

THE VIEW FROM NEW YORK

## Cutting an ancient myth down to size

By HIROAKI SATO

NEW YORK -- The myth of the Japanese sword, which Quentin Tarantino plays to the hilt in the film "Kill Bill," has several origins: There was a religious connection. The manufacture of the blade was linked to *Shugendō*, a form of nature-worship that held that rough physical training is essential to enlightenmen

t.

There was the Japanese propensity to pursue anything, even sword-brandishing, as a means of attaining "the way."

There was Bushido, which, in equating honor with death, found the very means of death in the sword. Edward Zwick deploys this ideal in "The Last Samurai."

One might even add the ancient notion, which is probably universal, that the sword has magical powers. Legends of Excalibur exemplify it.

I don't know when I started believing in the myth. But if there was one thing that helped to congeal the amorphous sense I had developed while watching samurai movies during the 1950s and 1960s, it was Noel Perrin's 1979 book, "Giving Up the Gun: Japan's Reversion to the Sword, 1543-1879."

Perrin's short treatise was timely and important. In the days when horrible notions such as mutual assured destruction still had intellectual currency, it argued cogently that military technologies did not have to advance unchecked. For a prime precedent, look at Japan. The Japanese accidentally gained knowledge of the gun in the mid-15th century, but after perfecting its manufacture and use, they essentially abandoned it in favor of an inferior weapon, the sword.

Perrin made this point in a way that tickled a Japanese -- yes, me -- still suffering from the century-old sense of inferiority to the West. The prevailing view was that Japan was a backward country when the U.S. naval officer Matthew Perry forced it open in the mid-19th century. Perrin said that was not wholly the case. During the isolationist period, Japan had made progress that matched or was ahead of the West in such fields as waterworks, agriculture, mathematics, medicine, retail-merchandising and sanitary engineering. My favorite among his examples was Kleenex. The Japanese had invented its equivalent three centuries before the Americans!

Oh, yes, Perrin did not neglect to mention the superior quality of the Japanese sword. He quoted a Dutchman who observed that Japanese swords were "so well wrought, and excellently temper'd, that they will cut our European blades asunder, like Flages or Rushes."

The 20th-century arms collector George Cameron Stone took part in a test to check the Dutchman's word and saw a newly made Japanese sword "cut a modern European sword in two." It was the quality Walter Ames Compton called "a fantastic order of high efficiency in doing the work for which [it was] designed," when his collection of Japanese swords was shown at Japan House Gallery in 1976. So tickled, I joined the credulous horde. Those who actually used the sword and those who had to deal with its consequences knew better.

During World War II, officers of the Japanese Imperial Army, both commissioned and noncommissioned, wore "military swords" (*gunto*). The sword expert Sekitsugu Naruse toured the Chinese front at the army's request to repair damaged swords. His detailed report, "Tatakau Nihonto" (The Fighting Japanese Sword), published in 1940, was devastating. Not that Naruse, a modern-day swordsman, did not know the virtual uselessness of the Japanese sword as a weapon in a modern war before he was sent to the continent. Rather, he was disgusted, even amused, by the ignorance of those who carried the sword.

Of the 2,000 specimens he examined and repaired during the nine months of his tour in Northern China, 70 percent were those damaged as a result of mishandling. Naruse wrote of a major who inadvertently

dropped his sword, scabbard and all, while on horseback. His horse stepped on it, creating a sword bent at two places for him. What? A Japanese sword bent by a mere horse's hoof? Yes, and that particular sword was one made by the swordsmith Kanehira, no less. (Most army blades were newly minted with a sizable portion of them made, it was said, from scrapped automobile springs imported from the United States. Many were also "real swords," some even made by fabled craftsmen like Kanehira.)

Bending, indeed, was one great flaw of the Japanese sword, as latter-day samurai quickly found out. The sword in most cases bent at the first strike, effectively becoming a nonweapon, like a gun that has run out of bullets. But, whereas a spent gun could be kept for further use without difficulty, a bent sword couldn't.

Another flaw lay in the hilt. The hilt (tsuka) of the Japanese sword is in effect a scabbard made for the part of the blade called "tang" (nakago). It is fastened to the tang with one or more removable rivets. The fact that the tang receives scant attention in forging, in stark contrast to the blade itself, doesn't help. And since the hilt is an attachment that plays a pivotal role in brandishing a weighty blade, it easily comes undone, even breaks. In this, the Japanese sword was decisively inferior to the Western saber or the Chinese "blue dragon sword." In both, the hilt is a solid extension of the blade. A fully 60 percent of the damages Naruse inspected occurred at the hilt.

Some Japanese soldiers nonetheless believed in the invincibility of the Japanese sword, as actual samurai did not. Naruse tells of a soldier who possessed "a real and true Tadamitsu." The engravings on the sword said it was crafted by Tadamitsu, of Osafune, during the Bunmei era (1469-86), and it surely was made excellently.

Evidently having heard stories such as the one Noel Perrin tells of a Japanese sword slicing a machine gun, the soldier "suddenly cut at an iron plate two inches thick. Of course he created large chips in the blade and brought it to me. What he had to say then was, 'They say the Tadamitsu is a superb sword, but this one was no good. It merely cut an iron plate by one inch, and chipped like this. It also bent. Do you think this is a fake?'"

Naruse, an admirer of the swords of his country, could only sigh: "**A master's work died a dog's death.**" His simple word on the instrument is so common-sensical as to put all of us blind believers to shame: "After all, a sword is neither devised nor designed to cut iron."

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