

# Opportunities and Challenges for Traditional Chinese Medicine in South Asia under the “Belt and Road” Initiative: The Case of Nepal and Pakistan.

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## ABSTRACT

*Driven by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China is quickly expanding its cooperation and integration with other nations worldwide, particularly in South Asia, across a range of sectors. The present study examines how the BRI has contributed to the globalization of traditional medicine, particularly in South Asia. South Asia’s culture is more open to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) because it values conventional medical practices. This article examines the opportunities and difficulties of TCM cooperation between Nepal and Pakistan using those two nations as case studies. Furthermore, the article addresses methods to improve TCM’s worldwide distribution and long-term growth. Despite the challenges and concerns, the Belt and Road Initiative presents a unique opportunity to enhance regional connectivity via international cooperation and opens up new channels for the international promotion of Traditional Chinese Medicine.*

**Keywords:** Traditional chinese medicine, the Belt and road initiative, South Asia

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## 1. Introduction

China proposed the Belt and Road Initiative

(BRI) in 2013 (yidaiyilu.gov.cn/). In order to construct the BRI, China had signed more than 200 cooperation agreements with 149 nations and 32 international organizations as of March 2023 (21jingji.com/). Through vigorously promoting the BRI, China is actively integrating into the global community. Traditional medicine is just one of the many fields where cooperation is required for this integration. Each nation's traditional culture includes traditional medicine in a unique way, and each nation's innovative development and cultural legacy depend on the internationalization of traditional medicine.

South Asia, located in southern Asia between the central and western parts of the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean, is a region with a unique role in the BRI. Among the many countries in South Asia, Nepal and Pakistan have a long history of friendly relations with China. In recent years, Nepal and Pakistan have had frequent interactions with China on traditional medicine. On 2023 September 26, China and Nepal issued a joint statement in which the two sides expressed their satisfaction with the completion and handover of the China-aided upgrading project of the Civil Service Hospital in Nepal and expressed their willingness to continue to strengthen cooperation in the field of medical and health care. The two sides welcomed the establishment of the China-Nepal Traditional Medicine Cooperation Committee in accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding between the State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) of the People's Republic of China and the Ministry of Health and Population of Nepal on Cooperation in Traditional Medicine and will continue to support the China-Nepal Traditional Chinese Medicine Center to carry out voluntary medical consultations, training, medical services, etc., and support the Chinese-aided Nepalese medical team to set up a new medical site in Kathmandu (2023, September 26). On April 28, 2023, Professor Muhammad Iqbal Choudhary of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC-COMSTech) told the Xinhua News Agency that, "In Pakistan, 70 percent population relies on traditional medicine for various diseases, so through cooperation with China, we are not only looking to launch traditional Chinese medicine in Pakistan, but also promote our own traditional 'Greek medicine' and streamline it to establish its proper market" (2023, April 28).

According to Xinhua News Agency, as of August 2023, Chinese medicine has been practicing in 196 countries and regions (2023, September 6). The BRI has created new opportunities for the growth of TCM in the global market, but it also presents challenges.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the theories, empirical knowledge, skills, and practices that are based on various cultural backgrounds and are used in the prevention, diagnosis, treatment, or maintenance of health for a wide range of physical and mental illnesses and diseases are all included in traditional medicine (WHO, 2023). These practices may or may not be interpretable. Chinese traditional

medicine has a complete theoretical system, rich clinical practice and a more mature disciplinary system, and its international influence has been expanding in recent years. At the current stage of development, TCM has ushered in new prospects for development as a result of the implementation of the BRI. However, at the same time, it also faces some difficulties and obstacles. This paper adopts an international perspective and draws from various sources, including government reports, news reports, theses, books, official statistics, and more. It examines Nepal and Pakistan as case studies from three angles: the traditional medicine market and trade situation, the development of traditional medicine talent education and training, and internationalization. The aim is to offer insights into the internationalization of traditional Chinese medicine and offer practical recommendations for the relevant countries.

### **2.1. Analysis of the situation in Nepal**

Traditional medicine encompasses not only medical practices but also reflects the culture, history, and accumulated wisdom of a people. In traditional medicine, China and Nepal are distinctive yet interconnected. Initially, Chinese medicine spread in Nepal in the form of acupuncture. In the 6th century B.C., the word “acupuncture” appeared in the Indian medical classic “*Suśruta Samhitā*”, which recorded more than 100 important points in the human body similar to the acupuncture points of TCM and which are of high medical value (Dahal et al., 2014). One of Nepal’s medical textbooks is the *Myohoji*, and Indian Ayurvedic medicine has a strong influence on Nepalese medicine. Nepal (known as the *Nibala Kingdom* at the time) had trade relations with China in the area of Chinese herbal medicine during the Tang Dynasty, according to the Tang Hui Yao. “The Mudra State sent emissaries in the twenty-first year, bok choy and onions” (Wang Pu, 1985). Apart from acupuncture, the use of aromatic and mineral medicines is customary in both Nepal and China. The Chinese history book “*Old Tang Book: Xirong Biography: Mudra*” claims that herbal remedies in ancient Nepal included fragrant and mineral medicines like pearls, amber, and spices. Nepalese Ayurvedic medicine, which emphasizes the “three elements and five meridians” and the balance of yin and yang, is centered on the study and use of herbs, supplemented by the use of massage and other therapeutic methods. TCM is a medical system originating in ancient China that emphasizes the balance of yin and yang and the operation of qi and blood. Its treatments mainly include the use of herbs as well as techniques such as acupuncture, massage, and Guasha to regulate the balance of Qi and blood and Yin and Yang. Due to their geographic location, Chinese medicine, Tibetan medicine, and Nepalese Ayurvedic medicine have interacted and shared some commonalities in their treatment methods. They both prioritize the use of herbs and employ diagnostic techniques such as observation, questioning, and pulse diagnosis Roberti Di Sarsina, Ottaviani, and Mella 2011. The links between China and Nepal in traditional medicine provide the basis for cooperation and exchange between the two countries.

China and Nepal have both made impressive gains in markets and trade. There is a

long history of trade between Nepal and China. Trade in medicinal and aromatic plants (MAPs) between Nepal and China has taken place for centuries. More than 1,500 years ago, regional traders established the Tea and Silk Roads, connecting China's Sichuan and Yunnan provinces with Nepal. The Tea and Silk Roads fueled a boom in regional trade and laid the foundation for the development of cross-border trade in MAPs. Currently, there is a growing global demand for MAPs, and although Nepal's participation in global value chains (GVCs) is low, Nepal has unique topographical conditions and a variable climate with 6,000 to 7,000 species of higher plants, which provide conditions for the collection and use of MAPs. It is estimated that 3,000 of these are exchanged globally (the World Bank, 2018).

The BRI has brought new prospects for cooperation between China and South Asia. As the BRI continues to develop, traditional medicine, as an important part of the construction of a healthy Silk Road, has received great attention from various stakeholders. TCM has been widely disseminated globally, and its unique method of treating diseases such as pneumonia has been recognized worldwide. Medical exchanges between China and Nepal have a long history. For many years, China has been dispatching medical teams to Nepal to provide TCM diagnosis and treatment services and promote TCM culture. The Nepali government and people have acknowledged and endorsed this initiative. Through cooperation, China and Nepal have utilized their respective expertise in traditional medicine to promote policy communication, strengthen technical cooperation, share resources, and promote the global recognition and acceptance of their respective traditional medicines. Through cooperation, China and Nepal are leveraging their respective expertise in the field of traditional medicine, promoting policy communication, strengthening technical cooperation, and sharing resources to facilitate the global recognition and acceptance of their respective traditional medicines. The BRI Report on the Development of International Cooperation in TCM (2023) by China's State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine (SATCM) states that TCM has expanded to 196 countries and regions, with over 300,000 TCM practitioners having established over 80,000 TCM clinics outside of China. China has signed traditional medicine cooperation documents with 14 countries, and 30 overseas TCM centers are under construction (the National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine, 2023). Nepal is a country that has extensive exchanges with TCM and shares many similarities in traditional medicine practices. Such similarities offer great prospects for both sides to conduct research, transfer technology, exchange medicinal products, and promote closer cooperation with China in the field of traditional medicine. This creates favorable conditions for Nepal and other countries to strengthen their cooperation with China. China's 14th Five-Year Plan clearly sets out the goal of establishing high-quality overseas centers and bases for international cooperation in TCM. The plan highlights the enormous potential for collaboration in this field and paves the way for China and other nations to work together in the field of traditional medicine.

Opportunities and difficulties do, however, coexist. Both parties are dealing with certain real-world obstacles and challenges as they work to advance cooperation in traditional medicine.

In recent years, due to increased anthropogenic activities and climate change, the growing conditions for Chinese medicinal herbs have been negatively impacted in both China and Nepal. The growing habitat of some endemic medicinal herbs is seriously threatened. Due to global warming, the melting of Himalayan glaciers, deforestation, and land degradation has increased severity. The number and variety of rare medicinal herbs have decreased both in China and Nepal as a result of soil pollution and overexploitation.

Furthermore, there are certain challenges facing the process of modernizing and internationalizing traditional medicine. While there are undoubtedly differences between Chinese medicine and Nepalese ayurvedic medicine, it is crucial to think about ways to keep these distinctions intact during cooperation and exchange. However, there is also an urgent need to find a solution for how to maintain traditional medicine’s uniqueness while modernizing and maintaining its quality and safety in accordance with international standards. In the promotion of Chinese medicine, there are also some difficulties, such as the lack of enough Chinese medicine practitioners and professionals, the long training time for professionals, and the high cost of training Chinese medicine practitioners.

Nonetheless, it is encouraging to observe that the Nepali government wants to deepen its collaboration with the Chinese government and places a high value on the advancement of TCM. In Nepal, traditional medicine has a lot of room to grow and flourish. As TCM offers positive and effective therapeutic outcomes in a reasonable price, there is a high degree of acceptance of TCM among the people of Nepal. Specifically, the general public in Nepal is aware of and receptive to several TCM therapeutic modalities, such as acupuncture, tuina, and fire cupping and more. On the other hand, the Nepali government has acknowledged and encouraged the growth, collaboration, and exchange of TCM within the country. Nepal has been sending international students to China since the 1970s, to continue further study with a focus on acupuncture and related fields. The aim is to equip these students with necessary knowledge and skills in TCM, which they can use to provide TCM treatments when they return to their home countries. As of right now, Nepal has at least seven TCM departments and institutions, including the Nepalese Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine, the Sino-Nepal Joint Hospital, and the Ayurveda Hospital. Among them, the China-Nepal Joint Hospital is a model of cooperation between China and Nepal in the medical field (Chen Shiyun et al., 2023). It brings together the Western and Chinese medicine to give the Nepalese people more medical treatment options.

China and Nepal meet countless opportunities as well as difficulties in the field of traditional medicine within the framework of the BRI. The distinctive features of

traditional medicine in both nations offer priceless chances for scientific, medical, and cross-cultural interactions. Both nations face certain inevitable obstacles and challenges in the process of promotion and development. It is thus hoped that the two nations can deepen their cooperation, fortify their exchanges, avoid their weaknesses, and engage in cooperative research. Only when the two countries truly realize mutual benefit and exchange a win-win stand, can strengthen cooperation and both countries can achieve the greater development in this field. It is anticipated, as Chinese medicine continues to spread throughout the world, that in the near future, Nepali and Chinese traditional medicine collaboration will flourish, and significantly improve the health and well-being of their respective populations.

## **2.2. Analysis of the situation in Pakistan**

Pakistan, a major participant in the BRI, has established the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which has allowed it to embark on a number of infrastructure projects. TCM is becoming more and more integrated into the healthcare industry. The cooperation agreement between Pakistan's Ministry of Health and China provides policy guarantees for the development of TCM and is supported by the government. However, the primary challenges faced by TCM in Pakistan are shortcomings in local healthcare infrastructure, disparities in language and culture between China and Pakistan, and shortcomings in legal and regulatory frameworks.

One of the main forces behind the growth of the China-Pakistani collaboration in Chinese medicine is market demand. Pakistanis in rural areas have long used herbal remedies to treat illnesses because of their closeness to nature. A growing number of urban dwellers are suffering from obesity, diabetes, and other illnesses in recent times, and they have developed a strong interest in Chinese medicine. Following its establishment in Pakistan, Chinese medicine has fostered mutual learning and complementarity between Western and Chinese medical practices, as well as increased patient choice and efficacy. Chinese medicine is becoming more and more popular in the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and both the Pakistani government and the general public are aware of this. Chinese medicine and its treatment modalities are very successful in treating a number of acute, difficult, chronic, and epidemic diseases in Pakistan. They also bring good news to the local population and help them recover from their illnesses, thus improving their quality of life. Pakistan has a high incidence rate of malaria, with rainy season mosquito breeding seasons often resulting in outbreaks of various degrees of epidemics. The main disadvantage of anti-malarial drugs used in Western medicine is their significant side effects. Effective anti-malarial proprietary Chinese medications like artemisinin have been approved by the Pakistan Drug Administration and have been available in Pakistan for use in recent years, providing relief for a significant issue that has long affected patients in the region. Furthermore, heart and urinary system ailments are common in Pakistan and can be effectively treated with Chinese herbal medicines and TCM, which is widely accepted by the country's populace. Chinese medicine

exhibits remarkable preventive and therapeutic effects when it comes to treating acute diseases, including typhoid fever and dengue fever, both of which are common in Pakistan. Acupuncture serves as the cornerstone of Chinese medicine's current comprehensive treatment model in Pakistan, with other Chinese medicine treatment modalities being used in parallel. More than 50% of local patients in Chinese hospitals are rushing to receive acupuncture therapy; word of mouth has drawn patients from all over the country to seek medical attention. Acupuncture and moxibustion have special efficacy on sciatica, frozen shoulder, facial nerve paralysis, and some other difficult diseases. The dispersion of Chinese medicine clinics in Pakistan demonstrates the growing popularity of Chinese medicine. Other Chinese medicine technologies, such as cupping, are also evident. These clinics use a variety of strategies and effective treatments to draw in local patients.

The long-standing cooperative partnership and amicable neighborly relations between China and Pakistan have established a strong social and cultural basis for the advancement of Chinese medicine. The expansion of the CPEC has led to the introduction and use of Chinese medicine in Pakistan. This has improved the effectiveness of Chinese medicine's holistic approach and created new avenues for collaboration between the two nations. It also, in part, encourages trade in Chinese medicine between the two nations and fortifies industry and scientific research in the medical field. In addition, the commonality of traditional medicine systems between the two countries can also help to promote the mutual dissemination and cross-fertilization of the two kinds of medicine. For example, Pakistan's traditional medicine system is based on Ayurvedic medicine, which has commonalities with TCM in terms of treatment concepts, diagnostic and therapeutic means, and similarities in views such as “unity of man and nature”, “treatment of the future disease” and “harmonization of five flavors”. This commonality makes it easier for Pakistani people to understand Chinese medicine (Long Kun & Zheng Linyun, 2020). In particular:

Firstly, the sharing of resources for Chinese herbal medicine. There are abundant resources of Chinese herbal medicine in Pakistan; the Jinnah University Herbarium houses over 180,000 plant specimens, and approximately 3,500 types of traditional herbs from Pakistan are also exported to China. Additionally, there is a significant demand for Chinese herbal medicine in Pakistan, which presents a chance for collaboration between the two countries in the areas of cultivation, processing, research, and development of Chinese herbal medicine (2023, August 6). The fields of traditional medicine in China and Pakistan have been collaborating successfully and in a variety of ways in recent years. In February of this year, seven varieties of Pakistani medicinal plant seeds that had been chosen by scientists back home came back to earth following a six-month stay aboard the Chinese space station. These seeds are being used by Chinese and Pakistani scientists to collaborate on studies related to breeding, genetic stability, the molecular basis of therapeutic effects, efficacy, and safety.

Secondly, there is cooperation in the medical aspect of Chinese medicine. Chinese physicians have established Chinese medicine clinics in Pakistan in an effort to educate the local population about the benefits of Chinese medicine. These days, Pakistan Qihuang TCM Center, Pakistan Physiotherapy Hospital, China-Pakistan Hospital, Chinese Hospital and Hashmi Acupuncture Clinic are the more advanced TCM clinics. The Gansu Provincial Health Planning Commission (now the Gansu Provincial Health Commission) sent a delegation to visit Pakistan in December 2016 to discuss cooperation with the Ministry of Health. During this visit, the China Acupuncture Center and the Gansu Provincial Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine Cooperation listed the establishment of the Pakistan Qihuang Chinese Medicine Center. This is just one example of how the Pakistan Qihuang Chinese Medicine Center was established. The center is equipped with laboratory, X-ray room, electrocardiogram room and other departments. Among the center's current medical staff, the Chinese doctors are senior doctors from Gansu Provincial Hospital of TCM, and the Pakistani doctors are all highly qualified and famous specialists, and the high-level team they form is welcomed by patients from all over the world. The center uses acupuncture, Chinese medicine and fire cupping to treat various common and chronic diseases, especially for migraine, sciatica, kidney stones, acute and chronic gastritis, pediatric enuresis, prostatitis and hyperlipidemia. Here, Pakistan doctors have acquired a thorough understanding of Chinese medicine and its treatment techniques, which has benefited both their individual careers and the diversity of the Pakistan medical field. The center currently sees and treats more than 50 patients a day on average, and its daily schedule is extremely hectic (2019, August 28).

Lastly, in the field of Chinese medicine education and training, early medical exchanges between China and Pakistan have taken place; in the 1970s, the Pakistani government sent doctors to study acupuncture and other Chinese medical practices in China; upon their return, the Pakistani doctors continued to treat patients with acupuncture to relieve their pain; in the early 1990s, Gansu Provincial Hospital of TCM started to promote Chinese medicine abroad by bringing in a team of doctors and specialists to investigate ways to promote the culture of TCM. For the benefit and problem-solving of Pakistan's local populace (2023, gov.cn/). The Center for TCM was established by Hunan University of TCM and the University of Karachi in collaboration. It provides Pakistani scholars and doctors with a thorough education and hands-on training in TCM. Some colleges and universities held training courses on TCM education, such as the Chinese Acupuncture Center in Islamabad, the Islamabad Institute of Health Services, and Gansu University of TCM, China. This is a good start towards promoting TCM education in Pakistan and effectively advancing the development of TCM in the nation. A Memorandum of Understanding regarding the collaboration in arranging TCM and acupuncture training courses has been inked by the Acupuncture Center and the Islamabad College of Health Services. Islamabad College of Health Ser-



vices will provide the teaching space and issue the certificate of completion, which will solve the issues of TCM qualification certification and licensing of acupuncture and moxibustion practice for the trainers upon completion of the courses; Gansu University of Traditional Chinese Medicine will provide TCM teaching support and professional guarantee for future in-depth cooperation and degree education; and the Acupuncture Center, as a registered medical entity in Pakistan, plays the role of a matchmaker in the cooperation and provides clinical practice and internship sites for the students of the training course (2023, May 13).

Although there has been a lot of cooperation between China and Pakistan in the field of Chinese medicine, there are still many obstacles to overcome. Due to the government's consideration of its own medicine, Chinese medicine has not yet been fully liberalized in Pakistan; as a result, the development of Chinese medicine in Pakistan is currently a private endeavor without any formal framework. Additionally, the lack of specific policies by the Pakistani government to control the practice of Chinese medicine in the area has somewhat confused the country's Chinese medicine sector and delayed the use of Chinese medicine. Chinese medicine is not yet regulated in Pakistan, and the industry standards for acupuncture are primarily focused on a few larger clinics or institutions. These standards have not yet spread throughout the acupuncture industry, which causes inconvenience for those working in the field. In addition, the absence of uniform standards in the acupuncture industry leads to less formal practices and more standardized operations, which are detrimental to the industry's ability to grow sustainably. In addition, the absence of market regulation may encourage the entry of shoddy and counterfeit goods, endangering the interests of buyers. Furthermore, even though Chinese medicine is widely accepted in Pakistan, there are still barriers that need to be overcome due to cultural differences and variations in conventional medical wisdom. A small number of Chinese physicians are dispatched from China, and in order to interact with patients in the area, Chinese physicians must get past linguistic and cultural obstacles, which can somewhat impair the effectiveness of their care. Pakistan is located in South Asia, a region where traditional medicine is more developed and deeply ingrained in people's hearts. When selecting a medical model, the locals typically give preference to the more well-known South Asian traditional medicine, and Chinese medicine has a relatively small following in South Asia.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

Chinese medicine has demonstrated exceptional potential for international cooperation in the development of the BRI, given its significant role in traditional Chinese culture. The globalization of TCM will boost medical cooperation between China, Nepal and Pakistan, encourage the spread of TCM culture, and raise TCM's profile and recognition globally by implementing a strategy that focuses on Pakistan and Nepal.

Pakistan shall place a high priority on enhancing its intergovernmental cooperation with China, especially when it comes to professional medical education and

legislation pertaining to Chinese medicine. The quality and effectiveness of Chinese medicine services can be directly improved by the establishment of Chinese medicine training centers and the provision of structured instruction. These measures can also significantly improve the professional knowledge and application of Chinese medicine among local medical personnel. In addition, Pakistan shall capitalize on the opportunities presented by the CPEC to strengthen trade and technical cooperation in TCM products. This will encourage Chinese medicine's advancement and widespread use.

In Nepal, the promotion of TCM requires consideration of cultural and traditional differences, with a focus on education and cultural integration. Chinese medicine professionals can be trained for the local community and Chinese medicine's academic standing and social recognition can be enhanced by collaborating with local medical colleges and universities to offer courses in Chinese medicine. The Nepalese government should simultaneously investigate medical services that are appropriate for the region and support a medical paradigm that blends Western and Chinese medicine. By applying it practically, this will not only improve the acceptance of Chinese medicine but also assess its safety and efficacy.

Furthermore, increasing public knowledge of the value of Chinese medicine is essential for both nations. Campaigns in the media, open talks, and neighborhood events can increase public knowledge of Chinese medicine. This method aids in debunking myths and highlighting the special benefits and potential applications of TCM in the management of various illnesses. The market for TCM will grow as a result of public education, which will also help TCM culture spread and be accepted.

In conclusion, despite the fact that Pakistan and Nepal have different obstacles to overcome in their efforts to promote TCM, both nations must devise focused plans to open the door for TCM's internationalization through increased government support, education and popularization, and enhanced cross-cultural interactions. By means of these endeavors, TCM will not only attain greater recognition and utilization in both nations, but also showcase its distinct treatment approaches and health ideology worldwide, thereby augmenting the diversity and enduring growth of international health-care.

#### **4. Conclusions**

China started the BRI in 2013 with the goal of boosting connectivity and developing infrastructure networks to promote regional economic growth throughout Asia and beyond. The idea is to establish a network of trade corridors connecting over 140 nations and international organizations, building on the legacy of the Silk Road. Case studies from Pakistan and Nepal demonstrate that the BRI holds extraordinary promise for the global development of TCM. These studies illustrate the practicality and complexity of promoting TCM in South Asia. A careful examination of the circumstances in these two nations reveals that, despite the challenges, there is still a lot of room for

the development and use of TCM globally with the right approaches and collaboration. Promoting greater cooperation and adaptation in the areas of policy development, education and training, and cross-cultural interaction among participating countries is necessary to guarantee the continued development of TCM and its significant role in the treatment of global health issues.

With the Belt and Road framework in mind, this study seeks to support future international cooperation and TCM development by presenting empirical facts and policy recommendations. The study also aims to encourage the balanced development of medical resources and global health varieties.

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