

Tourism Landscape: Understanding the Swiftlet “Hotel” Phenomenon

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the effects of the swiftlet “hotels” to the tourism industry. Tourism is a big business in Malaysia, so is edible swiftlet’s nest. The medicinal values appropriate to the nests by mainly ethnic Chinese result in high demand for them. This creates a booming sector over the horizon, with swiftlet houses dotting the urban and rural landscapes of the country. This study utilized a qualitative approach, with semi-structured in-depth interviews and personal observation employed on swiftlet houses and their owner-operators. Preliminary results suggest bigger swiftlet house operators possessed the notion of expanding their businesses by offering a variety of swiftlet nest-related products and by showcasing the processes to end users. Such action ensures a spillover effect to the tourism industry. On the other hand, findings also suggest that the rise of many of these swiftlet houses in place of conventional types of businesses in urban area has relatively tampered with the authenticity of the built environment.

Keywords: Built environment, commodity, product development, swiftlet nest, tourism landscape

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This paper is part of a series of research articles dealing with issues pertaining to swiftlet houses but confining within the parameter of the tourism industry in Malaysia. It deals with the current phenomenon whereby there exist many swiftlet houses in the mist of commercial buildings in many towns and cities of the country. It tries to bridge the phenomenon with the tourism industry, with the initial question would be; could the swiftlet houses be a new product to local tourism scene?

1.1 Tourism Scene in Malaysia

Malaysia has been for some time treating tourism as one of its pillar in the country’s quest for economic advancement. The falling of commodity prices such as tin and rubber experienced by Malaysia in the seventies and early eighties, resulted in tourism being intensively explored as a new platform to generate income (Jabil *et al.* 2008). Table 1 shows tourism arrivals in Malaysia within a decade, from 2004 until 2013. In 2004, 15.7 million arrivals were recorded, resulting in RM29.7 billion receipt. Tourism arrivals and tourism receipts continued to increase from then on. There were 25.7 million arrivals in 2013, resulting in a receipt of RM65 billion. The gradual and significant increase in number of tourist arrivals as well as tourism receipts is due to amongst others active promotion campaigns undertaken by the Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board, otherwise known as Tourism Malaysia. Malaysia is blessed with plentiful of natural and built-environment that form the kinds of products that tourists seek. A country too needs to continuously develop new tourism products and at the same time invigorate existing ones (Noel, 2003).

Table 1 International tourist arrivals and tourism receipts in Malaysia (2004-2013)

Year	Arrivals (million)	Receipts (RM billion)
2013	25.7	65
2012	25	60.6
2011	24.7	58.3
2010	24.6	56.5
2009	23.7	53.4
2008	22	49.6
2007	21	46.1
2006	17.6	36.3
2005	16.4	32
2004	15.7	29.7

Source: Ministry of Tourism and Culture (2014).

The tourism industry has many components such as accommodation, transportation, attractions, and institutional elements. Pearce (1997) notes that while accommodation is to cater for the place to stay of tourists when they travel, and transport services enable them to do so, the attractions encourage the tourists to visit the destination area (Nazir et al, 2014). Much of the absorption of the experience is acquired at either at or en route to the destinations. From the supply-side perspective, the tourism industry may be defined as the business that commoditized sought after experiences. Tourism provides goods and services for tourists to indulge in pleasure and leisure activities, away from home. In parallel, travelling to indulge in these activities, once considered a luxury, is now more than often is a necessity. Maslow (1987) through his 'human hierarchy needs' explains that human beings require physical needs, safety and security needs, social needs, ego needs and self-actualisation. Such need is based on the principle of relative potency. Therefore, travelling can be a form of activity to distress from intense work environment (Khan et al 2014). In line with that, tourism has become profoundly commercial due to the advocating of travelling among the world's population.

1.2 Swiftlet

McAfee (2011) notes that edible swiftlet's nest was first introduced in China some 600 years ago. Cranbrook and Lim (1999), however, postulate that edible bird's nest has been traded in China as early as 618 to 907 AD during the Tang Dynasty. McAfee (2011) also suggests that there is evidence swiftlet nests were also taxed during the Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644), hence, indicating their economic value.

The global habitat of swiftlets is relatively confined to tropical and subtropical regions of the world. This extends as far as Seychelles Islands in the western part of the Indian Ocean to the islands of the south-west Pacific in the Far East. Swiftlet nests were initially found in caves throughout South-east Asia. By the late 19th century, they were found in buildings in Java. Mardiasuti and Mranata (1996) believe that the first such house inhabited by swiftlets were in Sedayu, East Java. Mardiasuti and Mranata note that the swiftlets flew and nested in the houses in the town due to the latter's close proximity to the limestone hills, which had many natural caves. Mardiasuti and Mranata (1996) suggest that the colonisation of the houses by the swiftlets was simply based on pure luck. In Malaysia, there is evidence that swiftlets have started to occupy buildings as early as the late 1940s. This happened in Perak, Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Melaka. This was confined to the west coast region of Peninsular Malaysia. By then, houses were constructed purposely to attract swiftlets to nest in them. Of late there are varieties of building types to attract swiftlets to nest, ranging from converted shop lots, with sealed windows, to simple brick or wooden structures on vacant land. Inside these buildings, ceilings are modified to create suitable nesting place, with lights, temperature and humidity elements controlled. Such conditions are to emulate natural dark caves, the original nesting habitat of the swiftlets.

Swiftlets are known to travel at great height and great distance in search of food. Insects form their daily diet. They will consume these insects while in flight. Their powerful wings allow them to travel a great distance, away from their nests. By dusk they will return home, clinging to their nests throughout the night. Throughout a year, there would be several cycles of eggs laying and chicks raising. The annual breeding season is between August and April, the following year. The longer the nests are used, the hardened the nests would become. Also the nests would become darker in appearance, due to the accumulation of feathers. Nests are harvested after the chicks fly off. This creates a cyclic process of constructing new nests by the swiftlets.

While there are 24 species of swiftlets, only a few produce nests of commercial value. The main edible bird's nests that are traded come from two species; the White-nest Swiftlet (*Aerodramus fuciphagus*) and the Black-nest Swiftlet (*Aerodramus maximus*) (Lim, 2011). Both female and male swiftlets contribute in nest building. The white appearance of the nest is due to the glycoprotein rich saliva of the birds, produced by sublingual glands beneath their tongues. Edible swiftlet white nest contains 60% protein, 25% carbohydrates and 15% minerals. "This combination is said to inhibit colds and coughs, promote cell growth, enhance skin repair, retard ageing even promote the healing of surgical wounds" (McAfee, 2011, p. 8). Edible bird's nest produced from house faced sustainable risks such as uncontrolled harvesting, insecticide usage in plantation, complaint by neighbourhood residents due to noise in the form of recorded callings as well as reduced in vegetative land coverage which affects on the natural food supply for the swiftlets (Kamarudin & Abdul Aziz, 2011). Similarly, Lim (2011) postulates that the carrying capacity of the natural environment will be the ultimate limiting growth factor of the swiftlet industry.

The local price of unprocessed edible swiftlet nests hovers between RM4,500 to RM5,500 per kilogram, whereas the price of processed or clean nests are between RM6,000 and RM8,000 (McAfee, 2011). Overseas, the price can increase to between RM8,000 to 12,000 per kilogram for unprocessed ones, while between RM12,000 to RM24,000 for the processed one. Recent upheaval saw China's General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine (AQSIQ) listed bird's nest as banned item carried by check-in or hand luggage at air, sea and land entry points into China (The Star, 6th Nov, 2012). It is seen as prevention against avian influenza. However, bottled or canned bird's nest is exempted from such procedure. Nonetheless, the recent agreement between the Government of Malaysia and the Government of The People Republic of China in easing the flow of trade of swiftlet nests from Malaysia into China has helped to calm market uncertainties. A high and continuous demand from traditional markets like China, would nevertheless spell further benefits to local swiftlet industry. In a different perspective, the Malaysian Government has unveiled a plan to further exploit the swiftlet industry so as to intensify the country's agriculture sector. Under the National Key Economic Areas, the government is targeted to increase revenue from swiftlet industry, from US\$0.5 billion to US\$3.6 billion in 2020, with emphasize on developing downstream products (ETP, 2012)

2.0 METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative approach. The researchers were interested in the phenomenon surrounding the existence and increase in number of swiftlet houses throughout the country, and what this got to do with the tourism industry. While there are some literature dealing with swiftlets, the linkages between the swiftlets and the tourism industry is rather non-existent. Therefore, the researchers utilised the exploratory way of researching the phenomenon. The lack of theoretical base and explained variables justify the exploratory approach (Creswell, 2007). Printed documents, in-depth interviews with operators of swiftlet houses and passive observation on swiftlet houses formed the data collected. A passive observation of operating practices and procedures follows a systematic protocol (Buckley, 2007). Data analysis on transcriptions of in-depth interviews was done based on categories development and making compare and contrast of evolving themes.

In parallel, data as well as other information is presented in text and image forms such as quotes and photos. Photos or pictures, for example, depict abstract and non-abstract meanings. A picture depicts a thousand meanings.

■3.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Azhar (2011) notes that the swiftlet industry is relatively new in Malaysia. Peninsular Malaysia benefits with the arrivals of flocks of swiftlets from Sumatera as a result of uncontrolled forest fire in the latter during the nineties. Azhar also notes that the destruction of swiftlet houses along Indonesia's coasts as the aftermath of the 'Acheh' Tsunami of 2004 has resulted in increased in harvested nests in Peninsular Malaysia. These swiftlets possess powerful wings as previously mentioned enabling them to relocate a great distance away in a rather relative ease. Consequently, the population of swiftlets in the peninsular increased. At the same time too the population of swiftlets in Jawa decreased.

The increase in the population of these swiftlets in peninsular is in tandem with the mushrooming of the swiftlet houses.

3.1 Tampering With Authenticity Of Urban Landscape

The mushrooming of swiftlet houses from previously vacant or business shop lots, had swiftly transformed the visual scene of many towns in the peninsular. Kuala Krai, Gua Musang, Kota Bharu, Jerantut and Kuala Terengganu for example, contained many swiftlet houses. From the outside, these buildings looked a stark contrast to ordinary business shops. Figure 1 depicts the characteristics of a swiftlet house. A swiftlet house had sealed windows and numerous air holes, the latter were for better air ventilation (personal observation). The sense for security was invoked by barbed wires perched on top of these buildings to deter poaching of the highly prized edible nests. In many instances the barbed wires were visible from the street below.



Figure 1 A swiftlet house in Kota Bharu.

Many of these swiftlet houses were left unpainted and therefore, were rugged looking. Figure 2, for example, indicates the extension of the top floor of a shop lot, which was left unpainted. The second floor which had transparent glass windows on the other hand, was painted yellow. However, if one was to look closely, he/she would notice the mortared bare bricks and air holes. As a whole the back row of these shop lots were left without paint except for a small patch of red-coloured walled. This reflects a visually dull building block.



Figure 2 An example of a shop lot turned into a swiftlet house.

3.2 Expanding Business

At a site in Bandar Baru Rawang, several blocks of relatively new three-story shops were turned into swiftlet houses (it seemed more of a swiftlet farm). It was as if it was a ghost town where there were only a few people on the street (personal observation). A solitary shop that sold paraphernalia such as speakers, compact disc for recorded swiftlet calls, processed nests and swiftlet nest-related drinks seemed to provide the main activities for the area. A small room in the centre of shop was used as the place to process raw swiftlet nests. The room was made-up by glass walls, therefore allowing the shop's patrons to view what was going on in the room. Five workers were seen cleaning nests, with several using magnifying glasses to help in their work. The process of pulling out tiny feathers from these nests was momentarily intricate. The room was in fact a showcase of the process for which the swiftlet nests had to undergo.

On the second floor of the shop, the proprietor came-up with another showcase; a swiftlet house. Patrons were ushered along glass-fringed corridor to observe what was like in an actual swiftlet house. However, there were only several nests hanging on the ceiling. Perhaps the house was more of a showcase which might not encourage a natural habitation by the swiftlets. For example, it was not so dark for there were several lights although dim to help patrons found the ways along the corridor and steep stairways. Given such operations in progress, it was likely that the operator had huge capitals at his disposal to fund his business.

On the other hand, an owner operator of a swiftlet house in Jerantut acknowledged "I just sell the nests to the buyer... My business partner arranged it (the business transaction)." (Personal interview). In this respect the operator's main concern was to find a buyer once he harvested his swiftlet nests. Harvested nests if left intact for a long period of time would become hardened. The operator had his swiftlet house on the second floor of a linked shop lot, just next to a trunk road that run from Temerloh to Jerantut Town. In fact there were many swiftlet houses within the neighbourhood which was consisted of several blocks of a relatively new commercial double-story shop lots. The same operator also planned for a second swiftlet house of his. He constructed a double-story building on a vacant plot nestled between several small plots of oil palm trees (see Figure 3). However, the building was only half way completed. The price of swiftlet nest drastically went down due to importation sanctions imposed by China. The importation ban was due to traces of nitrates found in some import samples. The samples came from South-east Asia, of which Malaysia was one of the exporters beside Indonesia and Thailand. Similarly, the quality of these edible swiftlet nests had been smeared by unscrupulous businessmen who adulterate the nests for bigger profit margin. Adulteration in the form of increasing weight and altering the colour of the nests (Kamarudin & Abdul Aziz, 2011) spoiled the image of nest imported from Malaysia which was earlier praised for its high value.



Figure 3 An uncompleted swiftlet house

3.3 Hotels For New Kind Of Patrons

Figure 4 illustrates a different kind of notion. It shows a former small budget hotel that was turned into a swiftlet house (personal observation). This scene was taken in the old quarter of Gua Musang Town, Kelantan; nearby its iconic former train station with a backdrop of limestone hills (the town has a new train station). A signboard "Gunong Emas Hotel" hung by the side of a three-story commercial building. The building's second and third floors formed the actual swiftlet house. The air-conditioned "Gunong Emas Hotel" was not meant for the "human visitors" anymore, but bird population, a manifestation of a changing clientele, from "human visitors" to "bird population".



Figure 4 “Swiftlet hotel” next to a famous fast food restaurant brand.

Similarly, Figure 5 tells the same story albeit in a different location; this time around in Kota Bharu. The signage “Hotel Mekar” while purportedly attracting human visitors during the hotel’s early days invoked a different meaning. The signage reflected a man-made sanctuary for swiftlets, leading to the notion of the existence of the “swiftlet hotel” (see Awang, 2006). In light of Duncan Light’s (2014) consuming place names as tourist sights there were no evidence to suggest that these signage magnetised tourists or out-of-town visitors.



Figure 5 A “swiftlet hotel” in Kota Bharu

■4.0 CONCLUSION

The swiftlet industry in Peninsular Malaysia is growing from strength to strength. It has the potential to be a crowd puller as proven by a “one stop centre” as illustrated in Bandar Baru Rawang. However it too has its drawback. The increase in number of swiftlet houses in many towns and cities has changed the latter’s physical landscape. Tourism on the other hand is an integral part of the communities whether the visitors or the visited. One of the reasons that attract visitors to visit far flung places is the authenticity of the built landscape. Furthermore, people are now more sensitive with their surrounding environment, and hence, would demand that products and services rendered would not harm the environment. On the other hand, this study is far from complete. To untangle the complex webs further, more in-depth interviews with both policymakers and operators or owners of swiftlet houses are needed. To date, the understanding of the relationship between the swiftlet industry and tourism sector is still in its infancy.

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