
Exploring Traditional Health Culture Through Classical and Clinical Practice Research

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Abstract

Researching and exploring traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) health culture entails delving into the relationship between culture and health, as well as the impact of culture on health, with the aim of providing a solution to the increasingly severe health and survival crises in modern society. Drawing on nearly four decades of clinical practice experience rooted in townships, this study bases itself on clinical and daily life contexts, utilizing classics to solve problems by seeking thoughts, philosophies, and solutions from them. After years of clinical practice research and verification, it is believed that TCM health culture is the foundation of the health of the Chinese nation. It represents a health culture, a fundamental mindset for health consciousness, ensuring basic health while enabling a leap towards higher levels of health and well-being. It serves as a fundamental method and pathway to guide people towards health. TCM health culture encompasses multi-tiered health preservation methods and a conceptual framework for a healthy lifestyle. It is the essence of health, embodying a healthy outlook on life, values, and worldview. It provides a worldview and methodology for addressing health issues, possessing inestimable economic and social value.

Keywords

Traditional Chinese medicine health culture
Health foundation
Health crisis
Survival crisis
Multi-tiered healthy lifestyle

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1. Introduction

Throughout its history, traditional Chinese medicine has weathered profound historical changes, the ravages of war, the loss of ancient healing rituals (Zhuyou), the stunted development of surgery, and the enigmatic fate of obstetrics. Despite its fragmented state, TCM has remained steadfast in its original purpose, safeguarding

the Chinese nation and making immense contributions to its prosperity and continuation. It remains the most comprehensive form of general medicine in the world today. Classics, as the wellspring and theoretical foundation of TCM, have served as the cornerstone for the theories of medical practitioners throughout history. The ancients said: “Literature carries the “*Dao*” (the

Way), and language transforms people.” This means that writing serves as a tool to record and convey the “*Dao*”, while only language that explains and elucidates the “*Dao*” can change people’s behavior, guiding them to live in accordance with the “*Dao*” and pursue health. In modern society, with the increasing abundance of material life, diseases have also surged dramatically. Conditions such as high blood lipids, high uric acid, and high blood sugar are prevalent, while diseases like cancer, kidney disease, and cardiovascular and cerebrovascular diseases have erupted in a blowout manner, showing a significant trend of affecting younger populations. These issues cannot be completely resolved by modern medical technology. Data released by the country in recent years shows a gradual decline in birth rates, indicating that the Chinese nation is facing an increasingly severe health crisis and existential crisis.

2. Seeking the “*Dao*” in classics

The first chapter of “*Su Wen • On the True Nature of the Ancients*” in The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine states: “In the time of the Yellow Emperor... I have heard that in ancient times, people lived to be a hundred years old without showing signs of decline in their movements. Nowadays, people often show signs of decline in their movements at the age of fifty. Is this due to a change in the times, or is it because people are losing their way? Qi Bo replied, ‘In ancient times, those who understood the “*Dao*” followed the principles of “*Yin*” and “*Yang*” ... and lived to be a hundred years old before passing away... Therefore, those who decline at fifty do so because they do not follow the teachings of the ancient sages... By cultivating their virtue, they remain free from danger... Women mature at seven... Men mature at eight... In ancient times, there were True Men... In the Middle Ancient times, there were Supreme Men... Next came the Sages... Then the Worthies... who could also extend their lifespan to its fullest extent^[1].

The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine begins its discussion with the theme of “The True Nature of the Ancients.” Starting with “*xi*”, meaning past or ancient times, it implies the origin and essence. The “*huang*”, meaning yellow or golden represents the central earth, symbolizing righteousness, right mindfulness,

and right awakening. “*Di*”, meaning emperor signifies the ruler of the world. Since the central earth exists at different levels in heaven, on earth, among the stars, within the body, and in human culture, the term “Yellow Emperor” encompasses multiple layers of meaning. Therefore, “In the time of the Yellow Emperor” implies different levels of connotations.

- (1) The fundamental survival of all things depends on the sound functioning of the earth’s fundamental role
- (2) Whether the earth’s fundamentals are normal depends on the normalcy of heavenly moisture
- (3) The normalcy of heavenly moisture fundamentally depends on the presence of Saturn
- (4) The foundation of the survival and well-being of the Chinese nation lies in the classical thoughts passed down by its cultural progenitor, the Yellow Emperor
- (5) The root of an individual’s health lies in the sound functioning of their spleen and stomach
- (6) It is crucial to enlighten future learners that when studying the classics, they must clarify the different levels and realms of health culture and cultivate a mindset of comprehensive and dynamic management

Therefore, “achieving success and ascending to the heavens” also encompasses various levels and realms, corresponding to different health needs. The cultural progenitor of the Chinese nation reached a celestial position and realm in terms of thought and consciousness. With such breadth of vision and awareness, he planned and envisioned the healthy survival and future of the Chinese nation, and his health culture will undoubtedly become a guardian like Saturn. This leads to the first crucial question concerning the healthy survival of the Chinese nation: “I have heard that in ancient times, people lived beyond a hundred years without declining physical vigor; whereas nowadays, people often experience a decline in physical vigor by the age of fifty. Is this due to a change in times or a loss of human nature?”

The first question implies as below.

- (1) Longevity is not the goal; health is the key
- (2) In a new historical and social context, if the majority of middle-aged individuals face health issues related to aging during its development, it

is an inevitable consequence of the new historical era, where changes in circumstances have led people to forget or even lose the inheritance of health culture in their pursuit of changing their destinies

- (3) Ancient ancestors had long understood the essence of health and longevity
- (4) Such health issues and phenomena seem to have occurred multiple times throughout the millions of years of Chinese history, not just in modern society
- (5) It implies to future learners that they must keep pace with the times, innovate and pass on the classical thoughts, spiritual concepts, and wisdom in plain language, presenting them to contemporaries to meet the needs of different eras and societies

“Acting in accordance with “Yin” and “Yang”, harmonizing with the principles of nature, eating and drinking in moderation, following a regular routine in daily life, avoiding excessive exertion... one may live to be over a hundred years old”; “Taking wine as if it were water... one may decline before reaching fifty.” From this, we can deduce that the objects our ancestors referred to and learned from varied, leading to different perceptions of health, different health education approaches, and consequently, divergences in cultural heritage. These differences further result in distinct lifestyles, health states, and outcomes. Health itself is a state, a result, and even more so, a process. “Su Wen, Chapter 5, On the Correspondence Between “Yin” and “Yang” and the External Manifestations”: “Yin” and “Yang” are the principles governing heaven and earth... Heaven and earth encompass all things above and below. “Yin” and “Yang” represent the male and female aspects of vital energy. Left and right are the pathways of “Yin” and “Yang”. Water and fire are the manifestations of “Yin” and “Yang”...^[2]. From this classic text, we understand that the objects our Chinese ancestors referred to were “Yin and Yang,” encompassing all things in heaven and earth. “Yin” and “Yang” represent laws and principles, they are the parents, the male and female, the whole, the directions, the functions, the goals, the paths, and the beginning and end... Thus, “Yin” and “Yang” are an interdependent and interconnected unity of opposites, where each depends on

the other for its existence. The great “Yin” and “Yang” of heaven and earth mirror the small heaven and earth within the human body.

Everything possesses its own Tai Chi, and all things move and change in accordance with the natural movements of heaven and earth. The “Dao De Jing” also states: “Man follows the earth, the earth follows heaven, heaven follows the “Dao”, and the “Dao” follows nature^[3].” Understanding one’s roots, accepting education and heritage, and shortening the time for cognitive development are crucial for addressing health issues. “The teachings of the ancient sages to the people below” have already informed us that health requires education, and culture demands inheritance. Culture is the foundation of health, and health education and cultural heritage are the best paths to improving health. “Avoiding pathogenic factors when they arise, maintaining tranquility and emptiness, allowing true qi to flow, and keeping the spirit inward, how can illness occur?”... These teachings impart knowledge and methods, inherit cultural foundations and ideologies, and cultivate healthy populations.

To maintain health, one must possess “complete virtue without danger.” “Ling Shu, Chapter 8, On the Essence of the Spirit”: “What heaven bestows upon us is virtue; what earth bestows upon us is “qi”. Virtue flows and “qi” merges to give birth to life...^[4]. From this classic, we can learn that “heaven” projected onto the human body, or rather, the “heaven” within the human body, is the “virtue” (de) of the “Dao” (Tao) projected onto humans. It represents “yang”, the multi-layered endogenous environment of the human body, and the foundational state of spirit, consciousness, and emotions in the physical form inherited, nurtured, generated, and cultivated by nature through parents. It is the intrinsic state of human health, manifesting as healthy thoughts, consciousness, and emotional-behavioral states within individuals. “Earth”, as manifested in the human body, represents “vessels” (“qi”), “yin,” and the physical body. It is the physical form generated, nurtured, and grown through natural behaviors, influenced by what parents see, hear, smell, taste, and feel from nature. Therefore, only individuals with healthy emotions, thoughts, and conscious behaviors possess a healthy cognitive perspective, along with healthy conscious thinking principles and boundaries. Only those with healthy

conscious principles and boundaries can better control their emotions, manage their diet, lifestyle, and engage in physical exercise. Human life is a process that, like nature, appears constant but is in fact constantly and perpetually changing. Hence, health culture needs to be passed down, and health knowledge and methods need to be learned and reinforced. Health requires accumulation to elevate levels; it requires management to prevent deviations from the path of health and the onset of illness. The opposite is also true. Through nearly four decades of long-term clinical observations of several families spanning three to five generations, it has been concluded that different mentalities and health perceptions lead to the formation of distinct lifestyle and psychological habits.

These habits, in turn, become the health foundation for future generations. This could be the key reason behind the discontinuity in the inheritance of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) culture, the lack of TCM health education, ultimately leading to changes in people's health perceptions and the subsequent emergence of numerous health issues and frequent diseases. The classics outline models of health: the True Person, the Supreme Person, the Sage, and the Worthy. It is not difficult to deduce that below the Worthy are ordinary people; below ordinary people are the weak or frail, also known as the sub-healthy population; and below the weak are the sick, those plagued by illnesses. Individuals at different levels of health states form an idealized, dynamically healthy society. This society encompasses not only authentic beings, embodiments of heaven and earth, who enjoy boundless longevity, but also ordinary people around us who lead healthy and long lives, as well as those who are frail or ill. The consciousness and spirit of health that they embody represent the lifelong health goals pursued by people. This is the very root of why the Chinese nation has always revered health and morality since ancient times. Having goals in mind provides direction in life, ensuring that one's actions and conduct remain steadfast and purposeful. Innovating and inheriting traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) health culture, strengthening TCM health education, and guiding society towards healthy development and progress represent the call of the times for TCM. They also constitute an unshrinkable responsibility and commitment of TCM.

The classics take "Huangdi" (the Yellow Emperor)

as a model of health, discussing the health issues of the Chinese nation from the lofty perspective of the "Dao" of Heaven, standing at the pinnacle of health, and tracing back to the origins. They expound on the fundamentals of heaven and earth and nature, as well as the moral consciousness and ideology of the unity of heaven and humanity in harmony with the "Dao" and nature. They inherit the spirit of heaven and earth, impart healthy lifestyles and methods, and ensure the continuity of the cultural foundation of the Chinese nation over thousands of years. "Su Wen · Chapter Three of On Communication Between Vitality and Heaven": "...Hence, sages transmit their spirit, harmonize with the "Qi" of heaven, and connect with the divine...^[5]". Therefore, the foundation of health lies in a healthy cognitive basis, namely a healthy outlook on life, values, and worldview. It involves inheriting the spirit and will of heaven and earth, adapting medicine and diet to the four seasons, understanding human emotions and principles, and comprehending the true essence of health. "As stated in the I Ching: 'The movement of heaven is vigorous; the superior man strives continuously to strengthen himself' and 'The earth's capacity is Kun; the superior man carries with him the great virtue of nurturing all things.' These verses both speak to the connotations of a healthy culture. The foundation of health lies in embracing the will and purpose of the heavens, inheriting the tranquility, clarity, and perpetual vitality of the azure sky, as well as the courageous and forward-thinking spirit. It also involves upholding the virtues of the earth's boundless love and sense of responsibility, becoming the behavioral norms, bottom-line thinking, referring to a mindset that considers the worst-case scenario or minimum acceptable outcome, and standards of propriety for individuals. A true man should dare to be the first, with ambitions spanning the four corners of the earth, bravely advancing for the sake of the nation and its people, perpetually thriving.

As a teacher, one should serve as a model of virtue, exemplifying health and educating others. As a husband, one should lead by example, embodying health and responsibility, fostering filial piety and family harmony, and contributing to social harmony. As parents, one should teach by words and deeds, setting an example of healthy standards, respecting the elderly and loving the young, and fostering harmony with neighbors. For the

Chinese nation to thrive and multiply healthily across generations, it is essential to inherit the healthy culture of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), maintain a calm and enlightened mind, harbor lofty aspirations, and bravely advance. Strive to become a role model for children and a paragon for society, persevering through challenges to become the pillar of the nation. By inheriting the healthy culture of TCM, we can reshape the image of China, cultivate Chinese virtues, realize the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, and foster a healthy lifestyle, thereby creating a healthy China.

3. Clinical verification (Typical case)

Patient Duan XX, female, aged 23, accidentally caught a cold after giving birth in October 2012. She recovered after self-treatment, but around 10 days later, she developed symptoms of facial and limb edema and discomfort. She was diagnosed with glomerulonephritis at a county-level hospital and was later transferred to a provincial hospital for treatment. The diagnosis was chronic glomerulonephritis with nephrotic syndrome. After hospitalization, her condition improved, and she was discharged with medication. Upon returning home, she noticed significant weight loss and felt fearful when she learned that other patients on the same medication had gained weight. Consequently, she stopped taking the medication on her own and sought help from TCM. Upon examination, she presented with a thin and weak physique, fatigue, a pale complexion with little luster, dizziness, palpitations, soreness in the limbs, drowsiness, poor appetite, frequent urination, loose stools, cold limbs, and a deep and thin pulse. Urinalysis showed: occult blood 2+, protein 3+, ketones 2+, with no other significant abnormalities. Blood routine test: Hemoglobin 85 g/L, with no other obvious abnormalities.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) diagnosis showed that she has consumptive disease (deficiency of both lung and kidney, impaired digestion and transportation, and weakened ability to control blood). Treatment involved nourishing “qi”, strengthening the spleen, harmonizing the stomach, warming the kidney, and consolidating essence, with adjustments made according to symptoms. Simultaneously, lifestyle

interventions were provided, including guidance on emotions, diet, daily habits, and exercise routines. After nearly five years of intermittent TCM treatment and multiple liver and kidney function tests, as well as blood and urine examinations, no abnormal recurrences were observed, leading to a declaration of cure. Upon learning that the kidney disease had been cured, the patient and her family expressed a desire for another pregnancy. After nearly a year of conditioning, she conceived again and gave birth to a healthy baby girl, resulting in a complete family with both a son and a daughter, bringing joy to the entire household. Follow-up visits to date have confirmed the health of both mother and daughter.

Patient Yang XX, female, aged 65, first visited on March 16, 2017, with the chief complaint of recurrent vaginal bleeding, shortness of breath, dizziness, fatigue, and weakness in the limbs for over half a year. Present illness history showed that the patient experienced recurrent vaginal bleeding of unknown cause, shortness of breath, dizziness, fatigue, and weakness in the limbs half a year ago. She had sought medical attention at both county-level and provincial hospitals, where she was diagnosed with cervical cancer. Tests revealed that the cancer cells had metastasized, and the optimal surgical window had been missed. Additionally, the patient's family faced financial difficulties, leading to the recommendation for her to return home for palliative care (the family was informed that the patient had a maximum life expectancy of three months). Upon referral through acquaintances, the family sought TCM assistance.

Symptoms observed including the patient had a sallow complexion, was emaciated, showed signs of fatigue and listlessness, had a thin tongue, and presented with deep and thin pulses in all six positions. Diagnosis included as follow.

- (1) Metrorrhagia (deficiency of spleen and lung “qi”, impaired digestion and transportation, and weakened ability to control blood due to “qi” deficiency)
- (2) Consumptive disease (deficiency of spleen and kidney “yang”, impaired “qi” transformation, and blockage by dampness, toxicity, stasis, and turbidity).

Treatment was conducted by nourishing “qi” and promoting blood circulation, warming “yang” and

strengthening the spleen, detoxifying and resolving turbidity. The patient was treated with a modified Buzhong Yiqi Decoction. Given that the patient was aware of her condition, she and her family were informed that in TCM, there are no incurable diseases; the key lies in one's mental state and attitude. They were encouraged to face the disease calmly, adopt healthier lifestyles and dietary habits, and believe in their ability to overcome the illness. After more than two months of TCM treatment, the patient gained weight, her complexion improved, vaginal bleeding significantly decreased, and she reported a marked recovery in strength and vitality. She regained confidence, became fully self-sufficient in daily activities, and was able to perform household chores. The patient has continued with TCM treatment to date, with satisfactory results for both her and her family. She has also become a voluntary promoter of TCM in her village and surrounding areas.

4. Outcome status

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) health culture represents the core essence of TCM's foundational theories and health education. It serves as the intrinsic source that has sustained the Chinese nation's continuous existence for millennia and is the bedrock of health. TCM health culture encompasses fundamental concepts and levels of understanding regarding emotions, diet, daily routines, labor, exercise, and other aspects. In other words, it involves the conscious thinking about health goals, health approaches, and health methods in these domains, thereby forming the basis for self-management of emotions, diet, daily routines, lifestyle, labor, and exercise. This, in turn, fosters an internal restraint that cultivates good living habits and a healthy lifestyle. As material prosperity grows, people's outlooks on life, values, and worldviews evolve, leading to changes in their pursuit of health culture ideals. This has resulted in a

weakening and discontinuity in the transmission of TCM health culture.

TCM itself struggles to articulate its own issues clearly, resorting to language from over two millennia ago to communicate with the present, thereby exacerbating a significant crisis in TCM's inheritance. The lack of TCM health education is the root cause of frequent social diseases, declining physical fitness among the populace, emerging social health crises, and even survival crises. Strengthening the innovative inheritance of TCM health culture will enable TCM to be learned, applied, and explained clearly and understandably. Enhancing the daily application of the "preventive treatment of disease" concept will guide people towards better health.

5. Discussion on inheritance

TCM health culture originates from the unique inventions and insights of the ancestors and sages of the Chinese nation regarding the fundamental awareness and cognition of all things in heaven and earth. It has been documented in classics, forming a system that establishes the unique health outlook on life, health values, and health worldview of the Chinese nation. This, in turn, has given rise to a distinctive methodology for addressing health issues, characterized by a holistic health perspective of "harmony between man and nature"; a dialectical health perspective of "medicine and food as one"; a disease prevention and control perspective of "treating diseases before they arise"; a constant change perspective of "five movements and six 'qi'"; and a professional ethics perspective of "great physicians embody sincerity." Utilizing natural substances, adhering to natural principles, and employing natural methods to heal and benefit the human body and mind, promoting and maintaining comprehensive human health, TCM represents the sole and entirely novel wisdom-based life medicine model in the world today.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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