
China 'Open-Crotch Pants' Face Extinction

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BEIJING - With a look of intense concentration on his face, 21-month-old Zhang Xueyang explores the playground, ducking under swings and slides as fast as his legs can carry him.



His head is shaved. His loose, white-cotton shorts are grimy with dirt. Suddenly, he stops in mid-stride and squats, the seam of his pants parting smoothly to allow a stream of urine to pool onto the concrete.

"Good boy!" his 25-year-old mother, Wu Chunhua, shouts encouragingly as he speeds back to play.

The startlingly revealing "kaidangku" (literally "open-crotch pants") have made such posterior peek-a-boo a common sight in China for decades — rain, shine or, in a specially padded form, snow.

The principle is clear: no-fuss waste disposal. They're split down the middle — in front and back — and provide what many parents say is maximum convenience with minimum coverage.

But in recent years, with China's experiment in capitalism creating a growing middle class, rising incomes and more sophisticated lifestyles have pushed many parents, particularly those in big cities, toward disposable diapers.

While the origins of the slit pants are murky, they have been around at least since the establishment of communist China in 1949. In the late 1970s, when Mao-suit grays and dark blues were the norm for adults, children's vividly hued kaidangku were the only splashes of color on Beijing's drab streets.

But in Beijing these days, bare baby bottoms are an increasingly rare sight — even on sultry summer afternoons, when kaidangku used to be almost a uniform for toddlers.

"They're so uncivilized," says Su Shaojuan, a cashier from the southern city of Guangzhou who has a 2 1/2-year-old son. "People nowadays have more money, so they use diapers. It's more convenient and healthier for the child and parents."

Part of it is undoubtedly purely hygienic, a byproduct of the Chinese government's yearslong effort to spruce up its urban areas and, it says, steer people away from unclean practices.

Many cities have outlawed indiscriminate garbage dumping, public urination by adults and street spitting. And a country that's inviting the world in for the Olympics in 2008 hardly wants visitors to see public spaces used as toilets.

Zhao Zhongxin, a professor at Beijing Normal University's Education Science Research Institute, goes even further: The split pants, he says, have become a social indicator of sorts.

"Children in the cities do not wear kaidangku anymore. But children in the countryside still do," Zhao says. "This is the difference between the minds and living conditions of rural people and urban people."

"In the past, people did not have a strong sense of hygiene," he says. "Now parents are usually very busy and do not have time to help the children to relieve themselves."

Diaper sales have risen sharply in China in recent years, says Yvonne Pei, a Guangzhou-based spokeswoman for Procter & Gamble.

Pei says sales of Pampers have grown by 50 percent every year since 1999. The two main reasons she cites: "Economic development and education level."

At a branch of the Jingkelong supermarket chain in Beijing, hundreds of multihued diaper packages are piled atop each other in one aisle and brightly patterned samples are on display. Prices range from about \$1.80 for a package of 20, to \$12 for 60.

"They're more popular in winter because it's too hot in summer," says a sales assistant who would give only her family name, Li. "They may not be as comfortable as kaidangku, but the standard of life is rising and sales are rising with it."

Yu Min, who has a 2-month-old daughter, sees the benefits of both — convenience vs. cost. "But I use mostly diapers for convenience," says the 32-year-old from the southern coastal city of Xiamen.

At the New Mommy Post-Delivery Care Center in Beijing, new mothers are advised to use diapers regardless of cost, says Zhang Yue, head nurse of the facility.

"They're cleaner, healthier and disposable," Zhang says. More than 90 percent of the mothers use diapers, she said.

But Wu, whose son was playing at the Beijing park, remains unconvinced.

"Even if people don't think it looks good, that's a minority opinion," she says. "This is a Chinese tradition."