

# Some Notable Sabers of the Qing Dynasty at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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**I**N ITS SIZABLE collection of Chinese arms and armor, the Department of Arms and Armor at the Metropolitan Museum has a number of hilted weapons of considerable merit that date from the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). In contrast to the swords of classical antiquity and of the early Chinese Empire, this late imperial material has been generally ignored by art historians. This article will highlight four distinctive sabers dating from the seventeenth through the nineteenth century. The weapons display the richness of imperial China's sword tradition during its last dynasty.

The hilted edged weapons of China fall into two large classes, *jian* and *dao*. The former are straight double-edged swords, while the latter are single-edged blades that come in a variety of shapes. *Dao* may be straight, long and curved, short and compact, or broad with angular points, corresponding, respectively, to the European backsword, saber, cutlass, and falchion. This article focuses on the *peidao*, a type of saber designed to be wielded primarily in one hand and to be worn on the left side in a scabbard slung by straps or cords from a waist belt. A portrait of a Qing military officer of the mid-eighteenth century in battle dress shows a *peidao* suspended in its scabbard from the officer's girdle; its hilt is at the rear to keep the encased sword from becoming entangled with the bow carried on the same side (Figure 1). To draw the weapon, the user pushes the lower part of the scabbard rearward with his left hand, pivoting the hilt forward so that it can easily be grasped with the right hand and the blade can be drawn edge up. Such a draw allows faster deployment on a cutting stroke than if the blade were drawn edge down. An edge-up draw was extensively used in Asian and Islamic cultures, particularly in Japan, Vietnam, the Ottoman Empire, and the Caucasus.

## HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Throughout China's history, the *dao* has been associated primarily with the military. Its use dates from

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The notes for this article begin on page 222.

several centuries before the unification of the country in 221 B.C. by the first Qin emperor. The earliest examples were made of bronze, but by the third century B.C. most of the *dao* carried into battle were made of iron or steel. Initially, these weapons were issued to the rank and file. Officers seemed to prefer the double-edged *jian*, which has been identified with the nobility since feudal times and was considered one of the emblems of a gentleman throughout the imperial period.<sup>1</sup> The *dao* employed during this time was, with few exceptions, straight. The Chinese term for this blade configuration is *zhibeidao* (straight-backed knife).

The *zhibeidao* continued to be used throughout succeeding dynasties and became increasingly popular with officers and aristocrats. By the Sui dynasty (A.D. 581–618) fine steel blades in sumptuous fittings were produced.<sup>2</sup> The Metropolitan has two examples, both in unrestored condition (Figures 2, 3). During the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–907) blades of this style, and the metallurgy to fabricate them, were introduced in Japan, either directly from China or via Korea.<sup>3</sup>

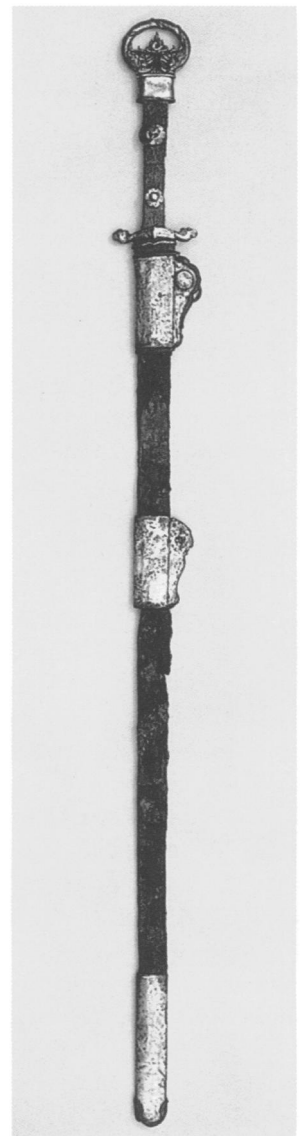
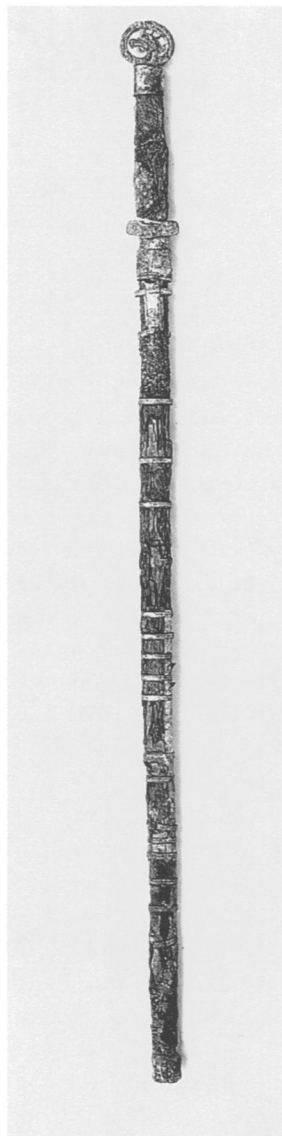
The origins of the *peidao* lie in the curved-bladed sabers wielded by warlike steppe horsemen who ranged during the Middle Ages from western Siberia across the Ural Mountains to the south of modern Ukraine (Figure 4). The nomads learned from experience that a curved edge is more efficient for cutting strokes because its arc coincides with the circular sweep of a rider's arm as he slashes his target at a gallop. Quantities of these weapons have been unearthed at various sites, notably in the Kuban region (where the finds date from the eighth to the ninth century A.D.)<sup>4</sup> and the Yenisey watershed (the artifacts there date from the tenth to the twelfth century).<sup>5</sup>

The descendants of these Eurasian tribes served in large numbers in the ranks of the Mongol hordes that overran and occupied much of eastern Europe and the Middle East, and all of China, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. At least one Western observer noted that sabers were widely used by the Mongol aristocracy by the thirteenth century.<sup>6</sup> The Mongol invaders brought the saber not just to China but also to other cultures that had heretofore relied almost exclusively on straight-bladed swords. The

207



Figure 1. Unidentified artist (Chinese, 18th century). *Portrait of the Imperial Bodyguard Zhanyinbao*. Hanging scroll; ink and color on silk; painting and inscription 74¼ x 37⅞ in. (188.6 x 95.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, The Dillon Fund Gift, 1986 (1986.206)



Figures 2, 3. Two *zhibeidao*, probably ca. A.D. 600, believed to have been recovered from an imperial tomb near Luoyang, Henan Province. Steel with fittings of gilt bronze and silver, overall L. 39¼ in. (99.7 cm), 40¼ in. (102.2 cm). Figure 2 has traces of its silk burial-wrapping attached to its scabbard chape. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Figure 2: Gift of George D. Pratt, 1930 (30.65.1); Figure 3: Gift of Clarence H. Mackay, 1930 (30.65.2)

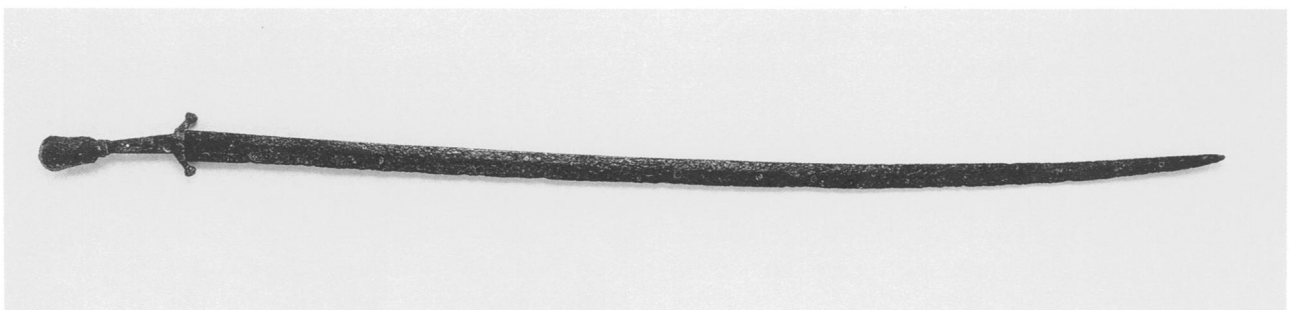


Figure 4. Saber, Eurasia, 10th–13th century. Steel, overall L. 48 in. (122 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger Gift, 2000 (2000.609)

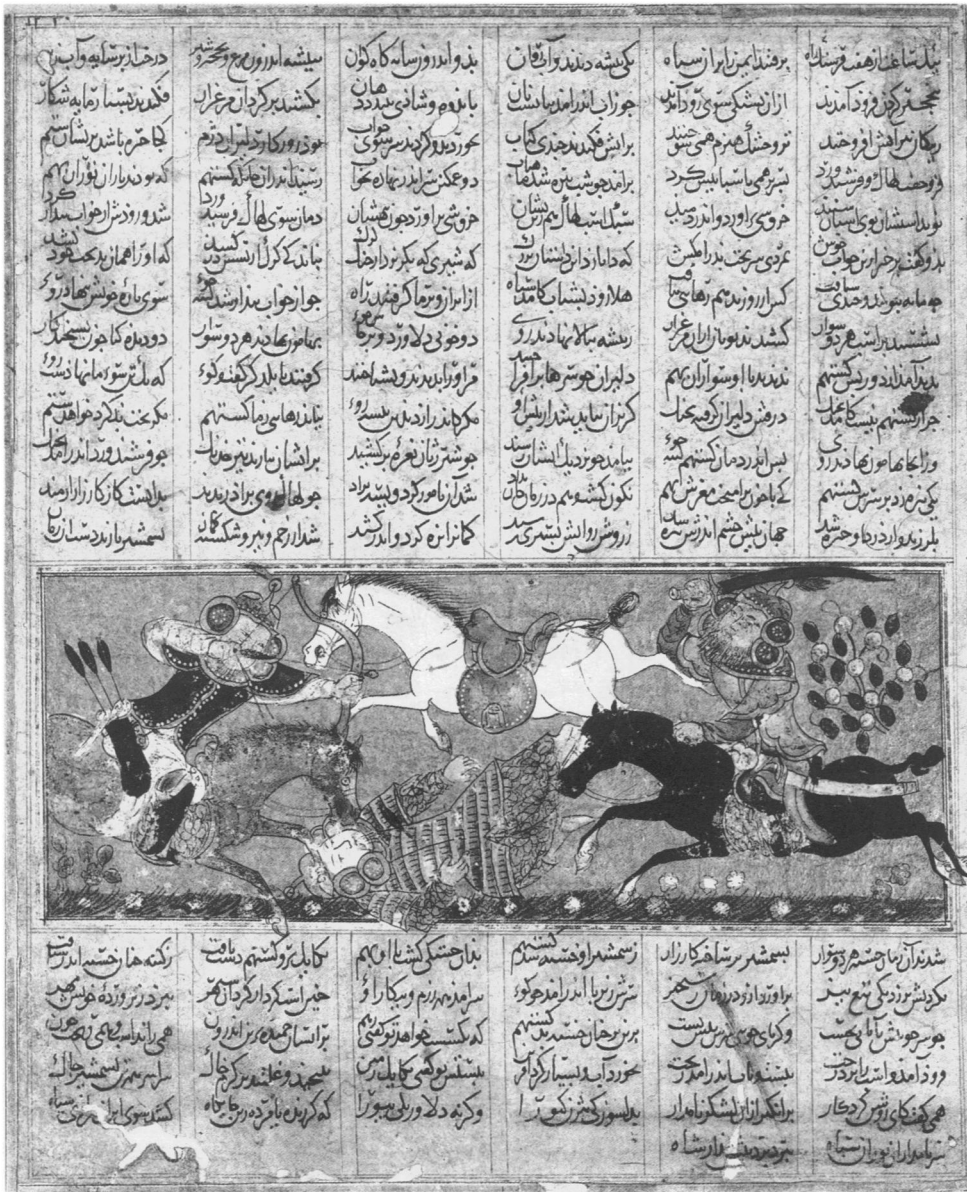


Figure 5. Leaf from *Shanama, Gustaham Kills Lahhak and Farshidward*. Iran, first half of the 14th century. Colors, gilt, silver, and black ink on paper, 6 1/4 x 5 in. (15.7 x 12.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1969 (69.74.4)

adoption of the saber was gradual, beginning not long after the Mongol conquests and lasting well into the fifteenth century. In many Islamic cultures curved blades almost totally supplanted double-edged swords. In China, India, and Europe sabers and swords existed side by side, and the sword continued to evolve until comparatively recent times.

The sabers used by the troops of the Mongol Empire and its successor states had long heavy blades with a slight curvature, fitted to simple hilts with stubby cross guards (Figure 5). In this form sabers were adopted in China early in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), when the country's armed forces were reconstituted and a number of Mongol traditions borrowed. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries,

many thousands of Japanese sabers were imported into China.<sup>7</sup> The Japanese had long since adopted a disk-shaped guard (Japanese *tsuba*) for their hilts. The Chinese eagerly copied this innovation and by the second half of the Ming had practically abandoned the cruciform guards that were favored in the Islamic world. The disklike guard (Chinese *pan hushou*) became a hallmark of the *peidao* hilt. However, Inner Asian antecedents continued to determine blade shapes, fullers and back edges, and the distinctive scalloped collars (*tunkou*) at the fortes of some blades. By the end of the Ming, the *peidao* had eclipsed the *jian* in China's military. The *jian* was to live on until the present day as one of the primary weapons of martial arts practiced by civilians.

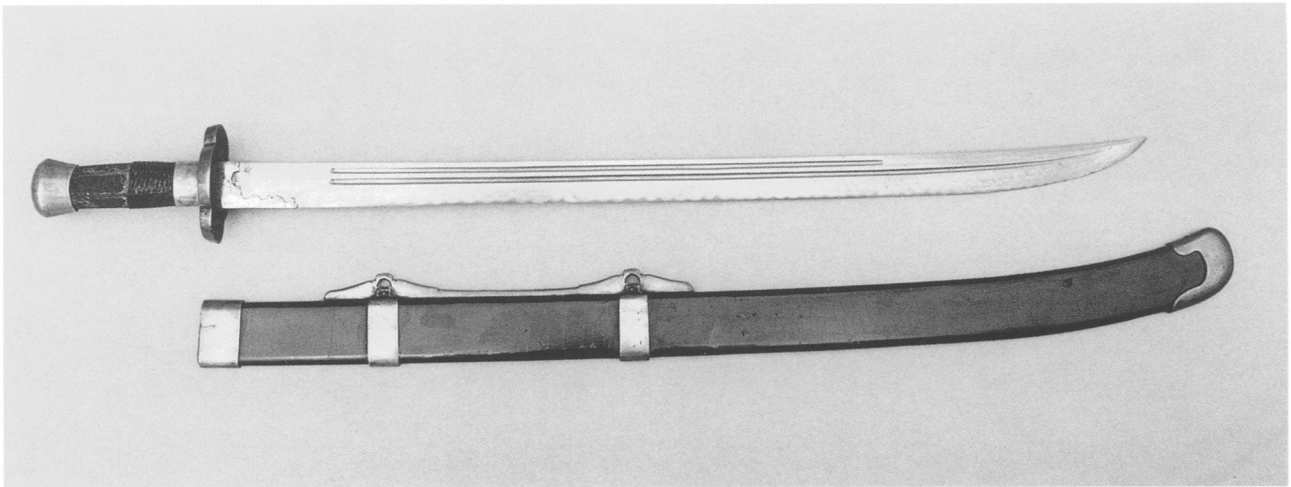


Figure 6. *Yanmaodao* (goose-quill saber) and scabbard, China, 18th century. Blade 29¼ in. (74.3 cm), with heavy brass mounts, lacquered scabbard. Author's collection (photo: author)

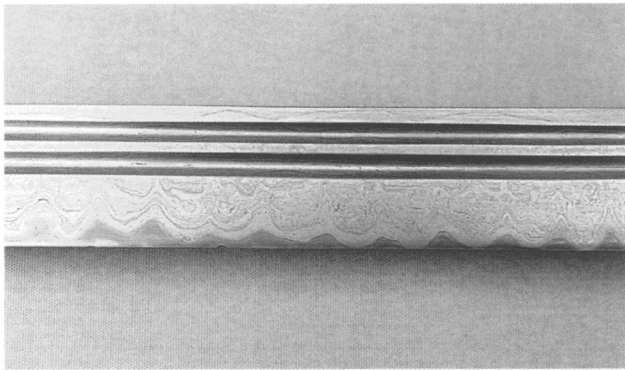


Figure 7. Detail of blade of Figure 6, showing lamellar construction, with triple edge plate assembly inserted in a body of pattern-welded iron/steel laminate (photo: author)

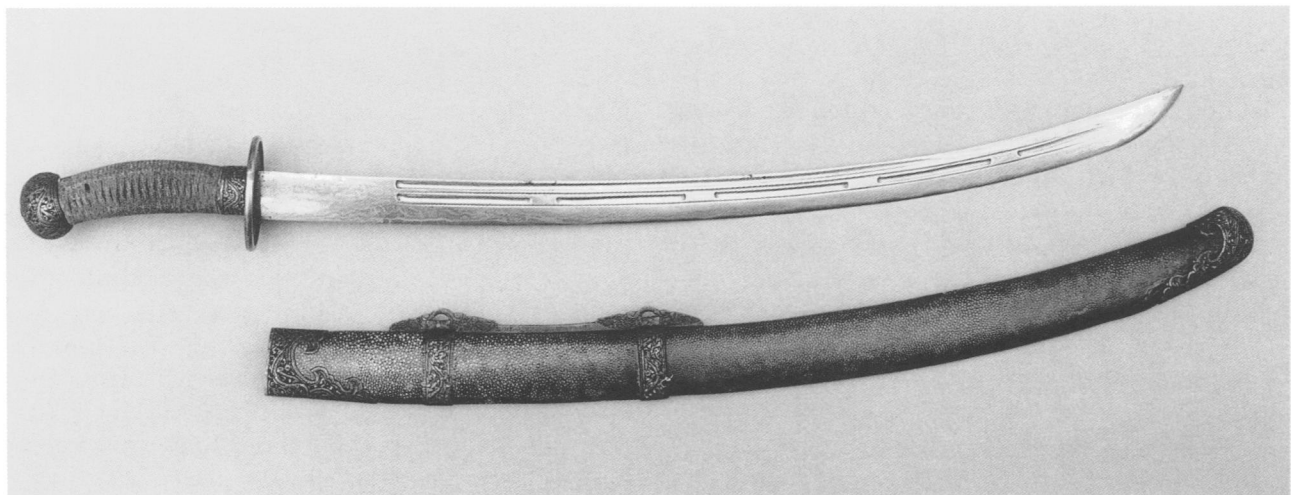


Figure 8. *Piandao* (slicing saber) and scabbard, China, late 19th century. Blade 26½ in. (66.4 cm), with segmented fullers inspired by similar effects on some Indian and Persian blades. Mounted in chiseled and pierced brass with rayskin-covered scabbard. Author's collection (photo: author)





Figure 9. Two examples of *niuweidao* (ox-tail sabers) and their scabbards, China, late 19th–early 20th century. Blades 27¼ in. (69.9 cm) and 32¼ in. (81.9 cm), with iron hilt fittings (silver damascening on those of the shorter specimen), brass-mounted scabbards. Author's collection (photo: author)

## TYPOLGY

There are several distinct types of *peidao*, classified and named according to blade shape. The earliest form, which is most closely linked to the ancient and to the medieval *zhibeidao*, is called *yanmaodao* (goose-quill saber). The edge of its blade is straight until the beginning of the back edge and then gradually arches upward to the point (Figures 6, 7). Examples in various collections date from the late Ming to the beginning of the nineteenth century. The *liuyedao* (willow-leaf saber) appeared during the Ming and remained popular until the end of the Qing. The curve of its blade begins gently ahead of the forte and accelerates toward the point (Figures 19, 23). It was the most widely used type of *peidao* during the Qing dynasty; two of the four Metropolitan sabers that are discussed below are *liuyedao*.

A third type of saber is the *piandao* (slicing saber), distinguished by its pronounced curvature (Figure 8). Like the Persian *shamshir*, it was designed for the draw cut at close quarters. Indeed, it is likely that the inspiration for the *piandao*, which saw limited use in China, came from the Middle East. The segmented fullers on the weapon in Figure 8 are strongly reminiscent of motifs found on Indian and Persian sabers.

The last major type is the *niuweidao* (ox-tail saber), which has a distinctive broad blade that widens gradually before terminating in a leaf-shaped point (Figure 9).

It appeared late in the Qing, toward the close of the nineteenth century. This is the only major type of *peidao* that was developed and used mainly by civilians. The shape of its blade suggests that it is derived from peasants' falchions, or even from certain types of pole arms, though some scholars link the broadening tip area with the raised *yelman*, or back edge, seen on many medieval Turkic saber blades.<sup>8</sup>

## PEIDAO WITH TWIST-CORE PATTERN-WELDED BLADE

One of the Qing sabers in the Metropolitan Museum has a blade of unusual form and metallurgical sophistication (36.25.1477a, b; Figure 10). The solid understated grace of the weapon's fittings seems to accord with the aesthetic values embodied in the best Yixing teapots and Ming-style hardwood furniture.

The 28½-inch pattern-welded Damascus blade is made of *huawengang* (flower-patterned steel), forged of six rows of twisted cores of iron and steel laminate; a narrow band of high-carbon steel forms the edge (Figure 11). The curvature of the cutting edge, almost imperceptible near the hilt, increases markedly a few inches from the tip, where the blade widens abruptly. There are two narrow fullers on each side, with small dimples at the forte. The fittings are of blackened iron. The scabbard bands and the flange of the *hushou*



Figure 10. *Peidao* with blade of proto-*niuweidao* form and scabbard, China, probably 18th century. Blade 28 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (72.4 cm), of six-row *huawengang* and stacked edge strip, fitted in iron, scabbard covered in black leather. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of George C. Stone, 1935 (36.25.1477a, b). See also Colorplate 3

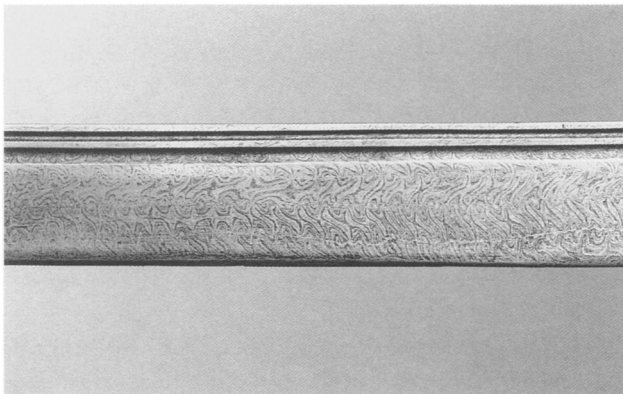


Figure 11. Detail of blade of Figure 10, showing *huawengang* pattern

are hollow-ground. Intricate file-cut decoration on the *tiliang*, or suspension bar, on the scabbard suggests the closely spaced nodes at the base of a bamboo stalk.

This type of blade is rarely encountered. The leaf-shaped point and the pronounced widening toward the tip are features of the more familiar *niuweidao* saber of the late Qing and the early Chinese Republic. The *niuweidao* curves considerably more along its entire length, however, and it broadens over a greater area as well (compare the examples in Figure 9). Perhaps the blade on the Metropolitan's example is a

type antecedent to the *niuweidao*. The near straightness of the blade behind the swelling tip appears indicative of a transitional form: akin to the *yanmaodao*, which seems to bridge the *zhibeidao* and the *liuyedao*. The paucity of examples of this blade type and the absence of textual references preclude a definitive chronology at this time.

Twist-core pattern-welded Damascus blades are sometimes found among weapons produced in China during the Ming and Qing periods. The cores were formed of alternating bars of high- and low-carbon steel forge-welded into a single billet, twisted into a tight spiral, and ground to a square cross section. The smith combined multiple cores when forming the blade. A large nineteenth-century *liuyedao* composed of six cores and a separate back edge is shown in Figures 12 and 13; a stout cutlass blade dating from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century has a four-row twist (Figure 14). Until the early twentieth century twist-core construction was also used for the manufacture of *jian* blades. Normally the cores were simply "stacked," or welded side by side. Often, as in the Metropolitan's example, a separate edge strip of high-carbon steel was added. Sometimes more complex structures were produced, utilizing inserted high-carbon edge plates. Several cores could be stacked to

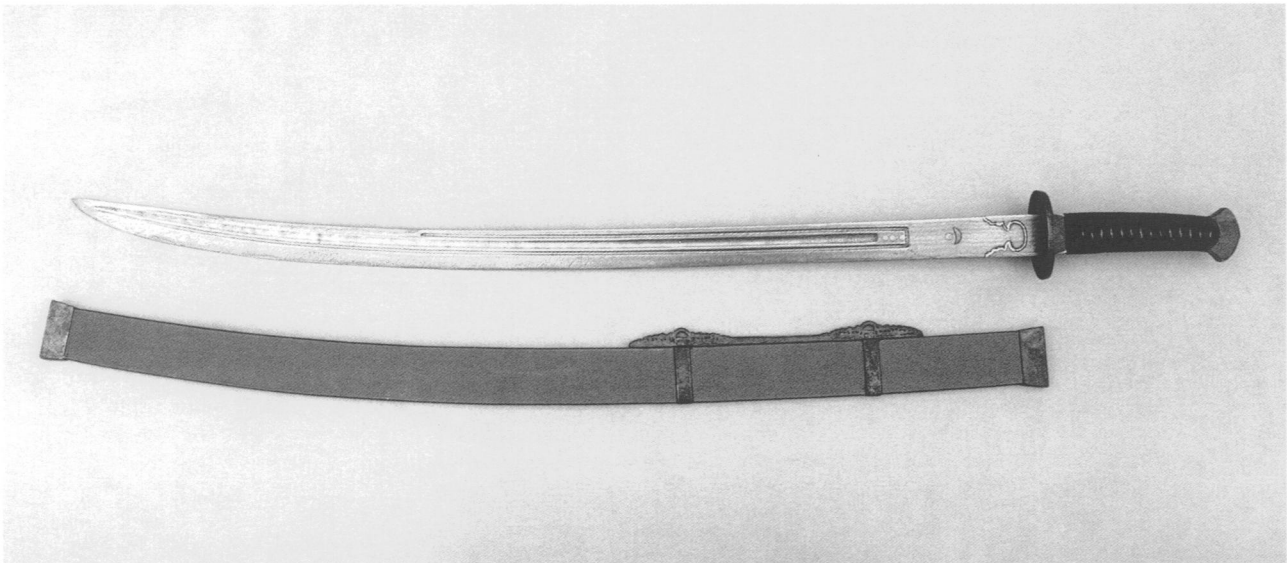


Figure 12. *Liuyedao* and scabbard, China, 19th century. Blade 35 1/4 in. (89.2 cm), of six-row *huawengang*, and with a Tibetan inscription and inlays of later date. Author's collection (photo: author)



Figure 13. Detail of blade of Figure 12, showing *huawengang* pattern (photo: author)

form composite plates that were welded to each side of the central edge plate. Such tripartite construction was called *sanmei*. Alternatively, a body of stacked cores could be cleft lengthwise to admit the edge plate; this method was called *qiangang* (inserted steel). Both *sanmei* and *qiangang* were also employed on blade bodies composed of simple lamellar pattern weld, that is, layers of iron and medium-carbon steel folded over and over, with a linear or undulating surface pattern (Figures 7, 28).

Pattern-welded lamellar forging and multiplate structures such as *qiangang* and *sanmei* have been known in China since late antiquity<sup>9</sup> and are the basis of the sword smith's art in Japan and elsewhere. Stacked twisted cores are unknown prior to the Ming dynasty, however. It may be that the manufacture of *huawengang* in China was an outgrowth of Ming connoisseurs' appreciation of blades from Islamic regions.<sup>10</sup> Iran, India, and Central Asia would seem the obvious sources of this technique, given their proximity to China and their well-developed metallurgical traditions. Pattern welding with twisted cores was



Figure 14. Detail of blade on a *peidao*, 17th–18th century, showing four-row *huawengang* and inserted edge plate. Courtesy Scott M. Rodell, Great River Taoist Center, Washington, D.C. (photo: author)

widely used in these areas in the production of gun barrels. Such was not the case with blades, though. The most characteristic sabers, daggers, and knives were made of crystalline Damascus steel (*poulad jauhar* or *wootz*). The surface patterns of this material differ from those of pattern-welded steels. They result not from the smith's mechanically combining steels or iron of differing composition but from the formation of a coarse network of iron-carbide structures in the steel.<sup>11</sup> This molecular structure originates during the smelting process.

When pattern welding was used for the manufacture of blades in India and the Middle East, smiths tended not to use twisted structures. The only part of these regions where parallel rows of twisted cores were

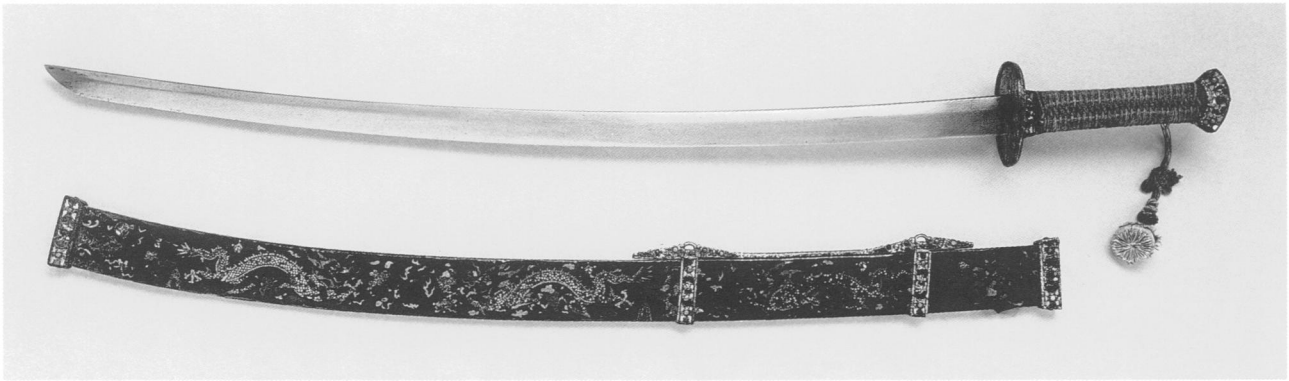


Figure 15. *Peidao* with Japanese import blade, the mounts Chinese, ca. 1750–1800. Blade 28¾ in. (73 cm), mounts gilt iron set with gemstones and mother-of-pearl, with polychrome lacquered scabbard embellished with mother-of-pearl. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Collection of Giovanni P. Morosini, presented by his daughter Giulia, 1932 (32.75.301a, b). See also Colorplate 3

employed for blades was the Ottoman Empire. There, the technique was sometimes utilized in the manufacture of *yataghan* and *kilij* blades. Examples of these weapons with twist-core blades are almost all from the late eighteenth century or later, however. *Huawengang* seems to have appeared in China at an earlier date.

Twist-core pattern welding was not a universal metalworking tradition in the East and was practically ignored in Japan, Korea, and mainland Southeast Asia. The Indonesian archipelago, though, easily outdid the rest of the non-European world in the production of twist-core blades. The use of this technique among the Moros of the southern Philippines<sup>12</sup> indicates that it was exported northward from Sumatra and Java, probably with the spread of Islam. The rows of star-shaped elements, feathery or flamelike bands, and “barber-pole” structures seen on Moro and Chinese twist-core forging are remarkably similar. Traders, pirates, and émigrés from southern China had extensive contact with Southeast Asian peoples. Indeed, Chinese smiths are known to have made *barong* blades of lamellar *qiangang* structure for export to the Philippines.<sup>13</sup> It is likely that *keris* and other weapons from Southeast Asia made their way to China as trade goods, booty, or travel mementos. Their construction, if not their form, must have held considerable fascination and appeal for Chinese swordsmen and collectors of curiosities.

#### PEIDAO WITH IMPORTED BLADE AND PRINCELY FITTINGS

Another Metropolitan saber is lavishly decorated (32.75.301a, b; Figure 15). It offers insight into the symbolism underlying the design of the Qing aristocracy’s court regalia and illustrates the ongoing appeal

of luxury foreign wares to wealthy and sophisticated Chinese. The saber’s mountings reflect the opulence verging on decadence that appeared late in the Qianlong period (1736–95) and grew during successive reigns.

The blade is of Japanese manufacture, with a *koshizori* curvature. It is affixed to the hilt by peening at the pommel, and its original surface polish is gone—features that make it difficult to be certain of its age, maker, and school. The forte is engraved and gilded to simulate a *tunkou*. The mounting is in the *fangshi* (squared or angular) style, with the peculiar quadrangular grip and scabbard sections and the squared-off chape that are also encountered on some Tibetan and Timurid weapons. Made of iron overlaid with gold leaf, the fittings are chiseled and inset with round cabochons of red coral, malachite, and lapis lazuli; between the stones and relief elements are small fragments of mother-of-pearl in mosaic patterns (Figure 16). The wooden scabbard is finished with polished black lacquer, embellished with four-clawed dragons (three on each side) amid clouds and auspicious symbols such as the Sacred Mountain, books, coins, and lozenges (Figure 17).<sup>14</sup> The grip is wrapped with blue-green braided silk cord in typical Chinese fashion and fitted with a long ornamental tassel.

Although the Japanese learned the art of sword making from China and Korea,<sup>15</sup> the Chinese developed an appreciation of Japanese sabers as early as the Song dynasty. The renowned poet Ouyang Xiu wrote, about 1060, “From the land of the rising sun come precious swords . . . / With scabbards of fragrant wood, sharkskin-covered, and bearing / Designs in silver and gold, trappings of brass and bronze.”<sup>16</sup> During the Ming dynasty, swords were a sought-after luxury import from Japan, and more than seventy-five thousand were shipped to China on eleven “Kango” trade



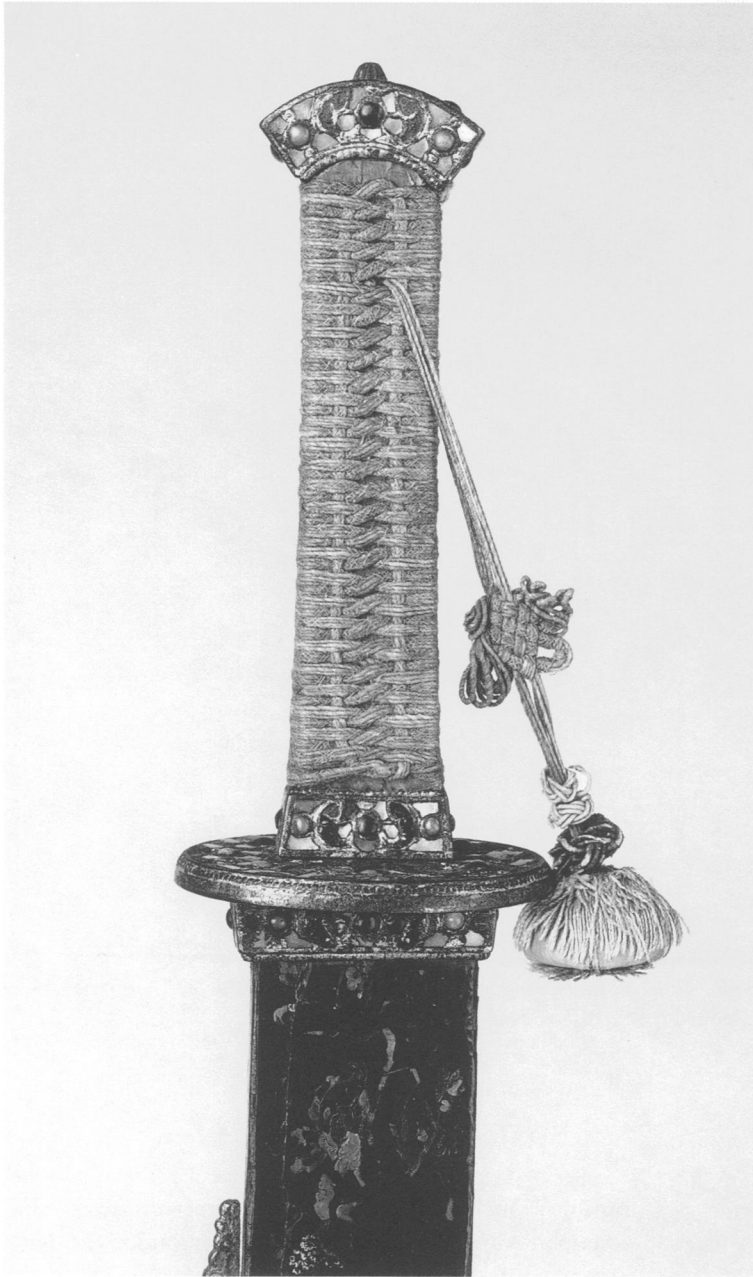


Figure 16. Detail of Figure 15, hilt and throat area of scabbard, showing position of cabochons, and surrounding mosaic-work of mother-of-pearl



Figure 17. Detail of decoration on lacquered scabbard of Figure 15

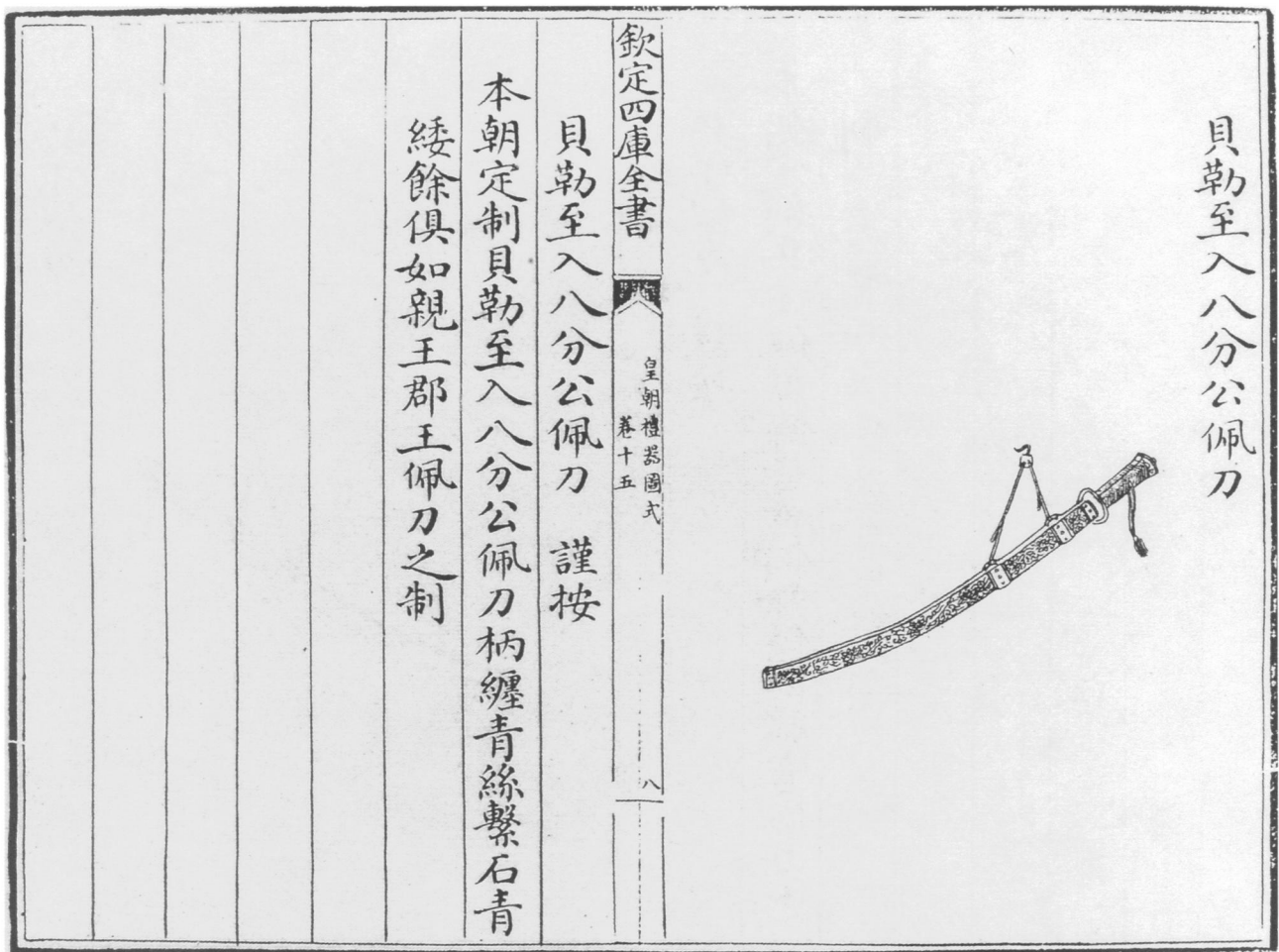


Figure 18. Illustration and description of *beile zhiru bafengong peidao* in the *Huangchao Liqi Tushi* (after facsimile of *Huangchao Liqi Tushi* in *Yingyin Wenyuange siku quanshu*, vol. 656 [Shanghai, 1983], p. 6)

missions between 1432 and 1547.<sup>17</sup> Others were captured as booty from the Wokou coastal pirates after Ming forces under General Qi Jiguang gained the upper hand in the sixteenth century over the large-scale depredations along the China coast. These blades varied greatly in quality, as did those made by the Chinese themselves.

The configuration of the hilt and scabbard of the Metropolitan saber, with a quadrangular cross section and a squared chape, is common in China from the late Ming. The nonmetallic materials that ornament the mountings conform closely to those specified for a *beile zhiru bafengong peidao*, or saber for Princes of the Third Degree (Manchu *doroi beile*) and the Eight Privileged Ranks (*bafengong*), during the Qianlong reign of the Qing dynasty. According to the 1759 *Huangchao Liqi Tushi* (Illustrated Regulations for the Ceremonial Regalia of the Present Dynasty; Figure 18), the deco-

ration of the *beile's* saber is a carryover from that of the side arm for the next-higher princely ranks, the *Qinwang* and *Junwang* (Manchu *hosoi cinwang* and *doroi giyun wang*, respectively).<sup>18</sup> The text states that the sabers for all three ranks are to have fittings set with coral, lapis lazuli, turquoise, and (saltwater) pearls; the polychrome lacquered scabbards are to be decorated with lotus motifs and miscellaneous subjects.<sup>19</sup> The differences are that the hilt and scabbard for the first- and second-degree princes have the *yuanshi*, or rounded cross section and chape, and that the grip is wound with braided cord of golden-yellow rather than blue-green silk.

The silk grip wrapping (*sikou*) of blue green on the Metropolitan's example is consistent with the regulations, as is the polychrome scabbard. Several features of the saber depart from the guidelines, however. For instance, malachite has been substituted for

turquoise. This substitution is less drastic than it seems, though, for much of the Tibetan turquoise used during the Qing for ornamental purposes had a greenish tint. More unusual is the replacement of pearls on the metal fittings with small pieces of mother-of-pearl applied in mosaic fashion. (Also of note is the fact that mother-of-pearl ornament on scabbards is atypical for China and more characteristic of Vietnam, until the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> This decorative technique was fairly widespread in the furniture trade of southern China, however.) A final departure is the presence of dragons on the scabbard—and the absence of lotuses. The regulations neither mandate nor rule out dragons. This may indicate that there was some latitude for individuals, whose regalia were custom-made. The four-clawed dragons depicted seem in any case an appropriate emblem for a *doroi beile*.

The high quality and the sumptuous ornament of this saber's fittings date them to the second half of the Qianlong reign (1736–95), or to the first part of the succeeding Jiaqing reign (1796–1820). Such a weapon would have complemented a suit of armor (the armor of this era later evolved into a military uniform without metal defenses) or a ceremonial robe, jacket, and hat. The armor and dress appropriate to each rank in the Qianlong noble and official hierarchy are detailed in the *Huangchao Liqi Tushi*. Unfortunately, the published regulations for other reign periods are incomplete, inaccessible, or lost.

#### LIUYEDAO WITH FITTINGS ORNAMENTED WITH LAPIDARY WORK

This saber represents the epitome of the sword maker's art in late imperial China (14.48.2a, b; Figure 19). It is a stunning marriage of elegance and function. Despite its graceful lines and its exquisite and impeccably crafted decoration, it is not a bauble for the parade ground. Its substantial blade has two narrow deep fullers on each side, a peaked *bei* (dorsal) ridge, a well-defined back edge, and a gilt iron *tunkou* at the forte. Distal taper is slight, giving this blade considerable weight and making it well suited for powerful sweeping cuts from horseback. In its current condition, details of the blade's fabrication are not discernible.

The iron mounts are ornamented with pierced fretwork (*loukong*), chiseling, gilding, and gemstones. The frontal surface of the flanged ogival guard is engraved with floral patterns on a stippled ground. All the fittings are set with coral and malachite; some of the stones are round cabochons, while others are combined in arrangements resembling characters in the archaic "seal" script (Figures 20–22). The wooden grip is wrapped with brown silk braid, and the scabbard is covered with brown morocco-finished leather; both are in the *fangshi* configuration. The chape is missing, and the locket is reversed.

Although the gemstones in the fittings recall the

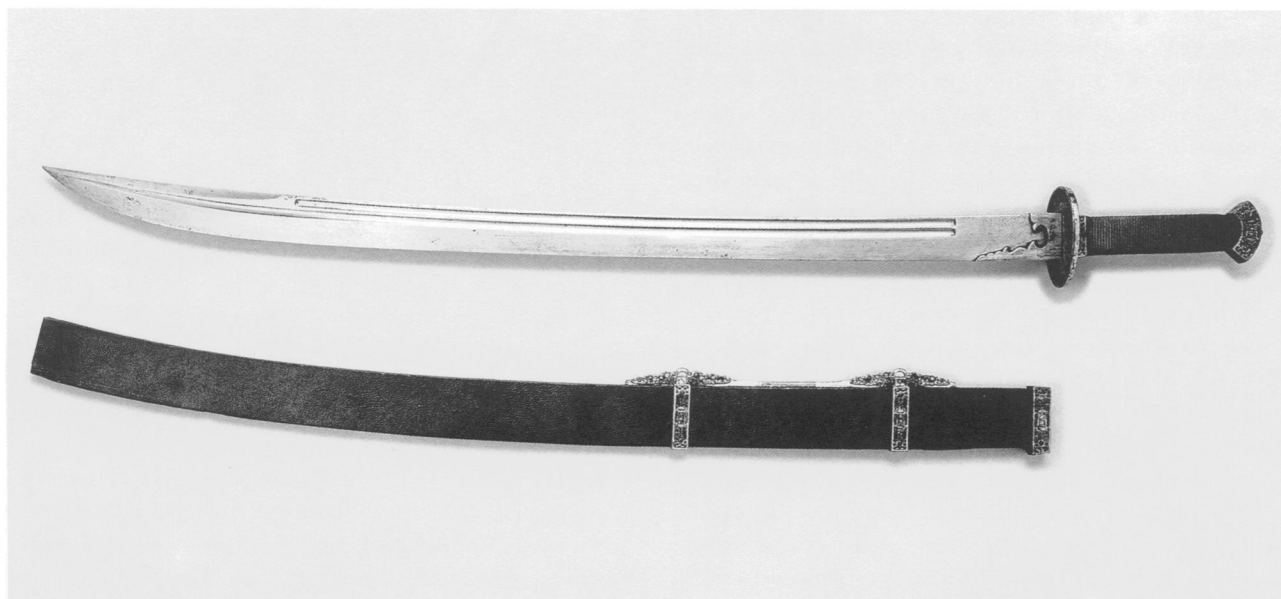


Figure 19. *Liuyedao* and scabbard, China, 17th–18th century. Blade 29 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (75.9 cm), mounted in gilt openwork iron, embellished with gemstones, with scabbard covered in brown leather. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1914 (14.48.2a, b). See also Colorplate 3

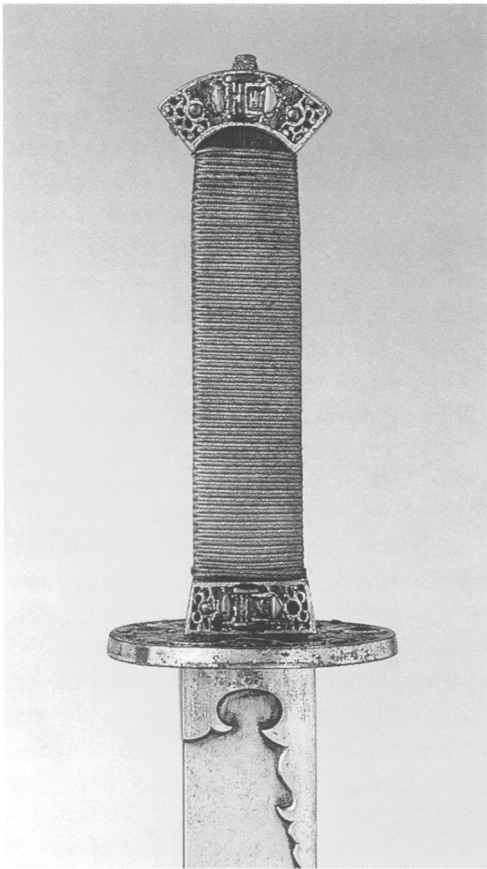


Figure 20. Detail of hilt of *liuyedao* in Figure 19, showing combination of fretwork and inset stones on the iron mounts

decoration of Figure 15, above, the combination of stones on this saber is not found among the regulation designs set out in the Qianlong-reign *Huangchao Liqi Tushi*. The ornament may have been a prescribed pattern for certain ranks of the nobility or officer corps in an earlier period, one for which published regulations are lacking. Or the saber may have been a specially commissioned nonregulation weapon not authorized for wear during formal court ceremonies or at the grand military reviews in the capital.

The form of the *tunkou* is typical. These collars are often found on *liuyedao* and *yanmaodao* but were frequently omitted from blades produced during the later Qing dynasty. Contrary to popular belief, the *tunkou* is not related to the *habaki* on Japanese sabers and daggers, which performs a similar function. Rather, the shape of the *tunkou* indicates that it is a direct descendant of collars on backswords and sabers made by various Inner Asian peoples during the Middle Ages (see Figure 4).<sup>21</sup> The flaring pommel with radiused end on this and many other *peidao* is also a

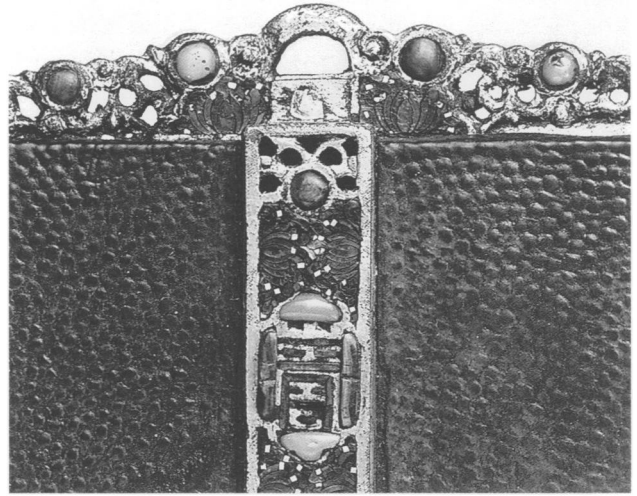


Figure 21. Detail of scabbard (*qiao*) of *liuyedao* in Figure 19, showing a suspension band (*tilianggu*) and part of suspension bar (*tiliang*)



Figure 22. Detail of guard (*pan hushou*) of *liuyedao* in Figure 19 from the hilt side

medieval Eurasian form. Like the *tunkou*, it can be traced back to the sabers of the steppe nomads of centuries past.<sup>22</sup>

Sabers of this style are encountered from the late Ming to just after the mid-Qing. During the late Qing downward-curving grips and *yuanshi* mountings (see Figure 23) became more popular. There was also a tendency toward standardized, pattern-book decoration that was less refined (Figure 8 is an example). As the nineteenth century wore on, the quality of both



blades and fittings declined, until production ended in the early twentieth century with gaudy and insubstantial pieces for the curio trade.

#### LIUYEDAO WITH BLADE SHOWING EUROPEAN DESIGN INFLUENCES

One of the sabers at the Metropolitan exhibits intriguing features analogous to those of Hungarian and Polish blades—while remaining typically Chinese in its curvature and in the design of its fittings (36.25.1473a, b; Figure 23). It is a rare example of limited Western influence on the design of mid-Qing hilted weapons, in contrast to the marked Western imprint on Chinese artillery technology during the same period.

The blade has a somewhat raised back edge with a slight drop at the tip, and deep well-defined fullers. Its dorsal ridge is not typical of a Chinese saber: it has an indented area beginning about ten inches from the guard and ending at the base of the back edge, and this recessed area is cut with a narrow dorsal groove. A brass *tunkou* is fitted to the forte; its frontal portion touches the ends of the fullers, which run farther back than is usual for a *peidao*.

The brass mounts are gilt, the finish much worn. The pommel is associated; the ferrule and the scabbard throat and chape have ornately scalloped borders (Figures 24–26). Quatrefoil in shape, the *hushou* features panels of *loukong* (Figure 25). All these components are engraved with tightly executed floral scrollwork. *Loukong* is also found on the *tiliang* (Figure 26). Yellow silk braid, now faded and worn, is wrapped around the grip. The scabbard is covered with polished green-stained rayskin (the *tiliang* and its supporting bands have shifted position due to shrinkage of the wood). The fittings are in the *yuanshi* style.

With a blade nearly thirty-two inches long, this saber was intended for a horseman. Its overall quality indicates usage by an officer or a member of the nobility, yet its configuration does not conform to the Qianlong-era *Huangchao Liqi Tushi*. This might be a nonregulation item purchased for field or informal use (as has been speculated concerning Figure 19, above), or it might date from a later reign when the regulations were changed or relaxed. Braided yellow silk cord on the grip was generally reserved for the emperor and his armed attendants (*suishi*);<sup>23</sup> a saber such as this would more likely have been carried by the latter.

The unusual features of this blade point to eastern European influence. Saber blades with recessed sec-



Figure 23. *Liuyedao* and scabbard, China, 18th century. Blade 31¼ in. (80.6 cm), with fullers and details of dorsal spine showing European influence, mounted in gilt brass with panels of openwork and with engraved decor, the scabbard covered with polished rayskin. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of George C. Stone, 1935 (36.25.1473a, b). See also Colorplate 3

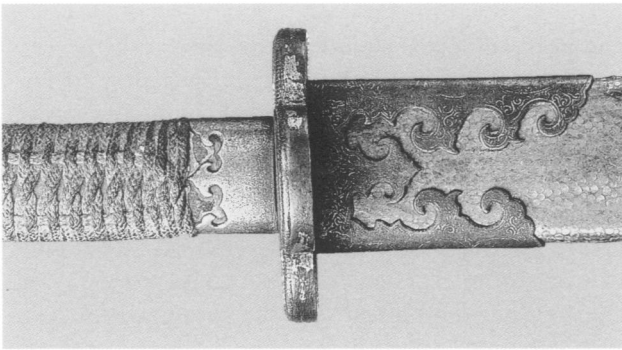


Figure 24. Detail of scabbard throat and forward part of guard of *liuyedao* in Figure 23, showing ornate cussing on ferrule (*binggu*) and scabbard throat (*qiaokou*), and the weave of the *sikou* around the grip

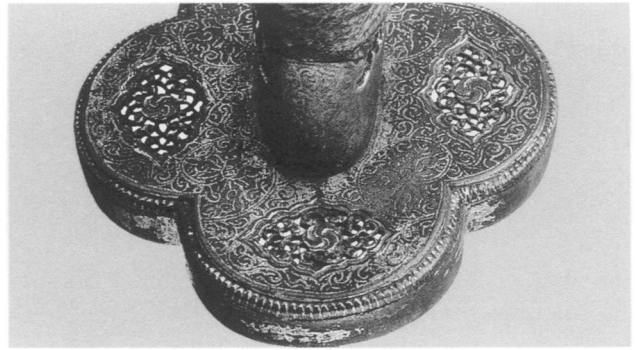


Figure 25. Detail of the guard (*pan hushou*) of the *liuyedao* in Figure 23, revealing its quatrefoil form, engraved decor, and panels of *loukong* (openwork)

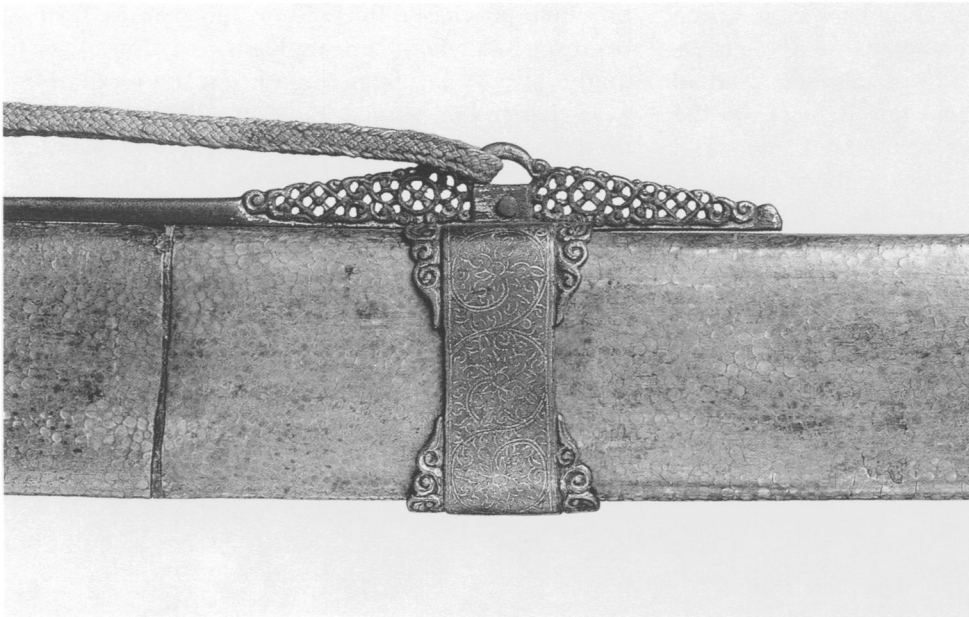


Figure 26. Detail of *tilianggu* and part of *tiliang* on Figure 23

tions of spine, sometimes with a dorsal fuller, were popular in Hungary and Poland during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>24</sup> Chinese sabers with either of these features are extremely scarce. An example in the author's collection features a dorsal groove but lacks a recess (Figures 27–29); its long back edge is flush with the remainder of the spine. It is tempting to conclude that the blade on the Metropolitan's example is an import from Poland or Hungary. The appearance of the fullers and the dorsal area would certainly support this contention. However, the curvature, rather slight compared to that of the European blades, is consistent with Chinese norms. Unfortunately, the blade's surface in its current condition does not reveal any details of lamellar structure or heat treating that would allow us to verify

the blade's origin (by contrast, Chinese *qiangang* lamination and differential hardening are apparent on the author's example; see Figure 28).

The four Metropolitan *peidao* that have been examined above represent an element of Chinese material culture receptive to foreign goods and stylistic concepts, and as such they help to modify the prevailing stereotype of a culturally introspective and isolationist Middle Kingdom. They demonstrate only a small part of the considerable technical and aesthetic repertoire of Chinese bladesmiths and sword fitters during the late imperial period. Yet the weapons reveal much about the tastes of the warrior elite of Qing society—the patrons of the skilled artisans who fashioned these beautiful yet lethal objects.

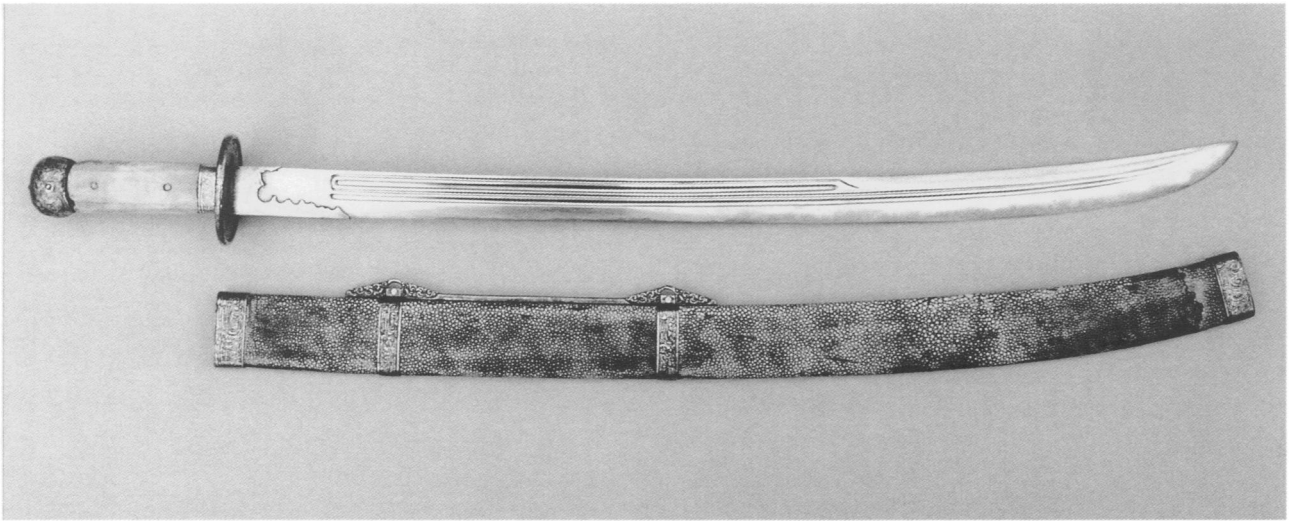


Figure 27. *Liuyedao* and scabbard, China, 18th–early 19th century. Blade of *qiangang* construction, 28 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (72.7 cm), mounts of engraved brass, with bone grip and scabbard covered in polished rayskin. Author’s collection (photo: author)

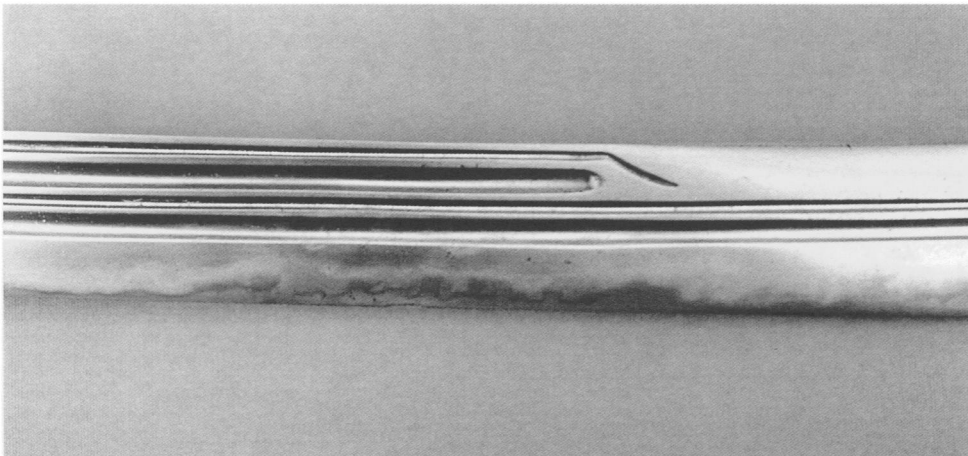


Figure 28. Detail of blade of the *liuyedao* in Figure 27, showing metallurgical details. The central edge plate of highly refined carbon steel is visible as dark gray, along with a white cloudy zone (*shuang-xue*), which is the result of a differential heat-treating process (photo: author)

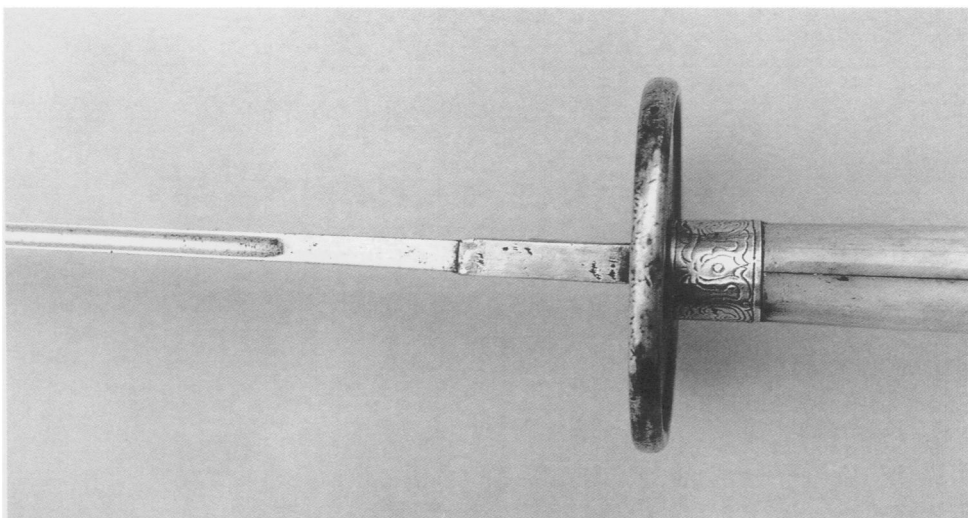


Figure 29. Detail of the dorsal portion of the *liuyedao* in Figure 27, just ahead of the guard. The brass *tunkou* occupies the area just ahead of the guard, and a dorsal groove begins a short distance beyond that. In contrast with Figure 23, this piece has no recessed section on the back of the blade (photo: author)

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- see Anatolij Kirpičnikov, “Der sogenannte Säbel Karls des Grossen,” *Gladius* 10 (1972), pp. 69–70.
5. Iu. S. Khudiakov, *Vooruzhenie yeniseiskikh kyrgyzov, VI–XII vv* (Arms of the Yenisey Kirghiz in the sixth to the twelfth century) (Novosibirsk: Academy of Sciences of the USSR, Siberian Branch, 1980), p. 49. For a rare inscribed example whose contour and other features closely resemble those of Chinese *liuyedao* blades dating centuries later, see Repsime Djanpoladian and Anatolij Kirpičnikov, “Mittelälterlicher Säbel mit einer armenischen Inschriften gefunden in subpolaren Ural,” *Gladius* 10 (1972), pp. 15–23.
6. Friar Giovanni di Piano Carpini, *Historia mongalorum quos nos Tataros appellamus*, trans. Erik Hildinger as *The Story of the Mongols Whom We Call the Tartars* (Boston: Branden Publishing, 1996), p. 72.
7. Randolph Caldwell, ed., *The Book of the Sword* (Dallas, Tex.: Tôken Kenkyû Kai, 1972), p. 32.
8. Arendt, “Säbel,” p. 64.
9. Needham, *Development*, p. 26.
10. Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Chicago and Urbana: University of Illinois, 1991), p. 110.
11. Oleg Sherby and Jeffrey Wadsworth, “Damascus Steels,” *Scientific American*, February 1985, pp. 112–20.
12. Robert Cato, *Moro Swords* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1996), pp. 20–21.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
14. For an explanation of the various motifs, see C. A. S. Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives*, 3rd ed. (New York: Dover, 1976).
15. Needham, *Development*, p. 41; Satô Kanichi, “Introduction to the Sword Blades in the Shôsô-in,” trans. Shigetaka Kaneko, in *Shôsô-in no Tôken* (Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 1974), p. vi.
16. Needham, *Development*, p. 42.
17. Caldwell, *Sword*, p. 32.
18. Pu Jiang et al., eds., *Huangchao Liqi Tushi*, Palace Edition of 1766 (British Library, 15300.e.1). This version of the text is based on a manuscript of 1759.
19. *Ibid.*, chap. 15, pp. 5a–b, 6a–b.
20. The Metropolitan Museum has two Vietnamese hilted weapons in its collection, a *guôm* (saber; acc. no. 36.25.1621a, b) and a *kiêm* (sword; acc. no. 36.25.1451a, b). The scabbards of both weapons are decorated with mother-of-pearl in mosaic-like patterns.
21. Khudiakov, *Vooruzhenie*, pp. 38, 41, 43.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 43, pl. VIII, fig. 2; Arendt, “Säbel,” pl. III, fig. 5.
23. *Huangchao*, chap. 15, pp. 1a–b—4a–b.
24. Wojciech Zabłocki, *Prawdziwą Cięca Szablą* (A true cut with a saber) (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sport i Turystyka, 1988), pp. 206–9.

## NOTES

1. Yun Zhang, *The Art of Chinese Swordsmanship* (New York: Weatherhill, 1998), pp. 17–19.
2. Joseph Needham, *The Development of Iron and Steel Technology in China* (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, 1964), p. 26, quotes the historical text *Beiqi Shu*, which describes the legendary backward blades made by the Taoist adept and sword smith Qiwu Huaiwen for the emperor Gaozi (r. A.D. 543–50). For a sumptuous 8th-century Tang *zhibeidao* preserved in almost pristine condition at the Shôsô-in, Nara, see *The Japanese Sword: Iron Craftsmanship and Warrior Spirit*, exh. cat. (Tokyo: National Museum, 1997), pp. viii, 71–72, 77, no. 58.
3. Stephen V. Grancsay, “Two Chinese Swords Dating about A.D. 600,” *MMAB* 25 (September 1930), pp. 194–96.
4. W. Arendt, “Türkische Säbel aus den VIII.–IX. Jahrhunderten,” *Archaeologica Hungarica* 16 (1935), fig. 24, pl. VI. For an outstanding specimen from the same cultural sphere and epoch,