

ISRG Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (ISRGJAHSS)



ISRG PUBLISHERS

Abbreviated Key Title: ISRG J Arts Humanit Soc Sci

ISSN: 2583-7672 (Online)

Journal homepage: <https://isrgpublishers.com/isrgjahss>

Volume – III Issue-I (January- February) 2025

Frequency: Bimonthly



From Output to Destination: An Analysis of the Transformation and Potential of Medical Tourism Development in China

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| **Received:** 14.01.2025 | **Accepted:** 18.01.2025 | **Published:** 20.01.2025

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Abstract

Medical tourism, encompassing advanced health check-ups, cosmetic surgery, rehabilitation treatments, and traditional therapies, has emerged as a rapidly growing segment of the global tourism industry. While countries like India, Thailand, and Singapore have established themselves as leading destinations in this field, China has historically been a medical tourism exporter, catering to affluent domestic patients seeking advanced care abroad. However, recent developments in China's healthcare sector, such as advancements in medical technology, the global appeal of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), and favorable policies, suggest the potential for China to transform into a competitive medical tourism destination. Despite these advancements, the literature lacks comprehensive studies addressing how this transformation can overcome persistent barriers, including weak international branding, insufficient cross-cultural service capacity, and limited integration with global medical insurance systems. Addressing these gaps is critical for leveraging medical tourism to revitalize China's inbound tourism sector, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era.

Here, we combined a systematic literature review with a case study analysis of key initiatives, such as the Hainan Boao Lecheng International Medical Tourism Pilot Zone, to evaluate China's transition from a medical tourism exporter to a destination. This study identifies the strategic drivers of this transition, including cost advantages, TCM's cultural appeal, and policy support, alongside critical challenges such as the need for enhanced service internationalization, patient trust, and global recognition. Our findings show that while China has made significant strides in building medical tourism infrastructure, addressing these barriers is crucial to fully realizing its potential as an international medical tourism hub. These results highlight that by bridging the

identified gaps, China can strengthen its position in the global medical tourism market, contributing not only to the diversification of its inbound tourism sector but also to the international competitiveness of its healthcare system. Furthermore, this study provides actionable recommendations for policy execution, service optimization, and TCM internationalization, offering a pathway to align China's medical tourism industry with global standards and advancing its role in the broader context of global health and tourism development.

Keywords: Medical Tourism; Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM); Inbound Tourism; Global Health Governance; Post-COVID-19 Era.

1. Introduction

In recent years, medical tourism has emerged as a significant segment of the global tourism industry, experiencing rapid growth worldwide. This sector encompasses a wide range of services, including advanced health screenings, cosmetic surgery, traditional therapies, and rehabilitation treatments. By integrating healthcare and tourism, medical tourism not only addresses the growing demand for health management and high-quality medical services but also serves as a vital driver of economic growth and international exchange (Connell, 2011; Carrera & Bridges, 2006). According to data from market research institutions, the global medical tourism market has maintained a double-digit growth rate over the past decade and is expected to continue its robust expansion in the coming years (Horowitz & Rosensweig, 2007).

China's medical tourism industry has undergone distinct phases of development. Historically, China primarily functioned as a source country for medical tourism, catering to the needs of high-net-worth individuals seeking advanced medical technologies and premium health management services abroad. Many patients traveled to developed countries such as the United States, Japan, and Germany for superior medical care. However, with the continuous advancement of China's medical technologies and the growing international recognition of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), China has gradually transitioned from a medical tourism source country to a destination. Today, China possesses the necessary conditions to attract international patients, including cutting-edge medical technologies, state-of-the-art healthcare facilities, relatively low medical costs, and the unique appeal of its cultural heritage (Connell, 2013; Hall, 2012).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the global tourism industry, with international travel restrictions, health safety concerns, and economic pressures leading to a significant downturn in inbound tourism. In this context, medical tourism, with its high added value and strong purpose-driven nature, has emerged as a new growth engine for the recovery of inbound tourism markets. In the post-pandemic era, China's focus on developing medical tourism has not only alleviated the sluggish recovery of traditional sightseeing tourism but also provided critical support for the implementation of the "Healthy China 2030" strategy and the internationalization of its healthcare services (Hopkins et al., 2010; Runnels & Carrera, 2012).

This paper examines China's transition from a medical tourism source country to a destination, highlighting its significant economic, social, and international implications. The transformation is analyzed through the following key aspects:

First, the role of medical tourism in revitalizing inbound tourism post-pandemic. Traditional inbound tourism, primarily focused on sightseeing and cultural experiences, has faced challenges due to COVID-19, as international tourists remain cautious about large-scale gatherings (Wen et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2022). In contrast,

medical tourism, centered on health needs, attracts high-spending, purpose-driven tourists. This not only injects vitality into the inbound tourism market but also fosters synergistic growth across related industries, such as healthcare services, hospitality, dining, and transportation, thereby driving economic recovery (Beladi et al., 2019; Tang & Abdullah, 2018). By promoting medical tourism, China can diversify its inbound tourism market and reduce its overreliance on traditional sightseeing models.

Second, the contribution to upgrading China's healthcare industry. Establishing China as a medical tourism destination necessitates improvements in service quality, medical technology, and internationalization to meet the demands of international patients (Dang et al., 2020). This process will elevate the overall standard of China's healthcare services, facilitate the creation of a global medical brand, and enhance the competitiveness of China's healthcare sector worldwide. Additionally, the medical tourism industry will accelerate the adoption of advanced technologies, such as AI-driven healthcare and telemedicine, furthering the digital transformation of the medical sector.

Third, the implications for the internationalization of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). As an integral part of Chinese culture, TCM possesses significant global appeal, with its recognition and acceptance increasing worldwide in recent years (Jiang et al., 2022). Medical tourism provides a platform to showcase TCM's unique therapeutic effects and cultural value to international patients. This not only promotes the global expansion of TCM but also integrates it with cultural tourism, creating a distinctive medical tourism brand that enhances China's soft power (Cham et al., 2021).

Fourth, the potential to balance urban and rural healthcare resources. While medical tourism development is often concentrated in major cities or specific regions, such as the Boao Lecheng International Medical Tourism Pilot Zone in Hainan, the influx of international patients and high-end medical resources can elevate local healthcare infrastructure and service standards (Chia & Liao, 2021). Moreover, the spillover effects of the medical tourism industry can benefit surrounding areas, contributing to a more balanced distribution of healthcare resources between urban and rural regions.

Fifth, the significance for global health governance. In an era of increasingly complex global health challenges, the internationalization of medical tourism offers a platform for cross-border medical collaboration and exchange (Yan, 2018). For instance, China can leverage medical tourism to strengthen health cooperation with countries along the Belt and Road Initiative, thereby making a positive contribution to global health governance.

This study employs a combination of literature review and case analysis to explore the development and transformation of China's medical tourism industry. On the one hand, it analyzes existing research on medical tourism both domestically and internationally to outline the current status and trends in China's medical tourism development. On the other hand, it investigates the strengths and weaknesses of China's medical tourism through representative case studies, such as the Hainan Boao Lecheng International Medical Tourism Pilot Zone. The study is structured as follows: Section 2 (Literature Review): A review of the global trends in medical tourism and an analysis of China's current position in this field, highlighting gaps and unresolved issues in the existing research. Section 3 (Discussion): An in-depth analysis of China's transition from a medical tourism exporter to a destination, examining its potential, driving factors, and challenges, as well as its role in promoting inbound tourism. Section 4 (Conclusion and Recommendations): A summary of the key findings, policy recommendations to advance China's medical tourism development, and an outlook on future research directions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Global Trends in Medical Tourism

Medical tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing sectors within the global tourism industry in recent years. It refers to the cross-border travel of patients seeking medical, health, or rehabilitation services (Arief et al., 2023). This field encompasses a wide range of services, including advanced health check-ups, cosmetic surgery, rehabilitation treatments, and traditional therapies, such as acupuncture and herbal medicine rooted in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) (Mosazadeh et al., 2022). Over time, medical tourism has evolved into a unique economic model that integrates healthcare services with tourism experiences.

Firstly, the price advantage and quality assurance of medical tourism are key factors in attracting international patients. Traditional medical tourism destinations, such as India, Thailand, and Singapore, have established strong global reputations by offering affordable costs and high-quality services (Chen & Wilson, 2013). For example, India provides significant cost advantages in advanced medical fields, such as cardiac surgery and orthopedic treatment, with prices ranging between 20% and 30% of those in Western countries, while maintaining treatment quality and state-of-the-art equipment at internationally recognized standards. Thailand, on the other hand, specializes in cosmetic surgery and high-end health check-ups, drawing a large number of visitors from Europe, the United States, and the Middle East (Sharma et al., 2020). Singapore distinguishes itself as a leading medical tourism destination in the Asia-Pacific region through its cutting-edge medical technology, highly developed healthcare infrastructure, and exceptional patient care standards.

Secondly, the growth of the medical tourism market is closely tied to the increasing demand for health management and disease prevention. As the global population continues to age and living standards improve, middle- and high-income groups are increasingly focused on preventive care and health management. This has led to a surge in demand for services such as high-end health check-ups, rehabilitation treatments, and anti-aging therapies, injecting sustained momentum into the medical tourism industry (Grudtsyn, 2024).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a dual impact on the medical tourism sector. On one hand, international travel

restrictions and the global strain on healthcare resources caused significant disruptions to the industry (Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020). On the other hand, the pandemic underscored the critical role of public health systems and heightened the demand for high-quality healthcare services, prompting many countries to recognize the potential of medical tourism in driving economic recovery (Nhamo et al., 2020). Specifically, the pandemic highlighted the importance of access to advanced healthcare, encouraging governments to strengthen policy support for medical tourism, positioning it as a key engine for post-pandemic economic revitalization (Borek et al., 2024).

2.2. Current State of Research on China's Medical Tourism

China's development in medical tourism started relatively late, but its role in the global medical tourism market is undergoing a profound transformation. From its early position as a medical tourism exporter to its recent emergence as a potential destination, China's progression in this field can be divided into two distinct phases.

Phase 1: Dominance as a medical tourism exporter

In the early stages, China was primarily a medical tourism exporter. With the growth of the middle class and the increasing number of high-net-worth individuals, many patients opted to travel abroad due to the limitations of domestic medical services. These demands were concentrated in areas such as cancer treatment, cardiac surgery, and high-end health check-ups, primarily directed toward countries with advanced medical technologies and reliable service quality, such as the United States, Japan, and Germany (Zhong et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2024). For instance, Japan, renowned for its expertise in precision health check-ups (such as cancer screenings), attracted a significant number of high-end Chinese medical tourists. This phase was characterized by a substantial outflow of financial resources and the externalization of demand for high-end medical services, underscoring the gaps in China's domestic healthcare system at the time.

Phase 2: Transition to a medical tourism destination

With advancements in domestic medical technology and the growing international recognition of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), China has gradually shifted towards becoming a medical tourism destination. In recent years, the establishment of specialized medical tourism zones and the introduction of international medical resources have enabled China to attract international patients (Kang et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2022). A notable example is the Hainan Boao Lecheng International Medical Tourism Pilot Zone, which has become a key initiative driving China's development in this sector. Supported by favorable policies, the zone has introduced advanced international drugs and medical devices, offering innovative medical services without lengthy approval processes, making it a focal point for international patients (Du et al., 2024). Additionally, cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, leveraging their well-developed medical infrastructure, have expanded high-end health check-ups, cosmetic surgery, and TCM-based services, successfully drawing patients from Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Russia.

2.3. Gaps and Debates in Current Research

Despite the significant potential of China's medical tourism industry, existing research reveals several gaps and debates that

hinder a comprehensive understanding of its transformation. This study aims to systematically analyze these issues and provide a foundation for future research.

First, insufficient research on China's transition to a medical tourism destination.

Most current studies on China's medical tourism focus on the internationalization and cultural appeal of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). For instance, many papers explore how acupuncture, herbal therapies, and other traditional practices attract international patients (Wen et al., 2022; Li et al., 2023). However, medical tourism extends beyond TCM to encompass modern medical technologies, high-end health check-ups, and cosmetic surgery. Existing literature lacks a systematic analysis of how diversified medical tourism services in China meet international demand (McCartney et al., 2024). Additionally, limited comparative research with traditional medical tourism destinations, such as India and Thailand, prevents a thorough evaluation of China's competitive advantages and differentiation in the global market.

Second, a lack of quantitative research on the post-pandemic contribution of medical tourism to inbound tourism recovery.

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted China's inbound tourism market. Although medical tourism is widely regarded as an essential supplement to traditional sightseeing tourism, there is little quantitative analysis of its specific economic contributions (Sun et al., 2022). For example, the potential value of medical tourism in boosting local economies, optimizing healthcare resource allocation, and extending the length of stay for international tourists remains underexplored. Furthermore, shifts in international travelers' preferences for healthcare services after the pandemic—such as increased attention to health and safety measures—have not been adequately studied (Liu & Gong, 2024).

Third, weak coordination between policies and internationalized service delivery.

In recent years, China has implemented several policies to promote medical tourism, such as the pilot policies in the Hainan Boao Lecheng International Medical Tourism Pilot Zone and the "Healthy China 2030" initiative. However, the extent to which these policies align with the internationalization of healthcare service delivery remains unclear (Xu et al., 2022). For instance, issues such as multilingual services, integration with international medical insurance systems, and the protection of legal rights for cross-border patients have yet to be sufficiently addressed (Yang et al., 2022). The lack of empirical research on the synergy between policy implementation and internationalized service provision may limit the effectiveness of these policies in attracting international patients.

In summary, the gaps identified in the research on China's medical tourism transformation not only provide the starting point for this study but also lay the groundwork for the conclusions and recommendations. By analyzing global trends and China's unique practices in medical tourism, this study seeks to fill these gaps and comprehensively assess the potential and pathways for China to establish itself as a medical tourism destination in the post-pandemic era.

3. Discussion

3.1. The Transition from Exporter to Destination: Current Status and Potential

In recent years, China's role in the global medical tourism market has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from predominantly exporting high-end medical demand to becoming an emerging medical tourism destination. Data indicates that this transition is closely associated with advancements in China's healthcare capabilities and its growing international influence, evidenced by the increasing volume and diversity of international patients arriving in the country (Li et al., 2023). This evolution not only reflects the diversification of China's medical services but also highlights its unique potential to attract international visitors in the post-pandemic era.

First, high-end health check-ups have emerged as a key highlight of China's medical tourism industry.

Health management centers in first-tier cities such as Beijing and Shanghai have reached internationally advanced standards in both equipment and service quality. These institutions offer personalized high-end medical examination packages, including cancer screenings and cardiovascular risk assessments, alongside comprehensive health management services (McCartney et al., 2024). Such offerings appeal to affluent international patients, particularly from Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and North America, meeting their growing demand for preventative care and health management at the highest standards (Wright & Zascerinska, 2023). This medical tourism model, centered on cutting-edge technology and superior service quality, has positioned China as a premier destination for advanced health check-ups.

Second, the global appeal of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) continues to grow.

As a distinctive aspect of Chinese culture, TCM has garnered significant international attention due to its demonstrated efficacy in chronic disease management, rehabilitation, and wellness. In recent years, through strategic efforts to internationalize TCM, China has introduced therapies such as acupuncture, massage (tuina), and herbal treatments to the global market (Tosun et al., 2020). As a result, TCM's role within the global medical tourism market has been steadily rising, establishing itself as a core competitive advantage for China (Chen, 2024).

Third, advancements in cosmetic and aesthetic surgery have provided a new growth driver for China's medical tourism.

Cities such as Guangzhou and Chengdu have become renowned hubs for cosmetic and aesthetic surgery, thanks to their cutting-edge technology, cost-effective services, and teams of highly skilled medical professionals. These institutions have successfully attracted patients from countries like South Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East (Connell, 2013). Particularly in high-demand areas such as facial reconstruction and body contouring, medical facilities in these cities have achieved internationally advanced standards in both equipment and technical expertise. This progress has allowed China to develop a recognizable brand in the global medical tourism industry, further expanding its influence (Yu & Ko, 2012).

3.2. Integration of Medical Tourism with Inbound Tourism

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted the global tourism industry (Gössling et al., 2020), and the recovery of China's traditional sightseeing tourism has been relatively sluggish in the post-pandemic period (Wen et al., 2020). However, medical

tourism, with its strong purpose-driven nature and high added value, offers a stable and long-term growth opportunity for the inbound tourism market (Škare et al., 2020). Compared to traditional sightseeing tourists, medical tourists typically have longer stays, higher spending capacity, and more targeted demands, which can significantly drive the coordinated development of multiple industries, including healthcare, accommodation, dining, and transportation (Harchandani & Shome, 2021).

First, medical tourism directly contributes to the high-end consumer market within inbound tourism. International medical tourists are often willing to pay premium prices for high-quality medical services and tend to spend significantly on luxury goods, cultural entertainment, and local experiences during their stay (Nagaj & Žuromskaitė, 2021). For example, international patients traveling to the Hainan Boao Lecheng International Medical Tourism Pilot Zone not only undergo advanced medical treatments but also participate in wellness and health tourism activities, further enhancing the added value of the region's tourism economy (Spalding et al., 2020).

Second, medical tourism extends the average length of stay for inbound visitors. Medical tourists typically require prolonged stays for treatment or rehabilitation, which helps offset the decline in short-term tourist numbers caused by the pandemic. This longer duration of stay stabilizes tourism demand and reduces reliance on the seasonal fluctuations common in traditional tourism, thereby optimizing the overall development cycle of the tourism industry (Li et al., 2021). Moreover, the consistent demand for medical services from international patients ensures a more predictable and sustainable revenue stream for related industries (Abrar et al., 2021).

3.3. Integration of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) with Internationalization

As a unique element of both Chinese culture and healthcare, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) serves as a critical component of China's "soft power" in medical tourism (Tang et al., 2018). In recent years, the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the advancement of TCM internationalization strategies have significantly enhanced its global appeal, establishing TCM as a defining feature in attracting foreign medical tourists to China (Lin et al., 2018).

The Hainan Boao Lecheng International Medical Tourism Pilot Zone serves as a prominent example of TCM's integration with internationalization. Leveraging policy incentives and an internationalized service system, Lecheng has attracted international patients from the United States, Russia, and Southeast Asia. The TCM services provided in Lecheng go beyond traditional acupuncture and massage (tuina) therapies to incorporate modern medical technologies, such as precision treatment plans that integrate both TCM and Western medicine. This innovative model offers a practical pathway for the global promotion of TCM and demonstrates how it can be effectively incorporated into contemporary healthcare practices (Wen et al., 2021).

Moreover, the internationalization of TCM is further reflected in the establishment and promotion of TCM standards worldwide. By collaborating with international medical institutions, engaging in academic exchanges, and conducting technical training, China has gradually expanded the recognition of TCM in global markets (Li

et al., 2022). This dual appeal, rooted in cultural heritage and medical efficacy, not only enhances the competitiveness of China's medical tourism industry but also provides new momentum for the diversification of cultural tourism (Jiang & Zhang, 2018).

3.4. Challenges and Driving Factors

3.4.1. Challenges

Despite the significant potential and promising trajectory of China's medical tourism development, it still faces notable challenges compared to established medical tourism destinations like India and Thailand. These challenges span from branding deficits to limitations in the internationalization of service systems, presenting multiple obstacles to China's emergence as a global leader in medical tourism (Wen et al., 2021).

First, insufficient international branding of medical services. China's international reputation and branding as a medical tourism destination remain relatively underdeveloped. Unlike Thailand, which has established its "Smile Medical" concept emphasizing cost-effectiveness and patient-centric services, or Singapore, which promotes itself as a global hub for high-end medical care through its "International Medical Center" positioning, China has yet to create a unified and recognizable brand image in the international market (Lin et al., 2018). Many international patients have limited knowledge of Chinese medical services, particularly in specialized fields such as high-end cosmetic surgery, cardiovascular treatment, and cancer care. While China possesses technical advantages in these areas, its global recognition and visibility lag far behind its competitors. Successful branding requires not only superior service quality but also effective international marketing and promotional efforts, areas where China's investment and experience remain insufficient (Tang et al., 2018).

Second, deficiencies in cross-cultural communication and internationalized services. Competition in the international medical tourism market extends beyond technical expertise and service quality to include the ability to deliver culturally sensitive and personalized care (Jiang & Zhang, 2018). For international patients, elements such as multilingual communication, cultural sensitivity, and tailored medical experiences are crucial. However, most Chinese medical institutions lack adequate multilingual service capabilities, such as English, Russian, and Arabic, and many front-line medical staff are not equipped to effectively communicate with foreign patients (Li et al., 2022). This deficiency directly impacts the experience and satisfaction of international patients. Furthermore, the integration of China's healthcare system with international medical insurance networks remains limited. Many international patients are unable to use their medical insurance in China, leading to higher out-of-pocket costs and reducing the appeal of China as a medical tourism destination.

Third, limited trust in China's medical system among international patients. Trust is a core issue in the medical tourism sector, as foreign patients typically prioritize transparency, patient rights protection, procedural consistency, and international accreditation when selecting a medical destination. Although some of China's leading hospitals have obtained international healthcare accreditations, such as Joint Commission International (JCI) certification, the majority of medical institutions still do not meet global standards in service delivery and quality assurance (Wang et al., 2023). Additionally, foreign patients often express concerns about legal and ethical issues when receiving medical care in China, such as mechanisms for resolving medical disputes, informed consent for surgical risks, and protections for patient

privacy. These factors negatively impact patient trust, thereby limiting China's ability to attract international medical tourists (Lin et al., 2018).

Fourth, gaps between policy formulation and execution. While the Chinese government has introduced numerous policies to support the development of medical tourism, such as the special pilot policies in the Hainan Boao Lecheng International Medical Tourism Pilot Zone, discrepancies between policy formulation and local implementation remain (Wen et al., 2021). For example, policy incentives are often concentrated in select pilot zones and have not yet been widely replicated nationwide. Additionally, many medical institutions lack sufficient understanding of the policies and fail to capitalize on the advantages they offer. This misalignment between policy support and institutional practice further constrains the overall development of China's medical tourism industry.

3.4.2. Driving Factors

Despite the challenges outlined above, China's medical tourism industry possesses several significant driving factors that provide strong momentum for its transformation into an international medical tourism destination. These driving forces are primarily reflected in policy support, cost advantages, and continuous advancements in technology and services.

First, policy support is the core driving force behind the development of China's medical tourism. The Chinese government places great importance on the development of medical tourism, integrating it as a critical component of the "Healthy China 2030" strategy (Xu et al., 2022). For example, the Hainan Boao Lecheng International Medical Tourism Pilot Zone has implemented pilot policies that allow the introduction of advanced international drugs and medical equipment that are not yet available in the domestic market, providing global-standard medical services to international patients (Shen & Bai, 2020). These policies not only enhance the competitiveness of China's medical services but also offer a solid foundation for attracting international patients to the medical tourism sector. Additionally, local governments are actively promoting the development of the industry. Cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou are optimizing healthcare resource allocation and improving service quality, gradually establishing internationalized healthcare service systems.

Second, cost advantages position China as a competitive player in the global medical tourism market. Compared to developed countries in Europe and North America, China's medical services offer a clear cost advantage (Pan & Moreira, 2018). For instance, the cost of high-end cosmetic surgery in China is only 30%–50% of that in Western countries. Similarly, high-end medical treatments, such as cancer care and cardiovascular surgeries, are offered at significantly lower prices than the global average. These high-value yet affordable services attract large numbers of international patients from Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Russia (Chia & Liao, 2020). Moreover, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), including acupuncture, massage (tuina), and herbal therapies, is not only cost-effective but also highly efficacious, further enhancing China's appeal to international patients.

Third, advancements in medical technology and improvements in international service standards. In recent years, China has made significant progress in high-end medical technology. Leading hospitals, such as Peking Union Medical College Hospital in

Beijing and Fudan University-affiliated Huashan Hospital in Shanghai, have achieved international excellence in fields like cardiovascular treatment and oncology care (Li et al., 2022). At the same time, Chinese medical institutions are increasingly aligning with international standards, continuously improving their service systems. For example, a growing number of Chinese hospitals have obtained international healthcare accreditations, such as Joint Commission International (JCI) certification, and are developing multilingual service capabilities and comprehensive patient management systems for international visitors. Additionally, the widespread adoption of advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI)-powered healthcare and telemedicine, offers international patients more efficient and accessible medical experiences.

Fourth, the cultural appeal of TCM provides a unique competitive edge. As a vital part of Chinese culture, traditional Chinese medicine has gained increasing recognition and appeal in the international market (Song & Xiao, 2020). Unlike conventional Western medicine, TCM focuses on holistic healing, making it particularly effective in areas such as chronic disease management, rehabilitation, and anti-aging treatments. For instance, the Hainan Boao Lecheng Pilot Zone has incorporated TCM services into its medical tourism offerings and developed personalized treatment plans tailored to international patients (Wen et al., 2021). This integration of TCM with modern medicine not only strengthens its global recognition but also supports the branding efforts of China's medical tourism industry. The unique combination of cultural heritage and proven medical efficacy offers China a competitive advantage that is difficult to replicate.

4. conclusion

This study focuses on China's transformation from a medical tourism exporter to an emerging destination, analyzing its global trends, current status, potential, and challenges. The findings highlight that China, driven by policy support, advancements in medical technology, the cultural appeal of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), and its cost advantages, is gradually building the capacity to attract international patients. This transformation not only provides fresh momentum to address the sluggish recovery of inbound tourism in the post-pandemic era but also promotes the integration of the healthcare and tourism industries, driving the coordinated development of related sectors. However, significant challenges remain in areas such as brand building, cross-cultural service capabilities, and alignment with international medical insurance systems. Additionally, trust in China's healthcare system among international patients needs to be strengthened. To address these challenges and enhance China's competitiveness in the global medical tourism market, future efforts should focus on strengthening policy implementation, optimizing service systems, advancing technological innovation, and promoting the internationalization of the TCM brand. By fostering coordinated efforts across multiple dimensions, China can achieve sustainable growth and establish itself as a key player in the global medical tourism landscape.

5. Funding Statement

This research was supported by the Research Team for Business Vocational Education and Industrial Economic Development at the SIPIVT, China, grant number 20240103124.

6. Conflict of Interest Statement

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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