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*Asia Pacific: Perspectives*  
Center for the Pacific Rim  
2130 Fulton St, LM280  
San Francisco, CA  
94117-1080

Tel: (415) 422-6357  
Fax: (415) 422-5933  
perspectives@usfca.edu

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*Asia Pacific: Perspectives* is a peer-reviewed journal published at least once a year, usually in April/May. It welcomes submissions from all fields of the social sciences and the humanities with relevance to the Asia Pacific region.\* In keeping with the Jesuit traditions of the University of San Francisco, *Asia Pacific: Perspectives* commits itself to the highest standards of learning and scholarship.

Our task is to inform public opinion by a broad hospitality to divergent views and ideas that promote cross-cultural understanding, tolerance, and the dissemination of knowledge unreservedly. Papers adopting a comparative, interdisciplinary approach will be especially welcome. **Graduate students are strongly encouraged to submit their work for consideration.**

\* 'Asia Pacific region' as used here includes East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Oceania, and the Russian Far East.

## Betel Nut Culture in Contemporary Taiwan

By Annie Liu, M.A.P.S.

### Abstract

In the past century, Taiwan underwent multiple major hegemonic changes. As the country entered a rapid economic boom in the 1970s, it made a mark on the global scene and interactions with different cultures greatly increased. The combination of globalization, industrialization, urbanization, and rapid political changes within the past century created an identity crisis for the Taiwanese. In what later became an assertion of ethnic and national identity, a revived interest in the betel nut chewing culture has led to an emergence of betel nut girls, who are scantily clad women who sell betel nuts in roadside stalls. This paper explores the history of the usage of betel nuts in Taiwan and considers consumption of betel nuts as a social, economic, and ethical barrier, as well as their contribution to the formation of personal and national identity. Health, gender, and ethical issues that have risen due to the increased consumption of betel nuts and arrival of the betel nut girls are also addressed.

### Betel Nut Culture in Contemporary Taiwan

As Taiwan entered a rapid economic boom in the 1970s and made a mark on the global scene, interactions with different cultures greatly increased. The effects of globalization – such as a growing global media and the increased exposure to foreign ideas, norms, and beliefs – forced the Taiwanese to reflect upon and transform their own culture. While many Taiwanese looked outside their country to find new cultural symbols of modernity, there were also many people who became hostile toward these cultural invasions and in response, created a heightened sense of ethnic awareness.

Around the same time, Taiwan was undergoing political liberalization as the Nationalist Martial Law lifted in the 1980s and political power shifted from the Nationalist Party to the Democratic Progressive Political Party. Furthermore, the combination of globalization, industrialization, urbanization, and rapid hegemonic political changes within the past century created an identity crisis for the Taiwanese. In roughly a century, Taiwan changed from being part of the imperial Chinese empire, to a Japanese colony, a military dictatorship, and finally a democratic republic. These rapid changes forced the Taiwanese to constantly redefine their personal and national identity.

Consequently, these changes caused a revival in native Taiwanese culture, one of which manifested an interest in the betel nut chewing culture in the late 1980s and since then, a new cultural phenomenon called “betel nut girls” (*bin-langxishi*) has emerged. Betel nut girls are beautiful women dressed in very seductive clothing who sell betel nuts in bright neon-lit glass stalls by roadsides. However, the revival of the betel nut culture in Taiwan and the arrival of betel nut girls, sparked many controversial debates on issues regarding health, social order, moral decline, female exploitation, and culture. Some of the topics that this paper will explore are the roles that globalization, urbanization, and politics play in the revival in the consumption of betel nuts and the inven-

tion of the betel nut girl. I will also consider consumption of betel nuts as a social, economical, and ethical barrier, as well as its contribution to the formation of personal and national identity.

### What is the Betel Nut?

The seed of the *Areca catechu* palm tree is called the “areca nut,” and is commonly known as the betel nut. The Areca palm is grown in tropical areas, such as Central Asia, South Asia, India and parts of East Africa and is often used as a stimulant to keep people awake and warm, and for the feeling of well-being it provides. In Taiwan, a package of six betel nuts typically sells for roughly \$1.25 to \$2.00 USD and is stuffed with a chalky lime paste and wrapped with a betel nut leaf.<sup>1</sup> Vendors sometimes incorporate various ingredients into their lime paste, such as food coloring, licorice, or menthol, to distinguish their betel nuts among competitors. After chewing betel nuts, people tend to experience an increase in the production of saliva, as well as an increase in heart rate and breathing.

Since the late 1990s, betel nuts became the second largest selling crop in Taiwan after rice. The betel nut industry in Taiwan is worth about \$1 billion USD and grows about 140,000 tons per year.<sup>2</sup> A reason that led to the success of the betel nut industry in Taiwan is the lack of regulations under the Nationalists administration since 1949, which helped turn betel nuts into a cash crop. For a long time, there were no laws or taxes placed on farming or selling betel nut, thus earning its nickname as “green gold.”<sup>3</sup> As the betel nuts are sold fresh and must be processed within 48 hours of picking, there are no barriers between the wholesalers and the vendors.<sup>4</sup> So far, aside from the betel nut girls, the wholesale marketing of betel nuts is practically free from corporate influence and governmental regulation.<sup>5</sup> In addition, due to the lax regulation on betel nut farming, more people began to exploit the lands to create more betel nut farms and as a result, it has brought attention to a number of environmental issues, such as soil erosion and flooding.<sup>6</sup>

In 1992, the International Agency for Research on Cancer declared the betel nut as a carcinogen that can cause cancer in the oral cavity, pharynx, throat, and esophagus.<sup>7</sup> Due to the increased consumption of betel nuts in Taiwan, it has become the prime cancer for men between 22 and 44 years old, creating 5,000 new cases of oral cancer and causing 2,300 deaths per year. Furthermore, most oral cancer patients die at around 54 years old, causing many families to lose their primary income earners.<sup>8</sup> According to the Bureau of Health Promotion in the Department of Health in Taiwan, 88% of those who have oral or nasopharyngeal cancer are betel nut chewers.<sup>9</sup> Despite the government’s efforts to educate the public about the dangers of chewing betel nuts, it has been argued that the existence of the betel nut girls thwart the efforts of the government and health department to curb cancer and instead led to increases in government spending on healthcare to take care of those who suffer consequences caused by consuming betel nuts.<sup>10</sup>

### **Betel Nuts in Chinese History**

According to Christian Anderson's *Betel Nut Chewing Culture: the Social and Symbolic Life of an Indigenous Commodity in Taiwan and Hainan*, the consumption of betel nuts in Taiwan began as early as 4,000 years ago. Since the Han Dynasty and throughout the Qing Dynasty in China, betel nuts were often used by nobles, kings and elites. Many Taiwanese aboriginal peoples, such as the Paiwan, Amis, Rukai, Yami, and Pingpu used betel nuts in rituals, shamanism, and even medicine.<sup>11</sup> In some Taiwanese aboriginal cultures, a woman would offer a gift of betel nuts to the man she adores to signify her desire to have a baby with him.<sup>12</sup> After the Han Chinese immigrated to Taiwan in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), many of them adopted the aboriginal betel nut culture and began to use them in medicine and as part of their gift-giving rituals at weddings or more generally when visiting friends. For the Han Taiwanese, the betel nuts carried the connotation of friendship or communication, and not accepting a gift of betel nuts would appear to be rude.<sup>13</sup> By the early Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) in Taiwan, the betel nuts became a very popular and high-priced commodity, resulting in the Qing government levying taxes on betel nuts.<sup>14</sup>

However, after the end of the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and Japan's colonization of Taiwan, the connotation associated with the betel nuts changed significantly. During this rapid political change, the Japanese outlawed all Taiwanese from consuming betel nuts by claiming that it was uncivilized and unsanitary. However they did not enforce the law upon the aboriginal people, which eventually led to the consumption of betel nuts turning into an ethnic and social barrier between the aboriginals and the Han Taiwanese.<sup>15</sup> Since only the aboriginal people were left consuming the betel nuts, a new connotation was created to associate those who consumed betel nuts as uncivilized.

After World War II, the Japanese elite was replaced by the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang), who fled Mainland China and took over Taiwan after the defeat of the Civil War with the Chinese Communist Party (1947-1949). The Nationalists continued to use the negative connotation associated with betel nuts to distinguish themselves and the aboriginals. Since then, the primary group that chewed betel nuts – namely the aboriginal people – were classified as the lowest socio-economic group in the Taiwanese society.<sup>16</sup> Choosing not to consume betel nuts, among other factors, enabled the new ruling elite to establish and maintain a sense of superiority over the native Taiwanese aboriginals.

From the 1970s on, the connotation behind the consumption of betel nuts evolved from serving primarily as an ethnic barrier to representing those among the lower-social-economic labor class. As Taiwan began to experience an economic and industrial boom in the 1970s, the expansion of highways created many new jobs. To deal with this new need for more laborers, many aboriginal people were hired to work as truck drivers and construction workers alongside the Taiwanese. During this time interactions between the aboriginals and the Taiwanese increased and the aboriginals introduced the benefits of chewing betel nuts to the Taiwanese.<sup>17</sup> They found that chewing betel nuts helped keep them awake and gave them

warmth as they worked long hours. This habit also became very widespread among those in the military who chewed it to help them keep up with their military routines.

Another lingering social stigma from the Japanese occupation in Taiwan is the social stigma against women who chewed betel nuts.<sup>18</sup> Women who chewed betel nuts were considered vulgar and unsophisticated, and as a result, other than indigenous women, the Han Taiwanese women typically do not consume betel nuts. According to the Bureau of Health Promotion, 1.5 to 1.7 million Taiwanese chewed betel nuts in 2009, which is approximately 7% of the entire population.<sup>19</sup> 16.8% of all men in Taiwan chew betel nuts, while only 1.2% of those who purchase betel nuts were women.<sup>20</sup> It is unclear exactly how many women in Taiwan chew betel nuts because the statistics only account for those who purchase the nuts and not whether the women themselves chew the nuts they purchase or if the nuts were purchased for someone else.

### **The Search of an Identity**

In response to the economic boom in the 1970s and the political liberalization and lifting of the Nationalists Martial Law (1948-1987), the tourism industry in Taiwan began to prosper and the Taiwanese people's interactions with the outside world increased greatly. A cosmopolitan atmosphere soon developed and brought with it many different cultures and foods from all over the world. Strangely, the greater freedom in exotic food selections did not lead to the decline of Taiwanese native cuisines, but instead revived local food traditions. David Wu, the author of the article "McDonald's in Taiwan: Hamburgers, Betel Nuts and National Identity," argues that McDonalds, which represented symbols of Western and Americana cultural imperialism, and the consumption of betel nuts, became two poles of ethnic consciousness and cultural identity.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Wu explains that the two cultural food traditions peacefully coexist in Taiwan. As a result of this greater freedom of choice not bounded by class or ethnicity, the increasing popularity of eating betel nuts became a sign of heightened ethnic awareness and contributed to the search of "authenticity" with everything considered Taiwanese.<sup>22</sup>

In the 1990s, the consumption of betel nuts played an important role in the Taiwanese people's construction of a national identity as the political relationship between the People's Republic of China and Taiwan deteriorated due to the 1995-1996 missile crisis after President Lee Teng-hui's visit to the United States and rumors of a pro-independent Taiwan arose. In 2000 political power suddenly shifted from the Nationalists Party to Democratic Progressive Party in Taiwan, ending more than half a century continuous rule by the Nationalists. Under President Chen Shui-bian's administration, he rejected One-China policy, which was a precondition for reconciliation talks with China. As a response to the souring relationship, the Taiwanese government created an Indigenous Cultural Renaissance to promote a "Taiwan-centric" culture, which is commonly referred to as "Taiwanization." The "emergence of a local identity coincided with things Taiwanese," in order to distinguish culturally the Taiwanese from the Mainland Chinese.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, the choice

to consume betel nuts became an expression and symbol of one's political identity. According to Wu, "Betel-nut chewing is associated with the symbolic revival of a 'Taiwanese' rural lifestyle among people who are searching for ways to construct a new national identity." Consequently, betel nuts came to represent cultural autonomy and served as a tool for asserting the freedom to choose one's own ethnic identity.<sup>24</sup>



Figure 1: **Betel nut girl Ada preparing betel nuts for sale in her stall. Ada has been featured in a number of photo exhibitions, interviews, and documentaries.** Photo credit: *Tobie Openshaw.*

### The Marketing of Betel Nuts

The revival of the betel nut chewing culture unintentionally sparked a cultural phenomenon known as "betel nut girls" that has swept over Taiwan. Even though betel nuts are sold in various parts of the world, betel nut girls can only be found in Taiwan, which makes betel nut girls a unique attraction for tourists. The betel nut girl is a combination of a waitress, a tour guide, local attraction, and a hostess. They are beautiful women, who dress in costumes or in provocatively skimpy attire while selling betel nuts to long-distance truckers, laborers, farmers, people of the lower economic class, and tourists.

"Betel nut girls" are known as *binlangxishi* in Chinese, where *binlang* means "betel nut" and *Xishi* is the name of a legendary beautiful woman in the China's Spring and Autumn Period. In Chinese history, *Xishi* is known for leading the kingdom to destruction due to her mesmerizing beauty. There is no exact date of when the first betel nut girls appeared in Taiwan, but the phenomenon is often attributed to a pair of sisters who called themselves the "Betel Nut Sisters"

on a television show in the 1960s. Betel nut girls became more widespread in the 1980s and the 1990s as more vendors appeared and created more competition in the industry. The betel nut girls prepare nuts for sale and go up to cars to take orders for betel nuts, drinks, and cigarettes. They often chat with their customers and give tourists information about the area, thus partly serving as a tour guide. Furthermore, these women are dressed in outfits to flirt with men as a technique to attract more customers. They work in shops or stalls that are decorated with brightly colored neon lights behind a large glass, which resembles an aquarium tank filled with exotic fish. The vendors are often located near highways where they hope to catch long-distance drivers. Some of the less elaborate stalls are portable and the vendors sometimes try to sell the betel nuts literally on highway ramps during rush hour where traffic is congested. As a result, these girls often cause a distraction to drivers and create car accidents.<sup>25</sup>

Aside from the commodification of betel nuts, the girls themselves and the experience of purchasing betel nuts from them has also turned into a commodity. Even though most men from higher social classes claim that they do not chew betel nuts, they sometimes still make purchases. However, like many tourists, the men from higher social classes might not actually chew the nuts but purchase them solely for the experience and opportunity to interact with the betel nut girls.<sup>26</sup>

Like the provocative and skimpy clothing a betel nut girl wears, the structure of the stalls also plays a vital role in attracting customers. The flashy lights give off an unreal or even fantasy-like feeling to those who see the stall and attracts them to come closer.<sup>27</sup> Since the girls work right behind the giant glass windows, everything they do can be seen by the outside world. Therefore it appears as if these girls are very vulnerable, and watching them, or the experience of interacting with these girls, is just as important as purchasing and chewing the nuts. However, although the glass is transparent to express their vulnerability, it is also solid and thus protects the girls. This means that men can see the girls and fantasize about them, but no physical contact is permitted unless allowed by the girls.

The women who work as betel nut girls come from very diverse backgrounds and it is impossible to group them in a single category. There are teenage school dropouts or women who are in their 40s with children and families, or even women who are single mothers. There are many betel nut girls that ran away from home at a young age or were not very well educated. Sometimes, the girls are sent from rural areas to work in the city by parents who want their daughters to earn and send money home.<sup>28</sup> The majority of betel nut girls are the sole income earners in their households, which could be just themselves alone or may include their entire family.<sup>29</sup>

Many women choose this job because it allows them to make money while doing relatively simple work without a lot of responsibility. Compared to working in a factory, a betel nut girl can earn more doing work that is suitable to their level of education.<sup>30</sup> The girls also work long periods, with shifts ranging from 8 to 12 hours. In fact, if sales are good and they get bonuses from their boss, they can even make more



Figure 2: **Betel nut girl Hsiao Chin stands by the roadside trying attract passing drivers to purchase betel nuts in Taoyuan, Taiwan.** Photo credit: Tobie Openshaw.

money than college students working in certain entry-level office jobs. In February 2010, the *Global Post* reported that their interviewee, a betel nut girl nicknamed as “Steam Bun,” made an equivalent of \$1,500 to \$1,900 USD in a good month, which was comparable to twice the amount of a typical Taiwan college graduate’s starting salary.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Discourse on Betel Nut Girls**

Some people argue that the betel nut girls are “victims of a society only too willing to market young female sexuality” and it is the Taiwanese society and economy that pushes these girls into this industry to work as betel nut girls.<sup>32</sup> The existence of betel nut girls devalues women and projects a bad image of Taiwan, which tries to present itself as a relatively conservative society to the rest of the world.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the betel nut girls set a bad example for young women because their existence sends a message that even if a girl is not educated and want to be independent from their families, they can use their body and looks to sell betel nuts to profit from men.

Activists argue that this line of work teaches women to self-devalue or to degrade themselves and may possibly lead these girls on a path toward prostitution.<sup>34</sup> While it is rare, there are betel nut girls who want to make extra money and allow themselves to be fondled by men or even offer “extra” sexual services.<sup>35</sup> It is these rare cases that get magnified in society and media, giving the industry a bad reputation and leaving a negative impression. As a result, a movement that focuses on the sexual exploitation of women in Taiwan emerged in the 1990s. The Garden of Hope Foundation, a church-related NGO, has taken a stance to help betel nut girls to leave this line of work. Consequently, the Taiwanese government began to take action against the betel nut girls in 2002 by imposing the “Three No’s Policy,” which requires the girls to cover their bellies, breasts, and buttocks or face hefty fines, as well as increasing fines for spitting betel nuts in public areas.<sup>36</sup>

On the other hand, feminists such as Josephine Ho, a professor and the coordinator of the Center for the Studies of

Sexualities at National Central University, and Christian Wu, a scholar and artist that focuses on betel nut girls, argue that selling betel nuts in this fashion is just another line of work. Although not a socially accepted or normal occupation, these women sell nuts and not their bodies. Furthermore, laws that require betel nut girls to wear more clothing violate women’s civil liberties and freedom to wear what they choose and as a result makes it harder for betel nut girls to make a living.<sup>37</sup>

Those who support the betel nut girls argue that they are not engaged in unethical behavior, but can be compared to models who sell automobiles, dancers, or even singers and entertainers who strip down to their underwear on stage, such as Jolin Tsai (a famous singer in Taiwan) or Karen Mok (a singer in Hong Kong), or generally models who use their bodies to sell products.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the existence of the betel nut girls is a form of self-empowerment for women and society’s sexual liberation from patriarchal Confucian gender roles because it tells women that it is socially acceptable for women to work outside of the household. Tobie Openshaw, a well-known South African photographer and a documentary film maker who spent nearly a decade doing fieldwork on betel nut girls, said in a 2009 interview with *National Geographic Canada* that he sees the girls as “an expression of urban art, combining design and performance.”<sup>39</sup> It is also interesting to note that Openshaw’s photos and Wu’s paintings have appeared in world wide art exhibits and galleries, including San Francisco Museum of Modern Arts, and garnered attention from people all over the world.<sup>40</sup> From these exhibits, it appears that those from overseas view the betel nut girls as unique and special to Taiwan, whereas educated people from Taiwan tend to view betel nut girls as shameful. Overall, it seems that those who support the betel nut girls look at this situation in terms of economics and civil liberties, whereas those in opposition argue in terms of health, environmental, moral, ethical, and social decline.

The problems regarding moral, ethical and social decline lies not within the betel nut girls themselves, but within the society and the media, because the portrayal of betel nut girls in the media fuels the consumer demand for sex appeal and



Figure 3: **A betel nut girl working inside a portable transparent and encased stall in Taoyuan.** Photo credit: Tobie Openshaw.

enhances the devaluing of women in Taiwanese culture. Instead, the government and the media should devote more effort on educating people to give more respect to women. It is also society's problem for not properly addressing and treating the betel nuts as an addictive drug that may cause severe health problems. In fact, chewing betel nuts is more socially acceptable in Taiwan than smoking or other forms of drugs, and is now considered as normal as chewing gum. The image of chewing betel nuts is similar to the portrayal of smoking cigarettes in the American film industry, where smoking was once considered sexually attractive. Therefore, Taiwan's Ministry of Health and Education should consider working with the entertainment industry to reform both the image and associated discourse surrounding betel nuts. The benefit to this approach will be that when people think about betel nuts, they will consider the product as a drug with harmful side effects, instead of thinking of a betel nut girl's sex appeal.

### Conclusion

Despite the popularity of betel nuts in the past three decades, this betel nut culture cannot escape the slippery slope of popular culture. Things that are considered popular today may not be popular tomorrow. Reflecting upon the history of the betel nut in Taiwan, it appears that the significance behind chewing betel nuts has fluctuated multiple times during political and economic changes, thus changing society's norms and attitudes toward the betel nuts. Furthermore, its cultural connotation has moved from being considered appropriate for high-class or elites to represent those of the lower socio-economic classes. These changes show that culture is highly dynamic and constantly changing. In only the past century, the connotation of betel nuts in Taiwan has shifted from representing friendship and communication among the aboriginal peoples, to unsanitary and uncivilized by the Japanese, to low socio-economic classes and ethnic barriers by the Nationalists, and finally to sexually attractive and entertaining since the introduction of betel nut girls. The meaning and significance regarding betel nuts continues to change today as health, environmental, gender, and ethical concerns remain central to the practice.

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Annie Liu recently received her B.A. in Asian Studies and M.A. in Asia Pacific Studies from the University of San Francisco. Starting this July she will be working as a Student Ambassador for the USA Pavilion at the World Expo 2010 in Shanghai, China. After the Expo she will embark on a two-month adventure travelling throughout East Asia, which will include enjoying the festivities of the 2010 Asian Games in Guangzhou, China.