

# Unearthing the Treasures: *The True Kung Fu Sword, Part I*

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There are various types of weapons in Chinese martial arts (wushu). But sword, among this large family of weapons, uniquely is "Number One" in many categories.

- ☯ Sword is the number one favorite weapon of martial art practitioners!
- ☯ Sword is also the favorite weapon of non-practitioners!
- ☯ Sword technique is most rarely transmitted correctly, most distorted, most legendary, most misunderstood!



*Pam Kung showing the Pi (chopping).*



Please consider:

Martial arts is not such a hot item today. How, then, can sword uniquely be so popular in all walks of life?

Please consider again:

Traditional weapons were defeated by firearms a hundred years ago. Cold weapons thus became completely obsolete for those with lesser ability in combat. Why does sword, and only sword, stand up against the tides of time? [Note: The Chinese term "cold weapon" means without fire, not a firearm.]

Please consider yet again:

Modern sword art in wushu tournaments or performances, albeit beautiful, can win gold, silver, bronze medals, and yet, how much can be legitimately called "brandish a sword" 舞劍, swordplay? How much is in fact "dancing with a sword" 劍舞, a performing art?



History is a finished product. It cannot legitimately be denied, rewritten or misunderstood.

According to history, since as early as the Han dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE) the sword had not been a major weapon used in battle. The main weapons were always saber and spear.

Whether it's for a righteous war against the enemy of one's country or clan, or a petty vendetta between individuals, crossing blades--gambling one's life in combat--is a serious and vicious matter. There is nothing romantic and playful about it.

No one would dare to use a lesser weapon for combat. That is suicidal, asking for defeat.



Sword is a tool for killing--in other words, a lethal apparatus. Why, for eons, has it been so widely adored by non-practitioners who do not kill? This is indeed a mystery.

Sword, still popular to this day in the 21st century, is, without a doubt, a fact. However, the popularity of sword does not equate with the popularity of *sword art*--a martial art.

Sword art is a category of martial art; but *sword culture* profusely appears in dance, theatre, commercial design, paintings and sculptures; as trinkets, as props for ceremonial or religious rites, fiction, cartoon strips, movies, TV drama, art collection, souvenir, and the latest addition: video games. Sword, is truly alive and well in life today.



Naturally, this is a gratifying and awe inspiring achievement. Sword culture not only adds zest to our lives but also brings about beauty and more or less instills a sense of chivalry. It is good for body and soul.

But in the meantime, this also reflects the sad decline and forlorn state of the martial sword, lonely and helpless, for most martial artists do not seem to know or care...



*Left: incorrect hand guard, Right: correct hand guard*

If further proof is needed, the most telling indication is the hand guard on modern martial swords, flipped upside down!

It is most interesting to look at swords in paintings, worn by young women, commanders, courtesans, literati. The hand guards are correct. Swords in theatrical art--Kun opera, Beijing opera, Taiwan opera, puppets shows--those hand guards are also correct. Even decorative swords, ceremonial swords in shamanic religions, swords for interior decoration, toy swords--their hand guards are also correct.

It seems only swords in the hands of swordsmen or sword masters almost without exception possess the wrong hand guards. They don't seem to care that the orientation of the hand guard can sometimes determine victory vs. defeat in a duel or life vs. death in combat.

Certainly, there is no longer any need for swords in battle or private feuds. Even in tournaments, only solo performances of forms are required, not sparring. The correct usage is not that important. Alas, what difference does it make if the hand guard is flipped?



Some collectors refer to their antique swords in an attempt to verify and support this upside-down guard. Most of the hand guards of the various antique swords that survived from previous dynasties are correct. But a minority are flipped.

Amazingly, antique swords with wrong hand guards are mostly rare pieces. They must have hung under the belts of those who commanded from the throne--kings, emperors, generals--who need not go to the

battlefield. No wonder they are all elaborately embellished, adorned with gem stones and gold. Commoners could not possibly have possessed such priceless pieces.

This type of sword is a symbol of power and wealth, a ceremonial necessity. Today, they are treasures for the enjoyment of collectors. They have nothing to do with martial arts, let alone combat. Whether their hand guards points upward or downward is determined solely by artistic design: how it matches with the emblem, with the design convolutions of dragon, phoenix, tiger, swallow, bat, etc. (*Note: The Chinese word for bat - fu - is a homonym for well-being and wealth. Unlike the West, bats are honored in their culture.*)



Sword culture surely exists today. Although not mainstream, it still seeps widely and deeply into life. Its growth should be encouraged but it's a dangerous tactic to "yank the seedlings to help them grow." (*Note: 揠苗助長 refers to a fable told by Mencius: An impatient farmer tried to make his crop grow faster by yanking and pulling at the seedlings. Instead of letting nature take its course, interventions by brute force or crudely artificial means can have the opposite effect.*)

Martial sword should be the root of cultural sword. How come, intentionally or unintentionally, it's mixed up with "sword culture?"

But then if it tries to separate from cultural sword, the frail figure of martial sword, still alive though hanging by a thread, is nonetheless in grave danger. Sword art is not recognized by the World Heritage Committee of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). It is not protected by environmental groups, nor animal groups and their systematic programs of breeding, adoption and naturalization. Worst yet, the feeble body of sword art also suffers from the bad influence of "commercial sword."

Recently, many new commercial brands of swords have appeared on the market. Manufacturers, facing fierce competition with competitors, with the strength of business management, using profit as the goal, utilizing commercials as a vehicle, rely on the motherland of sword for authority.

Actually, if ancient swords can be made into contemporary merchandise thus supporting the livelihood of many, that is indeed a good deed.

But in the meantime, can those sword merchants also contribute something to the sword other than profiteering?

For example: explore the real culture rather than creating myth; promote 舞劍 (martial swordplay) alongside 劍舞 (dance with a sword)--develop the martial art, not just exploit it?

What is the sword? The sword is an apparatus. It obviously comes with a price tag. If someone can sell swords to the whole world, how can sword merchants not be a great success? But in the meantime, can we try to understand and respect the roots of the merchandise: martial arts? Also research and develop more of its art?

At the very least, can anyone make a reasonable sword? One that a sword practitioner, after more than half a century of shame, can finally hold with pride?



Observing the past, martial arts has always been ingrained in a culture. How can sword art, among all the varieties of martial arts, be devoid of culture? Even in the earliest times, when there was not much to

distinguish between tools and weapons, the advent of sword recorded the wobbling gaits of an early civilization.

Hence, it is not possible to entirely separate martial sword from cultural sword. The fact is, to revive martial sword, in addition to the promotion of sword art, we should not forget the cultural nutrition from which it draws. Without it, sword art cannot possibly exist.

In the ancient times, swords were made by real craftsmen. Although the technology was far more primitive, their piety and dedication far surpassed today's sword merchants.

Needless to say, they were all hand made. Year after year, craftsmen spent their lives pounding, beating... Among hand made swords without any standardization, occasionally masterpieces appeared. These were "treasure swords"--treasured by practitioners, military commanders, high officials, powerful eunuchs--and left their marks in history.

But there has been never a master maker who could create swords identical in all respects. This is inevitable with handmade craftsmanship and yes, also the pride of a master maker.

Nowadays the producers of merchandise swords in mainland China would never refuse any overseas orders. They always sign a contract; accept the entire payment, only then assemble the workers. The goal: fulfill the order; turn out the product. There is no warranty nor any after-sale service. With the division of vast oceans, how can the customers do anything if the products do not meet their standards?

In this new mode of production, the entire town, the entire family, is involved. Sometimes, with luck or blessings from ancestors, occasionally some real treasures can appear from these semi-handmade swords--perhaps due to an individual's dedication and pride in his work or by ignoring the supervisor's order for speed. But the same level of fitness can't be produced in quantity. Why? For one thing, there is not enough grasp of technology; more importantly, there is no pursuit of quality. This mentality looks for short term, instantaneous profit.



## A TRUE CONTEMPORARY SWORD

As for individuals in the martial arts community who try to make their own swords for private usage, with a few exceptions, you cannot find a sword that connects to its cultural root yet still possesses commercial potential. I deeply feel that the contemporary martial artist is in extreme need of a sword that stems from culture and history, is commercially viable, can be mass produced with quality control, a genuine sword, a no-nonsense sword. A contemporary sword.

Such a contemporary sword draws spirit from its ancient roots and fulfills its usage as a martial apparatus. It meets three requirements: to be functional, aesthetic and serviceable.

### **Serviceability**

It has to provide young sword lovers affordability, usability, and even lose-ability!

Young people usually do not have much money and they also eat a lot. An expensive sword? Let's forget about its worthiness or functionality for a moment. They simply can't afford it! Therefore, the martial sword must be affordable, reasonably low priced, like a service.

Usability? Martial sword is not an antique, nor a duplicate of a museum piece. It is not meant to hang on the wall as pretty decor. It is supposed to thrust, slash, wave, chop, even drop or ding, over and over. If

a training tool is too expensive to be used, to be dropped, how can sword art be revived?

As for lose-ability, this is a "just in case" consideration: In case mom calls or a buddy comes by and the interruption causes one to lose the sword on campus, in a park, at the bus station, the metro. Lost and found does not always work; what if the person who picks it up likes it too much to give it back? Inevitably, one is left with remorse and a broken heart! However, a youth can save enough in few months to buy a replacement. This is my wish for sword serviceability.

**Aesthetics**

I must emphasize: a foundation of traditional Chinese aesthetics is imperative; nevertheless a contemporary sensibility is also essential.

Today's sword is made for today, employing modern materials and craftsmanship, possessing a contemporary aesthetic. If this step is omitted, it would become a mere copycat, a prop fit for Hollywood action figures but not a living sword.

Hence, a martial sword for the contemporary martial society should be grounded in culture; it must use carbon steel for the blade and fiberglass for the scabbard, a dignified and worthy symbol of all Chinese and swords in the 21st century.

As for the manufacturing process, a mixture of handcraft and machining is necessary for the highest production efficiency and the modern sensibility of self expression.

Even thousands of years from now, if someone unearthed it at an archaeological dig, a collector seeing it at an auction would recognize this was made in the year 2000 -- a sword.



**Sifu Hsu's design: a true Chinese sword with modern flavor**



**Functionality**

Functionality is most important. We can safely say that without function, there is no martial sword. A sword that is in want of function can never be a good martial sword.

The requirements of functionality involve three parts: sword body, hand guard and handle. There is only one standard: practicality.



**ANATOMY OF THE SWORD**

**Blade**

First, the body--that is, the blade--is the torso of a sword and the heart of its functionality. It has three main parts: tip, ridge or slot, and weight center.

The tip is the sharpest part of the blade. There is not much variation in shape. Most are narrow and pointy: one blade with two sharp edges. The structure is lighter and narrower at the tip, wider and heavier at the hand guard. There is rarely an exception. The most important thing is how to make a piece

of metal graduate from wider hilt to narrower, thinner, lighter tip. This is a very difficult and laborious process to control. Also even with the same design goal, each result can be different.

But this is where the value of a sword rests, what distinguishes a fine from lesser piece of work. This would be challenging for counterfeiters to duplicate and come out with enough profit.

Martial sword is a weapon, not a prop for performance or religious ceremony. Since its purpose is to stab and attack, its body must have a ridge; it goes down the entire body in a straight line. Some ridges are sloped; some are stepped.

If there is no ridge, there must be slots. This can be a center slot in a straight line, parallel twin slots, or three slots with one in the front and two in the rear.

Whether ridge or slots, their purpose is to allow the enemy's blood to flow. A sword then would not get stuck, sucked into the enemy's body by a vacuum; it can be withdrawn and used immediately for another attack.

Otherwise, a sword that stabs the enemy without drawing blood is difficult to withdraw. This then renders a supposedly successful attack useless! Need we ask more about the consequence?

The ridge of this newly designed sword falls somewhere between rising and stepping. It has an elegant arc. But it is not easy to polish. The ridge becomes an integrated part of the sword body. In the making, a grinding, not polishing, technique is adopted for the sword body. Under a microscope, the smooth appearance becomes spiky like trees in a forest. The surface of the sword body looks like the topology of shiny hills.

Lastly, and also most debatable, is the weight center. Some think as long as it suits you, it does not matter; some think one would just adapt to a sword after a while. And some are very fussy about this.

Actually, an individual's preference should be respected. But buying a sword is like purchasing a dress. Unless one can find a seamstress to custom-make it, most of the time the fit does not have to be so precise. Most crucial is its innate beauty and constitution, not the petty details such as the brand name and fancy trim.

There are only two possible balance points in a sword: front or rear. Rear balance, about three or four inches in front of the hand guard, is for the infantry. Martial sword is of this style. Front balance, about 3 to 4 inch from the tip, is for the cavalry.

One may ask why 3 or 4 inches? Can't it be more precise? There are two reasons: the sword and the user.

The weight center involves the entire sword--including hand guard, handle, nose, their material and dimensions. Every batch has a precise balance point. But we can't use it to measure another batch or another sword.

As for the practitioner, as long as one has the technique, one should have the ability to adjust to any sword. If one is spoiled, then one can only perform during practice sessions using a familiar sword. In a real combat, there is no such luxury: one just grabs whatever is most handy. How, then, can one require a sword must adapt to him perfectly?



## **Handle**

The most common mistake is to make the handle too thick, too round, resembling a saber. This is due to misunderstanding the usage: the saber grip must be full, while the sword requires one's grip to be flexible. Flexibility's purpose is not to facilitate acrobatics or flamboyant theatrical gestures. That would become 劍舞 (dance with a sword), not 舞劍 (martial swordplay).

"Flexible handle" in martial art refers to the swordsman's ability to perceive sensory feedback through the hand during engagement: driving a successful attack, the ease of maneuvering, the feedback when adhering to the enemy's weapon. During combat, these sensations are necessary while shifting the grip and rotating the handle, to control the sword body in order to command the offense and defense.

There are three reasons to wrap the handle: 1. Increase the friction for a more powerful attack. 2. Obtain better control in maneuvering. 3. Mechanical feedback--better sensitivity. The fabric and color of the wrap is unimportant; it's just a matter of personal preference.

In the old days, the handle and scabbard were often wrapped in shark skin. It provided protection and decoration for the scabbard. On the handle, it gave a better grip and feedback to the hand--especially the fish skin with bumpy scales. Some handles were wrapped with rope on top of shark skin.

The alternative is to score the handle. This is not done for environmentalism nor for frugality but for the same purpose as wrapping. The problem is wrapping wears out and loosens up easily thus requiring frequent rewrapping. Therefore, silk sashes are often used on cultural swords. For martial swords, simplicity is more common.



### Mystery of the wrong hand guards



*Correct orientation of hand guard.*

The previously mentioned, hand guards are mostly correct in cultural swords.

"Merchandise swords" made by small manufacturers often have overly elaborate handles. The design is often very flashy, accompanied by a fancy name transplanted straight from martial art fantasy with a legendary background story. Finally, the price is set as high as possible, the most convincing virtue of its value.

Since this is business, as long as buyer and vendor get what they want, both parties are happy. Nothing wrong here.

The real surprise is that handles in "martial swords"--I don't know when this started--all flipped upside down in unison! The mystery is practitioners, swordsmen, have been using swords of this design for the last forty years without getting frustrated?! Without losing their minds!? I'm afraid this not a good thing. Can it simply be a reflection that sword art is perishing and not a practical art anymore?



### The Arm Record

In the *Arm Record* 手臂錄 (1611 - 1695 CE, late Ming dynasty) the author, Wu Shu 吳叟, already had severely critical words for the sword practitioners of his day: "Chop and cut like saber," and "The

technique has been long extinct."

Wu Shu's book reveals that he specialized in spear but also studied various weapons: "I have focused on spear for thirty years; a shame that I only met a sword fairy at waning fifty..." As for the so-called "sword fairy"--he only knew his pseudonym, Yu-Yang Elder 漁陽老人. Of his life? His lineage? There is no mention. Even the sword he taught Wu Shu, he asked to be kept secret. "Now you have acquired it; be careful not to pass it on easily." On the one hand, Wu Shu was "afraid this art would be lost;" on the other hand, he was bound to "Consideration of the Elder." Being a poet, he wrote two poems, one long, one short, to leave some obscure clues. From these precious and meager pieces of wisdom, a smart practitioner would get it; a lesser one would not.

With such a tradition and atmosphere, whether it's sword art or martial art, how can it not be lost?

Following this trend, flipping the hand guard is not only a minor detail; it is to be expected!

*(To be continued.)*

