

The Vegan Athletes of Hong Kong  
Charmaine Ng



“May I ask if there is cheese in the salad? Can we have that on the side, and I would like the dressing to be served on the side too, please.”

The waiter shuffled away as Angie Li took a sip of water.

“Always good to make sure,” she smiled.

Compassion for animals, preserving the environment, allergies to animal-based protein – there are many reasons for a person to completely cut off all animal meat and products from their diet. In a city like Hong Kong where having meat dishes is historically celebrated as a luxury, it is uncommon to find someone who would not take a second look at a big, juicy slab of steak. Combined with the traditional views of Hong Kong people, accepting this change of lifestyle built over decades is difficult.

Li shook off her tan winter coat as she settled into her seat to reveal a sleek runner’s suit underneath. A pair of grey trainers completed her hidden sporty attire. She looked like a typical office worker in Hong Kong who was prepared to go for a run after work. There was nothing really outstanding about her appearance that was a telltale sign that her diet was any different than one would expect. But indeed, she lives very differently from the majority of the population in the city: she is vegan, and she is a passionate marathon runner.

“I became vegetarian three years ago, then one year later I became vegan,” she said. “There wasn’t really a reason. I remember just waking up one day and thinking, “It’s not like I’ll die if I don’t eat meat for the rest of my life.” Then I just did it.”

Li isn’t the only one living this lifestyle in Hong Kong. Though still a minority, the plant-based community in the city has seen a big growth over the last several years. In 2014, Ipsos Hong Kong published a survey that 23 percent of the population had taken to going meatless once a week after the social startup group Green Monday implemented a campaign to push Hong Kong people to eat like a vegetarian every Monday. Vegetarian and vegan eateries, salad places and raw juicing stores have been popping up citywide in the past few years. Scroll through Instagram and one will find the new generation sharing mouth-watering photos of plant-based food. The general frame of mind in Hong Kong is definitely changing.

“A well-planned vegetarian diet can be nutritionally adequate, so as long as the diet is in line with healthy eating guidelines,” explained Dr. Susan Chung, a registered dietician and registered Chinese medicine practitioner. “In fact, it is generally lower in total fat and cholesterol and higher in fiber, folate, potassium and antioxidants, which are protective against heart disease, hypertension and cancer.”

Carmela Lee, another registered dietician, agreed.

“The major nutrient provided by meat is complete protein, which is the type of protein containing all essential amino acids,” she said. “Certain types of plant food such as nuts and beans provide protein, and can be used to substitute meat. It’s simply that plant protein is usually incomplete and less bioavailable compared with animal protein.”

Veganism is possible – that has long been proved. But the real question that most are concerned with is: can you mesh the plant-based diet with intense sports?

Li’s family and friends were unsupportive of her change. None of the people around her were vegetarian or vegan. She said her mother was shocked and spent nights shouting and crying. Her father and brother tried not to add fuel to the fire and hid their opinions, but Li later found out that her father used to cry secretly at night. Her home had become living hell.

“My mum actually thought I had been taken over by a ghost – like literally. But I couldn’t reassure her; I couldn’t even explain the reasons for change to myself. Looking back, I know it must’ve been crazy for her. Veganism isn’t popular in Hong Kong, and all she could say to me was, ‘how can anyone live like this?’ And I just told her not to worry because I wouldn’t die.”

Li took a sip of her water.

“She was the reason why I began running, actually,” she said. “I wanted to prove my mum wrong. I wanted to show her that this lifestyle is possible.”

Li said she began by jogging outside her block and found out that she loved running. It allowed her to clear her head, and it was a new challenge. The distances she ran grew longer and longer, and through all this, she was following a vegan diet. Eventually, she joined her first 10-kilometre race, a half marathon race, a then full marathon. Now, she travels all around the world to take part in marathons.

“In September, I’ll be competing in Germany.”

Seeing her transformation, Li’s family has long stopped worrying about her. She had shown them that it was possible to not consume any meat. If anything else, she had influenced them positively – now the family eats more plant-based food and adds fewer unhealthy condiments to their cooking.

It’s all fair and well following a vegan diet at home, but Hong Kong still lags behind other Asian cities like Singapore or Bangkok in the vegan dining scene. With so many social gatherings involving food, does adopting this lifestyle mean being limited when it comes to eating out and maintaining a healthy social life? Although Li prefers to cook at home, she is positive about the situation in Hong Kong.

“The vegan dining scene is thriving here, actually,” she commented. “More and more restaurants either have vegan options or are willing to make changes to cater for vegans’ needs. Mana Fast Slow Food is one of the top-rated cafés, and it’s completely vegan. If you want Indian food, there are plenty of Indian vegetarian places. The other day, I told the chef to prepare my sushi with just avocado. There are always options.”

Like Li, Vlad Ixel adheres to a completely vegan diet, and his running achievements outshines most. He would not have moved to Hong Kong from Australia if he had thought the city’s vegan dining scene had no potential to support his demanding lifestyle. Ixel, as it turns out, is an ultra-marathon trail runner.

“Marathons are 42 km in distance and ultra-marathons are anything beyond that,” he explained. “I’ve run many 50 km, 100 km, 150 km races. My biggest achievement to date was a 250 km self-supported ultra-marathon – self-supported means that you carry all your stuff with you – which went on for five days, across a desert, where temperatures went as high as 40 degrees in the day and as low as 0 degrees at night.”

When he was younger, Ixel ate carnivorously. His parents own a restaurant in Perth, Australia, where his father is one of the top chefs in the city and country.

“I ate a lot of good food. I was a huge meat eater. I was at that age where everyone worked out at the gym, tried to bulk up to look better, and obviously, we’d constantly search for proteins. I would eat 1 kilogram steaks in a sitting because it was what everyone did.”

But Ixel didn’t feel well. While he looked strong on the outside, he did not have the correct nutrition for his body. On top of that, he was smoking cigarettes, too.

“I needed a change. I wanted to challenge myself, so I signed up for two marathons and without training, I ran them both,” he said. “It felt good to achieve something new. So I went on Google and searched for the hottest running race in the world, and that’s when I signed up for the 250-kilometre ultra-marathon.”

Ixel knew he had to prepare for the ultra-marathon, and while training, he researched for ways of quick recovery. He found that many advocated going on a plant-based diet. There was no loss for him to try, so after a huge steak on Christmas Eve three years ago, he quit meat cold turkey and became vegan overnight.

“My parents didn’t think that the change would be permanent,” he laughed. “They thought I was playing around: ‘Oh, it’s just a one-week thing for a teenage boy,’ but that Christmas was the last time I consumed any meat- or animal-derived food.”

The sudden change wasn’t hard for the runner at all. He had made up his mind, convinced himself that it was better, and he barely experienced any cravings for meat. Eventually he packed up his bags, moved to Hong Kong, and now resides in Sheung Wan, where he can hit the mountain trails conveniently. As a full-time runner who does coaching on the side, he trains two times a day, seven days a week, and joins races weekly.

What’s more, the changes both Ixel and Li felt after turning to a vegan lifestyle were than simply physical. Both Ixel and Li said they felt better emotionally and mentally too. They both also said they experienced lifts in their moods, clearer minds and had more energy.

“I just feel stronger and healthier now,” said Ixel. “I take regular blood tests, and I don’t need to tell the doctors about my diet. They never question me because I’m always completely good to go.”

Unlike many athletes, Ixel and Li do not take protein powders to enhance their training. In fact, Ixel noticed that his performance improved after cutting out the supplements.

“Before I changed my lifestyle, I used to drink multiple protein shakes a day. The thing is, I smelled when I exercised back then. It’s not the natural stink of sweat, but the ingredients of the drink inside you. When I went vegan, I cut out protein supplements altogether, and I found that I no longer had that smell. It really tells you how unhealthy they are.”

Ixel shows that a completely plant-based diet is even sufficient for running ultra-marathons if one really puts work into it – a feat that even the majority of omnivores can’t do. In fact, there are many great vegan athletes in history who have done incredible things. Carl Lewis, for example, is an American vegan Olympic sprinter whose outstanding career includes nine gold medals and one silver Olympic medal in 100 and 200 metre sprints, relays and long jumps. Murray Rose, a vegan Olympic swimmer, set 15 world records and won six Olympic medals, four of which were gold. They all illustrate that living a lifestyle shunned by so many is nonsense when it can even lead to amazing achievements.

But for the doubters who may argue that foreigners are of a different build than a Hong Kong person, then Li exemplifies that someone who was born and raised in Hong Kong, with the typical genes of a Chinese girl, can be vegan and an athlete simultaneously too.

“When it comes down to it, tiredness, bad weather, external factors out of our control – they’re only excuses,” said Ixel. “I went from a huge carnivore to vegan in one day. I quit smoking cold turkey right before I turned 25 because I wanted the second quarter of my life to be healthier. It’s all about the strength and will in our minds. We are stronger than we think we are.”

Image source: [Wikipedia.com](https://www.wikipedia.com)