

Chinese Business in Penang and Tenasserim (Burma) in the 1820s: A Glimpse from a Vietnamese Travelogue

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Introduction

Our understanding of Southeast Asian history and regionalization, especially along the scholarly divide between the end of the early modern period and what followed, has been the subject of serious rethinking and revision in the last few years (Hamashita 1997; Charney 1999c; Lieberman 1999b; Subrahmanyam 1999; Tagliacozzo 1999; Liu 2000; Sun 2000). An important part of this rethinking has involved looking at how Southeast Asia fits into larger historical rhythms that transcend the old "Southeast Asia is a separate and special region" framework and has focused more attention on a new slate of historical data (information on previously illusive developments in domestic economies), arenas of interaction (contact zones), and on migrant groups whose behavior and spheres of activity cannot be easily understood in regionalization schemes such as, for example, the divide between East or South Asia, on the one hand, and Southeast Asia, on the other.

This article is concerned chiefly with making available additional data on the activities of one transregional migrant group, the Overseas Chinese, in one contact zone, Southeastern Burma. Although there has been a recent increase in scholarly interest in the role of Penang-based Chinese traders in the Southeastern Burma-China trade in the nineteenth century (Charney 1999a; Charney 1999b), little attention has been paid to these traders or this trade prior to the 1830s. This is partly due to the poorly documented activities of Chinese merchants involved in this trade, activities that formed an almost "invisible world" of merchant networks that crisscrossed the Rangoon-Tavoy-

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Penang trade triangle. Reconstructing a picture of the trading activities in this triangle prior to the 1830s requires a closer look at Southeastern Burma's most important pre-rice trade commodity for the Chinese market, esculent birds nests, and identifying specific traders, especially the more mobile and connected Chinese merchants, involved in this trade. Fortunately, a Burmese-language document with new information on this trade for the early 1820s has emerged. One of several Burmese royal orders dated 25 April 1822 includes a contemporaneous Burmese translation of a Vietnamese oral account of the journey of an 1820-1821 mission dispatched by a court in Southern Vietnam. This journey is believed to have been made at the instigation of a certain local Vietnamese official whose name is rendered, in Burmese, "Ka-twei-lan" (my preferred usage here) and, in the western secondary literature, "Cao-danh-lam" (Pearn 1964, p. 149). The present translation and analysis is intended to make this document accessible to those not working in the Burmese language for research on the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, the history of the Straits of Melaka, and scholars of Vietnam's interaction with other Southeast Asian countries. I will first identify the sponsor of the mission and the reasons for dispatching it. I will then provide a translation of the Burmese-language Vietnamese account. Finally, I will conclude with some comments on the importance of this account.

I. The Sponsor and the Goals of the Mission

Ka-twei-lan's higher-ranking sponsor of this mission was difficult to identify due to significant differences in the few available accounts. I have tentatively identified him as the governor-general [*tong-tran*]¹ based in Gia-dinh in Southern Vietnam to Southeastern Burma. This requires some explanation and a brief survey of the relevant sources. From a comparison of these accounts, including a Vietnamese-language account made available in translation by Suzanne Karpeles (1959), I believe that the most accurate of the non-Burmese accounts is a reference to this mission that is included in John Crawfurd's record of a later mission to "Cochinchina." The information for this reference is apparently drawn from George Gibson, who was at that time the *shahbandar* [port officer] of Rangoon and member of the following Burmese return mission to Vietnam. This account (hereafter, the Gibson-Crawfurd account) refers to the sponsor of the mission on the one hand as "King of Kamboja," and, in other places, as the "King of Cochin China." In the mid-

1 D.G.E. Hall explains that Gia-dinh was the "administrative centre of the four provinces of Cochin China" and also served as the base for the *tong-tran* (imperial governor-general) (Hall 1966, p. 409). The governor-general at Gia-dinh in this particular case is identified elsewhere as Chao Kun (Pearn 1964, p. 149).

1820s, Crawford understood "Kamboja" as one of three great civil divisions of Vietnam (the other two being Tonkin and "Cochin China"), and was placed under a viceroy (as was Tonkin), who served the Vietnamese emperor at Hue. According to Crawford, Saigon was the capital of the "Kambojan" division (Crawford 1828, p. 457), and referring to Gibson's Chao Kun (anglicizing his name instead as Thao Kun), not as the "king" but rather as the "governor" of Cambodia (Crawford 1828, p. 525). "Cochin China," an unclear reference to begin with, is complicated, again because of different references. In the actual Gibson account, the mission is said to have gone to the capital of Cochin China, which Gibson identifies as Saigon (Saigon) (Crawford 1828, p. 588). Saigon was located in the former province of Gia-dinh. This helps to identify the powerful sponsor of Ka-twei-lan, as the Karpeles document does refer to the governor who sent the mission to Burma as the Governor of Gia-dinh province. Hence, there is agreement here. There seems to be enough evidence to suggest, then, that the sponsor of the mission was the Saigon-based Vietnamese ruler of Southern Vietnam, whether labeled as "governor," "viceroi," or "king" and whether Gia-dinh province was referred to as "Kamboja" or, more commonly, "Cochin China." This man appears to be Chao Kun.

But the Vietnamese account translated in the Burmese royal order refers to Doun-nain, not to "Kamboja" or to "Cochinchina." All three accounts, however, can be reconciled. The Vietnamese account translated into Burmese in the 22 April 1822 royal order claims that the court at Hue sent the mission, but a careful reading of the account reveals the hidden role of the *myo-wun* of Doun-nain. If we were to assume that the portion of the story covering the journey as far as Doun-nain is invented by Ka-twei-lan, as I would suggest, then the rest of the story would be in general agreement with the Gibson-Crawford and Karpeles versions. Gibson, referring to "Dong-nai" in Southern Vietnam, provides some useful notes on the historical context of these developments:

"Dong-nai was the old capital of the province when the Kambojans were in possession of the country. It was then a place of considerable size and trade, but is at present in a very decayed state. The Cochin Chinese, when they conquered the country, removed the seat of government to Saigon, which was more conveniently situated for shipping, and they called the new city and province Ya-din-tain" (Crawford 1828, p. 588).

Dong-nai appears to have remained the contemporaneous usage at the time Gibson visited Saigon to refer to the province that had covered much of Southern Vietnam as Vietnamese rule was extended to the area. As Gibson explains:

"[m]ore recently, the Cochin Chinese conquered the provinces of Dong-nai, and planted colonies of their countrymen at Que-douc, Sa-dek, Mitho, Camao, Saigun, Doun-tain, and many other places" (Crawfurd 1828, p. 587).

Certainly, this was the case when Crawfurd arrived at Saigon in 1822. As Crawfurd explains:

"The government of Kamboja, of which Saigun is the capital, is divided into six provinces, of which the following are the names in the Anam language: Ya-teng, Peng-fong, Fo-nan, Win-cheng, Ho-sin, and Teng-chong . . . The ancient Kambojan names . . . such as Dong-nai, Que-douc, Sa-dek, Mi-tho, Ca-mao, and Tek-sia, are still, I believe, more current among the inhabitants" (Crawfurd 1828, p. 457).

Another possibility, perhaps more likely, is that the name Dong-nai was how the Burmese, like the local inhabitants, continued to know the area and this was how they translated whatever name Ka-twei-lan gave them for Saigon, which, though a different town, was still in the general vicinity.² Similarly, Ka-twei-lan, knowing that the Burmese would not be familiar with recent changes, may have presented Saigon as Dong-nai. In any case, Dong-nai today is the province located on the Southeastern border of Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City). It appears fairly certain that, despite different names, the Burmese, English, and Vietnamese accounts all point to the same origin for the mission, the Vietnamese provincial governor based at what was at that time Saigon.

There is some disagreement in the available records on the reasons for the dispatch of the mission. According to a Vietnamese account translated by Karpeles, Le Van Duyot, the Governor-General of Gia Dinh, had dispatched Nguyen Van Do, an assistant, to purchase firearms in miscellaneous foreign countries. During a storm encountered en route: explains: "the vessel which carried Nguyen Van Do lost its way and ran aground at Tavoy. The Governor of Tavoy arrested the foreigner and sent him to the Citadel of Ava-Enva. . ." (Karpeles 1959, p. 5). The Gibson-Crawfurd misidentifies the year in which the mission took place as 1822, but the rest of the information clearly refers to the subject of the present translation. As Crawfurd relates:

"... a certain Cochin Chinese petty chief, or inferior officer . . . represented to Chao Kun, the Governor of Kamboja . . . that a mine of wealth might be made by purchasing esculent

2 In many Burmese chronicles, for example, the royal city of Upper Burma is usually called Ava or Inwa, regardless of whether the royal city was actually in Ava, or in Amarapura, or Mandalay.

swallows' nests in Ava and sending them as a speculation for sale to China . . . The Cochin chinese Mission was undertaken solely on the authority of the Governor of Kamboja, and without the sanction of his Court . . . the projector was placed at the head of this Mission. He proceeded to Rangoon by way of Penang, and in due course, was conducted to the Court" (Crawfurd 1828, p. 571).

A detailed analysis of the information in these two accounts and in the present translation, suggests the following scenario: an assistant, named Ka-twei-lan, suggested to the governor-general of Gia-dinh that if he were to gain privileged access to esculent birds nests from the Southeastern Burmese coasts, he might make a good profit reselling them on the Chinese market, where esculent (edible) birds nests were in high demand. A mission was then arranged and led by the Vietnamese official mentioned above and was conducted by sea to Burma (Pearn 1964, p. 149; Crawfurd 1828, p. 571).

The present Burmese translation is made of the oral account of Ka-twei-lan, who appears to have communicated with the Burmese in Portuguese, as the "Bayin-kyi [Portuguese] *saga-byan* [translator], Nga-tout-kyi, was ordered to translate" (Tun 1988, p. 8.384). The account of the actual journey is very short. The royal order is unclear if the remainder of the text following the account of the journey, which meanders through the details concerning a possible joint attack on Thailand overland from Burma and Vietnam, is from a translation of the Vietnamese official's account, or is the beginning of the royal order's commentary putting the account into context. In any case, that portion of the account shifts in tone and style away from the diary-like narrative upon which I am focusing attention in this article. Thus, only the portion of the document directly involved with the journey up to Ka-twei-lan's arrival in Burma will be included in this translation.

Earlier authors appear to have had access to this document. U Maun Maun Tin's *Kon-baun-zet Maha-ya-zawin-taw-kyi* (1905), for example, repeats verbatim some of the information from the story and thus likely had come across a copy of the original royal order. *Kon-baun-zet*, however, incorporates the work of the 1867 version of the *Hmannan ya-zawin*, which was ordered to be compiled by King Mindon Min (r. 1853-1878), and U Maun Maun Tin only added to the narrative for the years 1854-85 (Tin Ohn 1961, pp. 88-91). Thus, the information on this mission in the *Kon-baun-zet* almost certainly came from documents extant in the royal court during Mindon Min's reign. Than Tun, in his *Royal Orders of Burma*, offers an English version of this account (Tun 1988, pp. 8.61-63), but it is intended not as a loose translation for the convenience of scholars who cannot read Burmese but who would benefit from knowing the general content of the royal order. By contrast, I am focusing on the full details as found in the original royal and adding

notation both to make the account clearer and to put the account into a broader context. This translation is made from the Burmese text made available by Than Tun (Tun 1988, pp. 8.384-385).

II. Translation

[Beginning of translation]

[Minh-mang,] the King³ of Yun-kyi [Vietnam,]⁴ dispatched me [Ka-twei-lan] to [this,] the royal region and royal country [of Burma], on a matter concerning the embassy that [supposedly] had been dispatched [by the King of Burma] to the country of Yun-kyi before the death of the previous King of Yun-kyi [Emperor Gia-long].⁵ Yet the royal ambassadors [from Burma] we had heard about did not reach [Yun-kyi], nor did we know their purpose, nor even if indeed an embassy [really] had been sent. If it is true, the royal wish is to know why [that mission] had been dispatched. Is your relationship with Yodaya [Thailand] good or not?⁶

The king also desires to remember and carry on his head the royal wish, being whatever [the King of Burma] desires and to take shelter in the Lord [of Burma's] golden *hpon*.⁷ This is as it was wished by the father [Gia-Long] of [Minh-Mang,] the present great king of Yun. [Gia-long] had ordered his successors: "After I am no more, while you are administering the country's towns and villages, you must dispatch an embassy to the Lord [of Burma's] royal country and serve and carry on your head [the burden of whatever the Lord of Burma desires]."

After king [Gia-long] died, [Minh-mang,] the new king [,] ruled his father's place at the age of about thirty. After about one year, when selecting the men who would together depart for [Burma] they looked among those whom were appointed by the father [of the present king], those who held places of the royal ministers and commanders. I was the man who could understand the Bayin-kyi [Portuguese] language. On the docks of Palau Pinan [Penang] and Yangon [Rangoon], there are many Kala-Bayin-kyi [Portuguese] who come and engage in trade and sell things. Although we were not supposed to reach your golden feet, we were to arrive on the docks of Palau Pinan and Yangon and we were supposed to investigate and enquire. We were to report what we knew from

3 This refers to the Vietnamese emperor, Minh-Mang (r. 1820-1840).

4 The Burmese rendering of Southern Vietnam in this document is *Yun-kyi*, or, literally, the "Great Yun." It is a curious use because this is the same name given by the Burmese to a Shan-speaking ethnic group in the eastern Shan State (MIA/MED 1988, p. 388).

5 This refers to the Vietnamese emperor, Gia-Long (r. 1802-1819).

6 The Burmese have, since rise of the early modern Thai state of Ayudhya, referred to Thailand and the central Thais as "Yodaya."

7 *Hpon* is the Burmese concept of merit or power.

the investigations in *tin-sa* and *shauk-sa*.⁸ We were to be given commensurate tribute and dispatched. The king and the commanders and ministers consulted and I was given a *thin-bau*⁹ and over twenty *sinkyi* people.¹⁰

On the seventh day of the waxing moon of the month of Pyaso (10 December),¹¹ in the Burmese year 1182 [1820 A.D.], I departed. From the town of Hue to the town of Doun-nain, usually takes about one month, but we did not stop and thus we arrived at the town of Doun-nain in sixteen days. We stopped in the town of Doun-nain for forty days. The *myo-wun* [town-governor] of the town of Doun-nain said that only by going as merchants could we avoid danger. After we had finished loading our deep-sea boat with *sakra*¹² and lac, Tu-hat-Prain, a *sa-yei* [clerk], was assigned to go along with me in the boat and we left Doun-nain on the fifth day after the full moon of the month of Tabaun (20 February),¹³ in the Burmese year 1182 [1821 A.D.].

We arrived at the island of Kyauk-pyu-taun in nine days.¹⁴ After four days here, we arrived at the new town [Singapore] where the Ingalei [English] live. We left after staying here for six days. After five days, we arrived at the island of Mahal-laka [Melaka]. We left after staying on this island for eight days.¹⁵ After fourteen days, we arrived at Palau Pinan [Penang].¹⁶ Pretending to be traders in Palau Pinan, we met some Tayoub [Chinese] who had arrived from the town of Dawei [Tavoy] to trade [in Penang]. We asked them about themselves and we found out that [one of

8 Than Tun translates *tin-sa* "report" and *shauk-sa* as "petition." I think both the construction and context of these words, as used here, indicates that they fall into the same category of "reports." Literally, *tin-sa* means "letter of thinking" and *shauk-sa* means "letter of speaking" (Tun 1988, p. 8.61).

9 *Thin-bau* is the Burmese word for a deep-sea boat. It is probably the equivalent, as Than Tun understands the term in his English summary, of the Southeast Asian junk, Manguin's *jong*.

10 Literally, the text has *sin-kyi lu*. If this refers to the boat's crew, it is curious, because the simpler and more regular form of *thinbaw-thu* "deep-sea boat crew" should have been used. Than tun renders this as "Seamen and land men," but this usage would be similarly unusual and vague. I wonder then, if these people were not a normal Vietnamese crew, but rather drawn from Malays who would be much more acquainted with the route to the Bay of Martaban. Further, at this time, many of the crews of Chinese junks in the Straits were crewed by Malays. Perhaps they were Chams, for whom the Burmese would likely have no ethnic identifier and would have translated the Vietnamese term using a descriptive equivalent.

11 I follow Than Tun's dating here (Tun 1988, p. 8.61).

12 Sugar.

13 I follow Than Tun's dating here (Tun 1988, p. 8.61).

14 Than Tun translates "Kyauk-pyu-taun *kyun*" as "South White Stone Island" (Tun 1988, p. 8.62), but I suspect this should read "the island of White Stone Mountain."

15 Melaka is, of course, not an island, but rather a coastal port.

16 The Vietnamese or their Burmese translators used the Malay term for the island instead of the English Penang, Pinang, or Prince of Wales Island.

them] had been made a great man by the *bayin* [king] and lord [of Burma] and had been placed in charge of the bird's nest hills and islands of Dawei. He had been given the insignia [for this position] and a title, Thiwa-kyawswa-nawrata.¹⁷ After we saw the insignia, we believed him. While we were there, when we spoke about how we wanted to arrive at the royal region and the royal country [of Burma], Thiwa-kyawswa-nawrata lent¹⁸ [us] a *ma-lein*¹⁹ [pilot] who knew the water route [to Burma].

We stayed in the town of Palau Pinan for twenty-eight days. After we had sold the goods loaded into our deep-sea boat by the *myo-wun* of Doun-nain, we used the money [we had gained] from what we had sold to buy mirrors,²⁰ firearms,²¹ and woolens,²² that the Doun-nain *myo-wun* had asked us to buy. We sent them back in the ship to the town of Doun-nain for the *myo-wun* of Doun-nain and for the king of Yun-kyi. We sent a letter also to the *myo-wun* of Doun-nain explaining that Tu-hat-prain, the clerk, and I went on to the town of Dawei [Tavoy] from the town of Palau Pinan.

After we had left with the boat from the town of Palau Pinan, it took twenty days to arrive at the docks of the town of Dawei. In the town of Dawei, we built the mast and the yard-arm that had been ruined. When we were there for thirty-nine days,²³ orders came from the great lord and high royal official,²⁴ *bo-kyoke*, who ordered everything [and everyone] to come to the Mottama

17 In the *Kon-baun-zet Maha-ya-zawin-taw-kyi*, he is described as "*hnek-kyun hnek-taun mya ko a-oub akyoub kan-ta-thu Tayop lu my Thiwa-kyawthu-Nawrata* [The Man of the Chinese race, Thiwa-kyawthu-nawrata, who was appointed to rule over the bird islands and the bird hills]" (Maun Maun Tin 1968, 2.346).

18 Than Tun renders this passage to read that Thiwa-kyawswa-nawrata merely helped the Vietnamese look for a pilot. The verb in the passage, however, is *hnga-yan*, which means "to lend." The context of the sentence also leads to this understanding of the term. As a rich Chinese merchant with the whole of the Tenasserim coast's esculent bird nest farms under his control, Thiwa-kyawswa-nawrata certainly would have had a large number of vessels and pilots at his disposal. Also, since this was a mission to the court of his patron, Thiwa-kyawswa-nawrata certainly would have taken especial care of the party.

19 According to the English-Burmese Dictionary, the Burmese *ma-lein* is derivative of the Arabic word *muallim* (MIA/MED 1988, p. 338).

20 The word used here is *hman-kyi*, which is rather vague. It could be either a "great glass" or a "great mirror." I suspect it would be the latter. Than Tun, however, has suggested the former (Tun 1988, 8.62).

21 The Burmese word for firearm, *thei-nat*, is used here. It is supposed to be derived from the Dutch word *snaphaan* (MIA/MED, 1988, p. 500).

22 The text has *sakkalab*, which should be read as *sakkalat*, referring to thick woolen cloth. The Burmese version would be *dakkala* and is derived from the Persian *sakkalat* (MIA/MED 1988, p. 508).

23 Than Tun has added the words *sei-go* after *thon* in brackets in the Burmese version of the royal orders, thus rendering it as thirty-nine days and not three days.

24 The text refers to him as *min-kyi*, which usually refers to great king, or king. It can also refer, as it does here, to a very important royal officer (MIA/MED 1988, p. 350).

[Martaban] army.²⁵ The *thinbau*, *kat-tu*, *hlei*,²⁶ and people ascended [the coast] with those in the town of Dawei. Because the winds and the water were not agreeable, it took a journey of seventeen days to arrive at the [camp of] the Mottama army. There, in front of the army leaders of the royal Mottama army, we were interrogated about [1] the reasons for our arrival, [2] the family and descendants of the great king of Yun, [3] the area of the town of Hue, and the customs of Yun-kyi. That is why we drew a map of the country.²⁷

We had departed from the country of Yun-kyi on the seventh day of the waxing moon of the month of Pyaso (10 December), in the Burmese year 1182 [1820 A.D.] and by the time that we arrived at Mottama on the sixth day of the waning moon of the month of the second Waso (20 July),²⁸ in the Burmese year 1183 [1821 A.D.], it had been seven months and ten days.

[End of translation]

III. Conclusion

In this translation and commentary, I have tried to provide an additional perspective on one of the Burmese-Vietnamese political exchanges of the 1820s. In many ways, it confirms the details available in the other two accounts, the Karpeles document and the Gibson-Crawford account. In other ways, however, it demonstrates in much clearer terms the degree of misinformation in the efforts of Ka-twei-lan in his dealings with the Burmese and the Vietnamese courts. Clearly, following the Karpeles document, Ka-twei-lan must have returned to Vietnam and someone, probably a Vietnamese official or 'royal ear' present at the governor-general's court at Saigon, provided Hue with the rough narrative of his mission, including the details of dates and places, and some events, but concealed from both the actual nature of the events and purposes of the mission.

How did the Burmese interpret this mission? At first, there were serious doubts on the part of the Burmese. Ka-twei-lan's references to interrogations after his arrival; at Martaban reveal some

25 This commander and this event were recorded by Adoniram Judson in his diary for 31 January 1820: "The King of Ava . . . ordered preparations for a grand army to march against Siam appointing Chandamen Baogeoop the Commander-in-Chief, the title signifying Generalissimo. The Army is said to be collecting at Martaban and to consist at present of 20,000 men" (Saxena 1952, p. 574).

26 A *kat-tu* was a small, coastal vessel. *Hlei* is a Burmese generic term for a small boat. For more information on categories and descriptions of Burmese terms for boats.

27 I have altered the order here, placing this sentence before and not after the reference to the cumulative period of the journey in the interests of narrative coherence.

28 I follow here Than Tun's dating. (Tun 1988, 8.62).

resentment. His questioning continued at the Burmese royal capital in Amarapura. As the Gibson-Crawford account relates:

"His credentials not being considered here as altogether satisfactory, nor his explanations sufficiently clear, he was, according to Burmese custom, imprisoned and tortured for further education. It appears that his explanations, under this process, proved satisfactory . . ." (Crawford 1828, p. 571).

Similar, the Karpeles document relates:

"the king suspecting him to be a Siamese spy, had him cleverly questioned. When they learnt that he came from our Great Empire of the South they treated him with enthusiasm and sent him back to his country" (Karpeles 1959, p. 5).

Thus, despite initial doubts, after persistent interrogations of the Vietnamese "ambassadors" at several levels, the Burmese ultimately believed Ka-twei-lan's story.

Clearly, if the mission was sent unofficially by the governor-general of Southern Vietnam for personal profit, then "ambassador" Ka-twei-lan was not letting on to this in his contacts with the Burmese court. As indicated in the account from the Burmese royal order, the governor of Doun-nain is not mentioned to the Burmese as the sponsor of the mission. Instead, the governor of Doun-nain is curiously inserted into the narrative as a kind provisioner of the royal embassy from Hue, that happens to stop in Doun-nain for forty days. As the text explains, the governor gives the "ambassador" of the Emperor of Vietnam advice that the mission should pretend to be merchants and not an official embassy, so that they avoid dangers en route to Burma. Further, the account mentions that part of the ruse includes carrying sugar as cargo; once in Penang, this cargo was sold and the proceeds were sent back to the governor-general and, it is claimed, to the Vietnamese emperor at Hue. I have not yet found information regarding Ka-twei-lan's later activities. Certainly, Ka-twei-lan is not mentioned in the Burmese documents I have examined thus far connected to the return Burmese mission to Vietnam sent in response to the 1820-1821 mission.

Beyond questions of "ruse" and illicit provincial efforts at local commercial aggrandizement, the "diary" portion of the document is important for a number of other reasons. For one thing, this account gives a first-hand mainland Southeast Asian account of travels throughout the Straits which are often seen only through European, Persian, or Malay texts during this period. As the author of the account mentions, for example, Singapore is a new town where the English live,

and perception of the slight footing of the English in the area at this time, several years before the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826), can hardly be missed as an important part of the perspective not only of the Vietnamese, but likely also by the Burmese and the Thais. Second, although the later missions between Burma and Vietnam are well-known from European source materials and two Vietnamese documents in the Vietnamese archives (Karpeles 1959, p. 1-7), little is known about this initial mission. As far as I am presently aware, the Burmese materials, brief references in the Karpeles Vietnamese documents, and a short commentary by John Crawford to introduce his edition of the "Gibson account" of the 1823-1824 mission from Burma to Vietnam are the only substantial sources for this first mission.

Most importantly, this account gives some hints to the often invisible world of the Chinese in Tenasserim at this time. For instance, the account provides some interesting and valuable information on a Chinese merchant, whom the mission runs across in Penang and to whom the Burmese king had granted the royal farm for esculent birds nests for Tavoy (other information, however, suggests that this Chinese merchant had the entire Tenasserim coast under his authority). This Chinese presence, neglected in the secondary literature, suggests that the Overseas Chinese had already, by 1820, come to play a significant role in the trade of the Tenasserim coast and in Lower Burma. Furthermore, the emergence of this document also suggests that valuable data on early nineteenth century Overseas Chinese activities in western Southeast Asian may be available in the mass of Burmese-language material that has not yet been perused by scholars of the Overseas Chinese.

GLOSSARY

<i>akauk-wun</i>	Burmese customs official
Dawei	Tavoy
Gia-dinh	district in Southern Vietnam
Mahal-laka	Melaka
Mottama	Martaban
<i>myo-wun</i>	A Burmese town-governor
Palau Pinan	Penang
<i>sakra</i>	sugar
<i>shah-bandar</i>	port officer
Tayoub	Burmese word for Chinese
<i>tong-tran</i>	A Vietnamese governor-general
Yun-kyi	Burmese name for Vietnam

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