

Flush with victory in China's toilet wars

By LIJIA MacLEOD

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Anticipating Hillary Rodham Clinton's reaction to a malodorous, squat-style toilet, the hospitable Chinese government spent \$23,000 on a Western-style facility, complete with seat and air conditioning, for the first lady's visit to the Great Wall in June. That luxury lavatory was an inspiration to the nation's embattled toilet revolutionaries.

"Old-fashioned toilets have become an embarrassment to China; they have lagged behind the fast-growing economy," lamented Lou Xiaoqi, secretary general of the Foundation of Civilized Development in Beijing. A journalist-turned self-styled crusader, the thirtysomething Lou is in the vanguard of a campaign to reform one of the most backward aspects of Chinese life.

Some 90 percent of the public toilets in the capital, Beijing, are labeled fourth (lowest) grade, meaning brick shacks enclosing a row of holes with limited ventilation and no running water.

"I shall never forget my first encounter with a Chinese public toilet," recalled Carol O'Sullivan, wife of an Irish diplomat. "It was a small, dark structure on a side street near Beijing University; there was nothing in it apart from deep holes going down. When I looked up, there was not even a roof."

Horrifying toilets have long been the No. 1 complaint of foreign tourists, many of whom simply skip breakfast in the hope of avoiding the need for nonhotel facilities. And woe betide the occasional foreigner who enters a facility the wrong way, risking a cathartic submersion in the cesspool out back.

Quantity is as big a problem as quality. Beijing's 13 million citizens share a meager 6,870 public toilets, as few as 200 of which are located on the main streets and in commercial areas. Over 70 percent of them are scattered around the residential "hutong" alleys. The busy commercial street Xidan sees an average 100,000 shoppers everyday, all of whom must share a single toilet. One Foundation member reported a lunchtime rush-hour turnover of a visitor ev-

ery five seconds. The large influx of rural migrants to the cities has only aggravated the situation. Beijing alone has a "floating population" of some 3 million, while the number of public toilets has remained virtually level.

The nongovernmental foundation was established by Lou and some sympathetic friends in 1993. To its credit stand 38 new toilets in Beijing, not quite up to Mrs. Clinton's standard, but much better than most. Each one is the implementation of a winning design from Lou's 1994 "public toilet design competition." The overall winner boasted not only the necessary amenities, but also resting and reading areas, a public phone, bulletin board and newspaper kiosk.

"The toilet revolution means not only physical improvements, but also changing people's ideas," Lou explained. "In ancient China, the word for toilet was 'hun,' which originally meant pigsty. As a backward agricultural country, people thought a toilet was meant to be dirty and smelly."

Lou noted with satisfaction that such ideas are changing, as people start to take better care of public facilities, motivated by rising living standards and increased contact with the outside world.

The toilet scene elsewhere in China is similar to Beijing's, if not worse. Toilet activists from Harbin in the north to Shenzhen in the south are joining the revolution. The Shanghai government has launched what it calls "the No. 1 task under heaven" to tackle the problem, while at "five-star toilets" in prosperous Guangzhou, people can not only relieve themselves, but send a fax too.

Predictably, funding is the universal problem, with local governments allocating scanty budgets for public sanitation. The annual fee for using a Beijing public toilet is 300 yuan, but the actual costs for cleaning, maintenance and staff reach 800 yuan a year. The Foundation of Civilized Development hopes to raise public funds to supplement the cost of upgrading all the capital's public toilets, even if means simply adding a light bulb or roof. Complete renovation of all 6,870 toilets would require an investment of 1 billion yuan and at current spending

levels would take more than 40 years.

As more and more Chinese are drawn to Western-style facilities, American Standard, the global toilet giant, is flush with profits. An early entrant in the Chinese market, the company began by selling bathroom fittings to top hotels. Business took off only with the early '90s construction boom: Unlike in old residential blocks, almost all new buildings feature sit-down models, mostly cheap imitations of Standard's high-grade products.

But not all Chinese can switch so smoothly to Western habits. One Guangzhou couple saved hard for a romantic weekend at an expensive hotel to celebrate their wedding anniversary. Sitting down to business, they found themselves unable to function and were forced to escape to a row of squats in the street.

Another problem with "civilized toilets" is the larger volume of water they require, a challenge for a country facing severe water shortages. Lou's 1994 competition produced a design that does not require any water: A device automatically seals the discharge in plastic bags. Prototypes have already been installed in tourist areas where water supply is difficult, such as the Great Wall and Anhui's Yellow Mountain. The environmental headache then becomes disposal, as plastic bags are not biodegradable.

Even the Chinese leadership is taking a hands-on approach to the search for new solutions. When then Premier-elect Zhu Rongji excused himself during a state visit to Australia last year, security guards became nervous at the time he was taking. They forced the cubicle door open to find the former engineer carefully studying the innovative, two-button, dual-flush system he had disassembled on the floor. "We must introduce this toilet in China," Zhu concluded.

This was how China's door was opened to Caroma Australia, whose "revolutionary flush system" claims to use up to 67 percent less water than conventional flush toilets. Lou welcomes these high-tech allies. "They combine well our need for civilized toilets and water conservation," he said.

Lijia MacLeod is a freelance writer living in Beijing.

Flush with victory in China's toilet wars – China's on-going toilet revolution

Guessing the First Lady's reaction to a malodorous, squat-style toilet, the hospitable Chinese government spent US\$23,000 on a Western-style facility, complete with seat and air-conditioning, specifically for Hillary's visit to the Great Wall last month. That luxury lav is like a breath of fresh air for the nation's embattled toilet revolutionaries.

"The old fashioned toilets have become an embarrassment to China; they have lagged behind the fast growing economy," laments Lou Xiaoqi, secretary general of the Foundation of Civilized Development in Beijing. "That was why we launched the toilet revolution." Journalist turned self-appointed crusader, the thirty-something Lou is the vanguard of a campaign to overthrow one of the most backward aspects of Chinese life.

Take the capital Beijing - about 90% of its public toilets are labelled fourth (and lowest) grade, meaning brick shacks enclosing a row of holes with limited ventilation and no running water. "I shall never forget my first encounter with a Chinese public toilet," recalls Carol O'Sullivan, wife of an Irish diplomat. "It was a small dark structure on a sidestreet near Beijing University; there was nothing in it, apart from deep holes downwards. A granny was squatting there doing her business, but she stared at me as if I were an alien. When I looked up, there was not even a roof."

Lou summarizes foreigners' toilet experiences in China as "Crying, Smiling, Screaming and Jumping" - crying from the powerful smells that force tears to the eyes; smiling from embarrassment as one squats amid the bodily functions of people rarely hidden by partitions; screaming at rats or fat, white worms; and jumping on one's way out to avoid the waste of past visitors. Horrifying toilets have long been the number one complaint of foreign tourists, many of whom simply skip breakfast in the hope of avoiding the need for non-hotel facilities. And woe betide the occasional foreigner who has entered the facility the wrong way, prior to cathartic submersion in the cesspool out back.

Apart from the dreadful quality of public toilets, quantity is also a major problem. Beijing's 13 million citizens share a meagre 6,870 public toilets. As few as 200 public toilets are located on the main streets and commercial areas, while over 70% are spread around the residential *hutong* alleys. The busy commercial street Xidan averages 100,000 shoppers everyday, all of whom must share a single toilet - one Foundation member reported a lunchtime rush hour turnover of a client every five seconds! The large inflow of rural migrants only worsens the situation. Beijing alone has a 'floating population' 3 million strong, while the number of public toilets saw little increase.

The non-governmental foundation was established by Lou and some sympathetic friends back in 1993. To its credit stand 38 new toilets in Beijing, not quite in Hillary's league, but a far cry from most. Each is the realisation of a winning work from Lou's 1994 'Public Toilet Design Competition'. The overall winner, 23 year-old Wang Xiaohong, proclaimed "The public toilet is an important indication of urban modern civilization. It should not simply be the place for 'convenience'. Her design, embodying strong Chinese characteristics, not only boasted the necessary amenities, but also resting and reading areas, a public phone, advertising window and newspaper kiosk. Corporate donations paid for construction, complete with running water, sewage disposal, disabled facilities and at least one sit-down toilet. Despite the premium entry charge (40-50 cents, or double the standard fee), streams of visitors voted with their feet. Inevitably, many of these super-loos have lost their hygienic sparkle, while fittings like taps and plants have long disappeared.

"The toilet revolution not only means physical improvements, but also changing people's old concept about toilets," Lou explains. "In ancient China, the word for toilet was '*hun*', originally the place for pigs. As a backward agricultural country, people thought a toilet was *meant* to be dirty and smelly." He notes with delight that such concepts are fading; as people start to take better care of public facilities, helped by rising living standards and increased contact with the outside world.

The toilet scene elsewhere in China is similar to Beijing's, if not worse. Toilet activists from Harbin in the north to Shenzhen in the south are joining the revolution. The Shanghai government has launched the 'number one task under

heaven' to tackle the problem, while at 'five star toilets' in prosperous Guangzhou, people can not only relieve themselves but send a fax too.

Predictably, funding is the universal problem, as local governments allocate tight budgets for public sanitation. The annual fee for a Beijing public toilet is 300 yuan, but the actual costs of cleaning, maintenance and staff reach 800 yuan. The Foundation of Civilized Development hopes to raise funds from 'society' to supplement the cost and upgrade all the capital's public toilets, even just adding a light bulb or roof. Thorough renovation of all 6,870 toilets would require investment of 1 billion yuan and at current spending levels take 40 to 100 years to complete.

Lin Zhi and her husband are too realistic to expect miracles in their neighbourhood. One of her hateful morning rituals is the potty emptying queue, a task shared by 3 million other Beijingers whose only resort is public. Their one room home, hidden in a crowded courtyard in central Dongsì, is too small for a bathroom; purchase of a tiny flat in the suburbs represents the only hope of one's own toilet. Lin Zhi recently began work as nanny for a British family. "The difference between their toilet and ours is like heaven and earth," she says, overwhelmed by fragrant flowers and colourful paintings. "But we can only compare to our neighbours. We are lucky in a way that our toilet is close by. Others have to walk 5 or 10 minutes to reach one."

Besides their practical function, public toilets perform definite social and environmental roles. People take their time there, gossiping, smoking, reading newspapers. The 'night soil' left by patrons used to be shovelled into 'honey carts' for use as fertilizer outside Beijing. Such manual labour finally ceased early this year, when the last public toilet in a poor area too narrow for sewage trucks was demolished for re-development. Yet even the night soil itself is looked on with growing disfavour by farmers increasingly accustomed to chemical substitutes.

As more and more Chinese are drawn to western-style facilities, American Standard, the global toilet giant, is growing flush with cash. "We're as happy as pigs in s**t!" exclaimed general manager Horace Wittlesey at 60% sales growth last year. An early entrant to the market, American Standard began by selling bathroom fittings to top hotels. Business only took off with the early '90s construction boom - unlike the old residential blocks, almost all new works feature sit-down models, mostly cheap imitations of Standard's high-grade products.

But not all Chinese can transfer so smoothly to western *modus operandi*. One Guangzhou couple saved hard for a romantic weekend at an expensive hotel to celebrate their wedding anniversary. Sitting down to business, they found themselves unable to function, until they escaped to a row of squats in the street!

A more pressing problem with "civilized toilets" is the larger volume of water required, in a country facing severe water shortages. Lou's 1994 competition produced a design that does not require any: the device automatically wraps up the discharge in plastic bags. Prototypes have already been installed at certain tourist areas where water supply is difficult, such as the Great Wall and Anhui's Yellow Mountain. The environmental headache then becomes disposal, as plastic bags do not biodegrade.

Even the Chinese leadership is taking a hands-on approach to the search for new solutions. When Premier-in-waiting Zhu Rongji excused himself during a state visit to Australia last year, security guards became nervous at the time he was taking. They forced the cubicle door open to find the former engineer carefully studying the innovative two-button dual flush system he had disassembled on the floor. "We must introduce this toilet to China" Zhu concluded.

Thus opening China's door to Caroma Australia, whose 'revolutionary flush system' claims to use up to 67% less water than conventional flush toilets. Chinese toilet revolutionary Lou Xiaoqi welcomes these high-tech allies to join in the good fight. "They combine well our need for civilized toilets *and* water conservation." Perhaps Caroma Australia will soon be as happy as American Standard, wherever they are.

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