

The gift of bikes

Working together to get bicycles into the hands of poor rural kids has led to happiness for these volunteers
Chompoo Trakullertsathien



To provide help for poor kids in rural Thailand, David Hoong Kah Kuan, president of Singapore Bike-Aid, collected used bicycles on the island republic and delivered them to the Thailand Cycling Club.

Shipped from overseas, a sizeable gift for poor kids in rural Thailand arrived safely at the Siam Bangkok Port in Samut Prakan province last week.

Those who came to welcome the special gift included Dr Thongchai Panswad, president of the Thailand Cycling Club, David Hoong Kah Kuan, president of Singapore Bike-Aid, and many officials from the Office of the National Primary Education Commission. In a cooperative effort the groups are helping rural kids—some who have to walk barefoot to school—who cannot afford expensive bikes.

When the container was opened, Mr Hoong was overwhelmed with joy. He had sent the gift to Thailand on February 20, and then came to the Kingdom last week to ensure it arrived safely and on time.

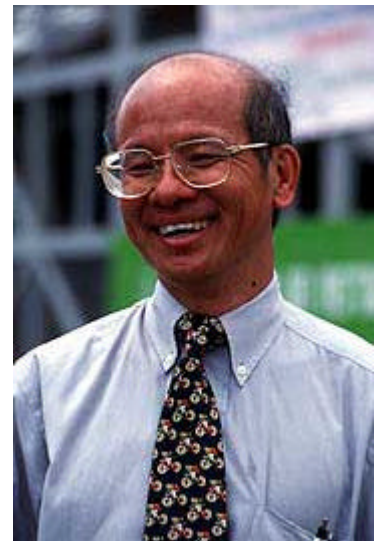
Wrapped without colourful paper or ribbons, but with the generosity of the Singaporean people instead, the overseas present was some 140 used bicycles collected by the members of Singapore Bike-Aid. All were delivered to the Thailand Cycling Club (TCC) which has been conducting its Recycled Bicycle Project for two years, aiming to donate old bikes to rural children across Thailand.

"When we heard that the TCC needed old bikes to donate to the poor children, we thought we could help. And we really did because we received good feedback from the public. Many called us to pick up their unwanted bikes," said Mr Hoong while helping unload the shipment.

Mr Hoong launched his recycling project in Singapore by sending email to his friends and to bicycle shops around the island. He also put posters in public areas where people could spot the details of his recycling campaign.

"The news of our project spread by word of mouth. We got many calls every day. People were willing to support the project even though they had no money. They said they would like the kids to go to school by bicycle. Our task was then to collect the old bikes. We also raised funds among the public to pay for the transportation of the bikes," said Mr Hoong.

Some 138 unwanted bicycles were sent to Thailand last October. All of them were repaired by the members of TCC and delivered to rural schools.



'My thanks goes to the kids that make me so happy. They give me a chance to feel great bouts of happiness. I catch myself smiling as I see the kids struggling hard to get the bike they like the most. It is their lovely nature that helps brighten our days.' - Dr Thongchai Panswad,

"The kids were overjoyed while lining up in the queue waiting for the bikes. They refused to have dinner with us because they were so obsessed with what they just received," said Pichid Uasakunkiat, vice president of TCC.

When Mr Hoong accumulated more bikes, he shipped a second container to Thailand. "Those who donated the bikes said they felt so happy having a chance to help less fortunate kids in Thailand as well as to do charity. We plan to support the TCC's project as long as the Singaporean people donate used bikes to our association," he said. A cyclist himself, Mr Hoong established Bike-Aid in 1992.



Members of TCC pull the bikes from the container to repair them before they are given away. Pictures by SOMKID CHAIJITVANIT

According to Dr Thongchai, all the donated bicycles are kept in the TCC members' storage room awaiting repair. Members who are technicians by profession volunteer to do the task on Sundays.

"Most of the donated bikes are in good condition. We simply change tyres and check brakes for the kids' safety. Spare parts are also mined from worn-out bikes," said Dr Thongchai, who started the Recycled Bicycle Project in 1998.

On Sundays, some 20 TCC members gather at a factory in Phra Pradaeng to check the condition of the bicycles and make repairs.

"But now we have a problem, lacking skilful technicians who can chip in their time. We are recruiting outsiders who want to support our project," said Dr Thongchai.

In order to teach the children to treasure their belongings, Dr Thongchai allows them to take part in repairing the bicycles. The school grounds serve as a temporary workshop, where children can hone some basic technical skills.

"This way they can value and take care of their own belongings. Besides, they can do the minor repairs themselves, if necessary," he added.

For the last two years, TCC members have visited many rural schools donating recycled bikes to some 500 students. Happiness is their only reward.

"My thanks goes to the kids that make me so happy. They give me a chance to feel great bouts of happiness. I catch myself smiling as I see the kids struggling hard to get the bike they like the most. It is their lovely nature that helps brighten our days," said Dr Thongchai.

Because of his work commitments, Mr Hoong was unable to join the TCC team in repairing the old bikes and giving them to poor kids. But he hopes to do so someday. "Apart from collecting the old bikes for the kids, I would like to repair and hand them over to the children myself. That way I can fully support the TCC project. I believe most kids love bicycles and cycling," said the veteran cyclist.

Apart from supporting TCC's project, Mr Hoong and the 60 members of Bike-Aid also do a lot of other charity work to help alleviate the suffering of the poor in Singapore and other countries.

In 1992, 50 cyclists made the 270 kilometre journey from Singapore to Mersing, Malaysia and back. The team raised \$25,000 (945,000 baht), which went to many non-profit organisations such as The Salvation Army, Working in Aid of Leukaemic Kids, and Moral Home for the Disabled.

In 1994, nine cyclists rode from Singapore to Kuantan, Malaysia, covering about 325 kilometres and raising \$48,000 (1.8 million baht) for the Hospice Care Association. Four years later, 30 cyclists rode 1,047 kilometres from Singapore to Hat Yai, and \$135,000 was raised for the Kidney Dialysis Foundation.

Through cycling, David says he can provide help to the underprivileged as well as do what he really loves.

"I love cycling -it gives me a sense of freedom. It exposes me to the outside world."

"It also makes me healthier. Besides, it can take me to many different places cheaply. It's also environmentally-friendly. I'm happy on the bike," he said, smiling.

Those who want to donate money or used or new bikes to poor children can contact Dr Thongchai Panswad on 218-6669 or 252-7511. Those who want to help Bike-Aid can write to David Hoong Kah Kuan at 8 Lorong 1, Geylang, Singapore, 389118, or email.

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