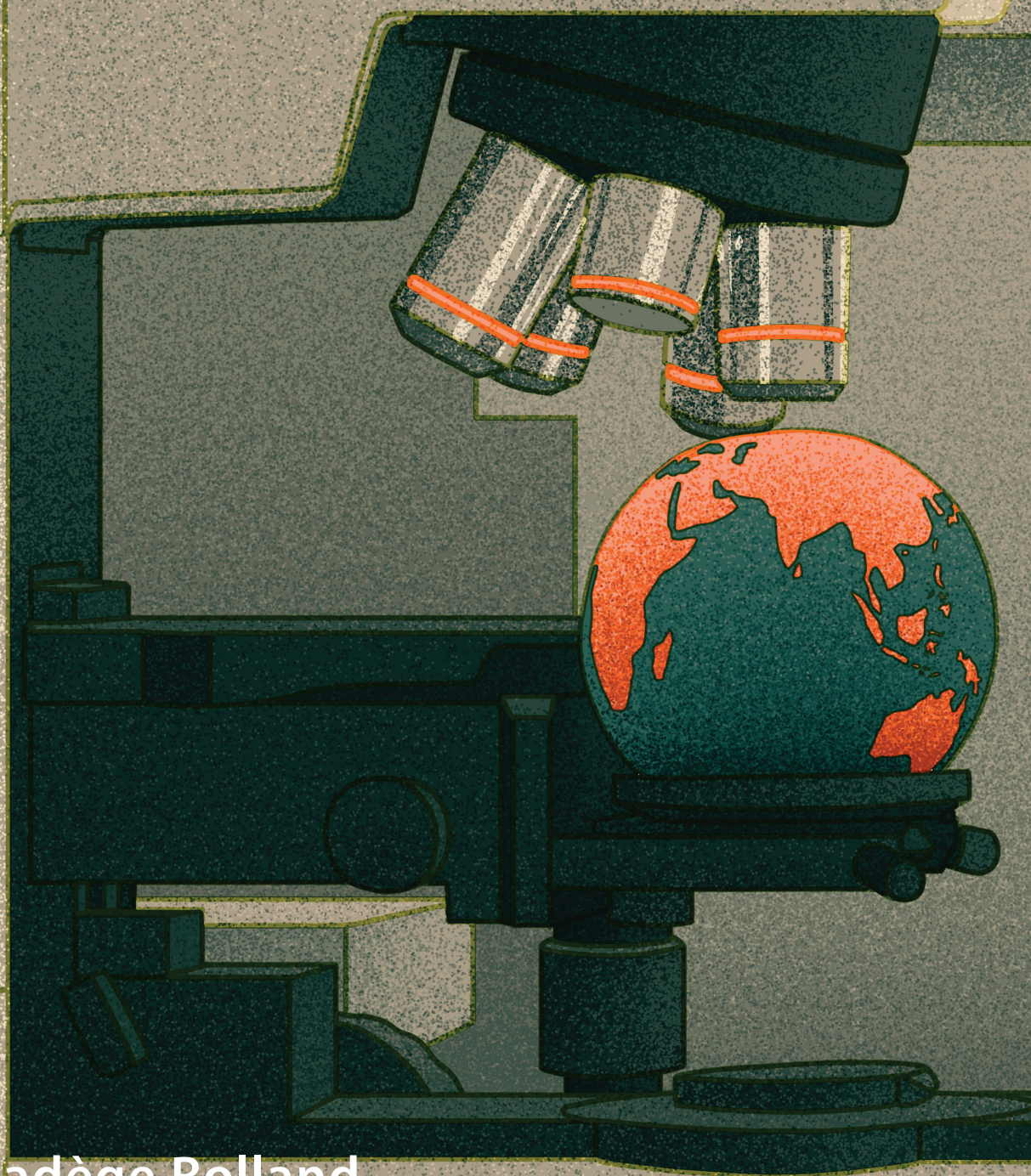


THE HEALTH SILK ROAD

A BRANCH OF CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE



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The Health Silk Road: A Branch of China's Belt and Road Initiative

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report describes the birth, geographies of expansion, and main drivers behind China's Health Silk Road, a branch of Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

MAIN ARGUMENT

The deployment of China's Health Silk Road (HSR), a branch of BRI specifically dedicated to international health cooperation, was decided and implemented five years before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. This report describes the HSR's birth and the geographies and mechanisms of its expansion, including existing international and regional multilateral institutions as well as a set of new institutionalized partnerships with nongovernmental actors in the form of so-called alliances. Beyond evident commercial and diplomatic drivers, the HSR represents a determined effort to project China's civilizational influence and to assert China's "wisdom" and "experience" as viable alternatives to Western models. The report argues that the centralized and orderly structure of the HSR serves as a useful illustration of the extensively systematic organization of BRI's deployment more broadly, at the service of greater geopolitical ambitions.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- As a branch of BRI, the HSR provides an informative model of Beijing's strategic planning and its use of specific mechanisms to expand its global influence: from the creation of medical and health standards to the penetration of foreign markets, and from shaping international norms to influencing the future of health governance in third countries.
- The HSR is not a public relations campaign founded on empty slogans. It is a systematic effort whose deployment exemplifies the Chinese party-state's ability to mobilize several of its own branches and affiliates, as well as nominally nongovernmental or nonstate actors, to execute its vision.
- The HSR reflects the Chinese party-state's vision of a future China-led order grounded in the rejection of Western systems of belief and their replacement with quintessentially Chinese alternatives.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) celebrated its ten-year anniversary in late 2023. Initially announced with little pomp and circumstance, the initiative rapidly became the central feature of China's global diplomacy, supported by a vast propaganda campaign and promises of lavish investments in infrastructure-building projects throughout the developing world. From its inception, many Western observers have regarded the initiative as little more than an empty slogan, barely concealing a jumbled reality of projects over which Beijing had little control.¹ BRI's investments and construction transactions peaked in 2016–17,² right around the time that growing international pushback started to emerge, prompting Beijing's recalibration attempts. Many a time has Xi Jinping's much-touted "project of the century" been announced as done and over.³

BRI is more complex than is generally portrayed in Western media and expert commentaries. Focusing only on its infrastructure component misses its multidimensional nature. Deriding the initiative as a catch-all without a vision fails to recognize its centralized and orderly structure. The BRI tree has many limbs extending in various directions, growing out in the form of increased global influence and rooted in Beijing's desire to dispute the existing world order.⁴ One of its least-known branches,⁵ the Health Silk Road (HSR), serves as a useful illustration of the extensively systematic organization of BRI's deployment at the service of greater geopolitical ambitions.

The HSR and its corollary, the "community of common health for mankind," started to attract worldwide attention in 2020 as Xi regularly emphasized the need for improved global public health governance and international cooperation to tackle the unfolding Covid-19 pandemic.⁶ Yet the Chinese government had already issued plans to develop international health cooperation under the BRI umbrella as early as 2015. Since then, China's health engagement has developed along many avenues, including providing health assistance and capacity development for Belt and Road countries, attempting to set health governance norms and standards in international institutions, creating networks for cooperation in medical and pharmaceutical research, boosting the commercial prospects for Chinese biotech companies, and promoting "Chinese solutions" and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) as valuable contributions to humankind's health challenges.

This report first describes the HSR as envisioned by Beijing's government plans and then examines how the leadership's central policy planning has translated into concrete undertakings to advance China's involvement in global health issues. The third section offers an analysis of the HSR's economic and diplomatic provisions, followed by a discussion of the global South as its main geographic expanse. The report concludes with a discussion of the HSR's promotion of TCM as emblematic of China's greater global ambitions.

¹ Christina Lu, "China's Belt and Road to Nowhere," *Foreign Policy*, February 13, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/13/china-belt-and-road-initiative-infrastructure-development-geopolitics>.

² Derek Scissors, "The Belt and Road Is Overhyped, Commercially," statement before the U.S. Senate Finance Committee on International Trade, Customs, and Global Competitiveness, Washington, D.C., June 12, 2019, <https://www.finance.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Derek%20Scissors%20-%20BRI%20Testimony.pdf>.

³ Charles Clover, Sherry Fei Ju, and Lucy Hornby, "China's Xi Hails Belt and Road as 'Project of the Century,'" *Financial Times*, May 14, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/88d584a2-385e-11e7-821a-6027b8a20f23>.

⁴ Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research [NBR], 2017).

⁵ Qi Feng, "Renlei weisheng jiankang gongtongti: linian, huayu he xingdong" [Health Community for Mankind: Concept, Discourse and Actions], *Socialism Studies*, no. 4 (2020).

⁶ "Speech by President Xi Jinping at Opening of 73 World Health Assembly," Xinhua, May 18, 2020, http://xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/18/c_139067018.htm; http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-05/18/c_139953480.htm.

The Health Silk Road: The Belt and Road's Health Branch

China's global health ambitions were first made apparent in the context of BRI. This finding should not be surprising. BRI is not merely an infrastructure-building plan but the backbone of the new world order that the Chinese leadership under Xi Jinping wants to see emerge.⁷

In March 2015, the State Council published a document that officially presented BRI, initially announced two years earlier in 2013 by Xi, and identified its five main axes of cooperation: “policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bond.”⁸ The health sector was specifically mentioned as one area that would help forge closer people-to-people exchanges between China and the rest of the world. The document openly disclosed China's desire to strengthen international cooperation “on epidemic information sharing, the exchange of prevention and treatment technologies and the training of medical professionals, [which will] improve our capability to jointly address public health emergencies.” It added that China “will provide medical assistance and emergency medical aid to relevant countries, and carry out practical cooperation in maternal and child health, disability rehabilitation, and major infectious diseases, including AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. [China] will also expand cooperation on traditional medicine.”⁹

A few months later, in October 2015, China's National Health Commission released a detailed three-year plan specifying how health cooperation would be promoted under BRI's banner.¹⁰ The plan explicitly stated China's medium-term goals as follows: to develop a network of health cooperation among the BRI countries centered on key projects and to increase China's soft power and influence in regional and global health governance mechanisms.¹¹ The implicit aspiration to become a global health leader by 2030 underpins the document.

The leading small group for the promotion of BRI supported the production of an additional specific plan for the development of TCM under the BRI framework (2016–20), issued in late 2016 and extended for the 14th Five-Year Plan period (2021–25) in early 2022.¹² TCM is also mentioned in the 2015 and 2018 Action Plans on Belt and Road Standard Connectivity as a target for China's efforts to set standards and definitions for terms related to TCM.¹³ China's international health cooperation under the BRI banner was later subsumed under the so-called Healthy China 2030, a national plan issued in late 2016 aimed at improving the Chinese people's general health levels (see **Appendix**).

⁷ Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century*.

⁸ National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China (PRC), “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road,” March 28, 2015, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics_665678/2015zt/xjpcxbayzlt2015nnh/201503/t20150328_705553.html.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ “Three-Year Implementation Plan for Promoting Health Exchanges and Cooperation along the Belt and Road (2015–2017),” National Health Commission (PRC), October 14, 2015, <http://www.nhc.gov.cn/wjw/gjhj/201510/ce634f7fed834992849e9611099bd7cc.shtml>.

¹¹ The key areas for cooperation include infectious disease prevention and control, public health emergencies, maternal and child health, traditional medicine, health system and policies, and capacity building and personnel training.

¹² “Zhong yiyao ‘Yidai Yilu’ fazhan guihua (2016–2020 nian)” [Belt and Road Traditional Chinese Medicine Development Plan (2016–2020)], <http://bgs.satcm.gov.cn/gongzuodongtai/2018-03-24/1330.html>; and “Tuijin Zhong yiyao gao zhiliang rongru gongjian ‘Yidai Yilu’ fazhan guihua (2021–2025 nian) zhengce jiedu” [Policy Interpretation of Promoting the High-Quality Integration of Traditional Chinese Medicine into the Belt and Road Development Plan (2021–2025)], State Council Information Office (PRC), January 15, 2022, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2022-01/15/content_5668344.htm.

¹³ “Action Plan on Belt and Road Standard Connectivity (2015–2017),” Belt and Road Portal, November 22, 2017, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/zchj/qwfb/35977.htm>; and “Action Plan on Belt and Road Standard Connectivity (2018–2020),” Belt and Road Portal, January 11, 2018, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/zchj/qwfb/43577.htm>.

The Health Silk Road (*Jiankang sichou zhilu*) was first presented to foreign publics in June 2016, when Xi addressed Uzbekistan's Supreme Assembly and called for the joint development of a "green, healthy, intelligent and peaceful Silk Road" and for increased cooperation in infectious disease prevention and information sharing, medical assistance, and traditional medicine.¹⁴ In January 2017, during Xi's visit to Geneva, the HSR was endorsed by the World Health Organization (WHO), then led by Margaret Chan, a Hong Kong-born Chinese civil servant.¹⁵ The WHO's signing of a memorandum of understanding with the Chinese government was greeted by Chinese official media as a "pact" establishing the HSR.¹⁶

Beijing has since then been keen to raise the HSR's international profile, starting with the Belt and Road High-Level Meeting for Health Cooperation convened in August 2017, just a few months after the first Belt and Road Forum was held in May 2017. The international conference hosted three hundred participants, including senior health officials from 30 countries and representatives from international health organizations such as the WHO, the UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the Global Fund, and the Gavi global vaccine alliance. In addition to foreign representatives, Chinese experts, health industries, and government officials were also present, representing the National Development and Reform Commission and the Ministries of Commerce, Industry and Information Technology, and Foreign Affairs, as well as the Central Military Commission's Health Bureau.¹⁷ After the opening speeches, foreign participants were taken on a visit to the Health Industry Expo and participated in four breakout sessions, giving an indication of Beijing's priorities and agenda: vaccines, maternal and child health, scientific and technological innovation, and hospital cooperation.

By their own account, the organizers had three main objectives. First, they wanted foreign participants to sign the Beijing Communiqué, which outlines the main axes of effort for the HSR, including:

- improving coordination on major infectious disease monitoring, prevention and control, and response;
- increasing medical assistance and health aid in BRI countries;
- enhancing training and capacity building for health professionals;
- strengthening cooperation in medical R&D and the use of traditional medicine;
- establishing a health-policy research network and a health-industry sustainable development alliance; and
- supporting the WHO's role in global health governance and its reform process.¹⁸

Second, the organizers wanted to sign bilateral health cooperation agreements related to disease prevention and control, traditional medicine, and education and training. They did so

¹⁴ "Xi Calls for Building 'Green, Healthy, Intelligent and Peaceful' Silk Road," Xinhua, June 22, 2016, http://www.china.org.cn/world/Off_the_Wire/2016-06/22/content_38723482.htm.

¹⁵ Margaret Chan left her role as director-general of the WHO in July 2017 and was replaced by Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. Chan was appointed in March 2018 as a Standing Committee member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).

¹⁶ An Baijie, "WHO, China Sign Pact Establishing 'Health Silk Road,'" *China Daily*, January 19, 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017/wef/2017-01/19/content_27993857.htm.

¹⁷ "Weishengjishengwei jiu 'Yidai Yilu' ji 'Jiankang sichou zhilu' gaoji bie yantaohui xiangguan qingkuang juxing meiti chui Fenghui" [The Health and Family Planning Commission Held a Media Briefing on the High-Level Seminars on "BRI" and the "Health Silk Road"], National Health Commission (PRC), August 14, 2017, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2017-08/14/content_5217682.htm#allContent.

¹⁸ "Beijing Communiqué of the Belt and Road Health Cooperation & Health Silk Road," National Health Commission (PRC), August 18, 2017, http://en.nhc.gov.cn/2017-08/18/c_72257.htm.

during the conference with countries such as Germany, Sri Lanka, Singapore, and Russia. Finally, they wanted to announce the establishment of China-led “alliances” dedicated to international cooperation with Belt and Road countries in specific public health sectors.¹⁹

The Covid-19 outbreak gave Beijing an additional opportunity to promote international health cooperation under the BRI banner. Western media discovered the HSR’s existence when Xi mentioned it in a call to Italy’s prime minister Giuseppe Conte in March 2020 and offered to deliver masks and medical equipment as case numbers began to surge in Italy.²⁰ In addition to China, 24 countries signed the “Joint Statement of the High-Level Video Conference on Belt and Road International Cooperation: Combating Covid-19 with Solidarity” in June 2020, reiterating their support for cooperation within the BRI framework in deepening practical cooperation, combating the Covid-19 pandemic, and promoting economic recovery.²¹

At the height of the pandemic, China started to actively promote the HSR as an essential element of its touted “community of shared future for mankind,” which then branched out in the form of a “community of common health for mankind” (*renlei weisheng jiankang gongtongti*).²² During his speech at the 73rd World Health Assembly in May 2020, Xi made reference to China’s responsibility to ensure “not just the life and health of its own citizens, but also global public health” as part of its vision for this shared future.²³ The white paper on China’s “victory” over Covid-19 issued in June 2020 contains a chapter dedicated entirely to “Building a Global Community of Health for All.”²⁴ Health also featured prominently in China’s 14th Five-Year Plan, approved by the Fifth Plenum in October 2020, joining the list of domains that China believes it needs to command to become a powerhouse of global magnitude. In addition to China’s “active participation in international cooperation on the prevention and control of major infectious diseases,” the 14th Five-Year Plan restates the country’s willingness to deepen international cooperation on public health and to promote a “global community of health for mankind.”²⁵

The central leadership’s commitment and policy planning to advance China’s involvement in global health issues quickly translated into concrete undertakings, as will be examined in the next section.

¹⁹ “Weishengjishengwei jiu ‘Yidai Yilu’ ji ‘Jiankang sichou zhilu’ gaoji bie yantaohui xiangguan qingkuang juxing meiti chuishenghui.”

²⁰ Lily Kuo, “China Sends Doctors and Masks Overseas as Domestic Coronavirus Infections Drop,” *Guardian*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/19/china-positions-itself-as-a-leader-in-tackling-the-coronavirus>.

²¹ “Joint Statement of the High-Level Video Conference on Belt and Road International Cooperation: Combating Covid-19 with Solidarity,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), June 19, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202006/t20200619_679632.html.

²² The lofty, ill-defined, and purposely vague “community of shared future” formulation refers to the new global order Beijing would like to create, with China enthroned as its political, economic, security, cultural, normative, and now healing center. See Nadège Rolland, “Eurasian Integration à la Chinese: Deciphering Beijing’s Vision for the Region as a ‘Community of Common Destiny,’” *Asan Forum*, June 5, 2017, <https://theasanforum.org/eurasian-integration-a-la-chinese-deciphering-beijings-vision-for-the-region-as-a-community-of-common-destiny>.

²³ “Speech by President Xi Jinping at Opening of 73rd World Health Assembly,” *Xinhua*, May 18, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/18/c_139067018.htm.

²⁴ “Fighting Covid-19: China in Action,” State Council Information Office (PRC), June 7, 2020, http://english.scio.gov.cn/whitepapers/2020-06/07/content_76135269.htm.

²⁵ “Zhongguo Zhongyang guanyu zhiding guomin jingji he shehui fazhan di shisige wunian guihua he erlingsanwu nian yuanjing mubiao de jianyi” [Proposal of the CCP Central Committee on Formulating the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and Long-Range Objectives for 2035], State Council Information Office (PRC), March 11, 2020, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2020-11/03/content_5556991.htm. An English translation of the document is available at https://cset.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/t0237_5th_Plenum_Proposal_EN-1.pdf.

Geographies of Expansion and Layers of Deployment

Well before the Covid-19 pandemic, health governance was already beginning to take a pivotal position in China’s international public policy. Beijing was actively advertising its contribution to global health both regionally and globally and beginning to work on expanding its international health cooperation. These efforts did not occur organically but, as the various action plans listed in the section above attest, were led by the Chinese central government, which devised the strategy at the macro level, provided policy support and guidance, and mobilized provincial governments, NGOs, and companies to participate actively in its construction.

The October 2015 plan identified preferred geographic areas of deployment for the HSR as well as multilateral mechanisms that should be used to advance China’s objectives (see **Table 1**). These areas of priority define key axes of effort and give an indication of how concrete engagement activities are deployed in support of the central political authorities’ designated objectives. As a result of these directives, China’s diplomacy has been increasingly proactive about raising global health issues in existing multilateral institutions and including health issues more often on the diplomatic agenda of high-level bilateral and multilateral dialogue mechanisms.

China also has launched a series of health-related programs comprising most of the Belt and Road countries and created a dedicated set of cooperation networks. Though presented as “nongovernmental” and officially aimed at fostering closer exchanges with, among others, foreign hospitals and medical schools, these networks are fully embedded within the party-state’s scheme. As of 2020, official representatives from the National Health and Family Planning Commission claimed that China had “carried out bilateral and multilateral health cooperation with over 160 countries, regions, and international organizations and established a diversified, multi-level, and multi-field cooperation involving the government, medical and health professional institutions,

TABLE 1 Priority areas and mechanisms envisaged to promote the HSR (per the October 2015 Plan)

	Silk Road Economic Belt	21st-Century Maritime Silk Road
Priority regions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central and Eastern Europe • Central Asia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South Asia • Southeast Asia
Priority countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Czech Republic • Russia • Mongolia • Central Asian republics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN countries • India • Pakistan • Australia • Fiji
Priority mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shanghai Cooperation Organisation • China–Central and Eastern European Countries Health Ministers Forum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN +1 • Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation • APEC • China-Pakistan Economic Corridor • Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor

think tanks and universities, companies, and other civil society organizations.”²⁶ This work has been supported by domestic funding as well as grants, loans, and technical assistance from international organizations such as the World Bank, the WHO, UNICEF, the Asian Development Bank, and other partners such as the UK former Department for International Development, the Australian Agency for International Development, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.²⁷

In its pursuit of increased global influence on health issues, Beijing has not limited its efforts to the list of priority regions and countries defined by the 2015 plan. Instead, it has been casting an increasingly wider net that now also includes the Middle East and Africa, a general direction consistent with BRI’s geographic expansion beyond its original focus on the Eurasian continent. Health cooperation items have been inserted within existing regional multilateral mechanisms whose purpose was originally unrelated to health issues, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) +1, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) formats.

China has also initiated regional high-level dialogue platforms such as the China-ASEAN Health Cooperation Forum (2016), the China–Central and Eastern European Countries Health Cooperation Forum (2015), and the China–Arab States Health Cooperation Forum (2015).²⁸ The Forum on China-Africa Health Development, launched in 2013 before the HSR, has been used for the same purpose. These forums usually conclude with a joint declaration that puts an official stamp on the relevant countries’ agreements to deepen their health cooperation with China.²⁹

In addition to regional forums organized at the state ministerial level, Chinese provinces also actively participate in the development of concrete cross-border health initiatives, on both BRI’s maritime and continental flanks. The 2015 HSR cooperation plan specifically endows Xinjiang, Guangxi, Yunnan, Heilongjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Fujian with the task of carrying out short- and long-term high-level medical professional education and training projects.³⁰ As a result, the province of Yunnan, for example, has developed prevention and control of infectious disease notification mechanisms with the bordering countries of Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar, while the autonomous region of Guangxi launched a “medical and health cooperation center” together with ASEAN.³¹ Both Yunnan and Guangxi have long-standing links with Southeast Asian countries. Through the Mekong Basin Disease Surveillance Network, which both Chinese provinces joined

²⁶ Fu Wei and Wang Yunping, “Gongzhu ‘jiankang sichou zhilu,’ gongjian renlei weisheng jiangkang gontongti” [Building the ‘Health Silk Road’ Together, Building the Community of Health for Mankind Together], *China Pictorial*, October 12, 2020, http://www.rmhb.com.cn/zt/ydy/202010/t20201012_800223365.html.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ “Gongzhu ‘jiankang sichou zhilu’: laizi Zhongguo de changyi” [Overseas: Building a ‘Healthy Silk Road’: Proposals from China], *Sohu*, January 17, 2021, https://www.sohu.com/a/445098556_731021; and National Health Commission Department of International Cooperation, “Xin Zhongguo 70 nian weisheng jiankang guoji hezuo jiqiliu jinzhan yu chengjiu” [Progress and Achievements of International Cooperation and Exchanges in Healthcare in the 70 Years of the PRC], *China’s Health Resources* 22, no. 4 (2019): 251–53.

²⁹ Examples include the September 2015 Yinchuan Declaration between China and Arab states, the November 2015 Suzhou Declaration between China and Central and Eastern European countries, and the October 2016 Nanning Declaration between China and the ASEAN Health Cooperation Forum.

³⁰ “Guojia weisheng jisheng wei bangongting guanyu tuijin ‘Yidai Yilu’ weisheng jiaoliu hezuo san nian shishi fang’an (2015–2017) de tongzhi” [Notice of the General Office of the National Health and Family Planning Commission on Disseminating the National Health and Family Planning Commission’s Three Year Implementation Plan for Promoting the Belt and Road Health Cooperation (2015–2017)], National Health Commission (PRC), October 23, 2015, <http://www.nhc.gov.cn/wjw/ghjh/201510/ce634f7fed834992849e9611099bd7cc.shtml>.

³¹ “Gongzhu ‘jiankang sichou zhilu.’”

in 2001, together with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, they can continue to develop their presence in the subregion's health space.³²

The provincial government of Xinjiang has focused on the Central Asian subregion and began implementing a plan issued in August 2015 for becoming the Medical Services Center of the Silk Road Economic Belt's Core Area.³³ The plan aims at transforming Urumqi into the leading regional health center, with hospitals offering cutting-edge medical and healthcare technologies for the entire Central Asian region and beyond.³⁴ It meticulously describes how, for example, the autonomous region will develop cross-border telemedicine services, sign agreements with overseas insurance companies, and strengthen international academic exchanges.³⁵ Accordingly, Urumqi's health committee developed a platform for the promotion of medical tourism along the HSR, connecting 29 local hospitals to 24 hospitals in countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Georgia, which led to the visit of nearly 20,000 foreign patients by the end of 2018.³⁶ It is hard to tell whether the severe repression of Xinjiang has affected the government's plans to develop the region as a health hub for foreign tourists. Further down at the subnational level, prefectures may also participate in China's ambition to position itself as a leader in health. Yunnan's Xishuangbanna Prefecture, for example, created "medical service communities" in five northern provinces of Laos.³⁷

Government-level outreach is supplemented by China-led academic and professional exchanges as well as professional training programs and hospital cooperation, supported by the creation of institutionalized partnerships in the form of so-called alliances. These international alliances by and large follow the dichotomy between the continental belt and the maritime road. Their founding documents usually assert among their goals their support for the development of BRI, the HSR, and/or the "community of common health." The establishment of such semi-institutionalized structures reflects the intricate connections that China, beyond its official grand declarations, is actively knitting within countries along the Belt and Road network (see **Table 2** for a nonexhaustive list).

Such groupings are emblematic of what Beijing refers to as "people-to-people diplomacy." Superficially, they give the impression that nonstate actors sharing similar interests gather informally to discuss issues of common concern. It is, however, really the Chinese central government that initially promoted the idea of creating the "alliances," which were then formally established by and are still kept "under the guidance" of central or provincial administrations, sometimes one or two steps removed. The sponsoring administrations ensure that the alliances remain focused on serving the central government's broader objectives.

³² Melinda Moore and David J. Dausey, "Local Cross-Border Disease Surveillance and Control: Experiences from the Mekong Basin," *BMC Research Notes* 8, no. 90 (2015), <https://bmcresearchnotes.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13104-015-1047-6>.

³³ Bo Yu, "Yinfa guanyu tuijin Xinjiang sichou zhilu jingjidai hexin qu yiliao fuwu zhongxin jianshe fang'an de tongzhi" [Notice on Promoting the Construction Plan of Medical Service Centers in the Core Area of the Xinjiang Silk Road Economic Belt], *Xinhua Silk Road*, November 21, 2021, <https://www.imsilkroad.com/news/p/70358.html>.

³⁴ "Zai Xi Jinping xindaishi Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi sixiang zhiyinxia: Jiakuai tuijin hexinqu yiliao fuwu zhongxin jianshe" [Under the Guidance of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era: Speeding up the Construction of Medical Service Centers in the Core Area], *Xinjiang Daily*, March 27, 2020, <http://news.ts.cn/system/2020/03/27/036178346.shtml>.

³⁵ Bo, "Yinfa guanyu tuijin Xinjiang sichou zhilu jingjidai hexin qu yiliao fuwu zhongxin jianshe fang'an de tongzhi."

³⁶ "Xinjiang 'Sichouzhilu jingjidai' yiliao fuwu zhongxin wei zhoubian guojia huanzhe tigong yiliao fuwu" [Xinjiang Silk Road Economic Belt Medical Service Center Provides Medical Services for Patients of Neighboring Countries], State Council Information Office (PRC), April 21, 2019, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-04/21/content_5384885.htm.

³⁷ "Gongzhu 'Jiankang sichou zhilu.'"

TABLE 2 Health Silk Road–related “alliances”

Cooperation domain	BRI	Silk Road Economic Belt	21st-Century Maritime Silk Road
Medical education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • B&R International Medical Education Alliance (BRIMEA) (May 2018) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SCO Medical University Alliance/ Consortium (November 2022) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China-ASEAN University Consortium on Medicine and Health (October 2019) • South and Southeast Asian Medical Education and Healthcare Alliance (July 2019)
Professional training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • B&R Health Professionals Development Alliance (June 2019) 	–	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China-ASEAN Health Silk Road Professional Training Project (2020–22)
Hospital cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • B&R Hospital Cooperation Alliance (May 2019) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SCO Hospital Cooperation Alliance (May 2018) • China-CEEC Hospital Cooperation Alliance (June 2016) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China-ASEAN Hospital Cooperation Alliance (September 2018)
Traditional medicine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • B&R Association for Traditional Medicine (November 2020) • B&R Traditional Chinese Medicine Industries Alliance (November 2018) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SCO Traditional Medicine Industry Alliance (September 2022) 	–

SOURCE: “‘Yidai yilu’ guoji yixue jiaoyu lianmeng zai Shenyang shengli” [Belt and Road International Medical Education Alliance Established in Shenyang], *People’s Daily*, May 27, 2018; “Shanghai hezuo zuzhi yixue daxue lianmeng zhengshi qidong” [SCO Medical University Alliance Officially Launched], Beijing University of Chinese Medicine, November 10, 2022; Shi Yinglun, “The ASEAN-China University Consortium on Medicine and Health Held in Beijing,” ASEAN-China Centre, October 15, 2019; “Qianren shenghui! ‘Yidai Yilu’ yixue rencai peiyang lianmeng dahui ji gongli yiyuan gao zhiliang fazhan jingyan jiaoliu hui zai Yiwu zhaokai” [Distinguished Event! “Belt and Road” Medical Professionals Training Alliance Conference and Public Hospitals High Quality Development Experience Sharing Meeting Held in Yiwu], Yiwu City Government, March 27, 2023; “Zhongguo-Dongmeng gonggong weisheng gaoji xingzheng guanli renyuan peixun xiangmu” [China-ASEAN Public Health Senior Cadre Training Program], National Health Commission (PRC), September 14, 2022; Yidai Yilu’ yiyuan hezuo lianmeng diaoyan” [“Belt and Road” Hospital Cooperation Research Alliance], Chinese Hospital Association, September 19, 2022; “‘Yidai Yilu’ yiyuan hezuo yu fazhan yangcheng guoji luntan zai Guangzhou juxing” [“Belt and Road” Hospital Cooperation and Development Yangcheng International Forum Held in Guangzhou], Sohu, May 10, 2019; Jiang Chenglong, “Hospital Alliance Aims to Boost Telemedicine Coverage in Remote Areas,” *China Daily*, June 10, 2018; and “Guangxi Holds Second China-ASEAN Forum on Health Cooperation,” National Health Commission (PRC), September 20, 2018.

NOTE: As of September 2022, six hospital cooperation alliances—CEEC (June 2016), Israel (March 2017), France (2017), ASEAN (June 2018), SCO (May 2018), and BRI—had been established.

The alliances also serve as hubs through which the sponsoring administration may connect additional Chinese actors to foreign members of the grouping, thereby participating in the gradual deployment of China's global influence in the health and medical fields. For example, the Belt and Road Health Professional Development Alliance, launched in June 2019 under the auspices of the National Health Commission, aims to create partnerships with medical schools, medical research institutes, and pharmaceutical companies in countries along the Belt and Road.³⁸

Alliances may also facilitate the connection of Chinese companies with foreign health actors. For example, Thailand's Mahidol University Faculty of Medicine Siriraj Hospital, the country's largest government hospital, signed an agreement with Huawei a year after becoming a member of the China-ASEAN University Consortium on Medicine and Health. The alliance was founded in October 2019, purportedly to "serve as a platform for faculty from both China and ASEAN members to learn from each other and to improve medical education and practice."³⁹ Huawei is set to provide the Thai hospital with integrated digital technologies and store its medical data in the company's China-based cloud.⁴⁰

The HSR's deployment is supported by an institutional gridding that enmeshes entire subregions and a large array of regional nongovernmental actors concerned with medical and health issues. The network provides Chinese government and government-related actors with a level of visibility into Belt and Road countries' health affairs that can be obfuscated by the seemingly decentralized and nongovernmental nature of the gridding.

Economic Gains and an Enhanced International Profile

The HSR's multiple geographies of expansion, as described above, make it apparent that the initiative is not a hazy branding exercise but an extensive, organized, and systematically deployed state-led effort. Although official documents, plans, and declarations tend to repeat the same lofty objectives, usually centered on strengthening international exchanges and cooperation, the HSR could benefit the Chinese government in important additional ways, namely, by producing economic gains and enhancing China's international profile.

Economic Gains

The HSR is meant to serve national development strategies, such as helping China become a destination for health tourism, enhancing the international competitiveness and market footprint of its biotech industries, and setting new international standards and norms.⁴¹ Health cooperation hence goes hand in hand with commercial and industrial achievements in the biotech field.

³⁸ "Yidai Yilu' yixue rencai peiyang lianmeng kuangjia wenjian" [The "Belt and Road" Health Professional Development Alliance Framework Document], https://jhy1-static-file.oss-cn-hangzhou.aliyuncs.com/mtta_web_test/dist/img/dataCenter/policy/资料中心-政策法规-“一带一路”医学人才培养联盟框架文件.pdf.

³⁹ "The Launching Ceremony of China-ASEAN University Consortium on Medicine and Health," Mahidol University, Faculty of Medicine Siriraj Hospital, October 14, 2019, <https://www2.si.mahidol.ac.th/en/aseanmednet/the-launching-ceremony-of-china-asean-university-consortium-on-medicine-and-health>.

⁴⁰ Dean Koh, "Huawei & Siriraj Hospital Sign MOU to Establish 5G Powered Smart Platform for Medical Services," Healthcare IT News, December 7, 2020, <https://www.healthcareitnews.com/news/asia/huawei-siriraj-hospital-sign-mou-establish-5g-powered-smart-platform-medical-services>.

⁴¹ "The CPC Central Committee and the State Council Issued the 'Healthy China 2030' Planning Outline," State Council Information Office (PRC), October 25, 2016, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2016-10/25/content_5124174.htm.

China aspires to become a leader in science and technology both in discovery and in production. This ambition includes the full health spectrum, ranging from biological research to medicine, medical equipment, and pharmaceuticals. The government supports the transformation and upgrading of China's economy and seeks to catch up with the advanced industrial countries, reduce its reliance on foreign companies, increase its domestic production share, and achieve scientific breakthroughs that will help it move to the top of the industrial chain.⁴² Both the Healthy China 2030 and the Made in China 2025/2050 plans envision the substantial development of China's national health industrial base: The Healthy China 2030 plan identifies China's health industry as one of its five priorities and envisions a "significantly expanded" scale by 2030, while biotech is listed as one of the ten key sectors for development under the Made in China plans.⁴³

As it promotes health cooperation with Belt and Road countries, the HSR can help China achieve its scientific leadership objectives. Ensuring China's access to foreign medical knowledge and health data may facilitate scientific discoveries, which the party-state sees as crucial to its domestic agenda of national development and rejuvenation. Pioneering biotech research and development may enable China to move ahead of and control others' access to future medical progress and technologies.

Even if these tall-order objectives are not achieved, implementing enhanced cooperation with foreign laboratories and research centers in pursuit of a common goal to fight infectious diseases and raise the prospects of humankind's well-being may, in the meantime, allow China to maintain its access to transfers of knowledge, intellectual property, and technology that advanced industrial democracies have increasingly restricted in a context of intensified geopolitical competition. Exchanges on global health issues envisioned through the projection of the HSR as a cooperative endeavor may eventually prove a useful antidote to Western governments' efforts to protect themselves against China's intellectual property theft.

Because epidemics "follow biological laws" rather than geopolitics, and the control of infectious diseases is "a positive-sum game rather than a zero-sum game,"⁴⁴ this leaves open the possibility for foreign governments and business actors to put aside their concerns about cooperating with their Chinese counterparts. As a Chinese journalist concludes, the HSR allows technologies to both "go out" from China and be "brought in."⁴⁵ Scientific and technological cooperation with countries that display "excellent R&D and innovation capabilities" and the integration of "cutting-edge theories, methods, technologies, and products" can lead to the upgrading of China's health industry and in turn enable the promotion of Chinese advanced technologies and products "for the benefit of mankind."⁴⁶

Finally, the HSR can help Chinese medical and pharmaceutical companies expand their market access. Chinese biotech companies consider increased foreign investment in public health as fresh

⁴² Li Changzhi, "Li Keqiang bi tan Zhongguo zhizao 2025 Zhongghuo hai neng tan shenme" [Li Keqiang Avoids Mentioning Made in China 2025, Is There Anything China Can Talk About?], *Duowei News*, March 25, 2019, <https://www.dwnews.com/中国/60125184/新基建李克强调谈中国制造2025中国还能谈什么>.

⁴³ Adolfo Arranz, "Betting Big on Tech," *South China Morning Post*, October 9, 2018, <https://multimedia.scmp.com/news/china/article/2167415/china-2025-biotech/index.html>.

⁴⁴ Jin Jiyong, "Quanqiu weisheng zhili de 'Jinde'erboge xianjing' yu Zhongguo de zhanlue yingdui" [The Global Health Governance Kindleberger Trap and China's Response], *Global Review* 12, no. 4 (2020).

⁴⁵ "The Health and Family Planning Commission Held a Media Briefing on the 'Belt and Road' and 'Healthy Silk Road' High-Level Seminar," State Council Information Office (PRC), August 14, 2017, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2017-08/14/content_5217682.htm#allContent.

⁴⁶ Wei and Yunping, "Gongzhu 'Jiankang sichou zhilu,' gongjian renlei weisheng jiangkang gongtongti"; and "Zhongguo Dongmeng gongong weisheng keji hezuo zhongxin chengli dahui juxing" [The Inaugural Meeting of the China-ASEAN Public Health Science and Technology Cooperation Center Convened], Peking University, School of Public Health, April 28, 2023, <http://sph.pku.edu.cn/info/1014/6604.htm>.

opportunities they must seize.⁴⁷ During the Covid-19 pandemic, several of them created joint vaccine production hubs in countries such as Morocco and the United Arab Emirates (which both hosted Sinopharm)⁴⁸ and Algeria and Egypt (which both hosted Sinovac).⁴⁹ The Shenzhen-based BGI Group, China's genomics research giant that endeavors to help the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) "seize the commanding heights of international biotechnology competition," has been donating rapid Covid-19 testing kits and gene-sequencing technology via its philanthropic arm, the Mammoth Foundation.⁵⁰ The Chinese government facilitated the installation of BGI's "Fire Eye" labs in several countries as part of its pandemic diplomacy and public-facing effort to "ensure safety and reliability of medical supplies."⁵¹ Chinese telecommunications giants have also been quick to position themselves as preferred interlocutors to serve Belt and Road countries' medical needs. In the early days of the Covid-19 outbreak hitting Italy, Huawei offered to "facilitate the exchange of information and good practices between Italian and Chinese health teams through its WeLink cloud collaboration platform" to ensure connections between medical teams and the "sharing of patients' medical files in real time."⁵²

*International "Discourse Power"*⁵³

Beijing seeks to increase its global stature, cultivate its image as a benevolent great power, and enhance its position as a rulemaker offering creative solutions for the rest of the world. The HSR serves as a suitable symbol of China's eagerness to deliver global public goods and is expected to foster positive perceptions of China's role as a great power.⁵⁴

As a token of its willingness to become more proactive on global health issues, China increased its voluntary contribution to the WHO's budget from 7.92% in 2018–19 to 12.00% in 2020–21.⁵⁵ But China does not limit its ambition to having a larger seat in international institutions. As two Chinese academics explain, Beijing also aspires to have a voice, one that will enable China to "inject" its own "position and values" on global health governance.⁵⁶ As such, Beijing "attaches importance to influencing the agenda setting and reform of global health governance via

⁴⁷ "Xiong Tao of BGI Group: Increased Investment in Public Health of CEE Countries Is Good News to Chinese Enterprises," SFC, June 22, 2020, <http://m.sfccn.com/article/20200623/herald/2059f1e25ebefc136493b8030aac8ea5.html>.

⁴⁸ Sylvia Westall, Adveith Nair, Farah Elbahrawy, "China Picks UAE to Make Millions of Vaccines, Boosting Gulf Ties," Bloomberg, March 28, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-28/julphar-signs-deal-with-abu-dhabi-firm-to-produce-sinopharm-shot>; and Álvaro Escalonilla, "Morocco Will Produce Chinese Vaccine Sinopharm," Atalayar, July 6, 2021, <https://atalayar.com/en/content/morocco-will-produce-chinese-vaccine-sinopharm>.

⁴⁹ "Algeria to Start Sinovac Covid-19 Vaccine Production Wednesday," Reuters, September 28, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/algeria-start-sinovac-covid-19-vaccine-production-wednesday-2021-09-28>.

⁵⁰ Kirsty Needham, "Special Report: Covid Opens New Doors for China's Gene Giant," Reuters, August 5, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-bgi-specialreport/special-report-covid-opens-new-doors-for-chinas-gene-giant-idUSKCN2511CE>.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "Coronavirus Emergency: Huawei Donates Technology and Health Supplies," Huawei, March 18, 2020, <https://e.huawei.com/en/news/ebg/2020/huawei-donates-technology-and-health-supplies-italy>.

⁵³ For a discussion of discourse power, see Nadège Rolland, "China's Vision for a New World Order," NBR, Special Report, no. 83, January 2020, https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr83_chinasvision_jan2020.pdf.

⁵⁴ Hao Yubiao, "Quanqiu weisheng zhili de kunjing yu Zhongguo tuidong goujian renlei weisheng jiankang gontongti de lujing xuanze" [Global Health Governance Dilemma and China's Path in Promoting the Construction of a Health Community for Mankind], *Guowai Shehui Kexue* 4 (2021): 93–105; and Tan Tan and Wang Wei, "Zhongguo tigong quanqiu weisheng gongong chapin de lujing fenxi: Yi Zhongguo yuanzhu Xifei guojia kangji aibola yiqing wei yi" [Analysis of China's Path to Providing Global Health Public Goods: Taking China's Assistance to West African Countries in Fighting Ebola as an Example], *Guoji Guancha* 5 (2017): 113–27.

⁵⁵ Song Xiaofeng and Fu Dongmei, "Quanqiu weisheng gongong chanpin gongji: Zhongguo juese yu lu" [Global Health Public Goods Supply: China's Role and Path], *Socialism Studies*, March 20, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20211015200727/http://socialismstudies.cnu.edu.cn/bencandy.php?fid=73&id=218>.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

mechanisms such as the G-20, BRICS, and Belt and Road” international cooperation programs.⁵⁷ A member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference National Committee describes the HSR as ushering in an “important opportunity for China to promote the global application of its healthcare model of prevention and treatment and to enhance its discourse power.”⁵⁸ Countries along the Belt and Road can play the role of springboard for China as it attempts to expand its influence over health governance on the global stage.⁵⁹

China’s increasingly active participation in health-related multilateral platforms may also generate indirect opportunities to “cross penetrate” other domains.⁶⁰ As two Chinese political economists argue, for example, drug research and medical technological innovations are connected to intellectual property arrangements and trade relations, whereas international talks on health issues can lead to discussions about environmental sustainability.⁶¹ These areas of innovation can provide additional opportunities for China to advance its interests beyond the health field.

The Global South as the Fulcrum of the HSR

China’s efforts to present the rest of the world with an alternative for health governance in the shape of the HSR is usually introduced as reflecting a benevolent desire to share its “experience and wisdom” with the world, and more specifically for countries of the global South.⁶² Chinese public figures and commentators present their country as a “benchmark” of global health governance,⁶³ a “role model” for developing countries,⁶⁴ and an especially appropriate interlocutor for these countries because it is “a fellow traveler that faced and overcame similar development challenges not so long ago,” which “creates a rapport not always enjoyed by wealthy development partners.”⁶⁵ Since China can “better understand the needs of developing countries than Western countries” and its own experience is “especially suitable” for them, it “opposes interfering with the developing countries’ health system and policies through the supply of international public health goods” and instead “actively explores the integration of its own experience with the local culture and health development of recipient countries.”⁶⁶

Chinese experts usually acknowledge that the power and influence of the West is stubbornly enduring over the health systems, regulations, and standards of developing countries, especially in Africa. They recognize that international healthcare NGOs that originated in the West, such as the International Red Cross or Doctors Without Borders, have “an important voice in the health

⁵⁷ Song and Fu, “Quanqiu weisheng gonggong chanpin gongji: Zhongguo jue se yu lu.”

⁵⁸ Ge Junbo, “Tisheng Zhongguo yiliao weisheng guoji huayuquan” [Enhancing China’s Health International Discourse Power], *Lianhe Shibao*, April 20, 2021, <http://www.shsxx.gov.cn/node2/node5368/node5382/node5400/u1ai108040.html>.

⁵⁹ Liu Zhangjun “‘Yidai Yilu’ changyi zhong de weisheng hezuo: Yindao weisheng zhili moshi de zhuanbian” [Belt and Road Initiative’s Health Cooperation: Guiding the Transformation of Health Governance Models], *Zhongguo Weisheng Fazhi* 29, no. 5 (2021): 59–65.

⁶⁰ Song and Fu, “Quanqiu weisheng gonggong chanpin gongji: Zhongguo jue se yu lu.”

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Cheng Yang and Cheng Feng, “China’s Unique Role in the Field of Global Health,” *Global Health Journal* 3, no. 4 (2019); and “Quanqiu jiankang zhili Zhongguo gongxian: Gouzhu renlei weisheng anquan mingyun gongtongti” [Global Health Governance: China’s Contribution: Building a Community of Health for Humankind’s Security], Sohu, May 21, 2018, https://www.sohu.com/a/232366847_464387.

⁶³ Bai Jianfeng, “Quanqiu jiankang zhili de ‘Zhongguo biaoan’” [Global Health Governance’s “China Benchmark”], *People’s Daily*, January 19, 2017, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0119/c1001-29033879.html>.

⁶⁴ Cheng and Cheng, “China’s Unique Role.”

⁶⁵ Margaret Chan, “China’s Growing Contribution to Health at Home and on the Global Stage” (lecture at the Chinese Academy of Governance, Beijing, November 18, 2016), <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/china-s-growing-contribution-to-health-at-home-and-on-the-global-stage-lecture-at-the-chinese-academy-of-governance>.

⁶⁶ Song and Fu, “Quanqiu weisheng gonggong chanpin gongji: Zhongguo jue se yu lu.”

system of African countries”; that the United States and other Western powers have traditionally been the largest donors of medical assistance; and that Western pharmaceutical companies account for about 70% of the African market.⁶⁷

This situation has not stopped China from making concrete contributions to developing countries, mostly in the form of medical assistance. Experts point to how China’s efforts in this area have “deep historical roots,”⁶⁸ starting with Mao Zedong’s decision to provide support to countries of the “third world” that he thought could ally with China in its struggle against Soviet and American imperialism.⁶⁹ Since the first Chinese medical teams were deployed to Algeria in 1963, a total of 26,000 medical staff have been dispatched to 71 countries and have provided aid, mainly in the form of medication and equipment donations, the construction of hospitals and clinics, and malaria control programs.

The 2003 SARS crisis forced the Chinese government to realize that, in a globalized world, public health can no longer be considered as only a domestic issue. Since then, China’s global health engagement has significantly evolved, starting with its greater involvement in multilateral cooperation on a wide array of global health issues and the strengthening of its public health diplomacy toward the developing world.⁷⁰ Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, in addition to launching training programs for health professionals from Belt and Road countries, Beijing had provided emergency assistance to West African countries during the 2014–16 Ebola crisis and launched the Brightness Action program in 2014, which provides cataract surgeries for patients in developing countries.⁷¹ In January 2023, China’s foreign minister inaugurated the new headquarters of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention in Addis Ababa, a project that the Chinese government committed to fund in 2018.⁷²

Official plans also mention women’s and children’s health as a key priority for the HSR. At the UN Sustainable Development Summit in 2015, Xi Jinping pledged to build one hundred clinics and hospitals and launch one hundred health projects for women and children in the developing world,⁷³ but it is not entirely clear whether and how this commitment has been translated into action. Although international contributions to help improve the health of populations living in developing countries are objectively valuable, they might be motivated by strategic purposes as much as by philanthropic intentions.

⁶⁷ Zeng Aiping, “Quanqiu gongong weisheng zhili hezuo: yi Zhong Fei gongjian ‘jiankang si lu’ wei shijiao” [Global Public Health Governance Cooperation: From the Perspective of Building a ‘Health Silk Road’ between China and Africa], Institute of West-Asian and African Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, March 10, 2021, http://iwaas.cssn.cn/xslt/fzlt/202103/t20210310_5317150.shtml.

⁶⁸ Liu Peilong et al., “China’s Distinctive Engagement in Global Health,” *Lancet* 384, no. 9945 (2014): 793–804, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7159291>.

⁶⁹ For a description of the strategic purposes behind China’s engagement with the African continent and how they echo Mao’s global vision, see Nadège Rolland, “A New Great Game? Situating Africa in China’s Strategic Thinking,” NBR, Special Report, no. 91, June 8, 2021, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/a-new-great-game-situating-africa-in-chinas-strategic-thinking>.

⁷⁰ Lai-Ha Chan, Lucy Chen, and Jin Xu, “China’s Engagement with Global Health Diplomacy: Was SARS a Watershed?” *PLOS Medicine* 7, no. 4 (2010), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2860492/pdf/pmed.1000266.pdf>.

⁷¹ Fu and Wang, “Gongzhu ‘Jiankang sichou zhilu,’ gongjian renlei weisheng jiankang gongtongti”; and “Jiankang sichou zhilu qianjing guangming” [The “Health Silk Road” Has a Bright Future], State Council Information Office (PRC), January 19, 2017, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/31773/35507/35510/35524/Document/1540561/1540561.htm>.

⁷² “China Foreign Affairs Minister H.E. Mr. Qin Gang Visits the AU and Takes Part in the Inauguration of the New Headquarters of the Africa Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC),” African Union, Press Release, January 12, 2023, <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20230112/inauguration-new-headquarters-africa-cdc>.

⁷³ “China to Donate \$10 Million to UN for Women’s Rights,” CGTN America, September 27, 2015, <https://america.cgtn.com/2015/09/27/china-to-donate-10-million-to-un-for-womens-right>.

The Curious Case of TCM Promotion

Official plans and documents give detailed indications about objectives and priorities of the HSR, as well as its preferred mechanisms and regions of deployment. One of its most intriguing components is the promotion of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM).

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the Chinese government has been elevating the importance of TCM both domestically and internationally, issuing over 30 policy measures since the 18th Party Congress in 2012.⁷⁴ On December 12, 2016, the State Council published China's first white paper on TCM, which bestows "equal status" to TCM and Western medicine "in terms of ideological understanding, legal status, academic development, and practical application."⁷⁵ The document concludes with the injunction to "actively introduce TCM to the rest of the world...so as to explore a new model of healthcare to improve the well-being of all people of the world, and make a full contribution to global progress and a brighter future for mankind."⁷⁶ A few days later, the National People's Congress translated the white paper's directions into law.⁷⁷

In parallel, the Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative issued the TCM Belt and Road Development Plan (2016–20). The development plan was updated in January 2022 for the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–25) and presented in a document entitled "Promoting the High-Quality Integration and Co-Construction of TCM into the Belt and Road Development Plan."⁷⁸ In early 2022, the National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine announced plans to build 30 overseas TCM centers and 50 international cooperation bases in Belt and Road countries before 2025.⁷⁹ TCM centers have already been opened in Mauritius, Uzbekistan, and Zimbabwe, and China has been using Cambodia as a "testing ground for models of future collaboration" in this domain.⁸⁰

The crowning achievement of the Chinese international promotion of TCM occurred in May 2019 when the World Health Assembly formally included a chapter on TCM for the first time in its eleventh compendium of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD-11). Chinese official media welcomed the decision as a "major step for TCM going global."⁸¹ At the time, several foreign scientists argued that the decision was contradictory to the WHO's mission to share evidence-based information. They described TCM as not only

⁷⁴ The detailed list of policy measures, up to August 2019, can be found in Wan-ying Wang et al., "Current Policies and Measures on the Development of Traditional Chinese Medicine in China," *Pharmacological Research* 163 (2021): 5, table 1, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7480280/pdf/main.pdf>.

⁷⁵ State Council Information Office (PRC), *Traditional Chinese Medicine in China* (Beijing, January 2017), http://www.china.org.cn/english/scio/2017-01/17/content_40621689.htm.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ "China Adopts Law on Traditional Medicine," Xinhua, December 26, 2016, http://www.china.org.cn/china/2016-12/26/content_39982656.htm.

⁷⁸ "Guojia zhongyiyao guanli ju tuijin 'Yidai Yilu' jianshe gongzuo lingdao bangongshi guanyu yinfa 'tuijin zhongyiyao gao zhiliang rongru gongjian 'Yidai Yilu' fazhan guihua (2021–2025 nian)' de tongzhi" [Notice of the TCM State Administration and the Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Construction of the "Belt and Road" on Printing and Distributing the Development Plan for Promoting the High-Quality Integration of TCM into the Joint Construction of the "Belt and Road" (2021–2025)], State Council Information Office (PRC), December 31, 2021, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2022-01/15/content_5668349.htm.

⁷⁹ "China to Promote Traditional Medicine Under Belt and Road Initiative," HKTDC Research, February 10, 2022, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202205/18/WS62843525a310fd2b29e5d50e.html>.

⁸⁰ Wang Xiaoyu, "Plan Looks to Expand TCM Globally" *China Daily*, May 18, 2022, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202205/18/WS62843525a310fd2b29e5d50e.html>.

⁸¹ "A Major Step for Traditional Chinese Medicine Going Global," *China Daily*, May 27, 2019, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201905/27/WS5ceb3682a3104842260bddec.html>.

unscientific but also potentially toxic to people's health and harmful to animals whose organs are used in some TCM cures.⁸²

One recent example of the Chinese government's promotion of TCM practices occurred in the early weeks following the Covid-19 outbreak. China's National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine started promoting a list of six formulas and medicines that it claimed had proved to be effective in treating an infection.⁸³ When Covid-19 started propagating outside China's borders, the Chinese government and Shijiazhuang Yiling Pharmaceutical Company, the medicine's manufacturer, began donating hundreds of thousands of boxes of the Lianhua Qingwen herbal compound.⁸⁴ Local Chinese embassies and consulates, as well as chapters of the Chinese Students and Scholars Association, distributed aid packages containing such herbal medicines to Chinese international students. Together with surgical masks, N95 respirators, disinfectant wipes, and Lianhua Qingwen capsules, the package included a message that read: "The motherland is by your side. Genuine affection from 10,000 miles away."⁸⁵

The Chinese government's promotion of TCM under the HSR umbrella could be explained by economic rationales. Chinese companies that manufacture traditional medicines represent nearly a third of the country's pharmaceutical industry.⁸⁶ According to a State Council Information Office report published in August 2019, the Chinese government expected TCM's expanding global footprint to spawn a vast global market with annual sales revenue of over \$434 billion by 2020.⁸⁷ According to the deputy director of the Health Development Research Center of the National Health and Family Planning Commission, the development of TCM services for overseas clients (e.g., health tourism, sections dedicated to foreign guests in TCM hospitals, and the creation of TCM "industrial zones" in border regions) could provide additional sources of revenue.⁸⁸

China's promotion of TCM also reflects a form of nationalistic pride, one that contrasts itself with the influence and dominance of Western medicine. National plans for the promotion of TCM particularly underline its value to China's global image as a symbol of the country's "outstanding contributions to human health." Used as a "beautiful business card for China on the international stage," a "carrier to spread Chinese traditional culture," and an "international language to tell Chinese stories," TCM can in many ways serve China's "national strategy," according to the TCM Belt and Road Development Plan. If the rationale of China's grand strategy can be understood

⁸² "The World Health Organization Gives the Nod to Traditional Chinese Medicine. Bad Idea," *Scientific American*, April 1, 2019, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-world-health-organization-gives-the-nod-to-traditional-chinese-medicine-bad-idea>; and "The World Health Organization's Decision about Traditional Chinese Medicine Could Backfire," *Nature*, June 5, 2019, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-01726-1>.

⁸³ "Six Effective TCM Recipes for Covid-19," *China Daily*, March 24, 2020, <https://covid-19.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202003/24/WS5e795bb6a3101282172816c2.html>; and "SCIO Briefing on TCM's Important Role and a List of Effective Drugs in Covid-19 Prevention and Control," State Council Information Office (PRC), March 25, 2020, http://english.scio.gov.cn/pressroom/2020-03/25/content_75858152_0.htm.

⁸⁴ Boxes were donated to Italy and Iraq, for example, among other countries. See Zhang Yu, "TCM Medicine on Way to Italy," *China Daily*, March 24, 2020, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202003/24/WS5e79f22da310128217281ad9_1.html.

⁸⁵ Yangyang Cheng, "A Coronavirus Care Package from China: Herbal Formulas Are Also a Potion for National Cohesion," *New York Times*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/25/opinion/china-coronavirus-traditional-medicine.html>; and Winston Szeto, "Doctors Warn Against Claims That Beijing-touted Health Supplement Distributed in Canada Treats COVID-19," CBC, May 7, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/beijing-govt-health-supplement-1.5558583>.

⁸⁶ "China Issues First White Paper on TCM," *Xinhua*, December 6, 2016, http://www.china.org.cn/china/2016-12/06/content_39857677.htm.

⁸⁷ Zheng Yiran, "A Healthy Way of Nursing the World," *China Daily*, August 12, 2019, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201908/12/WS5d50a0b6a310cf3e35565167.html>.

⁸⁸ Zhang Huaishui and Zhou Chengcheng, "Meijing zhuanfang Zhang Yuhui: Woguo jiankang fuwuy zong guimo chao 7 wanyi, yao jiasu tuijin youzhi jiankang chanpin, fuwu yinjinlai he chuantong zhongyiyao zouchuqu" [Zhang Yuhui Interview: China's Health Service Industry Total Scale Exceeds 7 Trillion Yuan, We Must Accelerate the Introduction of High-Quality Health Products and Services and the Going Out of TCM], *National Business Daily*, April 20, 2021, <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:IO06gBocBrsj:www.nbd.com.cn/articles/2021-04-20/1707199.html+&cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>.

as an effort to create a Sino-centric subsystem that excludes Western powers and focuses on the emerging and developing world,⁸⁹ then Beijing's insistence on promoting a non-Western medical tradition makes sense. Countries of the global South may also be sensitive to the appeal of practicing traditional medicine.

So obviously important is TCM to the Chinese government that it is not rare to find academic articles referring to “Xi Jinping’s Thought on Traditional Chinese Medicine Development” (*Xi Jinping fazhan Zhongyao sixiang*). For a while in 2020, the Beijing municipal government even considered criminalizing the defamation or slandering of TCM “via any means or behavior.”⁹⁰ Xi considers TCM as a “treasure-house” of the Chinese civilization (*baoku*)—a term Mao Zedong also used to describe China’s traditional medical practices.⁹¹ Mao saw TCM as an illustration of the Chinese people’s “incomparable intelligence and creative efforts” as displayed in the field of medicine.⁹² Similarly, Xi sees TCM as representative of China’s “profound philosophical wisdom” that can be spread overseas and “enrich the world’s medical undertakings,”⁹³ thereby fully integrating it within his global vision of a risen China projecting its civilizational influence well beyond its traditional sphere.

Conclusion

The Health Silk Road is emblematic of China’s strategic endeavors in the “new era” initiated by Xi Jinping, and specifically of BRI. It embraces a large geographic scope, with a focus on countries of the global South, and serves a mix of economic, diplomatic, and geopolitical interests. It is implemented by a multiplicity of state actors and their affiliates acting under the central government’s guidance. It takes the shape of a complex layered structure of China-centric international platforms, forums, and “alliances” specifically created for the purpose of implementing Beijing’s agenda. And it displays a streak of cultural nationalism that presents China’s “wisdom” and “experience” as viable alternatives to existing Western models. China’s newfound interest in global health is evidently part of a comprehensive strategy, encapsulated in the HSR concept, that is meant not only to enhance China’s international appeal as a great power delivering global public goods but also to actively shape the choices of foreign countries in matters pertaining to health governance.

The way the HSR is deployed is also representative of the Chinese leaders’ belief in their ability to manufacture international authority. Beijing is not simply waiting for its influence on

⁸⁹ Rolland, “China’s Vision for a New World Order.”

⁹⁰ Wong Siu-san and Sing Man, “Beijing Mulls Law Banning ‘Defamation’ of Traditional Chinese Medicine,” Radio Free Asia, June 10, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/tcm-defamation-06102020112400.html>. The law was eventually approved in December 2020 without the sections that would have made defaming TCM a crime following sharp internal criticism. See Sun Liangzi and Ju Yiwen, “Beijing Drops Plan to Criminalize Criticism of Chinese Medicine,” *Caixin Global*, December 2, 2020 <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2020-12-02/beijing-drops-plan-to-criminalize-criticism-of-chinese-medicine-101634925.html>.

⁹¹ “Xi Jinping chuxi huangjia Moerben ligong daxue zhongyi Kongzi xueyuan shou pai yishi” [Xi Jinping Attended the Awarding Ceremony of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology’s Confucius Institute of Traditional Chinese Medicine], Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), June 20, 2010, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/wjw/zjzg/xws/xgxw/t710185.htm>. Xi’s words were, “TCM is the treasure of ancient Chinese science and the key to the Chinese civilization treasure house.” In 1958, Mao stated, “Traditional Chinese Medicine and pharmacology are a great treasure-house, which should be explored and improved upon.” See Chen Shikui, “60 nian qian de jintian, Mao Zedong shuo ‘Zhongguo yiyaoxue shi yige weida de baoku, yingdang nuli fajue, jiayi tigao’ [60 Years Ago Today, Mao Zedong Said: ‘Chinese Traditional Medicine Is a Great Treasure House, Which Should Be Explored and Improved’],” Sohu, October 11, 2018, https://www.sohu.com/a/258885939_821367.

⁹² Ralph C. Crozier, “Traditional Medicine in Communist China: Science, Communism and Cultural Nationalism,” *China Quarterly* 23 (1965): 1–27.

⁹³ “Xi Jinping chuxi huangjia Moerben ligong daxue zhongyi Kongzi xueyuan shou pai yishi.”

global health issues to unfold organically but instead deploying a structured plan with multiple components, targeting specific multilateral institutions, regions, and countries, down to the level of hospitals and medical schools. The HSR's broad, interconnected, and overlapping global health network is the result of a concerted effort by the Chinese party-state to actively promote its interests and vision.

The pursuit of commercial and diplomatic gains explains only partially Beijing's active promotion of its role as a global health leader. The party-state has been gearing up to achieve the Chinese nation's great rejuvenation, and it is becoming increasingly apparent that its vision of a future China-led order is grounded in the rejection of Western systems of belief and their replacement with quintessentially Chinese alternatives. No interstice of human activity, not even health, should be left out of this ambitious plan.

The task will not be easily accomplished, as several Chinese observers acknowledge. The HSR will be confronted by the willingness of "Western countries led by the United States" to "suppress and contain China's influence." Despite China's "remarkable results" in fighting Covid-19, "some countries are still unwilling to recognize and learn from China's experience."⁹⁴ To political scientist Zheng Yongnian, the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated that the geopolitical rivalry between China and the West covers all fields of human activity, without exception. Health has now become a battleground in the "struggle for influence," "power competition," and "a battle of narratives" between two camps.⁹⁵ Is the West paying attention?

⁹⁴ Li Qiang and Fan Zhaoyang, "Goujian renlei weishen jiankang gongtongti shi yu xia de Yidai Yilu gonggong weisheng hezuo" [Belt and Road Public Health Cooperation Under the Vision of Building a Health Community for Mankind], *China Pictorial*, January 11, 2021, http://www.rmhb.com.cn/zt/ydyl/202101/t20210111_800232307.html.

⁹⁵ Zheng Yongnian, "Zhong Xi 'kangyi' huayuquan zhi zheng de miuwu" [The Fallacy of the China-West Dispute over "Anti-Epidemic" Discourse Power], *Lianhe Zaobao*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.zaobao.com.sg/forum/expert/zheng-yong-nian/story20200414-1045349>.

APPENDIX: HEALTHY CHINA 2030

Xi Jinping introduced the realization of the “dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” as the main objective of his leadership when he came to power in late 2012. He devised two intermediate “centenary” goals that needed to be achieved to realize this vision: (1) by the centenary of the founding of the CCP in 2021, “completing the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects,” and (2) by the centenary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 2049, “building China into a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious.”⁹⁶

Just before the 2021 deadline, the CCP announced that China had secured a “complete victory” in its fight against poverty, thereby self-validating the completion of the first centenary goal of building a moderately prosperous society.⁹⁷ However, Xi remains acutely aware of the “principal contradiction facing Chinese society”—namely, the tension between unbalanced development and the people’s ever-growing demands for better living conditions, especially as they relate to education, housing, and healthcare.⁹⁸

In August 2016, Xi elevated the issue of health to the top of the party-state’s agenda, as he chaired a national health conference, the CCP’s first such meeting dedicated to health in over twenty years. He underlined that “prosperity for all is impossible without health for all” and stressed the potential detrimental effects that unaddressed problems in the health sector could have not only on the nation’s economic development but also on social stability, thereby linking public health with national security.⁹⁹ In the aftermath of the 2016 conference, the State Council and the Central Party Committee approved a blueprint for Healthy China 2030 in October 2016, which was endorsed as a national strategy at the 19th Party Congress held in October 2017, and a few years later in July 2019 released a detailed action plan, the first long-term plan for China’s health sector published since 1949.

The party-state identifies health as “an inevitable requirement for promoting all-round development and the basic condition for economic and social development; an important symbol of the nation’s prosperity and rejuvenation; and the common aspiration of all the Chinese people.”¹⁰⁰ The plan generally aims at improving the nation’s physical fitness and health levels. It emphasizes prevention and sets specific metric targets regarding health literacy; a healthy lifestyle (e.g., obesity reduction, tobacco control, and fitness programs); the quality of medical services for women, children, and the elderly; the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases (e.g., cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, and chronic respiratory diseases); the promotion of medical and scientific innovations; and the creation of a group of Chinese medical

⁹⁶ “Hard Work Makes Dreams Come True” (excerpts of Xi’s speech at a discussion session with national model workers, Beijing, April 28, 2013), <http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/c23934/202006/34c5df6240994461a8d3bf47cfe8e8fa.shtml>.

⁹⁷ “Xi Declares ‘Complete Victory’ in Eradicating Absolute Poverty in China,” Xinhua, February 26, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-02/26/c_139767705.htm.

⁹⁸ “Principal Contradiction Facing Chinese Society Has Evolved in New Era,” Xinhua, October 18, 2017, http://english.www.gov.cn/news/top_news/2017/10/18/content_281475912458156.htm.

⁹⁹ “President Xi Calls for Full Protection of People’s Health,” *China Daily*, August 20, 2016, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-08/20/content_26544786.htm.

¹⁰⁰ “Jiankang Zhongguo 2030’ guihua gangyao” [“Healthy China 2030” Plan Outline], State Council Information Office (PRC) and Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (PRC), October 10, 2016, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-10/25/content_5124174.htm.

and pharmaceutical companies able to compete internationally. Finally, the documents indicate China's commitment to participate in global health governance.

The Healthy China 2030 plan launched several other health-related initiatives. A dozen additional guidelines accompanying the core plan indicate the importance of traditional Chinese medicine as a national strategy for public healthcare.¹⁰¹ The State Council also published a directive on healthcare big data in June 2016, qualifying medical data as “the important, fundamental, and strategic resource of the state.”¹⁰² Additional directives were issued to implement a national fitness strategy¹⁰³ and encourage Chinese people to eat healthily, exercise, and “keep their waistline under 85 cm for men and under 80 cm for women.”¹⁰⁴ Released in June 2016, the fitness circular was renewed in 2021, with a specific focus on children and adolescents.¹⁰⁵ Xi himself has promoted sports, not only to improve Chinese citizens' health but also to teach them how to “strive for excellence and outperform themselves.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ These guidelines include, among others, the Plan for Protecting and Developing Chinese Medicinal Plants (April 2015), the Outline of the Strategic Plan on the Development of TCM (February 2016), the white paper on TCM in China (December 2016), the Law on Traditional Chinese Medicine (December 2016), the 13th Five-Year Plan for the Development of TCM Informatization (December 2016), the One Belt, One Road Plan for Developing TCM (December 2016), and the 13th Five-Year Special Plan for the Scientific and Technological Innovation in TCM (May 2017). See Wan-ying Wang et al., “Current Policies and Measures on the Development of Traditional Chinese Medicine in China,” *Pharmacological Research* 163 (2021), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7480280/pdf/main.pdf>.

¹⁰² “Guiding Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Promoting and Regulating the Application and Development of Big Data in Health and Medical Care,” June 21, 2016, <http://lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?id=26003&lib=law>.

¹⁰³ “China to Implement National Fitness Program,” State Council Information Office (PRC), June 23, 2016, http://english.www.gov.cn/policies/latest_releases/2016/06/23/content_281475378214258.htm.

¹⁰⁴ Wang Hairong, “A Recipe for Good Health,” *Beijing Review*, August 9, 2019, http://www.bjreview.com/Current_Issue/Editor_Choice/201908/t20190812_800175509.html.

¹⁰⁵ “State Council Rolls Out Extensive Mass Fitness Program,” State Council Information Office (PRC), August 3, 2021, http://english.www.gov.cn/policies/latestreleases/202108/03/content_WS61090b69c6d0df57f98ddfbfa.html.

¹⁰⁶ “Xi Focus: Xi's Vision for Propelling China's Sporting Spectrum,” Xinhua, August 7, 2021, http://www.news.cn/english/2021-08/07/c_1310114249.htm.

