

Biographical Notes

Loke Wan Tho (14 June 1915 – 20 June 1964) - Businessman

During his lifetime, Loke Wan Tho was well-known as a film magnate, passionate ornithologist and photographer.

The youngest son of businessman Loke Yew (1845-1917),¹ Loke was born on 14 June 1915 to Loke senior and his fourth wife, Loke Cheng-Kim (1895-1981).² He was two years old when his father died.³

Loke received his primary education at home from a governess, and only started attending school when he was 12 years old.⁴ He studied at the Victoria Institution in Kuala Lumpur for only a year before Loke's family moved to Switzerland when he was 14 years old on account of his poor health.⁵ He studied at Chillon College, Montreux (1929-1933) and went on to read English Literature and History at King's College, Cambridge. After he graduated in 1936, Loke attended the London School of Economics for a year.⁶ In 1940, Loke returned to Singapore to work in the family's film business – the Associated Theatres – which his mother had established in 1935.⁷

When the Japanese troops invaded Singapore in 1942, Loke evacuated to Indonesia. But he was severely injured when the ship he was on was bombed by Japanese aircraft. He then spent a period of recuperation in Jakarta but managed to escape to India before the Japanese troops overran Indonesia. It was in India that Loke further developed his passion for ornithology when he befriended renowned ornithologist, Salim Ali.⁸

Loke returned to Singapore after the war. Between 1947 and the 1950s, Loke oversaw the expansion of the family's film business. He bought over chains of theatres in Penang and Singapore, and even set up a fleet of mobile film units that travelled throughout Peninsular Malaya to screen movies.⁹ By the late 1950s, Loke had also established Cathay-Keris (Singapore) film studios and took over Yung Hwa Studios in Hong Kong.¹⁰ The cinemas, film studios and film distribution arm were run as Cathay Organisation from 1959.¹¹

Besides cinemas and film studios, Loke's business holdings also included hotels and rubber plantations.¹² Loke was Chairman of Malayan Airways (1959 – 1964), National Library (1960-1964), director of Malayan Banking (Maybank) of which he was a founder,¹³ among others.

¹ "Towkay Loke Yew dead", *The Straits Times*, 24 January 1917, p. 9.

² "Family tree", *Loke Wan Tho private papers*, ISEAS library, LWT 010_014; "About Loke Cheng-Kim", *Loke Foundation website*, retrieved from https://www.lokefoundation.com.sg/#wrapper_page2

³ "Correspondence dated 16 July 1956", *Loke Wan Tho private papers*, ISEAS library, LWT 010_007.

⁴ "Behind the veil of vast wealth lies an artistic, lonely man with a sense of humour", *The Singapore Free Press*, 25 November 1960.

⁵ "Behind the veil of vast wealth lies an artistic, lonely man with a sense of humour", *The Singapore Free Press*, 25 November 1960; Lim Kay Tong, *Cathay: 55 years of cinema*, Singapore: Landmark Books Pte Ltd for Meileen Choo (1991), p. 12.

⁶ Lim, *Cathay: 55 years of cinema*, p. 12.

⁷ Lim, *Cathay: 55 years of cinema*, pp. 14-15.

⁸ Lim, *Cathay: 55 years of cinema*, p. 16.

⁹ Lim, *Cathay: 55 years of cinema*, p. 22.

¹⁰ Lim, *Cathay: 55 years of cinema*, p. 27.

¹¹ Lim, *Cathay: 55 years of cinema*, p. 22.

¹² "Behind the veil of vast wealth lies an artistic, lonely man with a sense of humour", *The Singapore Free Press*, 25 November 1960; Lim, *Cathay: 55 years of cinema*, p. 6.

¹³ "Mainly people", *The Singapore Free Press*, 17 September 1959; "Loke is library chairman", *The Straits Times*, 17 December 1960; Lim, *Cathay: 55 years of cinema* p. 6; Edmund Terence Gomez, *Chinese business in Malaysia: accumulation, accommodation and ascendance*, Surrey: Curzon Press (1999), p. 77.

Loke was a keen photographer and ornithologist. He kept meticulous records of his numerous bird watching and photographing expeditions in the 1940s and 1950s. These included expeditions to Kutch (1943, 1944), Kashmir (1951), New Guinea (1952), Sikkim (1955), Bharatpur (1957), Cambodia-Thailand-India (1957) and Vedan Thangal (1957).¹⁴

Loke's bird photographs, with his ornithological notes, were published as *A company of birds* in 1958.¹⁵ Loke's photographs of tribal people and that of the ruins at Angkor (Cambodia) were published in the *Illustrated London News*.¹⁶

In June 1964, Loke died in an air crash as the plane took off from Taichung city. He was in Taiwan with a delegation from Cathay to attend the 11th Asian Film Festival. His third wife, Mavis, also died in that crash. Loke's body was cremated in Taipei and his remains were brought back to Kuala Lumpur and interred at the family burial ground.¹⁷ Loke had no children from his three marriages.¹⁸

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¹⁴ *Loke Wan Tho private papers*, ISEAS library.

¹⁵ Loke Wan Tho, *A company of birds*, London: M. Joseph, (1958).

¹⁶ "In the remote Baram River district of Sarawak, Borneo: wild dances by pagan tribesmen", *The Illustrated London News*, pp. 1152-1153. Loke Wan Tho private papers, ISEAS Library, LWT 010_001; *Illustrated London News*, 15 October 1955, pp. 657-660; Loke Wan Tho private papers. ISEAS Library, LWT 010_002.

¹⁷ "Dato Loke and wife die in air disaster", *The Straits Times*, 21 June 1964, p. 1; Lim, *Cathay: 55 years of cinema*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁸ "Family tree", *Loke Wan Tho private papers*, ISEAS library, LWT 010_014.