

ИСТОРИЧЕСКОЕ ОРУЖИЕВЕДЕНИЕ

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**Vietnamese cold steel bladed weapons
of the 19th – first half of the 20th century.
The problems of attribution**

***Abstract:** In the article the author examines the details of construction of knives of Vietnam 19th - first half 20th centuries, the materials and the decorative elements that were used. Attention is drawn to the characteristic features that, according to the author, allow to accept them as attribute signs. The article also examines the historical factors influenced the development of edged weapons in the specified period and administrative-legal conditions of existence.*

***Keywords:** Vietnamese sword, Vietnamese saber, Cochinchina, Annam, Tonkin, the Nguyen dynasty, Vietnam, Le Loi, samrit bronze.*

The absolute majority of Vietnamese cold steel weapons kept in museums and private collections all over the world is ceremonial swords and sabers of the 19th - first half of the 20th century. According to Vietnamese classification the indicated period almost precisely coincides with the ruling of Nguyễn dynasty, 阮 (1802-1945). This ruling family came to power seriously reforming the ground forces, artillery branch, the marine forces, military engineering and fortification with French military experts. In the beginning of the 19th century Vietnamese sabers obtained French elements in their structure and in décor, and this situation remained the same until the middle of the previous century [Rodell, 1999].

However, the attribution of the Vietnamese cold steel weapons of the 19th-first half of the 20th century causes difficulties for specialists because of another reason –

they are frequently mistaken for Chinese. It is of no surprise, as to the beginning of a period that is of interest to us, the “northern influence” in culture, education, politics and military arts had been existing for over 2000 years. However, in spite of obvious prevailing of Chinese influence, the Vietnamese accepted and reworked the achievements of Cambodian, Thai, French and Japanese arms culture [Rodell, 1999].

Here an important digression should be made which is directly related to existence and preservation of survived cold weapons. Since the middle of the 19th century France began its colonial attack to Vietnam which ended with complete submission in 1885. French authorities held campaigns aimed at disarmament of indigenous population, as under the colonial legislation the manufacture and distribution of cold weapons allowed for 5 years of imprisonment and a fine varying from 100 to 1000 piasters [Vasilieva, 1947: 176]. The southern part of Vietnam, Cochinchina, suffered the most. It was declared a colony, and was governed by French administration only. In the middle part, Annam, the power of Vietnamese emperor was formally kept (and the rulers of Cambodia and Laos that also formed French Indochina, were still formally his vassals) with all proper administrative and court officers, imperial guardsmen and bodyguards. The northern part, Tonkin, was formally under the joint control of French administration and the imperial officers [Vasilieva, 1947: 169-170].

It is really important that according to traditional Chinese rules which Nguyễn dynasty tried to comply with, every Vietnamese officer in official situation was accompanied by assistants and servants which number was set according to the officer's rank. Such personnel compulsory included persons who carried some swords or sabers according to the officer's rank. Some may call these servants “bodyguards”, however, their main function was to observe the ceremonial and evoke respect (and even fear) in commons with their presence.

Based on the above, the overwhelming majority of Vietnamese cold steel bladed weapons that survived is richly decorated ceremonial swords and sabers manufactured during the reign of Nguyễn dynasty.

The first thing that clearly attracts the attention and that distinguishes the Vietnamese items is the abundance of chased silver used in décor (or rarely – silver-plated

brass). Very frequently all the metal details of weapons, both swords and sabers are made of it. In China craftsmen used steel and later on (since the end of the 18th – the beginning of 19th century) mainly brass was used.

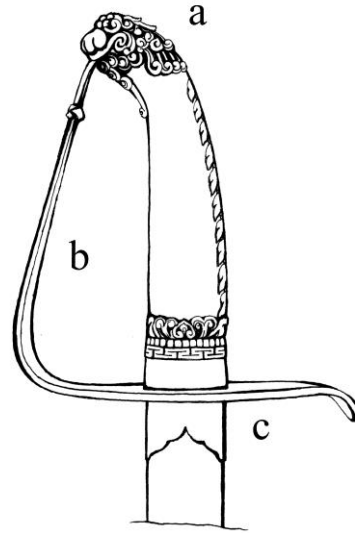
A distinctive feature is use of tough-pitch copper and bronze with high copper content; it was frequently used for handles, guards and scabbards. They were encrusted with silver and brass and covered with noble brown-red patina. Masters of Bắc Ninh province were especially famous for these works. [Nguyễn, 1982: 124] According to the author, such attention to these materials may be associated with the legendary Indochina dark brown bronze *samrit*. In ancient Cambodia, this alloy was included in the noble metals along with gold and silver and endowed with exceptional properties, in particular it was recommended to manufacture utensils for the production and storage of medicines.

One should pay attention to the fact that rare and precious stones such as tortoise shell, mother-of-pearl, elephant ivory were used in Vietnamese weapons much too often than in Chinese weapons. According to the author, this is related with less regulation of Vietnamese public servants (compared with China). At the same time, such typical Chinese methods as gluing with stingray skin and banding with *sikou* (丝扣) band did not find a wide application.

Apart from listed, the unique local materials were used in Vietnam – milk tusks of baby elephants, lateral cuts of elephant's molar teeth and four precious species of hardwood. This should be considered in more detail. When growing baby elephants change their milk teeth, including tusks (which are cutting teeth with changed shape) for permanent teeth. Thus, one gets almost completed handles for cold weapons – the lost tusks have about 300-400 mm in length, 20-30 mm in diameter, slight thickening at the bases, and besides, tusks are hollow. Grown elephant's molar teeth cut laterally have a beautiful laminated structure, resembling the best sorts of decorative stones. In Europe where, apart from Vietnam, these were imported from Indonesia, they were sometimes called “the dragon tooth”. Four species of precious hardwood are *lim* (*Erythrophleum fordii* Olive), *trắc* (*Dalbergia cochinchinensis*), *gụ* (*Sindora tonkinensis*) and *chai* (*Dipterocarpus*). Only masters who obtained a special permit were allowed to work with them [Nguyễn, 1982:

75]. Handles and scabbards from such wood are usually richly encrusted with silver and mother-of-pearl.

As for design features peculiar for Vietnamese bladed weapons, it is necessary to note the special shape of collar, which simple and symmetrical cut differs from Chinese *tunkou* (呑口) and Japanese *habaki* (鍔, はばき) (P. 1c). Most often this type of cut was used in metal parts of scabbards; in general, this is rather peculiar for South-Eastern Asia. As it was noted before, in the very beginning of Nguyen epoch the design and décor of sabers had considerable French influence. The novelties included a knuckle bow with a peculiar curve (P.1b), a pommel shaped as a styled



Pic. 1

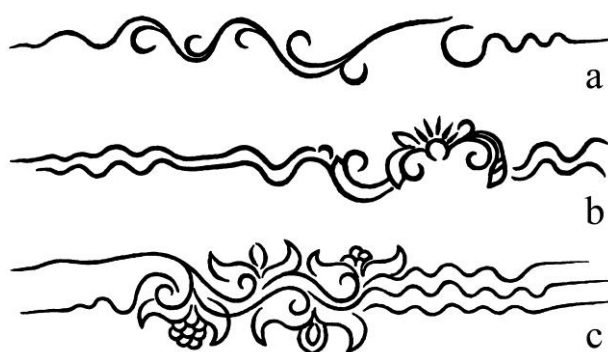
lion's head which chaps contained the end of the bow (P.1a), and the chape of scabbards gained a comb ended with a curl having a ball at the end [Rodell, 1999].

The décor of Vietnamese bladed weapons also had specific elements, allowing distinguishing them from Chinese items with a high degree of certainty.

One of such favorite motives was shoots of climbing plants such as grapes, vines, pumpkins of different varieties. They were frequently engraved at blades in a styled way (P.2), and at the scabbards such offshoots with flowers, leaves, fruits were depicted in a more natural way, with leaves and bunches of grapes. The reason for such popularity of climbing plants is that its clingy arms persistently running to lights were the symbol of active masculine energy, stanch fight for the place under the sun, and the bunches of grapes and pumpkins *bí* are filled with seeds were the symbol of men's numerous offspring, the bearers of the family name [Volshebny mir uzorov, 2003: 51; Nguyễn, 1982: 120].

Among the design elements image *tứ linh*, 四靈 and *bát bảo*, 八寶 could be found frequently. Four sacred creatures *tứ linh* are a dragon, unicorn, tortoise and phoenix. In addition to the symbol of moral perfection that are related with a dragon *long*, 龍 dragon was a mythical ancestor and patron of the Vietnamese. A peculiar

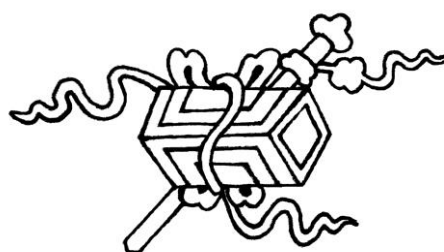
feature is picture of a dragon holding a character (one of the many types of character 壽 *shou* - that means longevity or immortality in Chinese) (P.3). One of the styles for depicting a dragon is related with increase of French influence – dragon's zoomorphic form turns into floral ornament. This technique that had been popular in European art since the late Renaissance could have been shown to Vietnamese students in the School of ornamental art, opened by the French in Hanoi in 1920 [Nguyễn, 1982: 78].



Pic. 2



Pic. 3



Pic. 4

The unicorn *ki lân*, 麒麟 was a symbol of peace, tranquility and successful career. In the latter case, it was depicted with a bundle of books and scrolls on the back. Turtle *quy*, 龜 represents longevity. In addition, in Vietnamese mythology, it is closely connected with the defense of the country in the most popular version of Lê Lợi (黎利) legend, as she was given to the future Emperor of the Holy sword which he expelled the Chinese invaders with. Image of a turtle with a sword or with a sword and a bundle of books are popular among the arms. Phoenix *phượng*, 鳳 like the unicorn, symbolized peace and prosperity. Phoenix with a

scroll in its beak served as symbol of sophisticated art connoisseur. A set of eight jewels *bát bảo*, which personified different aspects of the education and well-being, existed in several versions, the most famous of which included the crook-neck pumpkin *bầu*, a brush for writing, a fan of leaves, a flute, a basket of flowers, a sword, a gong in the shape of a crescent and feather duster [Nguyễn, 1982: 116-118, 120-121]. The combination of the sword and bundles of books - symbol of brave and persistent scholar is a special characteristic for exclusively Vietnamese culture (P. 4). In some cases the subjects *bát bảo* depicted tied with long flowing ribbons or surrounded by divergent shoots of climbing plants. This is also the most Vietnamese artistic technique designed to show the outgoing stream of magical energy. In Chinese images ribbons are devoid of dynamics, if its present.

The cartouche frame with styled signs in the middle of the floral ornament is rare but specific element of décor at Vietnamese weapons. Any picture of a character in this country was respected, and perhaps even higher than in China. Although such stylized characters harder to read, they often represent "longevity" 壽 (there are hundreds of variants of the character counted by specialist) and "happiness" 福. Thus, based on the totality of design features, the applied materials and used decorative motives, the author considers it is possible to attribute the items of Vietnamese bladed weapons of the 19th-first half of the 20th century with a considerable degree of certainty.

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