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The LATAM's *Laozi*: The Reception and Interpretations of the *Laozi* in Latin America

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Abstract: The *Laozi* has a long and variegated exegetical history inside and outside of China. This history shows the flexibility of a text that is always able to transform and adapt to the specific cultural context and historical period in which it emerges. Due to the expansion of Orientalism among Latin American intellectuals at the beginning of the 20th century, the *Laozi*, among other texts, began to propagate, producing a series of translations and original interpretations of the text. These works are the products of several Latin American writers who engaged with the *Laozi* mainly through the mediation of European and North American interpretations. From these cross-cultural interactions emerged some original interpretations and translations that created different ways of reading the *Laozi*. In this paper, I outline the major characteristics of the *Laozi*'s translations and interpretations in Latin America's sub-regions. I draw a tentative sketch of what could be defined as the Latin American *Laozi*'s experience, better called the *LATAM's Laozi*.

Keywords: Chinese philosophy; *Laozi*; Daoism; Latin America; orientalism; translation



Citation: Costantini, Filippo. 2022. The LATAM's *Laozi*: The Reception and Interpretations of the *Laozi* in Latin America. *Religions* 13: 952. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100952>

Academic Editor: Misha Tadd

Received: 24 August 2022

Accepted: 1 October 2022

Published: 10 October 2022

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1. Introduction

Each time the Way has descended to the earth, it has been different [. . .] Thus, Han dynasty commentators produced a Han *Laozi*, Jin dynasty commentators produced a Jin *Laozi*, and Tang and Song commentators produced Tang and Song *Laozis* (Chan 1991, p. 4).

The quote above from the Song dynasty Daoist priest Du Daojian highlights a common approach in the history of the translation and interpretation of the *Daodejing* (hereafter *Laozi*). The underlying idea is that the *Laozi* represents a mysterious and obscure wisdom that can easily adapt to the context and the time in which it is received. As Du Daojian claims, the capacity of the *Laozi* to adapt and transform according to different cultural contexts and historical periods explains the success and longevity of the text. Its longevity, today, includes around 2000 translations in 94 languages (Tadd 2022, p. 88). This considerable quantity and variety of translations—even within the same language—show the popularity of a text that goes beyond sinological studies. Proof of this phenomenon is indicated by the more than 50 authored translations and re-translations—in Spanish and Portuguese—produced in and for the Latin American market. Some of these versions shows interpretative readings of the text that create or follow what Robinet (1998, p. 121) calls the “school of reading”, that is, a way to interpret the text that involves emphasizing some aspects over others.

While the history of the translation and interpretation of the *Laozi* in the European cultural context is well-documented, this is not the case for the Latin American (hereafter, LATAM) sub-region. LATAM does not have a long tradition in either Asian studies in general or in sinological studies in particular. The interest in Chinese literary production for academic or informative purposes has emerged in the last decades due to the increasing popularization of the image of China and Chinese culture in this part of the world. However, to claim that the classics of Chinese thought were hitherto unknown in the region would be wrong, especially if this claim refers to the *Laozi*.

The aim of this paper is to outline the major characteristics of what I will call the *LATAM's Laozi/s*. I describe the major readings of the text developed within the Latin

American context and draw a tentative sketch of its identity. The relevance of this study covers several different interests that range from the history of cultural transmission to research on translations, the global history of ideas, and so on. However, the main aim is to analyze the *Laozi* from a new standpoint that goes beyond the typical East–West narratives. The history of the Latin American interpretations and translations of the *Laozi* show the LATAM's effort to go beyond Eurocentrism and build a horizontal mutual recognition with new rising world actors.

To trace the history of the translation and interpretation of the *Laozi* in Latin America is a complex task that needs to consider several elements that comprise the different cultural and linguistic contexts in the region. Latin America is a broad term that defines a variegated cultural and linguistic context, and I am aware of the oversimplification of taking LATAM as a single reference. However, a coherent and single thread can be identified when we talk about LATAM's relationship with Orientalism and Oriental culture. In this paper, I only consider Spanish and Portuguese works, leaving aside other languages spoken in the region since significant works in these languages have not been produced on the *Laozi*. Another issue is LATAM's cultural interchange with European countries, such as Spain and Portugal, for obvious historical reasons. In the publishing industry, Spanish and Portuguese books circulate in both European and Latin American markets, and therefore, it is often difficult to determine the main target market of a specific text. My solution here was to consider first editions published in LATAM's context, mainly written by Latin American authors,¹ including re-translations of previous *Laozi*'s translations published in Europe or North America. The distinctive element here lies in the target market the product was originally intended for, despite its later impact. Finally, the last issue is the uncountable production of *Laozi* translations published by independent publishers. This kind of product is often anonymous and usually produced in esoteric environments. At this time, I only analyze authored works published by recognized publishers based in LATAM countries.

This paper is organized in the following fashion: First, I present a brief history of the introduction and first development of “Oriental thought and texts” in the LATAM context. This will help to better explain the purpose behind Latin American intellectuals' interests in Daoism and the *Laozi*. Second, I frame the translations and interpretations of the *Laozi* as types of readings regarding their focus and targeting audience. I divide the readings into three types: the mystical/spiritual reading, the academic reading, and the miscellaneous reading. The taxonomy employed here only serves as a support to understand the kinds of readings that are produced in the LATAM context. I am aware that some works do not totally fit into one specific category and could lie among two or three different ones.

2. The Introduction of *Laozi* in Latin America

The introduction and the popularization of the *Laozi* in Latin America have taken place in different cultural contexts. Each context has conveyed a different aim, has targeted a different kind of audience, and has generated or influenced specific ways of reading the text—or what Misha Tadd ([Tadd 2022](#)) calls interpretive lineages.

The first introduction of the *Laozi* in Latin America occurred with the fascination toward Oriental culture that emerged at the beginning of the 20th century in different Latin American countries. This fascination contributed to shaping a particular form of Orientalism that can be called Hispanic Orientalism.² As [Kushigian \(1991, p. 3\)](#) claims, Hispanic Orientalism differs from Said Orientalism because it is not characterized by hegemonic paradigms, and it is based on the construction of a dialogue and exchange of ideas with the East. At the beginning of the 20th century, Asia gradually became the new horizon for Latin American young intellectuals moved by anti-imperialist and anti-positivist sentiments. “The Orient” represented the alternative political and cultural reference to the Western decline, which manifested its tipping point in the outbreak of the First World War. Dealing with similar colonial issues, Asian countries and leaders became important references for young Latin American reformists, from the Mexican Atheists to the Argentinian Modernists and Reformists. In this context, the ideas and the works of

Gandhi, Sun Yat-sen, Ho Chi Minh, and Mao Zedong, among others, began to circulate among LATAM's intellectual circles.

Following the so-called “awakening of the Orient” (see [Bergel 2006](#), p. 110), academic and informative journals began to publish translations and articles on Asian pre-modern and modern thought and culture. To give a few examples, the first volume of the *Revista Oriental*—a left-wing journal founded by the “Friends of Russia Association”—was published in 1925 in Argentina. The *Revista Oriental* published articles on political anti-colonialist movements of India, China, Morocco, and so on. Another example is Francisco Zamora's *Claridad* publishing house.³ *Claridad* published a collection between 1922 and 1926 called *Los Pensadores*. In this collection, Zamora dedicated a few issues to Gandhi and the famous Orientalist Romain Rolland (see [Devés and Bao 2005](#), p. 6).

The first and foremost interest in “the Orient” and its culture had a political purpose. However, along with the ideological and political vehicles, several Asian philosophical and religious traditions spread around Latin America and had a significant cultural impact.⁴ The key aspect of LATAM's attraction to Asian philosophy was the new kind of spirituality that Buddhism, Hinduism, and Daoism seemed to be able to offer. Literary modernists and esoteric groups—Theosophists, Spiritualists, Masons, and Paganists, among others—were the major groups attracted to this “new form” of spirituality that supported their anti-positivism and anti-scientism.

LATAM's attitude to Eastern spirituality followed the European Orientalist romanticized view of “the Orient”.⁵ The reason behind this approach was the fact that LATAM's interaction with “the Orient” was frequently mediated by European and North American interpretations. As Devés and Melgar stated:

Orientalism did not come to us through contact between our intellectuals and those from the East, but rather through the Europeans and North Americans, in their French and English translations, and to a much lesser extent via the Spanish versions. Certainly, our Orientalism was second- and even third-hand. ([Devés and Bao 2005](#), p. 8)

Second- and third-hand Orientalism means that LATAM's intellectuals read and understood the classics of the Far East through European translations or re-translations and through the filter of Western-specific interpretations. This occurred with the promotion of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism through Theosophist authors such as Annie Besant, Helena Blavatsky, and Jinajaras, who were well-known in Latin America.

Regarding the *Laozi*, the promotion and understanding of the text in Latin America followed the general Orientalist model explained above. LATAM's first engagement with Daoism was through the works of Western sinologists and Orientalists. To give some examples of this engagement, the Mexican philosopher Antonio Caso ([Caso 1975](#), p. 273) affirmed that his approach to *Laozi* was mediated by the work of the Italian sinologist Giuseppe Tucci and the translation of the German sinologist Richard [Wilhelm](#) (1985). The Argentinian novelist Jorge Luis Borges became fascinated with the Daoist classics thanks to the translations of Herbert [Giles](#) (1905), James [Legge](#) (1879), and Arthur [Waley](#) (1954) (see [Zhu 2018](#)). Leon [Wieger and Bryce](#) (1991) and Alberto [Castellani](#) (1927)—among others—were the main references for the works on Daoism by the Argentinian Orientalist Ángel [Cappelletti](#) (1964). In Brazil, the first works on Daoism were mediated by the understanding of French Orientalist authors such as Pauthier, Remusat, and Julien, among others. Traces of this influence can be found in the works on Chinese culture of Mendonça, Lisboa, and Cordeiro, and the translations of *Laozi* by Huberto Rohden (see [Bueno and Czepula 2020](#)).

Due to the growing interest in Daoism at the beginning of the 20th century, several LATAM publishers and journals began to publish Spanish and Portuguese translations of Daoist works. These publishers were often related to—and funded by—esoteric international networks such as Theosophy, Masons, and Spiritualists, which begin to expand in Latin America at the end of the 19th century. Some examples are the important publishers Kier and Sudamericana in Argentina and Orion and Diana in Mexico. These publishers decided to dedicate a part of their production to translations, re-translations, and works

of Oriental classics and released several *Laozi* versions. The Argentinian publisher house *Kier*—initially called *Libreria Teosofica*—published three versions of the *Laozi*: a Spanish translation of Waley’s (1979) *Laozi*, the well-known translation by Edmundo Montagne (1947), and one by Samuel Wolpin (1980). The *Sudamericana* published two works by Yutang Lin (1945a, 1945b) and Adolfo Carpio’s (1957) translation of the *Laozi*. In Mexico, the Orion and Diana publishers released two series edited by two Spanish Theosophists who had migrated to Mexico, Maria Sola de Sellares and Josefina Maynade. The 1954 Orion series was called *Grandes Maestros de la Humanidad* [*Grand Masters of Humanity*], which included a Spanish version of the *Laozi* called *Lao tse el Maestro de la Humanidad* [*Laozi the Master of Humanity*]. The 1972 Diana series was called *Tradición sagrada de la humanidad* [*The Sacred Tradition of Humanity*], which included Roberto Pla’s *Laozi* translation.

In Brazil, the major actor in the distribution of *Laozi* was the publisher *Pensamento-Cultrix*, which was funded at the beginning of the 20th century by the Portuguese immigrant Antônio Olívio Rodrigues. Directly linked with the first esoteric society of Brazil, *Pensamento* published esoteric works of various kinds, including translations of several Oriental classics (see Ramachandra 2007, p. 21). *Pensamento-Cultrix* published several Portuguese translations and re-translations of the *Laozi* and other Daoist works. To quote some of the most important: the *Laozi* translation by the Theosophist and Buddhist monk Murillo Nunes de Azevedo was published in 1971. The Portuguese version of Wilhelm’s translation of the *Laozi* was published in 1978 (Wilhelm 1978). In 1985, *Pensamento* published the famous interpretation and contemporary adaptation of the *Laozi* by John Heider (Heider 1985), *El Tao de los Líderes* [*The Tao of Leadership*]. In 1985, the Portuguese translations of Henry Normand’s work, *Os mestres do Tao* [*The Masters of Daoism*], were published (Normand 1985).

Along with international esoteric networks, the introduction and promotion of *Daode-jing*’s concepts and translations in Latin America took place through the works of modernists. Novelists, poets, and painters turned to the East and to Daoism in search of alternative aesthetics and religious values (Hagimoto and College 2013). As Bruno Podesta (1974, p. 235) confirmed, Orientalism and mysticism were important elements in modernist writers since they offered those spiritual elements capable of contrasting the materialistic Western values. Among the Eastern disciplines, Daoism was one of the most important. To give some examples, the Cuban writer Jose Marti referred to Daoism in his chronicle *Un funeral chino* [*A Chinese Funeral*]; Jorge Borges often employed Daoist references—mainly Zhuangzi—in his writings (see Hagimoto and College 2013, p. 19). Another example of modernist fascination was by the Argentinian group of painters and poets called Orion. Among the founders, the poet Ernesto Rodríguez and Aschero (1940) gave several lectures on the figure of Laozi and published a full translation of the *Laozi* in 1940 (see Figueira 1955, p. 340).

A further vehicle—but one with a minor impact—for the introduction of Daoist concepts and texts in Latin America took place with the Chinese migratory waves to the region. Migration facilitated the introduction and the popularization of Daoist-related disciplines, such as *taiji*, *qigong*, and traditional medicine, and contributed to the establishment of Daoist institutions and associations, on this topic, see (Costa 2019). This vehicle seems to have had a significant impact in Brazil, where there are some of the most important Daoist associations in Latin America.⁶

In sum, the introduction and first promotion of the *Laozi* in LATAM countries can be framed as a sentiment of fascination toward “the Orient” that emerged among young intellectuals at the beginning of the 20th century. This fascination was primarily drawn by political purposes and spiritual interests and developed in intellectual circles of several kinds. The context in which the promotion of Daoist ideas and texts took place conveys specific missions that influenced the production of ways of reading the *Laozi*. Each context determined—or at least influenced—the authors’ translations and interpretations, targeting a specific audience. In the next sections, I frame the most important LATAM translations and interpretations of the text in the above-mentioned taxonomy: mystical/spiritual reading,

academic reading, and miscellaneous reading. Each of them was developed in a specific context, emphasizing the specific elements that targeted specific audiences.

3. The Mystical/Spiritual Reading of *Laozi*

I define mystical/spiritual reading as the kind of interpretation that emphasizes—or over-emphasizes—a mystical/spiritual approach to the text. This view tends to describe the *Laozi* as a universal wisdom that can be grasped or experienced through individual spiritual cultivation. This is the most common reading of the text in Latin America and, thus, covers a broad range of audiences. The reasons for the great impact of this kind of reading are related to the Orientalist fascination mentioned above, with its interest in the spiritual elements of the Far East's wisdom. This kind of reading tends to emphasize a mystical interpretation of the *Laozi*, often prioritizing cultivation techniques and subjective understandings. The main aim of this kind of reading is spiritual development, and thus, circulates in esoteric environments. However, it is often accepted in academic circles.

The Edmund Montagne *El libro del sendero y de la línea recta de Lao-tse* [*The Book of the Way and the Straight Line by Lao-tse*]⁷—published in Argentina in 1916—is one of the first translations of the *Laozi* published in Latin America. Montagne basically proposed a re-translation of Alexandre Ular's (1900) French version of the text following his mystical and anti-modernist approach. Montagne read the key elements of the *Laozi* through a mystical lens. To give some examples, Montagne described *Laozi's* sage as the “perfected one” (Montagne 1916, p. 41) who is able to “participate in Universal Unity” (Ibid., p. 39). The sage is the one who can reach complete identification with the Dao—“the primordial and organizing energy of nature” (Ibid., p. 25)—expanding his/her spirit: “the supremacy of the spirit over the senses, in their constant parallelism, leads to identification.” (Ibid., p. 10) Montagne also follows Ular's anti-modernist approach in reading the text as a critique against any form of predetermined organization. This reading is in line with the critique against Western positivism and the focus on Eastern spiritualism promoted by young LATAM modernists and reformists. For instance, Montagne read Chapter 48 as “not-wanting, nothing-doing, is the essence of social organization” (Ibid., p. 23) and Chapter 57, “By suppressing the will, one can organize the society” (Ibid., p. 27). Even though this work is a re-translation of a previous French version, Montagne's translation had a significant impact on the Latin American understanding of the text, and his version has had multiple editions.⁸

A similar approach to the *Laozi* that has been equally successful in Latin America is that of the Chinese author Lin Yutang. Lin Yutang's works on Oriental philosophy became well-known in Latin America in the 1940s. Lin's philosophy is one of the best examples of the Oriental fascination mentioned above. Regarding his most famous work—*The Importance of Living* (La importancia de vivir, Lin 1945a)—the Argentinian Eduardo González says in his review of the work:

“*The Importance of Living* is the Bible of Common Sense embodied in the patient Chinese people. People chosen by that Holy Spirit of Common Sense.” (González 1940, p. 81)

Lin Yutang's works embodied “the alternative solutions” and “the ideal ways of life” of the Oriental world that could be employed in Latin America. Regarding the *Laozi*, Yutang Lin's (1945a) Spanish and Portuguese (Lin 1945b) translations were published in Argentina and Brazil in 1945. These translations have had a significant number of re-editions and countless citations in later works. To quote some of them, the *Recompilacion Taoista* [*Daoist Collection*] edited by Waldamer-Verdugo Fuentes (1983) includes Lin's re-translation of the *Laozi*. The translation by the Cuban poetess Mireya Piñero Ortigo published in 2003 is based on Lin's reading. In Brazil, Haydee Nicolussi published a re-translation of Lin's *Laozi* in the volume *A Filosofia Materialista Chinesa* [*The Chinese Materialistic Philosophy*] in 1967 for the “Asociacao Macrobiotica do Porto Alegre” (Nicolussi 1967).

Lin Yutang *Laozi's* success in Latin America was due to three major factors. First, his version was one of the first *Laozi* translations available in the region and the first in

Brazil (see [Bueno 2016](#), p. 10). Second, at the time, Lin was already a well-known author in North America, and his popularity gradually spread throughout Latin America. Third, the emphasis on spirituality and religious elements he offers in his reading resonates in several other LATAM readings of the *Laozi*.⁹

Further examples of the promotion of this kind of reading in the LATAM context are the works of Jesuits sinologists, missionaries, and theologians, such as the Spanish Carmelo [Elorduy \(1961\)](#); the French Guillaume [Pauthier \(1891\)](#); and the German theologian and sinologist Richard [Wilhelm \(1985\)](#). Elorduy's version became a referential work for several later Spanish translations published in Latin America.¹⁰ Pauthier's *Laozi* influenced the first works on Chinese culture and Daoism published in Brazil by Salvador Mendonça y Henrique Lisboa (see [Bueno and Czepula 2020](#)). Wilhelm's re-translation was published in Argentina (1985) and Brazil (1978) and is often taken as a referential translation in works such as Gaston Soubllette, Samuel Wolpin, and Antonio Caso, among others.

Regarding the original *Laozi* translations published in Latin America that follow a mystical/spiritual understanding, there are several works worth mentioning. In Brazil, three stand out for their impact and originality. The first is the translation by the theologian and philosopher Huberto [Rohden \(1982\)](#), "*Tao Te Ching—o livro que revela Deus [The Book that Reveals God]*".¹¹ Rohden's reading is a very interesting example of creative engagement with the text. He frames his reading of the *Laozi* within his philosophical system called *Filosofia Universica*—a syncretic philosophy that reflects on the very nature of the constitution of the universe.¹² Rohden reads concepts such as *Dao*, *qi*, *yinyang*, and so on, within this framework, which follows a transdisciplinary and cross-cultural approach that mixes religion with science and Hinduism with Buddhism and Daoism. Rohden's approach emerges clearly from the title of his work, *O livro que revela Deus*. He understands and translates the concept of *Dao* as *Deus* (God), a transcendental divinity similar to the Christian God, Brahman, and Yahveh. Commenting on the opening of the text, he states:

Dao is the unfathomable reality, the Absolute Brahma, the Transcendent Divinity that cannot be achieved by our finite knowledge. Dao, the Ontological Being, goes beyond our logical knowledge. We get to know the transcendent divinity in the form of the immanent god. Our finite knowledge finitizes the Infinite Being. (Ibid., pp. 14–15)

Rohden's syncretic approach reflects the spiritual universalism preached by New Age and esoteric groups, which have had a significant presence in Brazil since the 1950s. This approach emphasizes, on the one hand, a universal message beyond cultural peculiarities, but on the other hand, highlights an individual approach and experience of the text. [Rohden \(1982, p. 159\)](#) understands the Daoism of the *Laozi* as a mystical journey characterized by spontaneous individual freedom, a liberal political system, and a self-transformative experience.

Another important translation in the Brazilian market follows a similar approach—the one by the Buddhist monk and Theosophist Murillo Nunes de [Azevedo \(1971\)](#). Azevedo's version, *O Livro do Caminho Perfeito [The Book of the Perfect Way]*, emphasizes the same spiritual universalism and Rohden's cross-cultural syncretism. Commenting on *Laozi's* first chapter, he states:

That which has no name is therefore the Nameless, that is, what the Hindus call Tat, That, the Unmanifested God of the Christians. Now, what has a name, the nameable, the Manifested God, let's say is like the Japanese Buddhists Oyasama, Father and Mother of all things. ([Azevedo 1971](#), p. 2)

Being a Buddhist Monk and a member of the Brazilian Theosophic Society, Azevedo follows the idea that the *Laozi* expresses a universal sacred wisdom shared by several ancient cultures. He reads the text as a mystical wisdom that helps us to "dive into the transcendent reality where we live without knowing" ([Azevedo 1996](#), p. 60). "Laozi possesses [. . .] that cosmic consciousness revealed to the elect of the gods" (Ibid., p. 60). Hence, the final goal

of the *Laozi*, which is to reach the ultimate unity with the Dao/God/Nature, is mystical. Continuing the comments on the first chapter, Azevedo states:

Let's shed light on the keywords that open the text. Let's start with the word "followed". Here there is a clear indication that we can only follow, evolve, continue effortlessly, when we discover our "vocation": our path which is a word often used in the spiritual life. Each of us, or rather, each human being, visible or not, has it. The individual path is different from all others, because it is like a person's DNA, like the fingerprint record that makes him unique and never repeated in the nature that surrounds us. When we found it, the perfect way was found, and everything will be easy. (Ibid., p. 60)

Azevedo reads Dao in terms of the individual path one should follow in order to evolve into a sage. He defines this path as "unique" for each person, an individual vocation. Moreover, this path seems to be primarily a spiritual path that focuses on individual spiritual development.

The last example of this kind in the Brazilian context is the translation by the philosopher and theologian Ivo Storniolo. Storniolo reads the *Laozi* as a mystical journey toward the experience of the Dao. This journey goes beyond the kind of knowledge that searches, explores, and stores more and more facts: "In order to reach the Dao, it is necessary to go deeper and deeper, until reaching the point of unity, where the individualized personality comes into contact with the cosmic totality" (Storniolo 2001, p. 270).¹³ Storniolo understands Dao as the source and the foundation of nature and of the whole universe. Dao is present in everything, and it also surpasses everything. (Ibid., p. 10)

[Dao is the] Cosmic God known to the mystics such as Democritus (Greek philosopher), Francis of Assisi (Christian mystic) and Spinoza (Jewish philosopher) [. . .] Bonaventure's presentation of God applies to him: [. . .] God is a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. This is not pantheism (=God is everything), but panentheism (=God in everything). The visible reality would be the witness of the Tao, which makes everything evolve to the point where, as the apostle Paul says, God will be "all in all". (1 Corinthians 15:28). (Ibid. p. 11)

Storniolo reads the text describing a panentheistic mystical experience. Dao is everywhere and in everything, and thus, human beings can easily taste it and participate in it. The idea of an all-pervading Dao, and of human mystical effort to reach ultimate Unity with it, emerges throughout the text, for instance, in chapter titles such as Chapter 14, "Dao the all in all" (Ibid. p. 67); Chapter 32, "Dao is the source and the end of everything" (Ibid., p. 119); and Chapter 40, "Dao is everything and nothing" (Ibid., p. 142).

The spiritual and mystical reading of the *Laozi* tends to emphasize—or over-emphasize—self-cultivation techniques such as meditation, contemplation, and breathing practices. Focus on these techniques is usually found in editions published by small publishers connected to the esoteric network. These editions do not show either the authors or the translators, and they are a mix of the most famous previous editions. However, in addition to these non-authored examples, there are a few authored works that are worth analyzing. The first example is Roberto Pla's translation of the *Laozi* published in Mexico in 1972 by the publisher house *Diana*. This version was released in the collection series called *Tradición Sagrada de la Humanidad* [*The Sacred Tradition of Humanity*], edited by the Theosophists Maria Sola de Sellares and Josefina Maynade. In the Introduction, Pla (1972, pp. 7–22) describes the philosophy of the text as an ancient and transcendent "philosophy of living" rooted in the traditional wisdom of China. Pla reads the *Laozi* primarily as a manual of self-cultivation where the aim is to live a good life in harmony with the cosmos and nature:

Lao Tse advocates individual development as the only possible way to achieve a better life in the world, and therefore his Science is Reality, and his moral doctrine is Life itself. The wisdom of the *Tao Te Ching* is the wisdom of Life, the secret of knowing how to live in harmony with everything. (Ibid., p. 22)

Pla interprets the Daoism of Laozi as a philosophy of life. He leaves behind meta-physical and cosmological elements of the text, choosing to concentrate his reading on self-cultivation. The *Laozi* shows how human beings can achieve a deep connection with nature through meditation and other self-cultivation techniques, for example, in the opening of Chapter 56:

Who knows does not speak. Who speaks does not know. The Sage closes his mouth and eyes, overshadows his senses and becomes impenetrable to the outside world, to which only his heart opens. He collects himself in his inner world gathering all the intimate lights. He put in order his thoughts: discard the superficial ones and meditate on the deep things. Then the Sage merges with everything. What it means: hidden fusion with the Tao. (Ibid., p. 83)

Pla interprets the passage of Chapter 56 as a meditation technique for a mystical purpose—to achieve unity/fusion with the Dao. This approach is followed in several other passages. For instance, Pla emphasizes the attitude of the Daoist sage in living his/her life in a contemplative quiet state, free from worldly concerns (Ibid., pp. 6–12). Commenting on the end of Chapter 51, he states: “Time calms the mind. Things are transient. A serene, empty mind gives way to intuition; this is the meditation.” (Ibid., p. 86) Similar readings are found throughout Pla’s translation, showing the purpose of presenting the text as a training manual for spirituality.

The reading by the Argentinian Samuel Wolpin is along the same line. Wolpin—who published several works on Chinese philosophy—first published *Aforismos del Sendero y la Virtud* [*Aphorisms on the Way and Virtue*] in 1976 (Wolpin 1976), followed by *Lao Tse y su tratado sobre la virtud del Tao Te Ching* [*Laozi and his Treatise on the Virtue of the Daodejing*] in 1980, both in Argentina. In the first work, he presents a selection of aphorism from the *Laozi*; in the second he dedicates the last section of the book to a complete translation of the text. Wolpin’s translation follows the most influential interpretations without adding anything new. He relies on and often quotes Legge (1879), Giles (1905), Wu (1989), Lau (1963), and the Spanish versions of Carpio (1957), Oviedo (1976), and Elorduy (1961). However, the character of his interpretation often resonates with the trend that reads the *Laozi* as a manual of meditation and self-cultivation. This approach emerges from the word choices in his translations. To give some examples, in Chapter 1, he reads the phrase *zhongmiao zhi men* (衆妙之門) as the “Gate for the Supreme Wisdom” (Wolpin 1980, p. 68). In Chapter 39, *shen de yi yi ling* (神得一以靈) becomes “[from the unity] the [individual] spirit [becomes] strong (Ibid.,). In Chapter 45, the phrase *qingjing wei tianxia zheng* (清靜為天下正) is translated into “rest and tranquility put the universe in order” (Ibid., p. 118). Finally, in Chapter 10, “When the last vestiges of illusion are cleansed, the mind appears without cracks” is the translation for *dichu xuanlan neng wu ci hu* (滌除玄覽能無疵乎) (Ibid., p. 79). “Supreme Wisdom”, “individual spirit”, “put the universe in order”, and “cleaning of the mind” are typical vocabulary found in meditative and mystical environments.

Another important example of mystical/spiritual reading with a focus on self-cultivation is the translation of Juan Fernandez Oviedo. Oviedo published a translation of the *Laozi* in Argentina in 1976 and then a new edition edited by Javier Cruz in 2012. This latter edition was released in a collection called *Sabiduria Practica Oriente Occidente* [*East and West Practice Wisdom*], which aimed to interpret the classics of philosophy through the lens of self-cultivation/perfection. In the prologue of the edition, Javier Cruz (Oviedo 2012, p. 16) exposes the objective of the work: “Reading this book carefully will already involve a risk: that of having to reformulate and perhaps completely change our way of thinking and relating to ourselves and to our environment”. Oviedo and Cruz’s edition of the *Laozi* does not simply aim to present the classic to a Spanish reader. They want to lead the reader through a practical and personal experience of the book in daily life. While Oviedo’s translation basically follows the main translations,¹⁴ the 2012 edition’s core part is the commentary section. To give a paradigmatic example of their approach, in the comments on the opening of Chapter 10, Cruz reads *baoyi* (抱一)—usually translated into “embrace the One”—as a “gesture of love and commitment” to life, and he suggests to “live

in the present, which is the only moment capable of being lived" (Oviedo 2012, p. 52). This reading is backed by Oviedo's translation of the passage: "May your body and vital soul be United in an embrace without separation" (Ibid.). Oviedo's choice resonates with that of Gia Fu Feng and English's (1972) famous English translation that influenced a New Age and spiritualist reading of the text in the 1970s.¹⁵ However, the comments introduce a new way of reading the passage in practical terms.

A further and last example of this kind is the Portuguese translation by the German-Brazilian sensei Christian Haensell, published in 2003. Haensell understands the *Laozi* as a universal text beyond Chinese cultural borders. The text's wisdom goes beyond words and is based on individual practice: "The Tao Te King is merely a theoretical tool. Just reading it won't get us anywhere. We have to live it" (Haensell 2003, p. 8). Haensell's version proposes—together with an original translation—a commentary section that includes practical exercises. The practical part—affirms the author—"allows us to recognize ourselves. Looking at it, we learn, little by little, to get rid of the masks that we constantly use. We learn how to be spontaneous. Looking in this mirror we can recognize that you are me and I am you" (Ibid., p. 7). To give an example of the practical exercises he proposes, in the commentary section of Chapter 1, he presents a meditation exercise that can help the reader to better understand the verses "the mystery of mysteries, the essence of the secrets of life" (Ibid., p. 18). The exercise's aim is to improve the concentration of the mind. Through concentration, one can overcome the surface of the manifold phenomena and get to the essence (Ibid., p. 18). In addition to reading the *Laozi* in practical terms—as a manual of self-cultivation—Haensell remarks that the idea of the *Laozi* is an "individual/private experience" subject to personal understanding: "Don't be alarmed when in a few months or years you will suddenly interpret the same text completely differently. That's a nice sign you are alive, a sign that you are changing." (Ibid., p. 7) The focus of the book is the discovery of one's true self and learning how to live a good life, and the understanding of the *Laozi* must be intimate and personal, contextualized in one's own life.

4. The Academic Reading of *Laozi*

A second section of the Latin American translation and re-translation of *Laozi* is dedicated to those works produced in the academic context.¹⁶ These works are usually translations by philosophers who read the *Laozi* through Western philosophical categories as their main methodological approach and support their translations using previous sinological works. The focus of this reading is less interested in mysticism or cultivation techniques and tends to emphasize metaphysical and ethical aspects.

One of the first successful Spanish translations of the *Laozi* framed in this category is the one by the Argentinian professor and philosopher Adolfo Carpio. The book was published in Argentina in 1957, and it represents one of the first referential academic works on the *Laozi* published in Latin America. Carpio's work is based on Alberto Castellani's Italian translation published in 1927. Carpio justifies his choice in the prologue, stating: "the previous Spanish translations have not been taken into consideration because they lack seriousness and often simply fantasize" (Carpio 1957, p. 30). Carpio generally follows Castellani's translation throughout his translation, however, he also relies on other sources, such as those by Legge (1879) and Giles (1905). Carpio's approach follows the European sinological trend in reading the *Laozi* as a philosophical text in contrast to religious and mystical interpretations. To give an example of his approach, in the prologue, he justifies the choice of not translating the concept of Dao:

Translators gave to the term [D]ao the most varied interpretations: reason, substance, logos, absolute, monad, sovereign, God, etc. Perhaps the concept of Principle could be the most accurate translation, but it is preferable—like Legge, De Harlez, Strauss, and Castellani, among others—to leave it without translation. (Carpio 1957, p. 23)

Carpio follows the major European sinological translations of the *Laozi*, emphasizing a philosophical interpretation of the text. Even if he does not translate the word Dao as

Principle, he reads it in that way, as is attested in chapter titles such as “Return to the Principle” (Chapter 16) and “Thinking about the Principle” (Chapter 63).

Another example that falls into the same category is the translation by the Italian Orientalist and philosopher Onorio Ferrero, based at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru. Ferrero published a Spanish translation of the *Laozi* in Peru in 1972. Ferrero’s translation differs from most of the previous works published in Latin America, as it is one of the few real sinological studies. The references for his readings are primarily within the Chinese philosophical tradition. In his commentaries, he refers to texts such as the *Wenzi*, the *Huainanzi*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Yijing*, among others. Ferrero’s approach is similar to that of Carpio’s, preferring a metaphysical reading over a mystical one, and he relies on Wang Bi’s commentary for his reading (Ferrero 1972, p. 5). To give some examples of his focus on metaphysics, Ferrero refers to Dao as the “Principle of the universal order”, which corresponds to “the unity between the manifest world and the not-yet manifested one” (Ibid., p. 13). Referring directly to Wang Bi’s interpretation, Ferrero understands *wu* 無—non-being—beyond the privative sense of not being a being, but as “the principle that lies at the base of being” (Ibid., p. 39).

The third Spanish translation, which can be defined as academic—or semi-academic—represents one of the most original examples. This is the translation by the Chilean professor, philosopher, and musicologist Gaston Soubllette (1990). While Soubllette’s translation does not consistently diverge from previous works, his interpretation can be framed in a much broader purpose that includes his cosmic vision and his philosophical system. Soubllette is not a sinologist and thus bases his translation on previous European sinological translations and interpretations. As he acknowledges in the prologue: “among the important translations and commentaries in European languages I consulted, this translation principally follows Richard Wilhelm’s work, with some variations” (Soubllette 1990, p. 17). In addition to Wilhelm (1985), Soubllette also refers to other translations, such as the works of Legge (1879), Waley (1954), Castellani (1927), and Elorduy (1961). Therefore, his translation could be framed within the European sinological tradition and does not represent anything new. Nonetheless, his interpretation of the text does, since he proposes a different approach. Soubllette’s objective is not merely to translate and interpret the text. Soubllette wants to convey to the readers his own specific world-view that coincides with the ideas expressed in the *Laozi*. In doing so, he builds a personal hermeneutics that, on the one hand, wants to “follow the Daoism to its true extreme” in a way that Catholic sinologists such as Wieger and Elorduy could not (Ibid., p. 30). On the other hand, he wants to open the text to an intercultural dialogue, finding parallels with other ancient traditions that range from Europe to LATAM’s aboriginal thought.

Soubllette is clear in the goal he wants to achieve with his interpretation of the *Laozi*. He wants to convey a message that resonates with his own philosophical purpose. The message expresses the need to recover the global popular wisdoms as the only way to overcome what he calls “the megacrisis” (see Soubllette 1992–1993) that grips modern societies. The *Laozi* is part of those ancient wisdoms transversally found in aboriginal cultures: a kind of wisdom that searches for a connection between human beings and nature without thinking of the latter as a resource to be exploited.

Regarding the Portuguese academic translations published in Brazil, there are a few works worth mentioning. The first is the translation by Professor Mario Sproviero (1997), which can be defined as the first work on the *Laozi* by a Brazilian sinologist, as he claims in the prologue:

It is necessary to carry out an accurate translation [of the *Laozi*] into Portuguese, based on the original text in classical Chinese. The translations that we have in Portuguese are translations of translations. Therefore—in some cases—the meaning is changed so much that it expresses the opposite (Sproviero 1997, p. 1).

Sproviero justifies his work with the necessity of a new Portuguese translation of the *Laozi* directly from the Chinese versions. His translation relies on Chinese commentaries

such as *Heshang gong* and that by Wang Bi and is supported by philological analysis. Regarding this work, Andre Bueno states:

It is the first national translation by a specialist in Chinese literature. Sproviero made a masterful use of the Portuguese language, adapting the versified translation of the Chinese text, creating a unique image capable of conveying the essence and revealing the core of a highly spiritualized and philosophical poetry [. . .] Sproviero's artisanal work reveals a unique mastery of Chinese, and an unparalleled skill in transcribing it into Portuguese. (Bueno 2016, p. 74)

Sproviero (1997, p. 12) sees the *Laozi* as a fundamental text that teaches human beings "to live integrated to the Course, the foundation of existence. [To do that] one must penetrate the mystery, not reduce the mystery to the human realm. Renew the mystery in the mystery itself". The *Laozi* does not teach some form of esoteric mysticism nor a religious doctrine; it expresses the doctrine of Dao "the moving course of everything, from where we could think that reason, spirit, meaning, logos can express their own essences" (Ibid., p. 39). The Dao teaches how the spiritually cultivated human being could live in accord with nature.

A second Portuguese work that should be mentioned in this category is Giorgio Sinedino's translation of the *Heshanggong* commentary of the *Laozi*, *Escritura do Caminho e Escritura da Virtude com os comentários do Senhor às Margens do Rio* [*The Scripture of the Way and the Scripture of the Virtue with the Commentary of the Master on the River*]. The work was published in Brazil in 2015 and represents the first *Laozi* commentary translation published in Portuguese in Latin America. The book is a sinological work that includes a historical contextualization and is supported by primary references. Sinedino reads the *Laozi* as a political and self-cultivation text following the attitude expressed in the *Heshanggong* commentary and its common interpretation in Western academia.

5. The Miscellaneous Reading of *Laozi*

The miscellaneous reading is a broad category that includes readings of the text in specific contexts with a focus on specific topics such as religious practices, political ideologies, and dietary regimes, among others. As a broad category that covers different topics, the target audience usually coincides with the context in which it emerges. The first example in the LATAM context is the anarchist reading. This interpretation landed in Latin America due to the Japanese anarchist Yamaga Taiji's Esperanto translation of the *Laozi*, which was re-translated into Spanish by the anarchist Eduardo Vivanco (1963). The work was first published in Mexico in 1963. This kind of reading follows a well-established line of interpretation of the *Laozi* in both European and American scholarships,¹⁷ and it was promoted in Latin America by the anarchist journal *Tierra y Libertad* [*Earth and Freedom*]. Following Esperanto's version, the Vivanco re-translation is particularly interesting in the commentary section of each chapter, which is where the anarchist elements fully emerge. To give an example, commenting the line of Chapter 57, "Manage the country with justice and the army with strategy. If you know how to control your actions you will win the world" (2007, p. 32), Yamaga/Vivanco states: "This chapter was the first anarchist declaration against the futility of politics and the domination of man by man. Lao Tsé [Laozi] declares himself opposed to the State, laws and capitalism" (Ibid., p. 32).¹⁸ Generally speaking, Vivanco's work is a pure re-translation of Yamaga's version and does not add anything new. However, thanks to this translation, the anarchist reading reaches a considerable impact among Orientalist circles in Latin America.¹⁹

In Brazil, there are another two original Portuguese translations of the *Laozi* that emphasize specific aspects of the text. The first is Tomio Kikuchi's translation published in Brazil in 1966 (Kikuchi 1966). The second is the Portuguese translation by the Daoist monk Wu Jyh Cherng, based in Brazil, published in 1998 (Wu 1998). Kikuchi's translation can be easily framed within the Orientalist reading of the text shown above with its focus on spirituality and self-cultivation. However, his version stands out for his attention to specific food consumption and macrobiotic alimentation for cultivation purposes. This aspect

resonates with the dietary practices that have emerged in several Daoist religious texts and in the *Xiang Er* commentary of the *Laozi*.²⁰ Conversely, Wu's Portuguese translation could be framed in the religious institutional context where it emerged. As a Daoist monk who migrated to Brazil, Wu reads the *Laozi* as a sacred revealed text. To give some paradigmatic examples, Wu reads the character *sheng* 聖—usually translated as sage—as “sacred man” emphasizing the religious aspect of the Daoist adept. At the end of Chapter 20, the phrase *er gui shi mu* (而貴食母) is explained by Wu in terms of “feeding on what precedes everything, it is the One Breath of the Previous-Heaven of Taoist alchemy” (Wu 1998, p. 23). Following the lineage within Daoist Institutions, Wu's commentary of the text largely employs references on Daoist cultivation and alchemical texts and practices.

6. Conclusions

Defining *Latin America's Laozi* is an arduous task given the cultural complexity of the territory that we normally define as Latin America. Taking Latin America as a collective and shared identity raises several problems that cannot be analyzed in this work. However, following the works of Devés and Bao (2005), Kushigian (1991), and Tinajero (2003) on Latin American Orientalism, a single and coherent thread could be drawn to define the LATAM's approach to Oriental culture. LATAM's approach to the *Laozi* goes along a similar track. *Latin America's Laozi* is a product of the fascination of LATAM intellectuals toward “the Orient” that emerged at the beginning of the 20th century. This fascination existed on political and spiritual levels and was promoted mainly in political, artistic, and esoteric circles. Theosophists, Modernists, and Orientalists—among others—were the major actors in the promotion of the most common translations and interpretations of the text in their circles and the production of new interpretations. These new works tend to emphasize specific elements over others, reflecting the cultural context and aim of their production. The stress on spirituality over metaphysical concern. The emphasis on mystical and self-cultivation techniques over ethics. The praise of the subjective and private interpretation over the search for an objective “true message”. The focus on a “spiritual experience” of the text is thought of primarily as a “private experience”.²¹ We can find all these elements represented in the first and most common works on *Laozi* in Latin America. I define this approach as the mystical/spiritual reading.

All the characteristics mentioned here do not cover all the readings produced in Latin America. In addition to the mystical/spiritual reading, original translations of the *Laozi* can be also found within academic circles. In contrast to other academic contexts, these works are usually not the product of trained sinologists who deal with Chinese historical and literary sources. The authors of the *Laozi*'s new translations and interpretation within LATAM academia are mainly philosophers whose approach to the text is mediated by European and North American interpretations. This second- or third-hand approach sometimes creates original interpretations constructing a fruitful dialogue between Latin America, the Western sinological tradition, and the *Laozi* itself. One paradigmatic example of this kind is the interpretation of the Chilean philosopher Gaston Soublette. While Soublette's translation is mediated by European sinological works, his interpretation is framed in his own philosophical system.

Finally, I employ a further category—miscellaneous reading—to include the works that show specific readings of the text. This broad category shows the flexibility of a text that is always able to transform and adapt to specific contexts. The religious, macrobiotic, and anarchist approaches presented here are just a few examples of the different kinds of readings that can be found in Latin America. The context determines the aim of the reading and shapes its interpretation.

In conclusion, I can sketch a tentative identity of LATAM's *Laozi* as a set of readings produced in different cultural contexts that, in most cases, share a similar approach. The large presence of spiritual and cultivation practice in most of the readings highlights the main element of attraction of the text in the LATAM context: spirituality. As the version by Soublette—among others—confirms, the *Laozi* shows that “wisdom is an experiential/living

knowledge that teaches us the sense of life" (Soublette 2016, p. 237). This idea of the *Laozi* as a "philosophy of life" often taken as a plausible alternative to the Western culture emerges in the majority of interpretations shown above regardless of the type of reading. Clearly, the stress on spirituality and individual cultivation is more evident in the spiritual–mystical reading. However, traces of these elements can also be found in some academic works, such as those by Sproviero (1997) and Sinedino (2015), and in semi-academic work, such as the one by Soublette (1990).²² The focus on spirituality also emerges in the three examples of miscellaneous readings shown, regardless of their different emphases. For example, in the anarchist emphasis, Yamaga/Vivanco's version often refers to spiritual cultivation (see Chapters 12, 14, 37, 40, 52, and 71) and mystical experiences (see Chapters 45, 56, and 65).

The readings of the *Laozi* in the LATAM context show the effort of Latin Americans in searching for new experiences through new paths. These new paths are often described in a romanticized Orientalist fashion, pointing to the ancient mystical Orient as the main universal reference. The LATAM's *Laozi* is a paradigmatic product of this effort, and for this reason, the *Laozi* has become one of the most translated classics in the region.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank the editor Misha Tadd and the three reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- 1 A few exceptions of non-Latin American authors are presented in this paper. The exceptions are the translations of Eduardo Vivanco (1963), Jyh Cherng Wu (1998), and Tomio Kikuchi (1966). Despite the origin of the authors, the three works are clearly written for LATAM's specific contexts, as it is shown in the text.
- 2 On the definition of Hispanic Orientalism, see (Kushigian 1991; Tinajero 2003; and Camayd-Freixas 2013).
- 3 For a study on the history of the *Revista Oriental*, see (Bergel 2006).
- 4 To give some examples, the influence of Hindu and Buddhist texts on Mexican post-revolutionary intellectuals, such as Francisco Madero, is quite well-known. Madero—one of the heroes of the Mexican Revolution—translated and commented on the Bhagavad Gita and took the Hindu classics as important references for his writings on democracy and the principles of revolution (see Muñoz 2020). Other examples in Mexico are the "Ateneo de la Juventud", a group of intellectual reformists who promote an anti-positivist and anti-determinism view for the re-orientation of Mexican education. Most Atheists were attracted to "the Orient" as an alternative path to European culture and values. Examples include José Vasconcelos and Antonio Caso, among others.
- 5 For example, the representation of Oriental philosophy as a coherent whole is circumscribed in its ontological opposite position to the "rational" West.
- 6 There are other Daoist associations around LATAM's countries, but they are not funded by Chinese migrants and did not produce any particular readings of the *Laozi*.
- 7 The first translation of the *Laozi* I recovered is by the forbidden Mexican Orientalist Augustin Bazán y Caravantes, *Lao-tseu-tao-te-king: libro de la via eterna y de la virtud* published in Mexico in 1870. The author himself believed he delivered the first translation of the text for Latin American readers, as he states in the prologue: "With fear, but with happiness, Julien translated it [the *Laozi*] in Europe: with more fear, I translate it in America. May God bless my work!" (Bazán 1870, p. 1).
- 8 I counted more than ten editions of the text from 1916 to 2020.
- 9 See, for example, Soublette (1990), Piñero (2003), and Rohden (1982).
- 10 To quote some examples, Soublette (1990), Wolpin (1980), and Pla (1972) directly refer to Elorduy.
- 11 Rohden's work is a paradigmatic example that lies between the mystical/spiritual reading and the academic one. As a distinguished professor of several international universities, my choice to frame Rodhen's translation within the mystical/spiritual category lies in its emphasis on spirituality and self-transformative experiences characterized in his work.
- 12 The *Filosofía Universica* is a New Age syncretic philosophy that reflects on the very nature of the Constitution of the Universe. See (Rohden 1978).
- 13 Here, Storniolo quotes Richard Wilhelm's work on the *Daodejing*.
- 14 His main references are Legge (1879), Gia Fu Feng and English (1972), and Wu (1989), among others.
- 15 This kind of reading tends to over-emphasize pacifism, self-actualization, mysticism, and human interconnection with nature (cfr Tadd 2022, p. 107).
- 16 I define "academic context" as authors and publishers related to academic institutions.

- 17 Graham: “Western anarchists have claimed Laozi as one of themselves ever since his book became known in the West in the 19th century” (Graham 1989, p. 299).
- 18 The version quoted here is the digital version published in 2007 by the digital publisher Biblioteca Virtual Antorcha http://www.antorcha.net/biblioteca_virtual/filosofia/tao/indice.html, accessed on 7 May 2022.
- 19 The anarchist reading of the *Laozi* was especially promoted in Orientalist and theosophic circles around LATAM countries. For a study on anarchism in Latin America, where the idea of Daoism emerged as a proto-anarchist movement, see Cappelletti (1983).
- 20 It is interesting to note that Brazilian macrobiotic circles were an important vehicle for the promotion of the *Laozi*. To give an example, in addition to Kikuchi’s translation, the Associação Macrobiótica do Porto Alegre published the first Portuguese translation of Lin Yutang’s version of the *Laozi* in 1945.
- 21 Living Daoism as a personal and private experience is a common attitude in Western Daoism. As Palmer and Siegler showed in their study, the common view in the West is that “the authentic Dao is to be found within oneself, and can only be verified through one’s own experience” (Palmer and Siegler 2017, p. 50).
- 22 There are several examples of the emphasis on spiritual elements and cultivation techniques in the three works. In Sinedino’s translation, this emphasis is originally given in the primary source—the main focus of the *Heshanggong* version of the *Laozi* is self-cultivation. In the Sproviero’s and Soubllette’s works, there are several references, as shown above (see pp. 13–14).

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