

# Heritage - New Town Ipoh, After Dark

In the competitive world of entertainment, only the strongest survive. Every new venue must start with a bang to make prospective customers aware of the new attraction. The best way is to have a Grand Opening to make the public aware of 'spread the buzz', as the saying goes. Competition to win the customers' loyalty is always a strong challenge, the quality of the opening ceremony being an important step in that endeavour. It is no surprise that, over the years, Ipoh has experienced many such special occasions.

At one time Ipoh had around 11 cinemas and although several specialised in one language or type of movie, nonetheless competition was the keyword. Theatres like the Lido and Majestic would put on stage shows, competitions and promotions to stay in the public spotlight. Against this background, the Cathay Theatre opened in Ipoh on February 17, 1958, the eve of Chinese New Year.



*Cathay Theatre, Ipoh Grand Opening 1958*

The photograph was taken at the opening night, after the grand ceremony. The theatre built for \$600,000 was declared open by His Highness Raja Sir Izzudin Shah ibni Almarhum Sultan Abdul Jalil (the Sultan of

Perak). Designed by B.M. Iversen, this fully air-conditioned cinema (with its colossal 75-foot tower of jade tiles), stood proud along Cockman Street – in direct competition with the Lido Theatre just a few metres away; an area that, just a few years earlier, was home to rubber trees! That night the invited guests were treated to the Darryl F. Zanuck’s “CinemaScope 55” production of ‘The King and I’.

The Straits Times published a special supplement to mark the occasion entitled:

“A Milestone in Cinema Entertainment – Ipoh’s New Cathay Theatre”

Some 40 years later, single-screen cinemas were in the doldrums. Television and Multiplexes were in vogue with some of the grand old buildings already lying empty. One of the first to go was the Odeon at the top of Brewster Road. It closed in 1986 and lay empty for several years. However, in 1992, new life was breathed into the old building. There was to be music, entertainment and dancing; the Shanghai Nights Cabaret had arrived!



*Shanghai Nights Opening Procession 1992*

To highlight the old building’s new role and create the necessary buzz, a grand opening was planned with an evening trishaw procession through the town. In each trishaw sat at least one pretty Chinese girl, resplendent

in a tight-fitting cheongsam. There can be no better buzz than that to attract hot-blooded males. Sadly, the new venture did not last long but before it closed I actually spent an evening there, watched the live band with its qipao-clad singers and gyrating couples on the dance floor. My first introduction to the Chinese (Off Beat) Cha Cha!

Today, like many of the movie theatres, the building lies empty – a memorial to the days when peanuts, sunflower seeds and *kacang putih* were all part of the entertainment scene. At least they still stand, as part of our built heritage, although how much longer they will survive it is not possible to forecast.