

The earliest origins of karate are traceable to the island of Okinawa in the late fourteenth century (using European dating), when migrants from southern China (the so-called 'thirty-six families') settled in Kume village in the port city of Naha. ('Thirty-six,' by the way, is probably only a figure of speech for 'many.')

These newcomers brought with them a range of martial techniques which, absorbed into the native practices of Okinawa, formed what is generally called tode (唐手) – 'T'ang hand' or 'China hand' – or Okinawa-te (沖縄手). The various forms of tode that emerged in different locations – Shuri te (首里手), Naha te (那覇手) and Tomari te (泊手) – are the ancestors of all modern karate 'schools' or 'styles' (ryuha: 流派).

The history of Goju Ryu itself begins with Higaonna Kanryo (東恩納 寛量) (1853–1916) (his Okinawan name is pronounced 'Higashionna' in Japanese; he is not related to the contemporary Goju Ryu teacher Higaonna Morio (東恩納 盛男)).



Higaonna Kanryo

Higaonna was born into a commercial family in the Nishimura district of Naha City. At the age of fourteen or fifteen he began to study Lohan quan ('Monk Fist') with a teacher called Aragaki Seisho (新垣 世璋) (1840–1918). Aragaki was an official interpreter at the Okinawan royal court who had studied in Fuzhou City, Fujian province, with a teacher called Wai Xinxian (variously Wang Daxing; Wang Shijiang; Wang Yuedang; Wai Shinzan (1793?–1894?)) – possibly the same Wai Xinxian that some sources identify as a teacher of 'Bushì' Matsumura Sokon (松村 宗棍) (1809?–1896?). (Wai Xinxian apparently also came to Okinawa twice, 1838 and 1866 as the military arts executive accompanying representatives of the Chinese government.) Highly regarded in his day, Aragaki's students are said to have included Funakoshi Gichin (船越 義珍) (1868–1957), Mabuni Kenwa (摩文仁 賢和) (1859–1952) and Uechi

Kanbun (上地 完文). (1877–1948). It is possible that Higaonna learnt Sanchin and Seisan kata from him: Higaonna is usually said to have learnt Sanchin in China, but Aragaki was certainly teaching it on Okinawa during the 1860s and 1870s.

In March 1873 Higaonna travelled to Fuzhou, possibly taking with him a letter of introduction to Wai Xinxian from Aragaki. Some sources say that he remained in China for fifteen years or more, though according to others he was there only for three. Some say that he went to China on business or specifically to study the martial arts; others suggest that his anti-Japanese sympathies made it prudent to go into exile at a time of political tension between Okinawa and Japan. He appears to have trained in a number of schools with several teachers, but his principal teacher is usually identified, under variant forms of his name, as Ru Ru Kyo, Ryu Ryu Ko, To Ru Ko, Liu Liu Gung, Liu Liu Ko or To Ru Ko. Higaonna never wrote this person's name down and there has been a certain amount of speculation as to who he was. One widely accepted suggestion is that he was Xie Zhongxiang (1852–1930), the founder of the Fujian Whooping Crane method of quanfa, who was apparently known by the alias or nickname Xie Ru Ru or Ru Ru Ko. The legend is that Higaonna rescued Xie Zhongxiang's daughter from a disastrous flood and, in gratitude, Xie Zhongxiang accepted him as a pupil. This, however, is the kind of folklore motif that it is impossible to authenticate. Another suggestion is that Ru Ru Kyo is in fact the Chinese form (or a Chinese pronunciation) of Higaonna's own name, 'Kanryo.' If this is so, the idea of a separate teacher called Ru Ru Kyo may be a mistake arising from a simple misunderstanding.

Higaonna returned to Okinawa in the 1880s and began to teach a style combining his earlier knowledge of Okinawa te with the Fujian White Crane methods that he had acquired in China. According to his student Kyoda Juhatsu (許田 重發) (1887–1968) Higaonna taught four kata: Sanchin, Sanseiryu, Seisan and Pechurin/Suparinpai). It seems likely, however, that the earliest versions of these kata were somewhat different from the ones practised today.



Xie Zhongxiang, possibly Higaonna Kanryo's teacher in China

The immediate founder of Goju Ryu, Miyagi Chojun (宮城 長順) (1888–1953), was born in the Higashimachi district of Naha. When he was ten or eleven years old he began to study with a Tomari te practitioner called Aragaki Ryuko (新垣隆功)(1875–1961) (apparently unrelated to Aragaki Seisho) who in 1902 introduced him to Higaonna Kanryo. Apart from a two-year period of military service during 1910–1912, Miyagi remained with Higaonna until the latter's death in 1915. During his military service he studied judo and, as a non-commissioned officer in the army medical corps, acquired a knowledge of anatomy and physiology that he was later to put to use in devising the routine of junbi undo (準備運動) – warm-up or conditioning exercises – that is still used by Goju Ryu karateka. It is said that, after Higaonna's death, Miyagi learnt Kururunfa, Saifa, Seiunchin, Seipai and Shisochin kata from Motobu Choyu (本部朝勇) (1857–1928), the older brother of Motobu Choki (本部朝基). (1870–1944).

Shortly before Higaonna's death Miyagi travelled to China with a Chinese companion, a wealthy tea merchant called Wu Xiangui (1886–1940), known in Okinawa as Gokenki. Gokenki was an exponent of Fujian White Crane quanfa who had migrated to Okinawa from Fuzhou in 1912 (the kata Kakufa, preserved in the Goju Ryu of Higa Seko (比嘉 世幸) (1898–1966) is believed to have been taught or created by Gokenki). On this occasion Miyagi remained in Fujian province for some time, and is said to have studied baguazhang and Shaolin quan there. Some sources say that he visited China three times in all.



Miyagi Chojun

On his return to Okinawa, Miyagi began to teach a synthesis of tode and what he had acquired in China: a combination of the existing Naha te with the hard, linear techniques of Shaolin quan and the soft circular defensive movements of baguazhang. In 1926, with the financial assistance of Gokenki, he opened a dojo in

Naha City. His partners in this venture were Hanashiro Chomo (花城 長茂) (1869–1930?), Motobu Choyu and Mabuni Kenwa (摩文仁 賢和) (1889–1952). Each of the four taught his own version of tode, with additional instruction in Fujian White Crane provided by Gokenki. This dojo was short lived, however, succumbing to financial difficulties in 1929.

The name Goju Ryu came into being more or less by accident. In 1929, Miyagi's protégé Shinzato Jinan (新里仁安(1900–1945)) gave a demonstration of Miyagi's art at a festival in Japan. He was taken aback to be asked what the name of his school was – because no one had thought to give it a name. On the spur of the moment – presumably for the sake of saying something rather than nothing – he replied that it was called Hanko Ryu (半硬流) ('Half-hard school'). When he told this story to Miyagi, Miyagi decided on the name Goju Ryu ('Hard/Soft School'). The name comes from the third of eight principles of quanfa listed in the ancient Chinese martial arts manual called (in Japanese) *Bubishi* (武備志): 'hou go ju don to' (法剛柔吞吐). (The literal meaning of this phrase is 'The method of hard and soft is drinking and vomiting.' Since this is obviously not the intended meaning, it can be more sensibly translated into English as 'The method of hard and soft is breathing in and breathing out' or (perhaps better), 'The method of hard and soft is entering and withdrawing.' Goju Ryu was the name that Miyagi Chojun registered with the Dai Nippon Butoku Kai in 1933.

What we now know as Goju Ryu karate may thus be said to stand on four foundations:

The pre-existing martial arts of Okinawa generically called tode

The techniques of Wai Shinzan transmitted to Higaonna Kanryo by Aragaki Seisho

Techniques acquired by Higaonna in China, whether from 'Ru Ru Ko' or others

Techniques acquired by Miyagi Chojun in China and perhaps from Gokenki

Techniques acquired by Miyagi Chojun from Motobu Choyo

Techniques developed by Miyagi Chojun himself

The heart of Goju Ryu as currently practised consists of twelve kata, usually but not invariably taught in the following order:

Sanchin

Gekisai dai ichi

Gekisai dai ni

Saifa
Seiunchin
Shisochin
Sanseiryu
Seipai
Kururunfa
Seisan
Suparinpai
Tensho

We shall consider these kata and the various ways in which their names are written in Japanese in another section.