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WHITE CRANE KARATE

by Andrew N. Blackburn

In Okinawan Karate, There is No More Popular —Or Deadly—Animal Than the Crane

For centuries, warriors have looked to the animal kingdom for inspiration. Consequently, numerous martial arts are based on animals or mystical beasts of folklore. The Buddhist monks at China's famed Shaolin Temple created dozens of animal

The defensive crane posture shown below is found in the roh'ai kata, which includes a number of angular defensive and offensive maneuvers performed from a one-legged stance.

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combat systems. Other animal styles were influenced by the Shaolin systems or developed independently.

Martial arts techniques have been fashioned after the tiger, lion, snake, leopard, eagle, monkey and dragon, just to name a few. However, the white crane is arguably the most influential animal in the martial arts kingdom. The crane is particularly evident in traditional karate systems. For example, many

The one-legged crane posture (opposite page) is the trademark of the nipaipo kata, and is also found in the hakutsuru form.

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The double block from the one-legged crane stance shown above appears three times in the chinto kata. This posture convinced shotokan karate founder Gichin Funakoshi to rename the kata gankaku, meaning "crane standing on a rock."

traditional karate styles include the crane beak strike, the crane-like bent-wrist block and the crane stance.

The white crane, in fact, plays an integral role in more than a dozen classical karate kata (training patterns), including: saifa, roh'ai, wansu, sanchin, tensho, chinto, seisan, kusanku, wankan, unsu, gojushiho, hakutsuru, nipaipo and peichurim. Other traditional kata which feature elements of the crane include: anan, paiho, haiko, ohan, hakucho and paipuren.

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Following is a list of karate kata which are heavily influenced by the white crane:

Sanchin

Sanchin has been described as "the most important kata" in karate and is the basis for many martial arts that originated in the Okinawan city of Naha, most notably *goju-ryu* and *uechi-ryu*. Today, sanchin is practiced primarily for its breathing/health benefits rather than its fighting applications.

Sanchin is primarily practiced with the fists closed tightly, but in some karate styles, such as *uechi-ryu* and *shindo-ryu*, the kata is performed with the hands open. Sanchin is a relatively short and simple kata to learn; it is performed almost universally with three steps forward, a turn, and then three steps back.

Wansu

Wansu is considered one of karate's oldest kata and incorporates many exaggerated up-and-down movements, including a 180-degree jump that appears to impersonate the crane.

This combination is found in the wankan kata. The defender (near right) blocks (1) an opponent's punch from a crane stance while simultaneously counterattacking with a one-knuckle strike to the throat and knee to the groin. The defender steps down (2) into a sanchin stance and blocks a right-hand punch, then rotates his body and executes (3) a simultaneous block/strike. Pivoting back to his previous position, the defender blocks (4) another punch, then rotates his body and executes (5) a block-and-strike combination to the opponent's midsection.

Shotokan karate founder Gichin Funakoshi, in an effort to better describe the wansu kata, renamed the form *enpi*, meaning "flying swallow," or "flight of the swallow."

Rohai

Rohai means "vision of a crane" or "vision of a white heron." Some karate systems include two or three different versions of the kata—*rohai nidan* and *rohai sandan*, for example. Rohai contains a number of angular defensive and offensive tactics performed from the one-legged crane stance. The kata is featured in the *shito-ryu*, *shorin-ryu*, *shindo-ryu*

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and shotokan karate systems, as well as several other styles. Shotokan stylists refer to the kata as *meikyo*—a name that describes the opening movements of the kata and is better known to Okinawans as “the crane stretches its wings.”

Wankan

The wankan kata utilizes many Chinese-based leaning stances to feint an attack. The kata also includes a five-point combination that quickly changes from a one-legged stance to a shifting sanchin posture.

Chinto

The name “chinto” is most often translated as “crane standing on a rock,” although it is sometimes referred to as “night crane.” The chinto kata is riddled with one-legged stances

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The double crane beak technique pictured above is found in the tensho kata, which includes a number of bent-wrist block/strikes, hook blocks and double palm-heel strikes characteristic of the white crane.

and jumping kicks characteristic of the crane. The kata is similar to the wansu (enpi) form in the way the practitioner moves from high to low attacks. Chinto is a difficult kata to master because of the many balancing techniques and one-legged pivoting actions it includes.

Saifa

The saifa (or *saiha*) kata includes many feints, pivots and sidestepping actions designed to elude an oncoming attacker. Included in the saifa arsenal are crane wing blocks and front kicks executed from the crane stance. The kata also features double palm-heel block/strikes similar to those found in the much longer hakutsuru form.

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The opening move (above) from the unsu kata is often referred to as “crane stretches his wings.” The move is also found in the hakutsuru kata.

Seisan

The seisan kata begins much like sanchin with three steps forward, but then gets more difficult as it integrates spearhand strikes and one-legged stances. One of the highlights of the kata is a technique whereby the seisan practitioner pulls his imaginary opponent into a side stomp kick. Seisan also features three open-handed pushing and sweeping block/strike combinations that are also seen in the highly advanced peichurim kata. Some karate styles, such as *shorinji-ryu*,

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The final movement (below) from the peichurim (suparinpe) kata displays obvious crane influence.



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include crane head blocking techniques in their seisan kata. The shorinji-ryu version is also longer than most other seisan forms. Shotokan founder Funakoshi renamed the kata *hangetsu*, or "crescent moon," because of the arc-shaped steps found in the form.

Kusanku

There are almost as many versions of the kusanku kata as there are styles of karate. There is even a *sai* (forked trudgeon) kata performed to the movements of kusanku. In its original form, kusanku includes empty-handed push blocks executed from shifting stances, as well as a 180-degree jump kick.

Funakoshi changed the name of the kusanku kata to *kanku*—which means "to view the sky"—in honor of the opening sequence, in which the practitioner forms a circle overhead with his hands and peers through them at the sky. *Taekwondo's* *koryo* form mimics the kusanku kata by employing the same opening movements.

Unsu

Unsu is an extremely advanced kata. The opening sequence, in which the practitioner's hands form a circle, resembles kusanku. In unsu, however, the practitioner holds his hands at eye level instead of overhead. The open hands then move outward to the practitioner's sides, not unlike they do in the hakutsuru kata. The cat stance is employed frequently in unsu, as well as bent-wrist blocks and one-finger "open beak" strikes characteristic of the crane.

Gojushiho

The name "gojushiho" means "54 steps," and many historians believe the kata is related to an article in the legendary *Bubishi* martial arts text which chronicles the "54 steps of the black tiger." Granted, a black tiger is not a crane, but according to the *Bubishi* text, the 54 steps of the black tiger are actually movements to defend against and overcome a white crane's attacks. The article claims the tiger used open-handed "hook" blocks and grabbing moves to disrupt the crane's balance. The tiger also fights fire with fire in the gojushiho kata, utilizing crane techniques such as the beak strike while delivering a front kick.

Tensho

The tensho kata was developed by

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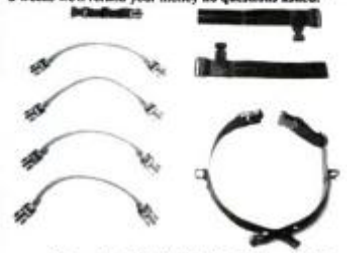
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goju-ryu founder Chojun Miyagi, who reportedly used the crane as the basis for the form. Like so many kata that originated in Naha, tensho is a short form that uses the three-steps-forward and three-steps-back approach. Tensho is considered a "soft" kata, and it employs many of the weapons of the white crane, including swift hook blocks, bent-wrist block/strikes and double palm heel strikes.

Nipaipo

The nipaipo kata is often referred to

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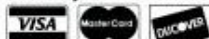
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as the "28 movements of the white crane." Nipaipo is a highly advanced kata in which the practitioner shifts from stance to stance while executing strong strikes and pulling blocks. The trademark "crane spreading its wings" technique from a one-legged stance is included in the kata, as are many spearhand techniques called "wing strikes."

Peichurim (Suparinpe)

Many martial arts historians claim that peichurim (perhaps better known as *suparinpe*) is actually another way to say Busaganashi, who was a warrior deity linked to the white crane through the *Bubishi* text. There are many drawings of this mysterious deity in a one-legged crane stance performing movements from the hakutsuru kata.

Peichurim is a difficult kata, not only because of its length, but because of its strange combinations, which include a crescent kick followed by a 180-degree turn into a jumping front kick. The kata concludes with a double crane hand block sometimes referred to as the "wounded dog posture" by goju-ryu practitioners. The wounded dog version of the technique features the practitioner's lead hand at an angle and is considerably higher than the other methods.

Hakutsuru

Literally translated, hakutsuru means "white crane," and the hakutsuru kata is the original white crane form. This classical kata originated in China and is believed to contain the entire white crane system. Among its movements are five slow steps forward in the classic spread-wing posture while executing grabs, spearhands, palm heels and hooking blocks.

Many karate styles—including shorin-ryu, shito-ryu, shindo-ryu and goju-ryu—include the long and intricate hakutsuru kata. It is still considered a secret kata in some old family karate styles on Okinawa.

The white crane has had a dynamic influence on the martial arts. Every traditional karate system has at least one or two white crane forms in its syllabus. When it comes to karate kata, there is little doubt that the white crane is the "king of the jungle."

About the author: Inverness, Florida-based Andrew N. Blackburn is the director of the Shindo-Ryu Karate-Do Kobudo Kyokai organization.

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