

THE CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE, CORE CHALLENGES, AND OPTIMIZATION PATHS OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE CULTURE EMPOWERED BY DIGITAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) culture is an important component of fine traditional Chinese culture and a vital cultural resource through which China participates in global health governance and promotes mutual learning among civilizations. In recent years, with the deepening advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative, the growing prominence of global health issues, and the rapid development of digital media technologies, the international communication of TCM culture has encountered new historical opportunities. A review of relevant studies published between 2015 and 2026 shows that research on the international communication of TCM culture has gradually shifted from macro-level advocacy-oriented discussions to more operational topics such as platform-based communication, cross-cultural adaptation, localized practice, audience identification, and communication mechanisms. At the same time, existing communication practices and studies still face a series of practical problems, including insufficient cultural interpretation, a mismatch between content supply and audience demand, the need to further improve the effectiveness of digital communication, inadequate localization and institutional adaptability, and a shortage of interdisciplinary professionals. On the basis of synthesizing existing literature, this article systematically examines the major characteristics and practical dilemmas of the international communication of TCM culture, and proposes optimization paths from the perspectives of content construction, media innovation, relationship formation, local collaboration, and institutional support, with a view to providing references for the high-quality development of the international communication of TCM culture.

Keyword: *Traditional Chinese Medicine culture, international communication, digital media, cross-cultural communication, localization*

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is a system of knowledge, practice, and values formed through the long historical accumulation of Chinese civilization. It possesses medical, cultural, and international communicative value. With the continuous advancement of the strategy of promoting Chinese culture globally, TCM culture has gradually evolved from being merely an object of knowledge dissemination in the conventional medical sense into an important vehicle for presenting China's cultural image, participating in global health cooperation, and promoting the building of a global community of health for all [1]. Especially in the post-pandemic era, increasing global public attention to disease prevention, physical and mental well-being, and holistic health concepts has created new opportunities for TCM culture within the international context [2].

In terms of research progress, over the past decade, the international communication of TCM culture has become a topic of shared concern across multiple disciplines, including cross-cultural communication, international Chinese language education, translation studies, medical anthropology, and international communication studies. Early studies mainly examined its necessity and basic pathways from macro perspectives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, national cultural soft power, and the internationalization of TCM [3]. In recent years, however, scholarly attention has gradually shifted toward more specific practical issues in communication, such as the construction of overseas centers, social media communication, translation and introduction of classical texts, audience identification, localization adaptation, and relationship building, thus making the research increasingly relevant to actual practice [4].

It is particularly noteworthy that the rapid evolution of the digital media environment is profoundly reshaping the logic of the international communication of TCM culture. Overseas new media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook, with their features of visual narration, interactivity, and algorithmic distribution, have opened up new narrative spaces and mechanisms for precise audience reach in the cross-cultural communication of TCM culture [5]. At the same time, however, media platforms do not automatically guarantee effective communication. The international communication of TCM culture still faces the practical contradiction between increased visibility and insufficient deep identification; in other words, a rise in communication volume does not necessarily translate into cultural understanding, institutional recognition, or local application. Therefore, systematically sorting out the contemporary landscape, core challenges, and optimization paths of the international communication of TCM culture is of clear theoretical and practical significance.

2. THE CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE AND MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE CULTURE

2.1 Research perspectives have shifted from macro-level advocacy to multidimensional mechanism analysis

Existing literature shows that research on the international communication of TCM culture has undergone a gradual shift from “necessity justification” to “mechanism analysis.” Around 2016, relevant studies were more often grounded in the background of national strategies, emphasizing that the Belt and Road Initiative had brought important opportunities for the external communication of TCM culture, and proposing communication paths that took industry, education, academic exchange, and charity as carriers [3]. Such studies laid the macro-policy foundation for subsequent discussions.

After 2020, however, the research focus clearly moved toward the analysis of specific elements in the communication process. Some studies constructed analytical frameworks from the perspectives of communication subjects, content, media, audiences, and effects, attempting to understand the complexity of the international communication of TCM culture from a systemic perspective [2]. Other studies, based on translation-mediated communication theory, examined “mediating subjects—mediating content—mediating channels—target audiences,” and pointed out that the external communication of TCM had moved beyond the mere output of information toward a process of meaning generation through multi-actor collaboration [6]. Overall, research perspectives have gradually progressed from macro-policy discourse to meso-level mechanism analysis and micro-level practical investigation.

2.2 Communication media have expanded from traditional platforms to digital platforms

Digital media has become one of the most prominent growth areas in recent research on the international communication of TCM culture. Existing studies point out that overseas new media platforms, through short videos, scenario-based narration, user interaction, and tag optimization, help break down the barriers posed by highly specialized TCM terminology and enhance the perceptibility and affinity of communication [5]. Compared with

traditional text-based communication, digital platforms place greater emphasis on visual presentation, individual stories, and embodied experience, making it easier for TCM culture to be transformed from abstract theory into concrete, tangible, and perceptible communication content.

At the same time, communication on social platforms has also promoted a shift in TCM culture from one-way transmission to interactive communication. Research focusing on Facebook indicates that overseas audiences show marked interest in information concerning the therapeutic efficacy of TCM, while misunderstandings, superficial cognition, and negative public opinion also exist. This suggests that digital media is not only a space for communication expansion, but also a space where public opinion risks may emerge [7]. Therefore, while digital media has extended the boundaries of the international communication of TCM culture, it has also imposed higher requirements on content gatekeeping, agenda setting, and public opinion guidance.

2.3 Communication goals have gradually shifted from “cultural output” to “identity construction”

At the level of communication philosophy, scholars in recent years have continuously emphasized that the international communication of TCM culture cannot remain at the level of one-way “going global,” but should instead move toward cultural understanding, value identification, and relationship building. Relevant studies point out that the overseas communication of acupuncture has already shown a trend of moving from “technical dissemination” to “cultural resonance.” The key lies in balancing cultural adherence from an emic perspective with local narration from an etic perspective, thereby forming a chain of “technical dissemination—cultural understanding—local innovation—value identification” [8]. This judgment suggests that the effectiveness of the international communication of TCM is not only reflected in whether the content is transmitted outward, but more importantly in whether it can enter the audience’s cognitive framework, everyday practice, and cultural context.

From the perspective of audience studies, media exposure can significantly affect the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication of TCM, while cultural identification plays a partial mediating role in this process. At the same time, the smaller the cultural distance perceived by audiences, the stronger their degree of identification [9]. This indicates that the core of the international communication of TCM culture is not merely to “increase exposure,” but to reduce cultural distance and strengthen identification, thereby promoting communication effects from simply “knowing” to “understanding” and “accepting.”

2.4 Communication practice has shifted from single-channel diffusion to a combination of localization and platformization

In addition to media renewal, the international communication of TCM culture has also shown a marked trend toward platformization and localization. Studies on the construction of overseas centers point out that TCM overseas centers have become important platforms integrating medical services, educational training, scientific research cooperation, and cultural promotion, and have played an organizational hub role in promoting the overseas development of TCM and strengthening cultural identification [10]. This type of platform-based communication practice reflects the fact that the international communication of TCM is shifting from fragmented and individualized communication models to more systematic and institutionalized modes of operation.

On the other hand, localization has gradually become a major focus of research. Existing studies stress that the overseas development of TCM is not a simple replication of the Chinese experience, but rather a process of reconstruction and transformation within different cultures, institutions, and lifeworlds. Such localized development follows objective laws and should be understood with an attitude of inclusiveness and openness [11]. This means that the international communication of TCM culture should not merely pursue formal “going global,” but should pay greater attention to the possibility of local adaptation, institutional embedding, and practical integration

3. CORE CHALLENGES FACING THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE CULTURE

3.1 Insufficient cultural interpretation and limited depth and explanatory power of communication content

Although the visibility of TCM culture in overseas communication has increased, many studies point out that current communication practices still suffer from insufficient exploration of its connotations and inadequate cultural interpretation. Hao Jianjun argues that in the external mediation and translation of TCM, there are practical difficulties such as insufficient excavation of core connotations and inadequate projection of cultural imagery, which, to a certain extent, weaken the intellectual depth and cultural persuasiveness of communication content [6]. In other words, much communication content remains at the level of introducing therapies, describing efficacy, or displaying cultural symbols, without effectively explaining the holistic view, dialectical thinking, and philosophy of life underlying TCM.

This problem is especially prominent in the digital communication environment. Although short videos and fragmented forms of expression have improved communication efficiency, they can also easily reduce TCM culture to “health-preservation tips,” “miraculous therapies,” or “exotic knowledge,” thereby weakening its integrity as a systematic body of knowledge. If communication content remains at a superficial level for a long period of time, it will be difficult to form a stable international cognitive framework, let alone realize a progression from arousing interest to generating value identification.

3.2 A clear mismatch still exists between communication supply and audience demand

The effectiveness of the international communication of TCM culture largely depends on whether communication content aligns with the practical needs and modes of understanding of target audiences. Existing studies point out that the communication of TCM culture should fully take into account the characteristics and needs of target audiences so that it is not only appealing but also useful; otherwise, communication content is likely to become self-referential [12]. This judgment reveals a prominent problem in current communication practice: on the supply side, emphasis is often placed on cultural display and knowledge output, whereas on the audience side, greater attention is paid to therapeutic experience, health services, everyday application, and practical comprehensibility.

Analysis of global English-language news corpora also shows that the high-frequency themes related to TCM in overseas news texts are mainly concentrated on health services, experiential descriptions, and disease diagnosis and treatment, indicating that international audiences are more concerned with the practical health dimension of TCM than with abstract cultural discourse [13]. If communication content cannot be appropriately adjusted around these practical concerns, it will be difficult to effectively enter overseas audiences’ everyday cognition and life contexts.

3.3 Inadequate localization and institutional adaptability

The international communication of TCM culture is not simply a matter of cross-linguistic translation; it also involves institutional adaptation at multiple levels, including laws and regulations, medical systems, educational structures, and social concepts. Taking Indonesia as an example, relevant studies point out that the communication of TCM faces practical obstacles such as incomplete policy frameworks, competitive pressure from other medical systems, and a relatively low level of TCM education [14]. These problems indicate that the bottlenecks in the international communication of TCM do not exist only at the level of discourse, but are also deeply embedded in the institutional environment and social structure of recipient countries.

In addition, the phenomenon of “localized TCM” overseas also reminds us that, in the process of cross-cultural communication, TCM often encounters the dual tension of “de-Sinicization” and “over-Sinicization”: the former may weaken its cultural roots, while the latter, due to an excessive emphasis on authenticity, may make it difficult to integrate into local society [15]. Therefore, how to achieve a balance between cultural adherence and local adaptation has become a key challenge in the international communication of TCM culture.

3.4 Insufficient coordination within the communication system and a relative shortage of interdisciplinary professionals

In essence, the international communication of TCM culture is a systematic project that spans fields, cultures, and media, and requires the joint participation of governments, academia, medical institutions, educational platforms, media platforms, and market actors. Existing studies point out that current cross-cultural communication of TCM still suffers from problems such as an incomplete communication system, relatively simple communication methods, and limited communication capacity [16]. This indicates that an efficient coordination mechanism has not yet been formed among communication actors, causing many communication practices to remain fragmented, temporary, and project-based.

Correspondingly, the insufficient supply of interdisciplinary professionals remains an important factor constraining communication quality. Many studies have mentioned that the international communication of TCM requires interdisciplinary talents who understand not only professional TCM knowledge but also foreign-language communication and cross-cultural interaction, yet such a talent pool is still relatively weak at present [17]. The lack of communicators capable of combining professional knowledge, cultural interpretive ability, and media expression often leads to communication content that is insufficiently precise in professional terms and insufficiently accessible in expression.

4. OPTIMIZATION PATHS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE CULTURE

4.1 Enhancing the international explanatory power of TCM culture through content reconstruction

To achieve high-quality international communication of TCM culture, the first issue that must be addressed is “what to communicate” and “how to make it understandable.” On the one hand, while adhering to the core values of TCM culture, efforts should be made to develop a more internationally intelligible interpretive framework centered on such key concepts as holism, preventive treatment of disease, syndrome differentiation and treatment, and harmony between body and mind [18]. Such interpretation is not a simple act of “downscaling translation,” but rather an innovation in expression oriented toward different audiences on the basis of preserving the essence of TCM culture. On the other hand, practical-oriented narration should be strengthened. In the international communication of TCM culture, therapeutic experience, individual cases, health services, and connections with everyday life are often more effective than purely theoretical exposition in establishing audience identification. As relevant studies have pointed out, experiential description and concrete diagnosis and treatment are important hotspots in the international communication of TCM [13]. Therefore, abstract cultural concepts should be combined with specific health scenarios, lifestyles, and case stories so as to enhance the realism and credibility of communication content.

4.2 Improving precise reach and interactive communication capacity through digital media innovation

Digital media is becoming an important incremental space for the international communication of TCM culture. In the future, greater attention should be paid to platform differences, content stratification, and interaction design, and diversified modes of expression should be constructed in accordance with the communication logic of different platforms. For example, on short-video platforms, micro-level narration, scenario-based presentation, and embodied expression may be used to lower the threshold of understanding; on long-video or thematic platforms, greater emphasis may be placed on knowledge explanation, in-depth case analysis, and cultural extension [5].

At the same time, digital communication should not merely pursue traffic expansion, but should also focus on relationship maintenance and trust generation. In the social media environment, comment interaction, tag operation, user feedback, and community connection together constitute important components of communication effects. In the face of negative public opinion and the risk of misunderstanding, it is also necessary to establish more proactive mechanisms for content review, issue response, and image restoration, so as to enhance the discursive stability of TCM culture on international platforms [7].

4.3 Promoting cross-cultural identity generation through relationship building

The key to the international communication of TCM culture does not lie in the intensity of one-way dissemination, but in whether stable and sustainable cross-cultural relationships can be established. Research based on grounded theory has proposed that the cross-cultural communication of TCM should proceed from the perspective of relationship building, emphasizing trust generation, reciprocal interaction, and cultural negotiation, so as to form a more sustainable communicative state [19]. This perspective breaks through the traditional linear model of “communication–reception” and stresses that audiences are not passive recipients, but participants in the negotiation of meaning.

Therefore, communication practice should attach greater importance to audience experience, local narratives, and practical needs, transforming TCM culture from an “object to be viewed” into a “participatory health resource.” In particular, for developing countries, East Asian countries, and regions with a foundation in traditional medicine, differentiated communication paths should be explored in accordance with their medical-cultural backgrounds, social cognitive structures, and institutional conditions [20]. Only when communication forms a foundation of trust at the relational level can TCM culture move from knowledge input toward the further generation of identification.

4.4 Advancing institutional embedding and platform support through local collaboration

The international communication of TCM culture cannot be detached from specific fields and institutional environments. In the future, cooperation with overseas universities, medical institutions, traditional medicine organizations, and community networks should be further strengthened. Through educational cooperation, joint research, standard development, and service practice, TCM culture may be promoted into more stable institutional spaces [14]. Compared with mere content output, this mode of institutionally embedded communication is more conducive to forming sustainable local development mechanisms.

At the same time, the organizational support role of overseas centers, Confucius Institutes, and other relevant international platforms should continue to be fully utilized. Existing studies show that overseas centers possess clear advantages in integrating medical care, education, scientific research, and cultural communication functions [10]. In future platform construction, greater emphasis should be placed on regional differences, distinctive positioning, and coordination mechanisms, so as to avoid “one-size-fits-all” replication and enhance local adaptability and resource integration capacity in platform-based communication.

4.5 Strengthening interdisciplinary talent cultivation and a coordinated communication system through institutional support

In the final analysis, the long-term development of the international communication of TCM culture still depends on stable institutional support and talent cultivation. To this end, a coordinated communication system jointly supported by government planning, university training, institutional participation, and platform collaboration should be established, so as to promote interdisciplinary integration among TCM, foreign languages, communication studies, and area studies [17]. In terms of talent cultivation, emphasis should be placed not only on professional TCM competence, but also on cross-cultural communication ability, international expression, and digital communication skills.

In addition, in line with the development of digital technology, efforts may be made to strengthen the construction of TCM language resource databases, cultural resource databases, and communication resource platforms, so as to improve the standardization and systematization of communication content production [21]. Only when content resources, communication platforms, institutional networks, and professional talents are organically linked can the international communication of TCM culture truly move from “fragmented expansion” toward “systematic development.”

5. CONCLUSION

Overall, the international communication of TCM culture has gradually moved from the early stage of macro-level advocacy into a new phase characterized by mechanism reconstruction and pathway optimization. Existing studies have shown that digital media has expanded the international expressive space of TCM culture, localized practices have enriched its forms of cross-cultural adaptation, and studies on identity have revealed the deeper logic underlying the generation of communication effects. Nevertheless, such problems as insufficient cultural interpretation, a mismatch between supply and demand, difficulties in local adaptation, and weak support in terms of talent and institutional systems still constrain, to a considerable extent, the improvement of the quality of the international communication of TCM culture.

Therefore, future efforts in the international communication of TCM culture should not remain at the level of merely “expanding communication volume” or “increasing exposure,” but should pay greater attention to the explanatory power of content, the relational dimension of communication, the localization of platforms, and the coordination of institutional mechanisms. Only by safeguarding the core values of TCM culture while truly entering the social contexts, institutional environments, and everyday practices of different countries and regions can TCM culture move from being “seen” to being “understood,” “trusted,” and “applied,” and thereby play a more profound role in global health communication and mutual learning among civilizations.

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