

# The Enlightenment and Guidance of the Theory of Qi, Blood, Phlegm, and Stagnation for Modern Emotional Disorders Treatment

Zhiru Cheng

Changchun Sci-Tech University, Changchun, Jilin, China  
[chengzi011107@163.com](mailto:chengzi011107@163.com)

## ABSTRACT

Zhu Danxi's emotional disorder theory, as an important part of traditional Chinese medicine, reveals the etiology and treatment methods of emotional disorders through core concepts such as the "Theory of Qi, Blood, Phlegm, and Stagnation," and the "Theory of Ministerial Fire." This paper explores the application of Zhu Danxi's theories, such as the Yin-Nourishing Theory, Six Stagnations Theory, and Emotion Regulating Method, in comparison with modern emotional disorder therapies such as cognitive therapy and Morita therapy. Research shows that Zhu's theory not only has unique advantages in regulating emotions and balancing the mind and body but also provides innovative ideas for modern mental disorder treatment, emphasizing dialectical treatment and emotional regulation. On this basis, the paper proposes combining Zhu Danxi's theories with modern treatment methods to create a more personalized and comprehensive emotional disorder treatment system to improve clinical efficacy and patient quality of life. This paper aims to promote the integration of traditional Chinese emotional disorder theories with modern psychology and provide new theoretical foundations and practical guidance for Chinese medicine psychology.

## KEYWORDS

Zhu Danxi; Emotional Disorder Theory; Qi, Blood, Phlegm, and Stagnation Theory

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Emotional disorders are mind-body diseases caused by abnormal emotions, often presenting with anxiety, depression, insomnia, and affective disorders. With the acceleration of social development and life pace, the incidence of emotional disorders has increased yearly. Modern treatments, primarily cognitive therapy, behavioral therapy, and medication, focus on adjusting cognition, emotional guidance, and behavioral interventions. However, these methods often lack cultural adaptability, leading to unsatisfactory results due to cultural differences and varying therapeutic philosophies. In contrast, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) theories on emotional disorders are more flexible, integrating emotions, constitution, and environmental factors, providing advantages in personalized treatments. Zhu Danxi, a representative figure in TCM for treating emotional disorders, developed theories such as the "Theory of Qi, Blood, Phlegm, and Stagnation" and the "Theory of Ministerial Fire," providing a systematic framework and effective treatment methods. Zhu believed that emotional disorders arise from emotional imbalances and internal and external environmental stimuli, causing qi stagnation, blood stasis, and phlegm accumulation. His core ideas focus on regulating emotions, nourishing Yin, and relieving stagnation to balance physiological and psychological states, ultimately alleviating emotional symptoms [1].

## 2. OVERVIEW OF ZHU DANXI'S EMOTIONAL DISORDER THEORY

Zhu Danxi (1281-1358) was a renowned physician of the Yuan Dynasty and a prominent representative of the Zhejiang School of Chinese Medicine. He proposed a series of pioneering theories and treatments for emotional disorders, which had a profound impact on the development of traditional Chinese medicine. Zhu Danxi believed that the root cause of emotional disorders lies in emotional imbalance, which often results from the combined influence of internal and external factors, including individual constitution, psychological state, and external environment. During treatment, he emphasized personalized and dialectical approaches, and developed several specific theories such as the Yin-Nourishing Theory, the Ministerial Fire Theory, the Six Stagnations Theory, and the Emotion Regulating Method. These theories share a common focus on a holistic approach, considering the dynamic balance of an individual's physical, psychological, and emotional states to restore overall health [2].

### 2.1. Yin-Nourishing Theory and the Ministerial Fire Theory

The Yin-Nourishing Theory and the Ministerial Fire Theory form the core of Zhu Danxi's approach to treating emotional disorders, providing significant theoretical and clinical guidance. The Yin-Nourishing Theory suggests that the body's Yin and Yang should remain in a dynamic balance. However, due to congenital deficiencies and emotional disturbances, "Yang is often in excess while Yin is deficient," leading to various emotional disorders. Zhu Danxi identified "excessive ministerial fire activity" as a major cause of depression. Thus, he emphasized nourishing Yin and reducing fire to restore the balance between Yin and Yang, thereby alleviating the physiological and pathological effects of emotional disturbances. The Ministerial Fire Theory, based on Zhu's understanding of the pathogenesis of emotional disorders, explains that "ministerial fire" refers to the internal fire energy that has a warming and activating function [3]. It is primarily associated with the liver and kidney in physiological terms and affects emotional activities in psychological terms. Zhu distinguished between "sovereign fire," which resides in the heart and governs consciousness, and "ministerial fire," which resides in the liver and kidney and is connected to the gate of life. The sovereign and ministerial fires interact and constrain each other, maintaining the normal physiological and psychological state of the body. If the sovereign fire is unclear or the ministerial fire becomes excessive, it can lead to mental abnormalities and emotional disorders. For example, excessive ministerial fire may damage true Yin, causing anxiety, depression, and fear; on the other hand, over-restriction of the ministerial fire can result in emotional suppression and depression. Based on this theory, Zhu proposed the treatment strategy of "nourishing Yin and reducing fire" to regulate liver and kidney functions, balance the sovereign and ministerial fires, and restore physiological and psychological harmony. In modern medicine, many emotional disorders are also closely related to imbalances in the nervous and endocrine systems. Zhu Danxi's Yin-Nourishing Theory and the Ministerial Fire Theory provide a framework for understanding the relationship between physiology and psychology, helping us to recognize the pathogenesis and treatment strategies for emotional disorders holistically. By nourishing Yin to regulate the ministerial fire, it can help patients recover physiological stability and alleviate emotional symptoms such as anxiety, insomnia, and depression. Furthermore, the pathological mechanism of "sovereign fire affecting ministerial fire" resonates with the influence of the subconscious mind on consciousness in modern psychopathology, reminding us that effective treatment should not only address surface-level emotional changes but also explore deeper psychological activities and their impact on physiology [4]. Overall, the Yin-Nourishing Theory and the Ministerial Fire Theory are crucial components of Zhu Danxi's emotional disorder theory, revealing the pathogenesis and treatment principles of emotional disorders, and providing theoretical support for modern emotional disorder treatments. Applying these principles to balance the physiological and psychological state of patients can enhance treatment efficacy and improve quality of life, offering a new approach for the treatment of emotional disorders in traditional Chinese medicine.

## 2.2. Six Stagnations Theory and the Emotion Regulating Method

Zhu Danxi's Six Stagnations Theory is an extension of the "Five Stagnations" Theory in the "Internal Classic". The Five Stagnations Theory holds that emotional imbalances can lead to disruptions in the body's qi, blood, phlegm, heat, and dampness, which, in turn, cause physiological and emotional disorders. Zhu Danxi added "food stagnation" to this theory, establishing the Six Stagnations Theory: qi stagnation, blood stagnation, phlegm stagnation, heat stagnation, dampness stagnation, and food stagnation. He systematically explained their etiology, pathogenesis, symptoms, and treatment, emphasizing the mutual influence between emotions and physiological systems. He believed that the formation of the six stagnations mainly results from emotional injury, internal blockage, and dysfunction of internal organs. Therefore, treatment should focus on overall regulation of emotions, qi, blood, and organ functions to eliminate stagnation and achieve therapeutic goals [5]. According to Zhu, the six stagnations often occur simultaneously in emotional disorders, manifesting in various combinations. Qi stagnation arises from worry or anger, presenting as chest tightness and low mood; blood stagnation occurs due to emotional suppression or trauma, causing menstrual pain or emotional depression; phlegm stagnation results from prolonged sadness or emotional injury, manifesting as chest congestion and insomnia; heat stagnation arises from prolonged anger or agitation, causing irritability and insomnia; dampness stagnation results from excessive worry or improper diet, leading to fatigue and loss of appetite; and food stagnation is caused by poor diet or emotional disturbances, leading to indigestion and abdominal discomfort. The Emotion Regulating Method, derived from the Six Stagnations Theory, uses the interrelationships between emotions to treat disorders. For example, "joy overcomes worry" and "anger overcomes pensiveness" utilize one emotion to counteract another pathological emotion. Specifically, if a patient suffers from lung qi stagnation due to worry, inducing joy can alleviate worry (joy overcomes worry); if excessive pensiveness disrupts the spleen, stimulating anger can disperse the stagnation (anger overcomes pensiveness). The method also includes strategies such as "pensiveness overcomes fear" and "fear overcomes anger." These approaches not only adjust emotional states through mutual regulation but also balance organ functions, helping to relieve physiological symptoms caused by emotional imbalances. In modern emotional disorder treatments, the Emotion Regulating Method provides a new perspective for emotional guidance and psychological intervention. Analyzing the patient's emotional symptoms and applying the Emotion Regulating Method can effectively alleviate symptoms and restore psychological balance. Compared with cognitive and behavioral therapies, the Emotion Regulating Method emphasizes the interaction between emotions and physiological states, offering stronger holistic and flexible approaches. The <Table 1> below details the types of stagnations in Zhu Danxi's Six Stagnations Theory, along with their causes, pathogenesis, symptoms, and treatment principles:

**Table 1.** Types of depression syndromes and their associated etiology, pathogenesis, and treatment principles

Stagnation Type	Etiology	Pathogenesis	Symptoms	Treatment Principle
Qi Stagnation	Worry or anger	Qi blockage, disrupted flow	Chest tightness, low mood	Soothe the liver, regulate qi
Blood Stagnation	Emotional suppression or trauma	Blood stasis	Menstrual pain, depression	Promote blood circulation, resolve stasis
Phlegm Stagnation	Prolonged sadness or emotional injury	Phlegm accumulation, qi blockage	Chest congestion, insomnia	Resolve phlegm, clear channels
Heat Stagnation	Prolonged anger or agitation	Excessive fire	Irritability, insomnia	Clear heat, nourish Yin
Dampness Stagnation	Excessive worry or poor diet	Dampness accumulation	Heaviness, fatigue, poor appetite	Strengthen spleen, eliminate dampness
Food Stagnation	Poor diet or emotional disturbance	Food accumulation, qi blockage	Indigestion, abdominal pain	Resolve food stagnation, harmonize stomach

In summary, the Six Stagnations Theory and the Emotion Regulating Method not only reveal the etiology and pathogenesis of emotional disorders but also provide important theoretical and practical guidance for modern emotional disorder diagnosis and treatment. Using these theories flexibly can help patients restore physical and mental balance and improve the effectiveness of emotional disorder treatments [6].

### 3. CHARACTERISTICS AND LIMITATIONS OF MODERN EMOTIONAL DISORDER THERAPIES

#### 3.1. Characteristics of Modern Emotional Disorder Therapies

Modern emotional disorder therapies are derived from Western medicine and psychology, featuring systematic, standardized, and procedural characteristics that form relatively fixed treatment processes. Commonly used methods include cognitive therapy, behavioral therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), psychoanalysis, and medication. These methods work by adjusting the patient's cognition and emotional responses to alleviate symptoms of emotional disorders, with a strong emphasis on scientific rigor and practicality. Cognitive therapy identifies and corrects cognitive distortions; CBT combines cognitive correction with behavioral interventions; and psychoanalysis explores the emotional roots within the subconscious. These therapies often use quantitative tools such as questionnaires to assess emotional states, making the treatment process more objective. The content and approach of modern therapies are also flexible, encompassing individual, group, family therapy, and psychological education, as well as remote treatment options, making them accessible and widely applicable. Medication treatments help regulate neurotransmitters to quickly alleviate symptoms and lay a foundation for psychological interventions [7]. Combining medication with psychological therapy effectively controls emotional fluctuations and addresses the root causes of emotional disorders. However, since these therapies are based on Western theories, they may not align with traditional Chinese cultural values, causing some patients to resist treatment. Furthermore, the standardized treatment models may overlook individual differences, leading to suboptimal efficacy. Additionally, long-term medication use can lead to side effects and dependency. In summary, while

modern therapies emphasize scientific validity, operability, and diversity, they still require further refinement in terms of cultural adaptability and personalization to better meet the needs of different patients.

### **3.2. Limitations of Modern Emotional Disorder Therapies**

Although modern emotional disorder therapies have achieved remarkable progress, they still face limitations in cultural adaptability and personalization. Most modern therapies are rooted in Western psychology, which emphasizes individualism and rational thinking, making them more suitable for Western cultural contexts. In Eastern cultures, where collective consciousness and self-discipline are valued, patients may find these approaches less relatable, reducing their acceptance and application. Furthermore, the reliance on standardized treatment processes can lead to a lack of flexibility and neglect individual differences and unique psychological states, affecting long-term treatment outcomes. Additionally, cognitive and behavioral therapies, while effective in relieving emotional symptoms, do not sufficiently explore the deeper causes and psychological mechanisms of emotional disorders. They do not address unconscious emotional issues, making it challenging to treat complex emotional disorders effectively. Medication, though useful for rapid symptom control, can result in side effects and dependency with prolonged use. This "symptom-focused" approach needs to be combined with psychological therapy to enhance efficacy. Modern therapies also place high demands on therapists' professional skills and expertise. However, psychological resources are scarce in many areas, and many therapists lack systematic training, limiting treatment quality and availability. Moreover, some therapies, such as psychoanalysis, have long treatment cycles and high costs, which can place a financial burden on patients, further hindering their widespread adoption. In conclusion, modern emotional disorder therapies face limitations in cultural adaptability, personalization, deep exploration of underlying causes, and issues related to medication side effects. Future development should focus on optimizing these areas by considering patients' cultural backgrounds and individual differences, integrating traditional Chinese emotional disorder theories such as the Emotion Regulating Method and dialectical treatment to explore more comprehensive and personalized treatment systems. This approach can ultimately improve overall treatment outcomes and patient quality of life.

## **4. COMPARISON AND INTEGRATION OF ZHU DANXI'S EMOTIONAL DISORDER THEORY AND MODERN THERAPIES**

Zhu Danxi's emotional disorder theory and modern therapies each have unique strengths in theoretical foundation, treatment strategies, and application methods. Although differing in approach, both aim to regulate emotions and improve mental health. Zhu's theories emphasize holistic views and dialectical treatment, identifying emotional disorders as arising from internal and external disturbances. He advocated "nourishing Yin," "regulating qi and blood," and "emotion regulation" as treatments, stressing individualized, comprehensive approaches. In contrast, modern therapies are rooted in psychology and neuroscience, focusing on cognitive and behavioral adjustments with structured processes. Zhu's "Emotion Regulation Method" leverages the interactions among emotions, such as "joy overcoming worry" and "anger overcoming pensiveness," to balance pathological emotions, while modern therapies adjust cognition and behaviors to alleviate distress. Zhu's methods are flexible and holistic, incorporating emotional regulation, herbal medicine, and psychological counseling. Modern therapies, focusing on psychological intervention and medication, are effective but may lack comprehensive and individualized approaches. Integrating Zhu Danxi's theories with modern methods can maximize the strengths of both. For instance, using his "emotion regulation" and "Six Stagnations Theory" along with CBT and psychoanalysis can offer a more holistic and personalized approach. Herbal remedies and modern drugs can be combined to mitigate side effects

and enhance safety. Additionally, Zhu's "Yin-nourishing" and "qi-regulating" strategies can complement modern treatments, addressing complex emotional symptoms [8].

**Table 2.** Comparison and integration strategies between Zhu Danxi's theory of affective disorders and modern therapies for affective disorders

Comparison	Zhu Danxi's Theory	Modern Therapies	Integration Strategy
Theoretical Basis	Holistic view of emotion, organs, and qi-blood balance; dialectical treatment	Psychology and neuroscience; focus on emotional and behavioral regulation	Combine emotional and cognitive regulation, emphasizing dynamic balance.
Treatment Approach	Emotion regulation, using interactions among emotions to treat disorders	Cognitive correction, behavior modification	Merge emotional regulation and cognitive correction for improved emotional control.
Treatment Methods	Emotion regulation, herbal medicine, diet therapy, psychological counseling	Cognitive, behavioral, psychoanalysis, and medication	Combine herbal medicine and modern drugs, psychological counseling, and behavioral interventions for comprehensive treatment.
Effectiveness	Emphasizes holistic regulation and personalization, but abstract and challenging to generalize	High scientific validity and structure but lacks cultural adaptability	Introduce Zhu's holistic principles to enhance personalization and cultural relevance.
Applicable Population	Suitable for diverse cultural backgrounds, especially those focusing on holistic health	Most effective for individuals with a basic understanding of psychology	Design culturally tailored treatment plans incorporating Zhu's theories.

As in the <Table 2> shown, integrating Zhu Danxi's theories with modern therapies can address each other's limitations, creating a more comprehensive treatment model. This integrated approach can provide new avenues for clinical practice, promoting the application of combined Chinese and Western methods in treating emotional disorders.

## 5. APPLICATION OF THE THEORY OF QI, BLOOD, PHLEGM, AND STAGNATION IN MODERN EMOTIONAL DISORDER TREATMENT

Zhu Danxi's theory of Qi, Blood, Phlegm, and Stagnation explains that emotional disorders are closely related to emotional imbalance, which can lead to internal disruptions of qi, blood, phlegm, and stagnation, causing various physiological and pathological changes. For example, qi stagnation is often caused by worry or liver qi stagnation, presenting as chest tightness and low mood; blood stagnation arises from emotional suppression, leading to symptoms like menstrual pain and depression; phlegm stagnation is linked to phlegm accumulation and emotional disturbance, causing phlegm retention, chest congestion, and insomnia; and other stagnations result from emotional injury and imbalance, manifesting as lethargy and sluggish thinking. Zhu Danxi's methods, such as regulating qi, promoting blood circulation, resolving phlegm, and relieving stagnation, provide a solid theoretical foundation for understanding and treating emotional disorders. The theory's significance for modern emotional disorder treatment lies in its ability to connect emotional disorders to physiological states, offering new diagnostic perspectives. For instance, qi stagnation symptoms are similar to anxiety disorders with shortness of breath, while blood stagnation corresponds to depressive

symptoms. This theory can help comprehensively understand the etiology of emotional disorders and support clinical diagnosis and treatment. Moreover, combining Zhu Danxi's principles with modern therapies can create a more integrated treatment strategy. While modern therapies, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), psychoanalysis, and medication, often focus on cognitive and emotional adjustments, they may neglect the patient's overall physiological state. Zhu's theory addresses this by regulating qi and blood flow and resolving stagnation. Thus, integrating traditional Chinese medicine methods, such as acupuncture and herbal medicine, with modern approaches like CBT and behavioral interventions can enhance treatment effectiveness.

**Table 3.** Characteristics, Etiology, and Treatment Strategies for Various Stagnation Types

Stagnation Type	Etiology	Symptoms	Treatment Principle	Modern Treatment Strategy
Qi Stagnation	Worry injuring the spleen, liver qi stagnation	Chest tightness, sighing, low mood	Soothe the liver, regulate qi	Combine CBT with herbal medicine and acupuncture to alleviate anxiety.
Blood Stagnation	Emotional suppression, blood stasis	Menstrual pain, depression, dark complexion	Promote blood circulation, resolve stasis	Use psychoanalysis with herbal medicine and acupuncture to relieve symptoms.
Phlegm Stagnation	Emotional injury, qi and blood imbalance	Phlegm retention, chest congestion, insomnia	Resolve phlegm, clear channels	Combine counseling with herbal remedies and behavioral therapy.
Heat Stagnation	Prolonged emotional disturbance, liver fire flaring	Irritability, insomnia, dry mouth, red tongue	Clear heat, nourish Yin	Use medication with TCM heat-clearing methods to balance emotions.
Dampness Stagnation	Excess worry, poor diet affecting spleen	Head heaviness, fatigue, poor appetite	Strengthen spleen, eliminate dampness	Apply behavioral therapy with TCM to alleviate emotional symptoms.
Food Stagnation	Poor diet or emotional disturbance affecting digestion	Indigestion, bloating, low mood	Resolve food stagnation, regulate stomach	Use dietary adjustments with counseling to improve digestion and emotions.

As in the <Table 3> shown, Zhu Danxi's theory reveals the etiology and mechanisms of emotional disorders, providing valuable insights for modern treatment. Combining these theories with modern therapies, such as integrating TCM methods with CBT and psychoanalysis, can enhance therapeutic outcomes and offer comprehensive protection for patients' physical and mental health.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Zhu Danxi's theory of Qi, Blood, Phlegm, and Stagnation provides a theoretical basis and practical guidance for modern emotional disorder treatments. Through methods such as regulating qi, resolving phlegm, and emotion regulation, it effectively addresses symptoms caused by emotional imbalance. In contrast, modern therapies, while standardized and scientific, lack personalization and cultural adaptability. Thus, integrating Zhu's theory with modern methods combines TCM's holistic principles with the scientific rigor of modern medicine, creating a more comprehensive treatment framework. Future research should explore this integration further to promote the application of

combined Chinese and Western methods in clinical practice, ultimately improving patients' health and quality of life.

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