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Digital and Intelligent Empowerment and Paradigm Shift —Challenges and Breakthroughs in the International Dissemination of Traditional Chinese Medicine Culture

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Abstract

Purpose – This study delineates the theoretical underpinnings of digital-intelligent empowerment, identifies the structural impediments currently obstructing TCM's global reach.

Design/Methodology/Approach – Based on WHO and TikTok data, the study analyzes digital intelligent reconstruction of TCM communication from epistemological and axiological perspectives, and proposes solutions for structural drawbacks.

Findings – Analysis identifies a three-dimensional paradigm shift of TCM: Epistemologically, multimodal databases, AI knowledge graphs and real-world evidence convert traditional empirical mysticism into data-based empirical science. Axiologically, algorithmic distribution, VR/AR and customized narratives replace cultural discount with value resonance. Methodologically, multi-stakeholder cooperation builds an interactive communication ecosystem to abandon one-way dissemination.

Research Implications – This paper constructs a tech-culture coupling framework for intercultural communication. It develops a three-tier system of content production, ecosystem optimization and technology integration, creates multilingual term libraries & VR/AR scenes, realizes blockchain-driven multi-party coordination, deploys digital intelligence for TCM clinical treatment, teaching and assessment, reconciles instrumentalism and value rationality, adopts ISO/TC249 norms, and completes TCM’s transformation from scale expansion to value integration.

Keywords: Traditional Chinese Medicine culture; international communication; digital and intelligent empowerment; cultural discount; communication ecosystem

JEL Classifications: Z11,Z13

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I. Introduction

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) occupies a position far exceeding that of a mere medical system; it constitutes an irreplaceable repository of Chinese civilisation, embodying profound insights into life, health and the human condition. It likewise serves as a vital strand of soft power in the construction of a global community of health for all. As conceptions of health continue to evolve worldwide, international appetite for TCM has grown markedly. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) reports that 113 member states now formally recognise TCM diagnostic and therapeutic modalities such as acupuncture, with a further 100 member states acknowledging broader applications of traditional Chinese medicine. Yet the international dissemination of TCM culture has long been hamstrung by a fundamental triad of problems: poor coordination among multiple communicative actors, content that remains opaque to foreign audiences, and communication effects that barely skim the surface (Sun et al., 2025). The persistent chasm between Chinese and Western medical discursive systems, the exoticisation of cultural symbols through inept translation, and an excessive dependence on conventional organisational and interpersonal channels (Sun et al., 2025; Guo et al., 2025) have all conspired to throttle TCM's global advancement.

The concept of "cultural discount" offers a well-established lens through which to interpret these difficulties. In their seminal 1988 article, Hoskins and Mirus argued that media products embedded in a particular cultural matrix inevitably shed appeal upon export, as divergences in style, values, belief systems and behavioural norms take their toll. At root, cultural discount stems from deep-seated differences in cognitive frameworks across cultures. Because TCM is anchored in Yin-Yang theory, the Five Phases and the visceral-meridian system, its epistemological logic departs radically from the anatomical-physiological foundations of Western biomedicine, erecting formidable barriers for foreign audiences seeking to grasp its philosophical substratum (Yu, 2025).

The swift maturation of digital-intelligent technologies is now rewriting the ground rules of cross-cultural communication. Algorithmic recommendation engines, Virtual Reality (VR/AR) technologies and big-data-driven user profiling are increasingly being marshalled to tackle these challenges. Employing the 5W communication model, Sun et al. (2025) have mapped the structural deficiencies of TCM culture's international dissemination across five dimensions—communicator, content, medium, audience and effect. Meanwhile, Xu et al. (2025) have deployed fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) to isolate two distinct pathway configurations for TCM short-video dissemination on TikTok: the "expert knowledge—rational communication" route and the "cultural knowledge—emotional communication" route.

Nevertheless, the existing literature exhibits notable lacunae. Much of it has fixated on deploying isolated technological tools at discrete stages of dissemination, slipping into what might be termed technological instrumentalism, without probing how digital-intelligent technologies might fuse with the very essence of TCM culture. Ethical hazards and the spectre of cultural alienation attendant upon technological deployment have been largely overlooked; equally, the dynamic coupling among technology, culture and audience has failed to keep pace with the growing momentum of TCM cultural dissemination. Against this backdrop, the present

study seeks to move beyond narrow tool-centric perspectives and erect a three-dimensional "technology—culture—audience" analytical framework. It addresses three interlocking questions: How can digital-intelligent technologies advance TCM cultural dissemination through the reconstruction of epistemology, axiology and methodology? What pitfalls accompany the deployment of these technologies? And how might one craft an approach that simultaneously delivers efficiency and depth, localisation and standardisation, thereby propelling TCM culture's paradigm shift from mere global presence to genuine global recognition?

II. Theoretical Logic of Digital and Intelligent Empowerment: A Three-Dimensional Reconstruction

Deploying digital and intelligent technologies to restructure TCM cultural dissemination involves far more than simply multiplying channels; it signals a fundamental transformation in how knowledge is created, valued and circulated. This section unpacks the theoretical foundations of digital-intelligent empowerment across three dimensions: epistemology, axiology and methodology.

1. Epistemological Logic: From "Empirical Mysticism" to "Data-Driven Empiricism"

For decades, the Western medical mainstream has dismissed TCM as an empirical craft devoid of scientific rigour, while its theoretical edifice—Yin-Yang, the Five Phases, the viscera and meridians—has struggled to find a foothold within the reductionist paradigm of modern science. The primary rationale for introducing digital and intelligent technologies is to catalyse a modern epistemological transformation of TCM and to open fresh avenues for bridging the scientific discourse gap that separates Chinese from Western medicine.

One pivotal strategy is the construction of multimodal databases that leverage digital and intelligent technologies to transmute classical texts and accumulated clinical experience into computable, verifiable structured data. The TCMBank database, for instance, now catalogues 9,192 herbal medicines, 61,966 chemical constituents, 15,179 molecular targets and 32,529 disease associations, furnishing robust data support for investigations into the molecular mechanisms of herbal therapeutics (Lv et al., 2023). Complementing this, the HuaTuo model has been engineered to automatically extract and infer TCM knowledge systems from vast corpora of traditional literature (Wang et al., 2023). Such databases and knowledge graphs do more than facilitate new drug discovery; they also furnish empirical evidence at the molecular-biological level for seemingly abstract theories such as Yin-Yang and the Five Phases.

Concurrently, AI-assisted mining of real-world evidence (RWE) can demonstrate that TCM is fully consonant with the evidence-based medicine principles championed by the international community. Conventional randomised controlled trials (RCTs) impose stringent environmental controls that ill suit TCM's hallmark features—multi-component formulas and personalised diagnosis and treatment (Chen et al., 2021). Real-world studies (RWS), by contrast, draw upon data harvested from everyday clinical practice and can yield

evidence with superior external validity for assessing TCM efficacy (Chen et al., 2021). The National Medical Products Administration's 2020 *Guidance on the Use of Real-World Evidence to Support Drug Development and Regulatory Review (Interim)* furnishes a critical policy foundation for deploying RWE in TCM evaluation.

2. The Logic of Axiology: From "Cultural Discount" to "Value Resonance"

Among the most formidable obstacles to TCM's internationalisation is the phenomenon of "cultural discount". Yu (2020) contends that such discounting originates from attrition occurring at the encoding, transmission and decoding stages of cross-cultural communication, and that new digital technologies—by enriching user experience—can mitigate these losses (Yu, 2025).

To begin with, dissemination efficiency has undergone a genuine revolution. Social-media algorithms have shattered the spatiotemporal constraints of traditional media, enabling content on acupuncture, tuina and related topics to reach hundreds of millions of users at minimal cost. Empirical data show that between 2020 and 2024, TCM-related short videos on TikTok grew steadily year on year, spanning eleven thematic categories including acupuncture, cupping, tuina and medicinal cuisine, with peak viewership hitting 118.3 million (Xu et al., 2025).

Second, perceptual modalities have been radically intensified. VR/AR technologies have given rise to immersive scenarios such as the "virtual Chinese medicine dispensary" and "meridian visualisation", converting abstract philosophical constructs like qi and shen into embodied cognition through direct experience. Merleau-Ponty (2010), in his Phenomenology of Perception, posited that the perceiving subject is none other than the body situated in the world, rendering perception, body and world inseparable. Building on this insight, VR can render TCM's abstract knowledge system more accessible and compelling by engendering a sense of "presence" through culturally embedded contexts; it furnishes hands-on experience conducive to "embodied understanding" and weaves a web of "empathic" meaning.

Third, personalised narratives have emerged as a potent force. AI algorithms can tailor health plans to the distinct needs of populations across different regions: chronic disease management for audiences in Europe and North America, beauty and skincare for those in Southeast Asia. In so doing, they deliver both "practical value" and "cultural value" in equal measure. This renders it feasible to move TCM dissemination beyond one-way didacticism towards genuine two-way interaction, thereby bolstering public trust.

3. Methodological Logic: From "One-Way Indoctrination" to "Ecological Synergy"

TCM communication has historically been government-dominated, operating as a unidirectional transmission devoid of interaction or feedback (Sun et al., 2025; Guo et al., 2025). Digital and intelligent technologies are now forging an all-weather, collaborative communication ecosystem that is reshaping practices across actors, content and channels.

Luo's (2022) analysis of the documentary Herbal China illustrates how cooperation among diverse communicative actors can substantially amplify TCM's reach. Through its sophisticated audiovisual language

and compelling narrative architecture, Herbal China has kindled public interest in TCM both domestically and internationally, setting a benchmark for the mass communication of TCM culture. Meanwhile, blockchain technology is enabling the construction of an integrated "research—industry—education" platform that safeguards cross-border data security and bolsters international confidence in products via smart pharmaceutical manufacturing, while simultaneously fostering synergistic cooperation between cultural dissemination and industrial development.

III. Current Dilemmas: Structural Imbalances Under the Pressure of Technology

Notwithstanding the tangible benefits delivered by the new generation of technologies and artificial intelligence, a cluster of structural problems continues to plague actual implementation, impeding TCM cultural development by virtue of technology's own internal logic and the irreducible laws of culture.

1. Cultural Perception Dilemmas: Terminological Distortion and the Demonisation of Symbols

Technology has hardly resolved the problem of cultural misunderstanding; if anything, algorithmic bias may have deepened it. At the terminological level, most existing AI translation systems draw upon Western medical corpora, routinely rendering " 上火 " as "inflammation" or " 气 " as "energy" in ways that are crude and reductive. Such calque translations frequently strip core TCM concepts of their original semantic richness. The *WHO's International Standard Terminologies on Traditional Chinese Medicine* (IST 2022), though encompassing 3,415 terms and pioneering new phonetic transcription approaches, has yet to achieve widespread uptake across much of the globe. Similarly, while the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) has promulgated dozens of TCM standards through ISO/TC 249, the application of standardised terminology in clinical and cross-border regulatory contexts remains fraught with difficulties (Zhao, 2025).

On the symbolic front, the deployment of short-video formats ought to serve the dual purpose of conveying medical information—diagnostic and therapeutic methods, treatment outcomes—and excavating the deep cultural heritage of TCM, thereby forging communicative bridges with diverse cultures. Evidence from TikTok indicates that short videos carrying strong emotional bias perform better when the content is non-professional (e.g., cultural knowledge), whereas neutral emotional registers prove more effective for professional knowledge content. This suggests that algorithmic content promotion is context-sensitive rather than uniformly privileging emotional or sensational material (Xu et al., 2025).

2. Dilemmas in Technological Application: The Digital Divide and the Superficialisation of Content

Technological application is beset by serious deficiencies, and communication continues to hover at a superficial level. For one thing, uneven Internet access has left its mark across the globe. Complex divisions persist among nations and social groups regarding access to the digital economy, digital literacy and digital economic output, exacerbating gaps across economic, political, cultural and social domains. Africa, for instance, trails far behind developed regions in digital infrastructure coverage and Internet affordability (Wei and Liu, 2024), meaning that technological advantages have scarcely permeated such territories.

Simultaneously, algorithmic incentive mechanisms have triggered a creeping "death by entertainment" in content. On TikTok, non-professional content (health and wellness tips) in TCM short videos markedly outperforms professional knowledge content (treatment methods and theoretical expositions) (Xu et al., 2025). The upshot is a drift towards "technique at the expense of theory", with the consequence that foreigners frequently dismiss TCM as little more than a "health-promoting exercise" rather than a rigorous medical system. From a communication-studies vantage point, Yu (2020) has demonstrated that "cultural discounting" in cross-cultural settings stems from structural conflicts between cognitive frameworks and divergent encoding-decoding practices. Extending this argument, Yu (2025) maintains that only through the mediation of digital-intelligent technologies can deep cross-cultural alignment of meaning be achieved.

3. The Dilemma of Ecological Synergy: Imbalance of Actors and Data Silos

The communication ecosystem is plagued by acute synergy failures. To begin with, stakeholder structures are lopsided: government bodies shoulder the bulk of overseas communication projects, while non-governmental organisations and enterprises—arguably closer to ordinary people—remain marginal players. The result is a stifling of flexible, adaptive communication (Sun et al., 2025). Second, data security and compliance present formidable hurdles. As regulations such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) tighten, the collection of sensitive health data for TCM diagnostic applications—including tongue and pulse diagnosis—faces growing restrictions, driving up compliance costs for cross-border "Cloud TCM" platforms. Third, cross-platform data silos persist. Because data from YouTube, Instagram and TikTok remain unlinked, users encounter the same rudimentary content repeatedly, while in-depth theoretical knowledge fails to gain traction. No spiral effect capable of deepening user understanding can therefore take hold.

IV. Pathways to Breakthrough: Construction of a "Trinity" Practice System

In light of the foregoing problems, a comprehensive breakthrough strategy is required—one that advances an operational model anchored in "precision dissemination—value resonance—ecosystem synergy" and decisively

abandons the old "one-way dissemination" paradigm.

1. Content Production: Shifting from "One-Way Output" to "Multimodal Co-creation"

Content lies at the heart of communication. First and foremost, a national multilingual terminology database should be established. Adopting a "foreignisation plus annotation" translation strategy, core terms such as "气" ought to be transcribed as "Qi" and supplemented with philosophical elucidations; otherwise, excessive localisation risks eroding both original meaning and cultural sovereignty. The WHO IST 2022 and the ISO/TC249 standards series (2022) can furnish indispensable support for terminology normalisation, while future efforts should concentrate on promoting their practical application and educational dissemination.

Second, AI technologies should be harnessed to tag voluminous content and construct knowledge graphs, with algorithms then nudged to privilege in-depth material that "transmits the essence through technique." A user searching for "Baduanjin" instructions, for example, might be automatically directed to accessible philosophical content on "the unity of heaven and man", thereby countering the prevailing superficiality. Research has shown that through the three-dimensional integration of "sensory immersion—emotional interaction—spatial collaboration", VR technology can enable audiences to experience and absorb culture immersively, forge emotional bonds with it, and consequently cultivate a sense of cultural identity (Wang & Tian, 2026).

Finally, VR/AR technologies should be leveraged to craft immersive, embodied experiences that transmute TCM's abstract ideas into visualised, interactive encounters (Ma, 2026; Wang & Tian, 2026). Through emotional engagement and cultural alignment, audiences can be moved from passive reception to active identification (Yu, 2025). As stipulated in the "Implementation Plan for the Action on the Dissemination of Traditional Chinese Medicine Culture (2021–2025)" (2021), every available technological means should be mobilised to build an integrated TCM cultural dissemination platform that weaves together health and wellness knowledge, healthcare experiential learning, and leisure entertainment.

2. Optimising the Ecosystem: Shifting from "Individual Efforts" to "Multi-stakeholder Collaboration"

Cultivating a conducive dissemination environment demands the mobilisation of all manner of actors. Governments can deploy policy levers to steer Internet companies, foreign pharmaceutical firms and individual creators towards active participation. TCM enthusiast communities on Facebook and TikTok, for instance, can channel high-quality information through both official accounts and organic word-of-mouth. The success of the documentary Herbal China underscores that professionally produced programmes can achieve superior reach through multi-platform distribution and secondary diffusion across social media channels (Luo, 2022).

At the same time, a data security and cooperation architecture tailored to TCM's distinctive characteristics must be erected. Confronted with data silos and pressing personal-information protection concerns, a

trustworthy data-sharing platform underpinned by blockchain technology should be created. This would establish norms for the intelligent collection of TCM diagnostic data, standardise clinical workflows, build cross-regional medical consortium cooperation mechanisms, and ensure the efficient distribution of high-quality TCM resources to rural areas. At the national level, a dedicated TCM digital dissemination hub could be constructed to centralise user-data management and push content across multiple platforms, thereby expanding access for broader audiences.

3. Technology Integration: From "Tool-Assisted" to "Paradigm Reconstruction"

Technology ought to be embedded at every stage of cultural dissemination. In diagnosis, treatment and education, 5G and AI should be harnessed to develop remote smart diagnostic and therapeutic services, transcending spatial and temporal barriers and remedying the uneven accessibility that afflicts developing countries. The deployment of metaverse technologies in cultural dissemination (Wang & Tian, 2026) has further broadened the technological horizon. By generating virtual avatars and immersive experiential scenarios, a shift from static exhibition to dynamic participation becomes attainable (Wang & Tian, 2026). Ma (2026) has additionally proposed that such immersive metaverse environments could be purpose-built for TCM cultural dissemination, thereby deepening international trust and understanding.

To refine the evaluation and risk-control apparatus for AI-mediated TCM review, concrete measures—such as the automatic filtering of pejorative labels (e.g., "mystification", "esotericism") and the incorporation of cultural-accuracy assessment metrics—should be instituted, ensuring that dissemination is popular yet substantive. Moreover, drawing upon Zhang et al.'s (2025) framework for evaluating the international dissemination effectiveness of online games, the four-stage progression of "exposure—cognition—attitude—behaviour" can be adapted to gauge TCM dissemination outcomes.

V. Conclusion and Outlook

The international dissemination of TCM culture in the digital-intelligent era has already precipitated far-reaching changes in knowledge production, value formation and communicative method. While technology has furnished powerful tools for surmounting "cultural discounting", it simultaneously harbours the potential to become an agent of cultural alienation. Simply multiplying channels and stockpiling technological capacity will not resolve the fundamental challenge of identity; instead, a dynamic equilibrium must be pursued within the synergistic ecosystem of "technology—culture—institutions".

Looking ahead, effecting the transition of TCM cultural dissemination from "going out" to "going in" will require adherence to two guiding principles. First, we must transcend instrumental rationality and recover value rationality: although digital and intelligent technologies will undoubtedly accelerate cultural flows, the overriding objective should be to deepen their impact on the everyday lives of ordinary people. In technological

application, the core TCM tenet of "people-centredness" must be upheld; practitioners' syndrome differentiation and treatment must be shielded from wholesale replacement by AI; and digital archives should be deployed to preserve the oral traditions of veteran TCM practitioners, thereby wedding traditional inheritance to modern innovation. Second, communicative strategies must be attuned to the cultural and psychological specificities of different regions, striking an optimal balance between standardisation and localisation in accordance with ISO international standards for TCM terminology.

Only through such an approach can TCM—this ancient Eastern wisdom—be revitalised in the digital age to deliver genuine benefits to all humankind, and secure its place as an indispensable Chinese contribution to the global health governance architecture.

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