

# 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.

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).<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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”.<sup>3</sup>

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



shark's fin made from maize, and fish fillet made from sugar cane flowers.<sup>4</sup> Vegetarian *mee siam* and curry were available on weekends.<sup>5</sup>

Loke Woh Yuen was entirely staffed by women, from the waiters to the cashiers and the cook. The restaurant operated for over six decades before the shutters came down for the last time in 2010.

The food served at Loke Woh Yuen was known to be tasty. Writing for the *Singapore Monitor*, Violet Oon wrote about her experience eating a 10-course vegetarian banquet priced at \$150. For those new to Chinese vegetarian food, Oon recommended the dish of *loh mei* or "mixed meats", as it "truly represents the spirit of eating vegetarian style". She also liked the mixed cold items with its "artful simulation of mock oysters".

She wrote: "Some people may object to this simulation of non-vegetarian food flavours but I welcome it as it takes the boredom out of eating vegetables." Overall, she said, the "richness of flavours achieved without the aid of meats or seafoods and the visual impact that was created impressed me".<sup>6</sup>

The restaurant was popular with many people. In addition to Chinese Buddhists, tourists would walk over from

Chinatown to eat at Loke Woh Yuen. It also attracted Indian customers as well. For a long time, the restaurant was so packed that it had to set up dining tents that stretched to the main road.<sup>7</sup>

One of the earliest trustees of Loke Woh Yuen was Qiu Yulan (邱玉兰居士), who later became one of the founders of the Bodhi Lin Vegetarian Restaurant. Bodhi Lin was set up in January 1954 and helmed by Yang Muzhen (杨慕贞居士),<sup>8</sup> who was known for her "unflagging affection" for charitable and educational causes.<sup>9</sup>

Yang was the abbess of Taoyuan Fut Tong (桃园佛堂), a temple that used to be in Tanjong Pagar but has since closed down. She was also a disciple of Venerable Cihang. With her savings, Yang bought an entire shophouse at 114 Neil Road to start Bodhi Lin restaurant.

One of her first acts was to organise a fundraiser for Nanyang University. She worked with the Singapore Buddhist Federation as well as prominent business people and religious leaders for the 10-day event in January 1954. The event welcomed diners for lunch and dinner, with each table priced at \$100.<sup>10</sup> It managed to raise \$11,170, a hefty sum for a small restaurant. Yang's act was hailed by the Chinese press as a breakthrough move for Chinese women ("此举, 施为妇女界破天荒").<sup>11</sup>

In March 1958, Yang organised a similar fundraiser to build wards for Kwong Wai Shiu Free Hospital (广惠肇方便留医院), where she was a trustee.<sup>12</sup> Banquet tables were priced at \$50 and \$100 for dining at Bodhi Lin, and these were quickly snapped up. The three-day event ended up raising \$9,880.

For the event, Taoyuan Fut Tong prepared the food, while staff from Bodhi Lin served the dishes.<sup>13</sup> Qiu sponsored the Chinese tea, while the other vegetarian restaurant, Loke Woh Yuen, provided the dish "vegetarian pheasant" (斋雉).<sup>14</sup>

Bodhi Lin celebrated its 18th anniversary in 1972 and in a newspaper article of the period, the restaurant was described as one of the most famous vegetarian restaurants in Singapore.<sup>15</sup> In particular, it was known for its vegetarian mooncakes, which were so famous that it even attracted customers from Malaysia.<sup>16</sup> Bodhi Lin subsequently shuttered, but when this happened requires further research.

The third establishment set up by these women was Fut Sai Kai Vegetarian Restaurant. Set in an "unpretentious shophouse but with much more character than the average coffeeshop",<sup>17</sup> the restaurant was founded in 1953 by Ko Tian-gu (高添姑) and run by several vegetarian nuns.

Located on Kitchener Road, Fut Sai Kai was aimed at a more price conscious clientele, unlike the pricier Loke Woh Yuen. Dim sum was priced at 3 cents per plate, while noodles and dishes were between 6 cents and \$1.50 respectively, similar to the prices of street food.<sup>18</sup> Fut Sai Kai was one of the first restaurants to employ Cantonese chefs from Hong Kong. It also advertised in the Chinese press.<sup>19</sup>

Ko was known to wake up early in the morning to buy the freshest ingredients from the market, and she also personally served customers at the restaurant. It operated from 11 am to 9 pm daily, and was packed on the 1st and 15th days of the lunar month as well as during major Chinese festivals.<sup>20</sup>

Like Loke Woh Yuen, the restaurant was also popular among non-Chinese and non-Buddhists. Tourist buses were occasionally spotted nearby as well. According to Ko, her restaurant was frequented by Christians on Fridays, and by Hindus looking for vegetarian food after temple worship.<sup>21</sup>

The food at Fut Sai Kai often received good reviews. Writing for the *New Nation* in 1972, Wendy Hutton was all praise for the corn soup. "I found the rather nutty, cereal flavour most enjoyable, and filled

my soup bowl several times," she said. For her, the highlight of the meal were the sugar cane flowers. "We all speculated as to whether we were eating genuine flowers, but since I've eaten such things as banana flower and candied violets in the past, I imagine the sugar cane flowers were authentic. A rather soft, fleshy morsel was buried inside a thick ball of butter and deep fried. Eaten with a sweet sauce, it was marvellous," she added.<sup>22</sup>

The restaurant operated for 64 years before closing in 2017. Its closure was important enough to have warranted a news story in the *Straits Times*. According to the article, the owner of the restaurant had died earlier that year and the family decided to close the restaurant as there was no one to take over the cooking.<sup>23</sup>

### Spreading Vegetarianism Through Temples

Restaurants were not the only way that these women promoted vegetarianism. At Choa Chu Kang's 12-milestone (十二英里) lies the temple Hai Inn See (海印寺), which was established in 1928. Its second abbess, a vegetarian nun named Yang Qincui (杨芹菜),<sup>24</sup> was well known for her vegetarian *soon kueh*. Like many temples, Hai Inn See grew vegetables and fruits on its grounds.

In the 1950s, Yang Qincui discovered that bamboo plants grew well, and since the main ingredient for the *kueh* is bamboo shoots, she led the effort to make it regularly.<sup>25</sup>

As the fame of her *soon kueh* spread, the temple was invited to sell it in a nearby coffeeshop. At 5 cents a piece, it quickly became an essential breakfast item for residents. The *kueh* was sold from the 1960s right up till Yang's death in 1975, and till today, customers have fond memories of her *soon kueh*. (The recipe of this *kueh* was published in the temple's 90th anniversary commemorative book in 2018.<sup>26</sup>)

Venerable Ho Yuen Hoe (何润好), the abbess of the Lin Chee Cheng Sia (莲池精舍) temple in Kovan, was another woman who used vegetarian food for fundraising. To raise funds for Man Fut Tong (万佛堂), her temple's new nursing home that opened in 1969, she sold vegetarian food to devotees attending dharma assemblies at the Khor Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery (光明山普觉禅寺). On average, Venerable Ho raised about \$50 each day though on a good day, she could raise \$80.<sup>27</sup>

When she wanted to expand the home, Venerable Ho came up with the idea of compiling her recipes into a book. Published in 1998, the book *Top 100 Vegetarian Delights* helped raise over



(From left) 双雄豪杰 (Stuffed Hot Chillies with Crunchy Gluten) and 金玉满堂 (Coconut Soup with Four Snacks). Images reproduced from Shi Chin Yam, *Top 100 Vegetarian Delights* (Singapore: Man Fut Tong Old People's Home, 1998), 79, 88. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 641.5636 SHI).



A 1991 *Lianhe Zaobao* article on Loke Woh Yuen having to relocate featured the owners of the restaurant at the time. The small photo shows (from left) Venerable Xingjing (性静法师), Venerable Zhishun (智顺法师) and Seck Seng Cheng (贤贞法师), disciples of the original founders. The larger photo in the article dates to 1984 and shows the original founders of the restaurant. Seated at the table are Venerable Dajian (达坚法师; 3rd from left), Venerable Huicheng (慧成法师; 4th from left) and chief cook Mdm Wong Sin Fung (黄凤仙; 1st from right). Image reproduced from 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).



## 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

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\$100,000 to fund the expansion. Apart from fundraising, she also wanted to use the book to promote the health benefits of vegetarianism, drawing from her belief in "renewed vitality and concentration" as means of healthy ageing.<sup>28</sup>

Venerable Ho also started giving cooking classes at Lin Chee Cheng Sia in 1987 for the growing number of devotees eager to learn vegetarian cooking from her. A long-time believer that "vegetarian food and regular exercise deliver longevity", she hoped to share "her secrets" to "as many people as possible" while preserving her recipes.<sup>29</sup>

But Venerable Ho was not the first woman to have her vegetarian cookbook published. Jian Daxian, one of the founders of Loke Woh Yuen, and who later founded Tse Tho Aum, wrote a vegetarian cookbook in Chinese titled 素食食譜 (*Vegetarian Dishes*) in 1974. The book was widely circulated in Singapore and Hong Kong, and proceeds from the sale were donated to the educational fund of the Singapore Girls' Buddhist Institute.<sup>30</sup>

During Jian's time at Tse Tho Aum, the temple developed a reputation for its tasty food. In February 1984, the *Lianhe Wanbao* (联合晚报) newspaper wrote that the dishes prepared by Jian during the Lunar New Year, including the vegetarian *yu sheng*, were "all but superior" to the Manchu imperial feast.<sup>31</sup> She also taught vegetarian cooking classes.

In many ways, women like Jian Daxian, Yang Muzhen, Yang Qincai and Venerable Ho Yuen Hoe were ahead of their time. Today, the vegetarian is spoiled for choice in Singapore. Apart from the mainstay of Indian and Chinese vegetarian restaurants, there are vegetarian eateries offering Indonesian, Peranakan, Korean,

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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

- Prepare the filling: Shred mushrooms, bamboo shoots, turnips, firm beancurd and sweetened beancurd sticks.
- 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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- 海印古寺90周年特輯, 145.

- Add in bamboo shoots and turnips. Fry to mix well. Add in salt and pepper to taste.
- Finally, mix in firm beancurd and sweetened beancurd sticks. Just before dishing the mixture out from the wok, drizzle a dash of sesame oil over the mixture. Set the mixture aside on a large plate to cool.
- Prepare the dough skin: On a large plate, combine wheat starch, tapioca flour, salt and sugar.
- Add in boiling water and stir the mixture constantly with a wooden ladle till well combined.
- Mix in oil before using hands to knead the dough till smooth.
- Divide the dough into smaller balls of equal portions. Flatten each ball of dough into a round disc to wrap a portion of the filling. Grease a steaming plate with oil before placing the *soon kueh* on it. Once the water starts to boil in the steamer, steam the *soon kueh* for about 10 minutes. After steaming, lightly brush the *soon kueh* with oil.

The vegetarian *soon kueh* of Hai Inn See and an undated portrait of Abbess Yang Qincai. Images reproduced from 海印古寺90周年特輯 [Haiingu Temple 90th Anniversary Special] (Singapore: Hai Inn Temple, 2018), 143, 144.

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