

Southern Chinese Kung Fu and the RyuKyu martial arts

Southern white crane is one of the core types of kung fu in Fujian both stylistically and historically.

In this document I consider the two best known touch points of White Crane on Okinawan karate together with some of the historic contexts on the prime actors of this influence.

All Yong Chun White Crane lineages trace their routes back to Fang Qi Niang circa 1650. Most Fujian and Taiwan white crane trace their roots back to Fang Qi Niang via Yong Chun. It is written in the white crane museum in Yong Chun:

"In the reign of of the Qing Emperor Xianfeng (1831 – 1861) – Lín shì chéng (林世城) taught Yongchun Bai He Chuen in Fuzhou and this evolved into Fu Zhou Crane Fist. His student Lín dá chóng (林达崇 - pán yù bā) taught Xiè chóng xiáng (谢崇祥) who taught the Japanese man Dōng ēn nà kuān liàng (東恩納寬量 Higaonna Kanryō)"

This references simultaneously the evolution of Fu Zhou crane from Yong Chun crane and the cross fertilization with Okinawan karate.

Full lineages in Yong Chun, for example in wen gong ci wu shu guan and the village Guan Shan, are currently headed by 12th or 13th generation practitioners. With a date for the founder generally taken to be around 1650 this would give an average duration of 30 years for each lineage head, a number confirmed by the last 8 generations where we have birth dates.

Higaonna Kanryo (born 1853) was the Okinawan martial artist who taught the founders of both GojuRyu (Miyagi Chogun born 1888) and ShitoRyu (Mabuni Kenwa born 1889). At the age of around 20 (1873) he travelled to FuZhou and trained in kung fu returning shortly after Japan annexed Okinawa (1879). Prior to this martial arts in Rukyu islands was not called karate but were referred to as "chinese hand" (漢手) Han being the word for chinese. Incidentally this is the same "han" which in Japanese is used for the Kanji (漢字 – Han Zi) which literally translates as "chinese characters" – giving kanji for chinese script and kante for chinese hand. The term karate was first used in print in the early 20th century.

It is written in the chinese texts and commonly assumed that the teacher of Higaonna Kanryo was Xiè chóng xiáng (谢崇祥). However there are two reasons why this is unlikely. The first is that when he first travelled in China around 1870 , Xiè would have been only 18 years old. Given the trans generational nature of martial arts he would certainly not have been the senior member of any guan or group or practitioners at that time.





Ilustración 1: Yong Chun White Crane practitioners circa 1928

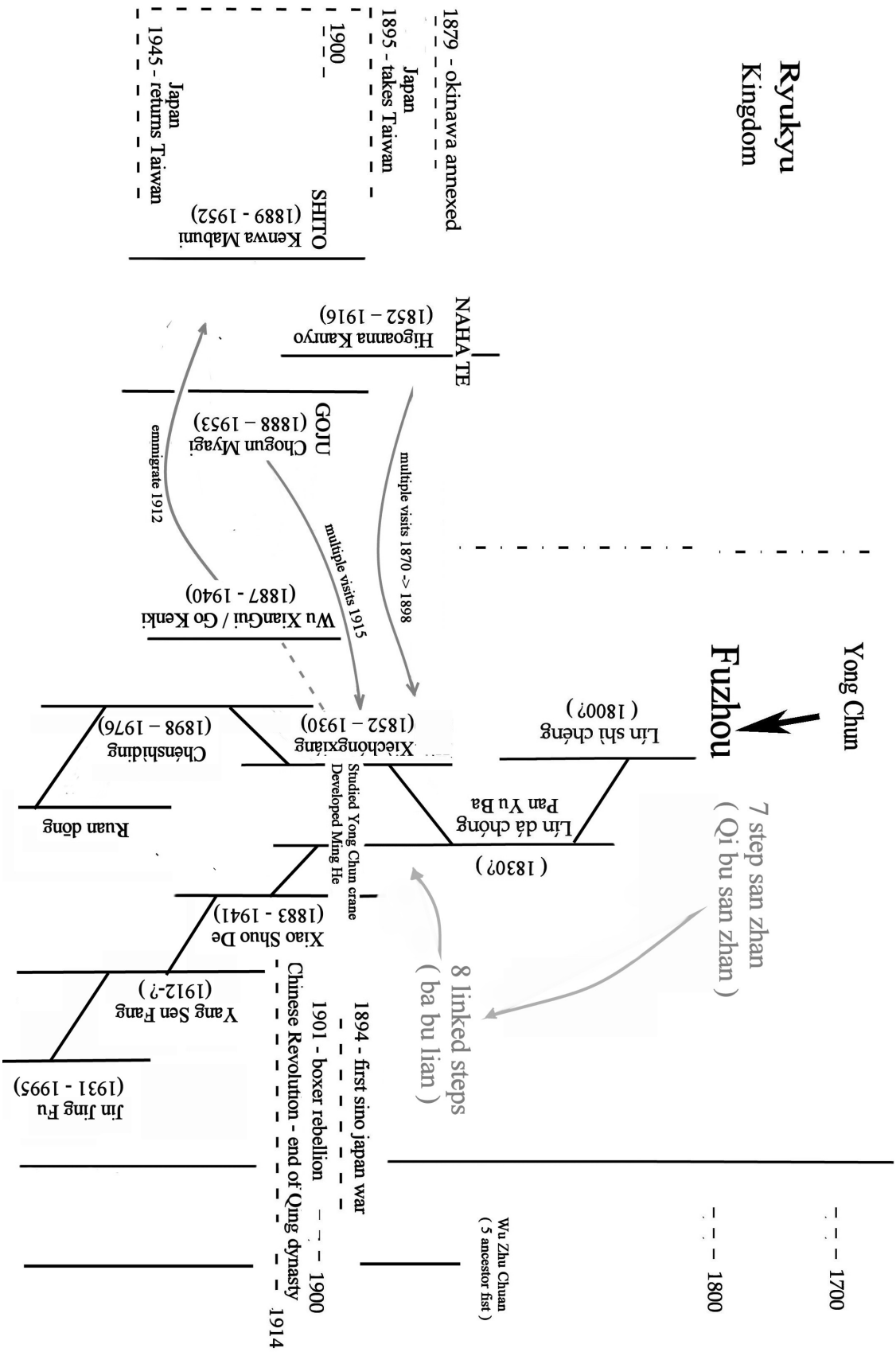
Consider the above photo from Yong Chun as an example of cross generational practice. Here the most senior with the dark sash is Pānzhēntuán 潘◎ 团(1845 – 1929). The teacher to his left is the next head of the system is Pānxiàodé 潘 孝德 (1908 – 1988). In this lineage example the average age span on the heads of the system taken over the last 4 generations is 80 years old. Xiè chóng xiáng at 30 years old would have certainly been the junior member of a teaching group likely encompassing members of 2 previous generations of students.

The second reason it is unlikely is that when Higaonna's student Miyagi Chogun the founder of Goju Ryu returned to china to find his Higaonna's teacher in 1915 he could not find him in spite of the fact that Xiè chóng xiáng did not die until 1930. The crane that Higaonna studied was likely very close to the Yong Chun crane as trained today. The reason that we can know this is the slowing of rate of modification of a style due to the number of practitioners in a location. This "**demographic inertia**" is maintained though a healthy number of cross-generational practitioners training together. The process of the evolution of a style is facilitated by the ignorance of students in new locations. Given that emphasis that Higaonna Sensei placed on San Zhan (Samchiem) - the fundamental form of white crane and related southern arts – he was likely training with a system of the same family as Yong Chun White Crane.

Timelines Comparison

1650 - Fang Qi Niang
(White Crane)

Tai Zhu
(great ancestor)



The martial arts mentioned in the same family as Yong Chun Crane are 5 ancestors (Wu Zu Chuan), and great ancestor or Tai Zu chuan. However not all styles are equal in importance in this regard. Great ancestor fist is a power centric basic deep system which has probably been around in Fujian and specifically Yong Chun since the mid 16th century. Certainly at the beginning of the 20th century it was still practiced in the town. However gradually practitioners in the Yong Chun area moved to training white crane as it was a more evolved system in terms of some concepts. Worth noting that in an ancestor worship based culture "great ancestor fist" is really "what my great grandparents trained". Wu Zu (5 ancestors) is a much more recent style and where it is practiced in Asia it most often contains a very high percentage of white crane rather than the 20% one would be hoping for if it is a blend of 5 different systems. It looks like White Crane with a re-folding of the initial great ancestor style in terms of stance and power generation. Recent theories about Five Ancestors being more ancient than the late 19th century have scant evidence or lineage documentation (compare several white crane books surviving from the late 1700's.)

The second much mentioned point of influence on karate of the Fuzhou styles is through Wu Xiangui (Go Kenki). However if he did indeed study crane this was either a modified version from the Yong Chun Crane or something entirely different. One explanation would be that if Go Kenki was calling what he was teaching "white crane" then it was crane animal styles of the south which is what we see in for example the Hung Gar version of Tiger Crane with its pecking beaks and twisted stances. The pure HakuTsuru forms of okinawan karate certainly have little in common with forms from any of the lineages currently practiced in Yong Chun.

By the early 20th century the San Zhan of FuZhou had evolved into Ba Bu Lian (8 linked steps) which is the Crying Crane (鳴鶴拳 ming he chuan) - FuZhou version of San Zhan. The full name of San Zhan as commonly performed in Yong Chun is "7 step double hand San Zhan ". Crying crane fist was developed within the Fuzhou Area county of Minhou - just across the Minjiang (River Min) which separates Fuzhou City from Minhou County. Babulian is qigong first, self defence second although the broader picture reveals that these are actually one and the same. Grand Master Jin Jing Fu used the Ginger Fist hand position during his Babulian practice. This fist-shape is predominantly used is for tendon-strengthening and limb-conditioning. Where as Yong Chun San Zhan as a single "kia" or shout point, the Babulian of Master Jin used 2. The three forward and three backward steps identify the form as a "fanqing, fuming!" or "Overthrow The Qing, Restore The Ming". This slogan provided the very foundation to the martial arts of that era and of that geographical location - Fujian - which is where the Triads have their origin.

Although there are many forms currently trained in Yong Chun White Crane the key of the system is terse with 3 forms marking progression points. The form taught first



is San Zhan which can simply be thought of as dealing with position and linear power drawing from the ground. The second is 13 Defences or 13 Shakes dealing predominantly with waist and shoulder rotational power. The third is 8 part hands which is 8 linked techniques reminiscent of Tensho in karate and expands ideas of in fighting. Following this there are techniques such as are mentioned in the bubishi like "iron ox enters the stone". Of the 22 forms of the syllabus of the wen gong ci lineage 14 are named are specific techniques revealed in them. One can easily understand stripping down the learning path for a practitioner who already had a library of techniques and concentrating on the 3 primal forms which teach the essence of the movement. This does not only apply to teaching Japanese students, but also passing the system to any cross training in FuZhou or for the travelling Yong Chun community. One aspect that does not tie with some of the goju ryu interpretations is that sanchiem is a hard form whereas tensho is a soft form. In White Crane the balance between hard and soft is to be found from the first form onwards – as stated in the book "white crane ancestor genuine techniques" (circa 1790) : hard is soft, soft is hard.... 剛者柔, 柔者剛 . Regarding open verses closed fist hand, San Zhan is trained in 3 hand positions, open , closed and half closed.



Illustration 2: 鹤翅中 Hè chī zhōng (crane wing centre – simplified ending)



Illustration 3: 鹤爪中 He Zhua Zhong (crane claw centre – shuffling / step drag)



Illustration 4: 鹤头中 He Tou Zhong (crane head centre – current San Zhan ending)

One other aspect must be considered when talking about the differences in how martial arts were taught to the Japanese in China which is the enormous political and cultural changes that happened at that period. At the initial point of Higaonnas (1870 or thereabouts) contact Okinawa had not been annexed by japan. In between that date and the arrival of GoKenKi in Japan Okinwas was annexed by Japan (1879), the first sino japanese war had taken place (1894) resulting in the invasion of Taiwan (1895) which was not returned until 1945 and China itself had undergone

both the boxer rebellion (1901) and the chinese revolution resulting in the end of the Qing Dynasty.

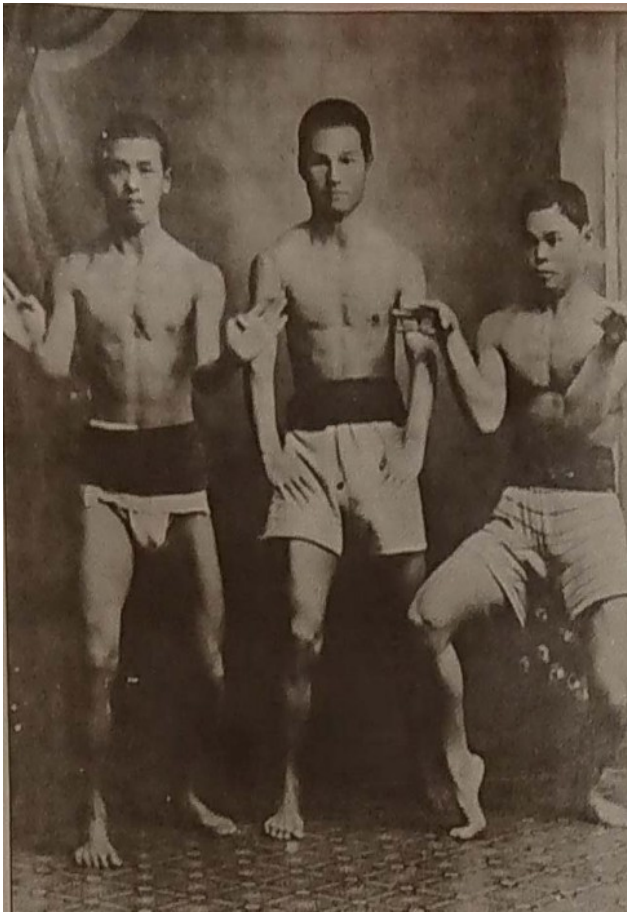


Ilustración 5: Gokenki Students

Leaving the country at the end of the Qing dynasty, finding refuge in a country which until recently was at war with China and which still occupied part of china it is highly likely his kung fu enjoyed considerably more reputation in his new found home that it had in China.

The photo to left is often shown as students of GoKenKi. Although there are similarities with Yong Chun White Crane – the arm position of the student on the left and the albiet rather high stance positions of the two left students, there are many points which would not be acceptable in any of the yong chun schools e.g. the thumb position of the student on the left and much about the student on the right.

In Conclusion, the geography , timelines and tequnique analysis of Naha style karate and the evolving Yong Chun crane in the Fuzhou area lead me to conclude that the initial contact of Higaonna with Fuzhou crane was with a version closer to Yong Chun white crane than subsequent often referenced influences which took place after the evolution of Fuzhou crane. Whilst the kung fu influencing karate may come from several sources in the South, historically Yong Chun White Crane is itself a, if not the, major source and influence in the foundation training and priciples of many of these styles.

Credits: Special thanks Simon Lailey Shr Fu for sharing his knowledge of Ming He (Crying Crane). Simon was living in Fuzhou for 3 years in the early 90s and trained with Grandmaster Jin Jing Fu. As a pioneers of the style he has an undiluted experience of training under traditional conditions in the era when it was still difficult to arrive and find a master in China. Simon lives and teaches in the Isle of Wight, England

