

The Chinese Connection

A perspective on the
technical theory of Ryusei Karate-Dō

by

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On October 25, 1936, a group of highly respected todi masters gathered in Okinawa to discuss a name change.¹ Until then, the native martial art had gone by the kanji for “China hand,” pronounced todi (唐手). Its alternative pronunciation was “karate.” There was a strong move afoot to keep the “karate” pronunciation but to change the character for “to” (唐, meaning China) to “kara” or “ku” (空, meaning void or sky). Rather than China hand, the art would be known as empty hand.

The gathering included notables such as Chitose Tsuyoshi (born Chinen Kinchoku), Miyagi Chojun, Motobu Choki, Yabu Kentsu, Kyan Chotoku, Hanashiro Chomo, Chibana Chosin and Gusukuma Shimpan. Also in attendance were weapons experts and local educational, military and police officials, and event organizer Nakasone Genwa. Some of the masters liked the philosophical implications of the character for void. But there was also pressure to make change because of the political climate in Japan. Nationalist feelings were running high, making many wary of foreign influences. The obvious connection to China contained in the characters for todi needed to be down played to ensure the art’s acceptance on mainland Japan. So “empty hand” or karate (空手) won the day.

Originally, todi had been a mixture of the native Okinawan martial art ti and Chinese kempo or kung-fu. Where ti was a strong, linear fist-fighting method, kempo was soft, circular and open-handed, depending on inner power (ki) as much as muscular strength. Todi would have fused hard and soft, straight and circle in its original techniques, and used kata as its primary learning method.

I would guess that over time there was a tendency for the muscular native methods to receive greater emphasis in the mix. In any event, in the hands of the mainland Japanese, this process intensified. First the Japanese largely ignored todi’s weapons practice, and its grappling and throwing methods, since the mainland already had a strong tradition of kobudo (sword, bow and arrow, spear, etc.) and its own well-established grappling arts (judo, jiu-jitsu). Kata also lost its place as the principal method of learning the art on the mainland; instead it relied instead on strong, linear basics and drills. The Japanese also developed the karate tournament system, giving this old martial art a strong sport aspect, like judo.

While these changes were going on, Chitose-Sensei, the founder of Chito-Ryu (千唐流), stayed true to his roots. While he may have attended the meeting that changed the kanji in karate’s name, the second character in his style’s name enshrined its historical origin. It is the same “to” (Chito) as found in todi, referring to the Tang Dynasty, the shorthand for China (so his style is the Thousand Year China Style). He kept kata as his primary teaching method, backed by two-man bunkai practice as a way to fully understanding what the kata moves mean. Weapons such as bo, eku (oar), sai and tonfa hung at his dojo and were used in practice. But the China reference in the name did not just pay lip service to the past. When O-Sensei performed his most-advanced kata, like Gung-fu no Kata, the moves were soft, flowing and dependent on internal energy—in other words, very much like Chinese kempo.

In developing his approach to Chito-Ryu, Sakamoto Ken (O-Sensei’s son-in-law and a live-in disciple) became interested in revisiting and incorporating approaches from early todi practices. So, technically, Ryusei Karate-Do is designed to be a traditional

¹ John Sells, *Unante*, Hollywood, CA: W.M. Hawley, 2000, pp 110-112.

Okinawan fighting art (*kempo-bujutsu*) that incorporates the techniques and spirit of Chito-Ryu karate with Sakamoto-Sensei's research into early *todi* and *kempo* techniques.

From the Inside Out

In his approach, Sakamoto-Sensei introduces *ki* development and open-hand training (*kaishu-naiko-ho*) much earlier than Chito-Ryu. For example, he has developed a “left-hand” version of Niseishi kata, taught to *kyu* belts, in which all the initial moves are done with open-hand variations, so the entire kata is executed without closed fists, changing its feel quite a bit.

To facilitate *ki* development, Sakamoto-Sensei has turned to proven Chinese methods, such as *qigong* (especially its standing at the stake posture). He also recommends seated meditation practice, concentrating on the *tanden* (the physical centre of the body, just below the navel, in which internal energy is made and concentrated) and moving the *ki* around the body.

This concept of strength—coming from the inside out, and from the ground up—stands in contrast to Western notions, where strength is usually signified by a muscled bodybuilder's bulging torso and arms. The taijiquan metaphor I like for this approach to power is “iron wrapped in cotton”—soft on the outside, hard inside.

Central to developing *ki* within the Ryusei techniques themselves are the principles of *shime* (closing or contracting) and *shibori* (a wringing or spiralling tension). If you ask different Chito-Ryu instructors about the function of *shime* and *shibori*, you'll get different answers. Hardening the body to withstand blows is one. And indeed there is a long Okinawan karate tradition of toughening and strengthening the body, so the practitioner can absorb punishment and still triumph in a fight. Another commonsense use of inward tension is to protect the groin from attack.

These ways of employing *shime* and *shibori* are, of course, legitimate. But I believe one of the chief purposes of *shime* and *shibori* is to develop *ki*. Overall, *shibori* is more difficult to apply than *shime*. Working from the feet up, the feeling in the muscles is an upward wringing or spiralling of tension. This contraction describes the path along which power should flow, as it rises from the ground and is traffic-copped by the hips to the hands.

If you read some *qigong* and *taiji* texts, they suggest clawing the ground with your foot or twisting it to activate an important *ki* cavity in the middle, front part of foot, called *yongquan* (gushing spring), on the primary kidney channel.² This relates to the primary purpose of *shibori*.

Shibori is supposed to help activate this acupuncture point on the bottom of the feet, guide the energy in a spiral up the legs and lead it to the perineum, where the *huiyin* (sea bottom) is found. Not only does the *huiyin* lead to the *tanden*, but it is the meeting place of a number of different *ki* meridians. The *ki* is supposed to rise through the Governing Vessel, go up your back, split between shoulder blades and then run down your arms.

In the Sakamoto approach to stepping, the *yongquan* plays a major role. At first the Ryusei karate student is supposed keep their feet flat on the floor as they step. But as they rise into the *yudansha* (black belt) levels and apply more *shibori*, the focus moves to

² Dr. Yang, Jwing-Ming, *Taijiquan Theory*, Boston: YMAA, 2003, pp. 102-105

the front of the foot, around the yongquan cavity.³ Eventually, the heel will actually begin to float and rise off the ground during stepping.

In clinics, Sakamoto-Sensei sometimes exhorts students to “bite and drink” with their toes and front of their feet, in an effort to coax the rise of energy through the yongquan. The power should also be projected down into the ground to work with the lowering of the body’s centre, to create strong rooting.

Kneading Power

In examining the development of internal power, Sakamoto-Sensei charts a clear progression. The simple inward tension of *shime*, leads to the spiralling power of *shibori*. This in turn gives rise to *neri* (from “neru,” “to knead”), which takes place in the *tanden*. I interpret this as a physical action of the muscles around the *tanden*, squeezing or massaging it, condensing the power inward. At the same time, the power produced in the *tanden* by *neri* is constantly maintained through abdomen surface tension described as “tame.”

In a similar vein, taiji instructor and author Dr. Yang, Jwing-Ming describes the difference between what he calls “Buddhist” and “Daoist” breathing. In the Buddhist breathing method (the one normally used by karateka), the abdomen moves out with the inhalation and squeezes in with the exhalation, as the practitioner keeps concentration on his *tanden*. With Daoist (or reverse abdominal) breathing, the practitioner again concentrates on the *tanden* but the abdomen contracts (as well as the muscles of the perineum and lower back) with the inhalation and expands with the exhalation.⁴

While this latter method may seem counterintuitive, combining the inhalation and muscular contraction is supposed to condense the *ki* inwards. With sufficient *ki* stored and armed with the right method of release, an adept can then direct the power outwards in an explosion of destructive power that Sakamoto-Sensei calls *hakkei*. (In Chinese martial arts, the release of this pent-up energy is called *fajing*.)⁵

Three Battles

One of the most important kata for developing power is Sanchin (Three Battles). Done slowly with muscle tension and special breathing, the kata helps cultivate and coordinate breathing, body and mind/spirit, and becomes a kind of moving meditation. Sakamoto-Sensei insists that “Sanchin” is everything,” containing all that the practitioner needs to know about the higher practices of the style.

While the Chito-Ryu version of the kata, at least for its first half, is done with hands in fists, Sakamoto-Sensei reverts to an entirely open-handed version. I say “revert” because evidence suggests that the Chinese original upon which Sanchin is based (transliterated as San Chian or Saam Jian) was performed open-handed, with much lighter breathing and muscle tension than done in Okinawan versions.⁶ Uechi-Ryu karate, which is heavily influenced by Chinese kempo, also practises an open-handed version.

³ Matt Mannerow, “Training Notes with Okashita-Shihan,” unpublished, 2004.

⁴ Jwing-Ming, *Taijiquan Theory*, p. 67

⁵ “Fa Jing,” Wikipedia (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fajing)

⁶ “Sanchin,” Wikipedia (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanchin)

At times, Sanchin seems to be performed by some people solely as a kind of bodybuilding exercise, seeing how much muscle straining against muscle they can stand. I think this approach is faulty. I believe you can experiment with different levels of muscle tension, just as you can try out different breathing patterns (long in, long out; short in, long out; etc.). The important thing is not how much contraction you apply but that it is done in the correct way in the correct places. As you do it, you should be trying to control the internal flow of energy with your mind.

Years ago I heard that a senior Chito-Ryu instructor claimed that when a student starts out, he will use Seisan as the prism through which he will understand the other kata. It is the most basic kata and the others build upon it. But when he becomes a senior practitioner, Sanchin becomes his principal frame of reference, changing how he understands and performs the other kata. I believe the same is true in Ryusei Karate-Do.

Hard & Soft

To apply Ryusei techniques properly, you need a combination of hard and soft muscle control. In describing the different approaches of martial arts in China, I've heard that they range from soft, internal arts like taiji to hard, powerful styles. Somewhere in the middle are the styles that strike with a soft body, only to contract the muscles at the moment of impact.⁷ This last description is how some people would characterize the approach in Ryusei and Chito-Ryu karate.

But the problem arises, especially among Western karateka, in trying to attain the soft aspect of the art. Karate tends to be taught as a strong, muscular endeavour, full of explosive moves. This makes it effective very quickly, whereas an art like taiji, which teaches slow, soft movement from the start, seems to take many years of practice before it becomes useful for fighting. But karate is supposed to reach the same goal as taiji eventually, with the practitioner having a soft body, using his limbs like whips instead of pistons.

The trouble is, in many cases, karate instruction does not go beyond the strong, muscular stage—it gets stuck at the tournament, young competitor level. An older practitioner is condemned to being a coach or doing “old man” karate. However, this is out of keeping with karate's goal of being a lifetime pursuit, with constant improvement throughout. The key to longevity is discovering the soft aspect of techniques.

Even if you contract the body at the moment of a punch's impact, the majority of the technique is done with a soft, supple feeling, with all the joints and muscles relaxed, so the body can act as a single whipping unit. The flow of power stops at any point of stiffness.

Tension can be misapplied by practitioners of all ranks. Too much contraction slows movement and forces up the centre of gravity. Ask a student, for example, to stand in uchi-hachiji-dachi and apply as much shime as possible. Go behind and lift them around the waist. They should be easy to pick up. Then ask the student to hold the stance and relax with a dead-weight feeling, almost as if they were drunk. Then they become very difficult to pick up, if you can do it at all.

⁷ Jwing-Ming, *Taijiquan Theory*, pp. 136-137

So *shime* improperly applied actually interferes with rooting, the sinking of the weight into the ground—an essential feature of many traditional Japanese and Chinese martial arts.

In fact, I think you may be trouble if you define *kime* (focus of power) solely in terms of muscle contraction. When hitting a makiwara, for example, many people think they need to contract their muscles on impact in order to create the best *kime*. If you punch a makiwara with a right *gyaku-zuki*, you would contract your base, in keeping with Chito-Ryu/Ryusei principles, and your left arm, so it retracts. But the muscles of your punching arm (lateral muscle, tricep,) etc. would expand to hit the target.

The moment you apply a contraction to the striking limb, you cut off, and do not increase, the power. The furthest point the makiwara pushes back is with the expanding muscles. The contraction only serves to stop the makiwara from returning to its original position. By this point, the damage has already been done.

It might be useful for a beginner to contract the muscles and hold the makiwara as it pushes back, showing whether or not he is using the correct muscles to apply the punch. (If, for example, his shoulder rises up as the makiwara pushes back, then it's a safe bet that he used his shoulder too much when applying the punch.) However, if you continue to use the makiwara in this way as an advanced belt, you may not only limit your progress but delude yourself as to the nature of power generation.

The strongest strike is a swift, penetrating blow that retracts immediately after impact. Your whole body must work together like a whip. In this case, *shime* is used to retract the limb. Instead of locking the arm on impact, it is used for swift recovery, or *hikite*. And when you kick, you again cut off the power if you contract the striking limb's muscles too soon. The strongest kick is one that uses a “dead-weight” feeling and goes right through the target, using the contraction only to retract the limb.

Progression of Kata

In Japan, “kata,” or prearranged form, is the central method of learning for many *bujutsu* (traditional martial methods). This holds true for Ryusei Karate-Do. Our kata are the same ones, taught for the most part in the same order, as the ones established by O-Sensei in Chito-Ryu. But there are some key differences.

Sakamoto-Sensei felt that some of the Chito-Ryu kata, mostly the advanced ones, seemed unfinished. To complete them, he drew on his ideas and discoveries, making some of them longer, more complex and challenging for the practitioner.

At the same time, Sakamoto-Sensei looked to the Chinese martial arts for ways to classify the Ryusei kata, using an overarching metaphor or feeling to describe each one, which guides a karateka's performance. The Chito-Ryu kata were already ordered to teach certain skills at certain levels. But Sakamoto-Sensei felt that kata shouldn't just be different combinations of the same techniques. In his system, the same technique done in two kata are performed differently, according to the kata's ruling metaphor.

In the Ryusei system, *Seisan* and *Niseishi* are the basic kata, teaching the fundamentals that are built upon in subsequent forms. Then, for the following kata, Sakamoto-Sensei borrows from Chinese *kempo* theory for classification. In the first group, *Keii Kata I*, the kata are associated with different animals. So *Bassai* features the moves of a snake; *Chinto*, a hawk; *Sochin*, a bull; *Tenshin*, a water spider; and *Rohai*, a

crane or heron. Again, incorporating animal movements into forms is a common practice in Chinese martial arts.

The next group, Keii Kata II, is based on human emotion. So Sanshiru is performed as if drunk at a festival (a feeling of celebration). And Kusanku is the lyrical kata.

In the final category are the *koryu* (old style) kata, all characterized by flowing, open-hand movement and refined breath/ki control. These are Chinese-influenced internal forms that begin with Ryushan. In Sakamoto-Sensei's view, the practitioner needs to practise the basic and Keii I and II forms diligently, in conjunction with Sanchin, to develop the ability to understand and perform the koryu katas.

Ryushan is of course part of the syllabus in Chito-Ryu, and the entryway into koryu kata in Ryusei Karate-Do. But after this Sakamoto-Sensei introduces forms that he learned from the teachings and techniques of O-Sensei, including Tensho, Unsu, Seichin and Hoen. These kata, he insists, cannot be taught. The practitioner must attempt to master these forms on his own, when he has sufficient expertise.

In practical terms, that means a senior karateka is left to review DVD performances of the kata by Sakamoto-Sensei (or watch him live, if he's lucky) to learn the basic pattern. To this he must bring to bear his own understanding of kata to create a personalized form that demonstrates the depth of his expertise—easier said than done.

Weapons Practice

Traditionally in Okinawa, the practice of kobudo (weaponry) and karate went hand in hand. So Ryusei Karate-Do offers senior practitioners a good range of kobudo kata, including ones for bo, sai, tonfa, eku, nunchuku, tekko and other weapons. In training, the weapons should be thought of as extensions of the empty-hand technique.

Kobudo teaches practitioners important lessons about distance, timing and *zanshin* (awareness) that support what they learn in regular karate practice. If you have a lapse of attention in regular kumite practice, chances are you or your opponent will only receive minor injuries. But in two-man kobudo practice, a slight slip or accident with a weapon can cause serious injury. So you must also have the proper awareness and attitude at all times.

Wielding kobudo weapons also teaches you to use your body properly. If there is any stiffness in your body, the strike of the weapon will be weakened. You must move like a whip, using proper hip action.

From the Outside In

In karate you must generate power from the inside out, but you need to learn kata from the outside in. When you begin a kata, you must learn the moves first, working hard to get the correct exterior form. Then you begin to work your way inside, making sure you are using the correct body mechanics for proper application of power, as well as working on your balance and rhythm—the interplay of soft and hard, fast and slow.

Then, as you master this stage, you must concentrate more and more on your centre—your breathing and tanden, seeking to cultivate the flow of internal energy to work with your muscular power.

In the next stage, you must try to project your power outwards. So as you perform your kata, you should have a strong sense of “enemy,” defending yourself from attacks and responding decisively with debilitating counterattacks.

Of course, what I have outlined above is a very simple description of a complex and time-consuming process. The Japanese have a saying: *Hito kata, san nen*, (one kata, three years), indicating how much time must be given to master a form.

Beneath the Surface

In order to effectively imagine an opponent while performing kata, you need to know what the moves of the kata mean. In some instances, you can guess the application from the way the move is performed. In bujutsu, these are called *omote* (surface techniques). But they do not contain the true secrets of the ryu. The Okinawans always sought to hide the secret meanings of techniques, so observers could not just pick them up from viewing a performance. The *okuden* (secret teachings) are what the practitioner wants to understand.⁸ These are also called *kakushite* (hidden hand), secret applications within kata technique.⁹

To understand kata secrets, we are lucky in Ryusei and Chito-Ryu karate to have set bunkai or *kaisetsu* (explanations). The two-man self-defence exercises, such as Henshuho and Nage no Kata, demonstrate many of the secret techniques of the ryu. A practitioner can look to them to explain many of the kata moves, as well as using them as a guide to develop approaches for other ones. Again, because Okinawan karate teachers were secretive about their core techniques, many karate groups don't have this key to understanding—the proper explanations weren't passed on.

But a practitioner should not be satisfied with a single explanation for a kata technique. Any move can have multiple possible applications. And it is not enough for him to *think* of applications for moves; he must work with a partner to be able to perform these applications effectively.

At first, the kata and even the formal bunkai can appear to be very stylized, linear with limited applications. The student must continue to train in them until he can dig below the surface and discover the natural principles at their core, which have countless ways of being applied. At this level of understanding, the performance of kata becomes natural, flowing and multifaceted. A practitioner's karate becomes personalized and effective.

Forging the Spirit

Although this is a technical document, the greatest aim of the ryu goes beyond technique. The word “Do,” from Ryusei Karate-Do, is the Japanese version of Tao—the Chinese way to self-enlightenment or perfection. To reach the highest level of the art, you must have lofty goals.

To join karate for health or social considerations, or because you want to learn how to fight or compete in tournaments are all valid reasons. But if these are as high as

⁸ Donn F. Draeger, *Classical Bujutsu*, New York & Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1973, p. 54.

⁹ Sells, *Unante*, p. 250.

your aim goes, then you will not achieve the top levels of the art. In his book *Classical Budo*, pioneering U.S. martial artist Don Draeger writes:

To be a classical do, a sport entity must drop all notions of competition and record-breaking, of immediate results for championships, of garnering group prestige, and concentrate upon the individual's self-perfection as the end point of training.¹⁰

I think that competitive karate can play a part in karateka's development, teaching strategy, timing, distance, fighting spirit and more. As a tool it is useful, but if it becomes the sole reason for training then it will stunt your growth.

True karate is about strengthening and enlightening the mind and spirit through training. There is a Japanese term I like, *seishin tanren* (spiritual forging). The real karate path is an extremely difficult one. In Japanese, if you are studying something like English language, you say, *Eigo o benkyo shimasu*. But to study karate, you say: *Karate o shugyo shimasu*. "Shugyo" means not just studying but "austere training."

Like other Daoist and Zen arts, karate doesn't depend on an intellectual understanding but direct experience, learning through action, not words. The intense training of your body may give you strength and fighting prowess, but if your development stops there, you are merely a technician.

By training your body, you are supposed to mold your mind and spirit, to recast your unconsciousness. The Chinese refer to a thought that lingers as *nian*.¹¹ In purely practical terms, conscious thoughts interfere with the right mind for combat. Stray thoughts can distract you. And if you try to think instead of acting in an unconscious manner, your timing will be slowed, putting you at the risk of defeat.

But to stop *nian tou* (the initiation of thought) is no easy task. Our fears, anxieties, desires and other deep-seated emotions work beneath the level of consciousness and upset our calm. Through breathing, meditation and by throwing yourself completely into your training, you are supposed to master your emotion and achieve *fudoshin* (immoveable mind), "a mental state that allows [a master] to meet any situation with composure."¹²

By entering into a serene but aware state, and raising your fighting spirit at the same time, you can also develop what the Japanese call *kan* (intuition), helping you to perceive your opponent's intention before he moves.¹³

But to reach this stage requires you to confront and know yourself and your weaknesses. There is no difference between the faults and problems in character and behaviour that hold you back in life and those that hold you back in karate. So to improve your karate you must improve yourself fundamentally.

Facing our true selves can be an intimidating and supremely difficult task. But in terms of karate-do, it is the only battle really worth fighting.

¹⁰ Donn F. Draeger, *Classical Budo*, New York & Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1973, p. 125.

¹¹ Jwing-Ming, *Taijiquan Theory*, p. 86.

¹² Draeger, *Classical Budo*, p. 27.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 26.