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THE ANATOMY OF SCHIN-GUNTO: EXPLORING *TACHI* STYLE SWORDS IN IMPERIAL JAPANESE ARMY

The article is devoted to the phenomenon of military swords in Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) in 1930–1940^s. The point of the author's interest is *tachi* styled *shin-gunto* sword for military Japanese officers. These swords were set as the main type of IJA officers side-arms in 1934 (Type 94) and renewed in 1938 (Type 98). Contrary to official descriptions and documents, there were serious differences in swords, including several types of blades, different dimensions etc. One of the most interesting facts described in the article is using of traditional samurai blades in regular *shin-gunto* mounts. The author gives here a description of two *shin-gunto* Type 98 examples, providing researchers with new information.

Keywords: Imperial Japanese Army, IJA, *gunto*, *shin-gunto*, Shōwa period, military swords.

Swords of original design were one of the most popular symbols of Imperial Japanese Army (IJA). The idea of providing every officer and NCO (non-commissioned officer) with a personal side-arms was the reality of military doctrine in Japan since the beginning of Meiji era. During the period of foundation of the Army and first decades of XX century, military side-arms – *gunto*, military swords – were ed under the strong European influence. That influence have been depicted in design of several military swords models – Type 8 and Type 19 army *kyu-gunto* (introduced on November 24, 1875, Meiji 8 and October 11, 1880, Meiji 19), Foot and Artillery Swords, Army Red Cross Sword (authorized on June 27, 1910, Meiji 43), Type 19 Cavalry Sword for officers, Type 25 Cavalry Sword for NCO's and soldiers (authorized on March 19, 1892, Meiji 25), Type 32 Army Sword (authorized on August, 3, 1899, Meiji 32), in series A (Ko) for NCO's and cavalymen and B (Otsu) for all NCO's, military police and the transportation corps as well as for all master sergeants in the infantry, engineers and artillerists.

This serious influence of European military standards at that time based on the difference between Japanese and European reality. The great wishes of Emperor to create the strongest military power forced the government to bring new rules, tactics and weapon to the Army. The creation of a modern military forces was under the British influence for the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) and under the French and German influence for the Army. First, prior to the Meiji restoration, the French had cooperated with forces of most powerful *daimyo* and the new born IJA. But after the 1871, members of Japanese government were highly impressed by German victory as well as Germany's Prussian trained military. So, they adopted German style uniforms, equipment and side-arms, including swords, as they were to adopt German military organization, strategy and tactics. All this standards received quite long life, during Meiji and Taisho periods. So, Japanese government swords remained decidedly European in appearance until the 1930s when military side-arms standards met with the renovation of the traditional culture based on modern political and ideologi-

cal system [Пронин, Москвитин, 2010. С. 234–238]. The result of the ideology transformation was the new style of military sword symbolized samurai traditions.

On February 14, 1934, Showa 9 new army sword for officers, patterned after the traditional *tachi*, was authorized. The description and all regulations of new *shin-gunto* sword according to the modification of army uniforms were authorized by the Imperial Decree No. 26. J. Dawson described the term “*shin-gunto*” [Dawson, 2007] as popular name of this sword, meaning new (*shin*) military (*gun*) sword (*to*). Designations Type 94 and Type 98 were originally invented by Japanese collectors and soon became popular among collectors abroad. These designations totally reflect dates of introduction of two types of the sword. The year of introduction of the *shin-gunto* is 2594 in the National Era System, and the name Type 94 was given according to the last two digits in 2594 which is 1934 in Gregorian calendar. Researchers could find no evidence that *shin-gunto* ever had an official type designation (*shiki*). [Dawson, 2007. P. 153] Of course, government issued items did have *shiki* designations, but officer swords were private purchase items from sword dealers or officer’s club *Kaiko-sha*. Clubs usually sold production from both private makers and military arsenals. During the war the *gunto* blades were produced in arsenals throughout Japan and the sword smiths were employed by the Army. These blades have no forging, therefore easy to bend or break. The blades were government property and were given to NCO’s from supply. But an officer must buy sword for himself from a sword dealer. So, dealer ordered to Seki or other province which were the centers of private sword’s production. If an officer had his own blade, he could ask the dealer to remount it into a *gunto* style *koshirae*. At that time most of *gunto* having been made in Seki, now we call them Showa *to*. There was no arsenal but there were a lot of sword maker groups lived and were making forged blades, *saya*, *tsuba*, *fuchi*, *kashira*. etc. Even women polished swords blades during the war.

Individually made blades usually have the smith’s engraved signature and date of making on the tang. If he doesn’t want to put the Showa date on the other side of the tang then he engraves only his signature. Some of the sword-smiths received individual orders but the rest of them were made into a bundle and brought to military warehouse. One can see the cherry flower mark or an anchor mark on the tang indicating that the blade has passed the examination by the army or navy authorities.

According to Imai Aiko [Imai Aiko, 1990. P. 131], the following army personnel were authorized to carry the new *shin-gunto*: commissioned officers, officer equivalents (officials), warrant officers, prison chiefs, officer candidates and unformed civilian employees of the Army – *gunzoku*.

There were special designed small-sized *shin-gunto* for officers in aviation and tank units. They are among the rarest now. Instead of the same *tachi* style of a mount, usual dimensions of such swords were close to a traditional *wakizashi*. J. Dawson gives two examples of these items (in different color pattern of scabbard and handle tape). [Dawson, 2007. P. 166; pl. 13–29, 13–30, 13–31]. Overall length of sword in scabbard depicted on the first two plates is 25 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches (654 mm), blade length is 15 inches (381 mm). He called them “pilot’s swords” and this term seems to be as good as our “crew officer’s sword”. Here we will give one more short *shin-gunto*, designed for an aviator.

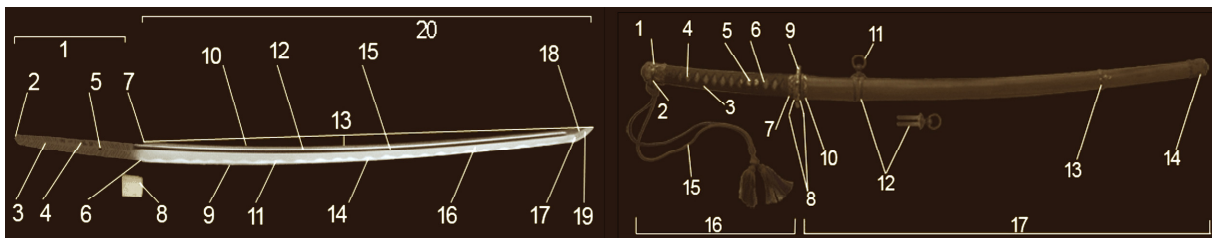
On May, 31, 1938, Showa 13, the number of suspension mounts was reduced from two to one by the Imperial Decree No. 392. Collectors from Japan and abroad usually call the swords produced with only one suspension mount as Type 98. The Type 98 name also derives from the last two digits in the year of the change in the National Era System – 2598. The fact is that lower suspension mount is removable on Type 94, and once removed, no one can distinguish Type 94 and Type 98. According to the construction of the Type 94’s lower suspension mount, such change in suspension mounts is a minor change. That’s why some collectors do not agree that the 1938 design should be classified as a separate type. But those, who support the Type 98 designation point out that Imperial Decree No. 392 simplified many uniform and equipment items to reflect a war-time footing. The 1938 uniform is a separate type which is called M98. [Dawson, 2007. P. 153]. Of course, general changes in the style of uniforms, equipment and side-arms depicted new ideological, cultural, political and military reality of Japanese life based on deep changes in national philosophy, interests and strategy [Пронин, Москвитин, 2010. С. 234–241].

As *shin-gunto* swords were copied the traditional design of Japanese *tachi*, the terminology used to describe them is mostly Japanese (Pic. 1). Hilt fittings here are *kabutogane*, *saru-te*, two *menuki*, *fuchi* and *tsuba*. The handle base is wooden sleeve made to fit blade tang and adorned on each side with a strip of ray skin and wrapped in a fabric tape which could be tan, brown, olive drab, blue or

black. Blades are retained by a bamboo or buffalo horn peg called *mekugi*. *Kabutogane* is theommel fitting and *saru-te* is the tassel loop that anchors in *kabutogane*. *Saru-te* can be made of woven cord, wire or decorative gold plated brass. *Menuki* are the hilt ornaments, one of each side of the handle. Standard military *menuki* depicts three cherry blossoms; however, *menuki* that had significance for the officer could be substituted for the military ones. *Fuchi* is the fitting between the tape wrapped handle and the hand guard. If the sword is fitted with a push button for activation of a scabbard release, the push button is located in *fuchi*. The hand guard is called *tsuba*.

Scabbards are painted steel, rarely aluminum, and can be tan, brown, reddish-brown, olive, drab, black or pumpkin orange. They have four or five fittings: a throat fitting called *kuchi-gane*, which was designed to match *fuchi*, one or two suspension mounts called *ashi* (if two, the lower is removable), a decorative band called *semegane*, and a tip fitting called *ishizuke* which was designed to match *kabutogane*. Tassels are color coded (Pic. 2). Company grade tassels are blue and brown with matching straps; field grade are red and brown with matching straps; and general grade tassels are yellow with red and brown straps decorated with zigzag stitching of yellow thread or gold wire [Dawson, 2007. P. 153]. The research of Japanese military photos of that period (1934–1945) shown that some times *shin-gunto* swords could be used by sergeants, master sergeants, corporals and even by 1st class privates [Фуллер, Грегори, 2008. С. 54]. In our opinion, all these photos are exceptions from the ordinary practice. Moreover, special designed *shin-gunto* Type 95 with aluminum handle was authorized on September 16, 1935 Showa 10 for all army NCO's and some privates, depending on their duty assignments (*kyujugo shiki gunto* – Type 95 military sword, or “NCO *shin-gunto*” as some western collectors call it – will be the object for one of my future posts). The reasons of such exceptions are unfortunately unknown. Fuller and Gregory describes four blade types used in Type 94 and Type 98 *shin-guntos*: 1) Forging from one metal piece. Usually such blades were associated with the final period of the Pacific War, 1944–1945, and emergency issues; 2) Blades produced with combined smithing and forging and with oil hardening. The great number of such blades produced during Showa period by private hammer smiths. This is the most popular blade type; 3) Traditional blades made by smithing and water hardened (*gendaito*). Such blades were made in private factories by famous and high-qualified hammer smiths. They are quiet rare. 4) Old blades, the heritage of samurai era. Some officers from old samurai families took their old blades to the military service. So, such blades were remounted in to the official *gunto* setting (*kosirae*). Very rare, according to the Fuller and Gregory, less than 10% of total *shin-gunto* number [Фуллер, Грегори, 2008. С. 62].

The author of this article worked with 24 examples of different *shin-gunto* swords, including three Type 98's “short” (“crew officer's”) swords. The dimensions of *shin-gunto* are different, but for swords with Showa blades they could vary from 838–1015 mm overall sword length in scabbard; 483–692 mm blade length; 24–38 mm maximum blade width; 965–1190 mm scabbard length; 225–260 mm handle length. The weight of the sword could vary from 38–59 ounce for overall weight with scabbard to 30–39 ounce for sword weight without scabbard.



Pic. 1. *Shin-gunto* sword. Blade and mount part names: A – blade: 1 – *nakago*; 2 – *nakago-jiri*; 3 – *yasuri-me*; 4 – *mei*; 5 – *mekugi-ana*; 6 – *ha-machi*; 7 – *mune-machi*; 8 – *habaki*; 9 – *ha*; 10 – *mune*; 11 – *hamon*; 12 – *hi*; 13 – *sori*; 14 – *ya-kiba*; 15 – *shinogi*; 16 – *jigane*; 17 – *yokote*; 18 – *ko-shinogi*; 19 – *kissaki*; 20 – *hacho, nagasa*; B – mount: 1 – *kabutogane*; 2 – *sarute*; 3 – *tsuka-to*; 4 – *same*; 5 – *menuki*; 6 – *mekugi*; 7 – *fuchi*; 8 – *seppa*; 9 – *tsuba*; 10 – *kuchi-gane*; 11 – *obi-tori*; 12 – *ashi*; 13 – *shibabiki*; 14 – *ishizuke*; 15 – *tosho*; 16 – *tsuka*; 17 – *saya*



Pic. 2. Examples of *shin-gunto* tassels: 1 – company grade tassel; 2 – field grade tassel; 3 – general tassel

Naturally, the quality of the blade and mounts of certain *shin-gunto* determined by the financial opportunities of it's owner. For example, second lieutenant's salary was about 70,83 yen per month in 1944. This was enough for purchasing of a sword with ordinary standard quality. Colonel's salary at the same time was about 220 yen per month. High quality *gendaito* price made by smithing in Yasukuni temple was 120 yen in 1940 and 170 yen in 1944 (both bought in the temple). In the case of purchasing such *gendaito* sword using officer's club *Kaiko-sha*, the price was 50 % more, 180 yen in 1940 and 255 yen in 1944. To sum it up, *shin-gunto* of a good quality of smithing and mount was an expensive purchase even for a field grade officer.

Pic. 3. *Shin-gunto* swords, general view: 1 – «long» Type 98 sword (smith Masahiro); 2 – «short» Type 98 sword for aviation and tank forces crew member officer (smith Masahiro)

Shin-gunto were a very popular type of military sword in IJA. But any example of it, even an ordinary sword, can be rare due to unusual mount or general tassel. If the story of such sword includes the truly information about its original owner, sword owner's history and the peculiarities of his surrender or seizure of the sword, such item can drastically increase its collection and historical value.

The first *shin-gunto* sword of two items presented here was made in February, 1945 (Pic. 3, 4). The blade of this sword was made individually by smith named *Masahiro*. Two sides of the blade's tang have engraved date "Showa, 20, 2nd Month", signature "*Masahiro*" and stamp "*Gi*" (Pic. 5). The last mentioned stamp is probably the abbreviation of "Gifu prefecture". Such signs were engraved on blade's tangs made outside of Seki (Seki is situated in Gifu prefecture, too). Blade with these stamps is supposed to be rare. Total length of the sword is more than 1 m, so its owner was a tall man. Metal scabbard painted in dark-brown color. The dark-brown scabbard's cover has small damages in several places. The scabbard has one suspension mount, so this sword is Type 98 *shin-gunto*. The olive tape wrapped handle is covered with ray skin. It possess complete *seppa* kit and *tsuba* marked with "98" number. The blade of this sword is *sinogi-zzukuri* made from arm's steel using combined smithing and forging with oil hardening, as one of the most blades made during the war. The blade has one fuller at every side. On the blade surface one can find *hamon* line of *midare* type. Blade's tang also has several production marks. Richard Fuller and Ron Gregory [1986] gave the list of military sword's *asigata* which contains other swords with *Masahiro* signature. In the first edition of Fuller's and Gregory's book, stamp "*Gi*" was marked as an unidentified, but in the 1996's and 2008's Russian editions it have been already determined as Gifu prefecture stamp (for swords made outside Seki) [Грегори, Фуллер, 2008]. *Kabuto-gane* is decorated with chrome plated copper disk with "*Nogata*" abbreviation. The sword is in a good condition for collecting.

The dimensions are as follows: total length 1055 mm; overall blade length 900 mm; blade length 690 mm; *sori* 19 mm; the space from *nakago-zziri* to *mekugi-ana* 130 mm; maximum blade width 30 mm; maximum blade thickness 8 mm.

The second sword presented here is the rare pilot's ("crew officer's") *shin-gunto* (Pic. 3, 4). It belonged to an officer of IJA aviation or tanks units. Its total length is only about a half of official officer's swords length. Mount details are made from gold plated brass. All proportions of mount parts are the same with the official IJA "big" *shin-gunto* (Pic. 4). Open-worked *tsuba* has number "98" on the one side and stamp "*Kami*" ("God, divine") with an assemble mark on the other. Richard Fuller identified this stamp, "*Kami*", as very rear. This stamp was placed only on *tsubas* of *shin-gunto* [Fuller, Gregory, 1986]. *Seppa* parts have the similar assemble mark. Dark-olive scabbard has one suspension mount, so this sword is Type 98 *shin-gunto*. The same dark-olive color type wrapped handle is covered with a black ray skin. Standard military *menuki* is made from gold plated brass. *Kabuto-gane* is decorated with white metal (silver?) disk with "*Nogata*" abbreviation.





Pic. 4. Type 98 «long» and «short» shin-gunto swords blades with mount parts



Pic. 5. Tang stamps and smits inscriptions: 1 – Type 98 «short» schin-gunto sword; 2 – Type 98 «long» schin-gunto sword

The blade of this sword is made from arm's steel using smithing with oil hardening. The blade has no fuller. Tang is marked: *ura* – with date “Showa, 20, January, day”; *omote* – *Masahiro* (smith's name). Originally this sword was decorated with field grade tassel (now missed).

This sword preserved in excellent condition. Its total length is 710 mm; overall blade length 643 mm; blade length 460 mm; *sori* 9 mm; space between *nakago-zziri* and *mekugi-ana* 112 mm; maximum blade width 25,5 mm; maximum blade thickness 5,5 mm.

The significant peculiarity of both two swords presented in the paper is the same smith, *Masahiro*, who made these blades in January and February, 1945. More over, these swords – one for IJA officer and another for IJA pilot or tank commander – have the same decorations of *kabuto-gane*: white metal (silver?) and chrome plated copper disks with the “*Nogata*” abbreviation (Pic. 6).



*Pic. 6. White metal plated and white metal (probably silver) disks with «Nogata» abbreviation:
1 – Type 98 «short» schin-gunto sword; 2 – Type 98 «long» schin-gunto sword*

This is an example of interesting story of finding swords united by the same period of birth and the same smith, who have created these blades. We've found these swords in China. We've purchased it from different dealers, who hadn't ever met. Now these swords are a part of Oriental society collection in Beijing, China, united by the same place and the same time of birth as well as the same country and city of finding, and also similar tang inscriptions. That's all we know about these swords. Their true story has been forgotten forever. Probably it covers a dramatic moments of sword's owners' life and their capture by Soviet, American or Chinese victorious soldiers.

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АНАТОМИЯ *СИН-ГУНТО*: ИЗУЧЕНИЕ МЕЧЕЙ В СТИЛЕ *ТАТИ* В ЯПОНСКОЙ ИМПЕРАТОРСКОЙ АРМИИ

Статья посвящена феномену военных мечей в императорской армии Японии в 1930–1940-е гг. Автор уделит основное внимание мечам *син-гунто*, оформленным в стиле традиционных мечей *тати*, являвшихся частью комплекса вооружения и военного костюма офицеров императорской армии Японии. Данный тип мечей введен в качестве основного холодного оружия армейских офицеров в 1934 г. (Тип 94) и модернизирован в 1938 г. (Тип 98). Несмотря на официальную документацию и описание, регламентировавшее размеры, оправу и тип клинка, на практике существовали значительные отличия, включавшие несколько типов клинка, значительно различавшиеся вариации общих размеров и т. д. Отдельный интерес представляет практика применения старых самурайских клинков, изготовленных по традиционным технологиям до реставрации Мэйдзи, в уставных оправах *син-гунто*. Автор приводит подробное описание двух мечей *син-гунто* Тип 98, вводя в научный оборот подробную информацию как о мече, несколько превышающем обычные размеры, так и о редком коротком мече для офицеров авиации и танковых экипажей.

Ключевые слова: армия императорской Японии, *гунто*, *син-гунто*, период Сёва, военные мечи.