

# *Clinical Advantages of Traditional Chinese Medicine in the Context of "Healthy China"*

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**Abstract:** Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) culture is a treasure of the Chinese nation. It provides modern medicine with invaluable wisdom through its clinical principles of holistic view, syndrome differentiation and treatment, Yin-Yang and Five Elements, and "preventing disease before its onset", as well as its philosophical tenets of human-centeredness and moderate harmony. TCM holds significant advantages in prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation. First, compared to the aggressive methods of Western medicine and the drug resistance of Western pharmaceuticals, TCM exhibits minimal side effects. TCM therapies, such as manual techniques applied to acupoints and meridians, enhance immunity through safe, gentle approaches with few adverse effects. Herbal medicines, derived from natural sources and rationally processed, also demonstrate low toxicity. Second, in contrast to Western medicine's high recurrence rates and poor long-term efficacy, TCM regulates the body's holistic state to achieve sustainable therapeutic outcomes. Herbal medicines act gradually, making them particularly effective for chronic diseases with notable long-term benefits. In recent years, the Chinese government has prioritized TCM development, issuing policies to support its innovation, inheritance, and grassroots system construction. Chronic disease management and the establishment of community-level TCM networks are emphasized as key future goals. Concurrently, China promotes TCM's global recognition through international collaborations and cultural exchanges, aiming to enhance its clinical and cultural influence worldwide [38]. Finally, TCM embodies profound cultural significance. Its theoretical foundations, rooted in classical texts like Huangdi Neijing, the philosophy of Yin-Yang balance, and humanistic values, form a brilliant facet of China's traditional culture. TCM's strengths in clinical practice, policy frameworks, and cultural depth contribute uniquely to individual health and national governance under initiatives like "Healthy China".

**Keywords:** Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), Chronic Diseases, Side Effects, Long-Term Efficacy, Healthy China

## 1. Introduction

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has a history spanning thousands of years and constitutes an essential part of Chinese culture, serving as a valuable heritage of Chinese civilization. TCM exhibits significant advantages, particularly in the treatment of chronic diseases. However, due to factors such as the social environment, healthcare system, and talent development framework, TCM has not received the attention and inheritance it deserves. It faces challenges related to trust and adoption. In response, this paper will compare the advantages and disadvantages of TCM and Western medicine,

including an analysis of side effects and long-term efficacy. It will also explore TCM policies, focusing on its development and dissemination, as well as the cultural aspects of TCM, to highlight its strengths. The ultimate goal is to further explore the potential of TCM in the prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation of chronic diseases, thereby making a greater contribution to human health.

## **2. Minimal side effects**

### **2.1. Side effects of western medicine**

#### **2.1.1. Side effects of surgery and chemotherapy**

The fundamental approach of Western medicine in treating chronic diseases is to address the symptoms directly, often employing aggressive interventions that inevitably lead to certain side effects. Common treatment methods in Western medicine include surgery, chemotherapy, and radiotherapy, all of which directly target the affected area but may also harm surrounding tissues, organs, and the immune system, leading to significant side effects. Surgery can cause damage to surrounding tissues, resulting in dysfunction of blood vessels, nerves, and other structures. Extracorporeal shock wave lithotripsy (ESWL), a widely used treatment for kidney stones, can lead to renal function impairment post-procedure, causing complications such as renal tubule dilation, necrosis, and capillary rupture [1]. Similarly, while chemotherapy drugs are designed to destroy tumor cells, they also harm normal cells, resulting in severe side effects, including nausea, vomiting, hair loss, and bone marrow suppression. Chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting (CINV) can further cause electrolyte imbalances and malnutrition while exacerbating anxiety and depression in patients. These negative emotions may reduce patient compliance with treatment and, in severe cases, lead to treatment discontinuation, posing a life-threatening risk [2].

#### **2.1.2. Side effects of western drugs**

Western drugs typically have a single active ingredient and follow a well-defined mechanism in treating diseases by promoting or inhibiting specific physiological processes in the body. While this targeted approach yields effective results, it also comes with significant side effects. Some drugs require metabolism and excretion through specific organs, while others may cause dependence and drug resistance, both of which can lead to severe adverse reactions. For instance, in the treatment of respiratory diseases, glucocorticoids and broad-spectrum antibiotics are essential for managing stable chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). However, glucocorticoid use can contribute to lung function decline [3]. In the treatment of neurological disorders, cholinesterase inhibitors such as donepezil hydrochloride are used to manage cognitive impairment following ischemic stroke. Nevertheless, extensive studies have shown that donepezil hydrochloride tablets can cause contact urticaria and damage the myocardium and kidneys, with severe cases posing life-threatening risks [4]. The liver, being the primary organ for drug metabolism, is particularly vulnerable to drug-induced damage. Many medications, including antibiotics, tetracyclines, and anti-tuberculosis drugs such as isoniazid and rifampin, as well as the prolonged use of antipyretic and analgesic drugs, exert toxic effects on the liver. These medications can cause abnormal liver pain and other hepatic dysfunction symptoms [5].

## **2.2. Advantages of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)**

### **2.2.1. Holistic approach of TCM**

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) emphasizes the holistic nature of the human body. The human body comprises multiple internal organs, tissues, and systems that are interconnected and mutually

restrictive, forming an indivisible organic whole. Centered around the five viscera (heart, liver, spleen, lungs, and kidneys), TCM connects the six bowels, five sensory organs, and seven orifices through the meridian system, thereby integrating all body structures and organs into a unified system. Through the functions of essence, qi, blood, and bodily fluids, the body maintains coordinated physiological activities [6].

The concepts of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements form fundamental principles of ancient Chinese philosophy. TCM employs the theories of Yin-Yang opposition, interdependence, waxing and waning, and transformation to explain the body's structural organization, physiological functions, and pathological changes, guiding disease prevention, diagnosis, and treatment. According to TCM, imbalances in Yin-Yang and disharmony in the Five Elements manifest as illnesses. Thus, when studying pathological changes in a specific body part, it is essential not only to examine local abnormalities but also to consider the overall structure of the human body [7].

In disease treatment, TCM applies the principles of Yin-Yang, the Five Elements, and the meridian-viscera system to adopt indirect treatment methods, thereby minimizing harm and side effects. This approach helps improve bodily functions, enhance immunity, combat diseases, alleviate pain and suffering, and ultimately improve the quality of life.

### 2.2.2. Minimal side effects of TCM therapies

Acupoint massage regulates the flow of qi and blood in the meridians through direct manual stimulation of specific acupoints. Meridians serve as pathways for qi and blood circulation, while acupoints are specific locations along these pathways. Techniques such as kneading and pushing promote circulation, relieve blood stasis, and effectively alleviate diseases and discomfort. These methods are gentle and have minimal side effects. For instance, in patients with dysphagia due to stroke, massaging the Lianquan (CV23) and Fengchi (GB20) acupoints can improve cerebral blood supply and restore the normal function of the nerves and muscles involved in swallowing, thereby enhancing their ability to swallow [8]. Traditional TCM exercises such as Tai Chi and Wu Qin Xi (Five Animal Frolics) regulate the coordination of form, qi, and spirit, harmonizing the organs and qi-blood circulation. Through specific postures, these exercises enhance immunity, prevent diseases, and pose minimal side effects. For patients with heart failure, specific movements in Wu Qin Xi, such as the Bird Play and Bear Play, help regulate the heart, improve qi and blood circulation, and enhance cardiac function, thereby improving daily life quality [9]. Tuina (Chinese therapeutic massage) is often combined with Wu Qin Xi for rehabilitation. Studies have shown that this combination is highly effective in treating lumbar muscle strain, with no side effects, a low recurrence rate, and high safety, making it suitable for clinical application and promotion [10]. Acupuncture stimulates specific acupoints to balance Yin-Yang, promote the normal circulation of qi and blood, and enhance the body's resistance to disease. Since acupuncture primarily works through the meridian system rather than directly impacting organs, it is a safe and reliable treatment method. In treating insomnia, Fang's scalp acupuncture combined with body acupuncture has shown effective clinical outcomes for insomnia caused by heart-kidney disharmony. By unblocking meridians and improving nerve conduction and excitability, this method reduces excessive Yang activity and restores Yin-Yang balance [11]. In stroke treatment, Liu Yanfang and colleagues have demonstrated that combining scalp acupuncture with medication significantly improves cognitive function in patients with post-ischemic stroke cognitive impairment. This approach addresses the limitations of Western medicine, which typically targets only a single pathological mechanism, thus avoiding many adverse drug effects while delivering safe and effective clinical outcomes [12]. Electroacupuncture, which integrates acupuncture with electrical stimulation, enhances therapeutic efficacy by combining needle stimulation with pulsed electrical currents. In treating diabetes and its common chronic complications,

Feng Y et al. found that electroacupuncture improves insulin sensitivity and reduces insulin resistance, thereby mitigating insulin-related side effects and yielding significant therapeutic benefits [13].

### **2.2.3. Minimal side effects of Chinese herbal medicine**

Compared to Western medicine, Chinese herbal medicine generally has fewer side effects and a higher safety profile, primarily due to its natural composition and lower toxicity. In the treatment of diabetic nephropathy (DN), TCM formulations such as Zhixiao Wenshenning and Zhixiao Baoshenning have been shown to lower blood glucose levels in diabetic patients, improve symptoms, reduce proteinuria, and protect kidney function with notable efficacy [14]. Herbal bathing therapy, which involves soaking the whole body or specific areas in a decoction of medicinal herbs, utilizes the dual effects of medicinal properties and thermal stimulation to promote transdermal drug absorption. This method is safe, convenient, and minimally invasive. Studies have found that the Tibetan herbal bath therapy known as Wuwei Ganlu can alleviate muscle spasms in stroke patients and accelerate recovery [15]. Currently, surgery remains the primary clinical treatment for advanced gastric cancer and the only potentially curative option. However, surgery alone is insufficient for achieving a complete cure in patients with mid-to-late-stage gastric cancer, as 50% to 90% of cases experience local recurrence and metastasis, with a five-year survival rate of approximately 30% [16].

Although a small number of Chinese herbal medicines exhibit mild toxicity, processing techniques known as "Paozhi" are employed to modify raw medicinal materials, enhancing therapeutic efficacy while reducing toxicity. Studies have shown that patients receiving processed herbal medicines experience significantly lower risks of adverse drug reactions and exhibit improved clinical outcomes. In summary, Paozhi-prepared Chinese herbal medicines enhance medication safety, have minimal side effects, and provide better treatment results [17].

## **3. Great long-term efficacy**

### **3.1. Poor long-term efficacy of western medicine and surgery**

#### **3.1.1. Poor long-term efficacy of western surgical procedures**

Western medicine employs surgery as an effective means to treat diseases by addressing existing problems. However, postoperative complications often arise, including new symptoms or worsening conditions, leading to poor long-term outcomes. Endoscopic submucosal dissection (ESD) is a major treatment for esophageal squamous cell carcinoma (ESCC). However, the background mucosa remains potentially malignant, increasing the risk of metachronous recurrence in ESD-treated ESCC patients [18]. Intra-articular injection is a direct treatment for knee osteoarthritis (KOA) that effectively alleviates pain and improves joint function. However, as an invasive procedure, it increases the risk of joint infection over time and can cause irreversible damage to cartilage, leading to poor long-term efficacy and patient dissatisfaction [19]. Given the risks of recurrence and complications associated with Western medical treatments, patients urgently need alternative approaches with better long-term efficacy.

#### **3.1.2. Poor long-term efficacy of western medications**

Chronic diseases often require long-term or lifelong medication. Western medicine primarily focuses on short-term disease control, which can lead to rebound effects and recurrence, making its long-term efficacy unsatisfactory. Lupus nephritis (LN) is typically treated with high-dose corticosteroids for six months to a year [20]. However, prolonged medication use often results in diminishing effectiveness at higher doses and rebound effects when dosage is reduced, leading to poor long-term

outcomes and negatively impacting patients' quality of life. Celecoxib and diclofenac sodium are among the most commonly used nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) for KOA treatment. While they effectively relieve pain in the short term, long-term use can damage the gastrointestinal tract and contribute to disease recurrence or progression. For migraines, the commonly prescribed drug Comproser has been found by Yang Li et al. to have poor long-term efficacy. Prolonged use negatively affects the gastrointestinal and nervous systems, and most patients experience relapse after discontinuing the medication [21].

## **3.2. Superior long-term efficacy of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)**

### **3.2.1. TCM's preventive medicine philosophy**

TCM's "preventive treatment" philosophy originates from The Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon (Huangdi Neijing). It emphasizes three key principles: preventing diseases before they occur, preventing progression in existing diseases, and preventing relapse after recovery. TCM views disease as a result of the dynamic balance between "righteous qi" (body's resistance) and "pathogenic qi" (disease-causing factors). After illness onset, TCM adopts a holistic approach, regulating Yin-Yang balance to prevent disease recurrence. This philosophy not only reflects ancient wisdom in disease prevention but also aligns with modern health preservation practices. It provides valuable guidance in disease prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation. Furthermore, TCM follows the principle of syndrome differentiation (Bian Zheng Lun Zhi), which considers biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors. This comprehensive approach helps maintain overall bodily balance, effectively preventing disease relapse [22]. Unlike Western medicine, which often focuses on immediate symptom relief, TCM emphasizes long-term internal stability, ultimately improving patients' overall health and quality of life.

### **3.2.2. Advantages of TCM therapies in long-term efficacy**

According to TCM's theory of the interconnection between meridians and internal organs, acupoints are closely related to visceral functions. Acupoint therapy helps regulate physiological functions, improve qi and blood circulation, prevent diseases, and strengthen the body, contributing to its long-term therapeutic effects. Acupoint application combined with warming-Yang and cold-dispelling therapy is an essential component of TCM-based pulmonary rehabilitation. Studies have shown that this approach significantly alleviates dyspnea and enhances exercise endurance in stable chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) patients, demonstrating superior long-term efficacy compared to Western rehabilitation methods [23]. Warm acupuncture therapy, which integrates acupuncture and moxibustion, improves blood circulation and restores qi-blood balance. It has been proven to have superior long-term efficacy with minimal patient discomfort. Wang Yake's research found that a modified Guizhi Fuzi Tang formula combined with warm acupuncture effectively treats cold-damp rheumatoid arthritis and prevents disease progression [24]. Qiu Ling et al. investigated the effects of warm acupuncture combined with rehabilitation training for KOA patients living in post-earthquake resettlement housing. Their study demonstrated significant pain relief, with the analgesic effects persisting long after treatment. Therefore, warm acupuncture is considered a stable and reliable long-term treatment [25]. Additionally, the modern adaptation of Wu Qin Xi (Five Animal Frolics) emphasizes coordinated body movements, enhancing musculoskeletal strength. Postmenopausal women are at high risk of osteoporosis, but research shows that practicing Wu Qin Xi helps slow bone loss, improve cardiopulmonary function, and promote mental well-being, thereby enhancing overall quality of life with significant long-term therapeutic effects [26].



### 3.2.3. Advantages of Chinese herbal medicine in long-term efficacy

The long-term efficacy of Chinese herbal medicine has garnered increasing attention. Extracted from plants and animals, Chinese herbs have a gradual but effective impact on chronic diseases and complex conditions. With consistent use over time, they help regulate the body and provide lasting therapeutic effects. Liu Meiying's long-term follow-up study on patients with chronic renal failure (CRF) revealed that TCM treatment significantly improved laboratory indicators for early-to-mid-stage chronic interstitial nephritis and chronic glomerulonephritis. The study concluded that syndrome differentiation-based TCM therapy—particularly using Buzhong Yiqi Tang—effectively alleviates symptoms and slows disease progression, demonstrating excellent long-term efficacy [27]. Yu Jinzheng studied 134 patients with diabetic nephropathy at the renal insufficiency compensation stage, dividing them into Yin-deficiency, Yang-deficiency, and Yin-Yang deficiency subtypes. The respective treatments—Zhixiao Tongmai Ning, Zhixiao Wenshen Ning, and Zhixiao Baoshen Ning—proved effective in delaying disease progression, offering superior long-term benefits [28]. Primary nephrotic syndrome (PNS) is a severe pediatric urological condition that can lead to various complications, significantly affecting children's physical and mental health. The Jianpi Bushen Huoxue Lishui formula has been shown to effectively relieve clinical symptoms, reduce inflammation, improve kidney function and immunity, and lower mid-to-long-term recurrence rates. It has demonstrated satisfactory clinical efficacy and high safety, making it a viable adjunctive treatment for pediatric PNS [29].

## 4. Policy support

### 4.1. Policies supporting the development of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)

Chronic diseases have become a major public health concern in China, significantly affecting residents' health. TCM, with its unique advantages, plays a crucial role in the prevention and treatment of chronic diseases. In recent years, the government has introduced numerous policies to promote TCM. In 2019, the Healthy China Action (2019–2030) was issued by the Healthy China Action Promotion Committee, emphasizing the large-scale development of non-pharmacological TCM therapies. The policy highlighted TCM's unique role in preventing and treating common, frequently occurring, and chronic diseases and aimed to expand TCM-based rehabilitation services [30]. As a result, TCM comprehensive service centers have been increasingly established in hospitals, the promotion of non-pharmacological TCM techniques has intensified, and the accessibility of TCM services has improved. In 2023, the General Office of the State Council released the Implementation Plan for Major Projects to Revitalize and Develop TCM, calling for the active implementation of TCM health promotion initiatives across China. Sixteen provinces have issued specific action plans to advance TCM health promotion [31]. The plan seeks to improve clinical treatment, rehabilitation, nursing, chronic disease management, scientific research, and healthcare services within TCM. It also encourages secondary and higher-level TCM hospitals to strengthen geriatric departments, providing comprehensive prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation for elderly patients with chronic diseases [32]. Despite TCM's advantages in managing chronic diseases, the system remains underdeveloped. To address this, the plan proposes establishing a robust TCM healthcare service system, leveraging TCM's strengths in elderly chronic disease management and rehabilitation. The 14th Five-Year Plan for TCM Development further aims to enhance grassroots TCM services by constructing county-level TCM hospitals, community TCM clinics, and "Famous Doctors' Halls." These initiatives will enhance TCM's role in disease prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, public health, and health education [33]. Currently, there is limited policy support for the development of grassroots TCM services. As the foundation of TCM development, grassroots TCM service systems play a crucial role

in chronic disease prevention and management. Thus, the government is actively working to improve these systems, positioning TCM as a key player in chronic disease recovery. Additionally, there is a growing expectation that TCM will fully realize its potential in preventive medicine.

#### **4.2. Policies supporting the global promotion of TCM**

TCM's advantages have gained international recognition, and its global influence continues to grow. In 2021, the National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine and the Office of the Leading Group for the Promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative jointly formulated the Development Plan for the High-Quality Integration of TCM into the Belt and Road Initiative (2021–2025). This plan aims to establish 30 high-quality overseas TCM centers and 56 TCM international cooperation bases, thereby creating a high-level medical service platform [34]. TCM education and clinical research have expanded globally, with government-supported teaching activities now taking place in multiple countries. Several TCM universities have established international collaborations, further enhancing the recognition of TCM worldwide. As a result, a high-level international TCM medical platform is gradually taking shape.

#### **5. The cultural significance of TCM**

TCM culture is an integral part of traditional Chinese culture, carrying profound historical significance and practical value. With a history spanning thousands of years, TCM embodies the wisdom and experience of the Chinese people, serving as a vital representation of Chinese civilization. Classic texts such as *The Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon* (Huangdi Neijing), *Treatise on Cold Damage and Miscellaneous Diseases* (Shang Han Za Bing Lun), and *Systematic Differentiation of Warm Diseases* (Wen Bing Tiao Bian) are considered treasures of Chinese culture. These foundational works established TCM theory and serve as key repositories of TCM philosophy, diagnostic methods, and treatment principles [35]. They provide a strong theoretical basis for both treatment and rehabilitation.

Moreover, TCM culture is a significant symbol of Chinese identity, fostering national pride and cultural cohesion. Core philosophical concepts such as harmony between humans and nature (Tian Ren He Yi) and Yin-Yang balance emphasize coexistence with nature and holistic well-being. The fundamental principle of putting people first and healing the world reflects the deep humanitarian spirit of TCM. These cultural values have had a lasting impact on Chinese civilization. The concept of Tian Ren He Yi, for example, embodies the Confucian ideal of benevolence (Ren), guiding ethical and moral development. It not only provides a deep philosophical foundation for moral values but also enhances the cultural and ethical significance of traditional Chinese civilization [36]. Therefore, TCM is more than just a medical system—it is a cultural treasure with unique philosophical advantages.

#### **6. Conclusion**

In the modern era, rapid economic development has led to lifestyle changes, increasing the demand for health management and chronic disease prevention. TCM offers an effective solution to the side effects and recurrence issues associated with Western medicine and surgical treatments. With fewer side effects and better long-term efficacy, TCM also possesses cultural and philosophical strengths. The advantages of TCM in chronic disease treatment and rehabilitation are increasingly recognized. In response, the government has introduced numerous policies to support TCM development and international promotion, strengthening public confidence in TCM culture and treatment methods. Looking ahead, with collective efforts, TCM's potential will continue to be harnessed, its healthcare

system will be further improved, and China's public health framework will advance. Ultimately, TCM will contribute its wisdom and strength to the prevention and treatment of chronic diseases.

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