

'Banquet ban' gives locals food for thought

A city in Southwest China has banned locals from hosting elaborate banquets as a way of reducing food waste and preventing unnecessary expenditure. **Yang Jun** reports from Anshun, Guizhou province, with **Hou Liqiang** in Beijing.

There are many government departments in China, both local and central, but few have a brief as unusual as the department that regulates the number of banquets local residents are allowed to host in Anshun, a city in Guizhou province, Southwest China.

The office may sound like a joke, but the problem it was set up to address is anything but amusing. The exorbitant number of banquets being held resulted in lost work hours and a huge waste of food. Moreover, people were gradually sliding into poverty because of the large amounts of money they were expected to hand over to the hosts as cash gifts, a must when attending a banquet in the city.

A "banquet ban" team was established in February last year in Puding county, which has a population of more than 470,000 and is one of six counties or county-level districts in the city, which is home to about 2.3 million. The county, which is administered by the Anshun government, also set up an office for the team in the building that houses the local commission to guide cultural and ethical progress.

The crackdown, which was overseen by the local commission for discipline inspection, was initially part of the central government's anti-corruption campaign and was aimed at regulating the behavior of public servants. However, the city government was dismayed to discover that the number of banquets being held by local residents was rising sharply, even as the campaign against official waste began to bite.

According to a statement provided to China Daily by the Puding commission to guide cultural and ethical progress, the problem was getting out of hand. "There were too many banquets. On average, each household spent about one-third of its annual income on cash gifts. To raise the money to provide cash gifts, some villagers sold crops they had earmarked as food for the family and even borrowed money at usurious rates. For the hosts, the banquets became a method of raising money, but for those attending, the practice resulted in a huge financial burden that led to many people suffering."

The statement also noted that some locals who lived in other towns and cities as migrant workers were pressured to return home regularly to attend banquets, further wasting time and money.

As a result, the focus of the regulatory team's activities was widened to target extravagant meals hosted by local residents. At one point, banquets were held so frequently that some locals decided the only way to avoid the pressure to attend was to relocate to distant towns and cities.

Zhang Qingsong, from Tangyue village in Anshun's Pingba district, was one of the "emigres". He returned to Tangyue in 2014 after more than a decade away. During his time outside the village, he didn't even return for Spring Festival, China's most important holiday.

FIRST PERSON

Life has improved since the regulation was introduced



Qiu Mingxiang, 64, from Tangyue village, Anshun city

Two years ago, my family of six still depended on *dibao* (a government poverty-alleviation program that guarantees people a minimum standard of living) to survive. Life was diffi-

cult and tiring then. But I wasn't worried about the hardships I had to endure; instead, I was concerned about the sudden rise in the number of banquets.

Though poverty-stricken, I had to give a cash gift of at least 50 yuan (\$7.50) at each banquet. I raised chickens, but I never killed them for food and ate very few of the eggs they laid because I wanted to sell them. I also sold home-

grown vegetables. Sometimes, the money I made from selling my goods was not even enough for one cash gift. When banquets came frequently, I had to sell pigs and cows to survive, but that still wasn't enough. Even though I received a government subsidy, I could only make several thousand yuan a year, but one year I handed out about 15,000 yuan in cash gifts.

I was really under pressure when my nephew got married

because he had previously given my family a gift of 1,000 yuan, and it was time to return the money. My only son was working outside our hometown and he didn't make much, so I was reluctant to ask him for help. I asked friends and relatives for loans, but they refused. As an uncle, I was duty bound to attend the wedding banquet, so as it drew nearer I racked my brains and finally found a "disgraceful"

solution — to apply for a loan. At that time, small loans were available to farmers in financial difficulties to buy materials, such as fertilizer. I had no choice, so I obtained a loan of 1,000 yuan.

In 2014, the village committee started to look at ways to change the practice of holding extravagant banquets, and last year, a regulation was passed stipulating that people were only allowed to hold banquets

at weddings and funerals. The committee also set limits on how much food could be offered at banquets to avoid waste.

A cooperative was also established. Farmland was collectivized and leased to companies who planted cash crops. I invested my farmland to become a shareholder, and my wife and I also worked for the cooperative. My son returned to our hometown and got a

bank loan to buy a truck. In total, my family can now make about 100,000 yuan a year. We are becoming richer and have moved into a two-story house.

Now, thanks to the measures taken by the village committee, we can concentrate on our work without worrying about those tiring banquets. Life is so good now.

Qiu Mingxiang spoke with Yang Jun



CHINA DAILY

Clockwise: residents gather for a banquet in Anshun, Guizhou province. **Second:** Members of the Tangyue village committee prepare food for local residents. **Third:** A stripped-down banquet in Tangyue village. **Fourth:** Children enjoy a banquet in Anshun.

QIAO QIMING / FOR CHINA DAILY



Online

See more by scanning the code.

Celebrations down the ages

• Manyue (30th day after birth):

In ancient China, it was believed that babies passed a difficult point after their birth if they survived for 30 days. To celebrate the achievement, this ceremony would be held, witnessed by relatives and friends, who prayed for the baby to be blessed. The tradition lives on in some areas of China today.

• Baitian (100th day after birth):

In ancient times, a midwife would be invited to dinner by the parents of a baby she had delivered. Eggs or noodles would usually be served, because eggs were regarded symbols of completeness and satisfaction, while long noodles signified long life. Banquets are still held in many regions to honor this tradition.

• **The 12th birthday:** In some parts of China, the 12th birthday is seen as signaling the end of childhood. Parents still hold banquets to celebrate their child officially becoming a juvenile.

• **Guanli (coming of age ceremony for males):** In ancient times, this ceremony was held when males reached the age of

20. Following the ceremony, conducted by senior family members, the young men were considered adult and were allowed to marry.

• **Jili (coming of age ceremony for females):** Held when girls reached 15. After the ceremony, the girls were considered adult and were allowed to marry.

• Dashou (literally "big age"):

Traditionally, this banquet was held to mark a person's 50th birthday, and then repeated every 10 years, at ages 60, 70, 80, and 90. A person's 100th birthday was not celebrated in this way because 100 is regarded as a symbol of wholeness, and is therefore one of the most satisfactory numbers.

"Everybody held banquets. If you worked in my hometown, it was almost certain that you would become poorer and poorer. The money you made would not be enough to provide all the cash gifts," the 44-year-old said.

"Sometimes I received more than 10 invitations a month. It was a face-related issue: If you didn't ask for leave to attend banquets, other people wouldn't attend yours, so you lost face. How-



Sometimes I received more than 10 invitations a month."

Zhang Qingsong, Anshun resident

ever, if you worked a long distance away, you had an excuse to not to attend."

Wang Hai, Party secretary of Jinma village in Anshun, said people who gave cash gifts always wanted to recoup their outlay, so they would use any excuse to host a banquet, often to mark events that were not on the list of traditional celebrations.

The problem was exacerbated by the fact that many people believed they had to give their

host a bigger cash gift than they had received from him at their own banquet.

The reasons for hosting banquets ranged from the traditional to the tawdry. Some people adhered to conventional celebrations, such as marking the 30th and 100th days after the birth of a baby, while others toasted a child's enrolment at college or entry into the army. However, some people held banquets whenever they added another story

to their house.

In 2013, Chen Qiang bought a new apartment in Jinma, so he held a housewarming banquet with the aim of recouping the money he had spent on his new home.

Unfortunately for Chen, the plan wasn't a success. "I spent 30,000 yuan (\$4,370) on the banquet, and received about 40,000 yuan in cash gifts. However, the extra 10,000 yuan was quickly eaten up by the cash gifts I had to give at

"Our efforts have produced good results. We are now discussing paying villagers' funeral expenses as well. That will mean local residents will be under less economic pressure so they will remain focused on their work, which will greatly benefit the local economy," Zuo said.

Dong Xianwu contributed to the story

Contact the writer at houliqiang@chinadaily.com.cn