

From the *Bangkok Post*, August 24 2003



*Ling Xiew Chue, 17, shows betel nuts she is preparing for customers at her shop in Nantou, Taiwan. — APICHT JINAKUL*

Sexy girls make good money selling nuts  
Betel-chewing very popular in Taiwan

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Nantou, Taiwan

**M**ost Thai people quit chewing betel nuts since the late Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsonggram ran a campaign against it more than 60 years ago.

In Taiwan, however, young Taiwanese ladies have revived the fad of chewing this palm nut and the business has become very popular among the people there these past few years.

All across the island, one can see young girls wearing mini-skirts and spaghetti straps selling betel nuts in little booths. Thousands of these shops can be found along the highway from the North to the South of the country.

Along suburban Taipei's Nankan road leading to Chiang Kai Shek International Airport, hundreds of booths with eye-catching brand names like Armani, Ferrari, Tiffany and 007, line both sides of the road.

For Taiwanese women, betel nut selling is a fast-growing business with high turnover for both investors and saleswomen. This is because almost 10% of the 26 million population have taken to chewing betel nut, according to Taiwanese authorities.

Ling Xiew Chue, a 17-year-old seller in Nantou province, said she has been selling betel nuts for three years.

"My parents could not afford to send me to study in high school after finishing my nine-year free education. But I don't feel sorry. I'm earning good money," she said.

Private operators invested in the betel nut shops. Most sellers were only employees, she said.

Ms Ling said she had to work eight hours a day. Her duty was to prepare betel nuts and pack them in boxes sold at NT\$ 20-50 (about 30-70 baht) each.

Wearing spaghetti straps was part of her marketing strategy.

"It helps passersby easily recognise me," she said.

Ms Ling said sometimes she sold as much as NT\$ 100,000 worth of nuts a month. Each month she earns up to NT\$50,000 including commission from sales of energy drinks.

Truck drivers and labourers commuting regularly along the highways were her main customers. The hot and spicy taste of betel nut helps keep them awake while driving, she said.

The salesgirl conceded she was sometimes harassed by male customers because of her "inviting" outfits. But she is used to it.

"I am only a salesperson. My job is to sell as many betel nuts as I can," she said.

Ms Ling plans to quit the job and return to school as soon as she has enough savings.

Meanwhile, Xiew Ching, 30 said she has been in the business for a year.

Her former job as an employee for a cultural village in Nantou province could not help her earn enough to live by. In contrast, she receives about NT\$ 30,000 and four days off each month from selling betel nuts.

“It is difficult to find other independent jobs with good pay when most of the Taiwanese people are still unemployed at present,” she said.

Unlike other saleswomen, Ms Xiew said she would rather wear conservative clothes than revealing outfits.

“The quality of my betel nuts comes first before skimpy, see-through dresses,” she said.

Taiwanese authorities so far do not have any regulations banning betel nut chewing although the habit could lead to cancer of the mouth. The country’s public health ministry runs a campaign to make people aware of the disadvantages of chewing betel nut.