

# **FILLING THE POWER VACUUM: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE SHAN IN CENTRAL MYANMAR (c. 1300-1550)**

Shwe Zin Maw\*

## **Abstract**

This paper is an effort to reexamine the origins and development of Shan influence in Central Myanmar. Except Bamar, Shans were the only people who enabled to establish longest dynasty and larger empire in Central Myanmar. They dominated Central Myanmar from the decline of Bagan to the rise of Taungoo dynasty. This paper also discusses the changes of political landscape brought about by the rise and fall of the Shans in Central Myanmar.

**Key words:** The establishment of the Shan dynasty

## **Introduction**

Shans entered Myanmar even before the beginning of Christian era. Their first settlements can be seen in northern Myanmar where the first kingdom of Mao Shan was established. They gradually migrated along Ayeyawaddy and Chindwin Rivers. Another Shan group moved from the eastern Shan States and founded the cluster of communities wherever they settled. After the collapse of Bagan dynasty, Three Shan Brothers become supreme lords of Central Myanmar and founded in Pinle, Myinzaing and Mekkhaya, the precedent city-states of Pinya and Inwa. They were assisted by another powerful Tai group from Lan Na, northern Thailand. The prevalence of power vacuum in Central Myanmar and absence of able Bamar leader paved the way for the rise of Shan dynasties of Pinya, Sagaing and Inwa. The main purpose of this paper is to depict the changes of political landscape of Myanmar from the downfall of Bagan dynasty to the rise of Taungoo dynasty. In this paper primary source materials and reliable secondary sources are analyzed and discussed with critical approach on the emergence and downfall of Shan dynasties in Central Myanmar.

---

\* Dr, Associate Professor, Department of History, Kyaukse University

## The Origins of the Shan

The Shan who belonged to the Mongoloid family of Tai ethnic group firstly settled in Central Asia, Huanghi River and Yangtze River valleys since the times immemorial. They later moved along the big rivers such as Brahmaputra, Chindwin, Ayeyawaddy, Shweli (Nam Mao), Than Lwin (Nam Kone), Me'nam, Me'kong, Black River (Nam-me-lam), Red River (Nam-me-long) and their tributaries and settled in southwestern China, Hainan, Vietnam, Laos Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar and in Assam (Sai Aung Tun, 2009, 3-7). In Their new homes, Shans were known by variety of names: Tai Lam Tai Kau, Tai Leng, Tai Lai, etc. (Scott and Hardiman, 1900, 1.a, 187-88). The name of Shan mostly derived from the name of the places, rivers, creeks they lived. In some cases they were known by their costumes and even by their teeth.

The first kingdom which consolidated the Tai people was Nan-chao kingdom, located in south-western China, founded in AD 650. After the collapse of Nan-chao's power, Tai people went looking for a new center to reestablish their kingdoms. The main body of the migrants moved to the fertile regions of Mao near the Shweli River. They chose this area to establish their new empire known as Mong Mao Long. When Traced, the location of Mao region favored Tai people to invade Upper Myanmar very easily. Overtime, the Tai people from Mong Mao area moved southward along the Ayeyawaddy River. They were joined by other group coming down from the present-day Shan States to settle in Central Myanmar (Sai Aung Tun, 2009, 13-14). Indeed, since they lived in Yunnan Province, Shans established clusters of communities known as *muang*, *mong* or *keng*- meaning state or town which was ruled by a hereditary chief known as *sao-pha*-lord of the sky. The Myanmar word *saw-bwa* had derived from *sao-pha* (Zen Peng, 1900, 372) At the Beginning of Christian era, Shans were supposed to establish Mongs in Upper Sagaing District, Mohnyin, Mong kwang, Mong Mit and Bhamo. Meanwhile other Tai groups established petty states in Hsenwi, Hsipaw, Mong Nai, Mong Pai, Yawng Hwe (Nyaung Shwe) and Kyaing Tong (Shwe Zin Maw, 2015-1). When Bagan was founded by king Anawrahta (1044-77) in the first half of eleventh century A.D, the Shan principalities had

already existed in the Trans-Than Lwin area, some areas of present-day Shan States and northern Myanmar.

### **Decline of Bagan and the rise of Shan power**

The diplomatic impasse with Mongol led to the downfall of Bagan. In September 1283, Mongol armies launched an offensive against Ngasaunggyan near Bhamo. This battle signaled King Narthihapati (1254-87) to flee from Bagan. The Mongol established a new province in northern Myanmar. It was known as Kien Mien (Than Tun, 2002,129-131). While the regions of Ayeyawaddy basin were plundered by Mongols, Three Shan Brothers from Myinzaing fought Mongol to defend Bagan. They were descendants of Chiang Mai, also known as Bhingharaha, and their ancestors come into Myanmar probably due the succession problem. Their father served under King Narathihapati who allotted fiefs to Three Shan Brothers near Kyaukse. However, Three Shan Brothers collaborated with Pyay-za Thihathu (son of Narathihapate and lord of Pyay) and revolted against Narathihapati (Yi Sein, 2011, 375-76). After the assassination of Nanathihapti, Kyaw Zwa (1287-98) ascended the throne. However, he was the titular king. The real power had fallen into the hands of Three Shan Brothers.

While Bagan was facing with the invasion of Mongol, a group of Tai people were organized in Chiang Mai under Phraya Mangrai between 1262 and 1273 (Ongsakul, 2005, 54-55). When Mangrai rose to power Mongols had already captured Yunnan, Myanmar and Tongkin. Mangrai, therefore, established a fortified *muang* in Kyaing Tong of Trans-Than Lwin region which became a buffer state between his Lan Na Kingdom and Mongol empire. The influence of Lan Na was not Limited to northern Thailand and Trans- Than Lwin area, but extended to Bago and Inwa. According to Chiang Mai Chronicle, King Mangrai went to Pukham-Ava in 1290-1291). He raised the huge army and arrived at the southern frontier of Inwa. The ruler of Inwa, after consulting with his minister, agreed to establish friendship by offering craftsmen and smithy to King Mangrai (Chaing Mai Chronicle, 1998,69). Mangrai also advanced to Bago and asked tributary gifts and daughter from Mon King (probably Wareru) as the gesture of alliance (Penth, 2004, 43). It is

attributed that Thihathu, the most ambitious ruler of Three Shan brothers, took assistance from Mangrai to build his power around Kyaukse and Inwa.

Three Shan Brothers chose the irrigated zones in Kyaukse area to establish their strongholds. Athinkhya, the eldest brother, built his stronghold in Myinzaing while the younger two Yazathingyan and Thihathu built their capitals at Mekkhaya and Pinle respectively. They won the allegiance of the Shan chiefs of Mohnyin and other principalities. Later they occupied Ma-le and Singu from Mongol's hands. When Mongols reinvaded into Myinzaing in 1301, they paid gold as bribes to the commanders of Mongol army (Hmannan, 2008, 220). In 1306, Thihathu observed *abhiseka* coronation by assuming the title of Anandathihathurazeyadewa. After the demise of his eldest brother in 1310, Thihathu killed his reigning brother Yazathingyan. During that time the influence of Mongol was wiped out from Central Myanmar and the Kien Mien, the Mongol subordinate state, was officially abolished (Than Tun, 2002,154).The lack of the able leaders from Bamar and evacuation of Mongol army brought about to emerge a power vacuum in Central Myanmar. Thihathu and his successors were able to fill this power vacuum and established Shan dynasty in Central Myanmar.

After the assassination of Yazathingyan, Thihathu made unsuccessful attempts to build Inwa as royal capital for four times. (Inwa, MS, 1047).He then chosen Pinya and established new royal capital under the name of Vijarapura. (Pinya, MS, 679). He invited Queen Saw of Bagan to attend the opening ceremony of new palace. Queen Saw was recognized as the Queen mother and a good friend and royal adviser to the Shan Kings (Sai Aung Tun, 2009,96). In order to strengthen friendship ties with Bamar, Thihathu married the daughter of Narathihapati, and had a son named Athinkhaya Sao Yun (1315-23). Sao Yun became the founder of another Shan dynasty at Sagaing. His territory extended as far north as to Manipur, but lasted only fourteen-nine years (U Tin, 2012, 118). The important reason of the short-lived dynasty at Sagaing was the emergence of court intrigues in which the royalties assassinated each other and finally the state passed to a kinsman by marriage. There Narathu (1359-64), chief of Pinya, angry at an outsider's accession to the throne and invited Mao Shans to depose him. Mao Shans, led by Thochibwa, plundered Sagaing and Pinya. Crowds of Myanmar fled to

Taunggoo (Hmannan, 2003 a, 392-93). Narathu was arrested by Mao Shans and was taken as prisoners by Thochibwa.

### **Rise of Inwa**

After the withdrawal of Mao Shans, Thadominphya (1364-68), who belonged to the Sagaing family, built Inwa. Although he reigned only for three years, died of small-pox in 1368, he became the successful founder of a new Shan dynasty at Inwa which lasted really 200 years. He was succeeded by his brother-in-law Mingyi Swasawke (1368-1401). Meanwhile Ka-le, Mogaung and Mohnyin, petty Ahom states in the north, fought each other. As they could not fight to win decisive victory, chiefs of Mohnyin and Ka-le asked for help from Inwa. Mingyi Swa took opportunity of this hostility and finally annexed Mohnyin (Toe Hla, 2012, 8). The remarkable achievement of Mingyi Swa was the building of Zidaw Weir in Kyaukse District and renovation of Meitila Lake. Another important step of Mingyi Swa to secure his power was to control Yamethin. He hold Yemathin as an appanage before he became king of Inwa. Yamethin was a major rice-cultivated zone after Kyaukse (Fernquist, 2005, 291). His influence extended to Rakhine by appointing chief of Rakhine (Hmannan, 2003 a, 414-16). In 1371 Mingyi Swa met with Banya U, Mon king of Bago to demarcate the frontier between the two kingdoms. However when Rajadarit ascended the throne of Bago in 1358, his uncle Laukpya wrote to Mingyi Swa, offering to hold Bago as vassal state to depose Rajadarit. The acceptance of Mingyi Swa to Laukpya's invitation signaled the outbreak of long hostility between Bago and Inwa.

While the war with Bago was escalating, Mohnyin Shans invaded into Mu Valley in 1391. Mingyi Swa organized *myozas* in the north and went upstream to Tagaung. However the land forces under Theinkhathu Saw Hnaung, commandant of Mingyi Swa, was unable to engage the Shans and withdrew to Sagaing. Shans followed Theinkhathu and stormed Sagaing. Mingyi Swa went downstream to Inwa and prepared strong defensive position. Thilawa, lord of Yamethin, summoned the chiefs of Taungoo, Taungdwin, Yamethin etc. and fought Shan forces. After fierce battle, Shans withdrew from Inwa and Sagaing with heavy losses (Hmannan, 2003 a, 431-32). When traced, Mao Shans, the powerful Shan groups from the north,

repeatedly invaded Central Myanmar and eliminated the two dynasties, Pinya and Sagaing, successively. After the unsuccessful invasion of Mohnyin Shans, kings of Inwa did not allow to rule *Sawbwa* at Mohnyin. Instead, *myo-za-town* fief-holder was appointed to rule Mohnyin.

When Mingyi Swa passed away in 1401, his son Mingaung (1401-22) ascended the throne of Inwa. In 1405, he was able to make friendship with Onbaung (Hsipaw) and Yawnghwe (Nyaung Shwe) *Sawbwas*. The establishment of friendship with these two principal *Sawbwas* eased tensions with the southern Shan States and favoured Mingaung to give priority to attack Rajadirit. However in 1413 northern Shan state of Hsenwi (Theinni) invaded Inwa and plundered the nearby villages. In addition Two Shan Brothers, chiefs of Mawke and Mawdon in Shwebo district, attacked Myedu. Rajadirit, taking opportunity on the distresses of Mingaung, invaded Inwa with strong naval expedition. When he encamped at Sagaing, Rajadirit met with *Thumyat*, an eminent monk of Pinya, who admonished him the sin of bloodshed. Rajadirit agreed to withdraw from Sagaing. However, the war with Mons prolonged due to the expedition of Mingaung to Lower Myanmar (Hmannan, 2003, 445-65).

After the demise of Mingaung, his son Hsinbyushin Thihathu (1422-26) ascended the throne. Thihathu assigned U-dein, lord of Myohla, as the commandant to fight against Mons. U-dein's ancestral line had traced back to king Narapatisithu of Bagan. After the conclusion of war with Mons, he was allotted Mohnyin as fief and known as Mohnyin Thado (Toe Hla, 2012, 9). The war with Mons continued in Hsinbyushin Thihathu's reign. When he besieged Dagon, Thihathu accepted the submission of Shinsawpu, sister of Bamyayan-the King of Dagon, as bride. However, he was killed in the plot of Queen Bo-me. After the demise of Thihathu, ministers had to face with the revival of Shan invasion, but they were able to defend Inwa. Thihathu was succeeded by his son Minhla-nge in 1462. He was assassinated by Queen Bo-me who invited another Shan chief known as Ka-le Kyetaungnyo.

The accession of Ka-le Kyetaungnyo was followed by the invasion of the king of Mohnyin who was accompanied by his two sons and sacked the fleet of Inwa. Ka-le Kyetaungnyo fled from Inwa to Salin where he died of sickness. The death of Kyetaungnyo opened the way for Mohnyin Thado

(1427-1440) to take the throne of Inwa (U Kala, 2006 b, 60-62). Mohnyin Thado made efforts to secure his throne. He enabled to subdue Taungdwingyi, Yamethin, Pinle and Taungoo. In his reign, Onbaung attacked Myedu and even for eight months drove Mohnyin Thado out of his place, withdrawing on payment of large sum of money. Mohnyin Thado was succeeded by his sons Minye' Kyawzwa (1440-43) and Narapati (1443-69). During the reign of Minye' Kyawzwa, Shan chiefs of Ka-le and Mohnyin fought each other. Myinye' Kyawzwa, accompanied by his brother-in-laws Thihapate and Thirizeyathura, advanced to Mohnyin. However when he arrived at Myedu, Mohnyin Sawbwa and Ka-le Sawbwa took refuge under Minye Kyawzwa. The King deposed two Sawbwas and allotted Mohnyin to Thihapate and Ka-le to Thirizeyathura (U Kala, 2006 b, 73). In 1441, he ordered his two brother-in-laws to attack Mogaung. As Mogaung *Swabwa* withstood the attack of Mohnyin and Ka-le, Minye' Kyawzwa led an army to Mogaung as reinforcement. He could not return to Inwa, passed away at Mogaung.

In 1480s, Mohnyin and rising principality Mong Mit strengthened themselves through trade with Ming dynasty of China. Mong Mit even sent tribute mission to the Chinese Court (Fernquist, 2005, 298). Mid- fifteenth century saw the chaotic situations in Mohnyin and Mogaung due to the rebellion of Mohnyin against Inwa. This rebellion was led by son of Thihapate, nephew of late Minye' Kyawzwa, named Min U-di. He collaborated with Mogaung Sawbwa Thopokbwa to attack Inwa. However, U-di was betrayed by Mogaung *Sawbwa* who gave information to Narapati, King of Inwa, the plot. U-di was killed by Narapati. Thopokbwa was allotted Mohnyin as reward. Between 1476 and 1507, the hostilities broke out among Mohnyin, Mogaung and Ka-le. Even in this situation Mohnyin Shan Salon invaded into Dipe'yin and forced King of Inwa to recognize Myedu and Ngayane' as the Mohnyin's subordinate towns.

Since 1507, the power of Mohnyin reached at its peak and enabled to challenge the weak king of Inwa. Mohnyin *Sawbwa* Salon organized 200 elephants, 800 horses and 120,000 men and annexed Mingin from thence to Myedu. Although the king of Inwa made utmost effort to defend Myedu, his forces collapsed under fierce attack of Mohnyin Salon. The areas between Chindwin and Ayeyawaddy fell under Mohnyin Shans. Inwa lost control over

its northern frontier and food supply when Mohnyin invaded and occupied the northern part of Mu River Valley (Fernquist, 2005, 317).

In the reign of Shwenankyawshin (1502-1527), son of Narapati, Mohnyin Shans enabled to occupy Sagaing, Kani, Kane, Nattaung, Badon, Amyint, Pakhan, Bankyi and the regions located in the west of Ayeyawaddy River comprising Sa-gu, Salin, Baunglin and Legaing. Mohnyin Salon entered alliance with the lord of Pyay and returned to Inwa. Shwemankyawshin was under helpless situation and looked for the assistance from Onbaung Khonhmaing. In 1526 Shwenankyawshin was killed in the battle against Mohnyin Salon who successfully annexed Inwa (Toe Hla, 2012, 13). However, Mohnyin Salon could do nothing to solve the chaotic situation of the country. In 1527, he returned home after installing his son Hso Han Hpa (Thohanbwa) on throne of Inwa. Thohanbwa was noted by chroniclers as a full-blooded savage. He destroyed pagodas and monasteries, killed monks whom he thought against him. Finally he was killed by Mingyi Yannaung who offered throne to Hkun Mong (Hkon Maing), Sawbwa of Hsipaw in 1546. Although Hkon Maing attempted to unite Shans and Bamars, he could not implement his plan and passed away in 1546. He was succeeded by his son Mobyè Narapati, Sawbwa of Mong Pai. (Sai Aung Tun, 2009, 103-04). Meanwhile, Tabinshwehti (1531-50), rising Champion of Hanthawaddy, enabled to exploit the disunity of Shans and extended his power to Inwa. His successor King Bayinnaung (1551-81) successfully ousted the Shan influence from central Myanmar and put all of the Shan principalities under his rule from 1557 to 1581 (U - Thayaw, 2006, 200-220). The disunity of Shan chiefs and rise of Taungoo dynasty marked the end of Shan influence in central Myanmar.

### **Conclusion**

At the beginning of the first millennium A.D, Shans established their first city-states in northern Myanmar, in some areas of Southern Shan States and Trans-Than Lwin region. Before the power of Bamar was consolidated in Bagan in the eleventh century, Shans were organized under their first kingdom known as Mao, located around Shweli River. Although the Shan established their city-states and kingdom in said areas, there was no significant relation with Myanmar during Bagan period. When Bagan was invaded by Mongols,



three Shan Brothers, descendants of northern Thailand, attacked the Mongols and involved in a plot to dethrone King Narathihapate of Bagan. After the fall of Bagan, they became the real rulers of Myanmar. They entered alliance with Chiang Mai and other Shan principalities. Lack of Bamar leaders to fill the power vacuum after the fall of Bagan opened the way for the Shans to establish dynasties of Pinya. Thihathu, youngest brother, became the founder of Pinya. His successors dominated Sagaing and Inwa. The first powerful Shan dynasty was established by Thadominphya who belonged to the Sagaing Shan family. His dynasty lasted about 180 years. However the kings of Inwa could do nothing for the consolidation of the Kingdom and their throne. Inwa was repeatedly invaded by the powerful Shan group from Mohnyin. Although the chiefs of Mohnyin had the opportunity to prolong the Shan influence in Inwa, the rivalries and power struggles among Shan chiefs led to their decline in mid-sixteenth century.

### **Acknowledgements**

History of the Shan States is familiar to me since I had prepared for my M.A Thesis. When I had the opportunity to write Ph.D Dissertation, I chose the field of Shan History and worked under the supervision of U Sai Aung Tun, Member of Myanmar Historical Commission and notable Shan scholar, and under valuable advices of U Sai Kham Mong, Director of the Center of Tai Studies, Taunggyi, Shan State. I would like to thank to my supervisor and mentors who fulfilled knowledge on the history of Shans. My special thanks also goes to the Director General and officials of the Department of Higher Education (Mandalay Branch), and the faculty members of Kyaukse University, headed by Rector and Pro-rector, who made efforts to complete this research paper.

### **References**

- Chaing Mai, (1998), *The Chaing Mai Chronicle*, David K.Wyatt and Aroomrut Wirchienkeeo (ed), Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books
- Fernquist , Jon, (2005), "Min-gyi-nyo, the Shan Invasion of Ava (1524-27), and the Beginning of Expansionary Warfare in Taungoo Burma (1486-1539)", *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research*, Vol 3, No. 2, Autumn 2005, ISSN, 1479-8484.
- Hmannan, (2003) a, *Hmannan Maha Yazawindawgyi* (The Glass Palace Chronicle), Vol. I, Yangon, Ministry of Information (Fifth Impression)

- Inwa, M.S, (1047), “Inwa Nan-ti Sadan” (Account on the Foundation of Inwa), *Parabaik M.S*, National Library Collection
- Ongsakul, Sarawadee, (2005), *History of Lan Na*, Chitrapon Tanratankul (trans), Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books
- Penth, Hans, (2004), *A Brief History of Lan Na*, Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books
- Pinya, M.S, (679) “Pinya Myo, Awa Myo, Amarapura Myo-ti Sadan Phaya” (Account on the Foundation of Pinya, Inwa and Amarapura), *Parabaik M.S*, National Library Collection
- Sai Aung Tun, (2009), *History of Shan States : Form its Origins to 1962*, Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books
- Scott, J.G and J.P Hardiman, (1900), 1 a, *Gazetteers of Upper Burma and the Shan States*, Five Volumes in Two Parts, Part I, Vol.I, Rangoon, Government Printing and Stationary
- Shwe Zin Maw, (2015), “The Uneasy Subordinate Alliance: The Relations between Myanmar and the Shan States in Late Nineteenth Century”, Paper Submitted to the International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies Conference (ICBMS), Center for Southeast Asian Students, Chiang Mai University
- Than Than, (2002), *Khit-haung Myanmar Yazawin* (The Early History of Myanmar), Yangon, Inwa Publishing House
- Toe Hla, (2012), “Myanmar Thamaing De'-ga Mohnyin” (Mohnyin through Myanmar History), Lecture Delivered at Mohnyin Degree College
- U Kala, (2006) b, *Maha Yazawingyi* (The Great Chronicle), Three Volumes, Volume II, Yangon, Yabyay Press
- U-Thayaw Amatkyi, (2006), *Hanthawaddy Hsinbyumyashin Ayedawbon Mawgun Udan*, (The Achievements and Conquests of King Bayinnaung), U Toe Hla (ed), Yangon, Myanmar Historical Commission
- U Tin, (2012), *Myanmar Min Okchokpon Sadan Hnint Bodawpaya Ei Yazathat Khaw Ameindawdangyi* (Treatise on the Rule of Myanmar Kings and Royal order of Bodawpaya called Yazathat), Yangon, Seik Ku Cho Cho Press
- Yi Sein, (2011), *Tai(Shan) Mya Shwe-pyaung Win-yauk Labon* (The Migration of Tai (Shans), *Selected Writing of U Yi Sein (1924-2005)*, U Thaw Kaung (comp), Yangon, Seik Ku Cho Cho Press
- Zeng Peng, “The Dai Suzerain of Xisaunvanna”, Proceedings of the Fourth Thai International Conference, Vol III, Kumping, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies