



Plastic waste washes up in Medan, Indonesia, last month.

Picture: Getty Images

LANGUAGE MATTERS | LISA LIM

Drastic plastic

“Plastic” has become a dirty word. Associated with fossil fuel-derived resins that contribute to pollution, the images it conjures up are of plastic bags, bottles and straws. “Single-use plastic” and “plastic pollution” are frequently collocated words. While microplastics were in the mid-20th century the domain of material sciences, this breakdown of plastic into potentially toxic waste in oceans is part of the 21st century’s vocabulary. There has been increased momentum around issues of one’s plastic footprint, as seen in global initiatives such as Plastic Bag Free Day – falling on July 3 – and Plastic Free July.

The word “plastic” used to mean something quite different, however. It entered English in the late 1500s as *plasticke* from the Italian (*la*) *plastica* (*scultura*), and the Latin *plasticē, plasticus* – the art of modelling or sculpting figures, especially in clay or wax. These derived from the ancient Greek *πλαστική, πλαστικός*, ultimately from *πλάσσειν plassein*, meaning “to mould, form”.

One of the few domains where this original meaning of plastic is preserved is in biology. Here, it relates to an adaptability to environmental changes, or the ability to alter neural connections of the brain as a result of experience or learning. One can consider protoplasm or certain plant species or synapses to be extremely plastic.

The word was also used figuratively in the 17th to 19th centuries, in relation to generating or adapting non-material, aesthetic or intellectual ideas or concepts, for example, the plastic energy of the imagination.

Plastic as we now know it first appeared in the 20th century. While the first plastic was developed in 1869 by treating cellulose with camphor to provide a substitute for ivory, the first fully synthetic plastic – containing no molecules found in nature – was Bakelite, invented in 1907, and able to be shaped into almost anything.

In the mid-20th century, corresponding to widespread production and plastic consumption, in particular the plastics industry during World War II and the post-war years, the word shifted meaning – to reference something or someone artificial and unnatural, thus shallow and insincere: plastic people. Mention of “plastics” as a career opportunity in the 1967 film *The Graduate* symbolised cheap conformity and superficiality.

Colloquially, plastic is used metonymically to refer to items made of plastic, for instance, vinyl records, frequently as the phrase “on plastic”, that is, as a recording. “Do you take plastic?” – once a question for credit card usage, now should be a question for the planet. This could be a plastic moment in history.

ON OUR RADAR | SARAH VEGA

Working miracles

Hong Kong’s post-war revival is the subject of a new exhibition at the Maritime Museum. Titled “Hong Kong’s Maritime Miracle: The Story of Our City since 1945”, it shows how the development of the maritime industry was crucial to the rebuilding and rebirth of the city after World War II, says Libby Chan Lai-pik, chief curator of the museum.

The exhibition, which relies on historical artefacts, fishermen’s tales, re-enactments of film scenes and other lively displays to tell the story, is split into five parts: “Regeneration (1945-1948)”, “Back in Business (1949-1970)”, “The High Growth Years (1960s-1980s)”, “Container Rules (1972-present)” and “The Future”.

“Regeneration” begins with an immediate symbol of war and destruction: a bomb that was recovered from a construction site in recent years. The 227kg deactivated World War II device packs quite a punch – visually – and the museum has further enhanced the effect with the use of virtual reality (VR).

“This is not like a traditional exhibition of only objects,” says Chan – visitors can wear VR goggles to experience what it would have been like when aircraft were dropping bombs of this size around the Taikoo Dockyard.

“Back in Business” centres on Hong Kong’s most crucial time for maritime expansion. With the end of the Chinese civil war, in 1949, Hong Kong saw a rush of migrants, rich and poor, securing the workforce, and investment in future trading companies.

The Korean war (1950-53) saw international restrictions on trade with China, making Hong Kong the best access point from which to procure Chinese products. It was also during this time period that “Made in Hong Kong” products became popular around the world.

“The High Growth Years” focuses on Hong Kong as it attempted to respond to Japan’s growing oil demands, and how the city outsourced much of its manufacturing to southern China.

The collection features a mix of eclectic artefacts, including a Star Ferry turnstile from before the Cross-Harbour Tunnel opened, in 1972.

“Container Rules” covers the transformational impact that containerisation had on shipping, boosting trade and the city’s prosperity.

The fifth theme concerns the future of maritime Hong Kong, and the importance of environmental issues and the development



The “Hong Kong’s Maritime Miracle” exhibition highlights the city’s manufacturing industry (above) and features exhibits such as a deactivated World War II bomb (left), a pre-1972 Star Ferry turnstile (below) and Hong Kong swimmer Siobhán Haughey’s 2020 Olympic silver medal (bottom). Pictures: Hong Kong Maritime Museum



of Hong Kong’s harbourfront. It also features Hongkonger Siobhán Haughey’s 2020 Olympic silver medals to showcase both the swimmer’s achievements and the extraordinary spirit of Hong Kong people.

“These exhibits have so many stories to tell,” says Chan. “I hope the audience will really know more about their own stories, that they’re highly connected to maritime history and that these are shared stories for all Hong Kong people.”

Within a year of the Japanese surrender, in 1945, the city’s population was growing exponentially, employment shot up and many buildings were rebuilt, says Chan. Today, thanks to Covid-19, the global supply chain is suffering heavy delays, ship crew members are harder to employ and many international borders remain closed. The Suez Canal incident – when the waterway was blocked for six days by a container ship – is also discussed in relation to this “new norm”.

“This is one of the challenges we need to face,” Chan says, stressing the importance of maritime trade as an economic pillar of Hong Kong.

“Hong Kong’s Maritime Miracle” highlights the historical resilience of Hongkongers and how they can overcome challenges such as Covid-19. For the 25th anniversary of the handover, Chan says: “We wanted to tell a maritime story that really related to Hong Kong people.”

“Hong Kong’s Maritime Miracle: The Story of Our City since 1945” is at Hong Kong Maritime Museum, Central Pier No 8, Central, until October 30. For more information, go to hkmaritimemuseum.org.

