

Ceramic Pillows

by Malcolm Wright

If you sleep on a soft type pillow such as those made from chopped plants and crushed chrysanthemums, your body will come to ill health. But if you sleep on a hard type pillow made of wood, stone, or ceramic, the pupils of your eyes will grow strong and you will be able to read fine print by the dark of night (in your old age).

From writings compiled by Kao Lien in 1591, adapted from translations by Helen Chapin.

Dr. Steven Bushell, an English physician residing in Peking at the turn of the century, wrote that pillows under eighteen inches in length were used only for the dead, and those larger than eighteen inches were used by the living. He urged the destruction of the corpse pillows out of respect for the dead, but as it turns out there are no pillows over eighteen inches in length. It is clear that Chinese measurement systems have changed, and that Dr. Bushell misunderstood the length referred to in the ancient texts. It is his translation, along with our concept of the pillow as a soft object, that has colored Western understanding of hard-type pillows.

My own recent study has shown that ceramic pillows are indeed comfortable, and perhaps therapeutic in light of ancient Chinese medicine. Hard-type pillows date from the twenty-fifth century B.C. in Egypt and India, and from the fifteenth century B.C. throughout Africa. King Tutankhamen's tomb contained a pillow very similar to one pictured in a photograph of a Somalian refugee carrying all his worldly belongings which appeared in the June 1981 *National Geographic Magazine* (p. 775).

There are only a half-dozen articles that deal with the history of ceramic pillows. They suggest the possibility that the ancient pillows were used, but it is clear that none of the authors had ever put their heads on these objects. Only the catalogue, *Chinese Art from the Newark Museum*, states directly that the pillows were intended for use.

My first clue that Chinese pillows had any therapeutic use came from the fact that the acupuncture point at the base of the skull is called the *jade pillow point*. Indeed, I have located two jade pillows—one in the Newark Museum, and one in the Metropolitan Museum.

The unresolved questions that interest me are, "Why, if wood and other hard pillows were in widespread use in China, did ceramic pillows appear only in the eighth century? Why weren't there more, and older, jade pillows? When, in fact, did the jade pillow point enter the language, if acupuncture dates to the Han period (second century B.C. to second century A.D.)? The jade pillows don't appear until the Yuan period (fourteenth century A.D.) or later.

Ceramic pillows form an unusual and varied group of objects—some sculpted, but most slab built. They flowered and developed over a 500-year period to become some of the most exciting objects—in both form and decoration—of the Tang and Sung periods, when all other forms were wheel-thrown or molded.

The earliest pillows were made of marbled clay, and it has been suggested that the potters were attempting to imitate wood grain in this way.

There were two main reasons for the development of pillow making. First was the connection with acupuncture already mentioned. Second was the movement of Tantric Indian Buddhism into China. Tantric Buddhism has to do with the flow of energy in the body, and the jade pillow point—the juncture of the spinal column and the skull—has everything to do with this flow of energy. The connection between Tantric Buddhism and the jade pillow point can be seen in the base of the jade pillow in the Newark Museum. This magnificent piece is composed of a very large, thin piece of old jade mounted on a wood base of a later date, and profusely decorated with carved Tantric symbols.

Tantric Buddhism is echoed in the Alexander technique—a contemporary system of postural reeducation—and *T'ai Chi Ch'uan*, a traditional form of meditative movement—which also aim at establishing a free flow of energy through the body.

The Alexander technique uses the prone, sitting, and standing positions, while *T'ai Chi Ch'uan* is only performed standing; but in both systems, a particular balanced relationship of head to neck is the key to freeing the whole body and bringing about effortless straightening of the spine.

In the Alexander Technique, the student lies prone; the knees are raised—thus flattening the small of the back and lengthening the spine—and the head is supported at the correct height to realign the juncture of the skull and spinal column, further lengthening and freeing the back.

There is a Chinese pillow in a collection in Lund, Sweden, which is stamped on the bottom—along with the maker's name—"use for good results," implying that the therapeutic results were known to the Chinese.

The height of the pillow is critical, depending on the length and curvature of the neck, and varies from as little as two inches to over four inches. The height also depends on the thickness of the mat, rug, or bedding on which the individual is resting. The history books give the maximum dimensions of the pillow, not the functional height; but on examination, the old pillows are all in the comfortable and correct range of height.

All Chinese pillows have a rather large hole on the side of the base. Historians tell us that these holes exist to let the air out during firing. However, one pillow in the Yale University Museum has only a small pinhole in the base, proving that the Chinese knew that a large hole was not necessary.

Ceramic pillows are cool in summer, but need to be warmed in winter. When filled with hot water, they are as soothing as a heating pad. Historians also tell us that because the pillows are not glazed on the inside, they will not hold water, but the clay is of a fine grain and fired to a moderately high temperature.

There are many kinds of Chinese pillows, including intricately carved celadon pillows; incised and inlaid clay pillows; pillows with holes for burning incense; small sculptural pillows—some in the shape of a leaf which cradles the head, others where the head fits into the small of the



Malcolm Wright, Square Pillow #37, Chun blue glaze, 9½" x 10" wide, 2½" high at the neck rest, 4" high overall, 1982.

Photo: Peter Mauss.

back of a human or animal figure. There is a Tang pig pillow with a slot on the rump and a smile on its face; there is a smiling reclining tiger pillow with a scene painted on the saddlelike headrest. The pillows from Tzu-chou are the most common and are well documented. They are quite varied, some extravagant in form and decoration. A number of the pillows are decorated with illustrated stories. There is a beautiful series of pillows with small bases and very large cup-shaped tops that cradle the head all around, extending radically behind and above the headrest itself. Some of these have beautifully incised patterns—calligraphic symbols meaning patience or forbearance, and on one, a standing bear which symbolized the desire to conceive a male child, obviously not a corpse pillow theme.

The only functional part of the pillow is the area about three inches in diameter and of the correct height. The rest of the form is for decorative purposes only, leaving plenty of room for exploration.

Rest on such a pillow, in the late afternoon for ten to twenty minutes, will bring renewed energy and enthusiasm to go back to work.

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Thanks for assistance and direction in this project goes to Professor John Rosenfield, Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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