

## **The Majestic Theatre (大华戏院): Where Chinese Opera Ruled**

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*Originally called the Great Theatre of Heavenly Shows, The Majestic Theatre has undergone changes both in name and function, reflecting the evolving times and entertainment needs of Singaporeans. The Majestic is now a conserved building and is currently used as a betting centre.*

In late 2011, the three-storey Majestic Theatre at the heart of Chinatown, along Eu Tong Sen Street, was brought back into the limelight when the Singapore Turf Club (STC) sued two architects for allegedly delaying the centre's multi-million dollar renovations in 2009. The case refocused the public's attention on the once-iconic theatre which is now listed as a conserved building.

On the theatre's side wall, just visible through the walkways of the Chinatown MRT underground station, are the bold black characters declaring the theatre's original name "Tian Yan Da Wu Tai" (天演大舞台, Great Theatre of Heavenly Shows). Yu Wei Chen or San Ye (余渭臣 or 三爷), who came to Singapore to teach Cantonese opera and often helped with getting additional musicians for visiting foreign opera troupes, reportedly wrote these Chinese characters on the theatre's façade. In 1927, philanthropist Eu Tong Sen built the theatre next to his Great Southern Hotel, offering Cantonese opera as well as the occasional silent movie. The theatre's exterior still sports the building's original vivid blue, green and pink mosaic dragon motifs. The theatre was then the grandest building in Chinatown and was a meeting place for the Chinese elite.

Chinese opera troupes of the different dialect groups—Cantonese, Teochew and Hokkien—were brought into Singapore from Shanghai and parts of Southern China on many "go South" tours where stops were made throughout Southeast Asia. Besides satisfying the entertainment needs of the local immigrants, these tours were also connected to the political developments and social upheaval in China during the mid-nineteenth century. From the 1930s to 1941 before World War II erupted, many Chinese opera troupes came to Singapore. Their performances were usually held at amusement parks as the costs of performing at there were lower than at a proper theatre. By late 1930s to early 1940s, Chinese opera was no longer performed at the opera theatres.

This decentralisation of opera activity could be the reason Tian Yan Da Wu Tai was rented out to the Shaw Brothers in 1938, who renamed it the Queen's Theatre (皇宫戏院), and used it to screen the latest Cantonese blockbuster films. Song and dance troupes—like the Silver Moon Song and Dance troupe from Shanghai—would also perform there.

The Queen's Theatre was renamed Tai Hwa Opera House (大和剧场) during the Japanese Occupation and was used to screen Japanese propaganda films. The Shaw Brothers' lease for the theatre ended shortly after the war. The theatre was renamed as Majestic Theatre by its new tenant, the Kong Ngee Film Company (光艺机构). The Ho Brothers, Ho Khee-Yong (何启荣) and Ho Khee-Siang (何启湘), founders of Kong Ngee, were Singapore film producers who made Cantonese films in Malaysia and Singapore. In 1956, the late Dato Loke Wan Tho of Cathay Organisation, together with two partners, Wong Siew Leng and Teo Cheng Hay, bought the theatre for S\$1.1 million from the Eu family. Many old-timers recalled the place

as the trendiest spot to be seen in Singapore, even attracting Hong Kong film stars such as Lin Dai and Ge Lan. The mega stars of that period would make appearances at their film screenings, attracting crowds.

In 1983, Cathay Organisation became the sole owner of the theatre after they bought out the partnership. The theatre continued screening Chinese films until its closure in 1998. On 17 January 2003, the Majestic Theatre re-opened after it underwent an S\$8 million facelift to convert it into a three-storey shopping mall named "The Majestic". However, the project did not take off and the building was sold by Cathay Realty in 2008.

In 2009, the STC took up the lease, and the building is mostly used as a betting centre now. Heritage activists feel that the building should be used to promote cultural activities, given its long history in the arts.

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