

Interviewing H.E. Sommai Hoontrakool
Minister of Finance and President of Thai-Japanese Association

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“Formerly I did not quite believe it. However, when I looked back, I felt that fate played an important role in one’s life, especially my own case”

Certainly, the story was never told to anyone before that the greatest aim in life of a young man before the outbreak of World War II, who later become Ministry of Finance of Thailand for so many times until it becomes hardly to recall, was to be a naval officer.

“After I had completed Mathayom 8, (high School) I thought of entering the Naval Academy. A very good friend of mine and I went together to apply for the entrance

examination. However, I had found to my regret that I could not meet the required qualifications. I felt very disappointed that I did not have a chance to sit for the examination this is because my friend who had been my class-mate came out second in the examination, Upon pondering, I was sure that if I had been allowed to take the examination, I would have come out as number five or number six. Since the candidates who had been admitted numbering over ten, I would certainly have been one among them. In those days, the entrance examination for the Naval Academy was considered the most difficult one. So, whoever could pass the examination would be considered a top-knot deserving great pride.

“Having been denied the chance to take the entrance examination, I started to feel lost. In fact, my relatives who were of my uncle’s and my elder brother’s generations were all educated in England. My father was the oldest in the family. He had a large number of younger brothers. It was he who gave them support. One of my father’s brothers who studied in England and later became famous was Phraya Srivisarvaja... As for my elder brother’s generation; two of them went to school in England because economically we were capable of meeting the expenses. However, when it came to my generation, economic depression started to hit the world economy. My father told me that it

would not be possible, given the situation we were in, to support my education abroad. I had then set my mind on entering the Naval Academy. But since I did not have the right to take the entrance examination, I then tried to look for other channels. I had learned by chance that it would not be too costly to study in Japan. From what I was told, it would cost only 50 baht a month for everything including room and board and tuition fee. So, I went over to discuss the matter appealingly with my father."

"In comparative terms, 50 baht was a lot of money when compared with the present-day standard. A fourth-grade official at that time would have a monthly salary of 20 baht. This amount would be sufficient for taking care of the family comfortably. The expenses for those who went to school in England would be around 200 baht per month."

"My elder brothers were sympathetic with my desire. So they supported me by urging my father to agree to my request. They promised that if any problem should occur, they would try to lend a helping hand with their financial support. I had thus left for Japan . . ."

"At that time I was still determined to take military science in Japan. This was because it happened to coincide with the period of the 1932 revolution. I graduated in 1934. It was indeed the era of the glory of the military profession. Most people were eyeing on military career. So was I. However, I thought I would switch from the Navy to the Army."

"I did not make any contact with anyone before departure, because at that time the Civil Service Commission was non-existent. I just packed and left. I travelled by ship. It took over ten days. The ship's name was Asahee Sanmaru. It was partly a cargo ship. There were only 3-4 cabins in the first class. Then there was the second class with a common cabin; meals were included. The ships called at various ports on its way. After Bangkok, it stopped at Saigon. It then stopped at Cam Ran Bay to load sand which was good for glass-making. It stopped there for 3-4 days."

"When the ship arrived at Japan, it stopped at Naha, then Kobe. From Kobe I continued on by train to Kyoto. The teacher had his younger brother who lived in Kyoto pick me up at the station . . . There were altogether five people in our group, three men, two women . . .

"I was put up with a family as far as Suginamiku. The couple in the family did not speak a single word of English. While I myself did not speak a single word of Japanese. I had to start picking up Japanese word by word. Later I was taught the language by a teacher with the help of a dictionary. After three months, I started to be able to communicate somewhat. Later, they started to show me how to get around. I had met my friends in the group and all of them expressed their surprise that I was not home-

sick for the past three months despite the fact that I had stayed put in one place. In fact, I was home-sick too. However, one good thing coming out of this was that my Japanese was much more advanced than those in the group.

"Finally, I took the selective examination and got admitted into Keio University. Almost all the students who passed the selected examination were Chinese. I was the only non-Chinese student. The students from Taiwan and Korea were allowed to study with the Japanese, while other nationals would be separated for they were taken as foreign students. This was a new system in the military academy. In the old system all students, Japanese and foreigners, studied together. But the Japanese had learned a lesson from the case of Chiang Kai-Shek, who was a graduate from the Japanese military academy but turned to be anti-Japanese and fought the Japanese after returned home. As a result, they had decided to separate the foreign students such as Chinese, Mongolians including me, a Thai, from the Japanese. In my view, this kind of system was useless for whatever they fed us, we had to swallow. It was like a colony. So I had decided to take economics instead. Economics, by the way, was a subject very few people in Thailand paid any attention to but in Japan then, the subject was becoming popular and I thought Keio University was strong in this field. The courses were hard. I had to take high-level mathematics and another foreign language apart from English. I chose German because at that time Germany had become a respectable country. I also had to take Chinese literature. The most difficult part was that if one failed in one subject, one would be retired. There was no such thing as repeating the class. The subject which I had found most worrisome was German. This was because I had to take one foreign language [German] from another foreign language [Japanese]. The teacher, whether out of his good intention or for other reasons, would keep pointing his finger at me asking me to stand up and do the translation, from German into Japanese. As my Japanese was still weak, to translate into German from Japanese was really quite an effort. The positive part was that I had to work harder. Apart from the above subject, I had to take Chinese literature, Chinese war strategies, Japanese literature, ancient language. My goodness... I got only a grade of C. I was overjoyed though because they were all very difficult."

"Later, I had learned that a Thai National Bank was going to be set up by the law to be enacted in B.E. 2485 (1942). I intended to come back and work for the National Bank of Thailand. I did not like to be a civil servant and tried to avoid it. I had then decided to write my thesis on the Administration of the Central Bank. Upon graduation, I strated to have practical training with the Bank of Japan for over a year. My training covered all parts of the bank. During my training there, the Japanese had been very kind to me. As it was during the war and food was scarce, there was a rationing of food. I got free meals for lunch during the time I was there, just the same as other bank employees."

"I was sent to undergo training in every unit, every section and department. It was a very good program. First I was sent to the Unit. I had to read the hardbook. After that the chief of the Unit would come to sit by me. He would point out to me the flow of work coming to the chief and told me how to handle them; what topics and what issues to attend to. After the Unit, the chief of Section would then come along for the same purpose. Then came the chief of the Department. When I had completed my training for one Department and was scheduled to move to a different Department, there would be a farewell party for me as if I was departing the bank. At first, I intended to have training in the bank's branches in other cities too. The idea was to have a chance to go sight-seeing because for all the times I was in school, I never had a chance to go sight-seeing because I had to work hard for my examination. I also did not have much money to travel around. Nevertheless, the war was getting expanded. As a result, I did not go anywhere . . ."

"Throughout the light years in school, my concentration was on studies. It can be said that ever since I left Thailand for Japan until my departure for home, I had been living a life of a scholar."

"When I came back to Thailand, I was 25 years of age, holding an M.A. in economics from Keio University of Tokyo as evidence of my training. But as for capability, I had yet to show by performance. I started my first job at the Bank of Thailand. It could be said that this was the early phase of the establishment of the bank. I worked at the bank until B.E. 2498 (1955) totalling 12 years. My last position there was Director of Domestic Banking Department. After that I was appointed Governor of Yanhee Electricity Authority. I was Director who served as an assistant to the Governor of the Bank of Thailand before becoming Director and General Manager of Siam Commercial Bank Ltd. I was appointed Deputy Minister of Finance for the first time in B.E. 2515 (1972). This is the 5th time now I have had the opportunity to work in the Ministry of Finance."

"As an former student of Japan, I would like to work toward betterment or relations between the two countries."

"At first, I had done my part in helping the Association. When Chao Khun Mahai (Phraya Mahai Sobutsiri) was President, I was a committee member. After Chao Khun Mahai passed away, both the Thai and Japanese committee members voted for me to become the President so that there would be continuity of the activities which had been started. It so happened that was the time I was working for the private sector and was not terribly busy. So I accepted the nomination. I thought I would be able to lend a helping hand for the Association because I have come to know a few people, both Thai and Japanese in the business circles."

"The first thing I have tried to do, which has not yet been very successful, was to bring about a better understanding between the Japanese and the Thai especially on the life story of Yamada Nagamasa who was known among the Thai as Ookya Sinapimuk. The Japanese had their version of Yamada. It was rather convincing because it was substantiated by evidence of Westerners who resided in Ayuthaya at that time. There were also Japanese documents. The Thai also wrote about Yamada . . . It was probably there was a change of reign. That was, Yamada gained the trust of the King. He was appointed to a high position by the King. When there was a change of reign, there might be suspicion and distrust because he was influential and commanded a large number of followers . . . He was eventually sent to Nakhon Si Thammarat. What happened was the event at this period was still controversial. So, I thought something should be done. My view is that whether it was about the Japanese village during the Ayuthaya period or about other matter, they were rather delicate issues. So, the Association had a policy of not trying to glorify or eulogize individuals. It was thought that it was high time history was reviewed. As it was the period which had long passed and no person would be directly affected, I had then asked Professor Rong Sayamanont to review the history of Thai-Japanese relations. This was to be done by taking evidence from the Thai, the Japanese, the Dutch and the Portuguese in order to ascertain the truth. I have done this by making my request through the Royal Academy. Professor Rong had been working strenuously on the subject. It was a pity he was too busy. It was, however, almost completed."

As an old student of Japan and as Minister of Finance, Mr. Sommai Hoontrakool expressed the following view on Thai-Japan relations.

"I think the relationship between Japan and Thailand will progressively improve. I have often told my Japanese friends that, the feeling and their relations with other countries have been good. There have been very few cases of" rupture of relationship. "For the 600 years of relations with Thailand, there were very few cases of bad relations. Even during Word War II, the Japanese, despite their presence in Thailand, did not come to occupy the country. So, I do not think there should be any problem either on the level of country to country relations or individual to individual relations. The overall relations will become in both the spiritual and material aspects. As Japan has been making progress in various aspects, Japan can, through its acheivement, render support and assistance to a good friend like Thailand."

"I have discussed the matter with high level Japanese. I have told them that in fact there have been very few real problems between Thai-Japanese between Thai-Japanese relations except the fundamental problem of trade imbalance. If this problem is solved, there will not be any other major problem then. As for bringing about a solution to this problem, Japan has been in the process of trying to do its part. We also try our part in

a friendly manner. However, I feel that the problem of trade imbalance still remains serious the problem cannot be solved by depending on agricultural produce. We have been discussing about our natural energy. If Japan agrees to buy a substantive amount, the trade imbalance problem may be mitigated. We are in the process of negotiation."

No one will deny that the 65-year-old Minister of Finance who does not even look as old as reaching the retiring age (60), has been trying to help the country out of its debt owned to foreign countries especially to Japan, a country from where he was educated.

And no one will deny that all these efforts are not for his own interest. The ministerial posts have never come to him because he has asked for them but instead he had to take them especially when the economy of the country was not in its best shape. Such is the situation he had been in and thus came this remark.

"I feel like it is an expiation. If it is the case, I have to endure it"

May be this is the fate that his Excellency has mentioned.

The above is a part of the interview of His Excellency Sommai Hoontrakool on July 2, 1983. The interview took almost two hours. It was going on informally as if I was talking with a senior relative. There were other interesting details which were not published here. I hope to have all the other interesting aspects published in the future. I would like to express here my gratitude for the invaluable time His Excellency kindly spared for me. I would also like to express my congratulations to His Excellency for being decorated Knight Grand Commander (First class) of the Most Illustrious of Chulachom Klao by His Majesty the King.