

China Bids to Preserve the "Heritage" of Traditional Chinese Medicine

Editorial Staff

The State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine, a bureau of China's Ministry of Public Health, is in the process of submitting an application to a United Nations agency that would make traditional Chinese medicine a recognized cultural "masterpiece." If accepted, the application would help to affirm the value of traditional Chinese medicine on a global scale, while ensuring its protection and continued development.

In February, Shen Zhixiang, director of the administration's Department of International Cooperation, told the China Daily news agency that the Chinese government is in the process of submitting an application regarding traditional Chinese medicine to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO. The application calls for traditional Chinese medicine to be recognized as a form of "intangible cultural heritage" that provides people with a sense of identity and continuity, develops cultural diversity, and encourages human creativity.

"The move is for the better protection and development of our traditional heritage," said Shen. "Our purpose is that we protect TCM not only for China itself, but also for all human beings."

According to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, intangible cultural heritage is defined as "the practices, representations, expressions, as well as the knowledge and skills, that communities, groups and, in some case, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage." It can be manifested in a variety of ways, including oral traditions and expressions, social practices and rituals, knowledge and practices concerning nature, and traditional craftsmanship.

To honor examples of intangible cultural heritage, UNESCO in 1998 created an international program, the Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Proclamations were announced in 2001 and 2003. To date, 47 forms of art, music and oral tradition have been proclaimed by UNESCO as masterpieces of oral and intangible heritage, including a Chinese form of opera called Kun Qu, and the playing of the *guqin*, or Chinese zither, a seven-stringed instrument that reportedly requires 20 years of training to master.

Some forms of healing are also considered "masterpieces" by UNESCO. In 2003, the Kallawaya, an ethnic group of priest-doctors in Bolivia, was recognized for its medical and pharmaceutical knowledge of approximately 980 species of plants that grow in the mountains and valleys north of La Paz. The term "kallawaya" means "land of doctors" or "herbalists from the sacred land of medicine," and for centuries, the Kallawaya's knowledge of these products has been transmitted orally, from father to son. By combining their understanding of the plants, animals and minerals in the region with deeply held religious beliefs and rituals, the Kallawaya have created a distinct culture known as "the Andean Comsovision," with values that are recognized not only in Bolivia, but in many South American countries where the priest-doctors practice.

UNESCO has yet to recognize any rituals, art forms or methods of expression from the United States as cultural masterpieces.

Applying for intangible cultural heritage status has been a goal of the Chinese government for several years. In 2001, the Chinese Commission for UNESCO, a component of China's Ministry of Education, included traditional Chinese medicine as part of a five-year plan on cultural heritage.

Cao Hongxin, president of the China Academy of Traditional Chinese Medicine, one of the agencies working on the application, noted that the submission to UNESCO would highlight the fact that traditional Chinese medicine is considered by many people to be a culture that has existed for thousands of years. Theories and experiences of senior Chinese medicine practitioners would be collected and incorporated into the application, along with recent advances in treating conditions such as AIDS and malaria. She Jeng, director of the State Administration, vowed that the agency would do all that it could to promote the advantages of TCM, and that medical practices used by various ethnic groups would also be included.

While the application will not be submitted until the next UNESCO General Conference, many practitioners and scientists have expressed optimism that the application will increase awareness of traditional Chinese medicine and show that it remains an effective alternative to the Western approach to healing.

"If it turns into a successful bid, the world cultural heritage status of TCM will help ensure the preservation of its original philosophical and physiological principles," remarked Lu Jiage, who manages a traditional Chinese medicine clinic in Beijing.

"We TCM doctors are losing our status in the hospitals," added Zhou Pingan, a professor at Beijing University of Chinese Medicine. "The financial difficulty for TCM universities and affiliated hospitals is striking. Without more financial support from the government, TCM will stumble."

"TCM's bid for world cultural heritage status will help raise the status of TCM in the present medical system. We should strive for it."

The next UNESCO General Conference will be held this October in Paris.

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