

Culinary Tourism and Night Markets in Taiwan

Chiung-Tzu Lucetta Tsai
National Taipei University, Taiwan
E-mail: cttsai@gm.ntpu.edu.tw

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the culinary landscape of Taiwan by examining three of its most popular night markets with regard to three factors: (1) the role that food plays in the activities of foreign visitors traveling to their destinations; (2) the relationship between food and destination image; and (3) the connection between food and cultural performance. Structured, half-structured, and unstructured interviews were conducted with foreign tourists from North America and Europe (i.e., Canada, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Germany, and France), who visited the three night markets. Results showed that Taiwanese night markets are ranked first on the itinerary of foreign visitors, ahead of even the National Palace Museum, and that most of the visitors went to a night market to “experience the culture and taste the food,” or “eat cheap and tasty food.” Most also agreed that night markets could be a critical element in destination image. Others stated that “gastronomy plays a big role in defining culture,” in that, when one likes the food, one might also like the culture. From this study, it is clear that, for most foreign visitors, the moment to enjoy food is also the moment to experience the culture of a night market. Results also showed that shopping at a night market could increase interpersonal interaction and thus enhance the relationship between local people and tourists. Given the popularity of local Taiwanese dishes among foreign visitors, it was also concluded that these dishes are the best way to publicize Taiwanese culture and customs. Since very few studies have focused on these issues, this study makes both theoretical and managerial contributions to the understanding of culinary tourism, particularly within the Taiwanese context.

Keywords: Culinary tourism, cultural image, night market, Taiwan

1. INTRODUCTION

As a result of the way urban development has occurred in many Asian cities, the business environment of night markets has become closely connected to people's lives in those cities. Night markets are part of Taiwanese night life and a tradition that deserves preservation. These markets were originally places where vendors gathered informally, but they gradually developed into special business areas and cultural spaces providing landscapes for unusual consumer behavior. They played a key role in starting and continuing socio-economic development in Taiwan. Although night markets exist in other Asian countries, such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, and Japan, those in Taiwan stand apart because of their historic, social, and economic meaning [Silver, 2000; Tsai et al., 2002] and because they so accurately reflect the special style of night life in Taiwan. From the economic point of view, night markets belong to the "informal economy" and thus directly reflect the socio-economic phenomena of the time [Hwang, 2000; Lee, 2001]. In many Asian countries, they have become important places of social and recreational activities. In addition to providing basic necessities of life, night markets offer an important venue for leisure activities, thus attracting tourists as well [Guo, 2002]. In this way, they have become a crucial index of both local culture and tourism. In Taiwan, night markets have become popular tourist spots because of social change and the government's "local industry development" initiative [Yu and Chou, 2004].

In recent history, night markets have transitioned from suburban to city locales. Although the sale of necessities such as food and clothing is central to the preservation of Taiwanese culture, night markets have added other merchandise to diversify inventory and attract consumers [Yang, 2000]. These additions include, for example, games (shooting, fishing, video games), services (massage) and performances (snake fighting, magic shows). In recent years, many night markets have become "internationalized" tourist sites through government campaigns and assistance. Examples include the Shihlin, Huaxi, Fengchia, and Liuhe night markets, which attract not only local and regional customers, but also business visitors from other countries.

According to a survey of expenditures and destinations of foreign visitors in 2007, the most frequently cited reasons for visiting Taiwan, in rank order, were:

- Scenery and view
- Cuisine
- Customs
- Distance to residence

Heritage

According to the same survey, the most popular destinations in Taiwan for foreign visitors were:

Night markets	62.72%
National Palace Museum	44.88
Taipei 101	36.68

Night markets are clearly a cultural symbol as well as a product of the transformation of traditional Taiwanese society and life style [Zhan and Huang, 2002]. For most people, the mere mention of night markets brings to mind the seemingly endless crowds and the huge variety of local cuisine on hand. These facts prompted the following research questions involving four components – food, destination, image, and cultural performance (Figure I):

- What is the role of food for visitors traveling to their destinations?
- What is the relationship between food and destination image?
- What is the connection between food and cultural performance?

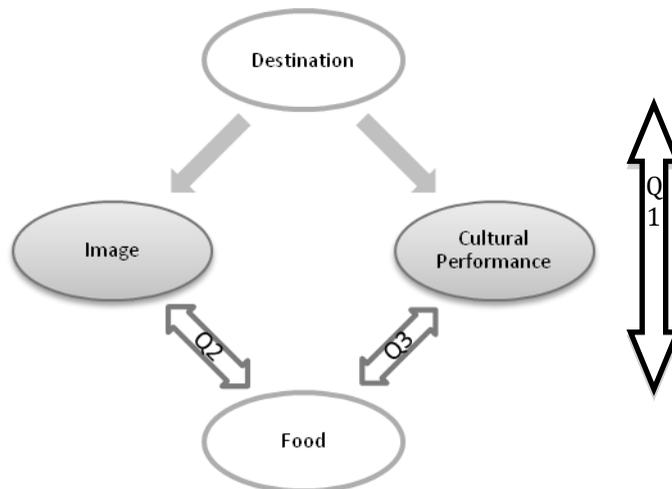


Figure I. The Study Model

This study was conducted at three tourist night markets in northern Taiwan; namely, Shihlin, Keelung Miaokou, and Shida. Participant observation and personal interviews were the main methods of collecting data. Since the purpose of this study is to understand the dynamics of what was happening in social

situations involving the night markets, tourists, and tourist destinations, it can be argued that participant observation would be the most appropriate tool to discover “what is going on” [Saunders et al., 2009]. Personal interviews were beneficial in understanding the perception and attitudes of foreign visitors. Cultural elements associated with night markets were also expected to be of benefit to this study.

The study focuses on observation of travelers’ perceptions toward culinary tourism and the role of food in cultural destinations. Since very few studies have focused on this particular subject, the current study makes two major contributions to the understanding of tourism. First, the theoretical contribution of this study enriches the body of knowledge on culinary tourism by identifying the actual experiences of travelers and by improving understanding of travelers’ behavior toward destination image and cultural performances associated with culinary tourism. Second, the managerial contribution of the study will assist hospitality and tourism managers in developing a more comprehensive and effective strategic marketing plan.

The remainder of this study is organized in the following manner. Section 2 is a review of literature on the fundamental concepts of culinary tourism. The section thoroughly examines the role of food, the importance of food and dining experiences in travel, and the connection between destination and food in terms of image and cultural performance. Section 3 explains the research methodology used in this study. Section 4 discusses research findings pertaining to three night markets in Taipei and the development of culinary tourism and night markets in northern Taiwan. Section 5 presents conclusions and recommendations for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2009, food and dining consumption in Canada during holidays ranked second in tourist expenditures (Kim et al., 2009). In England, an in-depth study of the tourist food market conducted by Enteleca Research and Consultancy [2000] revealed that 72% of tourists to that country were interested in local food during their visit. Other recent research indicated that tourists spend about 40% of their budget on food during their journeys in Scotland [Boyne et al., 2002]. According to Pomeroy [2005], culinary tourism in Australia and Canada generated \$1 billion annually and could generate as much as \$7.2 billion by 2010. These statistics portray food as an important element to tourists traveling to their destinations and as a key contributor to local economies [Telfer and Wall, 2000].

With these statistics in mind, more and more destinations have recognized the potential of culinary tourism and have used it as a marketing tool [Hjalager and Richards, 2002]. For example, Hong Kong and Singapore are two ambitious destinations that focus on cuisine when promoting tourism [Okumus et al., 2007]. On its tourism website, Hong Kong provides detailed information on all types of foods and dining places for visitors to explore. It touts itself as “the culinary capital of Asia” [Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2010]. In similar fashion, Singapore aims to become one of the most compelling dining destinations in Asia [Singapore Tourism Board, 2010]. France and Italy, known for their traditional cuisines, have long emphasized food and dining as core elements of tourism [Boyne et al., 2002]. More food-related elements – such as food and wine routes and gastronomic packages – emerge as peak experiences for travelers [Quan and Wang, 2004]. Clearly, these countries and others as well have come to realize that cuisine has the potential to generate enormous amounts of income and have therefore increased emphasis on food in their marketing.

Hospitality and tourism studies reveal that local foods play an important role in introducing a destination to tourists [Field, 2002; Ryu and Jang, 2006]. Previous studies have examined different aspects of food; for example:

- Food tourism as one element of destination marketing [Horng and Tsai, 2010]
- Food as a determinant of destination image [Hjalager and Corigliano, 2000]
- Attractions and impediments of local foods [Cohen and Avieli, 2004]
- Food as an initiative in regional development [Boyne et al., 2003]
- Tourist motivations relating to food [Kim et al., 2010]
- The relationship between food consumption and dining experiences [Hall and Sharples, 2003; Quan and Wang, 2004; Kivela and Crotts, 2006; Chang et al., 2010]

These studies show that food is widely recognized as an important factor in tourism, but its specific role is not always clearly defined. The major problem is that its role is argued from divergent opinions rather than from established concepts. For instance, Quan and Wang [2004] argued that food could be the peak experience for travelers, whereas Murphy et al. [2000] contended that food is only a part of service infrastructure and must be combined with other elements to form an overall tourist experience. Kivela and Crotts [2006] stated that food can serve as a sensory experience to increase satisfaction, whereas Cohen and

Avieli [2004] argued that food can be both an attraction and an impediment for tourists. In short, the role of food in tourism studies is one of divergence, calling for an integration of various viewpoints. In the current study, tourist night markets are examined as one part of the destination image of Taiwan. One of the goals of the study is to fill the gap between night markets and tourism by exploring the multiple roles of food with regard to destination image and cultural performance.

2.1. Condition of the Contemporary Tourism Industry in Taiwan

Except for 2003 when the SARS crisis resulted in a negative growth in the number of visitors, the tourism industry in Taiwan has shown positive growth in recent years. By implementing tourism campaigns such as the “Tourists Doubling Plan” in 2008 and the “Year of the Tourist” in 2012, the government proposes that Taiwan could become one of the most important tourist destinations in Asia. In 2007, visitor arrivals totaled 3.38 million; in 2008, 3.52 million; and, in 2009, 3.72 million (Table 1). The annual growth rate for visitor arrivals was 14.5%, 4.19%, and 5.58%, respectively, for the three years. The 2008 Olympics in Beijing attracted many visitors to Taiwan because of its convenient location and effective security measures. Throughout the period, the willingness of tourists to make future visits remained high, and the tourism foreign exchange rate accounted for 1.4% of GDP [Statistics of Visitor Expenditures, 2010]. Because of this success, the government announced that 2010 would be the “Year for Traveling,” continuing into 2011. Despite these many successes, some think that there is still room for improvement in the tourism industry.

As shown in Table 2, the main reason for foreign visits to Taiwan was for travel, and the next was for business. In recent years, the rate of visits for travel purposes increased. The important issue now is how to use the tourism industry to attract even more foreign visitors.

Implementation of policies pertaining to three direct links across the Taiwan Straits, which opened the door for Chinese visitors, put investors and direct transportation in the spotlight. Direct transportation not only saved transit time, but also saved transport costs for businesses and shortened entry time into markets. Opening the door to Chinese visitors has the potential to generate massive new business, and is thus an increasingly important issue for tourism and related industries in Taiwan.

Table 1
Related Index of Visitor Arrivals in Taiwan, 2009-2011

Index	2009	2010	2011
Visitor arrivals (million persons-time)	3.72	3.97	4.11
Foreign exchange income from tourism (billion U.S. dollars)	5.214	5.436	5.714
Satisfaction of visitor arrivals	89%	90%	92%
Willingness to make a future visit	98%	98%	99%

Source: Tourism Bureau, Ministry of Transportation and Communication, statistics on visitor expenditures, 2012

Table 2
Statistics of Visitor Arrivals in Taiwan by Purpose of Visit, 2009-2011
(Unit: %)

Year	For Business	For Travel
2009	25.76	44.60
2010	24.79	45.71
2011	23.15	46.86

Source: Tourism Bureau, Ministry of Transportation and Communication, statistics on visitor arrivals by purpose of visit, 2009-2011

According to statistics from the Tourism Bureau, Ministry of Transportation and Communication, the major elements attracting visitors to Taiwan in 2010 were scenery, cuisine, customs and cultures, distance from residence, and historical buildings, in that order (Table 3). For visitors from Japan, Hong Kong, and Macau, however, cuisine (not scenery) was the main reason for visiting Taiwan. These data confirm that Taiwan's scenery and cuisine are highly attractive to foreign visitors.

Table 3
Reasons for Visitor Arrivals in Taiwan in 2010
(Unit: person-time / hundred persons-time)

Country	Scenery & Views	Cuisine	Culture / Customs	Distance	Historic Bldgs.	Fruits	Prices	Weath-her
Japan	37.63	51.81	9.57	38.01	14.62	11.74	7.69	10.85
China	71.59	13.13	45.93	2.77	14.22	10.68	2.45	2.73
HK & Macau	57.67	77.83	20.19	16.45	8.76	15.18	23.90	10.03
Singapore	62.99	57.71	19.26	10.62	7.70	11.08	16.82	8.65
Korea	61.91	15.77	28.60	6.63	6.60	7.71	3.65	4.77
Malaysia	72.91	52.28	27.13	8.43	14.20	17.44	12.89	10.97
America	69.58	45.24	43.51	2.65	20.88	8.72	13.90	6.09
Europe	73.69	47.39	40.38	5.30	15.80	8.79	3.50	14.04
Australia & New Zealand	73.69	44.76	21.08	5.30	15.80	7.91	13.15	-
Total	54.79	49.60	21.78	20.25	12.48	12.02	11.20	9.06

Note: Questions had multiple-choice answers. A dash (--) indicates no sampling was done for the survey.

Source: Tourism Bureau, Ministry of Transportation and Communication, statistics on visitor expenditures, 2011

For foreign visitors who came to Taiwan in 2010 for pleasure, the places they most wanted to visit were night markets, the National Palace Museum, and C.K.S. Memorial Hall, in that order (Table 4). For those who came for business, the places they most wanted to visit were night markets, Taipei 101, and the National Palace Museum, in that order. The most visited night markets in 2010 were, first, the Shihlin night market and, second, the Liuhe night market in Kaohsiung [Tourism Bureau, 2011].

Table 4
Ranking of Desirable Tourist Spots in Taiwan in 2010
(Unit: persons/ hundred persons-times)

Ranking	Tourist Spot	Times	Ranking	Tourist Spot	Times
1	Night Markets	62.27	6	Ximen District	21.24
2	National Palace Museum	44.12	7	Joufen	19.01
3	Taipei 101	39.92	8	Longshan Temple	18.62
4	C.K.S. Memorial Hall	35.01	9	Damsui	15.21
5	Taipei Martyrs' Shrine	27.44	10	Taroko Gorge	14.01

Note: 'The main visiting spots' were multiple choices.

Source: Tourism Bureau, Ministry of Transportation and Communication, statistics on visitor expenditures, 2011

Taiwanese night markets are highly attractive to foreign visitors – both those who come for travel and those who come for business – because of the markets' unusual history, culture, and customs. No wonder foreign visitors listed night markets first on their itinerary, ahead of even the National Palace Museum.

2.2. Value of Night Markets

Shopping in night markets not only satisfies people's tastes, but also meets their leisure and social needs. Because night markets are everywhere in Taiwan, the Taiwanese consider them as a type of dining culture. Most Taiwanese go to night markets just to taste local specialty dishes, but foreign visitors go there to shop as part of an exotic cuisine trip with cultural profundity. Many tourists, therefore, put night markets at the top of their itinerary. They visit the markets to experience a blend of cultural and culinary elements. Yu et al. [2004] pointed out that night markets grew rapidly after the 1960s, when small-capital and labor-oriented manufacturing began. During the oil crisis of the mid-1970s, the high volume of returned orders caused night markets to become sales centers of cut orders and low-priced products. Today, night markets are still the place where export manufacturers sell goods whose quality makes them unsuitable for export.

A night market is an open, crowded space within city landscapes, which provides an intimate place for people to meet, date, and participate in informal social functions and for local vendors and enterprises to engage in business. Clustered within the typical night market are a large number of shops and floating vendors that are in operation between 6 p.m. and 2 a.m. This cluster of shops and vendors is a long-term, time-fixed, and large-scale venue for business activities [Wang, 2007]. A vendors' night market, on the other hand, operates in the evening hours and is semi-fixed, appearing only at a specific time and place. Historically, floating vendors gave rise to the establishment of night markets. Because of poor traffic conditions in an agricultural society and poverty due to the lack of goods and materials, floating vendors gathered in certain places and at specific times to "yell and sell" their products. The floating vendor is typically a one-man business offering a limited amount of goods at low cost in an outdoor public space. The typical floating vendor owns light equipment that can be used to move to another site. Both night markets and floating vendors have long been considered reasonable forms of sales in Taiwan and are now an essential part of daily life in Taiwanese culture.

According to statistics on visitor expenditures [Tourism Bureau, 2011], the main activities in which visitors engage are, in rank order:

Tasting Chinese cuisine	81.9%
Shopping	68.4
Window shopping	41.5
Attending a cultural performance	37.1

Although night markets exemplify positive historical, cultural, social, economic, and financial meaning, they also embody certain hidden, negative effects on society that need to be investigated and improved. These negatives include, for example, food hygiene, noise, and traffic jams. The Department of Commerce, Ministry of Economic Affairs, which oversees night markets in Taiwan, invests the best human and financial resources to guide and assist tourist night markets in planning, designing, lighting, and space distribution. Despite the negatives, business activities attracted to night markets create a win-win situation for consumers, owners, and nearby shops. The economic benefits and the social and economic value of foreign tourists, therefore, should not be overlooked [Hjalager and Corigliano, 2000], or underestimated.

The value of night markets includes not only economic benefits in the form of income generated, but also cultural and social benefits [Zhan and Huang,

2002]. A report on economic affairs in Taiwan indicates that up to 70% of people agree that night markets have a recreational function. They not only showcase the culture and customs of a country or an area, but also reflect the traditional character of these places. Because night markets provide consumers with more types of products than a traditional shop, market, or department store, it is easier for them to satisfy the diversified needs of customers. In the opinion of most customers, however, products sold in night markets should be low priced, a fact that encourages flexibility in bargaining. Through this type of interaction, vendors exchange emotions with consumers who realize their needs and wants for improvement, innovation, and more product information.

2.3. Experiential Marketing

Contemporary marketing has transitioned from traditional approaches that emphasize the function and effect of products to new approaches that shape sensory experience and thought identification. Goad [2000] and Steintrager [2001] have discussed how one circumstance/one experience can fascinate customers and engage their senses. A representative example is the marketing approach used by Starbucks. When a person enters the artistic space of a Starbucks store, the smell of coffee envelopes his or her senses. Sales personnel inquire about the customer's needs in a friendly manner and, at the same time, eagerly promote new products and trial offers in a congenial, knowledgeable way. For Starbucks, the operating strategy is one of experience marketing.

Holbrook [2000] confirmed that, whereas marketing previously focused on the function and effect of a product, today it focuses on sensory experience, entertainment, exhibitionism, and evangelism. Sensory experience derives from a practical connection between the consumer and the product. The approach of today's marketing, therefore, differs from that of traditional marketing, which was based on a rational model to make decisions. By contrast, the contemporary approach depends on a complete and consuming experience process that can be evaluated using both rational and emotional aspects [Holbrook, 2000; Yang, 2000; Olsen, 2001]. Kim et al. [2010] applied concepts from psychological modules to describe five types of experience as strategic experiential modules (SEMs): sense, feel, think, act, and relate (Table 5).

Table 5
Strategic Experiential Modules (SEMs) for Experience Types

Experiential Modules	Demanding Goal	Demanding Way
Sense	To create a strike against sense; increase added value	To create a strike against sense; through senses of vision, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touch to complete modules of stimulate, process, and result
Feel	To stir up inner feelings and emotions	To understand which stimulant stirs consumption and makes consumers participate actively; includes connections between brand, positive emotion, joy, and pride
Think	To excite individuals to think, participate, and transfer stereotypes	Through surprise, to excite interest, stimulate focus, and separate thinking
Act	To emphasize experience of body movements and connect to the lifestyle of the consumer	By adding body experiences to indicate substitution, substitute lifestyle, and enrich the consumer's life
Relate	To relate the individual with ideal ego, others, or socio-culture	To relate brand with socio-culture and environment and influence potential members

3. METHODOLOGY

The interviews conducted as part of this study were designed (1) to elicit remarks from foreign visitors about their image of the food in night markets; and (2) to identify the most attractive elements of those markets, which could then be used to integrate marketing and communication in such a way as to draw even more visitors and elevate the status of Taiwanese food. The first step in the process was to define the consumer behavior of foreign visitors in Taiwanese night markets and to ascertain their feelings and overall impressions about their dining experiences. The data from these efforts were collated using five experiential modules: sense, feel, think, act, and relate.

The second step was to generalize the most attractive foods in Taiwanese night markets from the perspective of tourists of various nationalities. This step was accomplished using a detailed literature review, which also helped clarify

related concepts, articulate the research structure, and provide an outline for the interviews.

Instead of using a questionnaire survey to collect data on the consumer behaviors of foreign tourists in Taiwanese night markets, this study chose instead to conduct personal interviews regarding their images and experiences. Using a blocked or half-blocked questionnaire would collect only superficial statistics, whereas a qualitative face-to-face interview would enable foreign visitors to describe, in their own words, deeper and more detailed accounts of their emotions and experiences regarding night markets, their main reason for visiting a night market, and whether food was an important factor in their decision.

The qualitative interviews conducted in this study were of three types: structured, half-structured, and non-structured. In the structured interviews, questions were classified into groups and asked in sequence, generally eliciting a narrow or restricted viewpoint. At the other extreme, the non-structured interviews elicited broad, random, or superficial remarks. The half-structured interviews – midway between the other two types – followed a set outline, but permitted the free expression of opinions, thus eliciting a deeper, more diverse response.

The interview subjects in this study comprised a sample of 23 foreign visitors who had been to the night market at Shihlin, Keelung Miaokou, or Shida. The three markets have different characteristics. The night market at Shihlin, for example, is a must-see attraction for Japanese visitors; the market at Keelung Miaokou is known for its diversified Taiwanese cuisine; and the market at Shida is situated close to universities and thus attracts foreign teachers and international students. The sample of interview subjects included visitors primarily from North America and Europe; that is, Canada, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Germany, and France. The sample was divided into two categories: foreign residents (those staying for more than three months) and foreign visitors (those staying for three months or less).

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The literature review and personal interviews conducted during this study produced results of both a theoretical and practical nature with regard to the cultural images of night markets and their service quality. Such findings provide a solid basis for making specific suggestions to the tourism and recreation industries. Furthermore, the diversified methods used to collect and analyze data provided a deeper understanding of night markets, which will be of

great benefit to the government in ensuring good service within the tourism industry as it relates to night markets and in distributing resources in such a way as to benefit the tourism industry.

This section presents a sample of comments made by interview subjects with regard to the cultural images of night markets, the role of cuisine in such markets, and the service quality of the markets themselves.

A Canadian male respondent described his night market experiences in Taiwan as follows:

Traveling is the main purpose of my visit to Taiwan. I came here and fell in love with the people and the food. Of course, I have been to many night markets in Taiwan. I visit the night markets in Taiwan around once a week to eat cheap and tasty food. What I like most in the night markets are the variety of foods and drinks ... cheap prices. My average spending in the night market each time is around USD. 20-30. Even though I like visiting night markets here, I must mention that there is a major turn-off about night markets and it's the trash it creates. It's really dirty and there is trash all over the place. It's a problem that needs to be taken care off.

A British respondent described her Taiwanese night market experiences in this way:

I have a lot of dining experiences in the night market after coming to Taiwan. In the UK we do not have such a place for eating and drinking, so I feel this is a unique type of leisure provision. When I was in Scotland, I lived in a small village and basically going out at night [was] a problem. Now that I live in the city and teach English in the kindergarten near the Shida night market, I feel I have a decent life, so in my spare time I stroll in the Shida night market, enjoying shopping and learning Taiwanese culture. I like to taste Taiwan's food, but most of the time the menus are not well introduced in English. I hope the shop owners can provide an English menu, letting me know more about Taiwan.

Culinary tourism is a critical factor in shaping destination image and differentiating among competitors, as reflected in the following comments by a French female respondent:

To describe the relationship between the food and the night market image, you can't think of the night market without the food ... I have stayed in Taiwan for 2 months and never bought anything there but food. To me, I go

there for food only. I like Asian food a lot ... all kinds (Chinese, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thai, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, etc...). I come to the night market to experience the culture and taste the food. The first time I went to the night market, it was a culture shock. Then when I returned, it was to experience more of the culture ... then I got more and more into the different types of foods and drinks ... Now, I am part of the culture and go there for the food! Also, I need to mention, the other reason I go to the night market is that most neighborhood restaurants close too early, so, when it's late ... the best place is the night market.

A foreign visitor's focus on food relates not only to the physical need for nourishment, but also to the desire to try interesting local cuisine in an appropriate environment [Hjalager and Corigliano, 2000]. An American female respondent stated, for example:

I have traveled to Taiwan three times already. My husband and I like high mountains and food in Taiwan and therefore we climb Mount Jade [the highest mountain in Taiwan, at 3,997 meters] every year. Before and after our mountain hiking, we must go to the night market to refill our energy. We go there with our Taiwanese friends who also like night markets very much. In my hometown in Texas, we do not have this kind of place for leisure at night, so this is a big difference.

It can be argued that impressive cuisine makes a visit extraordinary. The more senses that a tourist applies, the more memorable the journey will be and the more attractive the destination will be in comparison with other places. This intimate relationship between food and the tourism industry is reflected in the following comments by a Czech male respondent:

I used to go every other day. What do I do in these night markets? Food consumption, and sometimes buy the cheap socks. The food is what I like most in the night markets. However, the more delicious food is not a healthy option. I usually spend between USD 10-20 in the Shihlin night market. I buy different kinds of foods and drinks. The role of food is the most important part for me when I visit these night markets. The food is basically everything to me in regard to night markets. I like Asian food quite a lot. There definitely is a reciprocal link between the gastronomy and culture of a region. Gastronomy plays a big role in defining a culture. I go to night markets to experience both of the culture and the food.

Unlike other tourism products, food allows tourists to use all five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and feel [Kim et al., 2010]. In this way, it differs from tourism products that aim to satisfy a single need, such as mass transportation. A South African female respondent put it this way:

As a foreigner living and working in Taiwan, I would like to gain more leisure time to visit the Miaokou night market. I am not willing to spend more money and time in high-end department stores, but would like to go to the night markets to enjoy. I hope more open space can be vacated in the night markets because it's too crowded, especially on weekends. I nearly cannot breathe and get fresh air if I choose to visit on Saturday night. Furthermore, I hope more cultural shows and performances can be presented there because so many foreigners go there to study Taiwan culture. I truly hope more funding to set up a tourist information and management counseling center in the Miaokou night market. Most important of all, the toilet facilities need to be improved.

A British male respondent described his night market experiences in a similar fashion:

The role of food is important for me when I visit these night markets. It's something I thought about when [I] describe the relationship between the food and the night market image. I love Indian food. I'm also very keen on Chinese food. You cannot appreciate and even love another culture without liking its food. I would go to a night market just to try the food.

Night markets consist of vendors and shops situated along the street, most of which are open mainly at night since there is much greater activity in the evening than in the morning. In the vendor clusters at night, everything is sold with an air of friendliness, convenience, and family orientation. The cultural character of night markets in Taiwan provides the best context for foreign tourists to experience Taiwanese culture and customs and to taste traditional Chinese food. An Australian male respondent, however, expressed a view to the contrary:

I do not enjoy going to the night market. If you have a chance to visit the night market, you will find all the vendors selling very similar types of food. They look all the same to me, and I cannot tell the ingredients. All the vendors are very friendly but cannot speak English. The whole place is very noisy, and some [people] ride scooters in the pedestrian area. They do not

care about tourists and do not realize it's a threat to pedestrians. You cannot walk in relaxation and it's not comfortable at all. However, this is also part of the culture. I feel the atmosphere does not suit me best. I am not supposed to come to this type of place. It's better to go somewhere more hygienic and clean. Although people say this is the best place to [learn more about] the food culture, I might just enjoy a fast food restaurant nearby.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In summary, night markets are informal, highly mobile organizations that operate mainly at night, generally from 6 p.m. to 2 a.m., and feature a wide variety of products and prices in a casual atmosphere [Xiao, 2002]. Telfer and Wall [2000] described all night markets as having two characteristics in common: (1) they comprise shops and vendors situated along a street in an outdoor public space; and (2) they operate primarily at night.

Some Taiwanese consider night markets in general a good place to satisfy their hunger, whereas others are more selective, preferring to consume different cuisines in different markets, such as the double sausage at the Shihlin night market, the stew at the Shida night market, or the frost-ice at the Miaokou night market. For most people, the moment to enjoy food is also the moment to experience the culture of a night market through the five senses (seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and feeling). A person's feelings, however, can be affected both positively and negatively by certain external stimuli, producing feelings of like or dislike, satisfaction or non-satisfaction. Emotions evoked by local culture and customs stimulate the curiosity of visitors and prompt them to think. Meanings ascribed to various Taiwanese dishes and the legends surrounding them have made the dishes famous for several decades. Two examples are the story of the origin of the Changhua meat ball and the legend of the Tainan eel noodle.

Whether experiences at night markets influence the lifestyle of foreign visitors depends on the individual visitor. Some may think about similar or different cultures in their own hometowns or feel led to examine their own lifestyle in light of their experiences in Taiwanese night markets. Others who ponder the originality of the night market concept may think of something that could be done that has not yet been implemented. Still others may experience improved relationships as a result of shopping in a night market, where they get to know the owners better and have the opportunity to interact more frequently with other customers.

Prior research on night markets focused primarily on the business angle, but the current study focused instead on the attractiveness of Taiwanese night markets to foreign visitors, who place such markets at the top of their itinerary. It is a fact that the Chinese, who consider food as one of the most important things in the world, have developed complex, diversified culinary styles. Similarly, local Taiwanese cuisine available at all night markets includes not only traditional dishes but also exotic ones. Foreign visitors respond to Taiwanese cuisine in different ways, depending on their background and their own customs and cooking styles. Since local Taiwanese dishes are the most attractive feature of these markets, enabling foreigners to better understand local customs, these dishes are the best way to publicize Taiwanese culture.

Given the fact that local cuisine is the major motivation for foreign visitors to patronize a night market, this study examined which dish was the most popular food at night markets. According to a 2007 study published in *Global Vision Magazine*, the most popular foods of the Taiwanese in night markets, in rank order, were oyster omelette, tapioca milk tea, meatballs, rice dumplings, Taiwanese noodle soup, rice with sliced meat, special herbal soup, rice noodle soup, thick squid soup, and stinky tofu. Since foreign visitors have a different cultural background and culinary tradition, their preferences may differ. That is why this study interviewed foreign visitors to ascertain not only their favorite local cuisine, but also the extent to which Taiwanese food enhanced their understanding of Taiwanese culture. The results are presented in the tables and figures shown earlier in this paper.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chiung-Tzu Lucetta Tsai is an associate professor of leisure and sport management in the Business School Department of National Taipei University in Taiwan. She is also president of the Taiwan Leisure Association, an interim board member of the World Leisure Organization Commission on Women and Gender, and a member of the board of directors of the World Leisure Organization.