

History of the Tai Ping Theatre

Street shows in the form of Chinese Opera could be seen in Hong Kong's Central District as early as the beginning of British rule. As its population grew and its economy prospered, Hong Kong began to demand more entertainment. The entertainment business flourished even more noticeably in the Chinese communities in Sheung Wan and Western District. Chinese Operas were performed not only in temporary bamboo shed theatres, but also in purpose-built theatres when these were gradually erected. Better equipped than their bamboo counterparts, these purpose-built theatres became important entertainment venues for the Chinese, and one of them, the Tai Ping Theatre in Western District, established a name for itself in the early 20th century.

Erected between Queen's Road West and Des Voeux Road West in Western District in 1904, the three-storey Tai Ping Theatre accommodated over 1,000 seats and was one of the most well-established theatres in early 20th century Hong Kong. In addition to offering seating on chairs and benches, the Theatre also pioneered more comfortable "concubine couches" as well as numbered seating, setting the standard for other theatres to follow. The Theatre made a name for itself by inviting renowned troupes such as Yan Sau Nin and Yi King Tin to perform Cantonese Opera, and it attracted audiences by screening foreign motion pictures (silent films) before and after the Cantonese Opera shows. In 1922, Beijing Opera actor Mei

Lanfang was invited to perform for one month at the Theatre, proving a sensation for Chinese Opera fans.

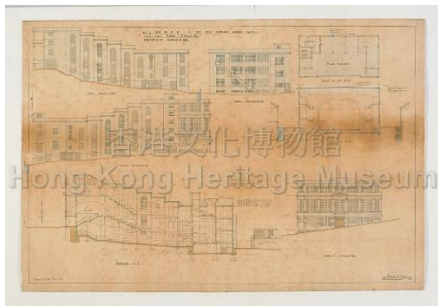
The Tai Ping Theatre was renovated in 1932 with a sound-on-film projector installed to screen Chinese and Western films. Upgraded in this way to a cinema, the Theatre expanded the number of seats to about 2,000 and also introduced ushers to substantially enhance its facilities and services.

Following the renovation, the Tai Ping Theatre invited famous actor Ma Sze Tsang to perform, and he then founded the Tai Ping Opera Troupe, while also writing a series of celebrated librettos. In the beginning, Ma's partner was the male actor Chan Fi Nung, but in 1932 the Theatre's proprietor, Yuen Hang-kiu, and his son, Yuen Jim-fan, began to advocate a mixed cast. When this concept was approved by the government, female actors such as Tam Lan Hing and Sheung Hoi Mui appeared on stage at the Theatre, and the Tai Ping Opera Troupe was renamed Tai Ping Mixed Cast Opera Troupe. In addition to Tai Ping, other famous troupes such as, Tai Lung Fung. Chung San Sing and Chor Fung Ming also performed at the Tai Ping Theatre.

After installing the sound-on-film projector, the Tai Ping Theatre eagerly rented Chinese and Western films from well-known film companies, including Metro Goldwyn Mayer (MGM), Paramount, Twentieth Century Fox, Universal Pictures and Unique Film Production Company, and many famous films such as *Madame*

Butterfly, Love Parade, King of the Jungle and *Pak Kam Lung* were screened at the Theatre. Theatre-goers were thus offered a much greater choice of entertainment rather than just Cantonese Opera. What's more, in the early 20th century the Theatre was used as a venue for receiving foreign guests, for charity performances and for social welfare campaigns.

After the Second World War, as the film industry in Hong Kong began to flourish, Cantonese Opera films also proved highly popular. Stage performances, however, began to lose their appeal in the late 1960s. As television became popular, together with the vigorous competition in the theatre field and other factors, the Tai Ping Theatre eventually closed down in 1981. The last screening was *Security Unlimited*. The Theatre was demolished and the site was developed. It is occupied today by the Wah Ming Centre.



Architectural Plan for Re-construction of Tai Ping Theatre

1931

2006.49.1574.1



Hanging Embroidery of Peacock and Couplet

1932

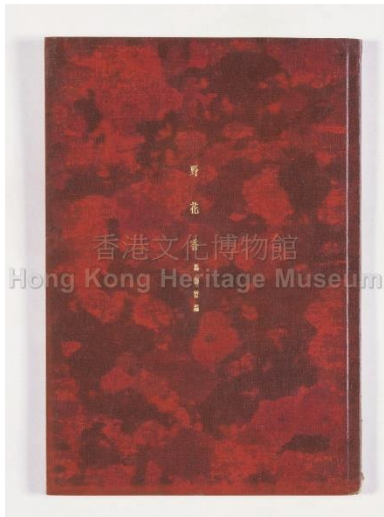
2006.49.1581



Photograph of Yuen Jim-fan, the owner of the Tai Ping Theatre and Ma Sze Tsang

1930s

2006.49.1080



Clay Print Libretto of *Scent of Wild Flowers*

Written and Performed by Ma Sze Tsang

1934

2006.49.1239



Tai Ping Theatre

1950

2006.49.1128