

Overview of Research on Cross-Cultural Communication of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) Culture

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Abstract: There is increasing governmental support for Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)'s global outreach. Despite that many scholars have identified linguistic and intercultural difficulties in this process, the disconnect between cross-cultural communication research and TCM culture dissemination remains a critical barrier. This review is going to introduce the current state of research on intercultural communication and TCM culture, and then reveal the trend. By analyzing existing studies, this article seeks to ascertain the paucity of research that (1) fully represents the cultural richness of TCM, (2) explores its broad empirical foundations, and (3) develops strategies for effectively communicating its principles across diverse cultural contexts. The conclusion will synthesize key insights from the review, offering practical guidance for future research aimed at enhancing the global understanding and appreciation of TCM and TCM culture's value. Ultimately, this review aspires to contribute to a more inclusive global dialogue about TCM, supporting its integration into international healthcare systems and cultural narratives.

1. Introduction

With the support from the Chinese government, scholars started academic research on the international communication of TCM culture within the previous decade (e.g. Liu et al. (2016)^[1], Yan et al. (2017)^[2], Shao and Chen (2021)^[3], Cui (2021)^[4], Mao (2021)^[5]). Apart from the language barriers and communication channels, cross-cultural factors also influence the process of international dissemination of TCM culture. However, the gap between these two domains is still large. The purpose of this review is to analyze the published literature of intercultural communication and TCM culture, finding out the scarcity in order to provide directions for further studies.

Literally, cross-cultural communication is interaction across cultures, which can occur among individuals, groups, or countries. According to Dodd (1991)^[6], successful cross-cultural communication hinge on three factors: (1) positive emotions at the affective level, such as affirmation, self-esteem, comfort, trust, and safety; (2) beliefs held at the cognitive level, including expectations, stereotypes, uncertainties, and misunderstandings of rules or procedures; and (3) skills at the behavioral level, encompassing verbal and nonverbal communication abilities in intercultural contexts. On the other hand, TCM culture being discussed in this review, which is not equal to

TCM, involves three parts – spiritual culture, behavioral culture and material culture (Mao, 2021)^[5].

2. Contemporary Research on Cross-cultural Communication

Two well-known theories providing basics for the current studies in this field are Hall's classification of high-context and low-context cultures (1976)^[7] and Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (1984)^[8]. Cultural Quotient (CQ) (Earley and Song, 2003)^[9] is another newly-proposed one. Over the past decades, there have been other emerging ones like cultural hybridity (Frello, 2012)^[10] and critical intercultural communication (Nakayama and Halualani, 2013)^[11].

According to Edward T. Hall's framework of high-context and low-context cultures (1976)^[7], cultures are distinguished by the level of context required to interpret messages (e.g., implicit vs. explicit communication), which is useful for understanding miscommunication between context-dependent (e.g. Japan) and context-independent (e.g. Germany) cultures.

Cultural dimensions theory provides a model for comparing cultures by identifying six dimensions: individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity vs. femininity, long-term or short-term orientation, and indulgence vs. restraint (Hofstede et al., 2010)^[12]. It explains how cultural values shape communication preferences and behaviors. To illustrate, high power distance cultures may favor formal communication.

CQ or cultural intelligence, introduced by professor Earley and Soon, refers to an individual's capability to function effectively in culturally diverse settings (2003)^[9]. It's applied in professional training, for example, for healthcare workers, to enhance cross-cultural interactions.

During the recent decades, studies in cross-cultural communication have been interdisciplinary. They cover a wide range of sectors including psychology, business and management, social media, and healthcare. Each of these disciplines contributes innovative methods and perspectives to the study of cross-culture.

Theorist Triandis (1999)^[13] found one of the limitations of social psychology is that Western cultures tend to use linear logic while thinking is more holistic and context-based when making judgments in the East. Thus, he concluded that culture should have been taken into consideration when generalizing the experimental social psychological findings. Besides, cultural adaptation is a key area of cross-cultural psychology research today. More and more scholars started to unfold research on international students' cultural adaptation in different countries (or regions). For instance, according to the research (Wang et al., 2018)^[14], we can have a general understanding about socio-cultural adaptation of international students in the United States. There were also measures proposed in this journal paper to improve students' competence to establish their social network and communicate with peers.

In response to the shortcomings of the above-mentioned essential cross-cultural theories, some scholars have proposed their own specific comparative perspectives on cross-cultural business management based on the cultures of different countries. Ouchi (1981)^[15] conducted a comparative analysis of American and Japanese corporate management and called the typical American corporate management model the Type A organizational management model, and the Japanese one the Type J organizational management model. Brisco and Schuler's definition of cross-cultural human resource management was relatively broad: It is about understanding, studying, applying and reforming all human resource activities (2008)^[16]. In summary, it is the discipline of how to adapt human management to cultural characteristics.

With the social media platforms (e.g. TikTok, Bilibili, Instagram, and The Red Notes) nurturing rapidly in the past a few years, scholars (e.g. Blair et al. (2011)^[17]) shift their focus to cross-cultural communication and social media. Blair and his colleagues (2011)^[17] examined (1) changes in communication under media dynamics, and (2) the role of media in bridging cross-cultural gaps

across national and gender lines, finding that medias' effects on people may vary from one to another. Presently there is a trend that studies delve into various groups of people. Take the research (Azahra et al., 2025)^[18] as an example, it utilized a qualitative method and discussed influence of social media on cross-cultural communication among young adults, suggesting that proper and smart use of social media can maximize its role as a medium for better intercultural interaction.

As for integrative studies on cross-cultural communication and healthcare, contemporary research can be generally categorized into two types: One is about healthcare workers, and the other about patients. Essien (1994)^[19] explored the impact of the HIV disease and AIDS on the health professionals' attitudes and activities. And, the research conducted by Orb and Wynaden (2001)^[20] was about the influence of culture on the communication process between patients and healthcare workers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Grounded in the Hospital Survey on Patient Safety Culture (HSOPSC 2.0), Suryani, Letchmi and Binti Moch Said's study (2022)^[21] offered "initial evidence of the psychometric properties of the Indonesian-HSOPSC 2.0." They asserted that further studies should be done to improve its generalizability.

Obviously, with the acceleration of digitalization and advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-assisted society, cross-cultural research is showing a trend of diversification and interdisciplinary integration, focusing on both interpersonal communications and cultural interactions in the context of globalization. But the point is that the discipline still faces challenges such as theoretical fragmentation and insufficient empirical cases.

3. Contemporary Research on TCM Culture

Research on TCM culture is dominated by scholars from the Chinese mainland, mainly focusing on the following areas: (1) the positioning of TCM culture as both a component of traditional Chinese culture and an element of intangible cultural heritage; (2) its definition and essence; (3) the similarities, differences, and integration of TCM and Western medicine; and (4) specific dissemination practices and strategies across various countries and regions. At the same time, international cooperation and cross-cultural dialogue are gradually being promoted, especially under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Firstly, TCM culture is a quintessential part of traditional Chinese culture which enjoys a long history and involves extensive contents (Cui, 2021)^[4]. The formation and development of TCM's theoretical system closely align with China's excellent traditional culture, as its cultural roots, philosophical thoughts, and thinking patterns can all be found in traditional Chinese culture. Therefore, TCM culture can reflect to a considerable degree the cultural characteristics of the Chinese nation. Yu and Hong's article (2005)^[22] studied the impact of Confucianism on the development of TCM, particularly in response to critiques that Confucian culture led to the stagnation of Chinese politics, law, and science and technology, with TCM often cited as a representative example. They thought it was an issue that must be clarified. Actually, similar viewpoints still exist in the current time, being one of the obstacles for global spread of TCM and its cultures. And Wen (2010)^[23] discussed the idea of neutralization, the core in the cultural concept of TCM, from four aspects: the moral concept of putting people first, the health concept of following natural laws, the development concept of inheritance and elaboration, and the treatment concept of harmony.

The scientific and cultural nature of TCM together constitute the foundational value for its recognition as an intangible cultural heritage. Their relationship has also been the subject of scholarly analysis. Zhou believed that TCM was an intangible cultural heritage that embodied the unique characteristics of the Chinese nation (2010)^[24]. Also, he delved into TCM's originality vs. modernity, and prosperity vs. endangerment in his dissertation (2008)^[25].

To study the topic of international dissemination of TCM culture, the correct understanding is a must. Many scholars (e.g. Zhang (2018)^[26], Mao (2021)^[5], Wang et al. (2022)^[27], etc.) have had deep analysis on the definition and essence of TCM culture. Mao (2021)^[5] stated that TCM culture includes three parts: spiritual culture, behavioral culture and material culture, which provided clues about the contents to promote. In addition to the perception of TCM culture, relationships between TCM and Western medicine is another highlight. Western medicine emphasizes a particular organ, while TCM employs a holistic approach. Thus, the two are highly complementary. Jia and others (2018)^[28] started with the cultural differences between China and the West, and then analyzed the development path of the integration of TCM and Western medicine. They believed that only through the synergy of TCM and Western medicine, developed in a coordinated manner, can a higher-level integration be achieved – one that also represents the future direction of medical research. Though supplementing one another, they are not the same. TCM focuses on the interconnected organs and meridians of the whole person, and uses the method of syndrome differentiation for personalized diagnosis and treatment. In contrast, Western medicine turns to a unified, universal and standardized strategy. This makes it difficult for individuals from different cultural contexts to understand the distinctions between the two medical knowledge systems and then accept TCM and TCM-related Chinese culture (Liu et al., 2016)^[1].

Empirical research on the cross-cultural communication of TCM culture is mainly carried out with an emphasis on particular countries or regions. In Southeast Asian countries, Long and Zheng (2017)^[29] proposed strengthening exchanges and cooperation between governments and making corresponding policy adjustments based on the development status of TCM in different countries under the BRI. Yang and Chen (2020)^[30] figured out that an extreme shortage of professional teachers and the copied communication model were two hurdles contributing to such a suboptimal situation of TCM education in Malaysia. Examining the dissemination of TCM in Singapore, Sun et al. (2023)^[31] noted that both experts and the general public had participated in the online discourse construction of TCM, which had presented a comprehensive image of TCM to the people of Singapore and other parts of the world. Regarding the expansion of TCM in Australia, Garvey (2021)^[32] believed that it can be developed according to TCM's practical value and uniqueness. With reference to the current situation of TCM culture in Russia, it was pointed out that acupuncture had gradually been officially recognized and welcomed in Russia, but other TCM cultures like Tai Chi and Qigong had been difficult to gain recognition (Fu, 2019)^[33].

Referring to the above content, it can be summarized as follows: Rooted in its historical origins and contemporary values, current research on TCM culture centers on the connections between traditional and modern medical systems and disparities in cultural cognition. However, problems have also been exposed, for example, an over-reliance on qualitative case studies and a weak theory-practice connection.

4. Conclusion

From the above synthesis, it is clear that ongoing studies on the intercultural communication of TCM culture have made some progress; nevertheless, they exhibit several key limitations.

Firstly, existing studies don't fully convey the cultural intricacies of TCM. Although some scholars interpret and disseminate TCM through its cultural lens, many conflate TCM as a medical system with TCM culture, despite their interconnected yet distinct natures. This oversight highlights the need for deeper exploration of TCM's cultural connotations. As an illustration, the collectivism emphasized by Confucianism, a foundational value in TCM's treatment method, is underexplored in cross-cultural contexts. Likewise, the idea of neutralization in Traditional Chinese Philosophy is often obscured in translation. This underscores the importance of foreignization that preserves

cultural uniqueness.

Furthermore, the empirical research perspective continues to be insufficiently comprehensive. Prior studies predominantly focus on popular therapies, specifically herbal medicine, acupuncture, and tuina massage (*tuina*), but overlooking other essential practices like cupping, moxibustion, and medicated baths. This limited scope curbs a holistic grasp of TCM's diverse cultural dimensions. In addition, the dissemination of TCM culture across different countries and regions lacks substantial empirical investigation in areas such as audience reception, cultural adaptation processes, media representation, and the effectiveness of communication strategies. Although some studies had focused on related factors, only few exhaustively discussed through specific examples or theories.

Lastly, more powerful communication means are needed. The cross-cultural communication of TCM culture abroad lacks robust analysis, particularly regarding media channels and content. With the advent of the Internet and AI, innovative communication forms have emerged, yet their potential in effectively disseminating TCM culture remains largely unexamined. This gap is particularly evident when considering how to spread the three types of TCM culture – as outlined by Mao (2021)^[5] – spiritual, behavioral, and material culture.

To sum up, while current research provides valuable insights, it falls short in capturing TCM's cultural depth, empirical breadth, and effective cross-cultural communication strategies. Addressing these gaps through nuanced cultural interpretations, broader empirical studies, and innovative, adaptive approaches will enhance TCM's global understanding and foster meaningful intercultural exchange.

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