

## TƏBİƏT ELMLƏRİ NATURAL SCIENCES

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### HEALTHCARE COLLABORATION BETWEEN CHINA AND AZERBAIJAN UNDER THE 'SILK ROAD OF HEALTH' INITIATIVE

#### Abstract

The article emphasizes the critical developments and agreements defining China and Azerbaijan's healthcare collaboration, highlighting the significant roles played by various institutions and governmental bodies. It delves into the enhancement of this partnership due to the COVID-19 pandemic, illustrating instances of mutual aid, cooperation, and the sharing of medical expertise. Additionally, the article explores the dynamics of post-pandemic cooperation, concentrating on the assimilation of traditional Chinese medicine into Azerbaijan's healthcare framework and the importance of cultural exchange in building international relationships.

**Keywords:** *Azerbaijan-China Relations, healthcare collaboration, Silk Road of Health, COVID-19 Pandemic, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Post-pandemic dynamics*

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### Çin və Azərbaycan arasında “Sağlamlıq ipək yolu” təşəbbüsü çərçivəsində sağlamlıq sahəsində əməkdaşlıq

#### Xülasə

Məqalə, Çin və Azərbaycanın sağlamlıq sahəsindəki əməkdaşlığını müəyyənləşdirən kritik inkişaf və razılaşmaları vurğulayır, müxtəlif qurum və dövlət orqanlarının əhəmiyyətli rollarını önə çəkir. COVID-19 pandemiyası nəticəsində bu tərəfdaşlığın gücləndirilməsi, qarşılıqlı yardım, əməkdaşlıq və tibbi mütəxəssislik bölüşmə hallarını əks etdirir. Bundan əlavə, məqalə pandemiya sonrası əməkdaşlıq dinamikasını araşdırır, Azərbaycanın sağlamlıq sistemində ənənəvi Çin təbabətinin istifadə edilməsinə və beynəlxalq münasibətlərin qurulmasında mədəni mübadilənin əhəmiyyətinə diqqət yetirir.

**Açar sözlər:** *Azərbaycan-Çin münasibətləri, səhiyyə əməkdaşlığı, Sağlamlıq İpək Yolu, COVID-19 pandemiyası, Ənənəvi Çin Təbabəti, Post-pandemiya dinamikası*

#### Introduction

Global Health Diplomacy and China's “Silk Road of Health” Initiative.

Global Health Diplomacy, an integral component of international relations, is pivotal in tackling global health challenges. It intersects public health, international affairs, and soft power, favoring cooperation over competition. Traditional health diplomacy focuses on urgent health crises and disease eradication; however, a new paradigm includes broader health determinants like economic policies and trade agreements (Ruckert, 2016: 61-72).

China has emerged as a key player in global health diplomacy, reflecting its foreign policy evolution. Its strategies encompass health aid, health technology collaboration, and active involvement in global health governance (Shaoyu Yuan, 2023: 333-346). China's health diplomacy is marked by bilateral and multilateral agreements and participation in global health institutions, aiming to enhance health outcomes, develop capacity in partner nations, and boost its global stature and soft power.

A pivotal moment in Chinese health diplomacy was President Xi Jinping's proposal on June 22, 2016, at the Uzbekistan Supreme Assembly (3). He suggested expanding medical and health cooperation, leading to the "Silk Road of Health" concept. This idea, central to China's foreign relations and international health diplomacy, emphasized collaborative action in infectious disease control, medical aid, and Chinese Traditional medicine. The "Silk Road of Health" was further advanced by the "Healthy China 2030 Planning Outline", launched on October 25, 2016, by China's Central Committee and the State Council, integrating health objectives into national and international policies (Luo Yuansheng, 2020: 23).

The Chinese government, at various levels, backs this initiative through strategic planning, policymaking, and resource allocation, encouraging participation from NGOs, think tanks, and businesses. The aim is to boost cooperative capabilities and establish a national health framework within the "Belt and Road" initiative.

Another key event was the 9th Global Conference on Health Promotion in Shanghai in November 2016, co-hosted by China and the WHO, resulting in the "Shanghai Declaration" (WHO, 2017). This declaration reinforced the commitment to stronger global health governance aligned with sustainable development goals.

The "Silk Road of Health" is designed to enhance health and sanitation standards in countries along the "Belt and Road" corridor. It's founded on a combination of multilateral and bilateral agreements, establishing a strategic health cooperation framework across six major economic corridors and key route countries.

#### China-Azerbaijan Cooperation

The cooperation between Azerbaijan and China in the health, hygiene, and medical field traces back to the initial establishment of diplomatic ties between the two nations (Li Xiangyang, 2018: 109).

A pivotal moment in this collaboration was on August 24, 2007, when Chen Zhu, then Minister of Health of China, met in Beijing with his Azerbaijani counterpart, Minister Oqtay Shiraliyev (7; 8). At that period happened the robust cooperative relationship between the health departments of the two countries. Both China and Azerbaijan agreed on strengthen the existing good cooperation by intensifying expert exchanges, technical and information sharing in medical studies and healthcare system. Some new cooperation agreements were signed in due course. These agreements propelled the development of bilateral relations and benefit the peoples of both countries.

Several key medical institutions, including the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Beijing Union Medical College Hospital, Fuxing Community Health Center, and National Food and Drug Administration were included into cooperation between China and Azerbaijan.

In another significant interaction on August 24, 2011, in Baku Azerbaijani Health Minister Oqtay Shiraliyev met with the Deputy Minister of Health of the People's Republic of China (9). Ministers acknowledged China's attention to the pharmaceutical sector and rise of Chinese Traditional medicine. Azerbaijan's interest in benefiting from China's experience in healthcare started to rise, and that reflects a broader desire for collaborative growth and mutual learning.

Then, about 8 years after, on August 30, 2019, a significant event marked the flourishing collaboration between Azerbaijan and China in the field of science and education. The Azerbaijani Medical University (ATU) hosted a delegation from the Chinese Academy of Sciences, led by Director of the Drug Research and Development Center of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (10).

During that meeting, was shared deep knowledge of how China and Azerbaijan medical institutions can cooperate in exchanges and launching bilateral trainings and other crucial issues.

In alignment with China's "Belt and Road" initiative, and to promote cultural exchanges, interactions, and strengthen tourism and medical trade between the two countries, DeKang International Health Consulting Group established a strategic international relationship with Azerbaijan's CHENOT Medical Group on April 18, 2018 (11). The collaboration between DeKang International and CHENOT Group signified a solid foundation for high-end medical cooperation and medical tourism between China and Azerbaijan.

COVID-19 as the Catalyst for Enhanced Collaborative Engagement.

In January 2020, the seeds of a deepened collaborative relationship in healthcare were sown during a seminar at the Jiangsu Province Parasitic Disease Institute in Wuxi, China (12). This seminar, focusing on "Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases for Developing Countries," was not just a gathering of health experts but a precursor to a robust partnership between China and Azerbaijan. Emin Dadashov from Azerbaijan represented his country, engaging in discussions on infectious diseases such as schistosomiasis, HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria, and learning about China's vaccination strategies and healthcare system organization. This seminar set the stage for a shared understanding and cooperation, which would soon prove crucial as the world faced the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic, erupting shortly after this seminar, became a turning point in China-Azerbaijan healthcare collaboration. It was not just a crisis to be managed but an opportunity to strengthen ties under the 'Silk Road of Health' initiative. The pandemic necessitated immediate and concerted actions, with both countries stepping up to demonstrate an exemplary partnership.

Ambassador Guo Min's meeting with Bahar Muradova in September 2020 epitomized this cooperation, and during that meeting was highlighted China's readiness to collaborate in protecting the rights and interests of women and children during the pandemic (13). The donation of children's masks to Azerbaijani schools was a tangible manifestation of this commitment.

The deployment of a Chinese medical team to Azerbaijan in August 2020 was a significant move. This team, comprising experts from the Sichuan Provincial Health Commission, showcased China's willingness to share expertise and resources (14; 15). Their activities in Baku, Jalilabad, and Sumgayit, including visiting hospitals, test labs, blood banks, and conducting seminars, went beyond mere aid; it was a transfer of knowledge and experience in epidemic control and management (16; 17).

The solidarity between China and Azerbaijan was further cemented through various diplomatic exchanges and support. The provision of COVID-19 test kits and medical supplies from China was a strong gesture of support (18). These actions, acknowledged by Azerbaijani officials like Deputy Foreign Minister Ramiz Həsənov and Deputy Minister of Health Viktor Qasimov, were crucial in strengthening the fight against the pandemic in Azerbaijan. Conversely, Azerbaijan's support to China during the early stages of the pandemic showcased mutual respect and solidarity.

A pivotal element in the Sino-Azerbaijani collaboration was in the frames of so-called "vaccine diplomacy" (19). The arrival of the Sinovac vaccine in Azerbaijan, facilitated through China's assistance, marked a significant achievement in this partnership. This was more than a transaction of medical supplies; it was a demonstration of mutual commitment to safeguard public health.

The collaboration was not confined to government-to-government interactions. The humanitarian aid from the Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation, which included essential medical supplies, reflected the role of private entities in augmenting public health efforts (20). This support underscored a comprehensive approach to pandemic response, involving various sectors of society.

The continued partnership between China and Azerbaijan can evolve to address other health challenges, potentially expanding to areas like research and development in healthcare, public health policy formulation, and capacity building.

The COVID-19 pandemic, while a challenge, has provided a unique opportunity to strengthen international ties and reshape healthcare collaboration. The China-Azerbaijan partnership under the 'Silk Road of Health' initiative has demonstrated that through joint efforts and shared vision, it is possible to create a healthier and more resilient world.

#### Cooperation Dynamics After COVID-19.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world witnessed a paradigm shift in cooperation dynamics, particularly in the fields of healthcare, rehabilitation, and cultural exchange. Azerbaijan, one of the players in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), emerged as a focal point of this transformation, intertwining traditional Eastern practices with modern rehabilitation techniques, and fostering international collaborations, especially with China.

On March 2, 2023, the Special Representative of the Chinese Government on Eurasian Affairs, Li Hui, attended the NAM Contact Group Summit in Baku, focusing on post-pandemic global recovery (21). He praised Azerbaijan's contribution to NAM and highlighted the importance of international unity and cooperation for economic revival and global governance. China's readiness to deepen ties with NAM countries and support their role in international affairs underlines the significance of South-South cooperation in building a shared future for humanity.

In August 2023, Azerbaijan's Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population, through its State Medical-Social Expertise and Rehabilitation Agency, introduced acupuncture as an alternative rehabilitation method at the Baku Rehabilitation Center (22). This initiative, led by Hasan Askarov, a specialist in Chinese medicine of Azerbaijani origin, marked a significant step in integrating Traditional Chinese medical practices into Azerbaijan's healthcare system.

In August 2023, the Confucius Institute at the Azerbaijan University of Languages held series of lectures for students focused on "Chinese Traditional Medicine" in honor of Chinese Doctors' Day (23). And the famous traditional Chinese medicine doctor, professor of Zhejiang Traditional Chinese Medicine University Wang Quanqing, and the head nurse of the Spinal Diseases Diagnosis and Treatment Center at the Zhejiang Traditional Chinese Medicine University Clinic, Gu Minjie, have conducted sessions on Chinese therapeutic massage, acupuncture, moxibustion, and phytotherapy.

The collaboration between Azerbaijan and China in the field of traditional medicine has been a cornerstone of their healthcare diplomacy. This cooperation was further strengthened by the opening of the Chinese Medicine Clinic in Lankaran in April 2023, following similar establishments in Baku and Ganja (24). The clinic, emphasizing natural and traditional treatment methods, signifies a commitment to holistic healthcare and the importance of traditional practices in modern medicine.

The post-COVID-19 era has ushered in a new era of cooperation, where traditional practices are being harmonized with modern techniques, and cultural exchanges are paving the way for deeper international relationships. Azerbaijan's initiatives in integrating Chinese traditional medicine and therapies into its healthcare system, coupled with its active role in NAM, showcase a model of collaboration that transcends borders and disciplines. This blend of healthcare innovation and cultural diplomacy highlights the potential for a more interconnected and holistic approach to global challenges, underscoring the importance of cooperation and mutual understanding in the journey towards global recovery and resilience.

### Conclusion

The mutual efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly strengthened partnership between Azerbaijan and China, including the effectiveness of international cooperation in health diplomacy. The integration of traditional Chinese medicine into Azerbaijan's healthcare system and the ongoing cultural exchanges underscore the broader implications of this collaboration, beyond immediate health concerns. As the world move into the post-pandemic era, this partnership serves as a testament to the power of combining traditional and modern healthcare approaches, fostering mutual learning, and building resilient international relationships. The China-Azerbaijan health

cooperation has a potential for creating a more interconnected and holistic approach to global health challenges, emphasizing the importance of cultural understanding and cooperation in shaping a healthier, more cooperative world.

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