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China's promotion of traditional Chinese medicine

By Yujing Liu

1 **1** In a little-noticed announcement in April, the Hong Kong government launched a free traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) **rehabilitation** programme for patients recovering from the coronavirus.

2 **2** The voluntary programme, covering up to ten consultations with five **doses** of **herbal medication prescribed** during each visit, was meant to provide patients with an **alternative** following their discharge from hospital, as well as to foster the **integration** of TCM and western medicine, according to the Food and Health Bureau.

3 **3** The programme has, however, done little to enhance the role of **TCM practitioners** in the fight against the pandemic. Not a part of the public hospital system managed by the Hospital Authority, they are not even allowed to **diagnose** or treat coronavirus patients.



4 **4** The frustration felt by TCM practitioners in Hong Kong, which is home to about 10,000 TCM practitioners and 14,600 western medicine doctors, is another reminder of the **lack of recognition** for

the ancient school of medicine outside mainland China. The dearth of scientific proof of their efficacy has hampered efforts by Beijing to win international recognition for its **traditional remedies**, according to medical experts.

5 **5** Their disappointment also runs especially deep because about 92 per cent of all coronavirus patients in mainland China have been treated with traditional remedies. “Mainland China gives equal weight to western medicine and TCM. But Hong Kong is not like that,” said Lin Zhixiu, professor and associate director of the School of Chinese Medicine at Chinese University of Hong Kong. “At least, some coronavirus patients in Hong Kong have lost their chance to benefit from it.”

6 **6** There is not yet enough evidence from **randomized controlled trials** — considered the gold standard of modern medical research — for TCM to establish its effectiveness in treating the virus, researchers said, even though existing research shows it is an effective treatment for influenza and the Severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) virus.

7 **7** Most research on traditional remedies has been conducted on individual cells or animals, to explore their potential, said Lu Weidong, an instructor in medicine at Harvard Medical School.

8 **8** These studies cannot be counted as **empirical evidence**, according to experts trained in modern

medicine such as Lu. Only randomized controlled trials, preferably a **blind experiment**, where patients are randomly allocated to two or more groups to receive different treatments without knowing what these are, can establish a causal relationship between a **therapy** and its result in a convincing manner.

9 A clutch of herbal medicines played an important role in combating the Covid-19 pandemic in mainland China in the absence of a cure. Authorities sent more than 700 TCM doctors in five batches to Wuhan, where the outbreak was first recorded in December. These experts later identified three **botanical** drugs and another three liquid formulas that were included in the national standard therapy for coronavirus patients, including the hugely popular Lianhua Qingwen capsule.

10 In an article published last month, Chinese President Xi Jinping stated that TCM should “play a significant role in preventing and treating major epidemics in the future”.

11 This endorsement also led to some **controversial** practices. In the northwestern region of Xinjiang officials forced residents to drink concoctions to prevent infections, according to Associated Press and BBC. This followed an incident in Yunnan, where education authorities issued an order for all students to take a traditional remedy known as big pot soup, which prompted a **backlash**. The order was quickly retracted.

12 TCM also potentially involves a lot of money. Shenzhen-listed Yiling Pharmaceutical, which makes the Lianhua Qingwen capsules, reported a 57 per cent surge in its first-half profit this year to 714 million yuan (US\$105 million), after the remedy became the most popular traditional treatment for the common cold and flu.



13 At home, the market for TCM is huge. Abroad, the sector runs into a brick wall. China exported just US\$262 million worth of TCM drugs in 2018, a fraction of its overall **pharmaceuticals** export, which stood at US\$174 billion the same year.

14 At least 170 clinical trials have been registered in China since the outbreak started to explore TCM’s effectiveness in treating the coronavirus. But, so far, researchers have managed to publish just two studies in international journals using randomized controlled trials.

15 One of them, led by Zhong, one of China’s leading health experts, and published in May in *Phytomedicine*, examines the impact of Lianhua Qingwen capsules on 284 patients that were assigned to two groups receiving either a standard course of mostly western medicine, or one that combined the capsule as well.

16 The paper concludes that the recovery rate in the group that used Lianhua Qingwen was significantly higher than the control group, and the time it took for symptoms such as fever, fatigue and coughing to reduce was also “markedly shorter”. This, the authors contend, suggests that Lianhua Qingwen could **alleviate** the symptoms of Covid-19.

17 Harvard’s Lu said it was a “very interesting and promising” study, and might be the first

randomized controlled trial on TCM for Covid-19 treatment with a large sample size. Its one limitation, however, was that all its participants were mild cases, he said. Additionally, the journal's impact factor, the gauge of its importance to the field of medicine, is 4.3, a relatively low number. *Lancet*, the world's oldest and most well-known medical journal, for example, has an impact factor of 60.4.

18 A number of past papers based on randomized controlled trials indicate that drugs such as Lianhua Qingwen are effective in treating, preventing or helping alleviate symptoms related to Sars and other influenza viruses, including H1N1. Moreover, traditional remedies have also been proven to strengthen the **immune system**. "This is all indirect evidence, but all related to Covid-19," said Harvard Medical School's Lu. "Now, what we lack is direct evidence, to gain global attention."

Comprehension

Answer the following questions using information from the article.

Specific factual

1. The traditional Chinese medicine programme was meant to be an alternative to what?

- A. herbal medication
- B. coronavirus
- C. consultations
- D. western medicine

A B C D

Implicit information

2. According to paragraph 3, TCM practitioners are ...

- A. essential in the fight against the pandemic.
- B. neglected.
- C. needed in the fight against the pandemic.
- D. an obstacle in the fight against the pandemic.

A B C D

Reference

3. What do the following refer to?

(2 marks)

- i) "they" (line 17)
- ii) "their" (line 24)

Vocabulary

4. Find words in paragraphs 3–4 that have similar meanings to the following:

(2 marks)

- i) almost a complete lack
- ii) figure out why a patient feels sick

Specific factual

5. According to paragraph 6, why might TCM not be accepted in coronavirus treatment?

Specific factual

6. What is a blind experiment?

- A. an experiment where patients do not know what drugs they are taking
- B. an experiment where patients choose which group they will join for treatment
- C. an experiment where patients randomly allocate themselves to a group
- D. an experiment where each group receives several different treatments
- A B C D
○ ○ ○ ○

Specific factual

7. According to paragraph 9, what kind of medicine is Qingwen?

Specific factual

8. According to paragraphs 9–11, are the following statements True (**T**), False (**F**), or Not Given (**NG**)?
(4 marks)

Statements	T	F	NG
i) Some herbal medicines are able to cure Covid-19.	○	○	○
ii) The standard therapy for Covid-19 on the mainland includes a variety of herbal medicines.	○	○	○
iii) Xi Jinping's words had no effect on promoting TCM.	○	○	○
iv) Not everyone agreed with forcing people to take TCM.	○	○	○

Vocabulary

9. Find a word in paragraph 11 that means “withdrawn”.

Reference

10. What does “At home” in line 89 refer to?

Figurative language




11. What is the metaphor used in paragraphs 13–14 that describes an obstacle?

Implicit information



12. Complete the summary of paragraphs 14–16 by writing ONE word to fill in each blank. The word may or may not appear in the original text. You should make sure your answers are grammatically correct, paying attention to tenses, plurals, etc. (4 marks)

Although there have been a large number of clinical trials using TCM in China for the coronavirus, researchers have had  (i) _____ in getting their results published. One trial used (ii) _____ of Lianhua Qingwen to treat patients. One of the groups in the trial used (iii) _____ western medicine while the other group combined western medicine with TCM. The study concluded that (iv) _____, such as fever and fatigue, could be alleviated by using TCM.

Tone and attitude

13. What is the authors' tone towards the future of TCM in paragraph 16?

- A. indifferent
- B. cautiously optimistic
- C. very optimistic
- D. disappointed

- | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| A | B | C | D |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Specific factual

14. According to paragraph 17, what did Lu think was a problem regarding the people in the study?
