

The History of Karate

By Ben Stone

The history of Karate is a long and meandering path of development, across seas from Japan and Okinawa, through the heart of long-ago China and over the mountains into ancient India.

For many karateka training in a traditional style, there is a certain satisfaction in making a connection to the past through training as their predecessors trained (or close to it) and, by observing tradition, carrying on values and practices still considered useful and important.

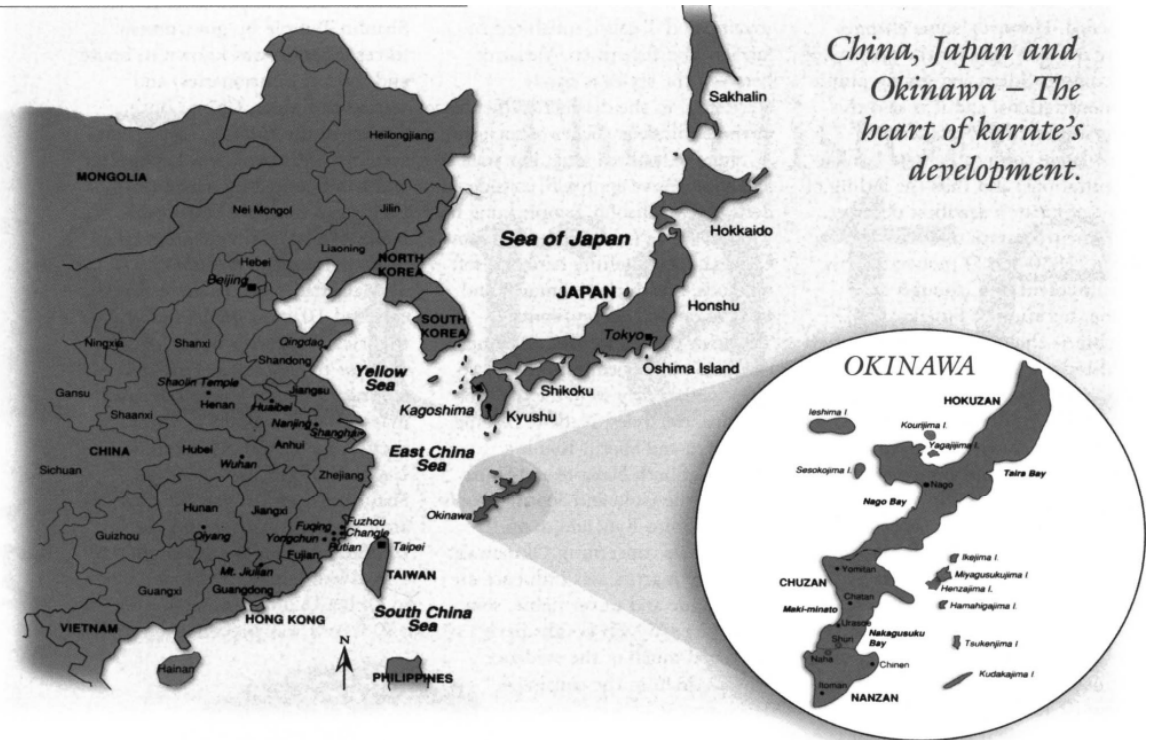
But what is traditional? Through the ages, martial arts undergo many changes: they adapt to new circumstances, they branch-off and are altered, they are led by new people. Others die with their inheritors. In the end, what we have may be likened to the message in a game of Chinese whispers; altered from its origins by so many people that any obvious links to its beginnings may be hard to find.

The many stories that make up karate's history have not escaped the Chinese-whisper syndrome. Modern karate's origins have been the subject of research and debate for so long that the history of karate now has its own history! This is partly because unearthing karate's earliest predecessors requires mapping the entire history of the martial arts in the East.

Many know Okinawa, an island 550 kilometres south of the Japanese mainland, as the birthplace of karate. But let's look first to Japan, considered home to most karate systems existing today. Karate is now practised in an estimated 120 countries and takes many forms. Of these, some of the most famous were founded in Japan after World War I. prominent examples being Mas Oyama's Kyokushin and Choiro Tani's Shukokai. At the same time in Okinawa, the dominant schools (Ryu) were Shorin-Ryu, Goju-Ryu, Uechi-Ryu and Matsubayashi-Ryu. Although there had been karate demonstrations outside Japan in the late 1920s and '30s, it was in the post-war years that karate arrived in European and Western countries like Australia. The Japan Karate Association, formed in 1958, assisted in spreading karate world-wide.

The many styles that developed inside Japan all grew from various Okinawan karate systems introduced to Japan early in the 20th century. Around 1902, karate was added to Okinawan schools' physical education programs and the secrecy that had surrounded the art lessened. However, some changes were made to kata for the purpose of teaching children and giving public demonstrations, and it is said this contributed to the loss of some knowledge concerning kata hunkai (applications) and thus the hiding of some of karate's deadliest defences.

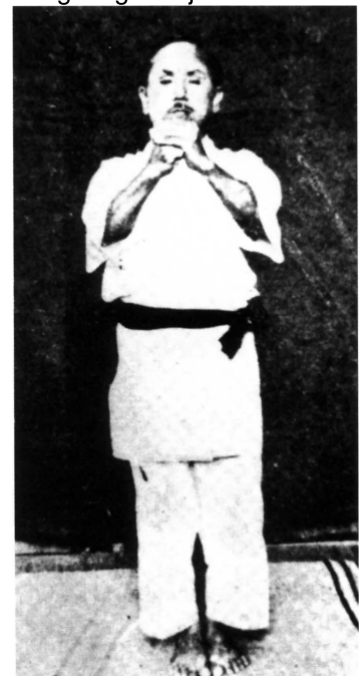
Shuri-te karate master Anko host! (1830-1915) pioneered this development and, though not alone, his student Funakoshi Gichin is the Okinawan most often credited with the establishment of karate in Japan. In the early '20s, Funakoshi impressed Japan's Crown Prince with a karate demonstration and his art was later given support by Judo's famous founder, jigmarn Kano, securing karate's acceptance by the Japanese.



Many Japanese held racist attitudes toward things Chinese or Okinawan, so these events were vital for Karate's growth. The Okinawan's originally called Karate tou-di, meaning China-hand. 'Hand' is a literal translation of to or di, which was used to describe Okinawa's fighting arts just as the Chinese used the word for fist. To help karate blend into Japanese culture, the character tou was changed to a Japanese one meaning empty, hence we now have kara-tedo, 'the way of the empty hand'.

From there, Kenwa Mahuni founded Shito-Ryu (1928), and Chojun Miyagi established Goju-Ryu (1930). Funakoshi founded Shotokan in 1938 and Hironori Otsuka blended jiu-jitsu with karate (learned from Funakoshi) to form Wado-Ryu in 1939. Universities in Tokyo and Osaka formed karate clubs and the art of Okinawan China-hand soon became Japanese. The Butokukai, Japan's top combat-arts organisation, also helped Japanese karate, creating standards for teaching and developing ways to competitively test the arts. These were the beginnings of sport-karate.

The various Okinawan karate schools had always been scattered and disorganised, divided into closely guarded regional and family groups (much like the arts of China). Many styles existed but the primary three schools were all concentrated in a small area of southern Okinawa and named after their towns of origin: Naha, a town of merchants, Shuri, home to royalty, and Tomari, inhabited by farmers and fishermen. Variation between the styles is partly attributed to the distinct influences



of these different classes of society.

Shuri-te featured long, low stances and an offensive approach, considered derivative of Shaolin Temple kung fu, while Naha-te is considered the most Chinese, incorporating hard and soft methods, breathing techniques and ki, (Chi or vital energy) control. Tomari-te (which focused on using the arms) developed from these two and together they were the basis for the Japanese styles; Naha-te became Goju-Ryu and Shorin-Ryu is a product of both Naha-te and Shurite. From the Goju and Shorin schools emerged Shito-Ryu, and so on.

The facts concerning Okinawa's sources of martial arts influence are often vague and unverifiable, some say because WWII bombs have destroyed much of the evidence. Still, aside from the continual development of self-defence methods among Okinawans, it is accepted that Chinese martial arts have most greatly influenced present-day karate. In fact, Chojun Miyagi said a style of kung fu that arrived in 1828 was "the source" of Goju-Ryu.

This passage of combat knowledge from China is closely linked to a book of Chinese origin called the Bubishi, the Bible of Karate. Published sometime during China's Qing dynasty (1644-1911), it details Chinese kung fu history, technique and philosophy. It is believed the Bubishi was written by a White Crane boxer, Fang Qiniang, the daughter of an Eighteen Monk Fist kung fu stylist who escaped the destruction of the Shaolin Temple by government forces (Shaolin was known to house and train revolutionaries) and settled in Fujian, China. Both feature in the Bubishi, as do their systems. This book was kept secret and hand-copied by generations of Okinawan masters; Funakoshi's books even contain chapters taken directly from the Bubishi.

Patrick McCarthy's version showed extensive research which exposed 10 more-or-less plausible theories as to who brought the Bubishi to Okinawa. Featured among them are some Okinawan masters who trained in China, including Uechi-Ryu founder Uechi Kanbun, who studied Shaolin Tiger kung fu in Fuzhou around 1897. Yet, while the Bubishi is of great importance to Okinawan karate, it did not arrive in Okinawa until sometime in the 1800s and was preceded by many more influential exchanges.

Common folklore tells of karate's development by downtrodden peasants, their weapons confiscated by Japanese invaders, who developed secret fighting traditions while their rulers slept. Legend has it that this is why karate gis look like pyjamas: because they once were, and the tradition has carried on. However, these romantic origins are considered unrealistic by most historians, as Okinawan combative traditions go back much further.

In the 800 years between 600 and 1400 A.D., Okinawa experienced territorial fighting under the rule of warrior-chieftans and in the 10th century military power struggles in Japan saw some warrior clans move to Okinawa. From 794 to 1185, Japan's methods of war were introduced, including grappling, swordsmanship and other weapon-arts.

Okinawa's regional warring continued until 1429, when the rival groups came under one rule as the Ryukyu Kingdom. In 1507, feudalism (a system whereby peasants farmed for a wealthy lord and fought in his army) was abolished and private ownership of weapons was outlawed. This, says Kyoshi McCarthy, "explains why the Uchinanchu [Okinawans] began intensively cultivating an unarmed means of self-defence".

So, long before karate was exported from Okinawa to Japan, the Japanese were bringing their own combative arts to Okinawa. However, Chinese kung fu's influence was more recent and is more evident in the Okinawan karate that exists today. Again, there are many theories explaining how it got there.

Okinawa established trade with China during the Ming Dynasty and by 1393, a group of Chinese referred to as the 36 Families was settled in Naha, Okinawa. There, Okinawans were taught

Chinese language, culture and, it is assumed, martial arts. During this period, Okinawan students also travelled to China to study and possibly learn martial arts. Another likely source are the sapposhi (representatives of the Chinese Emperor) who, in the 1400s, came to Okinawa for months at a time with many multi-skilled people in tow, including security experts. The Chinese kung fu that arrived in Okinawa, possibly by one or all of these means, was then used to police the island.



Itosu Anko, 1832-1915, helped bring karate to the world. He developed Pinan/Heian kata.	Shihan Chojun Miyagi, 1888-1953, founder of Go-Ju-Ryu Karate-do.	The late Gogen 'The Cat' Yamaguchi, born 1910, founded today's Goju Kai organisation.

After 1509, with even government officials barred from carrying weapons, these civil-defence methods went underground, but were secretly practised and developed by the middle-level samurai class known as pechin, whose responsibilities included law-enforcement. In 1609 Japan's Satsuma clan captured the Ryukyu Kingdom and until Okinawa became part of Japan in 1879, eclectic fighting traditions grew. Due to the weapon bans, kobudo evolved through Okinawans making use of domestic and farming implements instead, of which the sai is an example (it is said to have once been a hay-fork).

Some pechin also visited Satsuma and learned the Jigen-Ryu ken-jitsu of the Satsuma samurai; it is thought that the six-foot staff techniques of Okinawan kobudo originated there. One example is Matsumura Sokon, an important figure in Shuri-te who was a security agent for various Ryukyuan kings and studied martial arts in Satsuma and Fujian, China.

But to fully explore the origins of China-hand, one must look to China. Most brief histories of karate begin with the legend of the Indian monk Daruma (in Japanese) or Bodhidharma, generally described as a skilled martial artist born into a warrior caste. He travelled to China around the Sixth Century AD to spread Zen Buddhism, settling at the Shaolin monastery to teach Buddhist meditation and philosophy, and physical movements that included striking — the alleged beginnings of the kung fu systems mentioned so far.

However, there is evidence of strong warrior traditions existing in China long before the arrival of Daruma (the first emperor to unify China, Qin Shi Huang, for example, left terracotta replicas of his entire army in Xi'an in 210 BC). It could also be logically concluded that fighting methods and traditions existed to an extent in all human societies, just as surely as quarrels and aggression existed. Texts discovered in China, reportedly 4,000 years old, detail systematic physical training, while 2,800 year-old writings describing unarmed combat have also been found in Europe. That aside, the previously mentioned systems of Monk Fist and White Crane kung fu can be traced to Shaolin.

While it is uncertain how much of Daruma's story is true, the legend is strong and there is little

doubt that the texts and exercises introduced to Shaolin have been influential there. However, there have since been many other developments in the kung fu of Shaolin, with various influences flowing into and out from the Temples, leading to the creation of many different styles.

Keeping in mind that traditions are ever-changing, the predecessors of Shaolin martial arts are not necessarily the true origin of karate, just as one person in a game of Chinese whispers has only a small influence on what is whispered at the end of the line. Due to Okinawa's location (just 740 kilometres east of China and 550 north of Taiwan) it attracted the attention of pilgrims, traders and pirates of many races and has therefore had centuries of cultural exchange with Korea, Laos, Cambodia and numerous other Asian cultures with martial traditions. Some karate historians even say that the need for Okinawa's sailors to protect themselves against pirates played a part in the development of Okinawan te, which has existed in various forms for at least 1,000 years.

Despite the focus of Japanese martial traditions on weaponry and grappling during the periods that Okinawa was most exposed to them, their influence on Okinawan karate and kobudo should not be discounted either. So, to provide a complete history of today's karate, it would be wise to also include the history of all Japanese martial arts. That, however, would be another story entirely!

A good analogy for the history of karate might be that no child is born of only one parent; they will therefore have four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, and so on. It can be said that all karate systems in existence today are the descendants of many different parents, each with unique genes but also similarities, evidence of shared ancestors somewhere in their lineage.

That said, it is well worth digging around for the many great individual stories that make up the history of karate. Some of us might also benefit from researching a history that is more personal, immediate and accessible: what of your teacher, his life and his art? Who has he trained with, in what systems? How has karate affected him, and he it? And what of his teacher?

Although the past is often more wondrous than any prediction of the future, historians uncover it not only out of curiosity; their common aim, it is often said, is to learn about the present from the events of history. So, by uncovering your instructors' karate history, you should learn much that will help you on your own journey. You may also choose to learn from the history presented in this article and write it down carefully for future generations.