

The **FACES** of BURMA 2005

Than Shwe Burma's Junta Supremo

Burma's most powerful general has ruled the country since 1992 and currently holds the government's two highest posts—chairman of the State Peace and Development Council and commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

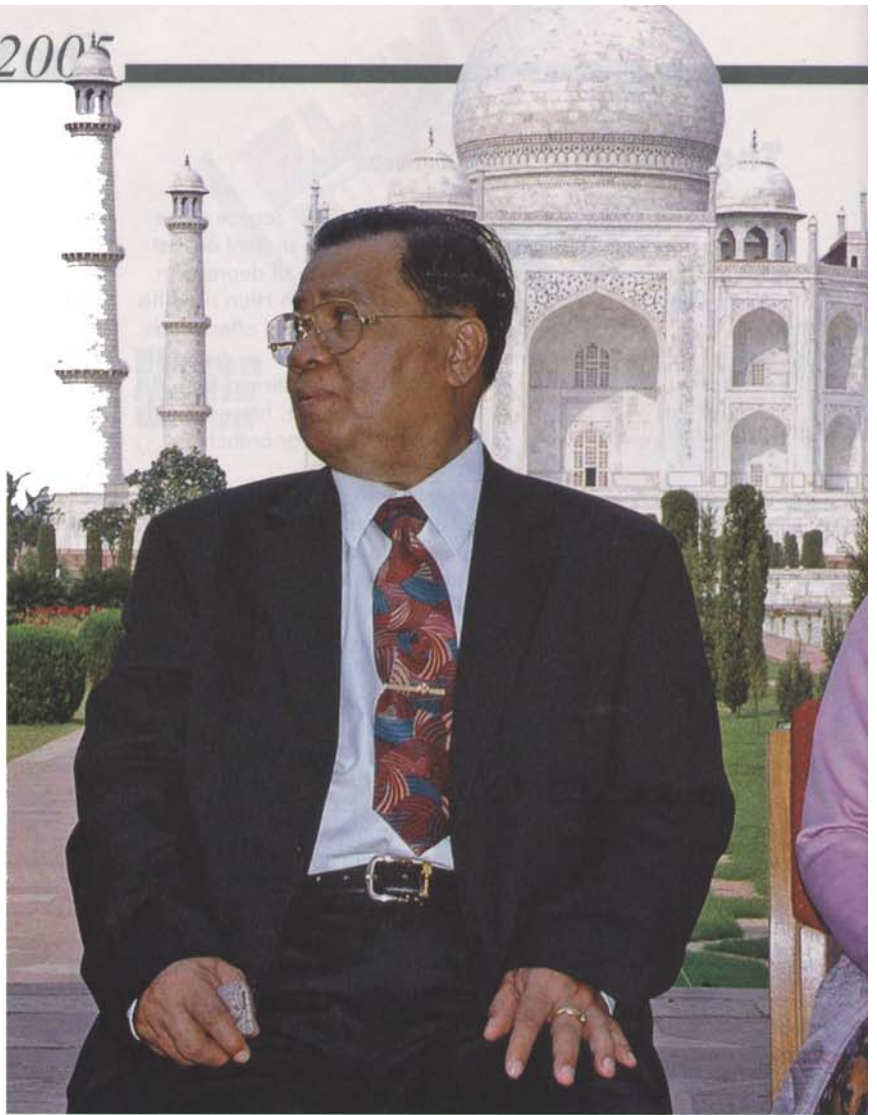
Many in Burma—including senior government officials—believe that the junta chief has grown increasingly out of touch with affairs of state, mentally unstable and extremely paranoid. It is also believed that he was principally responsible for the bizarre decision to relocate key government ministries to Pyinmana, central Burma, on the advice of his astrologers.

Some even say that Than Shwe—despite his as yet unchallenged hold on power in Burma—would gladly abandon his office for the position of president in a new civilian government.

The administrative capital of Burma may be moving north, but Than Shwe is staying put in Rangoon—in deference to his family's reluctance to leave the city. He is said to desire a fleet of helicopters to shuttle him between Pyinmana and Rangoon when his attendance at cabinet sessions and upper-level meetings is required.

The senior general rarely makes public appearances. He occasionally meets visiting diplomats, who have discounted persistent rumors of the general's poor health. Reports of mental instability notwithstanding, Than Shwe is still credited with considerable political acumen, as befits a former member of the country's psychological warfare department. He is reported this year to have told high-ranking UN officials that he wants no interference by the UN or any nation—including China and Russia—in the internal affairs of Burma.

Than Shwe is living proof of the adage that behind every powerful man stands a woman. In his case, there are two women who dominate his thoughts and are capable of disrupting his schedule. One of them, Kyaing Kyaing, is his wife. The other is pro-democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi—the very mention of her name is said to send the general into paroxysms of rage.



Kyaing Kyaing Burma's First Lady

Burmese supremo Snr-Gen Than Shwe's wife, Kyaing Kyaing, is regarded in Burma as a Shakespearean Lady Macbeth figure, the real power behind the Rangoon throne. Her influence is apparently so strong that she is said to have blocked her husband's wish to retire from active political life.

Much of what is written about her is based on rumor and hearsay, but the reports, from various sources, are so

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consistent that a large measure of credibility must be attached to them.

Kyaing Kyaing is an ethnic Pa-O and the widow of a senior army officer. That much is known—but then her life story enters the realm of hearsay. Even the circumstances of her army officer husband's death are not officially recorded—he is reported to have died in action.

After marrying Than Shwe, she slipped behind the security curtain that shields Burma's top leaders and their families from public attention. Nevertheless, enough is known about her from reliable sources to paint a picture of a forceful but superstitious woman who rules Than Shwe's private and professional life.

A well-informed source in Rangoon says that when Than Shwe expressed a wish to retire from active political life, Kyaing Kyaing skillfully played a sentimental card, telling him he had to stay in office in the interests of his favorite grandson. "Kyaing Kyaing asked Than Shwe who else would take care of their grandson's future," the source said. The grandson, Pho La Pyeit, is a favorite of Than Shwe, who reportedly believes the boy is his talisman of good fortune.

Kyaing Kyaing is said to share her husband's superstitious

ways, and she has been seen sometimes taking on the role of a mystic medium. She clearly displays signs of delusions of grandeur, expecting people to address her as "your majesty" and to drop to their knees in her presence.

She is also said to harbor a strong hatred of National League for Democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, and there are those who suspect she had a hand in the mob attack on the pro-democracy activist and her supporters in May 2003.

Within the home, Kyaing Kyaing oversees the preparation of all her husband's meals, according to a government official who has accompanied the couple on official trips in Burma. Nobody gets to meet Than Shwe without her approval.

Government and military appointments also have to meet with her approval, say informed sources. Her hire-and-fire influence reportedly nets her big rewards: luxury homes in new housing developments, business concessions and extravagant "New Year gifts."

When one businessman's wife presented her with a ruby worth 200 million kyat (US \$18,000) Kyaing Kyaing is said (by a source close to the entrepreneur) to have dismissed the gem as "cheap."

Burma's business community say that as the Burmese New Year approached in April, Kyaing Kyaing demanded from them gifts worth at least 6 billion kyat (\$5 million). "Daw Kyaing Kyaing told company owners not to regard the demand as extortion money or bribery, as it is the Burmese tradition to give presents to 'worthy people' during the New Year season," reported the Oslo-based DVB radio.

Kyaing Kyaing's cupidity—partly assuaged by shopping jaunts with her daughters to Singapore—appears finally to have alarmed her husband. He reportedly stepped in when his wife asked army officials to deliver to her a huge quantity of luxury goods confiscated from the home of sacked agriculture minister Nyunt Tin.

The disgraced minister was arrested on charges relating to a \$10 million business scandal. A raid on his home netted more than 30 unlicensed cars and a treasure trove of gold and jewelry. But when Kyaing Kyaing asked her army cronies to deliver to her the confiscated goods, alarm bells reportedly rang at the top and Than Shwe intervened and countermanded her instruction.

Kyaing Kyaing seems to have taken her husband's rare display of authority to heart, for she retired from public view for some time, although she remains honorary patron of the Myanmar [Burma] Women's Affairs Federation.

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Learning with the Irrawaddy 9

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Selected article:

Faces of Burma 2005: General Than Shwe and Kyaing Kyaing, pages 16-17

Activities to do Before Reading

Activity 1

What do you know?

What do you think you know?

What do you want to know?

- a) You are going to read an article about General Than Shwe. What do you *know*, what do you *think you know*, and what do you *want to know*?

General Than Shwe		
Things I know	Things I think I know	Things I want to know

- b) Complete the chart. There are no right or wrong answers in this activity.

Activity 2

Prediction: Describing People

- a) This article describes two people: General Than Shwe, and his wife Kyaing Kyaing. What sort of information do you think will be in the article?

Here are some types of information. Which do you think will be in the article?

1. Their jobs
2. Their favourite colours
3. Their parents' names
4. The economic situation in Burma
5. Their opinions of other political people
6. The writer's opinion of them
7. Burma's relations with Thailand
8. Their past history
9. Their opinions about modern music

- b) What other information do you think might be there?

Activities to do During Reading

Activity 3

Paragraph Summaries

- a) Read the first six paragraphs of the article. Which paragraph matches which summary? There is one paragraph not summarized.

1. *Two women are influential on General Than Shwe.*
2. *Than Shwe is very important in Burma.*
3. *Perhaps he wants to transfer his power to a high position in civilian government.*
4. *Some people think that General Than Shwe has mental problems.*
5. *Although he does not appear in public much, he still has a lot of political power.*

- b) Which paragraph is not summarized? Write a summary for that paragraph.

Activity 4

Key vocabulary

- a) Scan the text and underline any words you don't know.
b) Identify the meanings of these words in your dictionaries, if possible
c) Here are some words from the text. Use them to fill the gaps in the sentences.

principally	abandon	reluctance	persistent
acumen	icon	hearsay	consistent
mob	extravagant	extortion	crony
			sentimental
			honorary

1. He is very _____ - although he always fails his exams, he keeps trying over and over again.
2. She gave the job to her _____, although he didn't have the right qualifications.
3. The villagers had to _____ their village, because it was too dangerous.
4. We don't know if the story is true, it is only _____.
5. The large _____ attacked the police.
6. Her _____ to continue her education was because she wanted to help her family.
7. The gang used _____ to get the money from us – they said if we don't pay, they will beat us.
8. Mahatma Ghandi of India is an _____ for the peace movement.
9. Aung San Suu Kyi has many _____ degrees – universities give her degrees because they admire her, even though she has not studied the courses.
10. My mother has a lot of business _____. She sells a lot of things.
11. I like watching _____ movies, although they sometimes make me cry.
12. The house is very _____, it has gold mirrors and diamond taps.
13. I want to learn English _____ to help me with my work.
14. His job is _____ with his beliefs – he always wanted to help people, so he has become a nurse.

Activity 5

Idioms and phrasal verbs

Here are some excerpts from the article. Find the phrase in the text, and choose the best synonym or definition for the underlined words.

1. ...believe that the junta chief has grown increasingly out of touch with affairs of state... (paragraph 2)
 - a. unreasonable about
 - b. unaware of
 - c. afraid of
 - d. interested in

2. ...but Than Shwe is staying put in Rangoon (paragraph 4)
 - a. remaining
 - b. running away from
 - c. sleeping
 - d. hiding

3. She clearly displays signs of delusions of grandeur... (paragraph 12)
 - a. thinking she is very important
 - b. wanting expensive things
 - c. liking expensive jewelry
 - d. feeling unhappy

4. Government and military appointments also have to meet with her approval... (paragraph 15)
 - a. give her presents
 - b. say nice things to her
 - c. visit her
 - d. be liked by her

5. He reportedly stepped in when his wife asked army officials to deliver her a huge quantity of luxury goods... (paragraph 20)
 - a. got angry
 - b. complained
 - c. intervened
 - d. came home

Activity 6

Kyaing Kyaing's Influence

In the article there are several examples of ways that Kyaing Kyaing has influenced her husband. List another four of these examples.

1. She has blocked her husband's desire to retire from public life (paragraph 7)
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Activity 7

Comprehension Questions

1. What do people in Burma think of General Than Shwe?
2. Do people see Than Shwe very often?
3. Does Than Shwe want Russia and China to intervene in Burma?

4. What happens when Than Shwe gets information about Daw Aung San Suu Kyi?
5. How accurate is the information about Kyaing Kyaing?
6. How did Kyaing Kyaing persuade Than Shwe to stay in office?
7. When did Than Shwe finally stop Kyaing Kyaing's behaviour?
8. What does Kyaing Kyaing do now?

Activity 8

Identify the main point

What is the main point of this article?

1. Burma has so many problems because Than Shwe is a bad leader.
2. Than Shwe and Kyaing Kyaing have a very strong marriage, which helps them to rule Burma together.
3. Kyaing Khaing is very corrupt, and uses her position of power to get many expensive things.
4. Kyaing Kyaing is a very influential person in Burma, because her husband listens to her ideas and opinions.

Activity 9

Making claims

- a) Read these two quotes. What is the difference between them?

'The junta chief has grown increasingly out of touch with affairs of state, mentally unstable and extremely paranoid.'

'Many in Burma believe that the junta chief has grown increasingly out of touch with affairs of state, mentally unstable and extremely paranoid.'

The first quote states this as a *fact*. The second quote says that some people think that this is true.

In the second quote, the writer thinks this might be true, but does not know exactly, and can't prove it. Therefore he or she can claim that other people think this – making claims like this conveys the same ideas. However, the writer cannot be proved wrong. This is a way the writer can say something *indirectly*.

- b) Throughout the article, the writer says other things indirectly. Find these claims in the article. How does the writer express them?

1. *Than Shwe was responsible for the government moving to Pyinmana.*
2. *Than Shwe told UN officials that he doesn't want interference from the UN.*
3. *Kyaing Khaing's influence is very strong.*
4. *Kyaing Khaing's influence stopped her husband from retiring.*
5. *Kyaing Khaing's first husband died in action.*
6. *Kyaing Kyaing, like her husband Than Shwe, is very superstitious.*

7. *Kyaing Kyaing hates Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.*
8. *Kyaing Khaing's spending habits are worrying to her husband.*
9. *Than Shwe intervened when his wife tried to persuade the army to deliver confiscated goods to her.*
10. *Kyaing Kyaing has obeyed her husband, and retired from public life.*

Read through the article, and copy the sentences that make these claims.

- c) Which word or phrase in the article sentence means that the sentences above cannot be quoted as fact?

Activities to do After Reading

Activity 10 Describe Than Shwe and Kyaing Kyaing

Make two lists of adjectives that you can use to describe Than Shwe and Kyaing Kyaing. Work in pairs. Choose eight adjectives for Than Shwe and eight for Kyaing Kyaing. Then work in groups of six. Make group lists: choose eight adjectives for Than Shwe and eight for Kyaing Kyaing. Compare your adjectives as a class. Do you have the same ones?

Activity 11 Discussion

Discuss these ideas:

- 1) In paragraph 3, it says that perhaps General Than Shwe would exchange power in a military government for power in a civilian government. This means he is happy to end Burma's military rule, as long as he is in charge.

What is your opinion of this idea? Do you think it would be better than now, worse than now, or no real change?

- 2) Paragraph 7 compares Kyaing Kyaing to Lady Macbeth, a character from a play named 'Macbeth', written by Shakespeare. Lady Macbeth wants power. She persuades her husband to murder people so he can be king. After he becomes king, she controls him, tells him what to do.

How much do you think Kyaing Kyaing controls Than Shwe?
Do you know any other examples of women in history like this?