

A History of Matsumura-seito Shorin-ryu:
A Lineage of My Studies

By

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Shodan

Matsumura-seito Shorin-ryu

as per the requirements for the rank of Shodan

Matsubayashi Shorin-ryu

Foreword

This article contains a brief account of the development of Matsumura-seito Shorin-ryu. Undoubtedly, as with most histories of the martial arts, you may find differences in opinion or fact. The story given is a result of my own research into various media (including the internet, which I have tried to limit to a few instances) and any errors contained herein are solely my responsibility. As this is a somewhat personal endeavor and not intended for publication, I have refrained from citing sources until the end. The list given on the last page contains the works that I have consulted for this article, and in general they corroborate each other on the major conclusions. This is by no means an exhaustive attempt at a history of this subject and the interested reader would do well to see listings [1] and [2] for extensive information and references on the development and history of the martial arts. I am indebted to my teacher in Matsumura-seito Shorin-ryu Sensei Bob Stigall for eight years of training. I would also like to thank Sensei Sonny Johnson for granting me an interview and sharing his extensive knowledge on the subject of Okinawan Karate-do.

Introduction

The history and lineage of any particular tradition, martial or otherwise, are often reduced to estimates and outlines. This is especially true among those practices which have relied on oral transmission for the greater part of their existence. As such, accuracy and detail unavoidably suffer. Therefore, when it comes to us (that is, the next in line to tell the story of our traditions), we are obligated to do our best to verify what has been handed down and faithfully add to the account in accord with our own experiences. By their nature, the martial arts have been somewhat subjugated to this category. Having ultimately developed through a need for self-preservation, secrecy and discrimination were once vital to the peoples learning and teaching these arts. This has led, unfortunately, to the absence of any substantial amount of recorded history of the martial arts up to modern times. Nowhere is this more evident than in connection with the martial arts of Okinawa where the first published work on Karate appeared in 1922. The book, entitled *Ryukyu Kempo: Karate*, was written by Gichin Funakoshi; sadly, only one year after its publication, the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 destroyed the plates and the book with it. In this article I will try to give a brief history of Okinawan martial arts as it pertains to the style of Matsumura-seito Shorin-Ryu. Along the way, I hope to trace the long line of teachers up to the founder Hohan Soken, continuing on to my teacher Robert Stigall, and finally ending with myself.

Okinawa – Background

Okinawa can literally be translated as “a rope in the offing.” The kanji characters that make up its name are 沖縄 (pronounced Oki and nawa respectively). The first character means in the offing; offshore; out at sea. The second character means rope. The origin of the Okinawan people has been somewhat of a mystery and many theories exist including initial inhabitation by shipwrecked peoples. There have been only occasional immigrations and some evidence suggests Paleolithic/Neolithic migrations. However, there has been no significant influx of people for over 2000 years, which indicates that Okinawa has a very old and established culture. There is also evidence of trade with China and others as early as the 3rd century B.C. The Okinawan language is similar to archaic Japanese and the physical characteristics of the people have been likened to Southeast Asians, i.e. Malaysian, Polynesian. These details prove that Okinawa has evolved under the influence of many sources and so has been called the “melting pot of the Orient.” We are interested here in the martial arts of Okinawa and we will find that they have also been greatly influenced by outside sources. I shall try, as much as is possible, to start from the beginning of the story.

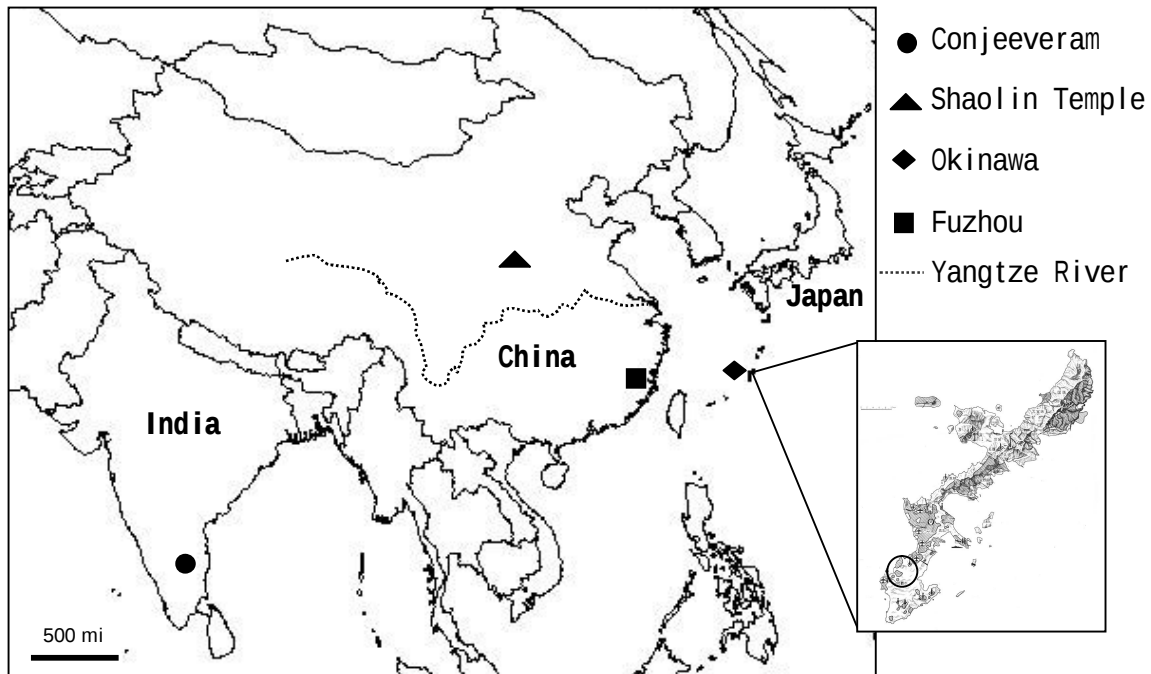


Figure 1 – Map of Asia showing points of interest in the development of Karate. Fuzhou is located in Fukien province, a place where several noted Okinawans, including Bushi Matsumura, traveled for instruction in the martial arts. The circle in the inset contains Naha, Shuri, and Tomari. This emphasizes what a great accomplishment the globalization of Karate has been.

Bodhidharma

Bodhidharma (Bodhi) was the 3rd son of king Sugandha in southern India (see Conjeeveram, Fig. 1) and grew up as a member of the warrior caste, the *Kshátriya*. This being the case, Bodhi was well trained in the use of weapons and in empty-handed fighting styles. The *Kshátriya* practiced a style of empty-handed combat called *vájramushti* which may be translated as: one whose clenched fist is adamant; of a *Kshátriya*, or warrior; the clenched fist as a weapon. The last translation is particularly intriguing in relation to our search for the origins of Karate. Bodhi was also the student of a famous Buddhist master named Prajnatarā. It was Prajnatarā who gave

Bodhidharma his name and upon his deathbed, so the legend goes, requested that Bodhi go to China to stay the decline of Buddhism outside of India. Overcoming many hardships along the way, such as his famous crossing of the Yangtze River, Bodhi took three years to complete the 3,000 mile journey. After a disappointing encounter with the Wei emperor (a famous student of Buddhism himself), Bodhi traveled to Honan Province, where he took up residence in a cave. Facing a wall in total silence, he sat in meditation for nine years. Again determined to spread the teachings of the Buddha, he found his way to the now famous Shaolin Temple. The monks of the temple were in such poor physical condition that they were unable to endure the strict regiment that Bodhi thought necessary for their proper training. Therefore, he taught the monks a series of exercises to strengthen their bodies. These exercises were called *shih pa lo han sho*, in English, “Eighteen Hands of the Lo-Han,” where the word Lo-Han refers to temple guardians of Hindu origin. This series of exercises, Eighteen Hands of the Lo-Han, eventually became the basis for the famous Shaolin *ch’üan fa* (known more popularly as Kung-fu, pronounced “gung-foo”). Several decades after Bodhi’s death a *ch’üan fa* master named Ch’ueh Yuan shang-jen combined the eighteen hands with his own style, expanding them to seventy-two offensive and defensive moves. Thus, *ch’üan fa* as a lethal martial art developed with Ch’ueh Yuan shang-jen.

So it is that most of today’s *ch’üan fa* forms can be traced back to Bodhidharma and his exercises, “Eighteen hands of the Lo-Han.” Although there are earlier accounts of martial arts in China, and even at Shaolin, there were no organized systems until the time of Bodhidharma. In addition, Bodhidharma has been definitively linked to the idea that spiritual enlightenment cannot be separated from intellectual and physical

development, an idea that appealed a great deal to warrior classes such as the Samurai of Japan. This is what makes the story of Bodhidharma so important in the development of Karate. The very essence of Karate-do, as outlined by Nagamine Sensei, is the pursuit of peace through the development of mind, body, and spirit, which are inseparable.

Interesting story: When Bodhi died he was buried in Honan province. However, three years later a Wei official reported meeting Bodhi on the road traveling in Turkestan. Bodhi was carrying only one sandal and said he was going back to India. When the Wei emperor heard this report he opened Bodhi's tomb and found it empty, containing only one sandal.



Figure 2 – Indian monk Bodhidharma developed Shaolin *ch'üan fa* in the 6th century. This image may be familiar to you if you get your uniforms from Shureido!

Chinese Influence in Okinawa

The Chinese style of *ch'üan fa* outlined above is known in Okinawa as Shorin-ji Kempo (Shorin refers to its Shaolin origin and Kempo means way of the fist). Although an indigenous form of weaponless fighting existed in Okinawa, called *tode*, it is this method of Shorin-ji Kempo that made its way to the islands and evolved, along with *tode*, into Okinawa-te (or *Te*) and eventually into modern day Karate. China and Japan have had official

relations as far back as the 6th century and several diplomatic and cultural missions between the two lands mysteriously disappeared, most likely shipwrecked. It has been postulated that these early shipwrecked envoys found themselves washed ashore in Okinawa where they undoubtedly re-established themselves and went on to spread the knowledge of their respective professions. Most certainly among them were politicians, monks, artists, and even warriors. Still another account says that *ch'üan fa* entered the Ryukyu Islands through contact with mainland China in Fuzhou in the 7th century. Regardless of these speculations, official relations between China and Okinawa began in 1372 with Okinawa's King Satto and so the influx of Chinese culture, including *ch'üan fa*, from this time on is undisputed. The style of Shorin-ji Kempo (or *ch'üan fa*) was soon incorporated into the indigenous fighting style of *tode* and the amalgamation of the two has come to be known as a martial art that is unique to Okinawa. I will next give a brief description of the events leading to the merging of *ch'üan fa* and *tode*.

The "hero-king" Sho Hashi united the three territories of Okinawa in 1429. He then instituted a national policy forbidding the possession of weapons of any kind by the people. This action no doubt led to great progress in the development of empty-handed fighting techniques. About two hundred years later in 1609 the Satsuma clan of Japan took control of Okinawa and confiscated all weapon on the islands. This led to many clashes between the Okinawans the Satsuma. In 1629 several secret meetings were held between members of *ch'üan fa* groups and members of *tode* groups. It was decided that they should unite against the enemy; this decision led to a new fighting style referred to simply as *Te*. Because of the circumstances under which *Te* developed, it was practiced and taught in secrecy. In

addition, its main purpose was to kill and maim enemies who had access to weapons; thus, *Te* became an extremely violent art. The dire need for secrecy permeated the art so deeply that it persisted until c.a. 1902 with the introduction of Karate into the curriculum of the First Public High School of Okinawa Prefecture.

As a side note, Sho Hashi learned a great deal about governing from the Chinese. As a result, Okinawa's two largest cities, Shuri and Naha, profited and became centers of culture and trade. Arguably, this is why the major schools of *Te* were founded in Shuri and Naha (as well as Tomari).

Shuri-Te

In 1756 a Chinese ship heading for Satsuma was blown off course and landed in the Ryukyu Islands. On board was a Chinese man named Kusanku, a master of *Shorin-ji Kempo*, who gave several impressive demonstrations of his martial skills. This man is given credit for the Kata that bears his name, which we practice to this day. Kusanku was also one of the teachers of the famous Toudi Sakugawa (1733–1815). Sakugawa held the rank of *Chikudun Pechin* (similar to the rank of Samurai) and was famous for his skill as a fighter under his Okinawan master Takahara *Pechin* (1683–1760). Takahara is credited with being the first to explain the Way (or do) with respect to Karate. In addition to studying under Kusanku and Takahara, Sakugawa also studied in Fuzhou, Beijing, and Satsuma, thus incorporating many ideas into his own way of fighting. The most famous student of Sakugawa is “Bushi” Matsumura, his full title being Bushi Matsumura *Chikudun Pechin* Soken. Soken learned the Okinawan fighting arts from Sakugawa. He was a security agent for three Ryukyuan kings and studied fighting arts in Fujian (China)

and Satsuma. In Satsuma he was taught *Jigen-ryu ken-jutsu*, the combative art of the Satsuma Samurai. He received his *menkyo* (teaching certificate) from Ijuin Yashichiro and was given the responsibility of combining the teaching principles of the Chinese, Japanese, and Okinawan arts that he had studied. This effort on the part of Bushi Matsumura was a systematized style of martial art that became known as *Shuri-Te*. Matsumura is known as one of the first masters to begin teaching his art and he opened the first martial arts school in Shuri in Sakiyama village. As we have seen, Bushi Matsumura's background in the martial arts includes Chinese, Japanese, and Okinawan influences. He was a body guard to kings and a celebrated warrior. Therefore, we can imagine that he combined the best of these influences, on the basis of personal experience, when developing and teaching his style of *Shuri-Te*. Among Matsumura's students appear the names of some of the most respected and well-known karate men of our time, including Anko Itosu, Nabe Matsumura, Gichin Funakoshi, and Chotoku Kyan. Thus, the Karate styles these men went on to develop and teach will have forever ingrained in them influences from beyond the islands of Okinawa.

Hohan Soken

Nabe Matsumura (1850–1930) was the grandson of the above mentioned Bushi Matsumura. Although not much is known about him today, he is said to have been very strict and disciplined. Nabe received his *menkyo* from his grandfather and thereafter was petitioned by many students, all of whom were turned away. He took on only one student in his lifetime, his nephew Hohan Soken (1889–1982). Hohan Soken lived in a time when his family had been stripped of their *Pechin* status, but he was still eager to learn

the ways of his grandfather and uncle. Soken studied the basics under his uncle for ten years until he was finally taught the more advanced techniques including the *Hakutsuru* (the White Crane). Soken said in an interview before he died: “My uncle [Nabe] only learned from Bushi Matsumura and only taught me what he had learned. So, it can be said that it is an "old version" with no updates. By studying my Matsumura Orthodox you walk back into ancient times when karate was more forceful and challenging.”

When Soken Sensei opened his dojo in 1952 he named it *Machimura sui-de*, or the more familiar Japanese term Matsumura Shuri-te, in honor of its origins. In 1956 he changed the name to Matsumura-seito Shorin-ryu Karate-do. Seito means orthodox, which was added to distinguish it from the modern and more “commercial” methods being taught. Soken Sensei, as he put it, still taught in the old ways and did not understand the new, softer teaching methods. Eventually, however, Soken did admit to somewhat changing his ways because his methods were thought to be too crude and severe. He defends his ways by saying, “It was the way I learned and the way I taught.”

Soken Sensei thought that the most important form in Matsumura-seito Shorin-ryu was *Kusanku*, which he says is the old version of the kata. He also taught the White Crane form (*Hakutsuru*), *Passai-sho* and *dai*, *Chinto*, *Pinan shodan*, *Pinan nidan*, *Naihanchi shodan*, *Naihanchi nidan*, *Gojushiho*, *Kusanku*, and three forms of *Rohai*. Soken also mastered the art of *Kobudo* under Komesu Ushi-no-tanmei and Tsuken Mantaka, who is famous for his *Chicken-bo*. Soken Sensei was thought to have learned many forms other than these but only taught them to select students or not at all.

Fuse Kise (1935 –)

Fuse Kise was one of the top students directly under Hohan Soken. He was recognized by the Okinawan Prefectural Government and a panel of scholars from Ryukyu University as the true successor of the Matsumura-seito Shorin-ryu style. He was promoted to 9th dan under Sensei Soken and was one of the few Okinawan masters of the time, along with Soken, who was willing to teach Americans stationed in the islands. Kise had several teachers besides Soken, including his uncle Master Macabe, as well as Zenryo Shimabukuro, and Shigeru Nakamura. However, in 1957 he chose to focus solely on the study of Matsumura-seito Shorin-ryu. He is the founder and current Grandmaster of the Shorin-ryu Kenshin Kan Karate and Kobudo Federation.

Roy Thomason

Roy Thomason began his training while stationed at Kadena airforce base in Okinawa under the guidance of Fuse Kise. At that time Kise was teaching a style called *Shorin-ji Ryu*, a term used by practitioners of Chotoku Kyan derived groups. Kise learned *Shorinji-ryu* from a famous student of Kyan named Zenryo Shimabukuro. During the same period Kise introduced Thomason to Hohan Soken for instruction in Matsumura-seito Shorin-ryu; he remained a student under Soken and Kise for seven years and eventually attained the rank of 5th dan. He was among the first to bring *Shorin-ryu* back to his home state of Ohio. The Karate training that took place at Kadena airbase would have a large impact on Karate in the states.

Sonny Johnson

Sonny Johnson began his training boxing in the navy in 1956. He soon migrated to Karate and received his shodan in Matsumura-seito Shorin-ryu under Roy Thomason. Unfortunately, Roy Thomason was in a motorcycle accident that put him out of training and teaching for almost twenty years. In 1977 Mr. Johnson was promoted to Yondan in the Okinawan Karate Federation under Hohan Soken, Fusei Kise, and Glenn Premru. He was awarded the title of *Renshi* in 1984 and On February 18th, 2006, Mr. Johnson was promoted to the rank of 8th dan and given the title of "Hanshi" by Glenn Keeney, Phillip Koepfel, Eddie Bethea, and Ronald Lindsey. Hanshi Johnson was inducted into the International Karate and Kickboxing Hall of Fame in December 1997. Over the past fifty years, Mr. Johnson has studied various styles under prominent teachers such as Chinese *Kenpo* under Jim and Al Tracy, Japanese *Gensi-Ryu* under Robert Fryer, and Okinawan *Goju-Ryu* under Glenn Keeney. He has also studied *Kajukenbo* with Al and Ben Dacascos as well as full contact and tournament principles with Joe Lewis. He has also studied with Ronald Lindsey in the White Crane System and Matsumura Seito Shorin-Ryu, and under Master Phillip Koepfel, as well as Glenn Premru. Mr. Johnson was the state director of Indiana for the Professional Karate Commission for a number of years and is still actively teaching in his home state of Indiana. Over the years he has trained many kickboxers and now trains fighters in mixed martial arts (MMA) as well.

Mr. Johnson is currently the style head of "*Shorin-ryu Hayashi*" for the United States Karate-do Kai, an organization comprised of various traditional styles of Karate-do led by Phillip Koepfel.

Impact of Hanshi Johnson

Sonny Johnson has been training in the martial arts for over fifty years. He has been actively involved in seeking a true understanding of traditional Okinawan karate and its principles. As stated above, the Kadena airbase in Okinawa played an important role in the spread of Karate to the United States. Established in 1945, just before the battle of Okinawa, the airbase was one of the few places Americans could train in the Okinawan arts. The most prominent men teaching at Kadena were Hohān Soken and his students Fuse Kise, Yuichi Kuda, Ronald Lindsey, and Glenn Premru. Premru eventually attained 10th dan and was thought to be Sensei Soken's successor by many, as was Sensei Kise. Premru, who was once head of the Okinawan Karate Federation, lived in Okinawa for many years with his Okinawan wife and spoke the Hogen dialect. Ronald Lindsey has spent the last forty-five years researching and training in the Matsumura-seito Shorin-ryu of Hohān Soken. He has teaching certificates from Hohān Soken, Fusei Kise, Yuichi Kuda and Takaya Yabiku (twenty year student of Soken and master of the White Crane). Sensei Lindsey is seen as the foremost authority in the United States on Matsumura-seito Shorin-ryu and the White Crane styles of Okinawa.

Sensei Johnson has studied with all of these men in an effort to capture the true essence of Okinawan Karate, specifically *Shuri-Te*. He claims that what he teaches in connection with Shorin-ryu has come from Hohān Soken, either directly or from the above mentioned students of Soken. He does, however, concede to the fact that the history of Karate-do is somewhat "washed together." For instance, I learned *Pinan* 1-5 and all 3 *Naihanchi* while studying Matsumura-seito but Soken only taught *Pinan* 1

and 2 and *Naihanchi* 1 and 2. I found out from Mr. Johnson that these kata were taught to him by Sensei Premru (prominent student of Soken) and that Soken Sensei knew many more kata than he taught, sometimes not to everyone. Furthermore, my training in this style ended at shodan with much more to be learned. In addition, Sensei Kise has been a big influence on the style taught by Mr. Johnson. For example, Kise was a long time student of Shimabukuro, who was a student of Chotoku Kyan (who was a student of Bushi Matsumura). The style that Mr. Johnson is now the head of is also known as *Sukanai Hayashi*. This is yet another alternative rendering of the characters used for *Shorin-ryu*, and is the same as the above-mentioned *Shorinji-ryu* used for Kyan derived styles (of which Kise was a master). These terms came into more prominent use after World War II to distinguish the style's origins. Sensei Johnson believes that through his extensive research and study what he now teaches is closer than ever to what Sensei Soken once taught.

One interesting addition to our curriculum by Sensei Johnson was a series of sixty prearranged self-defense techniques. I learned from Mr. Johnson that these are not derived from Soken. However, they do have, in my opinion, great practical value for learning concepts such as *tai sabaki* and are also of practical use. They were taken, says Sensei Johnson, from his study of Chinese *Kempo* under Jim and Al Tracy who were students of the well known Ed Parker (student of Professor Chow). The sixty self-defense techniques are derived from the *Kempo* forms called Short 1 and 2, Long 1 and 2, Tiger, and Crane.

Bob Stigall

Bob Stigall began his training under Sonny Johnson at the age of nine. At the age of sixteen he was eligible and successfully qualified for the rank of shodan in Matsumura-seito Shorin-ryu. He started his first dojo, The USA Karate Academy, in 1990 and has been teaching ever since in Muncie, Indiana. Mr. Stigall holds eight Indiana state championships, two national championships, two PKC kickboxing titles, and one United World Martial Arts Kickboxing championship. Aside from the traditional Shorin-ryu he learned from Mr. Johnson, he also trains fighters in kickboxing and mixed martial arts (MMA). Mr. Stigall currently holds the rank of 4th dan.

Jason Croy

I have been training now in the martial arts for a relatively short time (almost twelve years). I began my study in Matsumura-seito Shorin-ryu under Mr. Stigall in early 1998 and studied with him for almost eight years before receiving my shodan in 2005. In addition to traditional Shorin-ryu, I also studied kickboxing under Mr. Stigall.

Final Thoughts

In trying to trace my lineage in Matsumura-seito Shorin-ryu, I have seen that all of the currently accepted traditional styles of Okinawan Karate have a common origin. Cultural influences from India, China, Japan, and Okinawa, combined with the necessity to fight foreign aggressors, led the peoples of Okinawa to develop an empty-handed fighting system. This system has become distinctly linked to Okinawa and was first systematized by Bushi Matsumura. I note here that even Master Higashionna, founder of *Naha-te*, first studied under Bushi Matsumura and later under teachers in China before developing his own teachings of *Naha-te*. So it might be said that Bushi Matsumura is the true father of modern Karate as we have come to know it.

Finally, just as the language we speak is not static but changes with time, so to has Karate been adapted and changed by the various men we have come to call “Masters.” In addition, the changing demands of the times often alter our art. This is the origin of the different school of thought in Karate-do. Gichin Funakoshi said of some of these changes:

“Although one might claim that such changes are only the natural result of the expansion of Karate-do, it is not evident that one should view such a result with rejoicing rather than with some misgiving.”

– Gichin Funakoshi

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