



**Paul Martin**

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Volume 2, Issue 1

Newsletter Date :- January 2022

## Welcome to January issue of our newsletter

### Greetings and a Happy New Year!

As I write this month's newsletter, I am watching sunbeams of biblical proportions dance on the slopes of Mt. Fuji. The mists and clouds that thron through the other mountain ranges appear to me in the form of a fabulous hamon that has been brought to life. The end of the year has been rather quiet as I try to complete the first draft of my book, but despite the continuing saga of Covid and the sequel Omicron, life slowly seems to gaining some resemblance of, well... life. For the first time in two years I have been able to see some old friends and attend a couple of small end-of-year get togethers. The speed of the passing years seems to be spinning out of control as things that I think were recent events, turn out to be not so recent at all.

As we start the new year I still find myself in mourning of an old childhood friend who passed away a couple of months ago. They are sadly missed, and I am not sure things will ever be the same again. Yes, that's right. Although I get it, I'm still a bit put out by the killing off of James Bond.

### In the news

On January 6th 2021 NHK World Newsroom Tokyo included in their news a nine minute report an item all about our efforts with regard to our Shin-Gobankaji Project and the plight of all Japanese sword associated skills and crafts.



We also made Japanese NHK Matsue with a nine-minute segment, NHK World in December with a shorter version, and prior to that Sankei Shinbun National Newspaper. Hopefully, we are ringing the bell about the plight of the craft, and somebody might hear.

The English version of our fundraising site is now up and running, with some minor tech problems with regard to PayPal buttons and purchase pages still in Japanese.

On most browsers you can right click and select Translate to English. Hopefully this will allow donations to be processed.

Please have a look at the site by clicking on the link below.

<https://shingobankaji.hp.peraichi.com>

## Guest Author

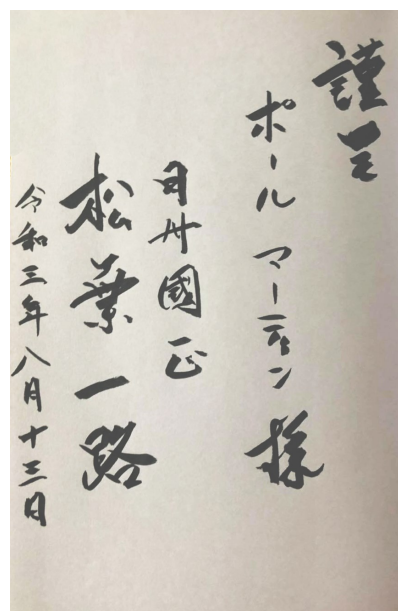
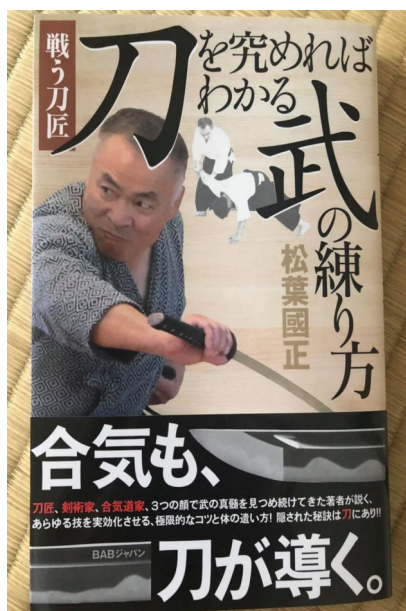


This newsletter also has a guest author, many of you know him as Master Swordsmith Matsuba Kunimasa, but he has now changed his name to Kagemasa.

I visited Matsuba san in his hometown of Hyuga in Miyazaki prefecture recently to take part in a talk show at an exhibition he was doing there. He also took me to some fantastic places around Miyazaki. He also gave me a signed copy of his latest book.

I first met Matsuba san not long after moving to Japan. The center of the sword world is Tokyo and there are many events taking place here. It

was a time when there were no splits in the organizations, so everyone would come together quite frequently. Matsuba san was also a part of the Murakumokai, group of swordsmiths who would collaborate exhibit together around Japan. I was asked to translate and make subtitles for two DVDs: one for the All Japan Swordsmith Association, and one for the Murakumokai. During this time, Matsuba san was very supportive of me. I will never forget his forthrightness and help.



Matsuba san loves his work and life. If you look at his Facebook photos (before Covid) he loves mixing with people from all around the world, and is very altruistic about the craft. He is a designated Master Swordsmith, but is also rare in that he is also an avid practitioner of Martial Arts. The amount of people that practice martial arts and study/work in swords is probably rarer that you might imagine. There are many high-level sword martial artists in Japan that are not knowledgeable about sword art history and manufacture etc. Conversely, the majority of sword and fittings lovers have little experience in martial arts.

If you are interested in commissioning a sword by Kunimasa/Kagemasa san, please feel free to contact us at [thejapanesesword.com](http://thejapanesesword.com).

## Japanese Style Swordmaking Outside Japan

I suffered a huge backlash about 8(?) years ago, when I commented on my own Facebook page that the proliferation of the mass marketing of Japanese style swords was having an effect on the Japanese sword economy. The problem was not so much the average person buying a \$300 USD 'Japanese style' sword, but people paying upper range prices for non-Japanese made folded steel-swords and kind of under the impression that they are getting a genuine Japanese sword or the same level of craftsmanship, when they are not. In fact for what they were paying, they could have gotten themselves a real Japanese sword.

Anyway, the backlash was quite severe, foreign sword forums with some not happy with the facts, and aspersions were cast that I was just trying to boost business, or I was in it for some financial gain, etc, etc. I also had some people uneducated in Japanese swords and Japanese culture trying to tell me how Japanese swords came from China, or how some Japanese martial arts sensei had remarked, "Sugoi!" (Amazing) about some swords made by someone not Japanese and with no training whatsoever in Japan.

Many non-Japanese who are not used to Japan, do not understand the nuances of Japanese politeness/flattery. Just to put this into perspective, when someone comes to Japan for the first time and they stutter the words, "Kon-Nii-chiii-Wa-!", more often than not, the Japanese person will tell you how great your Japanese is. However, once you have been here five or six years, and you think that your Japanese language skills are getting somewhere, that is the time when Japanese people tell you how bad your Japanese is, and that you really need to put some effort in. A thought that springs to mind is in an episode of Blackadder, where he tries to speak French, but his French adversary implores him to, "By all means kill me, but please don't murder my language!"

An aspect of Japanese humility is to constantly be surprised when someone not Japanese is interested in an aspect of Japan; language, history, swords, etc. Another example of Japanese politeness/flattery that is sometimes unwelcomed by certain expats is, "You use chopsticks very well!". Personally, I always see this as something positive, and that people are trying to be nice, as I know lots of people who struggle with chopsticks and Japanese food. However, a small segment of people see it as demeaning and feel slighted at the compliment.

I have personally found the vast majority of people in the Japanese sword world very welcoming. In the same vein that they are humbly surprised that you are interested in something Japanese, they will also help you very much if you show a sincere interest in something (but don't forget that five or six years in, you are expected to have improved considerably). However, the ratio of non-Japanese who go the distance compared to the number who come and take some skills/knowledge, and then pretty much disappear back to their own country is quite small. Traditional apprenticeships in Japan are tough, even for Japanese nationals.

Shortly before the writing my post on FB eight years ago, a swordsmith friend of mine had committed suicide, and around the same time two young smiths in Okayama had done the same. The catalyst was that in the space of a week, a couple of people had both posted pics of their 'Japanese sword collections' which were all Asian continent made and each sword was upwards in excess of \$1000 USD, to which my response was that for the money that collection had cost, they could have bought a single, real Japanese sword.

As I have a foot in both worlds, I am aware of several factors. I know backyard cutters and teenage kids are not going to fork out for real Japanese sword for the things that they want to do. I had cheap replica swords growing up too. However, around 2008, before the sword booms of *Token Ranbu* and the *Evangelion* exhibitions, etc, I had tried to get interest in publishing a modern sword craftsmen's meikan like the Ono Tadashi ones. At that time, there were something like 300 licensed smiths, 23 of which were mukansa, and there were two Living National Treasure swordsmiths (Amata Akitsugu and Osumi Toshihira).

Fast forward to the present, there are now only about 170 licensed smiths, and a severe lack of habaki makers and saya makers. The problem is very complex. It is not a simple answer of just changing the law to allow smiths to make more swords.

I also think that part of the problem is simply that the average Japanese person is under the impression that the craft of the sword is fine, due to the exposure of it in the media and movies, anime, etc. However, lots of *Sword Girls* (*Token Joshi*), and anime fans, et al, does not equate an improvement in the Japanese sword economy.

For a Japanese swordsmith's perspective on some of these issues, please see the following article.

## **Did Japanese Swords come from Korea? Absolutely not!**

By Master Swordsmith Matsuba Kunimasa



There is a certain group of Koreans who seem to want to rank everything and try to look down on everyone. They are promoting a theory that Japanese swords are a sub-class of Korean swords—just copies. There are some Japanese people who are unclear on history and that actually believe this argument, but that cannot be helped. It also seems to be a subject of no interest other than the parties concerned. A person of Japanese descent living in the United States said, "Japanese should be grateful to Koreans because they taught us how to make a Japanese swords". Of course, that is completely wrong. I took it upon myself to explain it to that person. However, I also have a Korean disciple (Fumitoshiki) Moon Jungi, so it may appear like I have betrayed Japan. So, I would like to take the opportunity to clarify the situation here.

About ten years ago, a young man, Moon Jungi, began studying swordmaking at my forge in Miyazaki, Kyushu. He had just graduated from college and finished his military service. I received an international call out of the blue from Jungi's father, who was a retired Army Lieutenant Colonel (Moon Hee Wan). He spoke in plain English, and asked me for my fax number. Shortly after, I received an enthusiastic fax saying that his son (Jungi) wanted to take a swordsmiths apprenticeship in Japan, and he also invited me to Korea. Around the same time, I had also seen an article on the internet stating that there was an exhibition of ancient Japanese, Korean, and Chinese swords on display at Korea University, Seoul. I wanted to see the exhibition, so I decided to take the opportunity and took the ferry to Korea.

I know that there is a novel idea that the origin of Japanese swords is unique to Japan, but from a common-sense point of view, there is no doubt that the roots of Japanese steelmaking and blacksmithing technology come to Japan via the Asian continent. However, compared to the abundant amount of ancient Japanese Jokoto and ken, there are very few extant traditional ancient Chinese and Korean swords. I have only seen those that excavated from ancient burial mounds. I had always wanted to see the Chinese and Korean swords that have been well polished and maintained. For example, I wanted to see the ones that had been properly cared for and passed down within the royal family. For that reason, I had high expectations for the exhibition. However, the swords in the exhibition, at best, dated back to the 15th century. Even the oldest swords in the Japanese section were only late Muromachi Period (16th C.) and some early Shinto swords. I was pretty disappointed.

Jungi studied sword making at my forge for about three years, but his ability is far from that of a licensed swordsmith. However, he seems to be still passionately working hard to try to recreate ancient Korean swords. His family business is called, Goryeo Swords (Korean Swords), a company that manufactures and sells swords. There seems to be an article on their site that says that the Japanese sword originates from South Korea, but at that is a considerable mistake, I will refute that in this essay here. I think that the best way in which to deal with such a problem is by refuting it this way in an essay, rather than contacting the person and asking them to remove the post.



Originally in Japan, even in the Jokoto sword period, Heian and Kamakura eras, at least a few thousand smiths were in existence. If you include all of the known Japanese swordsmiths up until the present day, it numbers around 150,000. Swords referred to as Nihonto (Japanese Swords) are not limited to being owned in Japan, there are about 3 million in existence that have been dispersed around the world.

In 1543, 2 arquebuses were introduced to Japan via the island of Tanegashima. Within a 20-year period, arquebuses were reproduced in tens of thousands across Japan. It is a fact that at that time, Japan became one of the world's leading military powers. Some people imagine the roots of Japanese swords in the same way. However, I think it is natural to think that because Japanese swordsmiths already in possession of the steel technology and had exceptional skills, that the difficult task of gun making was able to spread much more quickly.

It is becoming clear from the ongoing research of the archeological sites that traces groups with steelmaking technology that would have migrated from the southern part of the Korean Peninsula in the 5th and 6th centuries. At that time, the movement of that technology was only possible by people who had it. It was not possible to transfer technology in the ancient past in the same way it is transferred now in modern times.

In other words, the ironmaking method was not taught by use of data such as letters, numbers, and figures. Traces of migrants with iron-making know-how trying to make iron using furnaces of the same type as used in the Korean Peninsula, but using iron ore from Japan can be seen in various parts of the Chugoku region of Japan (modern day Hiroshima, Okayama, Shimane, Tottori and Yamaguchi Prefectures). From those archeological sites, the following 100 years onwards shows the development of that technology, using Japanese high-quality iron sand, and can be linked to the development of the modern tatara iron making process.

#### **Point of Note 1.**

It is illogically that the ironworks of the Japanese archipelago originated in South Korea. It is becoming known that the origin of ironmaking is much older than that of the Korean Peninsula, dating back to 2000 BC, and seems to be from an ethnic group that lived around the Black Sea.

#### **Point of Note 2.**

Our ancestors are made up of many migrants from the peninsula and continent, who would have become completely assimilated with the ancient Japanese over generations. In the first place, there would be no distinctions such as Korea and Japan in ancient times, and the spread of culture and civilization is probably the result of the movement of the people of that era.

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I think that this discussion is complete nonsense and is more about ethnic superiority complex/inferiority complex than swordmaking. In both the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese Archipelago, centuries of hard work by the people involved in steelmaking have resulted in the production of excellent iron, is it not? There is a time lag of 200 to several hundred years in the transmission of iron between the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese archipelago, but I think "So what?" It is a historical fact that the ironmaking method that is suited to the climate of the Japanese archipelago was created after years of trial and error is proven by the shining example of millions of extant Japanese swords.

However, it is natural to think that blacksmiths who used iron also came from the Korean Peninsula. There is also a description about Karakanuchi (Kan Smiths) in the Kojiki (7th C.). Forging of steel was not common in China until the Han dynasty (202 BC-220 AD), and it is said that weapons were mostly made of bronze instead of iron. In ancient China, the Chinese character for 'iron' was also used, but ancient Chinese iron was brittle and rusted easily and was probably even regarded as rough among the metals available at the time. Since high carbon steel production was possible in China from early on, the carbon content of cast iron (cast iron = high carbon content and brittleness) would have to be reduced. The majority of metal production is steel (Many iron products are steel, modern cars are made from sheets of steel, reinforcing bars, edged tools, and of course weapons are also made of steel.) It would seem that blacksmiths of that period would have had to put in a considerable amount of effort to produce steel.

It also seems that it was the ironware (especially the iron) used by the Xiongnu (Hun), or the tribes of the Northern Horsemen, is what made them as strong as they were. It is thought that there are many elements of northern steelmaking and blacksmithing technology that were transmitted to the Japanese archipelago. Naturally, that steelmaking technology was also transmitted directly to the Korean Peninsula, and the forging technology (refining method) was possibly different to that of China.

In particular, the transition from the (Korean?) peninsula-type kiri-ha chokoto (straight tachi) to the shinogi-zukuri curved Japanese sword (tachi), was seen when the Yamato court invaded northern Japan. It is thought that this was the result of realizing the advantages of the curved sword in their battles with the Ezo (Ainu) who fought using warabite-to that have angular hilt sections. There are also kenukigata-tachi that are thought to be a transitional sword from the kiri-ha straight blades into curved Japanese swords. A major feature of kenukigata-tachi is that the hilt section and sword blade are all made from metal. It is the same with warabite-to, but you will find that this is the only point in common with kenukigata-tachi and that other than that warabite-to are quite different to the previous chokoto.

The hilt of the old kiri-ha swords was made by wrapping ray-skin (samekawa) around an attached wooden cored handle, just like the swords of later generations. I think that the kenukigata-tachi would have out-performed the relatively short warabite-to on the battlefield. The kenukigata-tachi with the tweezer shaped cut-out in the tang was probably to reduce shock on the hand at the time of impact. I assume the later shift to a wooden cored hilt was because the burden on the hands over a prolonged period in battle. I guess that they learned from experience by repeated trial cutting just by wrapping cloth around the bare nakago. The role of the handle is to make it easy to use in battle. This is a very important point.



When I first saw the giant iron Buddha statue on display at the National Museum in Seoul, I was surprised at the high level of casting technology. It is from the 10th to 11th centuries around the same time when the Japanese sword appeared. It appears that the level of steelmaking technology on the Korean Peninsula was also quite high.

However, Japanese tatara steelmaking (direct to steel production method = the desired carbon content of the iron is obtained by a reduction method that produces a bloom steel with a carbon content of around 1%. The produced steel is then forged as is, refining it into useful steel) differs from the pig iron manufacturing method (a large amount of carbon is dissolved as a reduction reaction at a high temperature. If there is a high carbon content, the melting point drops and it tends to become liquid. This liquid iron is called cast iron (zuku), and is difficult to forge as it is. Generally, it is then decarburized and converted to steel for processing.) I haven't read the literature about that area, and I have no knowledge at all, but I have seen a restored relatively large circular single nozzled (tuyere) furnace of a Korean researcher. In principle, it was close to a modern blast furnace, and it seems that it was a pig iron making furnace. The furnace wall was 3 meters high and the inner diameter was close to 1 meter. Even if charcoal was used as fuel, it would have been possible to obtain a considerably high temperature.

For over 1000 years, the Japanese have imported goods and have taken good care of them. Not only with goods, but also with people from afar. It is recorded in Japan's oldest historical documents about the surprising amount immigrants to Japan and their great successes in the old imperial court. It took hundreds of years to create the original Japanese people and Japanese culture, who were undoubtedly shaped by the nature, climate, and spirit of the Japanese archipelago and the Japanese people themselves.

I think that the Rai school of swordsmiths who were active in Kyoto during the Kamakura period, were proud of their immigrant ancestors. However, Japanese curved swords produced by the Yamato, Ko-Bizen, and Ko-Hoki schools had already existed since the Heian period, more than 100 years before the Rai school even appeared.

The transmission of technology moved with the migration of people. The Japanese sword and its various features (Jigane, Hamon, etc) developed over hundreds of years in the Japanese archipelago. It was not introduced from Korea. I would like you to know that the Japanese sword is a rare weapon in that one of its requirements as a sword is intrinsic beauty. It was created in the spirit of the Japanese people in which beauty is of great value.

For all people who love Japanese swords, mankind is a descendant of a new type of human being born in Africa. We are better than those who spend their lives judging other people. It is better to stop that kind of behavior.

## **Matsuba Kagemasa (formerly Kunimasa), Nov 2021**

### **Master Japanese Swordsmith**

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#### **While you are here...**

We need your help. This is one of the most audacious projects in recent sword making history. The craft has gone through ebbs and flows in its long history, and currently we are in rather fragile downtrend. Japanese sword making is not only made up of swordsmiths. It is a team of different crafts that depend on one and other. If one of the crafts disappears, or a set of skills, the whole chain becomes perilous. This is not a void that can be filled by amateur craftsmen from abroad or domestically. There are traditions and canon to be followed and passed down from teacher to student. Reverse engineering and rebooting crafts from books are not going to fix the situation unless you have a solid background already in those traditional crafts.

The loss of any of these skills is also going to affect the stability of old swords too. For example, there is currently quite a severe lack of habaki and scabbard makers. These items are also very important for the preservation of swords of antiquity. The problem simply does not lay in changing the law to allow sword makers to produce more swords. The situation is much more complex than that. Even if it was changed, making three or four swords per month while maintaining the artistic integrity and quality control of blades would be quite challenging for most smiths. In my opinion the biggest problem is that nobody seems to be aware of the plight of the craft. I am sure that no one would want to see it in trouble, and by raising awareness the situation may begin to take steps to resolve the current problems.

We need your help. We will soon be opening English language pages to allow crowd funding for the Shin-Gobankaji Project internationally. Funds raised will establish the important data of representative works from each successive imperial era onwards, that will possibly become the standard for appraisal of works from the Showa period onwards in the future. As well as, information boards on important sword related sites (starting with Emperor Gotoba) in English for visitors to Japan. As many of you are aware, we are merely the custodians of swords for our generation, and pass them onto the next generation in the best condition possible to try and successfully preserve them as far into the future as possible.

The same applies to the support of the traditional crafts. As individuals, we may not be able to afford to purchase a single sword by a Japanese swordsmith, but we can come together as a collective to make a difference. As the current generation, we naturally bear the responsibility to try to support these crafts so that they can be passed successfully on to future generations. If any of the sword making crafts was to disappear under our watch, it would be a great shame. Your donation counts and will make a difference. If you cannot afford to make a donation, then please help by spreading awareness by sharing the flyers, posts, and this newsletter to interested parties.



**Thank you very much for your consideration.**



## EMPEROR GOTOKU SHIN-GOBANKAJI

### An Elite Group of Modern Master Swordsmiths

This year is the 800th anniversary of Emperor Gotoku's arrival on the Oki islands. A sword enthusiast, he invited the best swordsmiths in the land to the imperial palace in monthly rotation, and even took part in making and quenching them himself. These smiths became known collectively as the

Gobankaji. The Shin-Gobankaji project aims to recreate a modern Gobankaji with an elite group of swordsmiths who represent the pinnacle of the craft in Japan today. They will create modern masterpieces that will be dedicated to the spirit of Emperor Gotoku in Oki Shrine, Oki Island, Shimane Prefecture, while preserving and passing on these ancient traditions into the future.

Crowd funding

## 16th Oct - 12th Jan

The project will launch on October 16, 2021 (JST) with a ceremonial sword forging demonstration in front of Oki Shrine by master swordsmith, Sadatoshi Gassan, to be streamed live around the world.

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A new generation of Gobankaji smiths arise in the sacred lands of Emperor Gotoba and swords...

## Emperor Gotoba

Known for his brilliance in all things, the cloistered Emperor Gotoba was especially known for his love of waka poetry and swords. It is thought that his participation in sword making had such an effect on sword making that it is the reason that Japanese swords are so well-known throughout the world today. After the Jokyu Rebellion of 1221 he was exiled to the Oki Islands, Shimane prefecture, where he spent the remainder of his life.



## The Shin-Gobankaji Project

This year is the 800th anniversary of Emperor Gotoba's arrival on the Oki islands. In commemoration of this historical event, we are holding several events in the hope to propel Emperor Gotoba's legacy another 800 years into the future. For that reason, we have created the Shin (new) Gobankaji project to celebrate Emperor Gotoba and his love of Japanese swords. The project hopes to revive the Gobankaji in the form of masterpiece swords made by modern master swordsmiths for dedication to Emperor Gotoba.

## SADATOSHI GASSAN Creation of the First Shin-Gobankaji Sword

Sadatoshi Gassan has won many special awards at national competitions (Prince Takamatsu Award, Agency for Cultural Affairs Chairman's Award, Kanzan Sato Award and more). Designated a master smith at the age of 36, he is the fifth-generation head of the Osaka Gassan school famous for its Ayasugi, or Gassan-hada pattern in the surface steel of the blades. He has made swords for shrines and temples, Yokozuna Sumo wrestlers, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the New York Metropolitan Museum.

## Paul Martin Japanese Sword Curator

Paul Martin, the founder of the Emperor Gotoba Shin-Gobankaji Project, is a former curator of Japanese arms and armor at the British Museum. He is also a recognized specialist by the Ministry of Land Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLT) and a trustee of the Society for the Promotion of Japanese Sword Culture (NBSK).



## Further Information

For more information on the Shin-Gobankaji Project and Crowdfunding site and media pages, please follow our official Instagram, Twitter and Facebook pages where we will give daily updates on the status of the project.



Web site



National Line



October 16, 2021 (JST)  
Streamed live



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## Closing comments

Thank you for wanting to be a part of my journey and subscribing to my newsletter. Hopefully, together we can make a difference help this art and craft that we all love, by taking the joint responsibility as the current generation of sword enthusiasts and supporting the traditional craftsmen in Japan, and their intangible skills and safely pass them onto future generations intact.

Until next month...

Paul Martin

