

History of Karate

Karate originated on Okinawa a small island south of Japan. Okinawa was once part of an independent kingdom of fishermen and farmers. The Chinese conquered Okinawa in the 16th Century. The Chinese banned all weapons from Okinawa: therefore the people had no way of protecting themselves from bandits or greedy Chinese soldiers. Some of the islanders began to learn Kempo, or Shaolin temple boxing as a means of self - defence; they adapted these using a martial art techniques they had learnt from Japanese refugees who came to the island several hundred years earlier. The Chinese then banned all martial arts but the Okinawans continued to practise in secret. Three regions developed their own styles; collectively the styles were called Okinawa-te.

Kendo and Judo were brought to Okinawa during the Japanese Meiji period (1868 -1912). The Okinawans soon learnt these martial arts. This impressed the Japanese and they relaxed the ban on martial arts, and they were introduced in the islands school curriculum in 1903.

Okinawa-te was renamed karate-jutsu (Chinese hand art), the art had three components. Chinese kung-fu, Kempo (kara) the indigenous martial arts (te) and the Japanese karate tradition (jutsu).

The founder of modern Karate, Funakoshi Gichin (1869-1957), was born in Okinawa and began studying Okinawa-te as a child. He created a new style of karate-jutsu based on the three traditional styles. He gave exhibitions in Japan of the new martial arts potential. In 1921 while on a visit to Okinawa, Crown Prince Hirohito, (later Emperor), recognised the potential of karate-jutsu as a way to keep fit and a way of self-defence. Members of the Japanese Navy began studying the art in 1912. Funakoshi was invited to Japan to give a series of demonstrations; the Japanese were delighted with this form of karate and started to teach in their schools. Other styles of karate also began to develop in Okinawa at the same time.

In the early 1930's Funakoshi shortened the name karate-jutsu to karate. In 1936 at nearly 70 years of age the first karate dojo's had opened, the most important Shotokan was headed by Gichin Funakoshi. He began to study karate with Yasutsune Azato, one of Okinawa's greatest experts in the art. After the pen name used by Funakoshi to sign poems written in his youth. Shotokan Karate is characterized by powerful linear techniques and deep strong stances.

Wado-ryu, 'way of harmony', founded in 1939 is a system of karate developed from jujitsu and karate by Hienori Otsuka as taught by one of his instructors, Gichin Funakoshi. This style of karate combines basic movements of jujitsu with techniques of evasion, putting a strong emphasis on softness and the way of harmony or spiritual discipline.

After the Second World War the Americans banned martial arts from being taught or practised in Japan. In 1947 karate was reclassified as a form of gymnastics and not as martial arts. Shotokan dojo's reopened and American service men began to learn the mental and physical side of karate.

Funakoshi Yoshitaka developed karate as a sport. He changed the name to karate-do; emphasizing that karate was more than just a way of defeating an opponent in martial art combat it was a way of life. Karate spread all over the world.

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