

Betel Nut Beauty in Taiwan: Chinese Tourists' Perspective

Shwu-Huey Wang and Hsiu-Yuan Wang

Abstract—Tourists' eyes will often be attracted by the unique phenomenon of the roadsides: betel nut beauties (pronounced as binlang xishi in Mandarin), if they drive on the roads of Taiwan. Sitting in the neon-lit glass stalls with attractive dress on the roadsides, betel nut beauties usually sell betel nuts to the passing truckers or car drivers with much of their efforts. Moreover, in order to attract peoples' eyesight and increase the sales volume, the young girls are in skimpy clothing to promote betel nuts or beverages to their customers. Therefore, when the Chinese tourists come to Taiwan, to see the unique betel nut beauty phenomenon has become one of their greatly interested things or even a "must see". This paper describes betel nut beauties in Taiwan, explained why the Chinese tourists like to see them in Taiwan and proposed propositions for examination.

Keywords—Betel nut, betel nut beauty, Chinese tourists, tourism.

I. INTRODUCTION

DRIVING on the roads of Taiwan, tourists' eyes will often be attracted by the unique phenomenon of the roadsides: betel nut beauties (pronounced as binlang xishi in Mandarin). Sitting on a bar stool in a neon-topped glass booth, betel nut beauties usually wear skimpy clothing and hawk with efforts toward the passing truck drivers, pedestrians or tourists. Selling a kind of mild narcotic and date-liked fruit, betel nut beauties like to give a sweet and suggestive smile when passing off betel nuts, cigarettes or drinks to the customers. For most of the girls are young and beautiful, the public named them after the legendary beauty of ancient China. They go into the industry for it's easier to get relatively higher pay with low degree in the society like Taiwan. It is estimated that there are thousands of young girls are engaged in the industry [1]. With the age ranged from their late teens to early twenties, betel nut beauties have formed a popular and distinct culture in the cities and countries in Taiwan.

Betel nut is originally the seed of a tropical plant, *Areca catechu* palm tree. Chewing betel nut is a popular scene in Taiwan, as the plant is chewy and with the features of mild and stimulant, truckers or taxi drivers take it as tobacco substitute or breath freshener in the long way driving, blue-collar workers also regard chewing it as a daily habit [2]. Therefore, it is also called "Taiwanese chewing gum". In the recent years, the

planting area of betel nut has surpassed sugarcane to be the second largest crop in Taiwan, after rice [3]. Meanwhile, being regarded as the cash crop, betel nut has been contributed a great amount to Taiwan's economy in the past decades. For the consumption keeps going higher and higher in the past years even the behavior is controversial, stall owners started to hire young girls with the attempts to provide better service to customers.

However, as the competition is fierce, to be more attractive, girls had to wear even less. Even criticisms come from various sides of the society, the practitioners argue that they are doing a decent job; they are only selling merchandises to those who need them. As a result, the phenomenon made by betel nut beauty has become a unique popular culture in Taiwan even though no one exactly knows when it started from. Recently, when the Chinese tourists come to Taiwan, many of them rushed to see betel nut beauties [4]. Therefore, the study is to review the relationship between betel nut beauties and Chinese tourists from the perspective of tourism.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Betel Nut and Betel Nut Beauty

Betel nut is the seed of a tropical plant, *Areca catechu*, which is originally produced in Southeast Asia and widely planted in the countries such as Ceylon, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Philippines, India, South China, and Taiwan. In Taiwan, vendors sell betel nuts by stuffing them with lime paste and wrapping them with betel nut leaves. Truckers, long-distance drivers, or blue-collar workers like to take it as a stimulant or daily. Though the Department of Health [5] kept warning that chewing betel nut is harmful to health, it still seemed to be one of the basic level workers' hobbies in Taiwan.

For the demand amount is heavy, vendors started to run the business. On the other side, the sale of betel nuts in Taiwan contributed a high percentage to agriculture and economy annually (see Table I for reference); some people also regarded it as "green gold". Meanwhile, in order to survive in a keen-competitive market and increase the sales volume, vendors hired young girls in skimpy clothing to promote betel nuts or beverages to passing truck or car drivers.

Though betel nuts can be found in many countries, as stated above, one can only see betel nuts in Taiwan [6]. Actually, the existence of betel nut beauty in Taiwan arose some different comments, however, no matter how the society criticized, the betel nut beauties argued that they make money only by their own force, they did not against any regulations, so no one can

Shwu-Huey Wang, Lecturer, Department of Innovative Design and Entrepreneurship Management, Far East University, Tainan 74448, Taiwan, R.O.C. (phone: 886-6-597-9566 ext. 5211; fax: 886-6-5977610; e-mail: shwuhuey.wang@gmail.com).

Hsiu-Yuan Wang, Assistant Professor, Department of Hospitality Management, Chung Hua University, Hsinchu, Taiwan, R.O.C. (e-mail: hywang@chu.edu.tw).

look them down. It is interesting that the way they promote the merchandises on the roadside quickly caught people's attention and no one predicated that the scene would become a tourism feature in Taiwan.

Proposition 1: The existence of betel nut beauty has become a tourism feature in Taiwan.

TABLE I
THE OUTPUT AND OUTPUT VALUE OF BETEL NUT IN TAIWAN

| Year | Output (tn) | Output value (NT thousand dollars) |
|------|-------------|------------------------------------|
| 2002 | 162,253 | 12,169,000 |
| 2003 | 159,584 | 12,926,283 |
| 2004 | 143,368 | 11,512,433 |
| 2005 | 138,095 | 10,080,945 |
| 2006 | 141,563 | 9,838,625 |
| 2007 | 134,497 | 8,599,766 |
| 2008 | 144,195 | 8,651,698 |
| 2009 | 142,636 | 8,387,007 |
| 2010 | 131,737 | 8,288,370 |
| 2011 | 129,316 | 8,082,246 |

Source: Agriculture and Food Agency, COA, Executive Yuan, Republic of China

B. Local Culture and Tourism

Culture could be a crucial part to influence life style; people's behavior, belief or values are latently moved by culture [7]. Culture is postnatal [8], in other words, people usually learn or develop their beliefs/ values from other people or referential group. For example, when truckers or workers felt thirsty or tired, the way they used to do may be get some beverage from convenience store or buy stimulant (such as betel nut) from vendors, however, when they found that buying things may also bring different experiences, they tend to get into the way as time passes. And this may be the cause of betel nut beauty culture in Taiwan. When the Chinese tourists come to Taiwan for sightseeing, "To see what is different from China" would be one of the things that they would like to do the most. Definitely, betel nut beauty culture in Taiwan would be the point because they'll have nowhere else to see the similar phenomenon.

In addition, prior research also argued that culture and tourism are not only closely related but also mutually favorable [9]. It is acknowledged that local culture cannot be apart from tourism. For example, the gambling industry formed by the casinos in Las Vegas has long been a "must see" for the tourists in U.S.A. It is not only a fascinated special local culture but also a world wide famous scenic spot. In addition, the famous Polynesian Cultural Center in Hawaii attracted tens of thousands of tourists to visit the spot annually. Meanwhile, the lady boy show in Thailand is famous all over the world; one cannot go to Thailand without watching the lady boy show. The

special industry has contributed much for the country's tourism revenue.

On the other hand, the unique local life style can be integrated with the beautiful scenery to attract tourists; the wine industry in Australia and France is the notable case that formed by the local winemaking industry. Interestingly, the betel nut beauties in Taiwan have also become a point to attract tourists, especially those who are from Mainland China. Therefore, the idea of culture tourism can be applied to a broad extent of activities and also "visitors to cultural attractions are often labeled as cultural tourists, regardless of their motivations" (p.16) [10]. Based on the above, the study proposes propositions as the following:

Proposition 2: A unique local culture that is rooted from regional life style or products may lead to tourists' coming from abroad.

Proposition 3: The special betel nut beauty in Taiwan is a worthy-to-see phenomenon for Chinese tourists.

C. The effect of Betel Nut Beauty on Chinese Tourists

This section explains the reason why the Chinese tourists are interested in seeing betel nut beauties in Taiwan.

Taiwan and Mainland China was separated because of political factors since 1949, though the people of the two sides are rooted from the same cultural origin. From that time on, all of the cross-strait exchanges, including culture, were ceased. In the mean time, Taiwanese economy highly developed and soared to be one of the "Four Asian Tigers", and the beautiful scenery of humanities in Taiwan has become one of the features to attract oversea tourists, especially the ones from Mainland China.

TABLE II
NUMBER OF CHINESE TOURISTS IN TAIWAN

| Year | Number | Growth Rate (%) |
|------|---------|-----------------|
| 2002 | 2,151 | --- |
| 2003 | 12,768 | 493.6 |
| 2004 | 19,212 | 50.5 |
| 2005 | 54,162 | 181.9 |
| 2006 | 98,545 | 81.9 |
| 2007 | 81,904 | -16.9 |
| 2008 | 89,256 | 9.0 |
| 2009 | 592,534 | 563.9 |
| 2010 | 618,910 | 107.8 |

Source: Mainland Affairs Council, Executive Yuan, Republic of China

In 1987, Taiwan government lifted the Martial Law and started to allow the cross-strait exchanges. Moreover, tourism was opening up between the strait in 2002 and the people in China began to rush to Taiwan for sightseeing. Though the people of the both sides are of the same language and the same

race, however, after long-time separation, the development in various aspects (such as economy, society or even values) have reached to be significantly different. Therefore, when the government released constraints between the strait, Chinese tourists came to Taiwan in the way of tidal wave (see Table II for reference).

Based on the news report [11], the Chinese tourists' most favorite scenic spots including Alishan, Sun Moon Lake, and Palace Museum or Sun Yat-Sen Memorial Hall in Taipei. On the other hand, to see betel nut beauty is also one of their very important schedules, tour guides or bus drivers were often requested to detour for the tourists to take a look at the betel nut beauties on the road side. Sometimes, the beauties were invited to get on the bus to say hello to the tourists and find a chance to promote beverages, cigarettes, or betel nuts. The Chinese tourists were usually pleased at the way. Some of the Chinese tourists even expressed that the special sensory stimulation is just amazing for them and the red-lip culture brought by betel nut beauty is the one that they cannot see in the Mainland China [12].

When time goes by, the special local culture formed by betel nut beauty has gradually become one of the important things that the Chinese tourists have to do when coming to Taiwan. On the other hand, the boss or owner of the betel nut stands also made much money because of the Chinese tourists. Table II reports the number of Chinese tourists in Taiwan in the recent ten years. We can see that the growth rate of the Chinese tourists has soared up to 107.8% in 2010; this reflects that their preference will possibly become the point to influence Taiwan tourism. Therefore, the study develops the following proposition based on the above information:

Proposition 4: Chinese tourists' preference will have an impact on the sales volume of betel nut beauties.

III. CONCLUSION

The present study reported the local culture made by betel nut beauties and explained the background of why the Chinese tourists like to see the phenomenon in Taiwan. Though the existence of betel nut beauty arises controversy in Taiwan, it does not relate to pornography or illegal but only a special local culture that comes from lower level residents. To some extent, the betel nut culture in Taiwan reflects the way people work for their lives. Because the increasing rate of Chinese tourists has contributed a lot in Taiwan tourism, the phenomenon is especially worthy to be noted. The propositions proposed by the study are meaningful to be tested by future researchers or studies.

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