

Review of *Ankō Itosu. The Man. The Master. The Myth. Biography of a Legend*, by Thomas Feldmann

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REVIEW

Abstract

This review considers the book *Ankō Itosu. The Man. The Master. The Myth. Biography of a Legend*, published in 2021 by Thomas Feldmann. The volume is a thorough biographical study of Ankō Itosu (1831–1915), Okinawan born and essential figure to interpret initial developments of karate history during the 20th century. Approximately two decades before this indigenous martial art was to be popularized in mainland Japan by Funakoshi Gichin (1868–1957) and Mabuni Kenwa (1889–1952), and officially recognized by the *Dainippon Butokukai* [Greater Japan Martial Arts Virtue Society] (1933), Itosu consolidated important technical and discursive changes for karate. This novel way to practice and describe karate, still molding the perception of the art today, had the intention, among others, to further support its inclusion in the school system of Okinawa. Using a huge amount of written and oral sources, historical documents, and scholarly studies on Okinawa, this text offers a vivid picture of Itosu's life. In a manner unusual among the publications on the topic, the text not only explores the early days of modern karate through the existential vicissitudes of the master, but even more importantly it does so against the background of how the cultural, social, and political life was articulated in Okinawa at the time. Such a remarkable effort bears a value that should not go unnoticed among martial arts researchers and the interested reader alike.

Keywords: Martial arts; combat sports; karate; Japanese martial arts; history; Okinawa; biography.

Reseña de *Ankō Itosu. The Man. The Master. The Myth. Biography of a Legend*, por Thomas Feldmann

Resumen

Esta reseña considera el libro *Ankō Itosu. The Man. The Master. The Myth. Biography of a Legend*, publicado en 2021 por Thomas Feldmann. Nos encontramos ante un estudio exhaustivo de la biografía de Ankō Itosu (1831-1915), nacido en las islas de Okinawa y figura esencial para interpretar la evolución inicial de la historia del karate durante el siglo XX. Aproximadamente dos décadas antes de que este arte marcial autóctono fuera popularizado en Japón por Funakoshi Gichin (1868-1957) y Mabuni Kenwa (1889-1952) y oficialmente reconocido por la *Dainippon Butokukai* [La Sociedad de las Virtudes Marciales del Gran Japón] (1933), Itosu consolidó importantes cambios técnicos y discursivos para el karate. Esta novedosa forma de practicar y describir el karate, que aún moldea la actual percepción del arte, tenía, entre otras, la intención de sustentar su inclusión en el sistema escolar de Okinawa. Utilizando una gran cantidad de fuentes escritas y orales, documentos históricos y estudios académicos sobre Okinawa, este libro ofrece una vívida imagen de Itosu. De una manera poco habitual entre los libros sobre el tema, el texto no sólo explora los primeros días del karate moderno a través de las vicisitudes existenciales del maestro, sino

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Resumo

Esta resenha considera o livro *Ankō Itosu. The Man. The Master. The Myth. Biography of a Legend*, publicada, em 2021, por Thomas Feldmann. O livro é um estudo biográfico completo de Ankō Itosu (1831-1915), nascido em Okinawa e figura essencial para interpretar os desenvolvimentos iniciais da história do karaté durante o século XX. Cerca de duas décadas antes de a arte marcial indígena de Okinawa ser popularizada no Japão continental por Funakoshi Gichin (1868-1957) e Mabuni Kenwa (1889-1952), e oficialmente reconhecida pelo *Dai Nippon Butokukai* [Sociedade da Virtude das Artes Marciais do Grande Japão] (1933), Itosu consolidou importantes mudanças técnicas e discursivas para karaté. Essa nova maneira de praticar e descrever o karaté, ainda moldando a percepção da arte atualmente, teve a intenção de apoiar ainda mais sua inclusão no sistema escolar de Okinawa. Usando uma enorme quantidade de fontes escritas e orais sobre karaté, documentos históricos e estudos acadêmicos sobre Okinawa, este livro constitui um retrato vívido da vida de Itosu. De maneira incomum entre os livros de karaté, o texto não apenas explora os primórdios do karaté moderno através das vicisitudes existenciales do mestre de

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que, lo que es aún más importante, lo hace atendiendo a cómo se articulaba la vida cultural, social y política en Okinawa durante la época. Tan notable esfuerzo aporta un valor que no debería pasar desapercibido ni para los investigadores de las artes marciales ni para cualquier otro lector interesado en la materia.

Palabras clave: Artes marciales; deportes de combate; kárate; artes marciales japonesas; historia; Okinawa; biografía.

karaté, mas, ainda mais importante, o faz no contexto de como a vida cultural, social e política foi articulada em Okinawa na época. Este esforço notável tem um valor que não deve passar despercebido entre os pesquisadores de artes marciais e o leitor interessado.

Palavras-chave: Artes marciais; desportos de combate; karatê; artes marciais japonesas; história; Okinawa; biografia.

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1. Introduction: martial arts biographies and martial arts history

In the field of martial arts studies, prominent masters provide a central stage and generate much attention. Therefore, their biographies constitute an important source for research, writing and debate on the subject. In the case of karate, and broadly speaking Japanese martial arts, *Karate-Dō: My Way of Life* 空手道一路 (1956/1975), the autobiography of Funakoshi Gichin 船越 義珍 (1868–1957), frequently referred as the “father of modern karate”, is a quasi-compulsory work; John Stevens’ *Three Budo Masters: Jigoro Kano (judo), Gichin Funakoshi (karate) Morihei Ueshiba (aikido)* (1995), constitutes another classic. But should we really credit Funakoshi as the founder of the karate as we know it today, and therefore match him to Kanō Jigorō 嘉納 治五郎 (1860–1938) and Ueshiba Morihei 植芝 盛平 (1883–1969)? Or perhaps should we look further back at his teacher Ankō Itosu 糸洲 安恒 (1831–1915)? This question alone, which calls into question the very historical canon of karate, is reason enough to pay attention to this work.

2. About the contents of the book: Itosu, Okinawan karate, and the problematic transitioning from traditional to modern

Many texts have touched on Itosu, but this book is one of the very few entirely dedicated to study and analyze a capital figure in the conformation of modern karate. With an in-depth and lively account, the first six chapters drive us through the karate master biography in chronological order. Chapters seven to nine are dedicated respectively to reflecting his *tōdī* 唐手 (one of the ways to speak of karate in *uchinaguchi* 沖縄語, the Okinawan language) his favorite kata and his legacy. An appendix recapitulates recent studies on Itosu's possible appearance and the plausibility of different photographs that seem to portray him. Finally, the author provides a chart with popular tales about Itosu, that appear throughout the book – including title, narrator, and date– a useful timeline and a couple of maps. In addition to the content, all over the book the edition also reveals a careful attention to detail: the cover stands out aesthetically from other works dedicated to karate, the quality of the paper is superb, and several pages are beautifully decorated with old photographs and pictorial sources more than informative. All this makes for a splendid edition and makes the reading experience ever more pleasant.

Ankō Itosu was born in Shuri, old royal emplacement, and political center of the semi-independent Ryūkyū Kingdom 琉球王国 (1429–1879), just over half a century before it was officially abolished by Japan and incorporated as a national prefecture by the end of the 19th century. Pertaining to a low-rank aristocratic stratum, *pēchin* 親雲上, of the feudal and hereditary caste system that governed the Okinawan islands, Itosu worked most of his life as a scholar-official in an administrative position. A long-life karateka and an authority in the field, in his later days Itosu was a part-time karate instructor at the Okinawa Shihan-gakkō 沖縄師範学校跡 [Okinawa Normal School] and the Okinawa Chū-gakkō 沖縄県中学校 [Okinawa Prefectural Middle School]. There here became a central agent in the systematization of karate and its incorporation as a formal subject to school education in Okinawa under the auspices of the Japanese Government on the islands. Not by chance, Itosu created the famous five kata named *pinan* 平安 [lit. “peace” or “tranquility”, but also a

possible reference to Heian (794-1185), the Japanese historical period], today the elementary technical basis of numerous karate styles practiced throughout the world. Moreover, in 1908 Itosu wrote a very much circulated letter in the world of karate, commonly known as *Tōde jukun* 唐手心得十ヶ条 [the ten precepts of karate] and addressed to the Okinawa-ken Kyōiku linkai 沖縄県教育委員会 [Okinawa Prefecture Board of Education], advocating for the many benefits of this Okinawan martial art in, actually, forging Japanese imperial subjects.

The connection between school sports education, the development of a fighting spirit, and the preparation for the future military service, lies at the core of Itosu's letter. Feldmann devotes an entire chapter (Episode V) to address this overly sensitive issue. He concludes that Itosu's movement was probably a "kind of dance with the devil" intended "to ensure that Ryūkyū's cultural heritage is not lost through the ongoing process of Japanization" (p.275). Here, like in other key moments of the book, Feldmann demonstrates a sharp inquiring eye, for he links Itosu's letter to the *Kyōiku ni Kansuru Choku* 教育ニ関スル勅語 [Japanese Imperial Rescript on Education] that since 1890 was governing the educational policy of Meiji Japan (1868-1912). The great popularity that judo and kendo were reaching among the local young generations is also noted as one of the possible reasons why Itosu wrote the letter, and why the re-adaptation and modernization of karate was started in Okinawa and by Okinawans. All decades before its popularization in mainland Japan during the mid-1920s, or the official recognition by the Dainippon Butokukai 大日本武徳会 [Greater Japan Martial Virtue Society] in 1933.

This apparent collaborationism between Okinawan karate authorized voices and the Japanese national politics may be surprising to many. It is necessary, nonetheless, to address the historical background as well as to avoid unilinear causal explanations if we want to understand the complicated paths that karate was to follow in the first half of the 20th century and beyond. Only then will we be able to decode some of the most persistent myths, misconceptions and misrepresentations surrounding the creation of modern karate. For the interested reader, this book will be of immense help.

Without doubt, one of this work's major achievements is precisely that, to deepen in detail but from a broad perspective in the Okinawan historical and socio-cultural context during the turbulent years in which Itosu lived, and in which karate experienced crucial transformations. We should note that this includes the restructuring of a former feudal kingdom into a prefecture of the modern and emerging Empire of Japan (1868-1947), but also the outbreak of conflicts in the East Asian region like the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). In this sense, the research carried out by Feldmann not only frames the development of karate in such a convulsive historical period, but also manages to integrate it with an analysis of the numerous changes that affected substantially the daily life and customs of the Okinawan people, among them Itosu. Such comprehensive approach, conducted rigorously, has rarely been seen in karate-related literature, and is underpinned by a large number of primary and secondary sources in Japanese, English, and German. Citing, referencing and footnotes meet the academic standards, another uncommon quality in a karate book (although future research could have benefited greatly from an index of terms). As a scholar one can only be pleased about this.

It is also worth mentioning the effort to gather and compare different translations of some of the most best-known karate texts and quotations, in some cases providing new adaptations. Likewise, the book honestly deals with oral sources: martial arts narrations, memoirs, and anecdotes - as the author rightly points out - often respond to competing interests and battles for legitimacy. Therefore, such stories often convey contradictory views about people and events. Again, in this aspect, the book confronts attributed facts to direct or circumstantial documented evidence when possible, leading to valuable results, either to corroborate, disprove or put on hold certain claims related to the popular history of karate.

The critical reader will occasionally find laudatory reflections on Itosu, which reveal the author's clear sympathy for the master - after all, we have a biography at hands. This, however, does not cloud the clear commitment with objectivity that guides the book. Thus, it also records and ponders fierce criticisms of Itosu by other karate masters, contemporary to him or later, either in relation to his martial skills or to his responsibility for what they consider to be an erroneous



modernization of Okinawan karate. Interestingly, these same criticisms were to be reproduced later on Funakoshi Gichin and Mabuni Kenwa 摩文仁 賢和 (1889-1952), two of Itosu's most famous disciples, also Okinawans, and mainly responsible for the rise of karate in mainland Japan.

Towards the end of the book, the author portrays in a very human way Itosu's last days, marked by the mental and physical decadence connatural to those who reach an old age. Once again, documented facts and reliable accounts are contrasted with the classical stories of martial arts masters retaining quasi-divine powers until the last moment. This realistic and mundane approach to an aging karate master, if anything, aggrandizes the figure, not the other way around. More kudos for a text that, right from the title, puts the man before “the legend”.

For these reasons, the present volume builds many merits and is of interest for scholars and researchers in the area. Feldmann's writing reveals a monumental effort in compiling sources to reconstruct Itosu's life, and on this basis, puts sound evidence on the paper which allows to analyze extensively the situation of karate between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Moreover, he scrutinizes the threads that interweave this martial art with the history and culture of Okinawa. Therefore, and considering an even broader historical perspective, the text also offers elements to rethink some essential questions that remain taken-for-granted truths of karate. Whether from the debate on the forced “Japanization” of karate (Johnson, 2012), to the intricacies of its postmodern *bushidō* aspects (González de la Fuente, 2021); or from a reassessment of the role of Okinawan elites in the transmission and definition of the art, to the existence of a set of uncomfortable truths for the local historiography – for example, as early as the end of the 19th century, influential karateka volunteering for the Japanese army, or revered masters struggling with poverty; this work does not shy away from the most complex issues, but rather contributes to clarifying them. And it does with respect to the cultural history of karate, and by extension to that of Okinawa. Let's remember that when we talk about karate, we are talking about what is probably the most popular Okinawan cultural heritage all over the world.

With reference to the latter, in certain cases it would have been good to see the author challenge other sacred cows of the Okinawan karate discursive traditions (Meyer, 2008); as for example the affirmation that “prior to 1879, Ryūkyūan martial arts had solely been practiced by the members of the higher classes as a means of self-defense and self-development” (Feldmann, 2021, p. 170). However, it is fair to acknowledge that such an undertaking goes beyond the purpose of this biography, and requires karate studies to develop what, sadly, seem to be neglected lines of research.

3. Conclusion

This solid biographical study results in a more than recommendable book. To date, it is probably the most complete portrait of Ankō Itosu, a serious candidate to become the new father of modern karate. Feldmann accurately examines the complex nuances that define both karate and Okinawan history and culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, an era filled with radical transformations. An era that continues to shape how karate is practiced and imagined today.

In his day, master Tōyama Kanken 遠山寛賢 (1888-1966) singled out Itosu as the “forefather who rejuvenated *karatedō*” (p. 314). Today, karate seems to be living a new youth, whether because of its recent participation in the Olympic Games, the spectacular success of television series such as *Cobra Kai* (2018), or the growing fame of Okinawa as a destination for martial arts tourism. Given this interest in the subject, we can well affirm that Feldmann's publication represents an excellent novelty; a great contribution to a literature in recent years watered, slowly but fortunately, with invigorating waters.

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