

## **LACQUERWARE INDUSTRY IN KYAUKKA VILLAGE, MONYWA TOWNSHIP**

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### **Abstract**

Kyaukka village lies ten miles on the north of Monywa Township in Sagaing Region. It is divided into Kyaukka South and Kyaukka North villages. The former produce rough lacquerwares and the latter produce finished goods. The lacquerware industry, Kyaukka Shweguni Sutaungpyay Pagoda and Htantalo water fall attracted not only domestic pilgrims and holiday makers but also foreign tourists. Kyaukka village gradually become one of the famous in Upper Myanmar. Like the people living all over the world, the people of Myanmar possess rich cultural heritages and unique arts and crafts. Myanmar kings were accustomed to give lacquerwares to the foreign diplomats. Kyaukka lacquerware is well known for its durability and simplicity in design. It seems that the village initially produced articles for religious use and later produced different kinds of articles for domestic use. The most essential raw material for lacquer industry is bamboo. About 220 species of bamboo are growing in Myanmar. Of these species, Tin wa and Me-tin-kha-wa-the bamboo growing Homelin area are most suitable ones for making coil and basketry in lacquer industry of Kyaukka. Present day Kyaukka lacquerware industry use only Me-tin-kha. The lacquerware workshops of the village produce over 500 objects of lacquerware. The art of creating lacquer and lacquerware was handed down from generation to generation.

**Keywords:** Background, Bamboo and Industry

### **Introduction**

Kyaukka village is divided into Kyaukka South and Kyaukka North villages. According to the 2019 census, Kyaukka(South) village is inhabited by 1184 souls, 480 households with 477 houses, while Kyaukka (North) village is inhabited by 2605 souls, 670 households with 610 houses. At the current situation, Kyaukka lacquerware industry in Monywa township is facing difficulties for continued existence in future. This paper is written with the intention that if these difficulties can be settled, Kyaukka lacquer-ware industry will be expanded to external market and will get more foreign exchange

### **Background**

Like the people living all over the world, the people of Myanmar possess rich cultural heritages and unique arts and crafts. Some arts and crafts are known as pan-hse-myo or the arts and crafts known in Myanmar names which begin with pan-flowers. The saying goes pha-ya-ma-tin nat-ma-win lu-dwin-hse-pwint-pan- literally means the flowers which can be offered neither to Buddha nor guardian spirits, but only to be used by human. The flowers in this saying are metaphor to denote ten traditional arts and crafts. According to epigraphic evidence of Bagan, ten crafts and arts had thrived in Bagan period.( Dr. Than Tun (2004) Myanmar Anupinnya Letya Pyitsi (Myanmar's Objectives of Beauty and Arts), Yangon, Po Wa Press, p.67) Pawdawmu Stupa Inscription on 11st Century AD) and Mingala Zedi Inscription mention some lacquerware utensils of that time.( Sylvia Fraser-Lu(1985) Burmese Lacquerware, Bangkok, Tamanind Press, p.3) In addition, the discovery of lacquer box for keeping weights, lacquer betel box and cups of 12 Century AD (Bagan Cultural Museum, No.2909/99, No-864/99, No.1054/99) reveal that lacquerwares were popular household, items in Bagan period.

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In the later konbaung period the people-from royalty to the monkhood to the ordinary people used miscellaneous lacquerwares in their everyday lives. Myanmar kings were accustomed to give lacquerwares to the foreign diplomats. The other items of royal gifts were silk clothings and precious gem stones. Likewise, in the sacred days of Buddhism, the people used lacquer trays, pams, alm-bowls, hsun-oks - votive receptacles to put alms, food and other offerings to donate Buddhist monasteries.( Fraser-Lu 1985, 2) The ordinary people would like to use lacquer boxes to keep valuable items such as jewellery, flowers, etc. The art of making lacquerware was supposed to have been arrived from China to Myanmar since 3000 year ago. ( Than Tun 2004, 67) It was Pyu people who had diplomatic relations with Chinese empire. During the keydays of Pyu cultural and political achievements (AD 500-900), a troupe Pyu musicians visited to the imperial court of China in AD 802. The Chinese envoys reciprocally visited to the Pyu Kingdoms. Chinese arts and crafts including the making of lacquerwares probably arrived into Myanmar through such diplomatic and cultural exchanges. Other sources however mention that the art of making lacquer was not imported from China, but from other neighbouring countries. (Fraser-Lu 1985, 2) The earliest lacquareware were the teak chests and boxes which were not painted with a variety of colours, but applied with thit-si-sap of the Melaworrhoea usitata which is grey, viscous liquid which turn back on exposure and yellow ochre.

The name Yun in Myanmar has variant meanings. It means not only lacquer or lacquerware but also the name of region called Lan Na (present-day Chiang Mai). According to the early historical sources of Chaing Mai, it is known that the rulers of Lan Na were presented the skilled artists and various craftsmen and every material including lacquers from the trees. ( The Chiang Mai Chronicle, David K. Wyatt and Aroonrut Wichienkees (Trans and Ed) (1998), Chaing Mai Silkworm Books,pp-97-98) The relations between Chiang Mai and Inwa had existed since the time of Phraya Mang nai (1238-1259 AD). It is attributed that the lacquer and the art of making lacquerware arrived into Myanmar since that time onwards. However, a concrete evidence of the arrival of Yun artisans and craftsmen into Myanmar, including lacquer artisans, can be seen after the conquest of Trant. Than Lwin regions and northern Thailand by King Bayinnaung (1551-1581). Myanmar people called Yun to both the captives of northern Thailand and the glittering lacqueswares.( Than Tun, 2004, 68)

In 1557 the King of Chiang Mai submitted tributes including elephants, horses, silk clothing and lacquerwares.( Than Tun, 2004, 68) He also dispatched had various artisans and craftsmen, numbered about 40,000, including lacquerware. craftsmen to Bago. During King Thayawaddy Min's reign (1637-46), the King received a lacquer box from Yun Kingdom (Chiang Mai). The King ordered lacquerware craftsmen from Bagan to produce replicas of that box before he given it to his sister.( Fraser Lu, 1985, 4) These evidences indicate the relations between the lacquerware industries of Myanmar and those of Chiang Mai. Kyaukka lacquerware industry was supposed to be thrived since the time of King Mindon.( Sylvia Fraser-Lu (1994) *Burmese Lacquerware*, Bangkok, Tamanind Press, p.246) It is interesting to note that same villages located in the vicinity of Kyaukka also produced lacquerware. But these villages produced specialized items. For instance Maung-daung village, which located 7 miles to the north of Budalin, produced only daung-lan-lacquer tray with tripod.(Dr Myo Myint (2010) *Collected Essays on Myanmar History and Culture*, Yangon, Shwe Pyi Soe Offset, p.186 ) Sibok-taya, Kya-bo and Bauk-thin-daung in Khin-u Township were also well-known for daung-lan, while Yusathaya in Taze Township was note for tiff in carriers, hsum-ok and trays. (Fraser Lu 1994, 246)

## Bamboo

Rich forest resources of Myanmar such as bamboo and lacquer tree brought about the development of lacquer industry throughout ages. The most essential raw material for lacquer industry is bamboo. About 220 species of bamboo are growing in Myanmar.(Maung Maung Myint (2001) Myanmar Wash (Myanmar Bamboo) Yangon, Sarpay Biman, p.7) Of these species, Tin wa Cephalestochy pergracile Musro and Me-tin-kha-wa-the bamboo growing Homelin area are most suitable ones for making coil and basketry in lacquer industry of Kyaukka. Presentday Kyaukka laequerware industry use only Me-tin-kha bamboo which was left for are and half month to two months to day. Then the bamboo culm is split into strips. It a lacquer workshop use Tin-Wah, the bamboo joints are clupped out and left the bamboos in the brick tank to soak water for seven days. Kyukka (south) village primarily produce bamboo frame called apyu-hte. The instrument such as hand-saw, chopper, dak-mauk-knife with a broad blade and curved point and chopping block.

A Me-tin-kha bamboo usually has five to six internodes. These internodes are cut off either by saw or chopper. These clopped internodes are called hni-laung-wah-sit internode to become bamboo strips. These internodes are sub-divided into one inch strip. These are three types of hni-laungs. The first section is small and short inter node the second section is slightly thick called tet-hni. Third section is a wide strip which is sub-divided into Kattaya Hni and Htauk-hni. Then the bamboo sections are cut off in triangle shape. The other end of section is cut off in askew shape for sake of easy stripping.( Interview with U Win Swe, Age 56, Owner of Bamboo Frame Workshop, Kyaukka (South) Village, 1 August 2018) The culm is split into strips which may be coiled or interlaced in a variety of ways according to the object being made or interlaced in a variety of ways according to the object being made. A warp of bamboo is interwoven with a weft of horsehair for the finest, lightest and most flexible wares. The bamboo strips are called Kattaya-hni, Khwe-hni, htauk-hni and seik-hni. Kattaya-hni is the basic bamboo strips in making basic object known as aphyu-the. These strips are interlaced after making the notches with knife. Khwe-hni is the bamboo strips for coiling. These strips are coiled inside the kattaya ring. Htauk-hni is a bamboo strips to be used to fasten and to mold the coiled bamboo strips. It buttressed the ware together with Khwe-hni. Saik-hni is the smallest bamboo strips to be molded the desired form. These strips are mostly used along with Kattaya rings to make *hsun-ok*-votive respectable and betel box.

## Industry

For example, the production of *hsun-ok* is divided into three parts; These namely Khwa-pedestal, *hrun-ok* a-ma-main body lid and inner tray. The pedestal of *hsun-ok* is made by coiling the lowest rim with Seik-hni. The circular decorative bands are interwoven with smallest bamboo strips and Khwe-hni. There are four circular decorative bonds on the pedestal of *hrun-ok*. Amapaing or main body of votive receptacle is made from the upper rim. The bamboo coiling is made in Khayupat-pattern of winding down word. Kattaya-hni and Seik-hni are mainly used to obtain desired form.(Interview with U Win Shwe, Age 59, Owner of Bamboo Frame Workshop, Kyaukka (South) Village, 9 February 2019)

After completion of the four steps of bamboo coiling, the processing of making bamboo frame is finished Kyaukka usually produce *hsun-oks* of 10 inches, 12 inches, 14 inches and 20 inches of diameter. Of these sizes, 20 inches size is not in use widely. Then bamboo frame of

*hsun-oks* are applied with lacquer mixed with teak sawdust. Then these *hsun-oks* are placed in an underground cellar with earthen floor. After two or three days of placing in cellar, *hsun-oks* are applied with lacquer and find ground clay. After-applying scored coating the objects are polished with sand paper. Then they were placed again into the cellar. Three or four days after placing in cellar, the objects are again polished and then sent to cellar. When the texture and brightness of objects reach designed form, the final applying of lacquer and polishing is made, various exquisite patterns and designs are drawn on *hsun-oks* and then placed them to the cellar for last time. Then *hsun-oks* are ready to be exported to the markets of Bago, Mandalay, Mawlamyine and other towns.( Dr. Aye Win (2009) Myanmarhnu Saiya Kyaukkayunktemya Lelachyst (A Study on the Kyaukka Lacquerware Industry). Department of Myanmar, Monywa University, pp.8-10 (Unpublished))

In customary society and even in colonial society, the most familiar lacquerware in Myanmar household would be kun-it-a cylindrical box made of woven bamboo and fitted inside with a pair of shallow trays to hold the essential items for making betel quid.

( Interview with Daw Yi Yi Win, Age 55, Kyaukka (North), Taw Win Tun Lacquer Shop, 3 August 2018)The process of making betel box is divided into four parts namely, main body, upper inner tray, lower inner try and lid. All of these parts are repeatedly coiled with bamboo-like the making of *hsun-ok*, the bamboo strips such as kattaya-hni, htauk-hni, seik-hni are used in bamboo coiling.( Fraser-Lu, 1994, 224-25) The process of lacquering bamboo frame of betel box is not too different from that of *hsun-ok*. Bamboo frame are applied with lacquer mixed with pounded teak saw dust and then placed into underground cellar. The process is repeated with even finer coatings until the object has smooth, lustrous surface free from any rough patekes. Then the beautiful floral design and other figures such as birds are drawn with stylus on surface of the lid. The instruments used in making betel box are chopper, pointed knife and scissors.( Interview with Daw Yi Yi Win, 3 August 2018)

In order to produce lacquerware, the first step of process is to join woven bamboo matting known as *Yet-tha-phyra* (It is specifically woven for lacquer industry.) and bamboo-coiling frame. The lacquerware workshops of Kyaukka do not produce bamboo mats. Instead, they bought woven mats from Palington and Mindekun, the villages located eight eight miles to north of Kyaukka. A Yet-tha or woven bamboo mattiyat is usually measured 10 feet and six inches long and 3 feet wide.

The second step of producing black lacquerware is to polish bamboo frame which has already closed with modern bamboo mattiyat the bottom with knife. The third stage is to apply lacquer on the bamboo frame with coconut husk called tha-put-tan. This process is known as ye-kyin applying first coat.

The fourth step is applying raw *tha-yo* to the object *Tha-yo* is the mixture of bone-powder of cattle or teak sawdust and cow manure with lacquer. The lacquerware applied with lacquer and bone powder of cattle is the hardest one. Likewise the lacquerwars a made up of lacquer mixed with teak sawdust are also light and durable ones. Lacquerware workshops of Kyaukka commonly use teak sawdust. In order to get fine sawdust, a sieve with smallest meshes is used and mixed the sawdust with brown lacquer. This mixture is pounded into stones mortar.

As the producing raw lacquerware, *tha-yo* or mixture of sawdust and lacquer is thickly applied to the object. Then the object is put on the wooden pole to beat with wooden rod to get

desired mold. After beating, the object is placed into the underground cellar to dry for three days. The fifth step is to smear the object with *tha-yo-pyaw*- which is a mixture of fine clay obtained from a creek on the south of Kyaukka, ash of rice husk and lacquer. A piece of cloth is used to apply the mixture to the object. After applying *tha-yo-pyaw*-soft lacquer, the object is again placed into underground cellar.

In sixth stage, the object is needed to polish with a rough stone and then wipe the dust out of object with coconut husk. In seventh stage, the object is applied with brown lacquer. It is known as cover with *tha-yo*. Then the object is placed in cellar for three days. In eighth stage, the dried object is rubbed with the leaves of *dahat* tree-*Tectone hamiltoniana* Wall. These leaves are collected by lacquer workers before the fall reason in summer. The *dahat* trees are growing on the hill slopes on the south of Kyaukka. These leaves are as rough as sand-paper. When object is rubbing with the leaves, it is needed to splash with water for getting smoother and smoother. Same lacquer workshops used sand-paper instead of *da-hat* leaves.

After getting smooth object, stage nine begins, that is the object is applied with black lacquer which is repeatedly strain off dust. After that, the object is again placed into underground cellar. Two days later, it is took out of cellar to apply final coat of lacquer. Then it is kept in the cellar. Some lacquerwares are applied black lacquer on the outside surface and red lacquer in inside surface. Red lacquer is the mixture of vermilion or other red pigment with lacquer.

Whenever a black to lacquerware is made, lacquer is repeatedly applied to the object. Likewise the object is placed in the underground cellar after applying of lacquer. The underground cellar is necessary for lacquerware workshop. It is build with brick, cement and timbes. The cellar is usually eight feet height and ten square feet wide. In order to get vapour rising from the earth, thee floor of cellar is not covered with timber or cement. The cellar must have humidity and moisture.

The quality of lacquerware is wholly depending on lacquer. Accordingly the lacquer worker should have enough knowledge on the quality. They divided pure lacquer and diluted one by simple method, it is a wooden stick is dipped into the lacquer and watched the stick after pulled off from the lacquer. If the stick is thoroughly applied by lacquer within and bright layer, the lacquer is decided the genuine one. If the stick is smeared by lacquer unevenly, the lacquer is rejected for mixture with undesirable substance.( Chit Oo, 1967, 16) The *thi-si* or substance used to make lacquer is the sap of the *Melaworrhoea usitata*, a tree which grows wild up to elevations of nearly 1000 meters in the drier forest, of the Shan States and the Katha and Bhamo district. It is a grey viscous liquid which turn black on exposure, is tapped by making 'V'-shaped incisions in the back of the tree.( Fraser-Lu, 1994, 222) The name of *thit-si* is given by seeing its colour or the region extracted. The natural colours of *thit-si* are black, brown and red. The black is the best quality and the red is poor quality to the used in lacquer inducting. Kyaukka uses black and brown lacquer.( Interview with U San Win and wife Daw Ky Kyi New, Owner of Ngwe Kye-Zin Lacquer Workshop and Store, Kyaukka (North) Village, 3 August 2016) Income cases, the black lacquer is coloured with the addition of pigments such as cinnabar, a red mercuric oxide from China. Yellow is made from orpiment obtained from the Shan State, the blue colour is made from indigo.( Fraser-Lu, 1994, 225)

Miscellaneous instruments such as various forms of wooden striker, hammer, bronze spoon, coconut husk, leaves of *da-hat* tree, sand-paper, etc. The lacquerware are decorated with following arts and crafts.

- (1) drawing floral design
- (2) incising design with stylus and filling colours
- (3) decorating with moulded lacquer, and
- (4) gilding

The first type of decoration is drawn by using brushes and enamel paints the figures of birds, horses, elephants, palace and floral designs. The name of lacquer artist is written. The second type of decorating is made through some processes. Firstly, the design is completely impressed into the lacquered surface with stylus produced from the sharpened metal rib of an umbrella frame. The colours such as yellow, which, orange, brown are then painted on board. Lacquer artists usually drawn floral designs, landscapes, scenes from Jataka stories, gyo-shit-lon or Eight Planets' design showing the cardinal points, days of the week, animals and planets represented by the planetary prayer posts.( Fraser-Lu 1994, 235, below Fig.47) They also decorate the lacquerware with the design as the customer ordered. This process is also umpires of applying white enamel paint with oil on the surface of object. The reason of using oil is to be medium for easy drawing. A piece of cloth is used to apply enamel. Then the dried cloth is used to wipe out the background enamel. After this, the powder of paint in various colours is rubbed with hand onto the incised designs. After filling colour, the object is washed with water two times to obtain finished product. Another type of decorating is the relief molding to the object. In order to do so, *tha-yo* is prepared with thick boiled lacquer. It is needed in the finely sifted powdered bone, cow dung, or paddy ash. *Tha-yo* can be easily modeled and adheres easily to the objects such as to basketing, wood, stone and metal. It is noted that the object with glossy surface are not used to produce relief-molded lacquer. When the object is about to be molded brown lacquer is applied. Then the figures, floral scrolling are fastened to the ornamented surface with a dab of lacquer. Then objects are placed into the underground cellar. Not only black lacquer but red and brown lacquerware are produced. The strings of *Tha-yo*, produced with a small knife, are also used to decorate the object.

The decoration of lacquer with gold-leaf is also popular in lacquerware industry. In the past pure gold-leaf are used. Nowadays scroll of synthetic gold leaves are used. In order to press the gold leaf in to the surface of object, the adhesive is applied and then the scroll is pressed. Then the plastic sheet attached to the gold leaf is detached with a small knife. Then a plastic sheet is wrapped onto the object to rub with a brush to got finished goods.

Kyaukka lacquerware industry produced variety of lacquerwares such as various size of swon-offering baskets, various sizes of lacquer trays with triped, base of alm-bowl, tiffin carriers, golden bowls, gourd, pickled-tea receptacle, betel boxes, snack boxes, cheroot box, receptacles, vases, pons, plates, cosmetic boxes, water pot, pumpkin-shaped receptacle, water bottles, hand dress box, covered bowls, ornamental stand, water goblet, cigarette boxes, etc. About 500 types of lacquerwares are produced by the lacquer workshops of Kyaukka. (Interview with U San Win and Wife Daw Kyi Kyi Nwe, 3 August 2016) However the lacquerware workshops are giving priority to the demand of market. Although the artisans of Kyaukka primarily engaged in bamboo coiling, they can also bamboo weaving to produce frame like the artisans of Myingabar, Bagan.

The lacquerwares of Kyaukka are produced mainly with bamboo frame. As a result, the objects should be kept away from moisture. Nowadays the lacquer workshops innovated wares to

resist moisture and heat. Thus the objects are enduring so long as the lacquer coating is firmly adhering to the frame. Some ancient lacquerwares maintained by filling special lacquer.

Nowadays, some of the time-honoured traditional arts and crafts are on the verge of extinction. For example, almost all of weaving cottage industry and hand looms had disappeared in rural areas due to the influx of imported textiles and emergence of automatic weaving machines since the beginning of colonial period. Likewise the lacquerwares are no longer in use among the people. However lacquerwares continue to be used by the people as popular gifts to foreigners. Many well-off persons used to decorate the parlour rooms of their houses with or nominated lacquerwares. Thus the lacquerware industries continue to thrive in Myanmar society. The government opens the lacquer Institute at Bagan to maintain the art of producing lacquerware as the cultural heritage of Myanmar. U Kyin who studied at lacquer Institute redistributed his knowledge to the workers of lacquer workshops of Kyaukka.

Kyaukka lacquer industry had emerged since the days of pre-colonial rule. The lacquerware workshops of the village produce over 500 objects of lacquerware. The art of creating lacquer and lacquerware was handed down from generation to generation. However, as other lucrative jobs attracted the people, the lacquer artisans moved to these occupations. Meanwhile the scarcity of raw material partially hinders the lacquerware industry. Indeed Kyaukka ware is noted for its strength and durability. However the designs and simple colour of Kyaukka ware cannot compete embellish Bagan wares in the market. More importantly, the scarcity of young generation who like to work in the lacquerware industry as the worthy heir of their predecessors is an important cause for the gradual decline of Kyaukka lacquerware industry.

### **Results and Finding**

Field trips were gone for seven times to Kyaukka villages in Monywa township, such as Kyaukka south village and Kyaukka north village. When plain lacquer-ware and finished lacquer-ware are studied in comparison, it is found that plain industry became more prosperous. Merchants from Mandalay, Yangon and Bagan purchased by order the plain lacquer wares in their favorite designs. More than finished products, some merchants purchased plain lacquer wares which are applied with lacquer paste and resin with the intention to sell back and to produce finished products. It was because although Kyaukka lacquer wares were sturdy, but when it was compared with Bagan lacquer wares, it was necessary to use resin in good quality and it has weakness in technology and color quality. It is also found that craftsmen who made plain lacquer wares are rare in Kyaukka south and north villages. The labor charge of these craftsmen is just 7000 kyats per day and so they prefer to work other jobs which have more income than the lacquer-ware industry. Scarcity of raw materials, and weakness to distribute Kyaukka lacquer wares in markets in larger amount made the lacquer-ware industry faded away. In order to perpetuate lacquer-ware industry, it was necessary to make new generation of youths to attend Lacquer-ware training schools and to open lacquer-ware training schools in Monywa township. Townspeople should hold high regard to lacquer-ware industry as local products by producing in every house. If raw materials and skilled workers can be obtained easily in future and labour charge should be paid at the rate in consistence with the current price, as well as the utility of resin and colour in good quality and searching for external and internal markets, Kyaukka lacquerware industry will be developed.

## Conclusion

Kyaukka lacquer industry had emerged since the time of the later Konbaung kings. The lacquerware workshops of the village produce over 500 objects of lacquerware. The art of creating lacquer and lacquerware was handed down from generation to generation. However, as other lucrative jobs attracted the people, the lacquer artisans moved to these occupations. Meanwhile the scarcity of raw material partially hinders the lacquerware industry. Indeed Kyaukka ware is noted for its strength and durability. However the designs and simple colour of Kyaukkaware cannot compete embellish Bagan wares in the market. More importantly, the scarcity of young generation who like to work in the lacquerware industry as the worthy heir of their predecessors is an important cause for the gradual decline of Kyaukka lacquerware industry.

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## List of Interviewees

- Interview with U San Win and wife Daw Ky Kyi Nwe, Owner of Ngwe Kye-Zin Lacquer Workshop and Store, Kyaukka (North) Village, 3 August 2016
- Interview with U Po Hlaing, Age 68, Village Chairman, Kyaukka(South)Village, Monywa Township, 9 February 2019
- Interview with U Nyi Nyi Win Age 49, Village Chairman, Kyaukka (North)Village, Monywa Township, 13 August 2018
- Interview with U Win Swe, Age 56, Owner of Bamboo Frame Workshop, Kyaukka (South) Village, 1 August 2018
- Interview with U Win Shwe, Age 59, Owner of Bamboo Frame Workshop, Kyaukka (South) Village, 9 February 2019
- Interview with Daw Yi Yi Win, Age 55, Kyaukka (North), Taw Win Tun Lacquer Shop, 3 August 2018