

TSA Essay Week 4.3
LINEAGE TWO
KANRYO HIGAONNA
1853 to 1915



Kanryo Higaonna
東恩納 寛量

CHAPTER 16

Kanryo Higaonna was born into a family of lower nobility in Naha, Okinawa in 1853, and his father was actively involved in the trade that went back and forth between Okinawa and China. As a boy in Okinawa, Kanryo may have practiced karate (Chinese-hand) under Mayaa Aragaki, but research on this issue is not definitive.[1] This training, if it did take place, had less influence on the development of Kanryo Higaonna's karate than the stories that Kanryo Higaonna's father told his son about the wonders of China and about the power of the Chinese martial arts. These

stories roused the imagination of young Kanryo Higaonna and made him curious about the vast Empire of China and particularly about the Chinese martial arts.[ii]

Then in 1867, when Kanryo Higaonna was about 14 years old, his life was abruptly altered. His father was killed in a fight. As the young Kanryo Higaonna grieved his father's death, he recalled the stories that his father had told him about the lethal powers of the Chinese martial arts. With these stories firmly implanted in his mind, Kanryo Higaonna "decided to travel to China to learn these deadly arts, and then return to Okinawa to avenge his father's death." [iii]

Within that same year and with vengeance burning in his heart, Kanryo Higaonna set sail for Fuzhou in Southern China. After he arrived, he sought out a teacher in the Chinese martial arts with the intent of eventually returning to Okinawa to settle the score with the man who had killed his father. He was introduced to Ryu Ryu Ko who owned a furniture making shop and who was also an extremely skilled martial artist.[iv] Kanryo Higaonna presented him with a letter of introduction from a well-respected public official from Okinawa. After he judged the young Higaonna as possessing the proper character to learn the martial arts, Ryu Ryu Ko accepted him as his student.[v]

As a condition of learning the martial arts from him, Kanryo Higaonna was required to swear an oath of allegiance to Ryu Ryu Ko. During this ceremony, he also promised to adhere to the principles of Ryu Ryu Ko and to never misuse the knowledge which he was about to learn. Young Mr. Higaonna stayed in Fuzhou for about fourteen years working for and training with Ryu Ryu Ko. Every morning for the first five or six years of his stay in China, Kanryo Higaonna walked from the Okinawan hostel in Fuzhou to the residence of Ryu Ryu Ko. During the day he labored diligently in his teacher's workshop, and in the evenings he received instruction in the martial arts prior to returning to the hostel.[vi]

During these first years of his instruction, he was taught only one kata, Sanchin. However over the passage of time, Ryu Ryu Ko and Kanryo Higaonna became extremely close, and the teacher began to treat his student like a father treats his son. Mr. Higaonna moved into the house of his mentor and received the type of detailed instruction in the Chinese martial arts that was usually transmitted only from father to son. After their relationship had deepened, Kanryo Higaonna learned eight other empty hand kata as well as the several weapons kata that were known to Ryu Ryu Ko.[vii]As a result, Mr. Kanryo Higaonna became an extraordinarily proficient martial artist.

In 1881 when Kanryo Higaonna was about 28 years old, he became somewhat homesick. With the approval of his mentor, he returned to his native Okinawa.[viii] However by this time, the fire of revenge that once burned in his heart had been extinguished by the mentorship of Ryu Ryu Ko, and he had lost all interest in avenging the death of his father.

TEACHING in OKINAWA

Several years after he returned to Okinawa, Kanryo Higaonna began to teach his karate (still known as *Chinese-hand*) to a very small and select group of students. Training under the watchful eye of Mr. Higaonna was extremely intense.[ix] Additionally, each student had to ask permission to study with him and had to complete a period of character evaluation in order to be accepted as one of his students. Any student could be dismissed from Higaonna's tutelage for having a violent character or for violating social norms.[x]

Of this cadre of students who trained for lengthy periods with Kanryo Higaonna, three of them eventually established their own styles modern karate-do based on his teachings. Juhatsu Kyoda would establish To'on Ryu (*Higaonna Style*). Chojun Miyagi would create Goju Ryu (*Hard-Soft Style*), and Kenwa Mabuni would establish Shito Ryu (*Itosu-HigaonnaStyle*).[xi]

Mr. Kanryo Higaonna learned nine empty hand kata from Ryu Ryu Ko and taught them to his students in Okinawa. These kata were Sanchin, Saifa, Seiyunchin, Sanseiryu, Shisochin, Seipai, Seisan, Kururunfa, and Suparinpei. Additionally, Mr. Higaonna learned the bo, long sword, short sword, and other weapons kata from his teacher in China.[xii] Whereas Mr. Higaonna continued to practice and demonstrate both empty hand and weapons kata, it is not clear if he transmitted his knowledge of Chinese weaponry to his students in Okinawa.

It should not be considered unusual that Kanryo Higaonna learned both empty hand and weapon fighting arts from Ryu Ryu Ko: "In Chinese systems it is quite normal to learn weapons and empty hand arts as part of a complete package, so it is not so surprising to learn that Kanryo Higaonna was skilled in Chinese weapons. However, while he may have demonstrated them, he did not teach them, and there are no traces of Chinese weapons in any of the systems such as *Goju Ryu* or *To'on Ryu* which can be traced to him." [xiii]

It must be noted that researcher Mario McKenna contends that Mr. Kanryo Higaonna did teach his Chinese weapon arts to one other person, Juhatsu Kyoda.[xiv] However, there is no evidence that Mr. Kyoda ever taught these weapon kata to any of his students. It is interesting to note that Mr. Kyoda offered his opinion on the futility of teaching the weapon arts of kobudo: "In this day and age, you don't need these sort of things (weapons)."[xv]

One must question why Mr. Kanryo Higaonna did not teach the weapon arts that he had learned in China from Ryu Ryu Ko. Perhaps he felt what Mr. Kyoda expressed, and he too believed that these ancient weapons had little application in a modern world. Mr. Morio Higaonna offers his perspective on why Mr. Kanryo Higaonna dropped these kata from his curriculum: "Perhaps because Okinawa was in a time of peace he felt that there was no need for his students to learn

weapons. He wanted to concentrate on karate, which he felt was more important to the development of the human spirit.”[xvi] These are certainly plausible explanations of Mr. Higaonna’s motives for not teaching his weapon arts that he had learned to his students.

However, it is likely that there are at least two other plausible reasons why Kanryo Higaonna did not teach others the weapon arts that he had learned in China. As we recall, by the late 1800s anti-Chinese sentiment was prevalent in Japan and Okinawa, and teaching things that were Chinese was unpopular. Hence, teaching Chinese weaponry would not have been a welcome addition to a martial art curriculum. Additionally, the Japanese greatly revered the katana (sword of the samurai), and considered other weapons to be inferior. To teach the use of the bo (wooden staff) or sai (three tined short sword), would have been looked upon with antipathy in Japanese society.

Whereas Mr. Higaonna’s motives for not teaching the weapon kata that he had learned from Ryu Ryu Ko are not entirely clear, one thing is certain. The weapon arts of Mr. Kanryo Higaonna are forever lost to posterity.

Mr. Kanryo Higaonna was tremendously influential in the development of karate-do. He went to China, learned Chinese martial arts, and brought his knowledge back to Okinawa. There in his native country, he started a second lineage of Okinawan karate. He taught this art to a cadre of young men who were subsequently inspired to take their instructor’s teachings and form new styles of traditional karate-do. In the twentieth century, the styles which can be traced to Mr. Kanryo Higaonna were spread to every inhabited continent on the globe. His teachings now reach millions of people who train in karate-do in the twenty-first century. There are few other individuals in the history of karate-do whose influence is so pervasive.

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[i]Higaonna, Morio: *The History of Karate*: page 10

[ii]Higaonna, Morio: *The History of Karate*: page 9

[iii]Higaonna, Morio: *The History of Karate*: page 10

[iv]Higaonna, Morio: *The History of Karate*: pages 13-14

[v]Miyazato Eiichi: *Okinawan Den Goju Ryu Karate-do*: pages 20-21

[vi]Higaonna, Morio: *The History of Karate*: page 13

[vii]Higaonna, Morio: *The History of Karate*: pages 13-18

[viii]Higaonna, Morio: *The History of Karate*: page 18

[ix]Higaonna, Morio: *The History of Karate*: page 20

[x]Higaonna, Morio: *The History of Karate*: page 26

[xi]Higaonna, Morio: *The History of Karate*: page 24

[xii]Higaonna, Morio: *The History of Karate*: page 16

[xiii]Cook, Harry: *Cook, Harry: Shotokan Karate*, page 7

[xiv]McKenna, Mario: *Dragon Times*: Vol. 17 page 9

[xv]McKenna, Mario: *Classical Fighting Arts*, (Issue #44) page 51

[xvi]Higaonna, Morio: *The History of Karate*: page 51