

DATO' LOKE WAN THO

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HOW often does one find a poetry-loving film and cinema magnate, philanthropist, respected ornithologist and shutterbug all rolled in one? One such unlikely individual was born to a famous millionaire father, went to the Victoria Institution (VI) back in the twenties and owned a company that was a famous brand name to the moviegoers of the fifties and sixties. Loke Wan Tho was born on 14th June 1915, the ninth of eleven children of Towkay Loke Yew, one of the founders of the school. His father, a self-made millionaire and household name in Malaya at that time, died when he was not yet three. Wan Tho's education was at the old V.I., at the original building in High Street. By the time he was thirteen, while still in school, Wan Tho was already, through his trustees, head of the Loke family. The exact year when he joined the VI is not known but a reasonable guess would be 1922, the final year of the School's first headmaster, Mr B E Shaw. Not much is known of his VI activities except that Wan Tho was a Patrol Leader in the Scouts and it is recorded that he was on duty one March afternoon in 1929 when the present VI building was opened amidst great pomp and ceremony.

For reasons of his delicate health he left the VI in the early thirties to study at Chillon College, an English school, in Montreux, Switzerland. His health obviously took a turn for the better in the cool mountain climate for he became Chillon's *Victor Ludorum* and captain of the school soccer eleven! He was also the 1932 long

jump champion of the Swiss county of Vaud. His jump record stood for at least 30 years! Dr Harold Abrahams the 1924 Olympic sprinter of *Chariots of Fire* fame was so impressed by his athletic prowess that he urged Wan Tho to take it up believing that he could make a name for himself in the athletics world. Wan Tho had made it to the Vaud athletics team when a broken ankle forced him to retire from athletics for good.

Meanwhile, back in Kuala Lumpur, his mother, sensing the potential of the movie industry in Malaya, had other plans for him. In 1935, the twenty-year-old Wan Tho, now in King's College, Cambridge, felt the first of many responsibilities on his young shoulders when his mother, with two others, registered him as an absentee fourth partner to found a chain of theatres called Associated Theatres Ltd. The forerunner of the Cathay empire, the new company opened the 1,200-seat Pavilion cinema in Kuala Lumpur in 1936 just as Wan Tho graduated with an Honors degree in English literature and history. He had initially expressed doubts whether these were suitable subjects for someone going into the cinema business. However, he found English literature a pleasure, and the years ahead were to dispel any doubts about his choices. Wan Tho was briefly at the London School of Economics where he won the University badminton championship in 1937 and 1938. He had been smitten after having been given a Brownie box camera when he was eight years old and it was during a long vacation in rugged South Wales that Wan Tho's interest in photography intersected with a new interest in birds. Thereafter, combining his love of literature, his photographic-ornithological expeditions also included a couple of his favourite anthologies tucked in his kit.

Studies over, Wan Tho sailed back in 1939 to Malaya to administer his new empire and to expand into Singapore. Singapore's and, for that matter, South East Asia's, tallest skyscraper of 17 storeys made its debut when Wan Tho opened



The Malayan delegation leaving for Bangkok for the signing of the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) Agreement on the Pooling of Air Services, scheduled to take place in Bangkok the following day. Dato' Loke Wan Tho, Chairman of the Board of Directors, Malayan Airways Limited is seen heading for the aircraft along with Dato' Haji Sardon bin Haji Jubir, Minister of Transport and Dr Toh Chin Chye, Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore; January 8, 1963

(Source: National Archives of Malaysia)

the Cathay Cinema complex with much pomp and fanfare. The first film shown was Zoltán Korda's *Four Feathers* on 3 October, 1939, and it revolutionized the movie-going experience as the Cathay Cinema was the first to offer its patrons a plush air-conditioned 1,300-seat auditorium with spacious seats. Wan Tho next acquired a chain of cinemas in Singapore and Malaya. One of those was the Majestic cinema in Singapore for the screening of Chinese movies.

Before long, however, war came to the region. The Cathay cinema was converted to a Red Cross casualty station in February 1942 and Wan Tho found himself an evacuee on a ship fleeing Singapore. A 500-pound Japanese bomb was dropped on his ship and Wan Tho had to fished from the sea, blinded and severely burned in the face, chest and arms. As he recalled it, he was

"a curious figure, with almost no hair on my head, protruding goldfish eyes and a baby-pink new skin" in a Jakarta hospital. He was blind for a week and eventually made his way to Bombay from Java. "Shakespeare," he recalled later, "turned out to be a gilt-edged investment after all" as Wan Tho turned to reading the bard while recuperating. "It gave me an inner clarity of vision almost totally lacking in my clouded physical sight."

In India he was introduced to the great naturalist-explorer, Salim Ali, and followed him on an expedition to the Kutch desert, which ignited a passionate dedication to the hobby that was to make Wan Tho one of the world's finest bird photographers. As recalled by Salim himself who later became his close friend and companion on many expeditions, "he soon became an exceptionally enthusiastic observer and collector of birds. His unflinching courtesy and quiet good manner, friendly disposition and capacity to mix at all levels were qualities, which made him a welcome adjunct to the field camps. Never grumbling or complaining, ever ready to share all physical hardships and deprivations, even with a show of enjoyment, he was an ideal companion. Through it all he never lost his capacity to look on the humorous side of uninspiring situations."

During the Japanese occupation, the Japanese Broadcasting Department, the Military Propaganda Department and Military Information Bureau were housed in the Wan Tho's Cathay building but the cinema continued its business under the name of *Dai Toa Gekkyo* showing Japanese propaganda films. When the British returned in 1945 to Singapore the first film that was brought in was shown at the same Cathay cinema. (It was a British propaganda film, *The Tunisian Victory*, about their success in the North African desert campaign!) Until 1946, the Cathay complex also served as the headquarters for Admiral Lord Mountbatten, South-East Asian Supreme Allied Commander.

In 1947, Loke Wan Tho returned to Singapore, reclaimed his



Photograph taken on the occasion of the opening of an exhibition of photographs organised by Dato' Loke Wan Tho (extreme right). The exhibition was declared open by His Highness the Sultan of Selangor (seen pointing) at the National Art Gallery, Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur, 11 February 1964
(Source: National Archives of Malaysia)

Cathay building and embarked on an ambitious plan to rebuild the local film industry. He signed a joint-venture partnership with J. Arthur Rank Organization and formed a company, Caravan Films, which sent mobile film units into remote rubber estates, factories and villages. Using the slogan "Cathay for Comfort", he aggressively expanded his chain of cinemas from Penang to Singapore, Thailand and Borneo. He also set up studios to make films to feed into his chain of cinemas, for, in the fifties, Malaysians were the world's most avid per capital moviegoers. In 1953, Wan Tho plunged into the making of Malay films to directly challenge his Shaw Brothers rivals who had till then cornered the market. Wan Tho partnered with the owner of Keris Films, Ho Ah Loke, to set up Cathay Keris Films to make their first Malay movie, in colour - *Buloh Perindu*. He even visited studios in India to learn firsthand how movies were made and invited Hollywood

personalities to coach his stars. In his studio system, he encouraged everyone to compete with one another, director with director, producer with producer, actor with actor, so as to bring out the best in everyone. Focusing on stories from the *Bangsawan* and Malay folklore, Cathay Keris released about 10 films a year. In 1960 it produced its first Chinese film, *The Lion City*.

Wan Tho was very much involved in setting up the film industry of Hong Kong as well. In 1949, with many of the Shanghai filmmakers moving to Hong Kong to escape the Communist takeover, Wan Tho wrote to one of them, Lee Tsu Yung, saying that he saw no reason why Chinese films could not be made in Hong Kong, and that he would welcome Lee as a partner. At first Cathay only distributed films made by Yung Hwa Motion Pictures, films like *Rose Rose I Love You*. However, in 1955 when Yung Hwa faced insurmountable financial trouble, Wan Tho had to take over the business to recover his investment. He reorganized it the following year as Motion Picture & General Investment Company (later renamed Cathay Organization (HK)). He refurbished it with the latest in sound and film equipment, instituted a proper studio system to produce quality Cantonese and Mandarin films and marketed them creatively. The first films made by Cathay that year were *Miss Kikuko* and *Three Stages of Love*. Then *Mambo Girl* became Cathay's first hit in the theatres in the region, propelling the star, Ge Lan (Grace Chang), to superstardom. *Sun, Moon, Star* was another classic that enhanced Cathay's growing film making reputation.

In the next decade or so, over 250 films were produced by Cathay and distributed widely in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asia. Many of the Hong Kong films had Hollywood style plots; characters were modern and smart. Everywhere, their glamorous stars drew the crowds and were mobbed during personal appearances. Recognition soon followed: Cathay was the

first Hong Kong studio to win a major prize at the Asian Film Festival in 1957 with Lin Dai's *Golden Lotus*. You Min's first appearance in *Her Tender Heart* earned her the Best Actress award at the sixth Asian Film Festival and, in 1958, *Our Sister Hedy* was the best film at the Asian Film Festival. Back in Malaya, Cathay Keris' *Pontianak* made Maria Menado a star. For his contribution, Wan Tho was made a Dato'.

As Wan Tho's business empire grew, public and private office was thrust on him by an appreciative public and government: pro-chancellorship of the University of Malaya, chairmanship of the Singapore Telephone Board, Malaysian Airlines, Malayan Banking and the Singapore National Library Board, and directorships of numerous companies, including those with transportation, insurance, communications, rubber and mining interests. Despite these onerous duties, Wan Tho participated in the activities of the Malayan Nature Society, the Rotary Club and the Singapore Island Country Club as well. Not to mention the Presidency of the Singapore branch of VIOBA.

Above all, he ensured that he always had time for his two passions - ornithology and photography. From the make-believe celluloid world and the man-made business jungle of Singapore and Hong Kong, he would fly away effortlessly to the world of nature. He went on expeditions to the moss forests of New Guinea to photograph birds of paradise, and to Sarawak, Cambodia, Sikkim, Kashmir and Finland, to name a few exotic locations. He became, in 1958, the first Asian member of the exclusive Reindeer Club in Lapland, located north of the Arctic Circle where endurance at subzero temperatures and wanderlust were the principal qualifications needed.

Wan Tho once devoted weeks of patient waiting to capture on film one single bird in its natural habitat and on another occasion, in the Malayan jungle, he dangled precariously with his camera in gusty wind from a 130-foot tower in order to overlook the treetop

nest of a white-bellied sea eagle. His articles and photographs were published regularly from 1945 on in the journal of the Bombay Natural History Society. He also began a tape library of Malayan bird songs to augment his extensive ornithological library at home. In 1962 he was the Malayan delegate at Seattle to the Conference of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, and the First World Conference on National Parks. His kindred affiliations included the British Ornithologists' Union, the International Council for Bird Preservation, the British Wildfowl Trust, and similar organizations in the Far East. In addition to his many awards for his bird studies, Wan Tho was also an Associate of the Royal Photographic Society and the Photographic Society of America. His collections of Chinese ceramics and books were among the best in Singapore.

And there was yet a third career for Wan Tho, that of philanthropist, like his father before him. Generous to a fault, whether he gave to state, charity or institution, to aspiring artist or struggling student, his gifts were made after careful consideration and always with a minimum of ostentation. He took pleasure in assisting scientific expeditions and other deserving causes with funds or material contributions. Libraries, art groups, national park associations and even the raising of funds to send a chess champion to international matches all claimed his attention. The VI, too, benefited from its illustrious alumnus.

Loke Wan Tho inherited great wealth, and yet his tastes were essentially simple, cultured and humanistic and his love of nature an enduring passion. He was a brilliant conversationalist and his repartee was as sudden and as sharp as that of a duelist's riposte. But, typical of the man, he never talked over the head of his audience nor talked down on them. He had known extreme hardship and suffering during the war years and perhaps that explained later unexpected gestures like sending out tea and tarpaulins for rain-sodden pickets during a union strike at one

of his own studios.

And so when Wan Tho and Datin Mavis Loke met an untimely end in an air crash in June 1964 in Taiwan where he had gone to attend the Asian Film Festival in Taipei, the loss was received with shock and disbelief throughout the region. To honour its son, the VI sent two detachments of its cadets to join the cortege in a somber two-hour procession through Kuala Lumpur streets to the family burial grounds where Loke Wan Tho was laid to rest with his father. Crowds lined the streets, three or four deep, to pay their respects. The mourners included the Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, cabinet ministers, representatives from business, the government and the diplomatic service, and film stars from Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan. At the funeral service the Methodist bishop stated that ostentation had been unknown to Wan Tho and that he had never made any man feel inferior. That Wan Tho delighted to assist and honour all who shared his interests was less note-worthy than the fact that his household servants and business employees obviously held him in great affection. Three VI cadets sounded the Last Post over the caskets of the late magnate and his wife.

What is one to make of this many-faceted, versatile individual who was at once a student of poetry and nature, a leading light of the business world with a far-flung empire that weaved celluloid dreams for the common man and yet gave away pots of his money, one so cruelly taken away at the height of his success? Summarizing his personal philosophy in his own book, *A Company of Birds*, Wan Tho wrote, "the love of books and the desire to write, a deep interest in photography, the pleasures of living in the country and visiting strange and out-of-the-way places, the taste for mild adventure – all these interests had now become fused by ornithology into a coherent pattern of personal living so that now, in my own humble fashion, I follow in the footsteps of those great artists of China who make the country-

side and the birds a vehicle for their self-expression.”

Perhaps the Bard of Avon, whom he enjoyed so much, best sums him up:

*O good old man, how well in thee appears
The constant service of the antique world,
When service sweat for duty, not for meed!
Thou art not for the fashion of these times,
Where none will sweat but for promotion,
And having that, do choke their service up
Even with the having: it is not so with thee.*

(The above article was lifted from the Victoria Institution website (<http://viweb.freehosting.net/lokeWT.htm>) which is dedicated to the dissemination of information on the history of the Institution and its alumni.)