



Choki Motobu

(1870-1944)

One of the most unusual figures in the early history of karate, and an important influence in the development of Okinawan Shuri-ryu, was Choki Motobu. He was born in Akahira village, Shuri, on April 5, 1870, the third son of Chosho Motobu, a high-ranking Anji (Lord). His elder brother, Choyu, received a good education and was taught the secrets of the family fighting system by their father (as was traditional). Choki's education, in contrast, was rather neglected and he grew up with his mother, developing a reputation for being an uncontrollable child.

Choki Motobu's personal fighting style was primarily his own invention rather than a reflection of any established system of the time. He learned some of the Motobu family style by watching his brother practice, and utilized the knowledge by bullying others into street fights so that he could test his techniques in action. He had a great deal of enthusiasm for the martial arts, but most Okinawan masters refused to teach him for fear he would certainly misuse the skills.

Desperate for some formal training, Motobu disguised himself and used his mother's name, Sesoko, in applying at master Kosaku Matsumora's dojo. He was accepted and, although the master soon learned his real identity, Motobu was allowed to stay for a while. Matsumora showed him some basic techniques and two katas, *Naihanchi* and *Tomari Passai*, but refused to take the instruction further. Motobu learned Matsumora's fighting techniques anyway, by secretly peeking through a hole in the fence surrounding the master's back yard dojo while other students were being taught. He then tested the effectiveness of the techniques in the evening by visiting local bars and picking fights with patrons. He was generally victorious in these encounters, although it is said that he

was badly beaten once by a man named Itarashiki, and was defeated in a match against master Kentsu Yabu. He is also said to have fought one of Matsumora's students, Kodatsu Iha, receiving a scar on his left shoulder in the process (though no one recalls who actually won).

Motobu subsequently enrolled in the dojo of master Anko Itosu for a time, but was soon expelled for always wanting to prove himself in actual fights. He then studied with Pechin Tokumine, a well-known master of karate and the bo; Tokumine was also a heavy drinker, and Motobu paid for each night's lesson with flasks of rice wine. The arrangement came to an end after Tokumine beat up 30 local constables in a brawl in Tsuji and was promptly exiled to the Yaeyama Islands as an undesirable.

Motobu grew to be a large man, by Okinawan standards, and was extremely strong. He carried the nickname of Motobu Zaru, or "Motobu the Monkey," because of his remarkable agility, and his ability to climb up and down trees like a monkey. He trained long hours on the *makiwara* (punching board), and worked out using traditional Okinawan training methods.

Although Motobu's practice of training through actual fights (seriously injuring countless innocent opponents) was reprehensible, it did allow him to develop a unique style based on practically fighting experience of the kind scrupulously avoided by most masters. He favored the horse stance, and did not mind absorbing blows while closing with an opponent in order to deliver his close punches and elbow and knee strikes. His favorite kata (not that he knew many) was Naihanchi, which he is reputed to have performed up to 500 times daily. He believed that Naihanchi was the only kata necessary to make a good fighter. One of his specialties was the forefinger knuckle strike, a technique which he honed through rigorous *makiwara* practice. He also is said to have spent much time in two-man prearranged sparring drills.

In 1921, due to the failure of his horse-drawn taxi business, Motobu moved with his family to Osaka in search of employment, and was hired as a night watchman at a textile company. One day he attended a series of exhibition matches by a Russian (or German) boxer who had been touring Japan as part of a cultural exchange program, fighting Japanese jujitsuans and other martial artists (karate was then unknown in Japan). Motobu, though 52 years old at the time, could not resist entering the competition. He is said to have simply dodged and blocked the Russian's punches for the first round, without countering. In the second round the Russian charged in and was abruptly stopped by a front kick to the solar plexus, then felled by a single strike to the temple (or under the nose). The Russian was knocked unconscious—some say he never fully recovered—to the great astonishment of the audience, who had never seen such techniques. A story about the fight published four years later in a Japanese magazine gave Motobu instant notoriety throughout Japan, leading to such great public interest in Okinawan karate that he was able to begin earning a living as a full-time teacher.

Feeling overconfident after his win against the Russian, Motobu is said to have challenged his older brother to a fight during a visit home in Okinawa. Choyu reportedly toyed with him, as if dancing, and threw him about with ease. Thus humbled by Choyu's superb technique, Choki adopted more of the family fighting style into his own.

Choyu Motobu, Choki's brother, had risen to be the fighting instructor to Sho Tai, the last of the Okinawan kings, who reigned until 1879 and died in 1901. (Both the Motobus and Sho Tai traced their ancestry back to Okinawan King Sho Shitsu, 1648-1669.) He opened a dojo at Naha, and in 1924 was instrumental in the formation of an organization

for the development of karate which included a long list of notable Okinawan masters as members. Choyu died in 1926, leaving a student, Seikichi Uehara, in charge of the Motobu family style, his own son having no interest. Motobu-ryu, as Uehara formally named it in 1947, remained a little known style for many years. Uehara formed the Motobu-ryu Kobujutsu Association in 1969, as a branch of the All Okinawa Karate and Kobudo Association. Motobu-ryu (also called Motobu-Udundi), being the original family style, bears little resemblance to the style developed by Choki Motobu; it is instead more of a throwing and grappling system, like aikijutsu, in which the attacker's own momentum is used against him. The "internal" Chinese boxing styles of Hsing-i, T'ai-chi and Pa Kua seem to be the primary influences. Choki Motobu's interpretation of Naihanchi, however, did include similar grappling and throwing techniques.

Choki Motobu taught widely, in Tokyo and Osaka during the following years and even made a trip to Hawaii in 1933. Around 1938 he left his family in Osaka, returned to Okinawa (as he did periodically) and opened a dojo in Kumecho.

While in Okinawa, Motobu dictated the text of a book on his fighting style to a student, but both of the original manuscript copies appear to have been lost. Motobu did publish three books on Okinawan karate: *Okinawa Kenpo Tode-jutsu* (1926), on training methods; *Okinawa Kenpo Karate-jutsu Kumite-hen* (1926); and *Watashi no Karate Jutsu* (1933; available in translation by Patrick and Yuriko McCarthy).

Choki Motobu's fame rested not on his katas but on his remarkable sparring skill. One of his principles was that:

The blocking hand must be able to become the attacking hand in an instant.
Blocking with one hand and then countering with the other is not true *bujutsu*.
Real *bujutsu* presses forward and blocks and counters in the same motion.

In this respect his style is like the later *Jeet Kune Do* style of Bruce Lee.

Other masters often referred their students to Choki Motobu for *kumite* instruction. Consequently many current styles can trace at least a part of their development to the techniques and style of Choki Motobu, through famous students such as Shoshin Nagamine (Matsubayashi-ryu), Shinyei Kaneshima (Ishimine-ryu), Katsuya Miyahira (Shorin-ryu), Shigeru Nakamura (Okinawa Kenpo), and Shinsuke Kaneshima (Tozan-ryu). Motobu's visit to Hawaii may also have involved him in an unclear link with James Mitose and the origin of Kenpo karate.

Motobu is also known to have worked with a Chinese Hsing-yi master named Tung Gee Hsing. Hsing lived in the Chinese settlement of Kume Mura in Okinawa. They met there shortly before the outbreak of World War II, and apparently collaborated rather extensively. Hsing merged his Hsing-yi with Motobu's karate to create the basis for what was to become the Shuri-ryu system. In 1942 Hsing traveled as a Chinese missionary to the British Solomon Islands, where he met and trained an American serviceman and boxer named Robert Trias, later to become the founder of karate in America. Trias added some Goju-ryu katas to the system, resulting in modern Shuri-ryu.

There is today some disagreement regarding Motobu's character. Some of his students claimed he was not the bully and ruffian that he was made out to be, but rather quite a gentleman in accordance with his upper class background. He was, they say, polite and authoritative, emphasizing to his students the necessity of good manners. Others suggest that he was arrogant (not surprising in view of his noble lineage) and

coarse, and criticized his inability to speak mainland Japanese. (Whenever Motobu lectured in Japan he utilized an Okinawan interpreter.)

In his later years Motobu, no longer an outcast from the Okinawan karate community, returned to study karate with several Okinawan masters including one of the few ever to defeat him in a fight, Kentsu Yabu. He died in Tomari, Okinawa, in 1944, at the age of 73. His third son, Chosei Motobu (born 1925), still teaches Choki Motobu's style of Motobu-ryu, as well as the Motobu family style, Motobu-Udindi.

References

ALEXANDER, G.W. (1991) *Okinawa, Island of Karate*. Yamazato Publications, Lake Worth, Florida, 127 p.

BISHOP, M. (1989) *Okinawan Karate; Teachers, Styles and Secret Techniques*. A. & C. Black, London, 192 p.

CORCORAN, J., FARKAS, E., and SOBEL, S. (1993) *The Original Martial Arts Encyclopedia: Tradition, History, Pioneers*. Pro-Action Publishing, Los Angeles, 435 p.

TRIAS, R. (1987?) *The Pinnacle of Karate*. Privately published, "Revised Final Advanced Edition."

URBAN, P. (1967) *The Karate Dojo: Traditions and Tales of a Martial Art*. Charles Tuttle Company, Rutland (VT) and Tokyo, 146 p.

Website:

©Wendell E. Wilson (2010)

(email: minrecord@comcast.net)

from Essays on the Martial Arts

Home: <http://www.mineralogicalrecord.com/wilson/karate.asp>