

A Study on the Communication of Traditional Chinese Medicine Discourse on YouTube under the National Strategy Background

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Abstract

This study analyzes the dissemination of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) discourse on YouTube since its promotion as a Chinese national strategy in 2016. The research aims to map the communication ecology by examining the characteristics of high-impact videos and audience reception. Employing a mixed-methods content analysis, the study investigates 140 high-view TCM-related videos (2016-2024) and their associated comments.

Findings reveal a structural imbalance in discourse subjects. Communication is primarily led by non-governmental, North American-based individual practitioners, while sources from China, TCM's cultural origin, are significantly under-represented. Thematically, content is dominated by diagnostic and therapeutic practices, highlighting an audience focus on TCM's instrumental value. A key finding is a cognitive disconnect in narrative frameworks: Chinese-sourced videos often frame TCM as "civilizational heritage," whereas foreign-sourced videos predominantly present it as "alternative therapy." Sentiment analysis indicates predominantly positive audience reactions. However, analysis of comments shows a deeper "cultural discount," with audiences prioritizing practical techniques over philosophical foundations.

The study concludes that TCM communication on YouTube is active yet contested, marked by a disparity in discursive power. Enhancing communication effectiveness requires strategies that address this structural imbalance and bridge the framing gaps to foster deeper cross-cultural understanding.

Keywords

Traditional Chinese Medicine; Global Communication; Cultural Discourse Studies; YouTube

1. Introduction

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), embodying millennia of Chinese wisdom and practice, demonstrates unique potential in global health due to its diagnostic and therapeutic advantages of being accessible, simple, effective, and low-cost. However,

within the international medical system dominated by Western science, TCM has long faced challenges of insufficient discursive power and even marginalization. In 2016, the Chinese government elevated the international dissemination of TCM to a national strategy by promulgating key documents such as the "Traditional Chinese Medicine Law of the People's Republic of China."

YouTube, a major platform with over 2 billion daily active users, has become a crucial channel for the international communication of TCM culture. Existing research often approaches the topic from a single disciplinary perspective, such as linguistics or communication studies, focusing on specific issues like discursive power or image building, and lacks a holistic exploration of its global communication characteristics. Particularly on high-traffic platforms like YouTube, the mechanisms of TCM discourse dissemination have not been systematically analyzed. Since the implementation of the national strategy in 2016, the current state and characteristics of TCM communication on YouTube remain under-studied, which hinders the optimization of communication strategies.

Therefore, based on the theoretical framework of Cultural Discourse Studies (Xu Shi, 2022), this research selects high-impact TCM videos from the YouTube platform between 2016 and 2024 as samples. It aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the patterns of discursive practice in TCM's international communication within the national strategy context, thereby revealing the true picture of its communication ecology.

The perspective of Cultural Discourse Studies (Xu Shi, 2022) strives to transcend this binary framework. It defines 'discourse' as: a form of social communicative activity, undertaken by speaking subjects within specific historical and cultural relationships, who use language and other semiotic channels to achieve particular purposes and effects. Based on this definition, discourse is viewed as a holistic entity formed by the dialectical unity of multiple elements (including the speaking subjects, content, media channels, historical relationships, cultural relationships, and purposes/effects). Based on Cultural Discourse Studies (Xu Shi, 2022), this paper defines Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) discourse as a social practice. It aims to achieve the global dissemination of TCM culture, theory, facts, and technical knowledge through various media, including language, text, and visual cultural symbols, within specific historical and cultural contexts.

Studying TCM discourse in this paper involves not only examining the language itself but also analyzing the speaking subjects, their identities, the modes of expression, and the underlying cultural and historical relationships. In other words, the definition of TCM discourse here is not confined to traditional linguistic or communication studies concepts. Instead, it adopts a holistic and dialectical perspective, incorporating TCM itself and its interactive relationships with society and culture into the research scope.

The definition of international social media platforms has evolved from the concept

of social media. Social media is a product of internet development, created from users' need to establish virtual social networks (Obar & Wildman, 2015). There is not yet a complete consensus in academia on the definition of social media, but more widely accepted definitions include: a platform that connects users' social networks through computer technology (Wellman B, 1996); and a relational cyberspace where users create content and interact (Kapoor et al., 2018). Unlike traditional media, social media is user-driven, highly interactive, and decentralized, with platforms using algorithms to recommend and disseminate user-generated content (Kim, 2017). Social media can be categorized based on the geographical scope of its users, such as regional social media and international social media. Accordingly, this study defines international social media platforms as social media platforms that have a broad user base worldwide, where content is primarily user-generated and disseminated through continuous interaction powered by platform algorithms, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram.

To investigate the current state of TCM discourse practices on the international social media platform YouTube under the national strategy, deconstruct their patterns, and enhance the effectiveness of TCM's international communication, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What discourse characteristics (in terms of discourse subjects, content, and forms) are exhibited by high-view TCM-related videos on YouTube between 2016 and 2024, and what are their discourse effects?
2. Based on the above analysis, what kind of international communication discourse ecology has been collectively shaped by these high-impact TCM videos on YouTube, and what are the key issues and challenges within this ecology?

2. Research Methods

This study employs a content analysis method, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches, to systematically analyze high-impact videos related to "traditional Chinese medicine" on YouTube from January 1, 2016, to December 31, 2024.

On March 15, 2025, a web crawler program was written in Python to collect data using the official YouTube API. Using "traditional Chinese medicine" as the keyword, videos within the specified timeframe were retrieved, yielding an initial dataset of 500 entries. Collected information included the uploader, title, publication date, duration, view count, and video link. The data was sorted in descending order by view count to focus on high-impact content.

The initial dataset underwent manual cleaning and screening to exclude videos irrelevant to the TCM theme, duplicates, and highly homogeneous content (e.g., for TV series, only the episode with the highest view count was retained). To ensure sample representativeness, purposive sampling was applied, finally selecting videos with over 10,000 views as the study sample, resulting in 140 videos.

For the selected 140 videos, additional interaction data such as likes and comments

were collected. A content analysis was conducted by developing coding categories. Two coders performed the coding independently, and inter-coder reliability, measured by Holsti's coefficient, ranged between 0.91 and 0.93 for all items, indicating high reliability. Based on the coding results, characteristics of discourse subjects and content were summarized. Furthermore, comment data from the sample underwent word frequency statistics and sentiment analysis to identify audience focus and emotional tendencies, enabling a comprehensive evaluation of the videos' communication effects.

3. Research Findings

3.1. Discourse Subjects

Based on the analysis of video uploaders, the subjects in the sample can be categorized into three types: official institutions (12.8%), non-governmental institutions (39.3%), and individuals (47.9%), further subdivided into six categories based on Chinese/foreign distinction. Their discursive characteristics are mainly reflected in the following three aspects:

First, the geographical origins of the subjects show a diverse but uneven distribution, forming a "core-periphery" structure. North America (primarily the United States) accounts for 54.2%, holding an absolutely dominant position. Asia accounts for 23.9%, but China, the birthplace of TCM, constitutes only 11.6%, indicating a significant misalignment with its cultural origins. Europe, Oceania, and South America together account for 21.8%, situated on the periphery of the communication network. This pattern reflects the dominance of North America over TCM discourse on YouTube and the underrepresentation of China as the cultural source, highlighting a structural imbalance in global communication.

Second, the communication subjects are primarily non-governmental forces, with professional orientation being a prominent identity attribute. Individual accounts have the highest proportion, forming the core communication force. These mainly include licensed TCM practitioners (e.g., acupuncturists, TCM doctors) and health-focused self-media bloggers, who establish content authority through their professional backgrounds. Non-governmental institutions encompass clinics, educational platforms, brand companies, etc., and their communication content often carries commercial promotion intentions. Although official institutions are few in number, their credibility and broad influence (e.g., CGTN) make them crucial in agenda-setting and authoritative information dissemination.

Third, there is a notable "inversion" phenomenon in the composition of Chinese and foreign subjects. Chinese communication relies heavily on official institutions, with very low participation from non-governmental institutions and individuals. In contrast, foreign communication is centered around non-governmental individuals, with active participation from non-governmental institutions and a weaker official role. This difference reflects the fundamentally different strategies and resource al-

location models employed by official and non-governmental forces in using international platforms to disseminate TCM discourse under different socio-cultural contexts.

The speaking subjects in the videos, as a crucial component of the dissemination of TCM discourse, their identity characteristics and quantity distribution have a direct impact on the shaping of TCM discourse. The following core characteristics can be summarized:

First, internationalization and nationality diversity. The speaking subjects show a distinct international orientation. Overall, the speaking subjects with foreign nationalities reach 168 person-times, accounting for nearly 70%, highlighting the international dominant pattern of the dissemination of TCM discourse on the YouTube platform.

Second, TCM practitioners all occupy a core position, but there are differences in authority. Regardless of the video source, TCM practitioners all occupy a core position, with a total of 136 person-times, accounting for 54.2%, of which 44 person-times are from China and 92 person-times are from foreign sources, and their professional backgrounds are the key basis for shaping the authority of TCM discourse. However, there are obvious differences in the way of presenting authority. In contrast, the practitioners in the videos from foreign sources are mostly ordinary doctors or clinic practitioners with professional qualifications, especially non-institutionalized communication subjects with self-media accounts. Their speech focuses more on the daily practice and popularization of TCM overseas, showing the characteristics of decreasing traditional authority and emphasizing grassroots practice.

Third, role diversity, but there are differences in value orientation. The speaking subjects in both Chinese and foreign videos reflect role diversity, covering multiple links in the TCM industry chain (experts, patients/consultants, media personnel, business/industry-related personnel, government personnel, etc.), forming a relatively complete "expert-patient-media-business-policy" discourse ecology. But there are differences in value orientation: the videos from foreign sources obviously highlight the commercial characteristics. The number of commercial and industrial representatives, such as the founders of TCM brands, clinic founders and heirs, is much larger than that in the videos from China. And the role of TCM association personnel as an important source of funds for medical centers further strengthens the commercial logic. In contrast, the speaking subjects in the videos from China, such as academicians of the Chinese Academy of Engineering and Chinese herbal medicine researchers, are mostly national public servants or personnel of public institutions. Their speech focuses more on social services and knowledge dissemination, reflecting a stronger public welfare orientation.

3.2. Discourse Content

The content themes of China-sourced videos mainly cover six categories: TCM diagnosis, treatment, consultation, and therapies; TCM culture dissemination and application development; TCM philosophy and theoretical knowledge; Stories and perspectives of TCM figures; TCM and COVID-19; and Others. Among these, TCM culture dissemination/application development and TCM diagnosis/treatment/consultation/therapies dominate. It is worth noting that the theme of TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine) cultural communication and application development clearly focuses on the practice of TCM's overseas dissemination. For instance, the film and television work *Doctor of Traditional Chinese Medicine* (Lao Zhong Yi) artistically tells TCM stories in the form of a TV drama. By making this Chinese film and television production available on international social media platforms, it has expanded the reach of TCM cultural communication. Under this theme, the implementation and development of TCM overseas constitute a high-frequency sub-topic. For example, the video "Somali students learn Traditional Chinese Medicine" shows how TCM has been spread to Somalia through the "Belt and Road" Initiative, with teaching and practical activities carried out there; while the video "Traditional Chinese medicine doctor answers growing demand in Vancouver" reflects the increasing demand for and development trend of TCM in the Vancouver area of Canada.

The content themes of foreign-sourced videos cover seven categories: TCM diagnosis, consultation, and therapies; TCM health preservation and wellness; TCM culture dissemination and application development; TCM philosophy and theoretical knowledge; Stories and perspectives of TCM figures; Chinese herbal medicine knowledge; TCM and COVID-19; and Others. Among these, TCM diagnosis, consultation, and therapies have the highest proportion, followed by TCM health preservation and wellness. Content under the TCM diagnosis, consultation, and therapies theme often presents real or simulated TCM diagnosis and treatment processes.

Based on the above analysis of content themes in Chinese and foreign-sourced videos, the following characteristics of TCM discourse content themes on YouTube can be summarized:

First, the dominance of diagnostic and therapeutic practices. The theme of TCM diagnosis, treatment, consultation, and therapies appears most frequently in the eight-year sample (42.6%), holding a dominant position. This clearly reveals that the core focus of the YouTube audience regarding TCM is on its instrumental value and practical effectiveness, while also indicating that the platform's TCM discourse remains significantly influenced by the Western scientific discourse system. Content under this theme often presents traditional TCM consultation and treatment processes in a documentary style, which, on one hand, visually demonstrates the unique diagnostic models and technical methods distinct from Western medicine, and on the other hand, provides the audience with typical cases to understand the practical application of TCM.

Second, the one-sidedness of pandemic response discourse. Regarding the theme of TCM and COVID-19, there is a clear imbalance in the sources of discourse. Chinese official institutions (e.g., CGTN, New China TV) actively released a large number of videos during the pandemic, aiming to share TCM's experience in fighting COVID-19, clarify facts, and contribute to the global fight against the pandemic. However, the discourse output from Western sources on this critical public health issue is nearly absent, reflecting a significant gap in their use of international platforms to disseminate public health response experiences.

Third, audience preference differences for wellness and herbal knowledge. Analysis shows that China-sourced videos produce relatively little discourse on the two themes of TCM health preservation/wellness and Chinese herbal medicine knowledge. Conversely, foreign-sourced videos show significantly higher interest in such content, accounting for over 15% of the total sample, indicating a substantial audience demand on the platform for daily health maintenance and herbal application knowledge. This finding suggests that subsequent content production could appropriately increase investment in these themes.

Fourth, the weakness of the country of origin in theoretical discourse. As the country of origin for TCM, China-sourced videos produce significantly less discourse on the theme of TCM philosophy and theoretical knowledge compared to foreign-sourced videos. This near "absence of voice" contrasts sharply with its status as the knowledge source, warranting in-depth attention.

3.3. Discourse Effects

To investigate discourse effects, this study first employed NLTK (Natural Language Toolkit) for word frequency statistics and generated word clouds. Based on a word frequency analysis (selecting the top 500 high-frequency words) and visual representation via word clouds for comments on target videos from China (28 videos) and foreign sources (112 videos), the cognitive symbolic characteristics presented in these comments were systematically examined.

After processing the text with the NLTK library, the following core categories of cognitive symbols were identified in the high-frequency words from China-sourced video comments. First, symbols related to the TCM theoretical system, such as "medicine" and "tcm," reflected audience awareness of basic TCM concepts, specifically involving energy concepts like "qi," treatment methods like "acupuncture," medicine forms like "herbs," and representative proprietary Chinese medicines like "lianhua," "qingwen," and "baiyao." Second, comments closely linked TCM to specific diseases (e.g., "covid," "virus," "cancer," "flu," "fever") and frequently mentioned efficacy-related symbols like "cure," "effective," "treatment," and "works," highlighting the audience's focus on TCM's therapeutic effects. Third, positive emotional attitude symbols like "thank" and "thanks" expressed audience recognition and gratitude. Fourth, words such as "china," "traditional," "chinese," "western," "modern," and

"science" revealed audience comparisons and cultural identity based on TCM, reflecting cognitive differences between Chinese and Western treatment systems, although some comments also showed negative attitudes, using words like "propaganda" and "ccp". Fifth, high-frequency words like "video," "channel," "information," "learn," and "sharing" constituted symbols of knowledge dissemination and knowledge hunting, indicating that the audience primarily acquires TCM knowledge through videos and channels and demonstrates a clear need for learning and sharing.

The high-frequency word analysis of foreign-sourced video comments also identified distinct patterns of cognitive symbols. First, strong emotional and entertainment-oriented symbols like "thank," "thanks," "love," "great," "amazing," and "wow" appeared frequently, showing that audience interaction is dominated by positive emotions, and comments often included entertainment-oriented expressions like "funny" and "hilarious." Second, symbols pointing to specific therapies and ailments: comments highly focused on specific, operable TCM techniques like "massage," "gua sha," "cupping," target areas like "back," "face," "neck," "lymphatic," "feet," "skin," and addressed ailments like "pain," "tinnitus," reflecting audience interest in TCM's practical functions such as pain relief and beauty, tending to view it as a concrete treatment method. Third, video medium-driven communication symbols formed by words like "video," "watching," "channel," "youtube," indicated that knowledge acquisition highly relies on the visual presentation of videos, and users also showed a willingness to actively request information "sharing." Fourth, individualized treatment experience narrative symbols and personal practice experiences through words like "try," "tried," "use," "works," combined with perception words like "feel," "felt," "cured," reflecting the audience's cognitive path of verifying efficacy through personal experience. Fifth, the coexistence of TCM identifier words like "chinese," "tcm," "herbal," "traditional" and Western medicine reference words like "western," "doctor," "medical" constituted symbols of East-West medical cognitive conflict, revealing the cognitive contrasts and tensions audiences hold between traditional and modern, TCM and Western medicine therapies.

A comprehensive comparison of the high-frequency word characteristics in comments from China-sourced and foreign-sourced videos reveals both similarities and differences. Both highly rely on the video medium ("video," "channel") for knowledge dissemination and exhibit positive emotional expressions represented by "thank"/"thanks." Comment content from both also involves basic TCM concepts ("tcm," "herbal") and comparative cognition with Western medicine ("western"). There are also some differences. Firstly, comments on China-sourced videos place greater emphasis on TCM's theoretical system, cultural connotations ("traditional," "chinese," "science"), and its role in major public health events ("covid"), reflecting deeper cultural identity and theoretical discussion, often intertwined with political interpretations ("propaganda"). In contrast, comments on foreign-sourced videos

focus on specific practical techniques of TCM, target areas, and addressing specific symptoms, demonstrating a strong pragmatism and technical-operational orientation. Secondly, comments on foreign-sourced videos are more intense and diverse, with a noticeably higher entertainment compared to China-sourced comments, where gratitude is more concentrated. Thirdly, comments on foreign-sourced videos frequently feature individual experience narrative words, emphasizing verifying efficacy through personal experience. Comments on China-sourced videos more often reflect attention to systematic knowledge and group-level efficacy. Fourth, comments on China-sourced videos more prominently highlight TCM's symbolic meaning as an integration of national traditional culture and modern science. Although comments on foreign-sourced videos mention "traditional," they more often position TCM as an optional, specific "alternative" or "complementary" therapy, with relatively less exploration of its deeper cultural layers.

To examine the sentiment of overseas audiences towards TCM discourse on YouTube, this study employed the VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary and sEntiment Reasoner) sentiment analysis model supplemented by manual analysis to conduct polarity analysis on the collected valid comments. The dataset consisted of 862 comments from China-sourced videos and 14,111 comments from foreign-sourced videos.

Using predefined rules and a sentiment intensity lexicon, the VADER model can quickly determine the sentiment polarity (positive, neutral, or negative) of a text and output its sentiment intensity. In this study, comments with a sentiment intensity score greater than 0.05 were classified as positive; those with scores between -0.05 and 0.05 were classified as neutral; and comments with scores less than -0.05 were classified as negative.

Based on the VADER analysis, for China-sourced videos, 458 comments (53.1%) were positive, 218 comments (25.3%) were negative, and 186 comments (21.6%) were neutral. For foreign-sourced videos, 8,228 comments (58.3%) were positive, 2,603 comments (18.4%) were negative, and 3,280 comments (23.3%) were neutral.

These results indicate that audiences on YouTube, regardless of whether the video originates from China or foreign sources, predominantly hold positive sentiments towards TCM discourse. However, a substantial proportion of negative sentiments also exists. From this data, the emotional impact of TCM discourse dissemination on YouTube is generally positive, creating favorable conditions for its broader communication. Nonetheless, the presence of negative sentiments requires serious attention.

4. Research Conclusion

The current state of TCM discourse dissemination on the YouTube platform exhibits typical characteristics across four dimensions.

At the level of discourse subjects, Chinese and foreign video accounts show structural differences. Geographically, while diverse, the subjects are unevenly distributed and predominantly non-governmental. In terms of identity composition, there is a sharp contrast: Chinese accounts heavily rely on official media and institutions, whereas foreign accounts are primarily led by non-governmental individuals and organizations. It is noteworthy that subjects from both spheres are predominantly core professionals like TCM practitioners, while also displaying diversity in nationality and industry roles.

Regarding discourse content, a clear cognitive disconnect exists between Chinese and foreign videos. Thematically, diagnostic and therapeutic practices dominate both, but foreign videos place greater emphasis on wellness preservation and herbal knowledge. On the issue of COVID-19, Chinese videos demonstrate a distinct one-way communication characteristic. Furthermore, China, as the origin country of TCM, shows a notable shortage of content disseminating its fundamental theories and philosophy. The difference in narrative frameworks is even more pronounced: Chinese videos often adopt a "civilizational heritage" framework, emphasizing its five-thousand-year history, while foreign videos commonly use an "alternative therapy" framework. This divergence leads to the same techniques, such as cupping and gua sha, being constructed as two different cognitive symbols: "cultural heritage" versus "wellness method."

In terms of discourse effects, the dissemination of TCM discourse still faces the phenomenon of "cultural discount." Although both Chinese and foreign videos use audiovisual media for knowledge dissemination and receive generally positive audience sentiment, deep differences exist at the cognitive level: audiences focus more on practical techniques rather than theoretical systems and show strong interest in TCM's application in global public health crises.

In summary, TCM communication on YouTube is a field that is active in form yet filled with contention and negotiation in structure and connotation. On one hand, it demonstrates the potential for TCM's globalization; on the other hand, it highlights a complex situation arising from geopolitics, cultural differences, and communication strategies: namely, the lack of discursive power for the culture of origin on mainstream platforms, and the trend of TCM being interpreted "instrumentally" rather than understood "culturally" in cross-cultural contexts. To enhance communication effectiveness, it is essential to confront this structural imbalance and cognitive disconnect, and to explore innovative communication strategies that can bridge Chinese and foreign frameworks and promote deeper understanding.

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