THE ENVIRONMENT | MICHELLE CHEN

China's plastic mountain

China will never lack two things: people and plastic. As long as there are these two symbols of modern civilisation – the human mass and the ethereal man-made substance that binds it – China will continue chugging relentlessly along its path to neo-capitalist prosperity.

In the process of settling into my new apartment in Shanghai, I have amassed enough plastic bags to amaze even me, a native of Manhattan, which has seen its share of disposable packaging. With each visit to one of the nearby 24-hour markets, I receive one small plastic bag to hold my midnight snack, another for my disposable wooden chopsticks and tissues and perhaps a third, knotted loosely, containing one of the tea-boiled eggs sold from a steamy electric slow-cooker on the counter.

The local fruit stall bags my oranges, pears and tomatoes separately, while the chicken vendor packages a quarter of a bird in an open Styrofoam container and seals it with a gossamer-like shield that keeps its contents from spilling over in my cycle basket. At the fish market, my shrimps writhe in futility in a little red bag. I return home with perhaps half a dozen different bags, all the same small, fairly impractical size, of the same flimsy material.

Plastic ware is big here, too. Huge bins in primary colours are stacked on the streets in open stalls, carved from converted garages and one-storey apartment buildings. Rainbow piles of plastic bins, storage containers and chopping boards sit on the shelves of every stall in every market. These things are not built to last – but not much in China is.

Disposability has made great strides in the past 20 years in China, yet its distant cousin – hygiene – still lags in many regards. At night, I spot a rubbish collector scooping up open barrelfuls of waste from pavement canteens and carting the fetid muck away on a giant tricycle. Rubbish accumulates in the crevices of demolition sites, marbling into the piles of rubble over which pedestrians and cyclists sweep – no longer phased by the wreckage. And from the cavern of a skeletal concrete building, you will doubtless be able to purchase, by the light of a single bulb, telephone cards, iced tea and instant noodles, with an endless supply of bags whipped out for your convenience.

In a way, plastic is the perfect medium for China's economic ascent. It is cheap to manufacture, offers a basic way to conduct commerce with a modicum of hygiene and, most importantly, can be tossed away. The nation's capacity to absorb waste seems limitless to most of its populace, which has been devouring natural resources at an incredible pace since China was opened to the outside world in the early 1980s. A study in the 1990s revealed that the country had, over a few years, produced nearly six billion tonnes of solid waste, more than half of which ended up in landfills that took up a total of 55,000 hectares. Beijing alone produces 8,000 tonnes of rubbish every day.

To be sure, major cities are gradually improving their sanitation systems. In preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, the government has launched massive regreening efforts in China's flagship cities. Well-traversed corners in Shanghai now display shiny rubbish bins, although there is still no organised household recycling system. The State Planning Commission and the State Science and Technology Commission, in a marriage of authoritarian will and scientific savvy, have devised a 15-year plan for China's sustainable development, with a comprehensive, if far-flung, approach of poverty eradication, population control, and disaster mitigation and prevention. Meanwhile, in Shanghai, trucks parade up and down smoggy streets, emblazoned with images of blooming flowers, reminding people of their communal responsibility to "beautify the city".

As usual, the communist party is relying on a combination of patriotic propaganda and mobilisation of brute labour to implement its policy. But, judging by the unidentifiable slop oozing along an unpaved Shanghai alley on a rainy day, what happens on the ground may be quite different from the official line.

Aside from cosmetic reforms, China will probably only wise up to its environmental issues when things get too bad to be ignored. A city like Shanghai is far removed from the worst of China's pollution. The most unsavoury areas lie in outlying, painfully obsolete industrial bastions that churn out black smoke from Soviet-style factories.

The neon flair of developed Chinese cities connotes wild vibrancy, with no negative consequences in sight. At Da Run Fa and Carrefour, two big supermarkets that have sprung up in reform-era Shanghai, Chinese shoppers seem almost enamoured by disposability as a concept.

Everything about the west imported into China exudes abundance and redundance, which is most-sharply reflected in the superfluous packaging, bagging and wrapping of goods. The neurosis of post-industrial consumption culture is this obsession with keeping contents impeccably clean. Since Chinese cities, leaving the western chain stores aside, are awash with all sorts of filth, cleanliness – and by extension disposability – is a luxury.

The efflorescence of the cheap and the disposable seems right in line with the course of Chinese consumerism. Thousands of years of political and cultural tumult have taught the Chinese to be practical, and they know that the masses are too unpredictable to allow for the planning of the future –neither for the individual, nor the country as a whole.

With employment, rule of law and the economy in continual flux, long-term reliability and quality do not seem nearly as important as exploiting what is cheap and useful at present – be it a cheap labour force, disposable dishware or disposable income.

On a micro-level, there is something oddly attractive about being able to use something once, throw it away and then start afresh, particularly in a nation that has been trying to shake the burden of history.

The catch is that history and consumption both have consequences. In time, China will learn that nothing is really disposable. And the biggest challenge for its people and its government will be figuring out who will be the one to take out the rubbish.

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HARBOUR FEST | JIM THOMPSON

A passion for Hong Kong

Promoting the virtues of Hong Kong has been a passion of mine for many years. Since my arrival 25 years ago, I have come to appreciate the hard-working people, the freedoms we all enjoy, the natural beauty and the fact that Hong Kong is a "can do" city.

So when I found this city in the depths of despair in April and May I felt there must be something I could do. My role as chairman of the American Chamber of Commerce led me to seek ideas from our membership. The most intriguing, albeit ambitious, idea was put to me by two enthusiastic businessmen, Mike Denzel and Jon Niermann. Both are very experienced in events management and felt we should try to lift the spirits of the Hong Kong people through music. They put forward the idea of a popular music festival with international artists that would be held right on our beautiful Hong Kong harbour front.

They were certain they could assemble the team to make it work. I was convinced this was a good short-term, and perhaps even a long-term, idea for Hong Kong. Throughout recorded history, music has been a unifying force for people. It is clear that most people relate to the rhythm of popular music, so I felt this could be the event that would renew our spirits after the devastating effect of Sars. Knowing that the Hong Kong government was seeking ideas to bring the city back to life in the post-Sars period, we presented our proposal to InvestHK, and eventually to the Internal Working Group of the Economic Relaunch Strategy Group. Our idea was fairly simple. We would all volunteer our services and expertise to create a very professional venue at the Tamar site. We would find world-class talent and get them to perform at the music festival we would create, and we would produce a video of the performances to be shown in the United States on national television.

We felt many more TV stations would air this video, and eventually hundreds of millions of people would see Hong Kong as a vibrant city, where music stars came to perform. The world would see a city that had recovered from Sars, and people would return here to enjoy the sights, use our hotels, taxis and restaurants, and buy the wide variety of merchandise offered in our shops. The government liked the idea and in mid-July we began.

Fast-forward to today and we can say with great pride that we have completed what we set out to do. When the Rolling Stones left the stage at 10.45pm on Sunday, November 9, we all knew we had produced a world-class musical festival at a world-class venue and we had amazing video footage ready to be edited.

This whole event, while not without some imperfections, has to be considered one of the greatest popular music festivals in Asian history, and it came together in a mere 90 days. I sit in awe of the team that made it happen, and while many of their names may never be known, in my opinion, they too must be considered among Hong Kong's heroes. What they achieved was incredible.

The question now being asked is whether conducting a Harbour Fest was money well spent for Hong Kong. I would not hesitate for a minute to say: Yes! For the first time, Hong Kong has had a series of concerts performed by some of the best international talent ever to come here. More than 100,000 people saw the shows and every performance received rave reviews from the audience.

Hosting an annual popular music festival can become a big part of our future. We have shown it can be done and have gained tremendous experience in the process. Harbour Fest was carried out as promised and the world is now well aware what Hong Kong is capable of doing. The formula can be altered because we know the government cannot fund future Harbour Fests to the degree they have this year. However, if corporate sponsors will come forward, as they do for the Hong Kong Arts Festival and annual sporting events, and more time is available to plan the Fest, it can be done much more efficiently.

A major challenge in a compact place like Hong Kong will be finding a permanent venue where musical or theatrical performances can be held throughout the year. Hopefully, someone will take up this challenge and convince the powers that be that this should be a part of Hong Kong's future.

We realise our efforts have been battered by the Hong Kong media but, despite that, our spirits are undiminished. All of us connected with the Harbour Fest have nothing but pride in what we have achieved. We made this effort for Hong Kong and we would do it again. We firmly believe that the combination of the excitement developed in Hong Kong by these live events, and the video to follow, will have shown the world that Hong Kong is back – and we are more exciting than ever.

Jim Thompson is chairman of the American Chamber of Commerce

Hazy thinking on pollution

FRAGRANT HARBOUR

Luisa Tam

The severity of last week's pollution haze, which has increasingly become a regular event in Hong Kong, in turn prompted the annual debate about air quality and the origins of the pollution. Hong Kong usually blames Guangdong because of its polluting industry, and this time the accusing finger was again pointing northwards.

In fact, we should not be so ready to blame our provincial neighbour. First, we might have forgotten that only 20 years ago, all that industry was in Hong Kong. People reaped the benefits of the manufacturing boom and many fortunes were made on the back of it. It was not a problem then, but now, when it is perceived to come from somewhere else, pollution is seen as a big deal.

Two decades later, our vision appears to be blurred by the haze. No one seems to be talking about the root cause of the problem, which means solutions are still a long way off. We talk about air quality and pollution constantly, but we never get away from the bad habit of blaming it on factories elsewhere.

The truth is that Hong Kong is facing a global problem, caused by our heavy reliance on burning fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas, to satisfy our insatiable energy needs. Very little attention is being paid to the solution – renewable energy. Why?

Our power companies say they promote energy conservation, but do you really believe they want to sell less electricity? If you read some of their company literature, they actually see global warming as a business opportunity. As the world hots up, they will earn more from the increased use of air conditioning and refrigeration.

The problem of global warming started to gain international attention about 15 years ago. Less than a decade ago, scientists claimed it was the biggest problem facing humanity. Today, our government funds expensive feasibility studies that take years to complete, while power companies continue to burn the most polluting fossil fuel – coal.

Why has Hong Kong done nothing, while many of the world's banks and insurance companies are cashing in on renewable energy as one of their long-term investments? Why hasn't Hong Kong, as one of the world's foremost investment centres, noticed this?

The government group tasked with co-ordinating cross-border policies held its sixth annual meeting earlier this year. Infrastructure and health issues took top priority, while air pollution was predictably at the bottom of the agenda. Naturally, there was little progress worth discussing.

The ongoing debate about which city and whose factories and cars are to blame for the Pearl River Delta's smoggy air is again boiling over. And everybody is still trying to pass the buck. Isn't it time to stop bickering and for Hong Kong to accept responsibility as well? If Hong Kong finally wakes up, we may still stand a chance of giving the city a better economic and environmental future. Global warming is not one of those distant problems – like flooding affecting Bangladesh, melting ice threatening the Polar caps, or desertification marching across northwest China. We are all part of an inseparable ecosystem. The city will only be able to breathe more easily if we reduce greenhouse-gas emissions by switching from dirty coal and oil energy to clean, renewable sources.

Pretending it is never really our problem can be likened to the Chinese saying: "Plugging one's ears while stealing a bell", which means we are ultimately deceiving ourselves while not recognising the reality. Hong Kong's air pollution is estimated to claim hundreds of lives and put thousands in hospital every year. If that is the reality, it would be suicidal to continue to muffle the warning. Let the bell ring now, and let it ring everywhere.

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PETER KAMMERER'S WORLD

America's dream of bin Laden

Let us play a game of Fantasy American Foreign Policy. US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld is known to indulge in this pastime when he wants to escape reality, and perhaps it has caught on with a wider audience in President George W. Bush's administration.

First, take a silent vow: "I will do my utmost to be objective and not believe everything I read or hear in the mainstream media." Next, take a deep breath and drift into a fantastical black and white world of good and evil, and those who are with us and those who are against us – a place where right is right and everything else can be dealt with by acting first and asking questions later, if at all.

If visions of Texas in great-grandpappy's day come to mind – when they used to hang the bad guys high in the street – turn your thoughts to far-off and distant lands. Think of deserts and desolation.

Imagine that terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden's life was snuffed out by a 400kg bunker-busting bomb that crashed down on his lair in Afghanistan's Tora Bora mountains in November, 2001. Next, convince yourself that his al-Qaeda network of Muslim extremists has been decimated by 25 months of combat and is no longer a viable fighting force. Last, think of all those terrorists in places like Saudi Arabia and Iraq as being directed by an ideology based on a hate for all things American, rather than acting on orders from above.

There – it does not make the world a safer place, but it does raise questions about Mr Bush's war on terrorism. Perhaps immersing ourselves deeper in the realms of fantasy will help.

Take a deep breath, exhale and let the tension that has been building since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, subside. Turn on the television.

There, courtesy of the Arab satellite television network Al-Jazeera, is a recently received video purportedly showing bin Laden with a message that the Arab people will overcome the American infidels and throw them out of Iraq. Rise up and destroy the imperialist oppressors, he orders.

This is rather perplexing, because bin Laden is dead. Perhaps the video is old? No – the American occupation of Iraq was mentioned and that began only six months ago, so something is amiss. Further complicating the confusion is that American intelligence analysis of bin Laden's scratchy voice and blurred image on the tape conclude that there is a high degree of possibility that it is real.

Why would the world's most-feared person, delivering an important message on what appears to be 1970s equipment, want it to be of questionable authenticity, rather than loud and clear?

The CIA and FBI have some nifty hi-tech gadgets. But are they aware that in the digital age, even ungifted amateurs can do some amazing things with video and sound on their home computers?

Even bin Laden's horse could be turned into his double for a television audience. What further evidence could be needed that he is no more?

Georgetown University professor of Arab studies Mamoun Fandy has been saying for the past six months that such details point to only one possibility. "Osama bin Laden is not there – there is nothing called Osama bin Laden. I have no sign that he is alive. My statement stands – I haven't heard from him." Perhaps the Great Satan, as bin Laden is referred to in Bush administration circles, does not have a telephone, computer connection or pen, paper and mailbox handy.

Dr Fandy's theory also has another serious drawback – where is the body?

This is a problem for those of us whose fathers grew up in the birthplace of Nazism in southern Germany, and to their dying day believed that Adolf Hitler was living in Argentina. After all, the allies' story that he died in his Berlin bunker on April 30, 1945, after swallowing cyanide, and his body was burned by Soviet soldiers, lacked hard evidence.

Mr Bush faces a dilemma. He can hardly declare bin Laden dead and then face the embarrassment of having him show up on the White House lawn at the head of a procession of Iraq-occupation protesters. Besides, the death of Terrorist No 1 would mean that Iraq's ousted dictator Saddam Hussein would go to the top of the list. The fact that he is still on the run is tough enough to explain to the American electorate. No, best to keep bin Laden alive and keep the war on terrorism going, so that more reasons can be made to justify US activities in Iraq and the Middle East.

It is time for the fantasy to end. Yawn, rub your eyes and shake your head a few times. Be comforted in the knowledge that bin Laden and al-Qaeda live and that there is no end in sight to the war on terrorism.

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ASIA BEAT

TOKYO
Mutsuko Murakami

The art of selling

Japan's highly acclaimed contemporary artist Takashi Murakami has amazed art lovers inside and outside Japan for years with his work and, also, often with his ideas.

His latest endeavour arrived like a shockwave: he has agreed to include miniatures of his well-known works with packets of chewing gum, in the same way that cheap plastic toys often accompany sweets or cookies.

"Takashi Murakami's Super flat museum" packs will be sold in convenience stores across Japan from December 8. Priced at 350 yen (HK$25), each comes with one of 10 miniature replicas of his work, including his most famous figure, *Miss K02*, which fetched US$560,000 at auction in New York. Every piece is numbered and comes with a certificate.

"I believe this is a revolution in the art world that is changing the history of Japan," said Murakami, 41, as he unveiled his bold plan last month. "Reigning at the top of Japan's hierarchy are the masses, and I am so happy to deliver my artifacts to these ordinary people in the form of toys." This way, he says, his work becomes more accessible to everyone.

Tokyo-born Murakami studied traditional black-and-white brush painting at the prestigious Japan National University of Fine Arts and Music. By the time he had finished his master's degree and Ph.D thesis, he had become attracted to contemporary pop culture, particularly comics and cartoons. Since the mid 1990s, he has been pumping out his own animated characters – typically large-eyed and drawn in strong, simple lines – as figures or in paintings. His art is based on a mixture of pop art and the otaku culture of adolescent geeks obsessed with Japanese cartoons and comics. He is fond of bright colours, cuteness and simple lines.

Takashi established his reputation in New York, Paris and other global art centres before his homeland took him seriously. Here, some view him as Japan's answer to Andy Warhol, while others simply see him as eccentric. The hip artist became a national celebrity, though, following *Miss KO2's* auction in May.

He won more young female fans when he designed a US$5,000 handbag for Louis Vuitton in collaboration with the fashion house's Marc Jacobs this year. He has also been featured in an exhibition at the Rockefeller Centre in New York, held in September and October.

But there is more to Murakami that just a creative artist. He is already a media-savvy and successful entrepreneur, getting involved in public events and collaborations with leaders in the world of design. He heads KaiKai Kiki Corporation, a training ground for aspiring young artists, where his and other artists' work is made.

He produces a wide range of merchandise, from T-shirts, posters and videos, to watches and stuffed animals, which are sold at many retail outlets and on the internet.

His distinct approach to commercialise his art puzzles some classic art fans, who expect artists to be devoted only to creating beautiful works.

For others, however, he may be opening a new era in art history.

KUALA LUMPUR
S. H. Yong

Clean sweep

Liars and apple-polishers are not welcome – that is the message, if one may put it so crudely, from Malaysia's new Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Forget elaborate welcoming ceremonies, or providing expensive gifts. Help cut red tape to eliminate corruption and improve the government's delivery system. And work with me, not for me.

Those have been Mr Abdullah's most significant remarks in the two weeks since he took over from Mahathir Mohamad, who stepped down after 22 years at the helm.

Realising that frequent comparisons may be made with Dr Mahathir, Mr Abdullah has taken this in his stride by saying that although their leadership styles differ, the objectives remain the same: to work for the future of Malaysia and its citizens.

And Mr Abdullah stressed that he needs friends and officials who can assist him in carrying out his duties effectively, not "apple-polishers" whose insincerity could bring about disaster.

These are strong words from a man who is generally perceived as affable. In the past, in this column I have cautioned that it could be easy to mistake his affability for someone who is too agreeable or compliant.

Mr Abdullah, who is popularly known as *Pak Lah*, says he wants to hear only the truth from people, even if they fear that this may upset him, or that he may lose sleep over it. "If one is unwilling to hear the truth, then there is no need to become a leader," he said.

There is a Malay saying that goes: "Those who eat chillies will feel the heat." Mr Abdullah has shown that he will not stand for any nonsense, or mince his words.

He has since put forward a "wish list" for an efficiently-run government. To start with, he has directed Chief Secretary Tan Sri Samsudin bin Osman to set up a task force to reduce bureaucracy. And Mr Abdullah, who is also the finance minister, has acted swiftly by ordering that payments to government suppliers must be made within 30 days of delivery.

This speeding up of affairs is premised on the belief that too long a wait could spawn corruption. Mr Abdullah, also known by his moniker of "Mr Clean", has touched the hearts of many with his "back to basics" approach over the past few days. He means business, and the inept officials had better sit up and pay serious attention to him – before they are found out and rounded up.