

History of karate

1. Introduction

The history of karate is long and uncertain, and undocumented for long periods. The following is a very brief and condensed account. If you are interested in a fuller, more detailed account, please see the bibliography at the end of this section.

2. China

Although the island of Okinawa is regarded as the birthplace of karate, it's origins can be traced back further, to China.

In the sixth century, the legendary Indian monk Bodhidharma, is said to have travelled to China to spread the doctrine of Zen Buddhism. Having been refused an audience with the emperor, he settled in the Shaolin monastery. Here he found the monks too physically weak to follow his strict meditation regime. To remedy this, he began to teach a series of physical exercises.

At the time, monasteries were centres for learning and were frequented by political and military leaders who saw the possible martial applications of the exercises being taught. Over time the exercises developed into a fighting system that was to become known as kung fu.

3. Okinawa

Okinawa (now a Japanese prefecture) has always held a position of importance, being a stepping stone between China and Japan. The island has historically had cultural, political and military exchanges with both countries. One of the more notable exchanges took place in 1392, when 36 families from China settled on Okinawa, most likely bringing with them a knowledge of kung fu. These fighting methods were adapted and further developed by the Okinawans and came to be known as te (meaning "hand") or to-de (written to mean "Chinese hand" and pronounced kara-te in Japanese). One contributing factor to the development of te as an unarmed fighting art, was a number of successive weapons' bans imposed by domestic and invading rulers between the 15th and 17th centuries.



Gichin Funakoshi

Over time different styles of te developed to suit practitioners with different physical attributes. The Naha-te style focused on strong, heavy techniques, while the Shuri-te style specialised in light, fast techniques. (Note that Naha and Shuri are two towns in Okinawa where the different styles were popular). Two experts of note were Ankoh Azato (1827-1906) and Ankoh Itosu (1832-1915) who practiced Naha-te and Shuri-te respectively. These two experts had a student in common named Gichin Funakoshi (1868-1957) who would become known as the father of Shotokan karate. He combined the principles of both styles in an attempt to create a well balanced style that could be easily learned by all.

Gichin Funakoshi.

4. Japan



Yoshitaka Funakoshi
Yoshitaka Funakoshi.

Gichin Funakoshi (his pen-name was “Shoto”, hence “Shoto-kan” meaning Shoto’s club) was a school teacher, and in conjunction with Itosu and others had karate introduced to the Okinawan school system. In 1921, he led a demonstration for the then Crown Prince Hirohito who was passing through Okinawa on his way to Europe. As a result of the interest shown by the Crown Prince, Funakoshi received invitations from various groups in Tokyo to demonstrate his art. Invitations came from, among others, the Ministry of Education and the Kodokan (judo’s headquarters). These demonstrations led to the establishment of many clubs, most notably in Japan’s universities.

During this period (1920’s-40’s) what was to become known as “Shotokan” continued to be developed by Funakoshi and his senior students, especially his son, Yoshitaka (1906-1945). In order for karate to be accepted as a Japanese art (and not an Okinawan import) certain changes were necessary. One of these was to change the characters used to spell karate so that the meaning became “empty hand” rather than “Chinese hand”. Other requirements were the adoption of a standardised grading system and a standardised training uniform.

As a result of the Second World War, many of the top karate experts were either killed or stopped training. As Japan gradually recovered after the war and formal training resumed, it became apparent that

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much knowledge had been lost. In 1948 a meeting was held between some of the remaining top karate practitioners in Japan to pool their knowledge and standardise what was being taught. This meeting resulted in the formation of the Japan Karate Association (JKA) in 1949, with Funakoshi as chief instructor.

5. The World

From the 1950's on, karate began to receive increasing international attention, mainly through exposure to American servicemen stationed in Japan after World War II, and also through Japanese students travelling abroad to study. Martial arts organisations in countries around the world began to request visits from instructors from the JKA, and so the internationalisation of karate had begun.

As karate spread around the world and began to be practiced by countries and cultures far removed from Japan, various disagreements and splits started to emerge. Today, there is a myriad of karate styles and associations in existence, but almost all practitioners of legitimate Shotokan karate, regardless of association or affiliation, can trace their roots back to the JKA.

It is important to note that while Funakoshi was developing and promoting his Shotokan style in Okinawa and Japan, others were, at the same time, developing and promoting their own, equally valid styles. Examples include Kenwa Mabuni's Shito-ryu and Chojun Miyagi's Goju-ryu. However it is also important to note that Funakoshi himself believed karate should be considered as a whole and that classification into different schools would only lead to unnecessary divisions. In his autobiography, "Karate-do – My Way of Life", first published in 1956, he said,

"One serious problem, in my opinion, which besets present-day karate-do is the prevalence of divergent schools. I believe that this will have a deleterious effect on the future development of the art...There is no place in contemporary karate-do for different schools... Indeed I have heard myself and my colleagues referred to as the Shoto-kan school, but I



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strongly object to this attempt at classification. My belief is that all these “schools” should be amalgamated into one so that karate-do may pursue an orderly and useful progress into man’s future”.

6. Bibliography

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- Shotokan Karate – Its History and Evolution, Randall Hassell (Covers the history of Shotokan from Okinawa to Japan and its subsequent dissemination internationally, but from an American perspective).
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