

## Tracking the life of Madam Tank

On a path that has taken her from refugee camps at home to military bases abroad, Nopparat Kulhiran has lived up to her sobriquet in providing literal and figurative armour to those in her patronage.



Mrs Nopparat is known in the business as Madam Tank because of her involvement with armoured vehicles.

'A woman must not forget her duties: studying, working and taking care of her family.' This is the principle by which Nopparat Kulhiran, also known as Madam Tank, lives.

At 64, Mrs Nopparat is vice-president and overseas operations manager of Chaiseri Metal & Rubber Co, a maker of tank wheels, caterpillar tracks and tank-wheel links for military vehicles.

Chaiseri was also involved in designing First Win, a 15-million-baht bulletproof armoured vehicle capable of resisting AK-47 fire. The vehicle's run-flat system allows it to traverse 150km on flat tires, the most resilient in its class, Madam Tank says.

Chaiseri was established in 1939 by her husband's family, selling spare parts for commercial and special-purpose trucks.

"We have a long relationship with the Thai military that goes back to 1968, when the agency was seeking maintenance services for defence vehicles during the Vietnam War," Mrs Nopparat says.

"Most of those vehicles were imported from the United States but were left in a state of disrepair after America lost the war. At that time, the armed forces could not reach out to US suppliers to provide maintenance."

Chaiseri maintained a close relationship with the armed forces as the business transitioned from being a spare parts supplier to a vehicle maker. Today, the company serves defence agencies in 41 countries.

Chaiseri operates an 84-rai, 26-factory facility in Lat Lum Kaeo, Pathum Thani province. The company employs more than 400 workers and has its own research and development unit. Chaiseri has annual turnover in excess of 1 billion baht.



Mrs Nopparat at her assembly plant in Pathum Thani province.

#### Childhood in Chinatown

Growing up, Madam Tank learned the machinery and vehicle scrap metal business from her father. She spent her childhood days near the Odeon Roundabout in Yaowarat (Chinatown), in what used to be the Siang Kong Market, a spare parts market now situated on the outskirts of Bangkok.

Madam Tank's father, Nging-ho Saetang, ran a small shop on Song Wat Road called Tang-Jun-Huad that bought and modified scrap metal.



A Chinese-born Thai, Mrs Nopparat was the seventh of 12 siblings -- five boys and seven girls. She had two mothers: her biological mother and her father's fiancée who left Shantou, China to marry him in Thailand.

Her family lived a peaceful life. It was common for Chinese business owners at the time to have several wives. Mrs Nopparat says she loved both of her mothers.

"I was my father's closest daughter, because I wanted to help him in the business," Madam Tank says. "My father stuttered, which was an obstacle in scrap metal auctions, so I had to step in to help him win.

"If my father wanted to buy a pile of scrap metal at 50 satang, for example, I would lobby Thai-Chinese bidders to step aside when the price reached that point."

As a reward for their help, she would pour hot tea and blow a fan for the bidders. Most people at Siang Kong knew her well.

Mrs Nopparat learned Mandarin and Teochew from her father and helped her neighbours draft letters in Chinese to send back to the mainland.

"Most of the Chinese in Bangkok arrived at Ratchawong Pier on Song Wat Road," she says. "They came here to make a living and got married to locals, but they didn't know how to write, so my father and I assisted them."

The government, led by Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram, banned Chinese schools in Bangkok to protect the country against "communist influence". Most Thai-Chinese did not learn Mandarin, with the exception of a few that conducted underground studies.

Mrs Nopparat's relatives decided to settle down in Bangkok's Chinatown permanently. Her father taught her that daughters in Chinese families had to be more diligent and hard-working than sons. Daughters had to marry into other families, as any assets a family might have belonged to the boys.

That precept did much to strengthen Madam Tank's character.

### Studying education

Among her many talents, Madam Tank is a natural teacher.

"I love taking notes and recording my memories, passing on my knowledge and experiences to others," she says. "That's why I chose to focus on education instead of foreign languages, unlike most people doing an English-French major in Thai high schools."

In the early 1970s, she became a student at the College of Education, Pathumwan Campus, now known as Pathumwan Demonstration School of Srinakharinwirot University.

This was the right choice, she says, because it allowed her to volunteer for rural development camps in the Northeast every semester.

"I went to teach in rural provinces at a time when the communist influence in those areas was rampant," Madam Tank says. "It was not safe and locals did not welcome people from Bangkok and hated all government officials."

During the Vietnam War and the Cambodian Civil War in the 1970s, Madam Tank volunteered at refugee camp in the Thai-Cambodia border area of Aranyaprathet, where she served as an English-Thai interpreter between UN staff and refugees from Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos.

She was not only an interpreter, but also a teacher because many refugees were eager to learn Thai. "I set up a Thai class to instruct all foreigners at the camp, which allowed me to learn more about the world outside of Thailand," she says.

After contracting malaria in the camp, she was forced to leave her teaching duties and her father brought her back to her hometown.

### An arranged marriage

After getting her education degree, Madam Tank enrolled in the Bachelor of Laws programme at Thammasat University. Before she graduated, the Thanin Kraivichien government stormed the university and massacred students and civilians in what became known as the Thammasat University Massacre of Oct 6, 1976.



"I escaped the university by swimming across the Chao Phraya River to Ratchawong Pier," Mrs Nopparat says. "My father was afraid I would jump into the political fray and put my life in danger, so he arranged a marriage between me and Hiran Kulhiran.

"Unlike many students, I did not participate in the rallies, because I always kept my father and my family in mind. I was an obedient daughter."

At 23, Madam Tank married Mr Hiran and moved with her husband's family to Din Daeng.

Her father advised her that being a wife meant supporting her husband and taking care of him every single day. The wife had to take care of every member of his family, just as she would take care of her own family.

"No matter what happens after marriage, you have to be patient," Madam Tank says.

Military business

The newlywed couple took a honeymoon trip to Europe. But it wasn't a honeymoon in the traditional sense, as they used the opportunity to seek more business opportunities, Mrs Nopparat says.

"My husband and I went to Europe and the United States, where most military equipment was made," she says. "We visited military showcases and networked with manufacturers. We first made a pilot order of machinery from a manufacturer in Ohio, then we set up shop at our former factory in Din Daeng, where we started making parts for Thai tanks."



They spent 300 million baht on imported machinery and built up a massive production capacity base, but demand from Thai units was limited.

"I decided to use my English, French and Chinese language skills to contact overseas customers," Madam Tank says.

Over the past three decades, she has travelled around the world, making connections with military departments on her way.

"Forging relationships in some places is easy, but it can be much more challenging in others," she says.

In Bangladesh, for example, Madam Tank had to bond with the military community by staying in their camps.

"Sometimes, I taught the housewives of soldiers how to make food," she says.

In the Middle East, agencies made orders only after she secured sales with royals. "Since then, I get a VIP pass for military bases in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Qatar."

After four decades, Madam Tank and her husband continue to strengthen their brand and create innovative products.

"I am especially proud of the First Win and the run-flat vehicles, which are copyrighted and patented in many countries," she says. "The country is vigorous and secure. Our military vehicles and weapons have to be produced at home."

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