

Shin-gi-tai Karate Clubs

China vs Empty Hand

Background:

The kanji characters for Karate are currently interpreted as 'Empty Hand' which leads many to claim that karate is a non weapons based system. Much is made of the skills you will achieve in karate that negates the need for weapons. Others will claim that a set of weapons are traditional Okinawan and were always a part of karate.. Refer to the arguments about whether Funakoshi knew and practice Kobudo.

Some say that the term 'Empty' is actually referring to our intent when faced with aggression or any other daily situation. Personally I prefer this and it is in line with my beliefs of karate as a system and way of life.

However, we have to accept that most of the karate in Okinawa was heavily influenced by Chinese visitors and that karate was often referred to as 'China Hand'.

Another fact to bear in mind is the dislike of taking Chinese arts by the Japanese and the parallel desire of the Okinawan master to make their art survive by promoting it to the Japanese mainland.

So What Happened?:

There is certainly evidence to indicate that the transfer of Karate to mainland Japan was the time that the Kanji was changed 'for good'.

They key meetings in Okinawa in which the future of karate was decided were held in 1935/6 and there was a strong move to change everything to suit the Japanese. Chogun Miyagi was the notable exception to the support of this trend. However 'Empty Hand' rather than 'China Hand' was the way to go. There were also discussions on creating new kata for the new system to be promoted in Japan.. Unfortunately no documentation was created to help modern day karateka realise which were the old useable kata and which were those created to be acceptable to the Japanese.

Although this is a common acceptance of the when and why the name changed, we should bear in mind the research output offered by Bob McMahon in the SRSI;

'Itosu was assisted by Hanashiro Chomo and Kentsu Yabu in developing the Martial Art program for the Schools. In 1905, Hanashiro wrote a book on Kumite (Kumite-Hen?) where he used the kanji that could be translated as 'Empty'. Funakoshi may have popularized the term 'karate = empty hand' and he did use it in his 1935 'Karate-Do Kyohan' but he was not the first to publish the term anyway. I guess it is possible that a number of people had the same idea. Funakoshi's idea of 'empty' was perhaps more philosophical than

Hanashiro's pragmatic approach. Itosu first referred to his program as Toudi, i.e. China-Hand. Mitani felt that Hanashiro would not have used the term 'empty hand' without the blessing of Itosu.'

Conclusions:

It would seem that although the 1930's was credited with the adoption of the new name, it had been in use within certain circles before that and may well have been a natural evolution of naming.

References:

Besides a lot of information provided to me via e-mail and through web research, we also have the following reference points;

1. Documents from the Shotokan Research Society International
2. Communications from Joe Swift and Steve Attewell

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