



# Health Silk Road-Boosting the Development of Traditional Chinese Medicine

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## Abstract

The rich cultural connotations of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) make it a gem of Chinese traditional culture. As the Health Silk Road (HSR) takes root and blossoms, medical and health collaboration between China and countries or regions along the route is growing ever closer. In light of its inherent strengths, TCM has assumed a pivotal role in China's efforts to bolster the construction of the HSR. While TCM has been widely disseminated in countries along the HSR, it also faces some challenges. Hence, it is imperative that, backed by the Chinese government's endorsement, the cultural advancement of TCM must embrace the legacy of traditional practices while introducing fresh innovations, hasten the establishment of standards, elucidate the cultural connotations, and continually augment its global influence.

**Keywords:** Traditional Chinese Medicine; Health Silk Road; Global Health Governance

## The Current Situation of the Promotion of TCM Along the HSR

The HSR was proposed to build more healthy environment for local economic construction along Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) corridor in 2016[1]. Since then, TCM has made significant strides in its global outreach, particularly in HSR countries, yielding fruitful results. Specifically, TCM has been extensively embraced across 196 countries and regions, with nations such as Russia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Uzbekistan providing considerable recognition and support to TCM. TCM has also emerged as a crucial area of regional cooperation among China and multilateral organizations, including ASEAN, the EU, the AU, and the CELAC, among others[2]. In order to promote the landing and rooting of TCM along the HSR, Gansu University of Chinese Medicine has set up a 'Silk Road Special Scholarship', which has so far recruited 35 international students for whole-class TCM education. The university has also jointly established eight 'Qihuang Chinese Medicine Colleges' with

countries such as Ukraine, trained hundreds of clinical doctors, and set up four 'Chinese Medicine Centers' in places like Kyrgyzstan [3].

Additionally, In 2014, 92 high-level medical universities from China and Russia jointly formed the China-Russia Medical University Alliance, which is the largest and most widely participated cooperation alliance between China and Russia. On May 10, 2021, the 'Belt and Road China-Russia Medical University Alliance Youth League Pharmaceutical and Clinical Medicine Forum', hosted by the China-Russia Medical University Alliance Youth League, was successfully held. In 2016, the Beijing University of Chinese Medicine established the St. Petersburg Chinese Medicine Hospital in Russia. The hospital comprises of nine departments specializing in Chinese Medicine, including internal medicine, acupuncture, and massage [4]. In 2021, the Xi'an International Brain Rehabilitation Center was officially opened in the capital of Kazakhstan, Nur-Sultan. The center was jointly established by the Xi'an Chinese

Medicine Hospital for Brain Diseases, Astana Medical University, and Nazarbayev University Medical School. Since its opening, more than 3,700 people have sought medical treatment there. The aforementioned information illustrates the growing awareness and increasing application of TCM in HSR countries.

## The Promotional Advantages of TCM on the HSR

### The Rich Cultural Connotation of TCM

TCM is a comprehensive medical model that combines prevention, health preservation, treatment, and rehabilitation based on thousands of years of accumulated practical experience, and encompasses various traditional therapies and medicines in China. Rooted in traditional Chinese culture and philosophy, TCM places more emphasis on exploring healthy lifestyles from a systematic and macroscopic perspective, conforming to objective laws, and has formed four thinking models: image thinking, dialectical thinking, holistic thinking, and Taiji thinking, which are regarded as the 'fifth ancient invention of China'. Furthermore, TCM boasts a wealth of knowledge, encompassing theories of essence and qi, yin and yang, five elements, body fluids, organs, meridians, constitutions, pathogenesis, treatment principles, and health preservation, which all play a significant role in clinical practice. Esteemed texts, such as 'Huangdi Neijing', 'Shanghan Zabing Lun', and 'Shennong Bencao Jing', have laid the foundation for a relatively comprehensive disease prevention and treatment system, providing a theoretical framework for the study of medicine in subsequent generations. Notably, TCM excels in treating chronic and skin diseases, and has produced favorable outcomes in preventing and treating epidemics such as viral encephalitis, tuberculosis, and H1N1.

While fulfilling its most fundamental medical function, what makes TCM even more attractive is its close integration with the traditional Chinese culture. An example of this is how Confucianism stresses the importance of 'benevolence' and 'putting people first', which is echoed in TCM's idea of 'benevolent virtue, benevolent skills, and benevolent people'. Taoism's idea of 'harmony between human and nature' is also permeated in it. TCM thus believes that the functional state of the human body is the result of the joint action of internal and external environments. Accordingly, TCM proposes diagnostic methods such as observation, listening, questioning, and palpation, and uses the external examination to infer the internal, as the basis for clinical diagnosis and treatment. Besides, the Mohist school advocates the idea of 'inclusive love', which is nurtured in TCM culture as well. The concept of 'a physician with benevolent heart' enables doctors to treat every patient equally, regardless of their social status.

### Policy supports from Chinese government

In 2015, the Chinese National Health and Family Planning Commission issued the 'Implementation Plan for Three Years of Health Communication and Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (2015-2017)', which provided guidance for building a 'Health Silk Road'[5]. In December 2016, the State

Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine (SATCM) and the National Development and Reform Commission jointly issued the 'Development Plan for Traditional Chinese Medicine along the Belt and Road (2016-2020)', which clearly stated the need to strengthen cooperation with countries along the Belt and Road, and to build 30 overseas centers for TCM and 50 demonstration bases for international exchange and cooperation in TCM [6].

In May 2017, Chinese government and the World Health Organization (WHO) signed a Memorandum of Understanding to enhance health cooperation along the Belt and Road. This agreement bolstered collaborative efforts among BRI countries to prevent and control infectious diseases, improve emergency response, and prioritize the health of people. The ultimate goal is to build a 'Health Silk Road' and support the achievement of the health-related Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 [7]. In 2022, the State Council of the People's Republic of China provided policy support and long-term planning for the revitalization and development of TCM with the release of the '14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Traditional Chinese Medicine', which aims to promote the TCM culture and fully utilize its diverse values [8]. In the same year, the SATCM and the Leading Group Office for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative jointly issued the 'Development Plan for High-Quality Integration of Traditional Chinese Medicine into the Joint Construction of the Belt and Road (2021-2025)' [9].

### Support and recognition from international organizations

In 2017, the UN Secretary-General Guterres emphasized that the Belt and Road Initiative, proposed by China, provided a Chinese solution to global development and made significant contributions to addressing global issues while promoting international cooperation [10]. During the COVID-19 outbreak, the World Health Organization (WHO) unambiguously acknowledged the clinical effectiveness of TCM in managing COVID-19 and encouraged member states to consider adopting the 'Chinese integrative medicine' approach that combines TCM and Western medicine [11]. Moreover, with the WHO's support, the World Federation of Acupuncture-Moxibustion Societies (WFAS) was established in Beijing to advance academic research, medical practice, and international exchange of acupuncture-moxibustion worldwide. WFAS has now grown to 194 member organizations, including 13 professional committees, representing 53 countries and regions.

## The Predicament of Promoting TCM on the HSR

### Different medical policies and cultures among countries along the HSR

As the HSR spans across 65 countries, each with their own distinct policies and laws regulating TCM, combined with the diverse cultural characteristics of each region, the promotion of TCM faces significant obstacles. Compounding the issue is the absence of standardized guidelines for the practice of TCM along the HSR, and the prevailing ideology and historical cultural backgrounds

often lead to Western medicine being viewed as the global standard for medical systems. Consequently, TCM is frequently evaluated according to Western medicine standards, rendering it more challenging to obtain local policy support during its dissemination and promotion.

### Challenges in International Standardization of TCM

In the global academic community, TCM is commonly referred to as 'alternative medicine', suggesting that TCM still faces challenges in achieving widespread recognition internationally. Rooted in traditional Chinese philosophy and integrating multiple disciplines such as geography and astronomy, TCM is the accumulated experience of the Chinese nation. Compared with Western medicine, which emphasizes rational analysis, TCM has some shortcomings in its theoretical basis and scientific connotation. From a historical perspective, it can be observed that Western medicine gained widespread acceptance as the global standard medical system after the Second Industrial Revolution, while traditional Chinese medicine developed at a slower pace and was not recognized due to the perception of its lack of scientific rigor. Consequently, the status of TCM and Western medicine is unequal, with some Western scholars considering TCM to be unscientific, unacceptable, and even akin to witchcraft. In the modern era characterized by technological advancements and academic rigor, many of TCM's theories are challenging to validate. Despite significant progress in promoting international standardization of TCM, it still faces skepticism from Western medicine, which prioritizes clinical and experimental data. Therefore, it is essential for TCM practitioners to redouble their efforts to validate the effectiveness of TCM treatments and improve their scientific rigor.

### Multidisciplinary Talent Shortage

In order to effectively promote the international adoption of TCM, it is crucial to cultivate a cadre of competent professionals who possess not only advanced proficiency in TCM and foreign languages, but also a nuanced appreciation of local cultures and circumstances. Unfortunately, such multidisciplinary talents are rare in contemporary China. Despite the National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine formulating the '14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of TCM Talents' in recent years, which provides policy support and vigorously promotes the training of professionals, a shortage of multidisciplinary talents persists due to the high costs and lengthy training required for their cultivation.

### Conclusion

In recent years, as the HSR has continued to expand, TCM has gained increasing attention and recognition along the route. In spite of the progress achieved, the development of TCM faces challenges

due to differing pharmaceutical policies and cultural backgrounds in HSR countries, inadequate standardization of TCM, and a shortage of skilled professionals in this field. To address this, China needs to accelerate the creative transformation and innovative development of TCM, speed up standardization, and enhance its discourse power in the field of medicine. At the same time, it should innovate the talent cultivation mode for the international promotion of TCM. Through talent exchanges and mutual learning, telling the historical and therapeutic stories of TCM, the world can have a more comprehensive understanding of TCM. This will contribute uniquely to the construction of 'a community of common health for mankind'.

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