

BABY BETEL NUT

THE GIRLS SELLING TAIWAN'S FAVOURITE STIMULANT

Along busy roadways in Taiwan, women sit behind thick glass windows in small shops, decked out in high-heeled platforms, lace, and latex, their demeanor standing out like neon against the exhaust fumes and rust-colored tones of heavy traffic. They watch and wait, searching for something in particular … trucks carrying customers.

Like clockwork, when a semi stops by, they walk out, teeter up to the door, and pass a small package of greenish seeds wrapped in leaves, called betel nuts, to the driver in exchange for payment. The vehicle drives off, the girls return to their fluorescent perches, and the cycle begins again. These women are known as Betel Nut Beauties, or *Binglangshi*, and beyond the glamour, what they are selling is a mild stimulant, betel nut, to truckers and other blue-collar workers in need of a jolt of energy or a break from the monotony of a long drive.

Depending on who you ask, Betel Nut Beauties are either national symbols of a uniquely Taiwanese culture or poor role models, according to some facets of conservative society, who object to their sometimes scantily clad appearances and link them, without much evidence, to professions like sex work or organized crime. Either way, they are part of a betel-chewing culture that arrived on the island thousands of years ago and is considered sacred in some Indigenous ceremonies. The practice is also popular throughout Southeast Asia, though it has slowly declined in Taiwan after peaking in the 2000s.

Betel nut is chewed in many forms, but on the island it is often prepared as a quid, sometimes nicknamed "Taiwanese chewing gum". A piece of the green areca fruit, which resembles a nut, is wrapped in the leaf of a different plant, often a betel leaf to improve flavour, with spices, calcium hydroxide, and sometimes tobacco paste added to the centre to help the stimulating compounds absorb into the bloodstream.

Although betel nut arrived in Taiwan over four thousand years ago and was used by Indigenous communities as a gesture of hospitality, a wedding gift, or a social activity shared while sitting and chatting, the Betel Nut Beauty trend emerged in the 1960s from a small shop in Guoxing, Nantou, where three sisters, known as the Shuangdong Girls, began selling betel nuts.

Despite not being dressed in a flashy or revealing way like many Betel Nut Beauties today, they set the precedent of using attractive women as salespeople. The trend spread throughout Taiwan, reaching a fever pitch, with *Binglangshi* competing for customers by wearing increasingly revealing clothing, until legislation was passed in 2002, known as the Three No's, which banned beauties from revealing their bellybuttons, breasts, or buttocks while on the job. Many women's rights organizations called the law hypocritical, arguing that provocative clothing is used to sell many types of products aside from betel nuts and that it unfairly targeted the industry whose workers are often female from modest backgrounds trying to earn higher wages when facing limited educational and employment opportunities.

Today, betel nut chewing has fallen out of popularity, perhaps due to changing tastes or growing awareness of the health risks, which on the serious end cause mouth cancer and on the milder side stain gums bright red. Shops still remain, although they are less commonly run by beauties and are more often staffed by regularly dressed older uncles and aunties in corner store settings.

sabukaru spoke to Uki, the face of Baby Betel Nut, as well as Yu Chang: its previous owner. Baby Betel Nut opened in 2020 and was considered the epicentre of the Betel Nut Beauty revival in Taipei. In addition to selling betel nut, they organised DJ events and produced customised merchandise featuring pin-ups of employees. Even after the shop's closure in 2024, the impact of their four-year run lives on. We interviewed the pair to learn more about the day-to-day life of a Betel Nut Beauty, the hazards of the job, their thoughts on the current nightlife scene, and whether there is a Betel Nut Baby Part II in the works.

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SABUKARU Hi, thanks so much for speaking with us. You're up to a lot, but if you had to narrow it down, how would you describe what you both do?

UKI Right now, I'm focused on living how I want and exploring what I enjoy, while learning new skills through work.

YU CHANG I'm focused on my own photography projects, and I'm preparing work I shot over the past three years for a new photobook.

S To start with the basics, most of our readers have never heard of "betel nut". Can you describe what it is and the sensations it gives you?

U Betel nut in Taiwan represents a unique mix of labour culture, the need to stay awake, and local scenery. It also sits at the intersection of health concerns and social controversy. Betel nut became popular in working-class culture among long-haul drivers, construction workers, and fishermen. They used it to stay alert, curb sleepiness, and suppress hunger. It serves as a practical tool to help them get through the day.

S Are you both frequent chewers, or is there usually a professional line between the sellers and the users?

U Not really. Sometimes I'll have a *tshenn-á* [unprocessed betel nuts] when I'm drinking beer. It actually makes the beer taste sweeter. Really good.

YC I don't chew it. I'm probably one of the few betel nut stand owners who doesn't. Most people open stands because they chew it themselves.

S Betel nut shops don't really have an equivalent in the West or Japan; the closest comparison would be a smoke shop. How would you describe a typical betel nut shop in Taipei?

U Betel nut stands are a uniquely Taiwanese sight: green lightboxes, open 24 hours, clustered along highways, in industrial zones, and along rural roads. They're not tourist spots; they're part of everyday life.

YC It's actually closer to some coffee stands in Seattle: a takeaway counter, sometimes with attractive staff. In Taiwan, betel nut stands are basically tiny snack-and-drink supply stops.

S Where do you usually get your betel nut supply?

U We order from suppliers in Pingtung and Chiayi like all traditional businesses.



