

# Toilet training: How wealthy Chinese are becoming more tasteful

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Most toilets of good quality in China cost 1,000-3,000 yuan (US\$157-\$475). Many in the country were therefore astounded when US-based manufacturer Kohler unveiled its Numi range of toilets at a cost of 40,000 yuan (US\$6,330) each.

Yet despite the price, 40 of the new toilets were sold in Xi'an, the capital of Shaanxi province in northwest China, on the first day they went on sale, with many customers having to pay a deposit and wait for delivery, according to the Beijing-based magazine Global Entrepreneur.

People in China often buy luxury items in order to flaunt their wealth. So what to make of an item which, though it may impress visitors to one's home, cannot otherwise be taken around town to show off?

Naturally, the toilet's beautiful design and hi-tech functions, such as a bidet, a warmed seat which raises and lowers automatically through a sensor at the bottom of the toilet, and air deodorizer may answer the question in part. However, the other part of the answer lies in the newfound desire of wealthy Chinese people to enjoy, rather than purely to display, their wealth.

Ruan Jiamin, president of Kohler China, told Global Entrepreneur that he had found many Chinese billionaires actually dislike the luxury brands such as LV and Gucci beloved of the nouveau riche. Instead, they prefer using bags of excellent quality but without logos. This indicates they wish to enjoy their wealth, but tastefully and not in an ostentatious way.

Unlike cars and clothing, which are seen by others, toilets are used only in private; buyers choose them for personal comfort, just as they choose electrical appliances, according to Ruan.

Lei Yongtai, operations director at consultancy firm Continuum, told the magazine that Chinese consumers would adopt a higher standard of living once their income reached a certain level. "Such people are trying to combine Chinese factors and western factors together in their lifestyle," said Lei.

Lei said many members of China's upper-crust hold parties at their homes where they serve cheese and red wine to their guests, rather than traditional Chinese dishes. They eat salad more often than fried vegetables for the sake of their health, but decorate their home with Chinese paintings and antiques bought at auction. In doing so they show their affinity to the west but retain their Chinese sensibilities.

Ruan said this demographic cannot be reached through traditional advertising forms, because they prefer to keep a low profile and have unique tastes. If male, many may be too busy with their work and give their wives a free hand in deciding on sanitary ware for their homes.

For this reason, the products designed by German plumbing manufacturer Hansgrohe for the Chinese market had characteristics designed to appeal to women, since the company knew that the best way to reach wealthy Chinese men was through their wives.

Another characteristic of wealthier individuals is that they trust their own judgment more than falling for advertising. When German kitchen appliance maker Miele let it be known that it was the favorite brand

of the late Apple boss Steve Jobs, this cut little ice as a guarantee of quality. Instead, potential buyers examined the appliances themselves. One of them placed an apple into a Miele refrigerator to see how many days it could keep the fruit fresh.

Such people are more likely to be convinced by word of mouth through their friends than through advertising, Miele learned in a survey, in which it also found that that a satisfied customer typically told only three others about their positive experience, while an unhappy customer was likely to tell nine others, on average.

Like consumers in other countries, wealthy Chinese people are growing more mature, realistic, confident and discerning in their tastes, according to Global Entrepreneur.