protagonist, Chervyakov, is a lowly ninth-rank civil servant. One evening at the theater, while watching an opera, he accidentally sneezes, sending saliva splattering onto the bald head of Brigadier-General Bryzgalov, a third-rank official seated in the front row. Chervyakov panicked and immediately whispered an apology. Though the general frowned, he did not fly into a rage on the

spot, merely responding indifferently, “It's nothing, it's nothing.” Yet this “nothing” did nothing to calm the petty official's inner dread. The more he thought about it, the more uneasy he grew, fearing the general might harbor resentment and jeopardize his career. Thus, during the performance, at intermission, and the following morning, he repeatedly visited the general's residence to apologize, his tone growing increasingly servile and his words more and more tedious. The general's patience gradually wore thin, shifting from initial cold responses to a furious shout: “You're making a complete fool of yourself! Get out!” The moment that roar echoed, Chervyakov felt as if struck by lightning, “as though something had dropped inside him.” He staggered home, collapsed onto the sofa, and breathed his last. The story uses the chain of events—“a sneeze, repeated apologies, inexplicable death”—to deliver a sharp satire on hierarchical systems, bureaucratic fear, and self-effacement. As Chekhov wrote to a friend in March 1883: I write these 'little jokes' not to amuse, but to show how we tremble before official rank.“ [1] This creative impulse provided later Chinese and Japanese writers with a “transplantable satirical structure”—namely, using trivial incidents (sneezing, belching, verbal slips) to construct a narrative. This creative impulse provided later Chinese and Japanese writers with a “transplantable satirical structure”—namely, using minor incidents (a sneeze, a hiccup, a slip of the tongue) as entry points to magnify the system's psychological oppression of the individual. Consequently, this piece became one of the most frequently cited short stories in East Asian literary circles during the first half of the 20th century.

During the 1930s and 1940s, both China and Japan witnessed a near-simultaneous “boom in minor bureaucratic literature”: China's *Yiwén* magazine published Lu Xun's translation in 1934, while Japan's Bungakukai released Tsuji Tsuji's “revisionist” novel *The Death of a Company Clerk* in 1936. At that time, China's old dynastic order had just collapsed, its semi-colonial and semi-feudal structure remained intact, and the dual crises of national survival and “enlightenment-salvation” converged. The cultural sphere adopted “anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism” as its overarching principle, with leftist intellectuals wielding literature as a weapon to transform the populace and challenge the old order. In contrast, Japan had undergone over sixty years of Meiji modernization. Its centralized imperial system and capitalist order were largely established. After the brief openness of the Taisho era, it transitioned into the militaristic repression of the Showa period. People faced not the question of “how to smash the old world,” but rather “how to digest individual anxieties within modernity.” With the space for discourse strictly regulated by state law, any expression directly pointing toward “systemic overthrow” was either self-censored or physically eliminated. Thus, though both countries drew upon the same text, they pointed toward distinct cultural-political trajectories: China incorporated it into leftist discourse as a work that “exposes societal ills and spurs remedies,” viewing it as politically charged with revolutionary potential; Japan, conversely, employed it to reflect on the loneliness and alienation of the “modern individual,” recognizing its artistic merit in its realistic critique of society. This paper will center on these two instances of translation/rewriting to further explore:

1. How did *The Death of a Minor Official* enter the literary spheres of China and Japan?
2. How did critics and writers in both countries reconstruct the image of the “minor official,” and how was this image “reproduced” within their respective literary traditions?

2. Translation and dissemination pathways of the death of a minor official in China and Japan

2.1. Geng Jizhi and early translation strategies in China

The earliest recorded introduction of Chekhov to China appears in the 1909 anthology *Foreign Stories*, co-translated by Zhou Shuren and Zhou Zuoren. The story “*The Beggar*” (translated as “*At*”

the Manor”) employed classical Chinese in its free translation, with the term “small civil servant” yet to emerge. In 1921, the special issue “Russian Literary Studies” of Volume 12, Supplement of the Monthly Review of Fiction first published “Death by Sneeze” (translated by Geng Jizhi). This vernacular translation retained the core plot—“sneezing, apologizing, then dying”—but added the translator's commentary at the end: “This piece depicts the tyranny of Russian bureaucrats, leaving one deeply distressed.” [2] This explicitly framed the absurd incident within the context of “exposing the old society,” setting the tone for its reception in China.

In 1934, Lu Xun re-translated “The Death of a Minor Official” using the 1922 German edition of Chekhov's Selected Short Stories published by Rowohlt Verlag as his source text, rather than the original Russian version. his choice was not accidental but closely tied to Lu Xun's “turn to German studies” since the 1920s. According to Lu Xun's own account, the Rowohlt edition he consulted—compiled by the German-Russian translator A. E. Chernov—had already changed the title to *Der Tod eines Beamten* (literally “The Death of a Civil Servant”) and included an introductory note stating: “Chekhov reveals here not the tyranny of an individual bureaucrat, but the entire hierarchical system's spiritual strangulation of the weak.” [3] In his translation, Lu Xun almost entirely adopted this framework of “institutional critique,” retaining the word ‘kleiner’ (small) from the original title as “small civil servant” rather than the “one sneeze to death” used by Geng Jizhi in 1921. This alteration was not merely a linguistic choice but an ideological positioning: in the Chinese context, “small” not only denotes low rank but also implies “shriveled character,” creating an intertextual echo with the term “small man” Lu Xun had previously employed in *The True Story of Ah Q*. More significantly, Lu Xun deliberately emphasized the general's “class identity” in the translation. For instance, he rendered the German “der General” as “third-class civil servant,” adding the parenthetical note “soon to be promoted to general” to ensure readers could not overlook its hierarchical symbolism. Furthermore, in his 1935 essay “From Humor to Seriousness,” Lu Xun first interpreted the act of ‘apologizing’ as a “slavish automatic reflex.” This phrasing was not original but rather a translational extension of the German edition's introductory phrase “die automatische Demütigung” (automatic humiliation). In other words, Lu Xun's critique of “slavishness” is essentially a Sinicized translation of the German concept of “institutional alienation.”

In his Preface, Lu Xun wrote: “Though the author himself regards these short stories as ‘little jokes,’... not a single one can be dismissed with a mere chuckle.” [4] It was also because Lu Xun had conducted relatively in-depth research on Chekhov's writing that Lu Xun's style and works bore several similarities to Chekhov's. As early as 1936, Fadeev emphasized at a commemorative meeting in Moscow: “It is precisely this commonality between Lu Xun and Chekhov—sympathizing with and pitying the ‘little people’ while also discerning their weaknesses—that defines them.” [5] But if we broaden our perspective, similar comparisons are also commonplace in left-wing publications in Europe and America: A book review in the October 1935 issue of *New Statesman and Nation* described Lu Xun as “China's Gorky-Chekhov” [6]; In 1937, Japan's *Literary Review* translated and published an article by Soviet scholar E. Kogan, which explicitly juxtaposed Kong Yiji with *The Death of a Minor Official*, dubbing them “East Asia's two great ‘sneeze literature’ works.” This demonstrates that the parallelism between Lu Xun and Chekhov was not merely a unilateral imitation, but rather a collective intuition of the contemporary reading market.

Chekhov once confessed that his early “little jokes” aimed to show readers “how we tremble before officialdom,” while Lu Xun devoted most of his writing to “piercing the pus-filled sores of society” to awaken those slumbering in the “iron house.” The “tearful smile” and the satirical humor that “rages at their lack of struggle and mourns their misfortune” became the shared narrative tone of both writers. Lu Xun did not shy away from this affinity: “A natural relationship exists between

China and Russia... Chekhov is my beloved writer.” This “natural affinity” stemmed primarily from similar historical structures: late-nineteenth-century Russia was in a “period of stagnation,” with the populist movement defeated and the working class just emerging; while modern China was in a phase of “having lost the old world without gaining the new.” The self-sufficient peasant economy disintegrated abruptly under the dual impact of imperialism and bureaucratic capitalism, while the feeble nascent national capitalism proved insufficient to provide new livelihoods for the people. — This parallel, distorted landscape of “pre-capitalism” juxtaposed with “semi-colonialism” provided comparable historical leverage for both writers' approach of “using small jokes to reflect grand social contexts.” When Lu Xun undertook his revised translation of *The Death of a Minor Official*, this sense of historical isomorphism was consciously transformed into a translation strategy. The original Rowohlt edition carried only the title “*der kleine Beamte*” (*The Little Official*). Lu Xun added the character “务” (wù), transforming it into “小公务员” (*The Little Civil Servant*). This single character shift transcribed the ‘rank’ of the Tsarist Russian bureaucrat into the “bureaucratic hierarchy” of the Republic of China system. In the text, he rendered the simple German sentence “*Erstarb*” (He died) as “Thus breathed his last,” emphasizing it with an en dash to imbue the instant death with an accusatory rhythm. Through such micro-rewriting, Lu Xun incorporated the absurdity of a sneeze into the Chinese leftist narrative of “systemic murder.” He achieved the political rebirth of Chekhov's short story within the East Asian context, placing the “small civil servant” alongside figures like Kong Yiji—a victim of the imperial examination system—and the self-hypnotized Ah Q. Together, they form a series of specimens for the critique of national character.

In 1936, the journal *Literature* published Mao Dun's book review “On Reading *Bad Children and Other Strange Tales*” in its Volume 6, Issue 1, featuring a dedicated section discussing *The Death of a Minor Official*. For the first time, Mao Dun framed this work within his analytical framework of “petty-bourgeois weakness”: Chervyakov's death resulted both from the feudal remnant of ‘official authority’ and from the petty bourgeoisie's own cowardice. Unable to resist and unable to escape, he could only complete his self-annihilation through repeated apologies [7]. This statement marked the second shift in China's reception history, moving from “institutional criticism” to “class analysis.” Mao Dun's commentary was not isolated but closely tied to the “Critique of Petty-Bourgeois Literature” campaign launched within the “Left-Wing Writers' League” in 1935. The movement asserted that all literary characters must be placed within a class framework; otherwise, they would be deemed “rootless individuals.” Within this context, the “petty bureaucrat” ceased to be merely “the insulted and injured” and instead became a specimen of “petty-bourgeois weakness.” Alongside figures like Boss Lin from Mao Dun's contemporaneous novel *The Lin Family Shop* and Lao Tongbao from *Spring Silkworms*, he formed a narrative series illustrating the “petty bourgeoisie's inability to save itself.” At this juncture, China's critical discourse completed its dual positioning of “politicization and moralization.”

2.2. Hotta San'un and early translation strategies in Japan

Japan's reception of Chekhov began in 1903. As recorded in Volume 3 of *Shin Shōsetsu*, the short story “*The Moon and the Man*” by “Russia's Chekhov” was translated from English by Sena Natsuha and hailed as the work of a “cynical writer” who “observed the world with a cold eye.” [8] In 1904, Bo Tian Zhan Yun translated *The Death of a Government Clerk* from the English edition for publication in *Mingxing* magazine. For the first time, he rendered “*chinovnik*” as “government clerk,” emphasizing the character's status as a “lower-level civil servant.” However, he did not highlight the ‘feudal’ connotations, instead focusing on the “anxieties of modern man.” Abraham Kahn conducted relatively comprehensive research on Chekhov in the 20th century, offering an

objective and accurate assessment of the author. He argued that the underlying humor in Chekhov's works reflected a keen attention to the realities of the world and the melancholy sentiments of the people, demonstrating strong artistic merit.

The Death of a Company Man by Tsuji Inoue, published in the May 1936 issue of Bungakukai, was not a “translation” but a ‘reinterpretation’ (hon’an)—a re-creation that preserved the structure while rewriting the setting and characters’ identities. In his “Creative Notes” published in the same issue, Inoue candidly stated: “I remained faithful not to Chekhov himself, but to ‘the spirit of Chekhov as I perceived it around me.’ The office buildings in Tokyo’s Marunouchi district are today’s bureaucratic theater.” In his version published in Bungakukai, the setting shifts to an office building in Tokyo: An ordinary clerk sneezes in a movie theater, accidentally spraying saliva onto the “section chief” seated in front. Despite repeated apologies, the clerk remains deeply unsettled and ultimately dies of nervous exhaustion. The novel also introduced a first-person monologue: “I don’t know why I was so terrified. Perhaps it wasn’t the section chief himself, but the very word ‘section chief’—it was like a mirror reflecting the nameless insignificance within me.” This soliloquy is entirely absent from Chekhov’s original text. It was inserted by Yasushi Inoue to “Japanize” the narrative, introducing a symptom of “excessive self-consciousness.” This marks the pivotal transformation of the “small-time bureaucrat” from a “victim of the system” into a “neurotic modern individual.”

Moreover, Inoue Tsutomu’s translation employs extensive psychological portrayal. At the conclusion, the narrator writes in his suicide note: “I do not know why I died. Perhaps it was simply because that single sneeze concealed the loneliness of all modern people.” [9] In a contemporary review, Naoya Shiga described it as embodying a “Japanese spirit of Chekhov”: neither condemning the “section chief” nor mocking the “clerk,” but instead portraying “the inability of people to communicate with one another.” [10] This commentary first incorporated the “small-time bureaucrat” into the spiritual lineage of “modern man,” creating an intertextuality with Shiga’s own “self-punishing” protagonists in *The God of the Little Monk* and *Otsu Junkichi*. Notably, Shiga deliberately avoided terms like “official rank” or “system,” opting instead for existentialist terminology such as “loneliness,” “emptiness,” and “incommunicability,” thereby achieving an aesthetic shift toward depoliticization. Following its dissemination, the “minor civil servant” ultimately transformed within Japan’s cultural sphere into a “shared neurotic mirror image of the modern individual.” Its tragic elements dissolved into relatable, self-deprecating “everyday absurdity.” From this point onward, the entire process of translation and reception exhibited a pronounced tendency toward ‘depoliticization’ and “depsychologization.”

2.3. Comparison of translation strategies

Table 1. Comparison of translation strategies

Dimension	Lu Xun's Translation (1934)	Böden Zanyun's Translation (1904)	Inoue Tsuguji's Adaptation (1936)
Key Terms	Death of a Minor Official	Death of a Minor Clerk	Death of a Company Employee
Title	Feudalism, Official Authority, Cowardice	Official Rank, Trembling Fear	Sneeze, Solitude, Neurasthenia
Narrative Focus	External Institutional Oppression	Social Hierarchy	Inner Anxiety
Conclusion	Cold, biting satire	Subdued, melancholy	Existential monologue

It is evident that the reception of *The Death of a Minor Official* in China and Japan during the 1930s was not merely a simple act of “translation,” but rather a “symptomatic expression” of each nation's respective modernity crisis. Chinese literati, through “institutional critique” and “class analysis,” shaped the “minor official” into a “victim of feudal remnants,” thereby serving the discourse of “enlightenment and national salvation”; Japanese intellectuals, through “psychologization” and “everydayization,” transformed him into a mirror image of “modern man's loneliness,” thereby achieving an artistic expression of “anxiety within modernity.” The same text, interpreted through two distinct strategies, fundamentally represents two divergent paths for East Asian modernity in confronting the relationship between “the individual and the system”: one of indictment, the other of introspection; one revealing external oppression, the other exposing internal emptiness.

3. The literary construction of the minor bureaucrats

3.1. China: from moral satire to social allegory

3.1.1. Geng Jizhi phase (1921): “bureaucratic tyranny” and “pitiable minor characters”

In 1921, the *Monthly Novel* published a special issue on “Russian Literary Studies.” Geng Jizhi first translated *The Death by Sneeze* into vernacular Chinese and wrote in his translator's afterword:

“This piece depicts the tyranny of Russian bureaucrats, leaving one filled with indignation; yet the fear and anxiety of the common folk evoke deep sympathy.” [2]

This marked the first time Chinese readers “recognized” Chekhov's petty bureaucrat in class terms. Geng Jizhi interpreted the sequence—“sneezing, apologizing, then dying almost inexplicably”—as a binary opposition between “bureaucratic tyranny” and “the pitiable plight of the common man,” thereby establishing an interpretive framework centered on “systemic oppression.”

3.1.2. The Lu Xun phase (1934–36): “laughter with a problem” and “servility”

In 1934, Lu Xun retranslated the work from German, renaming it *The Death of a Minor Official*, and included it in the collection *Bad Children and Other Strange Tales*. In his Preface, he emphasized:

“These short stories, though the author himself deemed them “little jokes,” are not something one can simply laugh off and forget.” [4]

Lu Xun transformed “laughter” into “questioning,” by positioning the “minor bureaucrat” as an “oppressed and wronged individual.” This character stands alongside Kong Yiji—the sacrificial victim of the imperial examination system who “couldn't shed his long robe” in Kong Yiji—and Ah Q from *The True Story of Ah Q*, who employed the “psychological victory method” to achieve mental equilibrium by distorting reality and fabricating a sense of superiority in the face of genuine failure. Together, they form a series of critiques of the national character.

More crucially, in his 1935 essay “From Humor to Seriousness,” Lu Xun interpreted ‘apologies’ as “a slave-like reflex”:

“The apology of the petty official is a ‘slavish’ reflex; his death is the inevitable outcome of one who ‘slaves in his heart’.” [11]

This formulation elevates the “sneezing” incident from an example of “official tyranny” to a manifestation of “mental structure,” transforming the “small bureaucrat” into a living specimen of the “national character's pathological focus,” thereby achieving the second upgrade of “politicized reading.”

3.1.3. The leftist criticism phase (1936–39): “feudal residuals” and “institutional murder”

In 1936, the journal *Literature* published Wang Renshu (Ba Ren)'s essay *Chekhov and China*, which first framed the death of the petty official as a result of “feudal residuals”:

“Chervyakov's death resulted both from the feudal remnant of official authority and from the petty bourgeoisie's own cowardice.” [12]

In the same year, Hu Feng wrote in the *New Book Reviews* section of *Yiwén*:

“Chekhov's petty official is the most docile cog in the old Russian bureaucratic machine. His death is not accidental—it is institutional murder.” [13]

These critiques collectively solidified the “systemic murder” narrative, transforming the “small civil servant” into: a victim of feudalism, an inevitable product of bureaucratic hierarchy, a vessel of servility, a “case study” in critiques of national character, and the “weak” representative in class analyses of the petty bourgeoisie. Thus, China's literary world elevated the “petty official” from a “laughable minor character” to a “victim of feudal remnants,” completing a three-step leap from politicization to moralization to classification.

3.2. Japan: everyday absurdity and psychological emptiness

3.2.1. Late Meiji period (1904): “hierarchical society” and “anxious mentality”

In 1904, Hakuta Zangun translated *The Death of a Minor Official* for the *Mingxing* magazine. In his translator's preface, he emphasized:

“This piece depicts the mechanization of the hierarchical society and the anxiety of lower-ranking officials. It does not mock their cowardice but reveals the impermanence of life.” [14]

Unlike Geng Jizhi, Hotta avoided terms like “tyranny” or “oppression.” Instead, he introduced concepts of ‘mechanism’ and “impermanence,” attributing the events to “social inertia” rather than “institutional violence.” This established the “aestheticized” tone that shaped Japan's reception of the work.

3.2.2. The Taishō period (1910–20): “modern man” and ‘neurosis’

In 1916, Hasegawa Tenkei published “Chekhov's Minor Characters” in *Central Literature*, proposing:

“Chervyakov is not a Russian, but the neurotic clerk commonly found in our metropolises; his death represents the excessive fermentation of modern man's self-awareness.” [15]

This marked the first appearance of the concept of the “modern man,” detaching the “minor civil servant” from the “Russian bureaucrat” and transforming him into a “neurotic sufferer in Tokyo's office buildings.” This achieved a dual shift: “de-Russification” and “psychologization.”

3.2.3. Early Shōwa period (1930–36): “existential solitude” and “absurd everyday life”

In 1936, Tsugumi Ibusuki published *The Death of a Company Man*, relocating the story to Tokyo's Marunouchi district. In his creative notes, he wrote:

"The sneeze was merely a prelude. The true tragedy lies in a person's inability to reconcile with themselves. Chekhov showed me that the absurdity lies not in the system, but in the emptiness deep within the human heart.“ [16]

In the same month's Bungakukai, Shiga Naoya commented:

“The clerk in Ibusuki's pen is not killed by the section chief, but by his own loneliness; this is the Japanese spirit of Chekhov.” [17]

Thus, Japanese critics constructed the “small civil servant” as: a modern individual, a neurotic subject of the metropolis, an over-fermented being of existential loneliness and self-awareness, a figure of everyday absurdity—the quintessential embodiment of the hollowed-out human heart.

Unlike China, Japan did not send the “small civil servant” to the court of “judicial authority,” but instead invited him into the “psychological consultation room,” making him a classic case study of “modern loneliness.”

3.3. Comparative analysis of key imagery terms (high-frequency terms in the 1930s-40s)

Table 2. Comparative analysis of key imagery terms (high-frequency terms in the 1930s-40s)

Key Term	Occurrences in China (1930-40)	Occurrences in Japan(1920-36)	Semantic Differences
Official Authority	47 times	3 times	China: Institutional violence; Japan: Workplace etiquette.
Slavishness	36 times	0 times	Unique to China, critique of national character.
Neurasthenia	2 times	41 times	China: sporadic symptom; Japan: modern ailment .
Modern Man	0 times	28 times	Unique to Japan, reflection on modernity.
Absurdity	5 times	33 times	China: institutional satire; Japan: existentialism.

Ps: Data sources from: Shanghai Library's “Full-Text Database of Late Qing Periodicals,” National Diet Library of Japan's “Modern Digital Library”.

Through progressive deepening of understanding, China completed the construction of the minor official's image—from a victim of class oppression to a reflection of the enslaved nature of feudal society's populace, and finally to a figure used to critique feudalism. This narrative simultaneously exposed the “cannibalism” of the old society and awakened the masses to “refuse servitude,” carrying strong political revolutionary overtones.

Japan, however, integrated psychological pressures and loneliness within its social context, transforming petty bureaucrats into case studies of “modern loneliness.” This approach constructed

an “aesthetic-existential” discourse that downplayed external oppression while focusing on the alienation between 'self' and “other.” This approach carries a strong social and artistic dimension.

Thus, the death of the petty bureaucrat is portrayed in China as “the ravages of feudalism” and in Japan as “the emptiness of the human heart.” This completes the image exposition where the “petty bureaucrat” represents 'servitude' in China and serves as a mirror image of the “modern individual” in Japan.

4. Cultural interpretations of differences in reception between China and Japan

4.1. China: the “cold pen” of social critique

4.1.1. Lu Xun's Kong Yiji (1919): the “anti-climax” structure of laughter and death

In Kong Yiji, Lu Xun replicates the “anti-climax” narrative, transplanting it from the bureaucratic sphere to rural society to execute the judgment of “feudal ethics” upon the “relics of the imperial examination system”: no tragic grandeur, only mundane details like “sitting with broken legs, crawling on a straw mat with his hands” and “asking for a bowl of wine to drink”; no public sympathy, only collective mockery amid “an atmosphere of merriment filling the shop inside and out.” 'Laughter' becomes a tool for “devouring humanity,” mirroring the “minor official” driven to death by the “general's roar”—both manifesting as the gradual stripping away of “self-respect” by the “gaze of the other.” In a 1934 letter to Xiao Jun, Lu Xun acknowledged:

“The characters I write are often drawn from 'small people,' and I frequently use 'laughter' to underscore 'tragedy'—a technique I've partially learned from Chekhov.” [18]

4.1.2. Ba Jin, cold night (1946): coughing replaces sneezing, an “extended version of death” against the war of resistance background

The protagonist, Wang Wenxuan, is an ordinary clerk at a stationery company and a young intellectual. Yet he suffers discrimination from his superiors due to his persistent cough.

Wang Wenxuan's mother possessed an overwhelming need for control and an equally intense dependence on her son. She frequently expressed dissatisfaction with her daughter-in-law's actions, further straining family relations. Within this toxic environment, Wang Wenxuan's condition deteriorated until he ultimately passed away. Through its portrayal of familial dynamics, the entire novel reveals the existential struggles and inner conflicts of ordinary people against the backdrop of war. With profound insight and nuanced description, it exposes the complexity of human nature and the inevitability of life's hardships, showcasing the helplessness of individuals within a feudal society. In his afterword, Ba Jin wrote:

“They all pursued happiness, yet instead strove toward their own destruction.” [19]

Ba Jin channels the petty official's helplessness and sycophancy into Wang Wenxuan, embodying the powerlessness of individuals under feudalism and social upheaval, thereby achieving the political transformation of the minor bureaucrat.

4.1.3. Shen Congwen's “the eight horses” (1935): the cracks in confucian ethics behind professors' polished facades

Shen Congwen replaced the “minor civil servant” with seven professors from Qingdao University, and deconstructed the “sneeze” into: Professor A, a physicist, displayed a family portrait on his desk, while an advertisement featuring a half-naked beauty hung within his mosquito net. Biology

Professor B professes that celibacy offers freedom and convenience, yet during beach strolls, he often picks up tiny pearl-glistening clam shells from the footprint trails left by passing beach girls. Ethics Professor C claims to be an old man without romantic notions, yet whenever he mentions his beautiful niece, his face lights up with an odd expression. This work is less an “Eight Horses” painting than an “Eight Ugly Figures” tableau. A group of highly educated intellectuals, steeped in Western influences, reveal the inner emptiness and moral confusion of urban dwellers in the old society. Their conflicting emotions, conscious and subconscious struggles, expose a fractured psyche and alienated identity. Like the minor civil servant who appears ordinary and normal on the surface, yet has long lost sight of life's true meaning. As the text states:

“In this world, some know not the sea, nor love it; others know the sea, yet dare not love it.” [20]

Through this starkly contrasting satirical portrayal, the text critiques contemporary society and exposes the emptiness of the human heart. It transforms the image of the petty bureaucrat into a figure that resonates with the realities of modern urban life.

4.2. Japan: the “everyday absurdity” of psychological depiction—from 'sneezes' to “empty selfhood”

4.2.1. Shiga Naoya: *The Little Monk's God* (1920)

The story depicts a young monk, “I,” who belches during morning prayers and is glared at by his master. The more he thinks about it, the more ashamed he feels, “as if cotton had been stuffed into his chest” [21] — —This mirrors Chervyakov's description of “something falling inside his stomach.” Yet Shiga has the youth flee rather than die, substituting “self-awakening” for “institutional murder.” Shiga transforms social satire into a coming-of-age story, achieving a psychological shift.

4.2.2. Tsutomu Inaba, “*Saluting the Captain from Afar*” (1940)

Written after World War II, this story features Yuichi, a kind and simple-hearted boy. After his father's death, his mother worked tirelessly, gradually improving their lives. However, due to the war, Yuichi's mother, persuaded by the village chief, agreed to send him to a military school for youths. Yuichi earned the nickname “Captain of the Distant Salute” for frequently performing this ritual gesture. Later, Yuichi suffered an accident on the battlefield, becoming a cripple with a brain injury. After returning home, he frequently experienced episodes where he believed the war was still ongoing. Ultimately, mother and son struggled in poverty. The text also notes that villagers pressured Yuichi to leave the hospital prematurely because they believed “having an officer return to the village was a matter of great prestige.” [22] This story delivers a scathing critique of the extreme indifference and selfishness of humanity under militarism, echoing the theme of oppression by environment and human coldness that led to the death of the minor bureaucrat in “The Death of a Minor Bureaucrat.”

4.2.3. Osamu Dazai, “*The Flower of the Clown*” (1936)

The plot of “The Flower of the Clown” is relatively straightforward, primarily depicting how Yozō Ōba, after the death of his friend's wife, Ayō, attempts to commit suicide by drowning to follow her in death. However, he fails. After being rescued, Yozō's friends come to console him, urging him to pretend nothing has affected him. Through intricate psychological and linguistic portrayals, the work reveals the cold indifference and feigned concern between people, while also capturing the extreme

psychological states prevalent in the social climate of the time. This mirrors the extreme psychological state depicted in *The Death of a Minor Official*, where a minor official dies from a mere sneeze.

4.3. Structural comparison

It is evident that both China and Japan employ a narrative model of “minor daily incidents—escalating repetition—mental collapse” in their portrayal of the reincarnated “minor civil servant.” Moreover, both works reflect, to varying degrees, the helplessness and extremism of individuals under different forms of social oppression.

Chinese writers employ the unshakable long robe of Kong Yiji, Wang Wenxuan's worsening illness, and the disgrace lurking behind the polished facades of eight professors. Using a plain, everyday style reminiscent of the minor official's death, they denounce social corruption and human ignorance to foster enlightenment and awakening among the people. Japanese writers, meanwhile, employed the young monk's escape, Yuichi's mental breakdown, and Oba's suicide attempt to probe the coldness and selfishness of human nature within their societal context.

In essence, the same framework, two amplifications: China tends toward political amplification, while Japan leans toward psychological amplification.

Table 3. Structural comparison

Stage	Chekhov's Prototype	Chinese Adaptation	Japanese Adaptation
Triggering Event	Sneezing	BookTheft/Coughing/Hiccuping	Hiccuping/Saluting/Love Suicide
Escalation Mechanism	Repeated Apologies	Repeated Justifications/Apologies/Cover-ups	Repeated Self-blame/Practice/Bowing
Outcome	Death	Disappearance/Illness/Humiliation	Fleeing/Overwork Death/Suicide Attempt
Narrative Focus	Institutional Satire	Social Cannibalism	Psychological Void
Emotional Tone	Tearful Smile	Grieving Resolve	Detached Absurdity

5. Conclusion

The reception history of *The Death of a Minor Civil Servant* in China and Japan superficially presents a form of “cross-cultural exchange,” yet fundamentally exposes the divergent approaches of two modernities toward the relationship between “the individual and the system”: China opts to ‘historicize’ it, while Japan chooses to “psychologize” it. This divergence is not coincidental but rather a literary manifestation of structural differences within East Asian modernity. As Karatani argues, modern literature transforms reality into symptoms of modernity [23]. In this sense, the death of the “minor official” became a symptom carrier for “systemic murder” in the Chinese literary world and “fissures in existence” in the Japanese literary world, rather than Chekhov's original intent of “satire on hierarchy” itself. However, neither China nor Japan ‘misread’ Chekhov; they merely each “symptommatized” Chekhov. Chinese intellectuals amplified the “sneeze” into evidence of “feudal remnants,” thereby completing their indictment of the “old society.” Japanese intellectuals, conversely, internalized the ‘sneeze’ as the self-loathing of the “modern individual,” thereby completing their diagnosis of “modern loneliness.” Together, these two approaches constitute a “dual entry point to East Asian modernity”: one through the judgment of external systems, the other

through the fissures within the self. Furthermore, the “absurdity” in Chekhov's original work—namely, “death triggered by a sneeze”—was not “translated” with identical meaning across cultures. Instead, intellectuals in both countries infused it with distinct historical content. In China, the national crisis and class conflicts of the 1930s could not be directly expressed through “realism,” so ‘absurdity’ became a metaphor for the “irrationality of feudal systems.” In Japan, the militaristic oppression and speech restrictions of the early Shōwa period prevented direct “institutional criticism,” so the ‘absurd’ became a stand-in for “the loneliness of modern man.” As Japanese critic Maeda Kōichirō stated in a 1937 roundtable discussion in *Bungakukai*: “We cannot directly say ‘the system kills,’ so we must let the ‘sneeze’ stand in for the ‘unspeakable fear.’” [24] As British comparative literature scholar D.P. Costello first noted in his 1952 monograph in *The Slavonic Review*: The transnational vitality of Chekhov's short stories hinges on whether the receiving context “reduces the absurd to history or distills history into the absurd.” [25] —China chose the former, framing them within an “anti-feudal enlightenment” narrative that turned the “minor clerk” into a specimen of “servile mentality”; Japan chose the latter, using it to reflect on the loneliness of the “modern individual,” making the ‘sneeze’ a symbol of existential absurdity. Together, they constitute “a dual performance of the same absurdity.” Writers in both countries commonly employed Chekhov's “everyday detail-anticlimax” narrative in their creations, yet each transformed it into a tool for social critique and psychological analysis respectively, presenting a cross-cultural landscape of “same origin, different streams.” This “same origin, different streams” phenomenon extends beyond Sino-Japanese comparison, representing two inevitable destinations for Chekhovian modernity in its global dissemination: when absurdity is activated by historical consciousness, it flows toward institutional critique; when absurdity is internalized by aesthetic awareness, it flows toward existential anxiety. “Institutional critique” and “existential anxiety” are not unique to China and Japan, but rather two fundamental response patterns of modernity when confronting the relationship between “the individual and the system.” However, due to the historical peculiarities of East Asia in the 1930s—China grappling with a “semi-colonial, semi-feudal” social crisis, Japan mired in “imperialist internal rigidity”—these patterns emerged prematurely and in extreme form. Thus, the divergence between China and Japan represented merely the earliest and most vivid preview of the global landscape to come.

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