

History of Shotokan Karate

An accurate, well documented, history of Shotokan karate is difficult to establish due to the decimation of Okinawa during World War II. Most of the documented history we have today has been passed down through word of mouth or substantiated using secondary documentation. However, there are four common theories addressing the development of karate, they are:

- Karate developed from unarmed fighting traditions developed by the Okinawan peasantry.
- Karate was primarily influenced by the Chinese fighting arts.
- Due to the ban of weapons instituted in 1507 by the Okinawan king Sho Shin, wealthy Okinawans had a need to defend their property.
- Karate was developed by Okinawan law enforcement and security personnel after Satsuma invaded Okinawa in 1609 and banned all weapons.

It's most likely, however, that each of the above influenced the development of Shotokan karate. Early development can be traced back to Chinese fighting arts. The most popular being Gonfu (kunfu). Of all the Gonfu styles that may have influenced our Shotokan karate, it seems that White Crane gonfu, developed by Fang Qiniang, a young girl who grew up in Yongchun, China, appears to have had the greatest influence on the development of modern day karate.

Master Funakoshi believed that karate developed as an indigenous Okinawan martial art. Satunushi "Tode" Sakugawa was the first teacher in the Shotokan lineage who made specific contributions to the karate we study today. Though his techniques were primarily based on White Crane Chuan Fa, Sakugawa is credited with developing Kusanku kata, the basis for our Kankudai and Kankusho katas, the first set of dojo kun, and the concept of "hikite", opposite or pullback hand. One of Sakugawa's students was Sokon Matsumura.

Matsumura was the primary developer of the concept of linear power. It is also believed that he developed the Bassai kata, but this has not been proven definitively. Matsumura's legacy also includes developing early forms of Tekki, Hangetsu, and Gojushiho. He is also credited with developing Gankaku. Matsumura and Yasutsune Itosu were the two prominent figures in the birth of Okinawan Shuri-te.

Yasutsune was a senior student of Matsumura. Most of our current daily activities can be traced back directly to Itosu, with the exception of Jiyu kumite. Itosu was one of Gichin Funakoshi's instructors from approximately 1880 – 1900. Itosu was the first to take karate public in 1902 and is credited with developing the five Heian katas. Itosu is also credited with expanding the three Tekki kata's, although there is some disagreement concerning this.

The second prominent Okinawan karate master in Funakoshi's development was Yasutsune

Azato. Azato was actually Funakoshi's first teacher, however, there is little documentation of Azato's contributions other than a statement from Funakoshi that Azato was "the greatest karate master". Master Gichin Funakoshi, considered the father of modern day karate was born around 1868. As stated previously, Master Funakoshi trained under Masters Yasutsune Azato and Yasutsune Itosu. In 1922 Funakoshi traveled to Japan to demonstrate karate for the Emperor and never returned to Okinawa (at the time he left Okinawa, Funakoshi was married, he did not rejoin with his wife for 25 years, when she traveled to Japan to join him).

Master Funakoshi incorporated the colored ranking system used by judo into karate, he also had lightweight judo uniforms sewn for karate training. During the 1930's Shotokan matured and spread through the universities of Tokyo. During the allied bombings of 1945 Funakoshi's first dojo, the Shotokan (house of Shoto), was burned to the ground. Master Funakoshi also lost his son, Gigo Funakoshi, the heir apparent to Master Funakoshi, during the bombings. Gigo Funakoshi is credited with developing Wankan, Ten no kata, and the Taikyoku kata's.

In 1949 the Japan Karate Association (JKA) was established. In 1957 the Japanese Ministry of Education granted the JKA exclusive legal recognition. In 1957 Master Funakoshi died. Master Masatoshi Nakayama became the head of the JKA from 1949 until his death in 1987. Master Nakayama's most significant contribution to present day karate was the introduction of karate's first match system and tournament. The first JKA all Japan Karate Championship was conducted in Tokyo, Japan in 1957 (the same year Master Funakoshi died; Master Funakoshi had always been adamantly opposed to the introduction of "sports" karate).

Other than minor changes to kata's, more to boost individual ego's than to improve karate, there has been little significant change to the karate we practice today since the passing of Master Funakoshi and the establishment of the JKA.

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