

Global Communication of Traditional Chinese Medicine and Construction of International Discourse System

From the Perspective of Traditional Chinese Medicine's Foreign Health Assistance

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ABSTRACT

China's active foreign health assistance has made new contributions to building a human health community. In view of the irreplaceable role that traditional Chinese medicine plays in foreign health assistance, building a Chinese discourse system through traditional Chinese medicine is an important way to deepen exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations and promote Chinese culture in the world. On the basis of summarizing and analyzing the current situation and problems of the dissemination of Chinese medical culture in foreign health aid, this paper attempts to put forward suggestions for an appropriate path to construct a discourse system for the dissemination of Chinese medical culture.

Keywords: *Traditional Chinese medicine, Foreign health aid, International discourse system, Path.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional Chinese medicine(TCM) culture is an outstanding representative of China's excellent culture. Comrade Xi Jinping has pointed out many times that traditional Chinese medicine is "the precious wealth left to us by our ancestors" and "we must effectively inherit, develop and utilize traditional Chinese medicine, the precious wealth left to us by our ancestors"[1]. From the recorded medical literature, the culture of traditional Chinese medicine has been around for thousands of years [2]. Since the founding of New China, China has actively carried out foreign aid and made important contributions to the development of the human health community. This paper mainly analyzes the experience and shortcomings of TCM foreign health aid through the historical changes and current communication situation, thereby proposing to build an effective discourse system for the external communication of TCM culture to promote its international dissemination.

2. OVERVIEW OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE'S FOREIGN HEALTH ASSISTANCE

China's overall foreign aid is an important part of China's foreign strategy, and foreign health aid is the most distinctive content and one of the earliest areas involved in foreign development aid [3]. 2023 marks the 60th anniversary of China's dispatch of foreign aid medical teams. China has dispatched nearly 30,000 medical personnel to 76 countries and regions and treated nearly 300 million patients. TCM has never been absent from China's foreign medical aid work: not only was there a teacher of TCM in the first Chinese medical team in 1963, but also in the past 60 years of China's foreign health aid, with the multi-polarization of the world, economic globalization and the increase in China's comprehensive national strength, almost every Chinese medical team has traditional Chinese physician [4].

2.1 Initial Stage: 1960s — Before Reform and Opening up

In 1963, China responded to the Algerian government's request for emergency medical assistance and dispatched the first foreign medical assistance team [5], consisting of 24 medical experts. This marked the Chinese government's official start of organized, large-scale, and continuous provision of health care and development assistance. At this stage, TCM foreign aid mainly serves the country's diplomacy by sending TCM experts to treat foreign dignitaries with diseases that TCM is good at treating. For example, Wei Wengui, Tang Youzhi, and Feng Tianyou provided acupuncture to remove cataracts, and treat eye diseases and cervical spondylosis for political leaders in Albania, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Yemen respectively [6]. In 1971, with the support of the majority of developing countries and a group of developed countries, China restored its legal seat in the United Nations, and its international status was significantly improved. With this change, the number of foreign medical aid teams dispatched by China has increased rapidly, and it has continued to donate large amounts of materials and aid in the construction of hospitals free of charge to former colonial African countries that are engaged in national liberation struggles and striving for national independence. By the end of the 1970s, China had sent medical teams to 29 African countries, with a total of more than 5,000 foreign aid medical team members [7].

2.2 Adjustment Stage: the Late 1990s — After Reform and Opening up

In the early 1970s, as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution had not yet ended and the national economy was on the verge of collapse, the report of the Ministry of Foreign Economic Liaison recommended that the proportion of foreign aid expenditures in total fiscal expenditures should not exceed four percent [8], which had seriously exceeded the country's bearing capacity, and began to make certain adjustments to foreign aid. In the 1980s, TCM foreign aid focused on sending medical teams with acupuncture doctors to Algeria, Malta, Morocco, Botswana, Djibouti, the United Arab Emirates, Rwanda, and other countries. From 1988 to 1994, the "Mediterranean Regional Traditional Chinese Medicine Center" was built and put into use. As a cooperation project in the health field between the governments of China and Malta, the center marks the transformation of TCM's

foreign aid activities from one-way aid to cooperation between the two countries.

2.3 Development Stage: 2000 to Present

At present, China has dispatched medical teams to more than 70 countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Basically, each medical team has traditional Chinese medicine personnel, accounting for about 10% of the total medical personnel [9]. In addition to dispatching medical teams containing TCM personnel, TCM centers have also been built in many countries. So far, the Chinese government has supported the establishment of 10 traditional Chinese medicine centers overseas. There are also specialized TCM medical teams (sites) in Kuwait, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Malta, Namibia, and other countries. In recent years, with the advancement of medical science and technology and the continuous development of TCM, especially the successful application of artemisinin, the "miraculous drug of traditional Chinese medicine", in the treatment of malaria, China has strengthened its disease prevention and treatment efforts in developing countries, especially African countries. China not only provides aid materials to these countries but also dispatches a large number of traditional Chinese medicine technicians to the local areas to provide medical services to the local people. According to statistics, China has sent more than 400 traditional Chinese medicine technicians to more than 40 countries including Tanzania, Comoros, and Indonesia to carry out medical assistance work. These medical team members not only used traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture, massage, and other traditional Chinese medicine therapies but also combined with modern medical technology to provide a full range of treatment services for local patients, effectively treating many difficult and severe diseases and saving the lives of many critically ill patients. Work has been fully recognized by the governments and people of the recipient countries.

3. CONSTRUCTION OF INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION PATHS FOR FOREIGN HEALTH AID OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE CULTURE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES

With the accelerated pace of "going global" of traditional Chinese medicine in recent years, traditional Chinese medicine has spread to 196 countries and regions, becoming an important area of cooperation between China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS, and other regions and mechanisms [10]. According to statistics from the World Health Organization, 103 member states currently recognize the use of acupuncture, which is inseparable from the foreign aid of traditional Chinese medicine. Based on the "5W" elements of the communication process proposed by Harold Lasswell, an American scholar in communication theory [11], namely source (communicator), information (communication content), communication medium, information destination (audience), and the dissemination effect, this paper briefly analyzes the problems in the dissemination of TCM in foreign health assistance.

3.1 Single Source of Information and Lack of Diversity

For a long time, the international communication of traditional Chinese medicine has often been dominated by Chinese official institutions and mainstream media, forming a relatively single communication pattern. In domestic search engines, keyword searches such as "Chinese medicine aid abroad" yield reports from three types of sources. Firstly, there are national-level media outlets, such as authoritative newspapers in the traditional Chinese medicine industry supervised by the National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine, like China Traditional Chinese Medicine News. These include online platforms such as the Global Times, approved by the Central Network Management Department. Secondly, there are provincial-level integrated media platforms, primarily reporting on cases and commendations of physicians from provincial TCM hospitals and teachers from TCM universities engaging in medical aid abroad. Thirdly, there are mainstream media outlets, such as The Paper, mainly re-publishing relevant reports

from official media sources. In contrast, searching with the keyword "Chinese medical aid" in foreign search engines reveals a more concentrated focus on reports from national-level official media such as People's Daily, Xinhua Net, and China Daily. Comparatively, the roles played by individuals, enterprises, universities, and other entities in international communication are relatively minor, and international media coverage of this topic is limited. However, the dissemination by official media outlets is often perceived externally as part of China's political propaganda, potentially triggering resistance among local audiences and thereby affecting the international recognition of traditional Chinese medicine to some extent.

3.2 Monotonous Communication Content and Lack of Storytelling

Communication content is the center of communication activities, which are collected, organized, and processed by communicators. However, there are certain limitations in the contents of international communication of TCM foreign aid. These contents mainly involve the planning and effectiveness of foreign aid projects. While these messages help demonstrate China's goodwill and international responsibility, they often lack enough detail and storytelling to truly capture the attention of international audiences. Especially in the new media communication ecology, this kind of single and lack of innovative content often cannot stand out in the massive amount of information, and it is difficult to gain an advantage in traffic competition. International reports on China's foreign medical aid often place it within broader economic cooperation issues, such as trade and investment. As a result, publicly available information often provides only general information, lacking independent stories or comprehensive descriptions of aid projects. Reports focus more on the history and input of aid projects, rather than on actual impacts and results. Therefore, the bland communication content has not yet been able to truly attract the attention of the audience, and it is even more difficult to accurately convey the discourse resonance points, emotional resonance points, and interest intersection points with the recipient countries.

3.3 Limited Communication Media and Lack of Universality

On the basis of examining the history of human communication (media has roughly gone through

four eras of oral, written, printed, and electronic), Zhang Yinjie believes that the media of interpersonal communication can be roughly divided into oral, written, and letter, telegraph and telephone era, Internet and mobile phone era [12]. With the advent of the new media era, the speed and breadth of information dissemination have been greatly improved. In terms of communication media, active actions have been taken on the Internet to promote international communication of traditional Chinese medicine foreign aid. However, China still has a lot of room for development in making full use of the powerful communication power of new media. Limited communication channels may prevent the message from reaching a wider audience, thus affecting its international impact and visibility. For example, in the era of social media, traditional media have little international distribution and are not ideal for reaching audiences. It is necessary to take into account multiple communication media, carry out communication in multiple aspects and through multiple channels, and continue to enhance the international forwarding of traditional media and the communication effectiveness of international media platforms.

3.4 Significantly Different Audiences and Lack of Pertinence

On the one hand, due to the huge cultural differences between different countries, the cultures of European and American countries tend to avoid risks and are resistant to uncertainty. Western medicine focuses on logical thinking and empirical analysis, reasoning based on experimental data. In contrast, traditional Chinese medicine focuses on holistic thinking and uses the theory of yin-yang and five elements for diagnosis and treatment, covering rich philosophical connotations. Because its esoteric theories can inspire skepticism [13], audiences in most countries often have only a superficial understanding of TCM. On the other hand, from the audience's perspective, the evaluation of the final communication effect mainly relies on feedback from international audiences [14]. Audience differences will affect the evaluation of communication effectiveness, because different audience groups may have different reactions and acceptance levels. When the media reported on TCM foreign aid, they did not clearly explain the efficacy of TCM.

4. PATHS FOR THE GLOBAL DISSEMINATION OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE CULTURE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN INTERNATIONAL DISCOURSE SYSTEM

Although Chinese medicine has already contributed to the construction of the community of human destiny, it is necessary to continue to accelerate the construction of the discourse system for the external dissemination of Chinese medicine culture, in order to further enhance the recognition and influence of Chinese medicine culture on a global scale and to promote the prosperity and development of Chinese medicine culture. This paper tries to put forward the following construction path.

4.1 Diversification of Communication Subjects

In the new media era, every individual has become a potential external communicator. This has brought new opportunities for the international dissemination of traditional Chinese medicine. Therefore, it is advisable to utilize the "simplicity, inexpensiveness, and effectiveness" advantages of traditional Chinese medicine while providing foreign medical assistance, in order to popularize relevant knowledge among the local residents receiving assistance, so that they can also become disseminators of traditional Chinese medicine culture. In addition, by training local medical staff, volunteers, etc., and teaching them the basic theories and practical skills of traditional Chinese medicine, the traditional Chinese medicine culture can take root in the local area and form a wider communication network. Finally, it is imperative to attend to the opinions of key groups, including leaders of other countries, experts and scholars, Internet celebrities, and sports figures, engaging in active communication and cooperation with them, and fostering them to become public opinion leaders for traditional Chinese medicine. For example, in the 1970s, after a New York Times reporter received acupuncture treatment during US President Richard Nixon's visit to China, an experiential report "Now, Let Me Tell You About My Surgery in Beijing" quickly made acupuncture popular around the world, which triggered a huge response. It shows the importance of opinion

leaders to the international spread of traditional Chinese medicine.

In order to achieve the effect of strategic communication, it is essential to build a "united front" and form a trinity of diverse international communication entities composed of the government, media, and society. This pattern can continue to grow and develop, better adapt to the needs of international communication, and promote the formation of multiple subject clusters that collaborate and speak out. Through the joint efforts of all parties, TCM culture can be more comprehensively and deeply spread to the international community, promoting the prosperity and inheritance of TCM culture.

4.2 *Storytelling of Communication Content*

Focusing on the diseases that traditional Chinese medicine is good at treating, the communication content of traditional Chinese medicine is presented in a substantial, concise, information-rich, and intuitive form. First, it is feasible to commence from a micro perspective and showcase the beneficial effects of China's aid through authentic stories of the recipients. This people-oriented communication method can allow the international public to more intuitively feel the significance and value of China's aid. At the same time, by displaying benefit stories from various fields, classes, and occupations from multiple angles and levels, it is possible to uncover more representative cases and carry out localized reporting, thereby facilitating the audience's understanding and acceptance of this information, ultimately fostering a favorable perception of China's assistance within the international community.

Factual statements should be used as the main line, and the parties concerned should be allowed to speak for themselves, rather than simply relying on official data. This approach can more convincingly demonstrate China's effectiveness in foreign medical assistance, making it easier for the audience to resonate and understand. At the same time, empathetic representations and cultural codes surrounding disease, fear, trauma, and other connotations can be created within the "intertextual" narrative with the audience, thus evoking resonance and attention. Moreover, a soft discourse strategy can be employed to counter the stigmatization of China by certain countries, utilizing facts and genuine stories to substantiate

the genuine significance and value of China's aid. These measures facilitate the more effective dissemination of traditional Chinese medicine to the global community, enhancing China's international image and reputation.

4.3 *Expansion of Communication Media*

In the new era of media, the dissemination of TCM foreign aid cannot ignore traditional media. First and foremost, the most fundamental media for communication are body language and spoken language. In the process of dissemination, in addition to spreading examples that demonstrate the efficacy of TCM, TCM rhymes can also be passed on orally, which can become the basis for the public to understand TCM culture.

Secondly, practical communication media include written language and letters. Writing overcomes the weakness of language, which is difficult to preserve, and makes wider dissemination possible. At a time when the COVID-19 epidemic was spreading, China provided valuable aid supplies to many countries. Many slogans with Chinese cultural characteristics were added to the packaging boxes of these aid supplies, such as the sentence "Like the mountain range that stretches before you and me, let's share the same trials and hardships together." The words not only express the sincere feelings for friendship but also express the determination and confidence to face difficulties together. This kind of initiative to incorporate cultural elements into aid supplies is not just a simple cultural export, but also an organic integration of cross-cultural communication. Therefore, the external communication of traditional Chinese medicine can also use vivid and interesting forms such as text, images, and animations to sow the seeds of traditional Chinese medicine culture.

At the same time, it is vital to make full use of high-speed Internet communication. The Government or relevant spokespersons should strengthen the publication of news related to foreign assistance in Chinese medicine in foreign mainstream media, such as through social media platforms Facebook and Twitter, which can directly reach a wide international audience and increase the exposure and influence of Chinese medicine.

In addition, it is essential to actively rely on international activities for international communication, especially international events hosted by China, such as the "Belt and Road"

International Cooperation Summit Forum, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, the China-Arab Forum, and the China-Latin America Forum. In these home diplomatic events, China often promises to provide certain international assistance to support the development of developing countries [15]. Therefore, these international activities provide China with valuable international communication opportunities and should give full play to its positive role in international communication.

4.4 Precision Targeting of Media Audiences

In the process of dissemination, it is crucial to focus on the audience and combine the advantages of Chinese medicine in orthopedics and traumatology, gynecology, nephrology, acupuncture, and moxibustion, etc., with special attention paid to the value of Chinese medicine in the practical clinical application of each country, so as to combine the advantages of Chinese medicine with the medical needs of the target countries, and to carry out precise dissemination and promotion. For example, due to the special characteristics of the geographical location and climate of the United Kingdom, mental disorders, lower back pain, irritable bowel syndrome, arthritis, eczema, and so on are common and frequent diseases among the British people, and Chinese medicine has a better therapeutic effect in the treatment of all these diseases, which has been affirmed and accepted by many patients [16].

Under the background of different acceptance of traditional Chinese medicine in different countries, content can be produced more accurately and personalized based on the audience's identity, gender, religious beliefs, age, interests, and other factors. Hu Zhengrong pointed out in his research that different discourse systems should be used when communicating to different audiences abroad. For the "elite class" in politics, such as political elites and government officials, a more formal political language system can be adopted; for the "elite class" in culture, such as foreign experts and scholars, a relatively speculative "academic discourse" can be adopted; and for the "public layer", such as foreign netizens and new media users, a more flexible and personalized "net language" should be adopted [17]. This approach of adopting different communication strategies for different audience groups can help improve

communication effects and enhance the accuracy and pertinence of information delivery.

The success of communication activities depends not only on the quality of communication content but also on the timeliness and effectiveness of audience feedback. During the dissemination process, information will continue to accumulate and evolve through multi-party interactions, and audiences can also obtain new information and perspectives from other people's comments or discussions with others. Therefore, it is critical to pay attention to audience feedback in a timely manner in order to adjust and optimize communication strategies based on feedback, thereby improving communication effects. In order to better understand the audience's cognition, emotion, and attitude, different questionnaires can be designed for the target audience or field surveys can be conducted to collect their opinions and feedback on traditional Chinese medicine. By analyzing these data, the needs and preferences of the audience can be more accurately grasped, thereby guiding subsequent communication content creation and strategic adjustments.

5. CONCLUSION

The foreign health assistance of Chinese medicine has gone through the initial stage from the 1960s to the reform and opening up, the adjustment stage from the reform and opening up to the end of the 1990s, and the development stage from 2000 to the present, and based on which the international influence of Chinese medicine has become more and more significant. However, there are problems with a single source, monotonous communication content, limited communication media, and significant audience differences in the international communication of TCM foreign health assistance, which seriously affect the construction of the international discourse system of TCM. In response to these problems, this paper tries to put forward how to promote the construction of the discourse system of external communication in the dissemination of foreign aid of Chinese medicine from the latitude of diversification of dissemination subjects, storytelling of dissemination contents, broadening of dissemination media, and precision of dissemination audience, to promote the dissemination and exchange of Chinese medicine culture in the international arena and make greater contributions to the health and well-being of the world's people.

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