

# Status Quo of Rural Mobile Kitchens in the New Era and the Management Approach

## -- Taking Poyang County as an Example

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**Abstract.** Mobile kitchens are becoming a new industry in rural areas where a certain number of villages cooks initiatively get together, bringing their own cookers, tables, chairs and benches, and other utensils to serve local customers in need of a catering. In recent years, mobile kitchens have become popular in rural areas and are expanding in scale as social and economic conditions continue to improve. However, the development of rural mobile kitchens is still not fully in line with the requirements of rural development in the new era, and there are a lot of problems in many aspects, some of which are even not conform to the development plan of agriculture and rural areas in the new era. Against the background that the central government has established the general policy of giving priority to the development of agriculture and rural areas and made a major decision to implement the strategy of revitalizing the rural areas, it is important to study the status quo and problems in the development and operation of mobile kitchens for the benefit of people's happiness and rural revitalization, which is an important move to achieve sustainable development and historical changes. Taking Poyang County as an example, this paper explored the current situation and management methods of mobile kitchens with the aim of promoting the standardized and institutionalized development of mobile kitchens and responding to the call for modernization of agriculture as well as rural revitalization in the 14th Five-Year Plan.

**Keywords:** Mobile Kitchens; Status Quo; Management Approach.

## 1. The Prevalence of Mobile Kitchens in Poyang County and its Operational Advantages

### 1.1 Reasons

An important reason for the emergence of mobile kitchens in rural areas of Poyang County is the need to manage kinship among the villagers. In rural areas, relatives and acquaintances can enjoy wine and be guests in the village. Favours, affection and affinity can be seen in the whole process of attending catering, which is one of the typical ways to maintain neighbourhood relation and enhance interpersonal communication in the family-style traditional village model, and is loved by the majority of villagers. This has contributed greatly to the prevalence of mobile kitchens.

Another key factor that turned mobile kitchens so popular is that the catering in traditional ways is often costly and time-consuming, which is a burden economically and emotionally for the catering hosts. With the development of the commodity economy, catering organisers would sacrifice pays for a simpler, more dignified and less laborious way of organising catering, rather than the traditional way of doing everything themselves. By far, people who have more decision power in the rural families in Poyang County are middle-aged couples in their 40s and 50s, while most of the elderly who can organise traditional catering feel too tired to do so. The power to decide form of holding catering is transferred to the new breed of rural people who have spent their early years away from home, earning their living in other forms of work or starting their own business. Their view of "quick fix society" formed in their city life gradually replaced the traditional views which asks people to do everything on their own. Besides, their growing consumption ability enables them to pay for mobile kitchens to enjoy a more convenient and easy way to hold a catering.

## 1.2 Operation Advantages

Firstly, for the hosts of the catering, mobile kitchens free the hosts from the hassle. All they need to do is pay the contractor and the family's catering for wedding or funerals can be done properly. The hosts are liberated from the busyness of the past. Apart from occasionally keeping an eye on the progress of the food being served, they are able to spend most of their time in treating their guests to the activity. In addition, the lower cost of a mobile kitchen is more attractive than a restaurant or hotel. Moreover, holding catering at home enables more relatives and friends to come because it is more convenient. To a certain extent, this is a cost-effective and convenient way for the host to hold a catering.

Secondly, mobile kitchens offer an opportunity for rural labourers with good cooking skills to earn their livings. Employment is the fundamental aspect ensuring living standards. In rural areas, people often feel it hard to find a job to earn steady figure, and it is difficult to support family expenses with farm income alone. The prevalence of mobile kitchens in villages provided those villagers with good cooking skills with a chance to earn their living. In peak time, especially the period of Chinese New Year Festivals, their income can reach as high as tens of thousands. Yearly income can be more attractive compared with the number they can earn by working outside their home. This has also provided a very good employment opportunity for many villagers who need to take care of their elderly at home and look after their children at school, allowing them to raise their families without leaving home.

Thirdly, mobile kitchens make it possible to preserve and even promote the folk cuisine. The dishes presented in the rural mobile kitchens are local flavour that people there get accustomed to. A large number of villagers migrated outside and only went back to their hometown during the Spring Festival. Staying far from their hometown makes them missing the taste of local food more. Mobile kitchens, in this sense, arouse their memory and emotion for their hometown. Therefore, whether intentionally or not, mobile kitchens serve as a carrier of folk cuisine, which contains the local people's affection for their home.

## 2. Analysis on the Developmental Problems of Mobile Kitchens in Poyang County

### 2.1 Development Problems

The first problem is that the mobile kitchens are poorly-equipped. Although the flexibility makes mobile kitchens outperform other methods to do catering, flexibility also show adverse effect like the randomness for its operation time and location. The arrangement should follow the hosts' requirements. They serve for whoever is in need of them without a fixed client. In this regard, the facilities they use are quite poor. The staff of mobile kitchens often set up a tent and work with very simple kitchenware in the tent. In the event of extreme weather, they will face huge problems. Once upon a time, a mobile kitchen in Tali Village, Poyang County was confronted with the problem of collapsed tent caused by the sudden rain and snow. This not only delays the catering, but also gives rise to serious safety risk. Therefore, for the further development of rural mobile kitchens, their facilities must be improved and maintained well.

Besides, the food safety is hard to guarantee. For one thing, mobile kitchens serve as a platform for rural villagers who have culinary skills and are willing to work in the service, but most villagers only participate on a temporary basis and do not have a fixed job schedule, nor do they have the health certificates to be licensed to work. At the same time, these villagers have not received professional food safety training. The chefs, waiters and cleaners are all ignorant of the need to sterilise dishes and other food safety issues. Even worse, people who are responsible for purchasing the food materials are not aware of the quality control of the food and nor do they know the importance of keeping invoices. It is difficult to ensure the safety of food when low affordable prices are the norm. For another thing, food is vulnerable to mosquito bites and contamination, which are often ignored by

mobile kitchen staff, who rarely take the relevant protective measures. There are also inappropriate operations such as raw and cooked dishes being placed together, rough cleaning processes, etc. According to villagers who participated in the catering, it was common to see symptoms such as diarrhoea, fever and gastrointestinal discomfort.

Furthermore, the issue of post-meal hygiene needs attention. Although mobile kitchens are physical carrier of the local community, it is ultimately a profit-making organisation. Although the staff do clean up after the meal, the cleaning tasks are not properly done. The plastic paper covering the tables and the plastic dishes and chopsticks used by the guests are basically dumped in gullies in the village, without being recycled. This causes "white pollution" in the area and greatly damages the scenery of the countryside. Building a neat and tidy village is a fundamental project in the construction of an ecologically civilised village. At a time when rural mobile kitchens prevail, this problem has become one of the toughest scenes of rural construction in the new era, negatively affecting the living environment of local villagers and the overall impression of the village.

Last but not the least, its flexibility in service time and space makes it hard to be supervised. If any household need a team to hold catering for marriage or funeral, the only thing they need is to make a phone call for booking their time. Several chefs will purchase the food they need and drive to their home, loading all the equipment. When they arrive, they will set up the tents, install the kitchenware, arrange the tables and then start to do all the thing in order. Although this way generated from traditional catering now gains much popularity, it poses a problem for the supervision department. It is hard for the government to assess the sanitation status, the health condition of the local people, nor can they easily check whether the utensils have been sterilized or not and whether their operation is appropriate.

## 2.2 Causes of the Mobile Kitchens

The inherent features of mobile kitchen, actually, is the main cause of its current problems. Since it serves for different customers and its working time and space are not fixed, mobile kitchen is quite flexible in nature. Therefore, apart from the necessary kitchenware, tables, chairs and so on, it is important to minimise the burden of unnecessary items. The poor environment and simple utensils are the reason why the mobile kitchen looks so primitive.

The ethnic standards and literacy level are relatively low among the villagers, which is an importance reasons accounting for the status quo. As the main force in the development of rural mobile kitchens - the villagers, most of whom stay in their hometowns for development, usually focus on agriculture at home and only spend their free time to earn an extra income by utilizing their culinary skills. They are not highly educated and do not yet have a stable standard of sanitary requirements. Instead, they judge things according to their own feelings. This makes it hard for them to comply with an authoritative standard.

The key factor is the absence of powerful supervision department and the guidance. In Tali Village, the tradition of hosting catering in partnership has continued for a long time, without government supervision and regulations. It is quite common in their eyes to do the catering on their own and the villagers think it is not closely related to the government. Mobile kitchens, in essence, are a variant of family kitchens. The emergence and popularity of mobile kitchens do not change the original way of doing catering in deed, even though it is more convenient and efficient for hosts. Villagers believe that it is a good thing and even the secretary of Tali village, Mr Li hold the view that mobile kitchens are beneficial for both villages and their villagers, and since there is no adverse problem reported, the mobile kitchens should develop and be free from intervention.

## 2.3 Possible Development Path of the Mobile Kitchens in Poyang County

Even though mobile kitchens are quite popular, there are still a few families that prefer to do catering by paying for the hotels in the towns. Some believe that it is more convenient to hold catering in the hotel, and some do this out of their concern about the sanitation condition and other potential risks of mobile kitchens. The breadwinners who manage their household affairs of most families are

those people aged 40-50, of whom very few are working in the countryside as farmers and most are working outside or running small businesses. They have accepted more advanced and open ideas and are more profoundly influenced by the ideas of the younger generation. Thus, they place a higher requirement on the sanitation and believe that a simple mobile kitchen can no longer meet their requirements for doing chattering. Whether it is the problems of mobile kitchens themselves or the trends of the new era, mobile kitchens are facing a very serious challenge. If these problems cannot be handled in time in a proper way, and if no improvement can be made for standardizing the operation of mobile kitchens, they will disappear with the time going by. This indicates that mobile kitchens can only live in most people's childhood memories with the development of time. In this regard, it is especially necessary to explore management responses from now on.

### **3. Management Approaches**

#### **3.1 Refining Relevant Laws and Regulations**

In November 2020, the Tianjin Administration for Market Regulation formulated the "Measures on Food Safety Management of Rural Mobile Kitchens in Tianjin", which provides a good reference for the development of mobile kitchens in Poyang County, especially in the context of COVID-19 prevention and control.

Firstly, it is necessary to establish register system. The rural mobile kitchens should register at the local market supervision office after obtaining the business license, then fill in the forms for food vendor in Poyang County, and submit the copy of valid health certificate of food workers, the list of food processing equipment and facilities, the commitment letter of food safety responsibility, etc. This can regulate the behaviour of the rural mobile kitchens.

Secondly, a clear access system should be established. For those who want to enter the mobile kitchen service industry, knowledge of food safety and related training experience are required. Besides, they should also offer their health certificates, proof of quality control and invoice of the purchased raw materials. Strict access standard will improve the quality of staff working for mobile kitchens. Another one is to strengthen training and improve overall quality. According to Food Safety Law of the People's Republic of China, it is the responsibility of the township government to supervise the food safety of rural "mobile kitchens" and the county supervisory authorities are specifically responsible for guiding and enforcing the law according to the division of responsibilities. For village chefs who do catering, they should receive intensive training on food security issues, the relative laws and regulations, the requirements on the productions, food sampling and how to dispose toxic and harmful substances. The health condition of staff in this industry should be seriously checked, and those who have not obtained a health certificate will not be allowed to work.

In addition, it is necessary to add an article into the regulations on the mobile kitchens: wild animals(game) should be prohibited. The cause of SARS in 2003 was the indiscriminate consumption of civets, and we are now seeing some wild animals on the tables of the mobile kitchens in Poyang County. Victor Hugo once said, "Nature is kind of a loving mother, but also a butcher in cold blood." Many wild animals carry numerous pathogens, and people's indiscriminate consumption of wild animals will result in tragic consequences. This also reinforces the need for all-round governance and the rejection of game on the table. At the same time, there must be clear processes and guidelines for mobile kitchens to follow and clear regulations on what is feasible and what is prohibited.

#### **3.2 Enhancing the Government's Supervision**

The government should pay more attention to the development of mobile kitchens in rural areas. They must try their best to regulate the operation of mobile kitchens by providing more professional food knowledge and safety training, collecting health certificates for staff involved in rural mobile kitchens, as well as proof of quality control and invoices from raw materials purchase, and playing a regulatory role in the development of mobile kitchens in rural areas. The staff of each township government can, with the help of new technology, establish group chats through communication tools

such as WeChat to include mobile kitchen staff within the control area. Then, the government is able to release information about food safety training courses on a regular basis and incorporate them into the assessment criteria in the form of quizzes, so as to promote scientific and healthy dining, which can effectively prevent food poisoning and better ensure food safety for villagers. The government can gradually implement related measures like asking chef of mobile kitchens to register and requiring the health license of workers, and promoted tableware disinfection system and other related management system. By setting a unified standard and criteria and improving the access rules, they can supervise the chefs well. Meanwhile, the government can establish a database of workers and build a unified file, so as to fully grasp the number of workers in the district, the scale of services, the form of services, etc. They can even help to promote the law-abiding and orderly operation of the workers, and force those who have serious problems to quit through investigation and punishment, interviews, etc.

Apart from that, it's necessary to keep every registration and ensure full-time supervision. For the mobile kitchen registration system, the operators of mobile kitchens should fill the form of registration at the local authority managing the weddings and funerals. It is important to have a person in charge, clarify the scale and scope of the operation and implement a graded declaration system. Also, it is important to improve a three-level supervision hierarchy consisting of the supervisors in the authoritative department, liaison of the town and grid supervisor at the village level. Only in this can the supervision system be given full power to better monitor the development of these villages. Besides, Food safety liaison officers should be appointed to visit the place and instruct on how to choose healthy livestock, poultry, vegetables and other food and utensils, with emphasis on checking the procurement channels of various raw materials and the requirement of certificates and invoice, etc. Food and utensils found to be mouldy, spoiled, poor quality, beyond expiry date or of unknown origin should be disposed of on the spot.

### **3.3 Cooperation between the Villagers and Village Committee**

Villagers and village committees are often in the closest contact with mobile kitchens. The feedback from villagers and the supervision by village committees can effectively help to identify the problems that exist in local rural mobile kitchens. Villagers' response to the local committees can push the officers to negotiate with the staff operating the mobile kitchens there, and therefore, some instructive measures may be put forward. This is conducive to the improvement of mobile kitchens at the minimum cost. Early warnings should be sent for prevention of accidents. At the same time, village committees should establish emergency disposal mechanisms for rural food safety emergencies, prevent major food safety accidents, and make full use of village broadcasts, WeChat groups to increase awareness of food safety and food poisoning prevention and control in the catering of rural areas. The village committees should raise awareness of food safety and self-protection among the villagers, so that they can detect, report and deal with problems early, and respond quickly and appropriately to emergencies.

## **4. Summary**

Generally speaking, rural mobile kitchens, carrying people's affection and attachment to the countryside, are a positive industry in terms of its convenience and job opportunities created for many local farmers. It is undoubtedly a favourable sector. To identify the problems and reasons for its existence and to give reasonable management solutions is an effective way to ensure its better development. Furthermore, it will help to improve the rural environment, to guarantee the employment of rural people, and to achieve better benefits for the people in the poor villages. It is hoped that this project will draw widespread attention to rural mobile kitchens and contribute to their development.

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