

Japan

[See the Japanese Flag and what it represents](#)

Japanese martial arts are more straight line fighting styles, than the circular techniques of their Chinese cousins. Commonly call karate by those of us in the West, Japanese arts range from empty hand martial systems to joint locking and throwing systems to styles devoted entirely to weapons' practice.

The art of karate (*kara-te*), which means empty hand, is commonly believed to have come to Japan from the island of Okinawa, where fighting with weapons was banned for many years. Ancient Okinawan traders visited China's Fukien Province and brought back the martial techniques of China's southern Shaolin temple. The Okinawans developed such an effective self-defense system that many Japanese masters wanted it as their own. It was brought to the Japanese mainland in 1922 and eventually became the best known Japanese martial art. The karate arts of the All-Japan Karate Association – Go-ju, wado and Shito ryus – are among the best known karate systems

Before karate became well known in Japan, the most popular Japanese martial arts were ken-jitsu and ju jitsu. Kendo means the way of the sword, with origins in Japan's samurai culture and swordsmanship. It covers not only *kendo*, where heavily protected fighters spar offensively with wooden swords, but also *ia-do*, defensive sword drawing and cutting from scabbard to the first cut. Japan is famous among Asian martial arts for the skill of its ancient swordsmiths, who forged the finest blades in the Orient.

Ju jitsu is a martial art based on joint locks and throwing techniques that disarm and control an attacker. From the martial *art* of ju jitsu came the martial *sport* judo. Judo was first developed in the early 1900s as the competition form of ju jitsu. Judo is mainly a throwing art, similar to swai zhou (Chinese wrestling). An even more recent offshoot of ju jitsu is *aikido*, a martial art that uses the opponents' own movements and energy as weapons against them.

One of the most mysterious arts of feudal Japan was *ninjutsu*, Japan's early day espionage system. Cloaked in secrecy, the original ninjitsu practitioners were the terrorists of their era. They were families of spies and assassins hired by Japanese warlords to infiltrate and terrorize enemies. Today, ninjutsu is practiced in a far more harmless fashion, minus the deadly overtones that characterized the original ninja warriors.

There are Japanese martial arts that teach archery and special long weapons, such as the naginata, a long handled knife made famous as a women warriors' weapon. All Japanese martial arts have their roots in the principles of *bushido*, the way of the warrior.

Japanese martial arts are seeped in tradition and discipline to one's teacher and to the art itself. Along the same lines, an instructor is obligated to also have a responsibility to the student. The result is an close family-like association between instructor, student and martial art – bushido.

By: Jane Hallander and martialinfo.com

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The hundreds of Japanese martial arts and styles fall into two categories, the ancient Bujutsu and its twentiethcentury counterpart, the Budo. Styles deriving from these two classifications are distinguished, in literary terms, by the suffixes jutsu and do, respectively.

A virtual explosion of arts and styles occurred during Japan's feudal era, when warriorship and militarism was at an all-time zenith. More emphasis was placed on the sword at that time than on any other means of combat. Consequently, kenjutsu developed far more ryu (schools) than any other art.

Notably, some feudal martial systems, like the Katori Shinto-ryu, for one example, were of a composite nature and taught the techniques of more than one armed and/ or unarmed method. Consequently, as you pore over the Japanese systems in this chapter you will occasionally find a single style listed under several arts. It is possible, too, that kenjutsu and iaijutsu grew simultaneously and perhaps enhanced each other's development, which explains why some kenjutsu ryu. share the same name as iaijutsu ryu.

According to martial scholars Draeger and Smith, "During the height of the Japanese feudal era some 725 jujutsu systems were officially documented in Japan, as were 1,700 schools of kenjutsu, 412 iaijutsu schools, and 460 yarijutsu ryu." Most have not survived the march of time and have fallen into oblivion. By 1867, in fact, kenjutsu decreased to just over two hundred active

styles, with only a few of them extant today; and iaijutsu presently has but a handful of sects.

But according to two other martial scholars, Oscar Ratti and Adele Westbrook, there were far more. In their comprehensive *Secrets of the Samurai*, the authors claim "at least 10,000 ryu existed when Emperor Meiji came to power." They, too, emphasize that that number dwindled magnificently to the present day.

By 1960, according to Draeger and Smith, there were an estimated "75 karate-do and 30 karate-jutsu styles, 14 sects of aikido, and pure yarijutsu was virtually nonexistent." In a February 1987 *Black Belt* magazine article, one aikido expert claimed there were over 40 styles of aikido alone; if accurate, this means more than 26 new styles of aikido were created between 1960 and 1986! This example, in itself, demonstrates the enormous difficulty I encountered in compiling this chapter alone.

[By John Corcoran](#)

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