



ZHANG SHIXIAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Two sessions: New rules aim to focus delegates' minds

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Organizers across the country have cracked down on extravagance this year. The move didn't come as a surprise, though, because the central leadership has been engaged in fighting undesirable work practices, such as overt formality, bureaucracy, lavish entertainment and extravagance, since it took office late in 2012.

In line with the rules, the budget for the session of the Shanghai People's Congress was 20 percent lower than last year, and the number of staff in attendance was reduced by half, said Yao Haitong, secretary-general of Shanghai People's Congress Standing Committee.

"It's the first time we haven't given books as gifts to deputies and other members during the Shanghai sessions. We have also discouraged participants from giving each other souvenirs during the meetings," he said.

The decorations for the meetings have been simplified too, in accordance with the principle of displaying a solemn and unfussy approach to the work at hand, he noted.

With the exception of a few green plants placed on the rostrum at the opening ceremonies, no plants or flowers were visible. There were no red carpets to welcome the participants and no expensively produced information boards were erected during group discussions.

Nationwide changes

Similar rules have been enforced across the country. "There are no plants, balloons or banners in the meeting rooms," said Liu Weilin, spokesman of the Beijing People's Congress Standing Committee.

"Before the meeting, we imposed a number of strict restrictions to reinforce the message that delegates shouldn't accept gifts or attend lavish banquets," he said.

The new ruling came as a relief to some delegates from the business sector. "Before, I had to attend several business-oriented banquets every day, but this year I can enjoy dinner with my family," said Chen Juli, a member of the CPPCC Guizhou provincial

committee who is also chairman of Huanya Media Group.

"Previously, gifts given to officials to maintain good relations would cost my company tens of thousands of yuan every year. For example, we once had to supply 20 bottles of Moutai (an expensive white spirit) for a banquet. The cost was really becoming a huge burden on the company."

Du Zhaohui, a member of the CPPCC Henan provincial committee and also chairman of Henan Dongan Car Group, said: "We've seen fewer banquets this year. At this year's two sessions, deputies and members have turned to Weibo (the Chinese equivalent of Twitter) or WeChat (a mobile text- and voice-messaging service) to keep in touch, instead of having meals together as we used to as an aid to maintaining strong personal relationships."

At the suggestion of the Shanghai organizers, for the first time delegates were not allowed to smoke during meetings, and booths selling expensive food products and rare stamps, a tradition during the annual meetings, were removed from the venues to encourage delegates to focus more carefully on the business in hand.

The aim of the reforms is to allow deputies and members to attend the sessions with a single goal in mind — to focus on the content of the meetings and pay close attention to improving people's livelihoods, said Shum Yamwa, a Hong Kong-based member of the Shanghai CPPCC who is also president of Heal Force Bio-Meditech Holdings Ltd.

Paradigm shift

Sun Jie, a delegate to the Beijing People's Congress and chairman of the Beijing Food Association, said: "I know that some delegates have wondered if the changes have been excessive. Fruit used to be provided in the delegates' room, but not this year."

"Many people have found it difficult to adjust to the changes, but I think it will only take a short time for them to adapt to the new rules," she said.

Others wondered whether the changes are merely cosmetic and feared

that old habits may be revived over time.

"If the changes are ignored or abandoned quickly, they will just be seen as lip service to the ideas of frugality and simplicity," said Chen Yu, a philosophy professor at East China Normal University and a member of the Shanghai CPPCC. He claimed that some officials have adjusted their working styles temporarily, simply for the sake of appearances.

"Once the CPC Central Committee stops giving strict, regular warnings about bureaucracy and extravagance, members are likely to revert to their previous practices," he warned.

Instead of focusing on the number of meetings canceled or the savings made through budget cuts, deputies said the real issue is that the changes are aimed at serving the people in a down-to-earth manner.

"If a meeting is held with the aim of solving the problems related to the provision of people's basic needs, it doesn't matter if it lasts two extra hours. However, by the same token, empty talk is unnecessary and pointless," said Chen.

Li, from the Shanghai CPPCC, said that although officials in government departments and State-owned enterprises have been banned from hosting or attending lavish banquets or giving gifts bought with public funds, private businesses are not subject to the regulations.

"Some heads of private enterprises still invite officials to banquets and entertainment, and they're always willing to foot the bill," said Li, a research fellow at the Shanghai Institute of Microsystem and Information Technology at Chinese Academy of Sciences.

"That sort of behavior could provide opportunities for businesspeople to bribe officials and develop other ways of exchanging money and power. The new rules are part of an attempt to ensure that isn't allowed to happen," he said.

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Tang Yue and Yang Wanli contributed to this story.

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SUN JIE
DELEGATE TO THE BEIJING
PEOPLE'S CONGRESS

Clearing the air at smoke-free sessions

By ZHAO KAI
and YANG WANLI

A strict nationwide ban on officials smoking in public has been imposed at this year's provincial two sessions. In most provinces, "no smoking" signs have been placed on walls and pillars in the conference halls and ashtrays have been removed from the venues.

During the Guizhou provincial two sessions, the flowers and red carpets that usually adorn the conference hall are nowhere to be seen, and the chambers formerly reserved for smokers have been turned into tea rooms.

"It's also forbidden to smoke at restaurants and hotels, which is a good way of enforcing the non-smoking policy," said Zhang Mingfu, a deputy at the Guizhou Provincial People's Congress.

This month, every province, municipality and autonomous region has, or will, convene the annual sessions of their legislatures and political advisory bodies. They are the first meetings to be held since a circular was distributed on Dec 29 which ordered officials to take the lead by not smoking in public.

The circular banned officials from smoking in places such as schools, hospitals, sports venues, and public transport, thus helping them to "play a leading role" by adhering to the ban and kicking the habit.

That means non-smoking delegates, most of whom are female, won't have to worry about inhaling secondhand smoke.

Chen Juli, a member of the

CPPCC Guizhou provincial committee said: "I strongly support the ban. The conference hall was thick with smoke last year but now we are enjoying cleaner air. I hope the ban won't just be enforced at the two sessions, but will also apply in the future."

As the world's largest cigarette-producing and consuming nation, China has around 300 million regular smokers. The practice has long been an important aspect of social occasions, partly because many people find it easy to open a conversation while sharing a cigarette.

"As a smoker, I find it hard to go without cigarettes for long periods," said Luo Yongquan, a member of the CPPCC Guizhou provincial committee. However, he added that he had observed the ban rigorously and didn't leave the conference venue to smoke while the meetings were in progress. "When it comes down to it, those are the rules and one simply has to exercise self-control."

As refusal may cause offence, the fact that there is now no need for deputies to offer each other cigarettes means the sessions have run extremely smoothly, according to Zong Wanzhi, a delegate at Henan Provincial People's Congress who is also deputy director of Luohe municipal human resources and social security bureau.

"Now I don't have to feel embarrassed if a delegate offers me a cigarette and I refuse. We should all obey the rules, shouldn't we?" he asked.

Qi Xin contributed to this story.