

The Katas Meikyo (明鏡) and Rohai (鷺牌)

Richard E Overill

November 2021 – January 2022

The Shotokan kata Meikyo (“bright/shiny/polished mirror”) is believed to have been created by Gichin Funakoshi (1868 – 1957) after his arrival in Tokyo from Okinawa in 1922. There is jittery, grainy, black-and-white, 8mm footage of Funakoshi performing Meikyo which is claimed to date from 1924, although some commentators have suggested that it could date from as late as the mid-1930’s:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OonEErpicj&t=4s&ab_channel=Shooter16a2

A modern performance of Meikyo by Tetsuhiko Asai (1935 – 2006) can be seen here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVJ6_fEu3oE&ab_channel=JanKnobel

The reference to a mirror is believed to relate to moves 2 and 3 of the kata where you appear to look into a mirror formed by your two palms and then wipe it clean.

It should be noted that there are 2 variants of Meikyo: the Funakoshi / Nakayama (JKA) variant uses *gedan barai*, *gedan barai*, *uchi-uke* for the 3 sets of blocks, whereas the Kanazawa (SKIF) variant uses the sequence *gedan barai*, *uchi-uke*, *age-uke*.

Master Asai also developed 2 further versions of Meikyo during the 1980’s and 1990’s, which he named Meikyo nidan and Meikyo sandan. His performance of Meikyo nidan can be found here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lt2V5jw-3iA&ab_channel=JanKnobel

However, there appears to be no footage of him performing Meikyo sandan; here it is performed by Luis Miguel Mendez Urueña:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUJ2f0_W54g&ab_channel=LuisMiguelMendezUrue%C3%B1a

Meikyo is believed to be derived from an Okinawan kata named Rohai (“image of a heron”). This kata survives today as a family of 3 katas in Shito-ryu karate, named Rohai shodan, Rohai nidan and Rohai sandan, attributed originally to one of Funakoshi’s Okinawan teachers, Ankoh Itosu (1831 – 1915):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQcnymX2Fy8&ab_channel=KarateClubHirota

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=flbS8T08sEk&ab_channel=KarateClubHirota

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HQd3PdG6j90&ab_channel=KarateClubHirota

It is frequently stated that Funakoshi devised Meikyo from Itosu’s 3 Rohai kata, but this is an inaccurate over-simplification. If you examine the sequences of moves in each of Rohai shodan, Rohai nidan and Rohai sandan it becomes apparent that Rohai nidan is the major source for Meikyo. In addition to the initial signature move in which the performer looks at their open hands in front of their face, it also contains pairs of diagonally oriented stepping

block-and-punch combinations as found in Meikyo. This is followed by the sequence: *hidari tetsui*, *maegeri* (modified to *mikazuki-geri* in Meikyo), *ryo-ken gedan barai* (both blocks directed to the E here rather than to the N and E as in Meikyo), *ryo-ken age-uke* to the NW then to the NE (both directed to the N in Meikyo), *ryo-ken chudan barai*, *ryo-ken uchi-uke*, and *ryo-ken ura-tsuki*; this is clearly similar to the corresponding sequence (immediately prior to the jump) in Meikyo.

There is another, apparently older, version of Rohai attributed to Kosaku Matsumora of Tomari (1829 – 1898), which is misattributed to Sokon Matsumura of Shuri (1809 – 1899) in some ryu-ha¹ (both names are pronounced “Machimura” in the Okinawa dialect²) and is preserved in Shito-ryu and Matsubayashi-ryu, amongst others. The kata may have been passed to Matsumora by either of his teachers Karyu Uku (1800 – 1850) or Kishin Teruya (1804 – 1864) but there is no direct evidence for this. It is performed here by Juan Beltrán Rodríguez:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zYASKyvtelw&ab_channel=JuanBeltr%C3%A1nRodr%C3%ADquez

This kata makes use of *sagi-ashi-dachi* (“heron’s foot stance”) 3 times, which is distinct from the *tsuru-ashi-dachi* (“crane’s foot stance”) used in Chinto/Gankaku; here, the front foot is raised to about knee height, toes pointing down, while the front hand makes *shuto-gedan-uke* and the rear hand makes *shuto-age-uke*. Other features of this kata are the 3 *yama-zuki* followed by the 360° spin initiated by a right *mikazuki-geri* into the open left palm near the end. It is no coincidence that this is precisely the ending sequence of master Asai’s Meikyo nidán, which also uses *sagi-ashi-dachi* twice.

The most senior student of master Asai, André Bertel, has confirmed that Meikyo nidán is based on Matsumora’s Rohai³. He goes on to assert that Asai’s Meikyo sandán is based on an even older form of Rohai but offers no evidence for this⁴.

Funakoshi’s Meikyo also appears to borrow and modify at least one technique from Matsumora’s Rohai: the *sankaku tobi* (“triangle jump”) near the end of Meikyo is most probably a replacement for the 360° spin at the end of Matsumora’s Rohai; both are immediately followed by a backward stepping *shuto-uke*.

The likely origins of Rohai from within either the Fujian white-crane gong-fu or the southern shaolin monk-fist (aka incense shop) boxing communities of southern China are hinted at by Funakoshi’s contemporary Choki Motobu (1870 – 1944). Writing in 1932, Motobu mentions Rohai amongst 7 katas no longer practised in China, but only on Okinawa⁵, while writing in 1925, Funakoshi mentions Rohai amongst 32 katas commonly practised on Okinawa⁶. Iain Abernethy’s discussion thread on Rohai⁷ points out that the characters 鷺牌 would be pronounced “Lù pái” in Chinese and that “Rohai” is the Okinawan pronunciation of the same characters. However, another suggestion is that the kanji for Rohai were 羅漢 (Arhat or Arhan) which is pronounced Lohan/Rohan in Chinese but in the accent of

¹ Naoki Motobu, trans. Andreas Quast, Matsumura Rohai, <https://ameblo.jp/motoburyu/entry-12229900448.html>

² Naoki Motobu, trans. Andreas Quast, On the Distinction between Shuri-te and Tomari-te, <https://ryukyu-bugei.com/?p=4123>

³ <http://andrebertel.blogspot.com/2021/02/a-brief-comparing-and-contrasting-of.html>

⁴ <http://andrebertel.blogspot.com/2021/02/in-iks-we-have-threemeikyo-kata-all-of.html>

⁵ Choki Motobu “Watashi no Karate-jutsu” (1932), Karate My Art, trans. Patrick McCarthy, IRKRS (2006) p.82.

⁶ Gichin Funakoshi, Rentan Goshin Karate Jutsu, 1925, trans. John Teramoto, Kodansha Intl., 2001, pp.26-27

⁷ <https://iainabernethy.co.uk/content/tabata-ha-rohai>

southern Fujian it would be pronounced Lohai/Rohai, which was adopted by the Okinawans.

From the discussion thread above, it appears that the most likely route for the transmission of Matsumora's Rohai from Tomari-te to Shito-ryu may be summarised as follows:

Kosaku Matsumora (1829–1898, Tomari-te) > Kotatsu Iha (1873–1928, Tomari-te) > Shoshin Nagamine (1907–1997, Matsubayashi-ryu) > Teruo Hayashi (1924–2004, Hayashi-ha Shito-ryu).

Another identified transmission route leads from Tomari-te to the Shorin-ryu Shubukan, Ryubukan and Kyokai Buseikan dojos, as follows:

Kosaku Matsumora (1829–1898, Tomari-te) > Kotatsu Iha (1873–1928, Tomari-te) > Taro Shimabukuro (1905/6/7–1975/80, Tomari-te) > Joki Uema (1920–2011, Shubukan), Teikichi China (1924–2003, Buseikan) and Seitoku Ishikawa (1925–2013, Ryubukan).

For the transmission of Itosu's 3 Rohai, it appears likely that a Rohai kata originating with a certain "Gusukuma from Tomari"⁸, an otherwise unknown individual referred to by Funakoshi in a 1914 newspaper article⁹ and again in his 1922 book¹⁰, was taught to Itosu who split it into 3 parts. The nidan form (at least) was taught to Funakoshi and (later) all 3 forms were passed to Kenwa Mabuni (1889 – 1952). Funakoshi subsequently used the nidan form as a basis to fashion Meikyo for Shotokan, while Mabuni retained all 3 Rohai forms for Shito-ryu. In addition, Hironori Otsuka (1992 – 1982) acquired Rohai shodan (most probably from either Funakoshi or Mabuni) and incorporated it into Wado-ryu¹¹.

However, Rohai shodan also contains two elements found in Matsumora's Rohai, namely the *sagi-ashi-dachi* (twice) and the threefold *yama-zuki*. Since it is considered improbable that Itosu learned Matsumora's Rohai¹², the alternative conclusion would be that the hypothetical Gusukuma's Rohai also contained both these techniques which Itosu incorporated into Rohai shodan.

A detailed analysis of the transmission routes, going backwards in time from each of the current versions, using all of the available sources, has recently been produced in a blog, *The Karate Page*, by Olaf Steinbrecher¹³.

Note that Matsumora's Rohai and Meikyo both have essentially the same ending as Wanshu/Enpi (i.e., the 360° turn followed by a *shuto* move stepping backwards). In both of his books, Choki Motobu states that until the establishment of the Okinawan prefecture in 1879 Wanshū and Rōhai were only ever practised in Tomari village and were virtually unknown in Shuri and Naha^{14 15}. This suggests that they may have had a common source in Fujian province, southern China, and were later brought to Tomari independently.

⁸ Andreas Quast, The Invention of Karate, <https://ryukyu-bugei.com/?p=7521>

⁹ Shoto, "Okinawa no Bugi. Asato Anko-uji Dan" (Martial Arts Technique of Okinawa. Recollecting the Words of Asato Ankoh), Part 2, Ryukyu Shinpo, January 18, 1914, #4908, trans. Patrick McCarthy, in "Tanpenshu: the Master's Finest Work", IRKRS (2006) pp.16-17.

¹⁰ Gichin Funakoshi, To-Te Jitsu (1922) trans. Shingo Ishida / Kenneth B. Tallack, Masters Publication (1997), p.18.

¹¹ Tim Nunes, Rohai Kata: Celebrating diversity in Karate!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=affo-vu-srw&ab_channel=KaniUchiInternationalbyTimNunes

¹² <https://iainabernethy.co.uk/content/tabata-ha-rohai>

¹³ Olaf Steinbrecher, The Lineage of Rohai, <https://www.thekaratepage.com/the-lineage-of-rohai>

¹⁴ Choki Motobu, "Watashi no Karate-jutsu" (1932), Karate My Art, trans. Patrick McCarthy, IRKRS (2006) p.82.

¹⁵ Choki Motobu, "Okinawan Kenpo Karate Jutsu: Kumite" ((1926), trans. Eric Shahan, KJPS (2018) p.24.

Suggested applications (*oyo*) for some sequences in Meikyo

1. The initial 'signature' moves: our opponent grabs our gi using both hands; instead of attempting to strip their grabbing hands we reach behind their head with both hands and as we retract our arms we strike their occipital nerves (*kyusho* points GB20) in the depressions at the base of the back of their skull using the rear knuckles of our thumbs. Continuing to retract our arms, as we slide our hands down their upper arms towards their elbows, we rotate our hands from knuckles-up (pronate) to knuckles-down (supinate) and pin their forearms against our sides with our elbows; at this point we can use our thumbs to activate *kyusho* points LU5 just above and on the outside of their elbow joints. Sliding our supinate hands along their upper arms we drive our fingertips (*nukite*) into their neck at 45° angles with the intention of intersecting the vagus nerve and/or the external carotid artery on each side. Finally, rotating our wrists inwards, our hands change from supinate to pronate and we gouge the soft tissue around their throat with our fingertips and press downwards behind both collarbones (clavicles) with the tips of our thumbs.
2. The 3 *bo dori* ('stick grabbing') moves: just as with the similar moves in Kanku-sho, Bassai-sho and Jitte, the name need not be taken literally but may be understood figuratively. Having received our opponent's *jodan* punch we seize their arm at the wrist with our left hand and just beyond their elbow with our right hand, and with a downwards twisting action we drive it into their shoulder to overbalance them.
3. The sequence from *hidari tetsui* to the end:
 - a. *hidari tetsui*, *mikazuki-geri*, *ryo-ken gedan barai*: the hammer-fist strike to our opponent's midriff or throat should cause them to bend forwards, setting them up for the crescent kick to the same area, while our left hand forms a 'wall' behind the target to prevent them from evading the technique. In the following technique, our left fist strikes at *kyusho* point GB31 on their right thigh, while our right arm grabs their right wrist, pulling them off-balance.
 - b. *hidari ryo-ken age-uke* (step forward) *migi ryo-ken age-uke*: resembling moves 1 & 4 of Heian nidan, the first technique can be used to attack our opponent's right arm with an arm bar while the follow-up transfers their arm to our left hand and folds it backwards to overbalance them as we step in.
 - c. *ryo-ken gedan barai* (step forward) *ryo-ken uchi-uke*, *ryo-ken ura-tsuki*: the first technique can be used to press down on the right side of their neck with our right arm while hyperextending their right elbow with our left arm; the second technique over-hooks each of their arms; finally, a two-handed smash to their jawline (both *kyusho* points ST5) is aimed at stunning them.
 - d. turning behind our opponent, we strike their left occipital lobe (*kyusho* point GB20) with *hidari age-uchi* and then strike the side of their head against a 'wall' created by our left hand using *migi tate ude-uchi* (a similar technique appears in Enpi). Our clamped grip on their head enables us to attempt to throw them to the ground by spinning them anti-clockwise (a form of *Kubi Wa* – neck ring); in case they don't go down, our 2 follow-up *shuto-uchi* strikes to their neck (also used at the end of Enpi) are designed to finish the combat.

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

Grateful thanks to Ralph Overill and Charlie Betts for help working out the applications.