

Original Paper

Image Construction of Traditional Chinese Acupuncture from the Framing Theory Perspective—A Case Study of Reports in *The New York Times*

Meihua Cheng^{1*} & Xinyue Chen¹

¹ School of Publishing, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology

* Meihua Cheng, E-mail: 232082826@st.usst.edu.cn

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Abstract

As an intangible cultural heritage of humanity, traditional Chinese acupuncture has gained increasing global influence in recent years. Prominent U.S. media outlets like The New York Times have played a pivotal role in its international dissemination, shaping both its media image and public perception. Adopting framing theory as the analytical lens, this study systematically examines the image construction strategies employed by U.S. mainstream media in portraying Chinese acupuncture across three dimensions: high-level themes, mid-level narratives, and low-level expressions. Specifically, it investigates how The New York Times constructs acupuncture's image through its reporting.

The findings reveal that The New York Times frames a multidimensional image of acupuncture through thematic selection, emotional tone, and linguistic symbolism. These representations highlight acupuncture's therapeutic value and cultural significance while reflecting its localized adaptation within Western societies. This research offers theoretical insights into how international media shape perceptions of Chinese culture and provides practical implications for optimizing the global communication strategies of traditional Chinese medicine.

Keywords

Framing Theory, International communication; International image, Acupuncture, LDA topic mode

1. Introduction

As an integral part of Chinese culture, traditional Chinese acupuncture has seen its global influence grow significantly in recent years. In 2010, acupuncture was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, a milestone that affirmed its universal value. Prominent U.S. media outlets like *The New York Times* have played a critical role in shaping acupuncture's international dissemination, with their coverage not only constructing its media image but also influencing public perception.

Against this backdrop, this study employs framing theory to analyze how *The New York Times* constructs the image of traditional Chinese acupuncture through its reporting. By examining the thematic frameworks and their evolution in the newspaper's coverage of acupuncture, this research seeks to uncover the underlying patterns in its portrayal. Furthermore, it explores how these media frames influence the international perception and dissemination pathways of acupuncture. The study aims to provide new perspectives and strategies for understanding the media's role and responsibilities in cultural communication, as well as to enhance the effective global transmission of China's intangible cultural heritage.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research Status on the External Communication of Acupuncture

This paper firstly selects Web of Science as the literature source database and conducts a search using the topic "acupuncture + communication," ultimately retrieving 28 relevant essays. These essays primarily focus on the development, dissemination, and academic thoughts surrounding acupuncture in various countries and regions. They cover the history, current status, characteristics, challenges, and opportunities of acupuncture in China, Japan, Turkey, India, Iran, and other countries, as well as the contributions of acupuncture experts and the trajectory of acupuncture internationalization. The internationalization of acupuncture has undergone a process from unilateral export to local transformation, where different countries and regions, while absorbing acupuncture techniques, have also innovated and developed them in combination with their local cultures, forming distinctive acupuncture systems.



Figure 1. Annual Publication Statistics

Additionally, this paper selects the domestic CNKI database as another source of literature and sets the search terms as “acupuncture + international communication,” “acupuncture + external communication,” and “acupuncture + international image.” As of July 2024, through this search method, a total of 108 relevant essays were screened out (as shown in Figure 1).

Based on the changes in the trend line, this paper divides it into three stages. The first stage is before 2007, which is characterized as the “incipient stage,” where the overseas exploration path had not been fully opened up. The second stage spans from 2008 to 2017, during which the number of research essays showed an upward trend. From 2018 to the present is the third stage, where research on the overseas dissemination of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has entered a phase of rapid development, with the Belt and Road Initiative providing impetus for TCM to “go global.”

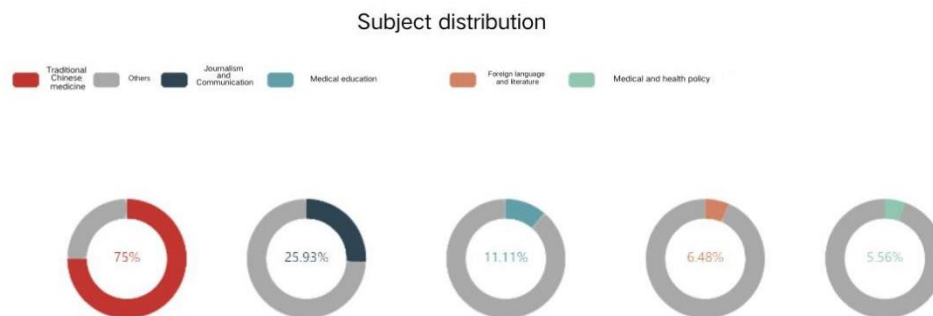


Figure 2. Subject Distribution

The research themes on the overseas dissemination of acupuncture are diverse (as shown in Figure 2), encompassing scholars from traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), journalism and communication, translation, Chinese culture, and other related fields.

Firstly, the majority of studies primarily focus on the strategies and effects of the international dissemination of acupuncture. For instance, Chen Yanxi and Liu Jitang proposed a window model for the international dissemination of TCM based on the Johari Window theory of interpersonal communication, and put forward corresponding dissemination strategies for countries with different levels of legal recognition (Note 1). Zhang Yijia specifically analyzed the localization evolution and innovation of acupuncture in their overseas dissemination, as well as the emerging trend of “emphasizing techniques over principles,” and proposed suggestions to adhere to traditional theories, strengthen modern expressions, and improve the theoretical system (Note 2). Zhao Haibin discussed strategies to promote the high-quality development of the international dissemination of TCM culture from the perspective of top-level design (Note 3). Luo Ruiqi, Ke Yulian, and Hu Jie proposed the construction of an international dissemination system for TCM culture in the post-pandemic era,

including five dimensions: the dissemination subject system, dissemination audience system, dissemination media system, dissemination content system, and dissemination effect feedback, aiming to promote the international dissemination of TCM culture (Note 4). These studies reveal the strategic choices and effect evaluations in the international dissemination of acupuncture through theoretical model construction and case analysis.

Secondly, some scholars have studied the international dissemination of acupuncture from the perspective of cultural dissemination. Guo Mingjuan discussed the necessity of English teaching reform in TCM majors at higher vocational colleges from the perspective of the international dissemination capacity of TCM culture, aiming to cultivate professionals who are proficient in both TCM and English to enhance the international dissemination capacity of TCM culture (Note 5). Besides studying the translation of TCM terminology, she also explored the recognition of TCM culture in cross-cultural communication and how to improve the international community's recognition of TCM culture. Liang Yanxin, starting with Hall's "encoding-decoding" theory, took acupuncture as an example to analyze the historical construction of TCM in terms of text, image, audio-visual, etc., from a semiotic perspective; and combined with its historical experiences and lessons in cross-cultural dissemination, analyzed the way out for TCM in the context of cross-cultural dissemination. Scholars such as Chen Hong, based on the theory of differential culture, analyzed the effectiveness and obstacles of cross-cultural dissemination of TCM through three decoding standpoints: dominant hegemony, negotiation, and confrontation; and combined with semiotic theory, explored the value of TCM cultural symbols in cross-cultural dissemination, seeking changes in narrative perspectives, methods, and means to realize the international encoding of TCM cultural symbols (Note 6).

Moreover, scholars have conducted in-depth discussions on the challenges and opportunities, dynamic mechanisms, and specific regional dissemination paths of acupuncture's international dissemination. Chen Shaozong reviews the dissemination process of acupuncture therapy in representative countries across continents, affirming the crucial supporting role of acupuncture's practical and scientific values in its international dissemination (Note 7). Tian Jing analyzes the dynamic mechanisms of the international dissemination of TCM culture, including its own influence, national policy support, dissemination subject execution, and audience recognition, providing a dynamic analysis framework for the international dissemination of acupuncture (Note 8). Li Yongqiang takes Central and Eastern Europe as an example to explore the development path of the international dissemination of TCM, demonstrating the dissemination effects and cooperation prospects of TCM in the region (Note 9). These studies reveal the challenges and opportunities faced by the international dissemination of acupuncture from multiple perspectives, as well as the driving mechanisms and specific paths to promote its development.

In summary, research on the international dissemination of acupuncture has achieved significant progress in various aspects such as strategy effectiveness, cultural dissemination, challenges and

opportunities, and dynamic mechanisms. Diverse research methods have provided us with rich theoretical and practical insights. However, despite these studies constructing a multidimensional framework for the international dissemination of acupuncture, there is still room for deepening the analysis of historical contexts and specific media influences.

2.2 Framing Theory

Framing theory originated from Bateson's elaboration on the definition and interpretation rules of communication symbols, and was later developed by Goffman into a cognitive structure theory to aid people in understanding and organizing external information (Note 10). After the introduction of the framing concept into sociology, it rapidly diffused across various social science fields such as mass communication, political communication, science communication, visual communication, journalism, social movements, risk, religion, and more (Note 11). Gitlin introduced the concept of "frame" into journalism and communication studies, making it a criterion for news production involving the selection, emphasis, and interpretation of news facts. The news frame not only guides media reporting but also reflects the ideology and power relations of social organizations. It serves as a standard for shaping media images and a reproduction of mainstream cognition, deeply influenced by the concepts and long-term contextual factors of the social organizations in which it operates.

Professor Zang Guoren's book, *Media and News Sources: A Discussion on Media Frames and the Construction of Reality*, introduces a three-tier framing theory (as shown in Figure 3), providing communication scholars with a novel perspective for analyzing the presentation of various group images in the media. This theory divides the frame into high, middle, and low levels: The high-level frame focuses on the overall definition of the theme or event, revealing its deep abstract meaning; the middle-level frame encompasses diverse elements such as main events, historical backgrounds, antecedent events, immediate consequences, impacts, causal analysis, and overall evaluations, which are flexibly adjusted in different types of event reporting to collectively constitute the meso-structure of the report; and the low-level frame meticulously examines the specific manifestations of the frame, including language use and symbolic expression, further revealing the deep meanings and influence of news reports through the analysis of word choice, sentence structure, and rhetorical techniques (Note 12).

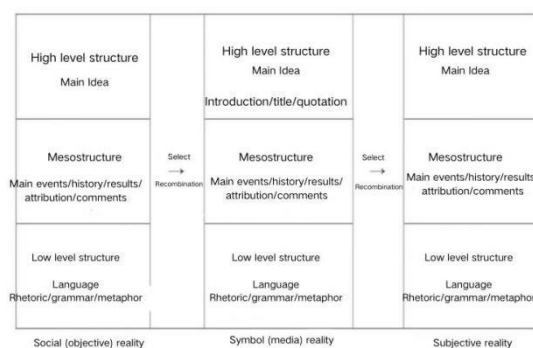


Figure 3. Three-tier Framing Theory

This paper intends to adopt Professor Zang Guoren's framing analysis method. Starting from the high-level macro-issue frame, it will first explore the thematic evolution and core issues of acupuncture reports. Subsequently, in the middle-level meso-narrative frame, it will analyze the emotional tendency, event development, and overall evaluation of the reports. Finally, in the low-level micro-expression frame, it will closely examine specific manifestation methods such as language use and symbolic expression to reveal the deep meanings and influence of acupuncture reports.

3. Research Design

3.1 Data Selection and Preprocessing

As a representative of mainstream media in the United States, The New York Times holds significant international influence. It has documented in detail the introduction and evolution of acupuncture from China to the United States, playing a crucial role in shaping the international image of acupuncture in China. Therefore, it serves as a valuable reference and holds significant research importance. This paper utilizes reports on acupuncture in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) from The New York Times since 1970 as the data source. Python is employed to organize these report texts. Based on the research questions and objectives, an LDA topic model is trained, and the perplexity evaluation metric is used to determine the optimal number of topics, thereby achieving topic classification of the reports. Furthermore, TextBlob is used for sentiment analysis to investigate the inclination or bias of these reports.

When using LDA for topic modeling, this paper selects the full sample data of relevant reports for analysis and processes the data using Python and other tools. The Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK) is utilized for part-of-speech tagging, lemmatization, and tokenization. Stop-words are also removed, completing the data preprocessing work and obtaining a text corpus for analysis.

Using web crawling technology and with “acupuncture” as the keyword, this paper retrieves news reports from The New York Times website spanning from 1970 to July 2024, obtaining a total of 932 reports. Subsequently, reports with low thematic relevance and duplicate reports are excluded. In conjunction with an English stop-word list, stop-words are removed after tokenization, establishing a more precise corpus. Ultimately, 832 sample reports are selected for in-depth analysis.

3.2 LDA Topic Extraction

In this paper, perplexity is used as an evaluation metric to determine the number of topics. Calculating perplexity at different numbers of topics aids in identifying the optimal number of topics for the LDA model, enhancing the precision of topic modeling. A lower perplexity indicates better generalization ability of the model. By plotting a relationship diagram of the number of topics versus perplexity, the trend of perplexity changing with the number of topics can be intuitively observed, facilitating the selection of an appropriate number of topics. The number of topics is traversed from 1 to 50, with perplexity calculated for each number and the results stored (Figure 4).

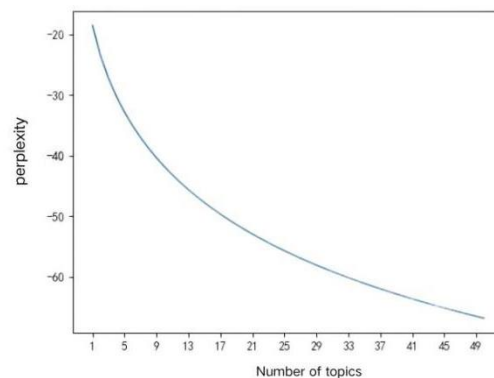


Figure 4. Perplexity

Topic coherence is used to measure the semantic similarity of words within a topic. Higher topic coherence typically indicates more meaningful topics. Plotting a relationship diagram of the number of topics versus coherence score can also assist in selecting the optimal number of topics (Figure 5).

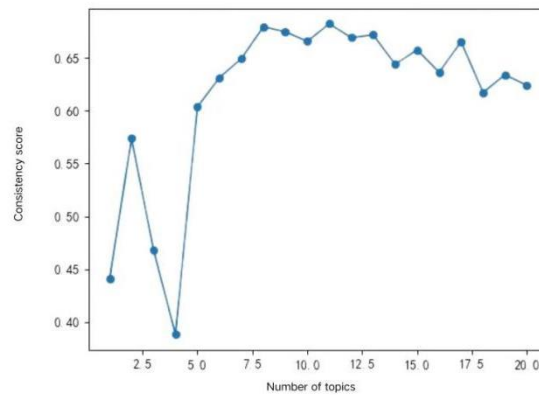


Figure 5. Topic Coherence

Based on the above, an LDA model is trained using 5 topics (Figure 6), corresponding to: Topic 1 - Pain Management and Medical Treatments, Topic 2 - Traditional Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture Practices, Topic 3 - Integration of Acupuncture into Western Culture, Topic 4 - Advertising and Pop Culture, and Topic 5 - Health Care and Alternative Therapies.

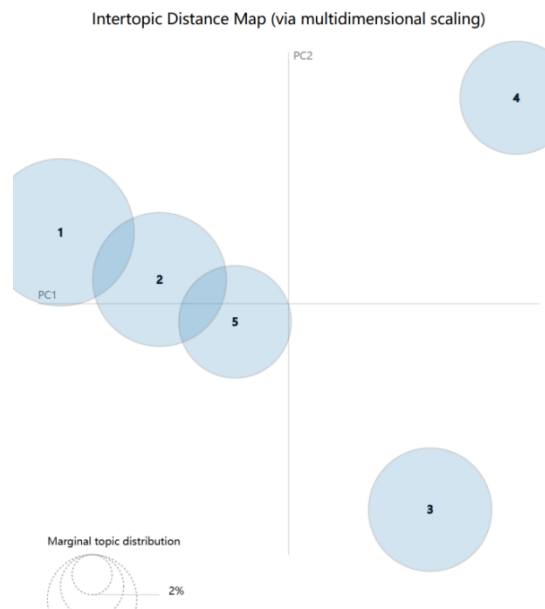


Figure 6. Intertopic Distance Map

4. Analysis of Reporting Frameworks

4.1 High-Level Thematic Framework Analysis

The high-level structure unveils the deeper meanings behind events, representing the fundamental themes or core concepts of specific issues. These core concepts constitute the core information or essence conveyed by news reports. An in-depth analysis of the high-level structure allows for an accurate grasp of the primary distribution pattern and overall content of issues from a macro perspective. This analysis primarily focuses on the definition of the themes or topics of news events, exploring the core issues in news reports and how these issues are defined and understood. The macro-level framework is closely linked to the main thrust and central idea of news reports, providing an important perspective and framework for understanding news events.

As mentioned earlier, the corpus of reports selected in this paper encompasses five main topics (Table 1):

Table 1. Five Core Themes

No.	Number of reports	Theme	Content
1	228	Pain Management and Medical Treatments	This section of my research paper focuses on the multifaceted nature of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) acupuncture as a pain management and medical treatment modality. It discusses the application effects of acupuncture in alleviating various painful symptoms such as migraines, back pain, and carpal tunnel syndrome, while highlighting its mainstreaming trend in modern medicine and the controversies it faces, including the placebo effect and regulatory issues. The research covers multiple aspects of acupuncture in medical practice, encompassing acupuncture education and training, legal status, scientific research, and its application in different cultures and regions. The reports indicate the potential utility of acupuncture in pain relief, addiction treatment, and as an adjunct to surgical anesthesia. They also delve into the controversies surrounding acupuncture's clinical use, such as the assessment of its effectiveness and safety, as well as comparisons with traditional Western medicine. Additionally, the reports mention legal support for acupuncture in specific regions like Nevada and its traditional and modern
2	204	Traditional Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture Practices	

			applications in countries such as the Soviet Union and China. Collectively, these reports reflect the globalization trend of acupuncture as part of medical practice and the ongoing exploration of its scientific validity and effectiveness. Furthermore, this section encompasses various facets of acupuncture in Western society, ranging from legal recognition and cultural integration to its application in sports, music, and holistic health. It showcases how acupuncture, as a traditional TCM treatment, has been accepted in modern society and integrated with traditional Western medical practices, and how it has influenced and improved people's quality of life, embodying the fusion and mutual influence between acupuncture and Western culture. Notably, as acupuncture spreads in the West, there is also a trend of “de-Sinicization.” While some Western countries embrace and develop acupuncture, they also attempt to integrate it with modern Western medical knowledge systems, resulting in acupuncture forms with Western characteristics, such as dry needling and electroacupuncture. This trend reflects cultural differences and reinterpretations of traditional TCM theories to some extent.
3	169	Integration of Acupuncture into Western Culture	
4	112	Advertising and Pop Culture	The diverse representations of acupuncture in advertising and popular culture are also explored, ranging from legal disputes, celebrity experiences, and exploration of alternative therapies to health insurance coverage and acupuncture’s popularity among specific groups. These representations demonstrate how acupuncture, as a traditional TCM treatment, is promoted, used, and discussed in various domains of modern society. The content of these reports reflects acupuncture’s role and impact in raising public awareness, treatment options, and as a choice for health and well-being. Additionally, this section covers the application of acupuncture as a health care and alternative therapy in different fields and contexts, including providing home services for veterans, alternative medical treatment for animals, the promotion and
5	119	Health Care and Alternative Therapies	

acceptance of acupuncture overseas, and comparisons and integrations between acupuncture and Western medicine. The reports also mention the popularity of acupuncture among athletes, musicians, and specific occupational groups, along with case studies and explorations of the effects of alternative medical treatments. Furthermore, they focus on the coverage of alternative medicine in health insurance, public awareness and acceptance of alternative therapies, and innovative applications of acupuncture in personal health care. These reports reflect acupuncture's diverse roles and increasing popularity as a traditional treatment method in modern society.

In terms of the number of reports, the most covered topic is "Pain Management and Medical Treatment through Acupuncture". This suggests that the adoption of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) acupuncture in foreign countries is largely attributed to its immediate efficacy. Since its dissemination, acupuncture has been recognized by most Westerners primarily for its convenient and efficient "feasibility," as well as its non-toxic and side-effect-free treatment outcomes, which align well with Western pragmatic values. Additionally, there has been a growing number of reports on acupuncture's clinical manifestations in various diseases and its role in health care. Furthermore, topics related to acupuncture policy proposals and practice norms have also received considerable attention, reflecting the gradual localization of acupuncture in terms of law, education, and profession in the United States. At different stages, the focus of reports varied, and the distribution of topics exhibited certain differences. In the early 1970s, reports on the miraculous effects of acupuncture in China gradually increased. Through mass media, people gradually enhanced their understanding of acupuncture and embarked on its study and dissemination. Despite the inadequate research on acupuncture anesthesia at the anatomical and physiological levels during that time, coupled with some skeptical voices, its remarkable clinical effects compelled the American medical community to seriously consider Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) acupuncture, igniting a wave of enthusiasm for acupuncture in the United States with official and authoritative endorsement. Starting from the 1980s, the professional system related to acupuncture in the United States gradually matured, with acupuncture legislation, education, and group development thriving across various states. The evaluation of acupuncture's rationality, legality, and the establishment of standards for practitioner qualifications reflected the cautious yet acknowledging attitude of American society towards acupuncture at that time. In the 1990s, acupuncture achieved notable advancements in the United States, with states accelerating the process of

legalizing acupuncture. The establishment of the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM) provided a standardized pathway for acupuncture certification. Acupuncture schools emerged in abundance, and the education and training system progressively improved. Additionally, acupuncture research increased, and its clinical applications expanded into various fields such as pain management, mental health, circulation enhancement, and gynecological disorders. Extensive media coverage and a favorable shift in public opinion further elevated the social recognition and acceptance of acupuncture, laying a solid foundation for its in-depth development in the United States and globally.

Entering the 21st century, with the rapid development of modern technology and medical techniques, acupuncture's application scope further broadened, and its efficacy has been scientifically verified and widely recognized in multiple fields. Reports frequently mention acupuncture's positive effects in alleviating chronic pain, reducing stress, treating vertigo, promoting blood circulation, assisting in the treatment of drug abuse and addiction, and addressing women's health issues such as endometriosis, menstrual irregularities, and infertility. These reports not only promptly update the latest findings of acupuncture research but also demonstrate its extensive application in clinical practice, further consolidating acupuncture's position within the medical system in the United States and globally.

4.2 Analysis of Mid-Level Narrative Framework

Among the news reports on acupuncture published by The New York Times, those with a positive emotional tendency account for the largest proportion, totaling 769 articles; there are 8 neutral reports and 55 negative reports (Figure 7). This indicates that acupuncture, as a traditional medical therapy, is increasingly recognized and accepted in modern society. Furthermore, acupuncture has made progress in the field of scientific research, especially studies demonstrating its effectiveness and safety. These reports contribute to enhancing public trust in acupuncture as a scientific therapy. Additionally, acupuncture, as an important component of traditional Chinese culture, may also prompt the media to give it more positive attention due to its positive image on the international stage. The viewpoints presented in neutral and negative reports mainly include doubts about the principles and effectiveness of acupuncture, medical accidents caused by irregular medical practices, disputes over medical insurance and costs, etc. Some news headlines contain obvious semantically and emotionally charged vocabulary, such as "U.S. Doctors Are Skeptical of Acupuncture in Treatment of Purely Physical Diseases" and "Acupuncture Relief of Nerve Deafness Is Questioned". Words with emotional tendencies like "Skeptical" and "Questioned" clearly reflect the doubts expressed in the reports regarding the effectiveness of acupuncture.

Overall, the high proportion of positive reports on acupuncture in The New York Times reflects a positive development trend of acupuncture in American society.

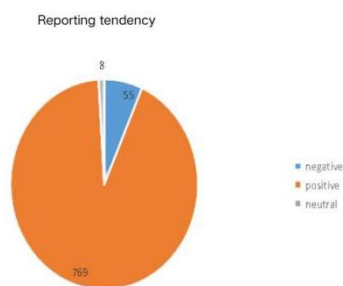


Figure 7. Reporting Tendency

4.3 Analysis of Low-Level Expression Framework

At the low-level framework level, the manifestation of the framework consists of language or symbols, with traditional news reports primarily relying on written text as their main carrier. In this paper, the Python software and the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic model were used to analyze 832 related news reports, and the top ten most frequent words in each of the five thematic reports were counted. (Table 2.)

Table 2. Top 10 Key Words

No.	Key words
1	Pain, acupuncture, Dr, patients, treatment, medical, doctors, body, treatments, Chinese
2	Acupuncture, Dr, medicine, Chinese, medical, China, treatment, doctors, patients, health
3	Acupuncture, first, women, back, They, United, day, game, American, before, States, Chinese, Dr
4	Get, women, We, drug, Usher, day, city, good, love, program, acupuncture, If, hair, go
5	Dr, medicine, care, health, acupuncture, alternative, medical get, Chinese, treatments

Firstly, the frequent appearance of words such as “acupuncture,” “medical,” “doctors,” and “treatment” in the reports undoubtedly highlights acupuncture’s status as a professional medical treatment. These words not only emphasize the professionalism of acupuncture but also place it within the context of modern medicine, showcasing its positive role in alleviating pain and promoting health. This emphasis on professionalism and medicality establishes a positive and authoritative image for acupuncture.

Secondly, the frequent mention of words like “Chinese” and “China” in the reports not only reveals the cultural roots of acupuncture but also deepens Western readers’ understanding and identification with Chinese medical culture. The use of these words makes acupuncture not just a medical treatment but also a cultural symbol, representing the wisdom and charm of traditional Chinese medicine. The incorporation of these cultural elements adds a rich cultural heritage and national character to acupuncture’s media image.

Furthermore, the appearance of words such as “patients,” “pain,” and “health” in the reports reflects the practical effects of acupuncture in improving patients’ health conditions and alleviating pain. These words, through specific cases and patient experiences, vividly demonstrate the efficacy and value of acupuncture, further reinforcing its positive image in the public mind. Meanwhile, the inclusion of words like “women” and “first” also showcases the diversity and personalized characteristics of acupuncture treatment, making it more aligned with the needs and expectations of different populations.

Additionally, the mention of words such as “alternative” and “get” in the reports reveals acupuncture’s unique position within the modern medical system. As an alternative or supplementary medical treatment, acupuncture not only complements modern medicine but also provides more treatment options and possibilities. This fusion of modernity and tradition not only enriches the diversity of medical treatments but also promotes the dissemination and acceptance of traditional Chinese acupuncture globally.

In summary, the reporting on traditional Chinese medicine acupuncture in American newspapers successfully constructs a positive, professional, culturally rich, and integrated image of acupuncture in the media through the clever use of a series of high-frequency words. This image-building not only enhances public awareness and trust in acupuncture but also promotes the international dissemination and exchange of Chinese medical culture.

5. The Image of Chinese Acupuncture Constructed by Mainstream American Media

5.1 The Mystical Power from the East

Since the stories of Chinese acupuncture began to be reported in The New York Times in the 1970s, the subject of the news was mostly “China” or “Chinese doctors,” and the content focused on cases where acupuncture served as a medical treatment for various diseases, sparking initial awareness and curiosity among various sectors of American society. For instance, the articles titled “China Tells of

Mute's Cure" published on March 20, 1969, and "Chinese Use Acupuncture Anesthetic in Heart Surgery" published on May 23, 1971, both highlighted the medical proficiency and efficacy of Chinese acupuncture. Subsequently, more and more Americans traveled to China to experience or study acupuncture personally, and the subject of the reports gradually shifted from "China" to "Americans" visiting or studying in China. A series of reports, such as "Quick Doctor, the Needle" in August 1971, "U.S. EAR SURGEON ARRIVES IN CHINA" in September, and "U.S. Study of Chinese Medicine Urged" in November, all centered on American doctors or medical teams coming to China for study and visits. Such extensive reporting further promoted readers' acceptance of acupuncture and its dissemination and popularity in the United States.

This series of reports consistently centered on American physicians or medical teams traveling to China for study visits and observational exchanges. Early coverage employed specific narrative strategies that exoticized acupuncture, heavily utilizing vocabulary with orientalist overtones to depict this therapeutic practice while deliberately accentuating its divergence from Western medical paradigms. Notably, while this mystification narrative stimulated curiosity, it simultaneously created cognitive distortions, preventing audiences from comprehending the theoretical foundations of traditional Chinese medicine underlying acupuncture. The cumulative effect of such extensive reporting paradoxically enhanced public receptivity toward acupuncture in the U.S., ultimately facilitating its dissemination and growing popularity within American healthcare contexts.

5.2 An Emerging Force in Need of Standardization and Localization

With the introduction of acupuncture, the United States strengthened the rectification and regulation of the acupuncture industry. During the first acupuncture boom in the 1970s, some Americans traveled overseas to study acupuncture in mainland China, Hong Kong, and other places, and a large number of acupuncture clinics and learning classes emerged locally in the United States. However, due to the lack of medical licenses, acupuncturists were often detained by American police, leading to the closure of many acupuncture clinics. The United States established a strict health care management system, and the development of acupuncture in the United States was actually subject to strict political control. The localization of acupuncture in the United States initially emphasized the localization of laws; without legal protection, acupuncture would be difficult to advance. In April 1973, the governor of Nevada signed a bill officially legalizing acupuncture. This was also the first time that a local government in the United States issued official regulations recognizing acupuncture. Subsequently, various states in the United States began the process of legalizing acupuncture. Driven by a series of professional bills, the size of the acupuncture professional group in the United States continued to grow. It can be said that since 1971, acupuncture has gradually achieved localization in the United States, undergoing a transformation from illegal status to legal status, from private teaching to formal education, from scattered practitioners to professional groups, from an Eastern secret technique to complementary and alternative medicine, and from traditional Chinese acupuncture to localized American acupuncture.

The standardization of acupuncture in the United States has revealed a noteworthy phenomenon: media coverage demonstrates a pronounced tendency toward technical descriptions while systematically neglecting the holistic philosophy and theoretical foundations of traditional Chinese medicine. This “decontextualized technification” in reporting has progressively transformed acupuncture into a culturally disembodied medical technique.

From a knowledge dissemination perspective, this process essentially constitutes cultural appropriation through epistemic assimilation - wherein Western medical systems selectively adopt and reformulate traditional knowledge via institutionalized frameworks. The decoupling of acupuncture from its cultural roots reflects a broader pattern of biomedical hegemony that privileges technical efficacy over philosophical coherence.

5.3 A Supplementary Medical Force Meeting the Needs of American Citizens

The reason why traditional Chinese acupuncture has achieved good development in the United States is largely due to its high practical value and safety, which complement the deficiencies of Western diagnostic and therapeutic techniques and meet the healthcare needs of different social groups in the United States. The commonality in the application of acupuncture between China and the United States is the treatment of chronic pain diseases such as low back pain, headaches, and arthritis. The difference lies in that stroke, facial paralysis, and hypertension are ranked at the forefront of acupuncture treatments in China, while depressive disorders, anxiety, allergies, infertility, and other emotional and reproductive diseases are ranked at the forefront in the United States. This also reflects the differences in Sino-American social cultures, as emotional issues and fertility problems are more common in American society. Acupuncture in the United States has always been undergoing localization adjustments in accordance with the characteristics of American diseases. Besides the aforementioned diseases, acupuncture is also used to assist in drug detoxification treatment and address addiction crises.

5.4 The Force of Integration with Western Technology and Culture

As a traditional Chinese medical therapy, acupuncture has demonstrated unique treatment advantages in modern medicine while also facing challenges in scientific validation and standardization. With the deepening of clinical research and the strengthening of international exchanges, acupuncture has shown a trend of “de-Sinicization” in the West. While accepting and developing acupuncture, the United States is also attempting to combine it with modern Western medical knowledge systems, forming acupuncture forms with Western characteristics, such as dry needling and electroacupuncture. For example, The New York Times reported in October 2020 on a study titled “Electroacupuncture for Chronic Back Pain Function Improvement,” which delved into the effects of acupuncture from the perspectives of clinical trials and treatment outcomes. The report introduced a double-blind randomized controlled trial that studied the effect of electroacupuncture (a form of acupuncture combined with electrical stimulation) on improving daily living functions for patients with chronic lower back pain.

The trial results showed that electroacupuncture could serve as a treatment method with clinically significant effects, effectively reducing patients' disability levels. This process not only promotes the diversification of medicine, enhances the acceptability and popularity of acupuncture, but also drives scientific research into the mechanism of acupuncture's action and strengthens cultural exchanges and understanding between China and the West. Through innovative practices that integrate traditional Chinese and Western medicine, the world has witnessed innovations in treatment methods and improvements in treatment outcomes. The integration of traditional Chinese acupuncture with Western culture is a bidirectional process, not only involving the dissemination of acupuncture in the West but also the localization and innovation of acupuncture by Western medicine. This integration contributes to advancing the field of medicine and making contributions to global health.

6. Conclusion

Acupuncture originated as an integral part of Chinese culture. However, under the influence of America's pragmatic philosophy that prioritizes efficacy, it has gradually evolved into a modernized practice that emphasizes utility while downplaying its traditional cultural essence—molding itself to fit the needs of American society. The image of acupuncture in the U.S. has undergone a distinct transformation: from an exotic “Oriental mystery” in its early days, to a “professional therapy” incorporated into alternative medicine, and finally to a “service product” in today's wellness consumer market. This shift is not merely a deepening of understanding but rather a selective absorption and systematic reconstruction of traditional Chinese medical knowledge according to Western societal demands.

While we must remain vigilant against the “de-Sinicization” of acupuncture in its global dissemination, we should also recognize that localization is an inevitable part of any traditional practice's cross-cultural journey. Thus, a rational and inclusive approach is essential.

Moreover, Chinese culture has always been characterized by its inclusiveness and vitality. In the international promotion of acupuncture, we must learn from overseas schools of practice, transcend the limitations of TCM's “organ-centric over meridian-neglecting” theoretical framework, and present the full scope of acupuncture to the West. While maintaining the integrity of our theoretical system, we should integrate the strengths of diverse approaches to continuously refine and advance the practice. What thrives today is merely the “technique” of acupuncture—the underlying philosophy and principles of traditional Chinese medicine are far from achieving global recognition. The path to bringing TCM acupuncture and its cultural depth to the world remains long and arduous, requiring generations of practitioners to advance from technique to principle, and ultimately to a harmonious integration of both.

Reviewing nearly five decades of acupuncture coverage in The New York Times, we observe an image of acupuncture that has gradually taken root in American society. At the same time, we must actively engage with Western media, addressing skepticism about acupuncture's mechanisms and efficacy while proactively shaping the discourse. Looking ahead, the global dissemination of TCM faces significant opportunities. As global health perspectives shift and medical paradigms evolve, the holistic and preventive principles of Chinese medicine are gaining increasing recognition.

Moving forward, we must maintain cultural confidence while embracing an open and inclusive approach to global health governance. We should strive to elevate TCM from mere "technology export" to "knowledge sharing," and from "cultural dissemination" to "civilizational dialogue." This is not only crucial for enhancing China's cultural soft power but also a responsibility—to contribute Chinese wisdom to the global pursuit of health and well-being.

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Notes

Note 1. Chen,Y., Liu, J. On TCM International Communication Strategies Based on the Johari Window[J]. *Asia-Pacific Traditional Medicine*, 2024, 20(09): 8-13.

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