**Biting into the Problem**

In part three of our series on Asia's friends of the environment, Mike Woolson looks at a company in Taiwan that is giving others food for thought.

by Mike Woolson for *Asia Magazine*

The facts about pollution in Taiwan make truly depressing reading. Consider the following:

* An estimated 5,000 tons of rubbish sat for weeks at a water pumping station, reeking and fouling the air, after being illegally dumped by authorities.
* The Tamsui River in Keelung was declared officially dead by Taiwan's Department of Public Works in the midst of a three-year Environmental Protection Administration attempt to save it.
* An evening stroll through any Taipei neighbourhood will encounter the day's rubbish piled at every corner.
* The 114 tons of garbage generated at this year's Lantern Festival was almost twice the amount of last year.

In the light of all this, it is heartening to come across any business that takes steps to mitigate the situation. One such company is I-Mei Foods.

Established in 1934, I-Mei now operates some 85 stores throughout Taiwan, selling its own baked goods, dairy products and speciality foods and drinks. In 1991, I-Mei launched a programme to collect and sort out used plastic and glass containers, which are then returned to the appropriate merchants for recycling. I-Mei also replaced plastic milk containers with paper-based cartons and phased out the use of Styrofoam packaging for most of their cakes. Their stores pay a "token fee" to customers for the return of certain containers, which are then recycled.

I-Mei spokeswoman Paula Tsai said the company began to respond to environmental concerns over a decade ago, when its production facility began treating its own waste water. More recently, I-Mei has responded to government requests to minimize energy consumption by producing certain items during the evening, when demand for electricity is lower. Not only that, most of the company's stationery is made from recycled paper, and employees are encouraged to re-use paper and envelopes at all times.

The company's customer newsletter, Nei-hung Ren ("The Peo-ple Who Understand"), contains regular tips and information on environmental topics such as the hazards of chlorofluorocarbons. In 1988, I-Mei published a free guide to locally available publications on the environment. An updated second edition was released last year.

The company also sponsored the publication of a local home-study guide for Earth Day 1990, similar to the one sponsored in the United States by the Rockefeller Foundation and clothing manufacturer Esprit. That guide contains diagrams on how to collapse I-Mei packages to store them for recycling, and general advice on reducing waste at home.

Tsai says I-Mei sees concern for the environment as directly linked with any manu-facturer's concern for quality. "When we look to the industries in the more developed nations, we can see the emphasis on more responsible manufacturing processes," she says. "People here are suddenly experiencing a whole new way of life as a result of the rapid rise in Taiwan's overall living standards. Now the demand for quality encompasses not only the product itself, but the packaging that comes with it."

The cost of implementing these programs is "impossible to calculate", says Tsai, but she says that while most involve a substantial investment at first, in many cases this pays off in the long run. For example, recycling containers is less expensive than making new ones. Even switching to paper milk cartons has been economically sound, since milk in semi-transparent plastic containers degrades more quickly because of its exposure to light.

Tsai says I-Mei employees have responded enthusiastically to the greening of their corporate culture. Some, for example, have gone so far as to cut up used cartons and convert them into file holders. "It is difficult, if not impossible, to make someone — whether it is an employee or a customer — perceive the environmental crisis. The conviction that it is important, and that each can participate positively in saving the environment has to come from the individual," says Tsai. ■