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Cutting Sword or Concealment

WHY NOT BOTH?

BY JERRY AHERN
PHOTOS BY SHARON AHERN



I have a fondness for concealed weapons. The ultimate combination of concealed weapons and swords is the sword cane. Generally, we think of the sword cane as something in the hands of a westerner, perhaps a dapper Englishman or a crafty European spy.

But human nature is human nature wherever you are—in the West or in the East. And the circumstances that compel good people to hide the fact that they are armed—sometimes even from established authority—knows no international boundaries.

Such was the case in Japan centuries ago, when a victorious warlord would initiate a *katanagari* (sword hunt) so that no new enemies could rise up against him. Soldiers were sent out to confiscate every sword they could find. Such a sword hunt took place as the stage was being set for the Tokugawa shogunate, which would last for nearly 300 years and more sharply define Japanese feudalism than before or since. At the summit of Japan's political structure in the early 1600s was the emperor, but the emperor was the most royal of royals and a religious figure as well, yet, he was someone who did not do the day-to-day governing.

“Both the Zatoichi stick sword and the Cormorant’s Neck Katana from CAS Hanwei proved to be excellent swords—finely made and offer outstanding value.”

The emperor appointed a *shogun*. Starting in 1600, the Shogunate endured until 1868, some say 1867. By the time Tokugawa shogunate was ending and the Meiji restoration era began, Japan was modernizing and governments entered modernization in the form of keeping people who have been armed from continuing to be armed.

By 1876, Japan's traditional love affairs with feudalism and the sword were officially decreed as over. Samurai were forbidden to wear their swords. There were two approaches for the swordsman to remain armed in defiance of the law: One was to dismount the *tsuka* (handle) and the *tsuba* (guard) from

Sword—

The Zatoichi sword stick is well-made, and the casual observer might not realize a blade was concealed inside. This sword stick from CAS Hanwei is a surprisingly fine value for the money, and Ahern strongly recommends it.

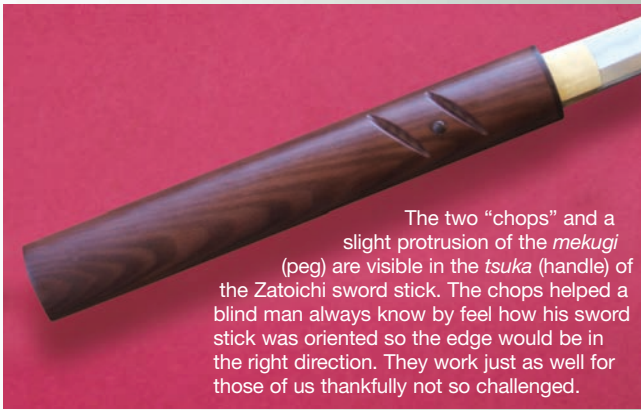


The blade of the Zatoichi swordstick is exposed, edge up. Not usually as effective as a katana, Zatoichi's sword, like this one from CAS Hanwei, made up for its straight blade with high-quality manufacturing. Ahern met Paul Chen, the driving force behind CAS Hanwei, at the June 2010 Blade Show in Atlanta. Chen's reputation for quality is stellar.

his katana and have a sword stick built where both the *saya* (scabbard) and the *tsuka* were made from the same piece of wood and the joint artfully disguised. The trouble was, the classic sword of the samurai, the katana, was curved, and walking sticks, or staves, were generally straight. To truly conceal being armed, what was needed was a straight blade, unlike the katana, and more like the *ninjato* (straight-blade ninja sword).

Katana weren't curved just for style. The curve was a natural result of differential tempering, part of the very means by which the katana derived its almost mythic resiliency. Ninja swords were straight for a reason, too. They weren't as expensive and weren't as well-made. But, a straight blade made for a vastly better sword stick. With customary Japanese attention to detail, such a *shikomi tsue* (cane sword) could be made to look like any tree (English, handmade wooden implement). The joint between the *tsuka* and the *saya* could be all but invisible after the work of a master craftsman was completed. It is this concept—a *shikomi tsue* that looks like an ordinary walking stick, *a la* the sword canes of Europe and the Americas that inspired the weapon of one of fiction's most





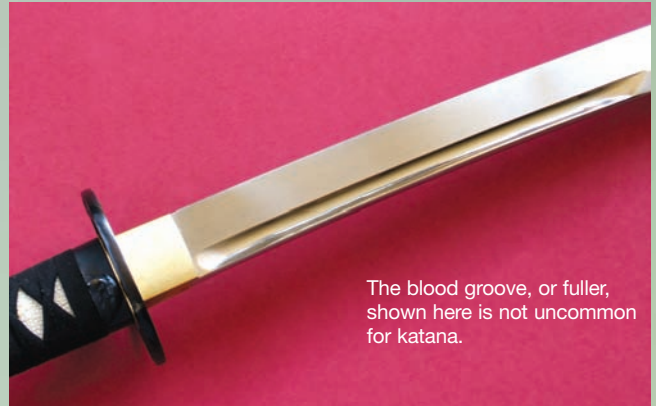
The two "chops" and a slight protrusion of the *mekugi* (peg) are visible in the *tsuka* (handle) of the Zatoichi sword stick. The chops helped a blind man always know by feel how his sword stick was oriented so the edge would be in the right direction. They work just as well for those of us thankfully not so challenged.



The *hamon*, (temper line) of the Zatoichi sword stick is a good-looking feature. The sword is very light and would be very fast to use in an armed encounter.



The *tsuka* of the Raptor Cormorant Katana is attractively decorated with a feather motif in lieu of the more customary *menuki*. The *tsuka* is double pegged to the full-length tang of the Raptor, this formidable sword built for tough cutting work.



The blood groove, or fuller, shown here is not uncommon for katana.



The Raptor in its *saya*, its *sageo* (cord) beneath it

revered warriors, the blind Japanese swordsman, Zatoichi.

The story of Zatoichi is set near the end of the Tokugawa Shogunate, otherwise known as the Edo period. Edo is the name of the capitol city that would come to be known as Tokyo, from which the shogun ruled while Kyoto was the splendiferous seat of the emperor.

Zatoichi is blind. He earns his living as a masseur and a gambler. Zatoichi was a minor character found in the writing of Shimozawa Kan, as I understand it. Minor characters have a tendency of asserting

themselves, as any author might admit. Between 1962 and 1989, 26 films and a 112-episode television series were based on Zatoichi. Zatoichi is a wanderer, not at all unlike the classic cowboy character set in the Old West. And as is often the case with the cowboy character, Zatoichi has a past. Instead of being lightning-quick with a Colt Peacemaker, Zatoichi was deadly with a sword. Zatoichi's sword was straight-bladed, a *shikomitsu*. Like the fictional cowboys who wandered the celluloid and printed page of the West, Zatoichi protects the innocent and fights

against impossible odds. What he lacks visually, because of his blindness, he makes up for with his other senses, heightened phenomenally. A curiosity of Zatoichi or Ichi ("Zato" simply indicates he is blind.) is his fighting style. Most katana are thought of as being presented point-up or forward, but Zatoichi employs a different style. Zatoichi holds the sword with the point down and the edge forward. This edge-forward technique can impart some interesting advantages, both offensively and defensively. In the defensive mode, the sword can function pendulum-



Ahern holds the Zatoichi sword stick as one might hold it preparatory to a defensive move.



Partially opening the sword stick allows the blade to block the hand or arm of an opponent, and unexpectedly so, the opponent potentially slicing himself badly.



With the sword drawn, as with any sword cane or sword stick, one now has two weapons, one edged and one impact; or, one can parry with the left hand weapon while attacking with a cut or thrust with the right-hand weapon.

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like and gain terrific momentum as it is raised upward. In the offensive mode, the blade will be moving quite rapidly and the weight of the sword and the hand that wields it will accelerate the speed of attack. And, of course, with the sword concealed inside a stick, quickly raising one's stick and partially separating the blade from the scabbard affords a razor-sharp implement with which to block ordinary blows.

But a sword that cuts people well is not necessarily going to perform the practice cutting that is so popular with persons in our modern age who are interested in fine-tuning their cutting skills. The classic thing to use when practicing cutting is tatami.

Tatami is made from densely woven rice straw. When they are rolled into tubes and then placed on what amounts to a target mount, the cutting practitioner hacks away. Obviously, cutting is not hacking, and the purpose of what is called *tameshigiri* is to prepare for combat—target practice.

The well-known martial artist and president of Bugei Trading Company, James Williams, is very fast and very accurate with his phenomenal *tameshigiri*. Many persons do use tatami for cutting practice, but that can get pretty expensive since once you've cut the tatami, you can't reassemble it to cut it again. A lot of people who like to actually use swords, myself included, seek out "targets of opportunity" when practicing *tameshigiri*. The late Hank Reinhardt recounted how his neighbors had nicknamed him "Hank the tree killer." Indeed, Hank would hack and slash his way past any



...Ahern is suddenly surprised, and reciprocates with a sudden surprise of his own, the sword already blocking as it is being drawn.

saplings that dared challenge him. Heavy cardboard tubes met a similar blood fate.

James Williams, very much involved with CAS Hanwei Blades, designed a series of swords specifically made to hold up to the rigors of cutting small trees and cardboard tubing and the like, which, with differentially tempered katana, can nick edges or even cause bending. Is this a reflection on traditional katana? Absolutely not, traditional katana are made to cut the enemy's flesh, not prune his Cherry Blossom trees.

CAS Hanwei offers both a replica of the Zatoichi sword stick and the Raptor katana series. The Zatoichi sword stick features a straight-blade forged from high-carbon



Ahern holds the Zatoichi sword in a guard position. A warm summer day, Ahern is wearing Woolrich Elite Series Tactical shorts, affording him plenty of freedom of movement.



Look closely at the *tsuba* (guard) and you'll see the image of a cormorant, a theme repeated in this excellent cutting sword from CAS Hanwei's Raptor series.



Ahern attacks the sappling's mid-section, makes contact, and cleaves it easily. Hot temperatures aside, Ahern had an enjoyable cutting session with the CAS Hanwei Raptor, the katana delivering on its promise of being ideal for cutting other than tatami or flesh.

“The late Hank Reinhardt recounted how his neighbors had nicknamed him ‘Hank the tree killer.’ Indeed, Hank would hack and slash his way past any saplings that dared challenge him.”

steel and is available in several different models. My sample, with a handle and scabbard of naturally colored hardwood, is elegant in its simplicity. When you actually see the Zatoichi sword stick, you will be amazed at the ridiculously low price when compared to its obvious quality. Blade length is 28 1/4 inches and overall length is 42 3/5 inches. The length is ideal for a walking stick and the precisely fitted sword to scabbard stays together until you need it. Since Japanese swords are made to be carried or displayed edge up, if you keep the two chops on the otherwise smooth handle always facing in the same direction, you will be able to present the

sword edge upward or edge outward merely by feel, which, of course, Zatoichi's blindness forced him to do. The blade is held in the handle by a single *mekugi* (peg), all-traditional katana ever needed.

The Raptor that I have been using is the one known as Unokubi Zukuri, which means “cormorant's neck,” and is otherwise called Nagamaki Naoshi, referencing a sword converted from *naginata* to katana. A *naginata* is a type of pole arm consisting of a long, curved blade affixed to a long, straight shaft. The Unokubi Zukuri is patterned after the long-handled swords used long before the time of Zatoichi. The blade is 28 1/2 inches and overall length

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