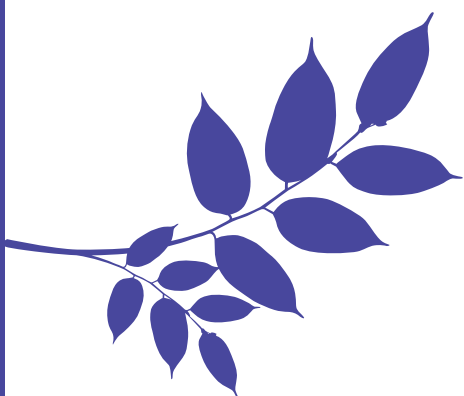


Cheroots in Myanmar: Rural Development behind the Government Policy

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Abstract

Cheroot, *seboleik* in Burmese, is a traditional and unique tobacco product made of tobacco and *thanatphet* (*Cordia dicotoma* Forst.) leaves in Myanmar. This paper examines the development process of production centers of the two materials for cheroot making, using information obtained by field surveys. The two centers were very different in ecological and cultural settings but have created strong interdependence between them. The centers had continuously grown, even under contrary agriculture policy and during political instability; the rural development was purely led by the local residents.

Keywords: *Burma, Pao, Thanatphet, Tobacco*

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1. Cheroot smoking in Myanmar

Myanmar has a traditional and unique tobacco product: cheroot. In Burmese a cheroot is called *seboleik*, which means light-tasting rolled tobacco. The cheroot has been smoked widely in Myanmar regardless of age, gender and ethnicity, although the majority of cheroot smokers are normally elderly men (Figure 1). Cheroot are more popular than commercial cigarettes in rural areas.

The cheroot contains leaves, stems and roots of the tobacco plant and wood chips from trees for fragrance. Local Myanmar varieties of tobacco are used for cheroots. Cured tobacco leaves are chopped and scented with vinegar, which is made from the sap of Palmira palm, banana, pineapple or tamarind. The chopped stems and roots are also scented and roasted. They are wrapped by a leaf of *thanatphet* (*Cordia dicotoma* Forst.) plant, with a filter made of maize husks (bract).

This paper focuses on commercialized cheroots. The commercialized cheroot, which is wrapped in *thanatphet*, is popular and available everywhere in Myanmar and is consumed in great volume at the present. People in Myanmar also smoke homemade rolled tobacco, which is rolled in materials including newspapers, banana leaves and maize husks. They all are also included among *seboleik* in a broad sense. The commercial cheroot looks like a cigar at a glance, but is completely different from the cigar, which is made solely of tobacco leaves. The cigar is called *sebyinleik* in Burmese and means strong-tasting rolled tobacco.

The main materials in the cheroot are tobacco and *thanatphet*. The two materials are produced in different regions and by different ethnic groups. Tobacco is mainly grown in the central part of Myanmar where mainly Burmese, the ethnic majority, live. *Thanatphet* is grown in the mountainous region where the ethnic minorities commonly live. This paper outlines the cheroot and its industry in Myanmar, and examines the independent development process of production centers of the two main materials for cheroot making, considering the national agriculture policy and politics. Field information and statistical data used here were primarily obtained by surveys in Myanmar from 2007 to 2017. This paper is largely adapted from Matsuda (2014) and original discussion on rural development is newly added.

2. Burmese cheroot making and tobacco farming in central Myanmar

Myingyan Township, located in the central dry zone of Myanmar, is the best-known production center

for both tobacco leaves and cheroots. Many people in Myingyan, mostly Burmese, engage in tobacco farming and/or the cheroot industry; local residents call the township tobacco town.

The Myanmar cheroot industry is concentrated in Myingyan. The number of cheroot making companies, *seleikkoun*, in Myingyan has been gradually increasing for the last few decades. The cheroot industry in other regions of Myanmar, in general, has been decreasing or has become a sub-center depending on Myingyan. Mandalay is probably the second largest center of cheroot production and approximately 15 companies were working in 2009, but the owners said that the industry was in a downward trend. Bago was also well-known for cheroot making in lower Myanmar and approximately 20 companies were producing their own brand in 2011; most of them use ready-made materials purchased from the manufacturers in Myingyan.

Over 200 cheroot manufacturing companies are probably operating in Myingyan town. There were at least 60 large scale companies with their own brand of cheroot with small subcontractors under them in 2010. A large-scale cheroot company can produce more than 150 thousand cheroots per day. Each company has acquired specific regions as their steady markets; Myanmar has no cheroot brands sold across the entire country. Most of the large companies have continued to purchase cured tobacco leaves from specific villages, each company working with different villages. The cheroot companies provide processed materials including mixed and processed tobacco, filters and *thanatphet* leaves which were purchased from the mountainous region to the workers in the villages to handle most of the wrapping process (Figure 2). Commission brokers link cheroot companies and villages; the cheroot companies commission villagers with the piecework of making cheroots.

Tobacco is a major cash crop in Myingyan Township. Local Myanmar varieties of tobacco called *seywegyi*, *bamase*, and *myanmase* have been grown more widely in Myingyan than a *bagyiniya* (Virginia) variety which was introduced into Myanmar from the USA in the 1930s and used for cigarettes. According to official statistics from the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation (MOALI), the sown area of the local variety of tobacco in Myingyan Township was 7,842 acres in 2009-2010. The area was the largest in Myanmar and accounted for approximately 24% of the national total sown area.

Tobacco is sown both in the upland fields (*ya*) and alluvial lowland fields (*kain*) in Myingyan. Farmers said that the former was generally higher quality and lower yield than the latter. Sowing tobacco starts

in August in nurseries and the seedlings are transplanted into the fields in September and October. The leaves are harvested from December to February. Harvested tobacco leaves are dried outside in the sun for a few days and inside for approximately three months. Then, the cured tobacco leaves are classified by quality and sold to cheroot manufacturing companies (Figure 3).

Although tobacco farming has been developed and is an important income source for local residents, Myanmar government policy has not supported the industry. The central government sometimes hindered tobacco farming in Myingyan during the 2000s. The agriculture policy of the previous government had prioritized rice production all over the country, probably in order to maintain a low and stable price of rice for social stability then. To achieve the chief objective in the agriculture policy, increasing rice production and attaining regional self-sufficiency, the government had a planned economy, especially for the politically important crop: rice. The government had set a production target for rice at the township level and led farmers to follow the policy. Even in the central dry zone where agricultural fields suitable for rice farming are limited from the agro-ecological viewpoint, increasing rice production had been driven by the government, especially since the late 1990s (Matsuda 2009). The planned sown area of rice in Myingyan Township was 2.68 times as large as the actual sown area in 2009-2010 and 1.85 times in 2010-11 according to the MOALI statistics. These areas probably indicate the strong political pressure for expanding the paddy fields in Myingyan Township in the late 2000s. According to local officials, the central government planned to replace tobacco with rice in lowland fields which were potentially available for rice production. Tobacco was thought of as an obstruction to rice production and the government called tobacco a restricted crop.

However, the tobacco farmers did not simply follow the rice-oriented agriculture policy and tried to maintain tobacco production, working against the policy and the strong pressure from the central government. The statistics from MOALI state that the sown area of tobacco was more than that of rice in the previous years, but decreased 73 percent from 2000-2001 to 2009-2010 and was replaced by rice in the late 2000s. That may have been an “achievement” of the national policy. However, the number of tobacco products changed relatively little from the previous years in the statistics, which indicated only a 39 percent reduction during the same period. All cheroot companies said that they had never faced any tobacco leave shortages then. The rice-oriented agriculture policy was changed and relaxed after a

democratic government was newly established in 2011; the sown tobacco area became greater than rice again after 2011-2012. Tobacco farming in Myingyan has developed in spite of the central government's policy.

3. Pao *thanatphet* production in a mountainous region

Thanatphet has been produced in the mountainous region of Myanmar and shipped to central Myanmar for cheroot making. *Thanatphet* has been widely planted as a perennial crop on the Shan Plateau at least since the British Colonial Era and used as a cheroot wrapper. Its cultivation and marketing were often found in descriptions of gazetteers published in the 19 century due to its importance as a revenue source for the colonial government. The recent production center is in Southern Shan State. According to MOALI, the planted area of *thanatphet* in Southern Shan State was 53,633 acres in 2009-2010, accounting for 98 percent of the total Myanmar *thanatphet* crop.

In Southern Shan, *thanatphet* has been grown mainly on the hillsides and is sometimes found in home gardens as well. The leaves can be harvested the second year after seedlings are planted. The harvest period is from June to September, which is the rainy season, and the leaves are picked twice a month. Manure and chemical fertilizers are used for *thanatphet* cultivation and pesticides are usually applied. Agrochemical use started by the 1950s (Maung Khun Nwe 1973). The harvested leaves are pressed and dried on stoves in villagers' houses (Figure 4). The processed leaves are classified by size and sold in central Myanmar for cheroot making.

Kyautaloungyi Sub-township, a southern part of Taunggyi Township located in Southern Shan State, is a well-known center of *thanatphet* production. Pao, an ethnic group, has lived there and grown *thanatphet* for a long time (Maung Khun Nwe 1973), which has been important in their livelihoods. Matsuda (2010) described *thanatphet* farming and its position in the livelihoods in a hillside village of the sub-township as follows. Many households, 29 out of a total of 36, grew *thanatphet* in the village and nearly half of the *thanatphet* farming households (13) have a stove for drying in their houses. Some households (5) have continued *thanatphet* production since the 1950s. *Thanatphet* production was a basic income source in the village. The villagers said that the area and amount of the production had originally been less than the present level in the 1950s when subsistence rice farming in shifting

cultivation had been important for their livelihood. *Thanatphet* planting had expanded when commercial crops and continuous upland farming had also increased there in the 1960s-1970s. Then, in the 1980-1990s, most of the villagers had engaged in *thanatphet* production at the present level. Although the villagers enjoyed a boom in garlic, which was intensively cultivated in the dry season in irrigated upland in the 2000s, they kept producing *thanatphet* as well until now.

The production center of *thanatphet*, Kyautaloungyi, was politically unstable for a long time. After the independence of Myanmar in 1948, ethnic armed groups against the central government had occupied their territories in rural areas in order to secure their autonomy. In Shan Plateau, military conflicts occurred between the ethnic groups and the national army; political tension was also high for a long time. The production center was the same, and the area was occupied by the Pao National Organization (PNO), an anti-government Pao organization. The ceasefire agreement between the PNO and the central government was signed in 1991. Then, the area was authorized as Special Region No. 6 and the PNO received some administrative autonomy. Even after the agreement, entry into the area was controlled by the PNO until 2011 when the democratic government established. Now, the area is a Self-Administered Zone established by the 2008 Constitution.

Although the political tension between the PNO and the central government was especially high before a ceasefire agreement in 1991, the *thanatphet* distribution from the production center to central Myanmar was not interrupted. The local residents continued their business in spite of the situation. According to Maung Khun Nwe (1973), the distribution of *thanatphet* from Shan State only stopped during the Japanese rule in World War II. Additionally, in the Socialist era, the central government intervened and started to control the *thanatphet* trade in 1963 (Maung Khun Nwe 1973). However, delivery to the government at the fixed price did not work well and the system was abolished in 1966 and *thanatphet* was liberalized again (Maung Khun Nwe 1973).

4. Co-evolution of the production centers

The two production centers of the major cheroot materials, Myingyan for tobacco and Southern Shan for *thanatphet*, have created a strong and closed interdependence between them. They need each other to exist because both materials are only used for making cheroots. The local tobacco variety is primarily

consumed for cheroots, although it is partly used as an ingredient for betel chewing. It is indispensable for cheroot making because the introduced variety of tobacco is not appropriate for cheroots. *Thanatphet* is only utilized for cheroot wrappers, indicating that the centers, disparate in ecological and cultural settings, are economically linked together.

The interdependence between the two different centers can be described as a consequence of co-evolution. As the cheroot industry developed and became concentrated, the production centers of the materials changed and their interdependence increased. Cheroot making changed from subsistence to a commercial enterprise. Then the cheroot industry and tobacco farming in rural area were gradually concentrated at Myingyan. *Thanatphet* came to be produced more intensively in Southern Shan and its importance in earning livelihoods was increased in Pao villages; they became major producers of *thanatphet* in Myanmar. The cheroot related industry should be a chief component in the rural development of the two centers: Myingyan and Southern Shan.

The firm bond between the two centers was a strong barrier against external dividing forces under political tension to realize stable economic connection. Even when political relations between the ethnic organization in the *thanatphet* center and the central government were hostile, good economic relations were maintained by the local residents. However, this could also be a weakness in that they have a common destiny. If one should face serious difficulties and the local industry declines for any reason, the other would also be affected by that negative impact.

In recent years Myanmar society and the economy have been changing faster than before, and the industry and relevant rural areas should adapt to the new environment in the near future. The local cheroot industry in Myanmar has developed in its own way and the production centers of materials have co-evolved until now, competing with cigarettes in the Myanmar domestic market. Asia has some examples of traditional tobacco industries that experienced modernization and they may provide ideas for the Myanmar cheroot industry in the future. Indonesia has a unique local tobacco, *kretek*, which contains cloves. The *kretek* industry have flourished by shifting to a cigarette-like *kretek*. Originally wrapped mainly in maize husks, it has been replaced by cigarette papers and the production process has been mechanized (Horii and Akasaki 2008). Whereas, Indian local tobacco, *bidi*, is rolled with the leaves of particular plants like Myanmar cheroot while *bidi* in Bangladesh is wrapped by papers at the present

(Dr. Muhammad Salim, personal communication, 2018).

5. Rural development according to local resident initiatives

The rural development accompanied by the cheroot industry in Myanmar is an obvious and concrete example purely led by local residents. Unsupported by the government and sometimes opposed by the government, tobacco farming in Myingyan had faced the challenges of both rice-oriented and anti-tobacco agriculture policies of the previous government, but was still developed by the local residents. Even with political instability, *Thanatphet* trading was also sustained by the common people.

Local resident initiatives could be a fundamental component of sustainable and desirable rural development. The Japanese One Village One Product (OVOP) is a well-known model for rural development in Asia. The movement started officially in 1979 in a prefecture in Japan and expanded domestically and internationally, such as the One Tambon One Product Project (OTOP) in Thailand. Financial or institutional support from the public sector are often found in these cases and are sometimes built into the projects. Cooperation between the government and the people, of course, is generally expected for successful results. However, the origin of the OTOP movement was a farmers' trial against the national agriculture policy of the Japanese government. The villagers had decided to prioritize the regional economy on perennial crop production instead of rice farming in the 1960s (Matsui and Yamagami 2006). The Japanese government had focused on promoting rice production then, but the local residents had decided to go the opposite way with their own initiative. Outsiders, including government agencies and universities, should play supporting roles in rural development. They can encourage and facilitate local initiatives, propose technical options (which can become part of the local strategies, if suitable), support adaptation to a new environment if the local society faces difficulty due to rapid socio-economic changes and make additional contributions.

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Figure 1. Burmese man smoking a cheroot. (Myingyan Township, Mandalay Region, in August 2017)



Figure 2. Cheroot making in a village. Chopped tobacco leaves and other ingredients were being wrapped in a shaped *thanatphet* leaf. (Myingyan Township, Mandalay Region, in August 2017)



Figure 3. Classification of cured tobacco leaves in a village. (Myingyan Township, Mandalay Region, in August 2017)



Figure 4. Pressing and drying *thanatphet* leaves by the stove. (Kyautaloungyi Sub-Township, Southern Shan State, in August 2013)