

Hangetsu: an Investigation of the Kata

Richard Overill

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The name Hangetsu (半月) literally meaning “Half-moon” or “Half-month” was given by Gichin Funakoshi. The original Okinawan name was Seisan (十三) which translates as “Thirteen”. It has been speculated¹ that the earlier name may refer to 13 distinct techniques demonstrated in the kata, namely:

1. uchi-uke;
2. chudan-zuki;
3. ryo-jishi-ippon-ken-kamae;
4. ryo-jishi-ippon-ken-morote-zuki;
5. kaisho-yama-kamae;
6. ryosho-kakiwake-kamae;
7. tsukami-uke (koko-uke);
8. uraken-tate-mawashi-uchi;
9. mae-geri/ken-kata-ue;
10. gedan-zuki;
11. age-uke;
12. mikazuki-geri;
13. ryo-teisho-awase-uke (gassho-uke).

Seisan / Hangetsu may in fact be the oldest kata of all as it is found not only in all the major traditional karate styles but also allegedly in southern China’s Fujian province in Incense Shop Boxing (formerly Southern Shaolin Monk Fist, 南少林羅漢拳) where a more intricate version is taught by grandmaster Lin Shan Quan in Fuzhou city under the name of Sanzhan (“Three battles”). Seisan is known to have been one programme item in the first ever recorded karate demonstration, performed by Aragaki Seisho (1840–1918) on 24 March 1867 at the Ochayagoten (East Garden Plaza), the famous park and tea house at Shuri Castle on Okinawa, in honour of the last visiting Chinese Sapposhi (diplomatic envoy)^{2 3}.

Funakoshi explains in his master text that his later name was inspired by the semi-circular shapes traced by the performer’s feet and hands during the first three steps forwards in *hangetsu-dachi*⁴. It should also be noted that semi-circular arm shapes

¹ Rob Redmond, *Kata: the Folk Dances of Shotokan* (2006) p.293

² Jesse Enkamp, *The Oldest Kata in Karate History*,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKdp6xXV8kU&ab_channel=JesseEnkamp

³ Will Wain-Williams (aka Monkey Steals Peach), *The Core Forms of Incense Shop Boxing*,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pAM8g5CPd5A&ab_channel=MonkeyStealsPeach

⁴ Gichin Funakoshi, *Karate Do Kyohan* (1935) p.34

are traced immediately before the first turn, and that semi-circular hand and foot shapes are traced during each of the three 180° turns towards the end of the kata.

This explanation contradicts an alternative one⁵ that Hangetsu provides a poetic link to Seisan through the lunar and lunisolar calendars which were in use in China, Korea and Japan: the lunar month has around 27 days, depending on precisely how it is measured, so that a half-month, rounded down, equates to 13 days.

Patrick McCarthy has given an explanation of the lineages of the several present versions of Seisan.⁶ Essentially, he contends that Aragaki's Seisan forms the basis from which arose Goju-ryu Seisan, Uechi-ryu Seisan, Shorin-ryu Seisan, Shotokan Seisan (*i.e.*, Hangetsu), Shito-ryu Seisan and Wado-ryu Seisan. For McCarthy, the kata clearly demonstrates Tiger, Monk Fist (*i.e.*, Arhat/Luohan), Lion and Southern Praying Mantis (SPM) movements and techniques, which makes sense given that Aragaki Seisho travelled to Beijing in September 1870 as an interpreter and took martial arts instruction from Wai Xinxian in Fuzhou city, Fujian province during his stay in China.

However, Emanuel Giordano has linked the Uechi-ryu version of Seisan to a form named Sam Chien / San Zhan of Wuzu Quan (Five Ancestor fist) from Yongchun village in Fujian province.⁷ Specifically, he identifies the form Shan Zhan Shizi (Three battles cross pattern) as the progenitor of Uechi-ryu Seisan. Notice that the investigations of Five Ancestor fist and Incense Shop boxing both indicate a historic link between Seisan and a southern Chinese version of Sanchin (*i.e.* San Zhan); this is significant in itself since it demonstrates a historical connection between these two fundamental kata of Okinawan karate.

A video comparison of 8 contemporary Seisan variants (Wado-ryu, Goju-ryu, Shotokan, Shito-ryu, Shorin-ryu, Isshinryu, Chito-ryu, Uechi-ryu) is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPduZcrV29Y&ab_channel=GarySuley and it will be noticed that Shotokan's Hangetsu is much more similar to Wado-ryu's Seisan than to any of the other variants.

Hangetsu makes use exclusively of three inside-tension stances. *Hangetsu-dachi* is an extended form of *sanchin-dachi* (hourglass stance); it is used to protect the groin and its efficacy is routinely tested by *shime waza* kicks in Goju-ryu Sanchin; the glutes are connected to the abdominals, the tailbone is tucked under and the knees are not allowed to drop inwards. *Kokutso-dachi* and *nekoashi-dachi* are the other two inside-tension stances used in the kata.

Breathing in Hangetsu is not intended to be noisy like the *ibuki* breathing often used in Goju-ryu Sanchin, but it should be diaphragmatic from the hara / tanden, inhaling as you pull back, exhaling as you push out. The first ten moves (up to the first turn) are especially useful for practising deep breathing control.

⁵ Redmond, *op.cit.* pp.291-2

⁶ Patrick McCarthy, Aragaki Seisan and Chokyu-gata, http://www.koryu-uchinadi.org/Aragaki_Seisan_&_Chokyu.pdf

⁷ Emanuel Giordano, Seisan's Origins, <https://karate-shorin-ryu-piemonte.webnode.it/news/seisans-origins/>

The three inside-to-outside semi-circular forward steps at the start of the kata can be used to step around our opponent's leading foot, enabling us to break their balance more effectively with our subsequent *hikite*: if they lead with their right foot and a right hand attack, our left foot can step inside their leading foot and hook it as we punch them with our right fist and simultaneously pull them off-balance with our left hand. The rule-of-3 applies here: we practise the technique twice against a right-handed attack and just once against a left-handed attack because the great majority of attackers will be right-handed.

The following pair of pull-and-push moves, performed with both index knuckles (*ippon-ken*), as opposed to the middle knuckles (*nakadaka-ken*), exemplify the "sink-and-swallow" / "float-and-spit" pairs of yin / yang techniques found in the soft or internal Chinese arts such as tai-chi chuan, where our opponent's attack is first absorbed by contracting and inhaling, then reflected back into them by expanding and exhaling. In practice, responding to a two-handed push or strike to our chest, we might react by using the twin *ippon-ken* to attack our opponent's floating ribs, or more painfully both his nipples.

If we can evade a frontal attack by moving behind our opponent, it is possible to use the open-handed variant of the mountain posture (*kaisho yama-kamae*) to reach under our opponent's armpits and lift up to trap their arms laterally. Then crossing and lowering our arms we can press down on the nape of their neck or even attack both sides of their neck with *ryo-te shuto-uchi*. This approach is demonstrated here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGZTOraePSo&ab_channel=JohnBurke

The first turn in Hangetsu is unusual in that we first step through with our right foot before pivoting 180° on both feet so that our left foot remains in front. This suggests that a throw may be implied since we have invaded our opponent's space with our right leg. If we can trap the side of our opponent's neck against our right flank with our right arm as we step past their right leg with our right leg, then our 180° turn can be used to throw them over our right hip (a form of *koshi-nage*). A demonstration of this application can be seen here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXDNYgPOVwM&ab_channel=JohnBurke

If the throw described above is not successful, our opponent is likely to attack us again and the following rule-of-three moves each involves a combined upward *haito-uchi* and downward *shuto-uchi*: our downwards left *shuto-uchi* can be used to intercept a right-handed attack while our upwards right *haito-uchi* can be used to simultaneously attack their neck or throat; alternatively, the downwards *shuto* can strike towards their groin while the upwards *haito* can attack their armpit. The wrist twist which follows each *haito-uchi* turns our palm from supinate to pronate and suggests a grasping, twisting action using a tiger mouth grip on the opponent (*tsukami-uke* / *koko-uke*). Several of the *shuto* / *haito* options are shown here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7PrwFbMbp4&ab_channel=JohnBurke

The second, third and fourth turns in Hangetsu are all similar and in each case the raised foot and hand both move in a 180° semi-circle, reinforcing Funakoshi's

revised name for the kata. An application for each of these moves involves us turning away and attempting to leave the scene but being restrained from doing so by being grasped on the shoulder from behind. Our response is to lean away to create some space, then turn towards their grasping arm, rolling our arm over theirs so that our elbow digs down into their arm, at the same time using the outside edge of our turning foot (*mawashi-sokuto-geri*) to drive into the outside of their thigh, aiming for one of the *kyusho* points GB31 or GB32. The rule-of-3 applies again. This application is demonstrated here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfD1JnoM_Rc&ab_channel=JohnBurke

The immediately following sequence consists of a unique series of continuously rising attack techniques, from floor level to face level: stepover – *maegeri* – *gedanzuki* – *gyakuzuki* – *ageuchi*. In the event that the previous technique did not finish the job, the stepover enables us to gain ground on our opponent surreptitiously in preparation for the *maegeri*, which in practice could be *kingeri*, after which we deliver attacks to their groin, stomach and jaw in sequence. The application is shown here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pakBoeE97HY&ab_channel=KataForSelfDefenseShotoryuGoshinjutsu

The final sequence: *mikazuki-geri* – (*gedan*)*gyaku-zuki* – *ryo-teisho-awase-uke* can be interpreted as a crescent kick to our opponent's leading leg or knee, taking them down, followed by a *gyaku-zuki* to their head to finish them off; however, if this is not successful they may sprawl forward attempting to grab our leading leg and a defence against this is to retract our leg into *neko-ashi-dachi* and press against their sprawling forehead using *ryo-teisho-awase-uke*. This application is illustrated here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUEu3nrnywU&ab_channel=practicalkatabunkai

Incidentally, *mikazuki* literally means “three-day moon”; in comparison with *hangetsu* (“half-moon”) this illustrates the use of two completely different pronunciations for the same kanji 月 representing “moon”: *zuki* vs. *getsu*.

bun bu ryo do (文武両道) – “writing and fighting, both ways”