

## Translation

# The Karate-do That Began with Chinmochi<sup>1, 2)</sup> Breaking Boards and Tiles is Not the Essence of this Art

Gichin Funakoshi

Translation by Mark Tankosich\*

## From Okinawa to Tokyo

“Have you begun a *mochi*-making business?” It was a Buddhist priest from Shomyoji, the temple located at the bottom of the cliff. *Mochi*-making business?!?! What in the world was he talking about? I came to understand later, and it’s humorous how karate-do’s pioneer in Tokyo — that is, its first voice [here] — [seemingly] started out making *mochi*.

Thinking about it, I guess I could say that the very beginning was my having come up to Tokyo about 40 years ago, at the end of 1921, to attend the First National Athletic Exhibition<sup>3)</sup> (including *kobudo*)<sup>4)</sup>, which was to be sponsored by the Ministry of Education, and held at the Tokyo Ocha-no-mizu Education Museum<sup>5)</sup> in early spring the following year. I had wanted to introduce karate-do to the heart of the nation for a long time, and had [the benefit of] the recommendation of the prefecture, etc., so, thinking that I shouldn’t miss this perfect opportunity, I had hurriedly prepared by hastily making double-width scrolls<sup>6)</sup> containing more than a hundred pictures<sup>7)</sup> of *kata*, along with explanations and whatnot.

Okinawa Prefecture had always been a place that was kind of synonymous with pov-

erty. It seems it was the poorest prefecture in the entire country, which at the time was referred to as “three centers and 43 prefectures<sup>8)</sup>.” It was so poor that there was a joke about asking what Okinawa’s products were, and being told, “Just the sea and the ground.” In spite of this, the prefecture issued me official notices of appointment and travel. But they [also] told me that there was no budget for [even] third-class roundtrip fare (though they did provide me a discount pass), or to pay the cost of making the scrolls, to cover my expenses during the stay, etc. I was truly caught in a difficult position. At the time I was the head<sup>9)</sup> of the Okinawa Shobu-kai<sup>10)</sup>, and, although my friends from there — worried for me and unable to just stand by and watch — took care of [some of]<sup>11)</sup> these expenses, now I was at a loss as to what to do about the cost of a place to stay in Tokyo and pocket money. Since I had left teaching, I had no regular source of income, and one wouldn’t expect an ex-teacher to have [much of] a savings. I couldn’t bear to be any more of a burden to my friends than I already had, so preparing myself with, “To heck with it; what will be, will be!” I boarded the ship for Tokyo. Upon arriving in Tokyo, I went straight from the station to see my seniors<sup>12)</sup> from the prefecture. When I pleadingly explained to them about the sad situation, I was told “Well then, why don’t

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\* Assistant Professor, Hiroshima University of Economics, Hiroshima, Japan

you settle in at the prefectural student dormitory for a while?” and [so] availed myself of this kind offer. The dormitory can perhaps be said to be where karate in Tokyo originated.

It was the lecture hall of this dormitory where I stayed that was our school for many years, until, owing to donations from the students, the Shotokan Dojo opened in Zoshigaya in the spring of 1937<sup>13</sup>. The dormitory was called “Meisei Juku.” I guess the lecture hall was about 40-mats large<sup>14</sup>, and [Meisei Juku] was a very quiet dormitory located on high ground in Koishikawa-suidobata, directly above the aforementioned Shomyoji Temple.

At the dormitory, not only was I kindly charged the same amount for food as the students, but I was also exempted from paying rent, with the understanding that I’d fill in at the vacant student houseboy position. I lived in the three-and-a-half mat student houseboy room by the dormitory’s entrance hall. My job was to handle any visitors or mail, and to clean inside and outside the dormitory. I have always been a guy who has liked cleaning, and it provides a good level of exercise, so I didn’t mind it in the least. But I was truly uncomfortable with the dormitory residents calling this old houseboy in his fifties [i.e., me,] “Sensei.”

### The Unforgettable Artist Hoan Kosugi

I recall that the exhibition was about two weeks long, and toward its end is when I came into the favor of the great artist Hoan Kosugi. He apparently had been to Okinawa before on an on-foot training tour for painting<sup>15</sup>, and it seemed he had an interest in karate-do. He said that, after the exhibition ended, he wanted for me to postpone my return home for a while,

and he wanted me to leave something in writing that would make it possible to practice karate even after I had left Tokyo. “We’ll cover your expenses during the time that you stay, and I’d like you to train the members at the Tabata Poplar Club (an artists’ group)<sup>16</sup>,” he proposed.

I was *so* grateful; *this* was the fervent wish that I had been unable to forget — even when [asleep and] dreaming — for the past 50 years.

Of the things that happened during my life, this great artist’s warmheartedness towards me is something that especially deserves to be told to future generations. That fall, again owing to his kindness, *Kenpo karate-jutsu*<sup>17</sup> was, for the very first time, published by Bukyosha. I think that this was probably the first of the literature dealing with karate-do.

Well then, returning to the *chinmochi* story, after the exhibition, there were people who, because karate was exotic, came to discuss it, but no new students. My financial situation was only getting worse, but not even a moment of neglect of training is allowed. So, avoiding the dorm residents’ study hours, I decided to train my fists on the *makiwara* before dawn. A *makiwara* is a wooden pillar that one strikes. The pillar is about one *jo*<sup>18</sup> long. [With thickness] planed away until it has flexibility, part of the pillar is buried in the ground so that it stands at about shoulder height. Braided straw rope is wrapped around straw about one *shaku* long and one *sun* thick, which is then tied to the upper part of the pillar. So, the sound produced when one strikes a *makiwara* resembles that made when pounding steamed rice to make *mochi*<sup>19</sup>. Every morning [I was making that sound.] Behind Shomyoji Temple, one level up, was a cemetery, and, one more level up the cliff

was Meisei Juku, so the sound must have *really* echoed. Given this, there was nothing strange about the priest having come looking for *chinmochi*.

Back then, because editors added slogans like, “Successfully defeat adversaries and protect yourself with your bare hands” and “Prevent all kinds of diseases and enjoy perpetual youth and longevity” to introductions of karate, there were also many times that people came to me saying ridiculous things. These various [episodes, resulting in] faint, forced smiles [on my part], are now often a topic of conversations about the pioneering days.

In this way, experiencing many ups and downs and many trials over the course of many years, karate finally came to be recognized among learned people. Around the time that the second and third [karate] reference books were published, karate clubs were formed at each university, following the ones at Keio and Waseda. We also received requests [for teachers] from public organizations and army- and navy-related schools. Karate had finally spread to the extent that we were dispatching assistant instructors.

These long years, I and the students have had extraordinary hardships, but, with hope and expectations, we believe that we must nurture this precious new seedling. For example, are we not disappointed that such things as the breaking of boards and tiles, or jumping and bouncing around, are recently mistakenly thought to be the essence of karate-do? To love [the Way of] the Fist and practice techniques is one way of cultivating, of developing, character, which is the proper aim of *budo*. The fist and Zen are one<sup>20</sup>): the serious karate-do student must make it his conviction that this is the ultimate goal. Be

humble! This [i.e., proper character development] is what we talk about [in our karate training].

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### Notes

- 1) The original Japanese version of this article, *Chinmochi kara hajimatta karate-do*, was published in the March, 1957, issue of the magazine *Nippon Shuho* (30–31).
- 2) *Mochi*, sometimes referred to as “rice cake,” is “a food consisting of a highly glutinous variety of rice that is steamed, kneaded by a machine or, traditionally, mortar and mallet, and formed into rounds or into sheets that are then cut into squares. Fresh *mochi* may be eaten as is; grilling restores softness to dried *mochi*.” (Mochi) Without going into details that are irrelevant here, the term *chinmochi* apparently refers to *mochi* that is made and sold / purchased at a business establishment, rather than made at one’s home. (Hikizurimochi)
- 3) This would seem to be the generally accepted English title of the event to which Funakoshi is referring. Interestingly, the original Japanese here reads 第一回運動展覧会 (lit. “First Exercise Exhibition”), while that in Funakoshi’s own autobiography (Funakoshi, *Karate-do ichi-ro* 149) is 第一回古武道体育展覧会 (“First Ancient Martial Arts / Physical Education Exhibition”). A quick (Japanese) internet search seems to indicate that the latter title is much more commonly used.
- 4) Literally, “old martial ways,” and referring to the classical Japanese martial arts.
- 5) This is a literal translation of the original Japanese, which reads 東京お茶の水教育博物館. I was unable to locate an “official” English name for this facility, if, indeed, one exists. Also, it is again interesting to note that in his autobiography, Funakoshi says that the event took place at 女子高等師範学校, which is rendered the “Women’s Higher Normal School” in the English version of the book. (Funakoshi, *Karate-do ichi-ro* 149; My Way 69)

- 6) The original Japanese more literally means something like “twice the width of a roll of kimono cloth.” The normal size of a roll of such cloth is apparently about 36 centimeters (Namihaba), so that the width that Funakoshi refers to here is roughly 72 centimeters or 28.35 inches. Also, while the number of scrolls is not specified here or in the Japanese version of Funakoshi’s autobiography, interestingly enough, the English version of that text clearly states the number to be three. (Funakoshi, *Karate-do ichi-ro* 149; *My Way* 69)
- 7) The original Japanese actually says 百数十枚, which means something like “a hundred and some tens of pictures.”
- 8) 三府四十三県. The *Kokugo Dai Jiten Dictionary* says that the 三府 part of this expression refers to Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto, the 3 府 (“centers”) established in 1871, when feudal domains were abolished and prefectures replaced them. (Sanpu) Currently, Japan consists of 1 都 or “to” (Tokyo-to), 1 道 or “do” (Hokkaido), 2 府 or “fu” (Osaka-fu and Kyoto-fu) and 43 県 or “ken” (prefectures).
- 9) The Japanese used here is *kaicho*, which is probably most often translated as “president” in a context such as this.
- 10) Shobu-kai (尚武会) might be translated to something like “Martial / Martial Spirit / Martial Respect Association.”
- 11) The original Japanese is somewhat confusing. At this point, Funakoshi writes (literally), “...these friends...solved (the money problems that he just noted, which included covering his expenses during the stay).” But then he goes on to talk about remaining concern over the cost of a place to stay and a lack of spending money. The logical conclusion is that his friends took care of only some of the costs that he faced.
- 12) Obviously, the *senpai* referred to here by Funakoshi are not senior to him in karate, but rather in some other way, most likely in terms of position in the prefectural government.
- 13) The original Japanese here reads, “the year Showa 12,” which is 1937, but the Japanese edition of Funakoshi’s autobiography says, “Showa 13” or 1938, while the English version says “...in the spring of 1936, I entered for the first time the new dojo...” (Funakoshi, *My Way* 83; *Karate-do ichi-ro* 174)
- 14) The size of a room in Japan is typically expressed with the number of *tatami* floor mats that the room has space for. “The size of *tatami* was gradually standardized within each region of Japan... A *tatami* generally measures ... 1.76 by 0.88 meters (5.8 by 2.9ft) in the Tokyo area.” (Tatami) It is unclear if these exact same dimensions are applicable to the Meisei Juku lecture hall.
- 15) The Japanese here actually says, a “picture” tour, but the English version of Funakoshi’s autobiography is clearer, terming it a “painting” trip.
- 16) I have used the word “group” here, but Funakoshi’s Japanese actually says “juku” (塾). “Juku” is most typically associated with a school of some kind, but a (Japanese) Internet search results in such descriptions of the Poplar Club as “an artists’ social club...whose main activity was tennis,” and “having 2 tennis courts and a clubhouse.” (Tengu kurabu; Popura kurabu)
- 17) Funakoshi here calls this first karate text *Kenpo karate-jutsu* (written in Japanese as 拳法から手術). In fact, his first book, published in 1922, was actually entitled *Ryukyu kenpo karate* (琉球拳法唐手). A few years later he published another book, *Rentan goshin karate-jutsu* (錬胆護身唐手術), which was basically the same as the first, but contained actual photos instead of illustrations. Perhaps Funakoshi combined these two titles — whether intentionally or otherwise — to arrive at the *Kenpo karate-jutsu* used here. Also, it seems some writers have, at least at times, chosen to read the 唐手 characters in these titles as “tode.” Perhaps this was simply meant as a way to distinguish between the 2 possible “kara” *kanji*, but both Funakoshi’s use of the phonetic *hiragana* “kara” here and a glance through the books themselves would indicate that the “唐” is properly read “kara” in these titles.
- 18) A *jo* is a unit of measure previously used in Japan. One *jo* equals 3.31 yards or 3.03 meters. Also mentioned below in the text are the units *shaku* (.994 foot or 30.3 centimeters) and *sun* (1.2 inches or 3.03 centimeters). (Weights and Measures)
- 19) Again, as explained in Note 1 above, *mochi* is “[traditionally] kneaded by mortar and mallet.”
- 20) Why Funakoshi has sandwiched a reference to Zen between two statements about character development (it is the “proper aim of *budo*,” and “Be humble!”) is not totally clear to me, but he apparently saw Zen and proper character cultivation as overlapping or interrelated to a significant degree.

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