

Toward a Chinese yardstick in TCM health technology assessment: a commentary on *Theory and Methods of Health Technology Assessment in Traditional Chinese Medicine*

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the newly published book *Theory and Methods of Health Technology Assessment in Traditional Chinese Medicine*. In response to the mismatch between conventional health technology assessment (HTA) frameworks and the holistic, individualized nature of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), this book proposes a localized “Chinese yardstick” for evaluation. It integrates standard health economic assessments with TCM-specific characteristics, drawing on over a decade of real-world research on Chinese patent medicines and non-drug therapies. Key innovations include adapting the Population, Intervention, Comparator, Outcome, and Study design (PICOS) framework to incorporate “pattern type,” modifying Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development and Evaluation (GRADE) to account for long-standing clinical wisdom, and employing multi-criteria decision analysis. By bridging the evidence-to-policy gap, the book establishes a scientifically rigorous yet culturally appropriate HTA framework, offering a strategic roadmap for integrating TCM into modern health systems and contributing valuable insights to the global HTA discourse.

KEYWORDS

health technology assessment, traditional Chinese medicine, value assessment, comprehensive evaluation, evidence-based medicine

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I am honored to comment on the newly published book *Theory and Methods of Health Technology Assessment in Traditional Chinese Medicine*.¹ After more than 60 years of studying, practicing, and advancing traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), I see this book not just as another academic text, but as a historic step toward properly articulating the value of TCM within modern scientific and global health frameworks. At a time when health systems worldwide are moving toward more holistic, sustainable, and patient-centered care, a shift explicitly advocated by the World Health Organization's strategy in traditional medicine,² and reinforced by *The Lancet's* emphasis on planetary health as the foundation for human well-being,³ there is an urgent need for an evaluation approach that respects the cultural roots of TCM while meeting scientific standards. This book addresses this need clearly and convincingly.

TCM is far more than a set of therapeutic techniques; it is a coherent knowledge system shaped by thousands of years of clinical observation and philosophical reflection. Its core principles of holism, pattern differentiation, dynamic balance, and individualized treatment offer insights into health that often go beyond the reductionist logic of biomedicine. However, because TCM interventions are complex and context sensitive, they have struggled to fit into conventional health technology assessment (HTA) systems, which were built for standardized, single-target therapies. This mismatch has created a persistent “evidence-policy gap”: effective TCM approaches are often omitted from public health programs or insurance coverage—not because they lack benefit, but because they are judged by measures that do not reflect how they work or the values of patients.

This book addresses that problem head-on. What makes it stand out is its balanced approach; it remains true to the theoretical foundations of TCM

while rigorously engaging with modern evaluation methods. More importantly, this is not merely a theory. It draws on more than a decade of real-world research and policy work by the authors, the practical experience of whom provides the empirical backbone of the book. To address the unique challenges of evaluating TCM, the editorial team proposed a localized HTA framework that integrates a standard health economic assessment with TCM-specific characteristics. This framework is designed to be systematic, transparent, and adaptable to the current Chinese healthcare context (Figure 1).

A major contribution has been their systematic HTA work on Chinese patent medicines (CPMs), which pose unique challenges owing to their multi-ingredient formulas, flexible usage patterns, and reliance on long-standing clinical experience. Over the past 10 years, the team has evaluated dozens of widely used CPMs for conditions such as functional gastrointestinal disorders,⁴ respiratory infections,⁵ and pediatric neuropsychiatric syndromes.⁶ Their assessments consistently combined evidence from randomized trials, real-world effectiveness data, post-marketing safety monitoring, and systematically documented human use experience. This pragmatic approach has produced transparent and reproducible evaluations that have directly informed provincial reimbursement decisions and national essential medicine listings, showing that rigorous HTA of complex herbal products is both possible and useful for policymaking.

Beyond pharmaceuticals, the team also applied the HTA principles to non-drug therapies, including acupuncture, for gynecological conditions. Studies on secondary dysmenorrhea, for example, have looked beyond pain scores or hormone levels and focused on outcomes that matter to patients: daily functioning, emotional well-being, and menstrual regularity.⁷ This broader view aligns with TCM's holistic understanding of health.

This breadth of experience across drugs and non-drug interventions and across many clinical areas provided a practical foundation for China's first official Technical Specification for Health Technology Assessment in Traditional Chinese Medicine.⁸ Prior to this document, HTA applications in TCM were inconsistent and fragmented. The specifications, developed through

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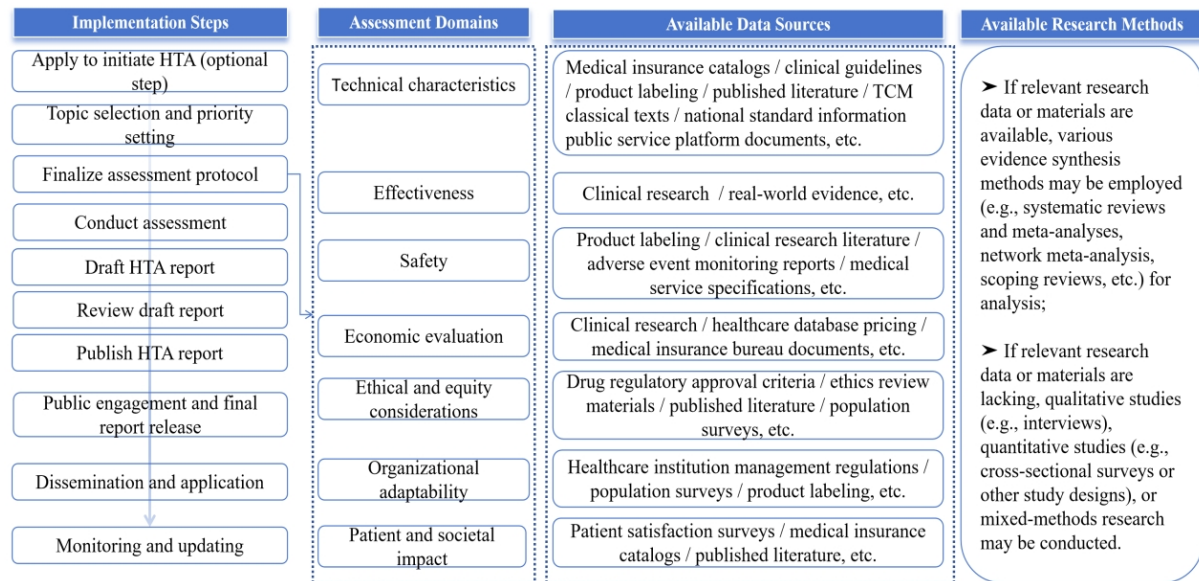


Figure 1 Overview of implementation steps and assessment content for health technology assessment in traditional Chinese medicine

Notes: HTA: health technology assessment; TCM: traditional Chinese medicine. The framework outlines a 10-step implementation process (left), covering 7 core assessment domains (middle left) supported by diverse data sources, including classical TCM texts and real-world evidence (middle right). Depending on data availability, appropriate research methods, ranging from systematic reviews to mixed-methods studies are applied (right).

expert consensus, pilot testing in multiple disease areas, and cross-agency consultations, offer clear guidance on how to define TCM interventions, choose relevant outcomes (including those related to functional recovery), evaluate diverse types of evidence, and incorporate cultural and ethical considerations into value judgments. As an officially endorsed industry standard, it marks the institutionalization of a TCM-appropriate HTA framework built from practice, not speculation.

The chapters in this book on evidence synthesis, uncertainty analysis, and decision-making draw heavily on these real-world experiences, ensuring that its methodological suggestions are grounded in feasibility rather than idealism. Building on this foundation, this book also proposes several practical adaptations to existing HTA tools. For example, it expands the Population, Intervention, Comparator, Outcome, and Study design (PICOS) framework to include “patten type” as a key element, turning clinical heterogeneity into a source of insight rather than noise. It adjusts the Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development and Evaluation (GRADE) system to more effectively accommodate TCM evidence, recognizing that centuries of accumulated clinical wisdom can, under certain conditions, carry a weight comparable to that of short-term trial data. It also incorporates multi-criteria decision analysis tools, such as the Evidence and Value: Impact on Decision Making (EVIDEM) framework, allowing decision-makers to consider not only efficacy and cost but also cultural acceptability, implementation feasibility, and alignment with national health priorities. These are not minor tweaks—they reflect a deeper rethinking of what counts as “evidence” and “value” in a pluralistic health system.

Importantly, this work resonates with the broader shifts in global health. As countries move from fee-for-service to value-based care, there is increasing recognition that health includes well-being, resilience, social participation, and harmony with one’s environment. By integrating safety, effectiveness, economics, ethics, and societal impact into a single assessment framework, the book echoes TCM’s vision of health as a dynamic balance. In this sense, the “Chinese yardstick” proposed is not inward-looking; rather, it offers a meaningful contribution to the global HTA discourse by introducing alternative ways to understand and evaluate care.

This is especially timely as China has pushed for the standardization of TCM clinical practice. National guidelines issued by authoritative bodies and published in peer-reviewed journals have recently established quantified diag-

nostic criteria and staged treatment protocols for conditions such as gout,⁹ post-stroke rehabilitation,¹⁰ and insomnia.¹¹ However, without a strong HTA infrastructure to test these standards in real-world settings and demonstrate their added value, they risk remaining in theoretical exercises. The framework presented in this book fills this gap by providing a credible pathway to generate policy-relevant evidence that can guide coverage decisions, improve resource allocation, and ultimately enhance patient outcomes, bridging the journey “from the lab bench to the bedside and onto the policymaker’s desk.”

In summary, *Theory and Methods of Health Technology Assessment in Traditional Chinese Medicine* is much more than technical manuals. This is a strategic roadmap for the future of TCM in an era characterized by data, accountability, and global integration. It combines scholarly rigor, practical insight, and cultural confidence to address decade-old challenges. I expect it to become an essential reference for researchers, clinicians, health economists, regulators, and industry professionals—not only in China but wherever TCM is studied or applied.

As someone who has witnessed the journey of TCM from a marginalized tradition to a national treasure and global presence, I believe this book embodies our highest aspiration, shou zheng chuang xin, to preserve the essence while innovating for the future. It honors the wisdom of past generations by insisting that TCM should be evaluated on its own terms, while also engaging constructively with contemporary scientific and policy demands.

Even when facing an illness, I remain committed to supporting the development of TCM. With optimism and deep hope, I look forward to the success of this important work.

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Yong-yan Wang: Conceptualization, writing – original draft, and writing –

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Use of AI Statement

During the preparation of this work, the author used the DeepSeek-V3 large language model, developed by DeepSeek (Beijing) Technology Co., Ltd. (Beijing, China), solely for language polishing and editing to improve clarity and readability. The author thoroughly reviewed and edited the output and takes full responsibility for the content of this publication. No artificial intelligence tools were used to generate core ideas or formulate scientific conclusions.

Declaration of Competing Interest

Prof. Yong-yan Wang, the honorary editor-in-chief of *Evidence-Based Chinese Medicine and Technology Assessment*, declares no competing interests relevant to the content of this article and was not involved in the peer review of this manuscript.

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