According to Chinese symbolism, the strength and martial spirit of a soldier is embodied in the single-edged blade (dao, literally meaning “knife”) whereas the double-edged sword (jian) represents the noble character of the gentleman and scholar. This article discusses the curved, single-edged hilt weapons with long blades, commonly known as sabers in the West and generically termed peidao in Chinese, dating from the heyday of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), with particular focus on the sabers worn by the officers of the Qing military forces. These weapons were not just battlefield tools, but were part of the symbolic package (which included armor, rank-badges, jackets and hats) which set their wearers apart from and above the civilians who were not ranking members of the dynasty’s administrative and ruling class.

The illustrated compendium of regulations for official and ceremonial regalia of the Qing Dynasty, Huangchao Liqi Tushi (compiled in 1759) lists a number of regulation patterns for the peidao used by the Emperor, the various princely ranks, officers, and soldiers during the most important military reviews and parades. An examination of surviving specimens, however, reveals that the lion’s share of these sabers vary considerably in terms of blade length and style, and in the design and ornamentation of their fittings. Only the general appearance follows certain basic norms. (A similar situation exists as regards the buzzi or square embroidered rank badges on the ceremonial coats of civil and military officials; the birds and animals which comprise the emblems follow prescribed norms but the subsidiary embellishment differs between one specimen and another.) This is in marked contrast to the strict adherence to standards of cut and color for the rest of the uniform and its headgear.

Fig. 1 Unidentified artist (Chinese, 18th century). Portrait of the Imperial Bodyguard Jianggimboo. Hanging Scroll; ink and color on silk; overall 188.6 x 95.1 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, the Dillon Fund Gift, 1986 (1986.206).
BLADE TYPES, CONSTRUCTION, AND DECORATION.

Peidao (its name literally means “waist knife” because its scabbard is worn suspended from the belt) are a class of weapons further subdivided according to blade shapes, of which there are several principal varieties. In keeping with the subject of this paper, we need only be cognizant of the two subdivisions which were the norm for almost all sabers worn by Qing military officials: the goose-quill and willow-leaf types (Fig. 2).

Both blade types are derived from prototypes carried by Eurasian warrior-horsemen of the Middle Ages, and brought to China (as well as the Islamic world) in the wake of the Mongol invasions. The peidao replaced the earlier straight backsword or pallasch (zhibeidao) and the jian in military service by the mid-Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The goose-quill saber (yanmaodao) is characterized by a cutting edge which is straight until the beginning of its dorsal back-edge, from which point it curves upward towards the point. The more common willow-leaf saber (liuyedao) has a slight curve throughout its length; the arc may begin gradually at the forte and accelerate towards the tip, or may have its maximum curve closer to the hilt with a decrease towards the point. Increase in curvature improves cutting efficiency with a corresponding reduction of accuracy on straight thrusts. Some liuyedao taper more markedly in width than others; tip profiles can vary from acute to a more radiused contour.

Fig. 2. Two representative examples of peidao sabers showing the principal blade shapes. Upper: Willow leaf saber (liuyedao) and scabbard, China, late 18th—beginning 19th century, blade 73.2 cm, yuanshi style fittings (scabbard associated) in bronze with filigree work on hilt. Lower: Goose-quill saber (yanmaodao), China, 17th century, blade 72.4 cm, fangshi style fittings in iron with silver overlay. (Author’s collection)

Fig. 3. Saber blade with guard of medieval Eurasian type, excavated in Eastern Europe, probably 9th-10th century AD, blade length 83.2 cm. Note the tunkou or sleeve at the forte. (Author’s collection)
The choice of blade shape depended on the fencing style favored by the saber's owner, and when considering this and also the variety in fittings styles and embellishment, it must be kept in mind that for the most part, these sabers were privately purchased by their owners and not issued from government supplies. This is also reflected in the material of the blade itself, which is often of fine laminated and tempered steel. Especially dramatic are those blades forged of multiple twisted cores of iron and steel laminate, the watered patterns taking the form of rows of star-like flowery forms (huawengang) as shown in Fig. 5.
The balance and “feel” of a saber was determined not only by the degree of curvature, but also its weight distribution along its length. The blade’s cross-section and the degree of distal taper (change in thickness) also play a role, and several designs were produced by swordsmiths in order to satisfy both functional and aesthetic criteria. The simplest blade section is the unfullered wedge shape (Fig. 2, lower), analogous to that seen on a Persian shamshir. Greater thickness of the edge profile is maintained by the use of facets, bordered by longitudinal ridges (qi) on each side of the blade (Fig. 4, upper).

This feature is often regarded as being in the Japanese style, but in reality it was used in China and Korea on zhubeidao blades from classical antiquity until the Mongol invasion period, and is found on medieval Eurasian-style sabers as well (Fig. 3).

Most peidao blades are provided with fullers or cannelures which serve to both lighten and stiffen them. The width, depth, number, and location of these grooves affect the weight distribution and therefore the balance of the blade. Typically, a peidao blade would have one or two fullers on each side, beginning at a distance of about 50-80 mm from the guard. If they are of different width, the narrower one occupies the dorsal position. During the 17th through 18th centuries, there was the vogue for ornamental types of fullering, along with other decorative effects, which were influenced by stylistic developments in the blades of the Near East and India (examples, Figs. 6 and 7). They include:

1. Segmented grooves
2. Channels which enclose others, or wrap around another in a partial “U” shape at the forte of the blade
3. Deep channels which contain rolling balls (kunju)
4. Dimples or depressions drilled into the blade, usually in conjunction with segmented grooves, and sometimes filled with cupric-alloy or precious-metal inlay
5. Round or oblong cartouches containing animal figures or calligraphy

These decorative features are found on saber and dagger blades from various Islamic cultures from the 15th century onward. Such items reached China in considerable numbers from the mid-Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) through the 18th century. They arrived as part of the caravan trade in luxury items across Asia, as gifts presented to Chinese emperors by the embassies of tributary states, and as war booty during the aggressive military campaigns of the first half of the Qing Dynasty. After the turn of the 19th century, as China became culturally more introverted as its political fortunes declined, the popularity of foreign decorative elements faded away. By the end of the Qing, only the segmented grooves remained a common feature of the cutler's stylistic repertoire.

Many blades were fitted at their forte with an iron or brass sleeve with scalloped outline, called a tunkou (Fig 6). The device helps stabilize the guard and provide a firm seating of the blade in its scabbard. Although these functions are the same as those of the familiar Japanese habaki, the tunkou’s shape link it to an almost identical element often seen on Eurasian saber blades of the Middle Ages (Fig. 3).
Fig. 6. Details of four saber blades, China, 18th to early 19th century, showing fullereng styles inspired by Near Eastern prototypes. Left to right: (1) cartouches containing stylized animal figures [in this case, a dragon in archaistic style] and a calligraphic motif, (2) dimples and segmented channels, (3) groove which wraps completely around another, (4) segmented channels, one of which forms a partial “U” shape around another continuous one. (2-3 author’s collection; 1, 4 anonymous private collections)

Fig. 7. Detail of qalchuri saber blade, Iran, 19th century, showing segmented fullering. (Author’s collection)
HILT AND SCABBARD FITTINGS.
The earliest forms of *peidao* made and used in China, which date from the Ming Dynasty, retained the handguards using projecting quillons (Fig. 3) of their Inner Asian antecedents. The import of thousands of Japanese swords during the 15th and 16th centuries popularized the disc-shaped tsuba guard, which soon eclipsed the crossguards entirely. The disc guard, called pan hushou in Chinese, became the norm for Qing sabers until the end of the dynasty.

Fig. 8. Details of three pan hushou (guards) on *peidao* sabers. Left to right: (1) Gilt filigree (loukong) brass with stylized scrollwork derived from Tibetan prototypes, mounted on a battle-trophy blade with Russian markings and date 1778, (2) Loukong work in bronze with swastika motifs, late 18th century, (3) Iron with gold overlay in two colors, with acanthus-leaf motifs, 18th century. (Author’s collection)
Peidao fittings are of two basic styles (Figs. 2 and 9). Fangshi (angular pattern) is characterized by a quadrangular cross-section to both hilt and scabbard (the latter having a chape or end-cap with flattened end) and was predominant through the end of the 18th century. Although yuanshi (round pattern) mountings with their oval cross-sections and rounded scabbard chapes are depicted in art as early as the late Ming, they did not become common during the Qing until the beginning of the 19th century, after which time they largely supplanted the fangshi in terms of popularity. Yuanshi fittings can have pommels which are either globular or hoof-shaped. Occasionally a transitional form of scabbard is seen, with a flattened-oval cross section but with a square end. Straight grips were the general rule until the late 18th century, after which slightly downward-curving handles gradually became the norm. The hilt is usually designed to accommodate one hand, although for the sake of additional leverage, many have a bit of additional length for the first two or three fingers of the other hand.

The wooden scabbards are typically covered in leather or polished ray skin. Lacquer was also used as a finishing medium, the usual colors being solid black or chestnut-brown. The scabbard is suspended from the belt by a hook connected to a pair of straps or cords attached to apertures in a bar (tiliang) held to the scabbard by two bands. Typically, the saber is worn with the hilt facing to the rear, to avoid it being tangled against the bow which was carried in a holster also worn on the left side (Fig. 1).

To draw the weapon, the left hand rotates the bottom of the scabbard rearward, bringing the hilt forward and allowing the blade to be unsheathed edge-up, which allows for quicker deployment for downward and lateral cuts. Seventeenth-century observers also describe blades drawn at waist-level behind the back.

The metal hardware itself may be of iron (more common before the end of the 18th century) or of bronze or brass, with occasional use of German silver. Weapons mounted up primarily for parade use were often fitted in gilt copper alloy, similar to the tombak used on Ottoman parade armor and maces (Figs. 4 and 10).
The ornamental repertoire is quite varied. Decorative details are frequently cast into copper or brass, finished by chasing, and often gilt. Alternatively, flat surfaces on brass or German silver fittings are chiseled or engraved. Iron mounts could be inlaid or overlaid with gold or silver (Fig. 8, far right), or left plain so that the primary appeal lay in the form of the pieces themselves. Especially prized by collectors are the openwork filigree fittings (loukong) in iron or brass. This pierced work comes in two principal varieties. The more common are curvilinear vegetal scrollwork of Indian and Tibetan (Figs 8 [left] and 9 [upper]) or Near Eastern (Fig. 9, lower) inspiration. Less frequently encountered are geometric motifs (Fig. 8, center).

As might be expected, the imagery of dragons pursuing the “wish-granting jewel” is often encountered on Chinese fittings, as are Buddhist elements such as lotuses and swastikas. Also seen with frequency is scrollwork depicting vine-like structures bearing palmette-shaped leaf sprays (Fig. 9, lower), or surface embellishments consisting of bundles of acanthus leaves (Fig. 8, far right). These arabesques hark back to classical Mediterranean civilization, and were introduced to western and central Asia with the spread of Hellenistic culture, and henceforth to China in conjunction with the spread of Buddhism in the early centuries of the common era. The glory days of Qing political might and military prowess faded with the close of the 18th century, and so did the excellence of the armorer’s craft in China. Although fine swords were still being made on occasion even into the early 20th century, the 19th saw an overall decline in manufacturing quality and artistic vigor. Officers’ weapons became more showy than functional, and décor was reduced to a limited number of pattern-book designs, mostly executed in an indifferent manner. Because of the tumult of China’s decline and transition from imperial to republican rule, many fine old sabers ended up in uncultivated hands and thus suffered the ravages of poor maintenance or repair, misuse, and neglect. To find a specimen in decent or restorable condition today is quite an accomplishment for the dedicated collector.
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MILITARY SABERS OF THE QING DYNASTY

by Philip M.W. Tom