

# Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in the Midst of Pandemic Protocols: Chinese International Graduate Students Navigating Uncertainties

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**Abstract:** This study investigated Chinese international students' use of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) during the COVID-19 pandemic, aiming to answer: (1) Motivations for TCM use, (2) Types of TCM used, and (3) Problems encountered. Fifteen students from St. Paul University Manila responded to an open-ended survey on TCM usage, and thematic analysis was applied. Uses and Gratifications Theory and Cognitive Dissonance Theory guided data analysis. Results revealed that respondents' motivations for using TCM during the COVID-19 pandemic were driven by cultural heritage and trust, TCM's holistic health approach, personalized treatment, perceived safety, integration with Western medicine, accessibility, availability, familiarity, and the importance of scientific validation and research evidence in supporting its effectiveness. Furthermore, The Chinese International Graduate Students' utilization of TCM showcased a preference for well-known remedies, specific formulas for addressing COVID-19 symptoms, personalized treatment approaches, and an emphasis on safety and quality assurance under professional guidance. Additionally, the integration of TCM with lifestyle recommendations emphasized a holistic approach to health management during the pandemic, reflecting the importance of combining TCM remedies with dietary adjustments and exercise routines to enhance overall well-being. Moreover, the challenges encountered by Chinese international students in using TCM encompassed taste preferences, integration with Western medicine, supply chain issues, adverse reactions, quality control, safety concerns, and skepticism about efficacy, emphasizing the importance of seeking professional guidance, ensuring proper preparation and sourcing, and addressing concerns regarding scientific validation and evidence-based practice in healthcare decision-making.

**Keywords:** Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), Chinese international students, COVID-19, Motivations and preferences, Challenges and integration

## I. Introduction

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has not only posed a significant threat to public health worldwide but has also prompted diverse responses from various communities in managing and mitigating its impacts. Among these responses, the use of traditional medicine, particularly Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), has garnered attention for its potential in alleviating symptoms, boosting immunity, and supporting overall well-being during the crisis.

In the context of Chinese international graduate students, who are often separated from their familiar healthcare systems and cultural practices while studying abroad, the utilization of TCM during the pandemic takes on particular significance. These students, representing a subset of the global population with distinct healthcare preferences and cultural backgrounds, offer a unique lens through which to explore the adoption, motivations, and experiences associated with TCM use amidst the COVID-19 crisis.

Understanding the motivations behind the adoption of TCM among Chinese international graduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it provides insights into the factors driving individuals to seek alternative healthcare modalities, especially when conventional medical resources may be limited or inaccessible. Secondly, exploring the specific types of TCM remedies chosen by these students sheds light on the perceived efficacy and cultural preferences influencing their healthcare decisions during a global health crisis.

Moreover, investigating the challenges and problems encountered by Chinese international graduate students in utilizing TCM offers valuable perspectives for healthcare providers, policymakers, and educators. By identifying barriers to TCM access, efficacy, and safety, stakeholders can develop targeted interventions to address gaps in healthcare provision, improve cultural competency, and enhance support systems for international students navigating health-related challenges in unfamiliar environments.

In summary, this study bridges the gap between the realms of traditional medicine, cross-cultural healthcare, and pandemic response by examining the use of TCM among Chinese international graduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic. By elucidating the motivations, choices, and challenges associated with TCM adoption, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of healthcare behaviors, cultural influences, and healthcare needs within diverse populations facing global health crises.

**Holistic Understanding and TCM.** Individuals pursuing higher academic degrees often engage in rigorous intellectual pursuits that demand critical thinking and holistic understanding (Culver et al., 2019). Similarly, TCM embodies a holistic approach to health and well-being, viewing the body as an interconnected system influenced by various internal and external factors (Tian et al., 2023). By incorporating TCM into their health management practices, these individuals demonstrate an appreciation for holistic frameworks that extend beyond reductionist approaches, reflecting a multifaceted understanding of knowledge.

**Cultural Knowledge and Identity and TCM.** For many individuals seeking higher academic degrees, their educational journey involves navigating diverse cultural contexts and identities (Bantugan, 2024). TCM, deeply rooted in Chinese culture and traditions, serves as a conduit for preserving and expressing cultural knowledge and identity (Ding et al., 2021). By embracing TCM practices, individuals in higher education affirm their cultural heritage and integrate traditional knowledge systems into their personal and academic lives, enriching their understanding of cultural diversity and interconnectedness (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014).

**Critical Inquiry and Evidence-Based Practice vis-à-vis TCM.** While TCM encompasses ancient wisdom and traditional practices, its integration into modern contexts often involves critical inquiry and evidence-based practice (Fung & Linn, 2015). Individuals pursuing higher academic degrees are trained in rigorous research methodologies and critical evaluation of evidence, skills that can be applied to assess the efficacy, safety, and validity (Tremblay et al., 2012) of TCM practices. By critically engaging with TCM principles and empirical evidence, these individuals demonstrate a nuanced approach to knowledge management that balances traditional wisdom with contemporary scientific inquiry (Farquhar, 2017).

**Personal Empowerment, Self-Management, and TCM Use.** The decision to incorporate TCM into health management practices reflects a proactive approach to personal well-being and self-management (Wu et al., 2022). Individuals seeking higher academic degrees often exhibit autonomy, self-efficacy, and agency in navigating complex knowledge domains (Felix, 2020). By exploring and utilizing TCM modalities, they assert

control over their health and wellness, actively seeking out alternative perspectives and strategies to complement conventional approaches. This proactive stance towards health management (Alt & Naamati-Schneider, 2021) reflects a broader ethos of empowerment and self-directed learning (Brydges et al., 2010) that permeates their academic endeavors.

**Synthesis.** The use of TCM by people seeking higher academic degrees underscores their engagement with diverse knowledge systems, including cultural, holistic, critical, and self-directed forms of knowledge management. By embracing TCM practices within the context of their educational journey, these individuals enrich their understanding of health, culture, and knowledge itself, fostering a more nuanced and inclusive approach to academic inquiry and personal growth.

**Uses and Gratifications Theory.** The theory views audiences as individuals with specific needs, and their exposure to the media as a process of using the media based on specific needs so that those needs can be satisfied. From the audience's point of view, the psychological and behavioral utility of mass communication for people is examined by analyzing the audience's motives for media exposure and what needs these exposures satisfy (Guo, 2010). In this context, TCM can be viewed as a form of "media" that fulfills specific needs and desires of the users.

**Cognitive Dissonance Theory.** Cognitive Dissonance Theory, proposed by American psychologist Leon Festinger in 1957, elucidates the psychological unease arising from conflicting beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors, leading individuals to employ strategies to restore cognitive harmony, influenced by the level of contradiction and the perceived significance of the issue, offering insights into how individuals, groups, and organizations strive to maintain consistency amidst conflict (Morvan & O'Connor, 2020).

### **Statement of the Problem**

This study aimed to investigate the use of TCM of selected Chinese International students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions: (1) What motivated selected Chinese international graduate students to use TCM during the COVID-19 pandemic?; (2) What TCMs did the selected Chinese international graduate students choose to use during the COVID-19 pandemic for specific purposes?; and (3) What problems did the selected Chinese international graduate students encounter when they used TCM?

## **II. Methodology**

Fifteen Chinese students studying at the College of Education of St. Paul University Manila were asked to take part in an open-ended survey consisting of three questions regarding their utilization of TCM amid the COVID-19 outbreak. Their responses, given voluntarily, were gathered and structured to extract the relevant data using thematic analysis. The collected data were then analyzed and deliberated upon, employing the perspectives of Uses and Gratifications Theory and Cognitive Dissonance Theory.

## **III. Results**

### **Motivations to use TCM during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

**Cultural Heritage and Trust.** TCM holds a revered position in Chinese culture, with its holistic approach deeply ingrained in the nation's heritage. Respondents frequently underscored TCM's historical significance and cultural resonance as factors influencing their trust and preference for its use during the pandemic. For instance, one respondent noted, "Its holistic approach, which considers the body as a whole and aims to restore balance and harmony, made it a natural choice in addressing the pandemic's impact on people's health." Additionally, another respondent highlighted that "TCM has been practiced for thousands of years and is deeply ingrained in Chinese culture." Moreover, TCM's historical use in managing respiratory infections and strengthening the immune system further solidified its appeal amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, as noted by

another respondent: "TCM has a long history of use in managing respiratory infections and strengthening the immune system, which made it a compelling option amidst the pandemic."

**Holistic Health and Immune Support.** TCM's emphasis on holistic health and immune support resonated strongly with respondents seeking to bolster their resilience against viral infections during the pandemic. Many highlighted TCM's preventive approach and its ability to strengthen the body's immune system, essential for combating infections and maintaining overall well-being. This holistic perspective, focusing on restoring balance and harmony within the body's energy systems, aligns with the traditional principles of TCM, which aim to promote health and vitality. For instance, one respondent emphasized, "TCM emphasizes prevention and strengthening the immune system, which is crucial in fighting off infections and viruses." Additionally, another respondent highlighted that "By restoring harmony to these energy systems and encouraging the free flow of *qi* and blood, Chinese medicine can strengthen the immune system and make the body more resistant to viruses." Moreover, TCM's capacity to regulate the immune system and enhance the body's resistance to viruses was cited as a compelling reason for its adoption during the pandemic, as noted by another respondent: "TCM has the power to regulate the immune system and strengthen the body's resistance, which can assist in the prevention of infections and the acceleration of the healing process."

**Personalized Treatment Approach.** The personalized treatment approach of TCM practitioners was a key motivator for respondents during the pandemic, offering individualized care perceived as more effective than standardized Western medicine. One respondent noted, "TCM practitioners assess each patient's condition and prescribe a personalized treatment plan," emphasizing its effectiveness. Another respondent highlighted that "Chinese medicine treatment pays attention to individuation," offering tailored solutions.

**Safety and Minimal Side Effects.** Respondents expressed confidence in the safety and minimal side effects of TCM, contrasting it favorably with certain Western medications. The predominantly natural composition of TCM, derived from plant or animal extracts, was cited as a key factor contributing to its perceived safety profile. Many respondents noted that TCM's reliance on natural ingredients mitigated concerns about adverse effects commonly associated with synthetic medications. Moreover, TCM's gentle and gradual approach to healing was viewed as preferable to the potentially harmful side effects of some Western drugs. For instance, one respondent noted, "Compared with some antiviral drugs, Chinese medicine has relatively small side effects and is relatively safe to use." Additionally, another respondent highlighted that "Chinese medicine is mostly natural plant or animal extracts, relatively small side effects, relatively small harm to the body." Moreover, another respondent emphasized that "... Chinese medicine has several advantages over Western medicine... Chinese medicine has fewer side effects and is more natural and gentler."

**Complementary Therapy with Western Medicine.** TCM's integration with Western medicine was seen as a means to safeguard health and provide comprehensive care amidst the challenges posed by COVID-19. Respondents strongly resonated with TCM as a complementary therapy alongside Western medicine, particularly amid the pandemic. Many viewed TCM as an alternative treatment option that could enhance overall health outcomes by complementing Western medical interventions. This integrative approach, leveraging the strengths of both systems, appealed to individuals facing the multifaceted challenges of the pandemic. TCM's perceived natural and holistic approach, coupled with its minimal side effects, offered comfort and reassurance to those navigating the uncertainties of the pandemic. One respondent emphasized TCM's role as a complementary medicine, providing an alternative treatment option that could alleviate pressure on the healthcare system. Additionally, the historical legacy and cultural significance of Chinese medicine further contributed to its appeal, as noted by another respondents. Furthermore, some respondents highlighted TCM's holistic approach to health and its emphasis on prevention, which struck a chord with individuals seeking alternatives or complements to Western medicine during the pandemic.

**Accessibility, Availability, and Familiarity.** The accessibility, availability, and familiarity of TCM played pivotal roles in respondents' decisions to embrace it during the pandemic. Respondents noted the widespread availability of TCM, particularly in regions with strong cultural ties to its practice, which

contributed to its widespread acceptance as a viable treatment option. The accumulated experience and prescriptions from previous health crises, coupled with TCM's long-standing presence in China, reinforced its appeal as a familiar and accessible resource amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. This familiarity and accessibility provided comfort and confidence to individuals seeking holistic solutions to their health concerns during uncertain times. One respondent highlighted TCM's extensive application experience in China, serving as a vital reference for its use. Another respondent emphasized TCM's deep-rooted integration into Chinese culture, underscoring its enduring significance. Moreover, the positive role of TCM in combating the pandemic was widely publicized, further increasing its visibility and acceptance. The promotion of policies, increased availability of TCM resources, the popularization of TCM services, and the development of Internet medicine all contributed to its accessibility during the pandemic, offering additional options and support for COVID-19 patients. These perceptions collectively present the importance of TCM as a familiar, accessible, and effective resource in times of crisis.

**Scientific Validation and Research Evidence.** Respondents emphasized the importance of scientific validation and research evidence in supporting the effectiveness of TCM, particularly amid the pandemic. Many cited modern scientific studies confirming TCM's efficacy in combating viral infections, underscoring the significance of evidence-based practices in decision-making. One respondent noted, "Many studies have shown that some components of TCM have antiviral, anti-inflammatory, antioxidant and other effects, which have positive significance for alleviating disease and improving recovery rate." Moreover, respondents emphasized the need for rigorous research to substantiate TCM's claims and ensure its safety and efficacy as a complementary therapeutic modality. Another respondent highlighted that "The efficacy of TCM is progressive, can be used for slow conditioning, more suitable for long-term use." Additionally, one respondent emphasized, "No cases of disease progression were reported under the intervention of TCM. It shows the irreplaceable role of TCM in the treatment of novel coronavirus pneumonia." These make apparent the reliance on scientific validation and evidence-based practices in evaluating TCM's effectiveness, highlighting its growing recognition within the broader medical community.

#### **TCM Used by the Chinese International Graduate Students**

**Preference for Well-Known TCM Remedies.** Respondents exhibited a preference for well-known TCM remedies with established efficacy. One respondent mentioned using ginseng, stating, "My hometown is an important area of producing ginseng, and it is easy to get ginseng." This highlights the familiarity and accessibility of certain TCM herbs among Chinese communities. Another respondent highlighted the use of Jinhua Qinggan granule and LianhuaQingwen granule, stating, "If the infected person has fever symptoms, you can take Jinhua Qinggan granule... (which) has the effect of clearing (and) detoxification, and releasing lung heat." This underscores the recognition of specific TCM formulations for addressing common symptoms like fever. Still another respondent also mentioned well-known remedies like Huang Qi (Astragalus) and Ren Shen (ginseng), stating, "Huang Qi is commonly used to enhance the body's defenses... Ren Shen... boost one's energy levels." These demonstrate the preference for TCM herbs known for their immune-boosting and energy-enhancing properties.

**Specific TCM Formulas and Their Intended Uses.** One respondent provided detailed information about various TCM formulas and their intended uses during the pandemic. For instance, they mentioned, "Qi Huang Bi Wen Formula is often recommended for preventing and treating diseases caused by external pathogens... It contains herbs that have antiviral, antibacterial, and immunomodulatory effects." This illustrates the specificity of TCM formulations tailored to address different health concerns. They also discussed the use of "Herbal teas and infusions made from various Chinese herbs," indicating the diverse range of TCM preparations used for respiratory health support. Another respondent discussed the combined use of "Radix Isatidis and LianhuaQingwen" to relieve symptoms, stating, "(the) Radix Isatidis root is widely used in the treatment of cold and flu, its main role is to clear heat and detoxify." These highlight the specific herbs and formulas chosen for their targeted therapeutic effects.

**Use of TCM to Address COVID-19 Symptoms.** Several respondents mentioned specific TCM remedies used to alleviate COVID-19 symptoms. One respondent mentioned Yin Qiao San, stating, "This herbal formula is traditionally used to treat symptoms of the common cold and flu, including fever, sore throat, and cough." This highlights the traditional uses of certain TCM formulations for respiratory symptoms. Another respondent discussed the use of "Jinhua Qinggan granules, LianhuaQingwen capsules, Qingfei detoxification Decoction," stating, "The main functions of these TCM are clearing heat and detoxification, expelling wind and releasing lung, dispelling dampness and detoxification." These show the multifaceted approach of TCM in addressing various symptoms associated with COVID-19. Additionally, another respondent mentioned the effects of LianhuaQingwen capsule, stating, "At the same time, it also has the effect of clearing heat and detoxification, releasing lung heat, relieving cough and asthma." These underscore the targeted actions of specific TCM remedies in alleviating respiratory symptoms.

**Emphasis on Individualized Treatment and Professional Advice.** The views of the three interviewees mentioned the personalized nature of TCM and the importance of seeking professional guidance. One respondent stressed that in TCM, treatments are tailored to the unique circumstances of the patient, stating, "The choice of TCM depends on an individual's symptoms, health status, and specific recommendations from a qualified TCM practitioner." This brings to the fore the personalized approach of TCM, which maximizes efficacy and minimizes risks. Another respondent further emphasized the importance of professional advice in choosing the appropriate TCM, stating, "Before using Chinese medicine, it is best to consult the advice of a doctor or Chinese medicine practitioner." This reflects the consensus that professional guidance is crucial for ensuring safety and effectiveness in TCM usage. During the pandemic, various TCMs were chosen based on their specific properties and benefits, emphasizing the necessity of personalized treatment and professional advice in TCM. Combining the views of the three interviewees, one clear conclusion can be drawn: the treatment of TCM reveals individuation and needs to be customized according to the unique symptoms, physique, and health status of the patient. This personalized treatment approach needs to be carried out under professional guidance to ensure safety and effectiveness.

**Herbal Combinations and Synergistic Effects.** The views of the three interviewees provide nuanced insights into the utilization of TCM, elucidating both its potential benefits and associated risks. One respondent underscored the importance of caution in TCM combination therapy, stating, "TCM should (be in) small doses and (taken with) commonly used drugs... to ensure the safety of treatment." This emphasizes the need for careful selection and dosage to avoid adverse reactions. Another respondent highlighted the need to consider individual health status and potential interactions between drugs, stating, "TCM may interact with other medicines when combined... in the process of TCM combination to avoid possible adverse reactions or drug interactions." This shows the importance of personalized treatment based on patient characteristics. Additionally, the efficacy of TCM combinations like Lianhua Qingyuan in treating influenza symptoms was noted by the third respondent, stating, "This TCM combination can inhibit the replication and spread of the virus... often used as an adjunct therapy." These perspectives demonstrate the complex nature of TCM combinations, which can offer synergistic effects in treating specific diseases. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the potential risks associated with TCM combinations, including drug interactions and adverse reactions, necessitating careful dose control and professional guidance. Overall, TCM combinations represent a promising approach for addressing complex health issues, provided they are employed judiciously and under expert supervision.

**Emphasis on Safety and Quality Assurance.** Respondents highlighted the importance of safety and quality assurance when using TCM. One respondent stressed the need to purchase TCM from reliable sources to ensure safety and effectiveness, stating, "Before beginning to use any TCM, it is essential to get the advice of a certified practitioner of TCM or a healthcare provider." Similarly, another respondent stated consulting a doctor or TCM practitioner to choose appropriate TCM based on individual physique and circumstances to avoid adverse reactions or drug interactions, stating, "Before using Chinese medicine, it is best to consult the advice of a doctor or Chinese medicine practitioner." These highlight the importance of safety protocols and professional guidance in TCM usage. Additionally, respondents emphasized the necessity of consulting healthcare

professionals before initiating TCM treatment. One respondent emphasized, "When choosing and using these herbs, consult a professional TCM or pharmacist to ensure safety and effectiveness and to avoid the risk of adverse reactions or drug interactions." Another respondent reiterated this sentiment, stating, "It's always best to consult with a professional before using any TCM treatment." These unveil the significance of seeking professional advice to ensure safe and effective TCM usage, highlighting the critical role of healthcare practitioners in guiding individuals towards optimal health outcomes.

**Combination of TCM and Lifestyle Recommendations.** Some respondents mentioned the integration of TCM with lifestyle recommendations during the pandemic. One respondent discussed the importance of dietary recommendations and exercise in conjunction with TCM usage to enhance immunity and overall health, stating, "In addition to the above several TCM, there are some other TCM can also be used for treatment and prevention during the pandemic, such as HuoxiangZhengqi capsule, ShufengJiedu capsule and so on." This highlights the holistic approach to health management that combines TCM remedies with lifestyle adjustments. TCM emphasizes the importance of diet in maintaining health. During the pandemic, dietary recommendations focused on consuming immune-boosting foods, such as ginger, garlic, mushrooms, and citrus fruits. Similarly, a respondent mentioned the importance of lifestyle factors in conjunction with TCM usage, stating, "These Chinese medicines help the body recover. However, before using Chinese medicine, it is best to consult the advice of a doctor or Chinese medicine practitioner to choose the appropriate Chinese medicine according to the individual physique and specific circumstances, and to ensure safety and effectiveness." These demonstrate the importance of a comprehensive approach to health maintenance that includes both TCM remedies and lifestyle modifications like Qigong and traditional Chinese exercises like Tai Chi and Ba DuanJin (Eight-Section Brocade) that strengthen the body, improve lung function, and promote relaxation when done regularly.

#### **Problems Encountered by the Chinese International Students in the Use of TCM**

**Bitterness of TCM and Battle with Western Medicine.** This brings together insights from respondents regarding the challenges associated with the taste of Chinese medicine, the integration of TCM with Western medicine, and concerns about potential adverse reactions. Two respondents raised significant concerns regarding the integration of TCM with modern medical practices. One pointed out the overwhelming bitterness of Chinese medicine, a taste so intense that it can induce vomiting, highlighting a considerable challenge in its consumption for many individuals. This sentiment was echoed by the second, who emphasized the difficulties in preparing TCM, particularly due to the intricacies involved in decoction and the lack of experience among users.

Furthermore, one respondent underscored the importance of harmonizing Chinese and Western medical approaches to minimize potential conflicts or adverse reactions. They stressed the necessity of careful attention to the interaction between the two systems, recognizing the differences in diagnostic methods and treatment approaches. This concern resonates with the broader apprehension about integrating TCM with Western medical treatments, as articulated by another respondent. While acknowledging the relative safety and lower side effects of Chinese medicine compared to its Western counterpart, they expressed hesitancy due to the complexities involved in combining the two modalities. One notable difference highlighted by a respondent was the reliance of TCM on the expertise and experience of practitioners rather than extensive clinical trials. This reliance on empirical knowledge poses concerns regarding potential unforeseen adverse reactions when combining TCM with Western medicine. These apprehensions reflect the need for comprehensive understanding and careful management when integrating traditional and modern medical practices.

**Supply Chain and Preparation Challenges.** Two respondents shed light on the challenges surrounding the procurement and preparation of TCM materials, particularly during the pandemic. The first outlined the difficulties in sourcing reliable suppliers due to high demand, leading to prolonged efforts in finding materials essential for TCM. This led to difficulties in procurement and the need for extra time and effort to find reliable suppliers. This issue was compounded by problems with the proper preparation of TCM, the respondent mentioned the lack of experience resulting in improper decoction and potential reduction in effectiveness. They highlighted the dependence on the expertise of doctors due to the deficiency in "rigorous experimental and

theoretical support,” which could lead to unexpected side effects. Furthermore, the other emphasized the susceptibility of certain TCM to quality issues such as adulteration or contamination, which could compromise their effectiveness or trigger undesired reactions. These unravel the importance of addressing issues related to the supply chain, quality control, and proper preparation techniques to ensure the efficacy and safety of TCM.

**Adverse Reactions and Drug Interactions.** Respondents highlighted the importance of seeking professional guidance and understanding potential risks associated with TCM. "Prior to using TCM, it is recommended to seek the advice of a physician or a pharmacist," emphasized one respondent. This cautionary approach was echoed by a second respondent, who pointed out, "Due to the complexity of TCM formulas, there may be problems with accurate dosage setting and standardization of drug ingredients." Moreover, a third respondent discussed adverse reactions due to the bitter taste of TCM, stressing the need for careful consideration and professional guidance to mitigate risks. These concerns were further accentuated by a fourth respondent who advised, "If the drug (causes) nausea, vomiting and other adverse reactions, you can go to the hospital." Finally, the fourth respondent emphasized the importance of understanding the properties, effects, and precautions of TCM to prevent adverse reactions or interactions with other medications.

**Quality Control and Safety Concerns.** Respondents emphasized the importance of sourcing TCM from trusted suppliers and ensuring adherence to correct medication guidelines to mitigate safety risks. "Certain TCMs may be susceptible to quality issues, such as adulteration or contamination, which may lead to a reduction in their effectiveness or undesired reactions," warned one respondent. The prevalence of quality issues such as contamination and adulteration in TCM emphasized the necessity for stringent quality control measures. Another respondent underscored the need for vigilance regarding potential allergic reactions caused by certain components of TCM. Moreover, "In the use of TCM, there may be problems such as uneven quality and inaccurate dose control," noted one respondent. Ensuring that TCM products come from reliable sources and meet relevant safety and quality standards is crucial to address these concerns. These amplify the importance of diligence and scrutiny in sourcing and using TCM to ensure safety and efficacy.

**Efficacy and Lack of Scientific Evidence.** Other respondents expressed skepticism regarding the efficacy of TCM and emphasized the importance of evidence-based practice in healthcare decision-making. "Its efficacy has not been verified by rigorous scientific research," mentioned one respondent. Another pointed out, "The use of TCM is more based on past diagnostic experience." Moreover, the lack of clear scientific evidence on the therapeutic effects of TCM was underscored by another respondent, stating, "The efficacy and safety of many of these herbs are still not fully supported by scientific research." These quotations collectively reflect a cautious approach towards TCM, highlighting concerns about its efficacy without rigorous scientific validation and variations in product efficacy and ingredients. This underscores the importance of evidence-based practices in healthcare decision-making.

#### IV. Discussion

Through the alignment of cultural heritage, health goals, treatment preferences, safety considerations, and treatment modalities, respondents reduce cognitive dissonance and reinforce their trust in TCM as a viable healthcare option. Uses and Gratifications Theory provides insights into the motivations underlying the use of TCM during the COVID-19 pandemic by highlighting how individuals seek gratification from their healthcare choices. Through cultural connection, holistic health management, personalized care, safety assurance, and treatment diversity, individuals derive gratification from TCM, aligning their healthcare decisions with their needs, desires, and aspirations.

**Cultural Heritage and Trust.** Respondents emphasized the deep-rooted cultural significance of TCM, which aligns with their beliefs and values. Their trust in TCM's effectiveness is reinforced by its historical use and holistic approach, creating a sense of consistency between their cultural identity and healthcare decisions. As noted by one respondent, "Its holistic approach... made it a natural choice," highlighting the alignment between cultural heritage and healthcare preferences.



Respondents derive gratification from TCM's cultural significance and historical resonance, viewing it as a source of cultural identity and pride. By embracing TCM, individuals fulfill their need for cultural connection and tradition, seeking gratification through alignment with their cultural heritage. As one respondent noted, TCM's holistic approach resonates with their cultural beliefs, fulfilling their need for cultural continuity and identity reinforcement.

**Holistic Health and Immune Support.** The emphasis on TCM's preventive approach and immune-boosting properties resonates with respondents seeking to maintain overall well-being. By prioritizing holistic health, individuals reduce cognitive dissonance by aligning their actions with the desire for comprehensive health management. As stated by one respondent, "Chinese medicine can strengthen the immune system," reflecting a harmonization of health goals and treatment choices.

TCM offers gratification by addressing individuals' desire for holistic health management and immune support. Respondents seek gratification through TCM's preventive approach and emphasis on overall well-being, aligning with their health goals and aspirations. By using TCM, individuals fulfill their need for proactive health management and immune system reinforcement, deriving gratification from a sense of control over their health outcomes. As stated by a respondent, TCM's ability to strengthen the immune system fulfills their need for health enhancement and vitality.

**Personalized Treatment Approach.** The individualized care provided by TCM practitioners addresses the need for tailored solutions, minimizing cognitive dissonance arising from standardized treatment approaches. Respondents value TCM's personalized approach, which enhances perceived effectiveness and reduces conflicting beliefs about one-size-fits-all healthcare. One respondent asserted that TCM treatment plans "can be formulated according to the specific condition," demonstrating alignment between treatment preferences and personalized care.

TCM provides gratification through its personalized treatment approach, catering to individuals' unique health needs and preferences. By offering tailored solutions, TCM satisfies individuals' desire for personalized care and attention, enhancing their sense of agency and empowerment in healthcare decision-making. Respondents derive gratification from TCM's individualized approach, fulfilling their need for autonomy and customization in healthcare. As noted by a respondent, TCM's focus on personalized treatment plans aligns with their desire for targeted interventions and specific health solutions.

**Safety and Minimal Side Effects.** By emphasizing TCM's natural composition and minimal side effects, respondents reconcile concerns about adverse reactions commonly associated with Western medications. This alignment between safety considerations and treatment choices reduces cognitive dissonance and reinforces confidence in TCM's suitability. As noted by a respondent, "Chinese medicine is mostly natural," reflecting a resolution of conflicting beliefs regarding treatment safety.

Individuals seek gratification from TCM's perceived safety and minimal side effects, fulfilling their need for reassurance and peace of mind in healthcare choices. By choosing TCM, individuals satisfy their desire for natural, gentle remedies that minimize the risk of adverse reactions and harm. Respondents derive gratification from TCM's safety profile, aligning with their need for risk mitigation and well-being preservation. As stated by a respondent, TCM's natural composition fulfills their need for safety and avoidance of potential harm associated with synthetic medications.

**Complementary Therapy with Western Medicine.** The integration of TCM with Western medicine offers a holistic approach to healthcare, addressing multiple facets of well-being and reducing cognitive dissonance stemming from exclusive reliance on one medical system. Respondents perceive TCM as a complementary option that enhances overall health outcomes, reflecting a harmonization of treatment modalities and healthcare preferences. One respondent highlighted TCM's role as a complementary medicine, illustrating the alignment between treatment choices and the desire for comprehensive healthcare solutions.

TCM offers gratification as a complementary therapy alongside Western medicine, providing individuals with a sense of flexibility and empowerment in healthcare decision-making. By integrating TCM with Western medicine, individuals satisfy their desire for comprehensive health solutions that address multiple dimensions of well-being. Respondents derive gratification from TCM's role as a complementary option, fulfilling their need for holistic healthcare approaches and treatment diversity. As noted by one respondent, TCM's integration with Western medicine provides them with alternative treatment options, aligning with their need for flexibility and choice in healthcare.

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