

Traditional grip wrapping on Chinese swords and sabers

by Peter Dekker

Introduction

Although most methods generally look the same, there are many ways to wrap a Chinese hilt. I started out copying grip wraps as done on reproduction swords and later began to learn grip wraps as seen on various antiques. Although different styles of grip wraps all tend to look the same, they do have some fundamental differences in how they are done. I based the following method on the study of various antiques. It is one of seven different methods I've identified so far, the difference between them is mostly in where / how one starts, ends, and with what end of the cord the loops are made. This method is a pretty universal because it causes two loop ends to appear near the pommel, that nicely match *fangshi* (square style) fittings but look good on any other style of *dao* or *jian*. This while some other methods might not suit all styles of sword furniture. It is done from the center out, meaning you start at the middle of the cord and work your way through the wrap using both ends. There are also ways that start at one end, working towards the other. The end result on the latter is characterized by crossings within the center loop that are made up out of a horizontal and a diagonal cord, while the center based wraps result in crossings that exist out of two diagonal cords. Both ways are found on antique Chinese hilts.

You can contact me for questions, or to help me improve this grip wrapping manual at:

peter@mandarinmansion.com

On my part I would be happy to get to see as many original wrappings as possible, preferably from both sides of the handle. I am also looking for any information about pre-treatment of the handle prior to wrapping, like regarding the use of ray skin and for example if any type of glue was used.

Type of cord

For a nice grip wrap it is important to use the right cord. Typically this is all natural cord (synthetic cord is generally more slippery) made out of silk or cotton. Also make sure it has a flat braid. Most cord on modern swords is significantly wider than on the old ones. Antique one handed grips tend to take about 5 metres of per grip, using a cord that is approx. 2mm wide when tightened. Many modern one handed swords take slightly more, sometimes more than 6 metres because their grips are often a bit longer/thicker.

Very accurate, natural cotton cord is available through me for € 1.50 per metre, ex. shipping. We deliver some standard colors like black, blue, brown and green plus natural ivory white that can be dyed by the user. I sometimes have special cords in stock like hand braided cotton or solk cords.

Preparation

Before starting I like to wrap some tape on both ends of the cords. Make sure a fairly rigid and sharp point appears, because it might come in handy later when you have to go under wrappings. (See pic below)



Layout

We start by laying out the two loops on either side of the handle. To do this, start in the middle of the cord and lay a loop at the pommel (pic 2). We call this side A. Lay the loop pretty much like you want it to appear on the final result, but a tad longer. The loop will tighten somewhat due to the cord going over and under. I like to tape the inner loop to the grip to keep it tight. You can tie the part at the guard as in pic 3, *or* let them cross as in pic 4. Both ways are traditional, but this time we go for the second way. (The first appears on what is thought to be a princely regulation saber in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, while the latter way is used on one of Qianlong's own *jian*.)



Pic 2, side A.



*Pic 3, Side A.
Alternative way*



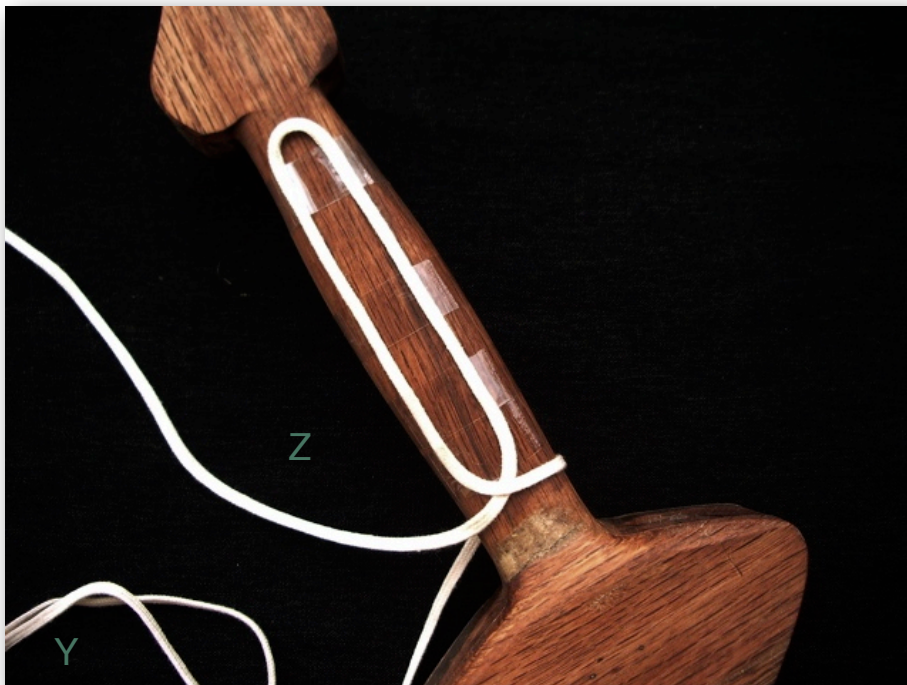
Pic 4, Side A. (as in Pic 2)

Note that Pic 3. is just for reference. This wrap continues with the loop on side A. closed as in pic 3.

On the other side, which we call side B, one of the two cord ends forms the second loop as in pic 5. Make sure both loops are exactly the same length and width.

Make sure you plan out the loops carefully, you don't want to find out they are too long or too short right before the end of the wrap. In the worst case you'll need to redo the whole grip wrap from scratch!

In this example I don't close the loop on this side as in pic 3, but just let them overlap as in pic 4.



Pic 5, side B.

Wrap

From here, proceed by putting one cord end (which we call Z) through the loop on side A as depicted in pic 6. Please note that as the other end, (which we call Y, left end in pic 6) goes around, it crosses the other on the *side* of the hilt. See pic 7. This is the only place where this occurs.



Pic 6, side B.



Pic 7, upper side B, lower side A. (Z over Y.)

Then, on the other side the first of the wrapping pattern will be made, see pic 8. Proceeding to the other side another if these is made, see pic 9. Always pay attention to what cords have passed under or over the inner loop, and do the opposite for the adjacent cord in the pictures. Now you will be getting able to tie the wraps tighter, it's best to hold it in place with your fingers (pic 10) until you finished the next wrap. Tie it as tight as you can, straighten the inner loop. Turn the handle, and repeat. Make sure they all lie flat on the handle, and none get twisted.

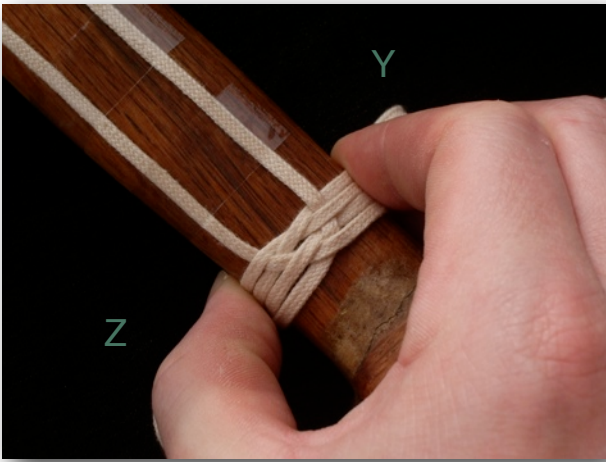
It's not easy to get the first part tight while keeping it all in place, so it's best to tie it as tight as is possible without deforming the layout and continue a few wraps. Then you can re-tighten the start a bit using a fork to pry the cord.



Pic 8, side A.



Pic 9, side B.



Pic 10, side B.



Pic 11, side B.

From here the wrap will continue in the same way. What is important from now is that you keep the wrappings very tight, and that you watch out that the inner loop is corrected each time you finish a wrap. Once the wrap is done, it is possible to slightly correct the inner loop by using a fork but it's best not to bet on this and do it right from the start instead. (There is a fair chance in damaging the cord or loosening the wrap up in an attempt to tidy it afterwards.) After a while, it should resemble the pattern on pic 11. The better you control the shape of the inner loop, the more tidy the whole wrap will look.

End

Once done you tuck the cord under previous wrappings, make sure you do the last ones a little looser so it's easier to tuck the cord under and then tighten the whole. Once you got it through, tie it as tight as possible. Only when you're sure it's done well, cut the two ends.

I also have a "secret" ending up my sleeve that makes it very hard to see where the ends have gone. I might make some pics of that process next time I do it and show it to you guys.



Pic 12, side A or B.



Pic 13, side A or B.

There you go! I hope you enjoyed this little tutorial.

Also check out:

www.mandarinmansion.com

www.manchuarchery.org

Or drop me a line on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/dekkerpeter>

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