

# ИСТОРИЧЕСКОЕ ОРУЖИЕВЕДЕНИЕ

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**TRADITIONAL BLADED WEAPONS OF VIETNAM.  
THE PROBLEMS OF TERMINOLOGY**

**Abstract:** *The article describes the problems of terminology in such very little-studied field as the Vietnamese weapons. The development of Vietnamese military tradition was facing intense Chinese influence. Major weapon types together with the terminology for their designation, were borrowed from China, which was simultaneously acting as a cultural contributor and ravenous aggressor seeking to regain the control over the lost southern territories. Having creatively elaborated the Chinese borrowings, as well as accepted Japanese, Thai-Burmese and even European elements, the Vietnamese craftsmen gradually developed a specific local set of weapons. In the article an attempt has been made to define a correct terminology for the Vietnamese bladed weapons, mark out its main types, trace back the history of their origin and expansion. A conclusion could be made that the Vietnamese traditional bladed weapon is made up of two major classes – dao and kiem/guom. First class encompasses single-edged slashing weapons having a broad, usually curved, blade. This class consists of smaller varieties – ma dao, and larger ones – dao trung, intended for one hand grip and two hand grip respectively. The latter are also called dai dao, which unites them with the polearms, close in form and purpose. To second class refer both straight double-edged swords – analogue of Chinese jian, and single-edged cut and thrust weapons with a narrow blade, similar to the Chinese yao dao/liuye dao. This class also includes sabers of Japanese, Thai-Burmese and French design, which became widespread in Vietnam in the 17th-20th centuries. To clarify the weaponology terminology the author*

*considers it possible to offer the following terms: falchion-dao, saber-guom and sword-kiem.*

**Keywords:** *Vietnam, terminology, dao, kiem, falchion, saber, bladed weapon*

The traditional weapons of Vietnam remain a very little-studied phenomenon up to the present day. Such a state of things seems to be unfair in view of a multitude of studies of the neighboring countries weaponry: Japan and of course, China, which influence on the Vietnamese weapons complex and warfare can hardly be overestimated. So far as bladed weapons are concerned, there is a very narrow range of specialized works on the subject. In that regard, the articles “Vietnamese Sword” by Scott Rodell and “Vietnamese Bladed Melee Weapons of the 19<sup>th</sup> – First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Attribution Problems” by Sergey Barchewsky could be referred to. The dearth of knowledge about the subject, on the other hand, opens vast horizons for research. In this context, the elaboration of correct terminology for designation of the Vietnamese traditional bladed weapons major varieties seems not unimportant.

In the works related to oriental weapons both European and Asian terms arranged in a specific manner are commonly used, which approach is considered by us feasible enough. Since the traditional Vietnamese script was a hieroglyphic one, and the Latin alphabet Quoc-ngu was made official from 1918 onwards, it would be logical to provide weapon terms in hieroglyphic and contemporary Latin writing. Influence the Middle Kingdom had onto the weaponry of its southern neighbor has already been mentioned above, therefore transliteration of some Chinese names was deemed appropriate by us.

The formation of the Vietnamese military tradition began at the turn of the first millennium AD. There is no doubt, of course, that its roots go back to much older times - the era of semi-legendary ancient Viet kingdoms of Van Lang, Au Lac and Nam Viet (mid to second half of the first millennium BC). At that time, the famous Dong Son culture existed in the north of what is now Vietnam, which bearers developed a bronze weapons complex including socketed axes of peculiar shape,

spears, bows, and crossbows. Bladed weapons were represented by daggers (some of which were apparently intended for ceremonial use), and extremely rarely, double-edged swords imported from China<sup>1</sup>. Despite the diversity of these finds, the Vietnamese traditional weapons complex is unlikely to have been directly developed from the Dong Son one.

The North Dependence Period (111 BC – 938 AD) played a by far more important role in the process of the Vietnamese spiritual and material cultures establishment, when the Viet lands as part of the Middle Kingdom were facing intense Chinese influence in almost all fields, including military one. At that point, a new ethnic community of indigenous tribes and groups from the north is beginning to take shape, which could already be treated as the Vietnamese nation from the moment they gained independence from the northern neighbor in 938<sup>2</sup>. The turbulent history of the Dai Viet kingdom, in the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries being under the dominance of the feudal Later Ly (1010 – 1225), Tran (1225 – 1400), and Ho (1400 – 1407) dynasties, contributed a great deal to warfare development. Major weapon types together with the terminology for their designation, were borrowed from China, which was simultaneously acting as a cultural contributor and ravenous aggressor seeking to regain the control over the lost southern territories. Having creatively elaborated the Chinese borrowings, as well as accepted Japanese, Thai-Burmese and later European elements, the craftsmen of the Later Le (1428-1789) gradually developed a specific local set of weapons, which finished its formation as late as the Nguyen dynasty was in power (1802-1945). Its founder Nguen Anh (ruled 1802 to 1840 under the motto “Gia Long”) renamed his country into Vietnam. Thus, the notion of the “Vietnamese traditional weapons complex” is absolutely accurate with regards to that era. The traditional weapons continued to be extensively used during the resistance to the French colonial invasion of 1858-1885, and even the struggle for

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<sup>1</sup> Tròn̄h Cao Tôô̄ng, Lê̄ Vaên Lan. Tr.. 294.

<sup>2</sup> This viewpoint was shared by N.V. Grigoryeva, a Saint-Petersburg vietnamologist, in a private talk with the author

the attainment of national independence in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>. Today they are still present as an integral part of the Vietnamese martial arts.

The Vietnamese bladed weapons as it established during the second millennium AD, encompasses two basic types. Most common and easy to manufacture is *dao* (刀, viet. đao). This may be said to be an entire class of bladed weapons made up of a few types and a wide range of subtypes, being determined as single-edged weapons with a wide blade, in most cases curved, frequently showing a raised yelman. The main function of *dao* is slashing, although many types could also be used for thrusting. It is often denoted as *falchion* as equal to a close type of European medieval weapon<sup>4</sup>. Unlike the latter, *dao* almost always has a round or oval guard, although certain examples with the guard in the form of a Z-like cross are known very often with a pommel in the form of a ring. The *dao* could be of a lighter variety, intended for one handed grip, and more massive two handed ones. Standard *dao* is around one meter long, with the blade being usually no more than 12 cm long. It weighs from 1 to 3 kg at an average<sup>5</sup>. These parameters may greatly vary though. Modern fencing *dao* blades are considerably thinner than their historical combat prototypes, which massiveness was to compensate for poor quality of metal. The latter (due to low cost of production) fuelled the popularity of this weapon type with common people.

In Vietnamese museums examples of *dao* are preserved which the local rebels fought with against the French in the 1940-1950s. Vietnamese and foreign museum collections also display falchions of the Later Le and Nguyen periods, dated 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Yet *dao* are absent in the archeological museum collections. Vietnamese scholars however are not inclined to support the assumption about late emergence

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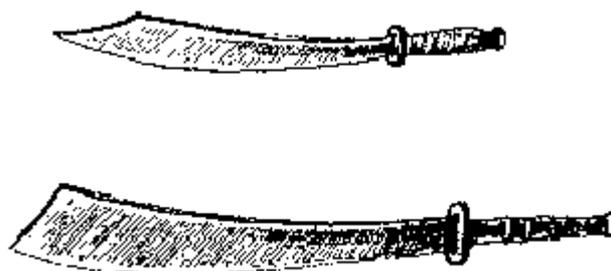
<sup>3</sup> Quite a variety of examples of traditional cold weapons, including bladed ones, employed during the liberation war of 1946-1954, are on display in Hanoi museums (Army Museum, Historical Museum).

<sup>4</sup> Falchion – from fr. *Fauchon* – “knife” – European bladed weapon name which distinctive feature is a heavy curved blade, crescent in the forward third, often having a yelman.

<sup>5</sup> Asmolov, 1994, p. 1, p. 215

of this weapon in their country, as in their view, local peasants would pick falchions left on battlefields up and reforge them into agricultural tools<sup>6</sup>.

According to the French ethnographers Huard and Durand, Vietnamese falchion was to be found of two major varieties<sup>7</sup>: “long dao” – *dao trung* 刀長 (đao trườg, Chinese version 長刀 *chang dao*, Cinicised Vietnamese name *truong dao* is also encountered), as well as a shorter and lighter “horse *dao*” – *ma dao* 馬刀 (*mã đao*). As the name says, the latter was originally a cavalry weapon. The French authors translate it as “sabre de cavalerie” – “cavalry sabre”<sup>8</sup>. The contemporary Chinese Language uses this term to denote a cavalry sabre, incl. the European one. An illustrative example of the 19<sup>th</sup> century *dao trung* is displayed in the collection of the Army Museum at Hotel des Invalides, Paris, under inventory number 5074 I. Named “Coupe-coupe du Tonkin” (Tonkin cutlass), it was exhibited within the special show “Indochina. Territories and people. 1856-1956”, which was held in the museum in 2013<sup>9</sup>.



**Pic. 1. Chang dao and ma dao**

The use of falchions by the Vietnamese army soldiers under the Later Le is documented by the well-known Confucian all-round scholar Phan Hui Chu (1782-1840). In his treatise “Classified Notes on the History of the Past Dynasties”, section “Notes about Warfare”, he provides text of the decree issued by King Uy-muc-de in 1505. The decree prescribed that 50 armament kits, which included a round shield,

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<sup>6</sup> This viewpoint was shared by the Doctor of Historical Sciences Nguyen Thi Hong in a private talk with the author.

<sup>7</sup> Huard, Durand 1954. P. 118

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> “Indochine. Des territoires et des homes, 1856-1956”, P. 210

a bow with arrows and *dao* falchion, were to be kept at each guard post near the capital gate<sup>10</sup>.

The scholar also mentions such a falchion variation as *dai dao* (大刀 dai dao Chinese version – *da dao*). He points out that under the decree of Emperor Le Thai To of 1428, the soldiers of the quan units were on a mass scale armed with this weapon<sup>11</sup>. Meant by the term *dai dao* is often a blade mounted on a shaft and therefore relating to polearms. It had many varieties, which primarily differed from each other in the size and shape of the blade. This weapon emerged in China in the first millennium AD and spread later around the neighboring countries<sup>12</sup>. Examples which can be viewed in Vietnamese museums are dated to the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Their pictures are shown in the works of the French authors as well<sup>13</sup>.

It should be noted that the word *dai dao* is sometimes used to refer to large falchions (above mentioned *dao truong*). This does not contradict the original meaning of the term which simple means “big dao”. There is a point that it is this name that is most correct in Vietnamese, while the shaft version of this weapon should be called *siêu đao* (超刀, Chinese pronunciation *chao dao* – «protruding dao»), otherwise we would deal with a blind calque from Chinese<sup>14</sup>.

In his article “Vietnamese Sword”, the American researcher Scott Rodell uses the term *dai dao* to refer to two-handed sabers from Cochinchina (southern Vietnam), being reminiscent of Japanese, Thai and Burmese bladed weapons<sup>15</sup>. This appears to be quite a strange approach. Rodell puts down the term with classical English letters, rather than in romanized Vietnamese. The result is the word *dai dao*, with a remark made in the end of the article saying that second “d” should be crossed and pronounced like an English “z”<sup>16</sup>. Thus, a new term *dai zao* comes about, which seems a crude error to us, as the crossed “d” - “đ” is pronounced like a hard “d”,

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<sup>10</sup> Phan Huy Chuà. T. 4., 1961. Tr. 25

<sup>11</sup> Phan Huy Chuà. T. 4., 1961. Tr. 25

<sup>12</sup> Asmolov, 1994. P. 2, P. 13

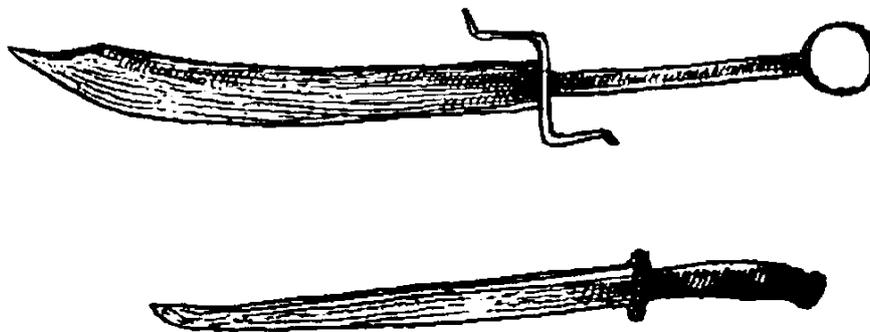
<sup>13</sup> Huard, Durand, 1954, P.119

<sup>14</sup> [https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%A3\\_t%E1%BA%A5u](https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%A3_t%E1%BA%A5u)

<sup>15</sup> Rodell, Scott M.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

and the plain Latin “d” is actually pronounced like “z” in all Vietnamese dialects. As for the word “dao” – zao, it denotes a common knife in the Vietnamese language. In all fairness, it must be noted that in China any saber is usually referred to the *dao* class. Among the original Chinese varieties there are also those which are distinct from falchion by the absence of yelman and blade widening towards the point. This weapon was lighter and sure to require a finer quality metal for its manufacture. It became to be somewhat popular among the Vietnamese nobility. Scott Rodell tracks the origin of the local sabers of this type from the Chinese *liu ye dao* (柳葉刀 – «Willow Leaf Dao”) of the Ming dynasty time (1368-1644)<sup>17</sup>. According to artistic sources (temple statues of Vietnamese military generals), this weapon existed as early as in the medieval country Dai Viet. Later examples of these sabers are to be seen in the expositions of a number of Vietnamese museums. In the collection of the Army Museum at the Hotel des Invalides, Paris, an excellent example is held under inventory number 5240 I. It was exhibited in the context of the “Indochina. Territory and People. 1856 – 1956” exhibition under the name of “Sabre du Tonkin” – Tonkin Sabre<sup>18</sup>.



**Pic. 2. Chang dao with the Z-shaped cross-guard and sword-kien (yao dao) from the Museum of History of Vietnam, Hanoi**

Another Chinese name for this weapon type is *yao dao* (腰刀- “dao worn at the waist”), which in all probability puts an emphasis on the difference from heavy falchions, worn resting on the shoulder or on a band behind a back. Although a local

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> “Indochine. Des territoires et des homes, 1856-1956”, P. 210

pronunciation of this name – *yeu dao* (yêu đao) - exists in the Vietnamese language, it almost never occurs. Instead, the term *kiem* (kiếm) or *guom* (gươm) is used, being a rare example of substantial difference from Chinese original terminology. Both Vietnamese names are written with the same character 劍 (Chinese pronunciation – *jian*), which originally denoted a double-edged sword. This difference might be explained by the fact that in the Vietnamese language consciousness, functional features of the object are crucial, rather than its design peculiarities. The thrusting feature of the double-edged sword apparently makes it in the eyes of the Vietnamese looking like a single-edged weapon with a slightly curved narrow blade having an expressed point, well suited for thrusting. This must be the reason for the Japanese katana to also be designated with the term *kiem* in Vietnamese, which is denoted by the Chinese with the character 刀 – *dao*, as almost any single-edged weapon variety.

It should be noted that due to their high quality, Japanese blades were extremely popular in Vietnam to the Later Le period. According to the French scholars, Japan was the major supplier of melee weapons to Vietnam and other countries of Indochina in the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>19</sup>. In Hanoi museums collections (History Museum and Military History Museum) examples of authentic Japanese bladed weapons (katana, wakizashi, odachi) and their local variations are encountered.

During the archaeological excavations of the military academia arsenal that was found on the bottom of Hanoi lake Giang Vo and dated to the Later Le period (1428-1789) there was described an interesting artefact. It was a single-edged weapon 44.3 cm long (blade - 31.4 cm, tang – 13.9 cm) and the width of 3 cm. The weight approximately 500 gr. The back of the blade is straight. By its general appearance, the form of the cutting edge this weapon is very similar to the Japanese “small sword” *tanto*. The weapon differs from the *tanto* only by the form of the tang which is very narrow and does not have a hole for *mekugi* by which in Japan a handle of sword was fastened. It is noteworthy that the Vietnamese researcher Nguyễn Thò Dôn who conducted the archaeological excavations identified the

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<sup>19</sup> Huard, Durand, 1954. P. 117

weapons as doankiem (đoản kiếm – short sword, dagger)<sup>20</sup>, attributing it to the class of kiem.

It is written by Rodell that Vietnamese blacksmiths made their sabers drawing them from Japanese samples, or used Japanese blade strips fixing them to a local mount. He also points out that the sabers from southern Vietnam (Cochin China region) show traces of Thai-Burmese influence<sup>21</sup>. Yet the attribution of the samples of the kind should be cautious, as trophy weapons gained during the repulsion of the Siamese aggression of 1784-1785 might be mistaken for local blades by a researcher. There is an entire case showing Thai sabers captured by the Tay Son army warriors in Ho Chi Minh City Historical Museum<sup>22</sup>.

Returning to the specific features of the Vietnamese term “kiem” and “guom”, it has to be added that it is also utilized to refer to almost all varieties of European sabers and even Kossack *shashkas*, as well as local (often ceremonial) sabers showing a French style guard in the form of the Latin letter “D”. The latter are fairly well presented in museum and private collections both in Vietnam and abroad. In Paris Army Museum an illustrative example under number 5206 I is kept <sup>23</sup>, quite a number of them are displayed in Vietnamese museums, the earliest ones dated to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when the European intervention was already under way. These sabers grew widespread with the establishment of the Nguyen dynasty in 1802, which rising to power was to a great extent made possible thanks to the French economical support (in particular, with weapons). Their stylized handles quite often capture the flair of Napoleon`s era and Empire style which was in vogue at that time and reflected in a peculiar way in weapon manufacture. In his article, the Russian scholar S. Barchevsky writes in detail about the ceremonial versions of these weapons and their decorative design<sup>24</sup>. Scott Rodell also mentions sabers of French

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<sup>20</sup> Nguyễn Thò Dôn, 2001. (*Lưu ảnh*) Tr..58.

<sup>21</sup> Rodell, Scott M.

<sup>22</sup> Tay Son is originally the name of a rebel movement which began in 1771 in the central area of the country. Having won control over almost the entirety of the country, its leader Nguyen Hue was crowned in the late 1788. After he died in 1792, the Tay Son forces were defeated by the Nguyen clan, which thereafter established a new dynasty in 1802.

<sup>23</sup> “Indochine. Des territoires et des homes, 1856-1956”, P.210

<sup>24</sup> Barchevsky S. P. 107 – 110.

design insistently calling them *dao* following the Chinese tradition. The French authors call it *guom*<sup>25</sup>.

Besides the functional features (good thrusting characteristics) that were mentioned above the constructive similarity in part of the small width and the small curvature of the blade relates all of the describes types of Vietnamese sabres and the foreign prototypes that influenced them. Thus it seems to be correct to use the term "*sabre-guom*"<sup>26</sup> for the three types of Vietnamese bladed weapons described above.

Despite all the differences from the Vietnamese terminology, it should be noted that the main meaning of the word *kiem* (kiếm) or *guom* (gươm) is still a straight double-edged sword – a parallel to the Chinese *jian*. It has a sufficiently long and wide blade, a guard shaped as an ornately figured cross, and a handle intended for a one hand grip, and much rarer –two hand grip. An example of this sword was discovered by Vietnamese archeologists in the arsenal of Hanoi Military Academy Giang Vo dated to the Later Le period<sup>27</sup>. Its grip is broken almost at the base of the combat part. Blade length is 61 cm, maximum width – 6,5 cm. The sword weighs 1340 g<sup>28</sup>. It must have reached 1,5 kg being totally 70 cm long together with the handle including a metal hilt, pommel and wooden middle part. Archaeologist Nguyen Thi Don attributes the weapon as *truongkiem* (trường kiếm – "long sword"). Thus this weapon was compared with the single-edged "short-sword" mentioned above.

According to the researcher Nguyen Thi Don, such a high weight of the sword from Song Vo could be explained by the fact that it was probably a training and examination weapon with which candidates for the officer degree were taught and checked

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<sup>25</sup> Huard, Durand, 1954. P. 118.

<sup>26</sup> Taking in attention that the similarity of the both words "sabre" and "guom" in the Vietnamese language the phrase "sabre-guom" is acceptable, but this can cause confusion in European terminology. That is why the author suggests using the term *kiem* only for straight double-edged swords

<sup>27</sup> Nguyễn Thò Dôn, 2001. Tr. 9.

<sup>28</sup> Nguyễn Thò Dôn, 2001. (Luấn àn) Tr. 58.

for their muscle strength<sup>29</sup>. Phan Huy Chu states that in the second half of the Le era (Trung Hung period 1533-1789), awarded with *kiem* sword were newly qualified officers, who had just passed the exams for the position<sup>30</sup>. The exams included strength training and fights with bladed weapons.



**Pic. 3. Sketch blades of of Hanoi Military Academy Giang Vo.**

Double-edged swords looking very similar to the canonical Chinese prototypes are displayed in the expositions of the Historical Museum of the City of Ho Chi Minh and Military History Museum of Hanoi dedicated to the Tay Son era, rich in military events (last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century). Still, it is not improbable that those are the trophies gained during the operation liberating the Vietnamese capital city Thang-Long (Hanoi) from the Qing forces in the early 1789. The swords of the type had a verbal prefix *bao* – “precious” – in China. The blade was forged with a particular thoroughness. Frequently, sacred symbols were embossed on it – seven stars of the Great Bear, image of the Blue Dragon, hieroglyphic inscriptions<sup>31</sup>. Vietnamese ceremonial examples of these weapons were also richly decorated<sup>32</sup>.

Sword-*kiem* (in its lightweight fencing version) has pretty much remained the most honored weapon type in the Vietnamese martial arts *Vo Thuat* until the present day. In the Vietnamese consciousness, it is linked to the personality of Le Loi (1385 – 1433) – the military leader who drove the forces of the Chinese Ming Empire out of the country in 1428. Having destroyed the enemy and liberated the city of

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<sup>29</sup> Information was shared to the author by the Doctor of Historical Sciences Nguyen Thi Hong in a private conversation .

<sup>30</sup> Phan Huy Chu. T. 4., 1961. Tr. 25

<sup>31</sup> Asmolov K.V. 1994, P.1. P. 207

<sup>32</sup> Barchevsky S. P.107-110

Thang-Long, he ascended the throne and became to be the founder of the Later Le dynasty. A legend has it that it was a magic sword received from spirits that helped the sovereign Le Thai To win the victory. Interestingly enough, after taking the throne the general returned his weapon to the spirit world by throwing it to a turtle living in the waters of the main capital lake. Since then, it has been called Lake of the Returned Sword – Ho Hoan Kiem, or simply Sword Lake – Ho Guom. The image of the straight double-edged *kiem* (often in the mouth of turtle) is a very widely spread decorative symbol in applied arts of Vietnam. Quite often scabbards and hilts of ceremonial sabers are decorated with such symbol.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, in the present article an attempt has been made to define a correct terminology for the Vietnamese bladed weapons, mark out its main types, trace back the history of their origin and expansion. A conclusion could be made that the Vietnamese traditional bladed weapon is made up of two major classes – *dao* and *kiem/guom*. First class encompasses single-edged slashing weapons having a broad, usually curved, blade. This class consists of smaller varieties – *ma dao*, and larger ones – *dao truong*, intended for one hand grip and two hand grip respectively. The latter are also called *dai dao*, which unites them with the polearms, close in form and purpose. To second class refer both straight double-edged swords – analogue of Chinese *jian*, and single-edged cut and thrust weapons with a narrow blade, similar to the Chinese *yao dao/lieu dao*. This class also includes sabers of Japanese, Thai-Burmese and French design, which became widespread in Vietnam in the 17<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. To clarify the weaponology terminology the author considers it possible to offer the following terms: *falchion-dao*, *saber-guom* and *sword-kiem*.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. C. 109

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