

Fiery Dragon's Milk along the Road of Silk: TCM and the New Chinese Empire

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ABSTRACT

Background: Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is poised to make an unprecedented impact in the world today, as it has the largest uptake of any traditional system of medicine around the world. It is bolstered by the rise of the Chinese economy, social influences, and robust peer-reviewed literature on the effectiveness of acupuncture and other modalities-- giving it a strong evidence base for health promotion, disease prevention and as a monoline or complementary treatment for a plethora of conditions such as migraines, physical pain, sciatica and depression. Moreover, China's effective prevention and treatment of COVID-19 prior to 2022 only furthered China's grand plans of being the pre-eminent economic power in the world. Within China, solid government support for TCM has resulted in large-scale cultivation of herbs for ecological sustainability and income, such that TCM herbs have now become one third of the domestic pharmaceutical market [1]. Inside China, TCM has not always enjoyed popular support, particularly within the educated elite; efforts to modernize TCM--making it comply to western scientific norms--appear to be increasing its acceptability with a larger segment of the Chinese populace. China's relative success in managing COVID-19 prior to 2022 may be attributable partly to widespread uptake of preventive measures such as mask wearing and to TCM, with articles in the peer-reviewed medical literature claiming that "TCM is currently the best choice for the treatment and prevention of COVID-19, and it is expected that it will be promoted by countries around the world" [2].

Purpose: In this article, I examine the larger context in which TCM is growing nationally and internationally. In making the critical connection between socioeconomic issues and medicine, I hope to shed light on the vital links between health systems and sociopolitical dynamics, illustrating the shifting balance in global power and its impacts on healthcare. Analysts have noted that the most important changes that are occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic are unrelated to public health issues, as the biggest change in the world today is that the rise of the new Chinese Empire is challenging the US for the position of the dominant superpower [3].

Linking TCM to Expansionist Aims: Grand plans for the growth of TCM in addition to modernization, include expansion beyond China's borders. To a large extent, TCM has already found a footing in most regions of the world. TCM clinics, educational institutions, and regulatory mechanisms exist in Europe, North America, Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Far from being haphazard or accidental, this expansion has been part of a three-phase plan beginning in the last century. The current phase is concentrated on establishing rigorous safety and (western) scientific standards.

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INTRODUCTION

TCM is an ancient system of medicine that has continuously evolved, both within China, and outside China. In China, 14-83% of people use Traditional Chinese Medicine, depending on their socioeconomic and health status [4]; those with less income utilize TCM more than their higher income counterparts [5]. Those with chronic conditions such as cancer tend to use TCM more than others [4], whereas about 22% of Canadians in 2016 utilize various aspects of TCM, mainly

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acupuncture [6]. This paper focuses on TCM within China and globally, with an emphasis on socio-economic and structural factors that shape its historical and current status. It traces the phases of growth of the Chinese economy side by side TCM as part of a grand plan for China to be the most powerful country on planet earth and TCM to play a small role in this hegemony. The paper ends with a section on TCM in Canada, given this is not well described elsewhere.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE: INSIDE AND OUTSIDE CHINA

TCM is an ancient system of health promotion, disease prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and palliation emanating from The People's Republic of China (PRC). TCM includes various modalities such as acupuncture, herbology, moxibustion, acupressure, cupping, exercise therapy, dietary therapy, tui na massage, manipulation therapy, and bone setting. Research on TCM has found it to be helpful for both disease prevention as well as treatment. Unlike other systems of traditional medicine such as Ayurveda, TCM is continuously evolving with a strong research and evidence base to support it. Prior to 2022, COVID-19 appeared to be prevented and treated effectively by a combination of TCM, public health measures and western medicine, and this could be a main reason why China has managed the pandemic relatively well. According to some researchers, "TCM has played and will continue to play an important role in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic, which is bound to increase more attention and application of TCM in China and abroad" [7]. The tremendous setbacks experienced by China during 2022 were unpredicted. Indubitably, this has put some brakes on China's rapid economic growth during the pandemic. But there is no evidence that it has stalled progress entirely.

With many nations of the world in deep economic and political turmoil as a result of the pandemic, China still stands a strong chance of becoming the world's most powerful nation, as it has not suffered to the same extent as other nations [8]. China's successes prior to 2022 in effectively managing COVID-19 meant that Beijing and Shanghai had no significant outbreaks despite their proximity to Wuhan. There are no reports of President Xi Jinping and high-level Chinese officials contracting the virus, which is remarkable, considering that other nations' leaders, such as Boris Johnson, Donald Trump, Emmanuel Macron, did contract COVID-19

TCM'S GROWING EVIDENCE BASE

Acupuncture is the most well-known aspect of TCM in other countries and has a solid and robust evidence base. Acupuncture has been used to effectively treat various conditions such as migraines, physical pain, sciatica and depression [9], and is widely used as anesthesia in operating rooms in China [10]. Besides acupuncture, TCM has influenced the development of pharmacotherapies for various ailments such as rheumatoid arthritis. The TCM herb *Tripterygium wilfordii*, commonly known as Thundergod vine, shows promising evidence for treating some of the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis with less toxicity than other medications but more research is required [11]. Similarly, growing evidence suggests that the TCM herb *Camellia sinensis*, commonly known as green tea, widely consumed in Asia, has properties that protect

against neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's and induces autophagy [12]. Exploratory research in sleep disorders, schizophrenia, and other mental health disorders reveal the need for further studies but preliminary results indicate that TCM modalities produce less adverse side effects than conventional treatments [13].

THE SCIENCE VS SPIRITUALITY DIVIDE IN TCM

Like most ancient systems of medicine, TCM was significantly influenced by religious and or philosophical/spiritual thought forms in the era in which it was conceptualized. Good health is achieved through mental, physical, and spiritual alignment. Healing occurs through harmonization of the healing energy of the practitioner and patient, engaging in a journey with a spiritual connection. Whole person healing includes self-care, through this original approach, encouraging patients to increase their self-awareness [14]. In this historical epoch, in the wake of 500 years of European power, followed by US ascendancy, notions of western science have replaced other forms of science. In the mid 1900's the Chinese government removed much of the philosophical/spiritual elements of TCM. Modern TCM practices are thus differentiated by a) those which maintain the ancient philosophical/spiritual lineage and b) those which are more scientized, according to western frameworks. Like other integrative health systems, TCM wrestles with being acceptable to the dominant scientific worldview and is thus divided internally, between those who support TCM as more of a science versus those who consider TCM to be a blend of science with spiritual philosophy. Many practitioners try to blend both science and spirituality in the practice of TCM. The debate between science and spirituality is one that creates great divisions between schools, regulatory bodies and practitioners. Given that the dominant worldview is a (western) scientific one, those who espouse the notion that TCM ought to be further scientized are often out front [15]. Some TCM practitioners posit that philosophical and spiritual elements of TCM are being practiced and safe guarded more outside

China than inside China, some Canadian TCM doctors, for example, consider their practice of science mixed with spirituality as a way of protecting this ancient tradition until China is ready to take it back. Despite these debates, the science versus spirituality debate is a false dichotomy. It is entirely possible to adhere to both the principles of western science while being guided by philosophical and/or spiritual notions. In Traditional Chinese Medicine, for example, the concept of Shen, or spirit, is linked to overall wellbeing; when shen is out of balance, people may suffer from anxiety, depression, or other conditions, which can be treated through mediation, Qi Gong, acupuncture, or herbs [16]. The concept of chi (vital force) in TCM has never clearly

been proven to exist in western science. Some liken it to the nervous system or other aspects of modern, western concepts while others say that it is different than that. Regardless of this debate, acupuncture, which is based on the notion that chi flows through the body in meridians has developed a robust peer-reviewed western medical literature base. It thus seems unimportant for health outcomes, to debate the existence of chi, particularly when this concept exists in dozens of other languages (but not in English), buttressed by cosmological frameworks to contextualize it. The Sanskrit word prana, for example, has the exact same meaning as chi. Ayurvedic medicine, yoga and many other South Asian health systems promote the vitality of prana as a means of improving the health of the whole human being including mind, body, and spirit. It is thus difficult to even explain the foundational aspects of chi in a language that is not ontologically or semantically equipped to define it. Understanding chi and related concepts requires a different paradigm than western biomedicine. In order to grasp the import of chi, humility and immersion into the worldview that created this concept are necessary. Part of the reason that these concepts are difficult to prove is because chi cannot be seen or measured easily. Much of the spiritual elements of TCM have been removed within the past few decades, both within China and abroad. This removal has served the interest of political forces internally as well as the perception that countries outside of China, where TCM is spreading, would accept TCM more readily without a spiritual focus.

CHARLATANISM

I would be remiss were I to ignore the fear-driven and lucrative business of pseudo- traditional healers. Confusing authentic traditional healers with those who profiteer from the vulnerability of people who are ill is a big mistake. While I rebuke the unscrupulous practices of those charlatans, this article does not focus on them. My larger research program explores the potential benefits of integrative health systems, such as Ayurveda and yoga, for improving population health and this article analyses the socio-economic context of this system of TCM, another system of holistic medicine.

EXPANSIONISM OF TCM: INTERNATIONALIZATION

Of all systems of traditional medicine-- including Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani, and many others from the continents of Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and North America -- Traditional Chinese Medicine has been preserved the best and is the currently the world's most influential traditional medical system with the largest number of users [17]. Its sheer size and global reach distinguish TCM globally; China is the world's most populous country, and these figures are influenced by the 1.44 billion people who live there [18]. It is further

augmented by Chinese economic and political prowess, internally and around the world. The Healthy China 2030 Plan aims to improve the health of Chinese people in the coming decade and a half through a variety of programs that include the development of TCM. Within China, TCM has held variable positions over the past several years. For some, TCM is medicine for those living in poverty and the peasantry; within this worldview the urban and economic elite members of Chinese society value allopathic medicine [19]. This appears to be changing so that the economic elite inside China, who will continue to access allopathic medicine, are open to the use of TCM as long as it is informed by allopathic medicine. Pundits estimate that by 2050 China will be the world's most powerful economy and, in many senses, it is already in that position [20] and the weaknesses of many nations' economies during COVID-19 has potentially consolidated China's rise to global hegemony [21]. Notwithstanding the extreme difficulties posed by COVID-19 in 2022, China will continue to bolster its economic strength internally and externally, albeit within a longer timeline. As part of the spread of Chinese institutions, TCM will be modernized and eventually internationalized [22]. Within China, farmers are encouraged to grow Chinese herbs to improve rural economies and the environment. The TCM herbal industry accounts for approximately one third of the nation's pharmaceutical market share and a growing portion of exports [23]. Those who are keen to market TCM globally have mapped out a grand plan for the proliferation of TCM. One such group of thinkers identifies three phases of internationalization and modernization. Phase I, from the 1950s – 1970s, consolidated modern

TCM research and education within China while Phase II, from 1980s – 2000s, was about developing international ties related to TCM [24]. A highlight during Phase II was the establishment of a TCM hospital in Germany, which was followed by the establishment of many similar clinics and medical facilities all over Europe. Research bodies in Austria, Australia, and the US focused on traditional medicine research which allowed for TCM to gain more credibility outside of China. The WHO, in efforts to map out the terrain of traditional medicines globally, produced landmark documents that included TCM [24]. Despite all this work many review studies concluded that more rigorous work was still required in order to assess TCM's efficacy. The significant growth of the Chinese economy in this era facilitated the expansion of TCM around the world. Phase III, from 2011 onwards, is devoted to consolidating scientific and safety standards for TCM around the world. Bold, open marketing plans for TCM, like this one, assert that “this new era represents a golden opportunity for TCM to further consolidate its scientific base so as to play a bigger part in forging tomorrow's medicines. To achieve this especially to reach the goals of better quality, safety and efficacy, the proposed rules of integrity, integration and innovation must be followed” [24]. Large scale efforts to propel

TCM around the world include a December 2018 meeting of the World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies (WFCMS), a Beijing-based organization with branches in 258 countries. The declaration emanating from this meeting encouraged all members to promote TCM research, legislation, standardization, and popularization around the world [25]. Moreover, the Belt and Road Initiative aims to spread Chinese institutions, including TCM, to over 70 countries with an emphasis on infrastructure development and other investments [26]. Building roads, bridges, buildings and other forms of groundwork usually in conjunction with national governments, has helped China develop relationships with many countries around the world. In fact, it appears that the Chinese government has a grand plan to spread Chinese social and economic prowess throughout the world using a variety of different strategies [27]. The Confucius Institute, an initiative of PRC's Ministry of Education, is one such large-scale program, which aims to promote Chinese cultures and languages, cultural exchanges, teaching and so forth. As a visiting scholar at the Beijing University of Chinese Medicine in 2018, I was invited to bring my students to the university for a week of learning and tourism and to work with the university as a researcher and a scholar in many different domains. This university was well organized, well-resourced and had ambitious plans for connecting with universities all over the world, with strong links and networks that were well established. TCM has a presence in most regions of the world [27]. Approximately 80% of 129 nations in a recent WHO study have regulated the use of acupuncture while 44% have created legislation for TCM practitioners and 30% have established education programs for Bachelors, Masters and Doctoral level education for TCM practitioners [27]. Several African countries have experienced TCM in treatment of malaria. Artemisinin, a TCM herb, has widely proliferated as an effective treatment for malaria [28]. European nations, such as Germany, are also showing growing interest in TCM clinics [29]. Pakistan, one of the nations along the Silk Road, continues the practice of TCM including qigong, herbs and other modalities in the treatment of chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder [30], amongst other conditions. Qatar, a wealthy nation also along the silk road, and part of the Belt and Road Initiative, has recently legislated parts of TCM and is developing diplomatic relationships with China that include cultural, literary, film, theater and other exchanges. The Chinese government's marketing strategy includes a comprehensive approach to developing closer ties with Qatar partly so that TCM will become a fixture in Qatari healthcare. While Qatar is a long way from accepting TCM as part of their mainstream allopathic healthcare system, TCM is, alongside Arabic traditional medicine, now accepted [30].

TCM IN CANADA

In Canada, TCM has a relatively strong presence, particularly in British Columbia (BC). BC was the first jurisdiction in North America to regulate TCM; a college and an association were created in 2001. Many private schools of TCM exist in BC and in 2015, the provincial government announced that it would support a publicly funded TCM college for the first time. Kwantlen Polytechnic University took up this challenge and now has a clinic and offers students over 450 hours of clinical practice.

BC is a relatively healthy province in Canada, with lower rates of cancer than the rest of the country [31]. British Columbians, particularly those living in the Lower Mainland, are well known for active lifestyles in the outdoors, nutritious eating habits, and the uptake of integrative health practices such as yoga, Tai Chi, and meditation [32]. As part of this overall interest in being healthy, other integrative health practices are also popular among British Columbians. Practices that promote wellbeing, prevent disease and treat illness with minimal/no side effects are high priority for many in this west coast province, often dubbed Lotus Land, for its adherence to practices that emanate from China and India.

Registered massage therapy is the number one form of non-western healthcare that is used in Canada [6]. TCM, chiropractic care, naturopathic medicine and other modalities are also popular [33]. Richmond and other areas with a high population of people of Chinese ancestry are often cited as healthy hotspots in this already healthy province [34].

Public health wisdom informs us that the two biggest determinants of population health are income and social status so the healthiest people are typically wealthy and socially powerful.

Beyond the social determinants of health, what modalities of healthcare do the healthiest people seek? The healthiest Canadians seek a variety of modalities of healthcare according to particular backgrounds and habit patterns. Massage therapy, chiropractic, physiotherapy and other integrative modalities are popular in Canada. Most Canadians who access systems of integrative healthcare are also accessing allopathic medicine. Canada's system of Medicare funds the provision of allopathic medical services as well as many tests and medications. While some notable exceptions exist, other systems of medicine are not generally covered under the umbrella of Medicare. Those who seek the services of TCM doctors therefore incur out of pocket expenses. Many Canadians have workplace medical insurance which covers at least part of these costs. Access to TCM and other systems of integrative healthcare is thus limited to those who can pay; some practitioners do have a sliding scale payment mechanism in efforts to be more inclusive. Group acupuncture, a growing service in BC, is another way to make TCM modalities more accessible to those with low incomes. Regardless, allopathic

medicine is free for all Canadians but virtually all other systems are private, so those living in poverty have limited access to non-allopathic care.

Like many OECD nations, Canada has not mainstreamed TCM; it continues to be outside of mainstream healthcare. Regardless, TCM has the potential to innovate the healthcare landscape in Canada, as elsewhere, by improving health status and lowering costs [35].

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

This article critically examined TCM within a social and economic framework. Within China the current government is focusing on further developing TCM, birthing a domestic renaissance. Previously, TCM was considered medicine for those living in poverty and in the countryside but is now becoming more widespread in its internal uptake [36]. Modernizing TCM essentially entails developing it under the lens of western scientific frameworks. The Chinese government is encouraging farmers in rural areas to grow TCM herbs as a way of bolstering the economy and improving the ecology of the countryside. TCM herbs have become a significant part of the internal pharmaceutical market accounting for one third of total sales [1]. Exports of TCM herbs have also increased.

A multiplicity of scientific frameworks exists; TCM was lodged within an ancient scientific framework. Evolving TCM as more of a western scientific system of medicine is seen as an essential component of modernization. Grand plans for the expansion of TCM have been in place for decades. In this current (third) phase of the growth of TCM, the emphasis is on integrating scientific and safety standards. The first phase was devoted to research and education within China while the second phase focused on creating TCM linkages outside the country. It is surprising that academic literature cites bold, open marketing plans for TCM, like this one, which assert that “this new era represents a golden opportunity for TCM to further consolidate its scientific base so as to play a bigger part in forging tomorrow’s medicines. To achieve this especially to reach the goals of better quality, safety and efficacy, the proposed rules of integrity, integration and innovation must be followed” [22]. Systems of medicine, throughout history, have proliferated through empires, so this is not new, but the audacious way the plan is articulated is unusual within the current global climate.

The current Chinese government considers this century “a new golden age for traditional medicine” and in collaboration with many global bodies is actively pursuing the proliferation of Chinese culture, economic power and medicine [22]. Many nations around the world have implemented some modalities, particularly acupuncture, within their healthcare constellation.

Traditional Chinese medicine has great potential for improving population health promotion, disease prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and palliation while probably lowering costs. Research-based evidence is relatively robust for many health concerns, particularly for acupuncture. Every region of the world has begun integrating TCM, mainly acupuncture, into their healthcare systems.

Prior to 2022, China’s success in preventing and treating COVID-19 with public health measures and TCM had catalyzed the nation’s growth and economic prowess. During the pandemic, China has grown its economic base. When the price of oil plummeted to negative numbers, for example, China was able to purchase large quantities of it. China additionally purchased a significant number of bankrupt or ailing companies at discounted prices. In 2022, China was blindsided by an extremely strong wave of COVID-19 from which it is struggling to emerge today, but it will emerge within some years. If things go according to plan, virtually all countries will incorporate some element of TCM into their healthcare systems by the year 2050, when China promises to be the ascendant economy on Earth.

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