

Palm-leaf Manuscript Record of a Mission Sent by the Myanmar King to the Chinese Emperor in the Mid-Eighteenth Century

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Introduction

On 16 September 1983, as Chief Librarian of the Universities Central Library (UCL) in Yangon, I acquired an extremely rare palm-leaf manuscript from a Middle School teacher from Pakkoku, U Tin Ngwe (U Tin Ngwe (1931-2004) later became Headmaster of a Middle School in Pakkoku). When U Tin Ngwe brought the manuscript to UCL, he told me that he had acquired it from a Buddhist monastery near Myaing, his birthplace about twenty-five miles northwest of Pakkoku. I first come to know of the existence of this manuscript about five years earlier, in November 1978, while I was in Pakkoku on one of many trips made to various parts of Myanmar in search of rare palm-leaf and paper *parabike* manuscripts. We used to go on manuscript search trips from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s and found many interesting and rare manuscripts that are now kept in UCL. The palm-leaf manuscript purchased from U Tin Ngwe is a record of a mission sent by the Myanmar king Maha-damá-ya-za-dí-patí (r. 1733-1752) to the Chinese Qianlong Emperor (r. 1736-1795) of the Qing Dynasty.

During the time I worked as a librarian, I used to inform scholars in various fields whenever rare manuscripts were acquired. I informed Dr. Than Tun about this manuscript and had a hand-written copy made for him soon after the manuscript had been cleaned and microfilmed. U Htun Yee, a close colleague of Than Tun and I made about one hundred mimeographed copies, half of which I bought from him for distribution to University and College Libraries in Myanmar and to send abroad on exchange to national libraries such as the British Library, the Japanese National Diet Library and the Library of Congress, and university libraries with special Southeast Asian collections like those at Cornell University, the University of Michigan, the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London), the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, and several others.

The Sino-Myanmar scholar who specialized, from the mid-1950s until his death in March 2005, in the historical relations between Myanmar and China was Chen Yi-sein (Chen Yi-sein (1924-2005) known in Myanmar as U Yi Sein was recruited by my father, Sithu U Kaung, the first Chairman of the Burma (later Myanmar) Historical Commission (M.H.C.) soon after it was established in Jan. 1955. Mr. Chen Yi-sein worked for M.H.C from 1956 to about 1987). When the palm-leaf manuscript arrived at UCL, I informed

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Chen as he was the foremost authority on the subject. He became very interested in the manuscript and promised to look for relevant Chinese records in China and Taiwan. He left Myanmar a few years later to join his family in Taipei and died there.

As promised, Chen continued to carry out research about this Myanmar mission, tracing the Chinese records of the Myanmar envoys in Beijing being received in audience by the Qing Qianlong Emperor.² He then made an important discovery. The Myanmar king had sent two letters, one written on a gold plate addressed to the Chinese emperor and the other on a silver plate addressed to the empress, the queen mother, both shaped like palm-leaf manuscripts. Of the two letters, the one on gold seems to have been melted down in later times for the gold to be re-used. But surprisingly, what seems at first sight to be a copy of the letter on silver had survived and had been found and identified by Chen in the Collection of the National Palace Museum in Taipei. He wrote me that he was working on a fairly long paper on this Myanmar mission to the court of the Qing emperor. For several years, he continued his researches and kept adding new information to this paper. In mid-2004, he decided to complete the research paper, which he then wrote out by hand, in his elegant Myanmar script, with some Chinese and English letters interspersed, and sent it to us in Yangon in December 2004 as his contribution to the Golden Jubilee Commemorative Volume of the Myanmar Historical Commission (MHC).

Unfortunately, Chen's paper could not be printed in the Commemorative Essays Volume because we received it too late and also, as we did not want to split it, because it was too long (ninety-six pages). It was the last paper written by Chen. We have now published this paper (The paper in Myanmar is entitled "Myanmar Min Maha-damá-ya-za-dí-patí let-htet Ta-yoke Naing-gan yauk Myanmar than a-phwei" မြန်မာမင်းမဟာဓမ္မရာဇာဓိပတိလက်ထက် တရုတ်နိုင်ငံရောက် မြန်မာသံအဖွဲ့) in the *Collected Writings of Mr. Chen Yi-sein*, in two volumes, one in Myanmar and one in English, as special publications in the MHC Golden Jubilee monograph series. The papers in Myanmar, including this last contribution of Chen, were published in 2007.

I am now editing the Myanmar text of this invaluable palm-leaf manuscript for publication. Its importance is immeasurable for it is the only Myanmar manuscript text which has survived of a number of missions from Myanmar kings to the Court of Chinese Emperors. However, due to its chaotic character, the manuscript needs careful editing.

I would like to dedicate my paper to Chen, a great but unassuming Sino-Myanmar scholar, and a life-long friend and colleague of mine. His researches on this mission revealed the bogus nature of Aye Thu Yei who came to the Myanmar King posing as the Chinese Emperor's envoy.

Another scholar, proficient both in Chinese and Myanmar, who studied the silver (or tin?) plate letter from Myanmar now in Taipei, is Dr. Sylvie Pasquet of CNRS Paris. She came to see me from 18-28 February

² For a brief life of the Qianlong Emperor (whose variant regnal dates are 1735-1796 of the Qing (Manchu) Dynasty (from A.D 1644 to 1911) see J.A.G. Roberts, *A Concise History of China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999): 155-161.

2006, and we had long discussions about the palm-leaf manuscript record and the text of the palm-leaf shaped silver plate letter. I am grateful to her for elucidating for me some of the Chinese records of the Myanmar mission.

The Palm-leaf Manuscript and its Contents

The palm-leaf manuscript is entitled *Hanthawaddy yank Min-ta-ya let-btet Myanmar than a-phwei Ta-yoke Pyi thwa mbat-tan* (In Myanmar script: တံသာဝတီရောက်မင်းတရားလက်ထက် မြန်မာသံအဖွဲ့ တရုတ်ပြည် သွားမှတ်တမ်း), but this seems to be a title given by later owners as it is not given in the text itself. No name or authorship is mentioned; also there is no date of composition. It was probably compiled in the early Kòn-baung period, in the latter years of the 1750s.

The palm-leaf manuscript bundle comprises of thirty-nine leaves. The palm-leaves are innumeral in the traditional Myanmar manner, using consonants and vowels in sets of twelve. The manuscript starts with *ka* (က) and ends with *ghi* (ဃီ). Each leaf, starting with *ka* verso (i.e. the second palm leaf page) has eight lines of text to a palm-leaf page. The palm-leaf manuscript is a *kyan-hsit* (ကြံဆစ်), i.e. painted vermilion on the two length-wise edges with about four inches in the middle gilded. The *kyan-hsit* palm-leaves were used by Myanmar court officials and in manuscript donations made by them to the monasteries which they supported. As the manuscript is not a *shwe-myin*, or *shwe-bain-cha* with gilding on all four edges of the palm-leaves, it was not made for the king, or royalty. Each palm-leaf measures 49.5 cm by 5.5 cm. The palm-leaf bundle has *kyan*, top and bottom wooden covers, also painted with a kind of vermilion (red) lacquer.

The text begins rather abruptly without a proper exordium, but with just a very short prayer and then a date: Myanmar Era Sakarac 1111 *Ta-gu la-byi kyan* (Tagu waning moon) 5 (CE 15 March 1750), stating that from that date the journey began starting from the royal garden called Manaw Ramma (Manaw Rammar garden (မနော်ရမာဉ္ဇယာဉ်), a Royal Garden in Innwa, which can be identified as being in the capital Inwa (Ava).³

The manuscript also ended abruptly without a colophon, though an important Myanmar manuscript like this one would usually have a proper colophon stating the author, the date of composition, the name of the scribe or copyist, and the date when the copy was made.

After the prayer and date, a list of cities, towns and villages is given, from palm-leaf page (from now on abbreviated as plp.) *ka* (က) verso [plp.1] to plp. *ki* (ကီ) recto [plp.6] (i.e. a total of six plp.) (To make references to palm-leaf page numbers easier to understand I have given not only the original pagination as given on the palm-leaves in the traditional manner but also numbered them with Myanmar numbers on a

³ See Twin-thin Taik-wun Maha Sithu. *Maha Yazawon Thit*, vol.3 (*Nyaung-yan-hset*) ed. by U Thein Hlaing (Yangon: Myat Mi-gin, 1997): p. 165.

copy of the manuscript and Arabic page numbers for this paper. I have also numbered each line on each page of the palm leaf). On each plp., written in two columns, are the post-stages, from a certain town to another, together with the distance between the two places given in Myanmar *ta* (a Myanmar measure of distance which could be either four cubits, seven cubits, or ten cubits). The list begins from the Royal Capital Inwa (Ava) and shows the route the Myanmar envoys took, travelling through the Shan States of Yauk Sauk and Theindi (Hsenwi) to the Chinese border, near Kaing Mar, and Bawdwin Nge-kwei (small silver mine), north of the present big Bawdwin silver mines, and through Yunnan to join the main post-stage route between Kuming and Beijing. This list of towns, villages, rivers and post-stages should be studied in conjunction with another similar list that is in this manuscript near the end, from plp. *gha* (၁၁) (no.66) to plp. *ghê* (၁၆) (no.70) where the manuscript ends. The list of post-stages at the beginning of the manuscript ends with a tabulated total of towns (71 in no.), rivers (19 in no.), post-stages (179 in no.), and total distance (1014) *taing* (တိုင်) is a Myanmar unit of distance which is equivalent to 1,000 *ta*, or approximately two miles.), (10,14,500) *ta* and (153) *yuzana* (*yuzana* [ယုဇနာ] is a Myanmar measure of distance equal to 12.72 miles), (3) *ga-wot* (*ga- wot* [ဂါဝုတ်] is a Myanmar measure of distance equal to one quarter *yuzana*, or approximately one league (three miles).) and twenty-five *utthaba* (*utthaba* [ဗုဒ္ဓဘာ] distance of 140 cubits) (see *ki* [ကီ] recto, plp.no. 6). U Sai Aung Tun, an authority on Shan history, has identified most of the Shan place-names shown in the manuscript (See Appendix).

The next section starts on *ki* (ကီ) verso (plp.7). It is about the Chinese emperor's capital. The Myanmar called the emperors of China *Utibwa*, or as in this manuscript, *Uti-Min* (*Min* being the Myanmar word for king or ruler). The place where the emperor resided is shown in the manuscript as *Su-chein-swan*, the inner city, *Da-si-thwan* and *Ni-ta-ok* outer cities; three cities enclosing one another with three moats complete with *padoma* lotus plants, the two inner cities with six gates each, and the outer city with nine gates. The description of the emperor's "royal city" and the royal palace is given in some detail on one plp. *ki* (ကီ) verso (plp. 7).

The next plp., *ku* (ကု) recto (plp.8) starts with another date Sakarac (henceforth abbreviated Sak.) 1113 *Wa-khaung* waxing moon 8 (AD 19 July 1751), mentioning that the Myanmar envoys arrived at the Chinese capital on that date with ten elephants and other gifts. So, it took the Myanmar diplomatic mission one year, four months and four days to travel from Inwa to Beijing. But scholars have now discovered that they remained in Yunnan for several months before proceeding to the Chinese capital. Some of the Myanmar envoys' titles and names are stated for the first time only on plp. *Ku* (ကု) recto (plp. 8), *viṣ*. Sawbwa of Panmaw, Aye Thu Yei, Mon-law-sei, Saw-paw-yei (on line 2) and later on line 5 the name of the translator Nga Htun is given.

The next date shown on the manuscript is Sak. 1113 *Wa-khaung* waning moon 11 (CE 6 August 1751), when the Myanmar envoys were received by the Chinese emperor in audience; the ceremonies are described together with the names of the Chinese ministers in attendance (plp. *ku* (ကု) verso (plp. 9). Only on

this page, the name of the Myanmar chief envoy is mentioned for the first time as Thiri Kyaw Htin; his name is given *en passant* in the list of presents given in return by the Chinese emperor.

The next three pages from *k|* (၇၇) recto (plp. 10) to *kay* (၆၈) recto (plp. 12) consists of a long note about the Chinese ministers, their names (or titles), their main respective duties, e.g. Minister in charge of court ceremonies, Minister in charge of construction of pagodas, palaces, cities, roads and so on.

Then strangely from page *kay* (၆၈) verso (plp. 13) the text goes back to Sak. 1111 *Tagu* waxing moon 5 (CE 5 February 1750) when the "so-called" Chinese emperor's envoys Aye Thu Yei and Tun Ka-yei (or Tun Ta-yei) were received by the Myanmar King at Inwa and the text of the emperor's royal letter (In Myanmar ရတနသီ [raja-tham] royal order, or royal letter) is given (*kay* [၆၈] verso, (plp.13) to *kaw* (၆၈၈) verso (plp.17). In the letter, the Chinese Emperor addresses the Myanmar King as younger brother and refers to himself as the elder brother. The Chinese emperor affirms the long-standing amicable relationship between the two countries and promises to subdue enemies of the Myanmar king if he is attacked. It also refers to two earlier letters sent by the emperor to the Myanmar King in Sak. 1109 (CE 1747-48) and Sak. 1110 (CE 1748-49). The Chinese emperor mentions that there has been a break in relationship between the two countries and no envoys had been sent by the two respective rulers for 150 years.

On plp. *kaw* (၆၈၈) recto (plp.16) there is a geographical demarcation in the Chinese Emperor's (faked) letter stating that the younger brother (Myanmar king) is given territory to govern from Kaing Ma (Gengma),⁴ Maing Maing (Meng Meng, Shuang Jiang), Maing Maing (Maing Maing is repeated twice; probably a copyist error), Maing Hlwei Thi-sin in the East to the Yodaya (Ayutthaya) and beyond Lin Zin (Laos) to Myet-hna-mei (Vietnam) with the ocean as the limit to the territory in the North (there is of course no Ocean to the north, but only the Himalaya mountain range). The "umbrella wearing," i.e. high-ranking kings, are rulers from Bagan, Moe Byei, Pakhan, Mottama (Martaban), Hanthawaddy, Bago, Than Hlyin (Syriam), Toungoo, Sagaing, Tei-tin(?), Kalay, Thaung Thut, Theindi (Hsenwi), Dawei (Tavoy), altogether fourteen cities and towns. Aye Thu Yei is mentioned in this letter as the ruler of the La-wa city/town; the La-wa are the Wa people of the Myanmar-China border. The letter also mentions that Aye Thu Yei must travel to the Myanmar capital and return to the Chinese Emperor within a period of eight months (*kaw* (၆၈၈) verso plp.17, line 3) and that the two rulers should be *Raja Maha Meit*, or Royal Friends and Allies.

On plp. *kaw* (၆၈၈) recto, (plp. 18) the Myanmar king's title is mentioned for the first time as Mahadamá-ya-za-dí-patí. This Myanmar king is stated to have received emissaries from Utibwa, the Chinese emperor, led by Aye Thu Yei, with a letter expressing eternal friendship and for the two countries to be as one for trade and business purposes (plp. *kaw* (၆၈၈) verso, plp. 19). Mention is also made of eight Brahmā

⁴ The Chinese name is given in parenthesis. I am grateful to Dr. Sylvie Pasquet of CNRS in Paris for identifying some of the Chinese towns.

images sent by the Chinese emperor, and other presents (according to Chen Yi-sein there are no Chinese records of such a mission being sent by the Chinese Emperor to the Myanmar King at that period).⁵

Plp. *Kan* (ကံ) verso (plp. 20) goes back to the mission sent by the Myanmar king led by minister Thiri Kyaw Htin together with Aye Thu Yei, Tun Ta-yei and a list of presents sent by the Myanmar king. It also mentions a letter sent to the Chinese emperor by four great Myanmar ministers or military commanders called *Agga Maha Thayna-dipati*, again expressing a wish for the two rulers to be friends and allies.

I have given above some details of the historical data that can be found in the first (20) palm-leaf manuscript pages, out of a total of seventy plp. that form this manuscript bundle containing records about the Myanmar diplomatic mission to China (AD 1750 to 1752). I will summarize the information recorded in the rest of the palm-leaf manuscript, i.e the next fifty plp., from plp twenty to plp. seventy its abrupt end.

To seal the alliance, the Myanmar king requested for the hand of either one of the daughters, a granddaughter, or a niece of the Chinese emperor (*kā*) (ကက) recto, plp. twenty-two.

The manuscript then gives the names of three other members of the Myanmar Mission who were appointed as *sar-yei-daw* (royal secretaries) together with instructions from the Myanmar king. They were envoy Thiri Kyaw Htin, *raja-taman* (royal envoy) Kyaw Pike Thiha, and Ei-bya yei (probably a Mon) (*kha*) (ခ) verso, plp. 25).

The reason for appointing the Theindi (Hsenwi) *sawbwa* as one of the main leaders of the Myanmar mission was because he understood the Chinese language (Rone-ywon Taroke Tayet ယွန်တရုတ်တရက် တတတ) (*kā*) (ခါ) recto, plp. 26) and could act as an interpreter.

There is data on the appointment of the envoys on Sakarac 1111 *Tagu* waning moon 2 (CE 2 March 1750), three days before the mission left the Myanmar capital, in the presence of two chief Buddhist *hsayadaws* (presiding monks). Aung-mye Shwe-bon and Aung-mye Tu-lut. The dimensions of the gold plate letter are then given together with its weight and it is stated that there are 12 lines of writing on the plate. A detailed list of presents for the Chinese emperor, and the Chinese queen mother is given. Also valuable presents given to Tun Ta-yei, Aye Thu Yei and the Theindi *sawbwa*, not only by the Myanmar king, but also by his queens, and gifts from even the two senior presiding Buddhist abbots (their names / titles are shown above the list of presents that each gave).⁶

Some queens of the western palace seems to have missed the Mission before it left Inwa, so they followed to Sint-gaing where they caught up with it on Sakarac 1111 *Ka-sone* waxing moon 6 (CE 30 March 1750), about fifteen days later. There seems to have been a furor amongst the queens vying with each other to give presents to the envoys, especially to the Chinese Aye Thu Yei.

A list of the ten elephants sent as the Myanmar king's royal gift is then given. Eight were for the Chinese emperor and two for his mother. Also, two elephants each were given to Aye Thu Yei, and to the

⁵ See *Selected writings of Mr. Chen Yi-sein* (in Myanmar) . . . Yangon: Historical Research Department, 2007): p. 395.

⁶ (*kā*) (ခါ) verso to *khi* (ခိ) recto, plp. 27-30).

Theindi *sambwa*, *kī* (𑄓𑄦) recto (plp. 30). This information is repeated on *gū* (𑄣) recto (plp.52). Each of the fourteen elephants have their individual names or titles, height, age, length of tusks, and name of each *Uzi*, or elephant trainer/ handler, given in detail. There are notes on *kī* (𑄓𑄦) verso (plp.31), repeated on *gū* (𑄣) verso (plp.53) that the elephants given as royal presents were bred and brought up in the royal palace compound, unlike other elephants, and given away only because of the great affection and friendship that the Myanmar king had for Utibwa, the Chinese emperor. The elephants were of a special large-sized breed, that they were carefully chosen to be of prime age (between ten and twenty-eight years old) when they were strongest and healthiest, to be able go on the long arduous trek and to climb high mountains during the journey. There is much repetitive data in the remainder of the palm-leaf manuscript.

One of the most important pieces of information found in the latter part of the manuscript is the text of a letter, the Myanmar king's *Yaza-than*, written on gold. This is found in the manuscript from *khaw* (𑄣𑄦) verso (plp.39) to *khāw* (𑄣𑄦) recto (plp.40). The Myanmar king mentioned that he is sending the envoys to mark the great friendship he has as a younger brother to the Chinese emperor. The Myanmar king also mentioned in his letter that he received the envoys sent by the Chinese emperor led by Aye Thu Yei and Dun Ta Yei (or Tuan Teh Yei) and knew about the friendship that the Chinese emperor had for the Myanmar king. He also stated that the two countries are *Yaza Maha Meit* (Great Royal Allies) for the prosperity of all the people, monks, etc., that this friendship should continue forever through the sons and grandsons, that the Myanmar king recognizes the demarcations mentioned in the Chinese emperor's letter and that enemies of the elder brother will be regarded as enemies of the younger brother and vice-versa (i.e. they are eternal allies). The presents received and sent back are mentioned, and to end the letter the Myanmar king requested the Chinese emperor to send back the Myanmar envoys as quickly as possible to seal the alliance.

The text of the other important letter is given on *gū* (𑄣) verso (plp. 53) to the end of *gai* (𑄣𑄦) recto (plp. 54). This is the text of the letter on the silver, (or tin?) plate, now preserved in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, as a national treasure.⁷

The manuscript also records the texts of the Myanmar king's instructions and royal orders issued with regard to this diplomatic mission. First a general order for the Shan *sambwas* to give assistance and protection to the Mission during the journey through their territory, also special royal proclamations (*bya-daik tau*) to the Lord of Maing-Si (i.e. the Viceroy of Yunnan and Kuei-chou), and to the Lord of Tali and so on. Myanmar king's royal order appointing minister Thiri Kyaw Htin, Aye Thu Yei and Dun Ta Yei with the *sambwa* of Theindi (Hsenwi) as the king's special envoys is also given.

The information given in the manuscript actually ends on p. *gā* (𑄣𑄦) plp.67, as the rest of the manuscript is a repetition in a slightly different format of the itinerary between Innwa and Beijing.

We are told on p. *gā* (𑄣𑄦) plp. 67 that the Myanmar mission had arrived back at the (Myanmar) frontier, and was informed that even at Theindi (Hsenwi) the whole region was in turmoil and the mission

⁷ Jacques Leider provided the author a translation of and comments about this letter.

was ordered to wait for the Myanmar king's (welcoming) party which would be dispatched with soldiers to guard the envoys bearing valuable the gifts sent by the Chinese emperor and accompany them back to the capital Inwa. But probably this detachment never came because the capital was besieged and later captured by Mon rebels. The king, the royal family and the ministers were all taken captive to Hanthawadi where the king was later executed.

Beyond the Manuscript

Aye Thu Yei- Interpreter or Impostor?

The name, or rather the title of what the Myanmar king and later Myanmar chroniclers and historians accepted as the Chinese emperor's envoy, Aye Thu Yei (အထွယှီ), is a Burmanised name which seems at first glance to be a familiar Myanmar title. "Thu Yei" in Myanmar means "a brave person" and is usually applied to a warrior or soldier as in Thu Yei Kaung, a hero or a man of physical and moral courage. Up to the present Aye (or sometimes transcribed as E) (in Myanmar အဲ; or ဧ) is a common name element for Myanmar people in such names as Aye Maung (or E Maung).

All the three main Myanmar chronicles which cover the late Nyaungyan Period (1711 to 1752) mention this Chinese emperor's envoy by name as Aye Thu Yei, except in the published, printed edition of the third volume (Nyaungyan Period), edited by U Thein Hlaing, of Twin-thin Taik-wun Maha Sithu's *Maha Yazawin Thit*,⁸ where probably due to a copying or transcription error "Aye" has been given as "Za" (ဇ), so Aye Thu Yei has become Za Thu Yei which is obviously incorrect. *Hman-nān maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi* (*The Glass Palace Chronicle*), compiled in 1829, has a good account of a Chinese emperor's mission to the Myanmar court of Maha-damā-ya-za-dī-patī, led by Aye Thu Yei and Dun Ta Yei (ဒုန်တထွယှီ). They came with a gift of eight Arbathara Brahma images, accompanied by five thousand retainers (mostly soldiers).

A fuller account of this Chinese diplomatic mission can be read in the still unpublished palm-leaf manuscript chronicle *Maha Yazawin Kyaw* compiled by the Monywè Hsayadaw (1766-1835).⁹ Aye Thu Yei's name and an account of his diplomatic mission are also given in the palm-leaf manuscript version of *Alaung Mintaya-gyi Ayedawbon*. by Letwe Nawrahta (1723-1791).¹⁰

⁸ Twin- thin Taik-wun Maha Sithu, *Maha Yazawin Thit*, vol. 3, *Nyaungyan Hset*; ed. by U Thein Hlaing (Yangon: Myat Mingin, 1997): p. 165.

⁹ *Maha Yazawin Kyaw*, or *Yazawinda Yazawaya-mandani Yazawin* ... hand-written and typescript copies of original palm-leaf manuscript (at one time in Mon-ywe Zetawun Monastery.) Palm-leaf *Nyan-recto* (ညှော်ဝှော်) to *Nyā recto* (ညှော်ဝှော်). Copies available at the Universities Historical Research Centre Library.

¹⁰ Letwe Nawrahta *Alaung Mintaya-gyi Ayedawbon*, Palm-leaf manuscript. University of Mandalay Library, Now being edited for publication by Daw Ohn Kyi of the Myanmar Historical Commission), by Letwe Nawrahta (1723-1791).

The most important account of Aye Thu Yei is undoubtedly the palm-leaf manuscript that this paper is focusing on. Chen Yi-sein was able to unravel the original Chinese title which Myanmar people had Burmanized as Aye Thu Yei, by first studying this palm-leaf manuscript account of the Myanmar king's mission to the Chinese emperor.

This manuscript gave three indications of Aye Thu Yei's identity:

- (1) that he was a leader of the Wa (or Lawa) people of the Myanmar-China frontier region,
- (2) that he was also known as the Baw sawbwa, i.e. the *sawbwa*, or chieftan of Baw or Silver (mines) and
- (3) that the Baw sawbwa was also known as Wu Thin Yi.

These three clues enabled Chen to positively identify Aye Thu Yei as Wu Shang-hsein, the self-styled leader of the Wa people and a leading Chinese official at the silver mines, in charge of the thousands of Chinese and Wa miners.

Chen searched for Chinese sources and found biographical data about Wu Shang-hsien in two Chinese historical records: (1) *Historical Materials of the Ming and Ch'ing Dynasties*, and (2) Chang Chifa's *A Study of the Ten Military Accomplishments of Emperor Kao-tsung of the Ch'ing Dynasty*.¹¹ As I do not know the Chinese language, I will summarize below Chen Yi-sein's account of Wu Shang-hsien whom the Myanmar people called Aye Thu Yei.¹²

Around early 1745 an impoverished Chinese man from Shih-ping Prefecture left his native village to try his fortune at the Mao-toong silver mines of the Wa mountainous region. The Wa Sawbwa P'ang-chu soon noticed this clever, enterprising and trustworthy young miner and took him into his service. The Governor of Yunnan also trusted him and appointed him as a Collector of Taxes at these silver mines. Wu was so successful at his jobs that he received many rewards and was able to purchase before long the post of T'oong-p'an, or Assistant to the Sub- Prefect.

Chen points out that at this time there were about twenty to thirty thousand Chinese and Wa miners at the silver mines. Therefore, Wu become quite an influential person as the foremost leader. In Chinese the three top leaders were called Ta- yeh (First Leader), Esh- yeh (Second Leader) and San- yeh (Third Leader) – so Wu became known as Ta- yeh, the First Leader. This is similar to the second part of the Myanmar name for Wu, Thu Yei. However, Wu also had a nickname; because he was short-legged, stout, bearded and fierce, the local people called him “Ai-chiao-hu,” or “short- legged tiger.” Chen wrote that Ai-chiao-hu became Ai-hu-yeh, a mixture of the First Leader's title and Wu's nickname. In Myanmar the ha (ဝ) and the tha (ထ) which come next to each other in the Myanmar alphabetical order sometimes gets transposed, so “hu” became “thu” and thus Ai- thu-yeh, or in Myanmar pronunciation Aye Thu Yei, from the Chinese word

¹¹ *Ming-ch'ing- shih-liao*. Taipei: Academia Sinica, Institute of History and Languages, 1953. Section 7, Vol. 7. In Chinese.

¹² Chang Chi-fa, *Ch'ing-Kao-tsung shih-ch'uan wu- kung yen-chiu* (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 1982). In Chinese.

meaning “short- legged tiger gentleman” or “Fierce First Leader.” This seems to be a very plausible derivation and explanation; scholars who know both Myanmar and Chinese languages¹³ should examine this carefully to see whether it is correct and acceptable. For us who do not know Chinese, the identification of Aye Thu Yei with Wu Shang-hsien is a gratifying solution to a baffling name from Myanmar historical records.

We are grateful to Chen for not only solving the origins of the name Aye Thu Yei, but also for a much more important revelation. He checked Chinese records for the mid-eighteenth century and found that the Chinese emperor did not send envoys to the Myanmar king in 1750. This new information will greatly alter what Myanmar historians and people have accepted over the last two and a half centuries. It is easy to dismiss Aye Thu Yei as an impostor who, with immense ambition, planned and carried out a big hoax for personal gain, both financial and political. But if we try to understand his mission in the wider context of Myanmar-China relationship over the centuries, later historians may be able to see him also not only as a bogus envoy, but also as a kind of interpreter, a liaison between Yunnan and Myanmar.

The Myanmar people usually referred to the Emperor of China as Udi or Utibwa as shown in our manuscript. But often the Myanmar leaders and the people had more dealings with the Chinese Governor of Yunnan and the Yunnanese people, especially its merchants and entrepreneurs. Therefore, as G. E. Harvey points out, Utibwa also often meant the Governor, or Ruler of Yunnan to the Myanmar.¹⁴ Utibwa comes from the Pali *udi* meaning "the rising sun" and thus, the east, and *bwa* as in sawbwa means "chief," or "ruler." So Utibwa is "Ruler of the East." There is a further confusion in our manuscript, which refers also to the Myanmar king as the King of the Rising Sun.

When Aye Thu Yei posed as Utibwa's envoy when he went to the Myanmar king in 1750 and was accepted as such, his mission would have been known to the Governor of Yunnan, Zhang Yun-sui, who most probably gave tacit approval because the Yunnanese, who depended on and profited from trade and commerce with Myanmar, wanted better relations with the Myanmar king and court.

Aye Thu Yei and the Governor of Yunnan knew that the Myanmar king wanted to form an alliance with the Chinese emperor. This last king of the Nyaungyan Dynasty was a descendant of Bayín-naung. Bayín-naung was a strong and able military commander and an astute ruler who was able to control the largest territories of any Myanmar king. But the last of his descendants to rule Myanmar, King Maha-damá-ya-za-dí-patí, had none of these military and administrative abilities. He was a weak ruler who wanted to spend more

¹³ Pasquet is just such a scholar, proficient in Chinese and Myanmar languages. She came to see me in February 2006. I gave her a copy of Chen Yi-sein's paper in Myanmar and she later told me that his conclusions are accurate. She has written a paper in Chinese about the Burmese tributary message on silver leaf preserved in the National Palace Museum and is now preparing a separate research monograph on Wu Shang-hsein.

¹⁴ See note on Utibwa in G. E Harvey's *History of Burma* . . . (London: Longmans, Green, 1925): p. 30.

time with his books and talking with learned persons, rather than taking an interest in maintaining his empire.¹⁵

Dr. Maung Htin Aung, a versatile academic who produced the *History of Burma*, the first general history in English by a Myanmar scholar, has these comments on another bogus Chinese Mission originating in Yunnan, about forty years later than Aye Thu Yei's mission:

The Sawbwa of Bhamo and some Chinese merchants from Yunnan were especially interested in the full resumption of trade relations, and they conspired to hoodwink both the emperor and Bodawpaya [King of Myanmar, r. 1782-1819]. They brought a bogus mission purporting to be from the Chinese Emperor, and Bodawpaya received it with due honour. When Bodawpaya sent a return mission to Peking, the conspirators arranged that the mission's own interpreter should become separated from the mission on the journey. Then as the mission arrived before the emperor the conspirators explained that the mission was bringing tribute. The emperor was pleased and ordered full resumption of trade. Sometime later the conspirators again brought a bogus mission with three beautiful Chinese girls who were said to be the emperors grand-daughters. Bodawpaya now realized that he had been fooled and put the Sawbwa of Bhamo under arrest. Whether the emperor of China ever found out the truth is not known, but the conspirators did achieve their objective — normal trade relations were restored.¹⁶

Harvey, on the other hand, wrote that Bò-daw-hpayà never found out about the hoax, and that the king “may have willingly misunderstood the interpreters” [in thinking the three Yunnanese girls were the Chinese emperor's granddaughters]. Harvey also makes a disparaging comment stating that Myanmar rulers, over the ages, “had a voracious appetite for self-deception.”¹⁷

Concluding Remarks

Aye Thu Yei's bogus mission might have achieved success like similar missions in Bò-daw-hpayà's time (circa 1790) and forged an alliance between Myanmar and China and thus restored trade relations. Due to him, the Myanmar king and the Chinese emperor exchanged royal letters pledging long lasting friendship and calling for trade and commerce to be revived and strengthened. But four unforeseen events resulted in making Aye Thu Yei's mission a total and tragic failure, though this is not stated in the palm-leaf manuscript.

¹⁵ Dr. Yi Yi. *Myanmar Naing-gan a-chai a-nai, 1714-52*. Yangon: Naing-gan Thamaing Thu-tay-tha-na Uzi-htana [BHC], 1973. p.185-86. One of the best books on Myanmar during the time of the Nyaungyan Dynasty's last two kings, 1714-52.

¹⁶ Maung Htin Aung. *A History of Burma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967): p. 199-200.

¹⁷ G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma . . .* (1925): p. 279-280 and also his Note on "Chinese embassies," p. 362.

Maha-damá-ya-za-dí-patí, the Myanmar royal family, and the court were all captured by Mon rebels and taken to Hanthawaddy (Bago/Pegu) on 11 March 1752,¹⁸ so the Myanmar mission to China did not return to Innwa (Ava) to report to the King who sent them about two years earlier. We now know from Chinese sources that a new Governor of Yunnan was appointed at the time the Myanmar envoys returned. This new Governor became suspicious and alarmed at the growing influence of Aye Thu Yei. Third, this new governor arrested Aye Thu Yei towards the end of 1751 for going to the Myanmar king in 1750 pretending to be the Chinese emperor's envoy, and for forging a royal letter purportedly emanating from the Emperor. Aye Thu Yei died in prison soon after. Nonetheless, up to the present he is venerated by the Wa people on the China side of the border as a leader who looked after and protected them, and brought prosperity during his leadership.¹⁹

Fourth, the Myanmar leader of the mission, Minister Thiri Kyaw Htin also died in Yunnan, on 21 November 1751, on the return journey, from an unspecified disease he had been suffering for a number of years. The long strenuous journey across mountains and forests resulted in the fatal deterioration of his health.

In writing about the past it is always intriguing to speculate about what might have happened if some important things had not occurred. If the four tragic events given above had not taken place, and the Myanmar mission had returned safely with the Chinese emperor's letter to Inwa and reported to the Myanmar king, the two countries could have become strong allies.

The Myanmar king wanted the support of the Chinese emperor and Qing military might to crush Manipuri invaders and Mon rebels. If the Qing army had defeated Myanmar's foreign and domestic enemies, the tottering Nyaungyan Dynasty might have lasted a few more years.

Also the Qianlong Emperor whom Aye Thu Yei met might not have launched the "most disastrous frontier war that the Qing Dynasty had ever waged,"²⁰ by attacking Myanmar between 1765 and 1770, and failing to control some parts of the Shan States.

Finally coming back to our palm-leaf manuscript Record of the Myanmar mission, we can see at once that it is not a proper report submitted to the Myanmar king, as for example the Report of a Myanmar Mission to Bengal in 1830.²¹

My personal opinion is that the secretaries (*sa-yei-daw-gyi*) and scribes taken along on the mission made notes of the journey, royal letters exchanged, instructions received, presents given, and other important

¹⁸ *Hman-nan Maha Yazawin-daw-gyi* . . . 8th ed. (Yangon: Thiha Yadana Sarpay, 2008, reprint): p. 799.

¹⁹ Personal communication from Dr. Sylvie Pasquet, 18th Feb. 2006.

²⁰ Yingcong Dai, "A Disguised Defeat: The Myanmar Campaign of the Qing Dynasty," *Modern Asian Studies* 38.1 (2004): p. 145.

²¹ See Myanmar Historical Commission, Research Monograph no. 2 entitled *Bingala thwa sar-dan*, edited by Daw Kyan. Yangon: The Commission, 1963.

information, probably on black paper parabiike note-books. These notes could have ended up in a personal collection and later given to a monastic library. Someone who saw these notes probably got interested in the records and, knowing their historical value, copied them on palm-leaves for a more permanent record. But the copying was not done systematically, some data were recopied two or even three times, and the data was not copied in a logical or chronological order. But we have to thank this anonymous person or persons for saving the records of this failed mission to China for posterity.

I am now trying to sort the information contained in the manuscript, taking out the repetition data and putting the rest in a chronological, logical order. After careful editing I will publish it, if possible, with Chen's notes. This would make the text and notes more accessible to all scholars

Further research needs to be done, not only on this Myanmar mission to the Chinese emperor, but also on both earlier (from the Pyu and Bagan periods) and later missions up to the time of King Mindon (1853-1878), the penultimate king before the last dynasty, the Kòn-baung, was terminated in 1885 when the British captured Mandalay and exiled King Thibaw to India. Scholars who are proficient in both Myanmar and Chinese languages could help us to understand more about the important relationship between Myanmar and China in the past and the intermediary, interpretive role played by the leaders, merchants and people of Yunnan and the Shan State, together with some of our ethnic groups from this region like the Wa and Shan themselves. Only then will we be able to see in better perspective the long standing, thousand years old relationship between Myanmar and China which has assumed more and more importance in recent years.

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Appendix

List of Place-names in the Shan Area

As given in the palm-leaf manuscript record of the Myanmar Diplomatic Mission to China, during the reign of Hanthawaddy yauk Mintara (Maha-damá-ya-za-dí-patí, 1733-1752).

From the golden city (capital) of Innwa, Myanmar...

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Kan Thit Ywa (village) | 31. Baw (Maw) 'Twin Nge' (town) |
| 2. Shan Pike Taw Ywa (village) | 32. Nam Se |
| 3. Yan Htaik Kway Ywa (village) | 33. Baw Long Hsan 'Twin Kyi (Gyi) |
| 4. Myo Gyi | 34. Pang Pin Ywa (village) |
| 5. Chaung Yoe Seik Sakhan | 35. Nam Paing Ywa (village) |
| 6. At the foot of the Pagoda? | 36. Mong Hkan in Wa Town |
| 7. Nong San Ywa (village) | 37. Mong Kaw Kung Ma |
| 8. Lawk Sauk | 38. Mong Nwe (Noi) |
| 9. Man Pan Ywa (village) | 39. Pang Saung |
| 10. Mong Pyin Myo (town) | 40. Kung Ma Town |
| 11. Nam Oat Taw Sakhan | 41. Mong Hsa |
| 12. Mong Lin Ywa (village) | 42. Ho Hko |
| 13. Ho Hko Ywa (village) | 43. Mong Nyaung |
| 14. Mong Ling Myo (town) | 44. Pang Kwe in China |
| 15. Loi Lin Ywa (village) | 45. Mong Kyo |
| 16. Pang Maw Ywa (village) | 46. Me Pa Chauk Kin Ywa (village) |
| 17. Arrived Hsenwi at Pang Nim village | 47. Shan Shin Kun Ywa (village) |
| 18. Arrived Mong Tong at Hsup Tong Ywa (village) | 48. Mong Hkam Myo (town) |
| 19. Mong La Ywa (village) | 49. Mong Lin Myo (town) |
| 20. Pang Maw Ywa (village) in Hsenwi. | 50. Hte' Pyi Shaw Ywa (village) |
| 21. Mong Sit Ywa (village) | 51. Long Lin Ywa (village) near Mekong River |
| 22. Kar Lay Ywa (village) | 52. Hsan Ywa at Law Kya |
| 23. Hman Me' Ywa (village) | 53. Mu Kwa Myo (town) |
| 24. Mong Liem Ywa (village) | 54. Mong Ku Ywa (village) in Ta Lin |
| 25. MongYaw Myo (town) | 55. Mong Si's Area (around present-day Kumming) |
| 26. Mong Kyit | |
| 27. Nam Taw Ywa (village) | Compiled by U Sai Aung Tun, February 2006 |
| 28. Mong Lin Ywa (village) | Vice-Chairman, |
| 29. Kun Long Ywa (village) | Myanmar Historical Commission, |
| 30. Mong Pin Ywa (village) | Yangon. |