What’s in a Squat Toilet?

In many travelogues or journal articles relating to China, the issue of the squat toilet inevitably arises. Using a squat toilet is typically framed as the author’s crossing of a threshold, his/her “initiation” into China. The way this moment is depicted is generally as a strenuous and terrifying experience: thighs burning, hands sweating, breath holding, all the while trying to maintain his/her balance so as to avoid toppling on to the urine and feces-ridden floor. If this doesn’t make a Western toilet-user (WTU) audience uncomfortable, it should. And though this is not always the experience of a first-time squatter, this depiction does demonstrate the underlying question: why is there a negative stigma attached to the squat toilet by Westerners, and what elements comprising the stigma are legitimate in a universal context? This essay seeks to understand this stigma through a cross-cultural approach regarding the relationship between people and toilets.

Reflecting upon my experience using both Western-style toilets and squatters, I find three compelling reasons why there is a stigma surrounding the squatters of China. They are foul-smelling, they are public, and, most significantly, they are very often unsanitary. Though the factors of odor and publicity contribute to the negative image associated with the squat toilet, the prominent factor that gives universal legitimacy to the stigma is one concerning sanitation and cleanliness. The issues of odor and publicity that arise when discussing squat toilets may displace individual comfort, but squatters plagued by
unsanitary conditions threaten human and ecological health and must be held to universal standards of sanitation.

Three types of squat toilets: the trough, the hole-in-the-ground, and the flush squatter

**They’re Odorous:**

Most squat toilets in rural China are smelly in and of themselves, but—from the perspective of my Western-toilet-scent-conditioned nostrils—the squatters reek. In general, Westerners despise bad smells that they are not accustomed to and consequently, extend their distain for odor to their aversion to squat toilets. Those scents to which one is regularly exposed tend to not bother that individual, as he/she is conditioned to that scent. Having become accustomed to the sanitary conditions offered of much of the Western world, most Westerners are not regularly exposed to “dirty” smells. The triumph of sanitation experienced by most of the developed world ensures features like garbage collection, sewage treatment, and proper conditions for food preservation. Thus, as a whole, Westerners have become conditioned to not have to deal with bad smells associated
with poor cleanliness standards; a plethora of odor-averting/shielding chemicals and machines even exist to protect us from disturbing smells. In China, attitudes are different. The presence of rightfully named “stinky tofu” vendors doesn’t stop people from walking down the street, as they have become conditioned to the scent, and maybe even enjoy it. A smelly place to use the restroom may not be ideal, but it is not a game-changer—many Chinese used even the worst smelling toilets that we trip-goers turned down in favor of “going nature”. Having not experienced the aforementioned features of high sanitation standards, many smells deemed “bad” by Westerners are not reflected in the attitudes of the Chinese. In this sense (or scents, if you will), aromas are purely subjective for an individual, family, or society.

Odor itself is not a health or sanitation threat, but it is likely to be augmented by poor toilet facilities that do not have adequate waste processing or collection functions. Odor could be greatly reduced in some squat toilets (squat flushers) by using a water trap to reduce sewage smell. This simple technology could greatly reduce the odor that contributes to the stigma surrounding squatters. However, the more prominent factor lies in the sanitation issues widely associated with squat toilets, and the presence of odor is an uncomfortable side effect of simplistic toilet technology that primarily affects Westerners unaccustomed to and revolted by toilet odor.
**They’re Public:**

Public toilets are not unheard of, and are used widely in the United States and the West. The difference is that even Western public bathrooms retain a privacy that does not exist in public toilets in China. In the West, even the term bathroom implies a certain intimacy—being a room, one would assume the presence of doors guarding an enclosed space. In public toilet facilities in China, there is a general enclosed area, but within that structure there are typically several open-faced “stalls” visible to anyone who enters. Especially as the transition from childhood to young-adulthood occurs, there seems to be an emphasis in Western culture that has embedded the sanctity
of the body and importance of one’s privacy. There is also a deep sense of individualism that permeates society, perhaps a result of capitalistic socioeconomic foundations. This individualism likely results in an increased interest in the respect for personal space and privacy. As such, a trip to the bathroom in, for example, America, is seen as an intimate and private respite rather than a shared and public experience as it is in many types of squat toilet establishments. This concept and appreciation of personal space and privacy seems to be hardly a thought amongst the Chinese, and toilet spaces are no exception. This is potentially a result of the historical significance of the society of which one is part. Even the most personal of moments—using the toilet—is shared with anyone who chooses to enter a squatter (trough or hole-in-the-ground styles). The anonymity afforded by Western facilities is lost, where instead using the toilet becomes a public act subject to the curious eyes of other members of society. The lack of privacy in using the toilet is initially awkward for a Westerner, and even after four weeks, it was never a very comfortable experience for members of the trip. However, like the stench Westerners associate with squat toilets, this element contributes to the negative stigma as it is contributes to individual discomfort. Individual discomfort experienced in the openness that the facilities present, especially by Westerners, does not warrant the disregard of the utility and viability of squat toilets within China, as the concept of personal space and privacy are not particularly relevant in Chinese culture, including toilet culture.

**They’re Unsanitary:**

My final contention for the deserved stigma accompanying the squatter toilets of China is their lack of sanitary provision. This stands as the paramount consideration for accepting
the negative stigma because it provides the most compelling cross-cultural reasoning, one based in cleanliness and sanitation. Cleanliness cannot be measured by one’s discomfort nor can a standard of sanitation be set in the frame of personal or cultural perspectives. High standards must be universally attained when it comes to the sanitary provisions necessary for preventing the spread of bacteria and waste generated by bathroom use. The risks associated with human waste have historically posed enormous concerns for human and ecological health, and the majority of toilets available for true public use provide pathways for communicable disease. Most facilities lack soap and water for hand washing and other amenities considered crucial for cleanliness and sanitation. This is true even in the Wenhai primary school, a place where sanitary hygiene is vital so that students can be healthy, avoid contacting illnesses (especially in a school environment where students play, eat, and study with one another), and excel in their education.

Wenhai primary school's open squatter toilets and the contents of one stall's trough.
In bathrooms that are privately owned or pay-to-enter, there typically seemed to be a higher standard of cleanliness and toilet paper, soap, and connection to a sewage/wastewater system are more likely to be present. However, there were instances when pay-to-use toilets did not meet sanitation standards that would be expected with a source of funding for upkeep. These instances were almost always at toilets that were “managed” by some individual that would demand payment—sporadically—at the entrance, or that would appear after toilet use to insist that a fee was required. This unorganized and seemingly unofficial collection of fees does not guarantee that funds will be used to sustain the facility or further enhance cleanliness.

China’s large income-inequality gap is thus visible even in toilet use, where those who will not be able to pay for or have access to a pay-to-enter facility (which is generally associated with better cleanliness, especially if there is official management) will be forced to use the least unkempt and most unsanitary conditions while using the bathroom. This not only
represents the lack of sanitary facilities available to poorer citizens based on income but it also presents a situation which could be labeled environmental racism for its concentration of environmental risk among poorer populations (in the form of disease, water quality, or waste disposal/treatment).

**Mastering the Squat:**

Although concerns of personal discomfort are present in the stigmatization of squat toilets, the main element for attaching stigma to a squatter seems to be—rightfully so—the lack of cleanliness and sanitary provisions currently plaguing many squatters, most of them for fully public use. Though the first two elements of odor and openness contribute to the undesirability of the squatter to the trip participants as well as other Westerners, these elements are attached to the negative stigmatization based on personal and societal values of pleasant aromas and personal space. The stigmatization is thus framed in the mindset of cultural relativism and one’s own values; however, the negative beliefs that Westerners associate with squat toilets does not necessarily make the toilets inappropriate or of poor design for use for anybody (in this case, the Chinese who hold a different set of acceptable standards). The element that does warrant the negative stigmatization of squatters is that of poor sanitation. This is an element that must meet universal sanitation standards in order to ensure greater health among global communities. The World Toilet Organization (WTO) is an international non-governmental organization whose mission is to build global awareness regarding the importance of sanitation for communities worldwide and promote educational and technological initiatives that improve sanitation. Sanitation plays an important role in eliminating poverty and keeping children in school, as well as reducing
global health concerns that stem from improper sanitation (World Toilet Organization 2011). By modifying squat toilets and bathrooms (especially public) to ensure accessible provision of more sanitary facilities, squat toilets can be a completely viable form of toilet construction, just as effective as the Western alternative. Not only does using the squat toilet prove to be a quad-strengthening and balance-enhancing accomplishment, but the squat toilet is also environmentally-friendly and can be very sanitary with the appropriate services provided (soap, toilet paper, etc) and high standards set for cleanliness and hygiene (cleaning schedule, flushing capacities, etc). This has been addressed in some areas as the issue of sanitation becomes increasingly important; in urban areas like Beijing, toilets seem to in better hygienic condition and improving. The same public restroom I visited in March 2011 was completely re-hauled and is now relatively clean and modern compared to other public toilets and even paid toilets in rural areas. Wastebaskets and flush toilets (both squat and Western) have replaced the trough style squatters that were previously littered with excrement and
sanitary napkins; one of the worst bathrooms I had experienced has transformed into one of the better public squatters I've used and in only one short year. By achieving high sanitation standards, the future of the squat toilet seems desirable and viable and the stigma surrounding the squatter can be given a big dump.

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