

The Naihanchi Enigma by Tim Shaw

Web version at: <http://www.wadoryu.org.uk/naihanchi.html>

Introduction

Naihanchi kata within Wado Ryu



Within the Wado Ryu style of Japanese karate the kata Naihanchi holds a special place, positioned as it is as a gateway to the complexities of Seishan and Chinto. But as a gateway it presents its own mysteries and contradictions. Through Naihanchi Wado stylists are directed to study the subtleties of body movements and develop particular ways of generating energy found primarily in this kata. They are taught that the essence of this ancient Form is to be found in the stance and that the inherent principles are applied directly to the Wado Ryu Kumite (the pairs exercises) and to achieve a stage where these principles become part of the practitioners body and natural movements involves countless repetitions of this particular form.

The following tantalizing quote from the founder of Wado Ryu Karate Hironori Ohtsuka, gives intriguing clues as to the value and influence that this particular kata holds.

"Every technique (in Naihanchi) has its own purpose. I personally favour Naihanchi. It is not interesting to the eye, but it is extremely difficult to use. Naihanchi increases in difficulty with more time spent practicing it, however, there is something "deep" about it. It is fundamental to any move that requires reaction. Some people may call me foolish for my belief. However, I prefer this kata over all else and hence incorporate it into my movement."¹

Many Wado karate-ka practice Naihanchi diligently, while remaining largely unaware of the background and long history of this unusual kata.

To begin to appreciate the complexities of Naihanchi it is necessary to remove it from the vacuum and insularities of a particular style or school. This can be done in three ways;

- by looking at the history of the kata.
- by exploring, where possible, the individual masters who studied this particular form.
- By examining the differences between the various versions of Naihanchi.

The Naihanchi kata is practised widely among traditional karate-ka of the Shorin Ryu lineage. But how many can actually say they have a full understanding of the kata and its usage?

Numerous researchers have tried to unravel this mystery. Many claim to have a complete knowledge of the rationale and application of Naihanchi, but amazingly, for such an outwardly simple kata, these translations seem to vary wildly, with very few common threads.

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Authoritative information sources

The search for authoritative knowledge has also presented researchers with an immense task. Okinawan and Chinese sources present the serious researcher with a tangled web, a complex labyrinth of truth, half-truth and verbal tradition. The researcher and martial artist Mark Bishop commented that in his questioning of the old Okinawan karate masters many of them if they did not know the answer to a particular question would make it up, as if they did not want to offend the interviewer by giving a negative response!²

All of this is further complicated by the lack of documentary evidence. Social upheaval, war and a tendency to rely almost exclusively on verbal/physical transition from master to student has denied us the opportunity to make any serious attempt to pull the pieces of the puzzle together.

An example would be the document often referred to as "The Bubishi". Once secret and coveted by the great karate masters, it is now generally available, but to most karateka it is too obscure and impenetrable to be of little more than a museum piece. Its origins are still a mystery, it contains no dates and provides very few historical facts and to many appears as a kind of "crib book", a set of revision notes for a long dead Chinese/Okinawan master.³

The Bubishi is a rarity on the island of Okinawan, but books of empty handed fighting strategy are abundant in mainland China.⁴

Admittedly there is currently an attempt at serious research in China and Okinawa, but evidence, particularly living evidence, is rapidly disappearing.

With Naihanchi authors of the purported research, particularly into applications, have a reluctance to acknowledge the origins and authority of their findings (or disclosures).

Naihanchi as a trilogy

To begin looking at Naihanchi it is important to understand that there are actually three Naihanchi katas. These are normally understood as a series, Naihanchi Shodan, Naihanchi Nidan and Naihanchi Sandan. Not every style has adopted all three. Some have chosen to drop the Nidan and Sandan versions and only practice the Naihanchi Shodan. One reason given for this is that the main essence of the kata is contained in the first kata. Ohtsuka Sensei went as far as to say:

*"There are three (Naihanchi) Katas, Shodan, Nidan and Sandan, but the last two are almost useless."*⁵

Again this decision within the Wado Ryu is quite revealing. Ohtsuka Sensei set great store by Naihanchi and commented on the depth contained within this kata, yet limited his study to just the one version. If we were to follow the logic common to the Japanese martial traditions that the first technique, or the first of anything, is usually the most difficult and important aspect within martial arts training. Then also, given that Ohtsuka Sensei believed

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that it is better to study a few kata well than many kata superficially, doesn't it make sense to concentrate solely on Naihanchi Shodan? Also, interestingly, it could be argued that Naihanchi Nidan and Sandan do not appear as repetitive when examined from the angle of their overt technical content, which perhaps gives us some clues as to the areas of focus that Ohtsuka Sensei attached particular interest to.

(Later in this feature we will examine some of the theories surrounding the trio of katas called Naihanchi.)

We have to accept that the Naihanchi that we know today has been toyed with. Various creditable masters have added their own ideas, some may say that they have improved the kata, others may argue that much of the original content has been lost and only a sniff of its original essence remains. I doubt that any version seen today could claim to be the real Naihanchi as formulated by its founder, or founders. I would hazard a guess and say the only aspect of Naihanchi that has any plausible claim to originality is probably the stance.

Secret Masters, secret knowledge

When undertaking research into any aspect of the Martial Arts of the far east it is difficult not to get drawn in to the dubious world of secret masters with secret teachings known only to the master's personal student. I have seen both sides of this argument. One side will say that there is knowledge still kept hidden from the Hoi Polloi and that's the nature of the art! Another will argue that this is a smokescreen to obscure the fact that we are all doing things without anyone really knowing what it is all about. Whenever I hear either of these two views I'm automatically suspicious.

If only life, history, cultural traditions and human relations were that simple!

I would say that both theories hold an element of truth.

Inevitably with any long standing tradition, ritual, or any body of knowledge that has to pass through many hands and numerous generations, not only are things added, but they are also lost. A possible example of this is quoted by Nathan Johnson in his book "Barefoot Zen",

"Mark Bishop, an eighth-dan Karate-ka and author, told me that Shinpan Shiroma (a student of Itosu) often admitted to not knowing the technical functions of some movements of Karate kata, and would quite blankly state that Itosu had not known the functions either, merely explaining that they were for show."

The balance between what has been lost and what has been gained is open to speculation. Obviously there is no way to be able to peer into the past and examine the earlier manifestations of the forms or katas we know today. It is difficult enough to attempt to pin down who, when and where these forms originated from. Some researchers have attempted to identify what Johnson calls the "antique kata", but no one can know with any certainty beyond the period of living memory, and even then controversy rages between various groups claiming to have the original form of this kata or that kata. Some would ask, does it matter?

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For the other side it is also clear that knowledge is still held back by martial arts masters. The established system within the Koryu (old school) martial traditions in Japan has a set of levels clearly defined. These are levels of transmission, ending with the Menkyo Kaiden, acknowledgement of full transmission. These are found within the weapons schools and schools of Jujutsu.

All too often modern researchers impose their own values and experiences on historical events, assuming that the same codes of human relationships are constant between eras and cultures. Hence speculation of the relationship between an ancient martial arts master and his student(s) tends to be coloured by the researcher's own experiences inside a modern Dojo. The old style of teaching involved a very different relationship between master and student than that usually undertaken today. The aspiring student didn't just sign up for a course!

Also the method of transmission was very different. I doubt you would have experienced the same kind of verbal and aural teaching that is used in the modern Dojo. No, it would be primarily based on bypassing the verbal, with students expected to explore the techniques they were learning by body feel, and in some areas working things out for themselves. As explained in a treatise on Japanese swordsmanship written by Chozan Shissai in 1729.

Shissai lamented the decline in traditional teaching of swordsmanship and in quoting the Chinese Classics had this to say about teaching and student master relations,

*"The Master first teaches technique without wasting a word about its significance; he simply waits for the student to discover this himself. This is called "drawing but not shooting". Not because he is wicked does he withhold explanation. He does it simply because he wants the student to attain mastery through practice and the involvement of his Heart. If the student has worked with his whole Heart and achieved something through his own power, then he departs and comes before the Master. And the Master, if his Heart tells him to, merely confirms it to him. There is no instruction on the part of the Master. This is not only true in the arts. K'ung Tzu says: "If I draw one corner, and he cannot transfer it to the three others, I do not repeat it"*⁶

Certainly no spoon-feeding in those days!

It is also common for researchers and commentators to assume that these same ancient masters were driven by evangelical zeal to popularise their chosen path, as if there was some kind of written obligation to do so. Altruism was not a factor.

It is perhaps interesting to speculate on a specific example within the history of the Internal Chinese martial arts.

In China in the early 19th century a certain Yang Lu-ch'an managed to infiltrate an obscure but very effective martial art system that until his arrival had remained secret to a particular clan. The Ch'en family village had developed a form of "soft" boxing which, through the catalyst of Yang Lu-ch'an, was to sweep China. This was to be the emergence Tai Chi Chuan.

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Yang made his fame and fortune by spreading this once secret art throughout the provinces and was tested to the extreme by the boxers at the Chinese Imperial court. He became known as "Yang the Invincible" and developed a family lineage that produced fighters of awesome ability.

Taking this example one cannot help but speculate what would have happened if Yang was denied access or the opportunity to open the art to the world. Perhaps the Ch'en family soft boxing would have sunk into obscurity. Perhaps the art could have escaped the popularisation of Tai Chi today. (There are senior Tai Chi practitioners who will not forgive the Yang family for the decline of Tai Chi into a gentle form of gymnastics).²

What is Kata?

To take things right back to basics, for a kata to have value within the fighting arts it has to have a function. Without the function it is a hollow and empty form, it is meaningless and has little value outside of aesthetic appeal.

Arguably aesthetic consideration has been the driving force behind the development of kata competition within modern karate both inside and outside of Japan. It is perhaps interesting to note the recent proposals for the world organizations that team kata members must also perform the "Bunkai" to their chosen kata! This hot issue has caused many eyebrows to rise, and we are perhaps seeing the beginning of the slippery slope! "Official Bunkai", "official standardised kata", history has taught us that the headlong rush towards homogenized systems all too often indicates the beginning of the end.

But how does codifying and packaging a series of moves into a set form (kata) ensure efficiency in fighting and the continuation of a body of elite knowledge? Because it is obvious that this is an issue of continuity, of developing a tradition to be passed on.

Also the value of these forms must in part be judged by their survival rate. If the functions were unworkable or translated badly, their survival and the survival of those who adhered to their principles would be endangered. But perhaps here is where critics could find a gap in the armour of the traditionalists. In these times of relative peace, of the reliance of firearms as instruments of self defence, civil and military, could it not be said that these antique principles are in danger of being unproven, not trialed in real situations? Hence the predominance of the advocates of street karate, usually little more than a hotch-potch of boxing techniques mixed with a little judo or wrestling. Where does kata fit into all of that? Yes, there has been a lot of scurrying around by various individuals, usually prompted by the temptation of making a quick buck, to link vicious techniques known to any street hooligan to exotic kata, and sometimes it's very difficult to separate this chaff from the wheat.

So what are these skills embedded in the traditional ancient kata, and how do they translate?

The prevailing wisdom informs us that these skills are generally made up of a mixture of the following categories:

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- Seizing and grasping.
- Striking to vital points and other anatomical weak points.
- Attacks directed to joints.
- Escapes and reversals.
- Chokes and strangulations.

And, often neglected or ignored,

- Principles of movement.

The kata are used as a kind of textbook, a manual and catalogue of fighting techniques. However, it would be naive to think that the katas have remained unchanged for hundreds of years. I'm certain that their outward appearance today would be unrecognisable to the ancient masters who originally created them, and as for their function....!

So it surely must be with Naihanchi.

I applaud those intrepid pioneers who in modern times have sought to find their own answers to the true function of Naihanchi. What is perhaps most revealing is how diverse these conclusions are! Are we seeing the positive side of "reverse engineering"? Or is this just another example of the old parable of the blind men's exploration of an Elephant? Could it be that each one sees what he wants to see, based on his own experience, and no one gets the full picture?⁸

"Function dictates Form"

This phrase, "function dictates form" has become a motto for those who have a serious interest in the true meaning of the classical kata. The only problem with this is that if all you're left with is the Form then we are making the assumption that the function will reveal itself in common sense ways.

An example being; "Danger! If it looks like a block it must be a block!"

Again, this is an assumption based upon our general perception (Blind men exploring Elephant yet again!) If we have had no experience of trapping or Kansetsu waza (joint attacks) then this movement that in our normal training functions as a block will always be read as a block. It would be a fair also to assume that the making of a fist, or any hand form, does not always imply a strike.

We know from research already conducted that when certain ancient katas made the geographical and cultural jump from China to Okinawa they were "tidied up". Hand forms that were originally open were changed to the closed fist. Further adaptations were made when Okinawan karate slipped into the mainstream of Japanese Budo and, rather like the previously mentioned Tai Chi Chuan, a shift of emphasis occurred and physical culture (and to some degree spiritual/psychological culture) became the main promotional selling point.

It is only natural that kata functions within modern karate systems (post 1921) to a large degree have their own revised thinking. The early Japanese karate pioneers, people like Yasuhiro Konishi

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and Hironori Ohtsuka obviously found something in the Okinawan karate that they felt could augment their already well-established understanding of the martial arts. They extracted, adapted, and where necessary sought the additional information to make the techniques (kata) they were adopting work within their own framework of martial culture.

Interestingly, numerous modern karateka attached to the major contemporary styles formed by people like Hironori Ohtsuka, are finding themselves adopting a revisionist attitude. They are questioning the kata taught to them by their Senseis and do not seem content with the answers they are getting.

In an attempt to resolve this dilemma they find themselves looking towards the methods employed by the Okinawan stylists. The problem with this is that the Okinawan methodology is not always compatible with the martial traditions, principles and methods of operation of the Japanese martial arts schools, and Ohtsuka Sensei was a product of these very same traditions.

The quest for so-called “Bunkai” and resulting interpretations, usually borrowed from outside of the particular system, or even “rediscovered”, is frowned upon in some traditional circles. While it is accepted that martial artists should be creative, experimental and always searching for further refinements in their skills and knowledge, it is also possible that the search for “fool’s gold” can become a crusade in itself. All that glitters is certainly not the full and total answer. There are Dan grades out there teaching Bunkai as if they have found the Philosopher’s Stone, and the one and only true interpretation of a particular move or sequence from a kata.



Are these applications the true ancient uses for the moves that make up the kata Naihanchi? (From various sources)

The flaw in this type of thinking appears when it comes to the point of realization that the discovered kata interpretation is one-dimensional. For example, when you know what the move is, and have an answer that you think works and takes you into a lock or joint attack, what do you do with it? Do you wait for that one situation to arrive and then just do your thing? And then by extension, do you develop a whole arsenal of techniques for a huge range of individual attacks? No, what is missing here is the study of principles! Principles that create freedom of opportunity and encourage flexibility. Obviously Principles need to work hand in hand with mechanical skills, but mechanical skills without principles of movement, balance, correct application of force, etc. slip to

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the lower levels of crude brutality, with severe limitations of workable options.

The "Bunkai" way of thinking is essentially a mechanical model, it has a certain structural convenience, all component parts clip together easily, and to me, here is where the weakness lies. Mechanical models do not necessarily mesh with organic models. The variables of the human frame, human emotions even, have a type of complexity that, no matter how you push them, will not easily comply with an artificially constructed model. Nature has its own logic. It is perhaps this type of logic that has both enticed and eluded the ancient sages. The Taoists claim to have an insight in to the logic of nature, hence the Tao is both simple and complex and maddeningly elusive. It is not by accident that Taoist thought and principles are woven in to the traditional Martial Arts of China and Japan. Ancient thought has in its own way sought to codify the natural laws of movement.

The eight trigrams of the I-Ching (China's most ancient book of wisdom, attributed to the legendary figure Fu Xi (2953 - 2838 bce) could be viewed as the embodiment of the laws of natural movement and is intricately connected to Taoist thought and the dynamism of the laws of opposites and complementaries. The "trigrams" or "hexagrams" that make up the framework for the I-Ching are at one level descriptions of the dynamics of all natural movement and as such hold considerable significance for those involved in the study of movement and the flow of forces.[9](#)

Many of the important principles of movement and use of energy are found in the basics, after all, weren't basic just ways of practicing the kata but in small repeated sections? Within Wado Ryu (The Wado Ryu of the Wado Ryu Karate Do Academy) the basic principles of Naihanchi are introduced at novice level, the working of the stance, the rotation of the hips and generation of energy are all taught at this stage.

The tendency to undervalue these principles is endemic in some modern styles of Karate. This is partially a result of modern karate being pressurised into the market place. Karate instructors who are running a business have to deliver what the students want and not necessarily what they need. The accumulated effect of this way of teaching is that generations of students will have an impressive list of set-pieces and a poor grounding in principles of movement, making these set-pieces empty of the foundation principles necessary for freedom of movement and fluidity, which by its nature will enable them to freely move from one possibility to another.

So we have the ludicrous situation of high-ranking karate-ka running around inventing Okinawan style "Bunkai" without examining the differences between the earlier katas (from Shorin Ryu schools that still exist with these katas still preserved, as if in a time-capsule) and the Wado or Shotokan etc. versions.

To impose the rules and techniques of Okinawan "Bunkai" on to Wado katas is almost an admission of ignorance that testifies to a lack of the correct understanding of the principles of Wado Ryu.

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More creative and interesting applications from the kata Naihanchi. (From various sources)

We know that Hironori Ohtsuka and Gichin Funakoshi (or Gigo Funakoshi, his son) changed the kata, so it is a logical step to make an attempt to unravel the reasons behind these changes. However, this is not an easy task.

One would imagine that a good starting place would be the published material of the late masters. Unfortunately in these all we find are bald descriptions of movements, with little or no embellishments or explanations. They are like catalogues of techniques, and any descriptions of applications that do appear are basic or “shop-front” answers. So nothing given away there! But closer examination does reveal some clues, which need to be cautiously read.

Ohtsuka Sensei once said that he would never write a book detailing his techniques, as the possibilities and details would be too complex to translate into print. It is also reported that when he eventually did publish his one and only book on Wado Ryu karate some of his students commented that the book was too complex and asked him to simplify it. To which, in a gesture of disgust, he refused to publish any further books and future projects were cancelled.

So, how did this work with Naihanchi kata? Any attempt to answer this question must involve a serious examination of the known, working towards the unknown. The best place to start is with the modern masters.

20th Century Masters

Hironori Ohtsuka, aged twenty-nine, already a Menkyo Kaiden in Shindo Yoshin Ryu Jujutsu had become involved in Okinawan karate after a meeting with Okinawan master Gichin Funakoshi. Very quickly Ohtsuka is able to absorb the techniques and katas taught to him by Funakoshi, but he still feels that he is not getting the answers he needs. He then approaches Kenwa Mabuni, Okinawan master of Shito Ryu karate, with an encyclopaedic knowledge of kata taught to him by his first teachers, Itosu from the Shorin line and Higashionna from the Naha-Te line. After meeting Mabuni he realizes that the kata and techniques taught to him by Funakoshi fall short of the full depth of knowledge available and he had to basically relearn his katas. (Interestingly, when Ohtsuka chose to formulate his own syllabus he kept to katas primarily of the Shorin Ryu lineage.) [See another article

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by the same author "Hironori Ohtsuka 1892 - 1982 the founder of Wado Ryu".]

The principle kata in the Shorin Ryu was Naihanchi. In the early days it was Naihanchi that was taught first to new students. Not because it was a basic form, but, as is the tradition within the martial arts, the most important and challenging principles were taught first, unlike in the west, where we learn simple techniques and then progress gradually towards the more difficult ones.

Ohtsuka and Konishi befriended and supported another Okinawan karate master, Choki Motobu (1871 - 1944). It is generally accepted that Motobu had the biggest influence on Ohtsuka's interpretation of Naihanchi.

Choki Motobu

Choki Motobu was quite a character. Younger son of a noble Okinawan family with its own tradition of empty hand fighting (understood to be a style referred to as "Ti"), a tradition largely passed on to Choki's elder brother Choyu. He had a rough and tumble upbringing and fighting was in his blood. Although he learned his skill with numerous masters he never really settled with any particular lineage, but he tested his skills in street battles and was renowned for his brawling and his agility. The most famous reported incident in his martial career was his very public clash with a western boxer at an exhibition bout. This occurred in Kyoto in 1921, when it could be assumed that Motobu, at fifty years of age, would be past his athletic physical prime. Motobu was able to knock the boxer out with one blow.

It has been suggested that Motobu only taught two katas, Passai and Naihanchi (although, according to his son, Chosei, he would also teach Seisan, and in the lineage inherited from his father the modern day Motobu Ryu also train in Naihanchi Nidan.)¹⁰

To gain any insight into Motobu's utilization and understanding of Naihanchi it is perhaps worth examining his formal karate instruction, i.e. who he trained with.

Motobu first trained with Anko Itosu. It is said that his sponsorship by Itosu did not last, as his rough character and boastful attitude were not tolerated by the master and he was expelled. He also trained with Kosaku Matsumura, as well as a Shuri-te master called Sakuma.

Motobu had some tuition from Tokumine Pechin, but this was cut short when Tokumine was banished to the Yaeyama Islands after demolishing thirty constables in a fight.

Motobu and Naihanchi

Firstly, it was Ohtsuka together with Yasuhiro Konishi (founder of the Ryobu-Kai) who supported and sponsored Motobu during his time in Japan and helped him to establish himself within the martial arts community. There seems to have been some exchange of ideas between Hironori Ohtsuka and Motobu.

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It has been suggested that Motobu was very interested in traditional Japanese Jujutsu and that there was an arrangement with Ohtsuka to teach Motobu elements of Jujutsu while Ohtsuka was able to work with Motobu on the finer points of Okinawan karate. It is intriguing to speculate how much Choki Motobu actually influenced Ohtsuka in the development of what was to be the Wado Ryu. Motobu certainly had the opportunity to see Ohtsuka in action, when he mischievously lured Gichin Funakoshi into a challenge with a Judo-ka, in an attempt to humiliate him. Funakoshi failed the challenge and then Ohtsuka, who was present, was invited to prove his ability, which he did with ease.

Motobu is quoted as saying, "The only kata that was necessary for one to be a good fighter was Naihanchi". This is because he believed that the Naihanchi Kata was also to teach how to enter the opponent's space, get in close and defeat him decisively with one technique.

Motobu called the techniques of the Naihanchi were called 'Jissen', which means to be able to use the techniques of the Kata in real fighting. Motobu believed that many of the Katas had lost their practicality (even back then!) and said that Naihanchi was practical because of what he had learned in actual combat.

Below are a series of quotes attributed to Choki Motobu which relate directly or indirectly to Naihanchi kata.¹¹

"The position of the legs and hips in Naifuanchin (the old name for Naihanchi.) no Kata is the basics of karate."

He expands on this theme by saying;

"Twisting to the left or right from the Naifuanchin stance will give you the stance used in a real confrontation. Twisting ones way of thinking about Naifuanchin left and right, the various meanings in each movement of the kata will also become clear."

Is this perhaps as clear a reference as we will ever have to be able to make some kind of connection between Ohtsuka Sensei's extension from Naihanchi dachi to Seishan Dachi (Yoko to Tate) and Motobu Sensei's working of Naihanchi kata? (Or at least one aspect of this.)

And intriguingly, this comment;

"The blocking hand must be able to become the attacking hand in an instant. Blocking with one hand and then countering with the other is not true bujutsu. Real bujutsu presses forward and blocks and counters in the same motion."

This final comment rings true to many Wado karate-ka. The modus operandi within the Ippon Gumite as practiced within the Wado Academy supports the particular strategy suggested by Choki Motobu. Perhaps it would be too much of a leap of logic to think that this was the source of Ohtsuka

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Sensei's emphasis on the blocking and striking with the same hand. All the same, a tempting thought.

Questions, speculations and mysteries regarding Choki Motobu



Choki Motobu only formed one official school, the Motobu-ryu Karate-Do Organisation now under the leadership of one of his sons, Chosei, although many key individuals in the history of modern karate claim direct influence from the great man. Shoshin Nagamine (Matsubayashi-ryu), Tatsuo Shimabukuru (Isshin-ryu), Shiyei Kaneshima (Ishimine-ryu), Shinsuke Kaneshima (Tozan-ryu) and others all claim influence from Motobu.

Legend has it that Motobu's teachings reached further shores. There is a story that suggests that he attempted to visit Hawaii in 1932, but was held by U.S. Immigration on the grounds that he was an undesirable. Apparently his reputation preceded him. It is said that while he was being detained in Hawaii he gave lessons to one James Mitose, considered by some to be the father of Hawaiian Kempo Karate. How this actually worked on a practical level is anyone's guess. Mitose's background and past have been objects

of speculation for many years, how much he was able to learn over what time-span is open to question, if indeed this meeting ever took place.



With such a character as Choki Motobu, bearing such a reputation, it is easy to see how legends can attach themselves to his larger than life personal history. Another shadowy figure attaches himself to the footnotes of Motobu's colourful life.

This time the story comes from the annals of Okinawan Isshin-ryu, by way of the late Robert Trias and his account of the history of his own branch of Okinawan/American Shuri-ryu.¹²

Robert A. Trias (1923 - 1989) first came into contact with the martial arts of the east while serving in the United States Navy during World War II. It was in 1942 when he was stationed in the Solomon Islands that he was to have a fateful encounter with a

Chinese missionary named T'ung Gee Hsing.

Trias was at the time a middleweight Navy boxing champion and was in training for his next bout. He was amused to find himself being approached by the Chinese missionary requesting lessons in Western Boxing in exchange for training in Hsing-I Chinese Boxing. After much pestering Trias thought he would teach the missionary a lesson and invited him into the ring. To his amazement he was unable to land a single blow on his Chinese opponent! It was this experience that was to change the direction of the rest of his life.

While training and studying with T'ung he learned something of the missionary's

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background. He discovered that T'ung was the nephew of the great Chinese martial artist Sun Lu T'ang (1859 - 1932) and had learned the secrets of Hsing-I Chinese Boxing from his late uncle.

T'ung had travelled widely and at one time lived and worked in Kume Mura in Okinawa. It was there that he met Choki Motobu.

Researchers Corcoran, Farkas and Martinez expand the story by saying that T'ung trained and exchanged ideas with Motobu and that Motobu incorporated key principles and techniques into his training, based upon the Hsing-I techniques taught to him by T'ung. Their suggestion is that Motobu's Karate is a blend of the Okinawan Shuri-Te he'd previously learned (as well as the influences of Ti taught to him by his brother) and Chinese Hsing-I. Interestingly Trias describes his art (Shuri-ryu) as primarily Okinawan karate, while emphasising the cross-currents and influences of fighting arts from mainland China.

It is Javier Martinez who goes further, and says that the Isshin-ryu founder, Tatsuo Shimabuku (1908-1975), as well as being a student of Choki Motobu was contemporary with T'ung Gee Hsing and training alongside him in the presence of Motobu. Martinez suggests that Shimabuku's Okinawan Isshin-ryu is a mixture of Hsing-I and Okinawan karate and cites examples. Shimabuku's system also includes a very idiosyncratic version of Naihanchi, which curiously starts to the left instead of traditionally the right.¹³

He says that short stances and the vertical fist used by contemporary Isshin-ryu stylist come directly from Hsing-I. (Interestingly the vertical fist (tate-ken) used in Wado Ryu is, in some circles, credited as coming from Motobu's influence, but this is difficult to verify as Ohtsuka Sensei was familiar with a variety of strikes and hand forms from the pugilistic aspect of Shindo Yoshin Ryu Jujutsu.)

While it is fascinating to speculate on the circumstances surrounding these claims, I would suggest that any development of ideas based upon this information should proceed with extreme caution. It is too easy for researchers to get carried away. An obvious tendency is to go along the well-travelled route of putting everything down to the inclination of Japanese masters to deny, or play down the influences of the Chinese martial arts because of Nationalist feelings. This view is heavily traded upon by martial arts historians in the West. While this view may hold sway in some areas, it should not be used as a panacea to solve all such historical dilemmas.

This does not mean that we should avoid taking a few tentative steps in that direction, until of course some serious research is undertaken to verify the claims of Messrs. Trias, Martinez, and of course T'ung Gee Hsing (Incidentally, T'ung is believed to have died in Taiwan in 1955).

But where does all of this connect with the exploration of Naihanchi kata?

This short diversion will perhaps highlight some of the complications involved in unravelling the puzzle of Naihanchi, for the detail and relevant clues can perhaps be found in the personal story and background of Choki Motobu.

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If we start with the premise that Motobu based his fighting strategies upon his study of Naihanchi kata. For him Naihanchi was a textbook of fighting techniques and principles. So really we need to have some reference to Motobu's fighting techniques.

For evidence of this, an obvious source would be his 1926 book "Okinawan Kempo" first published in May of that year by the Ryukyu Karate-Do Shihan-Kai. This book largely features fighting techniques and defences. A dozen hard-hitting responses to a variety of attacks and counters.

(If Motobu was influenced by T'ung Gee Hsing it would have been after the 1926 publication of the above mentioned book. In an article by Henk Goslinga published in 1999, he tells us that Tatsuo Shimabuku, alleged contemporary and training partner of T'ung Gee Hsing, only trained with Motobu from 1939 for about a year. This means that Motobu was at this time aged about 68 and only had four or five more years to live. How much he was able to develop his ideas between those years is questionable.)

But how different are the techniques illustrated from those of Motobu's contemporaries?

Again a difficult question. This was one of the first ever book published on the techniques of Okinawan karate, and the first book to show fighting applications. Funakoshi was also putting his ideas together for the publication of a book, but his particular contribution moved no further than a collection of kata. Very little in there on how the moves were applied, apart from sparse and very basic descriptions.

Any reference or parallels with Hsing-I Chinese Boxing?

Hsing-I as one of the Big Three Internal Boxing styles (the other two being T'ai-Chi Chuan and Bagua) is wrapped up in a very complex philosophical system that is threaded through the technical curriculum. There seems to be no evidence of the same philosophies within Motobu's teaching. The quotes mentioned above have practicality as their main theme and contain no references to principles found within Hsing-I.

I have found no references to the Five Elements, or Five Energies so important to the teachings of Hsing-I in any of the available material relating to the teachings of Choki Motobu. Neither have I found any direct reference to the Twelve Animals Forms, apart from the deep-rooted broad cultural references that are woven in to the fabric of the ancient Eastern martial traditions, originating from Shamanistic symbolism. (However, Robert Trias does refer to Animal Forms and characteristics in his description of his own system, Shuri-ryu.)

As regards the similarity of stances or fist forms, I would advise researchers not to get carried away with coincidental comparisons. For they may be just that - "coincidental". Because, how many variations on attack and defence are there? The human frame can only physiologically manoeuvre through a limited range of motions, so it is inevitable that the great minds, the great martial experimenters, would come up with the same answers!

As for Naihanchi - it is well known that Naihanchi (or Naifuanchin) was well established as

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the backbone of Okinawan Shuri-te well before the appearance of T'ung Gee Hsing on the Ryukyu archipelago. So unless T'ung could throw some previously obscured light on the functions of Naihanchi by connecting it directly to Hsing-I Chinese Boxing, it is unlikely that Motobu would have radically changed his understanding and interpretation of the kata.

To play Devil's Advocate on this point; perhaps Motobu experienced an aspect of Hsing-I through contact with T'ung that appealed to his practical nature? Hsing-I is known as the no-nonsense, no-frills, hard-hitting bridge between the Internal and the External Boxing systems. It is possible that Motobu chose to embrace this aspect, and not sign up to the more esoteric aspects of Internal Energy cultivation, Five Elements etc.? Who knows?

Motobu's Kumite – Ohtsuka's Kumite and Naihanchi

There are some similarities between Choki Motobu's Kumite and some of Ohtsuka Sensei's Kumite, but the modus operandi displayed by the inheritor of Motobu's teaching, namely his son Chosei, demonstrates within the applications to Naihanchi and within the twelve Motobu Kihon Gumite a very much more straight on and immediate approach. The Kihon Gumite of Motobu are very direct and also very accessible, whereas the Ohtsuka Kumite pairs exercises appear to have greater subtlety, betraying their Jujutsu and Japanese Budo roots.

Close examination of Motobu's 1926 book shows the use of deflections, simultaneous parries and strikes, closing of distances and punches acting as deflections. Also some researchers have sought to identify movements and positions found within Naihanchi kata, and indeed they are there! Returning to Motobu's previously mentioned quote;

"Twisting to the left or right from the Naifuanchin stance will give you the stance used in a real confrontation. Twisting ones way of thinking about Naifuanchin left and right, the various meanings in each movement of the kata will also become clear."

It is not difficult to see the applications within the 1926 book. In one example we see the attacker grabbed and pulled on to a strike which comes out of the side of the body, a clear and obvious application from Naihanchi.

As mentioned before, the key differences between the Kumite devised by the two masters are in Ohtsuka's use of principles taken from his background in Shindo Yoshin Ryu Jujutsu, as well as techniques that relate closely to traditional schools of swordsmanship. But common ground can be found in engagement distances and the closing down of the opponent by crashing through the zones and distances. Motobu also periodically demonstrates the use of his legs to destabilize or limit the manoeuvrability of his opponent, this is also found in Ohtsuka's Kumite, but is normally associated with the Kuzushi (unbalancing) found in schools of traditional Jujutsu. Here again we can make a clear connection between principles found in the Kumite of both Masters and Naihanchi. In Wado it is understood that the operation of the Naihanchi stance promotes easy use of the knees to destabilize while allowing the torso freedom to rotate. But if this is common to Motobu

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and Ohtsuka, who influenced who? Or is it just a coincidence? Whatever the answer is, Naihanchi seems to have been a common denominator.

Speculations on the Chinese roots of Naihanchi

It is more than guesswork to suggest that the origins of this kata can be traced back to China. cursory examination of the original Chinese Hsing-I (Xsing) Kung-Fu style which was popular amongst the Manchurian soldiers during the Qing Dynasty (17th to 20th century), will reveal that most of the techniques are practiced in what appears to be Naihanchi dachi.

Also, according to some researchers, Naihanchi has a strong similarity to a Chinese empty handed martial form practiced at least a hundred years ago called "Dai-Po-Chin" originating from the area south of the Yangtze River.

The reason given is that they developed techniques utilizing this stance to fight when losing their weapon from horse-back! Today, you can see in books and on video Bagua and Hsing-I Kung-Fu Katas that resemble Naihanchi, with some techniques which are exactly the same! Certainly the stance is also common in the above mentioned Chinese styles, as well as in others such as Wing-Tsun. But most importantly, in both the Hsing-I and Bagua systems, the Naihanchi stance was thought to be important to harness the Chi and to stabilize the mind. Bagua and Hsing-I are considered internal style of Kung-Fu.¹⁴

"Naihanchi" the name

Finding the origins of kata names is rather like trying to discover the root of ancient place names; sometimes the translations are fairly obvious, as they relate to simple descriptions, like the names of locations, or in the case of katas, the names of the master who created the kata, or made it his own. Or they may even be a basic description of the kata, possibly describing it as "24 steps", or "24 moves".

Although Motobu referred to the kata by its older Chinese name of "Naifuanchin", the generally used contemporary name is, "Naihanchi".

With Naihanchi it tends to be generally accepted that "Nai" means "inside" or "inner". But the remaining characters that make up the name present some difficulty. In one version the middle kanji means to "walk" or "progress" in another version it suggests the strip of land between two rice paddies, while the final character means "battle" or "war".

Shiomitsu Sensei puts his own spin on it; saying that he prefers an interpretation meaning "half inside, half outside" ("half" comes from "han".) "Chi" meaning energy. By this he explains that we should not think that the outside form was the most important, or that this was all there was to it.

The origins of the name are lost in the mists of time; it is possible that all of the above is mere guesswork and wide of the mark by some considerable distance.

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Gichin Funakoshi renamed the kata "Tekki". Meaning "Iron Knight", or "Steel horse riding". Previously the locked knees position while executing techniques and twisting the body have been explained to Wado students by asking them to think that they are fighting a battle on horseback, weapons in hands and steering the horse with their knees. Cutting to left and right, to remain on a straight course with the horse keep the knees fixed whatever way your upper body turns. However, the dynamics and exact positioning of the stance as practiced by modern day Shotokan stylists are quite different from the Wado version, and it may be interesting to compare the inherent emphasis and practicalities of the two schools. But that in itself would be a separate study.

The Okinawan Naihanchi

There is much to be said for the innovative approach of the great Okinawan master Anko Itosu, but when looking for the historical root of the katas of Okinawan karate Itosu seems to be a barrier that one needs to get beyond to reach into the past. Here is an example that relates to Naihanchi.

Kenwa Mabuni, who was one of Itosu's students had in his employ a servant, one Morihiro Matayoshi. It is said that Matayoshi taught Mabuni a kata which he called Kiba-Dachi-no-Kata, it is not known where Matayoshi gained his knowledge of this kata, but although it was a version of Naihanchi it was not the Naihanchi that Itosu was teaching. Mabuni demonstrated this kata to Itosu only to have the master confirm to him that this was the original version of Naihanchi that he had learned from his master, "Bushi" Matsumura (1809-1901), and that he'd modified Matsumura's version of Naihanchi to suit his own ideas.

It has been suggested that it was Matsumura who brought the kata Naihanchi over to Okinawa from mainland China, but nobody knows for sure.

It has also been cited that Naihanchi Nidan and Sandan were possibly Itosu's creations.¹⁵

But yet another shadowy Chinese master enters the story.

In the middle of the nineteenth century a Chinese Boxing master called Ason settled on the island of Okinawa. One stream of thought connects the introduction of Naihanchi to Ason. A theory suggests that Ason's Naihanchi was marked by its aggressive content and was much more complex than current derivations of Naihanchi, having over one hundred moves. (Chinese forms are noted for their length, in comparison to adapted Okinawan kata).

This idea of a longer, more complex Naihanchi concurs with Nathan Johnson's theory that the three Naihanchi katas were originally one long kata, which was taken apart. And split into three¹⁶. I have my doubts about his suggestion that it was broken up to save on Dojo/yard space. That may have been a minor practical consideration, but with Naihanchi taking primary position within the Shorin Ryu curriculum, and being the first kata taught, ease of transmission could possibly have been the main issue.

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Johnson supports his theory of a divided kata by examining the discrepancies in the modern-day Shotokan versions of the three katas (renamed by Funakoshi, Tekki Shodan, Nidan and Sandan.). He cites the example of the opening movement, saying that Tekki Shodan has a formal opening which is not found in Tekki Nidan and Sandan. He also goes on to explain that Shotokan stylist seem unable to agree among themselves as to the exact sequence of Tekki Sandan.

In his own teaching Nathan Johnson "restores" the three parts, which string the three forms together on a long sequence to the left (beginning with the one step to the right, as in most variations of Naihanchi Shodan.) and then returns with the same sequence all the way back to the right, hence Naihanchi retains its ambidextrous nature. His research into the practical applications of the kata leads him to the conclusion that the whole sequence is a kind of "pushing hands" contact drill, which utilizes destabilization and two-man locking/tumbling sequences. While the results of his research present some very interesting possibilities, inevitably there arise more questions than answers. The biggest question being that there is no way of establishing, recognising and endorsing an original "antique" version of Naihanchi that will fit the intentions that he proposes for the kata. The Matsubayashi version that he has adopted as his "antique Naifuanchin" must have gone through so many generational mutations to be almost unrecognisable to its founder and creator. Having said this I have nothing but praise for Nathan and his creative approach to an in depth study of this most enigmatic of traditional katas.

Comparisons and differences

It is not my intention to set about producing a detailed examination of the technical nuances of Naihanchi as practiced by Wado Ryu karateka today. The best place for that kind of examination is in the Dojo and under the direction of a suitably qualified and experienced Sensei. The methods of training this particular kata and the subtleties involved are best expressed through actual practice and not via the written page.

However, readers may be interested in a brief journey into the technical differences between the various interpretations of Naihanchi across the styles, as far as I understand them (I would not pretend to have a comprehensive working knowledge of any styles methodology outside of my own.)

Although the bones of the various versions of the Naihanchi kata remain intact, it is amazing to see how different the individual movements are between the different schools of karate, both Okinawan and Japanese.

I have drawn my examples from a number of sources, including available interpretations of Motobu's kata and the Matsubayashi version of Naihanchi Shodan as taught by the late Shoshin Nagamine. Who was a student of Choki Motobu as well as Chotoku Kyan and Ankichi Arakaki.

Interestingly there are numerous differences between Nagamine's Naihanchi and Motobu's. The height and arm positions are lower and there are additional Nameashi-geri kicks included in Nagamine's version. It would be fair to speculate that Nagamine's Naihanchi was not greatly influenced by Motobu's. In fact it is curious that within the conservative world of late 19th century,

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early 20th century Okinawan masters there should be such big differences in one kata, seeming of the same lineage?

For this comparison I will use the Wado Ryu version of Naihanchi as the standard, even though there are other versions that have a greater claim to any purity of lineage. (as far as any claim can go.)

Perhaps it would be a good idea to establish which movements are found in the Wado Naihanchi that are not found in any of the other versions of this kata. (as far as I know.)

Right at the very beginning, the first opening circular salutation is an oddity. One commentator from the Okinawan side of the fence, who had recently been teaching and training in a Wado Ryu Dojo, was asked about the differences between the Okinawan Naihanchi and the Wado version, and said:

"There is a Kusanku-esque beginning to the Wado version that I hadn't seen before. The Okinawan version I learned simply had the right fist in the left palm and then went down with the hands like the last part of the Wado version."¹⁷

The Shotokan Tekki Shodan does not have this salutation, and neither does it feature in Choki Motobu's Naihanchi.

In the Wado Naihanchi it would perhaps be easier to examine this peculiarity by breaking it into four parts; the opening large circular movement, the roll of the wrists to return it back to the original position, i.e. left hand over the top of right, the scanning from left to right and the apparent raising of the hands which accompanies the step across to the right.

The first part of this is exactly the same as in Kushanku kata. The second part, the rolling of the wrists seems to echo the Okinawan Naihanchi, but only in that the hands are pushed downwards in front of the body. The Okinawan downwards push is explained in some quarters as a strategy that is directed against an opponent who is attempting to secure a hold on your wrists, and can be employed as a wrist lock. It is interesting to speculate on Ohtsuka Sensei's take on this, particularly coming from a Jujutsu background. Perhaps he saw the Okinawan interpretation of this as being too basic and not meshing with his own ideas as to how the principles in Naihanchi should be utilized. But then, intriguingly, we get this rather odd roll of the wrists which appears in the Wado version and, from a different starting position, in the Okinawan version. What did Ohtsuka Sensei have in mind for this movement?

There are some similarities and connecting factors with the previously mentioned Okinawan explanation of operating a lock or release against a wrist grab.

When examining kata and attempting to unlock the secrets of application, it is always worth casting around to look for techniques that appear similar, or operate similar principles. For example, when you are required to rotate your hands around your wrists, or to grip your own wrist with the other hand, this quite often suggests that you are trapping an opponent's hand as they are attempting to grip your wrist. This then enables you to execute a painful wrist-lock.

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I am not suggesting that this is the interpretation of this move, or that Ohtsuka Sensei embedded these Jujutsu type moves within his embellishments to the Naihanchi kata he learned from Motobu. He obviously had a list of priorities concerning Naihanchi and the Jujutsu mode of operation seems to be way down on this list, and besides, whatever constitutes a "jujutsu mode of operation" to the Okinawan stylist, or even a contemporary 21st century martial artist or commentator, may not necessarily mesh with the Jujutsu/Japanese Budo that Ohtsuka Sensei was used to operating with. As mentioned before, to Ohtsuka Sensei principles of movement were the key issues.

Look also at this perceived raising of the hands as you take the first step across to the right. In actuality the hands do not raise, but the body drops and the hands remain at their original height and then track across to the right, following the body and guarding Suigetsu (the Solar Plexus). Anyone who has had any experience in the traditional schools of Jujutsu and Aiki-Jujutsu will perhaps wonder if what they are seeing here is the well-established principle of letting the hands remain in the position where an opponent is attempting to hold them, and moving the body around the stationary hand, usually used to create slack and facilitate an escape or reversal.

For examples of this look at the escapes from Pinan Sandan and Kushanku.

Throughout the traditional martial arts opening movements of this nature are often interpreted as being either salutary in nature, or indicating a signal or gesture to an opponent or partner, or as a gathering or sinking of vital energy. There can also be hidden practical applications.

Is the scanning from left to right unique to the Wado version of Naihanchi? (It does not feature in the opening sequence of Kushanku). This scanning found in the Wado Naihanchi does not make an appearance in the photographic stills of Motobu performing his Naihanchi, but Motobu's son, Chosei Motobu, inheritor of his karate tradition, does perform this same scanning move in his version of the kata.

Obviously the key difference from all other versions of Naihanchi and the Wado interpretation is the height of operation. Ohtsuka Sensei purposefully raised the height of operation to Jodan, as he did with the Wado Shuto Uke. His reasoning behind this was to force the practitioner to work at a more difficult height, in order to extract a greater involvement of the body placing further demands on the control of the centre, the logical way to do this is to move the range of operation as far as is reasonably possible away from the centre. So again we come back to Ohtsuka's primary intention for Naihanchi. Ohtsuka Sensei explained this by saying,

"All hand movements are done high. In this kata, this statement is true. When hands are held high, one concentrates about his hands and his lower body tends to collapse easily. It is with this fact in mind; that one trains Naihanchi without compromising his stance or posture".

The height of Motobu's blocking and covering arm position in his version of Naihanchi is also quite high, and his lateral strike, where both fists are extended away from the body, is higher than the Wado version, actually seeming to attack to jodan height. The Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu version operates primarily at Chudan level, as do the Shotokan Tekki Shodan equivalent.

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The stance in the Wado version is generally considered to be close to the original root. The Shotokan Tekki series has a stance that differs greatly from the mainstream Okinawan tradition, being more extended and a completely different set of physical demands.

Motobu's thoughts on the Naihanchi stance

Choki Motobu had his own thoughts about the dynamics of the stance used in Naihanchi kata. In his book, "Watashi no Karate-jutsu" (My Art of Karate-jutsu) he had this to say;

"You may probably already know that there is a kata (Naihanchi), which uses the hachimonji-dachi. There are those who believe that the proper way to perform this stance is by twisting the toes inwards and squeezing the feet together. Hence it is often taught this way. However I believe this to be completely wrong. This way of performing the stance has been handed down through the Itosu lineage. However, disciples of Matsumura and Sakuma just naturally opened their feet up into the eight-shape posture (hachimonji-dachi) without the application of power. I once questioned Matsumura and Sakuma sensei about this point. Matsumura sensei responded by saying, "I think the practicality of Itosu's method is precarious and someone using it could be easily defeated." I considered those comments and I agreed with his theory. Using the hachimonji-dachi by twisting the toes inwards and squeezing them together, as prescribed by Itosu, would be unstable. A person could be shoved to the ground even if just lightly pushed from the rear with someone's fingertips. I just don't think this is the kind of stance that functions very well when power is applied to it. Kata should be taught in accordance with the practical issues it represents. I don't believe that it is wise to teach a student how to apply force to the movements if the application of its technique is impractical or misunderstood. This is why I disagree with twisting the toes inward and squeezing the feet together and felt it necessary to clarify my point."¹⁸

From these very candid comments we see Motobu as critical to the translation of Naihanchi through the Itosu lineage and, more crucially, the exaggeration of the inwards turning of the feet and unnatural inwards tension. Interestingly Ohtsuka Sensei's teachings on Naihanchi-dachi also stresses that forcefully squeezing the legs together is to be avoided at all costs. Regarding the stance, he said;

"... it is obvious that if there is tension in the legs, then it would be difficult to move the body, for example. In Naihanchi, one must not place strength unnecessarily in the legs to facilitate a turn or other similar movement. The waist must be used instead. One important thing to remember is to not collapse the posture of the legs by placing strength in them."

But looking at stills of Motobu performing his Naihanchi it is clear that the feet are positioned in a parallel fashion, pointing almost straight forwards.

But remaining with the sequence of the kata.

The strike that follows the first step across is usually a backhanded swing. This is generally the accepted rule, with the exception of Okinawan Isshinryu, who not only start the kata to the left, but also execute the first move as an upwards scoop with the open hand, a completely different loci to the Okinawan, Shotokan and Wado katas. The Wado Naihanchi uses the first move as a Shuto

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straight thrust, again a feature unique to Wado and not part of the Okinawan/Motobu version, evidence of pure Ohtsuka.

The head level palm-up punch, just before the mid-point of the kata is often shown as an Uraken in the Okinawan schools. Motobu uses the preceding downwards movement with the left hand as a downwards strike onto the incoming hand/arm of an attacker and follows this up with the uraken.

It is obvious that Motobu's interpretation of the kata has a certain amount of flexibility of interpretation woven in to it. For example, he says that the first elbow strike would be better employed as a punch, but, "in the kata the elbow looks better".

There are numerous other anomalies that exist between the various styles, but I would recommend that those who wish to explore these further should examine them from a reputable source and actually try them out and by doing so gain a real feel for the meanings intended by those who employ the various methods.

The Naihanchi of Wado Ryu karate is perhaps one of the most unusual interpretations of this ancient kata available to modern day students of karate. Its singularity is a result of the intentions of the founder of the Wado school, Hironori Ohtsuka, and what he saw and understood within the nature of the kata as presented to him by the Okinawan masters.

Interestingly, any Wado Ryu Sensei who is confronted with the task of teaching Naihanchi to their students, invariably has to encourage the students to go beyond the surface appearance of the kata and look towards the dynamics and physicality of the form. This then has to be explained in terms that the students can understand, particularly when they are looking for "application". Hopefully, if the students have been given a solid grounding in the Pinan katas and Kushanku, there will be clues in abundance for them to draw from. But sadly, there is a worrying trend that means that some students, in their hurry to climb the grading ladder, only take from the Pinans and Kushanku a superficial, surface-only understanding. To look at Naihanchi in the same superficial manner will only result in the kata appearing unfathomable and perhaps anachronistic. The Sensei has the advantage of hindsight, he is able to view the kata from the vantage point of maturity and experience and to make the appropriate links to other aspects of his training that make direct connections to Naihanchi.

In conclusion, the importance of this kata is indicated by its durability. It is obvious that throughout history masters of the empty handed fighting systems attached great importance on the series of moves called Naihanchi/Naifuanchin. This kata has great depth, not just in its history but also as an area of physical study. It contains strata of physical exploration, not just in relation to the individual as he/she evolves on the spiritual side as a martial artist, but also in understanding the dynamism of one-on-one physical confrontation.

Credits

I am deeply indebted to M. Shiomitsu Sensei and F. Sugawara Sensei as a constant source of inspiration. Also a special mention to Nathan Johnson of Zen Shorin Do and to his students, who

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made me welcome at their Southampton Dojo. Thanks also to Harry Cook for his help on the Motobu research.

Footnotes

[1] "Wado Ryu Karate" Hironori Ohtsuka.

[2] Mark Bishop, "Okinawan Karate, Teachers, Styles and Secret Techniques."

[3] Patrick McCarthy, "Bubishi, the bible of karate".

In the Bubishi the hand drawn images of two-man exercises and fighting strategies are perhaps the most tantalizing aspects of the book. From these it is possible to recognise fighting applications from kata still practised today. These techniques typically carry exotic, even poetic names, probably meant to act as coded phrases known only to the initiated. Who would know that "going to fight with one knife" refers to a move similar to the third move in Pinan Shodan (even though Pinan Shodan was not devised until c.1907. But possibly this technique was extrapolated from an older kata.) Or that "little demons remove their boots and squat down" is the use of Sukui-Uke half way through Kushanku!

[4] See Robert Smith's translation of an alleged Shaolin text, published as "Secrets of Shaolin Temple Boxing".

[5] "Wado Ryu Karate" Hironori Ohtsuka.

[6] "The Tengu-geijutsu-ron" translated by Reinhard Kammer.

[7] Douglas Wile, "Tai-Chi Touchstones: Yang Family Secret Transmissions".

[8] "The Blind Men and the Elephant". A well-known Indian tale from the Buddhist Canon. The Buddha used this tale in reply to questions by his disciples as to the nature of the world and the human soul espoused by various hermits and teachers. The blind men each explore a part of the Elephant and declare that it is variously, a pot, a ploughshare, a pillar, a winnowing basket, or a brush! The parable is used to illustrate that each person describes reality according to his own prejudices and experiences.

[9] For arguably the best translation of the "I Ching" see the Richard Wilhelm translation, translated into English by Cary F. Baynes, with a foreword by Carl Gustav Jung.

[10] Dragon Times, Vol. 19. "Choki Motobu, Revelations from his son, Chosei". By Charles C. Goodin.

[11] Quotes attributed to Motobu Sensei, courtesy of the Journal of the Shoto Research Society International. Article by Joe Swift, "Wisdom from the Past: Tidbits on Kata Applications from Pre-War Karate Books. Part Three: Motobu Choki." (to quote directly from Joe Swift's article. "In 1978 an essay entitled "Collection of Sayings by Motobu Choki" was published in Japanese. This essay is

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based upon the oral teachings of Motobu Choki to his students, and was overseen by one direct student of Motobu, namely Marukawa Kenji.")

[12] Information from the [Shuri-Ryu website](#). Mark R. Rowe. Also, "Dissertation on the origins and development of Shuri-Ryu" by Robert A. Trias.

[13] Javier Martinez, "Isshinryu Naihanchi Kata Secrets Revealed" 1999.

[14] In his article "Naifanchi Kata: Surreptitious Stepping", Dan Smith of the Shorin Ryu Seibukan says:

"Another version for the origin of the Naifanchi kata is that Matsumura brought this kata back from China with him after one of his visits and that it was from a version of the BaGua system of fighting due to the name of surreptitus stepping. Some believe that rather than having the system of walking in a circle the Naifanchi teaches sideways stepping which in turn is just part of a circle. This version I think has a lot of credibility to it".

[15] Joe Swift in his article, "The Kata of Okinawa Isshinryu Karate Do" quotes his sources for this theory as referred from, "Iwai, 1992; Kinjo, 1991a; Murakami, 1991".

[16] In his article, "The Kata of Okinawa Isshinryu Karate Do" Joe Swift tells us that one common theory is that it was Itosu who broke the longer original Naihanchi into three parts. (Sources given: Aragaki, 2000, Iwai, 1992.)

[17] Discussion on the [Wado E-Group Internet Forum](#) relating to Naihanchi. Quote from Rob Rivers Sensei.

[18] Choki Motobu, "Watashi no Karate-jutsu" translated 2002 by Patrick McCarthy.

Additional Sources

1. "Barefoot Zen" Nathan J. Johnson.
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3. "Bubishi, the bible of karate" Patrick McCarthy.
4. "Choki Motobu, Okinawa's Fighting Old Master" article in Bugeisha magazine by John Sells, Issue 4, Winter 1997.
5. "Okinawan Kempo" by Choki Motobu.
6. "The Power of the Internal Martial Arts" B. K. Frantzis.
7. "Shimabuku Tatsuo Sensei (1908-1975)" by Henk Goslinga 1999
8. Article by G. Noble, FAI No. 32 (Vol. 6 No.2)
9. "The Essence of Okinawan Karate-Do" Shoshin Nagamine.