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China's potty past has been flushed away



Patti Waldmeir in Shanghai [Author alerts](#) ▼

A golden tale of toilets conjures up a symbol of development as potent as rule of law punditry



From the outside it looks like an art gallery. But this is a gallery of toilets, brought to the residents of Shanghai by Roca, the Spanish bathroom people. It has loos disguised as stacks of books and conveniences that flush with grey water from the sink. The best seller is a sleek commode designed by a former Audi stylist, with a leather seat made by the people who supply BMW with

motorcycle perches.

The best-selling colours? A striking deep red, viewed as lucky, and a deliciously understated champagne gold known as *tuhaojin*, or “nouveau riche gold”. Roca's China manager says the *tuhaojin* toilet became popular after Apple launched a golden iPhone in China last year. “People apparently wanted a toilet like their iPhone,” he says.

Nothing would be easier than to caricature China's golden water closets as symbols of a civilisation in decline. But that's not what I see in them. Because development is always, when it comes right down to it, about just such everyday intimacies: is the loo half a football field away or right next to the bedroom? Does it reek or sit there quietly conserving water? Does it open automatically, play music and let you trade stocks from the comfort of its heated surface? Proper pundits mutter darkly about rule of law and universal suffrage, shadow banking and debt defaults. But I prefer to tell a tale of toilets.

When I first came to live in China in 2008, mainland loos said “developing country” loud and clear. On our first train journey, to the home town of my then eight-year-old adopted Chinese daughter Grace, the rail car's potty ponged so much that we could not stomach our picnic.

But very soon all that began to change. The train loos stopped stinking. Prefabricated stainless steel commodes showed up on all newer rolling stock, complete with staff to sluice

them down at regular intervals. The only odour on Chinese trains these days is freshly brewed coffee from the dining car.

Closer to home, there was “Pipi Road”, the nickname we gave to the lane just next to our house, where dozens of Shanghai taxi drivers would every day choose to relieve themselves, after dining at one of the neighbourhood dumpling emporia. The stench nearly put me off moving there in the first place. In winter the wet patches froze and in summer they steamed.

And then one morning, a spanking new government porta-potty turned up on Pipi Road. It was staffed from 5am to 10pm every day by a government sanitation worker charged with keeping it smelling like a Swiss meadow. Who said you need democracy to have responsive government? I can't think of anything more responsive than putting a public convenience where it's needed. Pipi Road has had to be rechristened.

Even motorway service areas have done their bit for the toilet uprising. On a long bus journey back in 2011 I withdrew to a loo on one of eastern China's newest superhighways, to find a room with one long ceramic trough for use by all females in need. But on a family road trip on the same motorway last month I found stalls with doors, and even loo roll. Travelling in China just isn't what it used to be.

Back at the Roca bathroom gallery, the marketing manager Guillem Pages Giralt says he's seen big changes in how private customers buy water closets too: “Five years ago a customer would just come in and say ‘which is your most expensive toilet’.” That doesn't happen any more, he says, though Chinese shoppers do like to lie down in Roca's bathtubs or sit on its commodes for 20 minutes or so before buying, “to make sure it doesn't hurt the back of their legs”. But the sheer fact that they have 20 minutes (and up to Rmb30,000, or \$4,900) to spend making a loo purchase is good news in itself, surely. Only those who no longer worry about the necessities of life can take the time to worry about buying golden ones.

So call me puerile, and unworthy of the pundit's pen for pointing it out, but this is the stuff that revolutions are really made of. In my six-plus years in Shanghai, China has undergone an economic, social, cultural and technological transformation, in the water closet. A trifle, in the grand sweep of history. But it's the trifles that count.

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