

From Fujian White Crane to Okinawan Goju Ryu

The transmission of a martial art

Part 1 - By Adrian Chan-Wyles

China is an ancient civilisation and the ability to fight effectively has been part of Chinese culture from the very beginning. From the earliest times, various forms of alchemical Daoism formed the spiritual foundation for martial practice. It was believed that to fight effectively, one's character had to be aligned with the deepest aspects of nature. The human mind and body was viewed as a conduit for universal energy (i.e. qi). By focusing the mind and disciplining the physical body, through the various movements of the many martial styles (either armed or unarmed), this living channel is opened and purified so that the qi flows freely - and all can be achieved. This is, of course, an ideal state that is the culmination of many years of practice and experience, brought to a fine focus of personal development.

China's cultural influence has spread far and wide throughout Southeast Asia. And of the many martial transmission systems, arguably one of the most interesting has to be that of Fujian White Crane (Bak Hok) kung fu, taken to the island of Okinawa, where it evolved and is practiced today as Goju Ryu, Karate-do (Hard/Soft Empty Hand Way). What is of interest is not just the physical movements, but also the historical circumstances that led to, and allowed such a succinct transmission to occur. The memory of any martial transmission invariably rests in the ultimate destination of the transmission. As styles spread and diversified away from the original blueprint, it is usually the case that the parent style is never fully aware of the true impact it has had, far away from the place of its birth. This does not have to be necessarily true between two countries - in China it is well known that many northern originating styles spread southward, throughout China, undergoing physical changes in technical presentation - changes that essentially created new and effective styles, separate from the root style in many cases.

Couple these changes with the staunch adherence of the ancient Chinese people to the Confucian clan system, and each and every style would become a well guarded family secret, taught only to members of the same clan, down through the ages. Many such styles would have entirely new

origination myths and legends ascribed to them, usually fit into an already existing clan history, that would tell how the clan name came into existence, and why the clan name was important. The style would be attributed to a clan name, and if the notion of 'form' was to be upheld - the style would have to have an originator as an auspicious as the clan name itself. Of course, many clans did indeed 'invent' their own combat systems in antiquity.

Combat experience served as the blueprint for such a development. And a style of kung fu was a method that 'recorded' such wisdom and knowledge into a set of 'forms'. The 'form' is an ancient recording device, whereby a number of movements are placed together for the student to learn and practice over and over again. Forms are multi-layered, and the larger a student practices the more hidden wisdom is revealed and understood. As warfare had numerous and disparate circumstances surrounding it, the many different styles that developed from its experience, reflect that no one method of combat stood supreme to another, but all styles were relevant within the context of battle that formed its very unique style and its formulation as a style has to be assessed within the context of Fujian province itself.

Fujian Province. The name 'Fujian' means 'Happy Place'. And yet its geography is very mountainous and mostly lying on China's southeast coast, with a population of some 30 million. Fujian province has also been called Min Sheng, after the original Min people who use to populate the province. The River Min runs west to east, across the centre of the province, separating the two distinct subcultures, the Northern Min and the Southern Min. In fact, up until recent times, as a place, it has been difficult to access. Even today, Fujian province is rich in Daoist temples and Daoist ritual - including Shen Gong, whereby the spirit of a martial character from Chinese literature, or the spirit of the local Daoist deity 'enter' and momentarily possesses the mind and body of the adherent. For the

time of the possession, the adherent performs many and varied martial movements - afterward, when the spirit leaves, the adherent returns to their natural state, unharmed and at peace.

Difficult to access from the Chinese hinterland and relatively easy to access from the sea, the blend of Fujian culture and the incoming seafaring cultures has produced some very unique cultural and linguistic developments - distinct from those developments on the Mainland of China. The two main dialects that prevail in Fujian are the 'Bei' (Northern Min) and 'Min Nan' (Southern Min). The former is the dialect



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spoken around the capital city of Fujian - Fuzhou, and the latter is the dialect spoken around the southern city of Xiamen (sometimes called Amoy or Hoken). The two dialects are considered unrelated to one another. This process of distinctiveness may well have been compounded by the fact that directly to the east of Fujian province, lies the island of Taiwan (i.e. the Republic of China), one of the many areas that Min Nan is spoken. Another distinctive ethnic group worth mentioning is that of the Hakka, who migrated into the province from the latter 1600s onward, bringing their own unique language and culture into the area.

The Development of White Crane Kung Fu. As with virtually all Chinese fighting styles, many are based upon animal movements, and there is usually more than one originator story. Fujian White Crane is no exception to this. The animal overlaid as the basis of any martial art, is thought to contain the essence of that art, in all its behaviour and demeanor. Indeed, in many Daoist temples, adherents are encouraged to allow the spirit of a particular animal to temporarily enter their minds and bodies - perhaps this is why so many Chinese styles are attributed to animal or insect behaviour patterns. The physical movements of the White Crane, make full use of the anatomical spaces in and around the limbs,

torso and head. The human body, being essentially 'rounded' in nature, allows for a tremendous amount of movement within the space it already occupies. The joints of the limbs, particularly of the ankles, knees and hips, give an upright flexibility that can evade a blow, in such away, and at the same time creating a counter penetrating force (that travels up from the feet, via the knees and through the hip, spine, shoulders, neck, elbows, wrists, hands and fingers) that immediately strikes the opponent at the exact point of their greatest extension of the particular attack, whether it be a punch or a kick, etc.

At this point, the opponent's power diminishes and the blow has to be withdrawn. The White Crane, with the various finger, knuckle, wrist, elbow, (or with the numerous kicking and leg strikes in its arsenal), lashes out with a ferocious and pin-point accurate strike to the opponent's weak anatomical points. The opponent is ideally caught off balance between strikes as a vessel, and the strike aims to hit the nerve bundles beneath the outer layer of muscular protection. A nerve strike literally disrupts the opponent's ability to control his/her body in a combat situation. As the White Crane encodes whilst kicking, it is very difficult to counter such a technique effectively. Not only this, but the White Crane practitioner is taught to make use of

their full height (from a crouch to standing in high stance), and to make use of their full range of arm and leg extension, from close range to far.

The White Crane practitioner can move through a tremendous amount of range whilst standing on the spot, evading and striking in the process. However, a sophisticated and subtle stepping system is part of this style. If the White Crane needs to, it can move very fast and with accuracy. There are two broad origin stories with this style. Both involve a similar incident, which showed the Crane's effective martial prowess. One story has the style originating in Tibet. Whereby a Tibetan Buddhist monk (i.e. a lama), witnessed a White Crane bird fighting with an ape. The ape, despite being bigger and presumably stronger, and despite continuous attacking, could not dislodge the Crane from its stance. The Crane bobbed and weaved, blocked and redirected with its strong wing edges. It also struck with blinding speed and accuracy at the ape's face, cutting the soft tissue as it went. Eventually, the ape tired and left the White Crane alone.

The other story says that the style was founded in Fujian province in the 18th century by a woman called Fang Chi-Nang, who was drying grain on the floor in the mid-day sun. A large White Crane came down and started to eat. It did not seem to be bothered by Fang's presence. Fang made noises, shouted and banged objects, but the Crane took no notice. She then picked up a bamboo stick and tried to pick the Crane away from the corn. To her astonishment, the Crane deflected the stick with its wings, and pecked it with its beak. The sharp beak was able to break the stick in places, but at no time could Fang make effective contact with the stick. The Crane side stepped, and swayed and managed to neutralise Fang's best efforts! The Crane looked fragile, but with the proper use of its body, it was able to turn weakness into strength.

Fang is said to have taken this knowledge and developed the basis of the White Crane kung fu. Her father is said to have been an accomplished martial artist, who may have learnt kung fu at the Fujian Shaolin Temple. The Fang family lived in and around Fuzhou, the capital city of Fujian province. Of course, the differing origin stories could well refer to differing 'strands' of the art, and both could be true within their own particular context. And (as a speculation) it could be that Fang's father had learnt the Tibetan form of White Crane, before passing it on to his daughter - who moulded it into today's Fujian White Crane. This system has four basic and foundational schools of martial principle: The Vibrating Crane, Crying Crane, Eating Crane (sometimes referred

to as 'Morning Crane' and Flying Crane, each emphasising a different aspect of the White Crane's behaviour in combat. Whatever the truth about the origins of White Crane kung fu - it must be acknowledged that both Chen and Tang styles of Taijiquan (both from north China) contains movements carrying the name 'White Crane', which might suggest that White Crane is intended as an internal style.

Certainly, the martial expression of the Crane seems to have come down to the present time, in its distinct categories of practice - one category emphasising fast, fluid and relatively light movements, designed to fight many opponents in varied circumstances (Tibetan White Crane is an offshoot of this), and then there is the Crane practice that involves primarily the internal energy production method - many Fujian versions of the Crane have concentrated exclusively on the development of internal energy production. As a consequence, many Fujian systems appear to be comprised of powerful, jerky, small circular movements. This energy production method, after years of training toughening the ligaments, tendons and musculature, combined with the development of full body relaxation, is then applied to combat situations in training.

The northern versions of the style, have tended to maintain a fine balance between the internal energy production method, and apparent combat effectiveness - hence their fluidity. And, I think that both expressions of White Crane clearly convey the polar opposites, which are complementary in the ancient Chinese science of yin/yang energy measurement. And also emphasises the sheer adaptability of the White Crane style and method. As a style, it has influenced martial styles extensively, but often unobtrusively, working in the background and inspiring technical innovation. White Crane is found in widely diverse arts such as Wing Chun Kuen, and Yang Style Taijiquan.

The Island of Okinawa. Okinawa is the largest of the Ryukyu Islands, (the name 'Ryukyu' literally translates as 'is repeated into the water') and is believed to refer to the narrow, twisting geography of Ryukyu islands - as if it were a rope resting on the ocean surface. The Ryukyu Islands lay to the southeast of China and the south of Japan. In fact, the East China Sea links the Ryukyu's directly to Fujian province. The indigenous Okinawan people themselves, are thought to be of possible Ainu/ descent, and the basis of their language to be 'Ogami'.

From at least 605AD, the people of Okinawa have paid tribute to China's ancient imperial system - and from 686AD, they paid tribute to the Japanese imperial

court. Okinawa was independent until the Japanese military invaded the Ryukyu Islands in 1611AD. Prior to this date, the Okinawans travelled widely and traded freely with the other peoples of the region, including trade missions to Java, a melting pot of diverse cultures. So much so in fact, that China sent missions to Okinawa - that were both of a military and civilian nature. The Nine Villages of Chinese settlement developed on the island of Okinawa. With the settlement of Chinese people, came the propagation of Chinese martial culture. It is believed that the Okinawans integrated Chinese martial elements into their own indigenous combat arts. Indeed, the generic name for Okinawan combat arts was 'To-ryu', or 'Tang Handu', presumably developing during the Chinese Tang Dynasty (618AD-907AD), a time of great Chinese cultural development, experimentation and expansion.

Even in modern South Korea today, there exists an art called 'Tang Soo Do' (Chinese: 'Tang Shou Dao'), or 'Tang Hands Way'. As Chinese dynasties came to power, the Chinese state would be known by the name of that particular dynasty. So the name 'Tang' literally came to mean 'China'. The Okinawan martial art of To-ryu became understood as 'Chinese Handu'. Much later, during the early 20th century, the Japanese changed the Okinawan character 'To' (pronounced 'Kara' in Japanese), to a character that was pronounced in a similar manner (i.e. 'Kara'), but meant 'Empty'. Master Gichin Funakoshi suggests that the term was chosen by himself after reading the Heart Sutra - where it is said that, 'Form is void, Void is form'.

Despite the use of weaponry in traditional Karate-do, in Japan it became known as 'Empty Hand Way'. Following the Japanese invasion of Okinawa in the 17th century, Okinawans were forbidden by law to carry or use traditional weaponry. Instead, they adapted the use of farming implements for martial purposes. These weapons, which included the three-pronged bludgeon, rice flails and mill grinding sticks, were developed to counter the Japanese samurai sword. And it is at this time that it is believed that Karate men toughened their hands in training, so that they might smash through the wooden armour worn by the Japanese soldiers.

The Development of Goju Ryu. Like the origins of many great martial systems, the Okinawan system of what has become known today as Goju Ryu (Hard/Soft School), has developed and grown out of the human need to travel and explore. The martial arts that served as the backdrop for the temple of Goju Ryu, were themselves developed in ancient times, perhaps outside of China, over a time span of perhaps hundreds or thousands of years.

The spirit of exploration and daring was further personified by an eminent Okinawan, namely Kanyo Higazuna (1853-1915). Okinawa, since the 1400s, had benefited from highly favourable trading rights with China - and very close cultural links. As a result, there was many Okinawans who travelled to China to establish direct commercial links for trade, and of course, to study within the Chinese education system, including the martial arts. Chinese people also emigrated to Okinawa, and many of them settled in the Naha region of Okinawa. Here, Chinese martial systems would have been observable by the Okinawans, and many Okinawans would have been students of Chinese teachers. In Okinawa of this time, the Chinese cultural influence was extensive and the primary source of outside influence, although of course, not the only influence.

Kanyo Higazuna grew up at a time of great cultural upheaval in Okinawa. Japan was in the ascendancy of imperial power at this time, and exercised ever-greater political and cultural control over Okinawa. And despite Okinawa's close cultural and historical ties with China, China was unable to protect any real diplomatic or military power beyond its own borders. China at this time, under the Manchurian Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), was suffering from internal disintegration, as various political and ethnic groups sought to overthrow the Qing rule, and assert their own dynastic ambitions.

Next month, Goju Ryu practitioner of 28 years (24 of those years spent teaching Goju Ryu in the UK), Mr. Tony Smith (4th Dan), takes up the story, allowing me the benefit of his extensive experience and insight into the Goju style and historical development, during an interview in August 2006.



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Last month we looked at the link between Fujian White Crane and Okinawan Goju-Ryu, this month, Goju Ryu practitioner of 28 years (24 of those years spent teaching Goju Ryu in the UK) Mr Tony Smith (4th Dan), takes up the story, allowing me the benefit of his extensive experience and insight into the Goju style and historical development, during an interview in August 2006.

Okinawa today, is viewed politically and culturally as a Japanese island. At the time of Kanryo Higaoana, what was life like in Okinawa?

TONY SMITH: Kanryo Higaoana had been brought up with a Chinese education. His father had travelled extensively to China, and probably told the young Higaoana about the many diverse and fascinating cultural and martial practices he had seen on the mainland of China. Chinese cultural influence was still very strong, despite a forceful Japanese insistence upon the controlling of Okinawan politics. Japanese culture, on a day-to-day basis, took much longer to achieve, than the obvious political influence. The Okinawans had their own indigenous martial arts of course, and these were distinct from both Japanese and Chinese systems. Known collectively as 'Sei' (i.e. 'Hand' arts), these systems advocated both kicking and punching, as well as grappling and weaponry. At the time of Kanryo Higaoana, Okinawa had its own distinct culture, but was heavily influenced by China, and was under pressure from Japan.

Why did Kanryo Higaoana travel to China?

TONY SMITH: It is believed that at the age of about 14 years old, the father of Kanryo Higaoana was killed in a fight. The young Higaoana, inspired by the traditional response of wanting to seek revenge over his father's death, and probably inspired by the stories his father had told him about the effectiveness of Chinese fighting, decided that he would travel to China and seek instruction. Kanryo Higaoana had to apply for a travel visa to China, whereby he applied to be an academic student in China. In reality however, it is understood that his true intention was to get to China and learn martial arts. Getting official permission to travel China at this time, from the Okinawan authorities, was tightly controlled, and Higaoana had to show daring to do so.

Higaoana travelled to Fuzhou, the capital of Fujian province in southern China. Okinawa lies not far from the Fujian south coast, and Fuzhou was a major trading port of its time, linked directly with Naha city of Okinawa. He is known to have spent about 14 years in China. What do you think he experienced during this time?

TONY SMITH: Yes, Higaoana spent over 10 years or so in Okinawa, the number of years vary in differing accounts. It was a substantial amount of time, certainly long enough to learn the rudiments of a style, both its inner and outer aspects.

How did he find a Chinese teacher so quickly, who

was willing to take on unknown 'outsider', and teach him the secrets of his family arts?

TONY SMITH: It is believed that Kanryo Higaoana spent at least 12 months searching for a teacher in Fuzhou. When he arrived in Fuzhou (the capital city of Fujian province), he stayed at a boarding - the manager of which was named Kanryo Tannei. It was very hard in those days to be accepted into any martial arts lineage. However, Higaoana happened to mention to Kanryo Tannei that he had travelled from Okinawa to try and find a teacher of Chinese martial arts. And it was Kanryo Tannei who told Higaoana about a very well known teacher in the Fuzhou area called Ryu Ryu Ko (Rishi) - this is the Okinawan/Japanese pronunciation of the name and title, a name and title which would have been originally from the Hakken dialect of Fujian province.

(The term 'Rishi' is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese term 'Taizi', which literally translates as 'Old Master', but is often used in Chinese to denote an accomplished teacher-scholar). Kanryo Tannei agreed to formally introduce Kanryo Higaoana to Ryu Ryu Ko, who accepted him as student.



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What do you think was the basis of Ryu Ryu Ko's kung fu style?

TONY SMITH: Certainly the basis of the Goju Ryu style that developed from what Ryu Ryu Ko taught Kanryo Higaoana, appears to be that of Fujian White Crane kung fu. The Chinese dialect spoken in the Fuzhou area of Fujian province is 'Hakken' and White Crane is commonly referred to as 'Bok Hok'. There are many variants of White Crane, and the 'Shouting/Crying' version serves as the primary power concept in Okinawan Goju Ryu. The 'tsahhi' sound made during the performance of Sanchin kata - the special dynamic tension kata - is thought to have derived from this kind of Crane kung fu. And at the advanced level, Sanchin becomes a very internal kata - indicative of the Crane style that inspired it.

However, within the thirteen katas (a 'kata' is a form) that make up the Goju system, there are other kung fu styles that are evident. For example, there is tiger claw and praying mantis. And then there is the unique dynamic tension 'Sanchin' kata that for the beginning student is practiced as an 'external' kata but for the advanced practitioner, takes on an 'internal' dimension. The 'Tensho' kata, although of later development, is purely 'internal' in nature. Sanchin translates as 'three breaths' and refers to the qi energy (that is, Ki) being passed through the three primary 'Dan Tien', or 'Heavenly Centres', that is the centre between the eyes, the centre just below the sternum, and the well known centre just below the navel. There are different ways of using the breathing and circulating the qi when performing the kata, etc.

How did 'Goju' get its name?

TONY SMITH: As Kanryo Higaoana lived in Naha city, on Okinawa, the style he brought back from China was simply referred to as 'Naha Te', to distinguish it from the other styles of Chinese Boxing practiced on Okinawa - collectively referred to



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'to-te', or 'Chinese Hand'. There is some evidence to suggest that the style was also called 'Shorei Ryu', or 'Enlightened Spirit' school. However, in 1930, a major martial arts demonstration was held at the Meiji Shrine in Tokyo - Chojun Miyagi was invited, but could not attend. Instead, he sent one of his top students in his place - named Jin Shinzato. After the demonstration, Shinzato was asked what was the name of the style he was practicing - he could only reply 'Naha Te'. Upon his return to Okinawa, Shinzato mentioned the incident to Chojun Miyagi, who decided that the style required a name that best described its technical essence. He chose the characters 'Go' and 'Ju' from the text of the 'Tubushi' that reads phonetically as 'Ho Go Ju Dento' (that is, 'Breathing inward and outward, is hardness and softness'). From that time onwards, this name has been used to describe the Chinese kung fu style, that was spread to Okinawa.

In other words, the style practiced, encompasses both the 'external' and 'internal' aspects of the martial arts, and is therefore, a fully balanced system of spiritual, psychological and physical development, conveyed within the Confucian philosophy of respect for one's self, respect for others and respect for society in general.

How many katas are there in Okinawan Goju Ryu?

TONY SMITH: There are considered to be thirteen katas in Goju Ryu - however, there are two versions of Sanchin. Goju katas are separated into two sub-groups - the 'Heishu-kata', that is the 'closed hand' katas, and the 'Koshu-kata', or the 'open hand' katas. Both the Sanchin and Tensho katas are the only 'Heishu-kata' - and 'Heishu', or 'Closed Hand' in this context, means that there is an element of muscular tension required, throughout the performance of the entire form. Not only this, but the muscular contraction is accompanied by deep, abdominal breathing. The tension is relaxed, only when the kata is completed.

The other eleven katas, are called, in order of teaching: Gekisai Dai Ichi, Gekisai Dai Ni, Saifu, Seiryunchin, Shishochin, Seppai, Kururunfa, Seisan and Suparinpei (also known as by its original

name of 'Pichurin'). All these katas fall in to the 'Koshu', or 'Open Hand' category, which implies that the movements are performed without a sustained muscular tension.

Sanchin (lit. 'Three Breaths') kata is considered the basis of Goju Ryu and is often taught very early on, whilst Tensho (lit. 'Turning Hands') kata is taught later on, usually after a number of years of training. Both katas train the internal principle. Between the learning of Sanchin, and the learning of Tensho, the student will progress through the other eleven katas, which are placed into such a learning order, so as to ensure that there is a constant increase in the complexity of technical movement that is learnt.

Traditional Chinese styles of kung fu - generally speaking, have no formal grading as such, when did Goju Ryu adopt a grading system?

TONY SMITH: Originally, and for many years, Goju Ryu did not have the formal grades that we see today. In fact, Chojun Miyagi did not like the idea of obvious grades, and so did not allow them. This is very much in the spirit of traditional Chinese thinking. It is only after the founding of the Okinawan Karate Federation in 1956, that a formal grading system was introduced.

As a fully established style, with firm Chinese roots, and many Japanese influences, how is the modern Goju Ryu system fairing today?

TONY SMITH: Goju Ryu, under Oensei Maria Higaoana is practiced world wide, even as far afield as Israel! There are dedicated practitioners in many countries, some of whom, have attained very high grades indeed, reflective of the time, dedication and sacrifice they have committed to the art, and the pursuit of martial excellence.

Thank you for your valuable time, and inviting me to your home to witness the many and varied kata of Goju Ryu.

It is interesting to note the Chinese ideograms that make-up the characters 'Go' and 'Ju'. 'Go' is written in such a way to suggest that one strikes a stone, until one becomes as 'hard' as the stone. 'Ju' on the other hand, is written so as to suggest that one is riding in a rickshaw, and therefore, 'borrowing' the energy of another, to achieve a result. The implications of this are clear, namely that the concept of 'Go' refers to the 'external' aspect of the training, and that 'Ju' refers to the 'internal' practice of the art. It is also significant that they are placed in the order that they are, as the term 'Goju' is a guide to the order within which the training should be undertaken. When young, the physical body should undergo the rigours of 'external' training, this is a difficult task that prepares the mind and body for the development into the later, and much more advanced 'internal' practice.

Despite the upheaval of history that has dominated China, Okinawa and Japan over the last two hundred years, and despite the cultural differences that have abounded between those three great peoples, a dedication to the martial arts has served to unite many thousands of people in the preservation of a martial art that started life being practiced in secret, in a family backyard. Never taught to people outside the family - and certainly never to unknown people. However, times change and circumstances dictate that if an art is to survive, it must be taught to those who are able to preserve it. White Crane kung fu, as practiced in the Fujian province of southern China, is today preserved in the ancient traditions of Okinawan Goju Ryu Karate-Do.

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