

Deadly harvest

*Guangdong's burial ban has fuelled demand for human bodies, and criminal gangs are resorting to murder to meet it. **Choi Chi-yuk** and **Fiona Tam** report*

The signs are everywhere around Jieyang, in east Guangdong. On walls, on telephone poles and on bulletin boards, families searching for their missing relatives have posted notices appealing for information on people who have disappeared seemingly without trace.

In the past year, the problem has worsened, especially in Puning and Jiexi counties, which are administered by Jieyang. There, dozens of villages have reported missing people, including itinerants who used to beg in their communities. The elderly and mentally disabled are also among the most vulnerable potential victims.

Liu Jingsong, a motorcycle cabbie in Baita township in Jieyang, said the disappearances were unprecedented. 'I'm 54 years old now. I've never heard of such a crime before,' he says.

'Peng Kunsong, my 67-year-old brother-in-law, went missing in February while my wife's cousin, Liu Jianfen, disappeared three years ago. We've not had a single word from either of them since they've gone.'

Mr Liu suspects his relatives were murdered by corpse thieves, a class of criminals that has emerged in recent years in response to the suppression of an age-old tradition.

When the communists came to power in 1949, they discouraged burials in the hope of conserving farmland and eradicating superstition. Burials have been banned outright in Guangdong since 2000 but many people, particularly in rural communities, still regard burial, a widespread tradition in China for several thousand years, as the most respectful way of handling the dead. Villagers believe the interred deceased will repay the living with blessings and protection.

The result of this ban has been the emergence of a black market in corpses for those willing to pay to substitute their relatives' bodies at the crematorium with another.

Mainland media reports say that corpse-stealing from graves started in early 2000 and demand has outpaced supply to the extent that criminals have turned to murder to fill their orders. Substitute cremation corpses now sell for up to 10,000 yuan (HK\$11,356) apiece.

Mr Liu has no faith in the township government finding out what happened to his relatives. He just shakes his head and says: 'The government? Please don't talk about them, or I will be very angry. They don't bother to lift a finger to deal with these cases.'

Authorities in Puning have largely remained silent while grisly rumours circulate. Residents talk uneasily among themselves about the missing, and almost everybody fears an encounter with the killers.

But Puning has had one victory over the corpse sellers. On August 1, police officers intercepted a funeral vehicle during a routine stop and found the remains of two bodies bearing strangulation marks. They made several arrests but the main suspect, Liu Haiqun, , a driver for the city's funeral home, had fled to Sichuan .

Three days before the arrests, 57-year-old Xie Chuhua, from Renmei village in Puning, disappeared. His brother says that Xie is one of at least seven people to go missing from the small village in the past year.

'Police contacted me to identify remains after they located what they believed was the gang's headquarters and seized some corpses. I went several times but still failed to find my brother,' says the brother, who did not give his name.

Shi Meixiang , 35, a resident of neighbouring Jiedong county, says she was scared every time a van passed by because she had heard that the victims were dragged into vehicles in remote areas and either strangled or poisoned. Her mentally disabled neighbour, 43-year-old Lin Huipeng, was one of two men who went missing in August last year.

Puning authorities said nothing about the arrests until after news emerged hundreds of kilometres away in Sichuan's Gulin county that Liu Haiqun - 'the main suspect in a Guangdong-based murder and corpse-selling gang', according to Chengdu-based Sichuan Fazhi Bao - had been arrested by the county public security bureau. The paper reported that Liu was handed over to Jieyang police at their request.

The story was picked up by a Hong Kong newspaper and became a widespread topic of discussion on internet portals. Only after that, on September 4, did Puning police announce that they had arrested seven people on August 1 on suspicion of murder. They neglected to mention that the detainees all belonged to a gang accused of murdering hundreds of disabled and elderly people and selling their remains for cremation to families wanting to bury their dead.

Roughly 3? months after their arrest, the seven suspects went on trial at the Jieyang Intermediate People's Court, the Guangzhou-based Southern Metropolis News reported.

In the court on Tuesday, Liu Haiqun and co-defendant Guan Dadu were accused of masterminding the abduction and strangulation of three innocent people in July, the report added. The court was told that Liu had stored the dead bodies at a pig farm he owned before handing them over to Guan, who was responsible for selling them. A verdict in the case is still pending.

A middle-aged woman from Liu's village welcomed the trial, saying she feels a little more comfortable - about her village at least - after seeing that something is being done. 'As an ordinary person, all I want is to live in a peaceful environment, with all of my family safe,' she says.

'So many of my fellow villagers went missing in this area in recent years, but it seems much better

now. There have been no more complaints about missing people since Liu was arrested.' The Puning case is the third one involving a corpse-selling gang in Jieyang in the past four years, with the number of victims from this case alone estimated to surpass 400.

Part of the wider problem is the cremation targets some regional authorities set based on estimates of a 0.5 per cent annual death rate.

Jieyang has had a perfect cremation rate for the past six years, a distinction that has earned it praise and suspicion, especially as its rate jumped spectacularly from 2.5 per cent in 1999 to 100 per cent three years later.

The Guangdong civil affairs bureau, which oversees funeral and interment matters, issued three official notices in 2006 requiring lower-level authorities to provide authentic cremation rates.

'Some local authorities accept bribes and allow those willing to pay to bury their deceased. They later used corpses stolen from tombs or bought from corpse-selling gangs as substitutes to achieve a perfect cremation rate,' one notice says.

Guangdong authorities have deployed nearly 24,000 people to monitor cremation reform targets in every village in the past two years. Some of these are suspected of 'contributing' to perfect rates. As a result, police investigations are expected to find that more Jieyang officials were either involved themselves or neglected their duties in the Puning case.

Wuhan-based newspaper columnist Liu Hongbo says the strict cremation system violates traditional cultural values and has encouraged corpse sellers and buyers in Jieyang.

Liu points to the case of another Jieyang man who killed 10 people for their corpses in 2004, saying the situation will not change until authorities replace the policy with a more sensible one.

'Buyers knew those corpses were murdered but both parties simply treated life as a commodity to be used in their interests,' Liu said.

'For them, the value of life is far less than a corpse ... It exposes a gruesome side of our society and deserves careful examination by authorities and the people.'

Cai Xia, from the Central Party School, was quoted by Outlook Weekly as saying that for too long authorities have simplified 'development' down to numbers, and flawless figures usually mean a flawless political career.

Professor Cai says the country is paying a high price for cadres who ignore common sense and regulations in the interests of their careers.