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 environmental concerns have been developed for tourism destinations, few studies have focused on temple culture. This study determined whether environmental strategies can help temple fairs meet environmental protection regulations, mitigate pressures from the public, and maximize their competitive advantage. Analytical results indicated 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, 37.6% 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 tourist activities in Taiwan (Taiwan Tourism Bureau, 2008).

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, antiquities, religious products, and traditional arts and crafts have been established around numerous temples. Consequently, temple fairs typically cater to visitors by using culture as a 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://forelifefimy.info/females/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 fireworks 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 (Karagözoglu & 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 1,000 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.