

Real Life *Kantei* of swords 15: Is it Japanese ?

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Introduction

There is a type of sword called a *Dha* that according to (**Greaves n/d**) is a generic term for a sword or knife from one of the various ethnic groups that make up the areas of Burma (Myanmar), Siam (Thailand), Cambodia and Laos. What is peculiar with this kind of sword is the similarities it has to the Japanese samurai sword. According to (**MacNab (2010)** page 223) "it has a single curved, single-edged blade similar in shape but not in quality to a Japanese samurai sword." Many other books also acknowledge this similarity.

We recently examined a *Dha* that appears to have more Japanese influence than other *Dha* we have seen. This article will focus on this *Dha*.

The Sword

The sword fully mounted in its scabbard is shown in **Figure 1**



Figure 1- The sword mounted in its scabbard

In **Figure 2** we show the blade out of its scabbard. The hilt cannot be removed without heavy work and this is an important fact we will discuss later (see Appendix).



Figure 2- The sword out of its scabbard . The hilt cannot be removed.

This sword was quickly identified by an oriental arms expert as a *Dha*. (We shall explain later how a collector of Japanese swords can identify swords of other parts of the world.) The *Dha* was used in Burma and Thailand, until quite recently. However, this sword appears to resemble a Japanese Sword more than other *Dha* we have seen.

This *Dha* is unusual for a number of reasons.

First, the blade is better than the blades we have seen in other *Dha*. It appears to be forged and its edge is fire hardened, not like a Japanese *hamon* but similar in appearance. Although it is not uncommon to find oriental arms (from the Far East) with a hardened edge, we have never seen this level of hardening in other *Dha*. Also, there are signs of forging and the steel looks to have been subject to more forging work than what is usually found in far eastern swords. On first glance it would be tempting to assume this blade is a long *hira zukuri* Japanese blade of poor quality.

Second, this sword is mounted with a small *habaki* and a small *tsuba*. This is not common in other *Dha* we have seen. The ones we have seen with *habaki*, were of 20th century manufacture.

Third, the scabbard of the sword is of *niello* design. Not quite the *niello* we find in Caucasian swords but definitely *niello*. This actually increased our uneasiness about this sword. Why does a Japanese sword, mounted as a *Dha*, have a scabbard and hilt (see figure 3) in the style of a Caucasian sword?



Figure 3- The hilt of the sword.



The above swords represent typical *Dha* . These were on sale at Wallis and Wallis recently. Note that the above swords have no *Tsuba* or *Habaki*, but the blades resemble (perhaps vaguely) a *Hira Zukuri* Japanese blade.

Identification of the Sword

This sword is a *Dha* acquired from Thailand. In fact the *Dha* is the national weapon of Burma but was used in many neighboring countries. It is probably from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, but it is very difficult for a Japanese sword collector to identify swords like this. (see Appendix for some hints on how this can be done). It is well known and explained in the book by Richardson (**Richardson (2014)**), that Thailand was influenced by Japanese warriors in the 16th century, just before Japan was closed to the world by the Shogun. For example, *Dha* were used in pairs one large and one small, like a *katana* and *wakizashi*. The smaller *Dha* is generally identical to the big one. The *Dha* is frequently described as being similar to Japanese swords but of low quality. We believe in fact, that the *Dha* was inspired by the *Katana* but don't agree that they are entirely similar.

An expert in Oriental Arms that we discussed this with shared the following comments with us.

"This looks to be Thai; it belongs to a subgroup of dha from that culture that's deliberately patterned after Japanese swords. Note the visual effect of the hilt deco, consciously imitating the twisted braid cord wrap on a katana or tachi hilt. However, the grip is still of round cross-section, with the flaring bell shaped ferrule, in keeping with the functional norms of Thai swordsmanship. Blade profile is heavily Japanese influenced too, as is the habaki.

This is the result of Japanese adventurers going to SE Asia in the 16th , begin 17th cent. to seek employment as mercenaries. There were also Portuguese and Chinese down there doing the same thing. The kings of Siam hired many Japanese, who were put into their own military unit. The practice stopped when Japan closed its borders, and I recall there being some sort of political upheaval in Thailand where the Japanese were accused by the opposition side of being subversive, or traitorous. Still, during their term of service, these Japanese were trusted more than the Chinese or Portuguese -- Japan was far away and not interested in territory in the area,

whereas the Ming Dynasty was too close and was pressuring Burma. The Portuguese had valuable firearms technology but were still suspect because their country was actively building an Asian empire, and aggressively converting natives to Christianity" (2017 – Artzi, *Oriental-Arms.com*)

Japanese Influence in East Asia.

In a book published by the Royal Armories (Richardson (2014)) entitled *East Meets West*, an article in this book helped us make sense of the Japanese influence in Vietnam [and in Southeast Asia in general] . This book contains a series of wonderful articles about episodes when Europeans encountered Asians and exchanged gifts, some of which were swords. It is well known that until the 19th century these contacts were infrequent. The article is titled " A Diplomatic Gift Full of Surprises " and was written by Eveline Sint Nicolaas of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. It discusses Japanese swords exported to South East Asia and Japanese swords made there (or made in the style of Japanese swords) in the seventeenth century.

The book describes a rack full of oriental arms that belonged to Cornelius Tromp (1629-91). This rack was given to him by a friend, called Wemans, who lived in Batavia (present day Jakarta). Tromp added to the rack quite a few items and among them the three swords shown below in Figure 4. The book describes these swords as follows: "At first glance , the swords appear to be of Japanese manufacture; however, on closer inspection it can be seen to have various features which are typically Vietnamese, or at least Southeast Asian. The two almost identical [top two swords shown in Figure 4] swords have Vietnamese style *tsuba* or hilt guards and a type of tusk pommel that is often found in Vietnamese weapons. Finally the band connecting guard and the hilt, known as ferrule, has Vietnamese ornaments, while the way it was mounted, tapered and widening toward the guard is also Vietnamese." When the swords were dismounted in the 1970s, some of the blades turned out to have a hole in the tang while others did not. Blades made in Southeast Asia typically don't have a hole in the tang while Japanese swords always have a hole on the tang (See Appendix).

In conclusion, the swords seem to have blades that are Japanese in form, yet were probably made in Vietnam or some other part of Southeast Asia. The exception is the sword with green hilt binding, which appears to be an actual Japanese sword. [This is the third sword on the bottom of figure 4.] The other weapons may have been made by Japanese swordsmiths who found themselves in Vietnam and lost touch with their fellow craftsmen in Japan after the Island went into isolation in the 1630s. Successive generations of armories produced weapons which were basically Japanese in design, yet had all kinds of local, Vietnamese, features. It is, therefore, very likely the *Dha* was influenced by the Japanese sword since the 17th century. It seems, however, from the literature we read that contacts between Japan and Thailand (Siam) decreased a lot after the 17th century, which was to be expected with the closure of Japan during the Tokugawa Era. So one may question why this sword appears to have so much Japanese influence. In our opinion, this sword is not very old, and it seems to have been more influenced by the Japanese sword than other *Dha* that we have seen. Thailand was allied with Japan during World War II, following numerous pre-war diplomatic exchanges and the beginning of a Japanese invasion of Thailand. A Treaty of alliance was signed between Thailand and Japan on December 21, 1941, and on January 25, 1942 Thailand declared war on

the United States and Great Britain. During the war Japan stationed 150,000 troops on Thai soil.

We think that this *Dha* was made in this period. Our conclusion is based on the comparison we made of *Dha* examples found in literature that utilized *habaki* and *tsuba*. (As mentioned before, neither *habaki* nor *tsuba* are commonly used with *Dha*). These swords, however, were all dated to the period just before until the end of the WW-2.



Figure 4- Three swords manufactured in Vietnam that show Japanese influence.

About the Niello scabbard

The Niello scabbard was a surprise for us. We thought that Niello was found only in weapons made in the Caucasus. However, upon close inspection of the scabbard we realized that this Niello is not the same as the Niello found in the Caucasus. With further research we discovered that Niello was actually invented in Thailand. The reader can find on the Internet many beautiful and old pieces decorated in this fashion. This was a pleasant surprise, because, it is another piece of evidence that this *Dha* was in fact made in Thailand.

Conclusion

When we saw this sword for the first time we were a bit surprised. The blade appeared to be a long *Hira Zukuri* Japanese blade, it had a *habaki*, and the mount has a small *tsuba*. However, the hilt was glued to the tang and of a form completely different of what we have seen before. Finally the scabbard was of Niello that at that time we thought was only found in swords made in the Caucasus.

After some research we become convinced that the sword was a Thai *Dha*. It is, however, a different *Dha* from the ones we have seen before. It shows signs of forging and the edge is fired hardened. As explained before, these features are not common in *Dha*, however examples do exist. We do not know where this *Dha* was made. When we consulted a specialist in *Dha* and reviewed his reply (transcribed above) he was convinced this is a *Dha* was from Thailand. As mentioned before, the *Dha* are considered to be strongly influenced by the Japanese sword. We found evidence of this in an article in the book by Richardson (**Richardson (2014)**) that has examples of three swords dating from the seventeenth century that clearly show the Japanese influence on the appearance of the *Dha*.

Finally we learned that Niello was actually invented in Thailand which support the provenance of this sword being from Thailand. Since the Japanese influence over Thailand was not that great we think that this sword was made during the WWII when a large number of Japanese were troops stationed there. This explains why the sword looks new and why it shows so many signs of Japanese influence.

What was originally a mystery became very clear to us. The sword was probably made in Thailand during, or just before the Second World War. The form of the blade was strongly influenced by the appearance of the Japanese sword. So was the decoration of the hilt. The scabbard is atypical example of Thai Niello. The sword is in very good condition and is pleasant to look at, but definitively not Japanese.

APPENDIX

It is extremely difficult to identify where a sword was made if you have not previously seen a correctly identified example. It is easy for westerners to identify a European sword, because we see a lot of them in movies. However, Southeast Asian swords are not commonly used in western movies.

One characteristic that usually helps is to look at how the Tang is attached to the Blade. In a European sword there are steel pins that transfix the hilt the tang and are hammered at the other side of the hilt. There are usually more than two pins so the blade is permanently fixed to the hilt. (One exception are small swords that have the end of the tang transformed into screws and that are fixed by a bob on the top of the hilt) . Swords of the Far East (except Japanese ones) have their tang glued to the hilt. Since the blade we are examining has its tang glued to the blade we can conclude that the blade is from the Far East.

To learn about different swords, one must consult books with titles like "Swords of the World ". The following references are just examples of these kinds of books: (**MacNab (2010)**) , (**Cope (1998)**) and **Winters (2013)**. Unfortunately these books may only have one or two examples of the swords from each country. Eventually one needs to choose two or three swords that are similar to the sword being examined and consult the "sword bible" (**Stone (1999)**).

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