

Li Tianyun The significance of Russian classics to the world today

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Editor's Note

From November 6 to 8, 2024, the first World Classical Studies Conference was held in Beijing, with the theme of "Classical Civilization and the Modern World". The conference used classical studies as a bridge, widely invited well-known experts and scholars from various countries, brought together world culture, and studied and inherited civilization traditions in a modern context. The day after the closing of the conference, The Paper.com launched 7 columns to interpret the current research trends in the classical academic community and the relevant topics of this conference for readers. This issue reprints Li Tianyun's article "The Significance of Russian Classical Studies to the Today's World".

On November 7, 2024, the 107th anniversary of the October Revolution in Russia, the first World Classical Studies Conference was held in Beijing, China. Valery Petroff, a scholar from the Russian Academy of Sciences, delivered a keynote speech entitled "Thaddeus Zielinski (1859-1944) and His Concept of the Third 'Slavic' Renaissance of Antiquity" on behalf of Russian scholars. Petroff's keynote speech received a good response. On the international academic platform built by Chinese scholars, Petroff fully demonstrated the significance of Russian classics to the world today and proved the deep friendship between Chinese and Russian scholars.

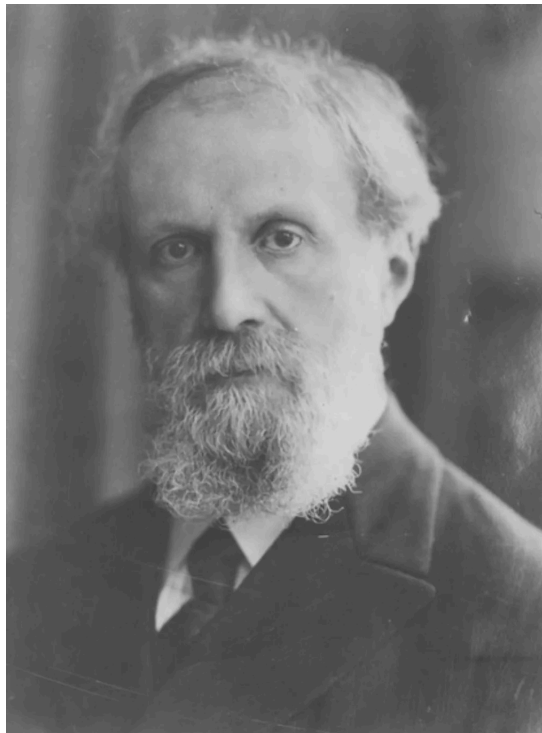


- ▲ Valery Petroff delivered a keynote speech at the opening ceremony of the inaugural World Conference of Classics

Russia often shows two completely different faces for the Chinese: either it values affection, willing to make sacrifices, and advocates beauty and art, etc., or it has a fighting spirit, being indomitable, and pays attention to principles and discipline, etc. But in fact, behind all this, it contains the Russian nation's pursuit of good virtues and a good political order, which is precisely contained in the pursuit of classical learning by Russian scholars. Understanding the exploration of classical studies by Russian scholars for hundreds of years can greatly promote our research on Soviet Marxism and Russian philosophy, literature and art in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

According to the book "A Brief Account of the Study of Western Ancient History in Russia" by the late professor of the History Institute of St. Petersburg State University, Edward Frolov, Russian classics have a long history. Before Peter the Great, Russian scholars had begun to accumulate knowledge about classical philology and Western ancient history. After Peter the Great's reforms, Russian classics embarked on a path of vigorous development. Especially after Alexander II's serfdom reform, a series of classical schools emerged in Russia like mushrooms after rain. Among them, Thaddeus Zielinski is one of the outstanding representatives of the Russian cultural-historical school. Zielinski is an expert in classical philology and is proficient in classical languages, but he never sticks to the philological study of classical writers, but conducts meticulous and in-depth research on all aspects of the entire classical culture. His representative work, the four-volume "Summary of Contemplative Life

[Из жизни идей. В 2-х т., 4-х книгах],” can be regarded as an encyclopedia of classical culture. Among them, the rich and vibrant atmosphere of classical culture hits the face. This set of books is still a benchmark in the Russian academic community. In addition, Zielinski also translated and published the Russian editions of the works of Sophocles, Euripides, and Cicero, which are exemplary works of Russian scholars publishing the works of classical writers.



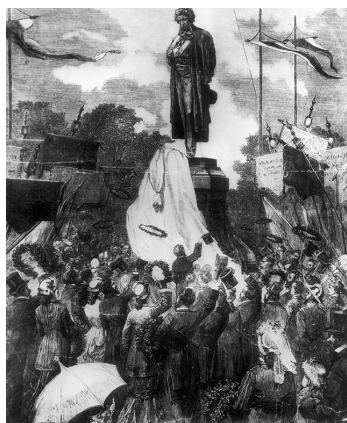
▲ Thaddeus Zielinski (1859-1944)

In 1899, Zielinski, who was just 40 years old, published a famous article entitled “The Ancient World in Maikov’s Poetry” in the *Russian Herald*, the “mainstream media” of 19th century Russia, in which he proposed the concept that classical culture has achieved “Renaissance” three times in human history. Zielinski reminds us that the “innovation” in human history is actually a return to the classics. Maikov was a famous aesthetic poet in 19th century Russia. He was also a long-time friend of the great writer Dostoyevsky, who often discussed the latest ideas of novels with him in letters. But Zielinsky’s article is definitely not an ordinary literary review. He took advantage of the topic to express his expectations for Russian classics and its world significance.

As we all know, the first Renaissance in human history first occurred in Italy from the 15th to the 17th century. Zielinski called it the “Roman” revival of classical culture. During this period, great artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael and Michelangelo, as well as influential philosophers such as Thomas More, Machiavelli and Nicholas of Cusa, were born. This was the first Renaissance of classical culture, and its world significance is undeniable. Zielinski believes that the second Renaissance in human history occurred in Germany from the 18th to the 19th century, which can be called the “Germanic” revival of classical culture. In addition to well-known philosophers such as Kant, Fichte, Hegel and Schelling, this period also gave birth to talented writers and poets such as Lessing, Goethe, Schiller, Novalis and Hölderlin. In Zielinski’s view, even the writers who are regarded as giants of modern thought were deeply inspired by classical culture. Zielinski believes that the second Renaissance of classical culture in human history is also well-deserved.

Zielinski believes that the third Renaissance in human history will take place in Russia in the future, which can be called the “Slavic” Renaissance. In the 19th century, Russia had already produced great writers such as Gogol, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, and Russian philosophers such as Soloviev and Rozanov also began to emerge in the second half of the 19th century. Zielinski believes that behind all this is the influence of the classical spirit on the Russian national character. Russian scholars continue to deepen their research in the field of classical studies, and their influence will not only affect Russian classical studies, but also the entire Russian and even world culture. In 1880, Dostoyevsky proposed the concept of “universal responsiveness” in his famous “Pushkin Speech.” Dostoyevsky believed that the characteristics of Russian culture are not blind arrogance, but a positive response to the invitation of world culture. Only by fully understanding the cultures of various nations in the world can we truly understand Russian culture. Zielinski’s article actively responded to Dostoyevsky’s “Pushkin Speech.” The development of Russian culture is not done behind closed doors, but can only be achieved by fully absorbing and learning from the

ancient Western ideological resources in order to continuously develop and innovate and ultimately make its own contribution to the world's nations.



▲ In June 1880, the monument to Alexander Pushkin was erected.

Zielinski's article has made an important positioning for Russian classics. Russian classics are not mainly a study in the study room, but to fully inherit the cultural heritage of ancient Western countries, update the Russian culture of his time, and finally give back to all nations in the world. With the help of the international stage provided by China, Petroff conveyed the spiritual appeal of Russian classics to classicists around the world at the World Classics Conference. Petroff's keynote speech also brought certain reference significance to Chinese classics scholars. The development and renewal of Chinese culture requires not only its own classical cultural resources, but also the excellent ideological and cultural resources of Western Europe and even the world. After fully inheriting the excellent spiritual and cultural heritage of the world, Chinese culture will inevitably be able to exert greater influence on the world stage.

In response to the sincere hearts of Russian classical scholars, contemporary Chinese scholars have also begun to translate Russian classical works. As early as the 1950s, Mr. Wang Yizhu, a senior translator in New China, translated "History of the Ancient East" (1956) by Soviet classical scholar Avkiev [Struve?] and "History of Ancient Rome" (1957) by [Sergey Ivanovich] Kovalev. The Russian classicist most familiar to Chinese readers is Mikhail Rostovtsev, one of the representatives of the socio-economic school. Professor Li Yining, a famous contemporary Chinese economist, translated one of his representative works, "Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire [Общество и хозяйство в Римской империи]." In 1985, the book was published in the "Chinese Translation of World Academic Masterpieces Series" of the Commercial Press. Since the new century, many Chinese translations of Rostovtsev's works have been published. However, Chinese scholars are still unfamiliar with the overall situation of Russian classical studies and urgently need one or two introductory works. Of course, these translations are currently mainly concentrated in the field of Western ancient history, and the translation of Russian ancient Greek and Roman literature and philosophy research, especially the translation of Plato and Aristotle's philosophy research, is still in its infancy. Russian classics are of great significance to the world today and are an important part of world classics. I hope more scholars who are interested in classics research and Russian thought and culture research will join us and join the team of Russian classics translation and research.



▲ November 7, 2024, the opening ceremony of the inaugural World Conference of Classics



Li Tianyun, born in 1992, is from Nanjing, Jiangsu. He holds a Bachelor of Arts and a Master of Philosophy from Jiangsu Normal University, and a Doctor of Philosophy from St. Petersburg State University, Russia. He is currently a young teacher at the School of Marxism at Hebei North University. He mainly studies Russian classics, Russian political history, etc. He has published more than 30 articles in academic journals such as “Russian Literature and Art,” “The Soloviev Studies” (Russian), and “Bulletin of the Russian Christian Academy for the Humanities” (Russian), and published a monograph “The Future of Humanity in the Philosophical Worldview of F.M. Dostoevsky and V.S. Soloviev” (Russian).