

Analysis of the Application of the “Heaven-Human Correspondence” Theory in Contemporary Traditional Chinese Medicine Health Preservation

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Abstract: “Heaven-Human Correspondence” is the core tenet of the holistic concept in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), rooted in the Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon. Its fundamental proposition is that human life activities do not exist in isolation but are deeply interwoven with the succession of the four seasons, the alternation of day and night, and the climatic environment, collectively forming a dynamically coordinated whole. This thought also provides the underlying logic for the TCM tradition of “preventive treatment of disease” (Zhi Wei Bing) in health preservation. However, contemporary society commonly suffers from disrupted daily routines, off-season dietary habits, constant temperature-controlled enclosed environments, and emotional dysregulation, which continuously undermine the inherent rhythm between humans and nature, with the sub-health population growing year by year. Western health management focuses predominantly on single biochemical indicators and lacks approaches that coordinate human rhythms with natural cycles. This article reviews the origins and multilayered connotations of the Heaven-Human Correspondence theory, and elaborates on its practical value in modern public health preservation from three dimensions—seasonal regulation according to the four seasons, circadian rhythm maintenance, and environmental adaptation—integrating contemporary research findings from chronobiology and constitutionbased medicine. It aims to provide a theoretical reference for the popularization of TCM-based lifestyle health preservation and the construction of nationwide health initiatives.

Keywords: Heaven-human correspondence; Traditional Chinese medicine health preservation; Holistic concept ; Preventive treatment; Chronomedicine

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1. Introduction

The holistic view is a distinctive feature that differentiates TCM from modern medicine, and “Heaven-Human Correspondence” serves as the most essential theoretical carrier of this holistic concept. It

is fully documented and systematized in the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon, which posits the fundamental assertion that "humans are born from the Qi of Heaven and Earth, and are formed in accordance with the rhythms of the four seasons", explicitly stating that the Zang-fu organs, Qi and blood, meridian Qi dynamics, and the waxing and waning of Yin and Yang in the human body all resonate with the rhythms of nature, and the two cannot be viewed in isolation ^[1].

With the ongoing urbanization and transformation of modern lifestyles, behaviors such as prolonged sitting, physical inactivity, reversed day-night cycles, long-term exposure to air-conditioned environments, excessive consumption of cold drinks and food, and emotional depletion have continuously disrupted the balance between humans and nature. Sub-health problems—including insomnia, spleen-stomach weakness, fatigue, recurrent external infections, and emotional anxiety—have become widespread health challenges in society. Western health management primarily focuses on disease treatment and biochemical indicator intervention, lacking comprehensive regulatory approaches that incorporate temporal and environmental dimensions. In contrast, the Heaven-Human Correspondence theory, centered on "adapting to natural rhythms and harmonizing human and nature", aligns with the TCM preventive philosophy of "treating before illness arises" and offers advantages of low cost, easy implementation, and broad applicability in health preservation.

In recent years, research in chronobiology and environmental epigenetics has confirmed the existence of multi-level endogenous biological rhythms in the human body, providing modern evidence-based support for the Heaven-Human Correspondence theory ^[2]. Grounded in classical TCM theory and drawing on relevant recent literature, this article systematically reviews the basic connotations of Heaven-Human Correspondence and its practical pathways in contemporary health preservation, aiming to provide a comprehensive overview that bridges classical and modern perspectives for TCM students engaged in the study of health preservation theory.

2. Core connotations of the heavenhuman correspondence theory

Heaven-Human Correspondence is not a simplistic mechanical mapping of the human body to natural phenomena, but rather a dynamic equilibrium system interwoven with Qi monism, Yin-Yang and the Five Phases, and the temporal correlations of Zang-Xiang (visceral manifestations). It comprises three layers of core logic:

2.1. Synchronization of four-season Yin-Yang with the Qi transformation of the five Zang organs

The natural Yin-Yang rhythms of spring birth, summer growth, autumn harvest, and winter storage directly correspond to the physiological governing functions of the five Zang organs: in spring, Yang Qi ascends and liver Qi governs dispersion and drainage; in summer, Yang Qi flourishes and heart Qi governs blood and vessels; in autumn, Yang Qi converges and descends, and lung Qi governs clearing and moistening; in winter, Yang Qi is stored and kidney Qi governs consolidation and storage of essential substance. Seasonal climate influences Zang-fu functions through the ascent and descent of Qi dynamics. Following the seasons keeps the Qi transformation of Zang-fu organs balanced, while going against them leads to stagnation of Qi movement and imbalance of Yin and Yang. Wang Yilan et al. pointed out that the Five Phases framework serves as a horizontal correlative tool for Heaven-

Human Correspondence, Yin-Yang explains the core laws of waxing and waning between heaven and humans, and Qi is the material medium connecting humans with nature ^[3].

2.2. Circadian rhythm dominating the flow of Qi and blood (Zi-Wu Liu Zhu)

The daily waxing and waning of Yin and Yang regulates the circulation of defensive Qi (Wei Qi) and the timing of Zang-fu organ restoration. During daytime, Yang Qi is abundant and defensive Qi moves in the Yang aspect, supporting physical activity and active metabolism; at night, Yin Qi predominates, and defensive Qi moves in the Yin aspect, allowing the Zang-fu organs to repair and store nutrients. Zi-Wu Liu Zhu further refines the rhythm of each of the twelve two-hour periods corresponding to specific Zangfu organs: during the Zi (23:00–1:00) and Chou (1:00–3:00) periods, the liver and gallbladder store blood and detoxify; during the Yin (3:00–5:00) and Mao (5:00–7:00) periods, lung Qi distributes Qi and blood throughout the body. Sound sleep at night is a critical window for the nourishment of Yin fluids and the storage of Qi and blood. Chronic reversal of day-night cycles directly disrupts the restorative rhythm of Zangfu organs, depleting liver Yin and kidney essence, and triggering multisystem subhealth impairments.

2.3. The six climatic factors determining the risk of external pathogenic invasion

The six climatic Qi—wind, cold, summer-heat, dampness, dryness, and fire—when in balance, serve as nourishing Qi for the body. However, abnormal weather, sudden temperature changes, and imbalanced human living environments transform them into the six pathogenic Qi (Liu Yin) that invade the body through the skin and interstices, damaging the corresponding Zang-fu organs. Modern enclosed, constant-temperature buildings weaken the body's adaptive capacity to natural climate changes; the opening and closing of the pores and interstices become dysfunctional, and the body's defensive Qi (upright Qi) declines in its ability to ward off external pathogens, leading to increased susceptibility to seasonal colds, arthralgia, and allergic diseases. The essence of Heaven-Human Correspondence is not passive adaptation to the environment, but active harmonization of the balance between humans and nature, in order to achieve the healthy state of “when healthy Qi is stored inside, pathogenic factors cannot invade” ^[1].

3. Practical application of the heaven–human correspondence theory in contemporary health preservation

3.1. Seasonal health preservation according to the four seasons to harmonize the Qi of the five viscera

Seasonal health preservation is the most widely applied scenario of the Heaven–Human Correspondence theory. Following the general principle of “nourish Yang in spring and summer, and nourish Yin in autumn and winter”, differentiated conditioning regimens are formulated in accordance with the dominating viscus of each season:

(1) Spring

Soothe the liver and raise Yang. Spring wood corresponds to the liver, and Yang Qi begins to ascend. It is advisable to engage in moderate outdoor walking and light exercises such as Baduanjin to stretch and regulate Qi movement; to consume a light diet and reduce fried, sweet, and greasy foods that may promote dampness; and to avoid violent anger or prolonged suppression, which may cause liver Qi stagnation. Li Qiang et al. proposed that the core of nourishing Yang in spring and summer is to regulate water and

fire, consolidate the root of Yang, and avoid premature exposure to cold that may damage the newly emerging Yang^[4].

(2) Summer

Clear the heart, strengthen the spleen, and eliminate dampness. Summer fire corresponds to the heart, and summer heat intertwines with dampness. Health preservation should focus on clearing heart heat, relieving summer heat, strengthening the spleen, and transforming dampness. Reduce prolonged direct air-conditioning exposure, and avoid cold drinks and raw, cold fruits to prevent cold-dampness from trapping spleen Yang. Daily consumption of wax gourd, adzuki bean, and Poria can strengthen the spleen and resolve dampness, while an afternoon nap helps nourish heart Yin.

(3) Autumn

Moisten the lung and conserve body fluid. Autumn metal corresponds to the lung. The climate is dry and descending, which tends to consume lung fluid, manifesting as dry throat, dry cough, and dry skin. Reduce strenuous, sweat-inducing exercise; consume more pear, lily bulb, and white fungus to moisten the lung; and regulate emotions to reduce grief and worry that may deplete lung Qi.

(4) Winter

Warm the kidney and store essence. Winter water corresponds to the kidney, and Yang Qi is stored and concealed. It is appropriate to rest quietly and consolidate the root, avoiding late-night work and vigorous exercise that cause excessive sweating and deplete kidney essence. Moderate warming supplements such as mutton, Chinese yam, and wolfberry are recommended, with attention to keeping the feet and lower abdomen warm, in accordance with the law of winter storage to conserve essence.

Zhang Ying et al., through chrono-viscera research, confirmed that seasonal disturbances in visceral rhythms are core triggers for the high incidence of seasonal fatigue, allergic diseases, and emotional disorders, and that timely conditioning can significantly reduce the incidence of sub-health conditions^[5].

3.2. Adapting to circadian rhythms to nourish Qi, blood, Yin, and Yang

Staying up late and reversing day-night cycles are the primary behaviors among contemporary young people that violate the Heaven–Human regularity, and they are also key triggers for the high prevalence of sub-health. The midnight-noon ebb-flow theory clearly states that the Hai period (21:00–23:00) is suitable for quiet rest and calming the spirit; the Zi period (23:00–1:00) is when the liver and gallbladder store blood for repair, the Chou period nourishes liver blood, and the Yin period sees the lung distributing Qi and blood. Falling asleep before 23:00 is a basic requirement for nourishing Yin and blood^[1].

Long-term sleep deprivation may lead to the liver failing to maintain free flow, deficiency of Yin fluid, and clinical manifestations such as hair loss, dull complexion, insomnia with vivid dreams, menstrual disorders, fatigue, and forgetfulness. Modern chronomedicine research has confirmed that circadian rhythm disruption interferes with the expression of biological clock genes, inducing endocrine and immune dysfunction, which closely aligns with the TCM pathogenesis of “damaging Yin and consuming Qi”^[2]. Daily health preservation should establish the habit of early sleeping and early rising, with moderate daytime sunlight exposure and activity to elevate Yang Qi, while reducing electronic screen stimulation at night to calm the mind and consolidate Yin Qi, thereby restoring the day-night balance of Yin and Yang.

3.3. Adapting to environmental changes and actively avoiding external pathogens

The modern urban lifestyle, characterized by constant indoor temperatures and sealed living environments, cuts off regular contact between the human body and natural climate, leading to degeneration of the body's defensive regulatory functions and increasing susceptibility to external pathogens when facing temperature changes or wind and rain. According to the Heaven–Human Correspondence theory, environmental regulation can be summarized in three aspects:

First, adjust clothing promptly according to temperature and solar terms; avoid direct cold air from air conditioners on the neck, shoulders, and lower abdomen in summer, and ensure moderate indoor ventilation in winter to reduce dryness-heat that may deplete Yin. Second, engage in moderate outdoor contact with nature; increase outdoor activities in spring and autumn to train the body's ability to regulate cold and heat, and enhance the defensive Qi that consolidates the exterior. Third, combine constitutional and seasonal care. As Wang Qi's TCM constitution theory points out, people with a Yang-deficiency constitution should focus on preventing cold-dampness in autumn and winter; those with a Yin-deficiency constitution should emphasize moistening dryness and clearing heat in summer and autumn; and those with a damp-heat constitution should strengthen spleen-strengthening and damp-eliminating measures in late summer, achieving individualized health preservation according to “the individual, the season, and the locality”^[6].

Liu Bingbing et al. confirmed that seasonal temperature differences and indoor-outdoor environmental imbalances are important triggers for stroke and respiratory diseases, and that environmental regulation based on the Heaven–Human Correspondence can effectively reduce the risk of chronic disease exacerbations and achieve prevention before disease onset^[7].

4. Problems and prospects

Currently, the promotion of health preservation based on the Heaven–Human Correspondence theory still has limitations: first, the public's understanding of the theory remains fragmented, with knowledge only of seasonal health preservation while neglecting coordinated regulation of circadian rhythms, environment, and constitution; second, the fast-paced modern work style makes it difficult to fully comply with seasonal daily routines, resulting in a disconnect between theory and real-life practice; third, related popular science mostly remains at the empirical level, and molecular mechanisms of chronohealth preservation and large-sample evidence-based clinical studies still need further improvement^[2].

Against the backdrop of the Healthy China strategy, the Heaven–Human Correspondence theory holds great potential for application. In the future, multi-level empirical studies integrating chronobiology and constitutional medicine can be carried out, while simplifying health preservation protocols to suit the daily schedules of different populations, including office workers, students, and older people, thereby promoting the normalization and standardization of TCM seasonal health preservation. Integrating the “preventing disease” concept of Heaven–Human Correspondence into daily health management can compensate for the shortcomings of modern medicine, which emphasizes treatment over prevention and neglects the connection between humans and nature, thus contributing to the improvement of the national health system.

5. Conclusion

“Heaven–Human Correspondence theory” is the core wisdom of traditional Chinese medicine passed

down from the Huangdi Neijing, which constructs a health cognition framework that coordinates and unifies humans with natural seasons, rhythms, and environments ^[1]. In the face of the high prevalence of sub-health conditions in contemporary society, the health preservation model based on the correspondence between Heaven and Human—following the four seasons, adhering to day-night rhythms, and adjusting to environmental factors—possesses both theoretical depth and practical value. By abandoning the mechanized, single-indicator modern health management approach, and by integrating the principles of conforming to nature and harmonizing the whole into daily routines, diet, and lifestyle, one can protect the body’s vital Qi and reduce various mild-to-moderate health problems caused by imbalances in emotions, workrest schedules, and environmental factors. Continuous exploration of the modern scientific connotations of Heaven–Human Correspondence theory and promotion of the popularization of traditional Chinese medicine health preservation can fully leverage the advantages of TCM in prevention and health care, providing unique TCM solutions for the national health cause.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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