

## Is wet really clean?

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A bunch of rags tightly tied to a sturdy stick and you have the prototype of the Chinese cleaning weapon of choice, the mop. During the day you can see them hanging in trees, leaning upside down against a wall, or stuck to the frame of an old bike, their drying strands like colourful banners of battle. There has not been a single day since we have been in China that we have not seen a mop slopped around with different degrees of enthusiasm.



Our students, when they are on duty, use it to clean classrooms, blackboards, corridors and carpets. To wet the mop they simply dip it in the bowl of the squat toilets, flush and then trail it behind them over the linoleum floors until they reach their target. If it is wet, it must be clean. To rinse the mop, it goes back into the toilet.

In buses there is often a big bucket tied behind the driver's seat with grey water sloshing almost over rim when the bus takes a tight corner or comes to a sudden stop. At the end of each route the driver or ticket seller dips a mop in the bucket to make the bus wet and respectable again, the water in the bucket turning a different, darker shade of grey as the day progresses.



Trains have an attendant in each carriage and, apart from checking train tickets and calling out the name of the next stop, their task is to keep their section of the train spic and span. So they check that the luggage is neatly stowed in the rack overhead, with no bits poking out, they come round to collect rubbish and, of course, they mop. Some take their task very seriously, coming around every two hours to evenly distribute wet patches that have accumulated in the train - hot water that has been spilled from the boiler, left-over broth from instant noodles, water or juice from dropped drink bottles and other unidentified wet spots, possibly created by split-pants-wearing toddlers. In supermarkets, mopping floors is team work, with always at least one staff member drying the floor with a piece of cardboard. However, train attendants have to do the mopping by themselves, and only seconds after people have lifted their feet or stepped out of the way of the approaching wet rag, the damp aisle carries a design of multiple footprints again. And guess where the mop gets cleaned. The train attendant was a student once and the toilets on the train look wet and reasonably clean, but where is the smell of bleach when you need it?



Museums, monasteries, restaurants, shops, waiting rooms, they all get another "once-over" at the end of the day, or at the end of someone's shift and it does not matter whether there are still people around or not. When the musty smell of damp, dirty laundry gets pushed towards you to create the "clean wet look", you don't have to understand Chinese to know it is time to move your stuff, or your feet, to higher, drier grounds. But if it is dry, is it clean?

