

The Fall of Feudalism (1878-1885)

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Abstract

The end of Myanmar feudalism was the one among many other things to the head to collision with the imperialistic capitalism. Myanmar feudal lords were found to be ignorant, not knowing the nature and true intension of the then rolling imperialism: they did not know how to prevent or stop it or know to align oneself to it. Myanmar monarchy was in fact complacent to their glory and victory in their little domain. Under Thibaw reign, the third Anglo-Myanmar war broke out and ended the Myanmar feudalistic monarchical system.

Key words: Political Occupation

Introduction

Myanmar monarchy was absolute in which son succeeded the throne upon the death of reigning father. The king's power was boundless where every words of the king became the order and the law. The king could appoint someone, confer him rank and title and also dismiss him from the post and repeal the title. He was the most powerful in the kingdom and also the chief administrator in his capacity as head of the state.

Myanmar monarchy can be said firmly established in Bagan period, particularly in the reign of founder king Aniruddha (1044-1077), that lasted till the year 1287, in which Bagan empire fell due to the invasion of Mongol peoples. This monarchy well passed through the ages of Pinya, Sagaing, Ava, Taungu, Nyaungyan and Konbaung. After the lapsed of almost 841 years, Myanmar monarchy ended abruptly in Thibaw's reign (1878-1885). Though the fall of Myanmar imperialist capitalism, it in part was due to its inherent fallacies of monarchy. After the three wars with the British, Myanmar monarchy came to a half and the kingdom became a British colony. The first Anglo- Myanmar war (1824-26) was fought in the reign of king Bagyidaw (1819-1837), the immediate cause of which was the dispute over the ownership of Shinmapyu island at the mouth of Naaf river, that forms natural boundary between Myanmar and the British India. To the minutes of the war can be found in A C Banerjee "*The Eastern Frontier of British India*" and Natmauk Phone Kyaw's "*Ingalaik - Myanmar Sitthamaing*" (History of Anglo-Myanmar Wars), it deems suitable to omit there details here.¹ The Indian Viceroy Lord Amherst declared war on Myanmar on the day of 5th March 1824.² The defeat of Myanmar forces led the British marched up to the Yandabo village beyond Myingyan, about 40 miles away from the royal resident Ava capital. On 24th February 1826, The Yandabo treaty was concluded and the first-Anglo - Myanmar war came over.³

The lot of Myanmar people was very huge. The economy came to ruin, in addition to loss of men and properties in the war. Through the days of monarchy till this war, Myanmar never had lost its territory to foreign country. But at the end of this war, Myanmar had to cede

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¹ (a) A C Banerjee, *The Eastern Frontier of British India, 1787 - 1826*, Calcutta, A Mukerjee of Co. Private Ltd, 1964 (Henceforth, Banerjee, 1964)

(b) Natmauk Phone Kyaw, *Ingalaik - Myanmar Sitthamaing* (History of Anglo-Myanmar Wars), Yangon, Bagan Book House, 1968. (Henceforth, Phon Kyaw, 1968)

² (a) Banerjee, 1964, 240

(b) Phone Kyaw, 1968, 22

³ (a) Than Tun, *The Royal Orders of Burma, AD 1598-1885*, Part VIII, AD 1819-1883, Kyoto, The Center for Southeast Arian Studies, Kyoto University, 1988, 441-449 (Henceforth, Than Tun, 1988)

(b) Mg Mg Tin, *Konbaungzet Mahayazawin Dawgyi* (The Great Chronicle of Konbaung Dynasty), Vol-II, Yangon, Yarpui Book House, 2004, 283-284 (Henceforth, Mg Mg Tin, 2004 b)

(c) Phone Kyaw, 1968, 150-153

Rakhine and Taninthayi to the British along with the abandoning of Assam, Manipur and Cachar. Though the war was over, Myanmar king was unable to reconstruct the ruined economy of the kingdom, as he was busy to settle the war indemnity, liable to pay the British. He was also preoccupied with the matters of the conclusion of commercial treaty and other frontier affairs.⁴

Then King Bagan's reign (1846-1853), the second Anglo-Myanmar War broke out on 2nd April 1852. The reason of this war was to open a trade route from Bhamo to China for the British merchants and Lord Dalhousie's colonial policy.⁵ At the time of British proclamation on the annexation of Bago province, Princes Mindon and Kanaung staged a rebellion against king Bagan on the day of 18th December 1852.⁶ On 17th February 1853, Mindon ascended to the throne.⁷ After his ascension, Mindon tried to halt the war and after the accession of it, he had tried much to rebuild the country by introducing a range of reform measures. Mindon knew well that the key to the development of the country rested on the economic reformation. He also knew that in order to maintain the feudal monarchy and to defend the country from the danger of imperialists, the country must be strong in all aspects and respects. For these reasons, Mindon had carried out a range of reforms in the country.

Mindon was unfortunate to rule only the two-fifth of territorial expanse of the former Myanmar empire. Territorial contraction meant the decrease of revenue to the royal court. Mindon succeeded a country without-seaports, along with the lost of rice bowl deltanic area and lower Myanmar, the sea of fishpaste and dried and salted fish industry. To be able to repulse the close enemy of the British, Mindon had endeavoured to make the country modern. The principal impetus of this drive might be to upkeep the feudal monarchy, but for which it became necessary to change the diplomatic policy in relation with foreign countries. In this regard, Mindon had tried his best to maintain a good foreign relation.

The first embassy ever sent to foreign countries was headed by Nanmadaw *Wun Mingyi Min Mahar Mingaung Yazar*. The emissary started their journey on 20th September 1854, but only to arrive back in Amarapura on 14th February 1855, with bare hands.⁸ Not only with the British, but also with other countries Mindon had tried to establish diplomatic relation. Of these, France came first, to which an emissary was sent in 1856⁹ with an intention to get help in the establishment of diplomatic relation with America was a failure.¹⁰

After Britain and France, Myanmar attempted to open diplomatic relation with Italy, which was successful to be able to conclude a treaty on 16th December 1872.¹¹ However, due

⁴ (a) Dr Toe Hla, *Alaungmintayagyiei Konbaung Shwepyi* (Alaungmintayagyi's Golden Konbaung), Yangon, South Okkalapa Press, 1993, 88-91, (Henceforth, Toe Hla, 1993)

(b) W.S Desai, *History of the British Residency in Myanmar, 1826-1840*, Rangoon, The University of Rangoon, 1939, P - 12 (Henceforth, Desai, 1939)

⁵ (a) D.G.E Hall, *Europe and Burma*, London, Oxford University Press, 1945, 143-147 (Henceforth, Hall, 1945)

(b) Dorothy Woodman, *The Making of Burma*, London, the Crescent Press, 1962, 122-153 (Henceforth, Woodman, 1962)

(c) Phone Kyaw, 1968, 181-189

⁶ Mg Mg Tin, *Konbaungzet Mahayazawin Dawgyi* (The Great Chronicle of Konbaung Dynasty), Vol-III, Yangon, Yarpui Book House, 2004, P - 93 (Henceforth, Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c)

⁷ Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 112

⁸ Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 152-154

⁹ (a) Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 15b-16b

(b) Dr Khin Mya Kyu (trans), *Konbaungkhit Pyinthit Myanmar Hset Hsan Ye Thamaing* (History of Konbaung Franco-Myanmar Relation), Yangon, Padamya Ngamauk Sarpya, 1999, 81-83 (Henceforth, Khin Mya Kyu, 1999)

¹⁰ Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 156

¹¹ Mg Htin Aung, "Three Unpublished Paper of Harvey", *JBRIS*, Vol. VII, Part I, 1975, 20 (Henceforth, Htin Aung, 1975)

to the obstruction of English the implementation of the treaty did not materialize as prescribed by the treaty.

To maintain feudal monarchy, Mindon tried his best by introducing reform measures. Mindon was the first who endeavored to transform traditional sufficient economy into commercial one. He had established well over 50 factories¹² during the period from 1858 to 1875. But all his effort came out a failure owing to a number of reasons: heavy dependence upon foreign personnel's, dishonesty of some foreigners, lack of expertise on the part of Myanmar people, obstructive intervention by the British and above all the assassination of Prince Kanaung, who headed the industrialization of the country. Apart from the establishment of industries, Mindon sent many scholars to such countries of India, Italy, France and England.¹³ However, the benefit of these scholars for Myanmar was not found. Of the modernization measures, introduction of the mint was important, as it was a reform of exchange medium, the vital tool of commerce and trade, upon which success of trade and commerce in part depended. The Yadanabon mint began its production of peacock coins on 11th November 1865.¹⁴ Peacock coins evidently increased the trade and commerce. Many flaws and failures notwithstanding, the kingdom of Upper Myanmar went on existed in Mindons reign, who passed away on 1st October 1878.¹⁵

Thibaw ascended to the throne on 1st October 1878,¹⁶ by the help of Queen Sinbyumashin and Kinwun Mingyi. After Thibaw's ascension, scores of royal bloods arrested in the last days of ailing Mindon, were massacred on 13th, 17th and 18th February 1879, to secure the throne for Thibaw.¹⁷ It can be said that this mass slaughter was done in order to upkeep the feudal power and system. Thibaw also had carried out administrative reform in that the kingdom was divided into 14 departments, each headed by an administrative official.¹⁸

In Thibaw's reign, possibility of the introduction of constitutional monarchy system once appeared due to the persuasion of the king by some ministers. It was learnt that within a short time span of three weeks, Thibaw consented to convene a legislature that resembled modern day legislative house. Ministers had built a meeting hall on 18th October 1878¹⁹ while the effort to introduce the constitutional monarchy was going on, there would be those who preferred the old traditional absolute monarchy. At the height of two opposing streams, Yenangyaung *Myoza Wungyi*, Magway *Myoza Wungyi* and *Wundauk Myoith Myoza* were being deposed from their job, on 19th January 1879,²⁰ Among them, Magway *Myoza Wungyi* was the most influential, who helped Mindon to secure his throne. On 22nd and 23rd January 1879, one Shwemyodaw *Wun*, two *Atwin Wuns* and one *Wundauk* were appointed.²¹ These newly appointed officials might be regarded anti-constitutional monarchy. This was also the first change of high officials in the court.

¹² Ma Kyan, *Konboungei Nauk Sone Ahman* (The Last Vigour of Konbaung), Myanmar Yadana Sarpay, Yangon, 2004, 5-6 (Henceforth, Kyan, 2004)

¹³ Kyan, 2004, 131

¹⁴ Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 22b-227

¹⁵ Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, c, 297

¹⁶ Hluttaw Parabaik Ahmat-atha Atokauk Hmatpon (Abbreviation used in the Hluttaw Parabaiks) Vol.II, Yangon, Government Printing, 1901, p278 (Henceforth: Hluttaw Parabaik,1901)

¹⁷ (a) Than Tun, *Nehle Yazawin* (Peripatetic History), Yangon, Pyizone book House, 2004, 402 (Henceforth, Than Tun 2004)

(b) Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 338-340

¹⁸ (a) Than Tun, *The Royal Orders of Myanmar, AD-1598-1885*, Part Nine, AD-1598-1885, Kyoto, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 1989, 912-915(Henceforth, Than Tun, 1989)

(b) Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 32b-327

¹⁹ Than Tun, 2004, 402

²⁰ Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 377

²¹ Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 377

Of the heads of 14 administrative departments, seven of *Wungyi* and *Atwinwun* were found to be some deposed and some imprisoned.²² Thus, it can be concluded that the 14 departments administration was not successful. Since the dismissal of efficient ministers, the strength of the state sapped and the industrialization effort unworkable, 9 departments administration system was introduced on 12th August 1880, by proclaiming a new law. Thus 9 departments²³ were:

	Name of Department	Head of Department
1.	Foreign and Religious Affairs	<i>Wungyi, Khambat Myoza</i>
2.	Civil and Criminal	<i>Wungyi, Yaw Myoza</i>
3.	Customs and Dues	<i>Wungyi, Taunggwun Myoza</i>
4.	<i>Thathamedha - Tithe</i>	<i>Atwinwun, Pin Myoza</i>
5.	Land Forces	Atwinwun Yenangyaung Myoza Atwinwun Taingda Myoza
6.	Water Forces	Hlethin Atwinlwun Sale Myoza
7.	Handicrafts and Manufactures	AtwinwunKani Myoza
8.	Agriculture	<i>Wundauk Myothit Myoza</i>
9.	Legislative and Judiciary	<i>Wungyi Legaing Myoza</i>

Other remaining ministers, such as Kinwun Mingyi, Myaunghla *Wundauk*, Phanchet *Wundauk*, Padein *Wun* etc. who had been arrived abroad and men of intelligence and knowledge were never reappointed. Myanmar court was thoroughly divided among such gangs of Taingda, Hnethin *Atwinwun* and neutral *Kinwun*.²⁴

Exploiting the divided situation of Myanmar court, British and French alike intervened in the affairs of the court and more and more spies were planted both in the court and the country. It had been found that since the ascension of Thibaw, the New York Times had covered various news of Myanmar Court propagandizing bad news around the world, which turned out to be much successful in discrediting Myanmar court.²⁵ The informer was Chevalier Andreino, the Italian Councillor and agent of British Irrawaddy Flotilla Co, who resided in Mandalay. He was also the man who sent Myanmar Court news to British High Commissioner.²⁶ Being well informed about the Myanmar Court affairs, British enjoyed a good position to intervene into the affairs of Myanmar Court.

The Indian Viceroy Lord Lytton, on nearing about the ascension of Thibaw to the throne, sent a felicitation, on behalf of the British government. At the same time he sent a telegram to the British Resident R. B. Shaw, informing him about the British position.²⁷ It was said that British opposed the massacre of royal bloods, which led to the British to consider whether it should go on posted British Resident in the Myanmar capital or not. On introduction of the viceroy, show formally objected the killing of royal bloods to the then foreign minister Kinwun Mingyi on 19th February 1879 and demanded not to kill further more of royal bloods.²⁸ Kingwun replied that the massacre was in accord with the Myanmar

²² Phone Kyaw, 1968, 293

²³ Than Tun, 1989, 993-994

²⁴ Phone Kyaw, 1968, 294

²⁵ U Ko Lay, *King Thibaw and New York Times newspaper*, Yangon, Yanpyi Book House, 2008, 45-78 (Henceforth, Ko Lay, 2008)

²⁶ E C V Focucar, *They Reigned in Mandalay*, London, Dennis Dobson, 1946, 112-115 (Henceforth, Fucar, 1946)

²⁷ A C Banerjee, *British Relation with Myanmar, 1826-1866*, Bonbay, The National Information Co Ltd, 1947, 31-32 (Henceforth, Bamerjee, 1947)

²⁸ Bamerjee, 1947, 33-34

tradition, on 20th February 1879.²⁹ At that time, the viceroy had already instructed Shaw if security conditions were not good, the Resident could withdraw.³⁰ Amid these situations, Shaw died on 15th June 1879. Instead of appointing a new resident, British kept only charged affairs in Mandalay. But on 7th October 1879, British withdrew the Resident and from that time on ward, diplomatic relation between Myanmar and British come to a cease.³¹ The close down of British resident caused the Myanmar court worried. It is thought that the court circle at that time might have the conjecture that there might have war in the future between the British and Myanmar. On this assumption, Myanmar began to gold military training by the French and Italian trainers.³² While the military preparation were under way, Myanmar on the other hand tried to restore diplomatic relation with British.

The result of these efforts was the sending of an embassy to the Indian Viceroy in November 1879, to hold direct negotiation with him. The head of the mission was Myaunghla *Myoza* Mingyi Thiri Mahar Zeyathu.³³ However, Myanmar emissary had to wait over 7 months at the border town Thayet and later returned home Mandalay. One of major reason might be that the draft treaty of Myanmar included clauses, which were totally unacceptable to the British. Thayet Deputy commissioner asked Myaunghla *Myoza* about the purpose of the emissary and the reply showed that it did not significantly benefit or interest to the British. For this reason, the High Commissioner reported to the Viceroy that there would be no benefit to accept the Myanmar embassy. On this ground, the Viceroy did not order to proceed the embassy.³⁴ Myanmar embassy had to endure the ordeal of delay at the border for about seven months. Myanmar at this juncture tried to repair the relation more energetically.

The second Myanmar embassy was sent in April 1881. The purpose was to deal directly with England and to enter a treaty with the Indian Viceroy. The embassy was headed by *Atwinwun* Kyaukmyaung *Myoza* Mingyi Thiri Mahar Zeya Nanda Kyaw Htin and went to Calcutta. But as the *Viceroy* was in Simala, they went to there. When negotiation began for a treaty, many difficulties raised and the embassy returned home on order of his Majesty on 31st August 1882.³⁵ Myanmar effort to negotiate with the British proved futile, indicating Myanmar was in a position, so weak to accept whatever demands British might have asked.

On 26th April 1883, Myanmar government informed British High Commissioner that a Myanmar emissary would be sent to Europe, and on 30th April 1883, the embassy left Mandalay and toured such European Countries of France, Italy and Spain. The embassy was headed by *Atwinwun* Myothit *Myoza* Mingyi Maha Zeya Thingyan.³⁶ The embassy arrived Paris, France on 13th August 1883. It arrived back Mandalay on 21st May 1885.³⁷ The mission could be regarded successful. On 15th January 1885, a France Myanmar treaty was concluded, and on 4th April 1885, on Alliance treaty was entered between Myanmar and German.³⁸ All these can be seen as of Myanmar effort to counterweight the British by finding out European friends. It was successful, but led to the British satisfaction especially to the possibility of

²⁹ (a) D G E Hall, *Europe and Myanmar*, London, Oxford University Press, 1945, 167 (Henceforth, Hall, 1945)

(b) Than Tun, 2004, 411

³⁰ Banerjee, 1947, 34

³¹ (a) Than Tun, 2004, 411

(b) Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 348

³² Than Tun, 2004, 415-6

³³ Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 351-352

³⁴ (a) Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 356

(b) Woodman, 1962, 217-218

(c) Hall, 1945, 169

³⁵ (a) Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 381

(b) Than Tun, 2004, 427

³⁶ Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 396-397

³⁷ Than Tun, 2004, 427

³⁸ Than Tun, 2004, 431

France entrance Asian market, including that of Myanmar market, where British had already established. Therefore, British began to focus on Myanmar affairs.

While intent on the relation between Myanmar and European countries, British came to know about the France-Myanmar treaty on 3rd March 1885. It was that Myanmar King granted French engineer Bonvillein to mine ruby and precious stones at Mogok Kyat Pyin and Kathe.³⁹ British were indignant at such Myanmar overture to the French. Later, British got a copy of France Myanmar treaty, that envisioned to construct railways, to open a bank and distribute monetary notes, to mine ruby, to import arms through the land route and to cancel timber production right given to Bombay Bamarh Timber Co. by any means.⁴⁰ The France government on its part sent Frederic Hass as Vice Consul to Myanmar and in return Myanmar sent U Myu as Myanmar ambassador to Paris on 30th June 1885.⁴¹ British on its part began to plan to annex upper Myanmar. At this juncture, Rangoon Chamber of Commerce and London Chamber of Commerce asked British government to annex upper Myanmar for the expansion of trade and commerce. Major argumentators suggesting to dethrone Thibaw were J Thomson, TF Pedley, WHT Wootton, JE Marks, M Gray, and WQ Rowett.⁴² These peoples were found to be major supporters of Thibaw's dethronement and colonization of Myanmar.

While British were in waiting, the affairs of Bombay Bamarh Timber Co. rendered good excuse to them. For illegal logging, Myanmar government fined the BBTC, the sum of over 2,300,000 rupees on 12th August 1885.⁴³ BBTC informed about their case to the viceroy, who signaled High Commissioner in Yangon, that an official would be sent to Myanmar to act as an arbitrator. At the same time, the viceroy also informed Myanmar *Hluttaw*, which on its part replied that the arbitrator should be from the kind party country.⁴⁴ But it was noteworthy that the timber affairs began by the imitation of the old two towns governor of Taungngu and Yamethin, who in high hope of reinstate of him to the former post, informed the Myanmar *Hluttaw* that the new governor was in conspiracy against the crown by collaborating with the British. But on the part of British, it was an excuse for Myanmar King to grant the logging right to the French. Meanwhile, a group of members of Yangon chamber of Commerce went to the high commissioner to ask him to occupy Myanmar forever.⁴⁵ British had been found already decided to annex upper Myanmar.

Myanmar ambassador U Myu in Paris had done his best to negotiate with the British. He telegraphed Myanmar *Hluttaw* on 10th September 1885, not to collect the fine forcibly from the BBTC. The telegraph went on said that the timber affairs could lead to war with the British; that the fine should be cancelled; that if Myanmar did not spare the fine, British could send on ultimatum with 5 points; that if the ultimatum was sent, it would be difficult to solve the problem. Unfortunately, the telegram, it was learnt, never reached Myanmar.⁴⁶ Myanmar ambassador in Paris tried to explain the matter to the British counterpart, who replied that he had no power to deal it.

On 22nd October 1885, the British sent an ultimatum of 5 points to Myanmar King.⁴⁷ The King in consultation with minister, at the audience, replied that the fine would be

³⁹ Than Tun, 2004, 447-448

⁴⁰ (a) Than Tun, 2004, 449

(b) Hall, 1945, 175

⁴¹ (a) Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 458

(b) Than Tun, 2004, 453

⁴² Than Tun, 2004, 443

⁴³ Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 458-459

⁴⁴ Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 458-459

⁴⁵ Than Tun, 2004, 462

⁴⁶ (a) Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 4b2

(b) Than Tun, 2004, 4b2-4b4

⁴⁷ Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 462-463

cancelled that residents should be sent in each other country as before and concerning with the foreign relation matter of the country, Myanmar would decide itself. This reply was sent on 6th November 1885.⁴⁸ King Thibaw on his part issued a royal order on 7th November 1885, dictation the whole country to prepare for war.⁴⁹ On 10th November, the Indian Viceroy telegraphed London for permission to send an expedition to annex upper Myanmar. On 11th November, General Prendergast got the order to march to Mandalay promptly.⁵⁰ This is the beginning of the third Anglo-Myanmar War.

Three Burmese forces of Lower Riverine column, Taungdwingyi column and Taungu column were sent to ward off the British. Total strength of Burmese forces was about 21230 strong.⁵¹ British forces under the General Prendergast were 2500 strong.⁵² On 28th November 1885, Prendergast arrived Mandalay Gawwein port. On 29th November 1885, at 5:45 pm, he took the king and the queen of Burma by Thuriya steersmen and arrived Rangoon on 3rd December 1885. On 14th December 1885, the two kings and queen arrived in Madaras.⁵³ In this way, Myanmar monarchy ceased to exist and the sovereign state of Myanmar became a British colony.

Conclusion

The end of Myanmar monarchical feudalism was mainly due to the capitalist imperialism. Like all over the world, Myanmar monarchy or Myanmar feudalism had its inherent defections, which prevented further development of monarchy and brought down the system. Of which the most outstanding was that of polygamy, that caused succession problem. We have witnessed that, of the eleven Kongbaung Kings, most were the weakens, in that some became deranged in their later life. How could such weak monarchs manage to withstand with or to stop the overwhelming wave of capitalist imperialism or colonialism?

A monarchy under the reign of weak sovereign was reflected in chaotic and disorganized conditions of the country with economic downturn and social instability, plus the rebellions and court espionages. Kongbaung monarchy, as we have already seen, was full of those weak sovereigns, who definitely were no match to the then most powerful people of British, in very aspects and respects. When the two empires collided, it is no strange to see the weak Myanmar monarchy such into the abyss of capitalist imperialism and colonialism. In precis, the last days of Myanmar monarchy can be described the struggle between feudalist Myanmar and capitalist Britain, in which the former was brought down by the progressive later, ending Myanmar monarchy.

⁴⁸ Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 4b3

⁴⁹ Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 4b3-464

⁵⁰ (a) Focucar, 1946, 133-135

(b) Banerjee, 1964, 311

⁵¹ Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c c, 464-466

⁵² Than Tun, 2004, 477

⁵³ Mg Mg Tin, 2004 c, 471-474

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