Real-Life kantei of swords, Part 7: Small mysteries

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Introduction: Previous articles – Coutinho (2010-a), Coutinho (2010-b), Coutinho (2010-c), Coutinho (2011-d), Coutinho (2011-e) and Coutinho (2011-f) -- discussed some problems that are encountered when examining unusual swords. This article considers yet another problem: small mysteries on the identification of swords.

This article was inspired by a recent article in this newsletter by Farrel (2011). In this article the author asks how a sword described in the classical book by B. W. Robinson (Robinson (1961) as a Nanbokucho blade was sold in auction by Sotheby (Sotheby (1993)) as a Shinshinto blade. Discussion of this question will be addressed in the first mystery section below.

First Mystery

To present this mystery in a more comprehensible form it will be considered in two parts. First: is the blade a Nanbokucho blade or is a Shinshinto blade and how this can be determined? Second: if the blade is Shinshinto, then in the words of Robert Farrel.

"Why do so many "experts" kantei the blade as genuine 14th century Akihiro and is subsequently judged to be a Shinshinto copy?"

The sword has the inscription Soshu Ju Akihiro and is dated Oan 2nd year (1369).

The answer to the first question is straight forward. The sword is gimei (false signature) and the date was put on the sword with the purpose of deceiving people. This may be verified as follows: if the sword were mumei (unsigned), with an old attribution, answering the first question would be much more difficult. Since, however, the sword has a signature, an oshigata (tang rubbing) or a digital photograph) of the nakago (tang) can be compared with shin-mei (genuine signature); the rubbing or photo can be compared to those found in books or sent to one of the associations in Japan (NBTHK, NTHK- NPO or NTHK club) for study. The latter option is preferable because those associations have a huge number of shin-mei oshigata with which to compare the signature of
the subject sword; the legitimacy of the sword would be established very readily. Presumably this was the path followed by the experts from Sotheby.

Contemplation of the second question must include a brief consideration of the progress of the study of Japanese swords since the book by Robinson was written in 1961. Robinson’s approach may be predicted according to his book (page29). The mnemonic SEPT is suggested when confronted by a sword as a guide for the steps to be followed. The first step is to examine the shape (S). While this can be a challenge, the photograph of the blade (page 33 of the Sotheby catalogue and plate 15a of Robinson book) coupled with the measurements given in the catalogue of Sotheby show a blade that can be from the Nanbokucho period (1336-1392), from the Keicho Shinto period (1596-1615) or from the Shinshinto (1781 -1868) period. Without access to the kasane of the sword it is difficult to say more than this. So from the first step Robinson might have concluded that the sword was in fact form the Nanbokucho period. The next two steps suggested by Robinson would be to examine the edge (E), that is the hamon and then the pattern (P) that is the hada, of the blade. Nowadays it is normal to invert these two steps and to examine first the pattern, that is, the hada of the blade and then the hamon (E from edge). To justify this interchange it is good to quote from the book by Nagayama Kokan (Nagayama (1997) page 33):

"The difference between Koto and Shinto blades is best determined by examining the steel of a blade and its surface-grain pattern."

It is not known if the sword was in good polish when first examined by Robinson in 1961. As will be argued later on, it is possible that the polish was not so good; therefore this second step pattern (P) could not be properly followed. The hamon (next step, E from edge) is described in the Sotheby catalogue as being midare hamon of nioi. Again, if Robinson examined this blade without proper polish this might be difficult to see clearly. Assuming that the blade was in good polish when examined by the Sotheby experts, the fact that the hamon is of nioi does not point to a Soshu blade. Finally the last step is to examine the tang (T); the tang must be examined independently of the signature. It is difficult from the photograph to see yasurime (files marks) and the general condition; however, the blade has both just one mekugi ana (not expected with a blade of the age the signature claims) and the tip of the nakago do not seem to be consistent with Akihiro. Nevertheless as will be argued next this type of information (about the type of the nakago and the yasurime) was not available to Robinson in 1961 or for that matter in 1970.
Since the book was re-printed in 1970, it is fair to compare the situation faced by Robinson with the situation faced by Japanese sword students in the USA some time later. Note this quote from an article by Hartman (Hartman (2008)).

"Locally in 1981, swords were still fairly plentiful and cheap. Gendai-To were often found but if out-of-polish, they had limited interest to me. As editor for the JSS/Us Newsletter in those days, I probably wrote a brief article on the interesting nakago inscription. Later, a member in Oslo, Mr. Per Tarje Norheim, contacted me and expressed interest in purchasing my sword and soon after he became its new keeper. In those days it was very difficult to have a sword polished without having some connections. Money was short in those days and a polish was expensive (by 1981 standards)."

In 1961 there were very few books available in English (in fact Mr. Robinson was one of the first printed) and even much later the available books did not had enough information for a really good kantei. This serves as an explanation for why so many "experts" kantei the blade as genuine 14th Akihiro..." At the time there was no reason to assume that the blade was a fake and it would be very difficult to properly kantei the blade because it was probably out of proper polish. The situation of a Western Japanese sword student was very difficult 40 years ago. What is perhaps surprising is to know that not much before that the situation of Japanese sword students was not very different in spite of their proximity to the sources. To show this a brief summary of the situation of Japanese sword studies follows.

The necessity of catching up with the West during Meiji times made a great impact on Japanese life. Here is what Bashford Dean says about this (Bashford (1915), page 113):

"Young Japan, indeed, took no pains to preserve armor and arms, still less to record the great body of ancient military precepts; and with complete change of interest the sons of samurai grew up, knowing nothing of the training in technical matters which their fathers and grandfathers regarded as of real, even vital importance. I remember meeting a nobleman, de jure, of the highest class, whose forbears included some of the most distinguished personages in the ancient wars of Japan, and whose father, he told me, had borne armor, but who himself knew as little about it as thought it had become extinct centuries ago. I met samurai who did not know the manner of wearing swords of their fathers ...". further on he says "to know the names of celebrated sword-artists and their
work was part of the regular training of the samurai. And the study is so difficult that few, indeed, there are today who have mastered it. Thus a great expert in Tokyo, high in the sword society (To-ken Kwai) there, declares that no one should buy a blade who has not studied the best examples throughout Japan for at least ten years!.

More recently in a series of articles by Ogawa Morihiro entitled Kuzan Dialogue the opinion is offered on the evolution of knowledge of swords in Japan by Homma Junji Kunzan. Through a series of dialogue excerpts:

(Ogawa (1979) page 28):

"You ought to realize how lucky you are to be living in the age when chances of appreciating really good examples of fine swords are readily available. Decades ago, when we were still engaged in examining National treasures objects (Kokuho), we had to go around and visit the residences of various owners such as Daimyo (feudal lords) and Kuge (court nobles). Ordinary people seldom had a chance to look at them. Having come through this period I remember my experiences well when I encountered exciting examples."

(Ogawa (1980)-a page 31)

"The Tokugawa family, descendent of the Shogunate had made a rule not to let the outsiders to see their swords. As a member of the national treasure investigation office, I was lucky enough to be the first to investigate their collection."

(Ogawa (1980-b)

"Kunzan: Let me tell you another interesting instance testifying how difficult it had been for us to look at real masterpieces and therefore to recognize what log-treasured important swords look like. It may sound incredible to the swords students trained in recent years, but when the famous Tokuzenin Sadamune was for the first time in history exposed to the public appreciation several decades ago, many swords students of expert status quite seriously argued that it had to be Yasutsugu or Horikawa Kunihiro, both of whom are Shinto-makers."

"Ogawa: That seems to prove how scarcely available those intact examples of famous Koto blades were not only for sword students in general but even for authorities at the time."
"Kunzan: We came through such a miserable period of lacking study material of superb quality. It is only after we acquired access, for the purpose of investigation to designate Kokuho objects, to the collections of great significance such as those belonging to the ex-shogun and other major Daimyo families, when even the then established Nihonto authorities at last gained knowledge and understanding of real master pieces at first hand."

From the above dialogue it can be concluded that only recently the study of the Japanese swords became firmly established in Japan. So we may forgive Mr. Robinson oversight in 1961. Nowadays the study of Japanese swords has progressed tremendously and the kind of mystery described above will tend to disappear.

Second Mystery: a collection of examples

A. Several small mysteries appear throughout various Sotheby sales. Some examples are offered. In Lot 11 of the same sale an item is describes as:


The book identifies the signature as Sadamune (1264-1343); once again this signature and workmanship were judge by the Sotheby's experts as a Shinshinto blade. In this case this cannot be declared positively as a forgery because there is no date given and the sword may have been signed by a Shinshinto swordsmith called Sadamune.

B. In another sale by Sotheby's (Sotheby 1982), eleven lots belonging to the Major Festing collection were sold. Lot 26 is described as

"A very finely mounted Daisho: Shinto blade with Kinzogan attribution to Masamune. The description of the Sho blade is: " Soshu-style Tanto blade ascribed to Yukimitsu."

In this case the mystery is heightened because the Dai has a Kinzogan mei (inlaid gold attribution) and this blade was "reputed to have been presented to Lord Inaba by Ieyoshi (12th Shogun), 27th December, 8th year Tempo (1837), having "transfer documents from Ex Viscount Inaba." This blade has "provenance". The sho, is contained in a "silk bag with Honami appraisal dated Genroku 10th year (1697) 10th month, 3rd day." and "reputed to be from the collection of the Tokugawa Kishu family." It has even more impressive provenance documents.
These blades are also illustrated in the book by Robinson (Robinson (1961)) (The Dai on plate 14a and the Sho on plate 14b) and fetched GBP 13 200. In spite of the high price, the Sotheby's experts considered that the two blades are not from the Masamune and Yukimitsu respectively. Given the explanation above by Homma Junji about how recent is the serious study of important Japanese blades in Japan, it is not surprising that these swords were considered from Masamune and Yukimitsu in old times. Even considering the provenance and associated documents, the swords are better judged as being well-made Shinto blades.

**Third Mystery**

The third mystery involves a tsuba that is illustrated in Fig 1. This tsuba was from the collection of R. B. Caldwell that was described in Caldwell (1993-a) and Caldwell (1993-b). This tsuba is also illustrated in the book prefaced by J. Harding and B. W. Robinson (Syz (1993)).

This tsuba is described in the articles by Caldwell by being very mysterious when he first acquired it. In his own words:

"When this tsuba was purchased in London at an auction in the middle sixties, no one could classify it as to origin and purpose. It remained a 'copper tsuba' no doubt. Even when I took it to Tokyo, there was much head-shaking and blank stares. As usual, no one would admit "we don't know" only" Kagemishi, Muromachi". "But why is it so light, hollow and of Ro?" "It cannot be used in battles, it's too light." "Ah so".

![Figure 1](image-url)
Finally a consensus was worked out to please everybody. When on the march, a heavy iron *tsuba* added to the weight of a heavy *nagamaki* or *yari* (pole arm or spear) at the end of a nine or eighteen *shaku* pole, which became extremely tiring at the end of a long's day march.

In addition to the *tsuba*, a rain-resistant covering had to encase the weapon at its most vulnerable extremity. This would be heavily waxed paper or brocade and accumulated moisture and weight as the day wore on. As a substitute for the heavy iron and weather-proofing, this hollow copper *tsuba* was substituted during long marches. Later in *Edo Jidai* this type of *tsuba* became standard to the dreaded stay in *EDO* or Sanki Dodai as it was known. These "traveling *tsuba* became standard equipment in parades or other ceremonial displays." "The next year these *tsuba* began to appear in the *Juyo* annuals." As a result this *tsuba* was classified as a "travelling" *tsuba* and mostly used during the Edo period (1596-1868) according to the article by Caldwell.

In the book by Syz (*Syz (1994)*) this *tsuba* shown on page 9, is described as a *Fujiwara Kanagu*, and is attributed as being from the *Fujiwara/early Kamakura* period (Fujiwara (806 – 1184)/ Kamakura (1185 – 1219)). Further this *tsuba* is accompanied by a *Tokubetsu Kicho* certificate from the NBTHK. (1969).

Three other references where similar *tsuba* can be found are cited in the book; the books by Torigoe, *Tsuba Kanshoki* and the books by Durand -Ruel, Collection T.Hayashi and finally the book by Wakayama, *Toso Kodogu Koza*. On page 376 of the book by Torigoe there is a very similar *tsuba*; however, Torigoe attributes this *tsuba* to the late *Muromachi* period (late *Muromachi* 1467-1596).

It is not known if the NBTHK attribution (presumably to the *Fujiwara/early Kamakura* period) was explained in earlier numbers of the *Token Bijutsu*; an attribution to three such different periods is indeed remarkable. Two aspects of this mystery should be considered.

**First:** The NBTHK document is said to date form *Showa* 44 (1969). This is earlier than the article by Caldwell that appeared for the first time in *Arts of Asia* in January 1993. It is probable that the date of this document is not 1969 but later than the article by Caldwell. In fact this document is said to be the certificate number 930 dated *Showa* 44 as mentioned above. However in the next page of the book there is another papered *tsuba* (a *Muromachi Kanagu*) said to have a *Tokubetsu Kicho* certificate number 35, issued by the NBTHK, and dated *Showa* 55 that is 1980. It is probable that
the document of the subject 

Second: On considering the reference in Torigoe’s book the question arises whether Caldwell knew of this early attribution or not. It is concluded that indeed he did not know about this example that is in fact very similar to his tsuba. The surprise is that authorities in Japan did not know of it either.

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