

HOW CHINESE BUDDHIST WOMEN

Shaped the Food Landscape in Singapore

Women who practised a particular form of Buddhism set up popular vegetarian restaurants in the 1940s and 50s that met the needs of local Buddhists and also helped promote vegetarianism.

By Kelvin Tan



(Above) Fut Sai Kai Vegetarian Restaurant (extreme right) was one of the pioneers in Chinese vegetarian food in Singapore. Pictured on the right is the founder Ko Tian-gu. Image reproduced from 善华 [Shan Hua], 本与佛教有深厚渊源而今随时代的进步 有益健康素食渐在我国流行 ["Singapore and Buddhism Have Strong Ties and Evolve with the Times. Healthy Vegetarian Food Is Becoming Popular in Singapore"], 新明日报 [Shinmin Daily News], 11 August 1980, 5. (From NewspaperSG).

(Facing page) Venerable Ho Yuen Hoe, abbess of Lin Chee Cheng Sia temple. Image reproduced from Shi Chin Yam, Top 100 Vegetarian Delights (Singapore: Man Fut Tong Old People's Home, 1998). (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 641.5636 SHI).

Impossible meatballs, oat-milk lattes and tempeh burgers. Whether it is from a desire to reduce their carbon footprint, improve their health or to avoid killing animals, more and more people around the world have started exploring a meat-free lifestyle.

Singapore is not immune to this trend either, as can be seen by the numerous plant-based restaurants that have sprung up recently. Vegetarian restaurants, however, are not a new phenomenon. One of the oldest vegetarian restaurants in Singapore is believed to be Ananda Bhavan, which serves Indian vegetarian food and opened its doors in 1924.

Chinese vegetarian restaurants, on the other hand, are of a more recent vintage. They date back to the 1940s, and a significant number were established by Chinese Buddhist women.

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These women hailed from southeastern China and migrated to Singapore in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They observed a strict vegetarian diet and spent much of their time in temples. This piece focuses on three types of Buddhist women in particular: ordained nuns, lay women (*jushi*; 居士), and vegetarian nuns or *zhaigu* (齋姑).¹ Most of these women belonged to a tradition of Mahayana Buddhism, with some practising a syncretic form that combined Daoism and Confucianism.

These women, in general, were opposed to animal slaughter and believed that a vegetarian diet would keep diseases and ailments at bay. They exercised Buddhist philanthropy alongside their faith. Through the food they produced in restaurants and temples, these women promoted their ideals to the community and contributed to Singapore's diverse culinary landscape.

The First Female Restaurateurs

In the late 1940s and 1950s, there were at least three Chinese vegetarian restaurants in Singapore founded and managed by these Chinese Buddhist women: Loke

Woh Yuen Vegetarian Restaurant (六和园素食馆), Fut Sai Kai Vegetarian Restaurant (佛世界素食社) and Bodhi Lin Vegetarian Restaurant (菩提林素食馆).

Loke Woh Yuen was established in 1946 by a close group of five women, including Jian Daxian (简达贤居士), later known as Venerable Huiping (慧平法师). (She later founded the Tse Tho Aum Temple [自度庵] in Changi, which has since moved to Sin Ming Drive).

The women had the support of people like Venerable Cihang (慈航法师), a prominent monk from Fujian province who was also behind the first vegetarian restaurant in Penang, Phoe Thay Yuen (菩提苑素食馆), which opened in 1932.²

Located at 25 Tanjong Pagar Road, Loke Woh Yuen was well known among the Chinese Buddhist community because its food was of restaurant standard and the menu was varied. Set in a single-fronted shophouse, the restaurant was described as "bright and breezy" and was notable for its "clean yet not clinical look".³

For people who wanted plant-based alternatives to meat dishes, the restaurant offered dishes such as vegetarian

Zen Fut Sai Kai, one of Singapore's oldest Chinese vegetarian restaurants, closes after 64 years



Zen Fu Sai Kai, a vegetarian restaurant located along Kitchener Road, first opened in 1953. PHOTO: LUKE OTTER

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SINGAPORE - A vegetarian restaurant along Kitchener Road that first opened in 1953 has closed down after 64 years.

Zen Fut Sai Kai, said to be one of Singapore's oldest Chinese vegetarian restaurants, was known for its traditional decor and Cantonese-style dishes.

The oldest vegetarian restaurants here are Indian eateries Anandha Bhavan and Komala Vilas, which opened in 1924 and 1947 respectively.

Vegetarian food blogger Luke Otter first broke the news of the closure of Fut Sai Kai Vegetarian Restaurant on 25 August 2017. Image reproduced from “Zen Fut Sai Kai, One of Singapore’s Oldest Chinese Vegetarian Restaurants, Closes After 64 Years,” Straits Times, 4 September 2017.

NOTES

- 1 Show Ying Ruo, “Virtuous Women on the Move: Minnan Vegetarian Women (Caigu) and Chinese Buddhism in Twentieth-century Singapore,” 華人宗教研究 [Studies in Chinese Religions] 17 (2021): 138, 167–68, https://www.academia.edu/46956207/Virtuous_Women_on_the_Move_Minnan_Vegetarian_Women_caigu_and_Chinese_Buddhism_in_Twentieth_Century_Singapore.
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- 3 Violet Oon, “Vegetarian Food for All,” Singapore Monitor, 26 August 1984, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
- 4 洪锦棠 [Hong Jintang], 星洲唯一素食馆六和園是佛教徒開辦是婦女界所營業 (“Singapore’s Only Vegetarian Restaurant Loke Woh Yuen Was Opened by Buddhists

and Managed by Women”), 南洋商报 [Nanyang Siang Pau], 23 June 1948, 6. (From NewspaperSG)

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- 7 区如柏 [Ou Rubo], 素食馆“老大”接搬迁令 六和园临别依依 [“The ‘Master’ of Vegetarian Restaurants Receives Relocation Orders, Loke Woh Yuen Bids a Reluctant Farewell”], 联合早报 [Lianhe Zaobao], 6 October 1991, 42. (From NewspaperSG)
- 8 菩提林素食館 昨日經開幕 [“Bodhi Lin Vegetarian Restaurant Opened Yesterday”], 星洲日報 [Sin Chew Jit Poh], 30 January 1954, 6. (From NewspaperSG)
- 9 菩提林素食館 十八週年紀念 本週五設素菜 招待各界嘉賓 [“In Commemoration of Its 18th Anniversary, Bodhi Lin Vegetarian Restaurant Runs a Vegetarian Banquet This Friday to Serve Guests”], 新明日报 [Shinmin Daily News], 18 January 1972, 4. (From NewspaperSG)
- 10 菩提林素食館訂二月廿日起義賣十天全部收入捐助南大基金預料售票所得可達一萬元 [“Bodhi Lin Vegetarian Restaurant Organises a 10-day Charity Drive from the 29th, All Proceeds Go to Nanyang University and

Are Expected to Reach \$10,000”), 南洋商报 [Nanyang Siang Pau], 18 January 1954, 5. (From NewspaperSG)

- 11 菩提林為南大義賣 獲義款一萬餘元 黃奕歡代表南大贈旗 [“Bodhi Lin Raises Over \$10,000 in a Charity Drive for Nanyang University, Huang Yihuan of Nanyang University Presents Flag”], 星洲日報 [Sin Chew Jit Poh], 3 March 1954, 5. (From NewspaperSG)
- 12 義賣齋筵為廣惠肇醫院募建病樓基金 [“Vegetarian Charity Drive Raises Funds for Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital to Build Wards”], 南洋商报 [Nanyang Siang Pau], 10 April 1958, 7. (From NewspaperSG)
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Japanese and Vietnamese cuisine. Most food courts, coffeeshops and hawker centres will also have at least one vegetarian food stall. Loke Woh Yuen, Fut Sai Kai and Bodhi Lin may have faded away, but their spirit lives on. ♦

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HAI INN SEE’S SOON KUEH RECIPE

Filling

500 g dried mushrooms, soaked
1 kg bamboo shoot
1 kg turnip
2 pieces firm beancurd
100 g sweetened beancurd sticks
2 tablespoons oil
1 tablespoon salt
1 tablespoon pepper
A dash of sesame oil

Dough skin

600 g wheat starch
300 g tapioca flour
Half tablespoon salt
Half tablespoon sugar
1200 ml boiling water
4 tablespoons oil

Method

1. Prepare the filling: Shred mushrooms, bamboo shoots, turnips, firm beancurd and sweetened beancurd sticks.
2. Heat oil in a wok and fry mushrooms till fragrant.

Soon kueh recipe reproduced from 海印古寺 90周年特輯 [Haiingu Temple 90th Anniversary Special], Singapore: Hai Inn Temple, 2018, p. 145.

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- 善华 [Shan Hua], 本与佛教有深厚渊源而今随时代的进步 有益健康素食渐在我国流行 [“Singapore and Buddhism Have Strong Ties and Evolve with the Times. Healthy Vegetarian Food Is Becoming Popular in

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- 海印古寺90周年特輯 [Haiingu Temple 90th Anniversary Special] (Singapore: Hai Inn Temple, 2018), 121.
- 海印古寺90周年特輯,145.

- 27 陈爱玲 [Chen Ailing], 57岁出家 61岁创安老院 88老尼有个心愿 要开第二间安老院 [“Ordained at 57, Opened a Nursing Home at 61, an 88-year-old Nun Has a Wish to Open a Second Nursing Home”], 新明日报 [Shinmin Daily News], 30 September 1996, 5. (From NewspaperSG)
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- 29 Uma Rajan and G. Uma Devi, A Life for Others (Singapore: Man Fut Tong Nursing Home, 2007), 23. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 361.95957 RAJ)
- 30 许源泰 [Hue Guan Thye], 狮城佛光: 新加坡佛教发展百年史 [The Buddha Lights of Lion City: The Hundred-year Development of Buddhism in Singapore] (Hong Kong: 香港中文大学人间佛教研究中心, 2020), 222–23. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. Chinese RSING 294.3095957 HGT)
- 31 李若莲与蔡成才 [Li Ruolian and Cai Chengcai], 自度庵的素菜 [“Vegetarian Dishes of Tse Tho Aum”], 联合晚报 [Lianhe Wanbao], 22 February 1984, 5. (From NewspaperSG)