

Can't help thinking dirty

Colin Goh



So thanks to you readers, I've been thinking dirty thoughts.

This was in response to some e-mail I received after my previous column on New York imposing Singapore-style hygiene ratings on restaurants and how this might have disproportionate effects on Asian eateries because, as we Singaporeans know, the hygiene rating of an eating establishment does not always correlate with its culinary reputation – in fact, quite often the reverse.

One expat reader posited that we Asians are less squeamish about dirt, because we've developed greater resistance to infection, since we're exposed to comparatively filthier restaurants. I think he meant it as a compliment, though I sensed an implicit suggestion that there are cultural differences when it comes to tolerating filth. Really?

I have noticed that very often, when Western guidebooks, travel shows or blogs feature Asian eateries, whether in Asia itself or in Asian neighbourhoods, they go out of their way to praise the food, "despite" the surroundings. I've also noticed how my less cosmopolitan Caucasian friends here in New York often manifest skittishness whenever the Wife and I invite them to try the food in ethnic neighbourhoods which do tend to be scruffier. They readily accept that the grub is tasty, but I always get subtle signs that they're bothered by the grease on the floors and windows, the cracked paint on the walls, and invariably, the toilets.

And I have to concede that in New York, the loos in almost all the mid- to low-end Asian eateries appear apocalyptic compared to those in Western makan places of equivalent class. Are we Asians dirtier?

Whenever I've travelled through Europe or North America, I'm always slightly surprised that the rest-stops and public loos are fairly decent. With the sole exception of Japan, I really can't say the same for my Asian experiences. When I was a kid, and my family travelled up to Malacca or Kuala Lumpur, we always made a pit stop in Ayer Hitam. For years I was convinced that the town was so named because of the brackish water in the toilets we had no choice but to use. Singapore has

improved greatly over the years, of course, but even on my recent trip back two months ago, I still encountered some gag-inducing spots.

Of course, there are always exceptions – the two worst loos I've ever encountered were Western ones. The first was in the old, pre-renovation Wembley Stadium in London, which made most stables look like the St. Regis. The second runner-up was the infamous men's room at the legendary (and now defunct) punk rock club CBGB's in New York's East Village, which I've long suspected inspired the grisly toilet scene in the movie *Trainspotting*.

Still, both these appalling restrooms don't hold a candle to an experience recounted to us by a friend of being on the road in China. It was bad enough, she told us, having to squat in a cubicle without doors, over a hole leading to a common trough. But why were the walls moving? As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she screamed as she realised the walls were crawling with maggots.

That squirm-inducing anecdote alone might have clinched the argument in favour of Westerners, except for something that's bugged me for years: Why do ang mohs, regardless of social status, wear their shoes into their homes? Why bring whatever muck, dog poo or who-knows-what-else you've trudged through on the streets into your home? As an undergrad in London, I was horrified whenever my Brit dorm-mates chucked their shoes into the washing machine, along with their clothes.

Here in America, I've noticed an even worse practice – and keep an eye out for it on American TV shows, where I've seen it all too frequently – the wearing of shoes INTO BED. I actually have American friends who do this. You complain about Chinatown loos, I've confronted one such buddy, but we don't track whatever's on our toilet floors into the place where we sleep. Who's dirtier? At a loss to explain it, all he could manage was a feeble: "It's a cultural thing."

One might form the reasonable hypothesis that Asians are more cavalier than Westerners about the cleanliness of public spaces and more particular about their homes, and vice versa. But really, in the end, such generalising isn't particularly helpful.

The fact is, all cultures are just dirty or fussy in their own way. If you believe that Western standards of hygiene are somehow higher than Asian ones, this only confirms that one thing has been washed thoroughly – your brain.