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 Shao can worship her.”

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

Dr Show explained that almost 160 vegetarian halls in the region for her fieldwork, but not all of interview requests were accepted. No other official research has been published on this subject.

A CHAPTER IS CLOSING

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

The venerable Kwong Phung 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 rituals, or they come to us for assistance. Our monks help in their religious affairs to ensure the halls’ survival.”

Dr Show added that halls are no longer the first option for women interested in mindfulness, as the religion is more complex than Buddha. Some women rank the vegetarian halls remain in Singapore and they are getting old.

Dr Show is chronicling the halls’ transition into mainstream Buddhist sites. She noted that their esoteric teachings will be disposed of and replaced by Buddhist wisdom. After transitioning, the halls’ Guanyin is usually replaced by Buddha or other Mahayana Buddhist iconography.

Vegetarian mans play different roles in the hall’s religious system, much of which cater to devotees. Some read fortunes and handle prayer requests. Others conduct funeral services by the rows of statues.

Anthropologist Vivienne Wee, whose ancestor Wong Ying sponsored the establishment of the Cuff Road hall, said these places and the people who lived there, played significant social roles. She added: “It is a form of indigenous feminism – where family units were connected through a system of religious adoption – that is especially endangered, and a cultural tradition that could survive.”

Together with a few other researchers, Dr Show and Dr Hong 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 is becoming a forgotten story of our region where women helped create communities and decentralized autonomous roles as religious leaders and temple managers.”