

A Study of the Stigmatization of Traditional Chinese Medicine

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Abstract: With advancements in medical science and improvements in human living standards, individuals can lead healthier and longer lives. In medical treatments, Western medicine has emerged as a dominant and highly influential approach, becoming the preferred choice for addressing various health issues. Conversely, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), despite being a valuable legacy passed down through generations, has been undervalued and disregarded by contemporary society. TCM offers a holistic approach to well-being, encompassing physical and mental health benefits. Neglecting this reservoir of wisdom and knowledge would be an unfortunate oversight. The oversight of TCM can be attributed to intricate sociocultural and historical factors. Unravelling these complexities presents a significant opportunity for exploration, shedding light on broader sociological and cultural trends. This study seeks to rekindle interest in TCM, delving into the multifaceted reasons behind its public neglect and stigmatization. By comprehensively analyzing these factors, individuals can appreciate the cultural heritage embedded in TCM and foster a more inclusive medical landscape that integrates the strengths of both Western medicine and TCM. This research aspires to initiate a dialogue that re-positions TCM within the contemporary medical discourse and encourages a more informed and balanced healthcare approach.

Keywords: traditional Chinese medicine, Western medicine, stigma

1. Introduction

Traditional Chinese medicine refers to an ancient system of traditional medicine developed in China over thousands of years, and it mainly focuses on acupoints and qi in the human body. Nevertheless, this special medical treatment seems to lose people's trust and attention due to several reasons. Most people are inclined to get advice and medicine from Western doctors. According to a survey by Judy Xu and Yue Yang, only 13.8% of hospitals in China are traditional Chinese medicine hospitals, and the rest are Western medicine hospitals, which shows the intervallic proportion of Western medicine and traditional Chinese medicine in China [1]. Individuals are less likely or have fewer chances to use traditional Chinese treatments when facing diseases. To be specific, a large proportion of Chinese celebrities have directly shown their depreciation and belittling toward traditional Chinese medicine. As an internationally famous writer, Lu Xun claims, "Traditional Chinese medicine is a deliberate or unintentional liar" [2].

Using the word “liar” shows that traditional Chinese medicine is losing people’s trust and expectations. According to the passage published by Big Think, traditional Chinese medicine is superstitious nonsense.

The former study conducted by Chengzhang Zhu in *An Analysis of Stigmatization of TCM International Communication--Taking the Twitter platform as an example* revealed the difficulties that doctors of TCM faced in spreading TCM worldwide [3]. In addition, by using LDA models, she found that most comments about TCM on Twitter were negative and related to Africa. Chengzhang Zhu explored that the stigma of TCM is mainly derived from two theoretical levels: stereotype and social control, which are two aspects the author will address in the following passage. According to *Qingshishuhuaqingyiyi*, the stigmatization of TCM is caused by Westernized Chinese education and the prevalence of fake TCM, which eliminates people’s trust in TCM [4].

In this research, the author will concentrate on discovering the reasons that caused stigma and ignorance toward traditional Chinese medicine and the specific strategies and advice that can be used to revoke people’s enthusiasm toward traditional Chinese medicine. Furthermore, the author will present the appropriate attitudes that people need to handle toward traditional Chinese medicine and Western medicine.

2. Essential Information

2.1. Definition of Stigma

Before cutting to the chase, people need to have a clear understanding of stigma. According to Goffman, stigma is an attribute that can be deeply discrediting, which reduces the whole person to tainted and discounted others [5]. In the following paragraphs, the author will illustrate the phenomenon and policy that shows either explicit stigma or implicit stigma.

2.2. Reasons That Counted into the Stigma Toward Traditional Chinese Medicine

Data sets can also implicitly inform the existence of stereotypes. According to Yongjie Chen, in 1949, there were 276 thousand traditional Chinese doctors, and there was no increase during the next 53 years. In the same survey, in 1949, there were only 8.7 thousand Western doctors. Nevertheless, after 53 years, the group of Western medicine was enlarged to 1570 thousand people. The proportion changed from 3.2:1 to 1:5.8, which shows that individual gradually lost their trust in TCM and are more likely to rely on Western medicines. Most people label TCM as “sorcery” and “pseudoscience” [6].

According to Yang, Phelan, and Link, Asian Americans in the local community also tend to look for Western treatments rather than TCM [7].

A much more specific analysis of the stigmatization of traditional Chinese medicine was written by Gongyao Zhang, a professor at Zhejiang University, which showed a fairly radical and subjective attitude toward traditional Chinese medicine. “Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) is a primitive medicine with strong idealism and superstition. It cannot cure diseases effectively like traditional medicine of other nationalities.” His words show his discrimination toward traditional Chinese medicine and bias. In his perspective, people view TCM as traditional Chinese culture, and people who refuse TCM will be seen as people who are against traditional Chinese culture, which is an unfair and childish idea. In his essay, he viewed traditional Chinese medicine as garbage in traditional Chinese culture, and by eliminating this medicine, the country could develop better. Doctors majoring in TCM will be seen as shamelessly tampering with science [8].

2.2.1. Historical Background That Implicitly Led to Stigma

People need to find history records. When Western medicine was introduced into China, politics in China was complicated. After the May 4 movement, people have already shown their discontent toward traditional culture, especially traditional Chinese medicine. The situation deteriorated in later ages. In 1929, according to Zy Dazhentan, the Chinese government published a law to abolish TCM in China [9]. Leaders of the Chinese government were the people to sponsor the stigma toward traditional Chinese medicine. According to Baidu, Yunyou Yu and Minyi Chu have drafted and published abolishment of traditional Chinese medicine since they believe traditional Chinese medicine is the defective goods from the ancient feudal age and can be fatal for the Chinese. This action not only leads to more intense criticisms of traditional Chinese medicine but also causes a rupture between traditional Chinese medicine and Western medicine. Furthermore, in 1929, the Beiyang government promulgated the Renzi and Dechou School System, which excluded traditional Chinese medicine from the formal education system, which shows the structural stigma toward traditional Chinese medicine that existed in policies. Last, according to Shidian Baike, in 2006, Gongyao Zhang, who is a professor at Nanjing University, blamed traditional Chinese medicine as a “deception” and “shame” of Chinese culture [10].

2.2.2. Policies Shown Stigma

Due to the restriction of policies, such as they must learn Western medicine even though their major is traditional Chinese medicine, doctors of TCM cannot concentrate on studying TCM. According to Bin Xie, the reason can also be shown by words that seasoned people said, “Western medicine is a life-saving skill, people have to survive, traditional Chinese medicine is the development of skills, dispensable, in short, medicos must know western medicine, traditional Chinese medicine, can be the best, not also nothing” which shows the insignificant status of traditional Chinese medicine [11]. According to Hatzenbuehlar, structural stigma is the societal-level conditions, cultural norms, and institutional practices that constrain the opportunities for stigmatized groups to access and thus threaten their physical and mental health [12].

In this place, the restriction toward traditional Chinese medicine has already reached a societal level and exists in policies, which shows structural stigma since the needs and requirements to learn Western medicine have already become a cultural norm that everyone must follow. Last, traditional Chinese medicine cannot generate as much economic benefit as Western medicine.

2.3. Cost-effective Traditional Chinese Medicine: A Contrast with Western Medicine and Cultural Challenges

Since Western medicine can be fairly money-consuming, and people need to use hundreds to thousands of RMB to deal with their illnesses. However, according to Zhengwei Huang et al., TCM significantly cost lower than Western medicine [13]. The most satirical fact is that even when doctors and people in the West start to treat traditional medicine seriously and evaluate it objectively. However, Chinese people still depreciate this culture and destroy their own culture without any hesitation.

3. Method

According to the literary review and analysis above, the dilemma can be realized that traditional Chinese medicine faces in China. Nevertheless, the mainstream ideas that counted into people’s depreciation are not apparent. The opinions are from only a small amount of group, which can easily lead to a convenient sample and bias. In addition, attitudes from the general population are ambiguous.

This research will mainly use qualitative and quantitative methods to conduct experiments and draw conclusions.

3.1. Data Collection

The sample size of this investigation is 273, which is appropriate and convincing for a survey to get a believable conclusion. The questions are mainly about people's opinions about modern traditional Chinese medicine. The participants in the survey are selected from almost all the regions in China, so there is no bias and errors caused by the different cultural customs in different regions. The aim of the survey is to get peoples' valuable ideas about traditional Chinese medicine and find the targeted groups that have the most negative opinions about traditional Chinese medicine. The further changes and solutions to deal with their depreciation will be based on their concerns and worries shown in the questionnaire now.

This survey is conducted on the Sojump platform, which is an authoritative software that specializes in making questionnaires. In the survey, seven questions are included.

3.2. Hypothesis and Assumption

First, the participants' genders should be included since gender can be a potential impetus for people to choose Western medicine or traditional Chinese medicine. Males may concentrate more on the science written in books and medical treatments with clear standards, so they are more likely to choose Western medicine due to their preference. Nevertheless, females may view medical effects as the most momentous issue to consider, so traditional Chinese medicine may be their priority. The author assumes that the proportion of people who keep negative views toward traditional Chinese medicine can mostly be males.

In addition, income levels cannot be ignored in the discussion. The author assumes that people who have higher incomes are more likely to choose traditional Chinese medicine. According to a survey done by I. Kawachi and B. P. Kennedy, people who have higher incomes tend to be healthier [14]. This theory can be the same for the usage of traditional Chinese medicine; people with higher incomes are more likely to take care of their bodies and make a comprehensive plan for their future health situation. Since traditional Chinese medicine can be effective for people's long-term health, people with higher income levels are more likely to access these resources.

Furthermore, age is an inevitable issue. The author assumes that people whose ages are between 20-45 are more likely to show a strong interest in traditional Chinese medicine in this survey because people at that age need to stand intense work, and some symptoms start to exist in their bodies. Western medicine is unlikely to minimize harm to human bodies, so they are more likely to choose traditional Chinese medicine. People between 15-30 are less likely to know traditional Chinese medicine because they do not suffer from different chronicle diseases, so there is no reason for them to either have positive ideas or negative ideas toward traditional Chinese medicine. People between 45-60 ages may have strong ideas toward traditional Chinese medicine, but they cannot fit in the usage of tech products in general, so results from them can be rare and hard to evaluate.

The last question is about people's preference between traditional Chinese medicine and Western medicine because the reason for people's ignorance toward traditional Chinese medicine can be the prevalence of Western medicine. People are attracted by the quick effect of Western medicine, so they are less likely to use traditional Chinese medicine. This can be only one part of the whole problem. The author also wants to find more reasons for people to prefer Western medicine by using this questionnaire.

Four factors are taken into consideration in the research. They are gender, age, income and attitude toward Western medicines. By using this comparison, it can also indirectly reflect the problems in

traditional Chinese medicine and the reasons why people favor Western medicines. Western medicine is used to be a comparison of traditional Chinese medicine. In addition, there are open-ended questions. These two questions ask why people think traditional Chinese medicine is ineffective and what changes can be made to improve the acceptability of traditional Chinese medicine.

In this survey, questionnaires are collected, and 97% of them provide effective and useful ideas. The author used SSPSAU to analyze the data. SSPSAU is a reputed and trustworthy platform, which shows that the analysis of the data can be highly acceptable and believable.

4. Results and Analysis

Stigma toward traditional Chinese medicine is most apparent in males rather than females. According to Table 1, 51.8% of males and 22.92% of females believe that Western medicine is more trustworthy than traditional Chinese medicine, reflecting that males are more likely to give negative comments toward traditional Chinese medicine.

Table 1: Chi-Square Analysis of Gender.

Chi-Square Analysis						
Question	Name	Gender (%)		Total	X ²	P value
		Male	Female			
Do you trust Western medicine more than Chinese medicine?	Yes	42(51.85%)	44(22.92%)	86(31.50%)	24.811	0.000**
	No	11(13.58%)	66(34.38%)	77(28.21%)		
	Neutral	28(34.57%)	82(42.71%)	110(40.29%)		
Total		81	192	273		

In addition, according to Table 2, the Pearson analysis shows that older people are more likely to trust traditional Chinese medicine than younger people.

Table 2: Pearson coefficient between ages and attitudes toward traditional Chinese medicine.

Age		
Do you trust Western Medicine more than Chinese Medicine?	Pearson Coefficient	0.149*
	P value	0.014
	Sample Size	273

There are also some people whose views are relatively neutral. Among the people who have negative ideas toward traditional Chinese medicine, several reasons are given. First, people need to wait for a long time to see actual positive changes in their bodies, but Western medicines only need to take a relatively short time. In addition, people view traditional Chinese medicine as a culture rather than a science. They cannot find scientific evidence that traditional Chinese medicine can improve the human body significantly, but Western medicines are based on real principles and models. Furthermore, the negative effects of traditional Chinese medicine make people feel threatened and scared, which makes them avoid using traditional Chinese medicine. Moreover, people do not think traditional Chinese medicine doctors are trustworthy, and these doctors are viewed as frauds and cheaters.

5. Suggestions

Participants also gave several suggestions. They claim that they are more likely to use traditional Chinese medicine only if scientific principles and laws are published. No scientific evidence can increase their doubts about the expertise of traditional Chinese medicine. Nevertheless, it cannot be objective to explain traditional Chinese medicine as not scientific since it is based on the yin-yang theory, which is a type of science. According to the Traditional Chinese Medicine World Foundation, the yin-yang theory is the macro level - the largest scale imaginable—all things are always balancing and re-balancing into a state of perfect harmony. Yin-yang theory is the oldest scientific system in China, and it has almost the same position as Newton's physics laws, which shows that traditional Chinese medicine is actually based on the laws, but people hardly know these theories, which means it is actually people's fault and misunderstanding.

In addition, they urge doctors of traditional Chinese medicine to improve their medical level, and standards should also be formed in traditional Chinese medicine. However, that is not realistic and unfair for doctors in traditional Chinese medicine. Doctors of Western medicine will also give different judgments based on patients' performance and symptoms. There is no reason not to allow doctors in traditional Chinese medicine to make the same judgement. The only concern that patients need to have is whether these medicines can solve their problems thoroughly instead of making specific judgments. There is no clear standard that should be held.

Furthermore, one of the common concerns is that people think traditional Chinese medicine is too slow and cannot easily find accurate effects. Nevertheless, during COVID-19, traditional Chinese medicine has shown fast and effective treatment, and traditional Chinese medicine is also effective in treating acute heart disease.

Last, some participants just use their examples to show the uselessness of traditional Chinese medicine. Nevertheless, most of them go to find doctors of traditional Chinese medicine only after their illness has lasted for a long time period. At that time, the most effective time to do traditional medical treatments had already passed, and it was hard for either Western doctors and doctors of traditional Chinese medicine to do further medical treatments, which shows that patients need to find doctors of traditional Chinese medicine as soon as possible after they are infected.

6. Conclusion

By looking at the results of the surveys, it is known that more people prefer to get Western medical treatments instead of traditional Chinese medical treatments for several reasons.

By collecting data from the general population, the author knows relatively accurate opinions from different people. In addition, the author also wants to reverse people's negative views toward traditional Chinese medicine by encouraging them to try these treatments by themselves and eliminate their stereotype of traditional Chinese medicine as "unscientific" and "valueless".

The intentional guidance on social platforms can also be catalysts for people to depreciate traditional Chinese medicine since most comments online are negative and illogical. Only people who have strong opinions toward traditional Chinese medicine are likely to express their voices on the platforms. People who have strong opinions are also likely to brainwash others who do not form strong opinions toward traditional Chinese medicine. These comments can definitely bring confusion and directly or indirectly form people's consciousness. In this case, people should not easily trust online comments and voices. It can be a wise idea for people to treat online comments objectively and critically instead of blindly listening to others' invalid opinions. Insulting them without further understanding is an irrespective behavior. People in China should carry forward this culture instead of depreciating it blindly.

However, as a disclaimer, the impact of this research is not to encourage people to give up Western medicine entirely and only use traditional Chinese medicine. This idea will be highly impractical and harmful to the human body. People need to find a way to combine Western medicine and traditional Chinese medicine to reach a win-win situation. Being radical on any side will be irrational and impractical. This research might be seen as an incentive to stimulate these policymakers to step forward and advocate Chinese traditional medicine to the public.

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