

Some Thoughts on the Rank of 10th dan

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For all martial artists whose art or style originates in Japan or Okinawa, the rank of *Judan* (10th degree) is the pinnacle of achievement. But two facts about the rank are little known. First, the entire belt ranking system is fairly new—dating only back to the 1880s—and the first 10th dan awarded dates only to the period of the Second World War. Second, use of the rank of 10th dan varies enormously between arts and styles, and applies almost exclusively to modern BuDO. Traditional BuJUTSU (Koryu) martial arts generally stick with the *shogo* (title) of *menkyo* (transmission) system.

Judo

The *kyu-dan* system for martial artists was introduced by Kano Jigoro (1860-1938), the founder of Judo. He appears to have taken the idea from the Sino-Japanese board game *Go* (or *Weiqi* in Chinese) which already used a similar system. The first person promoted by Kano to *Judan* was Yamashita Yoshitsugu (1865-1935), one of Kano's earliest adherents, one of the fighting stable of early *judoka* whose wins against other *jujutsu* schools helped build the credibility of Kano and Kodokan Judo, and the man Kano trusted to sent to the U.S. to teach President Theodore Roosevelt and teach at the U.S. Military Academy. Kano awarded the rank posthumously, but pre-dated the diploma for two days before Yamashita's death on October 26, 1935.

Kano's promotions. Kano was involved in only two more promotions to 10th dan before his death in 1938. Early students and defenders of Kano's Judo Nagaoka Hidekazu (1876-1952) and Isogai Hajime (1871-1947) were both promoted to 10th dan in December 1937, only a few months before Kano died. They were the first students ever promoted to 10th dan while alive; Nagaoka was the youngest person to gain that rank and Isogai was the fourth youngest.

Post-War promotions. Only fourteen people—all Japanese and male—were promoted to 10th dan by the Kodokan, all but the above three after Kano's death. Of them, four were promoted posthumously, eight while alive. The vast majority of the Kodokan's 10th dans were promoted either before or shortly after the War and went to early or long-time students of Kano. Three were promoted in the 1930s and four in the 1940s. There were no promotions in the 1950s; in fact the next two 10th dans were promoted in 1967 and 1969, both of them posthumously. The next promotions to 10th dan took another decade to occur, again both posthumously. Kotani Sumiyuki (1903-1991) was the only person promoted to 10th dan between 1979-2006, receiving his rank in 1984 and only the seventh person to receive the honor while still living.

The latest promotions. On January 1, 2006, three legendary teachers and competitors, all near or past 80, were promoted to 10th dan, the first such promotions in more than two decades. Multi-time champion Daigo Toshiro (80), top teacher, coach and referee Abe Ichiro (83), and

past-champion and world-level official Osama Yoshimi (79) were the last individuals to receive Judo's top rank. Two (Daigo and Abe) have since passed away, leaving only one living 10th dan.

Foreign promotions. The Kodokan in Tokyo is the world headquarters for international Kano-style judo and the only body authorized to award such promotions. They have seen fit only to promote Japanese. But in recent decades, a number of national or regional judo associations have promoted prestigious members to the 10th dan rank.

- In 1997, for example, the International Judo Federation promoted Dutch champion Anton Geesink (the first foreigner to win an Olympic gold medal in Judo in 1964) and British Judo pioneer Charles Palmer to 10th dan.
- The national ruling bodies of judo in France and the Netherlands promoted Judo pioneer Henri Coutine and Jaap Nauwlaerts Age to 10th dan.
- Keiko Fukuda (1913-2013), the last living student of Kano and the only woman ever promoted to 9th dan by the Kodokan, was promoted to 10th dan by the U.S. Judo Federation in 2011, two years before her death the age of 100.
- Others promoted by various organizations include British Judo teacher George Kerr (2010), American champion and long-time coach Philip Porter (1925-2011, promoted 2005), and Jeremy Glick (1970-2001). Along with two other men, Glick, a 31-year-old American Judo Champion with a three-month-old baby, charged the hijackers of United Airlines Flight 93 over the skies of Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001, saving hundreds, perhaps thousands, of lives.

Summary. It can be seen from the above, Judo—especially the Kodokan—has been very sparing with promotions to 10th dan, especially to living practitioners. With only one still alive and very elderly, one wonders if the Kodokan administrators will soon select a few candidates from the golden age of the 1960s and 1970s for this honor. There are certainly a number of well-qualified candidates. It is also noteworthy that the Kodokan's neglect of foreign candidates for Judo's highest honor has resulted in a number of international and national regulating bodies going ahead with their own promotions to 10th dan. This undoubtedly will continue.

Karate

Use of the 10th dan in karate has been very different than in Judo. But one has to distinguish between karate on Okinawa and its growth on mainland Japan after being transmitted there in the early 20th century. Let's look at the latter first.

Karate in Japan. Ranking practitioners in karate originated with the Okinawan master Funakoshi Gichin under the influence of Judo founder Kano Jigoro. Kano had adopted a *kyu-dan* ranking system at the beginning of 1884, initially using three *kyu* and three *dan* grades. The first black belts in karate were handed out to seven of his students in 1924 by Funakoshi. In addition to several people whose accomplishments have been lost to time, these included Ohtsuka

Hironori (later founder of Wado-ryu), Gima Shinken, and Tokuda Ante,¹ who had trained previously in Okinawa and received *nidan*. (Remember, at this time there were only three *dan* ranks.)²

10th dan promotions. Despite the fact that Judo had introduced a 10-level dan system by the 1930s, Funakoshi used only five levels. It was not until after his death in 1957 that any higher ranks were introduced to the style Funakoshi taught, by then called Shotokan. Even after that, very high ranks were scarcely used in Shotokan: Chief Instructor Nakayama Masatoshi (1913-1987) received a 10th dan only posthumously. After his death, Shotokan fractured into a number of competing associations, all differing mainly over politics and control rather than technique or style. These new associations began to elevate their leaders—most of them highly experienced karateka with decades of training—to the rank of *Judan*. Among them were

- Sugiura Motokuni (b. 1924-2015) succeeded Nakayama as chief instructor of the JKA. He was promoted to 10th dan in 2008 when he retired at the age of 84. He handed over his chief instructor responsibilities to Ueki Masaaki the next year (see below).
- Nishiyama Hidetaka (1928-2008) was promoted to 10th dan by the International Traditional Karate Federation and the International San Ten Karate Federation.
- Kanazawa Hirokazu (1931-2019) who received a 10th dan from the International Martial Arts Federation in 2001.
- Okazaki Teryuki (1931-2020) received 10th dan in from the International Shotokan Karate Federation in 2007.
- Shirai Hiroshi (b. 1937) received 10th dan from the International Sports Karate Association and the International Traditional Karate Federation in 2011.
- Ueki Masaaki (b. 1939) won numerous JKA kata and kumite tournaments in the 1960s and 1970s received 10th dan from the JKA in 2019.

It's noteworthy that many of the ethnic Japanese teachers of Shotokan or its offshoots had moved overseas and created their own associations. Shotokan in Japan appears to have limited the 10th dan to the JKA's chief instructor.³

Other styles in Japan. Other Japanese karate styles appear also to have been sparing in promoting their senior members to 10th dan. Aside from the founders of Wadoryu, Shitoryu (and its several branches), Gojukai, and Kyokushinkai, very few 10th dans have been awarded in these organizations. Often the second generation *soke*, frequently the son of the founder, is eventually promoted to 10th dan, as was Ohtsuka Hironori II (1934-2015). The elder Ohtsuka's student Shintani Masaru (1928-2000) was awarded the rank, apparently posthumously. In

¹ It may be that Tokuda Ante was related to the famous Okinawa-te teacher Tokuda Ambun (1886-1945), a student of Itosu, explaining why he already had some proficiency in karate.

² A five-level *dan* system was introduced after the war, a system which Shotokan stuck to for many years.

³ I am not aware of any foreigner who has been recognized as a 10th dan by any Japanese-dominated Shotokan-related organization.

Shito-ryu, both of Mabuni Kenwa's sons, Kenei (1918-2015), his father's official successor, and Kenzo (1927-2005), who ran a parallel Shito-ryu organization, both held the rank of 10th dan. Similarly, both of Yamaguchi Gogen's (1909-1989) sons Gosei (b. 1935) and Gosen (1940-1990) appear to have reached the rank of *Judan*.⁴ By contrast, the Kyokushinkai, founded by Oyama Masutatsu (1923-1994), retired the rank of 10th dan after the founder's death.

Karate in Okinawa. If the Japanese styles of karate came to adopt the dan-kyu ranking system early but only expanding it gradually and have used the rank of 10th dan sparingly, the Okinawans came to it late and in recent decades have made liberal use of the ranks of 9th and 10th dan. Although a handful of Okinawa "te" or karate experts had been granted *shogo of renshi* and *kyoshi*, it was not until the 1950s that rank *on Okinawa* became common.

Introduction of rank. The expansion of the ranking system came about in part due to the efforts of Toyama Kanken (1888-1966). Toyama was an Okinawan who had begun training under a master named Itarashiki, but switched to studying under Itosu Anko (1830-1915) around the age of nine and stayed with him until the latter's death in 1915. In 1907, Toyama was named Shihandai (senior assistant) to Itosu and taught for him at the Okinawa Teacher's College in Shuri City.⁵

In 1924 Kanken Toyama moved his family to Taiwan where he taught elementary school and studied related systems of Chinese Ch'uan Fa (kempo/kwan-bop). This included Taku (Hakuda in Japanese language), Makaitan, Rutaobai, and Ubo. Taku is one of central China's Hotsupu (northern school) Ch'uan Fa and is further classified as Neikung Ch'uan Fa (Shorei Kempo), that is, an internal method. Makaitan and Rutaobai, which the techniques of nukite (spear hand) came, and Ubo, all belong to the Nampa (southern school) Ch'uan Fa and are external methods or Waikung Ch'uan Fa (Shorei Kempo). These later three styles hail primarily from Taiwan and Fukuden, China. Toyama sensei was also known to have studied and taught Tai Chi Ch'uan Fa. Koyasu sensei studied t'ai chi from Toyama.

Early in 1930 Kanken Toyama moved again from Taiwan to mainland Japan and on 20 March 1930 he opened his first dojo in Tokyo. He called his dojo Shu Do Kan meaning "The Hall for the Study of the Way" (in this case the karate-way). Toyama sensei did not claim to originate a new style, system or school of thought, nor did he combine the

⁴ A third, and much younger, son, Goshi (b. 1942), may also hold that rank as "*saiko shihan*" of the International Karatedo Gojukai Association.

⁵ Note that Toyama would have only been 19 years old with at most ten years of training with Itosu. He is also said to have trained with Aragaki Ankichi (d. 1929), Azato Anko (d. c. 1909), Chibana Chosho (d. 1927), Oshiro Chojo (d. 1935), Tana, Yabu Kentsu (d. 1937) and Higashionna Kanryo (d. 1915). Given that he left Okinawa for Taiwan at age 36, and that many of the above masters died well before that, one wonders how much time he could have spent with each of them.

different styles he had learned. Those who studied under him basically learned Itosu's Shorin Ryu and the related ch'uan fa.⁶

In 1946, Toyama, now a senior master, founded the All-Japan Karate-Do Federation with the "intention ... to unify the karates of Japan and Okinawa into one governing organization, providing a forum for the exchange of ideas and technique. The federation became an authority for rank approval and advancement issuing rank certification, and also created a forum for competition."⁷ In 1937, Toyama reportedly had been given complete authority by the Ministry of Education to grant any *shogo* or rank in karate, one of only two people so authorized.⁸ After he founded the AJKF He attempted to convince the Okinawan masters to join his organization, but with the devastation of the war still all around them and with many resentful of the discrimination they felt from mainland Japanese and unwilling to subordinate themselves to people they felt were their juniors and inferiors in their own art, few took him up on it. One who did was Shimabuku Eizo (1925-2017) who, at the age of 37, was apparently the first Okinawan to be promoted to 10th dan.⁹

Self-organization. As Okinawa emerged from the catastrophe of the War the karate masters who had survived began to organize. In 1956, Chibana Choshin (1885-1969), with the advantage of his seniority and recognition from the Ministry of Education, spearheaded creation of a group of masters into the Okinawa Karate Association (*Okinawa Karate-do Renmei*). He became its first president.¹⁰ The OKA was established with Nagamine Shoshin (Matsubayashi-ryu) as vice president. Members were Yagi Meitoku (Goju-ryu), Higa Seiko (Goju-ryu), Higa Yuchoku (Shorin-ryu), Fukuchi Seiko (Goju-ryu), Uechi Kanei (Uechi-ryu), Miyahira Katsuya (Shorin-ryu), Gushi Jokei (Matsubayashi-ryu), Nakazato Shugoro (Shorin-ryu), Tomoyose Ryuko (Uechi-ryu), Toguchi Seikichi (Goju-ryu), and others.¹¹

This association included many of the more senior karate experts on the island, none of whom (except Chibana and Nagamine) had received any recognition (rank or *shogo*) from Japan. It was established to preserve traditional Okinawan karate, help standardize ranking and the use of

⁶ "Kanken Toyama: Shudokan Karate" at [Kanken Toyama: Shudokan Karate - USAdojo.com](http://KankenToyama:ShudokanKarate-USAdojo.com) dated February 13, 2005.

⁷ *Ibid.* It reportedly included such luminaries as Ohtsuka Hironori (1892-1982), founder of Wado-ryu and a senior student of Funakoshi; Chitose Tsuyoshi (1898-1984), a student of Motobu Choyu, Kiyama Chotoku, and Higashionna Kanryo; Mabuni Kenwa; and others.

⁸ "Kenunkan Budokai Rank Diplomas" at [Diplomas \(kenukan.com\)](http://Diplomas(kenukan.com)), undated. The Ministry of Education was the highest agency that could recognize such a martial arts organization since the Butokukai had been abolished by the US Occupation authority after the War. According to documents held by Toyama's association, Chibana had also been granted the authority by the Japanese Ministry of Education to award any rank in any style on his own say-so

⁹ The complicated stylistic and interpersonal politics of this period lie beyond the scope of this paper. The AJKF was far more successful among Japanese and Okinawan karate teachers in Japan and included

¹⁰ "How the Masters Got Their Ranks: Origins of the Karate Rank System" at How the masters got their ranks: the origins of karate ranks | Judo Info.

¹¹ Andreas Quast, "Answers over guessing," Posted on August 27, 2015 at [Answers over guessing | Ryukyuu Bugei 琉球武芸 \(ryukyuu-bugei.com\)](http://AnswersOverGuessing|RyukyuuBugei琉球武芸(ryukyuu-bugei.com)).

shogo, and issue such rank and honors. Over the next several years, it issued recognition of many masters as *Kyoshi* or *Hanshi* and issued high ranks. Among those who reportedly got grades as high as 10th dan were Soken Hohan, Kina Shosei, Higa Seitoku, Uehara Seikichi, Shimabuku Tatsuo, and Kojo Kafu.¹²

In 1960, another partially overlapping group of Okinawan masters gathered to do the same for kobudo (weapons arts) that the OKA had done for karate. They created the *Okinawa Kobudo Kyokai* (Okinawan Kobudo Association), with Higa Seitoku (1921-2006) as president. Higa was a student of Kishimoto Soko (1862-1945), Chinen Masami (1898-1978), and Uehara Seikichi (1904-2004). According to an article in the *Okinawa Times*, 29 August 2021 edition, “To further develop the Okinawa Kobudo Kyokai, he dissolved it and established a new organization, the “*Zen Okinawa Karate Kobudo Rengokai*,” and served as its president and continued to make efforts for the development of Okinawan *karate* and *kobudo*.”¹³

The principal organization coordinating Okinawan karate has changed several times since 1956 (a history beyond the scope of this short paper) but it and its descendants became the principal venue for senior masters vetting high rank and *shogo* for Okinawan karate. In addition, a number of styles and masters set up their own organizations to oversee rank and titles. Currently, the *Okinawa Dento Karate Shinkokai* (Association for the Promotion of Traditional Okinawa Karate), established in 2008, is the main governing body, with four principal member organizations.

10th dan in Okinawa. Unlike karate organizations in mainland Japan, the Okinawans wholeheartedly adopted the full range of ranks—from 1st to 10th dan—and the awarding of *renshi*, *kyoshi*, and *hanshi shogo*. As of several years ago, Miguel Da Luz, a resident karate expert, translator, and Okinawa resident published a list of 146 people who had been promoted to 10th dan since ranks were first introduced.¹⁴ Since that list was published, the author has identified at least another 16 people promoted to the highest rank available.

Although there are exceptions, the vast majority of those awarded 10th dan appear to be men at least in their 60s (more usually in their 70s) who have 50 years or more experience in a recognized style of Okinawan karate and a lineage tracing back to the pre-War (and pre-rank)

¹² “Historical Overview,” United States Karate Kobujitsu Rengokai, at [History – United States Karate Kobudo Rengokai \(usarengokai.com\)](https://www.usarengokai.com), posted 2019.

¹³ “Higa Seitoku (1921-2006) – Ultimate Skill – Lifelong Pursuit,” Posted on August 29, 2021 by Andreas Quast at [Higa Seitoku \(1921-2006\) – Ultimate Skill – Lifelong Pursuit | Ryukyu Bugei 琉球武芸 \(ryukyu-bugei.com\)](https://ryukyu-bugei.com).

¹⁴ The list was published in Issue #146 of Da Luz’s *Okinawan Karate News* and posted on Facebook. Unfortunately, the date of publication was not included. The names were in a rough semblance of chronological order, and at the time of publication, 56 of those named were deceased. Since its publication, quite a few more have died.

progenitors of modern karate.¹⁵ Awarding of 10th dan does not appear to be significantly different between major styles on Okinawa.

Summary. Although adoption of the ranking system was much later on Okinawa than in mainland Japan, once it took hold it expanded rapidly. Unlike Japan, where promotion to the highest rank of 10th dan was used very sparingly, elevation to this rank became relatively routine and common for senior masters around age 70 with a long and distinguished career of 50 years or more. Ultimately, acceptance by one's peers is the main qualification for 10th dan in Okinawan karate.

Other martial arts.

Other Japanese martial arts have varied widely in the awarding of 10th dan.¹⁶ Kendo retired the rank not long after World War II and the highest rank currently attainable is 8th dan.¹⁷ By contrast, the rank of 10th dan in Aikido was handled rather haphazardly by the art's founder, Ueshiba Morihei (1883-1969).¹⁸ The official regulations of the International Kyudo Federation provide for a 10th dan, but give no criteria. By contrast, for the rank of 9th dan in Kyudo "The Truth of Kyudo should be transparent."¹⁹ I have been unable to find an example of a living *judan* in Kyudo (archery), though several lived into the modern era.²⁰

¹⁵ I could not find any women among those promoted to 10th dan. Most 10th dan promotions took place nearer 70 than 60, but there are some exceptions, especially for sons succeeding their fathers as head of a style or organization. Nagamine Takayoshi, son and successor of Nagamine Shoshin, was 63. Yagi Meitetsu, son and successor of Goju-ryu master Yagi Meitoku, was promoted to 10th dan by his father at the age of 52.

¹⁶ Detailed discussion of the use of high dan ranks in other martial arts is beyond the scope of this short article.

¹⁷ It appears that the art of Naginata does not award 10th dan; *hanshi* is the highest grading.

¹⁸ See, for example, Christopher Li, "Something's Rank—Black Belts in Aikido" at [Something's Rank - Black Belts in Aikido - Aikido Sangenkai Blog](#) and Stanley Pranin, "Dan Inflation in the early Years of Aikido" at [Dan Inflation in the Early Years of Aikido, by Stanley Pranin – Aikido Journal](#).

¹⁹ International Kyudo Federation, "Kyudo Shinsa Regulations" at [Kyudo Shinsa Regulations | International Kyudo Federation 国際弓道連盟 \(ikyf.org\)](#)

²⁰ For example, Kamogawa Nobuyuki, who died in 2018 at the age of 95; Kaminaga Masakichi (1885-1961); Murakami Hisashi (1902-1987); and Suzuki Hiroyuki (1901-1984).