

## Back to basics for thanking teachers

June 3, 2012 The China Post By Daniel J. Bauer

Well, that surely didn't take long. The top headline on a local Chinese daily really did jump off the page one day last week. Big characters, dark and heavy, like clouds before a massive thunderstorm.

### TEACHER THANK YOU DINNERS BANNED FOR TEACHERS AT PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES.

And then, within 48 hours, the lead story on page 19 of The China Post came with the banner, "AAC denies teacher 'thank you' banquets ban" (5-29-12).

It turned out that the Agency Against Corruption (AAC) under the Department of Justice had apparently been misunderstood. A document the AAC published last December did in fact refer to "hsieh shih yen" (teacher thank you banquets). Officials in charge of overseeing behavior on our campuses did urge administrators and teachers this past winter to act sensibly (my interpretation) in response to the traditional custom of students soon to graduate throwing pricey dinners for themselves and their professors in the waning days of their college careers.

The earlier, sensationalistic news report had hinted at public concern that professors might be swayed by the dinners to pad grades or, heaven help us, pass students who deserve academic failure.

I may regret making this claim, but I doubt that many college instructors in this country have attended as many thank you teacher banquets as I have. This is my 26<sup>th</sup> year of teaching in English departments of both the day and night division of my university. You do realize, dear reader, what this means, don't you? The raw statistic shocks even me.

With two banquets every spring for a spate of years, I'll soon be enjoying my 51<sup>st</sup> and 52<sup>nd</sup> teacher thank you banquets. This is a subject about which I am qualified to write.

I'll readily attest that these occasions (most of the time) are great fun. They can also be beguiling, which is, I assume, the AAC's concern.

Why are the banquets beguiling? The edibles are guaranteed to be kilometers ahead of the chewy, bland burgers one finds at fast food restaurants, for starters. Also, the occasionally flattering praise student leaders dish out from behind microphones at the dinners can also be, as we say in American slang, a bit much.

Do the pleasures of these dinners, however, influence professors to move grades from the C and B range to the celestial heights of an "A," or to let students pass courses who ought to fail?

The presumption that university instructors cannot be trusted to act honestly while grading, particularly in the final semester of a student's years on a campus, is ridiculous. Instead of raising suspicions about the integrity of educators, let's talk about other aspects of these banquets that are real issues.

The AAC questions the expense of the dinners. We should all worry about this question.

How many students planning these affairs realize that a surprisingly large percentage of their classmates may not have as much spending money as they do? How many student leaders say out loud that a choice of a 5 star hotel restaurant could put a financial burden on the shoulders of classmates too embarrassed to object publicly?

A couple of times over the years I've suggested that professors could pay for their own freight. Why not? The majority of us enjoy these banquets, and do not want students to take a collective financial hit. Many of us feel truly thankful for our calling in life. Graduation is a time to show that gratitude is a two way street. Students can thank teachers for their efforts and dedication, and we on our side can thank our young friends for their good wishes and encouragement in our work. Maybe it's time to drop "teacher" from the term and call the dinners a "thank you banquet," period.

Not to sound too curmudgeonly, but in the end the very best way for students to thank their college instructors is to stick to the basics. Come to class, come to class on time, turn off all high tech gizmos until after the bell rings, don't jabber with your pals when someone else is talking at the front of the room, and put your heart into your homework. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

## **Talking Point**

1. This column focuses on "Teacher Thank You" dinners (hsieh shih yen). Some educational officials fear the dinners may influence student grades. Do you feel college instructors are fair in grading their courses, or are they swayed by personal factors such as the kindness or courtesy of students?
2. Although the traditional purpose of "hsieh shih yen" is to thank TEACHERS, is this the right time to change the name of the dinners to "thank you banquet" (hsieh ni yen) and ask teachers to pay for their own food?
3. The author suggests basic ways at the end of the column to say "thank you" to teachers. What is your opinion of these basic ways?