


Basic philosophy of three essences theory in traditional Mongolian medicine

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Author contributions

Wu RH and Wang XM conceived and designed the manuscript. Bao XM, Si T, Bao S, Jun J, Wang H, Bai L collected the data. Bao XM and Si T wrote the first draft. Fu MH, Wu RH and Wang XM made critical revision and all authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Abbreviations

TMM, traditional Mongolian medicine; TCM, traditional Chinese medicine.

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Abstract

Traditional Mongolian medicine (TMM) integrates Tibetan and Chinese medicine with indigenous Mongolian practices, focusing on the balance of three core essences: Khii, Shar, and Badgan, derived from the **Five Elements – earth, water, fire, wind, and space**. These essences regulate both physical and psychological processes, and their imbalance, often caused by diet, behavior, or environment, leads to disease. TMM utilizes holistic diagnostic methods such as pulse diagnosis, visual inspection, and lifestyle evaluation to identify imbalances of three essences. Treatments include herbal remedies, dietary adjustments, behavior modification, and accessory therapies like moxibustion and massage to restore balance. This mini review examines the philosophical underpinnings, diagnostic techniques, and therapeutic strategies to Khii, Shar, and Badgan, highlighting their importance in both traditional and modern integrative healthcare.

Keywords: traditional Mongolian medicine; three essences theory; diagnostic principles; treatment methods

Background

Traditional Mongolian medicine (TMM) represents a rich and intricate medical system that has evolved over centuries, combining the unique cultural practices of Mongolia with influences from Tibetan and Chinese medicine [1]. The philosophical underpinnings of TMM are deeply rooted in the belief that health and disease are governed by the balance and imbalance of three fundamental essences: Khii, Shar, and Badgan. These essences, derived from the Five Elements – earth, water, fire, wind, and space – are believed to regulate all physiological and psychological processes in the body [2]. The theoretical framework of TMM posits that Khii, Shar, and Badgan must be in equilibrium for a person to maintain good health. Khii, associated with the dynamic and light qualities, is believed to control movement and circulation within the body. Shar, linked to heat and metabolic processes, is thought to govern digestion and energy production. Badgan, related to stability and lubrication, is essential for maintaining the structure and hydration of tissues [3]. An imbalance among these three essences, often triggered by factors such as diet, behavior, seasonal changes, and unexpected events, can lead to illness.

The diagnosis in TMM involves a holistic approach that includes pulse diagnosis, visual examination, and detailed inquiries into a patient's lifestyle and habits [4]. Pulse diagnosis, a cornerstone of TMM, entails feeling the pulse at various points on the wrist to detect imbalances in the three essences. Each pulse point corresponds to different organs and functions, allowing practitioners to identify which essence is out of balance. Visual examination includes observing the patient's tongue, complexion, and overall appearance, while lifestyle inquiries delve into dietary habits, sleep patterns, emotional state, and other aspects of daily life [5].

Treatment in TMM is multifaceted, incorporating herbal medicine, dietary adjustments, behavioral modifications, and accessory therapies [6]. Herbal medicine in TMM utilizes a wide range of plants, animals, and minerals. Herbs such as milk vetch, rhubarb, and others are used either singly or in combinations to address specific imbalances [7]. The preparation of these remedies is guided by centuries of accumulated knowledge and experience, forming a unique theoretical system based on ancient philosophy. Dietary recommendations are tailored to the individual's constitution and the nature of their imbalance. For instance, someone with an excess of Badgan, which is cold and heavy, may be advised to consume warm, light foods to restore balance. Conversely, a person with a predominance of Shar, characterized by heat, might be recommended cooling foods [8]. Behavioral modifications in TMM encompass a range of practices aimed at harmonizing the mind and body. These include stress management techniques, proper sleep hygiene, regular physical activity, and mindfulness practices [9].

Accessory therapies such as moxibustion, massage, and cupping play a significant role in TMM [10]. Moxibustion involves burning dried mugwort on specific points of the body to stimulate energy flow and warmth. Massage techniques are used to manipulate the body's soft tissues, enhancing circulation and relieving tension. Cupping, which involves placing heated cups on the skin to create suction, is believed to draw out toxins and improve blood flow [11]. The theoretical constructs of TMM also emphasize the importance of seasonal and environmental factors in maintaining health. Each season is thought to affect the balance of the three essences differently, and thus, lifestyle and dietary practices are adjusted accordingly. For example, during the cold and damp winter months, which can exacerbate Badgan, warming foods and activities are recommended to maintain balance [4].

TMM's approach to health is not just about treating diseases but also about preventing them [12]. Preventive measures are deeply integrated into the lifestyle recommendations provided by TMM practitioners. These include maintaining a balanced diet, engaging in regular physical activity, managing stress, and adapting to seasonal changes. The philosophy of TMM recognizes that health is a dynamic state influenced by a complex interplay of internal and external

factors. This holistic perspective is increasingly relevant in modern healthcare, where integrative approaches that combine conventional medicine with traditional practices are gaining recognition. TMM's emphasis on balance, preventive care, and the interconnectedness of body, mind, and environment offers valuable insights for developing comprehensive healthcare strategies [13].

Therefore, TMM presents a profound and holistic approach to health and well-being. Its rich philosophical foundations, intricate diagnostic methods, and diverse therapeutic practices offer a unique perspective on maintaining balance and harmony in life. As modern healthcare continues to evolve, the principles and practices of TMM hold significant potential for contributing to integrative and personalized medical approaches.

The three essences: Khii, Shar, and Badgan

In the realm of TMM, the three fundamental essences – Khii, Shar, and Badgan – play a pivotal role in understanding the principles of health and disease [14]. These elements are believed to be inherited from the five basic elements and are crucial for maintaining physiological balance. A harmonious balance among these essences signifies good health, while any disruption leads to illness.

Khii

Khii, is characterized by qualities such as lightness, mobility, coolness, thinness, hardness, and roughness. Generally, Khii is relied upon at the hips and waist and located in the lower body. Khii also permeates the bones, ears, nerves endings, heart, life channel and large intestine. The function of Khii is exhalation and inhalation; it travels through the nutritional essence, produces stools and urine, clarifies the sensory organs and sustains the human body (Figure 1). Khii is considered dynamic and is responsible for movement within the body, influencing both the physical and mental states. It governs activities like circulation, breathing, and the nervous system [15]. When in balance, Khii facilitates dexterity, clear thinking, and a balanced state of mind. However, an excess of Khii can lead to symptoms such as anxiety, restlessness, and erratic pain throughout the body. The nature of Khii is dual; it can interact with both Shar and Badgan, influencing their qualities. For instance, Khii can augment Shar's heat or Badgan's coldness [14]. This duality makes Khii a crucial factor in maintaining the overall balance of bodily functions.

Shar

Shar, originates from the fire element and is intrinsically hot. It embodies seven qualities: heat, sharpness, oiliness, lightness, pungency, smooth bowel function, and moisture [16]. Shar is needed by the liver and gall bladder and is located in the middle part of the body. It travels through the blood, perspiration-fluid, eye, liver, gall bladder, and small intestine. The function of Shar is to cause hunger and thirst, digest food, and provide body-heat, and the complexion and intelligence and induce courage (Figure 1). Shar regulates metabolic processes, digestion, and the body's heat. It plays a significant role in transforming food into energy and maintaining body temperature. Individuals with a Shar-dominant constitution are typically ambitious, intelligent, and prone to anger. They have a yellowish complexion and prefer sweet, bitter, and astringent foods. Excess Shar can lead to inflammatory conditions, digestive issues, and skin problems like acne and rashes [14]. Balanced Shar supports a robust metabolism, sharp mind, and healthy digestive system.

Badgan

Badgan, is formed from the earth and water elements, giving it a cold and heavy nature. It includes qualities such as heaviness, coldness, oiliness, bluntness, smoothness, steadiness, and stickiness. Badgan sustains the brain and its location is in the upper body. Badgan makes the body grow, and stabilizes the mind, induces sleep, connects the joints, promotes patience and has a tranquilizing effect (Figure 1). Badgan is responsible for lubrication, stability, and cohesion within the body [17]. It governs the structure and fluid balance, affecting

aspects like joint flexibility, immunity, and emotional calmness. A Badgan-dominant person usually has a sturdy build, a calm demeanor, and a tendency towards weight gain. They prefer hot, sour, and astringent foods. Imbalances in Badgan can result in conditions such as mucus-related issues, sluggish digestion, and lethargy [14]. When balanced, Badgan provides stability, emotional resilience, and proper hydration to bodily tissues.

Interaction and balance

The interplay between Khii, Shar, and Badgan is central to maintaining health. These essences not only support each other but also counterbalance to keep the body in a state of equilibrium. For instance, while Khii and Shar are dynamic and transformative, Badgan provides the necessary stability and cohesion. The balance among these essences can be disrupted by various factors such as diet, behavior, climate, and sudden changes. An improper diet or extreme weather can disturb the equilibrium, leading to either an excess or deficiency of one or more elements [18]. For example, consuming too much spicy food can increase Shar, while excessive cold exposure can elevate Badgan. In TMM, restoring balance involves dietary adjustments, behavioral changes, and sometimes herbal remedies tailored to the individual's dominant essence and the specific imbalance [19]. The goal is to harmonize Khii, Shar, and Badgan, ensuring they function synergistically to promote health and prevent disease. By understanding the unique qualities and interactions of Khii, Shar, and Badgan, practitioners of TMM can diagnose and treat various ailments effectively, promoting a holistic approach to health that aligns with the natural rhythms of the body and the environment.

Comparative analysis of the three essences: Khii, Shar, and Badgan in traditional Mongolian, Tibetan, and Chinese medicine

The three essences theory in TMM, comprising Khii, Shar, and Badgan, bears significant similarities to analogous concepts in Tibetan and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), reflecting a shared philosophical understanding of bodily health rooted in balance (Table 1) [20]. However, each system incorporates these concepts uniquely, shaped by its cultural, environmental, and spiritual contexts.

Khii in TMM vs. Khii in Tibetan medicine and Qi in TCM

In TMM, Khii is associated with movement, circulation, and neurological functions. It governs activities such as breathing, circulation, and sensory processing. Khii is light, cold, and mobile in

nature, and its imbalance can lead to conditions such as anxiety, insomnia, and nervous system disorders [21]. Similarly, in Tibetan medicine, Khii (or Wind) is a vital force that controls movement, sensory perception, and mental activity. An imbalance in Khii leads to disturbances in the mind, such as stress or anxiety, and can cause physical symptoms like bloating or joint pain [22]. Wind is cold and dry in nature, similar to its counterpart in TMM. In TCM, Khii is conceptually related to the movement of Qi (a vital energy that sustains all bodily functions, circulates through meridians, and maintains the balance between Yin and Yang, with its disruption causing illness such as pain, fatigue, or stress). Like Khii, Qi governs circulation, respiration, and overall vitality. An imbalance in Qi can cause symptoms such as dizziness, headaches, and respiratory issues [23]. Khii in TCM is often associated with external environmental factors, such as climate changes that lead to illness, but it also affects internal imbalances.

Shar in TMM vs. Bile in Tibetan medicine and Yang in TCM

Shar in TMM corresponds to qualities of heat, transformation, and metabolism. It is closely linked to digestive processes, liver function, and body temperature regulation. Excess Shar leads to conditions such as inflammation, fevers, or irritability, while deficiency results in coldness or digestive sluggishness [14, 21]. In Tibetan medicine, Shar (or Bile) also governs heat, metabolism, and digestion. It corresponds to the fire element and is essential for maintaining body temperature and digesting food. Like in TMM, an excess of Shar results in inflammatory diseases, while a deficiency can impair digestion and lead to cold-related disorders [24]. In TCM, the concept of Yang parallels that of Shar (Yang represents heat, activity, and transformation, governing bodily functions like digestion, circulation, and energy production). Excessive Yang, like Shar, manifests as heat-related disorders (e.g., inflammation, high fevers), while Yang deficiency leads to cold symptoms and poor metabolism [25].

Badgan in TMM vs. phlegm in Tibetan medicine and Yin in TCM

Badgan in TMM is associated with coldness, stability, and structure, governing bodily fluids, growth, and repair. It is linked to moisture retention, physical strength, and mental stability. However, an excess of Badgan can lead to conditions like obesity, lethargy, or water retention, while a deficiency causes dryness or weakness [14, 21]. In Tibetan medicine, Badgan (or Phlegm) shares similar properties of coldness, stability, and moisture. It is responsible for physical strength, tissue development, and the body's ability to retain moisture

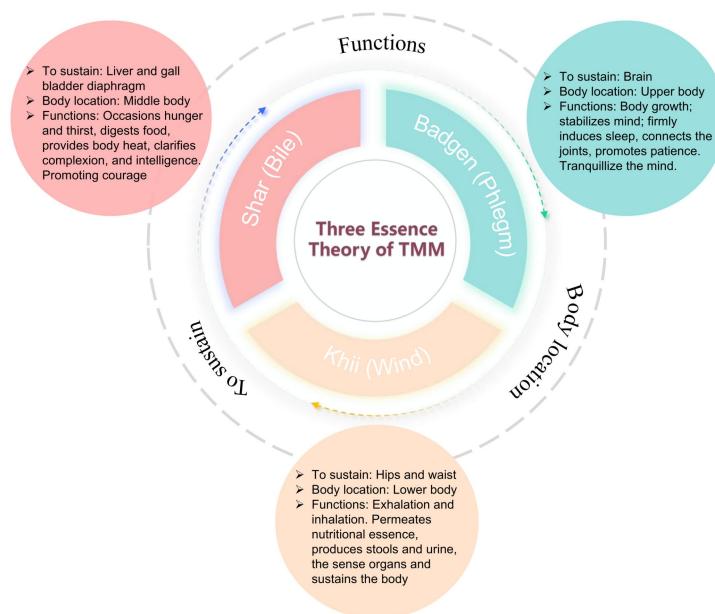


Figure 1 Location and function of three essences. TMM, traditional Mongolian medicine.

Table 1 Comparative analysis of the three essences in traditional Mongolian, Tibetan, and Chinese medicine

Essence	TMM	Tibetan medicine	TCM
Khii	- Movement, circulation, breathing - Light, cold, moShar - Imbalance: anxiety, insomnia, nervous system disorders	- Movement, sensory perception, mental activity - Cold, dry - Imbalance: stress, bloating, joint pain	- Corresponds to Qi - Governs circulation, respiration, vitality - Imbalance: dizziness, headaches, respiratory issues
Shar	- Heat, metabolism, digestion - Hot, sharp, oily - Imbalance: inflammation, fever, irritability	- Heat, metabolism, digestion - Fire element - Imbalance: inflammation, digestive issues	- Corresponds to Yang - Heat, transformation - Digestion, circulation, energy - Imbalance: inflammation, high fevers, poor metabolism
Badgan	- Coldness, stability, bodily fluids - Moisture retention, structure - Imbalance: obesity, lethargy, water retention	- Stability, moisture, strength - Imbalance: respiratory problems, obesity, dullness	- Corresponds to Yin - Coolness, passivity - Governs bodily fluids, structure - Imbalance: water retention, stagnation, respiratory blockages
Key differences			
Focus	Maintaining balance between Khii, Shar, and Badgan, shaped by Mongolia's nomadic lifestyle	Emphasizes balance between essences with a spiritual focus connected to Buddhist principles	Balances Yin-Yang and Qi, incorporating both internal and external factors affecting health
Environmental impact	Harsh climates shape the focus on Khii, Shar, and Badgan	Tibetan lifestyle influences a similar balance with a spiritual lens	TCM incorporates broader environmental forces (like external Wind, Heat) in diagnosis and treatment

TMM, traditional Mongolian medicine; TCM, traditional Chinese medicine.

[24]. Excess Badgan, like in TMM, leads to issues such as obesity, respiratory problems, and mental dullness. In TCM, Badgan is linked to the concept of **Yin, which represents coolness, passivity, and substance**. Yin governs bodily fluids and structural integrity. Yin and Badgan imbalances result in stagnation, leading to symptoms like water retention, lethargy, and respiratory blockages. A deficiency in Yin, on the other hand, causes dryness, weakness, and heat-related conditions like night sweats or hot flashes [25].

Synthesis and key differences

While Khii, Shar, and Badgan in TMM, Tibetan medicine, and TCM share core principles of balance between opposing forces that regulate bodily functions, their manifestations vary slightly due to cultural and environmental contexts. In TMM, these essences are shaped by the harsh nomadic lifestyle of Mongolia, where extreme weather conditions and physical endurance influence the focus on maintaining balance in Khii (mobility), Shar (heat), and Badgan (stability) [21]. Tibetan medicine, with its close ties to TMM, similarly emphasizes balance between these three essences, though it has a greater spiritual focus due to its deep connection with Buddhist principles [24]. In TCM, Yin-Yang and Qi theory expand the concept of balance beyond the three essences, incorporating a wider array of forces that govern both internal and external environments [25]. TCM's focus on harmonizing internal energy with external conditions gives it a broader framework for interpreting Khii, Shar, and Badgan-like imbalances, including environmental factors like Khii and Heat as external causes of disease.

Overall, the three essences theory in TMM reflects a synthesis of influences from both Tibetan and Chinese medicine, adapted to Mongolia's unique cultural and environmental context. It demonstrates a shared philosophical framework that emphasizes the interdependence of elements and energies in maintaining health, but with distinct adaptations to meet specific societal needs.

Diagnostic principles

TMM employs a comprehensive diagnostic system rooted in centuries-old practices. This system emphasizes understanding the

human body in both its healthy and diseased states, viewing the balance of Khii, Shar, and Badgan as central to maintaining health. When these elements are in harmony, they promote well-being; however, disturbances lead to illness. The diagnostic methods in TMM are multifaceted, encompassing observation, palpation, and questioning.

Observation

Observation is divided into two primary parts: observing the external body symptoms and examining excretions [26]. The physician starts by examining the patient's physical appearance to detect imbalances in Khii, Shar, and Badgan. For instance, a Khii-dominated individual may exhibit a bluish, pale complexion, while a Shar-dominated person might have a yellowish, oily skin tone. A Badgan-dominated patient typically presents with a whitish complexion and lips. The overall condition of the patient is also assessed by noting the clarity of their mind and the functionality of their five sense organs. A deteriorating condition might manifest as a bowed head, wrinkled body, and blurred senses, whereas a clear mind and well-functioning senses, despite severe illness, indicate improvement [27].

Excretions, including sputum, saliva, vomit, excrement, perspiration, urine, and blood, provide critical diagnostic information. Each type of excretion is associated with specific imbalances: Khii-related sputum and saliva tend to be blackish, blue, or pale and thin with large bubbles; Shar-related urine is reddish-yellow, with a strong odor and much vapor; Badgan-related urine is cloudy with little odor or vapor. The color and quality of urine, in particular, are meticulously analyzed, reflecting the internal state of the body. The process involves observing urine at different stages: hot time (color, vapor, odor, and bubbles), warm time (sediments and albumins), and cold time (tarnish characteristics) [27]. For instance, Khii-related disorders result in very clear urine, while Shar-related issues produce reddish-yellow urine, and Badgan disorders result in cloudy urine.

Palpation

Pulse reading, a vital diagnostic tool, provides nuanced information about the patient's condition. According to the "Four Medical Tantras", pulse reading is a sophisticated technique divided into

thirteen sections [14]. This method requires the patient to be well-rested and on an empty stomach to ensure accurate readings. The pulse should be taken at dawn, before the sun rises and influences the body's state. The physician places the index, middle, and ring fingers on the radial arteries to feel the pulses, which act as messengers between the doctor and the patient's condition. Each pulse quality—whether strong, weak, rapid, or slow – offers insights into the imbalances of Khii, Shar, and Badgan [4]. For example, a rapid and strong pulse may indicate an excess of Shar, while a slow and weak pulse may suggest a dominance of Badgan.

Questioning

The questioning method involves a thorough interview to understand the patient's lifestyle, diet, symptoms, and any recent changes in their environment or habits. This method helps identify external factors that may have disturbed the balance of Khii, Shar, and Badgan [28, 29]. For instance, certain dietary habits, emotional stress, or seasonal changes can exacerbate imbalances. The physician asks about the onset and progression of symptoms, dietary preferences, sleep patterns, emotional state, and any recent physical or environmental changes. This comprehensive inquiry helps correlate the patient's symptoms with potential causes, guiding the physician towards a precise diagnosis and effective treatment plan. TMM's diagnostic principles are holistic, integrating detailed observations, pulse readings, and in-depth questioning to assess and treat imbalances in the body's fundamental elements. This approach underscores the intricate relationship between the physical, emotional, and environmental aspects of health, aiming to restore and maintain harmony within the body.

Treatment methods

TMM employs a multifaceted approach to treatment, addressing both the internal and external causes of illness. The treatment methods are grounded in the principles of balancing the three fundamental essences: Khii, Shar, and Badgan. These treatments are classified into four primary categories: diet, behavior, medication, and physical or accessory therapy.

Diet

Dietary recommendations in TMM are tailored to balance the disturbed essence. For patients with Khii disorders, foods that are rich in nutrition and warming in nature are prescribed. This includes horse meat, marmot meat, lamb, butter, vegetable oil, butter, molasses, alcohol, bone wine, milk soups, grain beer with angelica root, chicken, garlic, ginger, and onions. These foods are believed to restore the warmth and vitality that Khii disorders deplete. For those suffering from Shar-related issues, a cooling diet is recommended. This includes beef, goat meat, venison, vegetables, fresh butter, fresh low-fat cheese, fresh goat and cow's yogurt, buttermilk, boiled milk, warm water, weak tea, boiled spring water, game, and fat-free food. These foods help to mitigate the excessive heat and irritability associated with Shar imbalances. Badgan disorders are countered with foods that promote warmth and dryness. Mutton, fish, meat of carnivorous animals, barley, yak's yogurt, honey, hot boiled water, old alcohol, vintage wine, ginger decoctions, cooked vegetables, and stored grain grown in dry areas are recommended. These foods help reduce the cold and sluggish nature of Badgan disorders [30, 31].

Behavior

Behavioral recommendations also vary according to the imbalance. For Khii-related disorders, patients are advised to stay in a dark, warm room with a quiet atmosphere and pleasant company. This setting helps to calm the erratic nature of Khii imbalances. The environment should be serene, and the patient should avoid any physical or mental stress. Patients with Shar imbalances are encouraged to seek shaded, moist, clean, and airy places. Cool air and engaging in worry-free activities help in reducing the excessive heat of Shar. Badgan patients, on the other hand, need a warm, sunny environment and are

encouraged to engage in lots of physical exercise. This helps to counter the cold and sedentary nature of Badgan disorders [32, 33].

Medication

Medication in TMM is divided into two main sections: relief and evacuation. Relieving medications come in ten categories: decoction, powder, pills, paste, oil, ash, herbal extract, alcohol, precious elements, and herbs. These medications are aimed at alleviating symptoms and restoring balance. Evacuating medications are used to expel the excesses of the imbalanced essence from the body. They take seven forms: oil, purgative, emetic, nasal, mild nourishment, suppository, and anal purgative. These methods are designed to cleanse the body and restore the natural equilibrium of the three essences [34, 35].

Physical or accessory therapy

Physical therapy in TMM includes both mild and rough treatments. Mild therapies involve hot applications, massage, oil application, and soaking. For example, a mild therapy for Khii disorders might include massages with year-old butter and hot oil applications to specific points associated with Khii. Rough therapies are more invasive and include venesection, moxibustion, and acupuncture. These methods are used for more severe imbalances. For instance, rough therapy for a Khii disorder might involve moxibustion at specific points such as the top of the head, the first, fifth, and sixth vertebrae of the spinal cord, and the sternum. In the case of Shar disorders, mild therapy might include soaking, covering therapy, and mild purgatives, whereas rough therapy could involve venesection and cupping. For Badgan disorders, mild therapy could involve hot applications, saunas, and mild vomiting, while rough therapy might include hot acupuncture and extensive moxibustion [36–38].

The treatment methods in TMM are diverse and deeply rooted in the holistic philosophy of balancing the three fundamental essences: Khii, Shar, and Badgan. By addressing diet, behavior, medication, and physical therapy, TMM aims to restore and maintain the body's natural equilibrium, thus ensuring overall health and well-being. The comprehensive approach of TMM highlights the importance of personalized care and the interconnection between physical, mental, and environmental factors in the healing process.

Conclusion

TMM offers a comprehensive and holistic approach to health by focusing on the balance of Khii, Shar, and Badgan. Its principles and treatments, grounded in ancient philosophy, provide valuable insights into maintaining health and treating diseases. By integrating diet, behavior, herbal remedies, and accessory therapies, TMM emphasizes the interconnectedness of body, mind, and environment in promoting well-being.

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