Sukanya Uerchuchai – Executive Director, Franco-Thai Chamber of Commerce

Thailand is the second largest economic partner of France in Southeast Asia

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Sukanya Uerchuchai, executive director of the Franco-Thai Chamber of Commerce, introduces one of the most dynamic European Chambers in Thailand, highlights the trade between Thailand and France, and explains the investment opportunities that Thailand offers for French companies.

Can you introduce yourself to our international audience as well as your main achievements as executive director?

I have been working for the Franco-Thai Chamber of Commerce since 1993 in various positions. I was executive director from 2001 to 2007. In March 2010 I became a board member and since August 2014 I have once again been executive director. I have seen a lot of development in both the Thai economy and in the levels of trade between Thailand and France in this time and I am delighted to be part of the journey.

Could you give us an overview of the Franco Thai Chamber of Commerce along with its activities and missions?

The Franco Thai Chamber of Commerce was established in 1966 by French Entrepreneurs. We are a private organization under Thai law and the first bilateral Chamber of Commerce in the country, which means that 70 percent of our members are French but we also have Thai and other international members. Today the Franco-Thai Chamber of Commerce represents a powerful business network of more than 300 members. We are now one of the most dynamic European Chambers in Thailand with more than 70 events organized every year such as business lunches, breakfast talks, small working groups, co-events with other European Chambers of Commerce and gala dinners. Our aim is to offer a wide network, allowing entrepreneurs and companies to successfully approach the market and build long-lasting trade relationships for efficient and fruitful business development.

We also promote French and Thai trade through more than 10-15 French trade fairs every year. The trade fairs are good opportunities for our clients to connect with potential partners. Our main role is to help people who want to set up a business in Thailand to collaborate with Thai authorities, Thai partners, and connect local and foreign companies.

Our members are from diverse sectors and industries and are of varying sizes. We support everyone from the big groups such as Accord, Sanofi, Michelin and Pernod Ricard to total newcomers, French entrepreneurs who have fallen in love with the country and established their own business here, and young people and their start-ups. Actually, big groups act like big brothers for these smaller companies. They sponsor the FTCC to be able to create activities for the whole French-Thai business community in Thailand.

We help them in different ways. The big groups need help on trade advocacy. The entrepreneur sand SMEs need more of our help in understanding the culture, market and language. Even if they speak English, it is difficult to understand everything, we are helping them to face the language and cultural barrier. We give practical advice and try to put in place a mentoring system between members to help each other. For the start-ups, we try to link them with investors and help them with crowdfunding.

What are the main challenges that the members have to face, and how is the Franco-Thai Chamber of Commerce helping them?

The culture is one of the main challenges that foreign and French companies face in Thailand. The business practice here is evolving. We can observe that more and more Thai people are going abroad to study and come back to Thailand. But even if Thai people are more internationalized, the

mentalities are still not the same as French people, what matters for French people doesn't necessarily matter for the Thai people. The Franco-Thai Chamber is playing an important role in understanding the culture. Each year we organize cross-cultural trainings for companies in order to understand and adapt to the culture. We are convinced that when we talk about business, it is crucial to understand the people. We can help the companies to understand and decode the Thai people and the French.

How did the trade relationship between the two countries evolve? What kind of opportunities does Thailand offer to France, and vice versa?

For the past few decades, the bilateral trade relationship between Thailand and France has been increasing. Thailand is the second largest economic partner of France in Southeast Asia and the trade relationship shows that industry is dominant in the commerce between the two countries. After the coup d'etat of May 2014, in October 2015, we organized the first trip for of a Thai delegation to France to try to rebuild the connection between the two countries.

Thailand had to show that even if its politics were not stable, business must go on. Last year with the successful meeting between His Excellency General Prayut Chan-o-Cha, Prime Minister of Thailand and President Emmanuel Macron at the Elysée Palace, the relationship became stronger than ever. They covered a broad spectrum of issues of mutual interest and concern to both countries, bilaterally, regionally and globally.

A large portion of the discussions between the two leaders focused on enhancing economic and business ties and collaborating in four mains sectors: energy transition, transport (rail and airport), smart cities, and food. Thailand and France are two of the world's top tourism destinations, our economies depend quite a lot on this sector. Thailand would like to work more closely with France regarding medical tourism and add hospitals and wellness to our list of collaboration with France. Because the hospitals here are of a high standard, for the past 15 years, we have seen more and more people from Cambodia, Malaysia, and Vietnam coming to Thailand for medical check-ups.

The healthcare market in Thailand is the second largest in ASEAN and represents more than USD five billion. What opportunities do you see in Thailand for the healthcare industry?

Thailand has to face some challenges such as the ageing population and the new generation which has taken care of its health since very young. For a few years, we have seen emerging wellness centres and a holistic approach regarding health. Nowadays, people don't want to take medicine, because they know the side effects; they are more focused on prevention than treatment. For example, Bangkok Dusit Medical Services (BDMS), one of the most prestigious hospital networks in the Asia-Pacific region, bought a hotel in Bangkok to create one of the top wellness centres.

We observe that more and more fertility centres are opening to help women get pregnant. This is becoming one of this generation's major challenges. However, also, advanced centres for stem cells, dietary supplements and other treatments are opening around Thailand.

The food supplement industry is booming in Thailand. The FDA has hard work to do in order to control these supplements. For the past few years, the trend has been functional beverages, which can be multivitamins, collagen, or fibre. For example, the PM group launched a product called P80 with longan extract, a result from the Chiang Mai University research, which helps to dilate the vein and allow the patient to sleep well. The product is publicised everywhere with the endorsement of a Thai celebrity and is widely and freely available.

In Thailand, we have a wide variety of herbs, flowers and fruits. We are helping a Thai organization to work with France Cosmetics Valley to develop the extraction of active ingredients from diverse herbs or fruits to create new products and market them.

Another segment of the market, which is booming, is cosmetics. Women in Thailand want to take care of their appearance. Cosmetics production in Thailand is quite advanced and many Thai cosmetics are now exported to the world.

The Franco-Thai Chamber would like to push companies to come and set up their business in Thailand because we have a strong science and biotech park. France is not well known in Thailand for pharmaceuticals or medical devices. Business France of the French Embassy and the Franco-Thai Chamber of Commerce are working closely together to create a "Club Santé" (Health Club), which has already been successful in Vietnam.

What would be your advice for French firms looking to do business in Thailand?

One of the most important pieces of advice that I can give is that French firms need to find a good partner here. In Thailand, we have a lot of potential partners, and it is our job at the Franco-Thai Chamber to connect partners together, because we have the "know who", the connection. France

can bring the technology and the know-how. Another piece of advice would be to be patient and work in a team. The French and the Thais are similar, we are artists, generally accustomed to working alone. However, French companies have to try and learn to work more together. Teamwork is the best way to build a strong relationship, we have so many things to share and learn from each other.

What drives you personally to keep going? Do you have a final message for our international community?

First of all, I really believe that the Franco-Thai Chamber of Commerce is a good platform, where everyone can share their best practices, insights, and expertise.

Since I am Thai, I would like to help to develop my country. I know that to go to Thailand 4.0, we cannot work on our own. France is good at technology, so my role is to help and reunite the businesspeople together. I know both cultures and speak both languages and I have connections in both Thailand and France, so I am quite well positioned in this job. That’s why I have continued working at the chamber

I would like to add that Thailand is a land of potential business that we do not promote enough. Thai people are quite shy, and they don’t promote themselves. In the mind of foreigners, Thailand is only a tourist destination, but it is more than that, we are already an industrialized country, and ready for business. You have to be in Thailand to understand how the country is working, the culture, the people and the business. I believe that 2019 is the year to come, otherwise you will miss out!

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