

On Overseas Spread of TCM at ASEAN Countries and Its Enlightenment: Research into *Traditional Chinese Medicine Diplomacy — Tradition, Dialogue, and Goodwill*

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Abstract: Based on the framework of the book *Traditional Chinese Medicine Diplomacy: Tradition, Dialogue, and Goodwill*, this paper explores the overseas dissemination of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in ASEAN countries and its implications for cross-cultural competence development through case studies. Taking Singapore and Vietnam as typical cases, it analyzes TCM's dissemination models and effects in distinct sociocultural contexts, and highlights the core role of cross-cultural competence in TCM's international communication. The study concludes that TCM's successful overseas dissemination relies not only on historical and cultural ties but more critically on the effective construction and application of cross-cultural competence, enabling the shift from cultural export to value sharing — which requires synergistic efforts in national strategic support, narrative innovation, localized integration, practice standardization, and translation improvement.

Keywords: TCM diplomacy; ASEAN; Intercultural communication; TCM culture

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1. Introduction

With the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative, the international dissemination of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), as both a vital carrier of Chinese culture and a unique health resource, has become an important means to enhance the country's cultural soft power and participate in global health governance. This paper aims to review this book and, through case studies on the dissemination of TCM in ASEAN countries, examine the implementation strategies and implications of TCM diplomacy in Cross-Cultural contexts.

2. Review of the Book Content

2.1. Research Questions of the Book

Centering on the core question of “how to promote national external exchanges through TCM diplomacy”, this

book aims to provide new insights for diplomatic practices with Chinese characteristics, systematically exploring the conceptual definition, historical practical experiences, and development strategies of TCM diplomacy.

Government level: The book examines policy recommendations in areas such as legislation, strategic planning, and talent development, and analyzes how to strengthen China's discourse power and international competitiveness in TCM diplomacy through international comparisons.

Non-governmental level: Focusing on the critical roles of non-governmental TCM organizations, industry associations, enterprises, and overseas TCM clinics in external dissemination, it investigates ways to optimize assessment mechanisms and management structures to improve the TCM external communication system.

Individual level: From the perspectives of TCM scholars, practitioners, and diplomatic personnel, it examines their roles and practical strategies in TCM diplomacy, offering theoretical references and methodological guidance for individuals to advance the international dissemination of TCM.

2.2. Major Chapters of the Book

Chapter One is An Overview of TCM Diplomacy. This chapter outlines the concept, origins, and theoretical foundations of TCM diplomacy—first explicitly proposed in 2012. It discusses varying academic views on its dual nature as both public and health diplomacy, highlighting its people-oriented and medical characteristics, along with its potential to stabilize international relations. Historically, practices date back to the Warring States period, with exchanges along the Silk Road and during Zheng He's voyages. Modern engagement began through world expositions and hospitals treating foreign patients. The chapter summarizes TCM diplomacy's value across health, economic, technological, cultural, and public relations dimensions, while noting challenges in risk management, market access, education, and talent development. It proposes establishing overseas TCM centers as connectivity projects and promoting systematic development through inter-ministerial and public-private cooperation.

Chapter Two is Contemporary Practices of TCM Diplomacy. This chapter focuses on current forms and mechanisms, including medical aid, multilateral cooperation, leader involvement, and hub attraction - with medical teams and overseas centers being key vehicles. The acupuncture boom serves as a representative case, tracing its path from international attention during Nixon's visit, to regulatory breakthroughs in Canada, and eventual establishment of centers and insurance coverage in Europe. The case shows that medical narratives can foster cultural recognition, but sustainable growth requires compliance with local regulations and scientific support.

Chapter Three is Regional Practices of TCM in Global Health Governance. This chapter analyzes region-specific approaches for TCM's role in global health. In Central Asia, models draw on China's barefoot doctor experience through local TCM departments and herb cultivation. In Gulf countries, a multi-faceted strategy combines medical tourism, industrial cooperation, and ecological governance. In West Asia–North Africa, emphasis is placed on TCM's preventive care in chronic disease management via education and service trade. In Central and Eastern Europe, efforts under the “16+1 Cooperation” focus on service trade, talent training, and herb cultivation to navigate trade barriers.

Chapter Four is TCM Diplomacy within the Framework of Bilateral Cooperation. Examining country-level practices, this chapter highlights differentiated bilateral pathways. In the Americas, U.S.-China cooperation has evolved from acupuncture legislation to addressing trade friction, underscoring the need for innovation and IP protection. In Europe, countries like Hungary and the Czech Republic pursue growth within EU frameworks via telemedicine and research collaboration. In Asia, nations such as Lebanon, Singapore, and Vietnam have developed service-trade models integrated with cultural outreach, adapted to local laws and market needs.

Chapter Five is Promotion Strategies and Development Prospects of TCM Diplomacy. This chapter proposes a systematic implementation plan centered on overseas TCM centers, advocating a Balanced Score Card system to assess financial, customer, process, and growth dimensions. Under the Belt and Road framework, it suggests developing drought-resistant herb cultivation and new production bases, exploring a “cultural wellness + research + high-value products” model. From a policy perspective, it recommends improving coordination mechanisms, integrating TCM into universal health coverage, strengthening talent development, using digital tools, and advancing global health governance through multi-level cooperation.

3. Case Analysis of the Dissemination of TCM Culture in ASEAN Countries

3.1. The Spread of TCM in Singapore

3.1.1. Cultural Identity Foundation

The dissemination and development of TCM in Singapore are rooted in a profound cultural identity. During the 19th to early 20th centuries, large-scale migration from southern China to Singapore due to war and poverty brought TCM into the region, where it gradually became localized^[1]. Ethnic Chinese constitute approximately 74% of Singapore’s citizens and permanent residents, forming the fundamental carrier for the preservation and evolution of this cultural identity^[1]. Sharing common origins in Chinese civilization, the two countries exhibit high cultural homology in language, values, and traditional customs. Building on this foundation, TCM has developed systematically since the 1950s through the establishment of colleges and clinics, supported by government regulation and integration.

3.1.2. Market Environment

Singapore possesses a top-tier public health system while also facing challenges such as an aging population. Its TCM market is well-developed, with a large number of clinics and a robust system, and TCM treatments have reached over half of the population^{[1][2]}. Singapore also serves as a major export and re-export hub for Chinese herbal medicines and proprietary TCM products, relying heavily on imports and extending its influence across the ASEAN market.

3.2.3. Education

Educational collaboration and talent cultivation form the cornerstone of development. Singapore and China have signed multiple cooperation agreements, with Singapore recognizing TCM qualifications from eight leading Chinese medical universities and fostering deep collaboration in clinical practice and teaching^[2]. Talent development often occurs through joint programs with Chinese universities, supplemented by mandatory continuing education initiatives^[3].

3.2. The Spread of TCM in Vietnam

3.2.1. Cultural Identity Foundation

TCM was introduced to Vietnam around the 3rd century BC and over time integrated with local practices to form the Vietnamese *Dong Yi* (Eastern Medicine) system. It is important to note that TCM has been present in Vietnam for over two millennia. Dong Yi is not simply a local medicine but a fusion of indigenous traditions and TCM, also referred to as classical or ancient medicine. Within Vietnam’s healthcare system, it operates alongside Western

medicine and inherently embodies core TCM principles^{[4][5]}. This deep cultural integration strongly supports the dissemination and development of TCM in Vietnam.

3.2.2. Market Environment

Vietnam's economic growth has increased urban health awareness, with TCM gaining recognition for managing common and chronic diseases and offering therapies like acupuncture and massage. Private TCM clinics are widespread in both urban and rural areas, and Ho Chi Minh City has become a major hub for Chinese medicinal materials. Climate complementarity has fostered a bilateral trade in medicinal herbs. Many Chinese TCM companies have entered the Vietnamese market. In 2017, China exported 13,900 tons of medicinal materials to Vietnam, valued at over USD 100 million, representing a significant portion of China's exports to ASEAN and Belt and Road regions^[6]. Nevertheless, smuggling of medicinal materials persists, and Vietnam maintains strict import-export regulations.

3.2.3. Education

Vietnamese traditional medicine universities have partnered with Chinese TCM institutions for academic exchange. Eight medical colleges in Vietnam offer undergraduate programs in traditional medicine. Vietnam sends physicians to China annually for TCM training, recognizes Chinese degrees, and allows returnees to apply for practice licenses after internships. Domestically, Dong Yi research institutes and associations train multi-level talent, including postgraduates, physicians, and pharmacists, forming a nationwide traditional medicine network.

4. Discussion: Overseas Communication and Cross-Cultural Dialogue of TCM

For achieving local integration, the key lies in cultivating and leveraging the intercultural awareness. This section will further explore the pivotal role of this awareness and competence.

4.1. The Key Role of TCM for Cross-cultural Communication

Nowadays, international dialogue and communication have become vital channels for positive exchanges among nations. TCM, as a medical system and practical science rooted in China's rich cultural heritage, demonstrates remarkable intercultural competence in the fields of international communication and diplomacy.

4.1.1. Inherent Cultural Attributes

Deeply embedded within the knowledge system of traditional Chinese culture, TCM naturally inherits the scientific wisdom, labor achievements, and philosophical thought accumulated by the Chinese nation over centuries. As a distinctive cultural symbol, it carries intrinsic cultural value and communicative power. This unique cultural identity gives TCM a competitive edge in cross-cultural contexts. Its international appeal has grown significantly. To date, TCM-related exchanges and cooperation have reached 183 countries and regions, and acupuncture has been successfully inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, gaining widespread international recognition^[7].

As a cultural vehicle, TCM takes diverse forms in diplomatic contexts, extending beyond mere verbal or material expression. In diplomatic engagements, TCM can be experienced by national leaders through acupuncture or *tuina* massage, facilitate professional interactions via research exchanges, or provide humanitarian support through health aid programs. In 2000, Victoria became the first state in Australia to pass TCM legislation, marking

a pioneering case of TCM legalization in a Western country^[8]. Thus, across different diplomatic scenarios and audiences, TCM's cultural forms can be disseminated with a focus on practical efficacy, effectively reducing cultural barriers in real-world applications.

4.1.2. A Future Medicine Grounded in Traditional Essence

TCM's intercultural competitiveness stems from both its historical foundations and its future potential, which aligns with global health needs. In diplomatic contexts, cultural symbols alone may lack sustainability, whereas universal practical value forms the core of cross-cultural appeal. As modern Western medicine increasingly embraces a “comprehensive health and wellness” approach, TCM's long-standing emphasis on preventive care and holistic well-being resonates with contemporary trends. For example, the *Qingfei Paidu* Decoction (a TCM formulation for clearing lung heat and removing toxins), recommended by Chinese authorities, demonstrated over 90% effectiveness in clinical trials, underscoring TCM's practical value in public health emergencies^[7]. This illustrates that TCM principles such as preventive treatment and medicinal food homology are not merely historical concepts but constitute a coherent and systematic methodology with modern relevance.

4.2. Strategies and Methods for Promoting Cross-cultural Communication

4.2.1. Narrative Transformation via Modern Media

Globally, TCM is often mischaracterized by stereotypes of mysticism and relegated to alternative therapy. To counter this, its international communication must proactively craft a clear narrative centered on its cultural core—telling China's TCM story by highlighting its universal philosophy of holism and balance. Short-video platforms offer significant potential to disseminate TCM's legitimacy and healthcare value overseas. On platforms like YouTube, TCM content dissemination is already multi-polar, driven significantly by individual accounts and civil organizations, with overseas audiences generally holding positive attitudes, providing a solid foundation^[9].

For culturally distant markets, TCM's social media communication requires a discursive shift: from persuading acceptance of its principles to directly shaping its image as gentle, wellness-oriented, and holistic. ASEAN, with its deep historical and geographical ties to TCM, serves as a strategic anchor for TCM diplomacy. Communication needs to emphasize cultural affinity and homology with local traditional medicines to lower engagement barriers. Beyond this, it is better to clearly articulate the systematic advantages of modern TCM disseminated through overseas TCM centers in countries like Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam.

4.2.2. Institutional and Resource Safeguards

Robust institutions and resources are fundamental for TCM's cross-cultural competitiveness and diplomatic advancement. TCM's long-term overseas development hinges on legal practice status. Governments could engage target countries via multilateral channels to integrate TCM first into complementary and alternative medicine frameworks, then mainstream systems. Standardized legal templates and safety protocols are crucial for negotiations. By 2023, TCM had reached 196 countries and regions, with 30 overseas centers built under the Belt and Road Initiative and inclusion in 16 free trade agreements, showcasing progress from sustained governmental efforts^[10]. Continuous funding for overseas bases is also essential.

Dissemination of TCM needs a solid trade and industry foundation. In service trade, the medicine-led-by-practice model can build trust and pave the way for compliant product registration. By 2016, over 60 TCM institutions operated commercially in 20+ countries, and China dispatches about 2,000 TCM clinicians annually

abroad^[11]. In goods trade, a full-chain support system is needed for overseas herb cultivation and quality control, with simplified export procedures and encouragement for leading firms to build global brands. This creates a virtuous cycle: from service recognition, product access, standard export, to cultural acceptance.

4.2.3. Reforms in Talent Development

Targeted talent cultivation is key to advancing TCM's international dissemination, requiring emphasis on interdisciplinary skills, dissemination responsibility, and cross-cultural awareness. Moreover, a shortage of professional translators and cross-cultural interpreters hampers overseas dissemination^[12]. Models proposed by Heilongjiang University of Chinese Medicine integrating language proficiency with TCM literacy are needed^[6]. Curriculum reform can embed TCM thinking into language learning to ensure accurate and readable communication^[12].

Overseas TCM teaching materials often suffer from issues like poor adaptation^[13] or excessive vocabulary and insufficient localization^[12]. Materials need to center on classical TCM theory to maintain disciplinary integrity^[13]. Incentive mechanisms can encourage overseas practitioners to engage in social media and dissemination activities, amplifying individual contributions.

4.3. New Directions for TCM Diplomacy

Translation serves as a bridge for the cross-cultural dissemination of TCM, fundamentally involving the co-construction and sharing of meaning across cultures. As a medical system embedded in Chinese philosophical thought, TCM's core concepts—such as preventive treatment and treatment based on syndrome differentiation—as well as culture-loaded terms like *yin-yang* and *qi* require effective transcoding from the source culture to the target culture through translation^[14]. For such culture-loaded terms and specialized TCM terminology, translators must consider not only structural differences between Chinese and English but also external factors in cross-cultural communication. Strategies such as foreignization with annotations can be employed to supplement relevant background and cultural information, preventing misinterpretation by target readers and loss of essential meaning^[15]. From a communication studies perspective, the quality of translation directly influences the agenda-setting effect of TCM culture in the international discourse, making it a crucial means to counteract Western stereotypes of TCM and enhance its global voice^[12].

TCM culture often encounters cultural discount in cross-cultural communication due to its abstract terminology and profound philosophical concepts. Especially when addressing Western audiences, terms like *yin-yang* and *wuxing* (five elements) are prone to misunderstanding, thereby undermining TCM's scientific image^[16]. Therefore, TCM translation needs to adhere to three core principles: First, skopos-oriented approach—with accurate transmission of medical principles and effective conveyance of culture as the central aim, flexibly selecting translation strategies. Second, audience adaptation—based on the audience segmentation theory from communication studies, prioritize medical accuracy for professional audiences and cultural accessibility for general audiences. Third, dual fidelity—ensuring both the accuracy of medical terminology and the preservation of cultural connotations in core concepts^[14].

5. Conclusion

This paper reviews the book *Diplomacy of Traditional Chinese Medicine: Tradition, Dialogue, and Goodwill* and,

through case studies of typical ASEAN countries, explores the practices of TCM's overseas dissemination and the construction of intercultural competence. The cases of Singapore and Vietnam demonstrate that successful dissemination relies on deep cultural affinity, supportive market and policy environments, and sustainable educational cooperation.

The discussion further proposes that intercultural competence is central to achieving deeper international dissemination of TCM. This necessitates proactive transformation in narrative construction, robust institutional safeguards, and the cultivation of versatile cultural ambassadors. Among these, translation, as a key link in cross-cultural transcoding, may become a priority for future TCM diplomacy and academic research through its optimization and enhancement.

Looking ahead, the overseas dissemination of TCM and the diplomatic wisdom it embodies will play an even greater role in promoting mutual learning among civilizations, participating in global health governance, and contributing to the Health Silk Road initiative. Future research could further investigate topics such as the cognitive patterns of different regional audiences, the specific efficacy evaluation of digital dissemination, and the establishment of a standardized TCM translation system. This will continuously enrich and refine the theory and practice of TCM diplomacy, advancing TCM's contribution to global health and well-being.

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