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The journey of the Japanese sword

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In the contemporary world swords no longer are essential tools of warfare. They are but objects of historical armories, museums, scientific interests, enthusiasts' collections, paraphernalia supporting martial arts training or weapons of re-enactors. However, swords constitute a significant part of the modern popular culture. They appear abundantly in movies, books, and video games. Moreover, among swords, there is one specific type widely recognized around the world – the Japanese sword. Most people would not know what *montante*¹, *pata*², *shamshir*³ or *kora*⁴ is. But the word *katana* sounds familiar to them, just as its historical wielder – the samurai. And when in the movie *The Last Samurai*, directed by Edward Zwick and released in 2003⁵, captain Nathan Algren (Tom Cruise) receives a new *katana* from the samurai leader – a sword made especially for him – the audience knows, that the main character finally gained acceptance as an honorable man, real warrior and someone worth wielding his new weapon. For the Japanese, a sword somehow became a legend connected with honor and death. And to enhance the appreciation of the Japanese blades featured in the contemporary culture, in this paper, I would like to present the main characteristics of the Japanese sword, and its travel from Asian fields of battle to the Western world shortly. I am fully aware that the topic of the Japanese sword is exceptionally vast and each aspect raised in this paper (for example methods of production or presence of

¹ Type of the two handed sword of the Iberian Peninsula.

² Type of Indian one handed sword with distinctive gauntlet integrated with handle.

³ Type of Persian saber.

⁴ Type of Nepalese sword with wide and heavy upper end of the blade.

⁵ This movie is inspired by historical events of Satsuma Rebellion of 1877 but cannot be treated as a valid historical film.

katana in popular culture) could be expanded into thick volumes. I do not cover here the problem of spirituality connected with these blades.

Characteristics of the Japanese sword

Nowadays in the native language the Japanese swords are called *nihontō*. It is a broader term including many longer and shorter swords and knife types, such as *tachi*, *katana* (or *uchigatana*⁶), *wakizashi* and *tantō*, to mention only the more recognizable specimens. Among them, *katana* is definitely the most well-known example. The *katana* belongs to the class of *nihontō* called *daitō* – “big blades.” According to the modern classification *daitō* consists of Japanese swords with blades longer than two shaku (around 60.6 cm long). The typical blade of *daitō* is single-edged, slightly curved, has distinctive middle ridges, its flats are sometimes provided with grooves, and has a clearly defined point. However, blade shapes may vary and the ones with flat surfaces also appear. The Japanese blades consist of two types of material, softer core and back, plus harder steel of the surface and edge:

They are a composite of steels. Swords need to be able to flex and be resilient against the percussive impact of deflecting blows from other weapons as well as having a hard edge. They must be able to resist breakage or permanent deformation and be able to withstand the shock of contact against hard surfaces such as armour. Samurai didn't use shields, so even greater demands were placed on their swords for defence than their European medieval counterparts⁷.

However, the unique quality of Japanese swords lies in the unusual method of the heat treatment, involving partial tempering of the blade during the quenching process⁸. This practice creates a noticeable line dividing the hardened and not hardened steel in the blade, and is responsible for one of the most important aesthetical values of the Japanese sword – *hamon*. *Hamon* is fully visible only after meticulous polishing. Blades were sharpened from the guard towards the point thus no part of the edge was blunt.

The hilt consists of several elements. In the generally peaceful Edo period (1600–1868) these mountings, especially the guard called *tsuba*, were often made from precious metals and served as a kind of the samurai jewelry. The hilt of *daitō* is always two-handed, yet the sword itself is not so heavy and can be easily operated with only one hand if necessary.

6 The term *katana* in the Japanese theoretically applies to any type of bladed tool but nowadays it is mostly used for samurai swords. The type of sword popularly called the *katana* more properly should be named the *uchigatana* as this type of sword was called before Edo times. In this paper I will follow the established custom of calling it simply *katana*.

7 Mike Loades. *Swords and Swordsmen*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2017, p. 216–217.

8 It is normally done with the use of special type of clay.

A sword – no matter if straight or curved – is a highly universal weapon, which enables its wielder to cut, thrust or parry⁹. In other words, it can be used as an offensive as well as defensive device, it has considerable reach yet can also be used close in – “it was surely the one [weapon] that had the greatest potential in the greatest range of encounters.”¹⁰ However, despite their versatility, swords were not the primary battle weapon – neither in Medieval Europe nor Japan¹¹. Japanese swords, curved and single-edged, are usually treated as the prevalently cutting weapons¹². However, their curvatures are not so deep, and their points are very effective in thrusting. What is interesting, the general shape of *nihontō* stayed almost unchanged across the ages which might testify to their effectiveness on the battlefield or in the duels¹³. Of course, production methods evolved, and some minor changes in length, curvature, profiles or thickness and width of the blade were introduced. They depended mostly on the preferences of the swordsman and the blacksmith’s school’s style. When the samurai in the 16th century started to wear the *katana* edge up behind the *obi* sash as a part of their daily attire, their blades became shorter, in the case to draw them easier and faster when suddenly needed. *Katana* is the weapon of infantry, while older *tachi* belongs mostly to cavalry.

Swords in Japanese History

The journey of the Japanese sword begins not on the Japanese Archipelago, but in continental Asia, therefore *katana* seems to be migrating since its inception. As numerous other technological and cultural achievements, methods of manufacture and transformations of bronze and iron came to Japan from mainland China via the Korean Peninsula. Interestingly, both metals were introduced roughly at the same time. It occurred quite late – around 300 BCE – when the Yayoi (~300 BCE-250 CE) period began¹⁴. However, gaining proficiency in smithery and inventing original objects required time. Thus for many years, the people of the archipelago were copying the continental products, among them shapes of weapons used in Asia. Therefore one of the most popular arms of ancient Japan was not the iron sword, quite challenging

9 Igor D. Górewicz. *Miecze Europy*. Szczecin-Warszawa: Bellona, Triglav, 2015, p. 13; Martin J. Dougherty. *Cut & Thrust: European Swords and Swordsmanship*. Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2014.

10 John Clements. *Medieval Swordsmanship: Illustrated Methods and Techniques*. Boulder: Paladin Press, 1998, p. 33.

11 Ibidem, p. 29.

12 „Curved swords give a more efficient cut, imparting a slicing motion as they strike the target” – Mike Loades, op. cit., p. 4.

13 John Clements, op. cit., p. 34.

14 *The Cambridge History of Japan. Volume I. Ancient Japan*. Ed. John W. Hall. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 21.

to make, but a simpler, yet universal, hafted bronze tool of combat, known under a Chinese name *ge*¹⁵. With time, the Japanese people started producing swords. However, they also based on continental models. Nonetheless, even in the Kofun times (~250–710), the Yamato elite still imported iron from the Korean Peninsula, and its weapons were probably forged by Korean artisans¹⁶.

The most typical and ancient type of sword consists of a short, symmetrical double-edged blade and a symmetrical one-handed hilt. The earliest specimens were made of bronze, but later iron and steel were used, and the blades became longer. This type of sword was known in Japan under the names *tsurugi* or *ken*¹⁷. Apart from this classical form other types of edged weapons were invented by the ancient Chinese in centuries preceding our era – namely single-edged precursors of later sabers¹⁸. These single-edged swords were at first straight, and their blades were narrower than in double-edged weapons. Their hilts were either one-handed or two-handed. However, according to the Japanese tradition, this single-edged type of sword was created by the legendary blacksmith Amakuni around 700 CE¹⁹. In reality, sword blades resembling modern Japanese *katana* emerged in the Heian period (794–1185)²⁰. It is possible that mounted warfare played a part in the evolution of the curved Japanese blades and the curvature was, in fact, borrowed from the *emishi* tribes of northern Honshū, who were perceived by the Japanese court as barbarians²¹.

When the recently established class of professional warriors, called *bushi* or *samurai*, gained political power and installed a different type of government, the new era in Japan had begun – the Kamakura shogunate (1185–1333). At the time the primary weapon of the samurai was the bow and arrows, through mastery of horse archery. However, the sword and the knife were essential side arms of the mounted warrior and the longsword called *tachi*, being precious, expensive and difficult to make, was treated with honor. The Kamakura period is often considered “the golden era” of the sword production in Japan²². There were significant improvements in forging tech-

15 Stephen Turnbull. *Early samurai AD 200–1500*. Oxford: Osprey, 2001, p. 52.

16 Richard H. P. Mason, John G. Caiger. *A History of Japan. Revised Edition*. North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 1997, p. 31.

17 Inami Hakusui. *Miecz samurajski [Nippon-tō. The Japanese Sword]*. Bydgoszcz: Diamond Books, 2009, p. 26.

18 Chris J. Peers. *Soldiers of the Dragon. Chinese Armies 1500 BC–AD 1840*. Oxford: Osprey, 2006, p. 67.

19 John M. Yumoto. *Miecz samurajski [The Samurai Sword – a Handbook]*. Bydgoszcz: Diamond Books, 2004, p. 16.

20 Leon Kapp, Hiroko Kapp, Yoshindo Yoshihara. *The Art of the Japanese Sword. The Craft of Swordmaking and its Appreciation*, Vercelli: Saviolo Edizioni, 2012, p. 72.

21 Inami Hakusui., op. cit., p. 27–28; Stephen Turnbull. *Katana: The Samurai Sword*. Oxford: Osprey, 2010, p. 17–18.

22 Among others – Inami Hakusui., op. cit., p. 32, Mike Loades., op. cit., p. 207.

niques. Firstly, the typical construction of the Japanese blade became a steel composite. Secondly, the larger part of the edge was hardened in the quenching process²³. Furthermore, the most famous of all Japanese blacksmiths, Masamune, was active at the time²⁴. Also, during the late 13th century classical Japanese blades had the chance to confront continental weapons when the Japanese people repelled dangerous Mongol invasions.

In subsequent centuries – especially the 15th and 16th century – the inhabitants of the coasts of China and Korea had reasons to fear the Japanese in the form of ruthless pirates called the *wakō*²⁵. The *wakō* became known on the continent as skillful swordsmen and their weapons – Japanese swords – soon gained a reputation, as Stephen Turnbull points out: “No pirate weapon was more feared or respected than the samurai sword. Zheng Sixiao²⁶ noted that »their swords are extremely sharp«.”²⁷ Since this type of weapon was sought after on the Asian continent, the Japanese started to export thousands of blades. And thus descendants of Chinese arms returned to China in the outstanding Japanese form, even if these weapons were in fact mass produced and not of the finest quality²⁸. They also returned to Korea, but this time in the hands of the samurai and not merchantmen or sea robbers, when Toyotomi Hideyoshi – the ruler of Japan at the time – decided to invade the continent in the last decade of the 16th century. In this era of turmoil and conflicts, some of the samurais traveled as far as Taiwan and Siam – modern Thailand – where they served local kings as bodyguards and mercenaries²⁹. Of course wherever the Japanese warriors migrated they took their already famous bladed weapons. But most of the Japanese swords were still used against other Japanese on main islands of the Archipelago. The 15th and 16th centuries are known in Japan as the *Sengoku jidai* – a period of almost constant civil war. Given this fact it is understandable that blacksmiths demanded substantial amounts of steel to forge large quantities of arms and armors. Furthermore, at the time Europeans started to roam oceans and were reaching further every year. In the 16th century, they started to trade with the Japanese and the steel was one of the products of old Europe. The Europeans, just as the Chinese before them, noted the excellent qualities of Japanese blades: “Their sharp swords could slice through a man in armour as easily

23 Leon Kapp, Hiroko Kapp, Yoshindo Yoshihara., op. cit., p. 73.

24 Inami Hakusui., op.cit., p. 36.

25 In fact not all *wakō* were Japanese – many Chinese, and in 16th century even Europeans, joined piratical groups.

26 He was a Chinese scholar of 13th and 14th century.

27 Stephen Turnbull. *Pirate of the Far East 811–1639*. Oxford: Osprey, 2007, p. 28.

28 Mike Loades., op. cit., p. 207.

29 Stephen Turnbull. *Samuraje. Dzieje japońskich wojowników [Samurai]*. Warszawa: Arkady, 2007, p. 94.

as a butcher carves a tender rump steak” observed Jesuit Caspar Vilela³⁰. It is interesting to note that today for a sword to be treated as a truly Japanese it must be made out of Japanese steel produced in the traditional *tatara* furnace³¹. Moreover, selling “the soul of the samurai” to the enemies of the *bushi* must sound as profanation to some enthusiasts of the Japanese culture. However, the celebrated sentence *katana wa bushi no tamashii* – “the sword is the soul of the samurai” – is in fact of quite a late provenance for it came from the will of Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of the Edo shogunate (1600–1868)³².

The journey of the Japanese sword was halted for a time since in the Edo period Japanese swords stayed on the Archipelago, just as their wielders. In the fourth decade of the 17th century the *shōguns* officially closed Japan to foreign influences, and since then foreign men, culture and trade goods arrived in relatively scarce supply. At the same time, the Japanese could not travel outside Japan under the threat of death penalty. Thus *nihontō* traveled rather only on the domestic routes behind the *obi* sashes of the samurai who at the time, were the only people allowed to carry fully-fledged swords. Sometimes merchants were allowed to carry shorter specimens of *nihontō*. Swords, known previously as noble and expensive weapons, demanding skill in using them effectively, thus, in addition, became a clear sign of social status³³. *Nihontō* served their purpose well during the two centuries of more or less peaceful times. In this period various schools of sword fencing (some focused primarily on the spiritual development through martial training) bloomed across the Archipelago since the samurai lacked conflicts in which more battlefield effective weapons like spears and guns could be employed, and *katana* was a weapon that every samurai carried all the time. However, the 19th century brought change to the world, and it came to Japan under the banner of new Western political powers. Seamen from Russia and other countries started to visit the coasts of Japan, and finally, in the year 1854, an American – Commodore Matthew Perry – and his black warships forced the shogunate to open their land to foreigners and the new technology. Among the Japanese population, discontentment increased. Subsequently, the last Tokugawa shogun lost his position when the power was restored to the emperor in 1868. However, it did not occur without bloodshed. In the last years of the old regime, *katana* was used exten-

30 Mike Loades., op. cit., p. 210.

31 Which is, in fact, of not very high quality, thus the process of making good weapon out of it is very demanding.

32 Henryk Socha. *Miecze japońskie Nihontō*. Warszawa: Bellona, 2002, p. 11; *The Japanese Sword. Katana wa Bushi no tamashii* (*The Sword Is the Soul of the Samurai*), “Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin”, Vol. 4, No. 21 (Aug., 1906), p. 29.

33 Stephen Turnbull. *Samuraje...*, op. cit., p. 82–83.

sively by the special police forces of Kyoto and their opponents³⁴. It was also wielded by the participants of the Boshin war of 1868–1869. The Westerners observed these conflicts. The usefulness of the blades at the end of the 19th century, aesthetical values and developed spiritual background of *nihontō*, as well as the mastery in fencing demonstrated by the samurai, not to mention *seppuku*³⁵ which made an electrifying impression on the foreigners – they all contributed to the modern legend of the Japanese sword.

Finally, the new Meiji government abolished older rules and rights, and the samurai lost their unique status as the highest rank in society. With the new era came the modern conscript army and navy, armed with western types of weapons, and the Japanese were prohibited from carrying Japanese swords in public in 1876³⁶. All of a sudden *nihontō* became obsolete, and the art of making them was endangered. But at the same time, at least some of the fine samurai blades traveled at last far into the West, finding their way into private collections and, more importantly, to the museum halls.

The new era for the Japanese swords began in the fourth decade of the 20th century even if nowadays the Japanese refuse to call these arms real *nihontō*. At the time the nationalistic imperial armed forces ordered the new model of a military sword – *guntō* – suitable for officers and non-commissioned officers. This time the weapon was based on the native design, yet the production differed from the time-honored methods. New military swords were not created from traditional steel nor were quenched in water to receive the hallmark of *nihontō* – *hamon*. However, they resembled the *tachi* in the general shape, and their blades were of good quality and sharp³⁷. Once again the Japanese carried their blades to continental Asia in another attempt to invade and conquer China. And once again they failed. Nonetheless the years 1937–1945 left a stain on the revered cold steel. It was caused by the atrocities of imperial military personnel, namely cutting off the heads of unarmed civilians and prisoners of war. More honorable acts with *guntō* in hand consisted of ritual suicides or charges into enemy lines without any chances of success.

After the capitulation of Japan, the isles were occupied by the allied forces. Americans banned “all swords and sword manufacture”³⁸ along with training of the Japanese martial arts, and destroyed thousands of *guntō*. Many more thousands of Japanese

34 Stephen Turnbull. *Katana...*, op. cit., p. 59.

35 *Seppuku* (called also *harakiri*) is form of ritual samurai suicide by disembowelment. Shorter blades were used in the process.

36 Edward J. Drea. *Cesarska armia Japonii 1853–1945 [Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853–1945]*. Kraków: WUJ, 2012, p. 47.

37 Richard Fuller, Ron Gregory. *Wojskowe miecze japońskie 1868–1945 [Military Swords of Japan, 1868–1945]*. Bydgoszcz: Diamond Books, 2008, p. 26 and the following.

38 Mike Loades., op. cit., p. 210.

swords were taken to the USA as spoils and souvenirs, and among them were real historical treasures. In subsequent years the ban was removed, and blacksmiths once again started to create *katana*, yet their usage as the tool of war came to an end. When the Cold War began to rage, the relationship between Japan and the USA became warmer. The Americans started to appreciate the Japanese culture and the Japanese started to look at their own ancestry without remorse. In the following decades, Japan rose from ruins and rebuilt its economy.

Japanese sword in Contemporary Western Culture

The development of modern media, such as manga, anime and movie industry, played an important role in the Japanese economical growth. Finally, popular culture, apart from cars, motorcycles and electronics, triggered the recognition of Japan throughout the world. Cinema was the harbinger of this appreciation. In the year 1954 *Seven Samurai* was released – the production acclaimed internationally and retold numerous times. In this picture, the noble sword was showed in opposition to the gun wielded by the bandits. *Seven Samurai* was directed by Akira Kurosawa who also created other famous pictures, such as *Throne of Blood*, *Yojimbo*, and *The Hidden Fortress*. Of course, Japan gave birth to numerous directors who indulged in *chanbara eiga* – “sword-fighting movies.”³⁹ The genre lives to this day.

Hence *Seven samurai* was hardly the isolated case of the movie depicting samurai and their weapons. Japanese swords started to appear in various productions of diverse quality, and not all of them were historical productions. The *katana* became an arm used in action or martial arts movies as well and entered the western route where Hollywood welcomed it warmly. It featured already in a James Bond movie of 1967 *You Only Live Twice*, but it was the *Highlander*, a fantasy production of 1986, where it played a considerably superior role. In fact, *Highlander* was probably one of the most influential movies of the decade featuring the sword and sword fighting, even if both were depicted in highly untrue manner. The main character, Connor MacLeod, is an immortal swordsman from the Scottish Highlands who lives for several centuries and fights with other immortals, who can die in only one way – when they are decapitated. In his early years, Connor received a Japanese sword from his Spanish friend. According to the story this sword was created by genius Masamune in 6th century BCE. It looks like a highly decorative *katana*. With it, Connor manages to win the final “Prize” after killing the last surviving immortal, who is using an unwieldy sword loosely based on European medieval specimens (which are usually, yet untrue, pre-

39 More on the topic of samurai in cinema can be found in: Alain Silver. *The Samurai Film*. New York: The Overlook Press, 2005.

sented as heavy and cumbersome weapons). It seems like *Highlander* creators thought of *nihontō* not only as of extremely ancient and sharp weapons, but probably also as the best swords in the world (such claims can be found not only in publications of *katana* enthusiasts but even in books published by historians dealing with the Japanese weapons⁴⁰) since in the end, the Japanese blade triumphed. *Katana* was also one of the inspirations for the famous lightsabers – swords of the Jedi knights – from the Star Wars universe⁴¹.

In the last three decades, numerous Hollywood productions used the *katana* as the essential paraphernalia, but I would like to mention only one more movie, in which it played an important role as a highly honorable weapon used in personal, yet just, vendetta. The Quentin Tarantino's film⁴² called *Kill Bill* consists of two parts, released in 2003 and 2004 respectively. The protagonist, Beatrix Kiddo, is a martial artist. She obtains her sword from a renowned blacksmith⁴³ who forged it especially for her and her cause. In one scene Kiddo not only beats numerous enemies but literally cuts to pieces her opponent's blade – an inferior *katana* – with her own sword. Such a feat is, of course, fictional, yet Kiddo's *katana* is showed in the movie as something unusual and unique since its maker stated openly that it is his masterpiece. In fact, the whole *Kill Bill* is a homage to the classical Asian martial arts movies. Moreover, even in the infamous Polish *Wiedźmin* (*The Witcher/The Hexer*) produced in 2001 – a film adaptation of the acknowledged series of fantasy books by Andrzej Sapkowski – the main character's iconic straight sword was changed into a weapon resembling *katana*. And thus *nihontō* reached Central Europe.

Of course, *nihontō* are also an indispensable part of numerous video games' armory. In addition, they appear in literature – fantasy or historical books, and comics. For example, we witness a fight with the Japanese swordsman in a historical pirate series *Adventures of Hector Lynch* by Tim Severin, where in *Sea Robber* the *katana* is shown as an extremely sharp and agile weapon, able to cut off a man's head with ease. Even popular Polish fantasy writers utilize them in their stories. And in the historical comic book by Belgian

40 Like Stephen Turnbull in his numerous publications.

41 "The Evolution of the Lightsaber Duel" reveals true extent of kendo's influence on Star Wars movies [on-line:] <https://soranews24.com/2015/12/25/the-evolution-of-the-lightsaber-duel-reveals-true-extent-of-kendos-influence-on-star-wars-movies/> [02.23.2018]; Were the lightsaber fighting styles in Star Wars inspired by real life sword fighting technique? [on-line:] <https://www.quora.com/Were-the-lightsaber-fighting-styles-in-Star-Wars-inspired-by-real-life-sword-fighting-technique> [02.23.2018].

42 It is not the only movie from this director in which we can observe samurai equipment. For example, we can see *katana* in action in the famous *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Quentin Tarantino also starred in a Japanese production (kind of spaghetti samurai western) *Sukiyaki Western Django* directed by Takashi Miike.

43 His name is Hattori Hanzō. In fact a samurai of this name served Tokugawa Ieyasu in 16th century and become known as a ninja leader.

Jean-Yves Delitte *Le Sang des Lâches* (*The Blood of Cowards*), set in 17th century England, the main character – the king's officer – uses a *katana* to fight with evildoers secretly.

Nowadays the *katana* became a recognizable weapon and an important part of mass culture, usually presented as the exceptionally beautiful, noble, sturdy, sharp and ancient weapon, able to cut anything on its way. It is believed to be made by extraordinary blacksmiths, who are treating it as a sacred object or a living creature. However, it is not the only place where we can find Japanese swords. A more realistic approach can be seen in modern training rooms – *dōjō* – of various martial arts⁴⁴. Japanese swords – made of metal or wood especially for training purposes – are used mostly in *kendō*, *iaidō*, *kenjutsu* and *aikidō*. For example in *kendō*, which is the most sporty and most popular of the enumerated martial arts, practitioners use straight bamboo swords called the *shinai*, but only their one edge is considered “sharp.” *Shinai* are used in the normal contact training – sparring and *waza* technique drill. In the *kata* form drill the wooden *bokken*, imitating the *katana* is used. In fact, *bokken* or *bokuto* were tools also used by historical samurai to improve their skill in fighting. In the high level practice of *kendō* metal swords can be used, and in some shows, masters use even the true *nihontō*. In *iaidō*⁴⁵ practice at first *bokken* are utilized, but the normal training weapon is the *iaitō* – a sword looking like a real *katana* but blunt and made from the non-steel material. Only at a certain level sharp steel swords are used. They are called the *shinken* and those who can afford them buy real *nihontō*, but most practitioners are content with less expensive versions made in China or other countries. Usually, artificial *hamon* on such blades is obtained in the chemical or mechanical processes and not by the quenching. Even if the sword is made *lege artis* and of the highest quality, looking exactly like the Japanese *katana*, if it is made not by the Japanese, outside Japan, and without the traditional Japanese steel, it is not considered *nihontō*, and its value is low. In fact, nowadays many blacksmiths around the world are able to create plausible *katana*. They can be as sharp and good as their historical counterparts, but to some, they lack “the soul” and are treated as worthless, just like the military swords of the Pacific War⁴⁶.

44 More on the topic of Japanese martial arts can be found in: *Martial Arts of the World. An Encyclopedia*. Ed. Thomas A. Green. ABC-CLIO: Santa Barbara, 2001; Donn F. Draeger. *Modern Bujutsu & Budo*. New York: Weatherhill, 1996; Fumon Tanaka. *Samurai Fighting Arts; The Spirit and the Practice*. Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 2003; Jinichi Tokeshi. *Kendo – Elements, Rules and Philosophy*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003.

45 Iaidō is a martial art focused on ability to quickly draw the sword and cut in response to sudden attack.

46 Mike Loades., op. cit., p. 208.

Concluding remarks

In the centuries past the Japanese swords traveled far from their cradle. From the humble origins of modest furnaces of Korean and Chinese immigrants on the Japanese soil two millennia ago to the well developed and celebrated blades created by the most renowned blacksmiths of medieval Japan. The finest samurai swords gained such honor and recognition that none of the European counterparts – even though in Europe swords were, and are, adored and treated as symbols of strength, chivalry, authority and law – can compete with *nihontō* when it comes to the state of conservation and the cult they enjoy in their motherland. The Japanese swords' reputation as extremely sharp yet beautiful weapons reached China, Korea, and Europe in the 15th and 16th century. In the 17th century, the sword became the soul of the warrior and the visible symbol of the highest status of its bearer and since then it could not be treated lightly and without respect. To this day this idealization of *nihontō* is visible in training halls of the numerous Japanese martial arts throughout the world⁴⁷. Japanese blades found their place also in the contemporary Western movies, games and literature. *Nihontō* became a hallmark of Japan and its culture, and an important element of the world's heritage. Perhaps the reason for this lies – like with other swords – in that “it is the weapon that gives the hope that skill can triumph over brute force”⁴⁸.

47 Where even wooden swords cannot be used for leaning – otherwise a typical sight in Historical European Martial Arts training rooms.

48 Ibidem, p. XIII.

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Summary

The article concentrates on the history of Japanese swords and their travel from Asian fields of battle to the popular culture of the Western world. The author presents the main characteristics of the Japanese sword and how it evolved from the ancient straight form borrowed from Chinese specimens to the recognized curved and single-edged weapon of the samurai. The article outlines the important role of the sword in Japanese culture and conquests and discusses how other countries learnt about the qualities of a *katana*. Subsequently, the process of popularization and usage of Japanese swords in the modern world is described.