

Appreciating Similarities and Differences in Martial Arts

Shoryin-ryu, Goju-ryu, and Beyond

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Inspiration

Inspired by the touching story of how Shoshin Nagamine (founder of Matsubayashi Shorin-ryu) adopted and adapted Chojun Miyagi's (founder of Goju-ryu) first kata Gekisai Dai Ichi to be Matsubayashi's second kata Fukyugata Ni—and *because I'm curious based on my own background in Goju-ryu*—I'm pleased to have this opportunity to explore the special relationship between Goju-ryu and Shorin-ryu (Matsubayashi in particular), as well as other styles more generally. Since most readers will already be more familiar with Shorin-ryu, I also included additional details about some Goju-ryu history, kata, stances, and techniques.

Founders Overview

Born in 1733, Santunuku Sakugawa is one of the first recognized karate masters. He studied tode under a Buddhist monk (Peichin Takahara) and later White Crane Chuan Fu under a locally stationed Chinese dignitary (Kong Su Kung). It was in his honor that Sakugawa created Kusanku (which is the translation of Kung's name).¹ Sakugawa's most significant student was Sokon Matsumura (known as Bushi, meaning warrior). Kanryo Higaonna (instructor of Chojun Miyagi, founder of Goju-ryu) was contemporary with Anko Itosu who trained Choshin Chibana (founder of Shorin-ryu and instructor Arakaki Ankichi, who trained Shoshin Nagamine, founder of Matsubayashi). *So both Chojun Miyagi and Shoshin Nagamine were influenced by Anko Itosu and others, but seemingly did not have much direct training together.*

There's not much detail available about a possible friendship between Shoshin Nagamine and Chojun Miyagi, but they were both leaders in Okinawa's karate community and must have had a shared mutual respect and admiration to have collaborated over the decades.

Shoshin Nagamine's (1907-1997) life spanned 90 years. Chojun Miyagi (1888-1953) was almost two decades Nagamine's senior, but only lived to 65 years old (so 25 fewer years). Their maximum overlapping years spanned 1925-1953. Chojun Miyagi named Goju-ryu in 1930, when he was 42 years old and he created the shared kata (Gekisai Dai Ichi / Fukyugaka Ni) about 10 years later in 1940, when he was around 52 years old and Shoshin Nagamine around 33. It was also 1940 when Chojun Miyagi recommended Shoshin Nagamine for his promotion to Renshi. Later in life, they were part of the 1972 formation of the Zen Okinawa Karate-Do Renmei, a federation dedicated to the preservation of karate as part of Okinawan's cultural heritage.

Style Overview

Shorin-ryu (pine forest style) and Goju-ryu (hard-soft style) are two of four traditional Okinawan karate styles. The other two being Shito-ryu (named after masters Kanryo Higaonna and Anko Itosu, who heavily influence the founder, Kenwa Mabuni) and Uechi-ryu (named after its founder, Kanbun Uechi). All share some core philosophies and priorities around respect, discipline, humility, and using martial arts as a means of self defense, personal development, and community betterment.

Some of the differences between Shorin-ryu and Goju-ryu can be traced to them being developed in different regions of Okinawa. Though small, the island of Okinawa has different terrains in the north and south that make some types of stances and techniques more beneficial than others. Shorin-ryu, for example, on beaches treading through sand and water benefited from higher, more natural stances. Goju-ryu on rockier terrain benefited from more rooted stances and circular stepping motions that could sweep aside rocks and grip for extra stability.

In broad terms, Shorin-ryu developed in the North (Shuri) uses fast, linear techniques and high, natural stances that allow for quick, agile movements that prioritize precision. Shorin-ryu is also more likely to include evasion techniques and to incorporate relatively higher kicks.

Goju-ryu, by contrast, developed in the South (Naha) uses circular movements (hands and feet) with more focus on deep breathing, rooted stances, power, and close-range applications.

Goju-ryu also emphasizes the practice of exaggerated hip movement and pelvic tilting combined with core and body tightening, especially in Sanchin and Seiunchin katas, but also used more subtly throughout other techniques. This also holds true for Uechi-ryu (the other Naha-te style).

While some exaggerated techniques may seem less direct for real life applications, they are good for conditioning (mind/body/spirit) and more practical at the advanced levels. The circular movements of Goju-ryu stances can function to destabilize the stances of opponents. The circular hand movements allow for redirection into grappling or Jiu Jitsu style applications. At the end of the circular techniques, there is a slight retraction which is reminiscent of (but functionally different than) the double hip in Shuto-ukes or other final touches often seen in advanced techniques.

In both systems, like many other martial arts, the techniques evolve as students advance. Many advanced interpretations have multiple strikes and function as take-downs. What is taught as a block may also be a strike with multiple interpretations depending on context. They share the core focus on empty hand techniques and basic kicks (mostly practical kicks midsection and lower contrasted to the higher, more flamboyant kicks popular in Taekwondo). Matsubayashi in particular prioritizes hand techniques, even compared to other Shorin-ryu styles. Shito-ryu is a blend of Goju-ryu's hard and soft style with Shorin-ryu's fast, linear style; where as Uechi-ryu is the hardest of the four with a heavy focus on strength, conditioning, and deep breathing (especially with Sanchin kata).

Shotokan, the most widely practiced style of traditional karate, was adapted to Japanese culture and priorities. Gichin Funakoshi brought karate to Japan in 1922, changing some of the names and style to better suit Japan. Notably, changing to-te (Chinese hand) to karate (empty hand). Shotokan, and Japanese martial arts more generally, tend to be more formal and used to develop athleticism and discipline. The stances are deep with long-range, linear techniques.

In Japan, there tends to be more focus on the “how” over the “why” and it is designed to be taught well in large classes. Japanese culture is often considered more aggressive with more emphasis with uniformity, etiquette, and rituals. By contrast, Okinawan styles are more relaxed in allowing for individual adaptations to their body and style. Okinawan martial arts are also more focused on the “why” of bunkai and self-defense applications, including joint locks and takedowns. Known as “Tuidi” these are methods of grabbing, twisting, and dislocating joints.

In terms of global popularity, all the traditional styles of karate are outpaced by Taekwondo. This Korean martial arts was developed in the 1940s from local martial arts mixed with Okinawan and Chinese martial arts. To the uninformed, all the styles may seem like “karate,” but Taekwondo has much more emphasis on high kicks, as well as jump and spin kicks. They also use higher stances with a focus on speed, while emphasizing sports and competition.

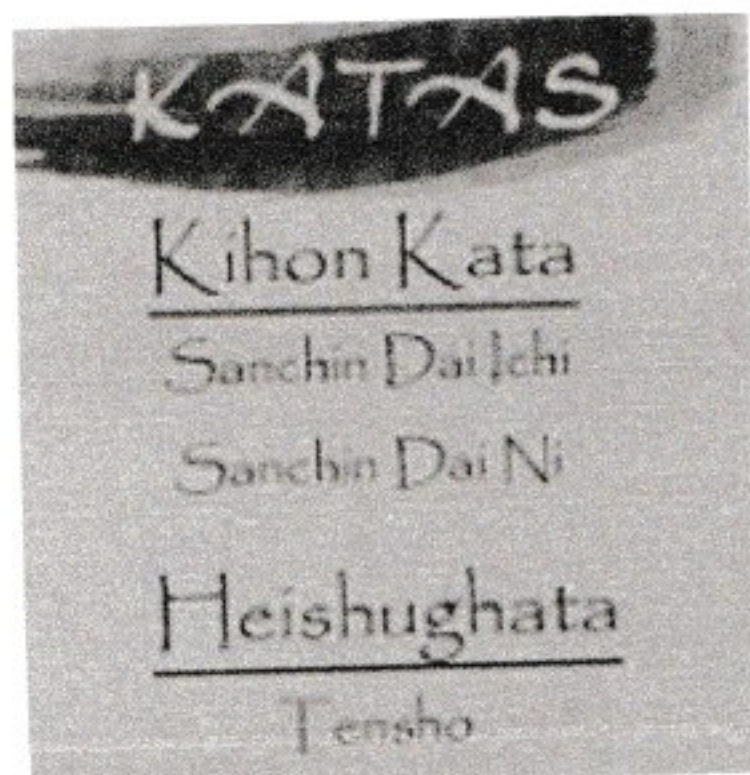
All the traditional karate systems and Taekwondo share the Okinawan Kobudo (weapon) system: bo, nunchaku, sais, tonfas, and kamas. Some schools also teach sword, but the primary weapons were traditional farming tools because overt weapons (like kendo/sword) and overt martial arts (like judo) were banned to varying degrees from the 1400’s (with the first and second Sho Dynasties) and in 1609 with the Japanese Satsuma Samurai invasion. This is just one of the ways in which Okinawa is unique with its long and complicated history being on the receiving end of military invasions and occupations.

Goju-Ryu & My Experiences

Some research notes that Goju-ryu is distinct because of the influence of Chinese martial arts on its “softer” techniques. But Matsubayashi kata, bunkai, YKs, and basics also include many “softer” Chinese-influenced techniques. The circular motions of Goju-ryu though are quite distinct from Shorin-ryu. Fortunately, I began my training in Taekwondo and my Goju instructor included TKD kata and techniques as long-range complements, so that helps with adapting to Shorin-ryu variations.

In Goju-ryu training, there is a great deal of hip tilting and tension with techniques and legs gripping with stances, with front foot pulling while back leg pushing and hips locking. This seems to cause wear-and-tear, so Shorin-ryu’s more natural stances seem to have the benefit of both more speed and more sustainability. There is some interesting reverse/scissor and double hip motion in Shoryin-ryu that is new to me.

Other similarities are that the traditional styles emphasize kata and basics, “practical” kicks with lower and middle body targets, using transitions and stances to breakdown opponent’s balance, techniques being usable as blocks and/or attacks, the folds of blocks being the actual block so that the “block” is actually a strike, and simultaneous block/strikes. I don’t know if “tracing” techniques back to opponents is style specific, but it’s also a shared strategy.

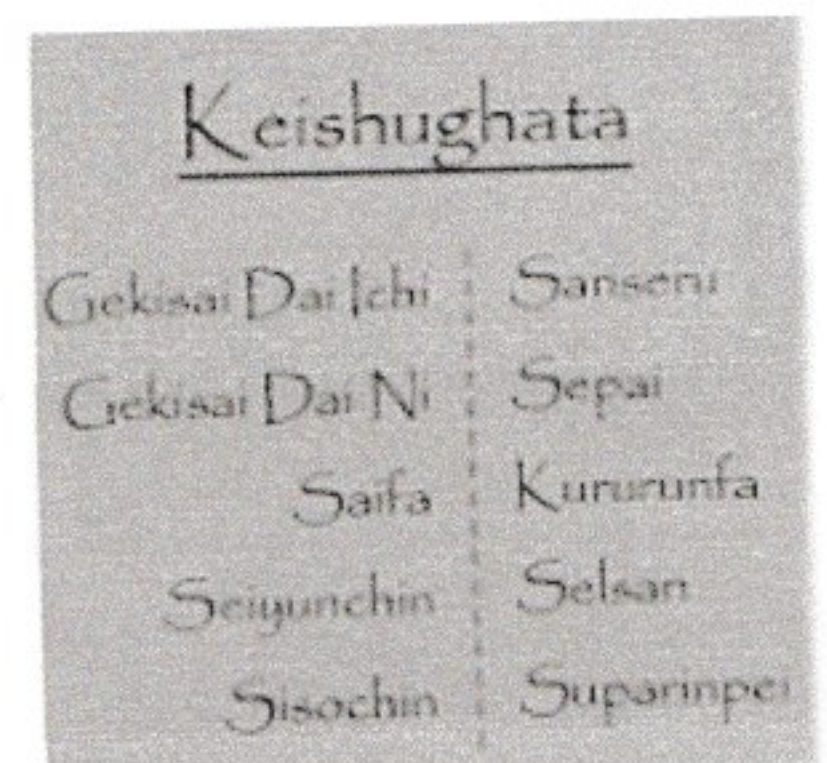


13 Goju Kata

Gekisai kata are for beginners.

Sanchin and Tensho are breathing forms.

Suparinpei is the longest and most advanced with 108 techniques.



Goju Kata/Stance: Sanchin

Sanchin is a foundational kata practiced in multiple styles but particularly emphasized in the Naha-te styles, Goju-ryu and Uechi-ryu. It is meant to unify the trio of mind, body, and spirit and translates to “three battles or conflicts.” There are no kicks or sideways movements, just forward and backward. The stance is similar to Shorin-ryu’s natural stance, Shizentai-dachi, but a little longer, wider, and more rooted.



In Sanchin kata, there is extreme tension combined with slow, deep breathing designed to build strength, stability, and the ability to withstand physical pressure. The body (especially the core) remains tight during inhale and exhale. This intentional tensing is known as “shime.” A common practice is to test the kata with strikes and pushes.

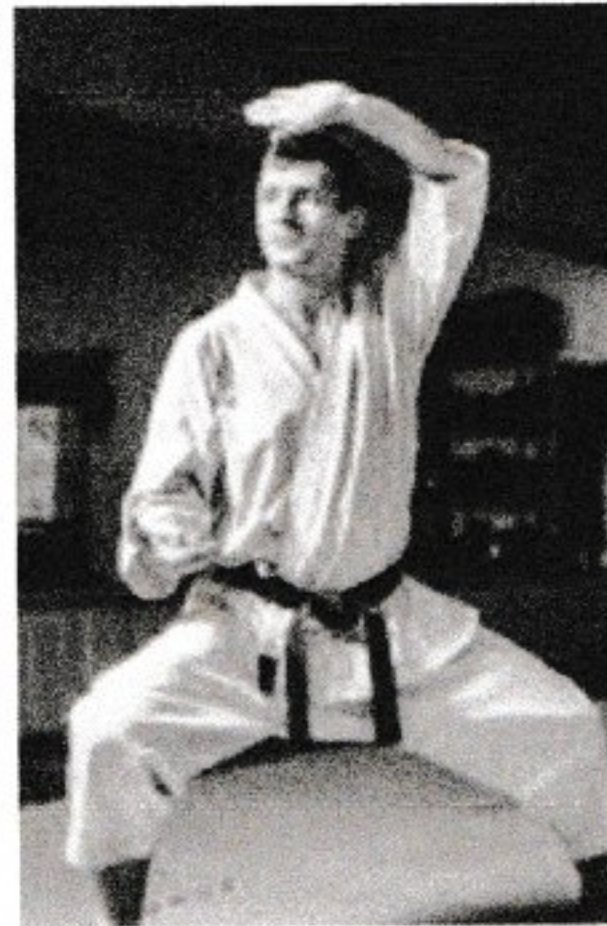
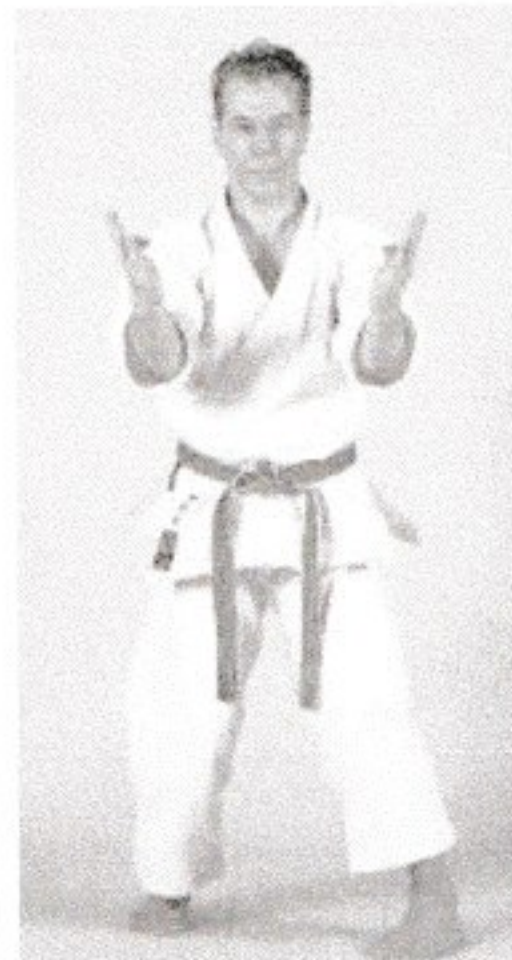
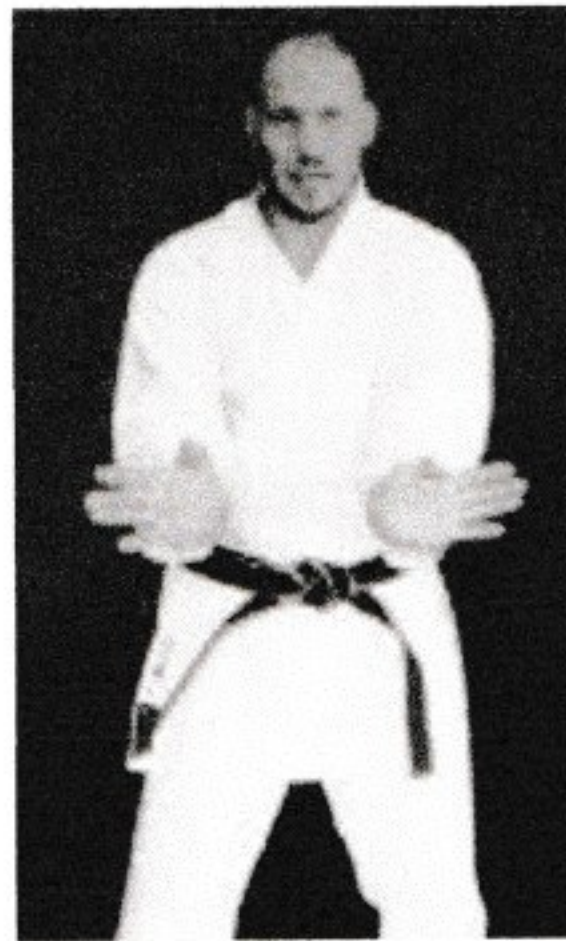
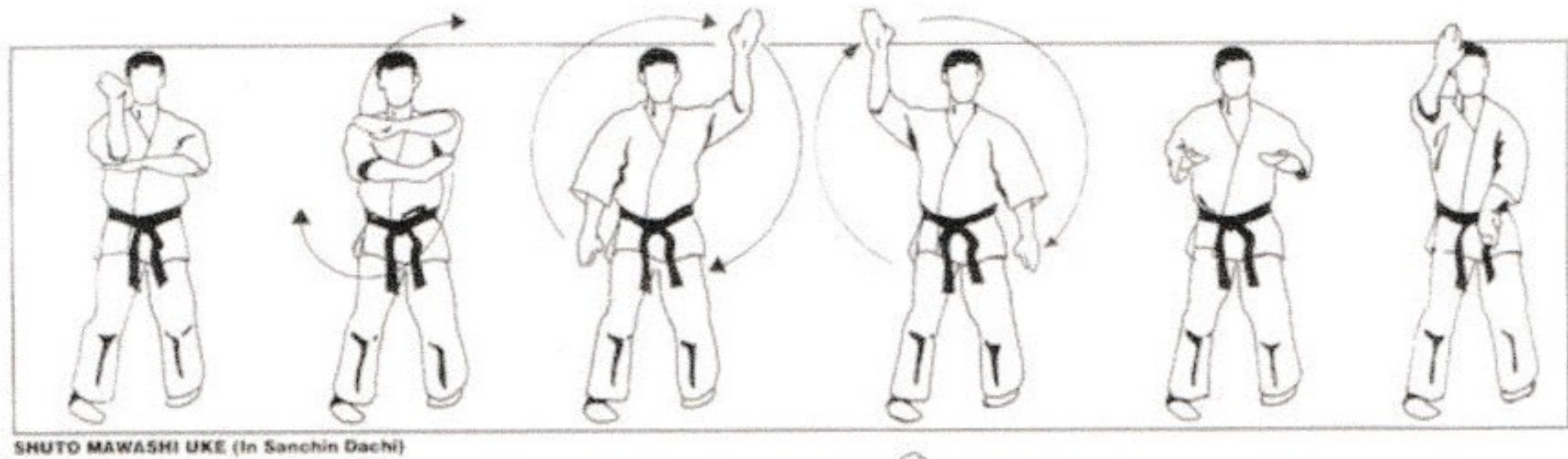
Goju Stance: Shiko-Dachi

Another key stance in Goju-ryu is Shiko-dachi (square stance), which is comparable to deep Jigotai-dachi (wide open stance). In both wide stances, the feet are placed at 45-degree angles. However, the Goju stance is wider than shoulder width with knees deeper and hips lower, trading mobility for groundedness. The kata, Seiunchin, emphasizes the Shiko-dachi with exaggerated breathing and pelvic tilt.



Goju: Double Blocks

Multiple Goju kata include Mawashi-uke, the double “roundhouse” block shown below (aka Tora Guchi, tiger mouth block). It is similar to both hands performing circular Shotei-uke palm heels. This technique is not common in Shorin-ryu, but is included in the final kata, Kusanku. Many other types of double blocks are popular in Goju-ryu. Of course, what’s called a double block is easily a block-strike, double-strike, take-down, or many other applications.



Multi-System Learning

Through this essay and recent training, I now better understand some of the distinctions between Shorin-ryu and Goju-ryu, while still very much appreciating the core similarities. The research has illuminated many distinctions, but those seemed to fade as both systems reach their higher interpretations and incorporate aspects from each other and other martial arts. Jiu jitsu, for example, begins with locks and takedowns, but there are also hidden strikes. And many/most mid-range karate techniques have in-close interpretations with takedowns.

Studying Shorin-ryu reminds me of being taught a second language in that students learn new things about their original system/language through making the similarities and differences explicit—as opposed to just knowing/doing what they’ve been taught from the start. The desire to combine systems and create new ones isn’t surprising, but I’m grateful that so many have kept their long traditions. My Goju instructor William Knoblock (intermittently 1984-2004) kept very true the system’s katas, techniques, and applications as taught by Morio Higaonna, the current head of Goju-Ryu. He is founder and Chief Instructor of the Traditional Okinawan Goju-Ryu Karate-do Federation (TOGKF) and founder of the International Okinawan Goju-ryu Karate-do Federations (IOGKF).

Mario Higoanna was born in Naha in 1938, and is still active at 86 years old. He is a 10th dan and has been described as a “living cultural treasure and inspiration” as he has authored influential books, made training videos, and travels around the world sharing his knowledge. Interestingly, my path is the reverse of his. He began training in Shorin-ryu, then transitioned to Goju-ryu with the assistance of Anichi Miyagi, who was a direct student of Chojun Miyagi but not related (Miyagi is just a common surname in Okinawa).

I like that my instructor was very thoughtful about training, focusing on understanding the nuances and developing the technique from there as opposed to changing the style much. Instead he would supplement it. For example, we used Taekwondo for long-range techniques. This worked well for me since I had started with Taekwondo (1980-1983) and joined with him after the dojo closed. It felt like forever that I had a “Taekwondo accent” in my Goju.

I thought the linear aspects of TKD would help me transition to Shorin-ryu, and I think it does, but now I can feel the “Goju accent” in certain techniques and stances. In some instances, I’m able to just think of them as entirely different techniques, Chodan-uki (linear, not circular), Tsumasaki-geri (using toes as weapons as a different kick), the Shuto-uke fold (additional type of knifehand block), and not “over” gripping in the Shizentai-dachi (this one is still a challenge since the stance is otherwise similar to Sanchin-dachi). Many aspects I just took for granted, which is why it reminded me of learning a second language. I learned a lot about English grammar when studying Spanish. And in learning another language, like learning another style, it’s easy to gain an extra appreciation for both.

Bonus: Women in Martial Arts

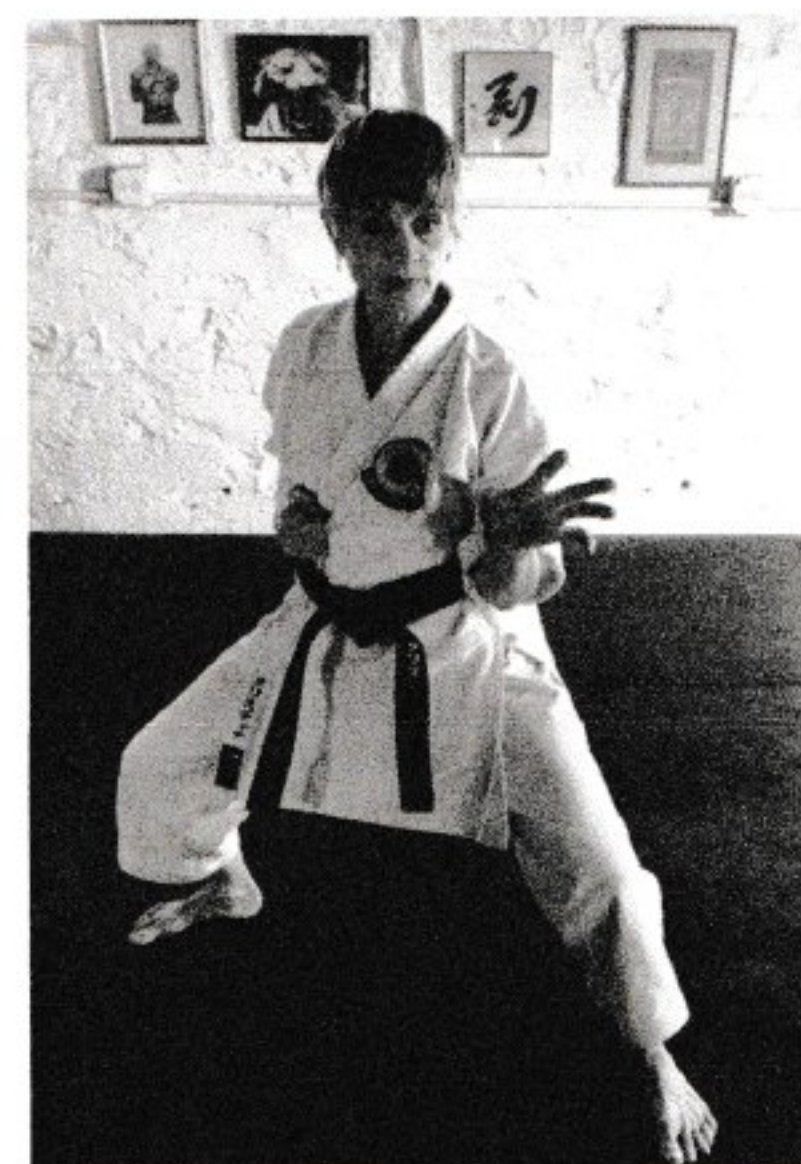
As I delved into martial arts history, I was interested in the role of women and how it may have varied among different styles. All the founders and masters seemed to be men. The older photos of large classes were all men. Historically, both China and Japan had “Onna-Bugeisha” female warriors, who fought alongside men often using a “naginata” (polearm with curved blade). And Japan’s Empress Jingu (169-269 AD) famously led an invasion of Korea while pregnant. Yonamine Chiro (also known as Tsura), was the most famous female sumo wrestler and martial artist in Okinawa. According to Funakoshi, Tsura was inspired to learn karate after being attacked as a teenager. She became very skilled and outperform many men.

All exceptional on many levels, but what about “everyday” women?

About a century and a half later, in 1994, Okinawa would finally open a dojo founded by a woman: Shorin-ryu 5th dan, Nobuko Oshiro (pictured here). Then on March 13, 2024, she made history again by being the first female 10th dan in Okinawa at age 77.² She is the only female grandmaster in Okinawa. While it’s a stretch to think of her as an “everyday” woman now, she didn’t begin training until she was 28, as a supplement to her dance training.



In Goju-ryu, the leaders seem to be Kristina Ingham, (pictured here) recently promoted to 9th dan in 2024 in Bermuda, followed by Linda Marchant, a 7th dan from England. There’s not as much biographical information online as I had hoped, but that is telling in itself. I was surprised that the highest ranking female Goju practitioners are not from Okinawa. Either the information is lacking, or perhaps it’s a product of women’s empowerment being farther along in the West.



As karate spread globally, the timing coincided with the women’s movement in the West, so it expanded both geographically and within populations to be more inclusive. We have Anko Itosu to thank in part. While on the whole, women and girls were discouraged or prohibited from participating, there are some notable exceptions. And fortunately, Itosu, who introduced karate

into the school system's physical education curriculum, was a proponent of having karate accessible to all, including women and all children.

Though the martial arts leadership is almost exclusively male, Kung Fu offers a couple exceptions. In 17th century China, White Crane Kung Fu was founded by Fang Qiniang (daughter of Fang Zhengdong, a Shaolin disciple) and Wing Chun was founded by Ng Mui, a nun who shared it with another woman, Yim Wing Chun. Though not designed exclusively for women, they share some strategies and methods that are especially well-suited for women. In particular, they do not rely on brute strength (especially upper body strength) but instead emphasize attacks on vulnerable areas (eyes, throat, groin, liver, knees, and other joints).

I especially appreciate this as someone who trains to overcome size and strength disparities and specifically trains for liver strikes because they are so damaging and good for causing immediate stoppage (as demonstrated in many MMA matches). This focus on vulnerable areas resembles self-defense, not something that can be practiced while sparring and not something to be used in "casual" conflicts. There is also great emphasis on deflecting.

In karate sparring, there may be a greater willingness to trade strikes and to increase conditioning. Kung fu conditioning may instead focus more on core strength, balance, speed, and fluidity. Power is the product of speed and mass. If someone is smaller, then increased speed helps compensate for the difference. The harder power aspects of traditional karate stand in contrast to the softer kung fu styles, but interestingly both Goju-ryu and Shorin-ryu incorporate many softer techniques from White Crane and other Chinese systems. Another example of how the systems are similar in meaningful ways, especially at the advanced levels.