

Thoughts on a Hard Crib and Flat Head

By Joshua Zhong

I first learned the phrase “air conditioning” in 1978 when Mao Zedong’s (the founder of Communist China) estranged wife Jiang Qing was accused of corruption and a political coup. People were told that she was so corrupt that she even had a Russian-made temperature-control system installed in her bedroom!

I did not see such a “fancy” system until I came to this country in 1986. Almost every house was equipped with this fascinating amenity and I fell in love with it right away. Who wouldn’t want to live in a house where you don’t have to fight with extreme heat or unbearable cold? Unfortunately, that was what I, my family, and almost all ordinary Chinese people have lived with for thousands of years, and even today. I remember the “fun” times during the 90-degree hot summer months when my parents set up a temporary camp every evening after dinner right on the street like all our neighbors did. We all slept right on a big piece of well-treated and splinter-free particle board. It was hard, but that was what we liked. Sometimes my mom added a bamboo sheet on top of the board. I was told that wood and bamboo absorb sweat well and that a hard bed was extremely beneficial to our backs.

In 1978 Deng Xiao Ping crushed Jiang Qing’s political coup and took over China. It was a turning point of the Chinese economy which had been spiraling downward for the last several hundred years. Deng opened China to the West, introduced a market economy, privatized some sectors previously owned by the government, and reopened higher learning institutes. Twenty-eight years later, a new, revitalized, and self-confident China has emerged on the global stage. China now boasts the fastest and longest streak of annual GDP growth, the largest foreign currency reserve, and the biggest population of cell phone and internet users. I learned recently that every year more people in China pass the international standardized test for Certified Public Accountants and Certified Financial Advisors than in any other country in the world!

Yes, many things have been changing rapidly in China. However, lots of other things have stayed relatively the same. Sleeping on a hard wooden board or bed in the summertime is still very popular and widely practiced, especially in the southern part of China. A single unit air conditioning system, costing between several hundred and a few thousand dollars, is still a luxury and an unattainable item for millions of regular households. Many Chinese actually believe that an air conditioner’s cool air is bad for your health. Even if a family can afford an air conditioner, it is usually a small wall unit or consol type that is capable of covering only one or two bedrooms at most. Plus, a tradition that has lasted for hundreds of years has shaped people’s mentality, preferences, and tolerance. It is a common belief among many Chinese that such practices are not only economical but physically beneficial. It is part of their culture and life.

However, for Americans who are used to working and living in offices and homes with central air and resting in soft comfy beds, this practice of sleeping on a hard wooden board is simply unimaginable, even cruel.

Last year, a group of families visited an orphanage in the southern part of China in May. They were astonished by what they saw: more than one hundred small kids sleeping and playing in their wooden cribs with no bed sheet or anything on it. They took a lot of photos and sent the pictures to CCAI begging us, “These kids are being mistreated and abused! Why doesn’t the orphanage buy

some nice crib pads and sheets for these kids, since families are paying a \$3,000 child rearing fee to them? Can we do a fundraiser to send blankets to the poor kids?"

We dispatched a team of China staff members to the orphanage right away. After listening to our concern and complaints, the caretakers and directors laughed. "We have been living like this for centuries," they said. "Why do Americans want to change us?" A director even took our staff to his house and showed them the bamboo beds lined up just outside his courtyard, under the steaming hot summer sun.

This story leads me to another traditional Chinese practice that makes no aesthetic and scientific sense to many Americans – a flat back of the head for girls. For centuries, Chinese women have been accustomed to braiding their hair into pigtails. It is a sign of beauty and pride. Such a traditional emphasis has led to a strong belief among our Chinese that parents must have their children sleep on their back. A flatter head makes pretty pigtails easier, and braided pigtails will make your head look truly symmetrical. A big pig-tail on a rounded head would make you look off-shaped and unacceptable. To prevent infant children from moving around in their cribs, parents make a little wall of blankets on both sides of the baby's body so he or she will sleep through the night without moving their head! A flat head is very common among children adopted from China. In fact, both Lily and I have pretty flat backs of the head!

One of the key training items that our In-China Charity team provides to orphanages is to educate them on getting rid of the "blanket wall" and allowing children to change their regularly sleeping position. We have seen some good progress, but at the same time, we have also encountered a lot of puzzled resistance from older caretakers.

So once again we have humbly learned that traditional practices and beliefs, good or bad, scientific or irrational, need to be first understood, tolerated, and if possible, appreciated. Our personal beliefs and emotions, no matter how strong and scientifically proven, may not always have universal acceptance and approval. I am sure one day when central air conditioning becomes as common as it is in the USA, the Chinese would love, as long as their chiropractors allow them, to dream in a comfy bed like you and I do. I am also confident that soon all the children in China will have the freedom to roam around in their cribs and have parents who believe in the healthy benefit of a symmetrical head. As my 70-year-old mom in China always tells me, "Everything takes time."