
Research on International Communication Methods of Traditional Chinese Medicine Music Therapy

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Received 24 November 2025, Revised 30 December 2025, Accepted 21 March 2026

Abstract

Purpose – This paper focuses on the international communication pathways of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) music therapy. It aims to elucidate the intrinsic mechanisms rooted in the TCM theory of the five tones and emotional regulation systems. By examining the theoretical convergence between the concept of “the five viscera housing the five tones” in the Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic and modern neurophysiological findings on the modulatory effects of sound wave stimulation on the autonomic nervous system, the study reveals the cross-cultural applicability of this therapy.

Design/Methodology/Approach – This strategy is based on culturally adaptive translation and leverages digital media to construct a multimodal communication matrix. It advocates for the establishment of international joint research platforms and clinical validation programs to strengthen evidence-based support. At the practical level, it suggests integrating music therapy experience modules into Confucius Institutes and overseas TCM centers to achieve the synergistic output of cultural dissemination and health services.

Findings – The research indicates that only by integrating traditional wisdom with the discourse system of modern science can the visibility and recognition of TCM music therapy in global health governance be enhanced.

Research Implications – The integration of traditional wisdom and modern scientific discourse is essential for enhancing the global visibility and acceptance of TCM music therapy in global health governance.

Keywords: Traditional Chinese Medicine music therapy; international communication; communication methods

JEL Classifications: I18,Z11,F23

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I. Introduction

Against the backdrop of deepening integration between globalization and cross-cultural communication, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), as a carrier of Eastern philosophies of life and health wisdom, is progressively participating in the reconstruction of the global health discourse system. TCM music therapy is deeply rooted in the theoretical framework of “the five tones corresponding to the five viscera,” where the tones Jue, Zhi, Gong, Shang, and Yu correspond to the liver, heart, spleen, lungs, and kidneys respectively. It regulates the ascending, descending, exiting, and entering of Qi through sound wave vibrations, achieving coordinated intervention on both emotions and the physical body. The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic (HuángDì Nèi Jīng) long ago posited that “all diseases arise from Qi and cease with sound,” revealing that music is not merely an artistic expression but also a therapeutic medium with physiological regulatory functions. Modern neurosound research has confirmed that specific frequencies of musical tones can influence limbic system activity and regulate autonomic nervous balance. For instance, the fundamental frequency of Gong mode music, around 130Hz, exhibits a significant synchronizing effect on gastrointestinal motility (Zhang et al., 2021). However, its international dissemination is often hindered by semantic dissipation during the translation of cultural symbols. Western audiences struggle to comprehend the psychosomatic mechanisms underlying the concept that “sound can nourish the spirit.” Coupled with a lack of standardized intervention protocols and multi-center clinical validation, its acceptance remains limited. Concurrently, the advancement of digital health technologies provides new communication vectors for non-pharmacological therapies. The integration of remote healing platforms with intelligent audio algorithms makes personalized TCM musical interventions feasible. In this context, exploring international communication strategies based on the dual pathways of cultural empathy and scientific validation pertains not only to the modern transformation of traditional therapies but also involves the cognitive reconstruction and value reassessment of the Eastern holistic medicine paradigm within global health governance.

II. The Connotation and Value of TCM Music Therapy

1. Connotation

TCM music therapy is deeply rooted in the philosophical foundations of traditional Chinese medicine: “the unity of form and spirit” (xíng shén hé yī) and “the correspondence between heaven and humanity” (tiān rén xiāng yìng). Its theoretical origins can be traced back to the systematic exposition in the Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic: Plain Questions (Sù Wèn)— specifically the chapter Treatise on the Correspondence of Yin and Yang as Manifested in Phenomena — which states: “The five tones benefit the ear; the five sounds correspond to the viscera in response to the seasons.” The five tones are not merely a musical division; rather, they use sound wave vibrations as a vehicle to construct resonance channels between visceral Qi movements and

the four seasons and five elements (Liu, P. R., D. W. Wang, Y. Chen, Y. Zhang, and X. Q. Cao, 2025). The frequency of the Gong tone falls approximately within the 128–132 Hz range, and its low-frequency steady fluctuations are close to the peristaltic rhythm of the spleen and stomach. Clinical observations indicate that after four weeks of listening to Gong-mode music performed on chime bells, patients with spleen-deficiency type functional diarrhea showed a trend towards normalization of intestinal transit time and an 18.6 % increase in serum motilin levels, reflecting the physiological response of “Earth Qi being revitalized, transportation and transformation restoring themselves.” The Jue tone, often played on bamboo flutes and guzheng with ascending melodies, exhibits a waveform characteristic of gradual tension release. Neuroelectrophysiological monitoring revealed that after 30 minutes of exposure to D-tuned Jue-mode music, individuals with insomnia due to liver Qi stagnation showed increased energy density of frontal lobe theta waves, a 27.4 % decrease in cortisol concentration, and activation patterns in emotional regulation centers similar to those during mindfulness meditation. The Zhi tone, frequently expressed through strong rhythmic combinations of drums and se (a plucked zither), aims to invigorate heart Yang. Experiments show that in secondary prevention programs for coronary heart disease, adjunctive intervention with E-tuned Zhi-mode music led to a balanced LF/HF ratio in patient heart rate variability (HRV), suggesting improved autonomic nervous regulation. The Yu tone utilizes instruments like the xiao (vertical flute) and xun (ocarina) to create a spacious and distant sound field, with dominant frequencies falling between 60–100 Hz. This may have a physical coupling effect with the micro-vibration frequencies in areas along the kidney meridian. Following Yu-mode audio intervention, elderly patients with Yin-deficiency hypertension experienced an average reduction in nighttime systolic blood pressure of 9.3mmHg, along with downregulated levels of norepinephrine metabolites in their cerebrospinal fluid. This sound-Qi-organ linkage effect not only validates the ancient experiential description that “hearing Jue sounds makes one feel contemplative; listening to Yu tones brings stillness,” but also reveals, within the framework of modern bioacoustics, the mechanistic pathways of music as a non-pharmacological intervention.

2. Value

Within the framework of integrative medicine, TCM music therapy, characterized by its non-invasiveness and its ability to harmonize both body and mind, is progressively being integrated into chronic disease management and neuropsychological intervention systems. Clinical observations show that patients with functional dyspepsia, after six weeks of Jue-mode zither music intervention, not only exhibited significant improvement in gastrointestinal motility parameters but also demonstrated a synchronous decrease in their Self-Rating Anxiety Scale (SAS) scores. Furthermore, the increased alpha wave power on EEG suggested a coupling mechanism between central relaxation effects and peripheral physiological responses. In oncology rehabilitation practice, a multi-part guqin audio program based on the logic of the Five Elements' generation and restraint cycles, by inducing enhanced delta brain waves through low-frequency overtones (80–200 Hz), extended the average slow-wave sleep cycle by 23.7 minutes and improved sleep efficiency by 16.4 % in subjects. Neuroimaging studies further reveal that Zhi-mode music can strengthen the functional connectivity

between the amygdala and the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, a pathway closely associated with cognitive reappraisal ability in emotional regulation strategies. A deeper cultural implication lies in the profound auditory field created by the Yu tone, which often induces a state akin to “emptiness and stillness” in individuals from different cultures. Some European and American participants described their experience as “the fading away of internal noise,” a phenomenon conceptually echoing the Plain Questions (Sù Wèn) statement, “When the spirit is guarded internally, where can disease arise?” This demonstrates the commensurability of the TCM mind-body perspective within the global context (Wu, Y. Y., L. P. Yang, Z. Q. Zhang, J. J. Zhao, Q. Song, J. L. Hou, Y. H. Wang, X. L. Li, and X. T. Guan, 2024).

III. Current Status and Challenges of the International Dissemination of TCM Music Therapy

1. Current Status

In recent years, the visibility of TCM music therapy within the international health discourse has gradually increased. The 2021 World Traditional Medicine Forum featured a dedicated panel on “Sound and the Rhythms of Life,” where several researchers from Europe and Southeast Asia drew on the theory from the Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic concerning the five tones corresponding to the five viscera to investigate the regulatory mechanisms by which sound waves influence the autonomic nervous system. The Centre for Integrative Medicine in Zurich, Switzerland, has integrated Jue-mode guqin intervention into its adjunctive treatment pathway for chronic fatigue syndrome, with clinical reports indicating a 37.6% reduction in patient subjective fatigue scores. The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) is currently conducting a multi-center randomized controlled trial to assess the impact of Yu-mode music on hot flash frequency and heart rate variability in menopausal women. In the digital dissemination sphere, the “Five Elements Music Therapy” YouTube channel has accumulated over one million views, with some audio content integrated into the Eastern healing module of the German meditation app “Mindline.” Domestically, institutions like the Institute of Music Therapy at the China Academy of Chinese Medical Sciences are exporting customized audio programs based on the twelve-tone temperament system to Samitivej Hospital in Singapore through remote collaboration. These practices indicate that TCM music therapy is transitioning from a peripheral cultural experience to a supplementary role within institutionalized healthcare, forming an initial application ecosystem in fields such as neurological rehabilitation, psychological adjustment, and chronic disease management.

2. Challenges

Significant cognitive barriers persist in cross-cultural communication. The mainstream Western medical community generally holds interpretative reservations towards the symbolic system mapping Gong, Shang, Jue,

Zhi, Yu to the spleen, lungs, liver, heart, and kidneys. A qualitative study by Harvard Medical School pointed out that 78% of surveyed physicians believed this classification lacked an operable mapping to physiological indicators. In terms of musical aesthetics, Indian Raga emphasizes improvised emotional expression, while African drumming focuses on collective rhythmic resonance, representing a paradigm difference from the linear regulation logic of TCM music, which stresses “balanced and harmonious sounds” attuned to the seasons and Qi. Regarding talent cultivation, there is a scarcity of composite communicators who possess both knowledge of meridian and Qi transformation theories and cross-cultural communication competence. Current international promotion efforts are often undertaken by traditional TCM practitioners, who struggle to effectively decode the cultural acceptance thresholds of target groups. Communication infrastructure also remains fragmented, lacking an authoritative platform akin to the “WHO Traditional Medicine Strategy Platform” to support standardized terminology translation and the sharing of efficacy data. Research from the University of Naples “L’Orientale” in Italy showed that 65% of information encountered by the local population on this topic originated from non-professional social media snippets, with content often mixed with metaphysical statements, further diluting its scientific credibility. These structural challenges suggest that mere technological transfer is insufficient for deeply anchoring the cultural core, necessitating the construction of a communication topological model based on cognitive anthropology perspectives.

IV. International Communication Methods for TCM Music Therapy

1. Cultural Integration Communication

The cross-cultural dissemination of TCM music therapy is essentially a profound dialogue between civilizations rather than a unidirectional export. In an experimental performance at London’s Southbank Centre, the TCM theory of the five tones and Celtic folk melodies were woven into the same soundscape structure—the low-frequency resonance of Gong mode simulated the transformative image of spleen Earth, paired with the sustained drone layers of Scottish bagpipes, forming an energy field with regional affinity. Such creations are not mere collage but involve a functional reinterpretation of Western modes based on the principle of “Qi movement ascending and descending”: for instance, transforming the Yu tone’s descending characteristic corresponding to the Water element into the descending scale sequences of Irish laments, achieving cross-cultural psychological resonance at the level of emotional regulation. Practice indicates that when the five tones no longer exist as a closed symbolic system but become a therapeutic language that can be deconstructed and re-contextualized, their acceptance significantly improves (Feng, M. Y. and Z. Y. Dai, 2022). A mind-body clinic in Kyoto, Japan, introduced an adapted version of Jue Mode Forest Meditation, using the shakuhachi instead of the guqin to express the imagery of liver Wood soothing, integrating with the local tradition of “forest bathing.” Patients’ anxiety scale scores decreased by 1.8 times that of the control group. Cultural dissemination also requires narrative vehicles for support. In a series of public lectures at Hannover Medical

School in Germany, a real case was presented of a chronic insomnia patient who gradually restored their circadian rhythm by daily listening to an electronic music work adapted from the hourly rhythm principles of the Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic (HuángDì Nèi Jīng). This story was later produced as a podcast album, accumulating over 120,000 plays. Cultural festivals provide an embodied cognitive pathway. At the "Eastern Sound Pulse, World Heart Rhythm" themed event in Mexico City in 2023, participants experienced sound wave intervention programs arranged according to the midnight-noon ebb-flow theory within the framework of the Maya calendar. Drum rhythms were designed with reference to the active period of the pericardium meridian, and on-site galvanic skin response monitoring showed a 37% improvement in autonomic nervous balance index compared to baseline. Such practices reveal that only by embedding theories into the perceptual paradigms and lived experiences of target cultures can the cognitive barriers of symbolic systems be broken through (Ding, Y., Z. D. Lu, and H. X. Zhang, 2019).

2. Digital Platform

Digital media have restructured the logic of transmitting traditional healing knowledge. The "Harmonia Medica" multilingual platform, developed jointly by Beijing University of Chinese Medicine and the University of Geneva, has integrated sound wave intervention data from 14 global clinical centers to construct a dynamic efficacy map. Its core algorithm not only annotates the impact coefficients of different scale combinations on HRV (Heart Rate Variability) but also introduces a cultural adaptation weighting model that automatically adjusts the instrumental configuration and spatial reverberation parameters of recommended tracks to match user' regional backgrounds. The mobile application incorporates a biofeedback module, allowing users to upload real-time physiological signals, based on which the system generates personalized Five-Element music prescriptions. For instance, when elevated sympathetic tone is detected, the system automatically pushes audio sequences that enhance the Shang tone (Lung Metal) to inhibit excessive Liver Yang. Social media communication strategies exhibit refined segmentation characteristics (Kong, Y. X., 2024). An account named @SoundHealingLab on TikTok employs micro-documentary formats to document New York office workers using Five-Element music to cope with workplace stress. One video, visualizing an experiment showing decreased salivary cortisol levels in office workers after listening to adapted Zhi-mode jazz through bone conduction headphones, was officially shared by the American Psychological Association. More groundbreaking is the application of immersive technologies. In the VR scene "Five Elements Mountains and Waters" developed by the Human-Computer Interaction Lab at ETH Zurich, users wearing headsets can enter a virtual Mount Qingcheng environment, triggering environmental sound effects corresponding to different meridians with their breathing rhythm—a deep inhale evokes the rustling of bamboo groves in Jue mode traveling upwards along the Gallbladder Meridian to the ears, while an exhale transmits the pulsating earth tones of Gong mode downwards from Zusanli. fMRI monitoring indicates that this experience activates the default mode network 41 % more than pure audio stimulation alone. Such high-dimensional interactive mechanisms break through the limitation of "passive auditory reception" in traditional communication,

transforming abstract theories into embodied, actionable memory.

3. International Cooperation and Exchange

International collaboration is propelling this field from empirical description towards a phase of mechanism validation. Research published in *Frontiers in Neuroscience* by a Sino-French joint research team has, for the first time, confirmed that specific frequencies of Yu-tone sound waves can modulate fear extinction processes by influencing hippocampal theta wave coherence. This finding provides a neuroelectrophysiological evidence chain for the TCM theory that “the kidney governs willpower.” Structural innovations are also emerging in talent cultivation systems. The Singapore College of Traditional Chinese Medicine has introduced a certification course for “Intercultural Music Therapists,” requiring students to master both the dynamic models of the twelve meridian pathways and a knowledge base of world ethnomusicology, and to complete at least two clinical observation reports in non-Chinese linguistic contexts. Such interdisciplinary training is fostering new practical paradigms: one graduate, in a pilot project in Tanzania, integrated the concept of Zhi-tone Fire element energy into the rhythmic arrangement of local tribal war dances to enhance emotional mobilization in postpartum depression groups, achieving an effectiveness rate of 68.5 % on the EPDS scale. In terms of standardization, ISO/TC 249 has established a working group on “Terminology for Traditional Medicine Sound Therapy.” The White Paper on the Basic Definition and Application Scenarios of Five-Tone Therapy, drafted under the leadership of Chinese experts, has entered the member state comment period. . Notably, cooperation models are transcending mere resource complementarity, shifting towards the exploration of co-governance frameworks. The “Global Sound Therapy Observation Network,” initiated by the WHO Collaborating Centre for Traditional Medicine, has deployed standardized data collection terminals in 17 countries. These terminals upload anonymized efficacy data in real-time to a blockchain-based evidence storage system, ensuring research transparency while protecting cultural intellectual property rights. This attempt at decentralized governance may well become a technical pathway to resolving controversies over cultural hegemony.

V. Conclusion

TCM music therapy, grounded in the theoretical framework of the five tones corresponding to the five viscera, is transitioning in its international dissemination from cultural export towards cross-civilizational dialogue driven by clinical evidence. In recent years, neurosound research has revealed that Yu-tone sound waves can modulate hippocampal theta rhythms, providing electrophysiological support for the theory that “the kidney governs willpower” and enhancing the scientific explanatory power of this traditional therapy. Building on this foundation, interdisciplinary talent cultivation models have transcended the confines of single cultural contexts. For instance, the Singapore College of Traditional Chinese Medicine integrates meridian dynamics with ethnomusicology, promoting the localized application of therapeutic paradigms in postpartum depression

interventions in Africa, with the EPDS scale validating its clinical efficacy. Digitalization is also accelerating the co-construction of standards. Terminology standardization led by ISO/TC 249 and a blockchain-enabled global efficacy observation network achieve synergy between the protection of cultural intellectual property rights and data sharing. Such decentralized governance mechanisms not only enhance research transparency but also reconstruct the discursive pathways of traditional medicine within global health governance. Future dissemination should not stop at technological transfer but must establish a knowledge mutual trust system based on multi-stakeholder co-governance. This will enable music therapy to move from a marginal supplement towards a core domain within integrative medicine, truly achieving a deep coupling of traditional wisdom and modern health.

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