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Traditional Chinese medicine as a tool for improving China's image: The role of socio-political factors

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Abstract. The purpose of the study was to analyse the factors of influence of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) on improving the image of China in the international arena at the present stage of historical development. The methodological base of the study is built on the basis of an integrated approach with a combination of theoretical and empirical methods of cognition such as historical, comparative, system, statistical data analysis. Within the framework of the study, the main stages and features of the development of TCM, which has a thousand-year history, are considered, its basic principles and methods of therapy are formulated. In addition, the territory of distribution of TCM is determined, and the countries where it is most common are identified. Namely, the approximate number of TCM doctors and departments in medical institutions of the Republic of Kazakhstan is considered. Special attention is paid to determining the place of China in the modern international arena in the context of implementing the policy of "soft power", considering the role of the Investment Project "One Belt, One Road" in improving the image of the state in the international arena, assessing the importance of TCM in the process of becoming a country as one of the world hegemonies against the background of the coronavirus pandemic, and analysing the contribution of TCM to the preservation of human health and world culture. In particular, it is proved that although Chinese medicine differs from Western medicine in its global, comprehensive approach to treatment, its therapeutic techniques are increasingly being introduced into the healthcare system of Western states and other countries of the world, including the Central Asian region

Keywords: healthcare; treatment system; diagnostics; national brand; prevention; soft power

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 21st century, there was a situation in the system of international relations in which the role of the People's Republic of China (PRC) substantially increased. In a short period of time, the country was able to transform from an economically backward state to a state claiming world leadership. However, China's hegemony is a specific type of dominance. In other words, it is based on non-violent means of influence, that is, this hegemony is based on the use of "soft power".

One of the factors contributing to improving the image of the PRC in the international arena is traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), which is currently widespread on various scales in more than 180 countries around the world. In addition, China has signed about 90 agreements on medical and pharmaceutical cooperation with other countries and international organisations. With China's assistance, hundreds of educational institutions that teach TCM methods have been created, as have dozens of foreign centres of Chinese medicine

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(Jin *et al.*, 2020). The subject of the development of TCM interests both Western and Asian researchers, so it is sufficiently examined in various aspects. However, TCM, as a tool for improving China's image on the world stage at the present stage of historical development, is considered in science for the first time.

The history, main strategies and treatment methods, current development, and future prospects of TCM are being investigated by a group of researchers, D. Ma *et al.* (2021). In addition, the origin and fundamental principles of TCM are considered by J. Zhao (2023). However, in their papers, the researchers do not analyse how the spread of TCM in the world affects the improvement of China's image in the international arena. The problem of integrating TCM into the Western Health System is considered by such researchers as L.C. Matos *et al.* (2021) and W. Liauw (2021). They conclude that over the past decades, western views on healthcare have changed, and the demand for complementary and alternative medicines has increased. In particular, more active implementation of TCM methods has begun. Therewith, researchers do not analyse how this affects the change in the perception of China in the minds of Western people.

Shaping the image of China in the media of the United States, Great Britain, Canada, and Australia against the background of the coronavirus pandemic is being examined by researcher D. Zhang (2022). The author concludes that in the Western media, the situation with the coronavirus in China is described subjectively and using "double standards". According to the author, this negatively affects the image of the PRC in the world. The researcher suggests turning the crisis into an opportunity to improve the international situation, discussing China's struggle with COVID-19, and actively forming the image of the state as a "responsible country". However, the author does not consider other aspects of shaping the image of the PRC in Western countries and focuses on the time interval between the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. TCM is considered by R. Gaur (2024) and X. Xiao (2019) as one of the modern alternative therapies. They pay attention to the development of TCM, primary methods of treatment, and prospects for their use in the future. The authors state that TCM is beginning to receive scientific recognition in Western countries, but in their papers, they did not specify how these methods are implemented in the West and in other regions of the world.

The purpose of the study was to analyse the impact of TCM on the formation of a positive image of the PRC on the world stage. The following tasks were set to achieve the goal: consider the main principles and methods of TCM; assess the place of China in the modern system of international relations; analyse the geography of the spread of TCM; describe the concept of "soft power" as an element of the PRC's foreign policy; determine the approximate number of TCM doctors and departments in medical institutions of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The historical method of cognition became the basis for considering the conditions of formation, features and stages of development of TCM against the background of isolation from the achievements of other parts of the world. Ancient Chinese doctors were well versed in human anatomy and physiology, although they had original, different from European, ideas about the functioning of the human body and its connection with the world around it. Special attention was paid to the analysis of the treatise, which, for the first time, systematically presented the theory of Chinese traditional medicine (Veith, 2016). This book is considered to be the oldest work on Chinese medicine that has survived to this day.

The method of statistical data analysis was used to assess the geography of the distribution of TCM institutions in different countries of the world. Within the framework of this method, it was also possible to determine what factors influenced the increase in the number of hospitals using TCM methods in Western countries and how this was affected by the implementation of a large-scale Chinese investment project, "One Belt, One Road". In addition, this method of cognition became the basis for determining the approximate number of Chinese medicine doctors and TCM departments in the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan. As part of this method, data posted on the website of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Kazakhstan and various medical portals of the country were analysed. In particular, the services Bolnica.kz and Polikliniki.kz published information about all licensed public and private medical institutions of TCM and the services they provide in this area in the largest cities of Kazakhstan (Almaty, Astana, Shymkent, Aktobe, Karaganda, Pavlodar, Aktau, and other localities). Data on the opening of state centres of Chinese medicine are posted, in particular, on the website of the hospital of the Medical Centre of the Presidential Administration of the Republic of Kazakhstan (A center of traditional..., 2017).

The comparative method became the basis for comparing the main differences in China's positioning in the international arena – in the second half of the 20th century and in the first decades of the 21st century. The emphasis was placed on Beijing's change in foreign policy against the background of successful economic reforms and assessing the importance of TCM in improving the image of the PRC. Within the framework of the structural and functional method, the actions of the Chinese authorities aimed at improving their image in the international arena were analysed. In particular, soft power tools such as providing assistance to countries affected by natural disasters or epidemics of infectious diseases were considered. In addition, this method provided an opportunity to consider how the implementation of the Chinese initiative "One Belt, One Road" in the medical field affects the growing role of the PRC in the world.

The forecasting method was used to identify the most likely ways to develop TCM in Western countries and other regions of the world in the coming years against the background of China's growing role on the world stage. In addition, this method allowed determining the main problems of TCM development on the example of Kazakhstan and assessing the prospects for their solution in the context of the rapid development of alternative medicine. In particular, difficulties in training highly qualified TCM personnel and the shortage of high-quality medical preparations were reviewed.

RESULTS

Fundamentals of TCM and therapy methods. During the present stage of historical development, TCM continues to be one of the components of the Chinese health-care system. It has a long history, but despite this, it is widely practised and integrated into modern medicine both in China and in other countries of the world. Chinese medicine is based on a system of knowledge accumulated over thousands of years, its own diagnostic methods, when the disease is determined by skin colour and pulse, methods of treatment with acupuncture, moxibustion, and the use of medicines made from natural herbs. Over the course of two millennia, TCM has developed theoretical and practical approaches to the treatment and prevention of various diseases. The first work of Chinese medical theory that has survived to this day is the treatise "Huang Di Neijing". It was created between 300 and 100 BC. This document describes the diagnosis and treatment of a substantial number of diseases and provides recommendations on a healthy lifestyle, exercise, and diet to prevent diseases caused by vitamin deficiency (Wang *et al.*, 2018). Chinese medicine has evolved over two thousand years, and the result is a heritage of works that exceeds eight thousand texts devoted to various health problems.

Like most varieties of traditional medicine, the theoretical and diagnostic foundations of TCM are not always explained by the terms of Western science. They are often found in philosophy, beliefs, and logic. The Chinese, in ancient times, considered the human body a reduced world in which there was a constant exchange between the five main elements: fire, earth, water,

wood, and metal. The forces of this exchange are concentrated in two polar principles, on the relationship of which the balance or violation of it depends both in the human body and the world. The Chinese consider one of these poles to be the masculine principle (Yang), which is considered active and light; the second pole, the feminine principle (Yin), is passive and dark. In this context, all diseases are divided into two groups: with a predominance of Yang, which is manifested by symptoms of activation of certain body functions, and with a predominance of Yin – with signs of suppression of these functions. Notably, TCM has long developed separately from the rest of the world. For example, information about it reached Europe only in the 13th century. The fundamental theoretical provisions of Chinese medicine have been tested for centuries and have survived to this day. Therewith, TCM plays a more substantial role in today's globalised world. A comprehensive examination of the phenomenon of TCM is important for the further development of this field.

TCM applies various approaches to the treatment and strengthening of the human body. In particular, such methods as herbal medicine, acupuncture, moxibustion, cans, tuina (Chinese therapeutic massage), and many others, are used. The approach used by TCM is radically different from Western ideas about health. While specialists in the West treat diseases and their manifestations, Eastern healers, both past and present, consider the human body a single system where everything is interconnected. According to Chinese doctors, a person's well-being depends on the circulation of vital energy – Qi and the balance of Yin and Yang. If the energy exchange is disrupted, it will definitely manifest itself in the form of a disease. Therefore, it is necessary to treat not the symptom but the cause, restoring harmony of the entire body (Nye, 2005). Notably, within the framework of TCM, treatment is always selected individually since no two people are similar. In general, an individual approach is a fundamental principle of TCM. The doctor chooses a set of methods that are suitable not for the disease but for a specific person, and even herbal preparations that are actively used in Chinese medicine are compiled for each patient individually (Table 1).

Table 1. TCM methods

Method	Scope of application
Massage	Chinese massage helps to relieve pain, swelling, and inflammation, deeply affecting the tissues and improving metabolism and blood circulation. In addition, massage relieves muscle tension, which can lead to problems with the joints, spine, breathing, and digestion.
Acupuncture	Acupuncture is a therapeutic method that helps to overcome pain. It is also recommended for diseases of internal organs, metabolic disorders, reduced immunity, insomnia, and some nervous disorders.
Herbal medicine	Many of the herbs that form the basis of herbal medicine in China are adaptogens that help the body cope with environmental influences: they strengthen the immune system, regulate blood pressure and sugar levels, strengthen defences, and normalise metabolism.

Table 1, Continued

Method	Scope of application
Therapeutic qigong gymnastics	It helps to harmonise the state of the body and spirit and allows these energies to flow freely. If you look at Chinese gymnastics from a Western standpoint, it substantially improves the oxygen supply to the brain and all systems and organs of the human body, increases concentration and performance, relieves muscle tension, and normalises blood pressure.

Source: R. Gaur (2024)

Despite the active development of TCM for many centuries in China, medicine was available only to a small part of the population, which included rich and powerful people. The average life expectancy in China for many years was approximately 35 years. The situation changed only in 1950-1960. Due to Mao Zedong, an extensive primary healthcare system based on the agricultural community was created in the middle of the 20th century. As part of the reform, comprehensive and specialised hospitals with state-of-the-art equipment were established in medium-sized cities in all provinces and autonomous regions of the country. In most rural areas, a three-stage treatment and prevention network was established only at the level of the county, parish, and village; central district hospitals were established in the counties, village outpatient clinics were established, and medical centres – in administrative villages. Mao Zedong's government, considering disease prevention, health care, and the further development of traditional medicine an important part of its strategy, paid great attention to the creation of medical institutions and the training of medical personnel (Dong, 2023).

Currently, Chinese medicine is divided into nine separate areas: gynaecology, therapy, external medicine, paediatrics, ophthalmology, laryngology, orthopaedics, massage, and acupuncture. Each of the above-mentioned industries covers a substantial amount of information, which is examined in the PRC as a separate medical speciality. Notably, in China, traditional medicine accounts for 40% of all medical manipulations. Almost all methods of Chinese medicine are non-invasive and non-traumatic and have a small list of contraindications and side effects. Thus, TCM exists and develops as a separate system of knowledge about the human body for several millennia. Its diagnostic and therapeutic effectiveness has been proven in practice and implemented in healthcare systems not only in China, where it originated, but also in dozens of countries around the world. In addition, the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends wider application of TCM methods in countries with limited resources and in countries that develop an integrative health system model.

China's place in the modern system of international relations. Global initiative "One Belt, One Road". The main goal of the foreign policy strategy of modern China from the very beginning of its formation is to strengthen the status of a great power, which the country lost during the opium wars in the middle of the 21st

century. This goal has remained unchanged throughout the recent history of China, only the means of achieving it have changed. The leadership of the PRC formulated the main foreign policy postulate – peaceful coexistence with all peoples, which is based on the doctrine of five principles: mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty; non-aggression; non-interference in internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; peaceful coexistence (Lanteigne, 2013).

In the modern multipolar system of international relations, the competition of great powers in their quest to gain superpower-level influence is becoming increasingly important. Recently, one of the great powers – the PRC, has substantially distinguished itself among other world leaders, which makes it visible in the international arena. According to the four criteria of a superpower, China is firmly on the path of development, increasing increasingly high indicators in the political, economic, and cultural sectors, resorting to the use of "soft power". Although some indicators need to be developed, nevertheless, the PRC is developing confidently and is one of the most confident potential superpowers. Therewith, three decades ago, in the worldview of the inhabitants of the Western world, the PRC was perceived as a socialist state with a closed political system and limited cultural and information exchange with the world community. However, at the beginning of the 21st century, economic growth, reforms in various spheres of public life, and the policy of "open doors" in the industrial, cultural, and other sectors contributed to the partial debunking of these stereotypes.

Previously, the world's ideas about China were formed on the basis of a number of factors. First, the long-term history of the Chinese empire, which influenced the development of world civilisation in different periods, and the ambiguous stage of the formation of "Chinese socialism" during the reign of Mao Zedong. However, rapid economic growth could not but contribute to changing the ideas that the international community previously used in its assessments of modern China. These changes were also facilitated by Beijing's targeted policies. Technologies for purposeful correction of public consciousness, which are prerequisites for achieving appropriate military-political goals and profound changes in socio-political reality, have occupied a prominent place in the arsenal of modern asymmetric strategies. In particular, these are the doctrines and practices of "soft power" and "public diplomacy", which allowed to shift of the emphasis on non-hard

power levers of constructing a new international reality against the background of the establishment of a new paradigm of international relations – geographic information, in which information flows and influence on mass consciousness became the decisive factor in world politics.

Until the beginning of the 21st century, the “soft power” of the Chinese state was not a priority. Further strengthening of “hard power” without the development of “soft power” threatened to lead to negative consequences in the PRC’s international political positioning, as it would contribute to the spread and strengthening of the myth of the “Chinese threat”, which would root public prejudices about China and its policies. This would indirectly affect the state’s ability to maintain and institutionally expand trade and economic ties and conduct its own development. In fact, it can be stated that the “soft power” in foreign policy and diplomacy of the PRC acts as a potential for trust and international image of the country, its ability to achieve its foreign policy goals without the use of coercion or necessary concessions. Therefore, at the present stage of development, the Chinese authorities face new tasks, among them: the promotion of socialist values on the world stage, respectively, the role of Chinese culture as an instrument of “soft power” becomes leading; simultaneously, the task of countering the penetration of Western values into the country becomes urgent, and instead the demonstration of Beijing’s success should grow. In favour of hard strategies in politics, “soft power” is the ability to engage and cooperate, as opposed to coercion.

In Western political science, “soft power” is a structural element of foreign policy activity, which is used by different countries to increase their own influence due to interest in their values and institutions. While hard power is based on military intervention, coercive diplomacy, or sanctions pressure, “soft power” is achieved precisely by creating a positive image of a particular country. This concept was formulated by the American political researcher J.S. Nye in the early 90s of the 20th century. It appeals to three main structural elements – culture, political ideology, and diplomacy (Mirza *et al.*, 2020). Despite the effectiveness of the use of “hard” forms of force on the world stage, both political theorists and practitioners tend to believe that the role of non-violent means of influence is gradually increasing. Since the early 1990s, the concept of “soft power” has gradually entered the foreign policy discourse of the world’s leading countries. The Chinese concept of “soft power” differs in that the PRC has a broader, more flexible interpretation of this concept. It includes culture, traditional medicine, and the Chinese economic model, ideology, and, in general, everything that can improve China’s image is associated with “soft power”. Beijing combines cultural and economic influence in practice. The Chinese concept of “soft power”, although formed under the influence of the American one, had

a different background, which was associated with the growing role of culture in socialist construction.

The PRC’s interest in the means of its own “soft” influence began to manifest itself in the 1990s, but only in 2007, at the Congress of the Communist Party of the PRC, “soft power” (primarily cultural) was identified as an important component of national policy. Along with the increasing role of the Middle Kingdom in the international arena in the political and economic spheres, the Chinese authorities began to formulate their own model of “soft power”, which is based on a combination of Marxist and Confucian ideologies (Upadhyay, 2023). China is actively pursuing a multi-vector policy aimed at increasing its “soft power”. This process not only contributes to more successful lobbying of the economic and political interests of the PRC but also substantially improves the perception of the country in other countries, even in those with which relations with China are traditionally difficult. Over time, “soft power” in China has acquired the importance of a strategic foreign policy resource of practical value. Moreover, this resource contributes to ensuring conditions for realising the potential of China’s international leadership.

In the wake of growing anti-Chinese sentiment, the Chinese leadership decided to use the potential of “soft” influence to improve the country’s image abroad. It also considered the proximity of the concept of “soft power” with the ideas of ancient Chinese philosophical teachings, in particular, Confucianism, which, in turn, influenced the process of implementing the concept within the country’s foreign policy doctrine, transforming the foreign concept of “soft power” and adding Chinese specifics to it. In this context, China’s traditional culture has become an attractive source of global interest, relying on the PRC’s establishment of several hundred Confucius Institutes in different parts of the world to promote the Chinese language and culture. The number of international students in China increased from several tens of thousands at the end of the 20th century to at least 240 thousand in 2010. China is the most popular country in Asia for international students and the second most popular country for education in the world. Notably, TCM is one of the elements of the country’s culture. TCM, like Chinese opera and Chinese painting, is one of the three main elements of the national cultural heritage of the PRC. In 2010, acupuncture, a branch of Chinese traditional medicine, was included in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list. Therefore, it can be concluded that the spread of TCM methods in the world contributes to the formation of a positive image of China in the world.

At the present stage of development, TCM has attracted attention outside of China and has followers and practitioners all over the world. The WHO has recognised the value of TCM and included it in its International Classification of Diseases system. TCM has also become the subject of interest and research in many

countries. The phenomenon of TCM in a modern modernised society is of natural interest. It testifies to the unique survivability of the tradition, which has been developing for two millennia and remains in demand today. In addition, it is TCM that focuses on the prevention of diseases and is more beneficial both for the individual and for society in general. In addition, its techniques usually represent only an integral part of complex systems of perception of the world and the world order. Another way to improve the international image is China's continued assistance to states affected by natural disasters or other emergencies. In particular, Beijing helped African countries fight the Ebola virus, supplied fertilisers and food to North Korea after the typhoon, or sent its own search team to Nepal, where the earthquake occurred. Assistance to countries in difficult situations became particularly relevant in 2020, when the world was gripped by the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, dozens of planes with medical workers, masks, medicines, and other medical supplies flew from China to Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Although there were many questions about the origin of the virus in China at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, Beijing's lively response to the outbreak in different parts of the world and its efforts to help other countries fight it helped improve its image to some extent.

Also, one of the tools for improving the image of the PRC was the so-called "vaccine diplomacy". It was also actively used by other influential countries of the world to attract partners because obtaining drugs for vaccinating the population became a chance for a rapid recovery of the "pre-pandemic" state of the world economy. The improvement in the situation with coronavirus inside China has allowed the provision of a Chinese-made vaccine for the needs of other countries. It has become a tool of Chinese foreign policy activities, helping to shape the country's image as a world leader in healthcare. It should be emphasised that China is not only the second-largest economy but also a substantial investor in foreign infrastructure through aid programs, which is a structural element of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative. This is an infrastructure project aimed at strengthening integration from Asia to Africa and Europe. The creators expected that this initiative would help China become a leader of "soft power" (Zhao *et al.*, 2021). Expanding infrastructure, trade relations, scientific cooperation, and communication between countries, peoples, and cultures within the project can create unprecedented opportunities and synergies to strengthen health systems, eliminate major infectious diseases, and improve the health of hundreds of millions of people (Minghui, 2018).

Chinese traditional medicine is distributed by the countries participating in the project. Despite the fact that the achievements of Western medicine are widely used in China today, some ancient methods are still of interest to specialists both inside and outside the

country. In particular, students from these countries study at Chinese universities. In addition, the PRC promotes the opening of TCM centres in the countries where the initiative is being implemented. Such establishments operate in Singapore, Russia, Thailand, Cambodia. Thus, the strengthening of China's international economic and political competitiveness directly affects the increase in its activity on a global and regional scale. With this in mind, today, the activation of China's foreign policy actions is determined by the tasks of the country's internal development. In relations with the main world centres, the country's leadership prefers to maintain stable relations and avoid open confrontation while defending positions on issues of principle for itself. At the regional level and in relations with developing countries, China seeks to build trust to create a stable and predictable environment in which Beijing can advance its interests. Thus, economic growth, demographics, military power, and geopolitical success make China a key factor in East Asia.

China's new strategy is no longer a strategy of closeness, hostility, dissociation from modern world processes, positioning itself as an antipode to Western states; at the moment, it is aimed at the active participation of the state in the process of globalisation and the development of global rules, at maintaining political, economic, and cultural cooperation between states, and at active participation in international affairs. This is the position of a state that assumes the role of a hegemon – a world leader. From this, it can be concluded that throughout its long history, which is full of philosophical trends, China has repeatedly shown "softness" in the field of politics. However, only after J.S. Nye introduced the term "soft power" into scientific circulation, it was widely used in the PRC in the field of foreign policy and, having gone through a long process of adapting to Chinese realities, became an integral part of the foreign policy strategy of the country.

The relationship between Western and traditional Chinese medicine. TCM development in Kazakhstan. Even more than two thousand years ago, during the reign of the dynasty of the "Spring and autumn periods" (770-476 BC) and "Warring empires" (475-221 BC), in the territory of modern China there were works devoted to medicine. The works of the Greek philosopher and physician, the father of Western medicine Hippocrates, who lived in 446-377 BC, in turn, belong to a later time. But it was he who generalised the practical medical experience collected by generations of Chinese healers, justified the theoretical taxonomy of the traditional art of treatment and passed on the main principles of Chinese drug therapy and such methods as acupuncture and moxibustion. In addition to China, where TCM originates, many countries in East and Southeast Asia, such as Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and Singapore, have integrated aspects of TCM into their own health

systems. In addition, in recent decades, there has been a surge in the popularity of TCM in Western countries, including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia, due to its holistic approach and natural treatment methods. This is due to the fact that many of the treatment principles used by Chinese medicine are recognised as effective and are actively implemented in the practice of Western doctors (Liu, 2023).

Chinese medicine has developed an independent system that explains the causes of diseases, created diagnostic methods and treatment methods. A person is perceived as a single organism, individual changes in which affect the state of the system in general. Each person is treated individually, depending on their lifestyle, profession, age. Western medicine is essentially allopathic, meaning it acts mainly on symptoms of the opposite principle. For this purpose, antagonist drugs are used against inflammation, fever, spasms, and the like. Chinese Medicine also affects the mechanisms of disease development. If this requires increasing the symptoms, the doctor will not relieve them but will deliberately provoke an exacerbation. Its purpose is to cure the disease, not to alleviate the condition. The second radical difference is the holistic approach. Chinese medicine treats the body in general, not a separate part of it, and not the disease, but the patient.

In China, TCM and Western Medicine co-exist and are often integrated into healthcare facilities. Many

hospitals in the country have departments that offer both traditional and Western medicine. Patients may receive TCM therapy along with traditional treatments, depending on their condition and the preferences of a particular method. However, it is notable that TCM is aimed at conservative treatment; in Western medicine, surgical treatment prevails. In China, operations are performed in extreme cases, for example, in cancer, when it is urgently necessary to save a person's life or when conservative treatment has not worked. Chinese medicine successfully treats chronic diseases conservatively. The drugs offered by TCM are cheaper. Since they are natural, of plant origin, they do not cause side effects. In addition, TCM is also common in Central Asia. In particular, in recent years, Kazakhstan has shown increased interest in integrating TCM into its healthcare system, due to the growing demand for alternative treatments and the desire to expand the range of medical services. An important step in this direction was the opening of the Sino-Kazakh Centre for Traditional Medicine in Almaty in 2017. This centre has become a place for the practice and spread of TCM in Kazakhstan and symbolises cultural and scientific exchange between states. It offers a wide range of services, from acupuncture to herbal medicine, and promotes international cooperation in the field of traditional medicine (Marshall, 2020). TCM centres also operate in the country's largest cities, where dozens of specialists' work (Table 2).

Table 2. TCM centres in Kazakhstan

City	Name of the establishment	Estimated number of TCM doctors
Almaty	DAO treatment and rehabilitation centre	The main staff consists of four specialists
Astana	Chinese Health and Wellness centre "Kainar"	One specialist
Almaty	Teo family health centre	Over 10 specialists
Almaty	Maya Maneza health and beauty centre	Over 10 specialists
Almaty	Centre for Chinese medicine and acupuncture	One specialist

Note: data on medical institutions are collected on the basis of open information posted on the portal Polikliniki.kz as of 2024

Source: created by the authors

However, despite these positive trends, there are also substantial problems in this area. One of the main ones is the lack of professional personnel. In Kazakhstan, the issue of training qualified specialists in the field of TCM who are able to professionally apply various methods and approaches characteristic of this medical system is acute. In addition, an increase in the number of private medical institutions operating without appropriate licenses creates risks to patient health and generally undermines confidence in TCM.

Another important problem is the shortage of herbal remedies necessary for full-fledged work in this area (Hashimova, 2023). Many of these drugs are imported from China, which creates dependence on external supplies and complicates the process of their certification and registration in the country (Yague *et al.*, 2022). A systematic approach is needed to overcome these

challenges, including improving the regulatory framework and developing educational programmes in TCM. Cooperation with Chinese educational and medical institutions can play a key role in this process, ensuring not only the transfer of knowledge and experience but also contributing to the development of appropriate standards. Despite a number of unresolved problems in this area, there are agreements at the highest interstate level to open new centres of TCM in different cities of the country and strengthen cooperation between the two countries in this area.

DISCUSSION

The topic of the development of TCM has interested researchers since the emergence of this phenomenon. Researchers from different countries examine various aspects of this issue. However, it is still insufficiently

examined how the TCM affects the formation of a positive image of China on the world stage in the context of Beijing's implementation of the "soft power" policy. Notably, the phenomenon of TCM in a modern modernised society arouses reasonable interest among researchers. This indicates the unique persistence of the Chinese tradition of treatment, which is constantly developing and remains in demand in the modern world.

Researchers consider this problem in the context of modernising TCM methods and applying them in Western countries, particularly E. Yague *et al.* (2022). They believe that the inclusion of TCM in modern medical practice is gaining momentum in the world. Researchers claim that Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases, cancer, and heart and vascular diseases are the leading causes of death in the Western world. TCM has long been used to treat these diseases in China and other East Asian countries. However, for the application of these methods in the West, it is necessary to change the treatment paradigm. TCM methods are beginning to be introduced in the Western world for the treatment of coronavirus. As noted in the previous section, China, trying to improve its image internationally, helped countries around the world fight the coronavirus pandemic. Namely, Beijing has actively implemented so-called "mask diplomacy", which involved providing medical workers and equipment to those states affected by the coronavirus to turn claims of China's guilt in the pandemic into a story of Chinese endurance gained by authoritarian policies.

X. Kang *et al.* (2022) examine the effectiveness of TCM methods in the fight against coronavirus infection. They concluded that TCM can relieve clinical symptoms, shorten hospital stays, and improve laboratory metrics. However, researchers state that there are currently too few clinical studies during the recovery period to see the long-term effects of TCM on COVID-19. Therewith, researchers have proven that TCM has a certain therapeutic effect on the coronavirus. In particular, TCM can reduce the proportion of patients with progressive severe diseases by 55% and reduce the mortality rate of severe or critical patients by 49%. In addition, the mechanism was examined and it was concluded that TCM plays a therapeutic role in COVID-19, mainly due to its antiviral, anti-inflammatory effects and immune strengthening. In this context, it can be stated that the use of TCM methods in the world will only gain momentum because the coronavirus mutates, so COVID-19 remains a relevant disease (Yuan *et al.*, 2022). However, the PRC improves its image not only by popularising its own medicine. The country's authorities are making efforts to form their zone of influence and understand their potential for implementing the "soft power" policy and in which regions of the world it is possible to do this. First of all, this refers to relations with the states of Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia (Bush, 2021). China is using a variety of tools to

increase its influence in developing countries. This refers to economic incentives and military cooperation, but the key element is the creation of institutions and the use of various mechanisms for implementing "soft power" (Albert, 2018). Although the economic sector is still the foundation of cooperation, an increase in the number of cultural exchanges, the distribution of academic programmes, and the organisation of various cultural and sports events by Beijing in different parts of the world is notable.

In this context, researchers X. Li & V. Worm (2009) conclude that China has made the idea of "soft power" its national strategy. In their opinion, China's soft power strategy is consistent with the country's Confucian culture and political values. Therewith, researchers believe that the Chinese are a nation with unique traditions and culture. In this regard, the country has many unique cultural resources, including national medicine, architecture, philosophy, cinema, painting, cuisine. However, in their paper, the researchers do not comprehensively consider the above-mentioned components but only describe the general features of China's cultural influence. Therewith, they state that China lags substantially behind the United States in this regard. The researchers propose to create a separate institution that would spread Chinese culture abroad. Thus, China has a progressive tendency to intensify "soft power". In other words, Beijing is gradually increasing its cultural, ideological, and political influence in its interstate relations (Dai & Cheng, 2022). In addition, the Chinese authorities are forming an institutional matrix of the "soft power" policy, which is aimed at creating a positive image of the country on the world stage. This happens, among other things, by popularising the methods of TCM in the world as one of the structural elements of the state's culture.

The Chinese initiative "One Belt, One Road" in the context of implementing projects in the field of healthcare is considered by researchers E. Tambo *et al.* (2019). The researchers believe that the initiative offers huge opportunities for partnership and collective action involving many countries to combat globalisation-related infectious and chronic diseases, pandemics, and outbreaks of potential threats. National and global health challenges are increasingly proving that economic prosperity cannot be achieved if there are huge gaps in knowledge and capabilities in health systems. Thus, there is a need for health initiatives aimed at strengthening health systems beyond sovereign borders to influence the global economy. K.E. Kuah (2021), in turn, notes that during the launch of the "One Belt, One Road" Initiative in 2013, the Chinese government defined TCM as a "commodity" that needs to be promoted on the world market as part of the country's cultural and intangible heritage. The researcher claims that the project contributes to the popularisation of TCM methods in those countries that have joined it. In particular,

this refers to Asian states. The researcher also expresses the opinion that this has already led to the development of cooperation, partnership and strengthening of socio-economic cooperation between China and the countries participating in the initiative.

As noted in the previous section, the “One Belt, One Road” initiative was created to stimulate China’s development through the search for new sources of growth, the creation of modern industries around the world, and increasing the role of the state at the regional and global level (Schulhof *et al.*, 2022). Now, it is the largest infrastructure project in history, covering more than 100 countries on all continents and dozens of international organisations; its implementation will lead to an increase in interconnectedness in the trans-regional space, primarily Europe and Asia, and a full-scale presence of China. Therewith, the healthcare sector is not yet a priority in the implementation of the Chinese programme. This factor determines the need for a comprehensive review of China’s policy in the field of promoting TCM methods as a unique phenomenon.

CONCLUSIONS

Due to the implementation of a number of reforms, China has managed to become one of the most influential international actors over several decades. This positioning was facilitated by Beijing’s use of a “soft power” policy in interstate relations. Its essence is creating a positive image of the state in the international arena by spreading its culture and values.

One of the elements of Chinese culture is TCM. Due to its success at home, the proposed solutions enjoy special prestige when exporting to other countries. Since the beginning of the 21st century and the development of globalisation processes, following

the transformation of ideas about human health and the change in the medical model, TCM has proved its unique advantages, and its own development has played an active role in the development of world medicine. Despite the fact that the medicine of the Western world does not recognise some Chinese methods, the popularity of the latter is only increasing. Hundreds of researchers around the world research TCM methods, confirming or refuting their effectiveness. In this context, it is also important to mention China’s global project “One Belt, One Road”. In the field of healthcare, the initiative has great potential and can be expanded from today’s health safety issues to broader collaboration, especially in the context of cancer treatment, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases. Gradually, Beijing has scaled up the implementation of its own infrastructure projects, making an increasing contribution to the fight against global problems and stimulating the spread of Chinese culture. In the future, the number of countries interested in building partnerships with China will only grow.

The prospect of further research on this subject is a detailed examination of the experience of specific countries of the world in the context of introducing TCM methods into the healthcare system. In addition, this study can become a starting point for considering the experience of the PRC in implementing geopolitical interests in the context of the “One Belt, One Road” project.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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Традиційна китайська медицина як інструмент покращення іміджу Китаю: роль соціально-політичних чинників

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Анотація. Метою дослідження був аналіз факторів впливу традиційної китайської медицини на покращення іміджу Китаю на міжнародній арені на сучасному етапі історичного розвитку. Методологічна база дослідження побудована на основі комплексного підходу з поєднанням теоретичних та емпіричних методів пізнання, таких як історичний, порівняльний, системний, аналіз статистичних даних. В рамках дослідження розглянуто основні етапи та особливості розвитку традиційної китайської медицини, яка має тисячолітню історію, сформульовано її основні принципи та методи терапії. Крім того, визначено територію поширення традиційної китайської медицини та виявлено країни, де вона найбільш поширена. А саме, розглянуто приблизну кількість лікарів традиційної китайської медицини і відділень в медичних установах Республіки Казахстан. Особливу увагу приділено визначенню місця Китаю на сучасній міжнародній арені в контексті реалізації політики “м’якої сили”, розгляду ролі інвестиційного проекту “Один пояс, один шлях” у покращенні іміджу держави на міжнародній арені, оцінці значення традиційної китайської медицини у процесі становлення країни як одного зі світових гегемонів на тлі пандемії коронавірусу, а також аналізу внеску традиційної китайської медицини у збереження здоров’я людини і світової культури. Зокрема, доведено, що хоча китайська медицина відрізняється від західної глобальним, комплексним підходом до лікування, її терапевтичні методики все частіше впроваджуються в систему охорони здоров’я західних держав та інших країн світу, в тому числі й Центральноазіатського регіону

Ключові слова: охорона здоров’я; система лікування; діагностика; національний бренд; профілактика; м’яка сила