

Like Throwing a Thirsty Man Into a Well

The first four of the scholarship holders supported by Credit Suisse in South-east Asia received their university degrees in the spring of 2010, in cooperation with the charity Child's Dream. One of them was Mehm Hong Da. Here, he describes for the first time the changes brought about by his stay abroad. It's the story of a great dream.



Mehm Hong Da: "I was always well prepared for the exams. I wanted to prove that I was worthy of the scholarship."

"In the icy cold of winter, the golden barnacle goose spreads its wings and flies from the safety of the jungle before its enemy." Those are the opening lines of a popular folk song in my native language. Peace, justice and freedom are concepts that my people, from the first to the fourth generation, can only dream about. Before I came to Thailand, fleeing had been as much a part of my life as water to a river. To get any chance of an education, I've lived in more than 20 different places since childhood. So you'll understand, I haven't got a favorite place. I consider education to be the greatest possible way of escaping poverty and dependency. Satisfying my personal desires is not my primary goal; in Asia a sense of community is paramount. The well-being of the individual depends on the well-being of the community. Acquiring knowledge should above all serve the entire community.

When I applied for the high school diploma program with a local charity in 2004, I was

very excited. Would I make it? Would they choose me? I knew that they had received a lot of applications during the short submission period.

Receiving final notice of acceptance was the biggest turning point for me and – together with my later acceptance into the university scholarship program – the happiest day of my life. What a unique opportunity! I was able to exchange the axes and saws of my plantation life for ballpoint pens and computers. I could grow to be a big tree with strong roots that one day could offer shelter to many birds. I was prepared to give up everything for this: to take the risk of leaving my country, and not being able to see my family for several years.

The most wonderful thing for me when I arrived in Chiang Mai was that going to school was not dangerous. And all the books! It was like throwing a man dying of thirst into a well. There's no other way to describe it. While I was studying for my high school

diploma I met my wife, who also held a scholarship. After graduating, we both applied to study communications in Bangkok. I had to compose a personal biography for the application. That was the hardest part for me.

Once I arrived in Bangkok I was constantly amazed. Everything was new to me: the big city, the modern buildings, the traffic. A lot of work awaited me. As I stepped through the doors of the university, in my mind I spoke to my father, saying: "Your son is attending an international university. He's a real man now. You can be proud of yourself, father."

The biggest challenge in Bangkok was finding an apartment. Being on a scholarship, I had to watch my budget carefully. The rent couldn't be too high. But the biggest obstacle was my background. Many landlords had apparently had some bad experiences with people from my country*; it didn't even help for me to show my passport to prove that I was not an illegal immigrant.

My first apartment was a dark, dank, narrow hole. With the help of an agent I was fortunately able to find a better place to stay six months later. The second-biggest challenge was the language. The house owners spoke only Thai and didn't understand English. After a year had passed, however, my Thai got good enough for that problem to disappear. Thanks to my years of experience as a teacher, I soon adjusted to everyday life as a student and was able to organize myself. I made sure I was always well prepared for the exams. I wanted to prove that I was worthy of the scholarship. There were other students from my country there, too. It's our custom for the experienced ones to help the newcomers, and people were gener-

Studies Thanks to Financial Support From the Child's Dream Organization

Founded in 2003 by Daniel Siegfried and Marc Jenni of Switzerland, the charitable organization Child's Dream supports disadvantaged children in the Mekong subregion. As the organization became more active, it became aware of increasingly more complex problems that affected entire communities. For this reason, in 2006 Siegfried und Jenni established a sister organization called the diversethics Foundation. Since then the two organizations have been collaborating closely on projects throughout the region. With their assistance, 90 talented young people are now studying at universities in Thailand and Hong Kong. In addition, 380 students are being taught in the organization's own secondary schools in refugee camps.

<http://childsdream.org/projects/higher-education/university-scholarship-programme-ssp/>

ous with their helpfulness and solidarity. I also got to know students from the US, Poland and Mexico.

Sports were also offered at the university. I went for tennis lessons, but only once a week. I never went to the movies or to a night club, as other international students regularly did. Cinema tickets cost four dollars, which is a lot of money for me. I would have had to take it out of my grocery money, and I didn't want to do that. In any case, I could watch films from the Internet on my laptop.

On Sundays, I used to teach English to other students from my country. Sometimes we'd translate song lyrics. Some of my favorite songs in English are "My Heart Will Go On" by Celine Dion and "Wind of Change" by the Scorpions, which evokes the fall of the Berlin Wall in Germany in 1989.

This spring I received my B.A. in communications with top grades. I'm very proud to be one of the first four holders of a Credit Suisse scholarship and one of the first eight from Child's Dream. At the end of August, I returned to my homeland with my wife, who was pregnant. I'm now advising others who

would like to study abroad. I also travel to remote parts of the country to tell people about the possibilities for foreign study.

Our daughter was born just a few days ago. She doesn't have a name yet; we'll have to discuss this with our parents first. I'm very happy, but I'm worried for her, especially about her education. I can't afford the tuition fees for an international school. It's much more complicated here than in Thailand – the health care system, transportation, communication (particularly access to telephones and the Internet) – there are obstacles everywhere.

I could imagine taking on political responsibilities in the educational system at some point. Education is the basis for deep-seated changes in my country. I dream of living in a democracy some day, but I don't know whether I'll get to experience that. The motto of Child's Dream is: "Even disadvantaged children have dreams!" I may no longer be a child, but I'll never give up on this dream.

Maria Ryser

* country of origin withheld for safety reasons

Students Have to Work Very Hard for Their Success.

Susan Sy, a Credit Suisse staff member in Singapore, explains Credit Suisse's commitment to higher education in Southeast Asia.

bulletin: Credit Suisse has been supporting disadvantaged students in Southeast Asia since 2006. How did this commitment come about?

Susan Sy: The scholarship program is offered by Child's Dream, with which we've had a successful partnership for a long time already. The program enables talented young people to study, which would be impossible without financial support. Credit Suisse is convinced that education is the foundation

for society's long-term development.

Which conditions should students meet?

We expect them to manage their scholarship grant prudently and to do sufficiently well in their studies. The grant that we give them has to cover tuition and fees, the cost of housing, food, materials and so on. Child's Dream coaches the students closely to make sure that everything goes smoothly. A number of discussions to track progress take place during the year. Detailed information on how the grant is being used and the current status of the person's studies can be gleaned from the individual reports on the

students that we receive after each meeting.

What do you yourself do?

I check each report and make sure that the grant is being managed properly. We then pass on our recommendations to the relevant committee, which decides whether the scholarships will be granted for another year.

What's your personal impression of the students?

I've found them to be highly intelligent people who really work hard to succeed, and who are aware of the unique opportunity that this scholarship has given them. We're very proud to see that our first scholarship holders completed their B.A. degrees in the spring of this year with top grades.

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