

## **Yue Hwa Building**

*One of Chinatown's most iconic buildings once housed a hotel, restaurant, café and cabaret in its early days.*

Built in 1927 by Swan and Maclaren, the Nam Tin Building (meaning “Southern sky” in Cantonese; 南天大廈) at the time stood along Chinatown’s main tributary, Eu Tong Sen Street. At six storeys high, it was then the tallest building in Chinatown. With Art Deco all the rage then as an architectural trend, the Nam Tin Building with its featured steel frame windows with metal railings and grills was considered a fashionable fixture.

## **Great Southern Hotel**

Owned by Lum Chang Holdings, the building was let out to several tenants, chief of which was the Great Southern Hotel, which took up six storeys and was Singapore’s first Chinese hotel with a lift (operated using a pulley system, and had a collapsible gate). Other well-known tenants included the popular Nam Tin Restaurant on the fourth floor, a café on the roof terrace and the fifth-floor cabaret that was frequented by Chinese businessmen and tourists.

Nam Tin Building’s location next to the newly-opened Tian Yan Theatre (renamed Majestic Theatre after the war) no doubt added to its glamour and allure as renowned Cantonese opera stars would perform at the latter.

The Cantonese-owned and operated Great Southern Hotel catered more to Chinese travellers, including celebrities from Hong Kong and China. This was unlike the upmarket hotels of the time, including Raffles Hotel, Goodwood Park Hotel and Adelphi Hotel which then accommodated mainly Europeans and English-speaking visitors. As a boutique hotel with shops and entertainment outlets for rich Chinese immigrants, the Great Southern Hotel was considered the “Raffles Hotel of Chinatown”.

Each room at the hotel had its own ensuite shower and toilet. It had a grand and spacious feel, owing to a 4m-high ceiling and cast iron casement windows, which let in plenty of natural light.

## **Golden Era**

In the 1940s, the hotel attracted much of Chinese high society, owing largely to its famed nightclub, the Southern Cabaret, also known as the Diamond Dragon Dance Palace.

With an interior that cost some \$50,000 to fit out, it featured “dragon pillars studded with cut glass” and “beautifully coloured carvings of birds and animals of Chinese mythology” on its walls, according to a Straits Times article which reported on the official opening of the club in 1948. In the centre was a “rotating multi-coloured lamp, especially imported from America”. Constructed under the supervision of Miss Leong Sai Chan, a former Shanghai movie star, the cabaret was said to be an imitation of China's famed Peking palace.

Dance hostesses dressed in cheongsams with thigh-high slits were hired to greet and accompany guests. These girls were called “taxi dancers”, because like taxis, they could be hired for dances. The going rate was \$1 for three dances.

Within its walls, the well-heeled sipped the finest liquor, smoked handcrafted opium pipes and danced the night away with the taxi girls.

However, there were rumours of unsavoury activities such as prostitution. When the hotel applied for a renewal of its licence for 1961, it was not approved by the police. The reason given was that the hotel was used for “immoral purposes”. The hotel eventually reopened in 1962 when its application for a new licence was finally approved.

Great Southern Hotel also provided other services such as the remittance of money to China, booking steamer tickets, transferring of luggage and other travel requirements.

Overall, the building and its tenants were such an anchoring presence in the area that Eu Tong Sen street was colloquially known as 南天前, or, “in front of Nam Tin”.

### **A New Era**

As Singapore’s hospitality industry developed and travellers became more sophisticated, other more modern hotels began to gain favour. By the time it closed in 1994, the Great Southern Hotel was operating only 40 rooms, with each room, furnished with a double-bed and ceiling fan, going for \$40 a night.

This came a year after Lum Chang Holdings sold the building to Hong Kong businessman Yu Kwok Chun in 1993. Yu was the head of a multinational business empire, Yue Hwa Chinese Products Emporium. Yu had established Yue Hwa in Hong Kong in 1959 and grown it to a leading retail group offering a diversified range of Chinese products such as ginseng, cordyceps, Chinese tea, embroidery, silk and brocades, in addition to simple daily necessities.

As the building had already been gazetted for conservation, the façade was retained in the \$25 million renovation and restoration process. Features such as an atrium and waterfall were added to the interior, which was also reconfigured with a more open layout suitable for a department store. A three-storey extension was added at the rear.

The building was renamed Yue Hwa Building and the Yue Hwa Chinese Products department store was opened in October 1996. Here, Singaporeans and tourists looking for unusual Oriental products and gifts will find unique candies and sweets, Hong Kong snacks, antique furniture, traditional Chinese apparel, Oriental ornaments and traditional Chinese medicines among others. The building was awarded the 1997 URA Heritage Award for its restoration work.

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