

Too many banquets to handle: an endemic disease

The Chinese tradition of giving monetary gifts on wedding or funeral banquets has been around for centuries, but the hosting of various banquets aiming to make money has become an unbearable burden especially in rural areas.



Hosting banquets under different pretexts aiming to make money has become an unbearable burden especially in rural areas. [Photo: Xinhua]

During important occasions like weddings and funerals, the family would host open-air banquets for friends and relatives, and those who are invited will pay an amount of money, depending on closeness, as a gesture of affection and care.

"I spent over 40,000 yuan (US\$ 5,824) last year on various banquets," said a winery boss surnamed Yang in a small town in central China's Hunan Province. "This way of returning other's favor is really costly."

In some places, however, banquets are also held for various reasons. Moving into a new house, family members getting enrolled into college and celebrating someone's birthday are some of the justifiable excuses. And there could be also not-so-justifiable ones like hosting a banquet to "prevent miscarriage" for pregnant women and to "start a new life" after being released from prison.

Relief fund used for monetary gifts

Those banquets could be a huge burden for some people, especially in rural areas.

"The average annual income of a farmer is between 30,000 and 40,000 yuan, and some people are spending half of it to pay for monetary gifts on those occasions," said Lyu Caifu, a farmer at the Three Gorges Reservoir Region in Chongqing Municipality.

Some low-income families are even drawing on their government allowance for those banquets, he added.

Hosting banquets under different pretexts has grown into a vicious cycle. Understandably, those who have paid could rack their brains to find any excuses for others to return the favor.

Tightened regulatory measures

Many places have rolled out measures to cure the "endemic" disease, with some targeting party and government officials and some the general public as well.

Regulations may vary from region to region but they mostly forbid any banquets except for wedding and funerals and limit the scale as well as attendees of those events.

As for punishment, party cadres are regulated based on party discipline. Some have even been removed from their current posts and expelled from party membership; non-party members were often investigated by the public security department or food and drug regulators. For example, a town in the Three Gorges Reservoir Region stipulated that the violator will be disqualified from enjoying subsistence allowances.

Some places have seen preliminary results. "Much of our burden has been lifted since then," said Yao Qiong, a self-employed business owner in a small town of Chongqing.

In the past, the average annual amount paid on banquets was over 40,000 yuan, and the number has reduced to only 3,000 yuan after the campaign.

There were also some controversial measures adopted during the campaign. Some cities even banned wedding banquets for second marriages and a declaration

needs to be filed ahead of hosting a banquet.

"Local government has the responsibility to curb unhealthy customs, but it should never cross the line," said Li Ping, a professor at Renmin University of China (RUC). Li advised the local community to formulate its own rules after soliciting opinions from the masses and lead the transformation of old habits in a step by step manner.

Social care and the prudence paradox

If you buy your own home and save for your old age you end up paying for your own stay in a care home should you need one. If you rent your home and spend all your earnings the state will pay for your time in the care home at the end of your life.

All parties in government have wrestled with this paradox. The prudent pay more tax, and end up losing their capital if they need long term care. All parties have so far concluded it is too dear to offer free stays in care homes to all who need them. All have rightly concluded if someone without any assets needs looking after in old age the state needs to step in to help.

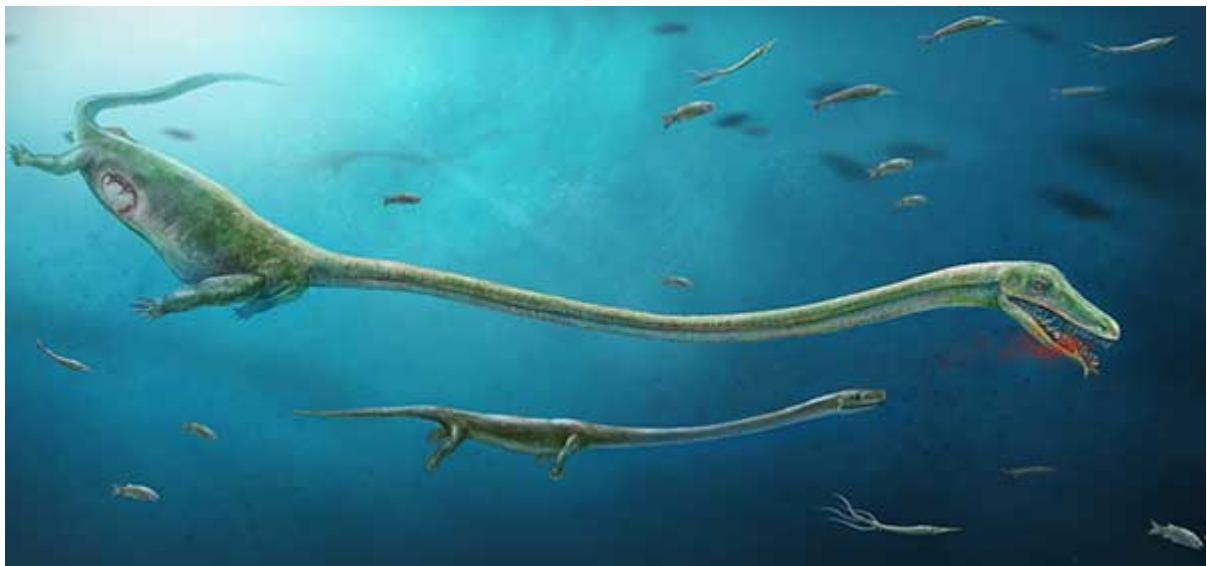
The resulting structure is complex and cumbersome. All individuals have a right to free health care from the NHS. The amounts and cost of NHS care usually escalate dramatically in the final years of a long life. Any time a person spends in hospital provides them with free board and lodging as well as health care. The aim, however, is to enforce a rigid distinction between health care – drugs, doctors time, operations – which are free, and social care including board and lodging which is only free if you have no money of your own. The elderly person staying in hospital has an adjustment made to their state benefits and pension to reflect their reduced living costs.

The children are third parties in the struggle between elderly person and the state over what the state will and will not pay for. With elderly people living into their 90s, the children are often pensioners themselves by the time the issue gets intense. Some seem to think they have a right to inherit the "family home" or the home of their parents. This is not normally the actual family home they lived in 60 years earlier, as people usually move on. Others say that if the elderly person has moved into a care home and is not going to move back to his or her home, it is only reasonable the property is sold and the money raised is used to pay the care home bills. No-one argues the children have to pay the care home bills of any elderly person who does not have the money to pay, though some chose to.

With social care back on the agenda, I would be interested in further views on what is the right balance between private payments and state assistance.

Should prudence be better rewarded? If so, how?

Fossil offers clues to live births



An image released by Nature magazine in February shows a pregnant Dinocephalosaurus catching a fish. [Photo: China Daily]

A fossil of a long-necked marine reptile unearthed in Yunnan province shows the creature that lived millions of years before dinosaurs was developing an embryo, an indicator that it gave birth to live offspring, scientists said on Tuesday.

The discovery at the Luoping Biota National Geopark of the pregnant long-necked marine reptile that lived about 245 million years ago proved the live birth of the unusual fish-eating reptile, known as the Dinocephalosaurus, or terrible-headed lizard, according to research published in the journal *Nature Communications*.

“Our discovery pushes back evidence of reproductive biology in the group by roughly 50 million years, and shows that there is no fundamental reason to suggest that archosauromorphs, or ruling reptiles, did not give live birth,” said Liu Jun, the lead author of the research and a paleontologist at Hefei University of Technology in Anhui province.

“Evidence of live birth among this category has never been discovered. The findings have changed our understanding of the evolution of vertebrate reproductive systems,” he said.

Liu added that some reptiles – including about 20 percent of the world’s 9,400 species of snakes and lizards – give birth to live young.

The fossil was uncovered along with another 20,000 fossils at the geopark in

2008.

With the help of other researchers, Liu was able to restore the fossil to its original shape and identify the creature in 2011. It is now preserved at the Chengdu Institute of Geology and Mineral Resources.

"I think you'd be amazed to see it, with its tiny head and long snaky neck," said Mike Benton, a paleontologist at the University of Bristol, who took part in the research.

The species had one of the longest necks relative to body size of any living creature to have existed. It was an estimated 4 meters long, with a slender neck roughly 1.7 meters long, Liu said. It had paddle-like flippers, a small head and a mouth with teeth, including large canines, perfect for snaring fish.

"The identification of the embryo as the reptile's baby, rather than one of its hearty meals, proved key to the whole research.

"In aquatic amniotes, prey is usually swallowed head first and this orientation is maintained during digestion and disarticulation. Therefore, the neck-forward position of the embryonic skeleton suggests that the included skeleton was not ingested prey, but was an embryo," the researchers wrote.

"We note that the embryo demonstrates the curled posture typical associated with vertebrate embryos."

Liu said the fact that the Dinocephalosaurus did not lay eggs has its advantages, as having live births would have been highly adaptive to reproduction in the sea.

"It is also an indicator that marine reptiles practically dominated the oceans at that time," he added.

Seaplane undergoing final tests



AG-600, the world's largest amphibious aircraft, will have a maximum takeoff weight of 53.5 metric tons and a size roughly comparable to that of a Boeing 737. [Liang Xun / Xinhua]

The world's largest amphibious aircraft, the AG-600, will carry out its debut flight in the first half of the year and is due to begin delivery in 2021, its chief designer said.

Huang Lingcai of China Aviation Industry General Aircraft Co, the seaplane's developer based in Zhuhai, Guangdong province, said on Wednesday that engineers are carrying out final tests on the AG-600 that will conduct the first flight.

Another AG-600 is also undergoing in-house tests in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, he said, adding that 46 out of 53 tests have been completed.

After the tests are completed, pilots will train aboard both aircraft and then practice taxiing before the flight, he said.

"After the maiden flight, we will continue to conduct tests and experiments and finish the certification procedures around 2020. The first deliveries are due in 2021," Huang said.

China Aviation Industry General Aircraft, a subsidiary of State-owned aircraft giant Aviation Industry Corp of China, launched the AG-600 project in September 2009, aiming to fill China's lack of amphibious planes.

The Chinese Navy once had a handful of SH-5 maritime patrol amphibious aircraft, but they reportedly have been decommissioned.

Seventeen orders for the new aircraft have been received from Chinese

government departments and domestic enterprises, the company said. An aviation source who did not want to be named said the first user will be the State Forestry Administration.

The company said that the first trial run was made on Monday of the four WJ-6 turboprop engines installed on the AG-600 that will make the first flight.

The seaplane will have a maximum takeoff weight of 53.5 metric tons and a size roughly comparable to that of a Boeing 737. It will be the world's largest amphibious aircraft, surpassing Japan's ShinMaywa US-2 and Russia's Beriev Be-200, Huang said, adding that it will have an operational range of about 4,500 kilometers.

Qu Jingwen, general manager of China Aviation Industry General Aircraft, said the AG-600 will play an important role in forest fire control, maritime search and rescue, transportation of personnel and supplies to islands, and law enforcement tasks at sea.

Huang also said the seaplane can fly a round trip between Sanya, Hainan province, and the shoal of Zengmu Ansha, the southernmost point of China's territory, without refueling.

It is capable of carrying 50 people during a maritime search and rescue mission. To extinguish a forest fire, it can collect 12 metric tons of water from a nearby lake or sea within 20 seconds, information from the company shows.

Wu Peixin, an aviation industry observer in Beijing, said seaplanes such as the AG-600 are suited to maritime search and rescue because they can land on islands and on the surface of the sea, which makes them flexible and gives them a longer operation time compared with ordinary aircraft.

Bike-sharing apps vow to prevent underage users



A girl poses for a photo while sitting in the basket of a bike owned by Mobike, a bike-sharing service provider, at the Bund in Shanghai on New Year's Eve. [Gao Erqiang / China Daily]

The operators of three major bike-sharing apps have pledged to make their services less accessible to children in response to Shanghai traffic and education authorities' calls for improved safety.

China's traffic law bars children under the age of 12 from riding bikes and tricycles on roads, yet a rapid rise in the popularity of shared bikes in cities nationwide has resulted in more young people breaking that law.

After meeting with Shanghai officials on Saturday, operators of Mobike, Ofo and Bluegogo promised to revamp equipment and security procedures to block underage users from accessing their bikes.

"We will replace the mechanical locks on our bikes with smart ones, which will help put an end to illegal use by children," said Ren Baoluan, Ofo's public relations manager.

Netizens have said that Ofo's bikes are easy for children to access because their locks require only a four-digit combination, which some users forget to scramble when they finish their journey, meaning the bikes can then be ridden for free.

Ren said that with smart locks, which Mobike and Bluegogo bikes already have, users are only able to unlock a bike after receiving a dynamic password on their smartphone, and can only end the service once a bike is properly locked.

The companies said they will also jointly assign specialists to patrol key areas such as schools and parks, and cooperate with neighborhood committees to crack down on underage cyclists.

"We will place a warning sign on each of our bikes," Ren added.

Authorities responded to the issue after receiving complaints that children had been seen racing bikes owned by the apps, which, in some cases, had resulted in injuries.

Statistics from the Shanghai Education Commission show that 245 non-motor-vehicle-related traffic accidents involving children under the age of 12 were reported in the city last year, causing one fatality and 85 injuries.

The total number of shared bikes – which are easy to rent through smartphone apps and can be parked at users' convenience – in Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou has surpassed 100,000.

Cao Guoxing, head of public relations at Mobike, said that while backing efforts to prevent children from riding bikes on the road alone, they encourage children to learn how to cycle when accompanied by adults in a safe space.