

Traditional grip wrapping on Chinese swords and sabers

by Peter Dekker

Introduction

I have found that there are many traditional and modern ways to do grip wrapping, I started out copying grip wraps as done on Huanuo Sword Art's *dao* and *jian*. I later began to learn grip wraps as seen on various antiques, it's interesting to note I have yet to see Huanuo's method on an antique. Although different styles of grip wraps all tend to look the same, they do have some fundamental differences in how they are done. I partly base the following method on some early Qing grip wraps I have pictures of. Partly, because most pictures only show one side of a sword grip and I always have to guess how it works on the other side. I think the following method is a pretty universal way because it causes two loop ends to appear near the pommel, that nicely match *fangshi* (square style) fittings but look good on any other style of *dao* or *jian*. This while some other methods might not suit all styles of sword furniture. It is done from the center out, meaning you start at the middle of the cord and work your way through the wrap using both ends. There are also ways that start at one end, working towards the other. The end result on the latter is characterized by crossings within the center loop that are made up out of a horizontal and a diagonal cord, while the center based wraps result in crossings that exist out of two diagonal cords. Both ways are historical.

You can contact me for questions, or to help me improve this grip wrapping manual at:

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On my part I would be happy to get to see as many original wrappings as possible, preferably from both sides of the handle. I am also looking for any information about pre-treatment of the handle prior to wrapping, like regarding the use of ray skin and for example if any type of glue was used.

Type of cord

For a nice grip wrap it is important to use the right cord. Typically this is all natural cord (synthetic cord is generally more slippery) made out of silk or cotton. Make sure it has a flat braid. Most cord on modern swords is significantly wider than on the old ones. A possible explanation is labour, since the narrower the cord, the more windings you have to make to wrap a whole grip. As a result, the narrower the cord, the more cord and time you will need. Antique one handed grips tend to take about 5 metres of per grip, using a cord that is approx. 2mm wide when tightened. Many modern one handed swords take slightly more, sometimes more than 6 metres because their grips are often a bit longer/thicker.

Very historically accurate, natural and hand braided cord is available through us at www.mandarinmansion.com for € 1.50 per metre, ex. shipping. We deliver some standard colors like black, blue, brown and green plus natural ivory white that can be dyed by the user. My supplier is speculating about possible silk cord in the future as well. More news about that later.

Preparation

Before starting I like to wrap some tape on both ends of the cords. Make sure a fairly rigid and sharp point appears, because it might come in handy later when you have to go under wrappings. (See pic below)



Layout

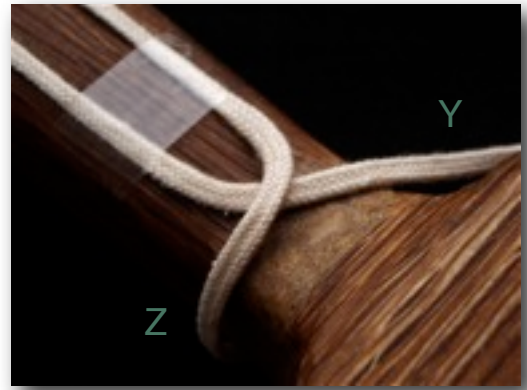
We start by laying out the two loops on either side of the handle. To do this, start in the middle of the cord and lay a loop at the pommel (pic 2). We call this side A. Lay the loop exactly like you want it to appear on the final result, or a bit longer but certainly not shorter. I like to tape the inner loop to the grip to keep it tight. You can tie the part at the guard as in pic 3, *or* let them cross as in pic 4. Both ways seem to be traditional, but this time we go for the second way. (The first appears on what is thought to be a princely regulation saber in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, while the latter way is used on one of Qianlong's own *jian*.)



Pic 2, Side A.



Pic 3, Side A.



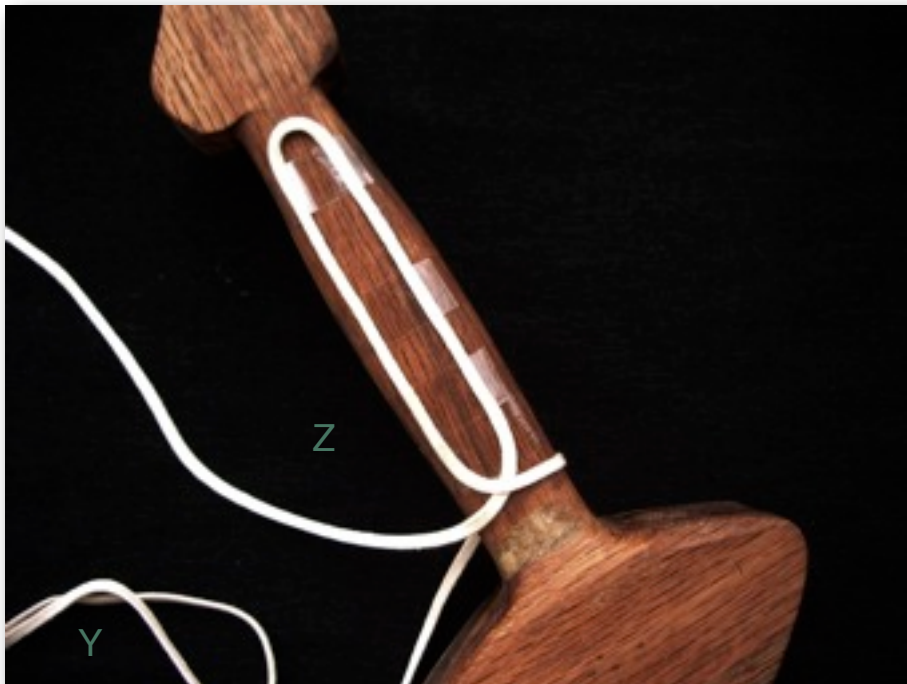
*Pic 4, Side A. (as in Pic 2)
Alternative way*

Note that Pic 4. is just for reference. This wrap continues with the loop on side A. closed as in pic 3.

On the other side, which we call side B, one of the two cord ends forms the second loop as in pic 5. Make sure both loops are exactly the same length and width.

Any mistake in laying out the loops will result in finding out they are too long or too short right before the end of the grip wrap and in the worst case causes you to redo the whole grip wrap from scratch.

In this example I don't close the loop on this side as in pic 4, but just let them overlap as in pic 3. I do expect it would be the norm to finish both sides of the loop in the same way. Unfortunately, I haven't seen enough material to verify this, yet. I chose two different ways in this single wrap to show how both turn out to look.



Pic 5, side B.

Wrap

From here, proceed by putting one cord end (which we call Z) through the loop on side A as depicted in pic 6. Please note that as the other end, (which we call Y, left end in pic 6) goes around, it crosses the other. See pic 7. This is the only place where this occurs.



Pic 6, side B.



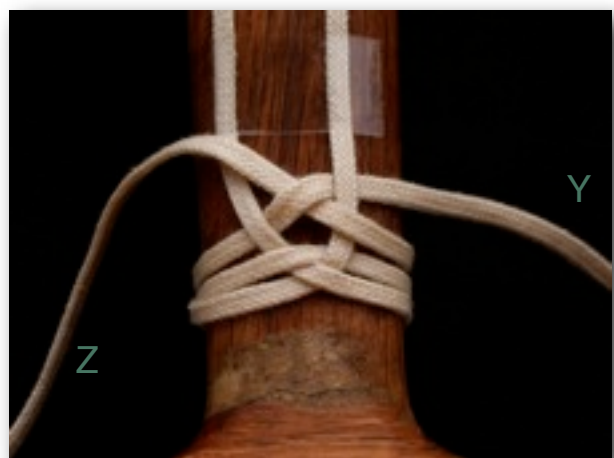
Pic 7, upper side B, lower side A. (Z over Y.)

Then, on the other side the first of the wrapping pattern will be made, see pic 8. Proceeding to the other side another if these is made, see pic 9. Always pay attention to what cords have passed under or over the inner loop, and do the opposite for the adjacent cord in the pictures. Now you will be getting able to tie the wraps tighter, it's best to hold it in place with your fingers (pic 10) until you finished the next wrap. Tie it as tight as you can, straighten the inner loop. Turn the handle, and repeat. Make sure they all lie flat on the handle, and none get twisted.

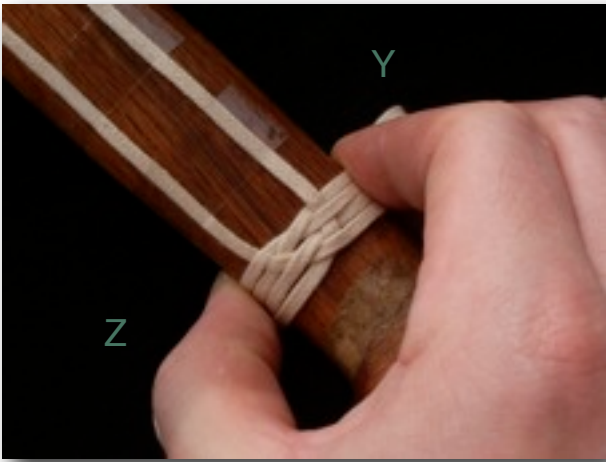
(It's not easy to get the first part tight while keeping it all in place, so it's best to tie it as tight as is possible without deforming the layout.)



Pic 8, side A.



Pic 9, side B.



Pic 10, side B.



Pic 11, side B.

From here the wrap will continue in the same way. What is important from now is that you keep the wrappings very tight, and that you watch out that the inner loop is corrected each time you finish a wrap. Once the wrap is done, it is possible to slightly correct the inner loop by using a fork but it's best not to bet on this and do it right from the start. (There is a fair chance in damaging the cord or loosening the wrap up in an attempt to tidy it afterwards.) After a while, it should resemble the pattern on pic 11. The better the shape of the inner loop, the more impressive the wrap will look.

End

This is the part I know least about. I found the cord is usually tucked under some of the previous wrappings (but don't know under how many, exactly) and I found it to disappear under the pommel in some occasions, too. To tuck it under previous wrappings, make sure you do the last ones a little looser so it's easier to tuck the cord under. Once you got it through, tie it as tight as possible. When you're sure it's done well, cut the two ends for a nice finish.

Pictures 12 – 14 are of one of the additional ways I thought of to end a wrap, but I don't know much about the historical accuracy of such an ending. It is done by making a simple knot as in pic 12, and then tucking both ends of the knot under some previous wrappings. Note that the two ends in pic 14 should be cut short and completely disappear under the previous wrappings. In pic 15 you can see the end result of the entire wrap, so the end result should look like pic 15.



Pic 12, side A or B.



Pic 13, side A or B.



Pic 14



Pic 15

Keep in mind that this method is not the only way to make a correct grip wrap. The most important thing in a good grip wrap is the grip it provides, style is just a plus. As many Chinese ways of doing things, be it swordsmanship, archery, calligraphy, or grip wrapping there are many ways to do it right. This is just one of them.

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