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The Invention of Toilet Paper

When it comes to leaving a paper trail, no one did it better than the Chinese. They claim to have been the first to invent toilet paper; but why did it take until the 19th century before other countries caught onto the idea? China's claim to fame from this much sought after product leaves us all wondering—how did the Chinese come up with such a useful idea, and how did it get to us today?

Toilet paper, a soft paper product (tissue paper) used to maintain personal hygiene, took centuries for people to develop and realize its benefits. Between the years of 202 B.C.E. – 220 C.E., China's Han dynasty was known for its years of prosperity and advanced ideas. Moreover, it was the equal of the Roman Empire which also flourished during these times. The sharing of ideas and products between these countries took place on the Silk Road, which stretched from Xi'an in the East to Antioch in the West. As a result, products such as precious Roman glass were brought to China and beautiful Chinese silks journeyed to Rome. Even China's technological inventions of the wheel barrow, stirrup, seismograph, and paper marveled traders from afar. As the Han dynasty continued to flourish, it welcomed many discoveries in areas such as technology and science. But the inventions didn't stop there. One of the most useful inventions we appreciate today was just about to be discovered.

So why did the Chinese come up with this idea of toilet paper when Rome still used the ever popular sponges on sticks? Simple— China was the first to invent a rough version of paper produced from rags and tree bark in 100 C.E., which was an obvious step forward since they also claim to have been the first to invent the toilet. Recently, Chinese archaeologists discovered “one of the world's oldest known toilets in a 2,000-year-old tomb of a king’ from the Han dynasty. ‘The stone toilet was provided with a seat and arm-rest and could

be flushed with piped water. It was one of a number of amenities provided for the king in his after-life and was a great invention and a symbol of social civilization of that time” (BBC News). Therefore, it was only logical that toilet paper was to follow several years later. By the sixth century C.E., toilet paper was used among the wealthy, and in the late 14th century, 2 foot-by-3 foot sheets of the material were made specifically for the Chinese emperor (Kissell). It was apparent that China was highly advanced for such a little known nation in the Far East. Surprisingly, the use of disposable paper for sanitary reasons had to wait another 1700 years before the western world caught on to the Chinese concept of cleanliness.

Without reservation, the first commercially produced tissue became available in the U.S. in 1857 and was used primarily for medical purposes. It was moistened with aloe and sold in 500 individual sheets. Unfortunately, Joseph Gayetty, the inventor of this product, was not as successful as he thought. People preferred using the old method of paper torn from catalogs or items from Mother Nature. Eventually, in 1879, the Scott Brothers came into the idea of selling a type of toilet paper. They used push carts to sell their product in the streets until they felt that promoting toilet paper might possibly ruin the family name. By 1880, a British company put a new spin on the idea and designed the paper in sheets. And by 1887, toilet paper came rolled, perforated, and treated with aloe! What’s more, toilet paper has become such a basic necessity in our life today that we simply cannot imagine how we would function without it.

On the whole, China had a novel idea with the invention of paper that started long before the discovery came to the West. Obviously, sanitation was important during the Han dynasty and it took hundreds of years later for European nations to finally realize the significance of hygiene. Today, while some people encourage the use of less paper to help our environment, it is safe to say that the manufacturing of toilet paper is here to stay. So the next time you walk down the paper product aisle of the grocery store and pick from the many brands of 2-ply quilted paper, secretly thank the Chinese for inventing such a useful product and the Scott Brothers for pushing the “tissue”.

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