JAPAN KARATE ASSOCIATION
INTERNATIONAL SHOTOKAN KARATE FEDERATION

Instructor Training Report #43

INDEPENDENT RESEARCH SUBJECT:
KATA BUNKAI WITH SELECTED APPLICATIONS OF THE KATA CHINTE

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Instructor Training ID #EC-478
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In the practice of modern karate-do, many practitioners see little connection between the practice of kata and the practice of kumite. They see kata as performance art with no bearing on kumite. This is reinforced by modern sports karate in which kumite practice is mainly concerned with dueling between two trained karate-ka to score an ippon while kata competition is based on the external aesthetics of the kata performance with interpretation having no real bearing on the outcome. However, since “kata is the essence of karate”\footnote{1}, there must be more to the practice of kata than simple performance art in which success and accomplishment is based on who has the cleanest looking technique and best rhythm. Furthermore, there are many historical references by past masters as to the importance of understanding the kata movements. These lessons of the importance of kata are re-iterated by modern day karate masters to this day. However, for many experienced karate-ka, there has always been a nagging question as to why the practice of kata and kumite do not seem to directly complement each other even though our instructors tell us
that they do. Why are there so many sequences in kata that seem to consist of multiple blocking applications without a counterattack? Additionally, even when the applications of some kata sequences seem self evident, there are always certain movements within a kata that seem superfluous or were explained simply as setup movements for the next sequence rather than having a direct application. For many practitioners, the idea of using a set up movement for self defense is seen as problematic. It begs the question, “if this move has no meaning, then why do we practice it?” Since the end of the twentieth century, there has been a surge of interest from karate practitioners regarding kata bunkai that has resulted in publications of some interesting, if not controversial, work in that area from authors originating both inside and outside of Japan. In this report, I will summarize some of the work that has been done in the area of along with the relative merit of some of the more controversial claims from the perspective of the historical documentation that is available. I will also attempt to design and present my own bunkai for the kata Chinte to demonstrate how a karate-ka may use some of the principals presented by the authors in question to explore kata bunkai on his own in order to enrich his understanding of the kata, self defense and the art of karate-do in general.

The term Bunkai literally means “analysis” and the term oyo means “application” but these terms are generally used interchangeably in the karate world. The difference is subtle since a specific example of how to apply the techniques from a kata technically should be referred to as oyo, while the process of analyzing the sequences and determining the various applications is correctly called bunkai. For the purposes of simplicity, I will follow the convention of referring to all analysis and applications from kata as bunkai.

The idea that kata is the essence of karate makes sense when viewing karate from a historical perspective. Prior to karate’s introduction to the Okinawan school system, the practice
of the art was very different from what it is today. Prior to the twentieth century, karate was practiced secretively in small groups and the focus of training was on kata. In his autobiography, master Funakoshi describes his early training as nearly endless repetitions of a single kata for up to years on end until it was performed to the master’s satisfaction before he was allowed to move on and learn another. Today, the focus of training centers more on the basic techniques and combinations of basic techniques that have been pulled out of kata to be practiced individually. This fundamental change in the way karate is practiced is widely believed to have occurred when Funakoshi’s instructor Yatsutsune Itosu introduced karate into the Okinawan school system in the beginning of the twentieth century. This is also the time period in which he is also credited with the creation of the Heian kata which many believe he devised by taking sequences and techniques from the older, historical kata. This shift in teaching methodology could be one of the main reasons for the problem of the transmission of kata bunkai because the practice of basic techniques became the emphasis of training. Furthermore, many believe that when Itosu devised the Heian kata, he purposely changed them to disguise the dangerous techniques to make them more suitable for teaching to school children and thus, the bunkai were simply not taught.

There is ample evidence in historical documentation that suggest that kata bunkai was valued and well understood during the time that master Funakoshi was training. Master Yasutsune Itosu, one of master Funakoshi’s instructors, created and documented his Ten Precepts. Precept #6 states: “Practice kata often, learning the meanings and when to use them. There are many oral instructions for the strikes, blocks, escapes and grappling techniques.”

Master Funakoshi also provided a similar message in his textbook: Karate-do Kyohan: The Master Text. In this book, Funakoshi provides a chapter on throwing techniques (nage waza) in.
which he instructs that the throws are applications from kata that should be studied carefully. The translator of the 1973 edition, Tsutomu Oshima, also provided pictures of the throwing applications and it is easily recognized that some of them are straight out of Bassai Dai and Jion. Choki Motobu, another karate master and one of master Funakoshi’s contemporaries, devised fighting sequences based on the Tekki kata and published them in his book: Watashi no Karate-jutsu. Motobu had a reputation as being a formidable street fighter and apparently, a favorite saying of his was “Kata and waza are limited by themselves unless one learns how they are applied in context”. This is also similar in sentiment to principle number 18 of master Funakoshi’s Shoto Niju-kun which states that performing kata is about correct and proper form but engaging in a real fight is another matter. At a very literal and superficial level, one might take this to mean that kata have no relative application to fighting and self defense. However, this would be an incorrect assessment based on the context of Funakoshi and Motobu’s training backgrounds – they trained primarily in kata. In fact, Itosu’s sixth precept gives us several messages about kata practice. First, it implies that you should practice the kata knowing the bunkai first – “learning the meanings and when to use them”. Secondly, it states that in order to understand the meanings of the kata movements, you need to have the oral instructions that go with them. Lastly, many of the kata applications are grappling techniques – meaning throwing and joint attacks. Based on these historical pieces of evidence that we have available to us, we can make a few conclusions about the way karate was practiced. First, the practice of kata is important and central to training and the kata had known bunkai. Furthermore, the oral instructions are necessary to understanding the kata bunkai. Lastly, it is clear that a karate-ka should have an understanding of the grappling techniques contained in kata.
Kata bunkai is generally not practiced much in modern karate dojo and when it is practiced it is usually trained at the simplest level or the explanations given are not practical. That is to say, most bunkai that is demonstrated and taught to students is oriented towards defending against an attacker who is doing karate techniques and thus, most bunkai is shown as defenses against simple punching and kicking techniques. However, it is very unlikely that a practicing karate-ka would need to worry about defending against a straight punch or a front kick outside of the kumite ring. Furthermore, kata techniques beyond the most simple block, punch or kick are never seen during kumite matches. According to Gennosuke Higaki, “the greatest problem facing modern karate is the gap between kumite and kata.”

He further notes that other martial arts practice their kata with two people so the bunkai is understood from the beginning and the technique is the same whether practiced as kata or kumite. For example, a judoka performing a seoinage while practicing nage no kata is performing the technique exactly the same way as ippon seoinage performed during a judo match. When I realized this, I came to the conclusion that the purpose of the Ten no Kata presented in the Karate-do Kyohan may have been an attempt by master Funakoshi to bridge the gap between kata and kumite. What remains a mystery is why the grappling techniques that master Funakoshi points out as being in the katas were not included in kihon and kumite practice. One theory that I have heard in the past is that this master Funakoshi wanted to ensure that karate was differentiated clearly from Judo and thus wanted to emphasize the punching, kicking and striking aspects of karate. I cannot remember where I heard this so I cannot attribute it to anyone but it is a reasonable thought although it cannot be confirmed.

If bunkai was so central to training in the time that master Funakoshi was learning karate, why is it not better understood today? There are many theories as to why this is true. As
mentioned earlier, when Itosu devised the Heian kata, many believe that he purposely altered the
techniques in order to disguise the dangerous techniques so that they would be more suitable for
Teaching to children. There is some logical merit to this assertion. Prior to karate’s introduction
into the public school system of Okinawa, karate was practiced in relative secrecy in a master-
apprentice relationship. In that kind of environment, the instructor can teach the dangerous
techniques found in kata because it is easy for him to judge his students’ character and judge
whether or not they would use the techniques for less than noble purposes. Teaching a large
group of kids in an open environment is a completely different scenario. The instructor cannot
truly get to know each of his students. Therefore, it makes sense that Itosu may have wanted to
hide the dangerous techniques from the kids in order to ensure they would not injure each other
outside of the class environment or go home and use the techniques on their siblings. Disguising
the techniques also provides a method for everyone to train together, performing the same kata,
while allowing the true bunkai to only be taught only to the instructor’s trusted students. Since
the techniques are disguised, oral instructions are required to unlock the meaning and allow the
practitioner enough understanding to be able to actually use the techniques in the kata. An
alternative and interesting possibility offered by a friend of mine is that Itosu might have actually
changed the bunkai to simplify the kata and make them less dangerous for the school children.\footnote{When I was presented with this argument, I had to acknowledge that it is certainly a possibility
because we truly cannot know Itosu’s true intentions since anyone who had trained under him for
any length of time is no longer living. However, I think it is more likely the case that the true
bunkai were hidden simply because the Heian kata resemble the older kata very closely. I would
think that if the bunkai had been changed, then the kata would have been changed more
drastically to meet the requirements of the new bunkai.}
The modern authors of published works on bunkai acknowledge that the kata bunkai were not taught. Most believe that the reason is what I mentioned previously – that the bunkai were purposely hidden to make the kata safer for teaching school children. However this line of thinking only addresses part of the equation. What about all of the adult students that were practicing karate under Itosu and others? Why weren’t the bunkai passed on more clearly through Itosu’s adult students such as master Funakoshi? Gennosuke Higaki, a Japanese karate-ka who has authored a couple of works on kata bunkai, claims that the Okinawan instructors who brought karate to Japan had a secret pact with each other not to teach the true bunkai. He further claims that his instructor, Shozan Kubota, was a personal student of Funakoshi’s and was taught the true bunkai of the kata despite this supposed oath of secrecy. Most other authors are skeptical of the claim that there was a pact of secrecy and it certainly would be difficult to find any hard evidence of such a pact if it was indeed secret. Higaki presents an argument that is based on circumstantial evidence and hearsay. Higaki recounts that sensei Kubota told him that the katas were altered on purpose before being taught on the mainland and that the karate that sensei Funakoshi taught and spread primarily at the universities was different from the karate that he taught at his own home. His claim is that this was because master Funakoshi and other Okinawan instructors had made a pact not to teach the true bunkai to the mainland Japanese. There is some compelling circumstantial evidence that this could have been a possibility. First, there is a lot of historical evidence that Okinawans were discriminated against on mainland Japan. He also notes that Funakoshi’s autobiography states that he sent letters to his instructors asking for permission to teach karate on the mainland and that they sent him letters of encouragement. How could that be possible since master Azato had passed away in 1906 and master Itosu passed away in 1915? Higaki claims that Funakoshi wrote this to be
deliberately confusing and it is rumored that his letters were actually discussed and decided upon by the Okinawan Karate Kenkyu Kai which had been established in 1918 and was comprised of many famous Okinawan karate masters. The outcome of this meeting was where the saying originated that “even if you teach the kata, do not teach the actual techniques”\(^6\). There is no real way to verify whether these intriguing claims are actually true or not but to summarize, Higaki claims that master Funakoshi knew the bunkai for kata, the oral instructions are key to understanding the bunkai, and that master Funakoshi only taught them to a select few students, including Higaki’s instructor Shozan Kubota who passed them on to him. Higaki has now made the bunkai public by publishing his books. Higaki states that once the true bunkai for the kata are known, they can be trained with a partner and thus the gap between kata and kumite is successfully bridged. The following is a list of the oral instructions that Higaki presents as the keys to unlocking the mystery of kata bunkai\(^7\) as presented to him by his instructor Shozan Kubota who claims that they were passed to him by master Funakoshi. I also provide my own paraphrase of what they mean:

- **Countering** – This means that the most common technique in karate is a counter-attack. This corresponds to the niju kun point that there is no first attack in karate.

- **Immobilize your opponent before striking** – This means that you should render your opponent unable to continue attacking before you counter attack.

- **The names of the movements have been disguised** – Higaki claims that originally there were no names for the kata techniques and the nomenclature we use for the basic techniques today was introduced once karate came to the mainland. This has caused the bunkai to be less understandable because if you strictly follow the naming of the techniques, you cannot understand that a block in a kata may actually be a counterattack.
• There are no techniques that end in a block – Many sequences in katas appear to be sequences of multiple blocks. However, it is impossible to counterattack an opponent by just using blocks. Therefore logically, some of the blocks in kata must be counter attacks. A perfect example of this is the last four knife hand blocks in Heian shodan. In this case, it is actually 2 sequences of block and counter-attack in which the 2nd and 4th knife hand blocks are actually strikes.

• Block with both hands – It looks like most blocks are done with one hand followed by a counterattack. If we take a look at how blocks are performed, there is always a setup movement where the hands are crossed in front of the body. This is the key, the setup movement could actually be the block and then the blocking hand performs the counter.

• Grabbing hand and pulling hand – Master Funakohi presented this idea in the Karate-do Kyohan. The draw hand can be used to grab the opponent and pull them off balance or pull them into your counterattack. Also, by grabbing the opponent, it can present an opportunity for perform a throw or joint lock as a counter.

• The front hand is the attacking hand – In most karate text books, the front hand is the blocking hand and the rear hand follows with a counter. However, in most kata bunkai, the front hand is the attacking hand while the rear hand is blocking. A perfect example of this is the opening movement of Heian Nidan whereby the front hand is a hammer fist to the face and the rear hand is a rising block.

• Perform a movement that consists of two counts in one count – There are many techniques in kata that are performed in two counts but when actually applied they should be performed in one count. The idea is that the movement has been broken down for
beginners. Higaki claims that the opening two movements of Heian shodan are an example of this. The block and counter should be performed in one count.

- **Switch step** – Most movements in kata are performed in a walking gait. However, this often makes the distance incorrect. Therefore, in application you can perform what Higaki terms as a “switch step” to adjust the distance. This can best be described as a shuffle like step in which the front foot is pulled back and then the rear foot is advanced forward. Again, the opening 2 movements of Heian shodan make better sense if you employ a switch step.

- **Kick low while grabbing the opponent** – many of the bunkai for kata involve grabbing the opponent. For example, in Heian yondan, an elbow attack is delivered directly after performing the side kick. Even though we perform the kick above the waist in the kata, to make the distance correct for self defense, the bunkai would indicate that the kick should be applied below the waist.

- **There is one opponent to the front** – even though the performance line of the kata is in multiple directions, you are only addressing one opponent at a time and he is to the front. In many cases, changes in direction in the kata indicate that you are throwing or dragging the opponent around. There are some exceptions to this general rule since some kata movements show escaping techniques from an opponent to the rear. For example, the last two movements of Heian sandan.

- **Hang the opponent to the sky** – Higaki states that this is the same technique as the forearm twist in Aikido. An example of this technique can be found in the double pressing blocks in the kata Empi.
- Reblock and regrip – This refers to controlling the opponent by using both hands to frustrate the opponent’s attack. For example, the first three movements of Heian sandan are example of this.

- Take the opponent’s back – this refers to positioning yourself behind the opponent since this makes it difficult for him to attack you.

- Cross legged stance signifies body rotation or a joint kick – Kosa dachi in a kata indicates a body shift or a joint kick – most of the time to the opponent’s knee joint.

- Jumps and body shifts represent throws – Jumps in kata usually represent throws. For example, in Heian godan and Empi, these are throwing techniques. Sometimes, a body shift in the kata can represent a throw.

- Break the balance in a triangle whose base is formed by the opponent’s feet – If you picture the opponent’s two feet in their stance as a base of a triangle, if you want to break their balance pull their head towards the tip of that triangle.

- Meoto te – this means using both hands together such as in the augmented forearm block. The supporting hand is the grabbing and pulling hand.

- Cut the forearm – This refers to using a knife hand block as a strike against the opponent’s attacking arm. For instance, the spear-hand technique is one that could be used to attack the forearm.

- The kamae is an invitation – this is the idea whereby you use your posture to invite an attack. If you know where the attack will come, it is easier to defend against it.

Bruce Clayton, who published a book on bunkai, makes a different claim as to why the bunkai were not taught. His claim is based on examining the karate men involved in the Shotokan lineage from a historical perspective. His claim is that since the karate men of Shuri
were primarily trained to be body guards for the Okinawan kings, they no longer needed to train their bunkai once the Okinawan monarchy was abolished. Once these men emerged from practicing karate in secrecy to introduce karate training to the public, they changed to focus of training from jutsu emphasizing martial techniques to “do”, emphasizing character development. Therefore, bunkai was simply no longer the emphasis of training and so was not properly handed down. Clayton’s claim is that if we view the kata from the historical point of view that they contained techniques useful to body guards, then all of the bunkai for kata make sense and can be rediscovered. Clayton provides the following list of required bunkai for bodyguards:

1. Break out of simple holds on wrists and arms.
2. Break out of restraining holds on clothing.
3. Break out of arm locks and wrist locks.
4. Break out of holds on hair.
5. Break out of body restraint holds (hugs with arms free and arms pinned).
6. Counter attempts to tackle.
7. Throw off choke holds.
8. Burst through a line of enemies to penetrate a crowd.
9. Rapid-fire body shifting inside the crowd.
10. One-hit stun/maim/kill techniques for targets in a crowd.
11. Rapidly clear a path through alert enemies.
12. Use an enemy as a weapon by throwing him at another enemy.
13. Use an enemy as a shield against other enemies.
14. Jump and dive to avoid weapons.
15. Leap past a blocking enemy.
16. Snatch and use enemy weapons.

17. Abduct an enemy.

18. Block and fight with tessen (iron truncheon disguised as a fan).

19. Fight on a stairway.

Clayton goes on to demonstrate various bunkai from the kata that fit into these bodyguard principles. His argument is compelling, but it is in no way verifiable as fact. However, there are some useful bunkai there. What is important to take from this list of required bunkai is that it provides the reader with a clear idea of what type of attacks that kata are designed to counter. Often, when the meaning of a kata movement cannot be easily determined, it is because the practitioner is unable to properly visualize the attack. In other words, if the movement doesn’t seem to work against a straight punch, for example, try it against a wrist grab or an attempted choke hold.

Another author of kata bunkai books, Elmar Schmeisser, although he acknowledges the problems facing modern karate-ka with the interpretation of kata bunkai, he doesn’t try to explain the reasons why bunkai have not been properly transmitted. Instead he provides another set of ideas on how bunkai can be discovered by reverse engineering the kata using a set of guidelines. He emphasizes that the key is to properly visualize the attack and how a sequence in a kata can be used to counter that attack. These sequences can then be taken out of the kata and trained with a partner in order to make the proper adjustments and discover a bunkai that works. Note that he does not claim that his work shows the “true bunkai”, but rather, it is one of many possible methods for discovering the bunkai of kata. Schmeisser presents a list of guidelines to help with determining the bunkai of the kata and are as follows:

1. Each movement must do something useful to the opponent
2. No opponent must be left in a condition to continue or resume an attack

3. There must be a safety margin in case your technique fails to achieve the desired effect on the opponent.

4. For any technique have a backup and/or continuation technique in case the opponent does not submit or the technique fails

5. Damage and then control the incoming limbs while avoiding the main attack

6. Keep control of the opponent by using off balancing movements and remaining physically attached

7. As far as possible, have both hands engaged with the opponent

8. Move away from and interdict any remaining threatening limbs as the situation evolves

9. Escalate the defense combination with progressive techniques that move inwards toward the opponent’s body (head, neck, or torso) and produce increasing amounts of damage. However, be aware that at any time, the combination can stop, provided the opponent submits.

**Bunkai for Chinte**

The kata Chinte was not one of the original 15 kata that master Funakoshi brought to Japan from Okinawa but was later acquired into Shotokan more than likely through interaction with Mr. Mabuni from Shito Ryu. The characters for the kata mean “unusual hands” or “extraordinary hands”. As the name implies, it is literally the case since there are many unusual hand movements within the kata that are not found anywhere else in Shotokan such as tate-zuki (vertical punch), nihon nukite (2 finger spear hand), and hasami-zuki (scissors punch). There are many people who mistakenly believe that Chinte is a woman’s kata. I believe that this may be due to the fact that master Nakayama pointed out in Best Karate #9 that the nihon nukite attacks to the eyes are particularly a good self defense technique for women because they do not require much strength to be useful. However, I think it would be a mistake to characterize the entire kata
this way just because of the one particular technique and it is a good idea for men and women alike to study and understand this kata. The bunkai analysis for the 33 movements of this kata will follow the conventions of master Nakayama’s explanations in Best Karate #9.

**Starting Kamae:** Right fist on top of left fist at the solar plexus level:

Question: Is there significance to the starting kamae?

When I first began trying to figure out the meaning of the opening movements, I asked this question. In this case, the oral instruction “the kamae is an invitation” does not apply and that the kamae must be part of the technique defined by the first two movements. When I first started trying to figure out the bunkai for the opening movements, I believed that the technique was designed to throw off a bear hug from the rear whereby the opening kamae was your attempt to grab the hands clasped in front of you and press of the pressure point along the first metacarpal that is almost parallel with the first joint of the thumb to loosen the attacker’s grip. See figure 1. Subsequently, movement 1, 2 and 3 would be throwing off the hold and then reversing to meet the opponent for movement 4 and 5. After experimenting with this for a while, I determined that this was not the proper bunkai for these movements because it is too complicated and requires too much time and strength to be effective for the average karate-ka. However, I still believe the kamae is part of the opening movements.
Figure 1 - incorrect bunkai for opening kamae

Movements 1 and 2: Right and Left vertical hammer fist strikes in front of the chest:

Oral instruction: There is one opponent to the front.

The key in understanding any bunkai is to correctly visualize the opponent’s attack. In this case, the attacker has grabbed your right hand with his left and is getting ready to swing at you with his right hand. You need to get away from the opponent’s center line and avoid the punch. First, you make a small counter-clockwise circle with your right hand to extend and lock his elbow, then you quickly grab his hand with your left hand, turn your body counter-clockwise to avoid the attack and further extend him off balance. It is then quite easy to release your right hand and hammer fist his head or clavicle. The second hammer-fist movement is the bunkai for when the attacker grabs your left hand instead of the right hand.
An alternative application shown by Harry Cook\textsuperscript{10} which pretty much is the same bunkai for a same side grab is a response to a cross grab whereby the opponent has grasped your left hand with his left hand presumably in preparation to punch or strike you with his right hand. To counter this, grab and pull his arm towards your abdomen with both your hands while turning your body to the left (your hands are now in the opening kamae). Follow up with the hammer fist strike. The second hammer fist strike reflects the bunkai for when your right wrist is grabbed.

**Movements 3, 4 and 5:** Upper level rising block with both hands. Vertical Sword hand block followed by middle level vertical punch:
Oral instructions: Block with both hands. Hang the opponent to the sky. Take the opponent’s back.

The opponent is coming in with a right handed punch. Use both hands to block the punch while turning your body to the side and moving outside of the opponent’s center. Your right hand should be blocking the opponent’s wrist and your left should be blocking the forearm above the elbow so that you are levering the elbow (hang the opponent to the sky). Grip the opponent’s wrist with your right hand and use the vertical knife hand block to pull him off balance and position yourself behind him. Counter-attack with the left vertical fist punch.

The explanation of movement 6 and 7 are the same as that for movements 4 and 5 except that you would turn the opposite way and use the opposite hands if you needed to block a left punch.

**Movements 8-11:** right middle level vertical sword hand block, left rising elbow strike, left middle level knife hand block, right knife hand block.

Oral instructions: The names of the techniques have been disguised. There is no technique that ends in a block.
Here, the opponent grabs you with his left in preparation to throw a punch with the right hand.

As he grabs, use the right vertical knife hand to stop his advance and immediately grab his shoulder or back of his neck and smash him with the rising elbow strike. With the hand of the striking arm, grab behind his head or neck and turn and execute the “knife hand block” to force his head down and body off balance. Then follow up with a knife hand strike to the back of the neck. Use a switch step if necessary to adjust distance.

![Figure 4 - Moves 8-11](image)

**Movement 12 and 13:** left front kick, right middle level inside outward block, left downward block.

Here, the opponent has grabbed your right hand or shoulder and is preparing to punch with the right.

Oral instructions: kick low while grabbing the opponent

Kick the opponent’s leg or knee the opponent, depending on distance and then use the double blocking movement to throw off the hold if he has not already released you.
Movements 14-16: right lower level inside outward block, left downward ridge hand block with right hand at the chest position then right downward ridge hand block with left hand in front of chest position:


This is another example of a nasty counter to throw off a wrist grab and control the opponent. Here the opponent has grabbed your right wrist or both of your wrists with one or both hands as if to grab you, control you, and pull you off somewhere. See Figure 6. For women’s self defense, this could be considered an attempt to abduct. To counter this, step up towards the opponent and execute the large circular blocking movement to release from the hold. See Figure 7 for the hand positions for releasing the grip and then reversing the move on the opponent. Continue by then taking the arm and continue to lever it and take his balance. Once you have
him stretched out, change your grip (re-block and re-grip) and rotate his arm in the other
direction taking his balance and possibly throwing him. See figure 8 for the full sequence.

![Image of Double Wrist Grab Attack](image1.png)

**Figure 6 - Double Wrist Grab Attack**

![Images of release and reverse the grip](image2.png)

**Figure 7 - release and reverse the grip**
Movements 17 -20: Middle level reverse wedge block, fist out to sides downward position, middle level falling block with right one knuckle fist then middle level falling block with left one knuckle fist:

Question: Why stand on one leg after the wedge block? What are the “falling blocks” for and why are they done with ippon ken?

These are fairly mysterious techniques and usually the ippon ken “falling blocks” seem to lend themselves to be striking techniques. If you put the following two oral instructions together it explains the standing on one leg after the wedge block.

Oral instructions: Kick low while grabbing the opponent. Perform a movement done as two counts as one count.

The opponent is coming towards you to either do a two handed push on your shoulders or grab your lapels and then do other bad things to you. See figure 9. As you perform the wedge block, simultaneously bring your knee up into their groin. Then grab their arms or shoulders (this is the
fists out to sides kamae) step in behind their leg and trip them over it while pushing them down with the “falling blocks”. The ippon ken can be used to inflict pain by pushing it into their neck near the carotid artery or pushing down inside the clavicle (between the clavicle and neck).

Also, the second ippon ken could be a finishing punch once the opponent is on the ground.

Figure 9 - Pushing Attack

Figure 10 - Countering the pushing attack
Movements 21 and 22: middle level 2 finger spear hand block inside outward followed by left rising punch with two finger spear hand:

Question: why would you block with your fist in the two fingered spear hand position? The oral instruction: “The front hand is the attacking hand” answers this question. The draw hand must either be the blocking hand or pulling hand while you use the nihon nukite as a counter attack.

The opponent grabs your wrist. Your hand that has been grabbed becomes the draw hand pulling him off balance and into your spear hand attack to the throat or the pressure points under the chin. You can continue to apply pressure which should compel him to move back. When he tries to escape, pursue the attacker with the rising punch spear hand attack to the eyes.

![Figure 11 - Moves 20-21](image)

Movements 23 and 24 have the same explanation as moves 21 and 22: The only difference is that these movements are used when the opponent grabs your other wrist.

Movements 25-27: Right middle level roundhouse palm heel block, left middle level roundhouse palm heel block, both fists out to sides:

Best Karate #9 shows the bunkai for these movements as blocking a right handed punch with the first palm heel block and then attacking the elbow joint with the second palm heel block. Follow this by pulling him off balance by moving your fists out to the side.
**Alternate 25-27:** An alternative bunkai for this set is to block a right punch with the left hand and then strike the ribs with a 1-2 timing of the palm heel blocks (strikes). You then grab the opponent’s arms or clothing and pull him into your head butt.

![Figure 12 - Moves 25-27](image)

**Movements 28-30:** middle level scissor punch, right vertical sword hand block, left vertical punch.

Use these movements to escape from a rear grab and then counter attack. The opponent grabs both of your arms from behind. Presumably, this would be a controlling attempt by an opponent that might want to abduct you. Use the pivot and scissor punch to escape from his grasp and then use the vertical sword hand block followed by the vertical punch as a counter attack. The pivot and scissor punch works to escape the grab because you move into the opponent rather than trying to pull away from the opponent.

![Figure 13 Moves 28-30](image)
Movements 31-33: left middle level sword hand block, right vertical punch, followed by right fist in front of chest with left palm wrapped around right fist, hop back:

The meaning of the backwards hops has been very mysterious and some claim that there is no bunkai for the hops; they are just a method to return to the starting location of the kata. I have been told that only the Shotokan version of the kata has the hops in it. Since returning to the starting point of a kata is part of the tournament scoring criteria, it is entirely possible that the hops were added in for the purposes of kata competition. Nonetheless, if we want to have valid bunkai for the kata, we should follow Schmeisser’s principle that every move of the kata should do something to the opponent. Also I was not entirely convinced of the embusen reason because why do silly looking hops when you could simply step smartly back to your mark? Therefore, I came up with a bunkai that is a combination strangle hold and neck break. Oral Instruction: Take the Opponent’s Back.

Here, the opponent attacks with a right handed punch. Block it with the left vertical sword hand block and counter attack with the vertical punch to the opponent’s solar plexus while keeping hold of his right arm. This should cause him to fold forward some. Slip your head under his right arm and slip your right arm around his neck laying your radius against his carotid artery. This part of the movement is easier if you are smaller than the attacker. You want to keep his right arm trapped over your shoulder with your arm as well. Cover your right hand with your left and apply pressure against the carotid artery, strangling the blood flow to the brain. This should be enough to subdue him for good because it doesn’t take long to pass out if the carotid artery is squeezed shut. The backwards hops are actually the most brutal part of the kata. These represent jerking your whole body backwards while applying the strangle hold to break the opponent’s neck. During the photography session, my opponent actually complained quite
loudly of the pain even when I only gently applied pressure. He also related that in addition to the pain in the area of his carotid artery, he felt quite a bit of pressure where his skull meets with the cervical spine so this technique as described should be effective.

![Figure 14 - Final Moves - note that the hops are not shown](image_url)

**Conclusion:**

The key to understanding the bunkai for any kata is to be able to clearly visualize the attack that the kata move or sequence of moves is countering. It is important to remember that the moves may have been designed to counter attacks other than karate style movements. The bunkai shown here are just a possible set to be used an explanation for this kata. There are probably more bunkai that could be determined with further study. It should also be noted that what might work for someone of a certain body type, may not work for everyone else and it is up to each individual to explore the kata to unlock the techniques and make them useful as a set of self defense tools and add an additional dimension to the practice of kata.

**Acknowledgements:**

I would like to thank Irvin Smoot for being my partner for the bunkai sequences in this paper. I would also like to thank Irv for giving me the first of many lessons in Shotokan Karate.
I would like to thank my wife, Lynn, for photographing the kata sequences in this paper and for putting up with all the time I spend going to the dojo, seminars, tournaments and camps. Lastly, I would like to thank everyone who has ever instructed me, trained with me, shared ideas with me, or taken lessons from me. There are too many to list; all of whom have had an impact on the way I practice karate today.
ENDNOTES


5 Personal conversation with Steve Majors in January of 2008.


7 It would be impossible to include all of the oral instructions for each kata that Higaki has published. However, presented here are some general instructions that are helpful in discovering bunkai for kata in general


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