

CATHAY RISING

The story of
Loke Wan Tho and the
Cathay Organisation



BKSTS member and cinema architect Bill Chew reports and draws parallels with the founder of the Odeon chain

On a recent trip to the Far East to carry out research into independent Asian cinema I found time to visit The Cathay Gallery in Singapore which is dedicated to the memory of one of the region's early cinema moguls, Dato Loke Wan Tho and his family .

Mention the name Loke Wan Tho and The Cathay Organisation and one immediately thinks of the Shaw Brothers of Hong Kong (Sir Run Run Shaw and his brother Tan Sri Runme Shaw)*. However, nearer to home, the parallels with Oscar Deutsch, the founder of ODEON (believed to be an acronym for Oscar Deutsch Entertains Our Nation) are perhaps more striking and bear closer scrutiny.

Both Loke Wan Tho and Oscar Deutsch founded and expanded their cinema empires in the 1930s. Within a short space of time

both became household names. In the case of Cathay the cinemas numbered 80 at its peak. Oscar Deutsch concentrated entirely on exhibition and although there were only 26 cinemas in 1933, by 1937 the number had grown majestically to 250, with the Odeon Leicester Square as its flagship. Of course the expansion of these cinema chains was not achieved by themselves alone - partnerships were forged with like-minded business affiliates which made this accelerated and remarkable growth possible.

Cinema Pioneers

Both men were truly cinema pioneers and ahead of their times. Oscar Deutch was instrumental in bringing the idea of the 'picture palace' to Britain. Although there were other cinema circuits in the early days of the 1930s,

from the late '20s cinema design still mimicked the vaudeville halls from which they were derived. However, Deutsch was increasingly aware of the affluent middle classes and he was one of the first to employ high profile architectural practices of the time to design his cinemas.

Thus the cinema as a unique architectural form was born. The Odeon, Muswell Hill by George Coles and the Odeon Colwyn Bay by J. Cecil Clavering of Harry Weedon's office are just two examples out of many cinemas purpose-built by Oscar Deutsch which exemplified this new architectural type.

Back in the Far East in 1939 Dato Loke's ('Dato' is the equivalent of 'Sir' in Malaysia) flagship was the sumptuous 1300 seat single screen Cathay Cinema, reputed to be the first

Fig. 1 (above) Cathay Cinema, 2008 (credit - Bill Chew) Fig. 2 (below left) Dato Loke Wan Tho (credit - Cathay)
Fig. 3 (below centre) Cathay Gallery, South Pacific Poster (credit - Cathay) Fig. 4 (below right) Cathay Gallery, early Gaumont Kalee Projector (Credit - Cathay)





Fig. 5 (top) Cathay Cinema, Early Interiors (credit - Cathay) Fig. 6 (above left) Cathay Cinema, Early 1960s (credit - Cathay) Fig. 7 (above right) Cathay Restaurant Interior View (credit - Cathay) Fig. 8 (below) Mrs. Loke Yew (credit - Cathay)

public space in Singapore to be air-conditioned. The cinema was housed in the Cathay Building and when it was completed in 1939 the building was said to be Singapore's first skyscraper, then measuring 83.5m high! The architect was Frank Brewer of Swan & MacLaren, a well-known and established local firm of architects (Swan and MacLaren were also responsible for designing the famous Raffles Hotel in Singapore). Perhaps Loke Wan Tho had visited one of these picture palaces during his stay in England and had felt that Singapore and Malaya could benefit from having a purpose-built cinema too.

The cinema offered an uninterrupted view of the huge screen and boasted comfortable and wide 'armchair' seats which was new and novel at the time. The cinema comprised a stalls and circle area with a wide set of stairs leading up to the circle. The interior of the cinema auditorium was lavishly decorated with sculptured plastered walls and a fibrous plaster ceiling. The cinema foyer had black marble pillars, green tiled floors, frescoed walls and a frescoed gold ceiling.

In line with cinemas of this particular era there was also a restaurant adjacent to the cinema. Therefore the precedents for the dining facilities associated with cinemas, such as to be found in cinemas like The Electric Cinema in London (CT, Sept.2003) and as presently promoted by the Everyman Media Group in the U.K., can be found in these early cinemas. The interiors of the cinema and restaurant were designed by a Mr. Zasiipkin, of which little is unfortunately known. With such an exotic name one cannot help but make comparisons with the flamboyant Russian designer Theodore Komisarjevsky (who was at one time married to Dame Peggy Ashcroft). It was Komisarjevsky of course who gave us the wonderful atmospheric interiors of the Granada Tooting and Woolwich, amongst others! The Granada Tooting is still extant, albeit now a bingo hall.

They say behind every great man is a woman. In the case of Loke Wan Tho it was his mother, Mrs. Loke Yew. Mrs. Loke Yew had a sharp business mind herself and was very much an entrepreneur. Her influence on the young

Loke Wan Tho must have been immense. As testimony to the detailed planning made by Dato Loke and his mother in the fashioning of their burgeoning cinema chain, the Cathay Gallery houses a collection of artefacts and memorabilia featured in these buildings as well as many personal items belonging to Dato Loke and the Loke family. These items range from projectors, various types of cinema seating, samples of interior finishes to posters of the time as well as personal items. The pivotal role played by Dato Loke within the regional industry and with well-known figures in Hollywood of the time are also very evident in the displays featured in The Gallery. This is a fascinating collection of artefacts and memorabilia which illuminates the movie making and exhibition business in the Far East from the late 1930s to the early 1960s. It will be of great interest to cinema buffs everywhere and The Gallery is well worth putting on your itinerary when you next visit Singapore. The fact that all this material has remained in the family after such a long period time is quite remarkable in itself and a great credit to the dedication of the Loke family and staff of The Cathay Organisation.

Privileged Backgrounds

Both Oscar Deutsch and Loke Wan Tho came from privileged backgrounds. It is interesting to note that the enormous wealth acquired individually by both separate families had come from metals - in Oscar's Deutsch's case, his father was a Hungarian émigré who made his money in scrap metals. Loke Wan Tho's father, Mr. Loke Yew had come to Malaya from China in 1858 as a poor youth, aged 11 years, but by the time Loke Wan Tho was born, his father had amassed his fortune from tin mining (which of course together with rubber was the main 'industry' of Malaya at the time) and property.





Fig. 9 (left) Cathay Gallery, Old Projectors (credit - Cathay) Fig. 10 (centre) Cathay Gallery, Old Posters (credit - Bill Chew)
 Fig. 11 (right) Cathay Gallery, Old Projectors (credit - Cathay) Fig. 12 (below) Cathay Gallery, Local Film Stars (credit - Cathay)

Loke Wan Tho was born in 1915, the ninth child of Loke Yew. When he was two his father died. Although his early education was in Malaya, by reason of his delicate health, his mother took him and his two sisters to school in Switzerland at an early age and then on to England.

Dato Loke read English and History at King's College, Cambridge University and in 1936 graduated with an Honours degree. English literature and poetry became his steadfast companions throughout his life and he later also developed a passion for ornithology as well as a result of the influence of the famous ornithologist, Dr. Salim Ali, whom he met in India when he was evacuated there during the Second World War when the Japanese invaded Malaya.

Cinema Mogul

On his return to Malaya from England in 1936, his mother formed a company known

at the time as Associated Theatres Ltd with herself and her son as directors. The first two cinemas to be built were The Pavilion in Kuala Lumpur and The Cathay Cinema in Singapore. Partnerships were forged with local businessmen and Associated Theatres Ltd later changed its name to The Cathay Organisation in 1959. At its peak in the early 1960s The Cathay Organisation operated 80 cinemas in the region and became a household name. I remember as a schoolboy growing up in Penang in the early '60s and going to the air-conditioned Cathay Cinema in Georgetown to watch the Hollywood blockbusters such as Ben Hur in colour and CinemaScope! Thus my fascination with cinema began.

Although Dato Loke had inherited a fortune from tin mining, plantations and property from his father it was to the burgeoning cinema business that he applied his energies. As in the West, cinema had come of age in the East (with the introduction of sound and colour in

the late 1920s) and masses were flocking to the 'movies'. Hollywood films were shown in these cinemas (The Cathay opened in 1939 with Sir Alexander Korda's 'The Four Feathers') as well as locally and regionally produced Chinese and Malay films. The chain of Cathay cinemas stretched from Malaya and Singapore to Borneo and Bangkok.

To supply his cinemas with local film product, in 1953 Dato Loke and his business associate Ho Ah Loke created a purpose built film studio in Katong, Singapore – named the Cathay Keris Studio - and many classic Malay films (Pontianak, Orang Minyak, Bawang Putih Bawang Merah, Hang Tuah, amongst others) were produced from this studio. In 1955 Loke Wan Tho took over an existing studio in Hong Kong to produce Chinese films for his outlets. Cathay stars like Ge Lan, You Min, Lin Dai and Yeh Fung became household names in the region. This was well before the advent and resurgence of Asian cinema in the early 1970s beginning with the Bruce Lee 'martial arts' films produced by Raymond Chow.

With exhibition and film production finally achieved, the last segment of a vertically integrated industry to be conquered was distribution. The Cathay Organisation formed a distribution company and their films were distributed throughout the region. Cathay as a cinema brand was thus established and became extremely well known and popular.

The Cathay Organisation of which Dato Loke was Chairman also diversified into hotels and restaurants (with The Cathay Hotel and Ocean Park Hotel in Singapore and in Fiji The Grand Pacific Hotel Suva and The Cathay Hotel Lautoka as prime examples).

Renaissance Man

By all accounts, Loke Wan Tho was indeed an unusual man for his time - a 'renaissance man' one could say with interests and knowledge in a great many subjects. He was an ornithologist (he wrote a book called 'A Company of Birds'



which has now become a classic), a lover of nature long before it became fashionable to care for the environment, a sportsman who played for the love of sport rather than winning (despite his poor health he was Swiss County (Vaud) long jump champion in 1932), an art collector and patron to many young aspiring artists, a philanthropist whose gifts to individuals, State or Charities were made after careful consideration but always with a minimum of fuss or ostentation. When the Cathay chain of cinemas was well established and had attained a critical mass of its own he found time to serve on the board of directors of several well-known Malayan and Singaporean companies.

Tragic Loss

It is one of life's mysteries why the talented are taken from us so young. Oscar Deutsch died of cancer, aged 47, and the exhibition industry was 'robbed' of one of its visionaries and pioneers. Loke Wan Tho, who was at the height of his career at the time, was killed in an aeroplane crash in Taiwan in 1964. He had just turned 49 years old. The cinema industry in the East had therefore prematurely lost one

of its champions.

Fortunately the legacies of these two great men lives on in cinema today. Odeon Cinemas was sold by the Deutsch family to J. Arthur Rank and The Rank Organisation. Odeon was in the ownership of Rank for a great many years. It is now nationally one of the most successful cinema exhibitors and is owned by a firm of venture capitalists, Terra Firma. The Cathay Organisation, still family owned, (although there was a recent foray into public ownership) has grown from strength to strength. The old Cathay Building was demolished in early 2003 and the construction of the new building began in 2004 and was completed in late 2006. The new building now houses 8 state-of-the-art cinemas including The Picturehouse, a dedicated art house cinema (a rarity for Singapore), shopping complex and a huge and very upmarket residential tower.

I think Dato Loke Wan Tho and Oscar Deutsch would have been very pleased with their legacies.

Bill Chew.

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The Gallery regularly features changing exhibitions on a variety of topics related to film, photography, travel, the arts and many interests of the Loke family.

The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance provided by Jennifer Wee-Almodiel of Cathay Organisation in the preparation of this article.

* An article on the Shaw Brothers who were equally influential in cinema in the Far East at the time will have to be left for another day. There is a recent academic treatise on the Shaw Brothers by Stephanie Po-Yin Chung published by Cambridge University Press.

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This summer, Senior Projectionist Keith Shankster will be retiring after 45 years in the industry.

After an education at Wishmore Cross School in Camberley, he became a trainee projectionist at the Astor Cinema in Guildford in 1963. In 1968 he became second projectionist at the ABC Kidderminster and in 1970 took a similar post at the ABC Empire, Coventry.

Obviously not a man to hang about, he moved to the Odeon, Shirley, Birmingham in 1971, and then in 1972 became joint chief at Studio 1&2, Guildford. In 1975 he became Chief Projectionist at the ABC Horsham.

In 1985 he moved to the Regal Cinema in Cranleigh, and in 1992 became senior pro-

KEITH SHANKSTER

retires after 45 years

Well-known in the cinema business, he was the trade union representative for the Ambassadors Theatre Group in Woking, was made a life member of BECTU, and proudly proclaims that he is still an active member of the Labour party!



jectionist / technician at Odeon Guildford. In 1997 he moved to The Ambassadors Cinemas, Woking, where he has worked as senior projectionist for the last 11 years, battling cancer twice and surviving a mild heart attack.

Keith told me that during his working lifetime he has worked on the following projectors:

Super Simplex, Ross, FP20s, Westars, Cinemecanicas with 2000ft reels and 6000 ft reels with changeovers. He has used carbon arcs and xenon lamps, Westars, towers and platters and digital projectors. He tells me that he has seen a lot of changes in the last 45 years, moving from 4 or 5 people working in a box for a one screen cinema to one person running an entire cinema complex on their own. The sound systems were optical when Keith first started, developed into four track magnetic, then Dolby, and finally Dolby Digital.

Projectionists who don't consider themselves amongst the best paid of technical staff these days might be interested to know that when Keith started, he earned £5 for a 40 hour week.

CT wishes Keith a long and happy retirement, and we hope to see him at the Projectionists' Christmas Party as usual this year.

Keith at work in 1970

