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Early Karate History: Okinawa

Okinawa is an island south of Japan, situated in near equal distance between China and Japan. A secret indigenous weaponless martial art developed (called Te, “Hands”) that experienced strong Chinese influences. Chinese sailors, traders and businessmen brought their martial art to Okinawa during their import/export business travels. In addition, many original Okinawan masters travelled to China to learn Chinese boxing (Ch’uan Fa, “The fist way”) directly from Chinese masters.

Having acquired new skills, in particular what is nowadays referred to as White Crane Kung Fu, these masters would return to Okinawa and begin to teach an art that had both original Okinawan and also Chinese heritage. This new way of fighting was called [To-De](#), “Chinese Hands”, to indicate the Chinese origin of many of the techniques.



In Okinawa, there were three villages that, although only few miles apart, each developed their own style of To-De. In the port town of Naha, [Naha-Te](#) developed. In the more aristocratic Shuri, the ancient capital of Okinawa, [Shuri-Te](#) developed, and further north in Tomari, Tomari-Te developed.

This seemingly unlikely isolation has its foundation partly in the geographical location of these villages, with a river separating Naha in the south from Shuri and Tomari in the North, but also by its very different social classes, with business and commercial trade enterprises in Naha, the King and aristocracy in Shuri, and farmers and country people in Tomari.

Okinawa has a long history of both Chinese and Japanese suppression that outlawed the possession of conventional weapons (such as swords). Thus, Okinawan martial arts developed a unique range of substitute weapons that in many cases were derived from farming tools. The use of these weapons is still practiced today in many Karate styles of Okinawan origin.