Hermetic Philosophy, Daoism, TCM, and the Taijitu

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1. Introduction

This document has two aims:
1. To offer a clear comparative map between the so-called Seven Hermetic Laws, Daoist philosophy, core concepts in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), and the Taijitu (yin–yang symbol).
2. To provide a concise historical and cultural background on Hermetism and on the modern text known as The Kybalion, including when, where, and in what context they developed, and the key contributors involved.

The comparative section is designed as a practical, conceptual bridge. It does not claim that Daoism or TCM are historically derived from Hermeticism, or vice versa; instead, it highlights resonances between independent traditions. The historical section then situates Hermetism and The Kybalion in their actual cultural contexts, which are quite distinct from classical Chinese thought.

2. The Seven Hermetic Laws and Their Parallels in Daoism, TCM, and the Taijitu

2.1 Mentalism – Dao, Shen, and "Mind Leads Qi"

Hermetic formulation:
The Principle of Mentalism is usually paraphrased as "The All is Mind; the Universe is Mental." It suggests that reality, as experienced, is fundamentally shaped—and perhaps constituted—by mind or consciousness.

Daoist resonance:
Daoist texts do not say that mind literally creates the universe, but they do speak of the Dao as an ineffable source from which "the ten thousand things" arise. The heart–mind (xin, 心) is central: an agitated, grasping mind distorts perception; a tranquil mind can align with Dao. Internal alchemy and meditation cultivate awareness and intention so that one's experience and energy are transformed.

TCM resonance:
In TCM, "The Heart houses the Shen." The shen (spirit/mind) is the sovereign that governs the body's kingdom. Intention (yi) guides qi: where attention is placed, qi tends to follow, a principle used implicitly in acupuncture, qigong, and many internal practices. Emotional and mental patterns are recognised as primary causes or aggravators of disease.

Taijitu resonance:
The outer circle of the Taijitu can be viewed as the undivided field of Dao or Mind, while the swirling black and white forms are the patterns arising within that field. The still, imagined centre of the diagram corresponds to the centred, witnessing mind that can hold both yin and yang without being pulled off balance.

Practical implication:
Cultivating shen—through meditation, breathing practices, ethical reflection, and emotional honesty—acts as a "first prescription." A clearer, calmer mind changes how qi flows, how symptoms are experienced, and how one relates to others in clinical and everyday life.

2.2 Correspondence – Heaven–Earth–Human and Zang–Fu

Hermetic formulation:
The Principle of Correspondence is usually expressed as "As above, so below; as below, so above." Patterns repeat across scales: macrocosm and microcosm mirror one another.

Daoist resonance:
Daoist cosmology emphasises the triad of Heaven, Earth, and Human (tian–di–ren, 天–地–人). Human beings are a bridge: we receive influences from Heaven (time, cycles, fate) and Earth (climate, terrain, food) and respond through behaviour, cultivation, and ritual. Harmony arises when these levels are aligned.

TCM resonance:
The human organism is treated as a microcosm of the cosmos. The Five Phases (wood, fire, earth, metal, water) correspond to seasons, directions, climates, emotions, and organ systems (for example, Liver–wood–spring–wind–anger;
Lung–metal–autumn–dryness–grief). Tongue, pulse, complexion, and bodily signs are read as "local weather reports" that echo larger patterns in a person's life and environment.

Taijitu resonance:
The dots of opposite colour within each half of the Taijitu show that each pole contains a microcosm of the other. Yin contains a seed of yang, and yang contains a seed of yin. Local patterns always reflect larger dynamics.

Practical implication:
A practitioner can read the body as a map of life-context. Adjusting seemingly small domains—sleep, diet, posture, relationships—can shift patterns in wider domains, such as mood, immunity, or overall vitality. Treating both root and branch honours the "as above, so below" principle.

2.3 Vibration – Qi and Dynamic Change

Hermetic formulation:
The Principle of Vibration holds that nothing is truly at rest; everything moves, pulsates, or oscillates. Differences between phenomena are differences in rate or mode of vibration.

Daoist resonance:
Dao gives rise to qi, which can be subtle or condensed, moving or congealed. Reality is seen as process rather than static substance. A classic adage, "one yin, one yang – this is called Dao," stresses alternating movement rather than fixed states.

TCM resonance:
Qi is described through dynamic qualities: deficient, stagnant, constrained, rebellious, sinking, collapsing, or exuberant. Health implies smooth, appropriately directed movement of qi, blood, fluids, and shen. Illness appears when movement is blocked, chaotic, or collapsed.

Taijitu resonance:
The Taijitu is inherently dynamic: the curved S-line suggests continuous turning. One can imagine it spinning, with yin becoming yang and yang becoming yin. The symbol encodes constant transformation—a visual analogue of "vibration."

Practical implication:
In both Daoist and TCM practice, anything that restores appropriate movement—breathwork, stretching, walking, acupuncture, tuina, emotional expression—helps "change the vibration" of a pattern. Rather than attacking a frozen state, the aim is to thaw it.

2.4 Polarity – Yin–Yang and Spectra Rather Than Binaries

Hermetic formulation:
The Principle of Polarity states that everything has two poles which are aspects of a single continuum: hot/cold, light/dark, love/fear. Opposites differ in degree, not in kind.

Daoist resonance:
This maps closely onto Yin–Yang theory. Yin and yang are opposites, yet they:
- Mutually oppose and control each other.
- Mutually depend on each other.
- Mutually consume each other.
- Mutually transform into each other.

TCM resonance:
TCM diagnoses are rich in polar pairs: interior/exterior, cold/heat, deficiency/excess, yin/yang, empty/full. Treatment often involves tonifying one pole, draining the other, or

harmonising their interaction rather than trying to eliminate one side entirely.

Taijitu resonance:
The black and white halves clearly show polarity, yet they form a single circle. The dots of opposite colour emphasise that each pole contains the seed of the other and can transform into it.

Practical implication:
Instead of treating realities as rigid binaries ("healthy/sick", "good/bad"), both Hermetic and Daoist–TCM perspectives encourage us to ask: Where on the spectrum is this pattern right now, and how can we adjust its degree? Often the task is not to destroy a pole but to restore proportion.

2.5 Rhythm – Seasons, Organ Clocks, and Life Cycles

Hermetic formulation:
The Principle of Rhythm claims that everything has tides and cycles: rise and fall, expansion and contraction, advance and retreat. Extremes tend to swing back toward the opposite.

Daoist resonance:
Daoism pays close attention to natural cycles: day and night, waxing and waning moons, seasonal shifts, and the phases of human life. The practice of wu wei is essentially acting in accord with the present phase of a cycle, rather than forcing a summer harvest in the middle of winter.

TCM resonance:
Seasonal adjustments in diet, behaviour, and treatment are foundational. The Chinese "body clock" assigns each organ system a two-hour peak period (for example, Lung 3–5 a.m., Liver 1–3 a.m.). Longer cycles, such as the seven-year and eight-year jing cycles, describe physical and reproductive changes across the lifespan.

Taijitu resonance:
Moving around the Taijitu's circle, one passes through phases of maximal yang, emerging yin, maximal yin, and emerging yang. The symbol thus encodes cyclic rhythm in a single image.

Practical implication:
Both traditions emphasise aligning behaviour with time. Sleep, work, nourishment, and practice are adjusted according to daily, seasonal, and life-stage rhythms. Expecting perpetual noon and high summer from a body in "autumn evening" is seen as a recipe for burnout.

2.6 Cause and Effect – Root and Branch (Ben–Biao)

Hermetic formulation:
The Principle of Cause and Effect holds that events do not occur in pure randomness. Every effect has one or more causes, and every cause leads to effects. One can learn to work with higher causes rather than being a passive effect.

Daoist resonance:
Daoist ethics and cultivation stress that patterns of thought and behaviour have consequences, often framed through the concept of de (potency or virtue). Attempts to force outcomes against the natural flow tend to backfire, whereas acting in harmony with Dao allows results to arise with less friction.

TCM resonance:
TCM distinguishes root (ben) and branch (biao). Root refers to underlying causes and constitutional patterns; branch refers to overt symptoms and secondary manifestations. The same symptom—migraine, for example—can be the branch of very different roots, such as Liver qi stagnation, Liver yang rising, or Blood deficiency. Clinical work is largely about identifying and treating the true root while relieving the branch.

Taijitu resonance:
The small dots of opposite colour may be read as "seed causes" embedded within the current phase. Today's tiny imbalance, if left unaddressed, becomes tomorrow's obvious pattern. Conversely, small, skilful interventions can have disproportionate long-term effects.

Practical implication:
Both Hermetic and TCM thinking invite us to look beyond surface symptoms. Whether in health, relationships, or work, shifting key root causes often allows many branches to resolve with less effort.

2.7 Gender – Yin/Yang, Qi/Blood, Doing/Being

Hermetic formulation:
The Principle of Gender states that everything expresses both "masculine" and "feminine" principles—active and receptive, projective and generative. This concerns metaphysical qualities rather than biological sex or social stereotypes.

Daoist resonance:
Again, this strongly echoes Yin–Yang theory. Yin is receptive, nourishing, containing, inward; yang is active, expansive, outward, expressive. Creation and transformation require the interaction of both.

TCM resonance:
TCM highlights many interdependent pairs: qi (more yang) moves blood (more yin); form

(yin) and function (yang); and the mutual dependence of Kidney yin and Kidney yang. Reproductive physiology, fertility, sexual function, and hormonal patterns are all interpreted in terms of yin–yang balance and interaction.

Taijitu resonance:
The Taijitu is a pure image of complementary "gendered" principles, each containing the seed of the other. The dynamic edge where yin and yang meet is the fertile place where new patterns arise.

Practical implication:
Balancing doing and being, giving and receiving, pushing and resting can be understood as harmonising "gendered" principles within oneself. Many modern complaints—anxiety, burnout, depletion—can be reframed as imbalances in these complementary forces.

2.8 Synthesis

Taken together, the Seven Hermetic Laws function as a set of philosophical lenses for understanding reality as mental, patterned, vibratory, dual yet unified, cyclical, causal, and creatively polar. Daoism transforms similar insights into a way of life attuned to Dao, while TCM translates them into a clinical technology of diagnosis and treatment. The Taijitu serves as a compact visual symbol summarising many of these shared patterns: unity, duality, movement, mutual inclusion, and cyclic change.

3. Historical and Cultural Background: Hermetism and The Kybalion

3.1 Hermetism in Late Antiquity

Origins and setting:
Hermetism (in the strict historical sense) refers to a body of religious–philosophical and technical writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, a syncretic figure combining traits of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thoth. These texts emerged in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt, particularly in the cultural milieu of Alexandria, between roughly the second century BCE and the third century CE.

This was a period of intense cultural and religious mixing, in which Greek philosophical traditions (especially Platonism and Stoicism), Egyptian temple religion, and Near Eastern currents interacted with emerging Christian, Gnostic, and Jewish mystical currents. Hermetic texts are one strand in this wider esoteric environment.

The Hermetica:
The core Hermetic writings are collectively known as the Hermetica. Scholars often distinguish:
- Philosophical or theological Hermetica: dialogues and treatises on God, the cosmos, the human soul, and spiritual rebirth. The best-known collection here is the Corpus

Hermeticum, a set of Greek dialogues such as Poimandres and Asclepius.
- Technical Hermetica: texts on astrology, alchemy, and ritual practice (theurgy), including works associated with the Emerald Tablet and other alchemical fragments.

The philosophical Hermetica present a monotheistic or henotheistic vision of a supreme, good, and transcendent God, a layered cosmos, and an anthropology in which the human mind or nous has divine roots. The path of salvation is framed as awakening, purification, and ascent of the soul through knowledge (gnosis) and virtue.

Authorship and contributors:
Hermes Trismegistus is a legendary author-figure, not a historical person. The Hermetica are anonymous compilations written by multiple, unknown authors over several centuries. Later interpreters and transmitters, rather than original authors, are historically identifiable. Important later figures include:
- Joannes Stobaeus (5th century), who preserved many Hermetic fragments in his anthology.
- Early Christian writers such as Lactantius and Augustine, who cited and sometimes praised Hermes as a wise pagan sage.

Hermetism thus arises not from a single founder but from a diffuse, syncretic environment in which philosophical, religious, and technical traditions were creatively recombined.

3.2 Renaissance Revival and Early Modern Developments

Renaissance rediscovery:
After late antique and medieval transmission (through both Greek and Arabic channels), Hermetic texts were dramatically revived in fifteenth-century Italy. In 1460, a Greek manuscript of the Corpus Hermeticum was brought to Florence, where Cosimo de' Medici commissioned Marsilio Ficino to translate it into Latin.

Ficino and, slightly later, Lodovico Lazzarelli helped catalyse what is often called Renaissance Hermeticism. Thinkers such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Giordano Bruno regarded Hermetic texts as part of an ancient, prisca theologia—primordial divine wisdom that pre-dated, and could be harmonised with, Christianity.

Hermetic influence:
Renaissance and early modern Hermeticism influenced:
- Alchemy and "chymical philosophy", which saw nature as living, ensouled, and transformable.
- Astrological and magical traditions, including ritual theurgy aimed at aligning the soul with higher intelligences.
- Later esoteric movements such as Rosicrucianism, certain forms of Freemasonry, and, in the nineteenth century, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and related occult societies.

Critical scholarship:

In 1614, the philologist Isaac Casaubon argued on linguistic grounds that the Hermetic dialogues could not be as ancient as their admirers believed, but instead dated from the first centuries of the Common Era. Later scholarship has refined this view but broadly confirms that the texts are products of late antiquity rather than primordial Egyptian revelations.

Modern scholarship thus distinguishes:
- Hermetism in late antiquity (the original context of the Hermetica).
- Renaissance and modern Hermeticism, which are philosophical and esoteric systems inspired by, but not identical to, the late antique texts.

3.3 The Kybalion: A Modern Hermetic Tract

Publication details:
The Kybalion: A Study of the Hermetic Philosophy of Ancient Egypt and Greece was first published in 1908 in Chicago by the Yogi Publication Society. The book is attributed to "Three Initiates". Modern research has shown that it is almost certainly authored primarily, if not entirely, by William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932), a prolific American writer associated with the New Thought movement, who wrote under multiple pseudonyms.

Context: New Thought and modern occultism:
The Kybalion arises not from late antiquity or Renaissance Hermetic circles, but from the early twentieth-century milieu of American metaphysical religion and occult revival. Key contextual features include:
- The New Thought movement, which emphasised the power of the mind, positive thinking, and mental causation in health and success.
- Popular interest in "Eastern wisdom", often filtered through Western esoteric lenses, including yoga, "mental science", and Theosophy.
- A broader occult revival in Europe and North America, with groups such as the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and a popular appetite for practical mysticism, mental training, and universal laws.

Teachings and the Seven Principles:
The Kybalion presents itself as a condensation of Hermetic wisdom supposedly stemming from ancient Egypt and Greece. In reality, its content is a creative synthesis of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century metaphysical ideas with selected Hermetic motifs. Its most famous contribution is the formulation of seven "Hermetic Principles":
1. The Principle of Mentalism.
2. The Principle of Correspondence.
3. The Principle of Vibration.
4. The Principle of Polarity.
5. The Principle of Rhythm.
6. The Principle of Cause and Effect.
7. The Principle of Gender.

Although these principles echo themes that can be found in the historical Hermetica—such as mind, correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm, and the role of polarity—this sevenfold schema in its familiar modern form is a twentieth-century construction. It reflects New Thought mentalism and self-help concerns as much as, and arguably more than, ancient Hermetic texts.

Key contributor(s):
William Walker Atkinson is the key identifiable contributor to The Kybalion. Writing under many names, he produced works on yoga, mental science, occultism, and self-improvement. The anonymous "Three Initiates" persona reinforced the book's aura of secret lineage and ancient authority. Later esoteric teachers, both in New Thought and in New Age circles, popularised and adapted Kybalion-style Hermeticism, but the book itself remains the foundational source for the modern seven-laws formulation.

Thus, while The Kybalion is often spoken of as a gateway to "Hermetic philosophy", it is historically best understood as a modern Hermetic tract in the New Thought and occult self-help tradition, drawing inspiration from but not faithfully transmitting late antique Hermetism.

3.4 Concluding Remarks

Hermetism, in its original late antique form, is a syncretic Egyptian–Greek tradition concerned with divine knowledge, cosmic structure, and the ascent of the soul. Renaissance and modern Hermeticisms re-imagined this material in new philosophical and esoteric contexts. The Kybalion, written in early twentieth-century America, represents one influential modern distillation that frames Hermetic ideas as universal mental laws.

When compared with Daoism and TCM, striking parallels emerge at the level of pattern: mind and spirit as primary, macro–micro correspondences, dynamic qi or vibration, yin–yang polarity, seasonal rhythms, root–branch causality, and creative "gendered" complementarity. Historically and culturally, however, these systems are independent lineages shaped by very different languages, symbol systems, and social worlds. Reading them together can be fruitful and illuminating, so long as one respects both the resonances and the differences.

References & Suggested Reading

On Hermetism and the Hermetica

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- Giovanni Maciocia, *The Foundations of Chinese Medicine* (3rd ed., Churchill Livingstone, 2015) – especially chapters on qi, yin–yang, and the Five Phases.

- Ted J. Kaptchuk, *The Web That Has No Weaver* (Rider, 2000) – an accessible overview of TCM pattern thinking.