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# NEWSLETTER

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## Real-life *kantei* of swords, Part 2: Unlisted smiths and undecipherable inscriptions

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In a previous article, (Coutinho 2010) it was argued that in the sense of identifying the smith who made a given sword described in a journal, "paper" *kantei*, is only possible for typical works of top-ranked smiths. For real-life *kantei*, in the case of run-of-the-mill smiths, one encounters all types of difficulties. This article presents two examples of unlisted smiths: a problem that is not so rare. Unlisted smiths are smiths that are not listed in the book *Nihon To Meikan* by Honma and Masakuni (2010). This book is a swordsmith directory with more than 23,000 makers and is considered to be the bible of the Japanese swordsmiths.

There are two types of unlisted smiths' swords. The first type is a sword made by a smith who really existed, signed and made the sword being examined. This type is a **genuine** sword by an unlisted smith. The second type is a sword that was originally *mumei* on which someone inscribed a spurious signature of an imaginary smith. This is just an ordinary forgery – that is a *gimei* sword. (See Tanobe (2009) page 45 for a comment on imaginary smiths.) Thus, when confronted with a sword suspected to be made by an unlisted smith it is necessary to proceed as if characterizing a *mumei* sword. This is done by checking to see if the inscription on the sword is compatible with references collected from books.

### First Sword

The first sword under investigation is by an unlisted smith. It is unusual in that it has an inscription on the *ura* side of the *nakago*. The inscription on the *ura* can be read *kanji* by *kanji* but does not make sense. So in the case of this sword there are two problems. First, it is necessary to determine whether the sword is **genuine**. Three elements will help in deciding when the sword was made, the Province where it was made, and the School of the smith who made it. Second, once the three



aforementioned elements have been identified, it will be necessary to decide whether the inscription is compatible with these findings? The second problem with this particular sword is understanding the meaning of the inscription on the *ura* side of the *nakago*.

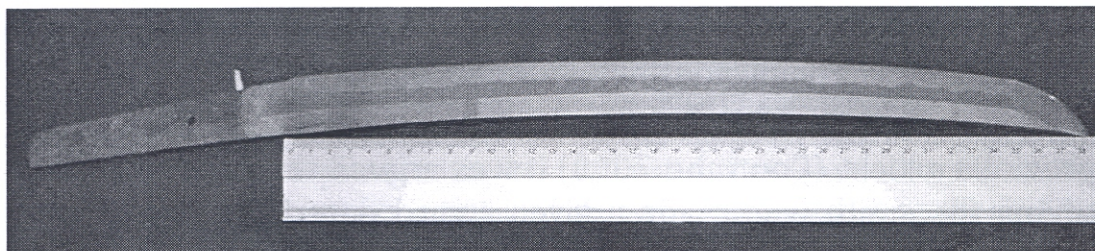


Figure 1

Table 1: Sword measurements

Nagasa: 38.2 cm	Sori: 1.0 cm
Moto haba: 3.0 cm	Saki haba: 2.3 cm
Moto kasane: 0.7 cm	Saki kasane : 0.7 cm
Kissaki nagasa: 3.5 cm	Nakago nagasa: 13.5 cm

The signature on the *omote* reads *Ho Shu Takada Ju Mune Nori*. On the *ura* there is an inscription that can be read as *Ko Dai Te Un Shi* (using the Sino-Japanese pronunciation-ON ).



Photographs of the *omote* and the *ura* side of the *nakago* are presented in Figures 2 and 3. These images are life-size.





The *haba* of the sword does not taper appreciably when going from the base (*moto haba*) to the point (*saki haba*). The *kissaki* is a little extended, but not much, and there is a tendency to *saki sori*. So this sword has a shape that is compatible with being made between 1600 C.E. to 1610 C.E. that is, the end of the *Keicho* sword era. It is also compatible with being made after the *Genroku* period that occurred just before the *Shinshinto* period.

The sword has a strong *itame hada* and the hamon is a *notare suguha* made in *nioi*, sprinkled with *nie*. The sword is well-made but there are no notable points in the activities that could identify the maker or even the Province where it was made, except perhaps that the *hamon* ends in a small *yakiotoshi*. (This old style is highlighted, in two of the three examples of *Takada* swords described in the book *Shinto Shu* by Fujishiro (1943).) The *yasurime* are *kate sagari* and the tip of the *nakago* is *iriyamagata*.

The signature says that the sword was made in *Bungo*, in particular, in the *Takada* School.

In review, here are the points in favor of the sword being made by a smith of the *Takada* School in *Bungo*:

- 1) The *hada* is compatible with the description of the *hada* of others smiths of the *Takada* School : a strong *itame*, covered with *ji-nie*.
- 2) The *hamon* in *nioi* is sprinkled with *nie*.
- 3) All *Takada* smiths use *kate sagari yasurime* just like this sword.
- 4) The tip of the *nakago* is *iriyamagata*. Figure 4 shows four *jiri* (tips of *nakago*) in swords made by *Takada* School smiths. The tip of the *nakago* of the present sword is very similar (perhaps even identical) with the tip of the *nakago* of some swords. All four were made by early Edo period smiths. The tips of the *nakago* of later smiths are more rounded.
- 5) The *kanji* **Mune** in the signature (**Munenori**) is used **exclusively** by *Takada* smiths. Hawley (Hawley 1981, page 546) lists 27 smiths that use this *kanji* **Mune** and they are **all** from *Bungo*. Of these smiths, 23 of them say



explicitly that they belong to the *Takada* School. (See also Yoshikawa (2006) and Turnbull (2002).)

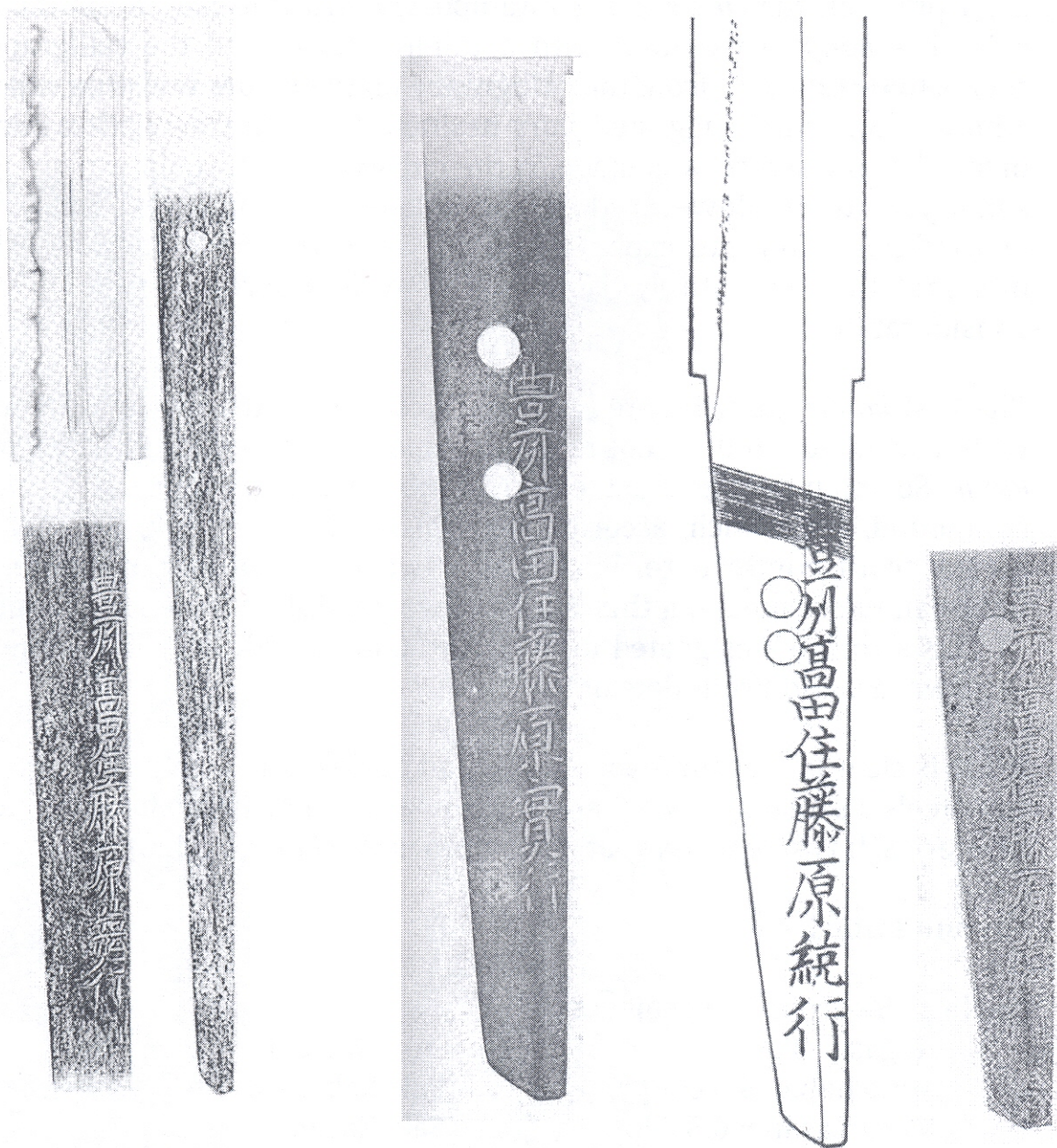


Figure 4

6) Finally, three experts in Japan were consulted about this signature. They all said that the signature looked good. Tanobe Michihiro in his article published in *MENOME* (Tanobe (2009)) commented that, with experience, one can feel that a signature is correct.



Consider the inscription on the *ura*. The experts consulted were unanimous in their inability to interpret it. It is quite possible that the inscription on the *ura* is not contemporary with the *mei* in the *omote* side. The *kanji* are written with a thinner chisel and the calligraphy seems to be different from the calligraphy on the *omote* side. One expert who was consulted suggested, very hesitantly, that the inscription might mean that the sword was made in the old style. This would explain the small *yakiotoshi*. However this is only one of an infinite number of possibilities. Alternate explanations are very possible. The following interpretation is entirely subjective and is offered here only for consideration.

The first *kanji* - *Ko* translates as **old**. According to the dictionaries that were consulted, *ko* does not form a compound word with the next two *kanji*. So its meaning must be **old**. The next two *kanji* can form a compound, *Ote*, which, according to Nelson (Nelson 1997, page 206), means **front castle gate**. Finally, the two last *kanji*, *Un*, meaning **to name** and *Kore* meaning **this**, suggest two possible translations, namely 1) This sword is designated to the Front Gate Guard or 2) The name of this sword is Old Front Gate of the Castle.

What is clear is that the sword is of good quality, sits nicely on the hand (one feels a sense of power) and has some romance in the form of small mysteries. It is safe to say that this sword is *shoshin* (genuine).

## Second sword

Table 2: Sword measurements

Nagasa: 41 cm	Sori: 0.9 cm
Moto haba: 3.0 cm	Saki haba: 2.6 cm
Moto Kasane: 0.5 cm	Saki Kasane : 0.4 cm
Kissaki Nagasa: 6.5 cm	Nakago Nagasa: 12.5 cm

The *haba* of this sword does not taper appreciably when going from the base (*moto haba*) to the point (*saki haba*). The *sori* is shallow, with a tendency to *saki sori* and the *kisaki* is large. The *hira niku* is not very pronounced. From the shape, one can confidently say that this sword was made at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, that is, at the beginning of the *Shinshinto* period. The *hada* is a well-grained *itame* with much *ji nie*. The



*hamon* is *gunome midare*, with a broad *habuchi* made of *nie*. There is a *yakidashi* at the *moto* that looks like the ones made by *Osaka* smiths. The *yasurime* is *sugikai* and the tip of the *nakago* is *iriyamagata*.

A photograph of the sword is shown in figure 5 and of its *nakago* in figure 6

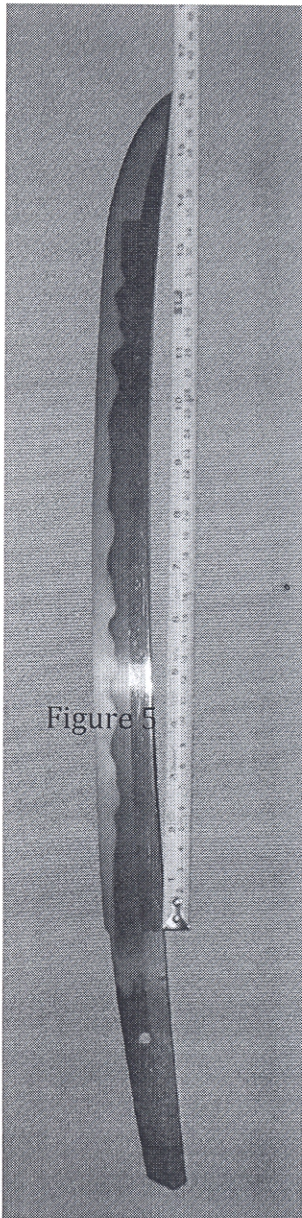


Figure 5

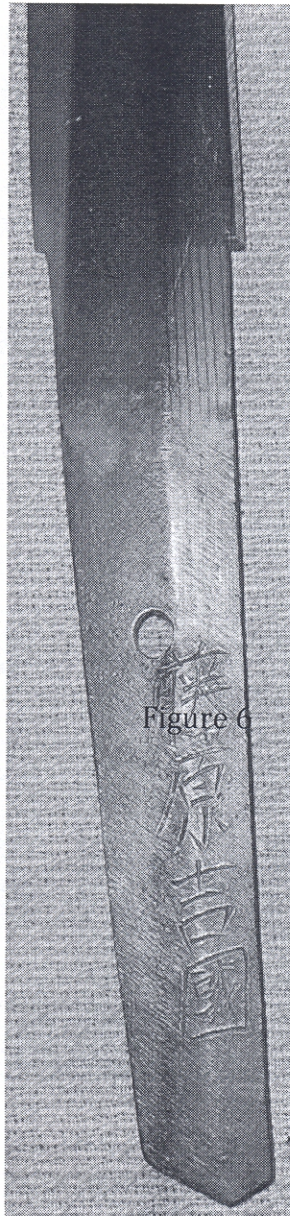


Figure 6



The signature on the *omote* reads *Fujiwara Yoshikuni*. There are many *Fujiwara Yoshikuni* listed in Hawley (1981), but the signatures are all longer than just *Fujiwara Yoshikuni*. Unfortunately there is no smith that signs only *Fujiwara Yoshikuni*. Either it may be concluded that the smith signed this particular sword in an abbreviated way or otherwise the smith will be identified as unlisted.

According to what was written before, one should now proceed as if the sword were *mumei* and try to identify to what School this smith belongs or at least in which Province the sword was made. In this case however, one has an opportunity to see what experts do when confronted with an unlisted smith. This sword has a certificate issued by *Shibata* (a well-known expert) that is shown in figure 7.

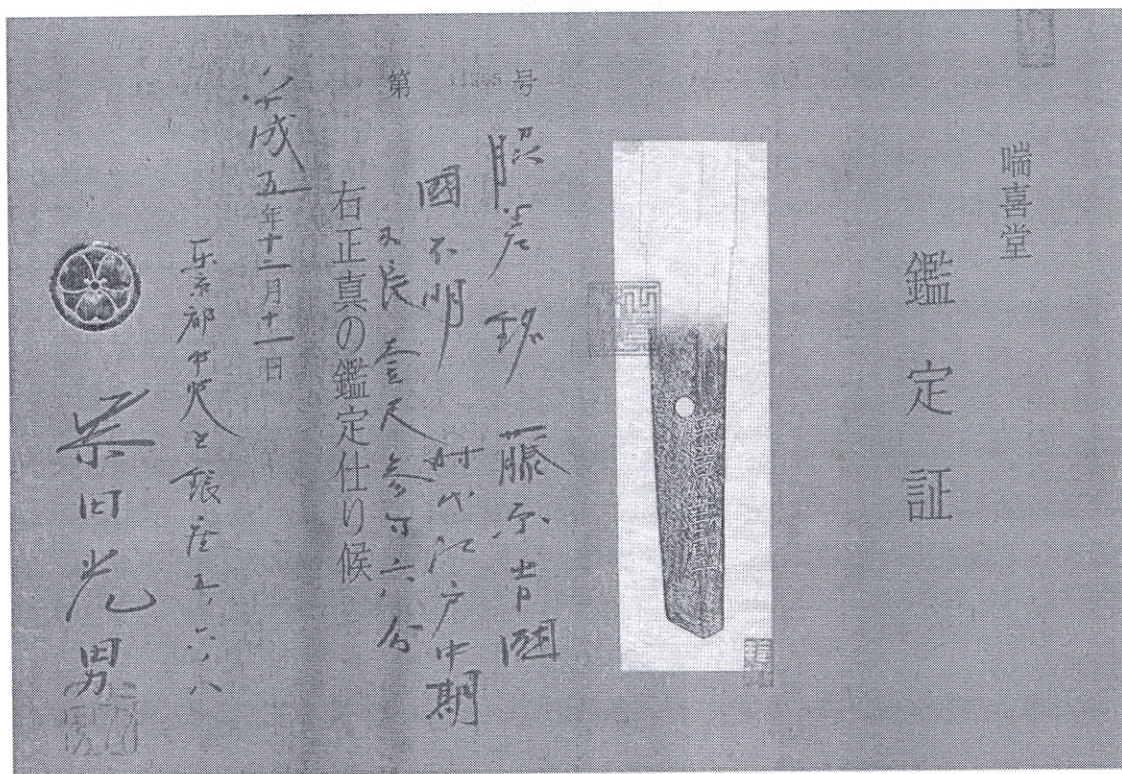


Figure 7

Figure 8 below shows each *kanji* in printed form. This makes it easier to understand the calligraphy of *Shibata sensei*.

The meaning of the certificate is as follows: **First, hand written column** : *Wakizashi Mei Fujiwara Yoshikuni* **Second, hand written column**: *Kuni* (Province), *Fumei* (unknown) and further down in the same column



*Jidai* (period of manufacture) - *Edo Chu Ki* (middle of the *Tokugawa* (Edo) era) **Third, hand written column:** *Nagasa one shaku three sun and six bu*. **Fourth, hand written column:** *Heisei fifth year 12 month 11 day* **Fifth, hand written column:** An address **Sixth, hand written column:** *Shibata Mitsuo* Finally the fourth **printed column** the sword is certified as **genuine (Sho Shin)**

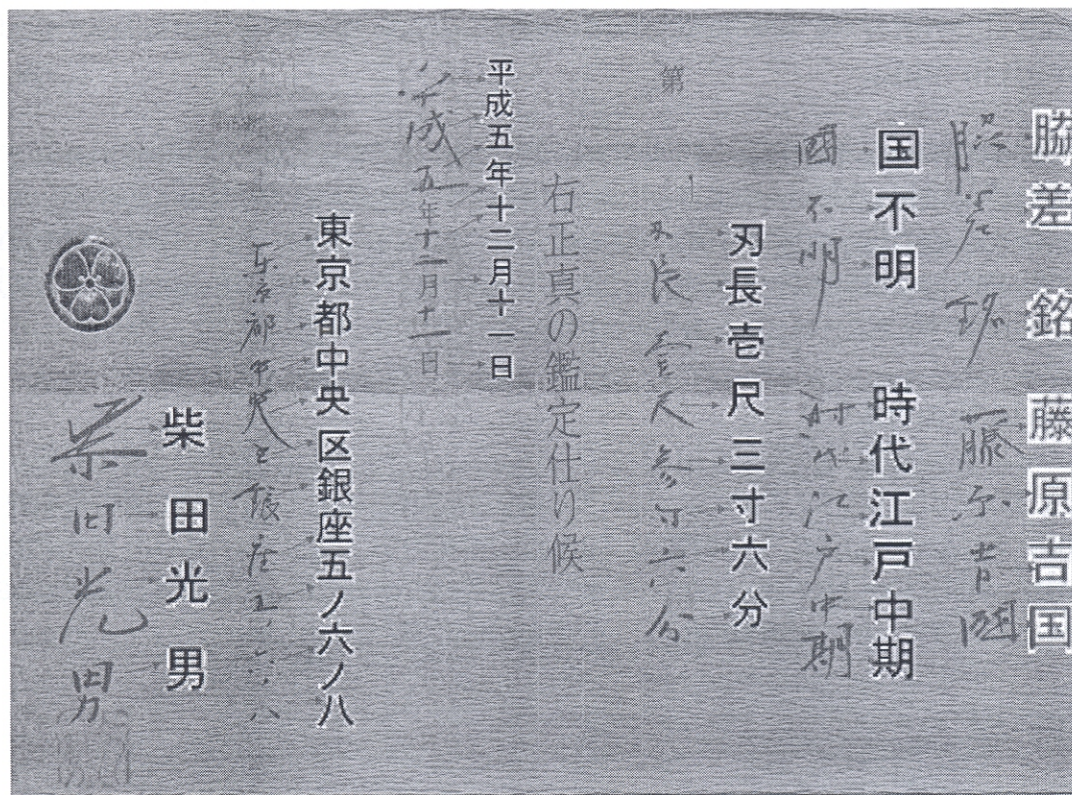


Figure 8

The above certificate outlines the opinion of an expert. As a result, one can say that the sword is definitely **genuine**.

However, it is frustrating not to proceed and try to identify the Province (*kuni*) where it was made. The following is the author's reasoning for the determination of Province. The sword has very characteristic signs in the *hamon*; for example, it has a clearly visible *yakidashi* of the type that text books described as being from *Osaka* (that is *Settsu* province). The *gunome-midare hamon*, suggestive of the *Soshu-Den* looks like the *hamon* of *Echigo (no) Kami Kanesada*. Consequently, this smith could be from *Osaka* from the School of *Kanesada (Echigo (no) Kami)*, also known as *Terukane*.



Consultation with Fred Weissberg suggested that one should not base arguments solely on hamon as there were many *Shinshinto* smiths who made *Osaka*-like hamon. Further, research on the *mei Yoshikuni* (Hawley 1981) suggests a probable period of manufacture of 1750-1830. Unfortunately during that production period there is no *Yoshikuni* from *Settsu (Osaka)*. A suitable candidate was found in the smith who signed *Sasaki Fujiwara Yoshikuni Saku Kore* (Hawley 1981 page 957). The Province in which he worked is unknown. Perhaps Shibata sensei had this smith in mind.

The above two examples illustrate the steps to follow when encountering this kind of problem (unlisted smiths) in the process of *kantei* for swords created by run-of-the-mill smiths. The problem of unlisted smiths is one that is often faced when trying to *kantei* some real swords made by run-of-the-mill smiths.

### Acknowledgments

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According to *Yoshikawa Kentaro Sensei* the *Takada* school was extremely  
prosperous during the period of the famous Christian daimyo *Otomo*  
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