

# Okinawa Kata Classification

## An Historical Overview

by Mario McKenna

Historical research into the art of karate-do inevitably leads one back from Japan to the Ryukyu Islands and finally to the Middle Kingdom. Literally thousands of different methods, theories, and specializations evolved within the fighting arts of China. One of the most prominent theories was that of *wai-chia* and *nei-chia*; more commonly recognized by the terms external or hard and internal or soft (Ratti & Westbrook, 1973, p. 365). Certainly, when one mentions the term internal martial art, images of the slow moving and graceful *xing/kata* of *tai ji quan* immediately come to mind. In contrast, mention external martial arts and an image of the powerful techniques performed in the *xing/kata* of the legendary Shaolin temple springs forward. Generally speaking then, most people associate the internal martial arts with grace, flexibility, and the ability to yield to an attacking force. In contrast, the external martial arts are associated with physical strength, power, and linear attacks. These broad categories of classification are for the most part associated with the Chinese martial arts, but how do these classifications relate to Okinawa karate-do? At first appearance, many of us would be quick to place karate-do in the category of external or hard. Indeed, who could deny the dynamic power, crispness, and focus of a Shotokan kata performance? The sheer athleticism alone would make us quick to label it external. What about the more circular and whip-like techniques found in the Okinawa karate-do styles of Goju-ryu and Uechiryu? Are these styles and their respective training kata internal or external? In the following article, I would like to examine the historical use of the terms internal and external, their origin in relation to Okinawan karate-do kata, and the validity of their use.

### Background - Funakoshi Gichin

After Funakoshi Gichin's successful demonstration of his native Okinawa fighting art in Kyoto in 1917 and his subsequent relocation to Tokyo, he set out to popularize the art of karate-do. Besides the numerous demonstrations and lectures given by him and his students, Funakoshi also wrote several pioneering books outlining the techniques, practice, and history of karate-do. Included among these works is Funakoshi's first publication, *Ryukyu Kenpo Toudi* written in 1922, that quite possibly contains the first attempt at classifying Okinawa karate-do kata (Funakoshi, 1922, pp. 5, 6). In *Ryukyu Kenpo Toudi* Funakoshi states that Okinawa karate-do kata can be classified into two main schools, *Shorin-ryu* and *Shorei-ryu* (Table 1). Funakoshi stated that the footwork and stances of *Shorin-ryu* kata are lighter and the hand and foot techniques are faster in comparison to *Shorei-ryu* kata and are best suited for people with a slight build. *Shorei-ryu* kata on the other hand use solid, rooted stances and slower, power based hand and foot strikes, and are best suited for stout and strong individuals.

Table 1 – Funakoshi Gichin's classification of Okinawan Karate-do kata in his respective works\*

KATA/ BOOK	Ryukyu Kenpo Toudi	Rentan Goshin Toudi Jutsu	Karate-do Kyohan
Pinan 1-5	Shorin-ryu	Shorin-ryu	Shorin-ryu
Naihanchi 1-3	Shorei-ryu	Shorei-ryu	Shorei-ryu
Kusanku	Shorin-ryu	Shorin-ryu	Shorin-ryu
Passai	Shorin-ryu	Shorin-ryu	Shorin-ryu
Seisan	Shorei-ryu	Shorei-ryu	Shorei-ryu
Wansu**	Shorei-ryu	Shorei-ryu	Shorin-ryu
Chinto**	Shorei-ryu	Shorin-ryu	Shorin-ryu
Jitte**	Shorei-ryu	Shorin-ryu	Shorei-ryu
Jion	Shorei-ryu	Shorei-ryu	Shorei-ryu

\*Adapted from *Kobou Kenpo Karate-do Nymon* pg. 71 (Mabuni & Nakasone, 1938)

\*\*Indicates change in the kata's classification in subsequent works

In Funakoshi's next book *Rentan Goshin Toudi Jutsu* (1925) the exact same means of classification is found as in his *Ryukyu Kenpo Toudi* (Table 1). Similarly in *Karate-do Kyohan* (1935) we find him again reiterating the dichotomy of Shorin-ryu versus Shorei-ryu forms. Funakoshi expands somewhat on his definition of Shorei-ryu versus Shorin-ryu in his book *Karate-do Nyumon*:

"The Shang Wu style founded by Chang-san Feng places primary emphasis on the power of Chi (Japanese Ki). Tai Chi (Chuan), Xing-I and Baqua are good examples of schools exhibiting characteristics of this style. In appearance, their movements have in them an explosive power which, effectively applied, can easily knock a man down. The Shaolin style looks upon Ta-mo Lao-tsu (Bodhidharma) as its founder. In this style, which stresses the practical application of hand and foot techniques for blocking and attacking, are seen hard-soft and long-short techniques, that is, both thrusting and short, snapping techniques." (Funakoshi, 1988, p.20.)

Examining the statements regarding Shorin-ryu versus Shorei-ryu that Funakoshi used throughout his works we can see that they approximate elements of the Chinese martial terminology of nei-chia or internal and wai-chia or external martial arts. According to Henning (1997, p. 11), the earliest reference to internal and external-fighting arts in China occurs in a publication known as *An Epitaph for Wang Zhengnan* written by Huang Zong Xi in approximately 1669. In it, the following definition is given to distinguish the two schools of quanfa:

"Shaolin is universally famous for its boxing, but it emphasizes striking a person and a person can also gain the advantage against it. There is the so-called internal school which uses stillness to overcome movement and an aggressor can be toppled upon being engaged." (Henning 1997, p. 11). It would appear that Funakoshi's concept of Shorin-ryu versus Shorei-ryu is loosely based on earlier definitions of the internal and external fighting arts of China. Unfortunately, despite the similarity of the Shorin-ryu versus Shorei-ryu dichotomy in relation to the internal versus external definitions of Chinese fighting systems, it will be shown that Funakoshi's use of such a means of classification for Okinawa karate-do kata was inaccurate and misleading. Indeed, noted martial arts historian Hokama Tetsuhiro, has also argued for the inaccuracy and inconsistency of Funakoshi's classification (Hokama 1998, p. 81). Notwithstanding this inconsistency in classification, what is more startling is that this method of classification was accepted at face value for several years.

### **Miyagi Chojun**

Funakoshi was not the only one to use the Shorin-ryu versus Shorei-ryu dichotomy. Twelve years after the publication of Funakoshi Gichin's original kata classification in *Ryukyu Kenpo Toudi*, Goju-ryu founder, Miyagi Chojun, wrote *Toudi Jutsu Gaisetsu* (An Outline of the Techniques of Quanfa) (McCarthy, 1999a, p. 46). Although a private manuscript that was never published, its contents echoed Funakoshi's general classification of martial arts into either internal or external, but it did not recognize the need to categorize individual kata. This can be readily seen in the following passage:

"Internal systems emphasized softness and pliability. Its defensive techniques were based upon evasive tactics and were representative of Wudang quanfa. External styles mainly emphasized technique based upon physical strength and was best suited for brawny people. The hard or external schools trace their origins to the Shaolin temple located in Dengfeng county, Henan province China." (McCarthy, 1999a, p. 46.) What is particularly interesting to note here is that Miyagi's and Funakoshi's definitions of what body-type is best suited for the internal versus external schools of quanfa were completely opposite! Remember, Funakoshi stated that Shorin-ryu was best suited for individuals with lighter frames while Shorei-ryu was better suited for people with stronger builds. Why both men's interpretations are so different is a source of speculation; one that has not been resolved to date.

### **Mabuni Kenwa and Nakasone Genwa**

Despite the differences between Funakoshi Gichin's and Miyagi Chojun's definitions of internal versus external schools of boxing, Funakoshi's Shorin-ryu versus Shorei-ryu classification of karate-do kata remained unchallenged until 1938, when karate-do pioneer and Shito-ryu founder Mabuni Kenwa wrote *Kobou Kenpo Karate-do Nyumon* with co-author Nakasone Genwa. In it, Mabuni took issue with the Shorin-ryu versus Shorei-ryu distinction and argued that it was an inaccurate and inappropriate means of classification. Mabuni felt that Funakoshi had simply created the distinction himself with respect to kata and went so far as to show how Funakoshi had changed the designation of certain kata from Shorin-ryu to Shorei-ryu and vice versa from one publication to another (Table 1).

Mabuni further argued that such a means of classifying kata had never existed in Okinawa karate-do, nor was it ever used by karate-do's most famous proponents (Mabuni, 1938, p. 71). Indeed, the only tradition that had been handed down was a loose reference to two broad based systems, Shorei-ryu and Shorin-ryu. Referring to his own personal research on the *Bubishi*<sup>2</sup> in his 1934 publication *Seipai no Kenkyu* (Research into the Kata Seipai), Mabuni suggested that the Shorei-ryu classification may have possibly come from a reference to Shoreiji-ryu and Shorinji-ryu found within the *Bubishi* but concluded that it was unsuitable to classify karate-do kata in such a manner. Mabuni himself opted to classify kata according to the teacher who disseminated the respective tradition. For example, Mabuni listed the kata as follows:

Naihanchi (1 to 3), Pinan (1 to 5), Rohai (1 to 3), Kusanku (sho/dai), Passai (sho/dai), Gojushiho, Jitte, Jin, Jion, Chinto, Chinte and Wansu were classified as Itosu lineage kata. The kata Sanchin, Tensho, Seisan, Seiunchin, Seipai, Sanseru, Suparempi, Sochin, Saifa and Kururunfa were classified as Higashionna lineage kata. Finally, Aragaki Seisho's kata, Niseishi, Unsu and Sochin were classified as Aragaki lineage kata (Mabuni, 1938, p. 74). Other works, such as Motobu Choki's *Okinawa Kenpo Toudi Jutsu Kumite* (1926) and *Watashi no Todi Jutsu* (1932) simply listed examples of the extant kata found on Okinawa (Motobu 1926, p. 6; 1932, p. 4). Despite the criticism leveled by Mabuni, the use of the terms Shorei and Shorin remained and were adopted by a later generation of karate-do practitioners and researchers. A clear example can be seen with Kyokushin karate-do founder Oyama Masatatsu, a student of Funakoshi Gichin in his book *This is Karate*.

In the northern style of boxing, the internal system, development of accuracy of movement and speed were emphasized. The southern style depends on the hardening of the body and external strength (Oyama, 1958, p. 316).

### **The Beginnings of Shorin and Shorei**

Funakoshi's teacher, Itosu Anko, reportedly wrote in *Toudi Jukkajo* (Ten Articles of Toudi), that quanfa was based upon two distinct styles, Shorin-ryu and Shorei-ryu, which were later imported to Okinawa (Hokama, 1997, 6 p. 75; Nakasone, et. al., 1938, p. 62). It is more than likely that Itosu was citing the *Bubishi* as references to Shorinji-ryu<sup>3</sup> and Shoreiji-ryu<sup>4</sup> as they can be found in it. However, there is an inconsistency between the Chinese ideograms used for Shorei (Table 2) in Itosu's *Toudi Jukkajo* and Mabuni's research into the *Bubishi* found in *Seipai no Kenkyu*. This is quite odd since Mabuni reportedly copied the *Bubishi* from Itosu's copy (McCarthy, 1995, p. 24). Why the inconsistency? It may simply have been a simple error in transcription on the part of Mabuni or perhaps on the part of Itosu. But this seems unlikely, as both Itosu and Mabuni were learned men who by all accounts were thorough and competent individuals.

Table 2- Interpretations for the Chinese Ideograms Comprising Shaolin and Shorei used in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century\*

Chinese	Japanese	Chinese Ideogram	Comments
Wudangshan	Butousan	武當山	A place in Fubei province, China where several <i>internal</i> styles (Tai Ji Quan, Xing-I Quan, etc.) originated
Shaolinsi	Shorinji	少林寺	The original writing for the shaolin temple.
Shaolinsiliu	Shorinjiryu	少林寺流	The original writing used to describe the shaolin temple style of self-defence (quan'fa or kempo).
Zhaolinsiliu	Shorinjiryu	昭林寺流	Used by Mabuni Kenwa
Zhaolinliu	Shorinryu	昭林流	Used by Mabuni Kenwa
Zhaolingsiliu	Shoreijiryu	昭靈寺流	Used by Itosu Anko, Mabuni Kenwa & Funakoshi Gichin
Zhaolingliu	Shoreiryu	昭靈流	Used by Itosu Anko, Mabuni Kenwa & Funakoshi Gichin
Shaolinsilu	Shorinjiryu	邵林寺流	Used by Miyagi Chojun
Shaolinliu	Shorinryu	邵林流	Used by Miyagi Chojun
Shaolingsiliu	Shoreijiryu	邵靈寺流	Used by Miyagi Chojun & Mabuni Kenwa
Shaolingliu	Shoreiryu	邵靈流	Used by Miyagi Chojun & Mabuni Kenwa

\*Adapted from McCarthy 1994, pp. 236

An alternate explanation may have to do with karate-do's reliance upon oral tradition. It is quite possible that the terms Shorin-ryu and Shorei-ryu were passed down from Matsumura Sokon to his student Itosu Anko, as Matsumura is known to have visited Fuzhou and to have studied Chinese boxing there, reportedly at the Fujian Shaolin temple (Bishop, 1989, p. 61; McCarthy, 1995, p. 39). The *Bubishi* itself, does not contain direct references to the terms Shorei-ryu and Shorin-ryu, but instead refers to two systems, Shoreiji-ryu (Shorei Temple Style) and Shorinji-ryu (Shorin [Shaolin] Temple Style) respectively. Itosu, in his efforts to provide a background to a virtually unknown fighting system, perhaps unwittingly perpetuated the Shorei versus Shorin dichotomy he had inherited from Matsumura.

Itosu may not have been the only source of this confusion. Itosu's counterpart, Higashionna Kanryo, was also active in popularizing karate-do in the public school system on Okinawa. Similar in age and interests, Itosu and Higashionna were known to be fast acquaintances. Higashionna reportedly referred to his particular brand of karate-do as Shorei-ryu (Bishop, 1989, pp. 26). Therefore it is not implausible that the two of them discussed the Shorei versus Shorin dichotomy. It is generally agreed that Higashionna Kanryo was not an educated man and it is highly probably that he was illiterate as well (Bishop, 1989, p. 24; Kinjo, 1999, p. 124; McCarthy, 1995, p. 37). It may have been that he was the source of the Shorei confusion. Unable to accurately represent the Chinese ideograms for Shorei, Higashionna may have had to rely upon oral tradition himself to convey the distinction between it and Shorin. It appears that Itosu was faced with only a vague oral reference to Shoreiryu and Shorin-ryu, which may have been reinforced by conversations with the karate peers of his time. As a result, faced with an almost complete lack of written material regarding the history, philosophy, and origins of karate-do, Itosu may have simply speculated as to what Chinese ideogram represented the Sho of Shorei-ryu.<sup>5</sup> Much like their Okinawan cousins, the mainland Japanese had always looked towards China as a source of knowledge and inspiration, and the naming of new emperors was no exception. The names of Japanese emperors were often selected from the works of Chinese literature or history. Itosu, in his capacity as royal scribe, seems to have followed the same tradition when he selected the Chinese ideogram of Sho for Shorei-ryu. Besides its obvious meanings of clear or to clarify, the Sho that Itosu chose also referred to the name of the king of the state of Chu who reigned in the 6th century BCE. It also referred to a special tablet that was placed in the ancestral shrine to embody one's father's spirit. Therefore Itosu chose what he felt was a dignified and appropriate Chinese ideogram to express Shorei-ryu.

Ironically, the same Chinese ideogram that Itosu selected was used several years later in the naming of Japan's previous emperor, Hirohito, also known as the Showa Emperor.

### **The Perpetuation of a Mistake**

Why then did Funakoshi perpetuate the Shorin-ryu versus Shorei-ryu classification? There is no definite answer, but perhaps one explanation may lie in Funakoshi's attempt to introduce the new art of karate-do to the Japanese public. As previously stated, most, if not all, of Okinawan karate-do's history is oral. Not surprisingly there was very little written information on karate-do when Funakoshi went about the monumental task of writing a comprehensive book on karate-do. In his attempt to make karate-do more palatable for the Japanese public, Funakoshi seems to have applied a simple means of discriminating the various kata he brought with him from Okinawa; that is the Shorin-ryu (external) versus Shorei-ryu (internal) distinction. However, these two broad categories were, as Miyagi Chojun had stated, a means of classifying whole styles, not individual kata. Okinawa karate-do was never a unified system, and kata and training methods entered freely from China to Okinawa, to be passed on from one teacher to the next, and subsequently modified. As martial arts researcher Patrick McCarthy (1999b, p. 7) has stated, "With the exception of the Kojo (Cai) family, this writer knows of no other style in Okinawa, which perpetuates a pure Fujian-based lineage tradition in its entirety. Most, if not all styles represent generations of eclectic synthesis, continuous reinterpretation and profuse influence by Japanese."<sup>6</sup> (McCarthy, 1999b, p. 7.)

Based on such a loose and eclectic tradition, how could such a classification have any real meaning? It obviously didn't, and Mabuni Kenwa was soon to point this out. The obvious flaws aside, why did Funakoshi and others use the terms Shorei (internal) versus Shorin (external) to describe the fighting arts? The Middle Kingdom had a protracted and profound influence on the Ryukyu Islands, and China was revered as a source of knowledge and teacher of wisdom of science, culture, literature, and the fighting arts. It is more than likely that this classification was borrowed from China like so many other things Okinawan. According to Henning (1997, p. 11) the earliest reference to internal versus external as a means of classifying Chinese boxing styles was in 1669. However it wasn't until the late 19th and early 20th centuries that any style of boxing referred to itself as purely internal or external (Henning, 1997: p. 17). This date is approximately the same time that Funakoshi was practicing and later introducing his native fighting art to the Japanese mainland. Henning argues that the soft or internal was not a style in and of itself, but simply a concept common to various martial arts styles.

In other words, the so-called internal school of boxing actually appears to have represented mainstream martial arts theory, applicable regardless of style (Henning, 1997: p. 14).

This also appears to be the case in Okinawan karate-do as the kata themselves are neither internal nor external; rather it is how they are practiced that distinguishes them as either being internal or external. Funakoshi seems to have borrowed from an earlier oral tradition he had inherited from his teacher Itosu, one that stated that there were two distinct schools of boxing, internal and external, but which did not refer to any specific Chinese ideograms as to how to write them. Faced with such a dilemma, karate-do's early pioneers may have manufactured a variety of ways to render the traditions which had been handed down to them through the ages.

Unlike Western languages such as English, Japanese uses ideograms, pictorial and symbolic images, which were originally borrowed from China to convey meaning through writing. Unfortunately, due to centuries of borrowing and modification, one ideogram will have both its original Chinese pronunciation (known as the *Onyomi*) and a Japanese pronunciation (known as the *Kunyomi*). These two methods of reading Chinese ideograms result in multiple ways of reading a single ideogram. Not surprisingly these different forms of pronunciation have produced literally hundreds, if not thousands of homophones. What does this all point to? There is a strange irony in the fact that both terms, Shorei and Shorin, are approximate homophones of the original Chinese terms for Shaolin (Table 3)! This would suggest, as Henning has stated, that the concept of

internal and external was mainstream martial arts theory in China and that it is indeed how a kata is practiced which classifies it as either internal, external, or a combination of both.

Table 3 - Okinawan Karate-do Ryuha Interpretations for the Chinese Ideograms Comprising Shaolin and its Variants\*

<u>Japanese</u>	<u>Chinese</u>	<u>Chinese Ideograms</u>	<u>Comments</u>
Kobayashiryu	Shaolinliu	小林流	Term originated by Chibana Chosin
Matsubayashiryu	Songlinliu	松林流	Term originated by Nagamine Shoshin
Shobayashiryu	Shaolinliu	小林流	Term originated by Shimabuku Eizo
Shorinjiryu	Shaolinsiliu	少林寺流	Term originated by Nakazato Joen
Shorinryu	Shaolinliu	少林流	Term originated by Soken Hohan
Sukanaihayashiryu	Shaolinliu	少林流	Term originated by Kyan Chotoku

\*Adapted from Alexander, 1991, pp. 14 & McCarthy 1994, pp. 236

### **Uechi-ryu and Pangainoon**

A more recent example of reliance on oral tradition and the resulting confusion can be found in Uechi-ryu karate-do and its founder Uechi Kanbun. Like his counterpart several decades earlier, Higashionna Kanryo, Uechi Kanbun never talked about, or taught quanfa after his return to Okinawa. When Uechi eventually began teaching karate-do again, he never stated the name of the system of quanfa he studied in China and simply referred to his art using the rather ambiguous term *Pangainoon-ryu karate jutsu* (Japanese half hard/soft empty hand technique). Not surprisingly, having no written documentation and relying on oral testimony, Uechi's students referred to Uechi's art using the same name, Pangainoon. However, to date, no system of quanfa called Pangainoon has ever been discovered. Examining the term Pangainoon, we find that it does not refer to a specific style of quanfa, instead it more than likely refers to the mixture of training methods from Fujian that Uechi Kanbun combined to make his system of karate-do. In fact, Pangainoon refers to principles common to all martial arts. These include: hard method (i.e. external), flexible method (i.e. internal) and hard/flexible method (Kinjo, 1999, p. 208). But Uechi Kanbun himself may not be completely to blame. Uechi Kanbun's principal teacher, Zhou Zhihe (more commonly referred to in Japanese as Shu Shi Wa), was an enigmatic figure and there is little factual evidence about him. It is known that Zhou originated in Minhou, Fujian and was a civilian boxing teacher.<sup>7</sup> He reportedly studied martial arts under Li Zhao Bei and Ke Xi Di and was proficient in a variety of quanfa. Still other sources state that Zhou had learned from Chou Pei and Ko Hsi Ti (Cook, 1999, p. 34). Zhou reportedly practiced, among others, Crane, Ox, and Tiger boxing, in addition to hard and soft qi gong, and was noted for his iron palm technique. Besides Uechi Kanbun, his students included Jin Shi Tian, Wang Di Di and Zhou Zheng Qun.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to this Zhou has also been described as a Taoist priest and a master of Chinese boxing, who taught, among other styles, his family system of quanfa (Breyette, 1999).

### **Conclusion**

Given such a reliance on oral records, it is not surprising that the terminology used within a fighting tradition became easily altered and increasingly misunderstood through successive generations of practitioners. Not surprisingly, little if any written information existed when the modernization of an obscure Okinawa fighting tradition took flight following the death of Higashionna Kanryo and Itosu Anko in 1915. Despite this fact, Funakoshi with several prominent karate-do teachers, such as Miyagi Chojun and Mabuni Kenwa, continued their teacher's campaign to popularize the art of karate-do throughout Okinawa and mainland Japan. By the

1930s the military had risen to a position of power in Japan and had begun their expansion into Asia and beyond. Faced with such a cultural climate and a lack of information, it is not surprising to find that Funakoshi and others simplified karate-do and provided a broad means of classifying the kata in order to make it more palatable for the Japanese people and to bring it in line with other Japanese budo.

Funakoshi's efforts should be commended. At a time when virtually no written information existed on karate-do, Funakoshi provided what is quite possibly the first means of kata classification. Unfortunately his efforts did little to further our understanding of kata as they were known in the early 20th century.

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## Footnotes

1. Miyagi Chojun is referring to a location in Fubei province, China (located near Manchuria and the Korean peninsula). Near the Wudang Mountains was a temple where many of the internal arts were reportedly developed.
2. Excellent translations and commentary of this classic martial arts text, *Bubishi*, have been published in English by Patrick McCarthy (1995) and in Japanese by Otsuka Tadahiko (1986) and Tokashiki Iken (1995).
3. The Shaolin temple was located to the southwest of Beijing in Honan and was leveled as a result of the Boxer Rebellion in 1901.
4. According to Alexander (1991, pp. 30) and Bishop (1989, pp. 26) the Shorei style originated at the Shorei temple in Fujian province, China. It has been speculated that the Shorei temple was a Taoist and/or Confucian monastery, while others have thought that the temple was a Buddhist sanctuary.
5. McCarthy, P. Personal Communication. December 1999.
6. For a complete over-view of the socio-political climate in which toudi jutsu was transformed into karate-do, see McCarthy, 1999b.
7. McCarthy, P. (1999). *Fujian Quanfa*. Members Restricted Archive. International Ryukyu Karate Research Society.

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