



O-Sensei Kanryo Higaonna

March 10, 1853 – Dec. 23, 1915

Founder of Naha-Te.

Teacher of Chojun Miyagi.

History of Our Karate – by Kyoshi Brent Baker

The history of karate is hard to nail down. The more one studies, the more differing accounts one hears. Much of this is because karate has an oral history – much of it has been passed down by word of mouth. Here is the history as has been told to me.

In the early days, the Okinawan art was referred to as “Te” or “Hand.” As a student in Hanshi Bernard’s dojo, I was taught that there were three early schools of Te: Naha-Te, Shuri-Te, and Tomari-Te. These sprang up in the cities of Naha, Shuri and Tomari, respectively. Eventually, Shuri-Te engulfed Tomari-Te, leaving the two schools: Naha-Te and Shuri-Te. The more modern styles of karate descended from these two (sometimes combining them, or incorporating other martial arts in the process). The traditional styles of Karate (“Empty

Hand”) include: Goju Ryu (Naha-Te), Shorin Ryu (Shuri-Te), and Uechi Ryu. Some also include Shito Ryu and Isshin Ryu.

When Higashionna¹ Sensei was a young man, his employer brought him to China and provided him the opportunity to learn both business and martial arts. While the history is unclear, most agree that he stayed between seven and eighteen years. Our lineage lists his teacher as Ryu Ryuko – a Japanese pronunciation of Liu Liukang. However, Richard Kim identifies his teacher as Woo Lu Chin in his book, The Weaponless Warriors. At any rate, when Higaonna Sensei returned to Okinawa, he began teaching Naha-Te, which he developed based on Chinese Kung Fu. (At a seminar that I attended with Teruo Chinen Sensei, he referred to Goju Ryu Karate as Kung Fu.)

Belt Color Sequence

White

Purple

Yellow

Orange

Blue

1st Green

2nd Green

3rd Green

Brown

Black

One of Higaonna’s many students was Chojun Miyagi. Miyagi Sensei studied under Higaonna for many years and, like Higaonna, went to China to study Zen and martial arts. Upon his return, Miyagi Sensei developed Goju Ryu Karate, incorporating shorei movements and Zen breathing.

Gogen Yamaguchi Sensei helped to bring Goju Ryu to mainland Japan. As such, his lineage of Goju Ryu is often referred to as Japanese Goju Ryu, and is slightly different than Okinawan Goju Ryu. (It is fair to say that each person’s karate is slightly different than their teacher’s. This is partly due to body mechanics, and partly due to Shu-Ha-Ri.)

In recent years, I learned from Hanshi Martin that we have a Japanese lineage, but study Okinawan Goju! It turns out that Hanshi Merriman decided to return to the roots of Goju, and studied under Chinen Sensei, who was a student of Eiichi Miyazato Sensei (who inherited Miyagi Sensei’s dojo and taught Okinawan Goju Ryu).

Code of Ethics

Contain rather than hurt.

Hurt rather than injure.

Injure rather than maim.

Maim rather than kill.

Kill rather than be killed.

¹ Higaonna was the Japanese version of his name.