

**Historic Building Appraisal**  
**Former Fanling Theatre**  
**No. 1 Luen Fat Street, Fanling, N.T.**

N246

Fanling Theatre (粉嶺戲院) was the first theatre set up in the area now known as North District, New Territories of Hong Kong. When the Theatre was opened for the public in July 1953, it was named Luen Wo Theatre (聯和戲院) founded by a group of local notables. The Theatre was situated in the most bustling part of Fanling, adjacent to Luen Wo Market, then a bazaar that went into operation two years earlier in 1951. The film audience came from the nearby areas of Lung Yeuk Tau (龍躍頭), Fanling Wai (粉嶺圍), Ping Che (坪輦), Kwan Ti (軍地) and up to Sha Tau Kok Road (沙頭角公路) connecting Sha Tau Kok, Luen Wo Hui and Fanling in the New Territories. *Historical Interest*

The Theatre's debut film was a documentary of the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II (英女王伊麗莎白二世加冕) which took place at Westminster Abbey on 2 June 1953; the debut film was offered free of charge to the public. To begin with, the Theatre was unroofed, with rows of wooden seats totaling 640, and two film showings were made every evening, ticket price was \$0.7 for a front seat and \$1 for a rear seat. As the Theatre was roofless and open to the sky, the film audience had to hold umbrellas on rainy days. The residents living at upstairs in the adjacent streets, however, benefitted from watching film shows from a birds' eye-view without buying tickets.

The Theatre remained a place of entertainment for local residents since 1953. Apart from that, it also provided moments of respite to soldiers whose days were primarily spent in the tedium of lengthy cantonment. Indigenous villagers recalled that in the early post-war years, the Theatre screened movies as a kind of amusement to entertain British Army Gurkhas who were stationed in Fanling, thereby distancing themselves from their families at home. Apart from watching movies in the Theatre, some of the soldiers also attended the dancing halls around Luen Wo Market. The most locally known dancing halls at the site included, for example, The Paramount (百樂門) and Ciro (仙樂) which no longer exist.

By 1959, Luen Wo Theatre was taken over by Asia Film Enterprise (亞洲影業公司) of famous tycoon Mr. Chiu Te Ken, Deacon (邱德根) (1924–2015) who was fondly dubbed by locals as “the king of theatres in the New Territories” (新界戲院大王). With his business partner, Ronald L.K. Chu (朱立愷), Mr. Chiu upgraded the original theatre with modern facilities and increased the seating capacity to more than 800. After the upgrading works, it was renamed Fanling Theatre. The re-opening ceremony on 11 September 1959 was officiated by Acting Assistant District Commissioner, New Territories, Mr.

Denis Campbell Bray (黎敦義) and a Chinese notable, Mr. Ho Chuen Yiu, J.P. (何傳耀) in the company of famous artists such as Bai Guang (白光), Ng Kwan Lai (吳君麗), Patricia Lam Fung (林鳳) and Yim Chun (嚴俊).

The upgraded theatre was an entertainer of the masses during the 1960s when it screened both foreign films and domestic productions. At the time, it was also granted the right to screen first-run Shaw Brothers' films. A 'kaifong' of the area recalls that there were times when the line-ups to purchase tickets were long, say, when good-selling movies went on-screen. But in 1967 Hong Kong saw cases of bomb terrorism inspired by the chaos over the border. Newspaper records for 1967 show that a bomb exploded at Fanling Theatre screen on November 15th, but caused no injuries. When the blast occurred at 8 pm on the day, the people in the Theatre were shaken up by the flames and thick palls of smoke.

In more recent decades, Fanling Theatre was no longer as popular as it was before, partly because home visual entertainment was becoming more popular, partly because no more effort was expended to maintain/upgrade the facilities of the theatre, a 'kaifong' of the area told us. The 'kaifong' said the Theatre had been struggling to survive for many years until it finally closed its doors for the last time on 6 January 2010, and has been empty since then.

Architecturally, Fanling Theatre is a reinforced concrete framed structure designed in a functional manner, which is in line with the purpose of a theatre in the 1950s. It is a single storey, double height building. It stands at an elongated open space alongside the low-rise Fanling Rural Affairs Committee which gives the theatre a prominent location as a central point of attention. It was constructed for the sole purpose as a theatre. It is a utilitarian structure with minimal ornamentation. Externally, the plain rendered walls of the four sides of the theatre are made of concrete to support the pitched roof made of corrugated sheets. A general survey by visual means shows that the overall exterior finishes are quite acceptable and in fair condition. Those defects found were mainly caused by pollution from the nearby environ over the years and lack of regular maintenance.

**Architectural  
Merit**

The interior layout of the theatre was designed based on functional requirements. The auditorium is divided into two (No. 1 and No. 2) of equal size. Internal access was not allowed during site-inspection in March 2015, but it is known that the seats were dismantled after its closure in 2010. At the ground floor there are the entrance foyer and box office. Two doors, one at the left and another at the right, lead to the auditoriums. The north section has a flat roof double height structure with a staircase leading to the toilet at the first floor.

Post-war public cinemas of this kind are becoming rare in Hong Kong, due to structural changes in the market. As the 1990s progressed, the boom in property prices spelt the end of big cinema halls; the exhibitions sector streamlined its operations by demolishing old-fashioned cinema halls and replacing them with mini-theatres in multiplexes. The Theatre, then, is a thing of the past being a reminder of Hong Kong's once vibrant and prosperous cinema halls.

**Rarity,  
Built Heritage  
Value &  
Authenticity**

Fanling Theatre is a source of much folklore. Over the past 60 years, it has witnessed some of the historic and momentous occasions. After the upgrading work of 1959, the Theatre acquired its present appearance and has unconsciously been recognized by the local community for its distinguished identity near Luen Wo Market. Alterations to the 1959 theatre building are not much in evidence afterwards and it retains much of architectural authenticity as a post-war theatre.

The Theatre's function to provide a space for amusement is to some extent a testimony of the lives of indigenous villagers and British Army Gurkhas in the historical past. Many residents at Luen Wo Market, Fanling and even the areas further north shared the memory of enjoying movies in this theatre, so it is quite an item of local interest. Furthermore, the Theatre was used for a brief scene in TVB's period drama series "The Charm Beneath" (胭脂水粉) broadcast in 2005, which pressed out with a majority of positive reviews.

**Social Value  
and Local  
Interest**

The Theatre is close to a number of early post-WW2 historic buildings, for example, Fanling Magistracy (粉嶺裁判法院) (Grade 3), St. Joseph's Church (聖約瑟堂) (Grade 3) and Luen Wo Market (聯和市場) (Grade 3). On the aspect showing Chinese tradition, there is Pang Ancestral Hall at Fanling Wai (粉嶺圍彭氏宗祠) (Grade 1).

**Group Value**

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**Historic Building Appraisal**  
**Former Peng Chau Theatre,**  
**Peng Chau, N.T.**

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Peng Chau Theatre (坪洲戲院) has ceased operation since the late 1980s. It was founded by Far East Consortium International Limited (遠東發展有限公司) owned by famous tycoon Mr Chiu Te Ken, Deacon (邱德根) (1924–2015) who himself took considerable pride in having had a finger in Hong Kong’s entertainment business. The Theatre was the only motion picture theatre on the island of Peng Chau during the time of its operation from the 1970s to the late 1980s. A local resident recalls that the Theatre had a seating capacity of nearly 500 shortly before its closure, playing one or two shows daily in the evening.

*Historical  
Interest*

The modern history of Peng Chau dates back to about 300 years. Having a natural typhoon shelter for boats and junks, Peng Chau was first mainly inhabited by fisherfolk. Farmers moved in later to set up village settlement. After the onset of Japan’s all-out attack on China in July 1937, industrialists poured in to set up factories for the production of match (火柴), leather (皮革) and lime (石灰), making industry an important part of the economy of the island. There emerged salaried employees who took up factory jobs for their living as different from the local fisherfolk who depended on the sea.

Against the background of industrial development and population growth in the early post-World War II period, there was a rising need of entertainment. In the early 1950s, before the subject theatre went into operation, another small unlicensed theatre (which no longer exists) had once stood at No. 3 Chi Yuen Lane (志園巷). In the 1960s, there was yet another small theatre (which also no longer exists) near the southern end of Wing On Street (永安街) (currently the location of CLP Peng Chau Quarters & Sub-station) which was an open-air theatre giving two evening shows each day and accommodate several dozens of movie goers each time, but this 1960s theatre was rather short-lived.

The Peng Chau Theatre set up by Mr Chiu Te Ken, Deacon (邱德根) emerged in 1978 as a kind of amusement to entertain the public. Its inaugural day on the eve of Lunar New Year (on 6 February 1978) was officiated by Acting Secretary for the New Territories, Mr J. R. Todd (杜迪), accompanied by personnel of the movie industry such as screenwriter Chung Kuo-jen (鍾國仁) and artists Chow Lai-kuen (周麗娟), Hon Kwok-choi (韓國才), Lau Dan (劉丹), Cheng Chi-ying (鄭麒鷹) and Cheng Lei (鄭雷). The film which debuted in the Peng Chau Theatre on the day was “Gang of Four” (四二八) cast by these artists.

Over the years, Peng Chau Theatre targeted at the local community mainly consisted of farmers, fisherfolk and workers on the island. It was opened for the public in the 1970s when the Hong Kong film industry advanced in a spirit of optimism, before the pervasive spread of in-home visual entertainment. The decline of Peng Chau's industry led to the dropping of movie-goers and box office receipts. The Theatre was finally closed in the late 1980s. Nowadays part of G/F and 1/F are used as a warehouse, a karaoke bar and several residential flats, but the auditorium and the lobby have been left vacant since its closure.

Peng Chau Theatre is a reinforced concrete block type building of the 1970s. *Architectural Merit*  
It was built together with the adjacent Far East Consortium Peng Chau Building (遠東發展坪洲大廈) at its east which accommodated shops at G/F and eight flats at each of the 1/F to 5/F. The front façade of the theatre faces south. For the Theatre, the G/F is the lobby which has two booking offices. Two staircases lead up to the rear part of the auditorium, one at eastern side and another at western side, with restrooms at the middle of the staircases. There are another staircase at the front of the auditorium leading to the G/F.

The Theatre is basically a rectangular box and rather Spartan in appearance. The design is obviously modern. The architectural features on the main front façade consist of a wide horizontal cornice or fascia above the G/F shops, and an inverted L-shaped window feature which partially frames a large rectangular wall space for advertising. There is a wide horizontal space above the windows for the cinema's name in English lettering, and a long vertical space at the side of the windows for the cinema's name in Chinese characters. The façade appears to be rendered and painted. The other facades are basically plain walls punctuated with doors and windows at G/F level.

Internally, the foyer or booking hall has a screed floor, mosaic tile clad walls and columns, and painted beams and ceiling. The auditorium is rather dingy with rows of plastic seats facing the raised stage and screen. The toilets are just basic facilities with white glazed tiled walls. The projection room still has the old projectors and other equipments in place but nothing further of interest. The shop spaces on the G/F are fitted with metal roller shutters and grilles but do not appear to be occupied. A tatty notice board and a jumble of bicycles adds to the depressing scene.

There is no denying that post-war public cinemas of this kind are becoming *Rarity, Built Heritage Value &*  
rare in Hong Kong, due to macroeconomic structural changes in the market. As the 1990s progressed, the boom in property prices spelt the end of big cinema

halls; the exhibitions sector began to streamline its operations by demolishing old-fashioned cinema halls and replacing them with mini-theatres in multiplexes. Peng Chau Theatre, then, is a thing of the past. It is also a reminder that theatre entertainment was once a thriving business. *Authenticity*

The construction style of Peng Chau Theatre was that of a common one for theatre for that period, and its scale cannot be comparable with the other early post-war cinemas in the urban areas, such as Paris Theatre (麗宮戲院) in San Po Kung which could accommodate 3,000 people. However, it had recreational, cultural and leisure significance to the local community. As it has been left vacant since its closure, no major renovation was done and its architectural authenticity is largely kept.

Peng Chau Theatre is not an architecturally aesthetic building and not of high architectural merits, but it has social value and local interest as a place of entertainment for the local community on the island. It operated for about one decade from late 1970s to late 1980s when Hong Kong cinema was at the last phase of a golden peak. At a time when there was not much choice of leisure activities on the island, it provided the islanders with a means of entertainment. *Social Value & Local Interest*

This building is within a walking distance with a number of other historic buildings, such as the Tin Hau Temple at Peng Chau Wing On Street (天后宮) (Grade 2), Peng Chau Chi Yan Public School (坪洲志仁公立學校) (Grade 2) and the Stone House at Peng Chau Wing On Street (坪洲永安街石屋) (Grade 3) *Group Value*

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