

Symbols of Status and Artistry: Asian Export Sword Guards and Nanban Tsuba

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Among Asian arms traditions, that of Japan is distinctive in its appreciation of sword fittings as works of art. As the central element of the *koshirae* (sword garniture), tsuba (sword guards) reign supreme. Unlike Chinese sabres worn slung from the waist, Japanese swords were carried on the left side of the torso, thrust through the obi, or waist-sash, with the cutting edge facing upwards. Sartorial regulations afforded Edo period (1603–1868) samurai few means of personal expression, except for the hilts and guards of their swords.

Unlike most Asian edged weapons, Japanese swords could be easily dismantled and assembled, allowing their owners to use different *koshirae* with the same blade in different settings. Imbued with animistic power, the samurai sword was believed to embody the soul of the warrior. It also represented a monetary investment equivalent to that of a home. Related objects such as sword guards—made both in Japan and overseas—gained value by association. They were collected, exchanged as gifts, and carefully preserved as works of art. Elsewhere in Asia, however, stray sword guards were regarded simply as missing parts of broken swords.

Since the Kamakura era (1185–1333) and perhaps earlier, members of the warrior class had taken pleasure in the examination of fine sword blades, competing with one another to correctly identify the maker before looking at the signature. As a form of contemplation, ritual sword viewing may even predate the tea ceremony. Swords and armour were regarded as the most auspicious of heirlooms—*omotedogu*—family treasures that embodied ancestral protective spirits. Sword guards, although less prestigious, played a significant role in rituals of gift exchange.



Fig. 1 Sword guard
By Cho Rakko (Zhang Lejiao; act. late 17th–early 18th century), China, Nanjing, late 17th–early 18th century
Iron, gold and silver with *sukashi-bori*, *takabori* and *zogan* decoration, 7.4 x 7.1 cm
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Gift of the heirs of Henry Adams, 1909 (19.291)
(Photograph © 2019 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)



Fig. 2 Sword guard
Sri Lanka, 18th century
Copper alloy, 7 x 6.9 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Gift of James Lancel McElhinney, 2019

Japanese swords were prized across Asia, not only for their strength and sharpness, but also for their artistry. In the Muromachi period (1392–1573), roughly 128,000 Japanese swords were legally imported to Ming (1368–1644) China (Sesko, 2013). Many more were undoubtedly smuggled in. In 1371, the Hongwu emperor (r. 1368–98) declared a *haijin* (sea ban) on unauthorized trade with China. Foreigners seeking to trade were required to swear fealty as tributary vassal states, a condition similar to the one imposed on the Dutch by Japan's Tokugawa government under its isolationist foreign policy three centuries later.

Carried along sea routes from Kyushu to Korea, the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the Philippines and Monsoon Asia, an untold number of Japanese swords were distributed, resulting in the appropriation of Japanese weapons-design concepts across mainland and maritime Asia. Notable adaptations include sabres made with faceted points, longitudinal ridge lines and discoid hand guards. The inscription on the tsuba in Figure 1, which has a design of chrysanthemums and daisies, states that it was

made by Cho Rakko (Ch. Zhang Lejiao; act. late 17th–early 18th century) in Nanjing, China. Such pieces were produced specifically for the Japanese market.

Fine weapons have always served as gifts of state—the highest compliment one ruler might pay to another as a mark of friendship, trust and peace. In 1640, after nearly sixty years of Hapsburg rule, King Dom João IV (r. 1640–56) declared Portugal to be independent from Spain. According to the historian Charles Ralph Boxer (1904–2000), António Ferreira set sail from Macao for Lisbon with 10,000 kilograms of bullion as tribute for the Portuguese king from his loyal colony in Asia (Boxer, 1928, p. 43). Carried in the hold of his ship were two hundred bronze cannons cast with copper mined in Japan. A few years later, an attempt was made to restore trade with Japan. Ferreira advised those planning the embassy that it:

... should not go destitute of any things which come from our native land ... I will mention some here which will not be very expensive. (1) A complete stand of arms,



Fig. 3 Sword guard
Sri Lanka, 1600–1900
Copper alloy, 7.9 x 7.4 cm
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
On loan from the Asian Art Society
in The Netherlands (AK-MAK-1145)



Fig. 4 Sword guard
Japan, first half of the 18th century
Iron with copper-alloy inlay, 8.8 x 8.3 cm
Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford
Bequeathed by Dame Jemima Church, in accordance with the wishes of her Husband, Sir Arthur H. Church, 1929 (EAX.10819)
(Image © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford)

requested an ornate firearm in an unusual calibre. Discovering that none was on hand in the armoury at Batavia (today's Jakarta), the company sent a wood model of the gun to its factory in Sri Lanka to have the gun made there. Comparison of 17th century Sinhalese *kastane* (single-edged swords) and 18th century small-sword garnitures produced in Galle for the European market with some of the sword guards classified in Japan as Nanban ('southern barbarian') suggests that the latter, too, were made in Sri Lanka. The sword guards shown in Figures 2 and 3, both made in Sri Lanka in the Japanese style, were inspired by European small-sword guards and also combine Western and Chinese design elements. Both have a design featuring *taotie* (zoomorphic masks) and dragons, Figure 2 in openwork (Ch. *loukong*). The sword guard in Figure 3 also bears the VOC cypher. The tsuba in Figure 4 with a design of dragons and *shishi* (lion dogs) illustrates a technique, atypical of Japanese work, used to apply copper-alloy highlights to carving in high relief. Comparable decoration has been seen on Sinhalese *kastane* dated circa 1650–1700.

well engraved—and if they can be gilded, so much the better. (2) A broad-bladed sword, of a larger size than the ordinary, well mounted, excellently polished, and as valuable as possible. (3) A half-length portrait of our Lord the King, on a painted metal panel measuring a hand's span, with a border of gold, and on the other part of the panel our Lady the Queen holding the Prince by the hand. (4) Two or four pieces of coral of extraordinary size. And finally, some curiosity, which they have never seen or heard of, because that King, lord as he is of so many mountains of silver, more esteems curiosities than any kind of riches.

(*ibid.*, p. 63)

In 1666, a delegation from the United Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, or VOC) presented King Pye Min (r. 1661–72) of Burma with a number of gifts, including weapons (Dijk, 2006, p. 36). The king specifically



Fig. 5a Side view of the weapons rack in Figure 5b
(Photograph: Peter Dekker. Mandarin Mansion, Haarlem, NL)

Gift exchange was an integral part of doing business in early modern Asia, just as vendors and clients today might present each other with paperweights, desk sets or baseball caps. Finely crafted weapons were highly desirable for this purpose. Sword guards appear to have played a central role in these rituals as modest expressions of deep sentiment. Borrowing heavily from other art forms, decorative motifs were appropriated from luxury export trade goods produced for a global marketplace, such as textiles, paintings, lacquerware and pottery.

Preserved in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam is a weapons rack presented to Admiral Cornelis Tromp (1629–91) as a gift by a childhood friend in the employ of the Dutch East India Company at Batavia (Jakarta) (Figs 5a and b). Presumably carved on Java, the rack is draped with swords, firearms and pole arms, which at first glance appear to be Japanese. The edged weapons were, in fact, manufactured in Tonkin, in north Vietnam, while the pistols are Dutch.

Accusations by Chinese merchants against the Dutch for acts of piracy led the Japanese authorities to require VOC employees stationed at the Dutch trading post on the small island of Dejima in Nagasaki to swear fealty as vassals of the state or be banished from Japan. Like any provincial lord, the Dejima *opperhoofd* (chief factor) and his staff were compelled at great expense to undertake periodic trips to Edo. Travelling with a large retinue, the *hofreis* (court journey) proceeded by land and sea to Edo to deliver news of events overseas and to present the shogun with a lavish array of gifts. Awaiting his summons to Edo Castle one evening in 1780, the *opperhoofd* Isaac Titsingh (1745–1812) entertained the young daimyo of Hirado, Matsura (Seizan) Kiyoshi (1760–1841). During the encounter Titsingh presented his guest with a pair of sword guards (Screech, 2006, p. 40). Matsura examined them with interest, noting their similarity to Japanese tsuba. Admiring their workmanship, he concluded that they were foreign, speculating that perhaps they had been produced by the descendants of Japanese carvers living in Nihonmachi (Japan towns) in Monsoon Asia. The encounter is described in *Kasshi-Yawa*, the collected essays of Matsura,

alongside images of rubbings of the sword guards he received from Titsingh (Matsura, 1910, n. p.) (Fig. 6). The guards themselves have been misplaced or lost, perhaps gifted to persons unknown.

No mention of sword guards appears on bills of lading for Dutch imports to Japan. In addition to approved official shipments, members of the Dejima trade mission were allowed to invest in private shipments known as *kambang* (Cleveland, 1965, p. 18). Prior to unloading, *kambang* goods were packed under the scrutiny of Japanese customs inspectors, then ferried ashore to be placed in a government warehouse until the day of the sale. Upon disembarking, members of the Dejima mission and their belongings were subjected to a thorough search. The *opperhoofd* was exempt from this humiliation and might come ashore with dozens of trunks, none of which was ever searched. Aligned

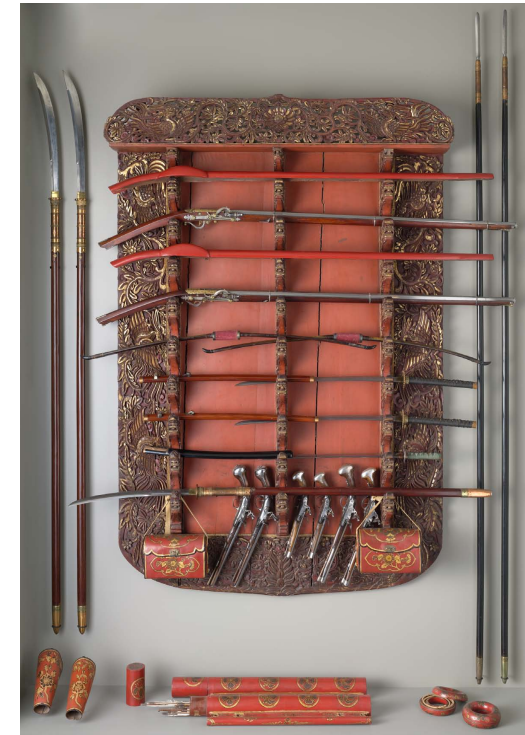


Fig. 5b Weapons rack
Indonesia, Java, c. 1650–79
Wood with lacquer and gilding, 200 x 132 cm
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (NG-NM-6087-A)



Fig. 6 *Oshigata* (rubbing) of a sword guard given by Isaac Titsingh to Matsura (Seizan) Kiyoshi Japan, c. 1780 (Image courtesy of Matsura Historical Museum, Hirado, Nagasaki prefecture, Japan)

this fact with Matsura's description of his visit to Titsingh allows us to piece together the story: the chief's luggage almost certainly concealed goods to be used as clandestine gifts during the *hofreis*. The German naturalist Engelbert Kaempfer (1651–1715) served for two years (1690–92) as a physician at Dejima. Concerning such gifts, Kaempfer wrote:

Presents amounting to a certain sum of money are selected for the shogun, his councillors, and some of his high officials at Edo, Miyako (Kyoto) and Osaka ... The presents are chosen by the city governors, who order from our director goods that they believe will please the court ... Sometimes they also use presents they have received from the Chinese for this purpose.

(Kaempfer, 1999, p. 240)

Upon entering the Japanese system of appreciation and preservation, imported sword guards faced a strange fate. Dutch and Chinese merchants who introduced them to Japan left no record of their places of origin. Seeking a workable classification, the Japanese divided these objects into two broad categories: Chinese and Nanban. Sword guards perceived to have been made in China, where they were known as *hushou*, or hand guards, were divided into two subcategories: Kanton (Guangzhou) and Kannan (South China), the latter with alternative readings of Kagonami or Kaminami. Kanton tsuba, as they were known in Japan, are Chinese–Tibetan-style sword guards bearing a design of a pair of confronted dragons chasing a flaming pearl amid an openwork *karakusa*, or scrolling plant, design (Fig. 7; see also Fig. 10). In Figure 8, the Roman lettering on the washer seat points to Hirado or Nagasaki as the place of manufacture. Foreign guards not of Chinese manufacture appear to have been identified initially as Nanban, a pejorative term first applied to Southeast Asians by the Chinese and later assigned to the Portuguese by the Japanese. In fact, the majority of non-Chinese guards seem to have come from Monsoon Asia.

Returning to the Edo period, questions arise. How were these objects valued? How were they consumed? According to Boxer:

One Japanese authority stated that Namban *tsuba* were 'not very valuable' but curious, and doubtless made for *chajin* and people of eccentric tastes ... the gentry and samurai became interested in Dutch Learning [Rangaku, or Oranda-gaku] ... It is more than likely that these people set the fashion for wearing of semi-westernised sword-guards.

(Boxer, 1931, p. 160)

The *chajin* (tea masters) mentioned in this passage are unlikely to have been adepts of the mainstream *uraseukei* tea ceremony and more likely to have been practitioners of *sencha*—the art of preparing steeped tea in the Chinese manner. Boxer continues: 'Other Japanese writers state that Namban *tsuba* were worn by doctors ... many physicians had a smattering of Dutch and liked it to be thought that they were proficient in medical science as practiced by the Hollanders' (ibid.).

Nagasaki became a centre of scientific learning where both Rangaku and Chinese medicine were

taught. Wearing a Nanban tsuba might be a badge of honour, a status symbol of someone privileged with outside knowledge. In his blog, Markus Sesko cites an early 19th century source that awarded Nanban tsuba high standing (Sesko, 2016). In the late 17th century, a number of Chinese carvers immigrated to Nagasaki, suggesting that sufficient demand existed for foreign merchants to import their own craftsmen to compete with local artists. The tsuba in Figure 9, with a Nanga (Japanese painting)-style landscape, was made by one such carver, one of three Chinese metalworkers working in Nagasaki, who all used the name Midorikawa-tei. The demand for Nanban tsuba seems to have peaked in the early 19th century, when a limited number of designs were mass-produced as curios.

In the early 20th century, de-Sinicization programmes sought to cleanse nationalist Japan



Fig. 8 Sword guard Japan, Hirado or Nagasaki, 1600–1900 Iron and gold, 7.6 x 7.3 cm Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam On loan from the Asian Art Society in The Netherlands (AK-MAK-1146)



Fig. 7 Sword guard Japan, Nagasaki, 18th century Iron, gold and copper, 8.3 x 7.8 cm Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford Bequeathed by Dame Jemima Church, in accordance with the wishes of her Husband, Sir Arthur H. Church, 1929 (EAX.10796) (Image © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford)

from all Chinese influence. It was at this time that 'Nanban' replaced 'Kanton' and 'Kannan' in the nomenclature. In his encyclopaedic work published in 1902, Captain Francis Brinkley (1841–1912), a soldier, journalist and adviser to the Meiji government on European affairs, did not use the term 'Nanban' in relation to sword fittings. Instead, he identified Chinese-style guards as *kwan-to* or *kannan* (Brinkley, 1902, p. 290). He had been writing immediately after the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), on the eve of the rise of militant nationalism and before the implementation of the de-Sinicization programmes. Through the tumult, terrors and suffering of the 20th century, memory was laid aside. On the morning of 9 August 1945, a singular event—the US bombing of Nagasaki—wiped out centuries of archives that might have answered lingering questions. Fortunately, the Dutch were assiduous at record-keeping. Many a Dejima *opperhoofd* proved equally fond of writing memoirs. The National

Archives of the Netherlands and the Dutch East India Company are digitizing their records and making them available online (www.nationaalarchief.nl/en). Thus, slowly, the picture is coming into focus.

Nanban tsuba, then, consist of diverse types of sword guards produced across Asia, copies by Japanese carvers, and sword guards produced in Hirado or Nagasaki by Chinese carvers (see Figs 7 and 8). One might also include Japanese pieces inspired by, or borrowing design motifs from, foreign prototypes. The 18th century example in Figure 10 was actually made by Yamada Gensho (act. 18th century) of Nagasaki, and is a copy of a Qing dynasty (1644–1911) Chinese–Tibetan-style *hushou*. It differs from Chinese designs in the use of materials, the shape of the washer seat and the presence of openings on both sides of the washer seat. Also



Fig. 9 Sword guard
By Midorikawa-tei (act. late 17th century), Japan, late 17th century
Iron with soft metal inlay, 7 x 6.7 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Gift of James Lancel McElhinney, 2019



Fig. 11 Sword guard
By Shugai (act. late 17th century), Japan, Nagasaki, late 17th century
Iron with silver- and gold-wire inlay and foil overlay, 8.35 x 8.35 cm
Asian Heritage Museum, New York

William Cleveland (Madoka Kanai, ed.), *A Diary of William Cleveland, Captain's Clerk on Board the Massachusetts*, facsimile, Institute of Asian Studies, Monograph Series no. 1, Quezon City, 1965 (c. 1798–1800).
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Matsura Seizan, *Kasshi-Yawa*, Tokyo, 1910 (1821).
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Fig. 10 Sword guard
By Yamada Gensho (act. 18th century), Japan, Nagasaki, 18th century
Copper alloy, 7.3 x 6.7 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Gift of James Lancel McElhinney, 2017 (2017.737.1)

from Nagasaki is a sword guard in iron with silver- and gold-wire inlay and foil overlay made by a carver named Shugai in the late 17th century (Fig. 11). It was awarded a Hozon ('worthy of preservation') certificate on 20 April 1994 by the Nippon Bijutsu Hozon Kyokai (Society for the Preservation of Japanese Art Swords), Tokyo. The workmanship of another tsuba, in iron with false damascening in gold, indicates influence of the Mitsuhiro school of Yagami and the Jakushi school of Nagasaki (Fig. 12). It shows a *tousen*, or foreign ship—specifically a Chinese merchantman with a phoenix prow, also resembling the Japanese Takarabune, the treasure ship of the seven gods of fortune. The author proposes the descriptive term 'Kiyou Toujin' ('Nagasaki Chinese person') for a school of carving practised by Chinese immigrants working in Nagasaki.

These objects appear to have played a role in international trade and diplomacy as *tusmaranai-mono*, modest gifts expressing great esteem. Chinese and Monsoon Asian sword guards reveal the far-reaching influence of Japanese weapons design.

Had these objects remained in the regions where they were made, and were it not for the peculiar Japanese custom of celebrating sword guards as works of art, many of these objects might no longer exist. Circulated along maritime trade routes, they bear testimony that contradicts the Sakoku (lit., 'locked country') absolutism of Japan's foreign policy by revealing lively connections between Tokugawa Japan, Europe, China and Monsoon Asia, through maritime trade, commerce and art.

James Lancel McElhinney is a visual artist, an author, an oral historian and a publisher.

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Fig. 12 Sword guard
Japan, probably Nagasaki, 19th century
Iron and gold, 7.6 x 6.9 cm
Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford
Bequeathed by Dame Jemima Church, in accordance with the wishes of her Husband, Sir Arthur H. Church, 1929 (EAX.108221)
(Image © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford)