

A Brief Over-view of the Etymology of Modern Goju-ryu Karate-do Kata

By Joe Swift and Mario McKenna

It is now well documented that Okinawa karate is indebted to the Southern schools of Chinese boxing for much of its technical knowledge and expertise. Modern Goju-ryu is believed to be originally based upon Fujian Crane boxing, specifically Whooping Crane boxing and its enigmatic founder Xie Zhong Xiang (AKA Ru Ru Ko). Although many Goju-ryu stylists would like to think of their system and its corresponding training kata as an unadulterated and traditional method handed down from Ru Ru Ko to Higashionna Kanryo and finally to Miyagi Chojun, recent evidence suggests the contrary (for a complete overview of this topic see McKenna, in press). Indeed, Goju-ryu is Miyagi Chojun's personal interpretation of his instruction from Higashionna Kanryo in conjunction with his own research.

Miyagi Chojun spent most of his life's energies and his sizeable family fortune devoted to studying the fighting arts. During his studies he came into contact with such fighting traditions as Fujian White Crane boxing, Tiger boxing (Hu Quan), Monk fist boxing (Lohan Quan) and quite possibly Five Ancestor fist boxing (Go Cho??) (Tokashiki 1991; Kinjo 1999). Not surprisingly these diverse styles are reflected in the kata of Goju-ryu. Regrettably, few practitioners of the style are aware of this fact or have little interest in Goju-ryu's development. Instead, most students of Goju-ryu focus on training in the various techniques contained within the kata. Commendable as this is, karateka miss out on Goju-ryu's rich diversity since few of these students stop to recognize the fundamental characteristics of each unique tradition. All kata in Okinawan Karate-do are fundamentally the same; strikes, blocks, kicks, grabs, chokes, throws and immobilization techniques. But what makes each kata unique is its use of body mechanics (posture), energy utilization (breath) and projection (ki), etc. These aspects in conjunction with the intent of the performance, is what makes each kata uniquely different and gives each one its own distinct flavour.

According to noted martial arts historian Hokama Tetsuhiro (Hokama 1999), there are six ways to analyze Okinawan karate-do kata. These include:

1. Methods of walking, hand use, and technique utilization. e.g. San Chin, Shisochin.
2. Names of the founder or originator of a particular tradition e.g. Kusanku, Wansu, etc.
3. Names of specific areas or districts in which the tradition was practiced, e.g. Shuri, Naha, Tomari.
4. The religious or spiritual principles inherent within a tradition, e.g. Suprempei, Seipai;
5. The metaphysical or transcendental aspects of a tradition (catharsis / purification / Zen), e.g. San Chin, Tensho.
6. The implied movement of animals.

Of these six methods, the analysis of animal movements found in modern Goju-ryu kata may provide one of the more interesting and useful means of investigating their origin and development. Generally speaking, most Goju-ryu karate practitioners would recognize the double mawashi-uke found at the end of several kata such as San Chin, Saifa, Seisan, Kururunfa and Suprempei as the movement of the Tiger. Indeed, this double mawashi-uke is more commonly referred to as Tora-guchi or the "mouth of the tiger." But what of the multitude of movements found within Goju-ryu kata? How are they related to the movements of animals as formulated by the various schools of Chinese boxing?

The movements of the Five Animals has had a long and revered position in the fighting systems of China. Traditionally, each of the Five Animals was associated with a specific physical / mental characteristic and training principle (Smith 1964). For instance, the dragon was believed to cultivate the spirit (i.e. mind) and emphasized light and fluid movements that did not rely upon physical strength. The tiger was in direct contrast to that of the dragon; movements were aggressive, hard and fast. The tiger was believed to train bone and relied heavily on isometric and isotonic exercises to do achieve its ends. The leopard, much like the tiger, used aggressive and swift movements, but was intended to develop physical strength. The snake was associated with the cultivation of ki (internal energy). As a result, emphasis was placed on correct breathing in addition to flexibility and strength. The last of the Five Animals was the crane. Movements of the crane were associated with swiftness and flexibility. Training in these movements was believed to strengthen the body's sinews.

In the case of modern Goju-ryu kata it has been considerably difficult to determine the animal origin of specific kata based upon the kanji (Chinese ideograms) currently used. The correct kanji for most, if not all, of Okinawa karate's kata have been lost to time. Most modern readings for kata using kanji are simply just that, modern interpretations using appropriate kanji which fit the phonetic reading of the kata in question. A crude but accurate analogy would be taking the proverbial square peg and beating it into a round hole. As a result, for each kata there are several different and often bewildering ways to write it with a corresponding difference in meaning (table 1). What this amounts to is basically a royal mess when trying to understand the origin of the kata and its etymology. However, recent efforts by martial arts researchers and historians has shone some light on a subject that has been, until recently, an impossible task. Of note is the research by three gentlemen, Kinjo Akio, Tokashiki Iken and Otsuka Tadahiko.

Both Kinjo Akio and Tokashiki Iken have analyzed modern Goju-ryu kata primarily by examining the various schools of Chinese boxing found in Fujian province, Southern China. They believe that Goju-ryu kata are, for the most part, derived from these Fujian boxing systems (Tokashiki 1991, 1995; Kinjo 1999). They argue that the current readings of Goju-ryu kata have been Okinawanized from their original pronunciation in Fujian dialect (table 2) with the accompanying meaning being lost through successive generations of students.

Otsuka Tadahiko, on the other hand, has examined the Goju-ryu kata using the techniques and martial terminology of Tai Chi Quan and corroborated it through the various techniques and postures found in the Bubishi. Both methods of kata interpretation are equally valid and offer insight into the possible technical and etymological origins of Goju-ryu kata, however with respect to examining the animal origin of the kaishu (advanced) Goju-ryu kata, the following section we will focus on the research of Kinjo Akio and Tokashiki Iken and their respective ideas. The reader should be cautioned as although most kata combine several different elements and / or techniques from different animals, there is a general "flavour" to a form as a result of its emphasis on one particular animal. It is hoped that such a presentation will allow the reader to draw his or her own conclusions.

Lion based kata - Saifa

Of all the Goju-ryu kaishu kata to be passed down, only Saifa appears to have retained its original pronunciation in Fujian dialect. In 1936 Goju-ryu founder Miyagi Chojun wrote "Ryukyuu Kenpo Toudi Enkaku Gaiyou" (an Outline of the History of Ryukyuu Toudi). In it we can find a section entitled "Kenpo Torai ni tsuite" (On the origin of Kenpo) in which Miyagi Chojun names several styles of boxing including: Tiger, Snake, Dog, Crane and Lion boxing. Among the Southern Shaolin system in Fuzhou exists a family of boxing systems aptly labeled as "Lion boxing" (Jap. Shishi Kenpo). These include, among others, Lion Form boxing, Golden Lion boxing and Lion boxing. Not surprisingly, several elements of Lion boxing can be specifically seen in Saifa such as the double hiraken strike (illus. 1) and mawashi uke (illus. 2). The double hiraken strike, according to Kinjo and Tokashiki, represents the pouncing and pulling action of the a lion's front paws pulling down its prey, while the mawashi uke, although often thought of as the mouth of tiger, can also be interpreted as the mouth of the lion as well. Finally, the many stomping actions contained within Saifa are meant to represent the powerful steps of the lion.

Hawk based kata - Seinchin

Depending on the style or association, this kata is known as Seinchin, Seiyunchin Seiyonchin or Seianchin in Okinawan dialect. However, the correct pronunciation of this kata in Fujian dialect is Chaiinchin. Both Tokashiki and Kinjo believe that Chaiinchin is derived from the fighting movements of the hawk with emphasis on the movements of the wings and talons. Although extremely rare, hawk boxing is still practiced in some areas of Fuzhou and on the island of Taiwan. The hawk is also one of the ten original animals incorporated into the internal system of Xing-I-Quan. However, it is believed that the hawk characteristics of Chaiinchin were not derived from Xing-I-Quan (Murakami, 2000). According to Kinjo, two movements in Chaiinchin are characteristic of hawk boxing. The first is the opening movement of the kata in which the hands are extended outward, the body lowered into a shiko-dachi and the body turned to a forty-five degree angle (illus. 1). This movement is meant to represent the hawk extending its wings before engaging its prey. The second movement found in Chaiinchin which is characteristic of the hawk, is the hooking grab and nukite (illus. 2). This movement is thought to be akin to the talons as they grab and tear its prey.

Crane based kata – Sanseru, Seisan & Suparempai

Sanseru, Seisan and Suparempai (known as Soparinpai in Fujian dialect) are considered Crane based kata. Although there is disagreement as to their exact origin, it is generally thought that the techniques contained within these kata are of the Crane family which consists of Ancestral Crane (Zong He Quan), Feeding Crane (Shi He Qan), Whooping Crane (Ming He Quan) and Flying Crane (Fei He Quan). Kinjo Akio argues that these kata belong to the Ancestral Crane (Zong He Quan) lineage originating in Yong Chun village and were passed on to Higashionna Kanryo by Zheng Li Gong (Jap. Jou Rei Kou) from Yong Chun city, Fujian. This is the same Yong Chun village where Fang Qi Niang, the founder of Nan Bai He Quan (Southern White Crane Fist), lived. In contrast to this it has been suggested that these kata were handed down to Higashionna by Aragaki Seisho, a noted Monk-fist and Crane boxing master who resided in Kumemura near present-day Naha or through the Kojo clan also of Kumemura.

Be that as it may, there are many techniques contained within these kata which are obviously crane in origin. One of these techniques, common among all three kata, is sukui-uke (scooping block). According to Kinjo, sukui-uke takes its name from the scooping action of the hands which is meant to emulate the crane scooping a fish from the water. This technique is used to quickly intercept an attack at close quarters and to topple the attacker to the ground. Thus to generate the necessary power to throw the attacker, "shaking jin" (power) is needed. Shaking jin refers to sudden and explosive movement of the torso and waist in conjunction with a rooted lower body (Yang 1996).

Dragon based kata – Kururunfa & Seipai

As is expected by kata which emulate the movements of the dragon, both Kururunfa and Seipai emphasize light and fluid movements that do not over-emphasize physical strength. The most obvious movement of dragon origin, according to Kinjo and Tokashiki, is the opening sequence where the karateka steps back into a shiko dachi and extends the right arm outward and straight in front of him or her (illus. 1). This is meant to represent the protruding tongue of dragon.

Kururunfa is referred to as Gorunfa in Fujian dialect and perhaps more than Seipai, the movements of the dragon seem more obvious in Kururunfa. The opening sequence containing the sokuto-geri is thought to represent the dragon kicking-off the ground or surface of the water as it takes flight (illus. 1). Other examples of the dragon in Kururunfa include the dragon's tail striking the water (lower palm-strike)(illus. 2). Finally, the sequence of techniques containing an escape from a full-nelson are distinctively dragon and bear a remarkable similarity to the chi-gong exercises emphasizing the dragon found in the opening sequences of five-animal / five-element form in Hung-gar Quan'fa (illus. 3).

Mantis / Cricket based kata - Shisochin

According to Kinjo Akio, Shisochin, or in Fujian dialect Shisauchin, is representative of the movements of a cricket and / or preying mantis. The opening kame (posture) and nukite (finger thrust) in Shisochin are thought to show the mantis hooking its prey and devouring it (illus.1). In contrast, the forward stance with the arms extended is indicative of the cricket spreading its wings (illus. 2).

Conclusion

It is hoped that this brief over-view of the animal forms present in modern Goju-ryu karate-do kata may better help the student gain insight into what makes each kata unique. By keeping in mind each kata's respective animal, a student may be better able to understand the use of body mechanics (posture), energy utilization (breath) and projection (ki) and hopefully gain a little more from his or her respective training.

Table 1 – Examples of Kanji used for the Kaishu kata of Goju-ryu

Kata	Chinese Ideograms	Approximate English Translation
Saifa	最破 碎破	Most – Break Crush – Break
Seiunchin	制引鎖 制引戰 征遠鎖	Control – Pull – Suppress Control – Pull – Battle Subjugate – Far – Suppress
Sanseru	三十六	Thirty-six
Seipai	十八	Eighteen
Shisochin	八荒 四向戰 四向鎖	Eight – Rough / Wild Four – Direction – Battle Four – Direction – Suppress
Seisan	十三	Thirteen
Kururunfa	久留頓破 來留破 廻留破	Lasting – Detain – Direct – Break Come – Detain – Break Overturn – Detain – Break
Suparempai	一百零八 壹百零八 一百零八步	One hundred & eight One hundred & eight One hundred & eight steps

Table 2 – Goju-ryu Kaishu kata and their respective animal origin according to Kinjo & Tokashiki

Kata	Animal
Saifa	Crane and / or Lion
Seiunchin	Hawk
Sanseru	Crane
Seipai	Dragon
Shisochin	Mantis and / or Cricket
Seisan	Crane
Kururunfa	Dragon
Suparempai / Pechurin	Crane

Table 3 – Correct Chinese Ideograms for the kaishu kata of Goju-ryu

Kata	Chinese Ideograms	Approximate Meaning in English	Pronunciation in Fukien Dialect
Saifa	獅法	Lion – Law	Saifa
Seiunchin	青鷹戰	Blue – Hawk – Battle	Chaiinchin
Sanseru	三十六「步」	Thirty-six (steps)	Sanseru[pu]
Seipai	十八「步」	Eighteen (steps)	Seipai[pu]
Shisochin	蟋蟀戰	Cricket / Mantis - Battle	Shisauchin
Seisan	十三「步」	Thirteen (steps)	Seisan[pu]
Kururunfa	臥龍法	Lie (Lying) - Dragon - Law	Gorunfa
Suparempai	一百零八「步」	One hundred eight (steps)	Soparinpai[pu]

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Mario McKenna is a martial arts teacher, writer and historian who also translates Japanese texts into English. He began his training under Yoshitaka Kinjo sensei in 1985, while a high school student in Lethbridge, Alberta. He moved to Japan in 1994 and while living on the island of Amami Oshima in Kagoshima, Japan, he trained under Minowa Katsuhiko sensei and his student Yoshimura Hiroshi sensei in classical Okinawan weaponry. In 1998 he began studying Tou'on-ryu from Kanzaki Shigekazu sensei until his return to Canada in 2002. His qualifications include: Tou'on-ryu Karatedo Go-dan (5th degree), Ryukyu Kobudo Yon-dan (4th degree), and Gohakukai San-dan (3rd degree). Other martial arts experience includes limited training in Aikido, Judo, Shorinji Kenpo, and 18 months of training in Chikubishima-ryu bo-jutsu in Omura, Nagasaki Prefecture, Japan. He has written on the historical and cultural aspects of martial arts training. He now teaches Okinawan karate-do at his Kitsilano dojo in Vancouver, B.C., Canada. Mario has previously contributed to FightingArts.com. His website is: www.mariomckenna.com

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