

Title: The Aphoristic Way: Lev Tolstoy's Translations of the Dao De Jing
Author: Jinyi Chu, Stanford University

Abstract:

Lev Tolstoy's interest in China and translations of Chinese literature have been accessed reductively as manifesting Orientalism. This article argues that Tolstoy's translations of the Dao De Jing from English, French, and German translations into Russian ought instead to be understood as a creative project, in which he constructed Laozi as an ideological ally and a cosmopolitan philosophical ancestor for late nineteenth-century Russia and Europe. It describes Tolstoy's participation in an evolving global intellectual network of translating Chinese classics for the first time in full. I begin with Tolstoy's first encounter with the Dao De Jing during his spiritual crisis in the 1870s and 1880s and his invocation of Laozi to intervene in an argument between Emile Zola and Alexandre Dumas. I then explain Tolstoy's understanding of the kinship of Dao, Logos, and God against the background of his polemics with the Russian Orthodox Church. I conclude by examining Tolstoy's use of the translation of the Dao De Jing to illustrate his views of the global connections and modernization of his later years. This case should enrich, challenge, and recalibrate our conceptions of cosmopolitanism, globalization, and world literature in the nineteenth century as well as today.