

# An investigation of the kata Wankan

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## Introduction

During lockdown 2.0, I decided to study Wankan aka Wankuan, Ohkan (王冠 “king’s crown”), as it seems to be a kata that is not much taught or demonstrated nowadays. The enbusen of the first 3 moves is said to describe a crown, although the kings of Ryukyu did not wear a three-pointed diadem, as this picture of the crown in the throne-room of Shuri castle on Okinawa shows:



Other names for Wankan include Matsukaze, also pronounced Shofu, (松風 “pine wind”) and Hito (飛濤 “flying waves”). Note that although Shofu and Hito each contain one kanji from Funakoshi’s pen name of Shoto (松濤 “pine waves”), neither of these names was ultimately accepted by his students.

Wankan (along with Ji’in) is not included in Nakayama’s Best Karate series; neither does it appear in Funakoshi’s 1935 master text Karate-do Kyohan. It is believed to have been introduced into Shotokan by Funakoshi’s son Yoshitaka (Gigo), who died prematurely of TB in 1945 before he had time to complete the Shotokan version, as was often mentioned by Taji Kase in his seminars.<sup>1</sup> Its acknowledged incompleteness may be the reason for its exclusion from the Best Karate series.

The Shotokan version has only 21 moves and just one (final) kiai – hence it is sometimes jokingly referred to as ‘half a kata’. Ferdinando Balzarro attempted to

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<sup>1</sup> Kai Diestel, Auf der Spur: Karate-Kata neu entdeckt, epubli GmbH (2009) pp.24–25.

reconstruct the putative missing second half of the kata; essentially this contains the same techniques as the first half but in reverse order.<sup>2</sup> The extended form, performed by Kai Diestel, can be seen here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5riMzLSzWc0&ab\\_channel=KaiDiestel](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5riMzLSzWc0&ab_channel=KaiDiestel)

## Origins and Development of Wankan

On Okinawa, Wankan appears to have originated in the seaport of Tomari, although it was probably brought there by a seaman from China (possibly via Kudaka island off the east coast of Okinawa). Hakkyokuken kempo (aka Baijiquan, “eight extremities fist”) is a possible source,<sup>3</sup> although the swift, powerful open-hand techniques and evasive footwork manoeuvres are said to be indicative of the Chinese tiger fist method of the southern shaolin temple in Fujian province.<sup>4</sup> As a tributary of the Chinese Qing dynasty the Ryukyu kingdom was obliged to rescue and protect any Chinese citizens and nationals affiliated with them and safely return them home, including incidents involving castaways adrift on Ryukyuan waters or shores; they were usually isolated in temporary compounds in (or near) Tomari with guards at the entrance. The people of Tomari (including the guards) welcomed Chinese castaways and sought instruction from any martial arts experts amongst them.<sup>5</sup>



The Tomari-based Oyadomari Kokan (1827–1905) is reported as having taught, Naihanchi [*i.e.* Tekki], Rohai [*i.e.* Meikyo], **Wankan**, Wansu [*i.e.* Enpi] and Passai [*i.e.* Bassai].<sup>6</sup> Iha Kodatsu (1873–1928), a senior student of Tomari-based Matsumora Kosaku (1829–1898), is reported to have taught Nagamine Shoshin

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Pat McCarthy, Classical kata of Okinawan karate, Black Belt Books (1987) pp.218–219.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Feldman, Anko Itosu: the man, the master, the myth (2021); exclusive sneak peek #4 at 1:00:00: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5owp8UJfVU&ab\\_channel=GerardoManuelPimentel](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5owp8UJfVU&ab_channel=GerardoManuelPimentel)

<sup>6</sup> Christopher M. Clarke, Okinawa Karate: a history of style and masters, Vol.1 (2012) p.118.

(1907–1997), the founder of Matsubayashi-ryu, the following katas: Chinto [*i.e.* Gankaku], Bassai, Rohai, Wansu and **Wankan**.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Miyahira Katsuya ((1918–2010), a senior student of Chibana Choshin (1885–1969) and founder of the Shorin-ryu branch of Kobayashi-ryu, is reported to have taught Wankan.<sup>8</sup> Nagamine Shoshin's Matsubayashi-ryu, one branch of Chibana Choshin's Kobayashi-ryu, as well as Richard Kim's Shorinji-ryu and the Gensei-ryu of Seiken Shukumine (1925–2001) are the main Okinawan ryuha to include Wankan in their syllabuses.<sup>9 10</sup> Andreas Quast has recently produced an excellent summary of Wankan<sup>11</sup> where it is also clarified that Wankan had effectively been lost at one point in time but was reconstructed and revived by Nagamine Shoshin in 1932 after a visit to consult some Tomari elders, each of whom remembered a part of it.

Mabuni Kenwa (1889–1952) introduced the Shorin-ryu Wankan, renamed as Matsukaze, into his Shito-ryu system some years after he relocated from Okinawa to Osaka in mainland Japan in the 1920s, while altering some of the initial moves. It is believed that the renaming was done for the sake of political correctness to avoid making any reference to the last Ryukyuan king, Sho Tai, who abdicated in 1879 when Okinawa became a prefecture of Japan.

Matsukaze itself is a martial arts (but not acupuncture or acupressure) term referring to a kyusho point on each side of the neck (the carotid sinus) which is repeatedly targeted (seven times in all) by shuto-uchi in the Okinawan and Shito-ryu versions of the kata. The vital point Matsukaze is referred to by Funakoshi Gichin in his master text,<sup>12</sup> by Konishi Yasuhiro,<sup>13</sup> and by Kane & Wilson,<sup>14</sup> amongst other martial arts texts. A possible explanation for this name is that just as Okinawan Black Pines (*Pinus thunbergii*) sway dramatically in the wind, individuals whose carotid sinus is struck typically experience a sudden but temporary loss of blood pressure leading to extreme dizziness and possible unconsciousness, with the head first swaying forwards as the neck folds and then backwards; a useful discussion thread is here: <https://iainabernethy.co.uk/content/wankan-kata>

The Japanese Shito-ryu and the Shorinji-ryu, Matsubayashi-ryu and Shorin-ryu Okinawan versions are all quite similar to one another but very different from the Shotokan version – the main similarity is the linear sequence of three kicks and punches near the end; the Shotokan version consists of three maegeri–junzuki combinations whereas the other styles use three gyakuzuki–maegeri combinations instead.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.119.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.175.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.249.

<sup>10</sup> Mark D. Bishop, *Okinawan Karate: teachers, styles and secret techniques*, 3<sup>rd</sup>.edn. (2017) p.278.

<sup>11</sup> Andreas Quast, The significance of Wankan, Ryukyu Bugei (10 November 2020): <http://ryukyu-bugei.com/?p=9068>

<sup>12</sup> Funakoshi Gichin, *Karate-do Kyohan* (1935); trans. H Suzuki-Johnson (2005); section 6, chapter 2, p.236.

<sup>13</sup> Konishi Yasuhiro, *Nyumon shinsho zukai karate nyumon: shindo jinen-ryu* (1956) p.211.

<sup>14</sup> <http://evols.library.manoa.hawaii.edu/bitstream/handle/10524/1076/konishi-ZukaiKarate1956.pdf?sequence=1>

<sup>14</sup> Lawrence A. Kane and Kris Wilson, *The Way of Kata*, YMAA (2005) p.174.

The Shorin-ryu version can be seen here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahT9Du6qBnM&ab\\_channel=JesseEnkamp](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahT9Du6qBnM&ab_channel=JesseEnkamp)

The Matsubayashi-ryu version can be seen here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WldA\\_ZK1-nw&ab\\_channel=JuanBeltránRodríguez](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WldA_ZK1-nw&ab_channel=JuanBeltránRodríguez)

Richard Kim's Shorinji-ryu version is here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NW\\_hl3r2bwE&ab\\_channel=MassBayBJJMassBayBJJ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NW_hl3r2bwE&ab_channel=MassBayBJJMassBayBJJ) and it is also available as an excellent photographic sequence in book form.<sup>15</sup>

The Shito-ryu version (renamed Matsukaze) is here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AX0ahXOx8LM&ab\\_channel=JuanBeltránRodríguez](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AX0ahXOx8LM&ab_channel=JuanBeltránRodríguez)

Like the Shorinji-ryu version, the Shotokan version starts with two diagonally oriented moves (the only Shotokan kata to start in this way); the other versions first move to the left, then to the right, suggesting that Shorinji-ryu is the most likely source for the Shotokan version. Shotokan itself has two minor variants here: the JKA version moves directly into kokutsu-dachi for ryoken-kakiwake-uke, whereas the SKIF version first steps across and then makes nekoashi-dachi for ryoken-kakiwake-uke.

The enbusen of the Shorin-ryu, Matsubayashi-ryu (and Shito-ryu) versions of the kata resembles the kanji for 'king' (王) which suggests that Wankan / Ohkan may have had a royal connection to the Ryukyu kingdom and Shuri castle in the past.

## **Analysis (bunkai) and Applications (oyo) for Wankan**

### 0. [YOI]

1. migi ryoken-kakiwake-uke: in response to a right-handed hook punch to the upper level, we simultaneously block the attack with the left fist and strike the opponent's neck or throat with the right fist; the technique also appears in Heian yondan and Gojushiho-sho (in kokutsu-dachi), and in Jion and Ji'in (in zenkutsu-dachi); in each case it is performed at a 45° angle in order to move off the opponent's centre-line.

2. hidari ryoken-kakiwake-uke: the preceding techniques should also be practised on the opposite side; the initial step-across can be used as a foot-sweep or a trip.

3. ryozenwan-hasami-uke: our raised right knee strikes the opponent's groin and our raised fists simultaneously strike upward under the opponent's chin while the parallel forearms of our scissors block protect our mid-section from any chudan attack; this technique is also seen in Tekki nidan and Nijushiho.

4 & 5. hasami-uke-sonomama, ashi-ippon-mae x2: while maintaining the scissors block in place as a pressing block to his upper torso and throat, in stepping down our right foot can either land on the opponent's left metatarsals causing him to go down backwards as we press forward, or with a longer stride our right foot can land behind

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<sup>15</sup> Pat McCarthy, Classical kata of Okinawan karate, Black Belt Books (1987) pp.220–233.

his left foot and trip him over backwards. If he manages to escape from either of these techniques, the kata suggests that we attempt the same techniques again on the opposite side (stamping or tripping with our left foot). If both these ploys fail, then we move from close-in range to medium-range techniques.

6. gyaku-tate-shuto-uke: we push his chin (or throat) backwards to the length of our extended left arm and his torso will follow; if we target his chin we can also turn his head away from us to reduce the chance of him hitting us.

7 & 8. tsuki, gyaku-zuki: we deliver two punches to the target located by our left hand in 6.

9. koko-sukui-uke / koko-osae-uchi (tiger-mouth scooping block / tiger-mouth pressing strike in nekoashi-dachi): this so-called “mystery technique”<sup>16</sup> also appears in Nijushiho and Gojushiho-dai. A takedown application, in which we scoop the left side of his neck anticlockwise through 180° with our left hand while assisting his torso to follow by placing the gap between the thumb and index finger (the thenar space) of our right hand palm upwards into the crook of his left elbow and turning anticlockwise will leave him on his back on the floor with his head angled to our right. This move is more easily executed if we first move to our opponent’s left side, as indicated by the left turn at this point in the kata.<sup>17</sup> One reason for using nekoashi-dachi here is to avoid the opponent reaping our front leg as we turn his torso during the takedown. This takedown is a more practical technique than scooping a mae-geri and attacking the knee with teisho as is shown in two of the videos mentioned below.

10. gyaku-tate-shuto-uke: if the opponent tenses rigidly in 9. the takedown will not work, so instead we target his chin (or throat) with our left hand as in 6. and ...

11. & 12. tsuki, gyaku-zuki: ... deliver two punches to the target located by our left hand.

13. koko-sukui-uke / koko-osae-uchi (tiger-mouth scooping block / tiger-mouth pressing strike): the technique is performed on the same side as previously in 9.; it can be interpreted as a follow-up to 9., if the opponent escapes by twisting out of the attempted takedown.

14. gyaku-tate-shuto-uke: as for 10.

15 & 16. tsuki, gyaku-zuki: as for 11. & 12.

17. tetsui-mawashi-uchi: if the opponent is still a threat, we move to his left side, seize his left arm in a monkey grip at the wrist with our left hand and sink into kiba-dachi while driving a right hammer fist into his solar plexus or throat, tensioned by using hikite to pull and twist his left wrist to our left hip.

18, 19 & 20. mae-geri, jun-zuki x 3: grabbing his collar with our right hand we kick his right leg away with our left foot to overlengthen his stance and step through with a

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<sup>16</sup> Rob Redmond, *Kata: the folk dances of Shotokan*, 2008, pp.369-372. [https://bu-do.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The\\_Kata\\_Book\\_2008-03-26op.pdf](https://bu-do.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The_Kata_Book_2008-03-26op.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Mabuni Kenwa, “Kobo Kenpo Karate-do Nyumon” (1938) pp.139-140, trans. Joe Swift (1998): <http://www.fightingarts.com/forums/ubbthreads.php?ubb=printthread&Board=10&main=8683&type=thread>

left punch; if he evades this technique it can be attempted again on the opposite side. Note that using a wide kiba-dachi in 17. will also enable our right foot to be planted behind his left foot and so cause him to trip as he tries to evade the kick-punch combination in 18.

21. ryoken-koshi-gamae, yama-zuki (both fists on hip posture, mountain punch in fudo-dachi) [KIAI]: finally, as indicated by the 180° turn in the kata,<sup>18</sup> we move behind the opponent with our left leg forward and seize him with our right hand on his collar and our left forearm across his throat; turning our hips 90° clockwise we throw him over our extended left leg; using a rooted stance enables us to stabilise our body while performing the throw. This throw is actually a modified version of Kubi Wa (Neck Ring), one of Funakoshi's nine throws shown in his master text Karate-do Kyohan.<sup>19</sup> Yama-zuki is also found in Bassai-dai, Jitte and Nijushiho.

22. [YAME]

A complete sequence of applications for the Shotokan version by Iain Abernethy can be viewed here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbobMew3hLw&ab\\_channel=practicalkatabunkai](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbobMew3hLw&ab_channel=practicalkatabunkai)

A quite similar interpretation is offered by Christian Wedewart here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCZVLhltBJU&ab\\_channel=karatepraxis](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCZVLhltBJU&ab_channel=karatepraxis)

David Gimberline demonstrates a rather different interpretation here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmvkwdRqL00&ab\\_channel=PracticalKarate](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmvkwdRqL00&ab_channel=PracticalKarate)

Jean-Pierre Lavorato's quite conventional oyo is here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5-Q0v\\_gcg4&ab\\_channel=imaginarts.tv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5-Q0v_gcg4&ab_channel=imaginarts.tv)

## Final Thoughts

Although short and possibly incomplete, Shotokan's Wankan is nevertheless rather unjustly neglected; it offers a range of defensive and retaliatory techniques that make use of skill rather than physical strength or prowess. Particularly noteworthy are the close-range grappling techniques, many involving potential trips, takedowns and throws. Wankan also offers follow-up sequences of alternative techniques for use in combat situations where an initial tactic fails to work satisfactorily, somewhat similar to the conditional 'if-then-else-if-then-else' sequences in a computer programming flow-chart.

## Additional resources available

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<sup>18</sup> Mabuni Kenwa, "Kobo Kenpo Karate-do Nyumon" (1938) pp.139-140, trans. Joe Swift (1998):

<http://www.fightingarts.com/forums/ubbthreads.php?ubb=printthread&Board=10&main=8683&type=thread>

<sup>19</sup> Funakoshi Gichin, Karate Do Kyohan (1935) section 4, chapter 6; trans. H Suzuki-Johnson (2005) p.195.

A full-length Wankan applications DVD has been made by John Burke

“Bunkai Strategies” Youtube clips by John Burke

“Practical Kata Bunkai” Youtube clips by Iain Abernethy

“Practical Karate” Youtube clips by Alexandr Matiushevskij

### **Acknowledgement**

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