

Functions of the National Unity Canteen in the Context of Commensality

Xin Zhou

Southwest University, School of History and Culture School of Ethnology, Chongqing 400715, China

ABSTRACT

Commensality is the basic function carried out by national unity canteens. The construction of national unity canteens in Guizhou Province has established a platform for multi-ethnic dining, promoting ethnic exchanges, communication and integration, assisting rural revitalization, strengthening the sense of community of the Chinese nation, and advancing the construction of rural customs and civilization.

KEYWORDS

Commensality; unity canteens

1 Introduction

In the face of issues such as excessive and lavish banquets, blind comparisons, and exorbitant gift money in local areas, Guizhou Province has initiated a special action called "Promoting the Transformation of Customs and Establishing a Civilized Rural Atmosphere" across the province since 2022, using national unity canteens as an important vehicle to advance this action.

National unity canteens serve not only as standardized venues for hosting banquets but also as propaganda rooms for fostering a strong sense of the Chinese national community and cultural activity rooms for villagers, becoming a crucial means for Guizhou Province to build itself into a model province for strengthening the awareness of the Chinese national community.

The most fundamental function of constructing national unity canteens in Guizhou Province is to serve as a place for villagers to "eat together." Commensality refers to the behavior of a group of people dining together at the same table or in the same setting, emphasizing the sharing of food and the experience of collective eating. It is a social activity that goes beyond merely satisfying physiological needs, placing greater emphasis on food as a social medium through which people establish social connections during meals, promote social interactions and communications, and form a certain degree of social cohesion and group identity.

Robertson Smiths divided the basic types of Commensality into sacred and secular.^[1] Since then, discussions among ethnological anthropologists regarding communal meal systems have largely followed his classification criteria, namely "sacred Commensality" and "social Commensality".

Early Western anthropologists such as Durkheim and Fraser mainly recorded and analyzed sacred Commensality in their classic ethnographic works.^[2-3] Functionalist schools such as Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski focused on the social functions of Commensality activities,^[4-5] while Moss, Benedict, and others made the "potlatch" (a form of Commensality) a classic topic of discussion in ethnology and anthropology.^[6-7]

After the emergence of food anthropology, the study of Commensality by Geertz, Watson, and others became a specialized topic, and their perspectives also tended to diversify.^[8-9]

In China, the terms "Commensality" are not commonly used. Based on the most basic distinction between "sacred" and "secular", sacred Commensality in China mainly refers to "sacrifice" or "offering", while secular Commensality mainly includes "feast", "banquet", and "dinner party", each with its specific meaning. Most Chinese scholars discuss banquets and feasts, focusing their research on gift reciprocity and human relationship exchanges. Research on Commensality in sacrifices and ceremonies is more common in ethnic regions, mostly focusing on the impact of Commensality on social relationships.^[10-11]

The national unity canteen is an important carrier of Guizhou Province's special action to promote the transformation of customs and establish a civilized rural atmosphere. The most urgent issue it needs to solve is to promote the transformation of customs and standardize weddings and funerals. Starting from 2022, Guizhou Province will start to promote this work. Based on sufficient research and demonstration, it will first subsidize 12 ethnic characteristic villages and relocated poverty alleviation communities to carry out pilot projects for the construction of national unity canteens. After achieving certain results and summarizing relevant experience, 151 national unity canteens will be built in 9 cities (prefectures) across the province in 2023. By the end of 2023, 126 national unity canteens have been built and put into use in the province, and preliminary results have been achieved in reducing the burden on the masses, establishing a civilized new atmosphere, realizing interest linkage, and consolidating national unity.

2 Practice of communication through multi-ethnic dining

Guizhou is a multi-ethnic settlement where 18 nations have lived for generations. While maintaining their own unique dietary flavors, various nations also learn from and integrate with other nations, jointly building a diversified culinary landscape in Guizhou. Especially in Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, the integration of multi-ethnic dietary cultures is particularly prominent.

In the national unity canteen, people of all nations can engage in communicative practices through communal dining, and ethnic social relations are formed through these interactions. "The communication, exchange, and integration among various nations" refers to comprehensive interactions based on economic interdependence, two-way exchanges grounded in inter-subjective communication, and orderly integrations guided by the promotion of commonality.

Social communal dining establishes a symbiotic relationship network through basic economic reciprocity, which then fulfills the social and emotional needs of various nations. Based on these needs, during communal dining, there is two-way communication between hosts and guests, with comprehensive exchanges across multiple dimensions such as politics, economy, culture, and psychology.

Communal dining creates an unstructured state of fusion. In this equal atmosphere, people of different nations can sit together, share their cultures and stories, thereby enhancing mutual understanding and friendship, and strengthening their sense of commonality and identity.

Participants in communal dining activities at the national unity canteen are not limited to local villagers; they also include people from other villages in Guizhou. Considering the developed tourism in Guizhou, there are even more tourist groups from other regions and nations who participate in communal dining.

Banwan Village, Yata Town, Ceheng County, Qianxinan Prefecture, has chosen distinctive ancient village buildings to construct a national unity canteen, combining it with the Buyi ethnic theater to provide tourists with an immersive experience of ethnic culture and distinctive cuisine.

Tourists, merchants, local nations, and neighboring villagers can all form an interwoven network through communal dining activities. They experience ethnic culture, feel local customs, exchange life experiences, and forge close and harmonious ethnic relations in the national unity canteen.

3 Combining culture and tourism for rural revitalization

Guizhou is known as the 'Cultural Thousand Island'. The coexistence of multiple nations has created a diverse and colorful ethnic minority culture, and on this basis, has formed rich and diverse traditional festivals with their own characteristics, including the Sama Festival and Eating New Festival of the Dong nationality, the Drum Festival and Flower Mountain Festival of the Miao nationality, the Torch Festival and Tea Picking Festival of the Yi nationality, and the Longshan Festival and Chabai Song Festival of the Buyi nationality.

During the festival, various nations prepare delicious food and exciting performances, which can become the highlights of the national unity canteen. Guizhou also has rich historical and cultural resources, including the Red Army Long March, Zunyi Conference and other red cultural resources. Through creative transformation and innovative development, they can be transformed into a force that solidifies the sense of community of the Chinese nation, becoming Chinese stories and cultural memories that can be talked about at the communal dining table.

At the same time, there are numerous villages in Guizhou Province that maintain traditional styles and ethnic characteristics. These villages are not only carriers of local ethnic culture, but also important tourism resources that attract tourists. Constructing national unity canteens in these characteristic villages can combine the canteens with the tourism resources of the villages, providing tourists with a richer tourism experience.

In these villages, tourists can personally experience the authentic ethnic customs and architectural styles. While tasting delicious food, they can also gain a deeper understanding of the local culture and traditions. Combining tourism resources such as ethnic minority characteristic villages can not only enhance the popularity and attractiveness of canteens, but also inject new vitality into local economic development.

The national unity canteen has significant economic benefits. As a collective asset, the national unity canteen can provide specialty catering, tourist reception and other services, thereby increasing the collective income of the village. The national unity Canteen in Yangfang Village, Taijiang County, as the backyard of the "village BA", generated a total income of over 20000 yuan in June 2023 and contributed over 2000 yuan to the collective economy of the village.

The national unity canteen promotes employment for the masses, especially for the relocated poverty alleviation and resettlement community. The national unity canteen in Feifeng Community, Shibing County, hires chefs and service personnel from the relocated community, enabling them to find employment at their doorstep.

The innovative economic model of "national unity canteen+cultural tourism integration" development helps to leverage the cultural, characteristic industries, and cultural landscape advantages of ethnic regions, promote the

integration of the tertiary industry and industrial upgrading, transform the resource advantages of ethnic regions into economic advantages, and promote rural revitalization. Sanmentang Village in Tianzhu County will unify the planning of the national unity canteen, oil tea experience hall, and homestay, and incorporate them into the layout of tourism industrialization development.

The national unity canteen will be developed into a rural tourism reception center and a farmhouse based on local conditions. Since 2022, the Sanmentang Village national unity Canteen has held more than 50 ethnic cultural activities, received over 200 various tourist groups, and generated a revenue of 2 million yuan. The construction of national unity canteens has become an effective way to promote economic development and common prosperity in ethnic areas, and is an important means to promote rural revitalization and modernization in ethnic areas.

4 Common emotional experience and Collective memory

Social communal meals convey a moral obligation and social emotion, creating a collective experience of community and bringing people together. Social communal meals often arise in shared life, when people gather together and form intimate relationships with each other, sharing common ideas and emotions, and forming a collective memory of solidarity and mutual recognition.

Collective memory is the process and outcome of members of a specific social group sharing their past experiences. Memory is a collective behavior, and the public can obtain memory from society; social groups have corresponding collective memories, which are used to maintain the continuity of the group. Social meal sharing is not only about food, but also about the cultural significance behind food and the emotional experience of "being together". Social communal meals have formed a collective memory of unity, friendship, mutual assistance, and harmony among people, further shaping the sense of identity of those who eat together.

There are many festivals and celebrations in Guizhou, and these rich and diverse festival activities are accompanied by the common dining customs of various nations in Guizhou. All nations in Guizhou rely on the rich forms of festivals and celebrations to carry out communal dining and entertainment. For example, the Sister Festival of the Miao nationality in Qiongzhusan, Guizhou, or the Water Ethnic Festival where local Miao women and children go to "beg for alms" for good luck, as well as the collective guest customs of the Dong nationality such as "eating lovesickness".

These cross ethnic social communal dining activities, through the platform of national unity canteens, carry the common life and shared culture of people of all nations. Through deep communication in communal dining, people shape common emotions and consciousness, forming the collective memory of the Chinese nation.

The national unity canteen strengthens the collective memory of the Chinese nation, and enhances the "Five Identifications". The national unity canteen carries the basic function of social communal dining, including government-led political communal dining and hospitality communal dining. This type of communal dining is usually associated with celebrations, commemorative conferences, and festive events related to ethnic affairs.

These politically ceremonial activities can form collective emotions through symbolic representations, strengthen group consensus, and create and generate collective consciousness. It is necessary to establish and standardize etiquette systems, organize diverse commemorative activities, disseminate mainstream values, and enhance people's sense of identity and belonging.

The national unity canteen in Fangliwan Community, Taijiang County regularly organizes mass meetings and courtyard consultation meetings for individuals of all nations, guiding them to uphold the spirit of unity, struggle, common prosperity, and development, while enhancing national consciousness, civic awareness, and legal consciousness. The communal dining area of the national unity Canteen allows members of all nations to participate in ceremonies and celebrations, jointly shaping national historical memory and continuously strengthening the "Five Identifications".

The national unity canteen strengthens the collective memory of the Chinese nation, creates an emotional experience of "Chinese nation as a family", and strengthens the sense of identity of the "Chinese nation as a big family". In the national unity canteen, members of different nations can sit around a table, share delicious food, chat about daily life, and share their stories and cultures. In this process, people of all nations work together, help each other, communicate friendly, and interact intimately. Moreover, the communal dining activities on this occasion are mostly collective celebrations of festivals and celebrations, which inspire collective consciousness and shape the collective emotional experience of "we are together" in this atmosphere.

The national unity canteen is filled with symbols of the Chinese nation's big family. Basically using the national common language and script, the "Promoting Puxing Township" campaign in Taijiang County is closely integrated with the construction of national unity canteens. The various material and non-material symbol forms of the National Unity Canteen include various national symbols, logos, red cultural dissemination symbols, as well as various national unity stories. At the same time, it also supports the inheritance and development of unique cultural customs of ethnic minorities, provides venues for cultural creation activities of various nations, and forms a development impression of the

diverse and integrated cultural system of the Chinese nation.

The cultural symbol of the "big family of the Chinese nation" inspires the collective memory of members of various nations, and under its influence, the people of all nations form new Chinese stories while enjoying meals together. The national unity canteen, as a place of memory with ethnic cultural characteristics, also plays a public role and function in strengthening the awareness base of the Chinese national community.

5 Contributing to the building of a civilized countryside

There are some unfavorable factors in social communal dining activities, such as food hygiene and safety problems, conflicts caused by cultural differences, the extravagant style of organizing large meals, alcoholism and gambling and other bad behaviors and the organization and management of communal dining activities, etc., and the national unity canteen is a standardized place to institutionalize communal dining activities, and the original purpose of constructing the national unity canteens in Guizhou Province is to effectively control the prominent problems of abusive hosting of banquets, organizing large meals, and wastefulness of comparisons in ethnic areas, as a fixed place for villagers to centrally host weddings and funerals.

As a fixed place for villagers to concentrate on hosting banquets for weddings and funerals, on this basis, a series of construction specifications are formulated, such as basic equipment and facilities, food hygiene and safety requirements, food and beverage utensils and dining environment safeguards, Canteen organization and management, etc., and the national unity Canteen is a systematic specification for the unfavorable factors and various chaotic phenomena that appear in the traditional communal dining activities, "each banquet The size of each banquet is not more than 20 tables, the cost of each table of food shall not exceed 300 yuan, and the wine used for the banquet is home-brewed rice wine, and the management fee will be confiscated for over-standard organization.

Each village has formulated the "Convention on national unity canteen" as a villager's convention to regulate the organization of banquets and to bring the masses from "Eat endless banquets, send endless gifts of money" in the liberation, effectively reducing the burden and pressure on the masses.

The norms and compartmentalization shaped in social communal dining are usually regarded as table manners and etiquette, and people in the communal dining process consciously follow table manners, and violations of them are often condemned. These communal meal norms are accompanied by a series of etiquette norms, and communal meal social activities play a role of indoctrination to a certain extent, providing opportunities for the acquisition of etiquette norms, so that people can participate in and witness the etiquette in vivid scenarios, and experience the educational significance and spiritual connotations in the etiquette.

The National Unity Canteen advocates civilized dining and food conservation, setting a new civilized trend for the rural community. The civilized slogans hanging in the canteen, such as "saving food" and "civilized eating", remind every participant in the communal meals to regulate their behavior and conduct, so as to jointly create a civilized and frugal environment for communal meals.

The National Unity Canteen helps to change customs and educate and guide villagers to resist the unhealthy trend of saving face, comparing ostentation and ostentation, and to continuously improve the villagers' quality and civilization of the countryside.

The National Unity Canteen also regularly organizes various cultural activities, such as lectures and exhibitions, which greatly enrich the cultural life of villages. These activities not only provide villagers with opportunities for learning and entertainment, but also invisibly enhance their cultural literacy and civilized awareness.

The National Unity Canteen is not only a simple dining place, but also a platform for cultural exchanges and a position for publicizing socialist core values. The subtle influence through the decoration, slogans and regular cultural activities of the communal dining hall has an inestimable value in enhancing the overall civilization of the rural society and promoting national unity and social harmony.

6 Conclusion

The National Unity Canteen realizes the practice of interaction through multi-ethnic communal meals and shapes harmonious ethnic relations through cultural exchange and mingling. Colorful cultural and tourism resources enrich the characteristics of the National Unity Canteen, and the economic development model of cultural and tourism integration stimulates the vitality of rural revitalization. This universal practice of sharing meals brings about a common emotional experience, forming a collective memory and forging a strong sense of community among the Chinese nation. The standardization of national unity canteens has solved the problems of communal dining activities and created a good environment for communal dining to promote the construction of rural civilization.

Of course, the further promotion and optimization of the national unity canteen faces problems such as lack of project support, unsound management mechanism, single service function and neglect of regional differences.

In this regard, it is necessary to deeply integrate the development of the cultural tourism industry, improve the management and supervision mechanism, create a good environment for communal meals, innovate forms and means while taking into account customs and habits, and improve the whole process of communal meals in canteens in order to promote their further promotion and optimization.

References

- [1] Smith W. R. (1889). *The Religion of the Semites: The Fundamental Institutions*. New York: Meridian Books.
- [2] Durkheim E. (2011). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Translated by Qu Dong). Beijing: The Commercial Press. p. 462.
- [3] Frazer J. G. (2017). *The Golden Bough* (Translated by Wang Peijiet al.). Beijing: The Commercial Press. p. 787.
- [4] Brown R. (2005). *The Andaman Islanders* (Translated by Liang Yue). Guangxi: Guangxi Normal University Press. p. 206.
- [5] Malinowski B. (2016). *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Translated by Gong Xiuying). Beijing: The Commercial Press. p. 150.
- [6] Mauss M. (2016). *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (Translated by Ji Zhe). Beijing: The Commercial Press. p. 13.
- [7] Benedict R. (2009). *Patterns of Culture* (Translated by Wang Weiet al.). Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press. p. 113.
- [8] Geertz C. (1999). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Nanjing: Yilin Press.
- [9] Watson J. L. (1987). *From the Common Pot: Feasting with Equals in Chinese Society*. *Anthropos*.
- [10] Wang Y., & Others (2012). Human Debt and Human Touch: Relationship Reproduction in Rural Banquets. *Zhongzhou Academic Journal*, 4, p. 107-111.
- [11] Yu Z. (2021). Coming and Going: A Study on the Construction of Shui Nationality Social Relations through the Communal Dining System—An Anthropological Investigation Based on the Shui Ethnic Villages in Libo, Guizhou. *Journal of Original Ecological Ethnic Cultures*, 4, p. 109-116.