

Book Title

The Path of Karate-Dō

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Dedicated to Sensei Nelson Carrión, who has taught me to observe attentively, to learn with humility, to understand deeply, and to act with determination; always progressing within one's own limits, without ever losing sight of the true purpose: to continue walking the path.

A path which, incidentally, began in Paysandú in 1987, alongside Sensei Julio Campopiano. This book is dedicated to him as well, because somehow that small photograph of Funakoshi in his Goshin-Dō dojo remains engraved in my memory.

Oss

Special Acknowledgment

My special thanks go to Sensei Salvador Herráiz, an essential reference in the historical research of Karate-Dō.

His work—and especially his documentary on the one hundred years of the Mita dōjō at Keio University—helped guide many of my questions and opened essential paths for this research and for the novels *Walking Upright*, *Bushi: The Guardian of Shuri*, and *Waka-sensei*.

Oss.

The Path of Karate-Dō

*A Historical-Narrative Essay
on the Origins of Karate-Dō*

Milton Chanes

Foreword

There is a particular feeling—difficult to name—that returns from time to time, and which I suspect we have all felt at some point. I am referring to the need to tell a story. It has accompanied me for years. Even when I wrote technical books about software for architecture and engineering, somehow there was a story beating beneath every manual. They were not simple instructions, or at least I did not intend them to be. My goal was for the reader to be able to transform, page by page, into someone more capable, more experienced, more in command of their craft. I wrote several of them convinced that such an effect was possible, although I was never entirely satisfied with the result.

I then tried online courses, videos and thousands of blog articles, looking for the perfect setting where a story could finally be told as I imagined it. It took me time to understand that beneath all those attempts there was a single impulse, which was simply to tell stories. With no further justification than that.

Vanity, I suppose, led me to dream that perhaps one day I would be able to tell a story capable of transporting the reader into an imaginary world. I have not lost hope of achieving it.

I will always remember with particular affection the first time I read *I, Robot* and the *Foundation* saga, by Isaac

Asimov; also the impact of more concentrated, but equally absorbing works, such as *Stories of Love, Madness and Death*, by Horacio Quiroga, or the stories of Edgar Allan Poe¹. Each book affects us differently depending on the age and the moment in which it is read. When I discovered *Foundation*, at ten or eleven years old, it produced in me a very different effect from the one it had when I reread it close to the age of forty. Although I knew the story, my relationship with the world, with science and with ideas had changed.

Even so, what those books—and many others—taught me, before any technique, was a way of looking. Asimov showed me that logic could also be a form of poetry; that a theorem taken to its ultimate narrative consequences could move us as much as a poem. Quiroga, on the other hand, taught me that nature is not scenery, but can be another character and, at times, the cruellest of all. Poe left me with the certainty that horror is not born from what is shown, but from what is suggested.

There were other readings, closer in geography and blood, that marked me in another way. Mario Benedetti taught me that everyday life—an office, a café, a farewell on a

¹ *I, Robot* (1950) and *Foundation* (1951) are works by Isaac Asimov, two fundamental pillars of twentieth-century Anglo-American science fiction. *Stories of Love, Madness and Death* (1917) is by the Uruguayan writer Horacio Quiroga (1878–1937), a master of the Río de la Plata short story, deeply influenced by Edgar Allan Poe and by the harshness of the Misiones jungle, where he lived and wrote a large part of his work.

platform—could contain all the material of a novel, as long as one learned to look with enough patience. And *Open Veins of Latin America*, by Eduardo Galeano, gave me something that no history manual had managed to give me, and I mean the conviction that denunciation and essay can also be built as a story, with characters, tension and a voice that does not hide its presence. Galeano taught me that writing about what is real, when done with narrative skill, is no less literature than writing about what is imagined.

Borges wrote that reading is an operation subsequent to writing, much more resigned, more civil and more intellectual. I believe, however, that for a writer in formation, reading and writing are the same operation divided into two moments. Learning and execution, like a *kata*. What is read with passion ends up being written with discipline, years later and, many times, without one even noticing it.

Every story is, deep down, a conversation with the books that formed us. That conversation is the one I try to transcribe in these pages. It is also the one I had to sustain with the documentation I gathered while researching for my novels about **Matsumura Sōkon**, **Gichin Funakoshi** and his son, **Gigō Funakoshi**.

Over the years I have written several dozen short stories. Some saw the light through Amazon; others remain stored away, perhaps waiting to become a novel one day. I have also tried essays and philosophical texts that will probably never be published, in addition to the almost twenty technical manuals

that gave me, for years, the craft of writing every day. I also had a technical blog that came to gather more than two thousand articles. What a way of writing... and to think that no text has yet managed to silence my need to tell a story.

I also keep the vague, almost endearing memory of something prior to all that, I mean a notebook with a little more than one hundred poems written during adolescence, probably lost in some drawer in Paysandú.

We are the result of the stories we have lived. Books also allow us to live the stories of others through their words. Every novel tells a particular story, filtered through the gaze of the person who writes it; a gaze which, in turn, is inevitably crossed by their own experience.

While I was documenting **Funakoshi's** life, threads began to appear that led towards many other stories. Of all of them I chose three, although I confess that perhaps there is a fourth waiting for certain events to happen.

This book is a historical essay. It brings together, orders and narrates the material I studied to write the "*Walking Upright*" trilogy, which includes the books *Walking Upright*, *Bushi: The Guardian of Shuri* and *Waka-sensei*, accompanied by quotations, explanations and references to original sources.

It is, in a way, the framework that supports the novels, but also an autonomous book, intended for those who wish to look into the real history that exists behind the fiction. It does not intend to offer a definitive history of *Karate-Dō*, nor to resolve all the contradictions surrounding its past. The history

of Okinawa and *Karate* has been built from documents, memories, late testimonies, traditions passed from teacher to disciple and, at times, silences that are difficult to fill. I have tried to distinguish, whenever possible, between documented facts, reasonable interpretations and legends that form part of martial memory.

I am convinced that, while reading these pages, you will discover facts that you may not have known, and I hope that some of them will surprise you as much as they surprised me when I found them for the first time. Because knowing the past of *Karate-Dō* does not consist only of gathering dates, names and techniques: it also means understanding the human chain that allowed that legacy to reach us.

How to Read This Book

Before beginning, it is worth explaining what this book is and what it is not. Because its order, its intention and its form respond to an earlier story that the reader deserves to know.

The Path of Karate-Dō was born as a working tool. For months, I have been writing a trilogy of novels based on the lives of three men: **Gichin Funakoshi**, **Sōkon Matsumura** and **Gigō Funakoshi**.

To build those novels, I needed to understand the world in which they lived. I mean the *Ryūkyū Kingdom*, *pechin* society, Shuri Castle, the secret transmission of *Tōde*, the leap to Japan, the transformation into *Karate-Dō*. For that, I needed sources. And, as I gathered them, studied them and compared them, I began to realise that this material—ordered, refined and explained—had value in itself. This book is the result of that work, that is, the historical framework on which the novels are built, now turned into a text that can be read independently.

That is why its structure follows a specific order. It is not an arbitrary order, but the journey I myself had to make in order to understand the path from the origins of *Tōde* to its expansion, its dissemination and its transformation into

Karate-Dō. To understand why an Okinawan martial art came to be practised all over the planet, it is first necessary to understand the historical moment of each stage, and how that moment may have influenced the people who brought about the change.

Each of them, intentionally or not, took one more step towards the point where we find ourselves today; each did what they believed was best with the information they had. And all of that has reached us charged with a symbolism that often exceeds our own logic, even when dealing, as we are, with different cultures and periods very far removed from one another.

It is important for me to be clear about one delicate point: the dates. Many of the stories told here allow for more than one dating. The life of **Sakugawa**, that of **Matsumura**, the years of the journeys to China, the ages at which the first meetings took place between masters and disciples. Almost everything is wrapped in a mist of contradictory versions. When writing the novels, I had to choose the dating that seemed to fit best with the rest, constantly moving from back to front and from front to back, checking that each chosen date was compatible with all the others. It was not easy. In this book I have kept that same criterion, indicating, when necessary, that other possibilities exist. The expert reader will recognise the choices; anyone approaching this for the first time simply needs to know that behind each date there is a reasoned decision, not an absolute certainty.

And here I come to the most important point. This book is an essay. And, as such, it does not attempt to say how things were, but to explain how they may have happened. To highlight facts that seem important in this long transformation. To observe which connections make sense, which threads link an old **Bushi** of *Shuri Castle* to a frail child from *Yamakawa*; and that child to the millions of people who practise *karate* around the world today.

I do not offer fixed truths; at most, I offer a way of looking. At most—and that would already be enough—this book aspires to inspire the reader to continue searching for their own path.

A practical note on the footnotes. Throughout the text, I have added numbered references that attempt to explain a name, a place, a term, a concept. My criterion has been to explain each thing only once.

Ideally, that explanation would always appear the first time the term is mentioned, and most of the time that is what happens.

But sometimes context takes precedence. There are concepts that carry more weight in a later chapter than in the one where they first appear, and in those cases I preferred to place the explanation where it is most useful. For that reason, it is possible that a term is first mentioned in passing and explained in detail later on, or that it reappears with greater depth when the narrative requires it.

Is any note missing? It is possible. In a text that spans centuries, cultures and hundreds of proper names, it is almost inevitable that something may have escaped me, even if it is only a simple clarification. But I am sure that someone will let me know—this is how the transmission of knowledge works, yesterday and today—and I will be able to correct and improve it in future editions.

All that remains is to hope that the journey is worthwhile. And, before leaving you with it, one final reflection.

Think for a moment that you—as a karateka, whether you have been in this for one week or forty years on the path—are the owner of the entire history of *karate*. It belongs to all of us. All of it, without exception. For better and for worse.

Because bad things have happened. Not because of the art itself, because a martial art cannot contain evil; it is only a way of moving the body and educating the spirit. But they happened around it. *Karate* was born and grew almost in secret, among small groups in Okinawa, and ended up becoming one of the most important martial arts in Japan and in the world. There was a specific historical moment that made it possible, a moment that was not good.

Karate had nothing to do with that; but the truth is that it was that moment which made it grow and spread. That is an uncomfortable truth that should be faced directly and not hidden.

And, precisely because of that, it is even more important to understand why **Funakoshi**—and his contemporary

masters, and those who came before him—insisted that the first thing one had to overcome was one's own self. That *karate* had to be, before anything else, an inner struggle. It is a profoundly deep thought, because it was born precisely in an age in which the exact opposite was happening.

An age of outward strength, expansion and conquest. In the middle of all that, a handful of men decided that the true combat was that of each person against themselves. It is no small thing. It is, perhaps, the most valuable thing they left us.

That is why I ask something of you. Take on the responsibility of carrying this art beyond movement. The path we walk today was already walked before us. It is there. It must not be forgotten, nor should it be embellished or made more beautiful than it was. But it must be looked at honestly, and we must think that it can still be made better.

That, and no other, is the path.

Oss.

Introduction

When I began writing about **Gichin Funakoshi**², I was actually preparing the thesis for my *4th Dan* examination in *Traditional Karate-Dō*. I had no intention of writing a novel.

The documentation, however, kept growing. Every time I tried to go deeper into one detail, another book appeared, and another, and another. At some point I understood that this—this overwhelming accumulation of sources—was the beginning of something different. My thesis would focus on why *Tōde* became *Karate*, and this, in turn, *Karate-Dō*. It started from a clear idea: **Funakoshi** never founded a style, although some of his students did.

While looking for information, I discovered the immense universe that exists around his figure, where sources copy one another and very often begin with an initial mistake, especially on social media. When I see, again and again, the photograph of the *Kōdōkan Dōjō*³ —the one belonging to

² **Gichin Funakoshi** (1868–1957), an Okinawan master regarded as the principal introducer of Karate to mainland Japan. He founded the first dōjō in Tokyo dedicated to this art. Some of his students went on to create styles, among them Shōtōkan.

³ **Dōjō Kōdōkan** (講道館), the principal headquarters of Judo, founded by Jigoro Kano in 1882. After several relocations over the decades, its contemporary headquarters in Bunkyo, Tokyo, dates from 1958; none of the original buildings has survived. It is frequently mistaken on social media for the Shōtōkan Dōjō.

Jigoro Kano⁴—presented as if it were the *Shōtōkan Dōjō*, I understand the extent to which basic information is missing from public circulation. It is likely that the striking nature of the *Judo dōjō*, especially when seen from outside, from the courtyard that leads to its entrance, has taken in the collective imagination the place of what a *dōjō* as important as the *Shōtōkan* should have looked like—at least in the imagination of those of us who practise this style.

The *Shōtōkan dōjō*, however, was simpler and was located at the rear of **Funakoshi**'s house in Tokyo. In fact, we know its interior from widely circulated photographs; I have even reconstructed its possible dimensions by combining those images, artificial-intelligence tools and a *CAD program* such as *ARES Commander*.

For a practitioner of *Shōtōkan Karate-Dō*, I want to begin by saying two things that may determine whether they continue with this book or not.

First, **Funakoshi** never founded a style of *Karate*. For him—and he maintained this until the last of his days—*Karate* was one single art.

Second, *Shōtōkan* as a style has a foundation much more closely linked to his son **Gigō—Waka-sensei**—than to his father, perhaps in similar proportions. But neither was he

⁴ **Jigoro Kano** (1860–1938), educator and founder of Judo. His work was key to the modernisation of Japanese martial arts and opened the institutional path that Funakoshi would later follow to introduce Karate in Japan.

the one who created it as a formal style; that would come later, in the hands of his disciples.

This book intends to take you on a journey from Okinawa to post-war Japan, in order to understand how that journey influenced *Karate-Dō*⁵ much more than **Funakoshi** himself could have done. We will meet many characters whose history is inscribed in the art we practise.

Thus, you will reach the conclusion that, although many modern styles exist, they all share a common origin. Art, as such, implies the interpretation of the artist. Their point of view, when it is profound and can be explained and synthesised, becomes a school—as happens with painting, music and sculpture. To carry out the project, I defined a chronology and the way in which the characters would appear in the narrative. When I had everything mapped out, I realised that a connecting thread was missing. That thread, almost without effort, revealed itself, and it was the *Shōtōkan Dōjō*⁶.

⁵ **Karate-Dō** (“the way of the empty hand”, 空手道), the evolved form of Karate after the suffix *Dō* was added, designating a path of personal refinement. It marks the transformation of the martial art into an integral formative discipline.

⁶ **Shōtōkan Dōjō** (松濤館), the first independent building constructed by Funakoshi as his own *dōjō* in Japan. Officially inaugurated in 1939 with financial support from the politician and Karate enthusiast Kichinosuke Saigō, it was destroyed during the Allied bombing of Tokyo in 1945. It should be clarified that the institutional teaching of Karate in Japan had begun fifteen years earlier at Keio University, where Funakoshi continued to teach—alongside his work at other universities—even after the opening of the *Shōtōkan*.

Its symbolism, I understood, transcends the style that bears its name. What remained of the *dōjō* after the American bombings of Japan in 1945 thus became the point from which the story would be told. From there, everything flowed. It was exciting to see how each piece fell into place and how all this material gave rise to the trilogy made up of the following books:

- *Walking Upright*.
- *Bushi: The Guardian of Shuri*.
- *Waka-sensei*.

Ultimately, it is a trilogy that tells how *Tōde* became *Karate-Dō*. The influence of China and Japan on Okinawa through **Matsumura Sōkon**⁷, and how that transformed *Tōde*. The role—so often ignored—of *Shuri Castle* in **Matsumura**’s formation and in an Okinawan culture that ended up defining many of the things we now take for granted in *Karate*. The way in which all that heritage reached **Funakoshi**’s hands and how he brought it to mainland Japan, in his personal struggle to find a place where he could demonstrate and teach his art. And,

⁷ **Matsumura Sōkon** (c. 1797–1889), an Okinawan martial arts master regarded as a central figure in the transmission of *Tōde* and a key link between Chinese martial traditions and modern *Karate*. He served at *Shuri Castle* under the last three kings of the *Ryūkyū Kingdom*. A disciple of *Tōde Sakugawa* and the teacher, among others, of *Ankō Asato* and *Ankō Itosu*, *Gichin Funakoshi*’s two principal instructors.

finally, the arrival of **Gigō**⁸, who—after training with other masters as well—brought a young and energetic perspective that modernised the martial art and transformed it forever. You yourselves will reach these conclusions, and others, after reading the documentation I have gathered in these pages. The first of them, *Walking Upright*, allowed me to articulate a much broader range of themes than I had anticipated.

Each chapter left a door open to another. The book tells the life of **Gichin Funakoshi** and the events that shaped *Karate-Dō*; some decisive, others apparently minor. And yet, when studied together, it becomes evident that many things could have happened in a completely different way.

The *Karate-Dō* we know today exists because certain circumstances aligned at a very precise moment. Ten years earlier—or ten years later—they probably would not have found an echo.

⁸ (**Gigō**) **Yoshitaka Funakoshi** (1906–1945), known as Gigō, the third son of Gichin and Gozei Funakoshi and a decisive figure in the technical transformation of modern Karate-Dō. Called Waka-sensei—“the young master”—by his students, in contrast to the Rō-sensei—“the old master”—as they referred to his father. Diagnosed with tuberculosis at the age of seven and given little hope by doctors before reaching the age of twenty, he devoted his life to the development of the art, introducing elements such as low stances, high kicks—mawashi-geri, yoko-geri, ushiro-geri—and the more dynamic forms of combat that today characterise the Shōtōkan style. His death on 24 November 1945, only a few months after the destruction of the Shōtōkan Dōjō, marked the premature end of an unfinished body of work. His life is the subject of the third novel in the trilogy, *Waka-sensei*.

When I finished that book, I understood that although **Ankō Asato** ⁹ and **Ankō Itosu** ¹⁰ directly influenced **Funakoshi** and his way of thinking, both masters also held different visions on essential matters. Yet they shared a common origin: **Matsumura Sōkon**. That contradiction intrigued me. If **Asato** and **Itosu** had received the same teachings, how was it possible that they reached such different conclusions? When observing the path of other disciples of **Matsumura**, all with their own paths, the question became even more interesting. Or perhaps, after all, were they not as different as they seemed?

That doubt led me to study **Matsumura Sōkon**, and the research proved fascinating. Not only because of the documented facts, but because of the stories surrounding him, clearly exaggerated, yet all supported by the same idea: that of

⁹ **Ankō Asato** (1827–1906), an Okinawan master of Tōde, a member of the noble pechin class and a direct disciple of Matsumura Sōkon. He served at the court of King Shō Tai as a military assistant and, after Japan's annexation of Okinawa in 1879, kept the traditional teaching of the art alive within a small circle of disciples. He was Gichin Funakoshi's first teacher, transmitting to him a vision of Tōde based on technical precision, moral rigour and economy of movement.

¹⁰ **Ankō Itosu** (1831–1915), an Okinawan master of Tōde, also a direct disciple of Matsumura Sōkon. Considered the father of modern Karate for his decisive contribution to the introduction of the art into Okinawa's school system from 1901 onwards, where he adapted traditional techniques so that they could be taught to large groups of students. Creator of the Pinan kata (五本の平安) and a reformer of the method of transmission, he was Gichin Funakoshi's second great teacher and represented, in contrast to Asato, a more expansive and pedagogical vision of Karate.

an extraordinary man, capable of extraordinary feats. A singular, almost mythical character, who profoundly transformed his way of seeing and doing as he travelled, discovered new places and encountered other masters.

And from there, almost inevitably, came the need to understand his own master: **Tōde Sakugawa**¹¹. Here the task becomes more elusive. The historical man fades away, and what remains is, above all, the legend. To that difficulty are added the contradictions in dates, which appear again and again in every document. Even so, the search was fascinating; hundreds—thousands, in truth—of pages read, annotated and compared.

I even built a timeline in a spreadsheet in order to place each event in its precise context.

This could not have happened here, because the scene speaks of his wife, and according to that date he had not yet married. This could have happened here, because even though the date does not match, the characters do.

Can the dates be wrong? Yes. And often they are. The same event appears, depending on the source, with dates that are impossible to reconcile: from his birth to his death, passing

¹¹ **Kanga "Tōde" Sakugawa** (1786–1867, according to Herráiz's dating; other sources propose 1733–1815 or 1733–1857), an Okinawan master regarded as one of the foundational figures in the Tōde lineage. His nickname, Tōde—"Chinese hand"—reflects his long period of study with Chinese masters, particularly the military official Kūshankū. He served at Shuri Castle during the Ryūkyū Kingdom and was the direct teacher of Matsumura Sōkon, placing him as a historical link between Chinese martial arts and the Okinawan tradition.

through almost any episode in between. Yet there is one fact on which all accounts agree: **Matsumura Sōkon** served at the castle under three kings—the last *three kings of Ryūkyū*¹². **Sakugawa** also served at the castle, but he probably coincided with only one or two of them. What appeared to be a minor detail ended up being decisive in establishing the period. It made it possible to discard certain dates, validate others, and reorganise the chronology until everything fit within the narrative I finally told in *Bushi: The Guardian of Shuri*.

There are things, of course, that it is impossible to know with certainty. And that is where the writer's imagination comes in. Not to invent, but to sustain the continuity of the narrative when the documents fall silent.

From those original notes, many stories began to emerge, although only three became novels.

Waka-sensei, the third of them—which will be published shortly after this book—is dedicated to the life of **Yoshitaka Funakoshi**. His father, and the family in general, called him **Gigō**. His students, many of them shared with his

¹² **Shō Kō** (尚灝), **Shō Iku** (尚育) y **Shō Tai** (尚泰) –were the last three kings of the Ryūkyū Kingdom under whom Matsumura Sōkon served at Shuri Castle. The character 尚 (*Shō*), shared by the monarchs of the dynasty, was granted by the Chinese Ming court to Shō Hashi after the unification of the archipelago in 1429, and it remained the royal surname for more than four centuries. During the reign of Shō Tai, the last monarch of the dynasty, Japan abolished the kingdom in 1879 and turned it into the Prefecture of Okinawa.

father, distinguished him as **Waka-sensei**¹³: the “*young master*”, in clear contrast to the **Rō-sensei**¹⁴, the “*old master*”, as they called **Gichin**.

The novel seeks to close many of the questions left open in the account of the life of **Gichin Funakoshi**, his father and teacher.

What was initially born as a narrative exercise became, almost without my noticing it, something different. We could say that it is a way of giving voice back to a figure whom the official history of *Karate-Dō* has treated, for too long, with an unjust silence.

Writing historical fiction requires accepting certain liberties. But there comes a moment when real history—the documented, verifiable history—becomes so complex, so rich and so unavoidable that it no longer accepts remaining in the background. I then understood that I was not gathering information for a novel. Rather, I was entering a network of

¹³ **Waka-sensei** (若先生), literally “the young master”, was the name by which the students of the Shōtōkan Dōjō referred to Yoshitaka—Gigō—Funakoshi when he taught alongside his father. In contrast, Gichin was called Rō-sensei (老先生), “the venerable master”. This pair of names expressed the daily life of the dōjō: the father embodied tradition, while the son drove the technical innovations that would eventually define modern Shōtōkan. It is also the title of the third novel in the trilogy.

¹⁴ **Ro-sensei vs. O-sensei**. During his lifetime, Gichin Funakoshi was called Rō-sensei (老先生), “the venerable master”, by his disciples, in contrast to his son Gigō, known as Waka-sensei (若先生), “the young master”. The title Ō-sensei, “great master” or “patriarchal master”, became widespread mainly after his death, when his figure was consolidated as a moral reference of modern Karate-Dō.

events, places and people connected to one another with a precision difficult to attribute to chance.

The history of *Shuri Castle*. The cultural transformation of Okinawa. The evolution of *Tōde* under masters such as **Kanga (Tōde) Sakugawa** or **Ankō Itosu**. The arrival of the art in mainland Japan. Its entry into university environments such as *Keio University*¹⁵. None of this happened in isolation. Each piece pushed the next. Each individual decision—of a master, a student, an institution—opened the path to something greater.

Over time, my working files ceased to be simple notes. They became thousands of pages of references, quotations, articles, documents and reflections. Material which, in itself, contained a story different from those I had written until then: the story behind all the stories.

This book is born from that need. It does not seek to establish an absolute truth or impose a definitive interpretation. It aspires, I believe, to something more honest: to show the path that was travelled.

¹⁵ Keio University (慶應義塾大学, Keiō Gijuku Daigaku), founded in 1858 by Fukuzawa Yukichi, was key to the legitimisation of Karate within the Japanese academic sphere. Although Professor Shinyō Kasuya asked Gichin Funakoshi to establish a *dōjō* in 1922, the project was delayed by the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923. Finally, on 15 October 1924, the Keio Karate Club was officially founded, becoming the first university Karate club in Japan. Its creation marked the transition of Okinawan *Tōde* from a regional art to national recognition, encouraging the emergence of clubs at universities such as Tōdai, Waseda and Takushoku in the following years.

The reader will find here sources, connections, questions and, why not say it, doubts. They will find names, dates and contexts. I have also added notes, clarifications and very detailed information about places, characters and events. But, above all, they will find a way of looking. Because if this process made one thing clear to me, it is that *Karate-Dō*—like so many other traditions—cannot be understood only through its techniques. It is the result of a much deeper cultural, political and human network. And, above all, it is the consequence of a series of encounters that, seen in perspective, seem to have been inevitable.

Perhaps that is the most important idea this book offers: Nothing, in truth, has been accidental. Or has it?

Part I

Origins

Chapter 1

The Origin of Karate-Dō

There is something curious about the origin of *Karate-Dō*; the more one researches it, the later it appears. Not the art itself—that is ancient—but its name. What we write today as “empty hand” is, paradoxically, the most recent layer of this entire story.

The reader probably knows the account, or has heard one of the many versions that exist about how Chinese hand became empty hand, and when. The truth is that the date itself matters little. In fact, as we approach that point, we will see that what matters is not when the change took place, nor who formalised it, but why it happened.

The change was not a graphic whim or an isolated decision. It responded to something broader: the need to present an Okinawan practice to mainland Japan, adapt it to its martial language and, at the same time, preserve part of its identity. And here it is useful to retain an idea that will reappear throughout the book: many Japanese names are chosen precisely because they allow more than one meaning at the same time. In the case of *karate*, the pronunciation did not change; the kanji that represented it changed. *China* was replaced by *emptiness*: the same sound, but another meaning.

This point often causes confusion, so it is worth explaining it in the simplest possible way.

Japanese characters do not have a fixed pronunciation. The same kanji may be read in different ways depending on the word, the period or the linguistic tradition used.

The character 唐 can be read *kara* or *tō*. In this context, it refers to China—more precisely, to the *Tang dynasty* and, by extension, to what comes from China. The character 空 can also be read *kara*, but it means “*empty*” or “*emptiness*”.

For that reason, the expression 唐手 allowed two readings: either *karate*, through a Japanese reading (*kara-te*, literally “*Chinese hand*”), or *Tōde*—or, in a transcription closer to Okinawan pronunciation, *tōdī* / *tū-dī*—through a Sino-Japanese reading adapted to Okinawa. In the latter, 唐 was pronounced *tō*, while 手, which in standard Japanese is generally read *te*, was preserved in Okinawa as *tī* or *dī*. Hence the different forms that appear in historical texts: *te*, *tī*, *Tōde*, *Tōdī*, *Tū-dī*. They do not always designate different arts; they reflect different pronunciations, contexts and systems of transcription within the same martial tradition.

Later, when 唐 was replaced by 空, the writing changed from 唐手 to 空手. The pronunciation *karate* remained, but the meaning shifted from “*Chinese hand*” to “*empty hand*”.

The first documented trace of this change leads us to a single man. The first known use of 空手—the characters for “empty hand”—is usually attributed to the Okinawan master **Chōmo Hanashiro**, who used this spelling in August 1905, in a text entitled 空手組手, *Karate Kumite*.

The title deserves clarification, because it is easy to misinterpret it through today’s eyes. In current usage, *kumite* is associated with practice against an opponent and is often translated, by sporting convention, as “combat”. But that is not a literal translation, nor does it necessarily express what the term meant in 1905, or what it preserves in *traditional karate*. The character 組 (*kumi*) refers to the idea of joining, combining or grouping; 手 (*te*) means “hand”. For that reason, it is more prudent to preserve the expression *Karate Kumite* without forcing a modern equivalent. It may be understood as a joint work of the hands within the practice of *karate*. Anyone who said that it refers to “*knowing how to work in pairs*” would not be far from the intention of the title.

It is therefore important to understand that the use of “empty hand” did not spread immediately, not even in Okinawa. **Hanashiro**’s gesture was, for years, an isolated case. The traditional spelling 唐手¹⁶, “*Chinese hand*”, remained predominant among Okinawan masters.

¹⁶ Tōde (唐手). “Tang hand” or “Chinese hand”, referring to the Tang dynasty and continental influence. In Okinawan it is pronounced *ti* or *tuudii*.

It would take almost three decades for the change to be collectively accepted on the island. It happened at the celebrated *Meeting of the Masters*¹⁷, held in Naha in 1936, where the replacement of 唐手 by 空手 was debated and publicly accepted among some of the central figures of Okinawan *karate*.

But—and here is the order that should not be confused—the first official change did not happen in Okinawa, nor in 1936. It happened earlier, and far away. It took place in mainland Japan.

It was in Mita, at *Keio University*, in Tokyo. Its protagonists were **Funakoshi** and the *Keio Karate Club*, founded there in 1924 under the name *Karate Kenkyūkai* (唐手研究会), “*Tōde Study Group*”, which still used the old character 唐 (“*Tang / China*”).

Five years later, in 1929, the club completed the transformation in two stages during the academic year. The first was one of writing.

On 15 April, the first day of practice in the new academic year, its members agreed to replace the character 唐 with its

¹⁷ The Meeting of the Masters of Naha, held on 25 October 1936 at the Shōwa Kaikan and promoted by the *Ryūkyū Shimpō*, brought together figures such as Hanashiro, Kyan, Motobu, Miyagi, Kyoda and Chibana. There, the use of the spelling 空手, “empty hand”, and the name Karate-Dō for the art was encouraged. Its proceedings were later reproduced by Kanken Tōyama. Today, that date is commemorated in Okinawa as Karate Day.

homophone 空 (“emptiness”). The pronunciation remained *karate*, but the name was stripped of its Chinese root.

The club was then written as *Karate Kenkyūkai* (空手研究会). The second stage came on 20 October, during the fifth-anniversary convention. There the suffix 道 (*dō*, “way”) was added and, for the first time, the full name was proclaimed: *Karate-Dō* (空手道), “*the way of the empty hand*”.

It is important to clarify **Funakoshi**’s role at that moment. Although he was the *Shihan* of the club, he was not the one who made the formal declaration; it was made by one of its members. But he was the one who gave it its deeper meaning. He linked the new name to the spirit of Zen and summed it up in formulations such as *Ken Zen Ichinyo* (“*the fist and Zen are one*”).

Thus, rather than merely being renamed, the art found its definitive form: a discipline and, at the same time, a path. It was the first solidly documented institutional use of the modern denomination.

*In the name **Karate Kenkyūkai**, the change lies in the Japanese spelling: the first ideogram was replaced, changing from 唐 to 空 (“empty”).*

And here something happened that goes far beyond the spelling. For **Funakoshi**, the term “emptiness” no longer meant the same thing as in **Hanashiro**’s original gesture. In that first case, the change can be read above all as a graphic and

cultural adaptation, intended to replace one character with its homophone in order to soften the Chinese trace. **Funakoshi**, on the other hand, added an explicit spiritual dimension, linking it to the Buddhist concept of emptiness (*kū*, 空) and to the *Heart Sūtra*¹⁸. The word continued to sound the same, but it came to contain something new: an idea, almost a philosophy. For all these reasons, we can state that the name karate written with the character for “emptiness” (空手) was not institutionally adopted in mainland Japan until 1929¹⁹. Before that date, what we today call *karate* was called *Tōde* (唐手, “Tang hand”), or simply *tī*, *te*²⁰. Although on the mainland it sounded the same, it was now written differently and, above all, aspired to something different.

¹⁸ The spiritual dimension of “emptiness” in Funakoshi is clearly formulated in *Karate-dō Kyōhan* (1935). There he cites the *Heart Sūtra* (*Hannya Shingyō*), a fundamental text of Mahāyāna Buddhism: “Form is emptiness; emptiness is form” (*shiki sokuze kū, kū sokuze shiki*). From this idea, he interprets the character 空 in karate beyond its literal meaning of “empty hand”: one must empty oneself of selfish and harmful thoughts in order to act with a clear mind. In this way, “emptiness” ceases to be only a linguistic matter and becomes an ethical requirement of Karate-Dō.

¹⁹ Here, “officially” refers to the first clearly documented institutional use of 空手 at a Japanese university, not to the first absolute use of the character, which had already been employed by Hanashiro in 1905. Hanashiro opened the graphic possibility; Keio turned it into an institutional and philosophical designation.

²⁰ *Tī*, *te* and *Tōde* are related terms, but they are not identical. *Tī* is the Okinawan word for the local art; *te* is the Japanese reading of the character meaning “hand”; and *Tōde* (唐手), “Chinese hand”, emphasises its connection with the continental tradition.

Three close, but not identical, terms that named different layers of the same martial tradition. An art transmitted behind closed doors, on a small island in the *Ryūkyū archipelago*. The path that led from that domestic art to a discipline recognised by the *Dai Nippon Butokukai*²¹ in 1933 was marked by the Japanisation of the *Meiji period* and by the modernisation of martial arts following the model of **Jigorō Kanō**²², founder of *Jūdō*.

However, when a practitioner today enters a *dōjō* in Paysandú, Montevideo, Madrid, Buenos Aires or Berlin, what they practise descends in large part from that tradition. How an art of the inner courtyard, taught in silence by a handful of Okinawan masters, came to become one of the most widely practised martial disciplines on the planet is the question this book attempts to address, and which my novels have been

²¹ Japanese nationalism and the “Chinese mark” of Tōde. In interwar Japan, the reference to the Tang dynasty in 唐手, “Chinese hand”, became increasingly uncomfortable as relations between Japan and China deteriorated. After the Dai Nippon Butokukai formally recognised karate in 1933, adapting its name became more necessary. By 1936, some Tokyo *dōjō* were already writing *karate* in hiragana to avoid 唐. The adoption of 空手, “empty hand”, removed the Chinese reference and gave the name a Japanese ethical and philosophical meaning.

²² Jigoro Kanō (嘉納治五郎, 1860–1938), founder of *Jūdō*, was a key figure in the modernisation of Japanese martial arts. His model of transforming a *jutsu* into a *dō* influenced the reception of Karate in Japan. He facilitated Funakoshi’s demonstration at the Kōdōkan in 1922, while *Jūdō*’s white uniform, ranking system and educational organisation provided a reference for Karate’s institutionalisation.

circling around. The answer is not one, but several, and they intertwine.

Date	Event	Historical significance
1905	Hanashiro writes 空手 in <i>Karate Kumite</i>	First known documented use
1922	Funakoshi publishes <i>Ryūkyū Kenpō Karate</i>	Funakoshi's first work in mainland Japan
1924	Foundation of Keio's <i>Karate Kenkyūkai</i>	Stable university entry in Japan
1929	Keio / Funakoshi proclaim Karate-Dō	First strong institutional use of 空手道
1933	Recognition by the Dai Nippon Butokukai	Integration into the Japanese martial system
1935	Funakoshi's <i>Karate-dō Kyōhan</i>	Written consolidation of the philosophical interpretation
1936	Meeting of masters in Naha	Collective Okinawan acceptance of the change

Table 1.1. Chronology of the change of name

Note on the Translation of *kara* (空)

Throughout this translation, the Japanese term *kara* (空) may be rendered in different ways in English, principally as *empty* or *emptiness*. This variation is not an inconsistency, but an attempt to preserve the two layers of meaning contained in the character within *Karate-Dō*.

When the text refers to the technical and literal meaning of *karate* as “*empty hand*,” *empty* is normally used: a

hand empty of weapons, not dependent on a sword, staff, or any external instrument for self-defence.

When the passage develops the moral, philosophical, or spiritual dimension associated with 空, however, *emptiness* is preferred.

In that context, it does not refer merely to material absence, but to an inner state: a mind and spirit free from selfishness, pride, violence, attachment, or harmful intent.

This distinction is particularly important in the writings of **Gichin Funakoshi**. For him, the character 空 was not to be understood only as the absence of weapons in the practitioner's hands. It also evoked an idea close to the Buddhist tradition: the emptying of the self as a condition for clarity, humility, and the proper use of strength.

For this reason, depending on the context, the translation may emphasize either the literal meaning of “*empty*” or “*unarmed*,” or its deeper dimension: that of the practitioner who seeks to empty the inner self of whatever prevents them from acting with integrity.

Both readings belong to the same character and form an inseparable part of the idea of *Karate-Dō*.

Note: Thanks Mike Leclair Sensei from Canada for the help

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Chapter 2

The Root: the Ryūkyū Kingdom and Tōde

Any serious attempt to explain the origin of *Karate-Dō* must begin in Okinawa and, more specifically, in the *Ryūkyū Kingdom*. We often say that karate comes from Okinawa, and this is not incorrect: Okinawa is the main island of the archipelago, the one that housed Shuri and its castle, and therefore had a direct and irreplaceable importance in this history. But the distinction deserves to be clarified.

When we say “Okinawa”, we name a place. When we say “*Ryūkyū Kingdom*”, we name something more: a historical moment. We do not merely place *karate* on the map—between China and Japan, at a particular point in the Pacific—but also in time, within a political entity with its own court, diplomacy and fragile independence. And it was precisely that entity—and not a simple geographical accident—that allowed the art to develop in the way it did, under highly specific circumstances.

We are speaking of a kingdom that for centuries maintained a fragile autonomy between two giants: China to the west and Japan to the north. That intermediate position was neither accidental nor anecdotal; it was decisive. From it would come everything else: the trade that enriched Shuri, the diplomacy that sent its young men to study in Fuzhou and Beijing, the martial influences that arrived from the continent,

and finally the pressure that would dissolve the kingdom and push its art towards modern Japan. *Karate* cannot be understood without that precarious balance between two empires. To begin anywhere else would be to begin too late.

Ryūkyū Kingdom

The *Ryūkyū Kingdom* (琉球王国, *Ryūkyū-ōkoku*) occupied the archipelago of the same name, a garland of more than 150 islands stretching some 1,000 kilometres between Kyūshū, Japan, and Taiwan.

The kingdom was organised around the main island—*Okinawa-hontō*, where the capital, Shuri, was located—and three major groups: the *Amami* Islands to the north, the *Miyako* Islands to the south, and the *Yaeyama* Islands at its southernmost end.

It formally existed from 1429—the year in which **Shō Hashi** (尚巴志) completed the unification of the three rival kingdoms of the Sanzan era, “the three mountains”: *Hokuzan*, *Chūzan* and *Nanzan*—until 1879, the year of the *Ryūkyū shobun* (琉球処分, “*Disposition of Ryūkyū*”), through which the Meiji government dissolved the kingdom and turned it into the Prefecture of Okinawa.

Its 450 years of existence are divided into two successive dynasties: the **First Shō Dynasty** (1406–1469), begun by **Shō Shishō**, father of **Shō Hashi**, and the **Second**

Shō Dynasty (1470–1879), founded by **Shō En** after a palace coup, during which nineteen monarchs reigned.

*It is important to distinguish between the dynasty and the kingdom. Before 1429, the island of Okinawa was divided into three rival principalities—Hokuzan in the north, Chūzan in the centre, and Nanzan in the south—during the period known as **Sanzan** (“Three Mountains”).*

The First Shō Dynasty came to power in 1406, when Shō Hashi overthrew the lord of Chūzan and installed his father, Shō Shishō, as king. At that point, however, they ruled only the central principality. It was not until 1429, after the conquest of Hokuzan in 1422 and Nanzan in 1429, that Shō Hashi unified the island under a single throne.

The last three kings of Ryūkyū were those served by **Sōkon “Bushi” Matsumura** as personal guard and chief instructor of Shuri Castle: **Shō Kō** (尚灝, r. 1804–1828), **Shō Iku** (尚育, r. 1835–1847), and **Shō Tai** (尚泰, r. 1848–1879). The latter was deposed by the Meiji government and moved to Tokyo, where he received the Japanese noble title of marquis until his death in 1901.

The dates given next to each king's name refer to the years of their actual reign, not to their lifespan, following standard historiographical convention.

In the case of **Shō Kō**, it is worth clarifying one peculiar detail: court records—the *Chūzan Seifu*—state that in 1828 he was formally forced to abdicate—according to the chronicles, because of mental illness—and that from then until his death in 1834, his son **Shō Iku** ruled *de facto* as regent, although he was not proclaimed king until 1835. From the fourteenth century onwards, Okinawa received the influence of the so-called thirty-six Chinese families (*Binjin sanjūroku sei*), established in the district of Kume, in Naha, who were responsible for diplomacy, administration and cultural transmission. With them also came technical principles which, over time, would blend with local forms of fighting.

Binjin sanjūroku sei

The “*thirty-six families*” (閩人三十六姓, *Binjin sanjūroku sei*, “*the thirty-six surnames of the people of Min*”) was the traditional name given to a group of officials, artisans, sailors and scholars from the *Chinese province of Fujian*²³, who settled in the *Ryūkyū Kingdom* around 1392, during the

²³ **Fujian** (福建), a south-eastern Chinese province, was historically linked to Ryūkyū through trade and diplomacy. Its southern *quanfa* influenced Okinawan Tōde.

twenty-fifth year of the reign of the *Ming dynasty*²⁴ emperor **Hongwu, Zhu Yuanzhang** ²⁵ . Their settlement was concentrated in *Kuninda—Jiumi* in Mandarin, today the district of *Kume* (久米) in Naha—an area specifically designated for them beside the harbour. The number “*thirty-six*” should not be understood literally.

It is a conventional Chinese expression meaning “*many*” or “*numerous*”, the same one used, for example, for “*the thirty-six mountains of Higashiyama*”²⁶ in Kyoto.

Contemporary historiography—Smits, Ikemiya Masaharu and others—has also shown that the episode was not a single migration in one year, but a continuous process over several decades, involving families from not only Fuzhou but also Quanzhou, Zhangzhou and other cities along the Fujian coast.

²⁴ Ming dynasty (明朝, Míng cháo, 1368–1644), one of the great dynasties of Chinese history, founded by the Hongwu Emperor and marked by naval expansion, international trade and cultural flourishing. It maintained regular tributary relations with the Ryūkyū Kingdom from 1372 until its fall in 1644, when it was succeeded by the Manchu Qing dynasty, which continued that relationship in similar forms.

²⁵ Hongwu Emperor (洪武帝, Hóngwǔdì, born Zhu Yuanzhang, 1328–1398), founder of the Ming dynasty. In 1392, he authorised the dispatch of the “thirty-six Chinese families” to Ryūkyū to strengthen tributary relations with the archipelago.

²⁶ The thirty-six mountains of Higashiyama (東山三十六峰, *Higashiyama sanjūroku-pō*) is a classical Japanese expression for the eastern mountain range surrounding Kyoto. “Thirty-six” is not literal, but a conventional Chinese formula adopted in Japan to denote a large group. It is used here as a parallel to the “thirty-six families of Min”.

The exact number of documented families ranges from *twenty-eight* to *thirty-two*. Their role in the kingdom was multiple.

One of these roles was *diplomatic*, as they served as official translators and ambassadors of the *Ryūkyū* court to the *Ming dynasty*, and as hosts to the Chinese imperial missions that arrived in Naha.

Another was *technical*, as they introduced advanced shipbuilding, cartography, metallurgy, printing and Chinese agricultural techniques. They also had a *cultural* role, bringing Confucianism—whose rites are still celebrated at the *Kume Shiseibyō* ²⁷, the Confucian temple of *Kume*—traditional Chinese medicine, calligraphy and classical writing.

And, according to Okinawan sources and the tradition preserved in the district of *Kume* itself, they also introduced the first systematic forms of *quanfa* (拳法, “Chinese boxing” ²⁸),

²⁷ Confucianism in Ryūkyū and the Kume Shiseibyō. Introduced by the Chinese “thirty-six families” in the late fourteenth century, Confucianism became an ethical, educational and administrative reference for Kumemura’s literate nobility. Built in 1676, the Kume Shiseibyō (久米至聖廟) was dedicated to Confucius and the Four Sages, and served to train officials in the Chinese classics. Destroyed during the Second World War, it was rebuilt in 1975 and still stands in Naha.

²⁸ Quanfa (拳法, *Quánfǎ*, “method of the fist”) is the general Chinese term for traditional martial arts, equivalent to Japanese *kenpō*. It includes northern styles, with long stances and broad, acrobatic techniques, and southern styles—linked to Fujian—with shorter stances, fast hands and close-range fighting. This latter tradition most strongly influenced Okinawan Tōde, particularly the Naha-te line.

which would eventually converge with local martial traditions to give rise to *Naha-te*²⁹. The *Kumemura* community was not static. Some families died out and were replaced by new waves of migration during the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

By the end of the nineteenth century, just before the dissolution of the kingdom, it is estimated that barely sixty per cent of the twenty-five aristocratic families that made up the *Kume* community could trace their lineage back to the original “thirty-six”. The remaining forty per cent descended from later Chinese immigrants, known as *shinnyū tōei jin* (“new members of the Chinese community”) ³⁰. Among the documented original families were the Sai (蔡, descendants of **Sai Chong**³¹,

²⁹ *Naha-te* (那覇手, “Naha hand”) was one of the three great Okinawan martial traditions, alongside *Shuri-te* and *Tomari-te*. It developed around the port city of Naha and the Chinese community of *Kumemura*, strongly influenced by southern Fujian *quanfa*, especially White Crane traditions. It was systematised by Higaonna Kanryō in the 1880s after years of study in China. Modern *Gōjū-ryū*, founded by his disciple Chōjun Miyagi, descends from *Naha-te*.

³⁰ *Shinnyū tōei jin* (新入唐営人, “new members of the Chinese community”) was the term used for Chinese families who arrived in *Kumemura* after 1392, mainly between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries.

³¹ *Sai Chong* (蔡崇), documented ancestor of the Sai clan (蔡) in *Ryūkyū*. He arrived in the kingdom in 1392 as one of the original members of the “thirty-six families” sent from Fujian by the Hongwu Emperor. The later branches of the Sai clan—one of *Kumemura*’s most prominent families, with an important role in the kingdom’s diplomacy and administration during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—recognised *Sai Chong* as their common ancestor. His is one of the few cases in which the genealogy of the “thirty-six families” can be traced with solid documentary support.

who arrived in 1392), the **Zheng** (鄭), the **Liang** (梁), the **Jin** (金), the **Lin** (林), the **Chen** (陳) and the **Mao** (毛), among others.

The connection between *Kumemura* and the history of *Karate* is indirect but decisive. Chinese martial culture spread from *Kume* to the rest of Naha and, over time, throughout Okinawan society over several centuries. It may be of some curiosity to know that the principal systematiser of *Naha-te* was not directly descended from the “*thirty-six families*”, although his story is particularly interesting. I refer to Master **Higaonna Kanryō**³² (1853–1915), who was the son of a merchant from the *Nishimura* district of Naha, not from *Kumemura*. Yet his training in *Fujian quanfa* stands in a direct line with the tradition that the families of *Kume* had introduced into Okinawa five centuries earlier.

Chinese martial culture had by then permeated the whole city, not only the “*Chinese quarter*”. The *Zheng* family, for example, has been identified by some researchers as having

³² Higaonna Kanryō (東恩納寛量, 1853–1915/16), an Okinawan master regarded as the principal systematiser of *Naha-te*. Born in Naha’s *Nishimura* district, the son of a merchant, he travelled to Fuzhou, Fujian, around 1868, where he studied Chinese martial arts for more than a decade under the master Ryū Ryū Ko, specialising in southern *quanfa* associated with White Crane traditions. On returning to Okinawa around 1881, he began teaching discreetly at home. His most influential disciple, Chōjun Miyagi, later founded *Gōjū-ryū*, one of the four major schools of modern *Karate*.

introduced the *quanfa* that would eventually shape *Nafadi* or *Naha-te*, although this attribution remains under debate.

Okinawan oral tradition nevertheless recognises that without the continued presence of the people of *Kumemura*, the development of *Karate* as we know it today would have been unthinkable.

Another very important fact is that, from 1609 onwards, the kingdom came under the indirect control of the Satsuma domain—of the *Shimazu clan*—without formally losing its monarchy or its institutions. That dual cultural belonging—Chinese in intellectual lineage, Japanese under political pressure—became inscribed in the body of *Tōde* and was never entirely resolved.

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Chapter 3

Tokugawa Japan

To understand what happened to the *Ryūkyū Kingdom* from 1609 onwards, it is worth first pausing over the Japan that would invade its shores. Without that context, the episode appears arbitrary. Once explained and understood, however, everything that happened afterwards in *Okinawa*—and consequently in *Tōde*—seems inevitable.

Before moving forward, it is worth establishing three key moments in Japanese history that provide the framework for everything that follows. In Japanese historiography, these three stages are known as:

- **Sengoku jidai** (1467–1568).
- **Azuchi-Momoyama jidai** (1568–1603).
- **Edo jidai or Tokugawa jidai** (1603–1868).

These three stages summarise what interests us in Japanese history in order to understand the context: a sequence that moves from fragmentation to unification, and from there to the closed order of the *shogunate*.

Three moments which, together, created the setting in which Okinawan *Tōde* would remain trapped for more than two and a half centuries.

***Sengoku jidai* 戦国時代, 1467–1568**

Japan was a mosaic of some two hundred and sixty feudal domains constantly at war with one another, without an effective central government. The emperor retained the throne in Kyoto but did not rule.

The medieval *shogunate*—the **Ashikaga**³³ family's—had disintegrated after the Ōnin³⁴ War (1467–1477), a succession conflict that devastated the capital and left the country without any recognised central authority.

³³ Ashikaga family (足利氏), the dynasty of *shōguns* that ruled Japan during the Muromachi period (1336–1573). They established their seat in Kyoto's Muromachi district, which gave the period its name. Their authority was strong during the fourteenth century, but progressively weakened throughout the fifteenth until the outbreak of the Ōnin War in 1467, after which the shogunate lost all effective control of the country. The last Ashikaga *shōgun*, Yoshiaki, was deposed by Oda Nobunaga in 1573.

³⁴ Ōnin War (応仁の乱, 1467–1477), a succession conflict within the Ashikaga shogunate that set two coalitions of major clans against one another over the appointment of the next *shōgun*. The war was concentrated mainly in Kyoto, which was devastated: much of the city's cultural and architectural heritage—temples, palaces and archives—was lost in the fires. It ended without a clear victor, but its deepest consequence was the total loss of central authority. From then on, the great feudal clans ruled as sovereigns in their own domains, beginning the Sengoku period.

This period of internal wars is known as the *Sengoku jidai*³⁵ (戦国時代), “the period of the Warring States”.

The defining feature of the period was the so-called *gekokujō*³⁶ (下克上, “the lower overthrows the higher”), in which lesser clans deposed their lords, vassals killed their masters, and generals of humble origin rose through military merit to become *daimyō*³⁷.

It was a world of broken hierarchies, where force was the only law. From that prolonged fire would emerge the three figures who would bring fragmentation to an end.

³⁵ *Sengoku jidai* (戦国時代, “the Warring States period”), a period of almost continuous civil war in Japan (c. 1467–1568), beginning with the Ōnin War and marked by the collapse of central authority and conflict among the great feudal clans. Its name deliberately evokes the analogous Chinese period of the Warring States (战国时代).

³⁶ *Gekokujō* (下克上, “the lower overthrows the higher”), a term describing the defining feature of the Sengoku period: the systematic reversal of the traditional hierarchy. Vassals killed their lords, generals deposed their *daimyō*, and figures of humble origin—such as Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the son of a peasant—rose to rule the country. The term remains in Japanese as a proverbial expression for any radical reversal of social hierarchies.

³⁷ *Daimyō* (大名, literally “great name”), the title of the great feudal lords of premodern Japan. Each *daimyō* ruled a domain (*han*) with broad autonomy: making laws, collecting taxes, maintaining an army and administering justice. Their power rested on the lands they controlled and the samurai who owed them personal loyalty. Under the Tokugawa shogunate, the country’s approximately 260 *daimyō* were subject to the *shōgun* through the *sankin-kōtai* system, which required them to reside alternately in Edo and their own domains. They were abolished as a political class during the Meiji Restoration in 1871, with the end of the feudal system and its replacement by the modern prefectural system.

***Azuchi-Momoyama jidai* 安土桃山時代, 1568–1603**

The name of this period comes from the castles of its first two protagonists: *Azuchi*, built by **Oda Nobunaga** on the shores of *Lake Biwa*, and *Momoyama*, where **Toyotomi Hideyoshi** lived during his final years, near Kyoto. Those two fortresses, now vanished, symbolised a new way of exercising power. It was no longer a matter of perpetual war between fiefs, but of the progressive concentration of authority under an ever broader power. It was a brief period—barely thirty-five years—but a decisive one, as Japan went from being a mosaic of rival fiefs to becoming a country unified under a single government.

Three successive warlords—**Oda Nobunaga**, **Toyotomi Hideyoshi** and **Tokugawa Ieyasu**—subdued the remaining *daimyō* by force until the country was reduced to a single authority. They were not allies. Although later historiography would present them as a trio of “unifiers”, that polished image conceals a more complex reality. Each took over the work of the previous one after his death, whether by killing him, betraying him or displacing his heirs.

Oda Nobunaga

Oda Nobunaga (織田 信長, 1534–1582) was the one who began the process. He inherited a modest domain in *Owari Province* and, thanks to an extraordinary military

genius and a particular willingness to break with every convention—he was among the first to use the Portuguese firearms newly arrived in Japan on a large scale—defeated much larger clans.

In 1568 he entered Kyoto, deposed the last *shogun*³⁸ of the **Ashikaga family** and became the most powerful man in the country.

By 1582 he controlled approximately one third of Japanese territory. But that same year, at *Honnō-ji Temple*³⁹, he was betrayed and forced to commit suicide by one of his own generals, **Akechi Mitsuhide**. He was forty-seven years old. Unification remained unfinished.

³⁸ *Shōgun* (将軍), an abbreviation of *Sei-i Taishōgun* (征夷大將軍, “great general who subdues the barbarians”), was a military title granted by the emperor to a supreme commander from the eighth century onwards. From the twelfth century, it became the country’s highest political office. The *shōgun* exercised real power from his own capital, while the emperor retained the throne and symbolic prestige in Kyoto. Tradition restricted the title to descendants of the ancient warrior nobility, especially the Minamoto clan (源氏). Hideyoshi, the son of a peasant, could not aspire to it by birth and therefore ruled under other imperial titles: *Kanpaku* (関白, civil regent) and *Taikō* (太閤, retired regent). Tokugawa Ieyasu, by contrast, claimed a lineage compatible with that tradition and obtained the title without difficulty in 1603.

³⁹ Honnō-ji Temple (本能寺), a small Buddhist temple in Kyoto where Oda Nobunaga was staying on the night of 21 June 1582. At dawn, it was surrounded by the troops of his own general, Akechi Mitsuhide, in one of the most famous episodes in Japanese history, known as the Honnō-ji Incident (本能寺の変). Surprised and surrounded, Nobunaga set the temple on fire and took his own life by *seppuku*. His remains were never recovered. Mitsuhide’s betrayal was avenged by Hideyoshi only thirteen days later at the Battle of Yamazaki.

Toyotomi Hideyoshi

Toyotomi Hideyoshi (豊臣 秀吉, 1537–1598), one of **Nobunaga**’s generals—of peasant origin, promoted through military merit—avenged the betrayal with extraordinary speed

In less than two weeks, he defeated **Akechi Mitsuhide** at the *Battle of Yamazaki*. Taking advantage of that legitimacy, he took control of the army and of the project, displacing **Nobunaga**’s heirs. Over the following eight years, he subdued one after another the great clans that still resisted—the **Mōri**, the **Chōsokabe**, the **Hōjō** and the **Date**—until reunification was completed around 1590.

He ruled de facto over all Japan, although he would never receive the title of *shōgun* (将軍), traditionally reserved for descendants of the ancient warrior nobility. His foreign policy was ambitious to the point of delirium. Between 1592 and 1598, he launched two successive invasions of Korea, dreaming of later conquering *Ming China*. Both campaigns failed and exhausted the country’s treasury. **Hideyoshi** died in 1598, leaving as heir his only son, a five-year-old boy named **Toyotomi Hideyori**, under the guardianship of a council of five regents.

Hideyoshi (*the father, the unifier, †1598*).

Hideyori (*the son, †1615*).

Tokugawa Ieyasu

Tokugawa Ieyasu (徳川 家康, 1543–1616), a member of that council, was sixty years old when **Hideyoshi** died. In truth, he had first been an ally of **Nobunaga** and, after Nobunaga's death, had become a tactical vassal of **Hideyoshi**. Yet he had never forgotten the displacement of the **Oda**. Barely two years after **Hideyoshi**'s death, he broke the regency he had sworn to protect, formed his own coalition and defeated those loyal to the child heir at the *Battle of Sekigahara*⁴⁰, on 21 October 1600. The victory was overwhelming. Three years later, in 1603, the emperor granted him the title of *shōgun*, thereby founding the *Tokugawa shogunate*. The **Toyotomi** line would survive for another fifteen years in *Osaka Castle*, until in 1615 **Ieyasu** finally eliminated it, forcing the young **Hideyori**—already twenty-two years old—to commit ritual suicide.

Three successive usurpations, not a collaboration. And yet, viewed over time, the result was the same: for the first time

⁴⁰ Battle of Sekigahara (関ヶ原の戦い), the decisive military confrontation in the history of premodern Japan, fought on 21 October 1600 on a plain in present-day Gifu Prefecture. Two coalitions faced each other: the Eastern Army, commanded by Tokugawa Ieyasu, and the Western Army, formed by clans loyal to the young heir Toyotomi Hideyori. After some six hours of fighting, Ieyasu's victory was overwhelming, largely thanks to the defection of several feudal lords who changed sides during the battle. The defeat destroyed the balance of the council of regents established by Hideyoshi and opened the way to the founding of the Tokugawa shogunate three years later. The clans that fought on the losing side—including the Shimazu of Satsuma and the Mōri of Chōshū—kept their domains but were marked as *tozama daimyō* (“outside lords”), permanently watched and distrusted, carrying a memory of defeat that two and a half centuries could not erase.

in more than a century, Japan was under a single power. Peace had not been built by diplomacy, but by the calculated succession of three different ambitions. The culmination of the process—and the beginning of the order that would follow—was the *Battle of Sekigahara* in 1600.

Edo jidai or Tokugawa jidai (1603–1868)

With the title of *shōgun* in his hand, **Ieyasu** inaugurated the regime that would bear his surname: the *Tokugawa shogunate*, also known as the *Tokugawa bakufu*⁴¹ (徳川幕府). That regime would govern Japan for the next 265 years from its capital, Edo—present-day Tokyo. That is why this period is also known as the *Edo jidai* (*Edo Period*).

It was a period of exceptional stability in world history. While Europe endured the Thirty Years' War, the English, American and French revolutions, and the Napoleonic Wars, Japan experienced almost continuous peace under a single regime.

⁴¹ *Bakufu* (幕府), the Japanese term for the military government headed by a *shōgun*. Literally meaning “government from the tent”, it refers to the mobile headquarters from which a military commander issued orders during a campaign. The expression was retained metaphorically for the country's military government, distinct from the emperor's symbolic rule in Kyoto. There were three *bakufu* in Japanese history: Kamakura (1192–1333), Ashikaga or Muromachi (1336–1573), and Tokugawa or Edo (1603–1868).

The new order after Sekigahara

On 21 October 1600, on a plain in central Japan called *Sekigahara*, two coalitions of samurai clans confronted one another in the most decisive battle in Japanese history. On one side were the forces of **Tokugawa Ieyasu**, the powerful lord of the eastern provinces. On the other were the clans loyal to **Toyotomi Hideyori**, a boy of barely seven years old in whose name a council of regents governed. **Hideyori** was the only son and heir of the great unifier **Toyotomi Hideyoshi**, who had died two years earlier. And the war fought at *Sekigahara* was, at its core, the struggle to decide who would protect—or who would dethrone—that child.

Ieyasu's victory was overwhelming and, as already mentioned, it began the *Tokugawa shogunate* that would rule Japan for the next 265 years. But the effects of that battle were not exhausted in the founding of the regime. *Sekigahara* also left a long list of defeated clans who kept their lands but lost all trust in the eyes of the new *shogunate*. They were marked as *tozama daimyō*⁴² (外様大名)—“outside lords”—closely watched and carrying a memory of defeat which two and a half centuries would not erase. One of those clans was the

⁴² *Tozama daimyō* (外様大名) were feudal lords regarded as “outside lords” by the Tokugawa shogunate, generally because they had submitted only after the Battle of Sekigahara or maintained a less close relationship with the Tokugawa family. By contrast, the *fudai daimyō* were hereditary allies and held the most important political offices in the government.

Shimazu, lords of *Satsuma*. Their history explains much of what would later happen to the *Ryūkyū Kingdom*.

The system of the *han*

Tokugawa Japan was not a modern, centralised state. It was a constellation of nearly two hundred and sixty feudal domains called *han* (藩), each ruled by a *daimyō* (大名), one of the great warlords.

The *daimyō* enjoyed broad autonomy over their territories—they legislated, collected taxes and maintained their own armies—but they were subject to the authority of the *shōgun* through an ingenious and oppressive system: the *sankin-kōtai*⁴³ (参勤交代), which required them to reside alternately in their own domain and in Edo.

Each *daimyō* had to maintain a residence in the capital, leave his wife and children as permanent hostages of the court, and travel periodically with a retinue that ruined his finances. The formula guaranteed political stability while simultaneously weakening the wealthiest feudal lords. It was an elegant way of domesticating the warrior nobility without having to fight it.

It is worth pausing for a moment over this system, because it is an extraordinary case of political engineering. The

⁴³ The *sankin-kōtai* system (参勤交代), formalised by the Tokugawa shogunate in 1635, required *daimyō* to reside alternately in Edo and their own domains. As a guarantee of loyalty, their wives and children remained in Edo under permanent surveillance, effectively serving as the *shōgun*'s political hostages.

same problem—how to neutralise an overly powerful warrior nobility—occupied other monarchs around the world, and all of them ultimately solved it in the same way.

Louis XIV of France, in the second half of the seventeenth century—at precisely the same time that the *Tokugawa shogunate* was consolidating the *sankin-kōtai*—had the *Palace of Versailles* built and forced the French high nobility to reside there. Under the appearance of a lavish court, the nobles were kept away from their lands, dependent on the king for everything, spending their fortunes on etiquette and clothing in order not to lose social rank. The difference between Versailles and the *sankin-kōtai* was one of style, not substance: in France, the nobility was domesticated with silk and mirrors; in Japan, with roads and hostages.

In both cases, the monarch achieved the same result—a prestigious but financially exhausted and politically neutralised nobility—without having to raise a single army against it.

Another characteristic pillar of the regime was added to this political architecture: *sakoku*⁴⁴ (鎖国, “closed country”). From 1635 onwards, the *shogunate* decreed the isolation of the country. Japanese people were forbidden to leave; foreigners were forbidden to enter.

⁴⁴ *Sakoku* (鎖国, “closed country”) was the policy of isolation imposed by the Tokugawa shogunate between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, severely restricting Japan’s contact with the outside world. Trade and diplomatic relations were limited to a few authorised ports and nations, while Japanese people were forbidden to leave the country and foreign entry was strictly controlled.

International trade was restricted to a few authorised points—*Nagasaki* for Chinese and Dutch merchants, *Tsushima* for Koreans, *Matsumae* for the northern *Ainu*⁴⁵—and to a fourth, singular and far less visible channel: the *Ryūkyū Islands*, through *Satsuma*. *Sakoku* would remain in force for more than two centuries, until the forced opening imposed by *Commodore Matthew Perry*⁴⁶ in 1853.

Satsuma: the southern domain

Of all the domains of *Tokugawa Japan*, *Satsuma* (薩摩藩, *Satsuma-han*) was one of the most singular. It occupied the southern end of the *island of Kyūshū*—what today roughly corresponds to *Kagoshima Prefecture*—and was the southernmost, richest, most militarised and most unruly of them all. Its capital, *Kagoshima*, stood beside a bay dominated by the imposing *Sakurajima volcano*⁴⁷. *Satsuma* was ruled by

⁴⁵ The *Ainu* (アイヌ) are an Indigenous people of northern Japan, particularly *Hokkaidō*, *Sakhalin* and the *Kuril Islands*. They possess their own language, religion and traditions, distinct from those of mainstream Japanese culture.

⁴⁶ *Commodore Matthew Perry* arrived in Japan in 1853 commanding a naval squadron known as the “Black Ships”. His mission compelled the *Tokugawa shogunate* to open the country to Western trade and diplomatic relations, bringing an end to *sakoku*, Japan’s long period of isolation, which had lasted for more than two centuries.

⁴⁷ *Sakurajima* (桜島) is an active volcano located in *Kagoshima Bay*, in southern *Kyūshū*. It is one of the most recognisable natural landmarks of the *Satsuma* region and one of Japan’s most active volcanoes.

the *Shimazu clan* (島津氏), one of Japan's oldest samurai families, with a documented lineage dating back to the end of the twelfth century.

For more than six hundred years, the *Shimazu* had exercised almost uninterrupted control over southern *Kyūshū*, and their martial prestige was proverbial. At the *Battle of Sekigahara* they had fought on the losing side, but their retreat through enemy lines became one of the legendary episodes of Japanese military history, a feat remembered even today. And here lies the key to what follows.

When **Tokugawa Ieyasu** took control of the country after *Sekigahara*, he did what was to be expected with most defeated clans: he eliminated them, dispossessed them and displaced them. But he allowed the *Shimazu* to remain. It was not through weakness, nor even less through generosity, but through cold calculation. Satsuma was too far away to control properly and too strong to subdue without enormous cost. **Ieyasu's** policy was to accept them reluctantly and keep them under close watch.

This ambiguous condition—a recognised but not entirely obedient domain—would mark all of *Satsuma's* subsequent history. Its lords learned to live in an unstable balance with Edo: sufficiently loyal not to provoke war, sufficiently autonomous to pursue their own interests. That room for manoeuvre explains much of what came later. And it also explains, in the long term, why *Satsuma* would more than

two centuries later—together with the *domain of Chōshū*⁴⁸—become one of the driving forces behind the *Meiji Restoration*⁴⁹, which in 1868 would overthrow the *Tokugawa shogunate* itself.

Why Ryūkyū

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the *Shimazu* needed money. Their defeat at *Sekigahara* had weakened them economically, and the administration of the new *shogunate* imposed costly obligations on them. Looking southwards, they found an obvious opportunity: the *Ryūkyū Kingdom* lived from its trade with China. It was small, militarily weak and, above all, immensely rich from its role as intermediary: it imported Chinese, Japanese and Southeast Asian goods, then redistributed them for profit. If *Satsuma* could control that flow, its economy would change overnight.

There was also a formal pretext. *Ryūkyū* had refused to contribute to *Hideyoshi*'s campaigns in Korea (1592–1598) and later to participate in the celebrations of the new *Tokugawa* order. For the *Shimazu*, this supposed “*lack of respect*” by the

⁴⁸ The Chōshū Domain (長州藩) was one of the great feudal domains of western Japan during the Edo period. Together with Satsuma, it played a decisive role in the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate and the success of the Meiji Restoration.

⁴⁹ The Meiji Restoration (明治維新, 1868) was the political process begun in 1868 that brought an end to the Tokugawa shogunate and restored formal power to the Emperor of Japan. It marked the beginning of the country's rapid modernisation and the transformation of feudal Japan into a centralised, industrialised state.

Ryūkyūan king was the perfect diplomatic justification for a military intervention they had been planning for some time. Far from opposing it, the *Edo shogunate* gave its authorisation: a small and successful foreign war would keep the country's most unruly clan occupied and, at the same time, open a concealed commercial channel with China.

The invasion

The invasion of the *Ryūkyū Kingdom* took place in April 1609, under the command of **Shimazu Iehisa**⁵⁰, with three thousand samurai and one hundred ships. Ryūkyūan resistance was merely symbolic, as the kingdom had gone for centuries without a professional army, trusting in its Chinese tributary status and its pacifist tradition.

The northern fortifications fell within a few days. *Shuri Castle*, the seat of the king, was taken without any real battle. **King Shō Nei**⁵¹ (尚寧, r. 1589–1620) was captured and taken

⁵⁰ Shimazu Iehisa (島津 家久, 1576–1638) was a *daimyō* of the Shimazu clan and one of the principal commanders of the 1609 invasion of the Ryūkyū Kingdom. Acting under the authority of the Satsuma Domain, he led the military campaign that brought the Okinawan kingdom under Japanese control, marking a decisive turning point in Ryūkyū's political history.

⁵¹ Shō Nei (尚寧, 1564–1620) was king of the Ryūkyū Kingdom during the Shimazu clan's invasion in 1609. After the kingdom's defeat, he was taken to Japan and compelled to acknowledge Ryūkyū's subordination to the Satsuma Domain, although the kingdom formally retained part of its autonomy.

prisoner to *Sunpu*⁵²—the residence of **Tokugawa Ieyasu**—and then to Edo, where he was forced to swear vassalage to the *Tokugawa bakufu* before being repatriated two years later. What happened from that moment onwards is what makes the episode one of the most singular chapters in the political history of the Far East.

The double vassalage

The *Shimazu* did not annex *Ryūkyū*. They deliberately preserved the appearance of *Ryūkyūan* sovereignty, kept the king on his throne and respected the court of Shuri, its rituals, ministers and administration. The reason was strategic and profoundly rational. The *sakoku* regime of the *Tokugawa shogunate* closed the country to almost all external contact, and especially to China.

But China remained the economic and cultural heart of East Asia. Its silks, porcelain, medicines, books, tobacco and silver circulated throughout Asia, and Japan needed them. The question was how to obtain them without violating isolation.

This is where *Ryūkyū*, as a tributary vassal of the Chinese court since 1372, became the answer. If the *Shimazu* formally absorbed it, the Chinese would immediately cut off

⁵² Sunpu (駿府) was an important city in feudal Japan, located in what is now Shizuoka Prefecture. During the Edo period, it became the retirement residence of Tokugawa Ieyasu, founder of the Tokugawa shogunate, as well as an important political and administrative centre of the period.

trade. They would never tolerate a vassal kingdom becoming a Japanese possession. But if *Ryūkyū* retained the façade of independence and continued sending tributary missions to Beijing, it could act as a *concealed channel*. What entered Naha from China ended up passing, through the *Shimazu* route, to the port of *Kagoshima* and from there to the rest of Japan.

In this way, trade flowed, China remained unaware and *Satsuma* grew rich. Thus was born the peculiar regime known as *nisshi ryōzoku*⁵³ (日支両属, “*belonging to Japan and China simultaneously*”), or double vassalage. *Ryūkyū* sent tributary ships to Beijing as a nominal vassal of imperial China, maintained its court and traditional rituals according to the Chinese model, and presented itself to imperial envoys as an independent kingdom. But at the same time, it paid real tribute to the *daimyo of Satsuma*, its kings periodically travelled to Edo to pay homage to the *shogun*, and its important political decisions passed through the *Shimazu* filter. The Australian historian **Gavan McCormack**⁵⁴ has described this regime as

⁵³ *Nisshi ryōzoku* (日支両属) is an expression used to describe the Ryūkyū Kingdom’s dual diplomatic subordination after the 1609 invasion: formally dependent on the Japanese domain of Satsuma, while at the same time maintaining tributary relations with China. This balance allowed Ryūkyū to act as a commercial and diplomatic intermediary between the two worlds for more than two centuries.

⁵⁴ Gavan McCormack is an Australian historian and scholar specialising in East Asian studies and the contemporary history of Okinawa. The expression “Potemkin-style theatre state” appears in his work *Resistant Islands: Okinawa Confronts Japan and the United States* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), co-authored with Satoko Oka Norimatsu, which examines the historical and political relationship between Okinawa, Japan and the United States.

a “*Potemkin-style theatre state*”: a deliberately constructed diplomatic fiction, a stage set of sovereignty maintained for more than two and a half centuries in order to preserve trade. Chinese ambassadors arriving in Naha were received with all the honours reserved for a foreign power; what they did not see was that, behind the curtain, a Japanese commissioner watched every decision of the court.

The expression “***Potemkin-style***” refers to the so-called “Potemkin villages,” associated with the Russian prince Grigory Potemkin (1739–1791). It is used to describe a structure that appears to possess prosperity, autonomy, or legitimacy, while in reality depending on an external power or concealing a situation different from the one it publicly presents.

The cultural consequences

This regime, maintained from 1609 to 1879—that is, for 270 years—profoundly affected *Ryūkyūan* culture. The kingdom’s elite learned to live in three languages: they spoke *uchināguchi*⁵⁵ at home, Japanese with *Satsuma*’s envoys and classical Chinese in official documents.

⁵⁵ *Uchināguchi* (沖縄口) is the traditional language of Okinawa and belongs to the Ryūkyūan language group. Although it was long regarded as merely a Japanese dialect, it is now recognised as a distinct language, deeply affected by the policies of Japanisation pursued since the Meiji era.

The nobility studied Confucius in Chinese texts but wore hairstyles and emblems of Japanese origin. Architecture combined elements of all three worlds. And martial arts—as would happen with almost everything else—silently absorbed that plurality.

Tōde developed in this context. Okinawan masters drew from Fujian *quanfa* arriving through *Kumemura*, knew Japanese combat traditions through the *Satsuma samurai* stationed on the island, and also incorporated their own indigenous techniques, *Ti*.

What is remarkable is that the *Shimazu* regime imposed an early weapons ban on the *Ryūkyūan* population: no civilian could carry a sword or firearms.

Okinawan nobles, deprived of their traditional steel weapons, deepened their practice of unarmed combat and the ingenious use of farming implements—the *bō*, *sai*, *nunchaku*, *tonfa* and *kama*—which became the repertoire of *Kobudō*⁵⁶.

The paradox is eloquent: *Tōde*, this art of the unarmed body, owes part of its sophistication precisely to the fact that it

⁵⁶ Okinawan *kobudō* (古武道, “ancient martial way”) encompasses the traditional martial arts based on weapons derived from agricultural, fishing or household tools adapted for self-defence after the weapon bans imposed in Okinawa from the fifteenth century onwards. Among the best known are the *bō*, *sai*, *tonfā*, *nunchaku*, *kama* and *eku*. Unlike other clandestine systems, such as Brazilian capoeira, in Okinawa the disguise consisted of preserving the functional appearance of ordinary working tools.

was practised by an elite whose Japanese occupiers had forbidden them weapons.

That dual cultural belonging—Chinese in intellectual lineage, Japanese under political pressure—became inscribed in the body of *Tōde* and was never entirely resolved.

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Chapter 4

The Three Currents of Tōde

Although we speak of *Tōde* as though it were a single art, the truth is that it never entirely was. For centuries, its practice was concentrated in three urban centres of the kingdom, separated from one another by only a few kilometres, yet sufficiently distinct in their social character to give rise to three recognisable traditions.

History has preserved them as the three currents of *Tōde*: *Shuri-te*, in the kingdom's former capital and associated with the royal guard; *Naha-te*, linked to the commercial port and to a more recent Chinese influence; and *Tomari-te*, cultivated in the small coastal village of the same name.

Before continuing, something should be clarified. This typology did not emerge in the time of the great masters we associate with each current. It is a later classification, popularised at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, when the art was beginning to cease being a practice reserved for closed circles and needed to describe itself to the rest of Japan.

In fact, **Matsumura, Asato, Itosu** or **Higaonna** did not see themselves as “*masters of Shuri-te*” or “*masters of Naha-te*”; they simply practised *Tōde* and trained with whoever was available and willing. The distance between Shuri and

Naha was little more than five kilometres, and many masters travelled that distance frequently.

Today, the urban area of Shuri—and even the former port of Tomari—has been absorbed into Naha, the capital of Okinawa Prefecture.

Even so, the three currents exist as a useful category. They reflect three distinct social realities that ultimately gave character to the art each area developed.

Shuri-te

El ***Shuri-te*** (首里手) was the *Tōde* of the court. It was practised in the kingdom's former capital, around *Shuri Castle*, and its transmission was linked to the noble *pechin*⁵⁷ class, the officials and bodyguards who served the king. Its technical features—speed, verticality, economy of movement, high or medium stances and long movements—respond to the demands of courtly combat. That is, the rapid defence of the sovereign, intervention in confined spaces and the containment of the opponent without great displacement. From this lineage came the great masters who would lead to modern *Karate*:

⁵⁷ The **Pechin** (親雲上) were members of the noble and administrative class of the Ryūkyū Kingdom. Many served as officials, diplomats, or warriors, and played an important role in the transmission of Okinawan martial arts.

Sōkon “Bushi” Matsumura, Ankō Asato and Ankō Itosu.
And from that same line, through **Funakoshi**.

Naha-te

Naha-te (那覇手) developed in a very different atmosphere. Naha was the kingdom’s commercial port, the place where Chinese ships docked, where the people of *Kumemura* lived and where, decade after decade, the technical innovations of southern Fujian *quanfa* arrived.

In contrast to the courtly character of *Shuri-te*, *Naha-te* has a pragmatic and popular stamp, with lower and more rooted stances. It also gives transcendental importance to deep and audible breathing—something its heir, *Gōjū-ryū*⁵⁸, would later systematise under the name *ibuki*⁵⁹—and to an extensive repertoire of open-hand techniques inherited from Chinese schools, especially *White Crane*⁶⁰.

Its two canonical figures are **Higaonna Kanryō**, who trained for more than a decade in Fuzhou with the master **Ryū**

⁵⁸ **Gōjū-ryū** is a style of Karate founded by Miyagi Chōjun, a disciple of Higaonna Kanryō. Its name means “the school of hard and soft” and reflects the system’s characteristic combination of powerful techniques and fluid movements.

⁵⁹ **Ibuki** (息吹) is a method of deep, controlled breathing characteristic of Naha-te and of derived styles such as *Gōjū-ryū*. It combines muscular tension with breath control to develop stability, power, and concentration.

⁶⁰ **White Crane** (Bái Hè Quán in Chinese) is a traditional martial arts system from southern China that profoundly influenced the development of Okinawan Naha-te, especially in its methods of breathing, close-range combat, and internal training.

Ryū Ko⁶¹, and his disciple **Miyagi Chōjun**, founder of *Gōjū-ryū*.

Tomari-te

El **Tomari-te** (泊手) occupies an intermediate position, both geographically and technically. Tomari was a small port neighbouring Naha and separated from Shuri by only a few kilometres inland, specialising in coastal trade and in receiving foreign embassies passing through. Because of its size and character, it was the least visible of the three centres, and its tradition is also the least well documented. Some researchers consider it an autonomous variant; others describe it as a natural fusion between the features of *Shuri-te* and those of *Naha-te*. Its most recognised masters of the nineteenth century were **Kōsaku Matsumora**⁶² (1829–1898) and his training companion **Kokan Oyadomari**⁶³ (1827–1905), to whom

⁶¹ **Ryū Ryū Ko** was the Japanized name by which a Chinese martial arts master from Fujian was known in Okinawa, commonly identified as Xie Zhongxiang. He was one of Higaonna Kanryō's principal teachers during his nearly ten-year stay in China.

⁶² **Kōsaku Matsumora** (1829–1898) was one of the most important masters of Tomari-te. He was noted for preserving and transmitting several traditional Okinawan kata associated with Tomari's martial tradition.

⁶³ **Kokan Oyadomari** (親泊興寛, 1827–1905) was a master of Tomari-te, a training companion of Kōsaku Matsumora, and, alongside him, a central figure in this tradition. Through students such as Chōtoku Kyan and Chōki Motobu, his lineage became part of modern Karate.

Gikei Yamazato ⁶⁴ (1835–1905) is usually added. **Matsumora**—with “*mora*”, from Tomari—should not be confused with the **Matsumura** of *Shuri-te*.

From this current come such important *kata* as *Wankan*, *Rohai* and *Wanshu*, which would eventually be incorporated into the repertoires of the other two traditions.

The very name *Wanshu* reveals *Tomari*’s direct Chinese trace: it refers to a Chinese diplomat surnamed Wang, who led a mission to the village in 1683 and is said to have taught *chu’an fa* to the local nobility.

Wankan, *Rohai* y *Wanshū* are traditional *kata* associated with Tomari-te, the martial tradition developed in the port village of Tomari, Okinawa. They preserve Chinese influences and technical methods distinct from those of Shuri-te and Naha-te.

Three cities, three perspectives, one art

Despite their technical differences, it would be a mistake to think of *Shuri-te*, *Naha-te* and *Tomari-te* as watertight compartments. The everyday reality of *Tōde* was always more fluid than the later categorisation. **Matsumura**

⁶⁴ **Gikei Yamazato** (山里義輝, 1835–1905) , also cited as Giei Yamada, was a nineteenth-century master of Tomari-te. He is mentioned alongside Kōsaku Matsumora and Kokan Oyadomari as one of the leading figures of this tradition. His son, Giki Yamazato (1866–1947), continued the family transmission of the art.

learned from Chinese masters who had also taught in Naha. **Itosu** taught students from Tomari.

Higaonna trained disciples who also studied with masters of *Shuri-te*. And all of them, without exception, travelled to China at some point or had direct contact with visiting Chinese masters.

What the three currents share is more important than what separates them. They are a common Okinawan substratum, a continuous Chinese influence across five centuries, a private transmission within closed circles, and a belonging to a society that lived simultaneously under two empires. That plurality was not a weakness. It was, precisely, the condition that would allow *Tōde*, once removed from its original context, to transform itself into something new.

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Chapter 5

Shuri Castle

Shuri Castle (首里城, *Shuri-jō*) was not merely a royal residence. It was the political, cultural, and symbolic centre of the former *Ryūkyū Kingdom* (1429–1879), as well as one of the environments that helped shape the conditions that would eventually influence the development of *Tōde*.

Beyond its architectural value, this fortress was a true breeding ground for modern *Karate*. Not only because of the people who worked, lived, or were trained there, but also because of the particular character of life within this royal complex, which ultimately left its mark on the very techniques of the martial art.

The history of *Shuri Castle* is the history of an independent kingdom, of its gradual absorption into Japan, of devastating fires and successive reconstructions, and of a cultural heritage that, against all odds, has repeatedly risen from its own ashes.

It is also—and this is an aspect often overlooked—the story of how a palace can shape an entire culture.

In Europe, we can see this clearly in the *Palace of Versailles*, where architecture, court rituals, political restrictions, and the social hierarchies experienced within a

palace shaped, for centuries, the way an entire people moved, fought, danced, and understood the world.

Throughout this book, the expression “modern karate” refers to the karate developed and disseminated internationally after the Second World War. That is, the karate practised in affiliated *dōjō*, with white *karategi*, a *kyū/dan* ranking system, standardised technical syllabuses and regulated competitions, promoted worldwide by masters such as **Kanazawa**, **Kase**, **Nishiyama**, **Ōshima**, **Nakayama** and **Asai**. It should be distinguished both from original *Tōde*—privately transmitted and predating 1922—and from pre-war Japanese Karate (1922–1945), the initial stage of university-based systematisation.

The Ryūkyū Islands: geographical and historical context

To understand the importance of *Shuri Castle*, it is first necessary to place it within the *Ryūkyū Islands* (琉球諸島), the name once given to the islands that today form Okinawa Prefecture (沖縄県, *Okinawa-ken*). The archipelago stretches far to the southwest of Japan’s main islands, close to Taiwan and the southern coast of China. This geographical location proved decisive, as it facilitated centuries of commercial and cultural exchange between the archipelago and mainland Asia

to an extent that mainland Japan—much farther north—never experienced so directly.

As already noted, it was here that, between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, the so-called *Three Kingdoms*, or *Sanzan*⁶⁵, emerged. Each functioned as a sovereign entity before the *Ming imperial court*. They maintained their own courts and sent independent embassies to China, with whom formal relations had begun in 1372.

In 1429, **Shō Hashi** united the three kingdoms under a single crown, thereby founding the *Ryūkyū Kingdom*. These exchanges with China—whether under the three separate kingdoms or the unified state—were organised through the *tributary system*⁶⁶, under which *Ryūkyū* sent regular missions to the Chinese imperial court in return for investiture, recognition, and commercial privileges.

The archipelago's geographical position—halfway between the major cultural centres of East Asia—made *Ryūkyū*

⁶⁵ The Sanzan (三山, “Three Mountains”, c. 1322–1429), or three kingdoms—though some translate them as principalities—were Hokuzan in the north, with its capital at Nakijin; Chūzan in the centre, with its capital first at Urasoe and later at Shuri; and Nanzan in the south, with its capital at Ōzato. Each functioned as a sovereign entity within the Chinese tributary system: they sent independent embassies to the Ming court—Chūzan from 1372, Nanzan from 1380 and Hokuzan from 1383—and received separate imperial investiture.

⁶⁶ The tributary system (朝貢, *chōkō* in Japanese; *cháogòng* in Chinese), inaugurated by King Satto (察度) in 1372 and in force until 1879, was far more than an act of submission: in exchange for symbolic tribute, vassal courts gained access to the Chinese market, diplomatic protection and, above all, the legitimacy conferred by imperial recognition. For *Ryūkyū*, it was its principal institutional link with the continent for five centuries.

a key entrepôt⁶⁷ along the maritime routes linking Japan, China, Korea, and Southeast Asia: Siam, Malacca, and Java. Sulphur, horses, porcelain, silks, spices, lacquerware, Chinese coins, and Japanese swords passed through its ports. Above all, however, ideas circulated: navigational techniques, administrative models, writing systems, religions, and martial arts. At the centre of this crossroads, *Shuri Castle* stood for more than five centuries.

Origins and construction: a *gusuku*, not a castle

Although the castle had existed earlier, it began to acquire real political importance from the fourteenth century onward, when royal authority was established there following the unification of the *Sanzan* kingdoms.

Archaeological studies place its initial construction during the *Gusuku*⁶⁸ period—the era of Okinawan fortresses, between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries—although some traditions suggest that it was later rebuilt or refounded under the influence of the architecture and court ceremonial of

⁶⁷ *Entrepôt*: a French term designating a commercial port for the transit and redistribution of goods. Naha, the principal port of the Ryūkyū Kingdom, was one of East Asia's great entrepôts between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

⁶⁸ The Gusuku period (グスク時代, *Gusuku jidai*, c. twelfth–fifteenth centuries): a stage in Okinawan history marked by the emergence of stone fortresses and local chieftaincies, the direct precursor to the Ryūkyū Kingdom.

Beijing's Forbidden City⁶⁹. Despite being called a “castle”, *Shuri-jō*⁷⁰ was not a castle in the European sense of the term. It was a *gusuku*⁷¹ (グスク), the distinctive Okinawan type of fortress, combining defensive, residential, ceremonial, and religious functions. Its conception was closer to that of a palace than to a military castle in either the Japanese or European tradition.

Shō Hashi (尚巴志) completed the unification of Okinawa's three kingdoms, the *Sanzan*, in 1429. It was a gradual process: *Chūzan* fell in 1406, *Hokuzan* in 1416, and *Nanzan* in 1429.

Its coral-limestone walls, around three metres thick and between six and fifteen metres high, did not form the sharp angles typical of European castles or Japanese *jōkaku*. Instead,

⁶⁹ The Forbidden City in Beijing (紫禁城, *Zǐjìnchéng*) was the imperial palace of the Ming and Qing emperors from 1420 to 1912. Its influence on Shuri Castle appears in the *Seiden*'s west-east orientation, the complex's axial symmetry and its five-clawed dragons. Ryūkyūan architecture adapted these elements to local materials, a smaller scale and the island's subtropical climate.

⁷⁰ *Shuri-jō* (首里城) is the Japanese name for the castle: Shuri (首里), the name of the district that was once the kingdom's capital, and the suffix *-jō* (城, “castle”). In the original Okinawan language, it was called *Shuri Gusuku* (首里グスク), retaining the indigenous word for “fortress”.

⁷¹ *Gusuku* (グスク) is the traditional Ryūkyūan fortress, distinct from the Japanese *jōkaku* (城郭). It is characterised by curved walls of Ryūkyūan coral limestone, between six and fifteen metres high.

they followed the curves of the terrain. This flexibility of design was not merely aesthetic; it was also structural.

Curved walls withstand earthquakes and typhoons—two constant threats in Okinawa—better than straight ones. Within the enclosure were also *utaki* (御嶽) —forests, groves, or stones regarded as the dwelling places of deities—, these linked the castle to the *indigenous spirituality* of the *Ryūkyūs*, which predated both Buddhism and Japanese Shintō.

This coexistence—a Chinese palace in its geometry, an Okinawan *gusuku* in its construction, and a *Ryūkyūan* sanctuary in its sacred corners—was not a contradiction. It was precisely what *Shuri Castle* was.

Sources agree that the castle became established as the royal seat from 1429 onwards, following **Shō Hashi**'s unification of the three principalities. However, some authors date the construction of the first enclosure to between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and there are even traditions referring to a fortress as early as the thirteenth century. Its precise dating remains the subject of archaeological debate.

An architecture full of colour

One of *Shuri Castle*'s most striking features was its colour, especially when compared with the customary sobriety of traditional Japanese architecture, where dark tones, browns,

and exposed wood predominate—as can be seen in the temples of mainland Japan. *Shuri-jō* was bright, golden, and filled with intense reds. Its palette was deliberately Chinese and clearly distinguished the building from the rest of the region’s architecture.

The main building, the *Seiden*⁷² (正殿, “main hall”), was the largest wooden structure in the kingdom. It faced west, towards China⁷³—a deliberate architectural gesture laden with political and diplomatic meaning. It served simultaneously as a throne hall, a space for diplomatic audiences, and the ceremonial centre of the kingdom. Its dimensions were considerable: three storeys and eighteen metres in height, built on a stone base that protected the wood from the moisture of Okinawa’s subtropical rains. Originally constructed during the ***First Shō Dynasty*** in the fifteenth century, the *Seiden* was rebuilt numerous times after the successive fires that marked the castle’s history. The most recent version, erected in 1992 according to plans based on the eighteenth-century building, was destroyed in the fire of 31 October 2019. Its reconstruction

⁷² The *Seiden* (正殿, “main hall”) was the largest building in Shuri Castle and the greatest wooden structure in the entire Ryūkyū Kingdom.

⁷³ The *Seiden*’s westward orientation—rather than the southward orientation customary in Chinese and Japanese palaces—is one of the castle’s most distinctive features. Some hypotheses explain it as a deliberate gesture of deference towards China: seated on his throne, the King of Ryūkyū would symbolically face the Ming imperial court in Nanjing, and later Beijing. Others attribute it to practical reasons connected with the terrain and the visitor’s natural approach from the east.

is currently under way and is expected to be completed by the end of 2026. The façade of the *Seiden* was dominated by columns and beams decorated with dragons: thirty-three in total. The five-clawed dragon⁷⁴ was the symbol of *Ryūkyūan* royal authority, appearing on columns, lintels, and rooftops.

Two principal carved pillars at the entrance formed the classic *a-un*⁷⁵ (阿吽) pair; one with its mouth open, the other with its mouth closed—the beginning and the end, inhalation and exhalation, the guardian who welcomes and the guardian who bids farewell.

Alongside them, reliefs of *komainu*⁷⁶ (狛犬), the lion-dogs that protected the threshold, completed an iconography

⁷⁴ The five-clawed dragon (五爪龍, *go-sō-ryū*) was, in the Chinese imperial tradition, the exclusive symbol of the emperor. Its use by the kings of Ryūkyū in the *Seiden* was exceptional within the Asian tributary system: no other vassal kingdom permitted itself such a privilege. It is further evidence of the kingdom's ambiguous status—tributary outwardly, sovereign inwardly. Subjects and lower ranks were required to use dragons with four or three claws.

⁷⁵ The *a-un* pair (阿吽) derives from Sanskrit (*a-hūm*) and represents, in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, the beginning and end of all things: the first and last letters of the sacred alphabet. Guardian pairs with one mouth open and the other closed are ubiquitous in the sacred architecture of East Asia: they appear in the *niō* (仁王) of Japanese Buddhist temples, in Shinto *komainu*, in Chinese imperial lions and in Okinawan *shīsā*. Their simultaneous presence in the *Seiden* reflects the kingdom's religious plurality.

⁷⁶ *Komainu* (狛犬): a pair of lion-like creatures that guard the entrances to Shinto temples and Japanese shrines. One figure has its mouth open (*a*) and the other closed (*un*), forming the *a-un* pair. Of Chinese origin, they reached Japan via Korea around the eighth century.

that blended the Chinese imperial dragon, *Japanese Shintō guardians*⁷⁷, and the distinctly Okinawan *shīsā*⁷⁸ (シーサー).

It was a *pan-Asian* synthesis made stone, carved into every corner of the building. The complex was completed by a hydraulic system as elaborate as it was symbolic. The *Ryūhi Fountain*⁷⁹ (龍樋, “dragon spout”), built in the sixteenth century during the reign of **Shō Sei**, allowed water to flow from the mouth of a dragon carved in stone. A few metres away, the so-called *Dragon of the Magical Fountain* formed⁸⁰ part of a drainage and water-supply system so refined that, centuries later, in March 1921, it deeply impressed the future **Emperor Hirohito** during his official visit to the castle, on his way to

⁷⁷ Shinto guardians: a generic term encompassing *komainu* and *nīō* (仁王), protective figures found in Japanese sacred architecture and distant descendants of the guardian deities of Indian Buddhism.

⁷⁸ *Shīsā* (シーサー): the Okinawan variant of the *komainu*, sculpted in stone or ceramic and placed in pairs on rooftops or beside entrances. One has its mouth open—to drive away evil spirits—and the other closed—to retain good fortune. Today, it is the informal symbol of Okinawa Prefecture.

⁷⁹ The Ryūhi Fountain (龍樋) still operates within the castle grounds today as a decorative and commemorative feature. Its original stone-carved dragon head miraculously survived the destruction of the castle during the Battle of Okinawa in 1945, making it one of the few authentic elements of the historic castle that can still be seen.

⁸⁰ Dragon of the Magic Fountain: an element of Shuri Castle’s hydraulic system, built in the sixteenth century. Unlike the Ryūhi Fountain, it formed part of a functional water supply and drainage conduit within the castle grounds. The conduit’s technical sophistication—remarkable by the standards of the time—was among the features that most impressed Prince Hirohito during his official visit to the castle in March 1921, according to testimony recorded by Salvador Herráiz.

begin his European tour. It was during that same visit that a historic demonstration of *Tōde* was presented in the *Great Hall of the castle*. It was led by a group of Okinawan masters that included **Gichin Funakoshi** and **Chōjun Miyagi**—the first time a member of the Japanese imperial family saw, with his own eyes, an art that had been practised in secrecy in that same place for centuries. The prince’s fascination with its “*strange elegance*” would contribute decisively to the art being *invited to Tokyo the following year*⁸¹.

The 1922 invitation was not addressed directly to **Funakoshi**, but to Okinawa Prefecture, which delegated the choice to the Okinawa Shōbukai (沖縄尚武会), chaired by him since 1912. Although masters such as **Motobu**, **Yabu** and **Hanashiro** possessed comparable, or even superior, technical prestige, Funakoshi brought together unique qualities: he commanded cultivated Japanese—something uncommon among masters whose mother tongue was *uchināguchi*—and he was a schoolteacher, calligrapher and poet, had experience in public demonstrations, and had no significant personal conflicts. Okinawa chose the best possible ambassador.

⁸¹ The demonstration before Hirohito on 6 March 1921 sparked the interest that led to Funakoshi’s invitation to Tokyo in 1922. That visit opened the art’s path to mainland Japan.

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Part II

The Masters of Tōde

Chapter 6

A Tributary Society: The Structure of the Kingdom

Before entering into the daily life of the castle, it is worth pausing to consider the society that inhabited it. For the *Kingdom of Ryūkyū* was by no means a simple exotic provincial monarchy. It was a deeply hierarchical society, organised according to Chinese Confucian principles, with a class structure as strict as that of Japan in its own time, but with one decisive difference: in Okinawa, the *samurai* did not exist as a separate military caste.

That absence is no minor detail. To a large extent, it is the key to understanding why *Tōde* emerged where it did, how it was transmitted, and why, from its very beginning, it possessed a character so different from that of the Japanese martial arts.

Yet this structure did not appear overnight. It was the result of four centuries of political evolution, from the small warrior lordships of the fourteenth century to the sophisticated and centralised court in which **Sakugawa** and **Matsumura** would serve. To understand the world of these masters, it is necessary first to trace the path that led to it. Let us begin, then, at the beginning.

From Warrior Chieftains to the Court: The Long Road to Shuri

In the centuries preceding unification, Okinawa was not a kingdom, but a mosaic of small lordships.

Across the island, local chieftains known as *aji*⁸² (按司)—also pronounced *anji*—ruled modest fiefdoms from stone fortresses known as *gusuku*⁸³. They were warlords on a small scale. They controlled land, collected tribute from nearby peasants, maintained armed bands, and competed with one another for control of valleys and ports.

By the fourteenth century, these lordships had grouped themselves into three rival kingdoms—*Hokuzan* in the north, *Chūzan* in the centre, and *Nanzan* in the south—the period known as *Sanzan* (“the three mountains”), which we have already discussed in previous chapters. It was a fragmented, warrior Okinawa, still far removed from the refined court that would come later.

Unification arrived in 1429, when **Shō Hashi**, king of *Chūzan*, subdued the other two kingdoms and founded the **first Shō dynasty**, establishing his capital at Shuri. For the

⁸² *Aji* (按司), also pronounced *anji*: originally, the local warrior lords who ruled small fiefs from their *gusuku* before the kingdom’s unification. After Shō Shin’s reform, they lost their territorial power and became a court aristocracy, ranking just below the royal family.

⁸³ *Gusuku* (グスク): an Okinawan fortress of limestone walls, serving defensive, residential, ceremonial and religious functions. Local *aji* ruled from them before the unification of 1429.

first time, the entire island was under a single sovereign. Yet the territorial nobility—the old *aji*, descendants of the warrior chieftains—still retained their power base in the countryside. In a certain sense, they remained lords of their districts, with their lands, revenues, and men. The king reigned, but the *aji* still governed their fiefdoms. It was still a feudal monarchy, with power divided between the centre and the provinces.

The decisive change—the one that would shape the society known by **Sakugawa** and **Matsumura**—would come half a century later, with an extraordinary king.

The Revolution of Shō Shin (1477–1526): The Birth of the Court

Shō Shin reigned for almost half a century, from 1477 to 1526, and under his government the *Kingdom of Ryūkyū* experienced its golden age. But his most far-reaching reform was, above all, political and social, for **Shō Shin** dismantled the territorial power of the old warrior nobility.

The measure was as simple as it was radical. **Shō Shin** forced the *aji* to abandon their rural domains and move permanently to Shuri, beside the castle. That act, one of great political sophistication, had a clear objective: to centralise power, break the territorial base of the feudal nobility, and turn the *aji* into a court aristocracy dependent on the king for its revenues, prestige, and privileges. It was exactly the same strategy later applied by **Louis XIV** when gathering his nobility at Versailles, and by the Tokugawa through their

system of *sankin-kōtai*⁸⁴. But **Shō Shin** implemented it a century and a half before either of them. From that moment on, the title of *aji* became largely symbolic. The day-to-day administration of the rural districts—the so-called *magiri*⁸⁵ (間切)—passed to officials appointed from Shuri. The *aji* retained their prestige and revenues, but their real power had been transferred to the castle.

And here lies what is decisive for our story. By stripping the old territorial nobility of its power and concentrating everything at court, **Shō Shin** created the need for a new class. Someone had to administer that centralised kingdom: draft documents, collect taxes, manage diplomacy with China, organise ceremonies, and guard the king. That class—the bureaucratic nobility that would, in fact, make the kingdom function for the next four centuries—would be the class of the *pechin*.

Yes, indeed, the very same social class to which **Sakugawa** and **Matsumura Sōkōn** belonged. It is worth saying that all—or almost all—of the great masters of *Tōde*

⁸⁴ *Sankin-kōtai* (参勤交代) — A Tokugawa shogunate system that required feudal lords (*daimyō*) to reside alternately in their domains and in Edo, while leaving their families as hostages in the capital. It was a mechanism of control that kept the nobility under surveillance and financially exhausted.

⁸⁵ *Magiri* (間切) — Rural administrative districts into which the kingdom was divided. After Shō Shin's centralisation, they ceased to be controlled by the *aji* and came to be administered by officials appointed from Shuri.

belonged to this social class. But before looking more deeply at **Sakugawa** and **Matsumura**, it is worth seeing the complete pyramid, already consolidated, as it existed from **Shō Shin** until the end of the kingdom.

The Summit: The King and the Shō Family

At the top of the pyramid reigned the **Shō family** (尚氏), the *Ryūkyūan royal house*. The king ruled from *Shuri Castle*, dressed in the style of *China's Ming dynasty*. This included a black silk cap with red cords, a robe embroidered with five-clawed dragons, and an ornamented sash. He was the political, ceremonial, and symbolic centre of the kingdom, and the ultimate source of all authority.

Below him, the whole of society was strictly arranged in a pyramid which historian **George Kerr**⁸⁶ summarised in three major blocks: the ***Shō royal family***⁸⁷, the privileged

⁸⁶ George Kerr — American historian (1911–1992), author of *Okinawa: The History of an Island People* (1958), long regarded as the standard English-language reference work on the history of the Ryūkyū Kingdom.

⁸⁷ Shō family (尚氏) — The royal house of Ryūkyū. There were, in fact, two successive Shō dynasties: the first, founded by Shō Hashi in 1429; and the second, begun by Shō En in 1469, to which Shō Shin belonged and which reigned until the kingdom's dissolution in 1879.

class—the *shizoku*⁸⁸—and the common people—the *heimin*⁸⁹. Around 1690, this stratification became even more rigorous with the creation of the *Chizuza*⁹⁰ (系図座), an official body responsible for maintaining the genealogical register of all Okinawan nobility.

From then on, the kingdom officially recognised only two categories of people: those who possessed genealogy—the aristocrats registered in the *Chizuza*—and those who did not, that is, the common people.

Belonging to one class or another was not a matter of wealth or personal merit, but of documented lineage. Immediately below the king and the princes—the *ōji*⁹¹, sons of the monarch—were the aforementioned *aji*, now court aristocrats without territorial power, and, on a slightly lower

⁸⁸ *Shizoku* (士族) — The category under which the Meiji system reclassified the former nobility—both Japanese and Ryūkyūan—after abolishing the feudal order. It was an honorary status that preserved the prestige of lineage while removing its material prerogatives: no stipends, no functions and no privileges.

⁸⁹ *Heimin* (平民) — The common people: peasants, fishermen and artisans without a recorded genealogy. They constituted the overwhelming majority of the population and were excluded from the nobility by birth.

⁹⁰ *Chizuza* (系図座) — Literally, “Office of Genealogies”. An official body created around 1690 to register and safeguard the family trees of the entire nobility. From its creation onwards, having—or not having—a registered genealogy marked the legal boundary between aristocrats and commoners.

⁹¹ *Ōji* (王子) — The princes, sons of the king. They occupied the highest level of the social hierarchy immediately below the monarch.

level, the *ueekata* or *oyakata*⁹² (親方), a rank obtained through outstanding service to the kingdom or reserved for the younger sons of the *aji*.

Ranks of the Bureaucratic Nobility

From highest to lowest: *ueekata* (親方), the highest rank, equivalent to a minister; *pechin* proper, a mid-to-high-ranking official; *satunushi pechin* (里之子親雲上), a middle rank; *chikudun pechin* (筑登之親雲上), the lowest rank within the nobility —the rank Matsumura attained upon entering the castle's service—; and, below them, the pages: *satunushi* (里之子) and *chikudun* (筑登之).

The Pechin: The Nobility That Made the Kingdom Function

The *pechin* (親雲上), also written *peichin* or *pekumi* depending on the transcription system, were the active core of *Ryūkyūan* society. It is a word worth learning, because *Tōde* cannot be understood without understanding the *pechin*.

⁹² *Ueekata* (親方), also *oyakata* — The highest rank of the bureaucratic nobility, equivalent to a minister. It was attained through outstanding service to the kingdom or reserved for the younger sons of the *aji*.

The *pechin* were the kingdom's literate and bureaucratic nobility. Hereditarily recognised as aristocrats and entered in the genealogical register (*Chizuza*), they were neither the great court lords, such as the *aji*, nor the commoners subject to agricultural labour.

They were the active middle estate, the men who, in fact, kept the kingdom running. Officials, administrators, diplomats, judges, tax collectors, secretaries, castle guards. Their power did not come from land or royal blood, but from direct service to the king. This class was itself divided into ranks. From highest to lowest:

- **Ueekata** (親方): the summit of the administration, equivalent to ministers.
- **Pechin** middle- to high-ranking officials with governmental responsibilities.
- **Satunushi pechin** (里之子親雲上): middle rank.
- **Chikudun pechin** (筑登之親雲上): the lowest rank within the bureaucratic nobility—the rank to which, for example, **Matsumura Sōkon** belonged when he entered the king's service.
- **Satunushi** (里之子) y **chikudun** (筑登之): higher and lower pages, at the lowest level of the aristocratic pyramid.

Practically all the great masters of classical *Tōde* belonged to this class: **Matsumura**, **Asato**, **Itosu**, and before them **Sakugawa**. They were not ingenious peasants who reinvented combat using agricultural implements, as popular legend sometimes claims. They were literate aristocrats who combined administrative, ceremonial, and, eventually, martial duties in direct service to the king.

Masters of Tōde, Men of the Pechin Class

It is worth pausing here, because the statement may seem exaggerated, yet it is not. All the great masters of classical *Tōde* were *pechin*. Not one, not merely the majority, but virtually all of them. Let us begin with the central figures of *Shuri-te*. **Tōde Sakugawa**, the first in the lineage, was a *pechin* from Akata, sponsored by the kingdom to study in China. His disciple **Matsumura Sōkon** entered the castle as a *chikudun pechin*—the lowest rank of the bureaucratic nobility—and rose to become chief instructor and bodyguard to the king.

Matsumura's two great disciples shared the same social condition. **Asato Ankō** belonged to an even higher rank, that of the *Tonochi*⁹³—hereditary village chiefs—while **Itosu**

⁹³ *Tonochi* (殿地) — The rank of hereditary head of a village or district, above that of an ordinary *pechin*. It was Ankō Asato's status, placing him among the highest aristocracy within the service nobility.

Ankō, of the *Keimochi* ⁹⁴ class—the nobility possessing genealogy—served for thirty years as personal secretary to **King Shō Tai**.

Among **Matsumura**’s disciples, the pattern is repeated without exception: **Kuwa Ryōsei**, **Itarashiki Chōchū**, **Tawada Shinboku**, **Sakuma**, **Kiyuna**, **Sakihara**—all *pechin* of Shuri. And it extends to the other traditions of the island. In Tomari, **Kōsaku Matsumora** was a *chikudon pechin*, an indirect descendant of the **first King Shō**. In Kumemura, **Aragaki Seishō** was a *chikudon pechin* and official interpreter of the kingdom for Chinese affairs.

The most eloquent proof of this affiliation lies in the names themselves. Several masters bore the title of their class incorporated into the name by which history remembers them: **Tokumine Pechin**, **Maeda Pechin**, **Oyadomari Pechin**, **Takahara Peichin**—the old master of **Sakugawa**. Rank and martial identity were so closely linked that the word “*pechin*” became attached to the name, like an occupational surname.

There is an even more singular case: **Sakugawa** himself. What became attached to him was not the name of his class, but the name of the art itself: **Tōde Sakugawa**, “*Sakugawa, he of the Chinese hand*”. According to tradition, it was his master **Takahara** who granted him that sobriquet on

⁹⁴ *Keimochi* (家持) — Literally, “one who possesses a house”. A noble family with recognised hereditary status and property, within the middle ranks of the aristocracy. This was the status of Ankō Itosu’s family.

his deathbed. One *pechin* among many, yes, but the only one whom history distinguished by making the art part of his name.

It is worth noting the exceptions, because they illuminate the rule. **Higaonna Kanryō**, the great master of *Naha-te*, was not a *pechin*, but the son of a port merchant: *Naha-te*, a commercial and cosmopolitan art, had a more popular social origin than aristocratic *Shuri-te*. And, at the other extreme, some masters stood above the *pechin* rank: the **Motobu** brothers and **Chōtoku Kyan** descended from collateral branches of the ***Shō royal family*** itself, aristocrats by blood rather than mere officials. But once those exceptions have been set aside, the conclusion remains firm. *Tōde* was, throughout its classical history, an art of the *pechin* class. And that—as we shall see next—strikes at the root of one of the most widespread myths about the origin of *karate*.

A Critical Distinction: Tōde Was Not a Peasant Art

It is important to establish something here before continuing, because it dismantles one of the most widespread myths concerning the origin of *karate*.

Tōde was an art cultivated by the *pechin* class, not by the common people. The sources are unequivocal: peasants (*heimin*) were strictly forbidden from practising unarmed fighting techniques, and the transmission of the art remained for centuries a secret, hereditary, and elite form of knowledge.

This contradicts a widely disseminated idea in popular culture: the one that portrays *karate* as an art of oppressed peasants who, in response to weapons prohibitions, developed a system of self-defence using agricultural tools. The social reality is very different. The weapons prohibitions of 1609—after the invasion by *Satsuma*—specifically affected the *pechin* class, that is, the *Ryūkyūan* warrior nobility, not the peasants, who had never had the right to bear arms. And it was the *pechin* who, stripped of swords and spears, adapted to unarmed combat the martial techniques they already practised. It is true that some peasants did, in parallel and independently, develop the martial use of agricultural implements, giving rise to *kobudō*—but that is a different and later tradition.

The peasant legend therefore coexists with a more complex reality, in which *Tōde* may have emerged on the technical margins—in unarmed combat and in the use of repurposed utensils—but was systematised at the very heart of the kingdom, among the members of its literate nobility. Seen in this way, the logic of reserved knowledge is neither strange nor exclusively Okinawan. Knowledge transmitted in secret, within a closed group that decides who deserves to receive it, is as old as humanity itself.

Something very similar happened with trades in medieval Europe: artisan guilds jealously guarded the secrets of their work—the techniques of the stonemason, the glassmaker, the blacksmith—and transmitted them from master to apprentice over many years, within a controlled circle,

in order to ensure that the knowledge did not become dispersed and that those who possessed it always retained its value and their livelihood. From that same impulse, Freemasonry would eventually emerge, which in its origins was a brotherhood of builders entrusted with the secrets of the trade before becoming what we know today.

The mechanism is always the same: valuable knowledge, a group that safeguards it, and transmission reserved to a few chosen by the group itself. *Tōde* belongs to that long human family of guarded forms of knowledge. It was not an art openly disseminated by the people, but a heritage which a specific class—the *pechin* nobility—preserved, refined, and transmitted privately, generation after generation, for centuries. To understand this is to understand why *karate* reached us as it did, laden with discretion, hierarchy, and secrecy.

The Decisive Point: There Were No Samurai in Okinawa

Here we arrive at the core of this chapter. In *Tokugawa Japan*, society was divided into four major officially recognised castes—the *shi-nō-kō-shō*⁹⁵ system (士農工商). At the top stood the *samurai* (士), a professional military caste devoted

⁹⁵ *Shi-nō-kō-shō* (士農工商) — The official four-class system of Tokugawa Japan, in descending order: warriors (*shi*), peasants (*nō*), artisans (*kō*) and merchants (*shō*). In Okinawa, significantly, the warrior class did not exist as a separate estate.

exclusively to arms, with a sword at the belt and a hereditary right to combat. Then came, in order, the peasants, artisans, and merchants. The *samurai* lived on a stipend—a fixed allowance, normally paid in rice, received according to their rank rather than for any work performed. They did not work with their hands or engage in trade; their only function was warfare and military administration.

In Okinawa, there was no samurai caste identical to the Japanese one. The Kingdom of Ryūkyū did, however, possess its own aristocratic and administrative hierarchy. Among its members was the class of the *yukatchu*, within which the *pechin* occupied different ranks of service to the king.

It is important to clarify a nuance, because this Ryūkyūan aristocracy was sometimes called *samurē*—and even “samurai.” But the term did not designate exactly the same thing as in Japan. The *pechin* did not form a professional warrior class comparable to that of the Japanese samurai. They were, above all, servants of the kingdom: officials, administrators, diplomats, and men educated in a literate tradition inspired by China. Many of them studied the Confucian classics and practised calligraphy, poetry, and the forms of etiquette proper to the court. Martial competence could form part of their education or responsibilities, especially in duties of guard, protocol, or security, but it did not by itself define the identity of the entire class. The difference from the Japanese *samurai* should not be overstated, since many samurai of the *Tokugawa period* were also officials and men of

letters. Yet in *Ryūkyū*, administrative, diplomatic, and cultural education seems to have carried particular weight within the elite surrounding the court of Shuri. That environment helps us understand part of the world in which *Tōde* developed: a tradition transmitted in small circles, linked to families of elevated social position and to a court culture in which physical discipline coexisted with writing, music, ceremony, and knowledge of the classics. It cannot be claimed that every technical feature of *Tōde* derived directly from this social condition. But it is reasonable to think that its reserved transmission, its emphasis on personal discipline, and its insertion into a refined cultural environment were inseparable from the *Ryūkyūan* world that saw it grow.

And that difference of origin would be decisive when, in the twentieth century, **Funakoshi** presented *Tōde* in Japan, the land of the samurai par excellence. There, a practice born on the cultural periphery of *Ryūkyū* would have to learn to speak the language of Japanese *budō* without completely losing its memory. This will be the key to everything that follows.

Living as a Pechin: Genealogy, Dress, and Movement

Belonging to one class or another was neither flexible nor merely nominal. The system was reinforced by a rigorous code of sumptuary laws. This meant that only aristocrats could

wear silk, keep their hair tied in a topknot (*katacashira*⁹⁶), and wear hats of a particular form according to their rank.

The king wore a black cap with red cords; the *ōji*—princes—and *aji* wore coloured woven hats with golden hairpins; the *ueekata* wore purple serge caps; the *pechin* wore hats differentiated according to rank. The common people wore cotton and simple garments; any attempt to imitate aristocratic dress was punished. Nor was there freedom of movement. Aristocrats had to reside in Shuri, Naha, Tomari, or Kume—the four privileged urban districts. Commoners were registered in their native village and, as a general rule, could not leave it. In other words, commoners lived bound to the land and their community, without access to the cities except when expressly summoned for work in the service of their lord.

Social mobility was therefore practically nonexistent. The Confucian meritocracy—so often invoked in official discourse—functioned within the nobility, not between classes: a low-ranking *pechin* could rise to *chikudun pechin* or *satunushi pechin* if he demonstrated exceptional service, but a commoner could never cross the line into the aristocracy. The

⁹⁶ *Katacashira* (片かしら): the traditional male topknot of the Ryūkyū Kingdom. It was formed by gathering the hair at the crown of the head and securing it with hairpins (*jiifaa*), whose material varied by rank: gold for royalty, and silver or other metals for the different levels of the nobility. Tying it for the first time was a rite of passage into adulthood, during which the young man also received his adult name and rank. After the Japanese annexation, the Meiji hair-cutting order of 1871 eventually brought the custom to an end.

only notable exception was introduced in the eighteenth century by the reformer **Sai On**⁹⁷ (蔡温, 1682–1761), a great administrator and Confucian philosopher, who attempted—with limited success—to recover the original meritocratic character of the class by opening certain paths of advancement through study. But the general rule remained in force until the end of the kingdom: one was born an aristocrat, or one never became one.

Service to the King as the Only Path

For the *pechin* class, there was only one possible path in life: service to the king. There was no “free” aristocratic life outside the kingdom.

The *pechin* were not landowners—the *qji* were, at least symbolically; the *pechin* were not. In fact, they lived on a stipend of rice received in exchange for their service in the administration. Without service, there was no stipend. And without a stipend, there was hunger. Contrary to the romantic image, Okinawan aristocratic families lived on the edge of modesty. They had no vast estates, no vassals, no independent revenues. They had access to the castle. That was all, and by then, that was already a great deal.

⁹⁷ Sai On (蔡温, 1682–1761) — A Confucian administrator and philosopher, and one of the kingdom’s leading intellectual figures. He reformed Okinawa’s economy and forest management and sought—with limited success—to reopen avenues of advancement by merit within the nobility.

For that reason, the education of the children of the nobility was directed from the cradle toward a single goal: preparing them for royal service. They learned classical Chinese and cultivated Japanese; they studied the Confucian classics, calligraphy, and poetry; they learned court rituals, diplomatic techniques, and, eventually—if their career required it—the martial arts of the castle. The brightest could travel to China as official students of the kingdom, sponsored for years at the imperial academy in Beijing or in Fuzhou, capital of Fujian province. Others were sent to Edo or Kagoshima on diplomatic missions. And the most exceptional—the Sakugawas, the Matsumuras—could combine all those experiences over the course of a single life.

For a young *pechin* born in a district near Shuri—let us say Yamakawa, where **Matsumura Sōkon** would be born around 1797—the horizon was almost singular: study hard, sit the examination for castle service, obtain a post, rise through the hierarchy, receive new ranks, and, should the occasion arise, be invited to join the king’s personal guard. To live “*at the gates of Shuri*” meant belonging to the core of royal service. There was nothing above that. There was nothing beside it either.

It was precisely this world—the world of **Shō Shin**’s centralised court, mature and consolidated two and a half centuries later—that **Tōde Sakugawa** would find when he was born in the eighteenth century, and which his disciple **Matsumura Sōkon** would inherit a generation later. Men formed in this mould: men of letters, officials, travellers to

China, servants of the king. And, in addition—only in addition—martial masters. The following chapters will be devoted to them. But first, it is worth seeing how this entire world came to an end.

The End of a Class: 1609 and 1879

This social structure, which remained essentially intact for more than four centuries, suffered two decisive historical blows.

The first was the invasion by *Satsuma* in 1609, already discussed in previous chapters. After the conquest, the *pechin* formally retained their status and privileges—including the right to bear arms under certain circumstances—but lost much of their autonomy. Their loyalty became divided between the Okinawan king, formally sovereign, and the *daimyō* of *Satsuma*, the effective lord. It was precisely in this context of dual vassalage that *Tōde* was cultivated with the greatest intensity. As a secret art, transmitted privately, away from the gaze of the Japanese samurai. This was the world in which **Sakugawa** and **Matsumura** would live, a kingdom formally independent but effectively supervised, where the literate nobility silently refined an art that could no longer be publicly displayed.

The second blow, the definitive one, arrived two and a half centuries later. In 1879, with the *Ryūkyū shobun* (“*disposition of Ryūkyū*”), the Meiji government dissolved the kingdom and turned it into Okinawa Prefecture.

The consequence for the *pechin* class was catastrophic. They were reclassified as *shizoku* (士族) in the new Japanese system—a symbolic status, without the material prerogatives of the former nobility. They lost their stipends, their functions, their reason for being. A nobility without a kingdom; heirs to a dignity without means.

It was within that generation—the first to experience the dissolution of the kingdom as adults—that **Itosu**, **Asato**, and **Funakoshi**'s father were situated. And it was in that transition, paradoxically, that *Tōde* began to open itself to the outside world.

Many *pechin*, deprived of their traditional means of livelihood, found in the public teaching of *Tōde* a new path to subsistence and dignity. A fact that helps explain why an art which had remained secret for centuries began, precisely then, to emerge into the light. It was also, incidentally, the generation to which **Funakoshi** belonged: born in 1868, in the very year of the Meiji change, he watched with his own eyes as his father's literate nobility became a residual class, without any real function, condemned to seek a place in the new Okinawa of schools, trades, and cities.

That transition—from *pechin* to primary-school teacher, from servant of the king to employee of the Japanese state—is **Funakoshi**'s personal history. But it is also, at its core, the story of his entire class. And with it, the story of the birth of *modern karate*.

Without understanding this structure, *Tōde* cannot be understood. One cannot understand why it remained for so long an elite art, transmitted almost within families. One cannot understand why its masters were at once calligraphers, poets, and bodyguards.

One cannot understand why it began to spread precisely when the class that had cultivated it ceased to exist. Nor can one understand why, when *karate* finally arrived in Japan in the twentieth century, it arrived not as an art of *samurai*, but as something else; the art of martial men of letters who, for five hundred years, had refined their bodies with the same discipline with which they refined their calligraphy.

That difference of origin would explain almost everything. But before reaching Japan, there is still much to tell about life within the castle.

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This book contains more than 550 pages and hundreds of references to online literature by a wide range of authors.

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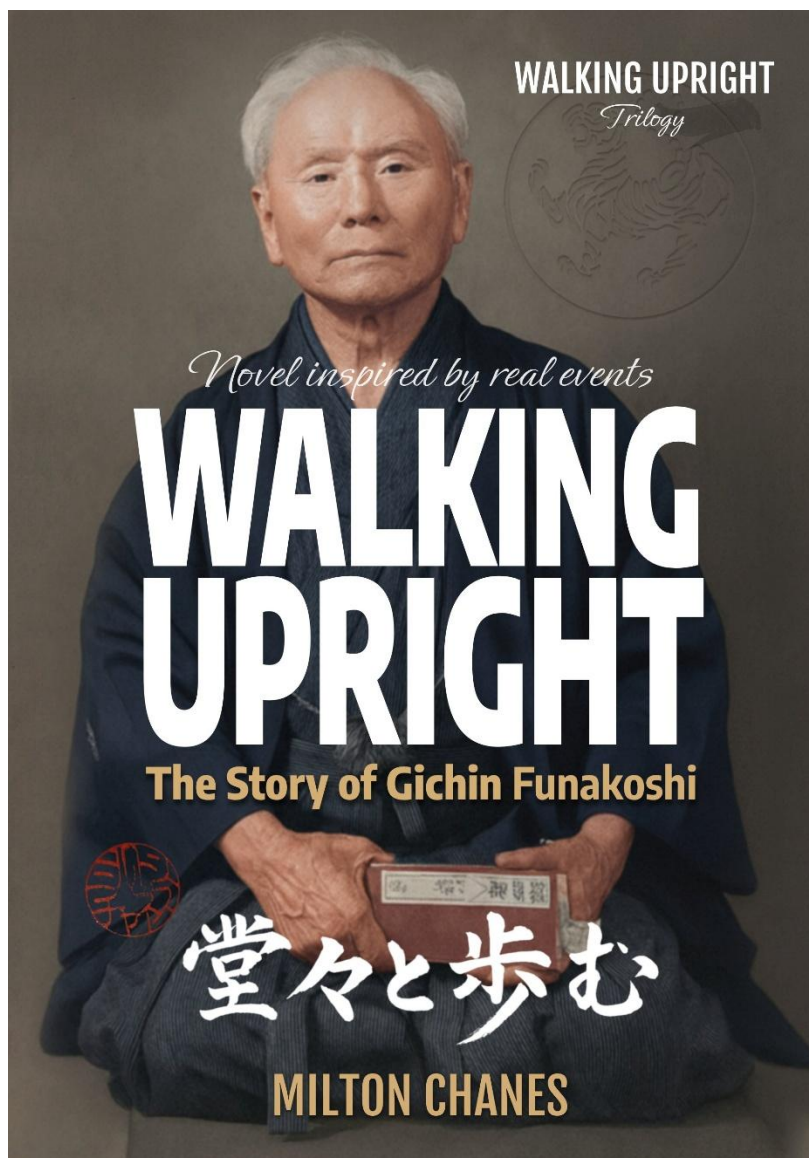


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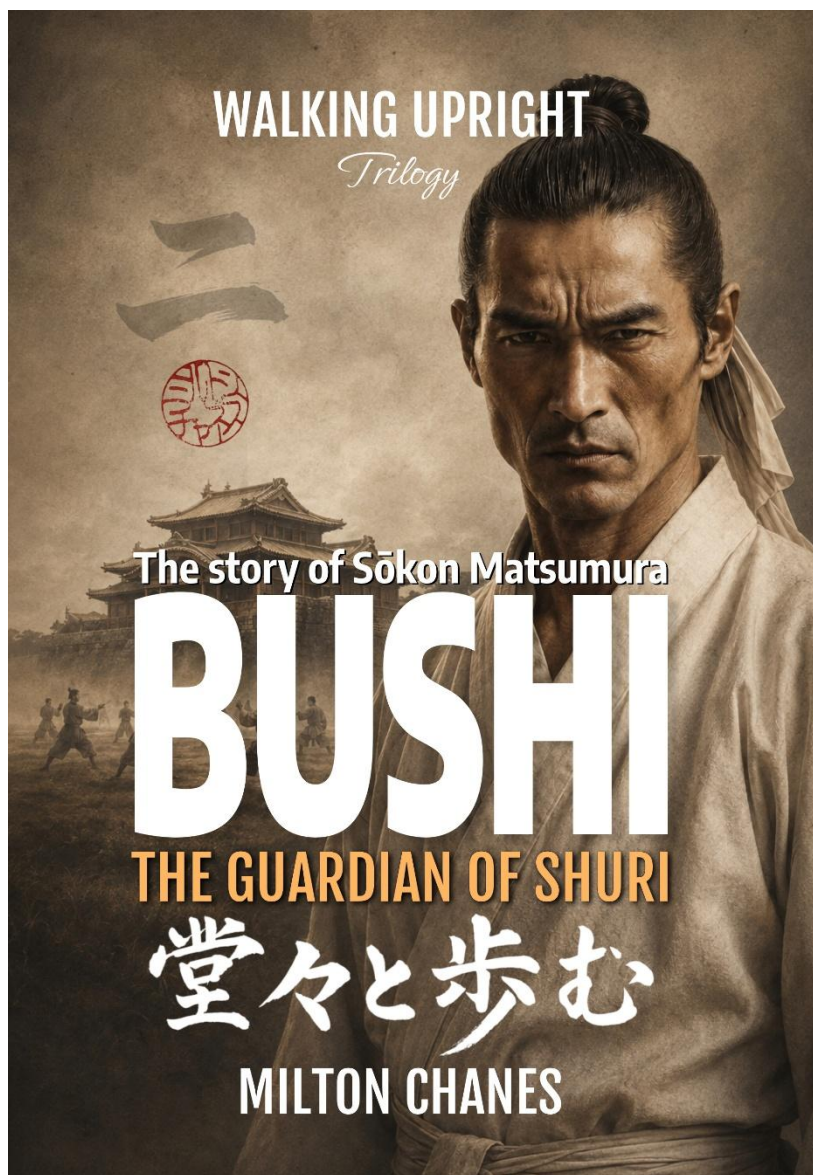
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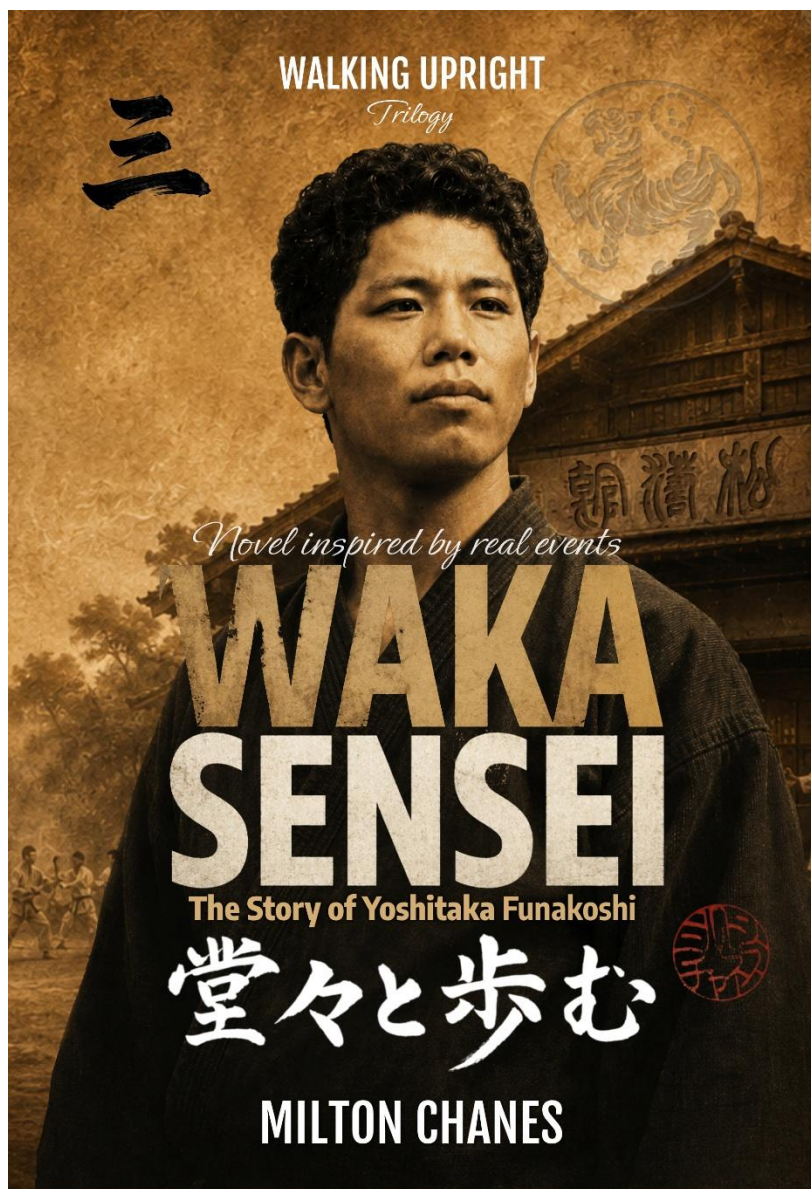
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