

Ambassador of the middle path



The relationship between Sweden and Thailand has never been better, says Thailand's ambassador to Sweden, Dr Apichart Chinwanno. The two countries may have more in common than we think.

TEXT: CHRISTIAN VON ESSEN PHOTOS: SIMON LINDH

At the age of 18, young Apichart Chinwanno was awarded a scholarship by Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to go abroad and study in the U.K. He studied in Britain for 12 years, eventually earning a PhD in International Relations from Oxford University. Before being appointed to Ambassador of Sweden (and Finland and Estonia), Dr Chinwanno served as the Director-General of Department of East Asian affairs, which proved to be "a challenging task".

Tackling diversity seems to be a key element to Dr Chinwanno's persona. Which brings us to the interesting question: what is it exactly that makes Sweden and Thailand so fond of each other?

– I have been asking that question to many Swedish people, and the first answer is always "The Thai people", says Dr Chinwanno. Swedes mention the hospitality, friendliness and the ability to make Swedes feel welcome whenever they visit Thailand. There is an important word in Thai – "namjai" – which literally means "water flowing from the heart". Thai people always feel like giving. Then of course, Swedes appreciate Thai food, climate, scenery and culture and they are exploring more and more areas of Thailand. But there is also a Swedish word that the Ambassador recognizes in the Thai culture, and that is "lagom" – the ridiculed and untranslatable little word that defines Swedes so well.

– We call it "the middle path", but essentially it is the same thing. We don't do things in extremes, but we try to find a

middle path. This is deeply rooted in the Thailand psyche and the Buddhist tradition.

140 YEARS OF FORMAL RELATIONS

This year marks the celebration of 140 years of formal relations between the two countries. It was on the 18th of May 1868 that the Kingdom of Siam and the Kingdom of Sweden/Norway signed treaty of friendship, commerce and navigation in London. Thailand's legendary King Chulalongkorn travelled to Sweden in 1897 to meet with King Oscar II and to learn about the logging industry. The visit was quite exciting for Sweden at the time, and to this day, a road in the small town of Ragunda in northern Sweden is named "Kung Chulalongkorns väg". Now adorned by a donated Thai Pavilion, the area has evolved into a tourist attraction and an important symbol for the growing Thai population in Sweden, comprising over 20 000 people.

– King Chulalongkorn is revered in Thailand, says Dr Chinwanno. We are indebted to him. He was able to maintain the kingdom's independence in the face of colonial expansion in Southeast Asia, and he introduced far-reaching reforms and laid the foundation of modern Thailand.

ROYAL RELATIONS

The Monarchy remains the pillar of Thai culture and tradition, and the two royal families enjoy a close relationship. The

Swedish Monarch has made two state visits to Thailand during the past five years. But apart from royal relations, interaction between the two countries at the government and business levels is frequent and intense, with exchange of visits on various levels. Three years ago a "joint plan of action" was launched to enhance cooperation in areas like economics, trade, investment, education, culture, sports, defence, science and technology.

A COMMON HISTORY

During the Tsunami disaster in 2004, many Swedish victims were helped by the Thai people with food, clothes and transport to the hospitals.

– A lot of stories were told when these people got back to Sweden. The Tsunami really helped strengthen the bond between the countries, and the Swedes were quick to go back to the area as a way of repaying to the people who helped them.

Before the Tsunami 210 000 Swedes visited Thailand annually. But after the catastrophe visits have increased substantially: last year the number was 374 000 and in 2008 over 400 000 Swedes are expected to visit Thailand.

INVESTMENT LOCATION

The Ambassador points out that Thailand offers an attractive investment destination for Swedish investors, being the gateway to Southeast Asia. The World Bank survey in 2006 ranked Thailand fourth in Asia and number 18 in the world as the easiest place to do business.

– Some facts about Thailand did indeed surprise a lot of

people. For example, we are the world's number one producer of hard disk drives. We manufacture over 1.2 million cars a year and export nearly half of them. Or the fact that over 1.3 million foreign patients visit Thailand annually for medical treatment which underlines the strength of Thailand as a medical hub of Asia.

MOBILE CONSULATE

As ambassador to Sweden, Dr Chinwanno has introduced the concept of a mobile consulate, touring distant towns in Sweden to make it easier for Thais all around the country to get help with passport applications, birth registration and other consular paperwork. He has encouraged the formation of Thai associations, "to empower them and encourage self-help as people who have been here for a long time can help newcomers, and they can have fun together in traditional celebrations". A handbook written in Thai is also on its way, introducing Sweden's basic laws, regulations and cultural quirks along with useful addresses and telephone numbers.

After "three enjoyable years" he has entered his fourth and last here in Sweden. He may go back to work at the Foreign Ministry in Bangkok for two or three years, or he may be posted to another embassy.

– The diplomat's life can be difficult for people with young children who have to adapt to new environment, new friends and new schools, but it is always fascinating to learn about a new country and its culture. Sweden has been a wonderful home away from home for me and my family. #

