

The Three Worlds (大世界、新世界、繁华世界): Great, New and Happy

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When life was a lot simpler—when there fewer vehicles on the road, no television and sporadic city lights—amusement parks provided families of all races and social milieu with hours of entertainment. In some way, the modern shopping malls of today have their roots in these amusement parks. Find out more about the love affair locals had with amusement parks through these wondrous “worlds”.

The New World Amusement Park (新世界) was the very first of the three famous amusement parks (or the three “worlds”, as they was more commonly known) to be built. Set up in 1923 by two Straits Chinese brothers, Ong Boon Tat (王文达) and Ong Peng Hock (王平福), it was built at Jalan Besar and became a prominent landmark at that time. The park was eventually bought over by the Shaw Brothers who jazzed the place up and introduced some Shanghai-style attractions. Soon business was booming.

Competing for a slice of the action was the Great World Amusement Park (大世界) located along Kim Seng Road. It was developed by Lee Choon Yung (李春荣) in 1931 but it, too, was sold to the Shaw Brothers in 1940.

The third amusement park was Happy World (快乐世界). It was located between Mountbatten and Geylang Road and set up by George Lee Geok Eng (李玉荣) in 1936. Its name was changed to the Gay World (繁华世界) in 1964 when Eng Wah took over its ownership.

These parks boasted of entertainment facilities such as retail shops, cinemas and restaurants, all of which were later moved indoors into multi-storeyed complexes that eventually became the ubiquitous shopping malls of today. Despite their similarities, each park had its own niche. In the days before the war, Happy World was frequented by families with children. New World grew famous for its cabarets, Chinese and Malay opera halls, shops, restaurants, open-air cinemas, boxing arenas, and shooting galleries. Great World was much like New World, but attracted British servicemen and the upper classes, with free films and Peking operas to watch in addition to wrestling and boxing matches.

During the war, all three worlds were converted into gambling farms, opened only to civilians but not Japanese soldiers. The cabarets and night clubs were initially shut down but the Japanese soon allowed the parks to reopen to maintain a façade of normality in Singapore. The amusement and entertainment industries proved to be lucrative as the Japanese used music to raise morale among their troops and for propaganda. They also had a hand in establishing the trend of performing modern plays and skits as part of the performance line up of performing troupes. They demanded that a new programme be launched once every few days and since the troupes did not have enough time or resources, they had no choice but to adapt and improvise modern play (文明戏) ideas from Shanghai. Thus, this style of improvisation began during this period and became a trend after the war.

After the war, the “worlds” got rid of their gambling dens and brought back western tunes. The cafes introduced singers, drawing Allied soldiers into the “worlds” in droves. With the

departure of foreign troops, striptease (with performers such as the famous Rose Chan) was introduced as a gimmick to lure—and retain—patrons. The traditional song and dance performances were slowly replaced by *getai* which was slowly growing more popular. As the rubber industry boomed in the fifties so did the three “worlds”—their visitors grew richer and their owners pumped in more money to spruce up the facilities and entertainment available. The boom period slowly came to an end in the seventies and eighties. With the invasion of television, night markets, cineplexes, shopping malls and game arcades, amusement parks became increasingly out of sync with the rhythm of life and people’s habits. One by one, they shuttered their gates.

The Great World closed down in 1978. Its five-football-fields-sized site is now home to the huge and imposing Great World condo-cum-office and shopping complex. New World closed in the mid-1980s, and City Square Mall now sits on its site. Meanwhile, Happy World, which was renamed Gay World, closed down in 2000, and is now the site of a new MRT line.

It is important to note that other than providing entertainment, the “worlds” also played an important socio-political role in the everyday lives of the people. For example, the amusement parks were the chief means for the dissemination of anti-opium propaganda in 1937; events and concerts organised by the Singapore China Relief Fund Committee to raise funds in aid of the war effort against Japan were often held there; war bulletin broadcasts in different languages and dialects were done via loudspeakers installed at the amusement parks to provide reliable news for the illiterate sections of Singapore’s populace and to check the proliferation of false rumours; registration to vote for the Singapore Legislative Council elections in 1947 were held at the three amusement parks, as was the vaccination drive in 1952. The People’s Action Party held “protest week” meetings at the three amusement parks to “expose Britain’s imperialist attitude which caused the breakdown of the Merdeka Talks” in June 1956. All these various events and activities demonstrate just how wide and deep the reach of these three “worlds” were during its heyday.

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