Bunkai is the study of the meaning of kata. There are traditional bunkai in Shotokan karate as outlined by the Japan Karate Association and by other instructors such as Hirozoku Kanazawa. However, some of these traditional bunkai are not necessarily practical for street applications. While it is desirable to understand traditional bunkai, it is also important for karateka to explore oyo, or applications outside traditional bunkai for self-defense. We will examine the kata Gankaku to illustrate these traditional bunkai and also explore oyo for certain techniques.

Gichin Funakoshi Sensei maintained that three principles must be observed in the performance of kata: correct use of power, proper speed of movement, and correct expansion and contraction of the body. In the Japanese karate system, several katas show the influence of the Chinese styles of kung fu that inspired the creation of karate. One of these katas is Gankaku, in the Shotokan system. The name of the kata Gankaku is interpreted as “crane on a rock” because many of the movements are done on one leg similar to a crane balancing/resting as it waits for food to come within reach. Funakoshi changed the name from Chinto (Battle to the East) to the Japanese name Gankaku in order to remove both the Chinese influence and the military aspect of the original name of the kata.
According to some researchers, the White Crane kung-fu style was the origin of the kata Chinto, which became Gankaku. However, other researchers dispute this claim, saying that the kata was derived from the original five gung-fu styles, and not exclusively from White Crane. The original instructor that developed this kata was either Sokon or Kosaku Matsumura, but the kata was further developed by Chotoku Kiyatake and Yasusune Itosu. As is recalled, Itosu Sensei is one of Funakoshi Sensei’s original instructors and the kata Gankaku practiced in the Shotokan style is the one developed by Itosu. The origin of the kata is unusual, in that it was derived from the techniques of a warrior outside the Okinawan court.

During the tenure of Sokon Matsumura, he was sent to a village to arrest a cunning thief. This thief, Chinto(or Chin Ji), was a stranded sailor who resorted to thievery to survive. To his surprise, Matsumura could not overcome Chinto’s techniques or fighting skill. The two were evenly matched, and eventually they agreed to an exchange of knowledge. The unusual fighting techniques of Chinto intrigued Matsumura so much that he developed the kata to transmit these techniques to students.

Each kata has a unique characteristic that sets it apart from other kata, and this unique characteristic for Gankaku is the one-legged stance that demands a high degree of stability in execution. The kata Chinto is found in many of the Okinawan styles of karate, including Shorin-Ryu, Shito-Ryu, and Ishin-Ryu. In Shorin-Ryu, the crane stance is present, but the kick is a low front kick and the stances are much higher. However, the Ishin-Ryu version of Chinto does not utilize the crane stance. Instead, a cat stance is substituted, but the kick is from the ground, not from the drawn up leg tucked behind the knee. In the Shito-Ryu version, the crane stance is still present, but, like Shorin, a front kick is used instead of the side-snap kick of Shotokan.

There is another kata that utilizes this crane stance in Shorin and Shito-Ryu. This kata is Rohai (vision of a heron) and was developed by Matsumura. The crane or heron stance is present, but no kick is delivered from the stance. The movements of Rohai were later transformed into the kata Meikyo in the Shotokan system. Obviously, balance was a major emphasis for Matsumura and later, Itosu.

The purpose of this kata is for the practitioner to develop balance and power to stop an opponent while standing on one leg. According to one source, this one-legged stance was derived as a defense against an attacker on a staircase. It is speculated that Matsumura encountered difficulty in fighting on a slope when attempting to arrest Chinto, and therefore thought it would be good to have techniques for fighting in such circumstances. Another researcher speculates that the palace at Shuri had a narrow staircase that the bodyguards had to defend to prevent invaders from getting to the throne room. The attacker was on the lower stair and would be vulnerable to a kick to the face using the raised foot. A staircase poses special difficulties for a martial artist due to the enclosed area or permitting lateral movement. In addition, in order to attack an opponent standing on a higher stair, a low stance combined with juji-uke is a good way of defending against kicks while attempting to grab the foot.

The spectacular double front kick (mae tobi geri) in the kata seems impractical, but used on a narrow staircase facing downward, could be very effective. Imagine driving attackers who are forced to line up behind one another down the stairs like bowling pins hit by a bowling ball. However, the crane stance and double flying kick might be impractical for self-defense on normal terrain.

The first two movements of the kata are interpreted differently by Nakayama and Kanazawa. Nakayama treats the first movement as a separate technique, taking down the attacker by pulling the attacker off balance. The second movement is interpreted as a block (hammer fist strike) followed by a straight punch while remaining in back stance. However, Kanazawa has a different interpretation, combining the first and second techniques against a single attacker. The first movement takes the attacker off-balance, but the second movement (hammer fist strike and punch) are used against this same attacker in the same sequence. This second interpretation is practical and effective, as the attacker will be disabled, instead of merely pulled off-balance.

The next series of techniques involve mae tobi geri. In the street, these techniques may not be practical, so a knee strike may be substituted for the flying kick to drive the attacker back and lead into a throw and finishing strike to the throat of the downed opponent. Another researcher speculated that the first movement of the series (juji-uke) should be combined with the fourth movement (downward cross-block) against a finger thrust to the eyes. The attacker’s wrist would be trapped and then a knee strike to the face (substituting mae tobe gari) would then be practical.

The horse stance in the movement simulates defending against an opponent in the front, perhaps escaping a grab. However, this technique and the following techniques can also be used to defend against an attempted grab from the rear. The hands block the incoming arms of the opponent, the downward motion of the arm is turned into a groin strike and/or elbow strike, and the opponent is then in a position to be thrown to the ground and finished.

In movement 15, using manji-uke (double-hand block, one hand performing down block, the other head level inside block), one interpretation would be escaping a grab. However, after escaping the grab, secure the opponent’s hands, and rotate into the next back stance. This will have the effect of throwing the opponent to the ground, where a stomp can finish the attacker.

Ending the sequence of manji-uke, one interpretation is throwing the opponent by reversing the back stance. This interpretation would be sliding behind the opponent and throwing the opponent using the extended left leg in back stance. After the opponent is thrown, the next movement is interpreted as blocking a front kick, and attacking the leg (similar to the jumping/landing sequence in Heian Godan). However, following the sequence, once the opponent is thrown, this next movement (kosa dachi, juji uke) could be interpreted as breaking the neck of the downed opponent.

The kata continues by invoking the one-legged crane stance, followed by a snap side kick and backfist strike, then a full straight punch. This sequence can be interpreted as avoiding a sweep attack or a kick, blocking a punch (or striking the head with the backfist
depending on which arm the attacker is using) and then kicking the solar plexus or groin. A thrust kick may be used for greater
distances. However, the straight punch may not work if the opponent is too close. Given the range, an elbow strike may be more
appropriate than a punch since the opponent is drawn close by the pulling action.

The next sequence of manji-uke uses a hooking punch (kake-zuki). Pulling the opponent’s head in and down to the hooking punch may
follow the blocking action of the backfist. Another interpretation simply involves pulling the opponent in for a punch to the rib area
(Kanazawa, p. 152, Movements 27-29). This interpretation does not finish the opponent, but it could set up a throw or other action to
finish the opponent.

The final sequence of the kata involves intercepting a left face punch, and striking the opponent under the chin with an upward elbow
strike (tate hiji-ate), followed by intercepting a mid-level punch and executing a 180 degree turn on one leg, with the hands catching
and pulling an opponent’s arm into position for an arm break using the shoulder of the karateka as a fulcrum. This can be modified into a
lock to take the opponent down given the close range of the technique. However, both Kanazawa and Nakayama depict this bunkai with
two legs on the ground. A one-legged stance does not permit enough leverage to execute this technique successfully.
Furthermore, if one were on stairs, the attacker would presumably be on a higher step, making this technique much more difficult to
execute successfully.

In conclusion, Gankaku has many interesting techniques that could be used in close quarters. However, these techniques may not be
practical for situations on a flat surface. The study of bunkai is fluid, not static. Situations on the street may not develop in the way that
the kata interprets attacks. Therefore, continual study of bunkai and oyo is necessary so that karate remains an effective self-defense art
as well as a way of development of mind, body, and spirit.

ENDNOTES

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