



The prayer room at the back of the Guanyin Gong vegetarian hall in Cuff Road. The woman in the black and white portrait is the late Ms Wong Ying, the hall's founder. There are about 30 such halls in Singapore today and they have housed unmarried, widowed, destitute, abused and orphaned girls and women since the late 19th century. ST PHOTOS: JASMINE CHOONG, KEVIN LIM

# HIDDEN WOMEN'S ABODES

Researcher studies little-known local history of vegetarian halls whose numbers are dwindling

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It looks like a typical temple dedicated to Guanyin, but behind the altar of the goddess are living quarters for women.

The Little India shophouse unit at 19 Cuff Road has been home to a low-profile group of "vegetarian aunts" and their adopted daughters since it was established in 1954 by a Hakka woman.

It is not the only one. Operating away from the public eye are about 30 other so-called vegetarian halls in Singapore today. They have

housed unmarried, widowed, destitute, abused and orphaned girls and women of a similar religious persuasion since the late 19th century.

In early Singapore, these female-led residences were critical in providing lodging and food to immigrant women living alone here, serving a niche neglected by most clans.

Some *zhaigu*, or vegetarian aunts or nuns, might have come from well-to-do backgrounds but were sent to vegetarian halls for reasons such as having incompatible Chinese horoscopes with members of their family. Then there were others who might have chosen to follow in the footsteps of Guanyin, who in one legend resisted mar-

riage to pursue her religious beliefs. Among them were also the *majie* (Cantonese domestic servants) who retired there.

The women in these halls still practise a religion known as "The Great Way of Former Heaven". It incorporates religious practices from Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, and has its own esoteric practices.

The vegetarian nuns who live in the halls lead celibate lives and follow a vegetarian diet. The halls require that their occupants subscribe to the religion in order to live there. The halls were supported by their founders and donations of devotees.

Their religion requires them to keep a low profile, said Dr Show Ying Ruo from the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Asia Research Institute (ARI), who embarked on a five-year project in 2013 to study the vegetarian halls of



Ritual costumes donated by the defunct Vegetarian Hall of the Blessed Lotus to Dr Hue Guan Thye, who hopes to set up a museum in homage to vegetarian halls.

Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. She presented her findings at an ARI workshop a month ago.

At one point, the Guanyin Gong shophouse in Cuff Road housed four vegetarian aunts and four adopted daughters. Now it is home to a vegetarian aunt and her two adopted sisters.

Dr Show's research project on vegetarian halls in South-east Asia is the first comprehensive effort of its kind since British anthropologist Marjorie Topley wrote about them in the 1950s and 1960s when she was based in Singapore.

Most of the vegetarian halls here

are located in central Singapore. They were once thriving places – especially after the British introduced the Aliens Ordinance in 1933 which placed limits on the number of male immigrants allowed into Singapore, resulting in an influx of women.

A number of female boat traders, who were practitioners of "The Great Way of Former Heaven", arranged for fellow believers to come to Singapore, said Dr Show, 33.

She told *The Sunday Times* that the low profile maintained by the vegetarian halls could be traced back to the religion's roots in China.

It was established during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), and expanded to parts of Asia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Dr Show said: "It was a controversial and popular religion in China which was banned up till the early 20th century. It however thrived under the radar here because the colonial rulers did not get involved in religious matters."

The group's hidden goddess, the Eternal Mother, is typically enshrined in a secluded area, and only members of rank can worship her.

The vegetarian halls are all locally and regionally connected. The Waterloo Street Guanyin Temple, founded in 1884, functions as the halls' Singapore headquarters.

Dr Show approached almost 100 vegetarian halls in the region for her fieldwork, but not all interview requests were accepted. No other official research has been published here on this subject.

## A CHAPTER IS CLOSING

Lacking successors, a good number of vegetarian halls are now defunct and their owners have handed over their premises to Buddhist caretakers such as monks.

The Venerable Kwang Phing of the Singapore Buddhist Federation said that the declining birth rate in Singapore is one of the reasons the vegetarian halls receive fewer women for adoption, leading to their eventual closure. He said: "In some instances, the halls invite priests from their regional counterparts to perform rites, or they come to us for assistance. Our monks help in their religious affairs to ensure their remaining devotees can continue to visit the place."

Dr Show added that these halls are no longer the first option for women interested in nunhood, as the religion is more complex than Buddhism. Only a few high-ranking vegetarian nuns remain in Singapore and they are getting old.

Dr Show is chronicling the halls' transition into mainstream Buddhist sites. She noted that their syncretic teachings will be disposed and replaced by standardised Buddhism. After transitioning, the front-hall Guanyin is usually replaced by Buddha or other Mahayana Buddhist iconography.

Vegetarian nuns play different roles in the hall's religious system, much of which caters to devotees. Some read fortunes and handle prayer requests. Others conduct funeral rites or sew the robes of deities.

Anthropologist Vivienne Wee, 67, whose ancestor Wong Ying sponsored the establishment of the Cuff Road hall, said these places and the people who lived in them, played significant social roles. She added: "It is a form of indigenous feminism – where family units were created through a system of religious adoption – that is especially endangered, and a cultural tradition that could soon be lost."

Together with a few other researchers, such as Dr Wee and Dr Hue Guan Thye from NUS' Chinese Studies Department, Dr Show hopes to one day establish a museum in homage to vegetarian halls.

Dr Show said: "Vegetarian halls will soon die out in a generation or so. It could become a forgotten story of our region where women helped other women and asserted unprecedented autonomous roles as religious leaders and temple managers."

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