

Palm-leaf Manuscript Record of a Mission Sent by the Myanmar King to the Chinese Emperor in mid-18th Century

by U Thaw Kaung*

Introduction

On 16th September 1983, as Chief Librarian of the Universities Central Library (UCL) in Yangon, I bought an extremely rare palm-leaf manuscript from a Middle School teacher of Pakkoku, U Tin Ngwe¹. When U Tin Ngwe brought the mss. to UCL, he told me that he had acquired it from a Buddhist monastery near Myaing, his native town, about twenty-five miles north-west of Pakkoku. I first come to know about the existence of this manuscript about five years earlier, in November 1978, while I was in Pakkoku on one of the many trips made to various parts of Myanmar in search of rare palm-leaf and paper *parabike* manuscripts for UCL. We used to go on manuscript search teams from UCL during the period from late 1960s to mid-1980s and found many interesting and rare manuscripts which are now all kept in UCL. This rare palm-leaf mss. is a record of a Mission sent by the Myanmar King Maha Dhamma Yazar Dipati (r.1733-1752) to the Chinese Qianlong Emperor (r.1736-1795) of the Qing (Manchu) Dynasty.

During the time I worked as a librarian, I used to inform scholars in the respective fields whenever rare manuscripts were acquired for the library. I told Dr. Than Tun about this mss. and had a hand-written copy made for him soon after the manuscript had been cleaned and microfilmed in UCL. U Htun Yee, a close colleague of Dr. Than Tun and me, made about (100) 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 some national libraries like the British Library, National Diet Library and the Library of Congress, and University Libraries with special Southeast Asian Collections like Cornell and Michigan Universities, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and several other libraries outside Myanmar.

The Sino-Myanmar scholar who specialized (from mid-1950s until his death in March 2005) on historical relations between Myanmar and China was Mr. Chen Yi-sein². When the palm-leaf mss. arrived at UCL, I informed Mr. Chen Yi-sein because he was the foremost authority on the subject. He became very interested in this mss. and promised to look for the relevant Chinese records in China and Taiwan. He left Myanmar for good, a few years later, to join his family in Taipei, and died there.

As promised Mr. Chen Yi-sein 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 Manchu Qianlong³ Emperor. He then made an amazing 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

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1. U Tin Ngwe (1931-2004) later became Headmaster of a Middle School in Pakkoku.

2. 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 soon after it was established in Jan. 1955. Mr. Chen Yi-sein worked for M.H.C from 1956 to about 1987.

3. 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.p.155-161.

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 like a copy of the letter on silver had survived and had been found and identified by Mr. Chen Yi-sein in the Collection of the Gugong National Palace Museum in Taipei. He then told me in a personal letter that he was working on a fairly long paper on this Myanmar mission to the Court of the Chinese (Manchu) Emperor. For several years he continued his researches and kept adding new information for 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 he sent it to us in Yangon as his contribution for the Golden Jubilee Commemorative Volume of the Myanmar Historical Commission (MHC), which came out in time for our celebrations in January 2005.

Unfortunately, Mr. Chen Yi-sein's paper could not be printed in the Commemorative Essays Volume of MHC. because we received it too late and also because it was too long (96 closely written pages), and we did not want to cut out any parts. Also, it became the last paper written by Mr. Chen Yi-sein, as he died in March 2005, a few months after completing this paper. We are now trying to publish this paper¹ in the *Selected Writings of Mr. Chen Yi-sein*, in two volumes, one in English and one in Myanmar, as special publications in the MHC Golden Jubilee monograph series. The papers in Myanmar, including this last contribution of Mr. Chen Yi-sein, is about to be published.

Also, I would like to publish the Myanmar text of this invaluable palm-leaf mss. Its importance is immeasurable for it is the only Myanmar mss. text which has survived of a number of missions from Myanmar kings to the Court of Chinese Emperors.

I would like to dedicate my paper to Mr. Chen Yi-sein, 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 (Wu Shang-hsien) who came to the Myanmar King posing as the Chinese Emperor's envoy.

Another scholar, proficient both in Chinese and Myanmar, who studied the tin/silver plate letter from the Myanmar King now in Taipei, is Dr. Sylvie Pasquet of CNRS Paris. She came to see me from 18-28 February 2006, and we had long discussions about the palm-leaf mss. record and the text of the silver plate letter. I am grateful to her for elucidating me on the Chinese records of the Myanmar mission.

The Palm-leaf Manuscript and its Contents

The palm-leaf manuscript is entitled *Hanthawaddy yauk Min-ta-yar let-htet Myanmar than a-phwei Ta-yoke Pyi thwar mhat-tan*,² but this seems to be a title given by later owners of the mss. as it is not given in the text itself. No name of authorship is mentioned; also no date of composition. It was probably compiled in the early Konbaung period.

The palm-leaf mss. bundle comprises of three *anga* and three leaves (that is a total of 39 leaves). The palm-leaves are innumeraled in the traditional Myanmar manner, using consonants and vowels in sets of twelve. The mss. starts with *ka* (က) and ends with *ghi* (ခိ). Each leaf, starting with *ka* verso (i.e. the 2nd palm leaf page) has eight lines of text to a palm-leaf page. The palm-leaf mss. is a *kyan-hsit* (ကြံဆိပ်), 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 mss. donations made by them to monasteries which they supported. As the mss.

1. The paper in Myanmar is entitled "Myanmar Min Maha Dhamma-yazar-dipati let-htet Ta-yoke Naing-gan yauk Myanmar than a-phwei" "မြန်မာမင်းမဟာဓမ္မရာဇာဓိပတိလက်ထက် တရုတ်နိုင်ငံရောက် မြန်မာသံအဖွဲ့."

2. In Myanmar script: "ဟံသာဝတီရောက်မင်းတရားလက်ထက် မြန်မာသံအဖွဲ့တရုတ်ပြည်သွားမှတ်တမ်း"

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.

(1.) Examining the text, first of all I found that it 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 kyaw* (Tagu waning moon) 5 (=AD 15 March 1750), stating that from that date the journey began starting from the Royal Garden called Manaw Rammar¹ which can be identified as being in the capital Innwa (Ava).

The mss. also ended abruptly without a colophon, though important Myanmar mss. 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. *kĕ* (ကဲ) recto [plp.6] (i.e. a total of six plp.)² 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*.³ The list begins from the Royal Capital Innwa (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 which is in this mss. near its end from plp. *gha* (ဝ) (no.66) to plp. *ghĕ* (ဝဲ) (no.70) where the mss. ends. The list of post-stages at the beginning of the mss. ends with a tabulated total of towns (71 in no.), rivers (19 in no.), post-stages (179 in no.), and total distance (1014) *taing*,⁴ (10,14.500) *ta* and (153) *yuzana*⁵, (3) *ga-wot*⁶ and 25 *utthaba*⁷ (see *ki* (ကိ) recto (plp.no. 6). U Sai Aung Tun, Vice-Chairman of the Myanmar Historical Commission, and an authority on Shan history, has identified most of the Shan place-names shown on the mss. (see Appendix 1).

(2.) The next section of the mss. starts on *kĕ* (ကဲ) verso (plp.7). It is about the Chinese Emperor's capital. The Myanmar called the Emperors of China *Utibwa*, or as in this mss. *Uti-Min* (*Min* being the Myanmar word for king or ruler). The place where the Emperor resided is shown in the mss. 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* verso (plp. 7).

(3.) The next plp., *ku* (ကု) recto (plp.8) starts with another date Sakarac (henceforth abbreviated as Sak.) 1113 Wa-khaung waxing moon 8 (AD 19 July 1751) mentioning that the

1. Manaw Rammar garden (မနေ၍ရမ္မာဥယျာဉ်), a Royal Garden in Innwa 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.

2. 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 copy of the mss. and Arabic page numbers for this paper. I have also numbered each line on each page of the palm leaf mss.

3. A Myanmar measure of distance which could be either four cubits, seven cubits, or ten cubits.

4. *taing* (တိုင်) is a Myanmar unit of distance which is equivalent to 1,000 *ta*, or approximately two miles.

5. *yuzana* (ယုဇနာ) is a Myanmar measure of distance equal to 12.72 miles.

6. *ga-wot* (ဂါဝုတ်) is a Myanmar measure of distance equal to one quarter *yuzana*, or approximately one league (3 miles).

7. *utthaba* (ဥထာဝ) a distance of 140 cubits.

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 Innwa to Beijing. But scholars have now discovered that they stayed 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* recto (plp. 8), *viz.* 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.

(4.) The next date shown on the mss. is Sak. 1113 Wa-khaung waning moon 11 (AD 6 Aug. 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.

(5.) The next three pages from *k/* (က) recto (plp. 10) to *kay* (ကေ) 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.

(6.) Then strangely from page *kay* (ကေ) verso (plp. 13) the text goes back to Sak. 1111 Tagu waxing moon 5 (AD 5 Feb. 1750) when the "so-called" Chinese Emperor's envoys Aye Thu Yei and Tun Ka-yei were received by the Myanmar King at Innwa and the text of the Emperor's royal letter¹ is given (*kay* verso, plp.13 to *kaw* 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 (AD 1747-48) and Sak. 1110 (AD 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* recto (plp.16) there is a geographical demarcation in the Chinese Emperor's letter stating that the younger brother (Myanmar king) is given territory to govern from Kaing Mar (Gengma)², Maing Maing (Meng Meng, Shuang Jiang), Maing Maing,³ Maing Hlwei Thisin 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. The "umbrella wearing," i.e. high-ranking kings, are rulers from Bagan, Moe Byei, Pakhan, Mottama (Martaban), Hanthawaddy, Bago, Than Hlyin (Syria), Toungoo, Sagaing, Tei-tin(?), Kalay, Thaung Thut, Theindi (Hsenwi), Dawei (Tavoy), altogether 14 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* verso plp.17, line 3). Also that the two rulers should be *Raja Maha Meit*, or Royal Friends and Allies.

1. In Myanmar ရာဇဝံ (*raja-than*) royal order, or royal letter.

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

3. Maing Maing is repeated twice; probably a copyist error.

Appendix 1: List of Place-names in the Shan Region

As given on the palm-leaf mss. record of the Myanmar Diplomatic Mission to China, during the reign of Hanthawaddy yauk Mintara (Maha Damma Yaza Dipati, 1733-1752).

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

1. Arrived at Kan Thit Ywa (village)
2. Shan Pike Taw Ywa (village)
3. Yan Htaik Kway Ywa (village)
4. Myo Gyi
5. Chaung Yoe Seik Sakhan
6. At the foot of the Pagoda?
7. Nong San Ywa (village)
8. Lawk Sauk
9. Man Pan Ywa (village)
10. Mong Pyin Myo (town)
11. Nam Oat Taw Sakhan
12. Mong Lin Ywa (village)
13. Ho Hko Ywa (village)
14. Mong Ling Myo (town)
15. Loi Lin Ywa (village)
16. Pang Maw Ywa (village)
17. Arrived Hsenwi at Pang Nim village
18. Arrived Mong Tong at Hsup Tong Ywa (village)
19. Mong La Ywa (village)
20. Pang Maw Ywa (village) in Hsenwi.
21. Mong Sit Ywa (village)
22. Kar Lay Ywa (village)
23. Hman Me' Ywa (village)
24. Mong Liem Ywa (village)
25. MongYaw Myo (town)
26. Mong Kyit
27. Nam Taw Ywa (village)
28. Mong Lin Ywa (village)
29. Kun Long Ywa (village)
30. Mong Pin Ywa (village)
31. Baw (Maw) Twin Nge' (town)
32. Nam Se
33. Baw Long Hsan Twin Kyi (Gyi)
34. Pang Pin Ywa (village)
35. Nam Paing Ywa (village)
36. Mong Hkan in Wa Town
37. Mong Kaw Kung Ma
38. Mong Nwe (Noi)
39. Pang Saung
40. Kung Ma Town
41. Mong Hsa
42. Ho Hko

43. Mong Nyaung
44. Pang Kwe in China
45. Mong Kyo
46. Me Pa Chauk Kin Ywa (village)
47. Shan Shin Kun Ywa (village)
48. Mong Hkam Myo (town)
49. Mong Lin Myo (town)
50. Hte' Pyi Shaw Ywa (village)
51. Long Lin Ywa (village) near Mekong River
52. Hsan Ywa at Law Kya
53. Mu Kwa Myo (town)
54. Mong Ku Ywa (village) in Ta Lin
55. Mong Se's Area

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