

## China's toilet revolution as Olympics draw near

) Strolling along Beijing's Chang'an Street in May, Kevin Born was drawn to an ancient Chinese-style building with delicate wooden carvings and wash painting- only to find it was a public toilet.

Inside, he found a granite floor, remote-sensor flushing, automatic hand drier and piped music. He found it difficult to believe that only three years ago when he first came to China, answering nature's call was an experience not for the faint-hearted.

'You had to take a deep breath and dash into the toilet. You held your breath and your head high and never look down. Then you'd dash out quickly for another gasp of fresh air. All within 30 seconds,' recalls Kevin, 30, an engineer from Germany.

The city launched a three-year campaign - with a 400-million yuan (\$57 million) investment - to modernise its public toilets in 2005 as part of its effort to prepare for the 2008 Olympic Games.

With 1,000 new public toilets being built and renovated each year, the fetid back-street privies are being replaced with clean, well-maintained flush toilets.

Now, Beijing is flushed with pride that all the 5,333 public toilets, with standardised white male and female figure signs, are available within a five-minute walk of any downtown location.

In addition, there will be 700 toilets in Olympic venues by the time the Beijing Games start and an additional 800 nearby.

Meanwhile, toilets in restaurants, bars and shopping malls are required by the government to be maintained properly, not only for the sake of their business, but also to show a more civilised Beijing.

A survey by Beijing's Municipal Bureau of Tourism in 1994 showed more than 60 percent of overseas travellers were dissatisfied with Beijing's toilets, and most described going to the smelly and dirty toilets as a revolting experience.

The renovation also included hi-tech devices to save water and neutralise odors. Water-conserving equipment is being fitted in bathrooms of all Olympic venues, with the hand basins and toilets equipped with inductive flush valves, which only use a tenth of the water flushed away in ordinary toilets.

Meanwhile, there is culture clash over which kind of toilet is better. Westerners are used to seated toilets, which are more comfortable and convenient for the elderly or the infirm.

The squat, or keyhole, toilets widely used in Chinese public toilets are considered more hygienic as there is no body contact, given the condition of some public toilet seats.

Education on how to use the toilets is another important task, says Ma Kangding, an official of Beijing municipality.

'The good image of modern toilets will go down the pan if the users don't change their bad habits.

Some people still leave shoe prints on the toilet seats, or even take the whole roll of toilet paper away, ' said Ma.

The government has distributed pamphlets to promote 'civilized behaviour', including topics such as toilet use, discouraging spitting and queue jumping. Inside public toilets, reminders of proper use of toilets are posted on the walls.

'Most of them are quite humorous with a human touch, which is acceptable to the public,' says Guo Weidong, director of publicity department of Beijing Municipal Utilities Administration Commission.

But most importantly, he says, the maintenance of a clean toilet depends on he self-discipline and standards set by the public, since public supervision is more difficult.

*Rong Jiaojiao ( © IANS / India eNews)*