



Traditional Eastern Sword Types

From Samurai and Ninjas to Ancient China

Ever wondered about the different types of swords?
What they are and how to tell them apart?

In this unique step-by-step guide, we go in detail about the different types of swords. We give easy ways to tell them apart, as well as delve into their histories.

- The BladesPro Team

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There are 5 main types of Samurai Swords, 2 types of Chinese swords, and the Ninja sword.

Samurai Swords

Samurai Swords come in 5 different types. We will explore them from smallest to largest.

Tanto

Size: 1 Shaku in length (up to 30cm), with some styles being unusually long (up to 40cm).



Tantos were originally developed between 794 to 1185 AD. Unlike most knives, they are designed to also be stabbing weapons, thus they are often referred to as a type of dagger.

The Tanto was often combined with the Tachi to form a daishō (big-little pair of weapons). As was common in Japan, weapons designed in peacetime were often made to be ornate works of art as well as weapons, and Tantos were no exception. However, when Japan entered the time period of the Northern and Southern courts, fighting dramatically increased, and the resulting demand for Tantos meant that knives were made to be

functional only and their blades were generally of less quality than the blades made in previous eras.

After the reunification of Japan, there was a period of peace during which the Katana and Wakizashi were invented, causing the demand for Tantos to drop dramatically and few were produced, and the ones that were were copies of those made in earlier eras. The Tanto experienced a resurgence before WWII when the empire was restored, and members of the Imperial Court once again began wearing the Tachi-Tanto pair. After WWII, demand again fell as the government restricted sword forging but has since seen a recent rise, as interest in Japanese culture from the West has created a new demand for Tantos.

There was a special type of Tanto worn by women, the Kaiken. They were usually slightly smaller (25cm) than the normal Tantos and were used primarily for self-defense but would be used rarely for ritual suicide by slashing the veins in the left side of the neck. When a woman married, she was expected to carry one with her when she moved into her husband's house. It was typically worn in the Kimono in either a pocket or sleeve-pouch.

Wakizashi

Size: 1-2 shaku (30.3cm to 60.6cm)



The Wakizashi was a shortsword typically carried with a Katana by Samurai as part of a daishō (set of two swords: one long, one short). It served multiple purposes including serving as a temporary replacement for the Katana in case of breakage, beheading opponents, and allowing ritual suicide.

Unlike Katana, Wakizashi could be worn indoors when entering a palace or castle. It could also be used for combat when paired with a Katana in the Two Heavens technique. A Wakizashi is worn on the left side of the bearer.

Katana

Size: 2+ Shaku (60.6+ cm)

Japanese Samurai carried Katanas as sidearms, similar to how officers in the West often carried swords, even after the event of firearms. They were a mark of identity and not normally used as primary weapons. However, they served as a secondary weapon that could be used in a pinch if the main weapon were damaged or destroyed. Thus, they were made to be easy to draw and strike with one fluid motion.



Soldiers in Japan wore uniforms that were made mostly of cloth or leather, with not much metal, at least until the introduction of guns. Relatively shortly after firearms were introduced by the Portuguese, Japan entered a peaceful period and duels became more common than actual fights. Because of this, Katanas were used mainly against lightly armoured or unarmoured opponents, and their design reflected that.

Tachi

Size: 2-3 Shaku (60.6cm to 90.9 cm)



Tachi swords were originally developed around 900 AD and commonly made until about 1600. They are slightly longer than a Katana, the sword to which they are most often compared. However, there are other differences between the two. Both the Katana and Tachi are curved, but the curvature of the Tachi is greater. Additionally, Tachi are worn with the cutting edge down, while Katana are worn with the cutting edge up. Because a swordsmith's signature would be put on the side of

the tang facing outward when worn on the wielder's left side, this difference in wearing style meant that the swordsmith's signature on a Tachi and Katana are on opposite sides of the tang.



Because of its greater length than the Katana, the Tachi has been suggested to have been used as more of an open-field weapon. In combat, the person whose weapon has the greater reach almost always has the advantage, so the Tachi with its longer length would have been preferred. However, it would be less effective in more closed-in spaces. A further suggested use of the Tachi would have been its use on horseback, as longer reach is even more important for cavalry, and the cutting edge worn down would seem to fit the needs of a horseman more. However, we lack early contemporary references to horseback combat, so we don't know for sure.

Odachi

Size: 3+ Shaku (90.9+ cm)



The larger version of the Tachi, the Katana's predecessor, was the Ōdachi. Meaning "Long Sword", it commonly reached lengths of 90-100cm or more. There were two main uses of the Ōdachi - war and showmanship. As less is known about the Ōdachi compared to the Tachi, we have to make some educated speculation on how it was likely used.

While a Katana or Wakizashi can be drawn in one smooth stroke that can also be used as an attack, the Ōdachi's size would have necessitated it being worn on the back, preventing this. It would also limit the Ōdachi's self-defense proclivity, instead making it more useful as a primary weapon on the battlefield. Some soldiers may have even been accompanied by a retainer whose job was to carry the blade and assist the Samurai in drawing it. One place it would have especially shined is as a horseback weapon - the longer reach offered by the blade would have given the horseman an advantage against foes on foot.

A few Ōdachi were made especially long - some over two metres, with the Norimitsu Ōdachi measuring over 3 and three-quarters metres!. These would have been too impractical for use on the battlefield, so they were more likely created as showpieces by their forgers. When a sword is forged, it is important that the entire blade be heated to the same temperature. While fairly easy today with modern technology, back then it was incredibly difficult, and this difficulty increased with the length. Thus, only an expert swordsmith could make a high-quality Ōdachi.

Ninja



The most unique of the Samurai Swords, the ninja swords (also known as ninjatō, ninjaken or shinobigatana) are the legendary swords supposedly wielded by the Shinobi of feudal Japan. The sword is heavily featured in popular culture and synonymous with black-clad warriors sneaking through the shadows to silently dispatch foes. In modern times the ninja sword is used by practitioners of ninjutsu, which includes Masaaki Hatsumi. However,

historically there is little in the way of physical evidence to support the fact that these swords were used by ninja. That hasn't made them any less popular, however.

The design of the Ninja sword (Ninjatō) is typically shorter than a Katana, with a straight blade, and having a square guard. The reason for Ninja choosing this sword over a Katana is largely speculative, with some theories suggesting the shorter sword was better for quick draws and strikes, allowing for the Ninja to defeat the target before they could even react.

Chinese Swords

In ancient China, there were five main weapons. Chinese swords were two of them, along with the spear, halberd, and staff. The two Chinese swords were the Jian and the Dao.

Jian

Type: Double-Edged, straight



Originally descended from daggers, they were the first type of sword in China. Because of the poor swordsmithing techniques available at the time, they were not considered very reliable as they tended to break easily - not desired behaviour in a weapon one's life depends upon. They were also hard to use, requiring much training to become proficient. An old saying was that the Dao took a day to learn, the spear a week, and the Jian a year. Thus, when the Dao came along, the Jian were quickly supplanted

for use by common soldiers, though they remained popular with masters. Needless to say, with modern swordsmithing, Jian swords are much more reliable, though they still require training to use effectively.

Dao

Type: Single-Edged, often curved



Dao swords are single-edged and usually curved. They were created as swordsmithing advanced, and it was discovered that dulling one of the sides of the Jian and thickening it would increase its reliability. As Japanese swordsmiths received much of their early swordsmithing knowledge from China, some people say that the Dao influenced the Japanese toward making their renowned Katana and Wakizashi. Because of its relative ease of use compared to the

Jian, the Dao quickly became a favourite in battle, and the Jian fell out of favour except by officials and experts.

Conclusion

You now should have a better understanding of the different types of Eastern Swords. If you have any further questions, we are always happy to help , and you can [check out our swords here](#).

Want to learn more or buy your very own sword?
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Thanks for reading, and have fun looking at swords!

- The BladesPro Team