



## the bible of karate; bubishi

The Bible of Karate; Bubishi

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Review by Scot Combs

Bubishi is divided into three major sections. The first section is concerned with history and philosophy, the second section covers Chinese medicine and herbal pharmacology and the third examines techniques.

Each time I've read the history and philosophy behind Bubishi, I have been absorbed by the interlocking history of Chinese and Okinawin martial arts, particularly in light of the 'Japanized' version of karate that made its way to the United States. It seems that the content of karate is a combination of the Chinese arts of Shaolin Monk Fist Boxing and White Crane gongfu with the indigenous fighting arts of Okinawa. The Japanese contribution was to give karate an organizational structure which made the art more easily transportable.

The actual Japanese goal was to mold this Okinawin 'karate' (translated as china hand) into a discipline that resembled kendo and judo with a closely supervised curriculum, etiquette, ranking system, licensing process for instructors and uniforms. First, however, they had to do something about the name of the art. With the animosity between Japan and the Middle Kingdom, 'China Hand' simply would not do. As far back as 1905 some instructors began spelling karate differently in order to rid the art of reference to China. By 1936 the official spelling of karate translated as 'empty hand', and uniforms, etiquette, a ranking system and instructor licensing had been put in place. But the advent of WWII delayed the development of a single, monolithic curriculum, and we can be thankful for that. If the Japanese had succeeded in creating a curriculum similar to kendo and judo, we might not know how closely tied karate was to Chinese philosophy and technique.

The origin of Bubishi is probably lost to antiquity. No one knows who first compiled the book but there are several theories. One has Bubishi evolving during the early part of the Ching dynasty. There was some resistance to the Chings and the Shaolin Temple was known to be a safe haven for resistance fighters. As a result the temple was burned to the ground and the monks scattered.

One monk, Fan Zhonggong (Huishi), moved to Fujien Province to escape and passed Monk Fist Boxing to his daughter, Fan Chiniang. The daughter, after her fathers' death, realized she could not face a larger, stronger attacker in direct combat and developed a softer system that became White Crane gongfu. These two disciplines, along with Chinese herbal medicine and pressure point theory, were recorded in Bubishi.

Other theories postulate Bubishi may be a compilation of smaller texts or it may represent a compilation of small sections from larger texts. Chris Thomas (co-author of the Dillman Method of Pressure Point Fighting books and well known karate historian) suggests Bubishi might be a student's notebook, citing the incompleteness of the text. When studying Bubishi a reader may become a bit frustrated with the cryptic nature of the information, as if certain common knowledge was taken for granted by the writer. No one really knows for sure and a theory that combines a number to these theories may be plausible.

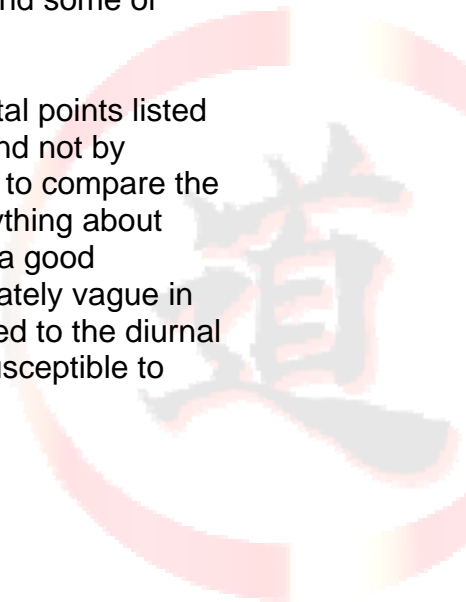
Bubishi was a closely held secret. Anyone who had a hand written copy guarded its contents jealously. It passed from master to student through the years and finally came to Okinawa. There are a number of theories on exactly how Bubishi found its way to Okinawa but it seems safe to say it probably moved from Fujien, China to Okinawa via several conduits.

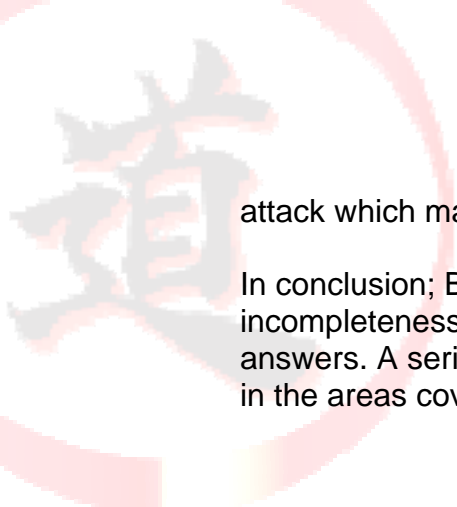
It is interesting to note that a number of early karate masters' texts are taken directly from Bubishi. In fact some of them simply copied the entire document and put their style's name on it.

The section on Chinese medicine and herbal pharmacology is interesting but there are several factors that render it more of a curiosity than a serious tool for study. For one, many of the Chinese characters have radically changed or are not in use any more and significant sections of the text are obscured due to an inability to translate them. Secondly, the recipes assume a certain general knowledge of herbal pharmacology practice that leaves us moderns at a disadvantage.

The third section can be the most frustrating. It offers an outline of pressure point theory and a few specifics but fails to answer the questions it raises. The most problematic portion of the text involves the 36 vital points. Master Feng Yiyuan developed the theory of attacking 36 points on the body that were divided into four categories consisting of 9 death points, 9 neurological shut down points, 9 pain points and 9 paralyzing points. While the 36 points are detailed on charts, there is no detail given of the four categories. It would seem imprudent and unsafe to use any of this knowledge without some explanation of the four categories. Some mention is made of seven restricted locations and some of these correspond with the chart for the 36 vital points, but not all.

To further confuse things there are literally dozens of forbidden vital points listed for acupuncturists but they are all given in their Chinese names and not by meridian point structure (eg. TW-17, LI-10, etc.). One would have to compare the Chinese location names with meridian point structure to know anything about them. It seems the text of Bubishi either assumes the reader has a good understanding of these 36 points and four categories or is deliberately vague in order to protect their secrets. There is much more space committed to the diurnal cycle or the times of the day when certain vital points are more susceptible to





attack which may lead one to the former conclusion.

In conclusion; Bubishi is obviously an important historical text. However, the incompleteness of the document gives rise to many more questions than answers. A serious student would do well to look elsewhere for practical teaching in the areas covered.