

Temple fairs in Taiwan: Environmental strategies and competitive advantage for cultural tourism

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ABSTRACT

Among the top ten tourist activities in Taiwan, temple fairs attract millions of domestic and international visitors annually. However, numerous environmental problems are associated with such fairs. Although numerous environmental strategies have been developed for tourism destinations, few studies have focused on temple culture. This study determines whether environmental strategies can help temple fairs meet environmental protection regulations, mitigate pressures from the public, and maximize their competitive advantage. Analytical results indicate that energy conservation and pollution prevention can increase the financial performance and reputation of temple fairs; however, environmentally friendly products do not improve temple reputation.

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1. Introduction

The global trend of cultural tourism has attracted the attention of countless tourists (Ark & Richard, 2006; Kim, Wong, & Cho, 2007). Temple fairs in Taiwan exhibit Chinese traditional rituals for worshipping gods or Buddha, and millions of visitors are attracted to such fairs annually to experience Taiwan's local history, folk art, customs and heritage. According to statistical data from the Taiwan Tourism Bureau, temple fairs are a favorite tourist activity for international tourists. Among foreign tourists visiting Taiwan, 37.66% visit a temple or temple fair. Foreign visitors consider temples and temple fairs to be representative of Taiwanese cultures. To the Taiwanese, temple fairs ranked second only to exhibitions as a favorite cultural activity (Fig. 1). Hence, temple fairs rank among the top ten tourism activities in Taiwan (Taiwan Tourism Bureau, 2006).

Taiwan has 11,275 officially registered temples (Table 1). On average, each county or city in Taiwan has 451 temples (Taiwan Tourism Bureau, 2006). To attract followers, temple administrators incorporate dancing, plays and acrobatics into their rituals. Markets selling snacks, calligraphy, antiques, religious products, and traditional arts and crafts have been established around numerous

temples. Consequently, temple fairs typically cater to visitors. By using culture as marketing tool, temple fairs promote tourism, encourage local development and provide unique business opportunities for local residents (Ismail, Labropoulos, Mills, & Morrison, 2002; Jones, 2000; Taiwan Festivals, 2005).

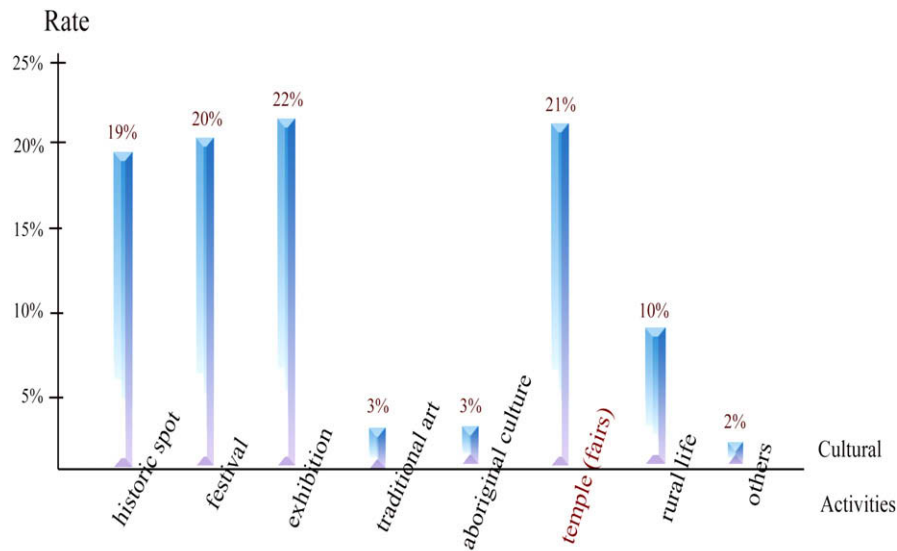
Fireworks are a major attraction at temple fairs (e.g., <http://forestlife.info/Onair/262.htm>). However, fireworks cause serious air and noise pollution. In response to global warming, the central government has established environmental regulations that reduce the use of firecrackers in ceremonies and the noise made by temple fairs (Apple News, 2008). Such restrictions have threatened the attractiveness of temple fairs and reduced customer perceptions of quality (Karagozoglu & Lindell, 2000). In the 21st Century, the influence of environmental protection issues on business competitive advantage has become an important consideration for companies. This study utilizes the research model developed by Tien, Chung, and Tsai (2005) to examine the relationship between environmental strategies and competitive advantage for temple fairs, with the aim of realizing sustainable temple management.

2. Overview of temple fairs

Temple fairs, which have roots in Buddhist and Taoist religions, have existed for over 1000 years in China. When Buddhism reached China in 2 B.C., it competed with traditional Daoism. Both Taoist and Buddhist temples thus began to hold fairs to attract followers and collect money. Activities at these fairs fall into three categories – worship, praying for good fortune and redemption of the soul.

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Source: from Taiwan Tourism Bureau, 2006

Fig. 1. The popular cultural activities in Taiwan.

Religious parades are the most impressive activities related to worship (Fig. 2). To celebrate the birthdays of gods or of Buddha, people parade behind a holy sedan chair containing joss from the temple. During the tour, firecrackers are set off and gongs and drums are used to produce a deafening noise. Such parades thus attract the attention of passerby. Praying for good fortune includes the following activities: a) Honeycomb artillery barrages: large numbers of firecrackers are set off, releasing sulfurous fumes to kill harmful bacteria and prevent epidemics. b) Kindling and releasing heavenly light. A light, square kerosene lamp is lighted and sent off into the sky. The height the lamp flies is positively related to the ease with which people's wishes will come true. c) Exploding the gangster god—The God of Wealth who is said to dislike cold weather. By lighting firecrackers to warm him, people hope to achieve good financial fortune. Activities related to the redemption of souls include: a) Grappling with ghosts. People offer sacrifices to hungry ghosts. b) Lighting water lantern to attract and treat drowned ghosts. c) Pudu rite during Ghost Month (the 7th moon), in which wandering ghosts without fixed worshippers are offered sacrificial articles.

Temple fairs to pray for fortune are held in the first month of the lunar calendar, while those for the redemption of souls are held in the seventh month. Fairs for worshipping gods are held at various times, coinciding with the birthday of gods or Buddhas. Therefore, temple fairs are held in Taiwan all year round, attracting numerous tourists annually (Taiwan Festivals, 2005; Taiwan Tourism Bureau, 2006).

3. Environmental strategy and competitive advantage

Strong competitive advantage is a goal of many nonprofit organizations (Amin, Hagen, & Sterrett, 1995). Since sustained competitive advantage can lead to extraordinary firm performance, nonprofit organizations should also focus on developing competitive activities (Kong & Prior, 2008). Environmental strategies, which are typically regarded as business opportunities for achieving sustainable development (Cater & Pucko, 2005), should be used by nonprofit temples and the cultural tourism industry when pursuing competitive advantage and sustainable management.

Environmental strategies are very important to the tourism industry as they can minimize costs, maximize profit (Erdogan & Baris, 2007) and foster competitive advantage (Gibbs & Hooper,

1996). Mihalic (2000) observed that environmental quality is essential to tourism industry survival, and that environment management was closely related to the environmental competitiveness of destinations. According to Lindell and Karagozoglou (2001), being green is a key challenge for businesses. Numerous enterprises consider environmental issues when designing and developing manufacturing processes to attract green consumers and gain competitive advantage. Gibbs and Hooper (1996) observed that environmental strategies are a proper response to environmental regulations that can increase competitive advantage. Thus, most studies investigating the relationship between environmental strategies and competitive advantage demonstrated that environmental strategies can yield competitive advantage. Achieving environmental protection is essential to sustainable tourism (Erdogan & Baris, 2007; Li, 2004; Mihalic, 2000).

However, Karagozoglou and Lindell (2000) indicated that environmental protection did not always generate competitive advantage since environmental friendly practices tended to negatively impact customer perceptions of quality. Andrews (1998) also pointed out that good environmental performance does not necessarily lead to good financial performance, since environmental investments are frequently costly (Lindell & Karagozoglou, 2001). Since environmental protection is a major challenge faced by temple management, this study discusses whether environmental strategies reduce the attractiveness of temple fairs, preventing them from achieving their competitive advantage.

4. Methodology

This study collected data using a self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire had three sections – environmental

Table 1
Number of temples and churches in Taiwan, 2006.

Religion	Numbers	Rate	Ranking
Daoism	9027	61.7%	1
Christianity	2411	16.5%	2
Buddhism	2248	15.4%	3
Catholic	678	4.6%	4
Others	263	1.8%	5

Sources: Ministry of the Interior, Taiwan (2006).

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