

Karate-do and Japanese Reading & Writing

SHODAN THESIS

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1 Introduction

From the day we start the first lesson in *karate-do* we get exposed to spoken Japanese and Okinawan words. It is also inevitable to notice that there are Japanese characters all around the *dojo* from the walls to the rank certificates to the patch on our *karate gi* to *sensei's obi*. From time to time it is explained to us what some of the *kanji* characters mean, including how to read the non-Arabic numerals. Then we read Nagamine's book, and we find out some history behind the word *karate* and the origins of the name *Shorin* and *Matsubayashi*. These facts explained in the book are usually taken for granted and superfluously understood by the non-Japanese speaker. However, by learning a little about the Japanese language, these facts become more interesting, revealing information that otherwise would go unnoticed.

This paper presents a brief lesson in Japanese writing as applied in our study of *karate-do*. We do not necessarily learn how to read and write Japanese while we study karate, but some basic concepts are shown to serve as general knowledge of the Japanese writing system. Perhaps these concepts will help to read and understand the *kanji* and *kana* characters found throughout the *dojo*.

2 Origins of the Japanese writing system

The Japanese language employs 3 different character sets, *hiragana*, *katakana* and *kanji*. It is possible to imagine that there are 3 different alphabets. The first two character sets consist of syllable representations, called *kana*. The third character set is the largest and most complex, consisting of a system rather than a character set. This type of writing is called *kanji*, which was adopted from China. We will refer to the Japanese history to learn about the origin of *kanji* and *kana* characters.

Chinese characters are believed to have originated more than 3,000 years ago. It was originally developed as a writing tool based on pictography and ideography representing objects and events of daily life. The characters used today have been stylized, and they are the result of centuries of evolution. A common example of a pictographic character is

木 (“tree”), which derives from the representation of a tree with 2 branches and roots. Then 2 trees form the ideographic character 林 (“forest”). The character 日 (“sun”), is difficult to recognize, but it is a pictographic representation of the sun. Combining 木 and 日 gave origin to another ideographic character 東 (“east”), depicting the sun rising from behind a tree in the east. Other abstract ideas were represented by sign characters, which were composed of points and lines. For example: 上 (“up”), 下 (“down”). Certainly not all characters are as easy to identify since they have a more complex origin. For example, 空 (“empty” or “sky”), combines 3 different radicals to signify “large hole where you can go straight up and find nothing.” Thus, this type of character is considered phono-ideographic since it is composed of ideographic and phonetic elements. Most *kanji*, or Chinese characters, fall into this category.

The Japanese did not have writing symbols until the Chinese writing was adopted in the 5th century during the Kofun period (300 – 710). The word *kanji* (漢字) literally means “Chinese characters.” A detailed translation would denote “Han Dynasty (漢) characters (字).” The history of China is long and complicated, and the word “China” can be represented by the name of a dynasty. In this case *kan* is an old name for China. In a further section of this paper we will see where the old name for *karate* comes from.

The Japanese tried to use Chinese characters phonetically to write down Japanese syllables, ignoring the meaning of the actual characters. This process turned out to be difficult when it took several *kanji* to write a single word consisting of multiple syllables. Therefore, new scripts (*kana* symbols) were created during the Heian period (794-1185) as a way to represent these syllables. Either character set can represent the entire sound system of the Japanese language.

2.1 Hiragana

Hiragana (ひらがな) originated from simplifying a cursive representation of an entire *kanji*. This fact explains the curved appearance of these characters. The following table shows some *hiragana* symbols with its corresponding *kanji* origin. *Romaji* is the name of the system used to represent Japanese words with the Roman alphabet, and the table

lists the *romaji* for the *hiragana* character, not the *kanji*. The written words *karate*, *dojo*, *obi*, *sensei* are examples of *romaji* transcriptions.

Table 2-1: Hiragana derivations from kanji

Hiragana	Originating Kanji	Romaji
あ	安	A
い	以	I
う	宇	U
く	久	KU
た	太	TA
ち	知	CHI
は	波	HA
み	美	MI
も	毛	MO
れ	礼	RE

The following table lists all of the *hiragana* characters with corresponding *romanji* representations. Note the special combinations used with the basic character set in order to create the rest of the syllables.

Table 2-2: Hiragana Table

あ A	か KA	さ SA	た TA	な NA	は HA	ま MA	や YA	ら RA	わ WA
い I	き KI	し SHI	ち CHI	に NI	ひ HI	み MI		り RI	
う U	く KU	す SU	つ TSU	ぬ NU	ふ FU	む MU	ゆ YU	る RU	
え E	け KE	せ SE	て TE	ね NE	へ HE	め ME		れ RE	
お O	こ KO	そ SO	と TO	の NO	ほ HO	も MO	よ YO	ろ RO	を WO
				ん N					

Adding " and ° to selected characters create the following syllables

が GA	ざ ZA	だ DA	ば BA	ぱ [°] PA
ぎ GI	じ JI	ぎ JI	び BI	ぴ [°] PI
ぐ GU	ず ZU	づ ZU	ぶ BU	ぷ [°] PU
げ GE	ぜ ZE	で DE	べ BE	ぺ [°] PE
ご GO	ぞ ZO	ど DO	ぼ BO	ぽ [°] PO

Combining small や, ゆ and よ with selected characters create the following syllables

きゃ KYA	ぎゃ GYA	しゃ SHA	じゃ JA	ちゃ CHA	にゃ NYA	ひゃ HYA	びゃ BYA	ぴゃ PYA	みゃ MYA	りゃ RYA
きゅ KYU	ぎゅ GYU	しゅ SHU	じゅ JU	ちゅ CHU	にゅ NYU	ひゅ HYU	びゅ BYU	ぴゅ PYU	みゅ MYU	りゅ RYU
きよ KYO	ぎよ GYO	しよ SHO	じよ JO	ちよ CHO	によ NYO	ひよ HYO	びよ BYO	ぴよ PYO	みよ MYO	りよ RYO

2.2 Katakana

Katakana (カタカナ) was developed using portions of a *kanji*. So in contrast to *hiragana*, these characters appear with strokes that are either similar or slightly altered parts of the original *kanji*.

The following table describes the origin of some *katakana* characters. Distinct characteristics can be observed between the origin of a *katakana* symbol and a *hiragana* symbol, though a few were derived from the same *kanji*. Note that the symbols for *CHI* (チ), *HA* (ハ) and *MI* (ミ) closely resemble the appearance of the original *kanji*.

Table 2-3: Katakana derivations from kanji

<i>Katakana</i>	<i>Originating Kanji</i>	<i>Romaji</i>
ア	安	A
イ	伊	I
ウ	宇	U
ク	久	KU
タ	多	TA
チ	千	CHI
ハ	八	HA
ミ	三	MI
モ	毛	MO
レ	礼	RE

The following page describes the *katakana* character set, including the special combinations that create extra syllables.

Table 2-4: Katakana Table

ア A	カ KA	サ SA	タ TA	ナ NA	ハ HA	マ MA	ヤ YA	ラ RA	ワ WA
イ I	キ KI	シ SHI	チ CHI	ニ NI	ヒ HI	ミ MI		リ RI	
ウ U	ク KU	ス SU	ツ TSU	ヌ NU	フ FU	ム MU	ユ YU	ル RU	
エ E	ケ KE	セ SE	テ TE	ネ NE	ヘ HE	メ ME		レ RE	
オ O	コ KO	ソ SO	ト TO	ノ NO	ホ HO	モ MO	ヨ YO	ロ RO	ヲ WO
				ン N					

Adding " and ° to selected characters create the following syllables

ガ GA	ゼ ZA	ダ DA	バ BA	パ° PA
ギ GI	ジ JI	ヂ JI	ビ BI	ピ° PI
グ GU	ズ ZU	ヅ ZU	ブ BU	プ° PU
ゲ GE	ゼ ZE	デ DE	ベ BE	ペ° PE
ゴ GO	ゾ ZO	ド DO	ボ BO	ポ° PO

Combining small ヤ, ユ and ヨ with selected characters create the following syllables

キヤ KYA	ギヤ GYA	シヤ SHA	ジャ JA	チャ CHA	ニヤ NYA	ヒヤ HYA	ビヤ BYA	ピヤ PYA	ミヤ MYA	リヤ RYA
キユ KYU	ギユ GYU	シユ SHU	ジュ JU	チュ CHU	ニユ NYU	ヒユ HYU	ビユ BYU	ピユ PYU	ミユ MYU	リユ RYU
キヨ KYO	ギヨ GYO	シヨ SHO	ジョ JO	チョ CHO	ニヨ NYO	ヒヨ HYO	ビヨ BYO	ピヨ PYO	ミヨ MYO	リヨ RYO

Additional katakana created with small ア, イ, ウ, エ, オ

ヴァ VA	ヴィ VI	ヴ VU	ヴォ VO	ウエ WI	ウエ WE	ウオ WO	ファ FA	フィ FI	フェ FE	フォ FO
ティ TI	トゥ TU	ディ DI	ドウ DU	シェ SHE	ジェ JE	チェ CHE	ツァ TSA	ツイ TSI	ツェ TSE	ツォ TSO

3 Using Kana

As explained earlier, the word *kana* refers to both *hiragana* and *katakana* symbols. Although both sets represent equivalent syllables, meaning that any Japanese word can be written in either *hiragana* or *katakana*, each set is used for specific purposes.

Hiragana is primarily used to write words or parts of words native to Japan. It is often used to complement *kanji* and to connect sentences. The following picture is a section of a *kyu* rank certificate showing all the *hiragana* characters in boxes. Everything else in this picture is written in *kanji*.



Figure 3-1: Using hiragana with kanji

Katakana, on the other hand, is used primarily to write words of foreign origin. It is common to see English words written in this manner. We can find *katakana* characters in *sensei's obi*, describing his name using Japanese syllables.

Just like there are foreign sounds that cannot be represented in written English (French *r*, Spanish rolling *r*), there are several limitations when representing foreign words in the Japanese language. For example, the lack of the “*r*” sound, forces the conversion of the original word containing the “*r*” into a word composed of one of the syllables *RA*, *RI*, *RU*, *RE*, or *RO*. We can see that “lemon” is written as *remon* (レモン), “hotel” is written as *hoteru* (ホテル), “Florida” becomes *Furorida* (フロリダ). In summary, sounds that do not exist in the original Japanese language are represented with close-sounding Japanese syllables. This property also applies to names. For example, “Lisa” becomes *Risa* (リサ); “Mike” becomes *Maiku* (マイク). This is how names are written in some of the black belts, explaining the unfamiliar reading.

Katakana also adds special combinations that allow the representation of some sounds that do not normally exist in the Japanese language, but that are used in popular foreign words. For example, “spaghetti” is written and pronounced as *supagetti* (スパゲッティ), but the syllable *ti*, is not natural to the Japanese language. It is represented with *TE* (テ) plus a small *I* (イ). Another example is “file,” which would be represented as *fairu* (ファイル). The syllable *fa* is artificially created using *FU* (フ) plus a small *A* (ア). It is important to note that expressing a foreign word in either *katakana* or *hiragana* highly depends on how the Japanese speaker pronounces or knows this word. A dash — is commonly used in *katakana* to express a long-sounding vowel. For example “roll” would be represented as *rooru* (ロール) instead of simply *roru* (ロル), or “juice” becomes *juusu* (ジュース). The name “Orlando” is written as *oorando* (オーランド).

Table 3-1: Examples of words written in katakana

<i>Katakana</i>	<i>Romaji</i>	English
レモン	REMON	Lemon
トマト	TOMATO	Tomato
ナイフ	NAIFU	Knife
アメリカ	AMERIKA	America
フロリダ	FURORIDA	Florida

ディスク	<i>DISUKU</i> (“DI” artificial)	Disk
フェンス	<i>FENSU</i> (“FE” artificial)	Fence
コーヒー	<i>KOOHII</i>	Coffee
ソーダ	<i>SOODA</i>	Soda

The following figure shows two black belts with names written in katakana. The *obi* on the left shows *KYAATI* (キャーティ) to represent the name Kathy, and the *obi* on the right describes *PATORISHIA* (パトリシア) to represent the name Patricia.

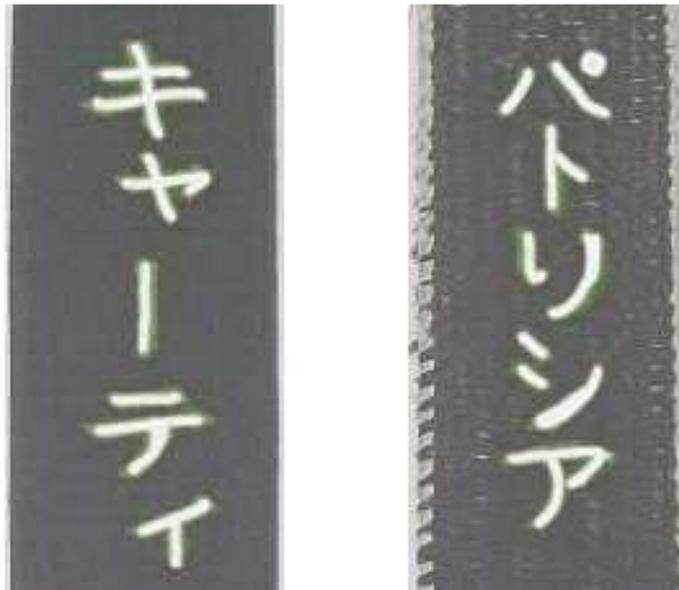


Figure 3-2: *Obi* with names in katakana

4 Kanji

Although *kanji* was originally imported from China, today it is the standard way of writing most Japanese words, especially proper names and native terms, including those that came from China.

Today there are approximately 2,300 *kanji* used in ordinary newspapers and magazines. 1,945 of these *kanji* were selected for regular use by the Japanese Ministry of Education in the year 1981, revising the reform after World War II, which limited the number to

1,850 for use in official publications. The Ministry of Justice also created a list of 284 kanji used only for names. It is believed that a Japanese person with average education can read about 3,000 *kanji*.

While a Chinese dictionary can have around 40,000 characters, a modern comprehensive Japanese *kanji* dictionary contains just over 20,000 entries. Many Japanese words do not have *kanji*, and they are simply written in *kana*.

Unfortunately, the use of *kanji* is very complicated for the non-Japanese speaker, due partly to the required knowledge in vocabulary.

Kanji is characterized by having form, meaning and reading. But one *kanji* can have more than one meaning and more than one reading. The complexity of *kanji* is attributed to the fact that sometimes it represents the sound, the original meaning, the derived meaning, or a “borrowed” meaning. For example, 月 is the pictographic representation of the moon, so it means “moon.” However, it can be used to represent “month,” and if used in conjunction with another *kanji*, then it can mean “Monday.” There are 3 ways of reading this *kanji*: *getsu*, *gatsu* and *tsuki*. *Tsuki* (月) means moon; *ichigatsu* (一月) means January (first month of the year); *getsuyobi* (月曜日) means Monday. In a later section we will see how these *kanji* properties have influenced the terminology in *karate-do*.

Kanji is read by what is called *on-yomi* and *kun-yomi*. *On-yomi* is the Japanese reading of the original pronunciation in Chinese (Sino-Japanese pronunciation). *Kun-yomi* is the reading of the Japanese word applied to the *kanji* according to its meaning. 月 has *getsu* and *gatsu* as *on-yomi*, and *tsuki* as *kun-yomi*. 手 (“hand”) for example, has *shu* as *on-yomi* and *te* as *kun-yomi*.

Most *kanji* are composed of a few elements, and some parts of a *kanji* are repeated in other *kanji*. These “shared” parts are called radicals. A *kanji* dictionary classifies the characters by radicals, not reading, although there is an index to find the *kanji* by meaning (*on-kun* index). There can be left-side classifiers, right-side classifiers, top classifiers, bottom classifiers, outside classifiers and inside classifiers.

The following *kanji* share the left-side classifier radical 木.

杯	板	枚	林	析	枝	松	枢	枠
“cup”	“board”	“counter”	“forest”	“analyze”	“branch”	“pine”	“pivot”	“frame”

5 Kanji in Karate-do

Perhaps understanding *kun-yomi* and *on-yomi* is the most difficult part of interpreting *kanji*. And it is the most important way of communicating in Japanese. Sometimes we find that many words have the same sound, being “homophones,” and the only way to make a distinction is by referring to the *kanji* representing this word.

Karate terminology presents a few cases of homophony, and it is interesting to realize how many words share the same *kanji*, as well as how many syllables sound the same but are represented differently using *kanji*.

5.1 To-te or Kara-te

Kanji	Romaji	English Translation
唐手	<i>To-te, karate</i>	“Chinese hands”
空手	<i>karate</i>	“empty hands”

We know from karate history that there was a meeting in 1936 that changed the first *kanji* in the word *karate* to eliminate any Chinese connotation.

Nagamine’s book explains that the original name was *To-te*, meaning “Chinese hands.” While this is correct, it is also useful to analyze the *on-yomi* and *kun-yomi* of the *kanji* 唐.

唐 has the *on-yomi* **to**, and *kun-yomi* **kara**. The meaning of this *kanji* is “Tang Dynasty.” As explained earlier, the character 漢 (*kan*) of 漢字 (*kanji*) refers to the “Han Dynasty,”

and it is known to also mean Chinese. The same definition applies to 唐, *to* or *kara*, referring to Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.) or “China.”

The original *kanji* writing of *karate*, 唐手, could be read as *to-te* and *kara-te*. It is difficult to determine from history what the original reading was; however, it would make perfect sense if this *kanji* was always read as *kara-te*, implying that changing the first *kanji* to mean “empty” did not affect the phonetic representation of this martial art. Today it is found that the *kanji* 唐 is specifically described as *kara* whenever 唐手 is written. The following pictures show portions of 2 karate books in original language, where the pronunciation “*kara*” is specifically denoted in *kana* symbols (から, カラ).

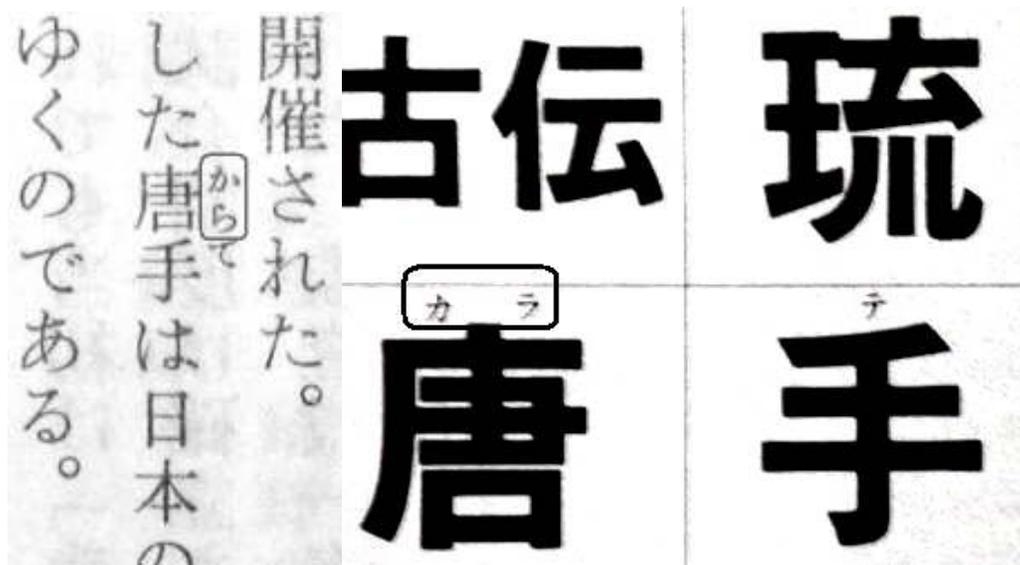


Figure 5-1: Kara in hiragana and katakana

As a side note, there is one martial art known today that uses the original *kanji* for karate, the Korean martial art *Tang Soo Do*, written with corresponding kanji 唐 for *Tang*, 手 for *Soo* and 道 for *Do*.

5.2 The Origin of the name Shorin

It is understood that *shorin* is the Japanese or Okinawan pronunciation of Shaolin, and we learn that there are 3 styles of karate called Shorin, Matsubayashi being one of them. Sometimes these statements are simply taken for granted without further analysis.

One fact that is not usually explained is that Shaolin is written in Chinese as 少林, where the first character 少 means “young.” And, as we know, the second character 林 means “forest.” Therefore, referring to the *on-yomi* of the characters 少 (*sho*) and 林 (*rin*), we obtain “*shorin*.”

The following three *kanji* are read as “shorin” using the *on-yomi* properties of the *kanji* components, but they describe different meanings when read with *kun-yomi*.

Kanji	Using on-yomi	Using kun-yomi	English Translation
少林	<i>shorin</i>	<i>shobayashi</i>	“young forest”
小林	<i>shorin</i>	<i>kobayashi</i>	“small forest”
松林	<i>shorin</i>	<i>matsubayashi</i>	“pine forest”

5.3 Understanding Kata names

There are several styles categorized under karate, and we find that many of them practice the same *kata*, and sometimes each style calls them differently. For illustration purposes, a few selected *kata* names are described to explain the origin and meaning of their names referring to the *on-yomi* and *kun-yomi* properties of *kanji*, only the applicable *on-yomi* and *kun-yomi* readings are mentioned. The *kanji* descriptions of the *kata* names were taken from Nagamine’s book. Also, it must be noted that most *kata* names were passed down verbally, therefore the *on-yomi* or *kun-yomi* do not match the original Chinese or Okinawan pronunciations. As a result, we cannot fully rely on the depicted *kanji* to determine the exact meaning of the *kata* name.

Fukyugata

Kanji	普	及	形
On-yomi	<i>Fu</i>	<i>kyu</i>	
Kun-yomi			<i>kata</i>
English	“widespread/ universal/ common”	“to reach/ extend”	“shape/ form”

There is a Japanese word called *fukyu*, written as 普及, meaning to “promote,” “diffuse,” “spread,” “propagate.” The pronunciation of the full name of the *kata* has a phonetic change from “*kata*” to “*gata*.”

Pinan

Kanji	平	安
On-yomi	<i>hei</i>	<i>an</i>
English	“flat/ calm”	“peaceful/ safe”

This is a case where the *kanji* is read in Japanese as *heian*, the way this *kata* is called in the Shotokan style. But the original Chinese/Okinawan pronunciation is “*pinan*.” Modern Mandarin reads this *kanji* as “*ping an*.”

The character 平 (*hei*) is used in the word 平和 (*heiwa*), meaning “peace.” The character 安 (*an*) is used in the word 安心 (*anshin*), meaning “peace of mind” or “relief.”

Ananku

Kanji	安	南	空
On-yomi	<i>An</i>	<i>nan</i>	<i>ku</i>
English	“peaceful/ safe”	“south”	“empty/ sky”

The name of this *kata* appears easy to translate, though there could be a number of combinations to translate it literally, one translation could be “peaceful sky from the south.” Different karate sources have translated the name of this *kata* in different ways, not even related to the *kanji* describing it. There is not enough documentation in karate history to determine the exact writing of this *kata* name, and what is presented here was taken from Nagamine’s book. Notice that *ku* is the *on-yomi* of the same *kanji* portion used for karate, 空 (“empty”).

Wankan

Kanji	王	冠
On-yomi	o	kan
English	“king”	“crown”

This is another case where the original Chinese or Okinawan pronunciation reads *wankan* instead of *okan*. This *kanji* is read as “*wang guan*” in modern Mandarin.

Passai

Kanji	拔	塞
On-yomi	<i>batsu</i>	<i>sai</i>
English	“pull out/ rise above/ surpass/ excel”	“shelter/ wall/ close”

This *kata* is also known as *Bassai* in other styles of karate. Different interpretations of the *kanji* led to several translations, one of them being “breaking the fortress.” We can see where this meaning could have derived from.

Gojushiho

Kanji	五	十	四	步
On-yomi	<i>go</i>	<i>ju</i>	<i>shi</i>	<i>Ho</i>
English	5	10	4	“walk/ step/ pace”

So far this is probably the easiest *kata* name to translate. It literally means “54 steps.”

Chinto

Kanji	鎮	鬪
On-yomi	<i>chin</i>	<i>to</i>
English	“quell/ subdue”	“fight/ struggle”

History tells us that this name is related to a Chinese sailor that arrived in Okinawa, thus being one of the oldest *kata* in the system it suffers from inaccurate *kanji* representation. The literal translation of each *kanji* component given by Nagamine describes the idea of a “strong” *kata*, though different karate sources have translated the name of this *kata* in unrelated ways, mainly as “fighting to the east.” Most sources include the word “fight” as part of the translation. A personal theory indicates that 鬪 (*to*) may have been written by others as 東 (*to*), meaning “east.” Both characters are homophones.

Kusanku

Kanji	公	祖	君
On-yomi	<i>ko</i>	<i>so</i>	<i>kun</i>
English	“public/ official/ formal”	“ancestor/ originator”	“ruler/ sovereign/ monarch”

Again, different karate sources disagree with the literal translation of the name of this *kata*. It is perhaps another case of phonetic transcriptions that never captured the exact *kanji* representation. Phonetically it is consistent with Nagamine’s statement describing that this *kata* is called *kosokun* in mainland Japan. We must also remember that “Kusanku” is the name of a person, and it may not have significant meaning other than a desired meaning by selecting specific *kanji* symbols to describe the name of this *kata*.

5.4 Shared Kanji in karate terminology

In contrast to what was observed with the name *Shorin*, where there are three ways of writing it by using different *kanji*, there are a few words heard in class that actually share the same *kanji* but are used in completely different situations.

We often hear the words *ki*, *kiai* and *ki-o-tsuke* in *karate-do* terminology. And as non-Japanese speakers, we usually ignore the “detailed” definition of these words since we are given an English translation that presents words that are completely unrelated from one to another.

These three words actually share a common *kanji* as described below:

Kanji/kana	Romaji	English Translation
気	<i>ki</i>	“spirit”
気合	<i>kiai</i>	“spirit convergence”
気を付け	<i>Ki-o-tsuke</i>	“attention”

The word *ki* encompasses a deep and powerful meaning, and we can find that the other two words, *kiai* and *ki-o-tsuke* carry the same kanji. Although *ki-o-tsuke* sounds like one word, it has 2 separate parts connected with *wo* (を). Moreover, this is the conjugated form of *ki-o-tsukeru*, meaning “care/ attention/ precaution.”

The kanji 気 (*ki*) means “spirit/ mind/ consciousness.” *Kiai* is written as 気合, literally meaning “spirit convergence.”

The kanji 合 (*ai*) translates as “combine/ unite/ join together/ meet.” This is the same kanji used to describe “federation” or 連合 (*rengo*).

Ki-o-tsukeru is composed of 気 (*ki*) and 付ける (*tsu-keru*), meaning “attach/ affix/ fit/ build up.” In a sense it means “to keep the mind attached.”

The karate words *shuto* and *sokuto* both contain interesting *kanji* components. It is worthwhile to look at these characters and truly understand the meaning of those karate terms.

Kanji/kana	Romaji	English Translation
刀	<i>TO / katana</i>	“sword”
手刀	<i>shuto</i>	“knife hand”
足刀	<i>sokuto</i>	“foot edge”

These two words strictly belong to karate. What is interesting is the pronunciation of the kanji 手 (“hand”) in *shuto*. For this type of technique, the *on-yomi shu* is used, rather than the *kun-yomi te*.

Soku is the *on-yomi* reading of 足 (“foot”). We have heard in class the *kun-yomi* pronunciation of this *kanji* several times, *ashi*.

The shared *kanji* 刀 (“sword”) is the word which is famously heard as *katana* (in *kun-yomi* form). The *on-yomi* pronunciation of this *kanji* is *to*, just like it is commonly heard in *nihonto* (日本刀), or “Japanese sword.” The given translations “knife hand” and “foot edge” almost hide the true meaning of *shuto* and *sokuto*.

6 Writing Kanji

Just like in *karate-do*, there are strict rules on how to execute a movement, a *kanji* stroke in this case. It is believed that this is necessary to accomplish uniformity and consistency when handwriting *kanji*. There are a few fundamental rules for writing *kanji* strokes:

- Horizontal strokes are made from left to right.
- Vertical or slanting strokes are made from top to bottom.
- Hook strokes are made from top left to right or left bottom.
- The center stroke is made first, followed by the left and right strokes.
- The outside strokes are made first, followed by the middle strokes.
- The horizontal stroke is made first, followed by the vertical stroke.
- The left side slanting stroke is made first, followed by the right side slanting stroke.

The following pages demonstrate how to write some of the *kanji* found at the *dojo*. These characters were written using computer fonts; therefore, there are slight differences between the presented characters and traditional handwritten *kanji*. The order of the strokes remains the same, teaching the correct order of the strokes.

6.1 Numbers

一 ICHI ("1")

一				
---	--	--	--	--

二 NI ("2")

一	二			
---	---	--	--	--

三 SAN ("3")

一	二	三		
---	---	---	--	--

四 SHI ("4")

丨	𠃉	𠃊	四	四
---	---	---	---	---

五 GO ("5")

一	丁	五	五	
---	---	---	---	--

六 ROKU ("6")

丨	𠃉	六	六	
---	---	---	---	--

七 SHICHI ("7")

一	七			
---	---	--	--	--

八 HACHI ("8")

丿	八			
---	---	--	--	--

九 KU ("9")

丿	九			
---	---	--	--	--

十 JU ("10")

一	十			
---	---	--	--	--

6.2 Mizu no kokoro (水の心) ["mind like water"]

水 MIZU ("water")

丿	勹	才	水	
---	---	---	---	--

心 KOKORO ("mind/spirit")

丶	乚	心	心	
---	---	---	---	--

6.3 Matsubayashi-Ryu (松林流)

松 MATSU ("pine")

一	十	才	木	杝
杝	松	松		

林 HAYASHI ("forest")

一	十	才	木	杝
杝	材	林		

流 RYU ("style")

丶	丷	冫	氵	灬
灬	灬	灬	济	流

6.4 Karate-do (唐手道)

空 KARA (“empty/sky”)

一	二	三	四	五
空	空	空		

手 TE (“hand”)

一	二	三	手	
---	---	---	---	--

道 DO (“way/path”)

一	二	三	四	五
首	首	首	首	首
道	道			

6.5 Beikoku (米国) [“United States”]

米 BEI (“America/rice”)

一	二	三	半	米
米				

国 KOKU (“country”)

丨	冂	冂	冂	冂
国	国	国		

6.6 Rengo (連合) [“federation”]

連 REN (“link/connect/unite”)

一	冂	冂	冂	冂
亘	車	車	連	連

合 GO (“combine/fit”)

ノ	人	人	合	合
合				

6.7 Okinawa (沖縄)

沖 OKI (“offshore/open sea”)

、	、	、	、	、
沖	沖			

繩 NAWA (“rope”)

纟	纟	纟	纟	纟
纟	纟	纟	纟	纟
纟	纟	纟	纟	纟

7 Conclusion

This paper presented several topics related to Japanese reading and writing that could be useful to the non-Japanese speaking karate practitioner.

Sometimes English translations hide the extra information that may be found in the original language, and while this information is irrelevant to the strict study of karate, finding original meanings derived from *kanji* appear enlightening. This extra information can be found through detailed research in history and understanding of the Japanese language.

The purpose of this paper was to present facts that are not obvious to the non-Japanese speaker, covering an overview of the Japanese writing system and its application in karate-do. Unfortunately, fully understanding written Japanese requires some knowledge of the spoken Japanese language, especially pronunciation and vocabulary. It was not within the scope of this paper to include those aspects of the Japanese language, thus the vocabulary contained in the paper was mainly composed of the terminology used at the dojo, facilitating pronunciation of the written *romaji* words.

With certainty, it can be stated that the written Japanese language is complex, and this fact could be attributed to its origin, adopting the Chinese characters into the language. The existence of homophones presents ambiguity that can only be resolved by referring to the meaning of *kanji*. As demonstrated, 東 (“east”), 刀 (“sword”) and 唐 (“China”) all

sound the same, *TO*; or 小 (“young”), 少 (“small”), 松 (“pine”) all sound as *SHO*, but each character carries a different meaning. Spoken words, such as old *kata* names may have been represented in *kanji* in diverse forms, and this has created variations on the translations or interpretations of *kata* names.

It appears that writing in Japanese is an art just like in karate-do, requiring several years of practice, and never achieving total knowledge. For now we can start by understanding a few fundamental concepts that will complement the study of karate-do.

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