

Laozi's Intercultural Reception: A Journey from Europe to Latin America

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Abstract

At the turn of the 20th century, Latin American publishers began producing Spanish translations of Asian philosophical and religious classics, reflecting a growing fascination with Oriental cultures. This surge in publications was fuelled by emerging transnational esoteric, intellectual, and artistic networks. Among these texts, the *Laozi* stands out for its remarkable adaptability, undergoing multiple interpretative shifts to align with diverse cultural and intellectual frameworks.

This paper investigates the intercultural reception of the *Laozi* in Latin America, focusing on how European intellectual networks mediated its translation, interpretation, and domestication in the region. Through a comparative analysis of three paradigmatic retranslations—Edmundo Montagne's anarchist-spiritual rendition, Adolfo Carpio's metaphysical reading, and Onorio Ferrero's traditionalist interpretation—the study traces the text's transatlantic trajectories and its reframing for Latin American audiences. Each translation reflects a distinct interpretative approach shaped by the author's intellectual background and objectives. Collectively, they demonstrate how translators negotiated European frameworks while addressing local intellectual concerns, from critiques of Western modernity to postcolonial re-evaluations of non-Western epistemologies that remained entangled with colonial knowledge hierarchies.

By analysing these cases, this paper highlights the complexities behind the reception of Daoism in Latin America, underscoring the entrenched power imbalances within the broader intellectual networks that linked the region with Europe. These dynamics contributed to the global circulation and reinterpretation of this Daoist classic, revealing how even anti-colonial critiques often relied on Eurocentric paradigms to legitimize non-Western thought.

Keywords: Chinese philosophy, Daoism, *Laozi*, Latin America, translation

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Medkulturni sprejem *Laozija*: potovanje iz Evrope v Latinsko Ameriko

Izvleček

Na prelomu 20. stoletja so latinskoameriški založniki začeli izdajati španske prevode azijskih filozofskih in verskih klasikov, kar odraža naraščajoče zanimanje za orientalske kulture. Ta porast števila publikacij so poganjale novonastale transnacionalne ezoterične, intelektualne in umetniške mreže. Med omenjenimi besedili s svojo izjemno prilagodljivostjo izstopa *Laozi*, ki je doživel več interpretativnih premikov, s katerimi se je prilagajal različnim kulturnim in intelektualnim okvirom.

Članek raziskuje medkulturni sprejem *Laozija* v Latinski Ameriki, osredotoča pa se na to, kako so evropske intelektualne mreže posredovale prevod, interpretacijo in udomačitev besedila v regiji. S pomočjo primerjalne analize treh posodobljenih paradigmatskih prevodov – anarhistično-duhovne interpretacije Edmunda Montagneja, metafizične interpretacije Adolfa Carpia in tradicionalistične interpretacije Onoria Ferrera – študija sledi transatlantski poti besedila ter njegovemu preoblikovanju za latinskoameriško občinstvo. Vsak prevod odraža svojstven interpretativni pristop, ki so ga izoblikovali avtorjevo intelektualno ozadje in cilji. Prevodi skupaj kažejo, kako so se prevajalci spoprijemali z evropskimi okviri, obenem pa naslavljali lokalna intelektualna vprašanja – od kritike zahodne modernosti do postkolonialnih reevalvacij nezahodnih epistemologij, ki so ostale zapletene v mrežo kolonialnih hierarhij znanja.

Na podlagi analize omenjenih primerov članek izpostavlja kompleksnost sprejemanja daoizma v Latinski Ameriki ter izpostavlja globoko zakoreninjena neravnovesja moči znotraj širših intelektualnih mrež, ki so povezovala to regijo z Evropo. Ta dinamika je prispevala h globalnemu kroženju in ponovni interpretaciji omenjenega daoističnega klasika, pri čemer pa je razkrila, da so se, da bi legitimirale nezahodno miselnost, celo protikolonialne kritike pogosto opirale na evrocentrične paradigme.

Ključne besede: kitajska filozofija, daoizem, *Laozi*, Latinska Amerika, prevod

Introduction

The intellectual history of Daoism in Latin America (hereafter LATAM) is intimately connected to the translation and dissemination of its philosophical classics. Concepts such as *Dao* 道, *yinyang* 陰陽, spontaneity (*ziran* 自然), and flow became popular in contemporary LATAM societies largely because they emerged in seminal texts like the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*. Among these works, the *Laozi* is the most translated East Asian text published by LATAM publishers since the late 19th century. This reflects a growing interest in Eastern cultures, fuelled by the emergence of international esoteric, intellectual, and artistic networks within the region.

Building on previous research, approximately 57 distinct authored translations of the *Laozi* have been published in LATAM, with Spanish and Portuguese as the primary target languages (Costantini 2023, 646). Most of these translations emerged in the latter half of the 20th century, and importantly, most are either retranslations of influential Anglo-European editions or compilations selectively drawing from these sources. Only a small fraction qualifies as academically rigorous works produced by trained sinologists, resulting in what can be called a second-hand reception where European hermeneutics—whether mystical, academic, or esoteric—dictated LATAM’s engagement with Daoist thought.

This proliferation of retranslations in LATAM contexts arises from both textual and contextual factors.¹ The *Laozi* ranks among the most translated and globally circulated classics; according to Misha Tadd (2022a, 8), there are over 2,051 translations in 97 languages. This phenomenon aligns with broader trends in translation studies, where sacred and literary texts—often characterized by polysemy and demands for competing interpretations—are disproportionately subject to retranslation (Brownlie 2006, 146; Feng 2014, 70). The *Laozi*’s reputation for semantic ambiguity further amplifies this tendency. As noted by Western scholars like Holmes Welch (1957, 12), interpreting the text necessitates an “act of creation”, while Isabelle Robinet (1998, 29) argues that its openness not only allows but demands pluralistic readings. Combined with its brevity and rising popularity in spiritual and intellectual circles, these qualities have ensured its enduring translatability.

Reception contexts in LATAM have also shaped retranslation practices. Previous studies (e.g., Costantini 2022; 2023; Bueno and Czepula 2020) reveal that esoteric and neo-esoteric circles produced versions of the *Laozi* that emphasize the mystical and spiritual dimensions, whereas academic interest in Oriental studies spurred retranslations prioritizing philological precision and philosophical rigour. Nonetheless, the majority of 20th-century LATAM editions were derived from indirect translations based on prominent European works or compilative efforts blending multiple sources.

This paper analyses three paradigmatic retranslations of the *Laozi* in 20th-century Latin America, tracing their intellectual lineages and the networks underpinning their interpretive frameworks. Through this approach, the study aims to: first, illuminate the origins of specific interpretations and their transatlantic trajectories from Europe to Latin America; second, demonstrate how international intellectual

1 Borrowing from Pym (2011, 90), in this paper, I use the term retranslation to describe a translation for which the same source text has already been rendered into the same target language at least once.

networks facilitated the reception and domestication of the text in LATAM contexts; and finally, show how LATAM's reading of the text tends to perpetuate a model of interpretation mainly based on Western hermeneutics, thus reflecting entrenched power imbalances in global knowledge production.

The selected case studies—Montagne (1947), Carpio (1957), and Ferrero (1972)—reflect distinct phases and methodologies in the reception of the *Laozi* across the region. Montagne's Spanish retranslation, a direct appropriation of Alexandre Ular's (1900) French edition, exemplifies the unmediated replication of European interpretive frameworks. By adopting Ular's version as his sole reference, Montagne advanced a reading of the *Laozi* infused with mysticism and political critique. Carpio's approach, by contrast, employs a hybrid methodology. While grounded in Alberto Castellani's (1927) philologically rigorous Italian translation, it selectively integrates other sources to justify deviations, reflecting a broader shift from spirituality to philosophy, particularly in the academic engagement with Eastern traditions. Ferrero's work, although framed as a direct engagement with the Chinese source text,² remains deeply indebted to European hermeneutics—particularly René Guénon's traditionalist theories—even as it gestures toward greater textual autonomy.

Collectively, these cases reveal a dual dynamic: an evolving process of textual domestication and foreignization that reframed Daoist thought for LATAM audiences, shaped by translators' growing familiarity with Asian traditions. Yet simultaneously, a persistent Eurocentric lens governed all three interpretations—European frameworks remained the sole authoritative hermeneutic, naturalizing colonial knowledge hierarchies even in critiques of Western modernity.³

While spatial and temporal constraints limit this investigation to Spanish-language translations, preliminary research indicates similar patterns in Portuguese contexts (Costantini 2022; Bueno and Czepula 2020). Although not exhaustive, this tripartite analysis provides a foundational framework for understanding the *Laozi*'s reception in LATAM and highlights the importance of transatlantic intellectual exchange in shaping regional engagements with Daoist thought.

2 Ferrero does not cite any specific Chinese source text in his work, and there is no evidence that he knew Chinese or had studied the language. Consequently, his statement remains speculative.

3 Scholars such as Quijano (2000), Dussel (2015) and Mignolo (2002) demonstrate how modern Eurocentrism is characterized by a destructive model where local epistemologies are eliminated. As Mignolo (2002, 64) pointed out: “the Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism was accepted in former colonies as ‘our own’ critique of Eurocentrism [...] Quite simply, the colonial difference was not considered in its epistemic dimension”.

The Book of the Way and the Straight Line by Laotse—Montagne’s Indirect Translation of Ular’s Laozi

Edmundo Montagne—an Uruguayan poet, novelist, and journalist (later naturalized as Argentine)—engaged with Argentine anarchism and actively participated in the modernist and symbolist literary movements of his time. Although not an expert in Oriental traditions and never engaging with Asian texts beyond the *Laozi*, Montagne, like many LATAM modernists, sought inspiration in Eastern philosophies, viewing them as spiritual antidotes to the perceived decadence of Western culture. This fascination permeates his prologue to the 1916 first edition of his *Laozi* retranslation, where he writes: “*The Book of the Way and the Straight Line* is destined to awaken great interest among the intellectuals of the superficial and noisy West in which we live” (Montagne 1916, 2). In a later edition published by Kier, he expands on this sentiment, declaring: “Laozi represents a moral summit as lofty as those of Buddha and Jesus. For this reason, he is a liberator for all Westerners who read him. Yet, only mystics can grasp, albeit distantly, an idea of Laozi” (Montagne 1947, 11–12).

Montagne’s decision to publish what he considered the first Spanish translation of the *Laozi* remains enigmatic but can be understood in light of several factors. First, the text was already quite popular among Buenos Aires (*porteño*) intellectuals at that time, often serving as a new source of inspiration for artists and writers (Diz 2006, 101).⁴ Second, Montagne received the “source text”—Alexandre Ular’s French translation—as a gift from his friend Roberto de la Carreras, an eccentric modernist and anarchist poet whose time in Europe fostered his direct involvement in Parisian intellectual circles (see Durán 1948). In the prologue to a later edition, Montagne recalls first encountering the *Laozi* through fragments quoted in the works of Tolstoy and Emerson.⁵ It was only after obtaining Ular’s edition—published in *La Revue Blanche* (Montagne 1947, 9)⁶—that he resolved to produce a Spanish version of what he believed to be the first complete translation

4 A prominent example is the novelist Jorge Luis Borges, who was deeply intrigued by Daoism and incorporated its perspectives into many of his works. For an analysis of Daoist influence on Borges’ writings, refer to Zhu (2018).

5 In the prologue of the 1947’s edition Montagne affirms: “In my philosophical readings, I had seen Lao-tzu cited—with respect and an awareness of his worth—by very few authors: by Emerson, by Tolstoy...”. However, he does not show any specific sources.

6 In the prologue, Montagne (1947) states that he used as the base text for his translation the French version by Ular published by the library *La Revue Blanche*. However, unfortunately, he does not specify which edition he is referring to, since Ular’s French version was first published in two parts in the journal *La Revue Blanche* (1900), and only later as a complete version in 1902.

of the text into a European language.⁷ Third, at the heart of this project was his belief in *Laozi's* emancipatory potential. Convinced that its teachings could liberate Westerners from the superficiality of capitalist modernity, he wrote in 1916: “Laozi’s philosophy will grow ever more fruitful in the world day by day” (ibid., 2). By making the text accessible to LATAM readers, Montagne aimed to disseminate a philosophy he viewed as both profound and subversive—a counterpoint to the spiritual and intellectual crises of Western modernity.

Regarding the source text, Alexandre Ular—a writer, journalist, and political envoy who spent years in Asia—produced two versions of the *Laozi*: one in French (1900) and another in German (1903). As several scholars have pointed out (Reiter 1996; Marino 2024; Tadd 2022b), Ular’s interpretation of the *Laozi* is largely shaped by his personal understanding of Daoism as a mystical, proto-anarchist, and anti-modern philosophy without any grounding in philological analysis. In the prologue to his German edition, Ular criticizes earlier sinological translations for “completely forgetting the historical context in which the old master lived”, instead interpreting Laozi’s writings “as if they were written yesterday” (1903, 64–65). He elaborates:

The hieroglyph *Tao*, which Lao-Tse uses to designate the principle of his system, represents a well-trodden path. To translate it as ‘all-reason’ or even ‘God’ is to impose a horrific reinterpretation rooted in modern, Indo-European frameworks. (Ibid., 66)

Ular aimed to transcend the Jesuit-influenced sinology of his era, which relied exclusively on a new scientific method of philology designed for Indo-European languages. In his view, such approaches distorted the text’s meaning and severed its spiritual essence. Instead, Ular championed an empathetic engagement with the *Laozi*. As he explained:

My translation is for readers, not philologists—for those who seek the spirit of the work, not scholars who dissect it [...] Each person must feel Laozi’s ideas for themselves, from verse to verse. (Ibid., 70)

Despite his unconventional and idiosyncratic approach, Ular’s translation achieved commercial success in Europe and served as the basis for numerous

7 It is not surprising that Montagne regarded himself as the first Spanish translator of the *Laozi*, given that his version was preceded only by Augustin Bazan’s 1870 Mexican translation, which had limited impact. However, his belief that Ular’s version was the first in a European language is more unexpected. This reflects Montagne’s limited familiarity with the broader history of translations on this subject.

retranslations.⁸ His rendition of the Daoist classic also gained traction in modernist and avant-garde circles, particularly among Germanophone Dadaists (Marino 2024, 11). It was likely through these networks that Roberto de la Carreras encountered Ular’s translation during his European travels, and later introduced it to Montagne.

Biographical evidence (see de Guido and Guido 1989, 549–50) suggests that Montagne, similar to Ular, held an anti-positivist and anti-modern perspective, a connection to anarchist ideas, and a curiosity about mystical or spiritual texts. Embracing this approach, Montagne created a version of the *Laozi* that significantly shaped its reception in LATAM. His emphasis on spiritual elements over strict philological accuracy became a hallmark of later retranslations, even if it sometimes led to contentious interpretive decisions. For instance, echoing Ular’s perspective, Montagne interpreted the concepts of *Dao* 道 and *De* 德, recalling their pictographic origin and translating them as “Path” and “Straight Line”. In doing so, he posits the text as a pedagogical tool for spiritual self-mastery. He states:

The book’s aim is to cultivate the Perfect Being [...] The ‘Path’ represents the spiritual realm, while the ‘Straight Line’ signifies the wise conduct leading to it. The *Laozi* advises individuals to discipline their spirit over their senses and to diligently strive for perfection. (Montagne 1947, 13)

In this framework, *Dao* becomes a mystical path through which the “Perfect Being” (*sheng* 聖) transcends the “superficiality of the phenomenological world” (ibid., 14) and participates in the Universal Unity (Montagne 1916, 39), thereby aligning with the “primordial and organizing energy of Nature” (ibid., 13). The Perfect Being is thus the one who is able to give up his/her own individuality and ego-driven forces becoming one with the eternal Universal Source:

The Universal is eternal. The Universal is eternal because it does not exist as an individual. This is the condition of Eternity. In accordance with this, the Perfect One, by eclipsing himself, asserts himself; by squandering himself, he becomes eternal. (Ibid., 5)

The author seems to portray the Daoist Sage as a mystic who has relinquished any individual characteristics to become one with the Universal Source. The Sage

8 To give some examples based on Ular French or German interpretation of the *Laozi*, the Italian versions by Evans (1905) and Evola (1923); the English version by Crosby (1916); and even an Armenian version by Ch’avtaryan (1919). For a study on Ular *Laozi* dissemination, see Tadd (2022b).

transforms into an empty yet inexhaustible bellows, “retiring into himself” (ibid., 13), withdrawing from the world (ibid., 15). “He is no longer the actor of the Great, but its goal” (ibid., 17).

Montagne extends this ethos to social organization, arguing that the *Laozi* advocates a society free from ego-driven governance. In Chapter 48, he translates the passage *wuwei wu buwei qu tianxia* 無為無不為取天下 as: “Not wanting, nothing doing, is the essence of social organization” (ibid., 23).⁹ Furthermore, reinforcing the same approach, he also reads the passage in Chapter 57 *yi wushi qu tianxia* 以無事取天下 as: “By suppressing the will, one can organize society” (ibid., 27). These passages reveal a critique of individualism and centralized authority, framing Daoism as a proto-anarchist, anti-modern philosophy. This interpretation resonates with early 20th-century concerns about scientific and technological progress, enhancing the text’s popularity in the LATAM context. Over several decades, Montagne’s retranslation—reissued multiple times—cemented this spiritual-anarchist reading of Daoism, leaving a lasting impact on the region’s intellectual legacy.¹⁰

Adolfo Carpio’s Interpretation of the *Laozi*

The second case study examines the Spanish retranslation of the *Laozi* by the Argentine philosopher Adolfo Carpio. A prominent professor at the University of Buenos Aires, Carpio specialized in the history of philosophy and metaphysics. He became well-known for his significant work, *Principios de Filosofía* (*Principles of Philosophy*), which still influences Argentine academia with its many reprints. His academic perspective was deeply influenced by his early studies in Germany at the universities of Heidelberg and Freiburg, where he learned from notable thinkers like Gadamer and Fink. During this time, he also engaged with Martin Heidegger, a pivotal figure who significantly impacted his philosophical journey. Carpio played a key role in introducing Heideggerian thought to Argentina, particularly while serving as dean of the Institute of Philosophy at the National University of the Litoral in Rosario (Martínez 2006, 108). Although he is primarily recognized for his translations of Heidegger and Husserl (ibid.),

9 To convey this meaning, Montagne follows Ular’s personal interpretation of the punctuation in the *textus receptus*, moving the pause after *tianxia* 天下 rather than before the character *qu* 取.

10 Montagne’s version of the *Laozi* was reprinted at least ten times by Kier in Argentina and several more in Spain. Other works published by Latin American publishers also promote the interpretation of Daoism within an anarchist framework. Notable examples include the Spanish retranslation of *Laozi* by the anarchist Eduardo Vivanco, published in Mexico in 1963, and the writings on Daoism by Argentine philosopher Ángel Cappelletti (1964; 1983).

Carpio's first translation was an unconventional choice: the *Daodejing of Laozi*, published in 1957.

Given Carpio's lack of formal training in sinology and limited engagement with Chinese or Eastern philosophy, the motivations behind his decision to translate the Daoist classic remain ambiguous. However, three contextual factors help illuminate his undertaking.

First, Carpio's translation was published as part of Editorial Sudamericana's *East and West* collection, curated by Argentine philosopher Juan Adolfo Vázquez, a comparative religions and indigenous literatures scholar. This series aimed to disseminate foundational philosophical and religious texts from global traditions. Editorial Sudamericana was closely linked to the modernist journal *Sur*, founded in 1931 by Victoria Ocampo, which served as a conduit for introducing Eastern philosophies to Argentina (see Gasquet 2008). Vázquez, along with several of Carpio's mentors, contributed to *Sur*'s editorial board, and Carpio himself collaborated with the journal through essays and translations, situating his work within this intellectual network. The *East and West* collection published several Oriental classics, such as *Hymns of the Atharva-Veda* (Tola 1958) and the *Dhammapada* (Dragonetti 1967), among many others. Therefore, the decision to publish a new translation of the *Laozi* is not unexpected.

Secondly, the University of Buenos Aires's Department of Philosophy, where Carpio both studied and later taught, hosted several professors whose involvement with Eastern philosophy greatly impacted future scholars. Noteworthy figures included Vicente Fatone, who was a pioneer in the study of Buddhism in Argentina; Carpio's mentor Francisco Romero, a philosopher of culture who began comparative analyses between Western and Eastern thought; and Juan Adolfo Vázquez, who translated key Western academic works on Asian philosophies. This focus on cross-cultural research fostered an intellectual environment that shaped Carpio's generation, including contemporaries like Ángel Cappelletti and Víctor Massuh. By placing the *Laozi* within this context, Carpio aligned his translation to a rising academic interest in Eastern traditions as counterpoints to Western thought paradigms.

Third, Carpio's formative residency in Germany (1956–1958)—a period coinciding with his work on the *Laozi* translation—profoundly informed his hermeneutic approach through three intersecting intellectual currents: his exposure to Heidegger—a philosopher renowned for his admiration of the *Laozi*—and to contemporary German philosophical discourse; his deepening engagement with metaphysics, which he conceptualized not merely as an abstract discipline but as an “existential mode and praxis of being” (Carpio 1998, 397); and his exposure to

German Orientalist scholarship and sinological methodologies, which dominated European engagements with classical Chinese texts during the mid-20th century.

Regarding the source texts, by 1957 the available Spanish versions of the *Laozi* included Edmundo Montagne's widely circulated retranslation of Alexandre Ullar's French version, Lin Yutang's popular—albeit interpretive—rendition (1945), and two largely forgotten editions: Augustín Carvantes' 1870 translation and Ernesto Rodríguez's 1940 version. Carpio dismissed all of these as unsatisfactory, criticizing their “lack of rigour” and propensity to “fantasize” (Carpio 1957, 30). Seeking a philologically grounded alternative, he turned to Alberto Castellani's well-known bilingual Italian translation, *La Regola Celeste*, published by Sansoni in 1927.

Castellani's version is the first direct Italian translation of the text, recognized for its philological accuracy and philosophical interpretation. Following the approach of sinologists such as Julien, De Harletz, and his mentor Puini, Castellani rejects the Jesuits' religious readings of the *Laozi* in favour of a philosophical understanding of the text centred on the concept of *Dao*. For Castellani, the *Laozi* encompasses all the essential elements of a complete philosophical system, covering metaphysics, ethics, and political philosophy, structured around metaphysical inquiries that ultimately reveal the nature of the Principle (1927, 58). In addition to Castellani, Carpio frequently draws upon and cites other significant sinological works and translations. Notably, Richard Wilhelm's 1911 interpretation of the *Laozi* and Albert Forke's 1927 studies on Daoist cosmology and metaphysics appear to have had a profound influence on the text.

Following the above examples and reflecting his philosophical orientation, Carpio's translation strategy emphasizes metaphysical analysis. For instance, like Castellani (1927, 60–64), he retains the untranslated term *Dao* but consistently frames it as “Principle” (Carpio 1957, 23) in both commentaries and in chapter titles—such as “Return to the Principle” (Chapter 16) and “Thinking about the Principle” (Chapter 63). For Carpio, *Dao* functions on two interconnected levels: first, as the Supreme Reality, the transcendent origin of all existence (Carpio 1957, 22–23); and second, as the ontological foundation that imbues the world with meaning (ibid.).

At the first level, Carpio frames *Dao* as “the way through which all things come into existence” (ibid., 22), situating it within a dynamic ontological framework defined by the interplay of *Being* (alternately termed *non-being*)—an indefinable “Supreme Reality” (ibid.)—and its phenomenological manifestations (*beings*). This dialectic is exemplified in his rendering of *Laozi* 25's opening line *youwu huncheng xian tiandi sheng* 有物混成先天地生, as “the invisible and perfect

Being that existed before Heaven and Earth” (ibid., 78), a formulation that privileges metaphysical transcendence over cosmogonic literalism. Carpio further theorizes Being’s relationship to the phenomenal world as “radically heterogeneous in relation to beings” (ibid., 27), thereby recasting *Laozi*’s immanent cosmology through an ontological perspective. This duality is reiterated in his commentary on Chapter 1, where he frames *Dao*’s dual aspects—its simultaneous unnameability (*wuming* 無名) and nameability (*youming* 有名)—as a dialectical tension between the ineffable ground of Being and its provisional articulation in language. As he elaborates:

The distinction between the unnameable and nameable can be linked, as Tucci does, to the distinction between essence and appearance, although it might align more closely with the opposition between existence and essence, since the former is indefinable, while the latter relates to the consistent or necessary elements understood by thought in each thing. (Ibid., 38)

This shift from a conventional Western framing of *Dao* (as an essence-appearance dichotomy) to a dynamic ontology—where *Dao* constitutes both the ground of existence for all beings and the essence manifest in their worldly forms—underscores Carpio’s synthesis of German sinology and Heideggerian philosophy. Notably, Richard Wilhelm’s seminal translation interprets *Dao* as “the origin of all existence” (Wilhelm 1911, xii) and renders *De* as “life” (*leben*) or “essence” (*wesen*), describing it as “what beings receive to emerge” (ibid., xvi). This formulation is strikingly congruent with Carpio’s metaphysical framework.¹¹

This hermeneutic synergy deepens in Carpio’s secondary articulation of *Dao*. Echoing Wilhelm’s translation of *Dao* as *Sinn* (“sense” or “meaning”) (see Wilhelm 1911), Carpio posits the concept as the ontological force that imbues worldly phenomena with structure and significance. For him, *Dao* functions not merely as a transcendent principle, but as the “direction” and intrinsic logic governing phenomena’s functional integration into the cosmos (Carpio 1957, 23). This interpretation mirrors Heidegger’s assertion in *The Nature of Language* that *Dao* is “the way that gives all ways, the very source of our power to think what reason, mind, meaning, logos properly mean to say” (Heidegger 1971, 92)—the “great hidden stream which moves all things along and makes way for everything” (ibid.).¹²

11 For a study on the translation of the *Laozi* by Richard Wilhelm, see Li and Yuan (2023).

12 The connection between Heidegger and Daoism has been explored many times in recent years. For a comprehensive work on the topic, see Nelson (2024).

Carpio utilizes this framework by reinterpreting Daoist metaphysics as a praxis-oriented discipline. By rejecting abstract speculation, he redefines Daoism as a “mode of existence and life practice” (Carpio 1957, 28–30), contending that its essence lies in embodied realization rather than theoretical abstraction. For him, this ethos permeates its ethical theory:

While the religious man acts to obtain the reward of the afterlife or because the Divine Will desires it, and the Kantian does so out of pure respect for the moral law, out of pure duty, the Taoist man seeks to fulfil his metaphysical essence. (Ibid., 28)

This approach prioritizes intuitive synthesis over analytical reasoning, as fulfilling one’s metaphysical essence means achieving a complete fusion with *Dao*. Thus, true knowledge emerges not from empirical science but rather through a “cognitive coup”: the dissolution of the subject-object divide that enables union with *Dao* (ibid., 23).

Carpio’s interpretation diverges sharply from LATAM’s mystical views of Daoism by emphasizing the intellectual aspect of self-dissolution into totality. While he acknowledges parallels with mysticism (such as non-empirical intuition and union with the Absolute), he underscores Daoism’s absence of affective or emotional mediation, presenting the sage’s realization as a pre-moral transcendence that stands in contrast to Western individualism. This aligns with his mentor Francisco Romero’s cultural typologies, which contrast the West’s “individuality, action, and progress” with the East’s “abolition of individuality through incorporation into totality” (ibid., 8). For Carpio, Daoism epitomizes Eastern supra-personal knowledge, rooted in tradition and intuitive transcendence.

Finally, Carpio’s reading of *wuwei* 無為 (*non-action*) crystallizes this paradigm. Rejecting Montagne’s anarchist interpretation of the concept as political disengagement, he redefines it as ontological attunement—a suppression of egoic desire to harmonize with the immanent “Principle” (e.g., Chapters 35, 46, 53, 55). His translation of Chapter 37 illustrates this approach:

The Tao constantly does not act, yet there is nothing it does not do. If princes and rulers could adhere to it, everything would transform by itself. If, in this transformation, desires were to arise in them, I would suppress them with the simplicity that has no name. In the simplicity that has no name, there are no more desires. If there are no desires, everything is at peace, and the world corrects itself on its own. (Ibid., 99)

Wuwei signifies neither passivity nor inertia but a “deep assimilation into the meaning of the universe” (ibid., 29), achieved through the ego’s withdrawal from action. This movement of return to the Source creates a hermeneutic space wherein *Dao*’s truth reveals itself. The Daoist ideal, then, lies in embodying *Dao* through attuned existence, where self-effacement enables participation in the primordial order.

The Traditionalist Reading of Ferrero’s *Tao Te Ching de Lao Tzu*

The third case study focuses on the 1972 retranslation of the *Laozi* by Onorio Ferrero, an Italian philosopher and Orientalist residing in Peru.¹³ Ferrero’s translation greatly influenced the local circulation of the text, being one of the few editions published in the country, and also reached a wider Spanish-speaking audience through numerous reprints. He was an eclectic thinker with expertise in pre-Socratic philosophy, metaphysics, and the history of religions, particularly within Asian traditions. He spent most of his career at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (PUCP), where he was dean of the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences and founded the Centre of Oriental Studies. There, he pioneered courses on the history of cultures and religions, particularly South and East Asian traditions, introducing students to thinkers like Mircea Eliade and René Guénon. Furthermore, Ferrero was one of the first to promote an academic form of Traditionalism in Peru—an intellectual movement inspired by Guénon that influenced academic philosophy and anthropology departments throughout the country (see Sedgwick 2021, 173).

Though Ferrero published infrequently, prioritizing teaching over scholarly output, his translation of the *Laozi* emerged as his most consequential work. Published in 1972 as part of Ignacio Prado Pastor’s *Oriental Sacred Texts* series—a project dedicated to producing direct, bilingual translations of Asian classics—Ferrero’s edition aligned with the editor’s universalist vision:

These texts contain truths that, due to their richness and depth, have survived to this day. Truths that do not belong to one culture or civilization alone but are the heritage of all humanity. (Ferrero 1972, 4)

Embracing this universalist hermeneutic, Ferrero produced a version of *Laozi* that occupies a middle ground between a direct translation and compilative work.

13 Since the 1972 edition I consulted does not contain Ferrero’s complete prologue, I referred instead to a 2002 edition of the *Laozi* that includes Ferrero’s original introduction.

While he claims to translate directly from the Chinese source text relying on Chinese commentaries and related works (e.g., Wang Bi 王弼, the *Wenzi* 文子, and the *Huainanzi* 淮南子) to justify his interpretations, he completely omits previous Western translations. However, his translation choices at times subtly align with—if not directly echo—earlier works, such as Alberto Castellani's (1927) and Lin Yutang's (1945) interpretations. Ultimately, what sets Ferrero's approach apart is his affinity for Guénonian Traditionalism, which reframes Daoism as an esoteric initiatory branch of *sophia perennis* (perennial wisdom).

René Guénon, a key figure in Traditionalism, interpreted Daoism as an initiatory tradition rooted in the *Yijing*'s metaphysical framework, emphasizing concepts such as the Heaven-Earth-Humanity triad and *yin-yang* polarity. Rejecting Western mystical or theosophical readings of the *Laozi*, he instead framed Daoism as a purely intellectual system centred on ontological transformation—particularly the doctrine of immortality, which he defined not as posthumous survival but as a metaphysical awakening within the living body.¹⁴

Ferrero's translation echoes these themes. He posits Daoism as a manifestation of a "Primordial Tradition"—a universal wisdom tradition shared by agrarian societies attuned to celestial cycles. This perspective permeates both his commentary and translational choices. For example, in Chapter 70 he renders *yan you zong* 言有宗 (my words have an ancestor) as "my words derive from a Primordial Tradition", interpreting *zong* (ancestor) through a Guénonian lens (Ferrero 1972, 57). In Chapter 14, *gu shi* 古始 (ancient beginning) becomes "Primordial Wisdom", with Ferrero asserting that such wisdom originates in the *Yijing*, the "foundational scripture" of Chinese metaphysics (*ibid.*, 21).

Ferrero's Traditionalist hermeneutic further reconfigures the *Laozi*'s metaphysical architecture. Despite the received text (*textus receptus*) mentioning *yin* and *yang* only once (Chapter 42), Ferrero positions this duality as the text's implicit framework. In his analysis of Chapter 1, he correlates the unmanifest *Dao* with *yin* and the manifest *Dao* with *yang*. Likewise, he interprets *wu* 無 (non-being) and *you* 有 (being) as *yin* and *yang*, respectively (*ibid.*, 40). Chapter 6's valley symbolism is similarly reinterpreted:

14 Guénon discusses Daoism in several of his works. For example, in *Le Symbolisme de la Croix* (*The Symbolism of the Cross*), he examines Daoist metaphysical concepts such as *yin-yang* and the doctrine of immortality (Guénon 1931). In *Aperçus sur l'ésotérisme islamique et le Taoïsme* (*Insights into Islamic Esoterism and Taoism*), he explores the sage's path toward union with the *Dao* (Guénon 1973). In *La Grande Triade* (*The Great Triad*), he analyses the Chinese triad of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity (Guénon 1957). For a reliable study on the Guénonian reading of Daoism, see Sacco (2008).

The valley is a receptive, feminine symbol and is therefore linked to the maternal image. It is clearly *yin*. The ‘secret mother gate’ suggests that one must enter *yin* (darkness) to reach *yang* (light), thus transcending complementary duality – a unity that does not constitute a dualism. (Ibid., 16)

Beyond *yin-yang*, Ferrero emphasizes the triadic worldview as central to Daoism, drawing parallels to the Hindu “three worlds” and Incan “three pachas” to underscore a shared agrarian cosmovision (Ferrero 2002, 26).¹⁵ In his analysis, Ferrero underscores humanity’s role as the central axis and mediator between Heaven and Earth, identifying this theme in the *Laozi* in three key ways: first, as a spatial position—in rituals, humans occupy the centre, symbolizing the sacred cosmic axis (see Chapters 5 and 47); second, as a metaphysical function—human beings facilitate *yin-yang* transformations through non-action (*wuwei*); and third, as an inner effort—achieving equilibrium through self-cultivation (ibid.).

For Ferrero, attaining this balance—becoming the centre of the world—requires mastery of esoteric techniques. Like Guénon, he perceives Daoism as an initiatory tradition accessible only to a select few, reinforcing this interpretation through key translational choices. In Chapter 14, for instance, he translates *daoji* 道紀 (continuity of the *Dao*) as “initiation to the *Dao*”, situating the text within an esoteric framework. Commenting on the passage, he states:

It is the knowledge of the subtle, the non-sensible, which is the first initiation into the *Dao*. Primordial wisdom is the unity of primordial chaos and remains the sole source of life for the ten thousand beings. This is a markedly esoteric text. (Ibid., 20)

In the introduction to his translation, Ferrero further clarifies his perspective, commenting that Daoism is essentially an initiatory doctrine, which implies realizations in the metaphysical order and is not “mystical”, as some interpreters have wrongly translated it as (ibid., 5). A key concept to understand Daoist path of realization is the doctrine of *wuwei*. Going against Western common interpretation of *wuwei* as a quietist and passive attitude, Ferrero understands it as a doctrine of action grounded in a law, which is that of “concordant actions and reactions” (2002, 24). As he explains:

15 Unfortunately, there are no other references in Ferrero’s works to a comparison with Inca worldviews, nor does he cite any sources on this subject. This attempt is likely the result of his universalist approach, which seeks to identify a common origin for all religions.

This law is indicated in our text, and especially in one of its chapters,¹⁶ but with the final instruction that prohibits teaching it to the uninitiated. From what we know from oral Taoist sources, this would be one of the pillars of the Taoist tradition and has a special application concerning the law of movement. (Ibid.)

The esoteric dimension of Daoism remains a consistent focus in Ferrero's translation. For example, he interprets the character *xuan* 玄 (mystery) in Chapter 1 as "the mystery through which secret knowledge is attained" (ibid., 13). Similarly, he presents the cryptic passage at the beginning of Chapter 10—"Make the body and the vital soul unite in an inseparable embrace"—as a reference to yogic practices aimed at accessing the "Secret Truth"—his original translation of *xuande* 玄德 (hidden virtue) (ibid., 18). Finally, commenting on the phrase from Chapter 36, "May the fish never come out of the depths of the water, the weapons of the kingdom are not shown to foreigners", he states:

This is clearly an esoteric text. Consider the connection between this passage and the doctrine of concordant actions and reactions. The final verses indicate that this is a secret doctrine not meant to be revealed to the uninitiated. (Ibid., 34)

Ferrero's focus on the esoteric aspect of Daoism culminates in his interpretation of immortality. While traditional sinology often dismisses Daoist teachings on immortality as superstition or a later degeneration, Ferrero aligns with Traditionalist thinkers such as Guénon and Julius Evola, who see immortality as the operative and esoteric essence of Daoism.¹⁷ Rather than viewing it as mere physical longevity, Ferrero perceives immortality as a metaphysical integration with the Supreme Principle—an achievement made possible through esoteric practice. For instance, in Chapter 33, he comments on the phrase "To die and not perish is true longevity", stating:

16 Here Ferrero refers to Chapter 36.

17 The effort to restore the esoteric dimension of Daoism and the doctrine of immortality, in response to critiques from certain European sinologists influenced by Jesuit thought, was a perspective shared by Guénon but not exclusive to him. The controversial Italian thinker Julius Evola also pursued this endeavour, translating the *Laozi* twice, in 1923 and 1959, and often shared a similar view of Daoism with Guénon. Evola regarded the Daoist doctrine of immortality as one of its core teachings because of its operative dimension. Its ultimate aim, according to him, was to cultivate a new kind of human being—a "superman" or "superior being"—detached from mundane, ego-driven desires (see Stucco 1992, 15).

To die and not perish is true longevity, in other words, immortality. This represents a conscious transition from a state we call life to another state we call posthumous, which implies a certain kind of ‘conscious’ continuity [...] True longevity does not consist in avoiding death, but in dying without losing a lucid consciousness, following the same path the sun and moon take in the sky. (Ibid., 33)

Similarly, commenting on Chapter 50’s line, “Because there is no mortal place in it”, he writes:

The *Dao*, which is the path of the wise (*shengren*), does not depend on perspectives of life-death or up-down, because it is a celestial path. Immortality transcends what humans conceive as life or death. (Ibid., 44)

Daoist immortality is thus achieved within the body and implies a form of “conscious” continuity. Borrowing an idea from the *Wenzi*, Ferrero remarks that to be immortal is like “reaching one’s proper place in the universe” (ibid., 33). When someone is in his rightful place, he comes to rest and remains in stillness. True longevity does not lie in avoiding death but in dying without losing lucid awareness, thereby overcoming in life the crisis of existential change. The immortal is one who appears to die but has fully merged with the Transcendent Principle called *Dao* (ibid.).

Conclusions

The journey of the *Laozi* into Latin America is not merely a tale of linguistic transposition but a vivid illustration of how ideas travel across continents, transformed by intellectual legacies and cultural negotiations. This study reveals how Latin America’s engagement with Daoism was mediated by European networks that acted as gatekeepers and interpreters of Eastern thought. The reception of the *Laozi* unfolds as a layered dialogue, filtered through Eurocentric frameworks that reinterpreted Daoist concepts for local audiences.

The case studies above reveal a central paradox of decolonial critique: while Latin American translators creatively adapted Daoist philosophy to address regional intellectual concerns, their interpretations remained structurally constrained by Eurocentric epistemic frameworks. Edmundo Montagne’s anarchist-spiritual reading drew on Alexandre Ular’s anti-modern mysticism; Adolfo Carpio’s metaphysical interpretation filtered Daoist thought through

Heideggerian ontology via Alberto Castellani's Italian sinology; and Onorio Ferrero's Traditionalist reframing recast Daoism as *sophia perennis* through René Guénon's universalist lens.

A comparative examination of *Laozi's* key concepts—*Dao* and the role of the ideal human being—can illuminate these contrasts. Montagne interprets *Dao* as the Universal Source, “the Supreme Being, the Unnameable [...] similar to those of Hindus and Jews” (Costantini 2022, 650), accessible only to mystics who transcend their individuality. The path toward this Supreme Source is situated within the spiritual domain, where “the supremacy of the spiritual over the senses [...] leads to identification with the Source” (Montagne 1947, 13). For Montaigne, the perfected individual loses consciousness of personal identity, merging into the Universal, or the One.

This form of mysticism is either rejected or significantly reinterpreted in the other two translations. Carpio, influenced by Heidegger and Wilhelm's understanding of *Dao* as the sense and meaning of life—“the way that gives all ways”—approaches Daoist doctrine as a praxis-oriented discipline aimed at realizing the metaphysical essence of humanity. Here, the Daoist sage is one who, through lived experience, assimilates into the meaning of the universe.

Similarly, Ferrero views Daoism through the lens of the universal common origin of the archaic thought (see Ferrero 2002, 26), interpreting it as an “esoteric initiatory tradition” and emphasizing its operative dimension. Setting aside metaphysical speculations, Ferrero focuses on the natural dyadic manifestation of *Dao* (*yin-yang*) and on how the ideal human being can attain a central position within this dynamic. The Daoist Sage, in this context, is not the mystic who abandons his or her individuality, but instead the Sage is one who attains a central position (*ibid.*, 27), acting as the sole mediator between Heaven and Earth.¹⁸

Generally speaking, all three versions relied on European hermeneutic lineages, exemplifying what Aníbal Quijano (2000) termed the “coloniality of power”—a structural paradigm wherein non-European epistemologies are systematically categorized as “raw material” awaiting refinement through Eurocentric hermeneutics. The translators' reliance on European interpretive lineages did not merely reflect pragmatic constraints but reproduced what scholars have identified as a

18 Ferrero does not forget the Daoist effort in overcoming the ego-driven disposition of the sage; however, he emphasizes the individual effort to achieve immortality. Commenting on Chapter 59, he affirms (Ferrero 1972, 51): “The Tao has no limits (Wang Pi), but in the human world, moderation is necessary. Esoterically, the text is applicable to the individual who seeks to achieve an eternal path of life.”

global hierarchy of knowledge production embedded within academic dependency networks. In this hierarchy, Chinese thought could only enter Latin American discourse after being validated and processed by European authorities, effectively positioning Latin America as a secondary consumer in the intellectual supply chain.

Montagne’s critique of Western modernity, for instance, replicated Ular’s romanticized “mystical and proto-anarchist” Daoism, while Carpio’s metaphysical rigour depended on Wilhelm’s German sinology. Ferrero, though claiming direct engagement with Chinese sources, subordinated the *Laozi* to Guénon’s universalist esotericism. Critically, this epistemic domination persists not through coercion but through “dependency networks” that determine knowledge circulation patterns (see Beigel 2025). The near-exclusive use of European source texts illustrates how coloniality shapes knowledge access through what Walter Mignolo (2002) calls “the geopolitics of knowledge”—a system that legitimizes Western interpretations as “universal” while marginalizing Chinese exegetical traditions as “local” or “particular”.¹⁹ For instance, reading the *Laozi* through (or against) the lens of mysticism and spiritualist paradigms shown above exemplifies the universalizing approach often adopted by Western interpreters, as well as the influence of their own channels of reception on the interpretive history of the text.²⁰

To transcend these limitations, Enrique Dussel’s (2015) concept of “transmodernity” offers a compelling alternative: fostering pluriversal dialogues that centre marginalized epistemologies to challenge Western modernity’s illusion of neutral, universal knowledge (see Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2002; Castro-Gómez 2005). However, the path forward requires more than theoretical acknowledgment. As Tadd’s *Global Laozegetics* (2022a) demonstrates, all interpretations – including Chinese commentaries – are contextually situated, challenging the notion of any single authoritative reading.

The solution perhaps could lie in what Mignolo (2010) terms “epistemic disobedience”: deliberately centring marginalized hermeneutic lineages to enable truly pluriversal dialogues. This approach would involve, for instance, engaging with Andean cosmovisions, which emphasize relationality, correspondence, and complementarity as foundational principles, or Indigenous American non-dualisms

19 One example of this attitude can be found in Ular (1903, 68), who claims that his interpretation of the *Laozi* is far superior to those of the Chinese scholars, as he believes they did not understand the essential passages of the text.

20 For some studies on this idea, see Clarke (2000), Costantini (2023), and Pokorny (2024), among others.

that conceive of reality through interconnectedness rather than Western subject-object divisions.²¹ Such methodologies would treat the *Laozi* not as a static “original” to be mined, but as a catalyst for transmodern co-creation—where Latin American thinkers engage with Daoism from their specific locus of enunciation. Only through authentic decolonial praxis can global intellectual traditions transcend their Eurocentric confines and become catalysts for epistemic liberation, rooted in the irreducible diversity of local knowledge systems.

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21 The works of Chilean philosopher Gastón Soublette on the *Laozi* (1990) and the Daoist sage (2016) represent an innovative attempt to bridge Daoist philosophy with Mapuche cosmovision, offering a promising foundation for cross-cultural dialogue. However, his approach faces two critical limitations. First, Soublette’s interpretation of Daoism remains heavily indebted to European sinological traditions, particularly the frameworks of Richard Wilhelm and James Legge, whose Eurocentric lenses risk distorting Daoism’s original context (Costantini 2022). Second, while his comparative analysis between Mapuche culture and Daoist thought is conceptually ambitious, it often remains superficial, lacking sustained engagement with the nuanced spiritual, ethical, and cosmological parallels between these traditions.

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