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## Acknowledgements

No work of this nature is ever the product of one individual alone. While the ideas, interpretations, and conclusions in this book are my own, they are inseparable from the people who have supported, challenged, and endured me throughout its creation.

First and foremost, I wish to thank my wife. Her unwavering support, patience, and belief in my pursuit of martial arts—often spanning decades rather than moments—has been the foundation upon which this work rests. She has tolerated long hours of training, study, writing, and reflection, and has done so with grace, encouragement, and understanding. Without her steady presence and commitment, this book would not exist.

I am equally grateful to my children and extended family. Their patience, flexibility, and quiet understanding during periods when my attention was divided between family life and personal study did not go unnoticed. Their support reminds me that the discipline and values cultivated through martial arts extend far beyond the training floor.

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to my teachers—past and present—who demonstrated not only technical skill, but intellectual honesty and open-mindedness. Their willingness to question, to debate, and to engage in long and sometimes uncomfortable discussions about training methods, history, and application shaped the way I think about martial arts today. More importantly, they allowed me the freedom to explore, to disagree respectfully, and to develop my own understanding without dogma or restriction.

I would also like to acknowledge my training partners and peers. Through shared effort, resistance, failure, and refinement, they provided the necessary testing ground for ideas discussed in this book. Martial arts cannot be understood in isolation, and their role in pressure-testing both technique and theory has been invaluable.

Finally, I extend my thanks to the broader martial arts community—past and present—whose recorded histories, preserved traditions, and ongoing conversations continue to inform and challenge modern practice. Whether through written accounts, oral transmission, or practical experimentation, their collective contribution ensures that martial arts remain a living discipline rather than a static relic.

Any errors, omissions, or misinterpretations that remain are entirely my own. It is my hope that this work honours those who influenced it and contributes, in some small way, to the ongoing study and responsible evolution of martial arts.

— Robert

## Foreword

I first met Robert Teske in the early 2010s, when I was invited to teach a seminar on Tou'on-ryu in Ottawa at the dojo of his teacher, Hing Poon Chan sensei. What stood out even then was not only his enthusiasm and skill, but his interest in how Karate works, why it changed, and what could be learned if we approached it as a method rather than disparate styles. His book reflects that long-standing line of inquiry.

Much of my own research has focused on understanding Karate within its original historical context; a martial art shaped by environment, social constraint, and practical necessity. From that perspective, many modern assumptions about Karate, long-range exchanges, rigid stylistic boundaries, fixed interpretations of kata, are historically recent developments. Robert's manuscript addresses these issues directly. Rather than treating Karate simply as a collection of techniques, he approaches it as an adaptive system whose methods shifted over time.

Central to this idea is the view that kata functions as record of methods, not as literal a script for fighting. This position is consistent with what we see in writings and oral accounts articulated by luminaries such as Patrick McCarthy, Mabuni Kenewa and Toguchi Seikichi. Robert places these ideas in a practical framework, emphasizing close-range engagement, clinch control, balance disruption; elements that align more closely with self-protection than with consensual sporting matches.

The discussion of Chinese influence is handled with appropriate caution. Rather than advancing simplistic lineage claims, he focuses on shared mechanics and principles that possibly survived transmission, such as economy of motion, upright structure, soft-hard alternation, and the integration of striking with seizing and off-balancing. His comparative use of Southern Chinese systems, particularly Wing Chun, in which he is also an expert, is presented not as historical proof but as a functional reference point. This helps Karate practitioners make sense of kata mechanics when tested at close range.

Finally, like the foundational research of Patrick McCarthy, Robert's work challenges the dominance of style-based thinking. Early Okinawan teachers did not transmit fixed styles; they taught individuals, adapting method to circumstance. When Karate later became standardized for mass instruction and sport on the Japanese mainland, that flexibility was lost. Understanding this process does not require rejecting current style-based Karate, but does require recognizing its limits. His argument is not for revivalism, but for clarity.

In closing, readers will find a coherent synthesis of historical understanding, practical experience, and methodological discipline which will be invaluable to their training. For students and teachers willing to examine Karate beyond inherited assumptions, this book offers a grounded perspective. One that encourages inquiry, testing, and individual responsibility in training.

Mario McKenna

Vancouver, British Columbia



## Introduction

My name is **Robert Teske**, and I have been training in the martial arts since the age of nine. Over the course of several decades, I have earned black belts in **Gōjū-ryū Karate** and **Taekwondo**, and hold a **Gold Sash (7th-degree black belt)** in **Wing Chun** and competed at various levels. I have also studied **Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu** and **mixed martial arts**. Beyond my personal training, I have owned and operated a martial arts academy and have had the privilege of teaching civilians, military personnel, law enforcement officers, and members of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS).

These experiences, taken together, have shaped my understanding of martial arts not as fixed systems, but as living practices—ones that reveal as much about the individual practitioner as they do about the art itself.

For nearly fifty years, I have been attempting to answer a deceptively simple question: *How are martial arts supposed to work?* Early in my journey, I believed that studying multiple disciplines would naturally grant me a broader and more complete understanding—different arts for different skills, different styles for different problems. While this approach did offer valuable insights, it eventually led me to a deeper realization: the distinctions we draw between martial arts are often far less significant than the similarities we overlook.

Through study, practice, and research, I came to understand not only *what* martial arts are, but *how* they came to be understood in the way they are today. More importantly, I began to see how martial arts training is best approached—at least from my perspective—when stripped of assumptions tied to style, identity, or tradition for tradition's sake.

At their core, all martial arts serve essentially the same purpose: **self-preservation**. They are methods developed to protect the individual from harm. While the expressions of these methods vary, the underlying need that gave rise to them is universal. Every culture, in every region of the world, faced the same fundamental problem: how to survive violence.

What differed were the conditions under which that problem had to be solved. Environment, available weapons, social structure, and cultural beliefs all influenced how martial methods developed. Where environments and threats were similar, comparable solutions often emerged independently—much like the invention of the boat arose wherever humans needed to travel across water.

Martial arts, like languages, are living entities. They change over time as people change. New interpretations arise, meanings shift, practices adapt, and emphasis evolves. As long as martial arts are practiced by human beings, they will be shaped by opinion, creativity, physical ability, bias, and preference. Culture, politics, and environment further accelerate this process of transformation.

There was a time when martial arts were not systems of identity or performance, but pragmatic responses to real-world needs. They were not organized around styles, but around **methods**—methods chosen to suit a mandate and an environment. Individual expression existed, but it was the byproduct of problem-solving, not the foundation of the art itself.

From this perspective, the *art* is the method, and *style* is the individual expression of that method. Style belongs not to the system, but to the practitioner. It is shaped by intelligence, creativity, logic, physical attributes, and lived experience.

This book is an exploration of that idea: that martial arts are best understood not as rigid styles, but as adaptive methodologies shaped by context.

By examining **Tōde**, an early form of what would later be known as karate, this work seeks to illustrate how **mandate, environment, and method** have shaped the art's development, offering readers a clearer framework for understanding both the historical evolution of martial arts and their practical relevance in the modern world.

# Karate: A Kung Fu Time Capsule

## Chapter 1: Let's take it from the top

## Let's take it from the top

I think it's safe to say that most Karate practitioners realize that Karate came to Okinawa from China. Historians have clearly documented that Okinawa was an extremely well-located hub for trade in east Asia and as such it did trade with many cultures but none more than China.

Due to the well-established trade with its neighbor to the west, Okinawa received lots of influence from the Chinese, so much so that China even sent some 36 families to settle in Okinawa to further this cultural relationship. The 36 families of China all settled in Kume village.

(Excerpt from Wikipedia)

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Kumemura was an Okinawan community of scholars, bureaucrats, and diplomats in the port city of Naha near the royal capital of Shuri, which was a center of culture and learning during the time of the Ryukyu Kingdom. The people of Kumemura, traditionally believed to all be descendants of the Chinese immigrants who first settled there in 1392, came to form an important and aristocratic class of scholar-bureaucrats, who dominated the royal bureaucracy, and served as government officials at home, and as diplomats in relations with China, Japan, and others.

The community's special function came to an end in 1879, with Okinawa's formal annexation to Japan, and it has since been geographically absorbed into the prefectural capital of Naha; the area is now known simply as Kume. However, its association with scholarship and culture, or at least with China, remains.

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With this established community also followed the Chinese martial arts, predominantly southern Chinese martial arts. Which the Kume residents willingly shared with their Okinawan hosts. These martial arts came to be known as Tode or Tang Hand/China Hand.

### The Transmission of Southern Chinese martial arts to Okinawa

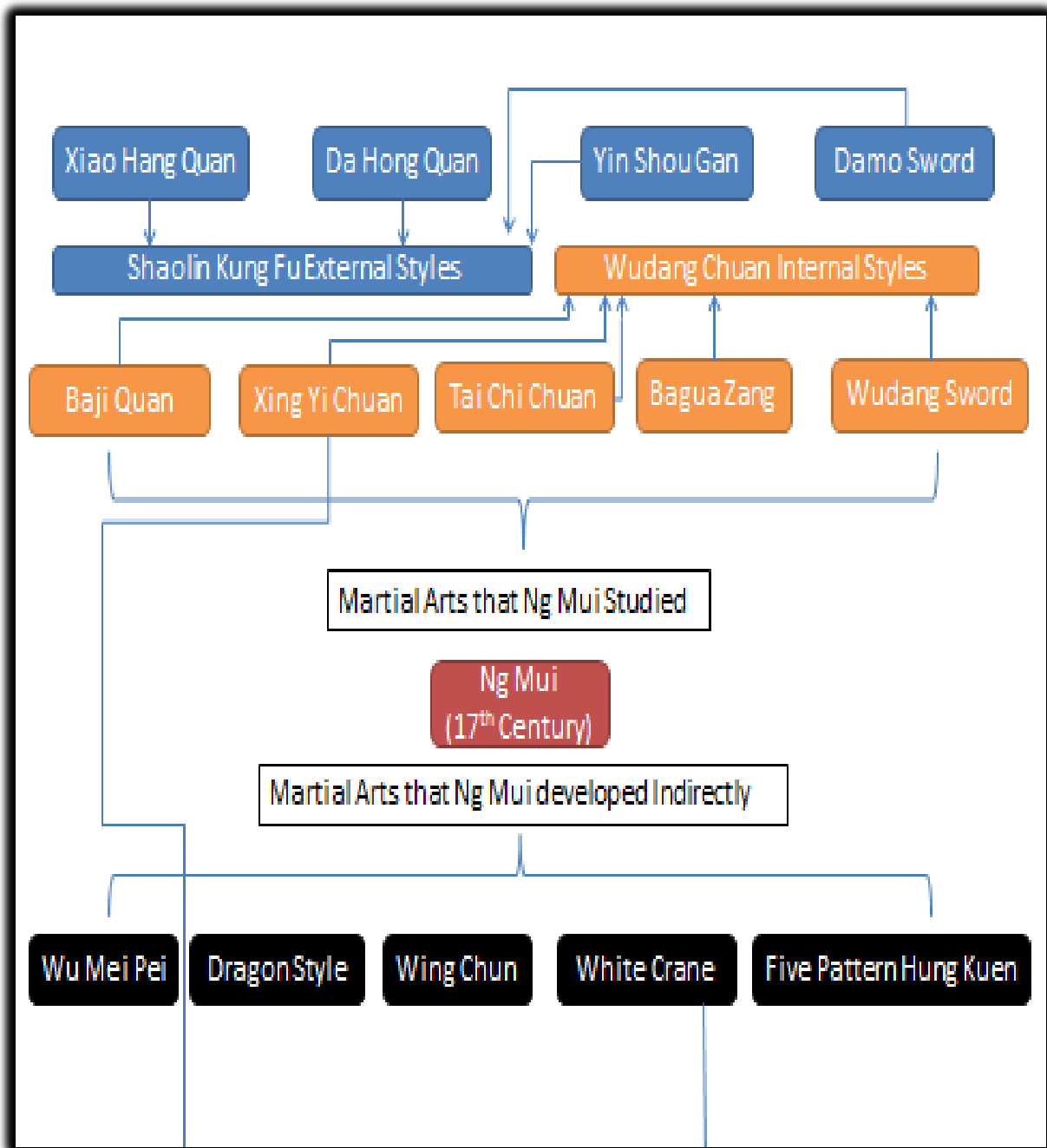
In order to understand how Kung Fu influenced the Okinawan Karate styles of today, one would first have to understand how martial arts styles get created in the first place.

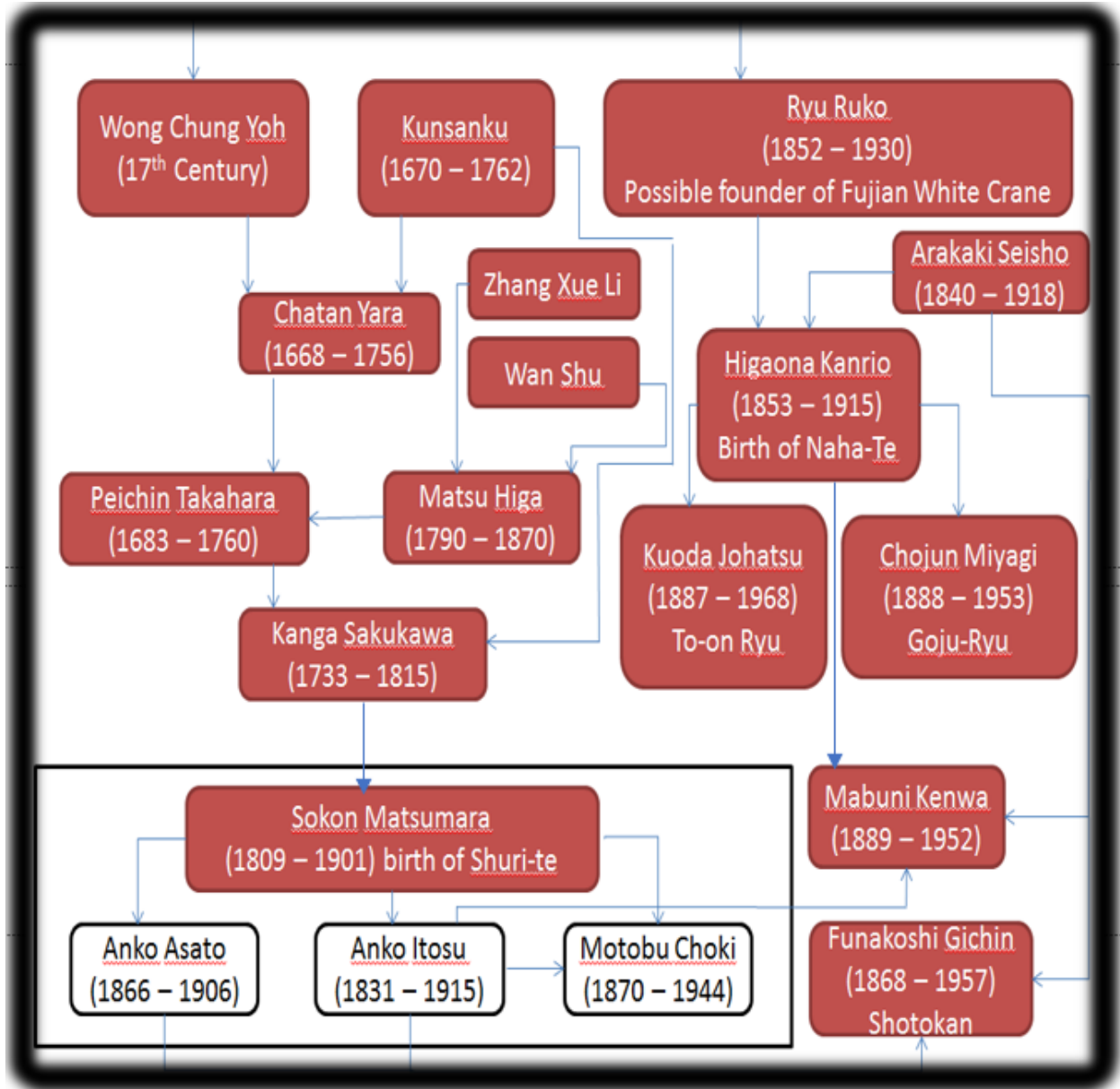
The following chart (The evolution of Martial Arts), traces how early Kung Fu systems were responsible for the formation of key figures that taught the well know Tode practitioners martial arts, these martial arts would have been eventually disseminated into organized teaching methods that come to be recognized as present day Karate.

It is also worth noting that Karate masters (founders) of their own Karate styles, did not agree with the classifications of Karate styles.

Kenwa Mabuni (Shito ryu) is know to have said, **“There are no styles of karate-do, just varying interpretations of its principles.”**

The evolution of Martial Arts





Furthermore, you will notice that the shaolin abbess Ng Mui is responsible for motivating the founding of numerous martial arts styles herself.

This simply points out that martial arts were not taught in a structured format in days of old, but rather lessons were organized to highlight an individual's abilities and strengths. It is this kind of individualized approach that has been responsible for the creation of so many complex training methods. An individual of Ng Mui's extensive knowledge would be able to systemize a method of training that would fit the student perfectly, making use of their natural attributes and abilities. If the student would be so inclined to pass on what they had learned, they would definitely pass on what they had been taught, this would carry on from teacher to student. Eventually this method would be given a name and a martial art style would be born.

Note: The reason I make mention of Ng Mui, is because of her influence in the creation of the Kung Fu style of White Crane, which is a well know staple for many of the popular Karate styles of today.

The chart above clearly indicates how Karate owes its heritage to the Chinese, however, it also clearly indicates how the Tode masters trained or should I say cross trained. Many Karate practitioners of old had the opportunity to train with multiple masters, some even going as far as relocating to China in order to learn from the source directly.

It was not until *The Bubishi*, a classic Chinese martial arts text, was translated and annotated by Patrick McCarthy—published under the title *The Bible of Karate*—and made available to the West that practitioners could identify recorded techniques corresponding to those demonstrated in karate kata.

This evidence supports a definitive conclusion regarding karate’s origins; moreover, the subsequent adoption of a name change contributed to the further obscuring of those origins from their original Chinese martial arts source.

(Excerpt from Wikipedia)

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The Chinese origins of karate were increasingly viewed with suspicion due to rising tensions between China and Japan and as well as the looming threat of a full-scale war between the two countries. In 1933, the Japanese character for karate was altered to a homophone— a word pronounced identically but with a different meaning. Thus, "Chinese hand" was replaced with "empty hand."

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During this change in terms (1930s) the suffix “Do” was also adopted as a way to make Karate more acceptable in mainland Japan. And the term with its present-day meaning was put in place and became Karate-Do (the way of the empty hand).

But that’s not all that began to change.

### Look and feel

The practice of Karate also began to undergo significant reform. As styles became increasingly formalized into distinct *ryū* during the 1930s, the look and feel of Karate began to change, particularly as it was adopted within Japan. New practitioners, often unknowingly, sought to conform to these emerging style classifications, shaping both training methods and outward expression.

These developments occurred largely to the disapproval of the founding masters—Gichin Funakoshi (Shotokan) , Kenwa Mabuni (Shito ryu), and Chōjun Miyagi (Goju ryu) to name a few, who emphasized principle over form and warned against rigid stylization.

Funakoshi explicitly stated, **“There is no place in contemporary karate-do for different schools... I have heard myself and my colleagues referred to as the Shotokan school, but I strongly object to this attempt at classification,”** arguing that all of Karate should be unified rather than divided.

Chōjun Miyagi, remarks at the 1936 Meeting of Okinawan Karate Masters **“There is an opinion insisting that there are two *ryū* or styles in Karate, namely Shōrin-ryū and Shorei-ryū. I think such an opinion is wrong or false, as there is no evidence at all. However, if we are to speak of two types, they can only be distinguished by their methods of teaching. The principles of Karate itself are the same.”**

Furthermore, as Karate became popular in the Japanese universities, young practitioners sought a way to test their newly acquired skills’ effectiveness and began to experiment with Kumite (sparring). This gave way to a drastic misinterpretation of the original Karate’s fighting range and opened up a whole new way of reading kata (forms).

Kata were now becoming associated with long range consensual combat and not the close range of un-consensual combat which was the original purpose of Karate.

*Note: The term consensual and un-consensual fighting was first adopted by Iain Abernethy to explain Karate’s original purpose.*

Due to this development many Kata movements were completely misinterpreted.

Things like:

- 1) Blocks: Were being misappropriated as a defence to a long-range attack (either from hand or foot). When in fact most of these movements were not to be used as blocks at all, as noted by Seikichi Toguchi.

Seikichi Toguchi's claim that **"there are no blocks in karate"** is a common adage meant to highlight that the movements often taught as simple blocks in basic training are, in fact, **multifunctional techniques that serve as strikes, joint locks, throws, and controls in real-world applications.**

This perspective emphasizes the original, practical self-defence (*bunkai*) nature of Okinawan karate over the simplified, sport-oriented interpretations prevalent in modern dojos.

- 2) Angles and Directional changes: Many dojos began associating directional changes in Kata as a way of facing multiple opponents. When in fact, Kata was meant to be facing one opponent and one opponent only, as Seikichi Toguchi further claims.

**Focus on a Single Attacker:** The movements within a kata are designed to handle a single attacker, rather than a mob of opponents attacking from all directions simultaneously. This allows for a deeper, more practical study of applying leverage, locks, and throws against one person.

**Tactical Positioning:** While it might seem counterintuitive to a real-life fight, the principle suggests that the practitioner should maneuver to get the opponent directly in front of them, or use the movements and turns in the kata as a guide for how to position themselves relative to the opponent to gain a tactical advantage. The changes in direction within the kata represent the practitioner adjusting their angle to control the fight, not turning to face a new attacker.

**Complexity of Techniques:** The applications for single techniques often involve seizing, controlling, and finishing an opponent. Performing these complex movements is difficult enough

against one person; attempting to apply the specific, intricate details of a kata movement against multiple, simultaneously attacking opponents is generally considered impractical.

**Core, Practical Self-Defense:** This rule brings the focus back to the core, effective self-defence of Okinawan karate, which deals with real-world, close-range confrontations where managing one threat at a time is paramount.

- 3) Closed fist in chambered position (hikite): Many modern Karate dojos see the closed fist in chambered position as a way of generating torque and maximum kinetic energy through the rotation of the hips and the opposing force, making the main strike more powerful.

However, the closed fist is not at all a power generator for the other hand's strike, but often as a **simultaneous grab, check**.

**A Tool for Control:** The closed fist in this position facilitates seizing an opponent's limb after receiving incoming danger, allowing for immediate follow-ups like joint locks, throws, or close-range vital point strikes.

**Practicality over Form:** Consistent with his claims that "there are no blocks," Toguchi would interpret the standard "form" of a closed fist in a chamber as a simplified representation of a functional, practical grappling movement that would be executed in a real fight to control an attacker.

- 4) Stances: Modern Karate now separates its stances for two purposes visually distinct from one another, Kata which has many deep stances and sparring with its lighter bouncing stances, a far cry from the original short, upright functional stances of Tode (China Hand) the art of self defence.

Pre-1900: Okinawan Karate preferred **natural, mobile** stances. They were short, upright, and functional. The weight mostly centered, similar to everyday postures when Karate was for **self-defence**, not performance. Training emphasized **mobility, balance**, and striking power at close range. Stances were **transitional**, not positions to "sit in", Okinawan masters stood how people actually fought.

1900–1920s: The introduction of Karate into schools & Itosu's reforms began **changing** stances, they became **longer and more clearly defined**. The **deep front stances (zenkutsu-dachi)** in kata places more emphasis on **leg strength and posture**.

In the early 20th century, Ankō Itosu adapted karate for **children and physical education**. Deep stances built **strong legs** taught **discipline and structure** and made techniques **visually clear** for group instruction. Karate began shifting from fighting method to an educational system.

1920s–1940s: The Japanese mainland influence (Shotokan era) dramatically changed stances even further. Stances got **very deep and long** to support strong forward/backward linear movement and low center of gravity.

1950s–1970s: Post-War Sport Karate saw the adaptation of stances for **tournament kata** which favoured very deep, dramatic stances and **point sparring** which by contrast favoured lighter, higher, bouncing stances. Karate was becoming unrecognisable from the original version of the Karate first practiced by the Okinawans in the late 1800s.

The following examples demonstrate how reforms in karate over the past 100 years have influenced both kata movements and the interpretation of their associated bunkai (applications).

Modern Kata movement



Application



Classic Kata movement



Application

*(AI generated pictures)*

Modern Kata movement



Application



Classic Kata movement



Application

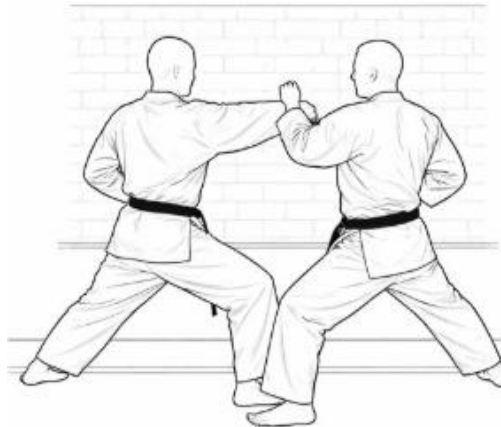


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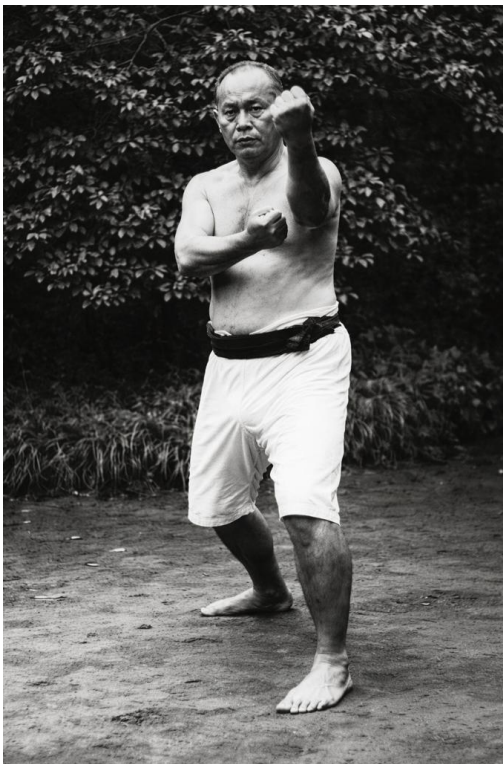
Modern Kata movement



Application



Classic Kata movement



Application



*(AI generated pictures)*

By comparing modern practice to classical forms, it becomes clear how significantly the reformation has influenced both kata movements and their intended applications. Stances have become deeper, blocks that originally derived from grappling movements have been misinterpreted as standalone defensive actions, and distancing has been modified to support sport karate kumite.

## Chapter 2: The decoding

## The Decoding

So how do we fix this?

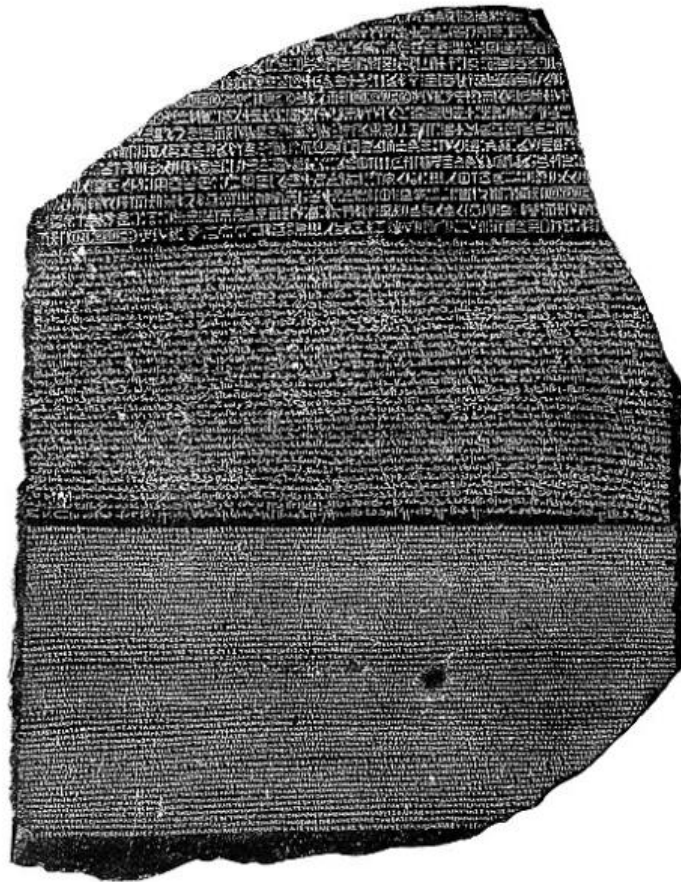
As the title of this book suggests, karate may be viewed as a “kung fu time capsule,” which might imply that a direct comparison between karate and modern kung fu would yield an accurate representation of its origins.

Unfortunately, this is not the case, as kung fu itself has undergone significant reform over time. Rather, the title is intended to convey that karate represents an older, largely forgotten Chinese martial method—known at the time as *quan fa* (“fist method”)—as it was introduced into Okinawan society.

Consequently, practitioners must rely on what has remained relatively unchanged: the kata, which serve as a means of preserving and representing the technical, tactical, and theoretical knowledge contained within the art.

We simply need a way of reading it correctly, and luckily, we have that.

How to interpret Kata



“Illustration of the Rosetta stone, generated with AI”

In recent years there has been lots of discoveries and advancements about how one should be reading kata.

Renowned Karate researchers, authors and historians like Patrick McCarthy, Iain Abernethy, Jesse Enkamp, Mario McKenna to name a few, have all contributed extensively to provide the karate world with a guide of how kata should be read.

This guide that was built from discovered texts and clarifications from old time Karate masters like: (Seikichi Toguchi, Kenwa Mabuni, Gichin Funakoshi, Anko Itosu, Morinobu Itoman, Choki Motobu etc...) that have been painstakingly translated by the efforts of the aforementioned researchers and historians, in order to offer us a time capsule of sorts of how karate was practiced in days of old, when it was a method of forgotten kung Fu.

## Theory

The theory is that originally kata began as sets of paired drills or “sparring sets” practised by ancient martial artists. Over time large numbers of these drills became difficult to remember and so the defensive portion of the drills were assembled together into units and became the first kata. It is worth noting that these would probably have been Chinese martial art forms.

The attacking methods were not recorded in the forms and are therefore unknown. However, they may be inferred from limb and body positioning and preceding and following movements through the process of bunkai. It has been theorised by Patrick McCarthy that the drills and defensive routines recorded were responses to Habitual Acts of Physical Violence (HAPV Theory).

## The 4 Protocols (Iain Abernethy)

Protocols are in essence rules of conversation, they put a framework on how to properly converse in a given language (environment) in this case the language is kata.

The 4 protocols read as such:

- 1) Kata are only interpreted from the individual practitioner’s perspective. Meaning, don’t interpret the kata based on what the opponent might be doing, but only from the practitioner’s perspective. i.e. if I turn to my left, that would represent the angle I have taken in relation to the opponent.
- 2) Kata are thought in sequence, but don’t have to follow the sequence to be applied. What is meant here, is that kata often contain options that can be used to overcome resistance or provide variable applications. You can’t predict what an opponent will do, therefore, the kata can’t either.
- 3) Kata never deal with multiple opponents. They are sequences for dealing with an individual, by presenting options and resolutions to overcome resistance from an attacker.
- 4) Kata do not provide demonstration of techniques for dealing with long range punches and kicks, but rather detail movements at clinch range distance.

## Kaisai no Genri (Seikichi Toguchi)

*This is a theory and set of rules of thumb which were used by Gōjū-ryū karate master (Seikichi Toguchi) to extract the primary fighting applications of kata.*

Here are some rules from Kaisai no Genri that should be applied when interpreting kata:

- 1) Don't be deceived by directional changes (embusen) in the kata. Many kata were modified to accommodate small spaces.
- 2) Techniques applied while advancing = offence. Techniques applied while retreating = defence.
- 3) There is only one enemy and he is in front of you.

Those listed above are the main three, however, Toguchi lists an additional 9 advanced rules:

- 1) Every movement in kata has a fighting application.
- 2) A hand in a closed position usually has something in it.
- 3) Utilize the shortest distance to your opponent.
- 4) If you control your opponent's head you control your opponent.
- 5) There are no blocks in kata.
- 6) Angles in kata are important.
- 7) Touching your own body, indicates you're touching the opponent's.
- 8) Don't attack hard targets of your opponent with hard parts of your body.
- 9) There are no pauses in application.

## Key Points for interpreting kata (Iain Abernethy)

Iain Abernethy has also provided these additional 3 key points that assist with determining application of technique found within kata. These are listed in order of importance.

- 1) Angles, the direction that the motion appears in the kata, Keep the enemy in front of you, but don't stay in front of the enemy. Move toward what you know and away from what you don't know. The line (position) you take relative to the opponent.
- 2) Stance, the posture we see the motion being applied from. To and through. Karate has many stances it also has none (Genwa Nakasone). Where is the energy going? Weight distribution!
- 3) Arm position, the passive hand is either telling you where the opponent is or clearing an obstruction out of the way. Kata is for close range, not long-range punches and kicks.

Another worthy note Iain makes is worth remembering "Fighting is consensual, Self Defence is not. Kata is self defence!

## The Chinese connection

Many Chinese martial arts like to focus on Theories, Concepts and Principles that the movements are attempting to convey instead of focusing on application (bunkai).

In this way the movements relay information that can be transmitted to many other movements that contain the same theories, concepts and or principles making the need for an excessive number of forms unnecessary. This method also empowers the practitioner with some creative license, allow them to build on the fly movements that share theories, concepts and or principles that otherwise might go undocumented.

### Definition:

- 1) Theory: A system of ideas that are independent. i.e., “The Centre Line Theory”.
- 2) Concept: A plan or intention, these are tactics that aid in managing an encounter. i.e., Flanking the opponent.
- 3) Principles: The foundation for a system of belief, techniques or movements can share principles.

Another tool the Chinese martial arts use to convey tactical knowledge to practitioners is the use of Idioms.

Idioms are a group of words established by usage as having a meaning not deducible from those of the individual words (i.e., raining cats and dogs, see the light).

### Idioms:

- 1) Wing does not stop or stay: This is referring to techniques not being static, but continuous in nature.
- 2) Punch comes from the heart: This is referring to striking or attacking with conviction, i.e., Punch from the soul.
- 3) Simultaneous attack and defend: This refers to attacks occupying the centre line, or one hand arresting while the other attacking simultaneously. Can also reference (Best defence is a strong offence).
- 4) He comes, I remain, he leaves, I pursue, thrust in as hand becomes free: This is a battle tactic, a formula for success, it refers to centre line control and pressuring the opponent.
- 5) Move first to get the initiative: This refers to getting out of the way, or changing lines of attack, can be done while bridging.
- 6) Two sticks make one sound: This refers to timing. Can also reference (simultaneous attack and defend).
- 7) Have shape hit shape, no shape hit impression, no impression cleave centre: This refers to maintaining and regaining your squareness (keep opponent in front of you).
- 8) Best defence is a strong offence: This refers to pressuring the opponent to keep them on the defensive.

As you can see, by understanding all what is indicated above, one can begin to properly interpret Kata. By relying on protocols and rules of thumb and linking in theory, concepts and principles along with idioms (battle tactics) one has a much better chance of interpreting kata in the way it was originally intended.

However, is it enough? I think not.

It may be enough to help interpret the Kata's original message, but not necessarily the recommend application as per the individual practitioner.

This will require a more hands on experimental approach that can only come from live drilling with a resisting partner.

Live drilling in various situations i.e., bridging and bridge control, take downs and throwing, grappling and submissions, is the only way to connect ideas and understanding on how to work the techniques that kata are trying to teach.

All drills can be done individually or united to form a more comprehensive drill. Live drilling can be done with a co-operative partner in order to teach the technique as well as against a resisting partner in order to discover solutions.

Which will bring to light how a technique is to be performed by the individual practitioner. You see not all practitioners share the same characteristics, what works for one might not work for another, kata is not a one size fits all. It's a way of reminding the practitioner of a structured solution that might have to be modified in order to work for the individual.

This goes a long way to explain the numerous bunkai per kata technique!

Let me clarify, in applying the protocols, rules and idioms one can definitely eliminate many mis-constructed bunkai but many well-constructed bunkai will remain, can all the ones that remain be all correct?

Yes, that's were your personal karate becomes clear, it will be your karate, a style of self defence unique to the practitioner, discovered through live drilling and re-enforced by kata.

### [Corroborating our comparison](#)

When comparing the original form of Okinawa-te ("China Hand") with Chinese martial arts, the most useful reference is the original form of White Crane, which initially influenced Okinawa-te—particularly Naha-te, the style of karate developed in Naha.

"Original White Crane" influenced Okinawa te. It originated in **Fujian province**, likely mid-17th to 18th century and was most likely developed by **Ng Mui's disciples** (aligns with traditional oral histories).

It Focused on:

- 1) **Practical self-defense** (short- to mid-range).
- 2) **Crane-inspired mechanics**: beak hand strikes, wing deflections, upright posture.
- 3) **Rooted stance and body alignment**.

#### 4) Energy principles (soft–hard alternation, coiling and releasing).

Note: It was **less formalized**, had fewer long forms, and was likely passed orally, not through codified manuals.

In terms of **fidelity to the original functional principles of southern Fujian White Crane**, **Wing Chun is arguably more comparable to the “original” White Crane that influenced Okinawa Te** than modern White Crane itself. Here’s why:

#### Core Principles Preserved in Wing Chun

Principle	Original White Crane	Wing Chun	Modern White Crane
Close-range combat	✓	✓	✓
Compact, rooted stances	✓	✓	Partially (some modern forms have exaggerated stances)
Deflect-and-strike mechanics	✓	✓ (Bong/Fook structures)	✓ (stylized for forms)
Soft–hard alternation	✓	✓ (relaxation before fa jin)	✓, but sometimes over-formalized
Efficient economy of motion	✓	✓ (minimal wasted movement)	Often less efficient in performance forms

**Insight:** Wing Chun is essentially a **condensed version of White Crane**, keeping its **functional mechanics** while removing ritualized animal forms, high kicks, and long, stylized sequences.



*“Illustration generated with AI”*

## Why Wing Chun Feels “Closer” to Okinawa te

### 1) **Simplicity and efficiency:**

Both Wing Chun and Okinawa te (e.g., Naha-te / Goju-ryu) emphasize **practical hand techniques and stance structure**, much like the original White Crane.

### 2) **Short-range focus:**

Original White Crane had compact, practical strikes. Wing Chun preserves **inch power, chain punching, and centerline defense**.

### 3) **Direct mechanical translation:**

Many Wing Chun techniques can be mapped to **what Okinawa te codified in kata**, whereas modern White Crane has **added layers for aesthetics and demonstrations**.

## What Wing Chun leaves out compared to modern White Crane

- 1) Animal imagery and long forms.
- 2) Some long-range kicks and acrobatics.
- 3) Breathing forms and ritualized sequences.

Wing Chun is **more stripped down**; it’s essentially “White Crane for real-world combat,” whereas modern White Crane evolved into a full traditional martial art influenced by generations of the civil and political pressures of evolution.

## Bottom Line

- 1) **Wing Chun ≈ distilled functional White Crane**
- 2) **Modern White Crane ≈ stylized traditional White Crane**
- 3) For understanding **the mechanics that influenced Okinawa te**, Wing Chun gives a more direct **insight**.



*“Illustration generated with AI”*

## Chapter 3: Reassembling the Pieces

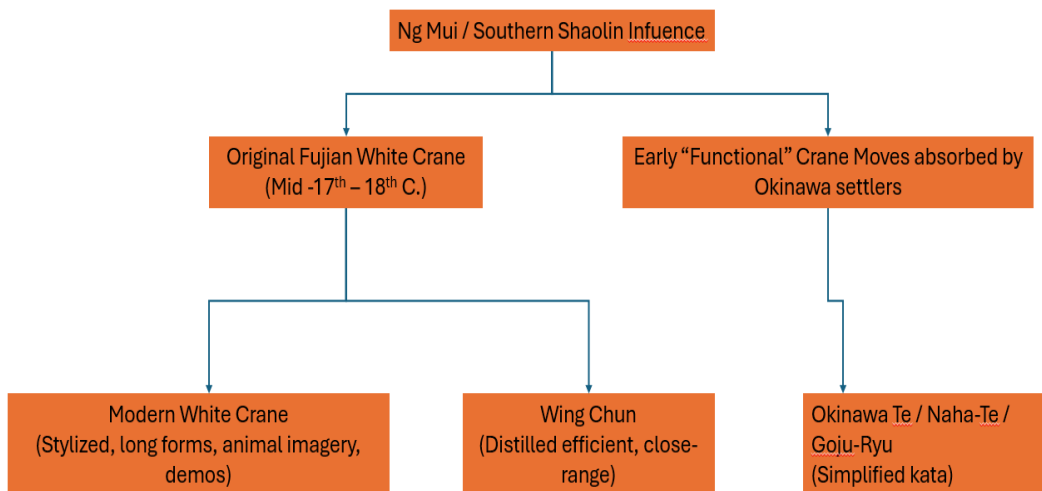
## Reassembling the Pieces

By examining the body of evidence available to us today—historical texts, images, early training manuals, manuscripts attributed to past masters, and oral accounts preserved through the work of dedicated karate historians—we can begin the process of reconstructing what was once known as *Tōde* (China Hand).

This task is not without difficulty. Many primary sources have been lost, degraded, or survive only in fragmentary or ambiguous form. As a result, reconstruction must be approached with the care and discipline of a historical forensic investigation, identifying what *Tōde* likely encompassed and methodically piecing those elements back together.

## Evolutionary Map

Every meaningful treasure hunt begins with a map. In this case, our guide is not a chart of places, but a map of evolution—one that allows us to identify the elements that made Tode functional, and to reassemble them where they remain intact, or to replace them with functionally equivalent substitutes where the originals can no longer be found.



## Comparison of Key Features

Feature	Original White Crane	Wing Chun	Modern White Crane	Okinawa Te / Goju-ryu
Close-range combat	✓	✓	✓	✓
Compact, rooted stances	✓	✓	Partially	✓
Deflect & strike mechanics	✓	✓	✓ (stylized)	✓
Soft–hard alternation	✓	✓	✓	✓
Economy of motion / efficiency	✓	✓	Less	✓
Animal forms / ritualized sequences	✓	✗	✓	✗
Long forms / performance emphasis	✗	✗	✓	✗
Direct influence on kata	✓	✓	✗	✓

To uncover the true roots of China hand/Tode/Okinawan karate, we must look beyond its later forms and seek the original source—a source that seems, at first, to have vanished.

But the trail isn't cold. Clues remain:

The kata act as footprints of the past, the rules and protocols provide the logic for interpretation, and the functional mechanics of Wing Chun offer a living map of movement and principle. By following these traces, we can piece together the hidden path that leads back to the foundations of China hand, Tode, and the martial arts that would eventually become Okinawan karate.

But this isn't enough

Many kata contain throws, takedowns, and finishing techniques that are often **not emphasized in the formal instruction** of modern karate or kung fu. Additionally, **ground grappling is largely absent from kata**, even though it would have been a functional component of historical combat or would it have?

## Origin and Context of Okinawa te / China Hand

Okinawa te (later Okinawa karate) evolved in **southern China and Okinawa** as a **civilian self-defence system**. It was designed primarily for **standing combat in confined spaces**—streets, markets, homes where **ground fighting was risky or impractical**.

Techniques were meant to **disable an opponent quickly** rather than engage in prolonged grappling on the ground.

### Cultural Factors

Traditional Okinawan society valued **upright, respectful posture**, which influenced martial arts aesthetics. Grappling on the ground might have been seen as **undignified** or **impractical** in public confrontations.

Training methods prioritized **balance, stance, and striking mechanics**, all of which are harder to practice consistently on the ground.

### Safety and Training Practicality

Kata are **solo patterns**, designed to train techniques safely without a partner. Ground grappling, throws, and joint locks often require **resistance from a partner**, which makes solo practice harder.

Practicing throws and pins alone could **be considered impractical**, so kata were structured around **strikes, blocks, and movement**.

### Technical focus of kata

Kata are primarily about:

- 1) **Striking (punches, kicks, elbow strikes, knees).**
- 2) **Controlling and evasion.**
- 3) **Footwork and stance transitions.**
- 4) **Body mechanics and energy generation.**

While some kata include **throws or sweeps**, they are usually **standing techniques**, not extended ground grappling. Ground techniques require **partnered drills or kumite** (sparring) for full understanding.

### Exceptions and Adaptations

The ancient Okinawans practiced wrestling (tegumi) and pushing exercises that were similar in principle to sumo. These drills were sometimes referred to as Shuri Sumo or Okinawan Sumo, particularly in the Shuri and Naha regions, which were cultural centers for martial arts. During the Ryukyu Kingdom period (15th–19th century), Okinawan martial arts were influenced by both Chinese and Japanese traditions. Therefore, any attempt to reconstruct ancient Tōde (China Hand) would be incomplete without considering these cross-cultural influences.

When viewed through this lens, it becomes reasonable to understand classical karate not solely as a system of striking, but as a comprehensive method that included clinching, off-balancing, throws, takedowns, and decisive controlling techniques. These elements were preserved in kata through close-range movements, body positioning, and transitional actions that reflect grappling exchanges rather than purely percussive combat.

In this way, kata may be interpreted as a mnemonic record of integrated fighting principles, where strikes, throws, and finishing controls function together as part of a combative sequence rather than isolated techniques.

*What sources can we consult in our modern times to corroborate our observations of throws, takedowns, and finishing movements found within Kata?*

Modern observations of throws, takedowns, and finishing movements embedded within kata, can draw on several **overlapping categories of sources**. None of these stands alone as definitive proof, but taken together they form a strong, mutually reinforcing body of evidence.

### 1. Classical Okinawan and Early Karate Texts

Early karate writings often imply or directly reference grappling, clinching, and control methods:

**The *Bubishi*** – a Chinese martial text long associated with Okinawan karate and made accessible to modern readers through the translation and commentary of Patrick McCarthy. Perhaps the most important technical source. It contains illustrations and descriptions of seizing, joint manipulation, throws, chokes, and vital-point attacks that closely resemble movements found in kata. Its influence on Okinawan masters is well documented.

**Ankō Itosu's writings** (e.g., *Ten Precepts of Karate*) – While brief, they emphasize close-range self-defense and practical application rather than sportive striking.

**Gichin Funakoshi's early works** (e.g., *Karate-jutsu*, 1922) – These include references to throwing, clinching, and finishing an opponent once balance is broken, even if later Shotokan pedagogy deemphasized them.

**Kenwa Mabuni and Chōjun Miyagi's writings** – Both acknowledged grappling and close-contact methods within kata, especially in older forms.

### 2. Testimony of Prewar and Early Okinawan Practitioners

Statements from senior karateka before karate's modernization provide valuable insight:

**Motobu Chōki** explicitly advocated close-range fighting, throws, and takedowns, and criticized purely long-range striking interpretations.

Accounts of **tegumi** (Okinawan wrestling) training among karate practitioners suggest that grappling skill was assumed background knowledge.

Oral histories recorded by later researchers (e.g., Nagamine Shōshin, Higaonna Morio) frequently reference throwing and controlling techniques as implicit parts of kata.

### 3. Kata Structure and Internal Evidence

The kata themselves act as primary sources:

**Close-range postures**, crossed arms, limb wrapping, and rotational body mechanics are mechanically consistent with clinching, off-balancing, and throwing.

**Sequential movements** that appear impractical as strikes often function coherently as grips, takedowns, or finishing controls.

**Embryonic stances and transitions** suggest moments of balance disruption rather than static striking positions.

This internal consistency strengthens the argument that such techniques were intentionally encoded.

### 4. Chinese Martial Arts Parallels

Because *Tōde* was influenced by Southern Chinese boxing:

Southern Chinese systems (e.g., early White Crane, Monk Fist) integrate strikes, seizing, throws, and close-quarter finishes in ways that mirror kata mechanics.

Chinese training manuals and forms demonstrate how grappling methods can be embedded within solo routines, providing a comparative model for interpretation.

### 5. Japanese Grappling Traditions

While distinct, Japanese arts provide useful context:

**Classical jūjutsu** emphasizes balance-breaking (*kuzushi*), clinching, and throws that align with movements seen in kata.

The existence of Okinawan “sumo-like” practices bridges karate and Japanese grappling traditions conceptually and mechanically.

### 6. Early Photographs, Film, and Demonstrations

Though limited, early visual records show:

Kata being performed at much closer ranges and with more natural postures than later stylized versions.

Applications demonstrated by early masters that include sweeps, takedowns, and controls.

### 7. Modern Scholarly and Practical Research

Contemporary researchers help synthesize these materials:

Works by **Patrick McCarthy**, **Iain Abernethy**, **Jessy Enkamp**, **Andreas Quast** and others analyze kata through historical texts, biomechanics, and pressure-tested application.

Their conclusions often independently converge on the presence of grappling and finishing methods within kata.

## 8. Law Enforcement and Self-Defense Training Footage

Some **defensive tactics programs** demonstrate:

- Clinch-based entries
- Takedowns into pins or control holds
- Close-range strikes combined with grappling

These methods often resemble kata sequences more closely than sportive martial arts do, reinforcing the idea that kata reflects **civilian self-protection scenarios**.

How to put it all together

Achieving a coherent reconstruction requires systematic problem-solving, drawing on established knowledge, function-driven clues, comparative analysis, and corroboration through pressure testing.

Putting together a lab

To assemble these elements into a coherent and functional body of knowledge—one that can serve as a credible window into past practice—requires the proper mindset.

First, emphasis must be placed on function rather than form, as was likely the case for the original practitioners of *Tōde* (China Hand). Movements should be evaluated by what they accomplish mechanically, not by how they appear when performed in isolation.

Second, the practitioner must adopt an appropriate method of inquiry. Modern training environments can be used as a laboratory in which functional movements are explored, tested under resistance, and refined, with particular attention paid to those mechanics that align with the structure and transitions found in kata.

Finally, kata should be employed as a means of reinforcement and corroboration, serving to preserve and organize the functional discoveries rather than to generate them.

In this way, kata is not treated as the primary source of proof for functional movement. Instead, functional movement is first identified through experimentation and testing, and kata is then examined to understand how this information was encoded, preserved, and transmitted through form.

Here are some suggestions for building a process that can put it all together.



MMA a useful place to explore throws, takedowns and finishes

### 1. Pressure-Testing Kata Mechanics

MMA gyms provide:

- **Fully resisting opponents**
- Clinch fighting against strikes
- Live transitions from standing to ground

This environment helps answer an important question:

Can the body mechanics suggested by kata actually work against resistance?

If a kata-derived throw or takedown:

- Works reliably in MMA-style clinch fighting
- Requires no sport-specific grips or rules
- Emerges naturally from balance-breaking and posture control

...then it supports the idea that the kata movement encodes **functional human mechanics**, not stylized fiction.

In this way modern MMA training can serve as a pressure-testing environment in which the mechanical viability of kata-derived throws and takedowns may be explored. While MMA cannot function as a historical source, it provides a laboratory for testing balance-breaking, clinch control, and takedown mechanics under resistance, helping to distinguish plausible interpretations of kata from purely theoretical ones.

Wing Chun exercise of Chi Sao functions as a sensitivity and structure-testing laboratory

### Where Chi Sao *is* useful

#### 1. Developing Close-Range Sensitivity

Chi Sao is specifically designed to cultivate:

Tactile sensitivity

Limb control and trapping

Continuous pressure and redirection

Immediate exploitation of imbalance

These attributes align closely with:

The close-range nature of kata

Crossing arms, limb wrapping, and hand exchanges found in many forms

Transitional movements that make little sense at long striking range

Chi Sao helps reveal how small positional changes can create openings, a principle that appears repeatedly in kata.

## **2. Understanding Flow and Continuity**

Kata rarely depicts isolated techniques; instead, movements flow from one position to another. Chi Sao emphasizes:

Continuous engagement

Rapid transitions between control, strike, and off-balancing

Adaptive response rather than prearranged sequences

This mirrors the non-linear nature of kata, where movements often represent phases of an exchange rather than discrete actions.

## **3. Testing Structural Integrity**

Chi Sao quickly exposes:

Weak posture

Over-commitment

Loss of centerline or balance

When kata movements are explored through Chi Sao-like contact, practitioners can identify:

Which interpretations preserve structure under pressure

Which collapse when contact is maintained

This helps separate mechanically sound interpretations from speculative ones.

*Note: As Wing Chun has become increasingly commercialized in the modern era, certain aspects of its combative curriculum—particularly those involving throws, takedowns, and decisive finishing actions—are often underrepresented or omitted in mainstream practice. However, these elements remain implicit within the system's structure and mechanics. When Wing Chun training methods are cross-referenced with Okinawan kata, clear mechanical parallels emerge. Through this comparative approach, throws, takedowns, and finishing movements can be reintegrated seamlessly, not as foreign additions, but as natural extensions of close-range control and balance disruption. This process offers a more complete and functionally authentic lens through which to understand Tōde, consistent with its historical role as a comprehensive civilian fighting method rather than a purely striking art.*

Many opening sequences of kata are often misunderstood as purely ceremonial or preparatory movements, rather than as expressions of functional combat mechanics. When these movements are instead viewed as responses to incoming danger, they reveal a consistent emphasis on **establishing contact and control**—what can be understood as creating a *bridge* between oneself and an opponent. This bridge provides the mechanical foundation from which striking, off-balancing, throws, takedowns, and finishing actions may occur.

One effective method for discovering and testing this engagement is through a structured drill referred to here as **The Circle**.

### The Circle

Before any strike, takedown, or throw can be applied, a connection must first be established—an idea depicted repeatedly in kata through receiving, crossing, and wrapping motions. *The Circle* is designed to isolate and reinforce this critical phase of engagement.

In this drill, one practitioner assumes the role of **receiver**, while another acts as the **attacker**. For ease of instruction, attacks should initially be pre-arranged, allowing the receiver to focus solely on receiving the attack and establishing a stable bridge. Once contact is made, the action pauses. This pause allows practitioners to examine the quality of the connection, structural integrity, balance, and available responses suggested by kata mechanics.

As proficiency develops, additional attacks may be introduced. Once multiple attacks have been assimilated, follow-up actions can be layered in, gradually increasing complexity. Resistance is then added incrementally until the drill becomes fluid, adaptive, and continuous rather than static or cooperative.

When the drill has been sufficiently refined, one practitioner (the receiver) is placed at the center, with the remaining practitioners (the attackers) arranged around them in a circle. Each attacker is assigned a number. The instructor calls out numbers to initiate attacks, increasing difficulty by calling numbers out of sequence or at a faster pace to introduce controlled unpredictability.

This final progression preserves the principles of kata—reception, connection, and response—while exposing the practitioner to timing pressure and multiple lines of engagement without abandoning structure or intent.



## Complete the picture

Based on the evidence available to us, the Okinawan karate systems that survive today place clear emphasis on various methods of strength development and body conditioning. These methods—ranging from general strength training to hand and body conditioning—can be traced back to *Tōde* (唐手), the precursor to modern karate, which developed through cultural exchange with Chinese martial traditions brought to Okinawa by immigrants, traders, and envoys. While not all methods were directly imported, these influences combined with local practices to form a pragmatic and functional approach to physical training.

No martial system can be considered complete without addressing strength and conditioning. In contrast, many modern dojos operate on tightly scheduled class rotations, with one group entering as the previous group exits. Students are commonly separated by age or rank, leaving limited time within formal classes for dedicated strength or body conditioning unless pursued independently.

Traditional Okinawan training was far more inclusive and informal. Instruction was typically conducted in small groups or private settings, allowing ample time and space for physical development. Training was not rigidly divided by age or rank but functioned as an open practice environment. The teacher would provide individualized instruction, assigning drills, kata, and conditioning exercises according to the needs and development of each student. Because training sessions were not constrained by strict start and end times, there was greater opportunity for strength and body conditioning to be integrated naturally into daily practice.

This individualized approach also allowed instructors to select kata based on a student's physical attributes, temperament, and level of maturity. Evidence of these traditional conditioning methods remains visible today, particularly within Goju-ryu and Uechi-ryu, which preserve many aspects of older training practices.

Traditional strength training tools included the *chi ishi* (levered stone), *nigiri game* (gripping jars), *tan* (weighted bar), *kongoken* (oval iron ring), *ishi sashi* (stone padlock), and *tetsu geta* (iron sandals). Body conditioning methods that have been passed down include *kote kitaie* (forearm conditioning), *ude tanren* (arm forging), *ashi kitaie* (leg conditioning), *sanchin kitaie* (body and core conditioning), *tetsu taba* (iron brush), *jari bako* (stone bucket), and the *makiwara* (striking post), often accompanied by the use of herbal liniments commonly associated today with Dit Da Jow.

These practices represent a traditional approach to karate training, not merely as historical artifacts, but as functional methods developed to meet practical needs. If we adopt the mindset of the original masters—prioritizing function over form—we are naturally led to consider modern advancements in strength, conditioning, nutrition, and recovery.

Contemporary strength training may include exercises such as squats, deadlifts, bench presses, pull-ups, dips, kettlebell work, and other resistance movements. Body conditioning may involve heavy bag training, box jumps, knuckle push-ups, and continued use of the makiwara. Nutrition, recovery, proper rest, cold exposure, and heat therapy all contribute to a comprehensive and sustainable training routine.

Martial arts, ultimately, are not confined to the dojo—they are a way of life.



*Examples of karate training and conditioning*

Fig 1.



Fig 2.

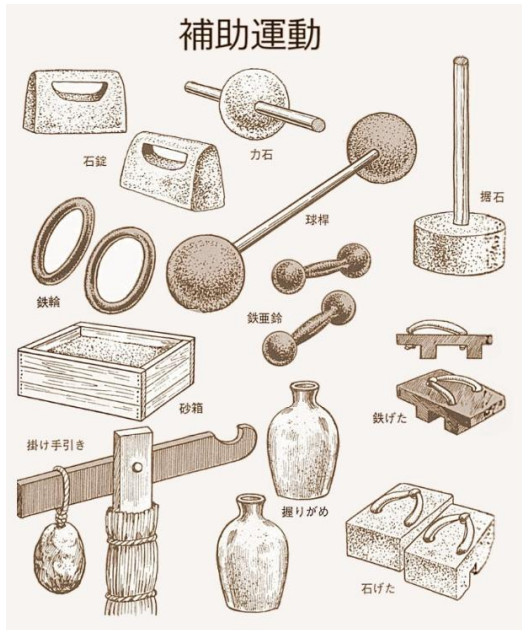
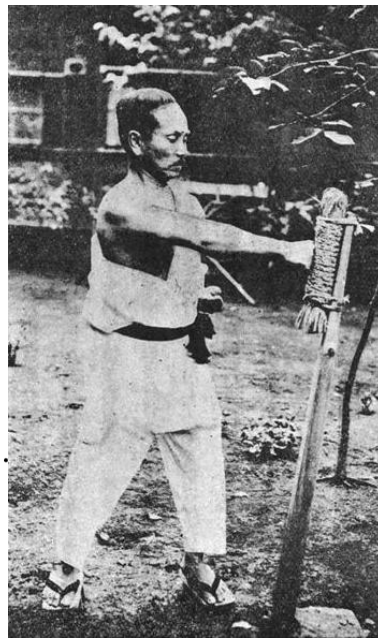


Fig 3.



*Fig 1. Illustrative reconstruction of early Okinawan karate hojo undo training using traditional resistance implements.*

*Fig 2. Illustrative reconstructions of traditional hojo-undo training tools (chiishi, ishi-sashi, nigiri-game, etc.).*

*Fig 3. Public-domain photograph of Funakoshi Gichin training at the makiwara, circa 1924.*

**Fig 4.**



*Fig 4. “Reconstructed illustration representing strength-training methods that influenced early Okinawan karate, including the use of weighted tools and communal practice.”*

## Chapter 4: The Evolution of Combat Sports and the Shift from Method to Style

## The Evolution of Combat Sports and the Shift from Method to Style

### “How do I get the most out of my martial arts training?”

This question has existed for as long as people have trained together. Yet in the modern era, it is often misunderstood, largely because it has become tied to **style identification** rather than purpose.

Common modern assumptions include:

*I train in Judo to learn how to throw.*

*I train in Karate to learn how to strike.*

*I train in Mixed Martial Arts to learn a combination of styles.*

While not entirely incorrect, this way of thinking is incomplete. It reflects not how martial arts were originally conceived, but how **combat sports have evolved**.

### Why Combat Sports Emerged

Combat sports did not arise from a desire to define styles, but from a practical need: **students needed a way to test their development**. Over time, testing took the form of competitive comparison—one student measured against another.

Once practitioners of the same art began testing themselves against one another, several consequences followed naturally:

1. **Rules were required** to ensure fairness and safety
2. Rules created **standardized conditions**
3. Standardized conditions produced **specialized methods of success**
4. These methods gradually became associated with **style identity**

In this way, systems that were originally methods of personal development evolved into **competitive frameworks**. Combat sports were born not because martial arts were meant to be competitive, but because competition became the most accessible way to measure progress.

Importantly, martial arts were never originally intended to be tested primarily by pitting one practitioner against another under agreed-upon rules. That model is a *modern solution* to a modern problem.



## Method, Not Style

Historically, martial arts were not categorized by styles, but by **methods**.

A method was the means by which a teacher transmitted knowledge to a student or group, shaped by the teacher's personal experience and refined through practical application. Methods were fluid, adaptive, and situational—not fixed systems with predefined outcomes.

This concept is expressed in terms such as:

- **Kufū** (工夫)
- **Faat Do** (法道)

Both terms may be understood simply as *“the method”*.

The method a practitioner developed depended on two primary factors:

1. **Mandate** — *Why am I training?*
2. **Environment** — *Where and how am I likely to need these skills?*

## Mandate and Environment as the True Dividing Lines

If a practitioner’s mandate is **personal protection**, then their method must emphasize practical tactics, situational awareness, and proportional response.

If the mandate is **law enforcement**, the method must incorporate control, restraint, and legal accountability.

If the mandate is **military service**, the method reflects entirely different realities.

If the mandate is **competitive fighting**, and the environment is an MMA cage, then the method must reflect that environment precisely.

In this last case, the practitioner should seek instruction from a coach with direct experience in that environment—not because it is a different *style*, but because it is a different **mandate and environment**.

This distinction is critical.

A method should never be confused with a style.



## The Problem with Style-Based Thinking

When method becomes permanently attached to a named style—as is common in modern martial arts—it unintentionally **predetermines the mandate and environment** for every student who walks through the door.

This was never the original intention.

Traditionally, teachers relied on their own experience to develop methods suited to:

- Civilian self-defense
- Law enforcement duties
- Military application
- Competitive fighting

Students were not expected to find the “correct style,” but the **correct teacher**—someone whose experience aligned with their needs.

Over time, however, martial arts became divided into styles with fixed identities. This shifted responsibility onto the student, who now must choose a system before they even understand their own requirements.

For beginners, this presents a significant challenge. They are often asked to decide whether they want self-defence, competition, or recreation before they possess the experience to know the difference. Many schools attempt to solve this by claiming to offer everything, further obscuring clarity.

### Individual Interpretation and the Loss of It

Originally, martial training allowed for **individual interpretation**. Through drilling, resistance, and experience, students discovered what worked for them. What was effective for one practitioner was not assumed to be universal.

As styles solidified, this individual exploration diminished. This is particularly evident in the treatment of forms or kata.

While many instructors teach bunkai with sincerity and structure, application is often:

- Predefined
- Demonstrated as fixed sequences
- Taught as “correct” interpretations

Whether bunkai is taught through formal principles, concepts and theories or inherited explanations, both approaches often limit individual discovery. In doing so, they once again impose a predetermined mandate and environment upon the student.

## Returning to Method

When method is favored over style, the student is free to:

- Discover what works for them
- Adapt to the environment in which they live
- Align training with their personal mandate

In this model, **style becomes personal**, not institutional. The teacher provides a method shaped by experience; the student refines it through live drilling and honest practice.

Kenwa Mabuni is quoted as saying:

*“There are no styles of Karate, only varying interpretations of its principles.”*

This idea may be extended further:

**There are no styles of martial arts—only varying interpretations shaped by mandate and environment.**

In its original Okinawan context, **Tōde** was not a style in the modern sense, but a **method of civilian self-protection** shaped by experience rather than classification. Instruction was informal, personal, and adaptive, transmitted privately through family lines or small groups rather than standardized institutions. What was taught depended on the teacher’s background, exposure to violence, and understanding of risk, not adherence to a named system. Techniques were selected, modified, or discarded based on effectiveness within the student’s social and environmental realities. There were no rigid stylistic boundaries, uniforms, or rank structures; these would emerge much later. Tōde functioned as a practical method—an evolving body of principles, tactics, and training practices—designed to preserve personal safety under specific conditions, not to define identity through style.

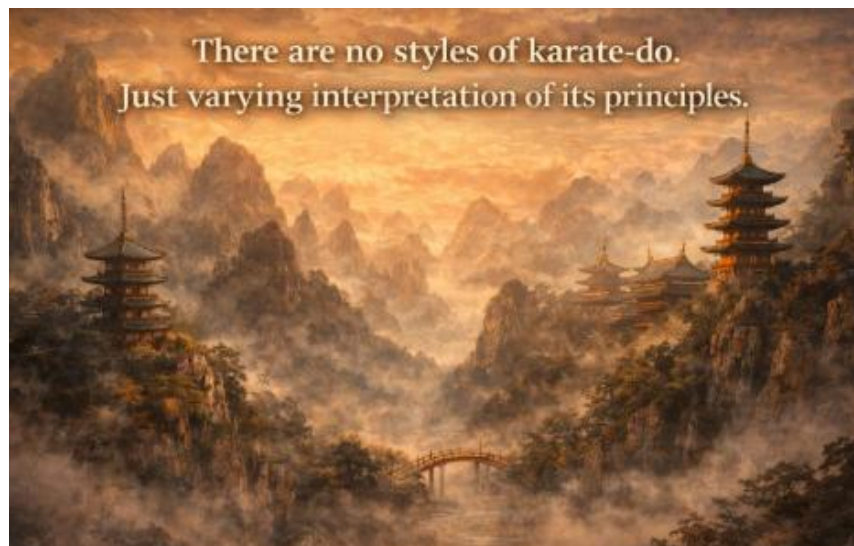
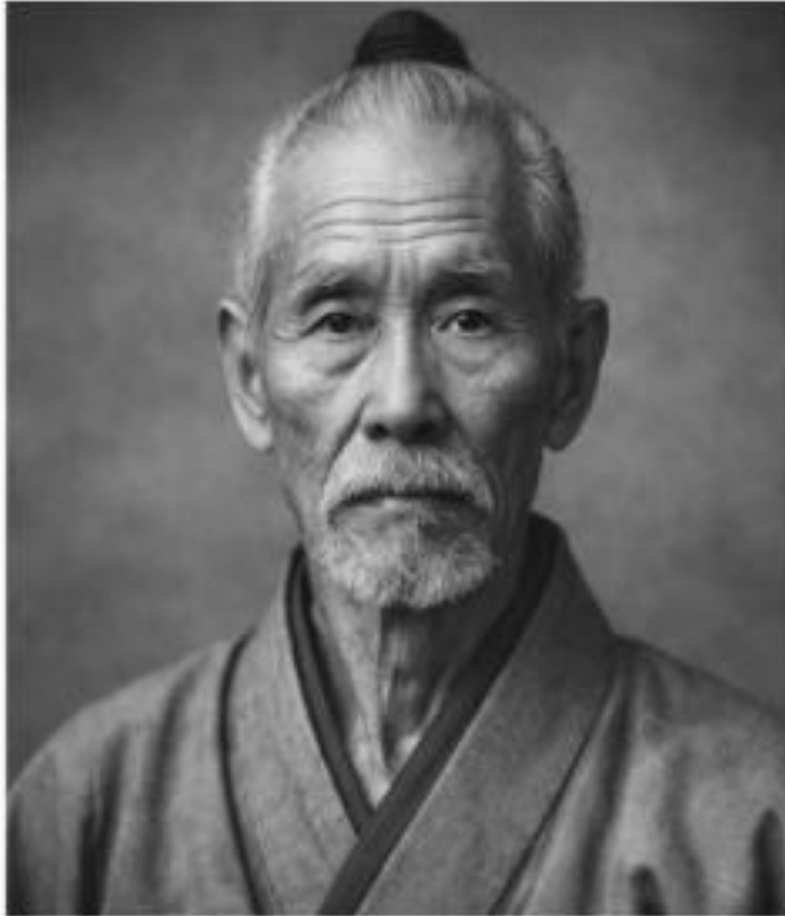


Table showing how mandate affects training

<b>Mandate(Purpose of Training)</b>	<b>Environment(Likely Conditions)</b>	<b>Method(Training Emphasis and Tactical Expression)</b>	<b>Okinawan Karate Context</b>
Civilian self-protection	Densely populated towns; narrow streets; domestic spaces; uneven footing; legal and social consequences	Close-range striking, limb control, off-balancing, tactile sensitivity, rapid incapacitation followed by disengagement	Early <b>Tōde</b> practice; principles preserved in <b>Naihanshi</b> kata
Personal safety under weapons restriction	Weapon prohibitions; reliance on empty-hand skills	Anatomical targeting, joint manipulation (tuite), body conditioning, integration of striking and grappling	Pechin-class practice; synthesis of <b>tegumi</b> and kata
Conflict management without escalation	Small communities; long-term social accountability	Pre-emptive positioning, control over destruction, proportional response	Short, efficient kata sequences emphasizing economy of motion
Instruction of select individuals	Private homes; small groups; informal transmission	Individualized instruction, adaptive interpretation, method shaped to student needs	Teaching practices of <b>Matsumura</b> , <b>Higaonna</b> , and contemporaries
Physical and moral education (Meiji period)	Public schools; youth instruction; modernization efforts	Simplification of methods, safer training protocols, standardization	<b>Itosu Ankō's</b> educational reforms
Competitive testing and athletic development	Dojo, gymnasium, tournament venues	Rule-bound techniques, repeatable drills, conditioning for endurance and scoring	Post-war sport karate; formal kumite formats

A teacher such as **Sōkon Matsumura** did not teach a “style” in the modern sense. He taught methods informed by his experience as a bodyguard, court official, and martial practitioner. Students did not receive a uniform system; they received **principles and training approaches** that they refined through personal experience.



Sokon Matsumura (c. 1809–1899)  
artistic reconstruction based on historical descriptions.

## Chapter 5: The Modern Reassessment of Kata and Practical Karate

## The Modern Reassessment of Kata and Practical Karate

In recent decades, a growing number of karate practitioners and researchers have begun to re-examine kata through a **functional and pragmatic lens**, seeking to understand how these forms may have been used prior to the widespread influence of sport competition and post-war standardization.

This movement is not defined by a single methodology or ideology, but by several shared characteristics:

- An emphasis on **close-range application**
- Integration of **grappling, clinch work, and limb control**
- Resistance-based training and live drilling
- Historical and textual research into early Okinawan practice
- A rejection of purely aesthetic or performance-based interpretation

Historians, researchers and practitioners such as **Iain Abernethy, Patrick McCarthy, Jesse Enkamp**, and **Mario McKenna**—among others—have contributed significantly to this reassessment through research, teaching, and public discourse. While their approaches differ, they share a common objective: to reconcile kata with realistic civilian self-defence.

### Historical Motivation for the Movement

Much of this renewed interest stems from the recognition that post–World War II karate culture became increasingly influenced by:

- Competitive kumite
- Point-based scoring systems
- Uniform curricula designed for mass instruction
- Visual uniformity and athletic performance

These developments, while valuable in their own context, often removed or obscured the **original combative intent** embedded within kata. Techniques that did not fit competition rules—such as close-quarter strikes, joint manipulation, takedowns, and pre-emptive actions—were deprioritized or reinterpreted.

As a result, kata came to be viewed by many as:

- Symbolic
- Abstract
- Or purely traditional exercises

The modern practical movement challenges this view, arguing instead that kata represent **compressed records of method**, shaped by mandate and environment rather than by sport.

## Alignment with Traditional Method-Based Practice

What distinguishes this movement is not innovation, but **realignment**.

The emphasis on:

- Method over style
- Function over form
- Individual adaptation over fixed interpretation

closely mirrors the historical realities of Okinawan Tōde. Rather than inventing new systems, these practitioners are attempting to restore karate's **method-based logic**, in which kata serve as frameworks for exploration rather than scripts for performance.

This approach also acknowledges that kata do not contain a single “correct” application. Instead, they encode **principles** that can be expressed differently depending on mandate, environment, and individual capability.

## Cultural Impact on Modern Karate

As this perspective gains traction, karate culture is slowly shifting. There is increasing acceptance that:

- Kata and kumite need not be oppositional
- Sport karate is a specialized expression, not a universal standard
- Practical application is a legitimate and historically grounded pursuit

This reassessment has encouraged a more critical, informed, and honest engagement with karate's past, allowing practitioners to choose their training focus consciously rather than inheriting assumptions.



## Why This Matters for Karate’s Future

This movement does not seek to replace sport karate or invalidate competitive practice. Instead, it restores **context**. By understanding kata as functional records shaped by real-world needs, karate practitioners are better equipped to align their training with their own mandates and environments.

In this sense, the movement represents not a departure from tradition, but a **return to it**.

## Historical Impetus for Reassessment

The emergence of this movement is largely a response to the structural changes karate underwent in the mid-20th century. As karate expanded beyond Okinawa and became institutionalized within schools, universities, and sporting organizations, training methods necessitated change. Emphasis was placed on:

- Uniform curricula
- Safer training practices
- Competitive formats
- Visual clarity and standardization

These developments were neither accidental nor malicious; they reflected the needs of the time. However, they also resulted in the marginalization of training elements that did not align with competitive rules or large-group instruction, including close-quarter tactics, limb control, pre-emptive actions, and grappling-based methods.

Over time, kata came to be interpreted primarily through the lens of performance or competition-adjacent application, leading to the perception that kata were symbolic, impractical, or obsolete in relation to modern fighting systems.

The contemporary reassessment challenges this assumption, suggesting instead that kata were **never designed for competitive exchange**, but for managing unstructured violence within specific civilian environments.

## Kata as Methodological Archives

Central to this movement is the view that kata function as **methodological archives**—condensed records of principles, tactics, and training concepts shaped by mandate and environment. From this perspective, kata do not prescribe a single application, nor do they encode fixed techniques. Rather, they provide frameworks within which practitioners can explore:

- Distance and positioning
- Timing and initiative
- Anatomical vulnerability

- Balance disruption and control
- Transition between striking and grappling

This interpretation aligns closely with what is known of early Okinawan practice, where instruction was individualized and adaptive. Kata served as a means of preserving knowledge while allowing for variation in expression based on the practitioner's needs and circumstances.

### Relationship to Traditional Okinawan Practice

When viewed through the lens of mandate and environment, the contemporary applied karate movement represents a **realignment** with earlier method-based practice rather than a modern innovation. The emphasis on individual interpretation, live drilling, and contextual application reflects the same logic that governed Tōde instruction prior to formal systematization.

Importantly, this perspective does not deny the legitimacy of sport karate or competitive practice. Instead, it situates such practices as **context-specific expressions**, optimized for particular mandates and environments rather than as universal representations of karate as a whole.

### Cultural Implications for Modern Karate

As this reassessment gains visibility, karate culture has begun to reflect a broader understanding of its own diversity. There is increasing recognition that:

- Kata and competition serve different purposes
- Effectiveness must be judged relative to context
- Historical practice cannot be evaluated solely by modern sporting criteria

This shift encourages practitioners to engage with karate more critically and deliberately, selecting training methods that align with their personal mandates rather than inheriting assumptions based on style identity.

### Continuity Rather Than Conflict

The contemporary movement toward practical kata application does not seek to redefine karate, but to **recontextualize it**. By viewing kata as expressions of method shaped by mandate and environment, practitioners are better equipped to understand both karate's past and its relevance in the present.

In this sense, the reassessment represents not a departure from tradition, but a return to karate's original logic: adaptive, functional, and grounded in lived experience.

Understanding this movement allows modern practitioners to engage with karate not as a fixed system of techniques, but as a living methodology—one that remains responsive to the realities of those who practice it.

## Chapter 6: The Future of Karate and Martial Arts

## The Future of Karate and Martial Arts

The future of karate, like that of all martial arts, will not be defined by a single direction, organization, or interpretation. Rather, it will continue to fragment, adapt, and re-coalesce in response to changing mandates, environments, and cultural conditions. This is not a sign of decline, but evidence that martial arts remain living systems.

Historically, martial arts have never been static. They have always reflected the realities faced by those who practiced them. As those realities change, so too must the methods used to address them.

### Diverging Mandates, Parallel Futures

One of the defining features of modern martial arts is the **divergence of mandate**. Karate now exists simultaneously in several legitimate but distinct forms:

- As a **competitive sport**, governed by rules, safety considerations, and performance metrics
- As a **cultural and educational practice**, emphasizing discipline, tradition, and character development
- As a **method of personal protection**, focused on pragmatic application in civilian environments
- As a **hybrid or cross-trained practice**, integrating grappling, striking, and resistance training

These expressions are not inherently in conflict. Problems arise only when one mandate is presented as universal, or when training methods designed for one environment are assumed to be effective in another.

The future of karate will increasingly depend on **honest mandate alignment**—training that clearly reflects its intended purpose.

### The Continued Shift Toward Method-Based Understanding

There is already a visible movement within karate toward a **method-based interpretation**, particularly in the study of kata. This shift is characterized by:

- Increased interest in historical context
- Greater emphasis on close-range application
- Integration of striking, grappling, and positional control
- Use of live, resistant training to test interpretations

This trend is likely to continue, not because it is “new,” but because it aligns more closely with karate’s original civilian context. As access to historical sources improves and practitioners become more critical of inherited assumptions, karate will likely see a continued re-evaluation of how kata are understood and trained.

Importantly, this does not signal a rejection of tradition. Rather, it reflects a return to **functional tradition**, where form exists to support method, not replace it.

### Technology, Information, and the End of Insularity

Modern practitioners have unprecedented access to information. Historical texts, comparative analysis, video documentation, and cross-disciplinary dialogue are now readily available. As a result, martial arts can no longer exist in isolation.

This will likely accelerate:

- Cross-training as a norm rather than an exception
- The breakdown of rigid stylistic boundaries
- Greater scrutiny of claims that cannot be tested or demonstrated

At the same time, this environment places greater responsibility on instructors to clearly define what they teach, why they teach it, and under what conditions it is meant to function.

### The Role of the Individual Practitioner

As martial arts continue to evolve, responsibility will increasingly shift from the system to the individual. Practitioners will be required to:

- Identify their personal mandate
- Understand the environments in which they are most likely to operate
- Select or adapt methods accordingly

In this sense, the future mirrors the past. Early martial arts were not style-driven; they were **problem-driven**. Individual expression was not suppressed, but refined through experience and testing.

The future practitioner will not ask, “Which style is best?” but rather, “What problem am I trying to solve, and what method best addresses it?”

### Continuity Through Adaptation

Karate will survive not by resisting change, but by understanding it. Attempts to freeze the art at a particular historical moment misunderstand the very forces that created it. Equally, attempts to discard history in favor of novelty ignore the accumulated problem-solving embedded in traditional methods.

The future of karate lies between these extremes: grounded in history, tested in the present, and adaptable to the realities of modern life.

## Closing Perspective

Martial arts endure because the human need for self-preservation endures. As long as individuals face uncertainty, conflict, and violence, they will seek methods to manage them. Karate, when understood as a method rather than a style, remains fully capable of fulfilling that role.

The question facing future practitioners is not whether karate will change—but whether they will understand **why** it does.

As the historical evidence makes clear, it is neither possible nor desirable to resurrect **Tōde**—whether referred to as *quanfa*, *China hand*, or early *karate*—in its original form. Despite kata serving as a form of historical record, the realities of modern life, including changes in environment, culture, and political context, render direct reconstruction impractical. However, it remains possible to follow the same path taken by the early practitioners by honouring their underlying mandate: **function over form**. By seeking knowledge from sources that address present needs and applying it thoughtfully, practitioners may develop their own coherent expression of karate—just as earlier generations did when the art was still known as *quan fa*.

Morinobu Itoman, a police officer during what is often regarded as the golden age of Okinawan karate, articulated a view of martial learning that reflects the methodological understanding common among earlier practitioners. As cited in **Mario McKenna’s work “The Study of China Hand Techniques”**, Itoman described the developmental process of martial study as follows:

“Following, breaking and transcending involve a student first copying the form of his teacher and restraining himself from making personal changes to it.

Next, he breaks or separates his practice from that of his teacher, attempting to exceed him.

Finally, he transcends his teacher’s instruction and finds his own unique martial art.”

This progression—from imitation, to experimentation, and ultimately to individual expression—was not an exception, but a principle widely understood and accepted among early masters. It reinforces the idea that martial arts were never intended to be static systems, but adaptive methods shaped by experience, context, and personal understanding.

## Glossary

### **Applied Karate**

A modern interpretive approach to karate that emphasizes practical function, contextual relevance, and resistance-based training, particularly for civilian self-preservation. Applied karate focuses on method rather than stylistic conformity.

*See Chapters 1, 5, and 6*

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### **Bunkai**

The analysis and interpretation of kata movements. In traditional contexts, bunkai was exploratory and adaptive; in modern practice, it is often standardized. This book treats bunkai as a methodological inquiry rather than a fixed set of applications.

*See Chapters 4 and 5*

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### **Combat Sports**

Rule-based competitive systems designed to test physical skill, endurance, and strategy under controlled conditions. While derived from martial traditions, combat sports are optimized for competition rather than self-preservation.

*See Chapters 1 and 6*

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### **Context**

The situational factors—social, legal, environmental, and cultural—that influence how martial methods are developed and applied. Context determines whether a method remains functional or becomes symbolic.

*See Chapters 1, 3, and 6*

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### **Environment**

The physical, social, and cultural conditions in which martial skills are expected to function. Environment includes terrain, clothing, legal constraints, social norms, and likely threat profiles.

*See Chapters 1, 3, and 6*

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**Embusen**

The prescribed pattern of movement within a kata. In forms such as Naihanshi (Tekki), embusen reflects lateral movement consistent with close-range civilian environments rather than choreographed performance.

*See Chapter 4*

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**Form**

The outward structure or appearance of technique or kata. In traditional practice, form existed to support function; in modern systems, form is sometimes preserved independently of practical application.

*See Chapters 3 and 5*

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**Function Over Form**

A guiding principle prioritizing practical effectiveness over aesthetic or stylistic considerations. Central to early Okinawan and Chinese martial practices and foundational to method-based training.

*See Chapters 2, 3, and 6*

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**Kata**

A pre-arranged sequence of movements serving as a mnemonic device for preserving principles, tactics, and methods. Kata are best understood as methodological records rather than literal combat scripts.

*See Chapters 2, 4, and 5*

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**Kiba-dachi**

A wide, seated stance common in karate, particularly in Naihanshi (Tekki). Historically associated with lateral stability and close-range engagement rather than static posture training.

*See Chapter 4*

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**Koryū**

Japanese martial traditions predating the Meiji Restoration. While often contrasted with karate, koryū share a similar emphasis on mandate-specific method and contextual training.

*See Chapter 2*

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**Kufu / Faat Do**

Terms meaning “method” or “way of doing.” Used in Okinawan and Chinese contexts to describe adaptive approaches to training based on experience, necessity, and environment rather than fixed style.

*See Chapters 2 and 3*

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**Mandate**

The purpose or objective guiding martial training (e.g., self-preservation, law enforcement, military service, sport competition). Mandate determines method selection and training emphasis.

*See Chapters 1, 3, and 6*

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**Martial Arts**

Systems or methods developed to manage interpersonal violence and preserve personal safety. Though culturally diverse, all martial arts share this foundational purpose.

*See Chapters 1 and 2*

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**Method**

The means by which martial skills are taught, trained, and applied. Methods are shaped by mandate and environment and are not inherently tied to stylistic labels.

*See Chapters 2, 3, and 5*

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**Naihanshi (Tekki)**

A classical Okinawan kata characterized by lateral movement and close-range engagement. Often cited as an example of civilian-focused method embedded within form.

*See Chapters 4 and 6*

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**Okinawan Karate**

Martial practices developed on Okinawa prior to full Japanese institutionalization. Characterized by individualized instruction, pragmatic focus, and method-based training.

*See Chapters 2 and 3*

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**Quanfa**

A Chinese term referring broadly to fighting methods or boxing arts. Many early Okinawan practices drew influence from various forms of Chinese quanfa.

*See Chapter 2*

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**Resistance-Based Training**

Training that incorporates unpredictability and opposition to test the viability of techniques and interpretations. Historically present in partner drills, though often minimized in modern practice.

*See Chapters 5 and 6*

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**Self-Preservation**

The primary objective underlying all martial arts: the protection of the individual from physical harm. This book treats self-preservation as the unifying mandate across traditions.

*See Chapters 1 and 6*

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**Style**

A systematized expression of martial practice characterized by standardized curriculum, rank structure, and institutional identity. Style is treated here as an organizational framework rather than the essence of martial arts.

*See Chapters 1 and 6*

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**Tōde**

An early Okinawan term meaning “China hand,” referring to pre-modern karate practices influenced by Chinese martial methods. Tōde emphasizes method over stylistic identity.

*See Chapters 2 and 3*

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**Tradition**

The transmission of knowledge, practice, and values across generations. In martial arts, tradition is best understood as a process of adaptation rather than static preservation.

*See Chapters 2 and 6*

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**Transcendence**

The stage of martial development in which a practitioner moves beyond imitation and structured learning to express principles independently. Often described in traditional pedagogy as the final phase of mastery.

*See Chapters 3 and 6*

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**Use-of-Force**

The legal and ethical considerations governing the application of physical force. Environment-specific and central to mandate-driven training.

*See Chapters 1 and 6*

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**Editorial Note**

Throughout this work, terms are defined functionally rather than stylistically. Where multiple interpretations exist, preference is given to definitions consistent with historical practice, contextual relevance, and practical effectiveness.

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## About the Author

**Robert Teske** has trained in martial arts for over five decades, beginning his study at the age of nine. His experience spans multiple disciplines, including Goju-ryu karate, Taekwondo, Wing Chun, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, and mixed martial arts, providing broad exposure to differing training models, technical approaches, and combative contexts.

He holds senior rank in Goju-ryu Karate within the Meibukan lineage and in Wing Chun under the Sunny Tang lineage. Teske is a National Certified Senior Coach and a recipient of a Lifetime Martial Artist Achievement Award. Over the course of his career, he has competed at various levels, owned and operated a martial arts academy, and instructed civilians, law enforcement, military personnel, and intelligence professionals.

As founder and chief instructor of Cumberland Martial Arts Academy, Teske has spent decades developing and delivering training programs tailored to specific mandates and environments. His work has emphasized functional skill development, structural efficiency, and adaptability, informed by long-term practice, teaching, and continued study.

The perspectives presented in this book are grounded in that experience and in ongoing research into the historical development of martial arts, with particular attention to Okinawan karate and its method-based foundations.

