



INTRODUCTION

I don't really remember what caused me to make a wrong turn down that hitherto unknown street in Chiang Mai back in November 2007. Simple curiosity, I guess. Wanderlust, maybe. From the corner of my eye I glimpsed a rust-streaked movie marquee perched above the road. The sight of it piqued my curiosity, leading me to stray even further from my original destination. A quick turn off the main road brought me into a steamy wet market, at the far end of which stood the Tippanetr theatre, then one of the city's last standalone movie theatres.

Prior to that, I hadn't given much thought to the legacy of movie-going in Chiang Mai. I naively figured that movie theatres had come with the development of shopping malls, an assumption which precluded the 700-year-old city from ever having known the majesty of a downtown movie palace or the down-home intimacy of a neighbourhood theatre. But standing before me was an example of the former, its paint-chipped modernist facade overlooking a bustling bazaar in a gritty corner of town.

With the Tippanetr, a whole new facet of Chiang Mai's social history appeared before me; a world which – to my foreign eyes – seemed more authentic, more human than the plastic shopping mall multiplexes ever had. Indeed, the contrast between the two movie theatre worlds was stark. The multiplexes confined within shopping malls had always felt cheap and antiseptic; cutting edge as far as comfort and technology were concerned, but otherwise devoid of any character. The Tippanetr, on the other hand, even in all its faded grandeur, was the embodiment of character. I made a mental note to come back and catch a film at this ageing standalone, vaguely hoping it would become my new go-to movie sanctuary. But those aspirations were crushed a few months later when I returned to discover a rubble-strewn lot where the Tippanetr once stood.

That act of destruction became the genesis of this book. If the Tippanetr's loss reflected the state of standalone movie theatres across Thailand, then these buildings needed to be documented while they were still around. In the back of my mind were memories



The Tippanetr Rama theatre, 1990
(courtesy Philippe Doro).

Opposite: The auditorium of the Sala Chalerms
Krung theatre, Bangkok, circa 1950s.
(courtesy Paisarn Piemmettawat).