

# New Solution and Application of the Theory of “Acting According to Time”

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**Abstract:** From the perspective of theoretical analysis, based on the annotation of ancient doctors on the theory of “acting according to time,” this article puts forward the view of “time”; that is, the impact of the social environment on the occurrence and development of diseases. In addition, it points out that the characteristics of modern diseases are of “multiple heat syndromes and multiple repletion pattern.” Based on this characteristic, the use of heat-clearing drugs in the clinical stage would have a good effect. It has been suggested that contemporary doctors should not only inherit the theories from predecessors, but also think diligently and innovate bravely along with the current environment in order to ensure that the theories of TCM are constantly full of vitality to better serve the clinical aspect.

**Keywords:** Acting according to time; Setting measures according to three causes; Theoretical explanation; Basic theory of traditional Chinese medicine

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## 1. Theoretical traceability

The theory of “acting according to time” has richness and maturity of medical experts from past dynasties. During the Qin and Han Dynasties, Huangdi Neijing discussed the relationship between seasons and human physiology, pathology, treatment, prognosis, and so on, which laid a theoretical foundation for acting according to time <sup>[1]</sup>. For example, the “Treatise on the Vital Qi Connecting with Heaven” in “Plain Questions” states, “In the human body, Yang Qi mainly plays the role of protecting the body surface during the day. In the morning, a person’s Yang Qi is born from the inside, and travels to the body surface; at noon, the person’s Yang is the most prosperous; in the evening, the person’s Yang Qi goes into the body, gradually reducing the Yang Qi on the surface, thus closing the sweat pores <sup>[2]</sup>.” From the Warring States period to the Tang and Song Dynasties, in regard to health preservation, there had been discussions: “Do not eat raw scallions in the first month as they cause facial skin diseases, such as acne; do not eat polygonum in February as it wounds the kidney; do not eat small garlic in March as it affects people’s will; do not eat Allium Chinense G. Don in November or December as it causes a lot of nasal mucus <sup>[3]</sup>.” All these embody the principle of preserving good health under the guidance of “acting according to time.” During the Jin and Yuan Dynasties, numerous outstanding doctors had emerged, all of whom were quite proficient in and applied the academic thought of “acting according to time.” During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the “School of Epidemic Febrile Diseases” summarized the characteristic occurrences of seasonal febrile diseases, which further supplemented and improved the theory. As exemplified by Tianshi Ye in “A Guide to Clinical Practice with Medical Record – Spring Warmth and Wind Warmth,” “Spring is warm with considerable wind warmth. Warmth transforms into heat diseases the fastest. If the diverging wind chills, it will rob the body fluid, and change diseases rapidly <sup>[4]</sup>.” Xichun Zhang, a great scholar during the late

Qing Dynasty, clearly pointed out in the “Records of Tradition Chinese and Western Medicine in Combination” that doctors should treat diseases according to time. It is understood that human talent is transferred with the essence from heaven and earth; the essence of ancient and modern times may be different, thus having a difference in terms of strength, thickness, and partial Yin-Yang between modern people and ancient people. Ancient prescriptions are used today, and they should be modified according to time <sup>[5]</sup>.

By tracing back to the continuous improvement of this thought by ancient medical practitioners, it can be concluded that the traditional view of “time” refers to seasonal and climatic characteristics of nature as well as the time change law of year, month, and day <sup>[6]</sup>. Influenced by this view, various medical schools have been formed, and it has a great impact on the clinical treatment of diseases in later years.

## 2. New theoretical solution

With the continuous change and development of society, “according to time” does not only refer to the effect of climate change during different seasons on human diseases, but also different eras because different politics, economies, and cultures influences that occurrence and development of diseases. For example, in the “Treatise on Febrile and Miscellaneous Diseases,” Zhongjing Zhang was from the late Eastern Han Dynasty. During that era, with continuous political turmoil, social darkness, and constant war, people were facing cold and hunger, thus suffering from many virtual and cold diseases. Therefore, more than 80% of the drugs found in the “Treatise on Febrile and Miscellaneous Diseases” are heat drugs and warm tonics. In another example, three out of four great masters of Jin and Yuan Dynasties, Wansu Liu (1120-1200), Congzheng Zhang (1156-1228), and Dongyuan Li (1180-1251), were all northerners of the Jin Dynasty (1115-1234) but they had completely different academic views because they lived in different eras and social environments. Wansu Liu and Congzheng Zhang lived in the heyday of the Jin Dynasty. Under the rule of Emperor Shizong and Emperor Zhangzong of Jin, the society was relatively stable with transparent politics; the people lived and worked in peace and contentment. Therefore, most of the diseases then were repletion patterns and heat syndromes. The two great masters used cold, attacking evil method in their treatment of these diseases. Dongyuan Li lived in the late Jin Dynasty. During Jin and Yuan Dynasties, the ruling class extorted money and ruled brutally. The people suffered from mental devastation, hunger and cold, as well as severe disasters. Most of the diseases they suffered from had vacuity patterns and were of cold syndrome. In regard to that, Dongyuan Li proposed, “Internal injuries to the spleen and stomach cause all kinds of diseases”; thus, he treated diseases by warming the spleen and stomach. His Yang-Upbearing Stomach-Boosting Decoction and Aquilaria Stomach-Warming Pill were generally heat drugs.

We are now living in a period where we have more than enough food and clothing. This is because people have become materially rich, but they are unable to afford to live a rich life in terms of ideological and cultural quality. They pursue material enjoyment, drinking, and eating while worrying about gains and losses with an empty spirit. Physical activities at work are lesser in demand, and even then, most people refuse to take part in physical exercises outside work. Competition in all walks of life is becoming increasingly fierce, new things are emerging, and people’s living pressures are increasing. All the aforementioned result in a relatively rich human Qi and blood, loss of smooth operation, Qi and blood stasis, and the transformation into heat; thus, people are now suffering from diseases which have repletion pattern, heat syndrome, liver stagnation, and Qi stagnation.

There is evidence to use its prescription, there is evidence to use its medicine. Therefore, based on the characteristics of the diseases in today’s era – multi-heat syndrome and multi-repletion pattern, heat clearing drugs should be flexibly used when prescribing medications, such as *Coptis chinensis* and *Radix Sophorae Flavescentis*. *Coptis chinensis* has a bitter and cold taste. According to the Herbal Foundation, it

is bitter, cold, dry, and wet. It can relieve all excess wet fire and cure heat at the heart, spleen, liver, and kidney, as well as the fire at the gallbladder, stomach, and intestines. From eye diseases of wind and fire, to the relieve of vomiting due to the liver and stomach, down to the stagnation of abdominal pain, are dry dampness and clear heat effect <sup>[7]</sup>. It has the merit of taking into account the three cavities. The Herbal Foundation also evaluated Radix Sophorae Flavescentis as having great bitterness and coldness, heat-relieving and heat-releasing, as well as damp fire <sup>[8]</sup>. For patients with hyperactive heart fire with heart fire moving down the small intestine, they can be treated in combination with *Coptis chinensis* and treated up and down together.

### Disclosure statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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