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War Chronicle and Swordsmanship

By *Kunikichi Kaneko**

Preface

History always accounts for victors. Therefore, it is natural that history is re-written with the change of the time.

In the case of swordsmanship and its history, this theory may apply, and due to the much limited materials, there is no other way than finding a conclusion from indirect materials by means of the inductive method.

It is apparent that swordsmanship techniques were practiced since the olden times, however, the days in which importance was attached to swordsmanship philosophy were nearly the beginning of the Tokugawa era; the philosophy was begun to be studied by means of the inductive method. Before such days, explanations of history were based on legends. The swordsmanship techniques described in medieval history are of course legendary, however, it cannot be denied that they served as a factor for sources of action.

Social background

The Nara period is said to be the times when the continental culture was imported, and the culture had a great influence on the various systems of Japan. It is therefore natural that the Japanese military system was systematically completed, and with the completion, there was a significant change in the weapon, strategy and military exercise

During the Heian period, military movements against the natives of Ezo were continued from the previous period, which resulted in stronger demand for weapons. Then, in the rise of Fujiwara culture, confrontation and contention among the local powerful families occurred, and a great, continued social unrest was caused. Especially, with Masakado Taira's revolt as a momentum, the systematic corps by local clans came up to the surface of society. What came after this were the taking of

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power by warriors and the confrontation between the North and South Courts, which made military struggles more and more severe. Thus, a foundation for the rise of swordsmanship techniques was built based on practical fighting experiences.

An idea on swordsmanship techniques

The social conditions for rise of swordsmanship techniques are collapse of value of social order and esteem of real power. In other words, recognition of swordsmanship techniques by society. Swordsmanship techniques can be termed as: 1) When regarded as fighting techniques, neither technical skills nor manners are required. All that is necessary is physical fighting by strength and quick judgement, in other words, swordsmanship techniques in the battlefield, 2) Delicate techniques are required; a fight in which a victor and loser are decided in a moment; in this sense, swordsmanship techniques may be called drill hall techniques which respect a spiritual principle and swordsmanship theory.

As long as the realities of sworsmanship techniques are just techniques, they are not fixed ones but there should be in the techniques changes as circumstances require. According to social changes, swordsmanship techniques undergo changes, too.

Military chronicle and swordsmanship techniques

Literary works which are called military chronicles or military stories are limited to medieval works depicting facts of things historically and objectively using fights as materials. Typical of them are the Story of Masakado, the Mutsu Story, the Hogen and Heiji Story, the Historic Romance of the Heike, the Taihei Story, etc. Accordingly, the swordsmanship techniques of the Middle Ages fall in the category of legend from the historical viewpoint. In the above-enumerated stories, names of cutting tricks and description in detail of blowing and cutting are given very often. In reading these stories, we can know that the swordsmanship techniques used in the olden times melted in the Middle Ages into the Chinese style swordsmanship techniques imported during the Nara period, and that the unique swordsmanship techniques were born with the rise of warriors in the society. In view of the names of cutting tricks and the description thereof, it is obvious that the swordsmanship techniques made a considerable progress although they were violent battlefield techniques.

Conclusion

There are some swordsmanship techniques whose names are the same as those of

schools in later ages. However, it cannot always be said that the techniques themselves are the same. It may possible that names would differ even if the techniques are the same. The reason is that there is a basic difference between the medieval techniques employed in the battlefield and those used in the drill hall in later ages.

The swordsmanship techniques made advancement with the progress of the times so that they could match the circumstances therein.