

Southeast Asia is the cradle of betel-chewing. Used as a stimulant and to treat minor ills, the custom spread from Southeast Asian islands to mainland Vietnam probably around the first millennium B.C. Thailand seemingly received the practice from neighbouring countries to the west. These two main regional actors influenced Laos and Cambodia. Our decade-long research and observation, which intensified in 2002-04 and 2006-07, delved into this declining but storied tradition.

Betel-chewing in mainland Southeast Asia

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Betel-chewing goes way back. Areca nut and betel leaf are its two crucial components, born by the areca palm tree and betel vine, respectively. The areca palm tree was domesticated somewhere in the Malaysian archipelago. While excavations of ancient archaeological sites have never turned up betel vine or leaf remains, human skeletons bearing evidence of betel-chewing, dated to about 3,000 B.C., have been found in Duyong Cave in the Philippines. At Spirit Cave in north-west Thailand C. F. Gorman found carbonised areca-like grains carbon-14-dated to 7,000-5,500 B.C. (1970: 98), but their domesticity needs to be scientifically confirmed (C. F. Gorman, personal communication to Hiên, 1978).

Hailing from a time closer to ours, the Vietnamese folktale 'The Story of the Betel and the Areca Nut' is well known all over the world and quoted in publica-

tions on betel-chewing. Until 2004, it was believed that this was the only betel-chewing-related folktale in existence, with multiple versions adapted from its original source, *Linh Nam chích quái liệt truyện* (*Collection of Extraordinary Tales from Linh Nam*, hand-written version, 1695). But a careful screening of ancient and modern literature written in *chữ Nho*,¹ *chữ Nôm*,² *chữ Quốc Ngữ* (*chữ Việt*),³ French, English and German from the 11th century to the present led to a wonderful discovery: the tale is actually only one of a series of six different types on the motif 'The Origin of the Betel Chewing Custom'. The five other types are less popular, and each one presents its characters differently. All are told by the Việt ethnic group, while seven other ethnicities (Dao, Tày and Tháy in the north, Co, Katu, Sedang in central Vietnam and the Khmer in the south) contribute their own folktales on the same motif.

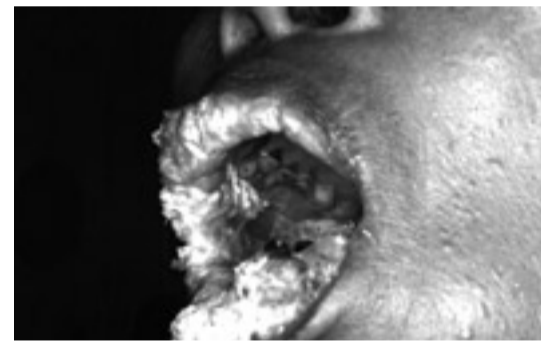
Moreover, folktales about other motifs related to betel-chewing were also dis-



Traditional lime tube from Thailand (P. A. Reichart).



Traditional lime pot from Vietnam (Nguyễn Xuân Hiên).



Typical cancer risk of betel chewers (P. A. Reichart).



Areca nut

covered, such as 'The Monk Turned into a Lime Pot', 'The Novice Turned into a Spittoon' and a tale about the specific way the Vietnamese prepare betel rolls, 'Why Do We Use a Tip-cut-off Betel Leaf?'. In addition, we found nine tale variants with details and/or episodes concerning the areca tree, betel-vine, betel quid and quid remains. Betel-chewing peoples are familiar with at least some of this rich folktale tradition. All of the tales share the same clear impact of Buddhism, as their characters experience endless incarnation, enlightenment.

Betel basics

Betel quid composition varies from place to place, but its core elements remain the same and consist of three components: the betel leaf, the areca nut and slaked lime. In northern Thailand, and to a lesser extent in Laos and Cambodia, dried areca grain is used in place of the fresh areca nut that is popular in other areas. White lime is popular in north and central Vietnam, while coloured (mainly pink) lime can be found in betel-chewing areas throughout mainland Southeast Asia. Tobacco is sometimes added to betel quid and the geographic distribution of its use is supposedly linked to coloured lime use. The manufactured ready-to-chew variety (usually sold under the name *pan masala*) is unknown in Southeast Asia, except in southern China.

Every betel chewer has to use certain tools to prepare his betel quid: a cutter or knife to cut the areca nut into quarters and a container for slaked lime. A complete betel service includes up to five components in Laos and Cambodia-areca cutter, lime tube, betel box, spittoon and betel mortar and nine in Vietnam-areca knife, lime pot, bronze betel box, wooden betel box, spittoon, betel bag, lime tube, betel mortar, betel cloth/towel. Betel service style and materials differ largely from country to

country. Handicraft skills, patterns, and decorative motifs depend on local history and culture.

Lime containers in mainland Southeast Asia can be divided into two types: lime tubes in Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, were made of bronze or silver with a stupa-shaped lid, richly decorated and never taller than 15 cm; lime pots in Vietnam were made of ceramic or porcelain (or, very rarely, of bronze, silver or gold), shaped like the areca nut or a globe and stylistically glazed. The latter type is divided into two sub-types: one has a curved handle (north and south Vietnam) and the other has a nodule-shaped handle (in central Vietnam, where Champa influence still exists). A round spatula hole is also a main characteristic of Vietnamese lime pots, and some are decorated with calligraphic poems. Some Vietnamese lime pots were actually made in China or England.

The Buddhist sects strongly influenced lime container shape and design. In Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, where the Theravada sect attracted major followers, the tube lid was stupa-shaped. In Vietnam, where the Mahayana sect was strongest and pagodas didn't include a tower, the potters chose to make their products in the shape of the areca nut. Today these once popular lime containers have totally disappeared from daily life. Collectors seek out ancient lime tubes and pots, while fake pots are made with a modern design and reserved for foreigners.

In Thailand, and to a lesser degree in Cambodia and Laos, areca cutters were developed in several forms and shapes, especially in royal courts and aristocratic families of dethroned dynasties. Nowadays, these highly decorated cutters have disappeared and been replaced by ordinary but sharp knives. In Vietnam, where areca cutters were unknown, areca knives



Betel nut stand in Burma

became smaller and the blade thinner and sharper owing to technological advances. In the Bangkok suburbs, the Sam Sen market is famous for different commodities from Vietnam. The market is located in the former *làng Gia Long* (Gia Long village), where at the end of the 18th century Prince Nguyễn Ánh (who later became King Gia Long) twice sought refuge and local villagers are still called (pejoratively) *yan Sam Sen*. The betel service there expresses some Vietnamese characteristics, such as an areca knife in place of an areca cutter.

Roll me a quid

Betel roll preparation was highly developed in traditional Vietnamese society. A. Landes has called it 'the great art' and said that 'not everyone can prepare a quid that meets all requirements and only highly skilled ladies from *une bonne maison* can do it'.⁴

Nowadays the casual quid is popular and chewers don't care about skillful prepara-

tion. However, the special quid named *trầu cánh phượng* (betel quid in the shape of phoenix wings) is highly appreciated in rituals, wedding ceremonies, religious festivities, and sometimes daily offerings to the ancestors altar or Spirit house. This kind of betel can be prepared in multiple ways and it's not easy to decide which is the most elegant and attractive. The betel quid's ritual role in such ceremonies has evolved to a level of such importance that even younger generations, whether living in the homelands or abroad, accept it.

In mainland China, Hu-nan Province, the young generation has been influenced by the new Taiwanese custom of betel-chewing and uses something similar to *pan masala*. This despite the fact that the Han majority group did not chew betel for centuries. On the other hand, in Yu-nan Province, near the Vietnam border, home to many people of the Tai ethnic group (Tai Hoa Yu branch), areca palm trees that once provided nuts for chewing are now

only decorative, because the chewing custom is disliked among the young. The Vietnamese enclave of Jiang-bin District, in Kwuan-xi Province, is home to 19,000 Chinese- and Vietnamese-speaking inhabitants (as of 2004). According to a local folk song, they moved from the Đố Sơn area (which today is a commune in Hải Phòng City) to Jiang-bin in 1511. While another age-old custom, the consumption of fish sauce (*nước mắm*, a typical Vietnamese sauce), has attained new popularity, betel-chewing is in decline. The elderly still chew it, but only in moderation.

Forever or nevermore? Custom versus cancer

For centuries, people saw betel-chewing as a useful and elegant custom, as the following quotation attests: 'When betel is chewed, hunger and thirst are inhibited and energy-requiring activities decrease in energy consumption. It generates a pleasant, bittersweet taste and stimulates in mild fashion the mind and the spirit, being

able to freshen and sweeten the breath and to cleanse the mouth' (Đỗ Thiện 1914: 243).⁵ But recent research reveals numerous high risks and side effects. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC 2004), in its *Betel-quid and Areca-nut Chewing*, states that there is sufficient evidence in humans of the carcinogenicity of betel quid without tobacco, which causes oral cancer, and of betel quid with tobacco, which causes oral cancer and cancer of the pharynx and oesophagus. Areca nut alone is also carcinogenic to humans. Cancer-screening conducted by P. A. Reichart revealed many cases of oral cancer/pre-cancer in elderly chewers throughout the region. Risk prevalence among various age groups still must be determined. Betel-chewing has declined by various degrees throughout the region, though no religion forbids its followers from chewing betel. At the beginning of the 20th century, 80-90% of the population practiced it; today no more than 5% do. It appears betel-chewing prevalence in Vietnam is still

higher than in neighbouring countries, as statistical data reveals a stable old guard of chewers, but only time will tell how long that will last. The presence of betel and areca in rituals, however, seemingly flourishes everywhere: among majority and minority ethnicities, from Vietnam in the east to Thailand in the west. Sustained by religion, spirituality and fashion, and posing less of a health risk than tobacco, we hope that the ceremonial and ritual use of betel will endure.

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Notes

- ¹ *Chữ Nho* is an old Vietnamese script that uses Chinese characters but with different pronunciation, grammar and syntax; it is not a kind of 'WYW is WYS'.
- ² *Chữ Nôm* is a Vietnamese script that was modified from the *chữ Nho* and represented the language of people on the street; it is a kind of 'WYW is WYS'.
- ³ *Chữ Quốc Ngữ* = *Chữ Việt* is the current script of the Vietnamese, based on Latin characters.
- ⁴ Landes, A. 1885. 'Contes et légendes annamites : Histoire de con Tầm et de con Cám'. *Excursions et Reconnaissances* 9-22: 363.
- ⁵ Đỗ Thiện. 1914. *La coutume de chique du bétel*. Hanoi: F. H. Schneider.