

## MARTIAL ARTS TOURISM

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### Recentring the Cartographies of Karate: Martial Arts Tourism in Okinawa

Submission: 17.03.2020; acceptance: 19.08.2020

**Key words:** *karate*, martial arts tourism, Okinawa, Japan, tradition, commercialization

#### Abstract

Background. Since the beginning of the 2010s, the Okinawan Government has been making significant efforts to develop, professionalize, and promote karate tourism in Okinawa, since this is known to be an essential sector for the island's economy.

Problem and aim. A systematized study into the nature of karate tourism in Okinawa has so far not been conducted. This article offers a comprehensive overview of the historical development of martial arts tourism in Okinawa, by discussing the most recent events in karate as a martial arts tourism niche and its ongoing institutionalization.

Method. The method of research presents and analyses a corpus of institutional and public sources of information on karate tourism available through the web. It should be noted that web presence is one of the leading action methods for the Japanese and Okinawan governments, and hence it supplies a valuable resource of information, particularly considering the lack of specific scholarly references on the matter. The article incorporates academic literature on martial arts tourism and other relevant types of sports and cultural tourism, as well as a body of work on Japanese and Okinawan studies examining the subject.

Results. The creation of an official karate tourism industry in Okinawa responds to Japan's economic and cultural plans for attracting higher numbers of tourists to the country, thus increasing overall revenues and fostering regional revitalization. However, Okinawan karate as a martial art and tourism sector is also conditioned by powerful global and transnational factors superimposed onto local interests and narratives.

Conclusions. Karate tourism is being actively promoted by the Japanese Government and the Okinawan Prefectural Government as a form of martial arts tourism intermingling cultural and sporting factors. Despite this convergence of economic objectives, hierarchical tensions exist as the Okinawan and mainland definitions of traditional karate and its cultural significance differ, forcing a debate on the current touristic institutionalization process for karate.

#### Introduction

Some men make long voyages and undergo the toils of journeying to distant lands for the sole reward of learning something hidden and remote. This eagerness attracts people to public shows, drives them to pry into everything that is closed, to inquire the most hidden things, to unearth the antiques, to hear of the customs of foreign peoples.

*De otio (1<sup>st</sup> century),*  
Lucius Annaeus Seneca,

*Karate*, one of the most famous martial arts and combat sports worldwide, is a major contribution to the set of Japanese cultural exports after WWII. In historical

terms, it precedes the boom of sushi, manga, anime, or J-pop in the West, giving rise to a cultural craze since the late 60s also expressed in consumer-oriented products as movies, magazines, books, and a quasi-infinite variety of other goods. Despite its Japanese symbolic status, karate was developed in Okinawa when this group of islands with a subtropical climate formed a separate state known as the Ryukyu Kingdom (1429-1879) [Kerr 1958; Kreiner 2001]. Today the national and prefectural governments are undertaking numerous measures to position Okinawa globally as ‘the birthplace of karate’ and ‘the land of karate’ [Okinawa Karate Promotion Division, 2018], slogans intended to operate in the tourism and heritage dimensions.

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Two years ago, in 2018, Okinawa held the 1<sup>st</sup> Okinawa International Karate Tournament, an event that involved 26,000 participants, including athletes, staff, fans, and family members. After witnessing such a massive turnout, the head of Okinawa’s Department of Culture, Tourism and Sports announced that there is a global market for “martial arts tourism” from which the Prefecture must benefit economically, taking further institutional policies and efforts [Ryukyū Shimpō, 31.8.2018]. These statements did not define so much a starting point as the confirmation of a process in the making. Four years earlier, a meeting at the Urasoe Industry Promotion Center had centered around the necessity of “create a strong organization to promote karate” and “strengthen the authority and trust for Okinawan karate in order to create the brand.” [Ryukyū Shimpō, 23.3.2014].

Throughout the last two decades, karate institutional organization in Okinawa has been undergoing important transformations, closely related to the internationalization of markets and the expansion of mass tourism. Such emerging circumstances are part of the post-industrial economies shift to the sectors of leisure and cultural consumption, which Japan has deeply embraced adopting the Nation Branding and Cool Japan policies [Valaskivi 2013]. This ‘Japan Brand Strategy’ aims to establish, via the national soft power repositories [Nye 1990; Iwabuchi 2002],<sup>1</sup> a renewed vision on the international image of Japan and its culture “in order to increase global demand for Japanese products overseas and to use as a resource of symbolic power for inducing pro-Japanese sentiments especially in Asia” [Daliot-Bul 2009: 248-249]. Thereby the planning capitalizes the global success of Japanese contemporary popular culture and the prestige of the national traditions to make them attractive assets monetizable through cultural industries and global tourism. The Japanese government sees tourism as a central force for increasing the international competitiveness of the stagnant national economy while contributing to local revitalization and place-based community development, with an important role reserved for sports tourism [Hinch, Ito 2017] and budo tourism [Japan Sports Agency 2019].

In this context, the worldwide appeal of karate con-

<sup>1</sup> In 1990 Joseph S. Nye defined soft power as a “Co-optive power – getting others to want what you want” thanks to the possibilities of “cultural attraction, ideology, and international institutions” [Nye 1990: 167]. In the case of Japan Nye also identified the manufacturing sector and its worldwide success as a relevant source for the country’s soft power repertoire [Nye 1990: 169]. Yet, precisely during the 90s, also known as “Japan’s lost decade”, the Japanese manufacturing sector relocated massively to other Asian countries, thus fostering the ongoing economic slowdown [Yoshino, Taghizadeh-Hesary 2017]. Japan’s need to reconvert the national economy, plus soft power repositories, towards post-industrial productive sectors such as cultural industries and tourism come out from this conjuncture.

forms a precious resource for promoting tourism in Okinawa while asserting its status as a Japanese symbol. Due to the joint ambitions of the national government and the dominant economic sectors in Okinawa, the archipelago is meant to become one of the main poles of international tourism in Asia. Sports and cultural tourism are fundamental to this tourism design, and thus karate represents a unique opportunity to open up a market niche with a remarkable economic impact for Japan’s poorest Prefecture. Over 3,000 *karateka* visit Okinawa per year [Hinch, Ito 2018], often accompanied by family and friends, and stay on the islands more than twice as much as compared with those coming for sightseeing activities (9 to 3.71 days). These numbers are expected to surge thanks to the discipline’s first time Olympic Games participation in Tokyo 2021.

The cultural practice and consumption of karate in Okinawa entail a complex articulation of Japanese martial arts as traditions / sports; a dichotomy that is not easy to disentangle in historical terms due to the many reconstructions of Japanese budo since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century [Niehaus, Tagsold, 2013; Pita 2014]. These factors intersect with the peculiarities of the Japan-Okinawa historical and political relations, because it was in this period that Okinawa was incorporated into Japan after the dissolving and annexation of the Ryukyū Kingdom (1879). The definition and standardization of karate take part in the initial decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, along a sociocultural and political process that established and centralized the official corpus of Japanese martial arts via the *Dai Nippon Butokukai* (The Great Japan Martial Virtue Society). Founded directly under the auspices of the state in 1895, the Butokukai was in charge of re-creating Japan’s martial traditions in the light of modernity. The society bases explicitly recognized such task: “The Butokukai regulations written in April 1895 included among its objectives the following: ‘Although *bugei* [military or martial art] does not have in the present utility for practical application, but there is the need to preserve it, provide the method to do so.’” [Pita 2014: 318].<sup>2</sup> In this regard, Stalisnaw Meyer has noted how karate, although connected to old martial arts, “fairly deserves the label of ‘invented tradition’”. Especially when it has served to justify Japanese ultra-nationalistic ideologies or, on the contrary, wielded to sustain “popular narratives that aim at depicting Okinawans as a peace-loving people constantly oppressed by the Japanese.” [Meyer 2008: 12].

In any event, Okinawa is unmistakably the origin place of karate, and for this reason millions of karate practitioners worldwide nowadays turn their attention towards the Japanese Prefecture, searching for the authentic roots of their martial practice. The Ryukyū islands offer to the international karate community a place of historical sites, but moreover even of specific bodily

<sup>2</sup> English translation is mine.

knowledge. Hence Okinawa karate, by opposition to Japanese karate, is increasingly perceived as the genuine matrix of this extremely popular martial art. The allure of Okinawa for karate fans works on many levels, being potentially connected with the auto reproduction of themselves. Pierre Bourdieu, in one of his early studies on sports, emphasized the particular relation of sports practitioners with the body, and how this characteristic shapes their habitus: “the basis from which lifestyles generated” [Bourdieu 1978: 833]. *Karateka* and aficionados thus understand the southern archipelago of Japan in the way of a distinct martial expertise reservoir, in other words, of a karate habitus.

Concurrently, for a significant part of global karateka and prospective sports/budo tourists in Japan, the authentic traditional karate is to be found in Okinawa. The notion of authenticity is central to tourism studies because frequently it involves the representational staging of identity and ethnicity [MacCannell 1973; Cohen 2007]. In the case of Japan, Assmann [2017] has explored the soft power policies of the national government on Japanese food to expose frictions on authenticity deriving from the intertwined logics between food globalization and gastrationalism. As I explore in the last sections of this article, in the construction of karate tourism the global-local articulation supposes the main concern for many Okinawan karate stakeholders. Generally, in tourist settings authenticity appears as a flexible experience, contextual not essential, and highly dependent on the active tourist perception of authenticity as “a marketing device for commercial purposes” [Assmann 2017: 124]. From this perspective, authenticity is remarkably correlated with the cultural and ethnic romanticization of tourism destinations, a common occurrence in Japan and Asia [Hiwasaki 2000; Picard, Wood 1997], which, as this article addresses, has affected Okinawa since the early 70s [Figal 2008, 2012; McCormack 1998; Nguyen 2017; Tada 2015; Toyokawa, Sakamoto 2017]. In the same manner, the notion of authenticity constitutes a nuclear element for re-inventing East Asian martial arts like karate. Paul Bowman has recently discussed [2020] how authenticity, together with its pairings tradition and origin, carries the cultural practice of East Asian martial arts with a strong sense of affection and desire.

Attending to the aforementioned circumstances, both the Okinawan regional government and the Japanese state have realized karate’s importance and its potential to boost international tourism. Consequently, since the beginning of the millennium policymakers had entered the previously informal karate tourism field in Okinawa, with growing intensity from 2010 onwards. In the course of the last two decades the official architecture of karate has given birth to the ‘Karate day’ (25<sup>th</sup> October) in 2005, the establishment of the Okinawa Traditional Karate Liaison Bureau (OTKLB) in 2011, the founding of the Okinawa Prefecture Karate Promotion Division in 2016, and the opening

of the Okinawa Karate Information Center (OKIC) and the Okinawa Karate Kaikan (or Karate Meeting Hall), a 7.810 m<sup>2</sup> spectacular facility with an initial budget of 6.5 billion yen (over 58 million dollars), in 2017.

To offer a comprehensive analysis of the formulation of karate tourism in Okinawa, this article gives first a succinct but concise outline of the historical place of the archipelago as a prime tourist destination since the postwar recovery of Japan, providing some examples on early karate touristifications and commodifications. It then examines the private and institutionalized marketing of a karate martial brand in Okinawa over the last ten years, attending to the sectors of martial arts tourism, sports tourism, contents tourism, and heritage tourism, and the ways they intermingle with the Japanese state cultural policies. Finally, the article concludes with a consideration of how the creation of a karate tourism niche in Okinawa, despite aligning with Japanese state strategies, is subjected to transnational processes that operate both as dangers and opportunities for disseminating local understandings of the Okinawa karate traditions. In practical terms, karate and karate tourism cannot be understood appropriately without paying close attention to the historical, cultural, political, and economic place of Okinawa inside the Japanese nation.

### Okinawa: ‘Japan’s Tourism Prefecture’

It was in 1995, at The Greater Ryukyu Festival Kingdom (*Dai Ryukyu – Matsuri O-Koku*), that the Prefectural Governor Ota Masahide proclaimed that Okinawa would be Japan’s “Tourism Prefecture” [*kanko ritsuken*]. His public speech, which did not fail to mention karate, was adorned with an ode to the historic-cultural charms and natural beauties of Okinawa, all part of the touristic landscape of the islands:

This place overflows in a bounty of sun and sea,  
A verdurous isle of eternal youth where people are  
naturally kindhearted;  
The *sanshin* resonates and drums to beat out the heavens,  
A tropical rhythm shakes Mother Earth;  
From the heroics of karate to dance, dragon boat races,  
and tug-of-war,  
And then the bejeweled splendor of royal culture;  
Young and old alike are cheerfully spirited and full  
of health,  
To a long life!” [Figal 2012: 232].

Indeed, Okinawa is an essential ingredient of Japan’s touristic architecture. Figures provided by the United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO] show that 31.19 million international visitors came to Japan in 2018, making it the 11<sup>th</sup> tourist destination in the World with a 10-year average growth of 14%. By its part, Japan Tourism Agency (JTA) data for 2019 shows that Naha Airport – Okinawa’s capital – is the 6<sup>th</sup> port of entry

for overseas visitors in Japan (5.8% of the total) and very close to becoming the 4th after Narita, Kansai, and Haneda mega airports. According to the 2016 McKinsey International Tourist Survey, Okinawa, branded as a beach and resort destination, ranks second in the western tourist awareness of the principal Japanese tourist assets. Remarkably, once possible visitors, bearing no previous knowledge of Okinawa, are informed of the islands' characteristics for leisure travel, the southern archipelago virtually equal the touristic appealing of Mount Fuji [Andonian *et al.* 2016].

Not by coincidence then, Okinawa has been at the center of Japan's tourism plans since its reversion to the Japanese administration after the postwar American occupation (1945-1972). These plans developed in two broad phases: first with domestic tourism orientations, and second, from 2002 onwards, by creating Okinawa as a gateway node in the Asia-Pacific region for attracting international visitors. Already at the early stages of the postwar economic recovery, it was clear for the authorities that the geographical location and subtropical conditions of Okinawa set a perfect stage for an island resort destination based in the “3s tourist spot”: sun, sand, and sea [Toyokawa, Sakamoto 2017]. Before the reversion, battlefield tourism still represented the main tourist activity in Okinawa. However, by the 60s the interest of middle-class Japanese to travel to Okinawa was evident, and in 1962 the Okinawa Tourism Association produced a diagnosis report on the main environmental assets, cultural properties, and Okinawan customs that must prompt tourism, among them karate [Figal 2008: 89-90]. During that decade the first resorts were constructed, and Japanese airlines targeted deluxe markets by advertising “overseas travel starting from Okinawa” and “shopping for luxury foreign goods such as whiskey, watches, cameras, and jewelry, all much cheaper than on the Japanese mainland”, which converted souvenirs in the 60% of their total travel expenditure [Tada 2015: 294]. Soon after Okinawa began to be publicized as “Japan's Secret Paradise” or the “Japanese Hawaii”, a classification that, beyond a tropicalizing catch phrase, stands for an actual model for tourism growth, introduced in the 1969 “Tropical Tourism Base Plan”. This blueprint was later incorporated by the Japanese government to set up a “unique tropical zone in Japan” [Tada 2015: 294].

On these grounds, since 1972, when the Okinawa per capita income was 58% of the national average, consecutive 10-year plans were implemented to improve the situation of the Prefecture and reduce the “economic disparity” with the mainland. Post-reversion Okinawan economy was defined by a “3k system”: public investment (*kokyo jigyo*), tourism (*kanko*), and bases (*kichi*) [McCormack 1998], a structure of dependence determined by the US-Japan geopolitical alliance at the East China Sea.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Okinawa is put in a startling paradoxical but immensely convenient socio-political situation in relation to its contouring

Japan's agenda sought to shift the economic orientation of its southern peripheral islands, downsizing the dominance of public expenditure by fiscal transfers and the weight of the military base related activities (from 15% in 1972 to 5% in 1987), while progressively increasing tourism income. The easing on the traveling restrictions to Okinawa represented the first rise of domestic tourism going from 200,000 Japanese visitors in 1971 to 740,00 in 1973. The 75' Okinawa Marine Expo acted as a first inflection point popularizing the regional peculiarities and its cultural and natural assets, and tourist visitors multiplied next to 2 million that year [Nguyen 2017: 7].

For Japanese travel agents, Okinawa could be presented as an ideal fusion of comfortable affinity (geographical, cultural) and exoticism. This conceptual reframing also transformed the dominant tourism in Okinawa, reversing a negatively charged postwar tourism (mainly driven by people who had lost their beloved ones in the Battle of Okinawa) into the leisure images of paradise beaches and far-away beauty experiences. The 80s economic bubble in Japan brought many infrastructural inversions and private investments to Okinawa; hence resort hotels, leisure beaches, golf courses, shopping centers, and theme parks began to flourish. At the same time, the Prefecture became a favorite destination for school trips.

The economic stagnation of the 90s, commonly referred to as Japan's “lost decade”, did not affect mass tourism in the islands because Japan was covered by a movement known as the ‘Okinawa boom’. The Okinawa boom, coinciding with Governor Ota mandate (1990-1998), was an Okinawan cultural renaissance. A celebration of difference founded in local festivals, language, dance, ritual and other cultural expressions still resonating today that characterize Okinawa “as peaceful, linguistically unique, a marine paradise, culturally distinct (from mainland Japan), an excellent investment choice, an ‘international’ community, the home of karate, and so on” [Allen 2008: 198].

The Okinawa boom crystalized in representational images disseminated by cultural industries products (music, theater, cinema, anime, videogames, etc.) and other commodities consumed across Japan. Correlated to the enormous significance of the psychosocial “*urusato* boom”, and “healing boom” dominating the Japanese tourism of the time [Robertson 1995; Kuhne 2012]<sup>4</sup>, mainlanders

into the Japanese nation-state. It combines the terrible inheritance of one of the worst WWII battles and the stupefying presence of the 73.8% US military bases land in Japan – being the prefecture only 0.6% of national territory, with the touristic images of a peaceful and natural-healing paradise.

<sup>4</sup> Literally “old village”, the idea of *urusato* introduces affective images of traditional social relations and rural landscapes. Interlaced with tourism, nation-making, and driven by nostalgia, *urusato* is the search of a traditional, authentic Japan



Karate and kobudo training at *Ryukyu no kaze* series.

Source: *Ryukyu no kaze*, NHK, 1993.

rediscovered a ‘native’ Ryukyuan culture and its appeal, which added up to the natural wonders of the islands to mature the archipelago as a top national destination. Thus, the Okinawa boom partially re-produced a romanticized image of the traditional Okinawan culture framed by the tropical allusions. It even supposed a laudatory reconception of the ‘Okinawa time’, hitherto stigmatized and now an enviable notion of a more slow-life style “free from the manic intensity of everyday life in the metropolitan centers of Japan.” [Nelson 2008: 236]. The Okinawa boom was especially driven by the 1992 opening of the Shuri Castle Park and the 1993 airing of the *Ryukyu no kaze* (Winds of The Ryukyus) historical drama Tv series, in which Okinawan martial arts appear noticeably, by Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK), the only public broadcaster of the country. This conjunction “was not coincidental; both the T.V. series and the park served as mutual promotions for each other as the castle complex was used for sets throughout the series.” [Figal 2012: 157]. The current karate touristification trend framed by cultural tourism seeks to associate both with the iconic power of Shuri Castle and the narratives of the Okinawan cultural difference already displayed in *Ryukyu no kaze*, historically grounded but consumer-oriented reconstructed:

“Echoing tourist guides past and present, what are considered defining elements of this cultural difference are overtly displayed throughout the series. Items of clothing, hair styles, language, sacred sites (*utaki*) and priestesses (*noro*), turtleback tombs, shamisen (*sanshin*), song, karate, and so on are prominently featured during the story” [Figal 2012: 160].

To record *Ryukyu no kaze* a large studio reproducing the Ryukyu Kingdom’s capital in the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> in regional expressions. Involves the sense of living in a historical and meaningful past for urbanite tourists overwhelmed by rapid industrialization. By its part, the “healing boom” and the “migration to Okinawa boom” of both young and retiring Japanese were amplified by the real estate and tourist industries.

centuries was built in the Yomitan area, at the central part of Okinawa island. Afterward, this set was transformed in the theme park Murasaki Mura, currently home to International Karate Study Centre. The center is a quite large facility with a training hall, offices, and dormitories that promotes itself in concordance with the typical touristic gaze of Okinawa:

The International Karate Study Centre (IKSC) is a *dojo* complex built in a traditional Okinawan style [...] The IKSC is located within the Murasaki Mura theme park where you can try various traditional Okinawan arts and crafts. We are also about 200m from the beach where you can enjoy the beautiful emerald green seas of Okinawa. Various marine activities can also be arranged. [International Karate Study Center Facebook].

*Ryukyu no kaze*, based on a homonym novel of 1992 and re-aired in 1997, situates the action in the time of the Ryukyu Kingdom invasion of 1609 by the Japanese Satsuma clan, when oral mythology tends to situate the creation of Okinawan karate. Historically speaking, however, it would be more accurate to speak of Ryukyu’s martial arts because karate neither as a defined body of styles and techniques or, of course, the mere image of a white *gi* black-belt karateka existed then. What probably could be found was a collection of systematized forms to be applied by the old kingdom’s military corps [Smits 2010], as well as less structured regional and familiar traditions, nurtured by diverse sources and combining in-islands systems with forms learned from other geographies of South and East Asia [McCarthy 2016].

The Ryukyu Kingdom accommodated a highly transactional maritime culture, and it is proper to acknowledge that Ryukyuan martial arts were developed inside this framing. If one visits the Matsuyama Park in Naha, a monument erected in 1987 to honor Higaonna Kanryo (1853-1915) and Miyagi Chojun (1888-1953), two renowned karate masters, will be found. In the same park, there stands a monument erected in 1992, a sculp-

ture of a boat dedicated to the 36 Fujianese families that in 1392 settled at the Ryukyus [Akamine 2016]. Those migrants from Fujian are said to have introduced Chinese martial arts in Okinawa. Although it can be subject to discussion, today the Okinawan prefecture recognizes this spot as a karate historical site, and some karate tours define it as one of the “karate birthplaces” [Age-shio Japan 2019].



Therefore, thanks to the Okinawa boom and the tourism and cultural industries, during the 90s a re-staged, revitalized and distinctive Okinawa culture was installed in the Japanese mainstream, fixing the islands as a preferential desire for Japanese travelers. National visitors raised steadily from around 2 million at the beginning of the 80s to 4.5 million in 2000. However, early in this new decade, resort-centered tourism showed the first signs of saturation, and the government actions targeted “new tourism markets from abroad and moved itself away from resort tourism and into business, education, and cultural forms of tourism.” [Nguyen 2017: 11].

The prefectural tourism plans replicated the national policies aiming to build up Japan as a world-leading nation in cultural industries and tourism, and Okinawa as an international bridge to Asia and the rest of the

World. We will see in the following sections how within this global-bridged scheme a special place is reserved for karate. According to the Okinawa Prefecture government [Okinawa Prefectural Office, *Okinawa no sugata* – Prefecture Overview], of the nearly 10 million visitors that Okinawa received the past year (2019) – numbers that rival with Hawaii – 30% were from overseas. Since 2013 foreign tourism has exploded in the islands, going from 300,000 to around 3 million international visitors in 2019. The vast majority of them arrived from other East Asian countries: Taiwan (28%), South Korea (27%), China (21%), and Hong Kong (10%), with citizens from the United States (4%) accounting as the first non-Asian visitors. Here it is important to note that United States karateka, with a notable presence of ex-military personnel formerly destined to the archipelago, tops among the repeating foreign tourists in Okinawa.



A Japan Airlines (JAL) Boeing 737 with the logo ‘Okinawa Birthplace of Karate’ stands at Naha Airport.

Source: The author, 2018.

Nowadays, the overseas demand growth in Okinawa continually outperforms the domestic (14.2% to 1.2%) one, and the overall set of tourism revenues beat again a 5-year consecutive record peaking 725.1 billion yen in 2018, approximately 6.8 billion dollars. Nonetheless, the sustainability of a tourism economic model supposes a great local concern, both from the ecological and economic point of view. Okinawa is a small island group with scant ecosystemic resources and a population of only 1.45 million that is already receiving more than five times its population in visitors per year. Hence several worries raise about the convenience of continuing branding Okinawa as an international tourist destination. The pushing issues of tourism massification in Okinawa have produced extensive literature: at the end of the last century McCormack [1998] spoke of “concrete islands”, and still today the construction industry in Okinawa practically doubles the national average, 10.7 to 5.6% [Okinawa Prefectural Office, *Okinawa no sugata*]. Kakazu [2017] refers to “Cheap, Near and Short-stay”, as the leading slogan for tempting East Asian tourists. Murray [2017] points out the irremediable unsustain-

ability of the “Okinawa tourism imperative”, because of the increasing costs of the energy demand and the eroding of the ecological systems. Okinawan natural assets continue to be by large the primary motivation for traveling to the islands [Toyokawa, Sakamoto 2017]. As happens with many other travel destinations, Okinawa is extremely sensitive to global events. Tourism numbers were profoundly affected by the post-2008 banking crisis, natural disasters as the 2011 earthquake and the subsequent Fukushima nuclear accident, or the surge of new influenza types like the 2003 SARS, and the COVID-19 this same year.

On the other hand, a mass tourism resort in East Asia is an extremely demanding and competitive sector. The limits and dangers of the tourism industry structure in Okinawa were already acknowledged by the 2010 Prefectural Government Plan that proposed to take “proactive measures” and “aggressive approaches” based on “sophisticated” ecotourism and internationalization [Ministry of the Environment Government of Japan, *Okinawa Prefecture Basic Plan for Tourism Promotion - Fifth Plan*]. As a result, the government tourism initiative is now centered on developing a wide range of cultural tourism inflows, the consumption of locally produced goods, and nature-related luxury tourism as viable alternatives for the present-day configuration of the Okinawan economy.

Karate has been a common item in the set of iconographies guiding the Okinawa touristification process, mixing with the images of a marine, peaceful, rich indigenous culture. Moreover, at the present internationalization stage of tourism in Okinawa, the local martial art is expected to become a valued sector itself. That said, the local government has decided to implement several actions to reenact globally Okinawa as ‘the birthplace of karate’ and thus bring higher numbers of visitors and revenues to the Prefecture.

### Marketing a martial brand: remapping karate to Okinawa

Martial arts tourism has produced abundant scholarly works [Miller 2010; Cynarski, Sieber 2007; Cynarski 2012, 2017]; raising special attention in Korea and China [Cho 2001; Shi-hong 2012; Li *et al.* 2012; Su 2016]. In the same manner, martial arts marketing and its possibilities are raising the attention of governments, companies, and academic economic fields [Ko 2002; Ko, Yang 2012; Kim, Zhang 2015; Jason 2017]. The martial arts tourist travels specifically for “attaining new knowledge and honing skills” as the “prevailing mentality claims that a martial artist can improve his or her craft faster and easier in its place of origin.” [Miller 2010: 412]. However, it is frequent that beyond the training purposes they:

may cultivate an interest in other cultural expressions such as music, dance, or the local religion. Besides training, these tourists prioritize visiting legendary cultural sites within the country, perhaps including those that figure heavily in the lore of their particular martial art; examples would be temples, training facilities, masters’ homes, or natural attractions. [Miller, 2010: 412].

From this perspective, martial arts tourism encompasses at least three overlapping types of cultural tourism: sports tourism, contents tourism, and heritage tourism. Sports and sports tourism have been both reason and result of the circulation of images and goods on a global scale, or in Gomes words:

the fact that the sports world has been now taken over by strong financial motivations has largely strengthened this correlation over the last two decades: the sports-vision of the World as the key metaphor for the globalization. [Gomes 2010: 222].

In this regard, combat sports derived from traditional martial arts conjugate the globalized image of international practices and championships with an exclusive nationalistic/localistic image supported on the genuineness of their origin place. This duality of martial arts as a modern sporting phenomenon coexisting and bounded to diverse East Asian traditions explain their unique appeal to sports tourism, because “travel and tourism are also an appropriation of the world, underlaid with symbolic appreciation and values.” [Schwark 2007: 119]. Therefore, martial arts tourism takes part in sports tourism acculturation but allocating distinctive emphasis on authenticity. Indeed, martial arts styles and schools as transnational communities are irremediably built up upon a legitimatizing and statutory network, in karate’s case Okinawan (and Japanese) masters and places.



Traditional karate exhibition at Kokusai Dori, Naha main shopping street.

Source: *The author*, 2018.

According to Cynarski [2012: 14] one of the main subtypes of martial arts tourism is the travel for cogni-

tive, educational, and self-realizational purposes such as attending classes, seminars examinations, competitions, galas, demonstrations, meetings and other types of events, usually affiliated to each individual school or branch and dependent on the lineage. Those kinds of in-site assistance require communication with local individuals and communities, comprising cultural (particular worldviews on body comprehension and movement), social (socialization with residents), and natural (appropriation of the spatial environment and cultural landscapes) dimensions. Martial arts tourism also incorporates unique added value to sports tourism by offering a singular economy of symbolic goods in Thorstein Veblen's terms [1912]: a sumptuary layer of iconic references, ostensible aestheticized practices, and conspicuous lifestyles for the practitioner's figurative auto-production.

This principle of intensified anesthetization of the social practices excited by post-industrial capitalism prompts martial arts and their commodified consumption into the domain of leisure and entertainment expressible through goods and cultural practices.<sup>5</sup> This evidences and highlights a turn into modern fashionable habits of the “old stoic” hard-working self-realization pedagogy commonly associated with martial arts. Such behavioral shift is useful to explain the current apparition of multimedia karate-oriented contents produced in Okinawa. Among them, for instance, historical manga: “The Seven Samurai of Okinawa Karate” (Ryukyu Shimpo, 2015); theater plays: “Okinawa Karate Garden – Ship of the Ryukyu” (Okinawa Culture Council, 2018); radio programs: “*Atsumare!* Karate kids” (Ryukyu Broadcasting Corporation, 2019); or women starring *doramas*: “Ryukyu Karate Idol TERAKA” (QAB Ryukyu Asahi Broadcasting, 2020). Hence, by the local manufacture of entertainment productions and leisure experiences, Okinawan karate is also entering the commercial space of contents tourism.

Contents tourism (*kontentsu tsurizumu*) theories precisely originated in Japan and were proactively adopted by the government's economic and cultural agenda [Seaton, Yamamura 2015]. Underpinned on the expressions of contemporary Japanese popular culture in media (manga, anime, films, videogames, etc.) content tourism draws upon product narratives, characters, and places to attract fans to pilgrimage sites:

it is hoped by the government that contents, tourism and the two working in concert as contents tourism will generate massive additional revenues for Japan. The

<sup>5</sup> However, we cannot forget that karate has been understood also in the past as a way of gaining social distinction, no matter if we are speaking of Fujianese merchants living in the Ryukyus at the verge of the XX century, the first Okinawan masters established in Japan prior to WWII, or even Japanese politicians of the 80s and 90s. What changes is the way that karate culture is consumed and performed by individuals in relation with the market production.

government has gone beyond thinking of contents as an export business, but rather now considers contents to be the first stage of a national strategy that invites tourists to visit Japan as the site where those contents originated. [Seaton, Yamamura 2015: 7].

Three leading players take part in content tourism: fans, local authorities, and content business. Fans perform the act of consumption through visiting places defined as important for the community, being in Okinawan karate case either the Karate Kaikan or sites spread across the island's geography, like the previously mentioned monument to Higaonna Kanryo (1853-1915) and Miyagi Chojun (1888-1953), or the former emplacement of the Okinawa Normal School in Shuri, where renowned masters like Itosu Anko (1831-1915), Hanashiro Chomo (1869-1945) or Yabu Kentsu (1866-1937) taught karate in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The second actor, local authorities, benefit from the tourism business, not only by direct and indirect revenues but also by exercising cultural diplomacy through the circulation of a global public image, in this situation the marketing of Okinawa as ‘the land of karate.’ Finally, the private sector of contents business and tour operators, while relying on the information and resources administered by the authorities and attending to markets demands, supply experiences, and items by which fans will be compelled to consume the particular culture.

In this sense, small private companies began to offer karate tours in Okinawa ahead of the prefectural administration. For example, *Challenge Okinawa*, founded in 2014 by the owner of the famous *Dojo Bar* in Naha, aims to “bring together locals and visitors in challenges that unite the spirit and bring to life the old Okinawan saying *ichariba chodei*: ‘once we meet we are family.’” [Challenge Okinawa webpage]. By its part, *Ageshio Japan*, a company dedicated exclusively to karate tourism appeared in 2017, advertises itself as “Japan's only karate specialist travel agency in Okinawa” [Ageshio Japan, *Visit karate Okinawa*]. Their packages range from the 6.000 yen (50 euro) cost of a *dojo* lesson to the 275.000 yen (2.295 euro) for a 14-day full Okinawa karate experience. The multiple day trips are adaptable to non-training companions, offering alternative activities to discover traditional Okinawan culture like *shisa* making, *bingata*, *sanshin*, *awamori*, dances, or tea ceremony, and resort type activities like *onsen*, yoga, and spa.<sup>6</sup> Aside from *dojo* training courses, seminars, camps, and the similar, *Ageshio Japan* organizes diverse “karate sightseeing” historical tours and pilgrimage routes. Mas-

<sup>6</sup> *Shisa*, “the best-selling souvenir for tourists” [Kazaku 2017: 18], are a pair of male-female lion dogs that can be found all along the islands protecting houses, businesses, and buildings. *Bingata* is a typical form of textile pigmented production decorated with colorful patterns. *Sanshin* is an Okinawan tree cord instrument omnipresent in folk songs. *Awamori* is a distinctive Okinawan alcoholic beverage distilled from long rice. *Onsen* are the traditional Japanese hot spring baths.



ters' tombs and public monuments had been part of these tours, however, since last year, they have ceased to offer burial sites in their tours. Seemingly those visits were causing discomfort and displeasure to family members and direct karate students of the buried master [Okinawa Karate Information Center, *Correct Attitude When Visiting a Master's Grave*], which accounts for some karate touristification problems and how they affect the local's notions about their heritage. Then, *Ageshio Japan* services diversified, offering Japanese lessons for karate, a "Zen + karate" bundle at Shuri Kannon temple, and even karate and kobudo experiences outside the main island, visiting Yaeyama or Zamami in pursuit of further tropical beauty, local food, craft arts, and other slow-life imaginaries and commonplaces of the touristic gaze in Okinawa.<sup>7</sup>

The government-sponsored initiatives, on the other hand, seem to aspire to put more weight on the heritage angle of karate. The Okinawa Karate Kaikan and the Okinawa Dento Karatedo Shinkokai ("Society for the Advancement of the Traditional Okinawa Karate", formed in 2008) last year launched the "experimental" package "Karate Taiken Program" (Karate Experience Program) spotlighting "watch, know and experience" to "discover the spirituality and courtesy of karate". This heritage trend is in concordance with the Prefectural plans of achieving the inclusion of the Okinawan martial art in the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage, a purpose that has led to the creation of a special committee formed by top members of the association mentioned above. The institutional heritage narrative links karate with local rites and customs like the tug-of-war and the dragon boat races that, beyond supporting the UNESCO candidature, attract themselves lots of tourist attention. 'Heritage karate' is also connected with the Okinawan UNESCO World Heritage officially registered in 2000 like the Shuri Castle and the Shikinaen royal gardens, and archeological remains of older stone fortifications (*gusuku*) conserved from the 14th-15th centuries, times of competing feudal lords (*aji*) in the Ryukyus. Naturally, private companies also take advantage of these World Heritage sites for captivating karate tourists to Okinawa.

Framed this way karate falls into the category of heritage tourism, a core of cultural tourism with specific particularities. Heritage tourism supposes the contact

with cultural heritage through the visit or consumption of heritage goods and services. It comprises visits to historic cities or towns, monuments, worship and civil heritage buildings, historic gardens, industrial heritage sites, archaeological sites, and museums, among other heritage attractions. It also includes the consumption of goods and services directly linked to them: souvenirs, handicrafts, special tours, etc. [Bonet 2013: 387-388].

<sup>7</sup> In contrast *Challenge Okinawa* offers a more modest 'Jungle Adventure Day', and an all-you-can eat and drink 'Beach Karate Training and Barbecue Party'.



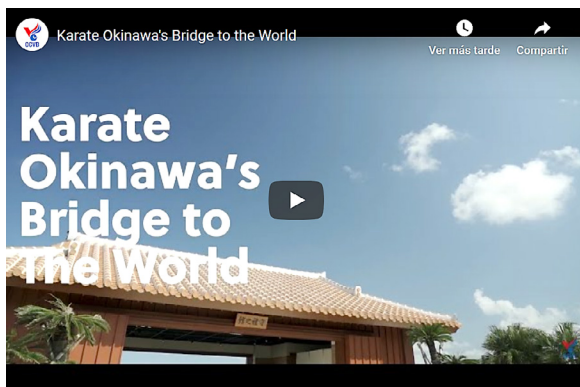
A comparison of karate t-shirts at the Shuri Castle Park Shop and the Karate Kaikan shop. Notice how at the first photo in Shuri Castle Park we read a "pro-Japanese" karate-do message in big capital letters, with a lifestyle wordplay and much smaller typography for 'Okinawan'; whereas at the Kaikan the return to the local origins, to plain 'karate', are utterly accentuated.

Source: The author, 2018.

As we can observe, to a considerable degree karate heritage tourism juxtaposes with sports tourism and content tourism. All of them can contribute to developing the cultural capital of an individual based on the location authenticity and its perception "as part of personal heritage", leading therefore to specific behavioral patterns [Bonet 2013: 389]. Karate represents a clear niche for heritage tourism, which in turn constitutes a relevant topic for Okinawan studies [Figal 2008, 2012; Hunter 2012; Casey 2013; *Lorthanavanich* 2013]; that has also been studied by its direct connection with East Asian martial arts [Raimondo 2011; Su 2016].

Having developed as a mass phenomenon during the 70s and 80s, heritage tourism forms an integral part

of the official construction of the World Heritage system. For good reason, UNESCO World Heritage is directly connected to tourism by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). Although demonstrated as a way of economic development in macroeconomic terms, the connivance of tourism and cultural heritage conform a delicate issue raising controversies about the place of local communities, the role of the nation-state, and fears about commercial banalization and alienation of cultural assets. Henceforth, the official commodification and sportification of karate culture is not a minor debate within local Okinawa karate spheres, implying questions about the property, autonomy, legitimacy, and the historical memory of the Okinawa-Japan relations.



The Karate Kaikan outdoors ‘Special Dojo’, in traditional red-tiled Okinawan style, opening the video footage of the official campaign Karate Okinawa’s Bridge to the World (2020). Notice the palms that from a tourism perspective may act as “tropicalizing” elements, but from the karate perspective bear remarkable significance, because betel palms are specially appreciated in making *bo* (wooden staffs) for martial practice.<sup>8</sup>

Source: Visit Okinawa, *Karate - Okinawa’s Bridge to the World* (OCVB).

Actually, the master lines guiding the Okinawan government-sponsored professionalization of a karate tourism industry derive from the application of national-level directives. The 2019 edition of the Japan Tourism Association (JTA) White Paper on Tourism systematizes several measures to situate this sector as a “core industry” of the country. The document highlights, among others, the “drastic open-

<sup>8</sup> Nakamoto Masahiro (1938), first person in being awarded with a 10<sup>th</sup> dan in kobudo and designated “Intangible Cultural Properties in the Field of Karate and Kobudo” by the Okinawa Prefecture, explains: “Betel palm is particularly suited to making a *bo* for martial arts use. Its main property is that has great flexibility or *muchimi* in local dialect. It is hard, of a sheen dark color while being also very firm wood. Even if it breaks after impacting, the point of breakage becomes a sharp spear tip that can be used as such. Betel palm is made of thin fibers that are thin and strong, much like hard needles. However, it is increasingly rare in Okinawa, and it is considered very valuable.” [Nakamoto 2008: 72-73].

ing of attractive public facilities and infrastructure to the public”, as in Karate Kaikan case; the “formation and development of world-class DMOs’ (destination marketing and/or management organizations), such as the Okinawa Convention & Visitors Bureau (OCVB), a public-private body appointed as manager of the Kaikan; and the “development of cultural assets as tourism resources”, namely the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage karate candidature. Such touristic developments of karate assemble equally with the Japan Sports Agency campaign for martial arts tourism promotion [Hinch, Ito 2018].

Aimed to become the mecca of karate practitioners around the World, the Karate Kaikan, supposes the quintessence of Okinawa karate branding. The inauguration was covered by local and national newspapers and received notable accolades in karate webpages and international magazines specialized in martial arts. The touristic impact expected from the Kaikan was perfectly synthesized by the Spanish magazine *El Budoka 2.0* in an article covering the opening of the facility that entitled: “Karate en Okinawa. ¡Más fácil que nunca!” (Karate in Okinawa. Easier than ever!) [Garcia 2017]. Although indicated to serve as a cultural house for Okinawan karate, including a remarkable museum, and a highly valuable research library, the Kaikan construction also clearly responds to tourism planning.

The Karate Kaikan is managed by the OCVB, a general incorporated foundation established in 1996 that is also in charge of The Former Japanese Navy Underground Headquarters Park (place of the Okinawa WWII memorial and museum), and the Busena Marine Park. The OCVB defines itself in the following manner:

the only unified public and private sector promotional body in Okinawa that integrates tourism [...] to fulfill the varying travel preferences of the Japanese people and to respond to the fierce market competition with the leading tourist destinations in Japan and abroad. [Okinawa Convention & Visitors Bureau, *Outline of the Organization*].

This DMO has been in charge of the Okinawa Sports Islands initiative that basically conceives Okinawa as a giant sports resort, as well as the Be Okinawa- Visit Okinawa internet campaign, in which karate appears prominently as “Okinawa’s Bridge to the World”. The *Be Okinawa* webpage highlights the worldwide appeal of karate and includes professional photos and video intercalating images of prominent Okinawan masters and all-condition international karateka exhibiting their art in the main streets of Naha. Totally engaged in developing the synergies between sports tourism and martial arts tourism in Okinawa, by 2018 the OCVB hosted an event for celebrating the establishment of the Okinawa Branch of The Japan Travel and Tourism Association (JTTA). There, karate was the one and only protagonist with a lecture named “Sports Island Japan: From the World to

Okinawa through Sports and Martial Arts Tourism”, and a Panel Discussion called “Sports Island Okinawa: To Become a Sports Island Okinawa Selected by the World Through Martial Arts Tourism” [OCVB, *Commemorative Okinawa Tourism Promotion Symposium*].

### Concluding remarks: globalized martial arts, transnational markets, and the limits of local agency

In the previous sections, I have alluded to how the growth and shaping of a karate business industry is a topic of tension and debate within Okinawan karate circles. The present debate goes back, in fact, to the commencement of the international tourism expansion in Okinawa and the strategic governmental advancements over karate tourism. Already in 2011 the Okinawa General Bureau (OGB), a regional branch of Japan’s Prime Minister Cabinet Office, organized a symposium for the ‘Okinawa Sense – Culture related Industry’ group in which the possibilities of karate for strengthening the Okinawan economy were discussed. Around 250 people attended the event, including “the elite of the Okinawan karate and representatives from local universities and the Okinawa Prefectural Government” [Okinawa Media Planning, *Symposium on Okinawa Karate’s Future*]. The panel speakers underscored that “has never been and will never be about making local Okinawan karate a business” but how it’s crucial to acknowledge the increasing numbers of non-Okinawan people attracted by traditional karate instead of sports karate. At the symposium the circumstances and challenges of Okinawan karate were delineated meticulously:

Facing this situation, Okinawa – as the birthplace of karate – definitely needs to furthermore promote itself and strengthen its actual international network composed of many traditional martial artists. Okinawan masters need to protect and polish the cultural treasure that is karate. By karate I mean the martial arts that were created on an island with their tradition and philosophy. This is actually one if not the main purpose of this concept. Karate has already been supporting the Okinawan economy with the visit of many foreign karatekas through many years, tournaments and seminars. Now there is a need of really organizing the local environment so that more people could come and experience and/or rediscover Okinawan Karate and Kobudo. By this I mean not only building a karate hall (a request and desire from many local masters) but also creating an official front office for Okinawan karate and kobudo (physically and virtually through the Internet). [Okinawa Media Planning, *Symposium on Okinawa Karate’s Future*].

Although accelerating throughout the last decade, the globalized commodification of karate goes back to the

second part of the 20th century, acting to fix it more like a Japanese than an Okinawan icon. Besides, the construction of the Prefecture as an international destination and the re-construction of karate as a national asset respond to Japan’s objective of becoming a tourism-oriented cultural state in a global contending field of nation branding and cultural diplomacy. In this scheme, and as implied in the former declaration at the symposium, Okinawan karate is, to a considerable extent, a passive protagonist of processes that even outpace the national level.

The following example will illustrate this statement. The World Karate Federation (WKF) “sole governing body for sport Karate in the world” [World Karate Federation, *The Book*], and only instance recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), has its headquarters in Madrid and is presided by a Spaniard, Antonio Espinós. This strong organization comprises 190 countries with their respective national federations, including the Japan Karate Federation (JKF), and gathers around 96.8% of the total worldwide karate affiliates: 10 million karatekas (remember that Okinawa entire population is about 1.45 million). The WKF televises live The Karate World Championships as “sports entertainment” to over 120 countries via satellite, and profusely uses the hashtag #karatelife in its social media. Okinawa cannot declare karate World Championships because it is a competence exclusive to the IOC and therefore the WKF. The World Karate Day (17<sup>th</sup> June) determined by this federation to manifest “karate’s harmony and singularity” and commemorate the practitioners’ “unity and identity” [WKF, *World Karate Day*] differs from the day appointed in Okinawa (25<sup>th</sup> October). Of the three major Okinawan karate styles,<sup>9</sup> only one, Goju-ryu, is recognized by the WKF.<sup>10</sup> Such is the scale of the forces that traditional Okinawan karate has to counter-image.

The question is then a matter of *realpolitik*; in other words, about the possibilities of regional karate actors to profile and benefit from national and global socio-economic processes that, despite built upon this Okinawan heritage, outreach their control. The construction of an Okinawa karate tourism industry is conditioned by global factors and determined by national policies and instruments. This government-regulated plan for the global branding of Okinawan karate may seek to rebal-

<sup>9</sup> *Shorin-ryu*, *Goju-ryu* and *Uechi-ryu*,

<sup>10</sup> Besides *Goju-ryu*, the WKF establishes as traditional karate the *Shito-ryu*, *Shotokan* and *Wado-ryu*, styles developed in Japan from 1930 onwards. Actually, *Shito-ryu*, *Shotokan* were founded by Okinawan masters, Funakoshi Gichin (1868-1957) and Mabuni Kenwa (1889-1952) respectively, that migrated to the mainland prior to WWII. Moreover, the WKF seems to have little interest for *kobudo*, commonly known as *karate* traditions with weapons, which is an integral part of the martial arts practice in Okinawa. A search of the term “kobudo” at the WKF site returns zero results.

ance the equilibrium of power over karate; and clear results from the institutional acknowledgment that this martial art has been, in fact, a common element of the Okinawan touristic landscape and gaze, especially for millions of karate fans.

A heightened worldwide consumption of karate as an Okinawan martial art, through tourism, must redefine the distribution of financial revenues and incomes reporting increasing benefits to Japan's most southern Prefecture. Karate is a global public asset that nonetheless gains distinction and monetary value as far as it can be associated with the authenticity of its origins. Promoting Okinawa karate tourism will have a network effect, meaning that the more people recognize karate as Okinawan, the more valuable it becomes in economic terms.

Private small companies started the economic competition in the professionally organized karate tourism sector. Despite its late arrival, the entry of government partnered business initiatives is incrementing its institutional velocity, apparently less as a regulatory response than as a quasi-monopolistic approach. After all, what is at stake is which actors and territories will benefit most from the global commercial exploitation of karate.

Karate appears to the eyes of the regional and central governments as a neat tourism niche that can foster economic development and local revitalization. However, defining and promoting Okinawa as the birthplace of karate, and karate as Okinawan cultural tourism, must fulfill certain demands that imply acts of declassification and reclassification. It entails a backward re-invention of the tradition. In other words, recognizing and displaying karate as a local heritage, a feature that has been largely bypassed in previous times. This rebranding process necessarily unveils discomforts about autonomy, authenticity, and historical memory between the Okinawan conceptions of this martial art and the Japanese ones, bringing in at the same time confluent antagonisms in the general Japan-Okinawa relations [Gonzalez de la Fuente, Niehaus 2020].

It seems that karate as sports tourism is the axis supporting the Japanese state's attempts to oversize the national modernity upon the local tradition, blur its connotations, and depict a depoliticized significant. On the contrary, one must say that such articulation constructs a truly politicized one. Sports karate presents a peaceful cleansed metanarrative that lines up not only with Japan's national interests regarding the Okinawan tradition; but conveniently and mutually with supranational institutions as the WKF and mega-events like the Olympic games, which promote themselves via sports as a transnational culture of peace. Hereof Okinawa karate tourism may end up instilling a reproduction of the hegemonic image that converts Okinawa into a historically peaceful and welcoming exotic land.

On the other hand, progressively since the 90s, tourism in Okinawa, with its inexorable requirement

of engaging and showcasing the difference for drawing the consumer's desire attention, has been a substantial factor in the emergence of an inner and outer sense of the prefectural particularities. Actual numbers show that Okinawa is reaching the global tourist markets, including, of course, millions of karate practitioners and fans. Obviously, the archipelago's popular and touristic characterizations rooted in the Okinawa boom assist national plans and private economic interests, commanded by real state inversions and the indigenous tropical resort stereotype. Still, these processes lead also to an awareness movement of the Okinawan cultural difference, enlivening appreciation, and political actions that are breaking the reproduction of previous categories of perception and structural power relations.

In this context, the current construction of the martial arts tourism industry in Okinawa sets the basis for a new global flow in the market placing of the archipelago as the emblematic land of karate, reterritorializing this Okinawan heritage, and conveying local history and criteria. The hegemonic narratives of karate disclosed by the Japanese state and the transnational organizations may tend to modulate and dampen the bulk of regional messages. However, it is impossible to completely control the disclosure of Okinawan karate meanings into the global markets. In fact, cultural markets are subject to a prerequisite of 'discovering' distinctness, which in conjunction with the multiplicity of information sources sharing and propagating Okinawan karate 'storified' messages, opens an opportunity for the local actors to influence global discourses.

During the last decades, Okinawan karate has become a device to rediscover a multiethnic and trans-cultural Japan via this global circulation of Japanese images, peoples, and commodities, a phenomenon considerably fostered by tourism, that has contributed to counter previous conceptions of Japan as a mono-cultural and monoethnic reality. In this sense, to interrogate the cultural history of karate is to interrogate the presumed social and cultural homogeneity of the Japanese, the ideology of the *nihonjinron* (theories on Japaneseness) that dominated the postwar period [Guarne, Hansen 2017]. Precisely since the 60s *nihonjinron* discourses capitalized on the cultural boom of karate covering the World to highlight the exceptionality of the Japanese identity and body politic. On the one hand, the ongoing propagation of Okinawan understandings of karate can serve to put in question what the underpinnings of being Japanese are. On the other, today karate constitutes an item used by Japanese policies on diversity and multiculturalism, which are officially designated as *tabunka kyosei* or "multicultural coexistence" [Guarne, Yamashita 2015], plus for nation-building and nation-branding Japan. Consequently, Okinawan karate, partially subsumed in a state system, continues to reinforce old hierarchies and hegemonies defining "a 'standard issue' Japanese

identity that is easily, clearly, and cleanly extractible from the nation's globalized, and ever-globalizing, reality" [Guarne, Hansen 2017: 8]. After all, despite many economic and cultural transformations, karate continues to embody, symbolize, and irradiate globally the dynamics of affinities and contrasts shaping the Japan – Okinawa bond.

Because the research presented here has its limitations, very pertinent questions remain to be clarified regarding karate tourism. These include for instance; the impact of institutional karate narratives produced from within the regional context, which are themselves selective; and the forcing of further standardization upon a cultural practice that comprises over 105 minor styles/schools and 350 dojo just in Okinawa alone [Okinawa Karate Information Center, *List of dojo in Okinawa*] in the guise of preservation. On another note, it is worth mentioning that scholars have begun to doubt the capacities of DMO to manage the tourism industries effectively in Japan [Nagai *et al.* 2018] which presupposes various uncertainties for the future of karate in Okinawa, which we have also seen administered by these types of organizations.

This article has sought to expose and analyze the current creation of a karate tourism industry in Okinawa catering to international visitors, and how it is grounded in the early postwar design of the Prefecture as a first-class Japanese and international tourist destination. The approach offered here intends to be an example of the academic possibilities of crossing martial arts studies and Okinawan studies to produce fruitful outcomes for both disciplines, demanding at the same time more academic attention to karate and Okinawa as reciprocal *explanandum* and *explanans*.

## Acknowledgments

The results here presented are derived from research stays conducted in 2018 and 2019 at The University of the Ryukyus and the Centro de Estudios de Asia y Africa at El Colegio de Mexico. I gratefully acknowledge the kind support of Professor Katsuyuki Miyahira during my stay in Okinawa, and Professors Satomi Miura and Michiko Tanaka during my stay in Mexico.

The author is a member of the Research Group GREGAL at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, which supported the research and publication of this article.

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## Odnowienie mapy karate: Turystyka sztuk walki na Okinawie

**Słowa kluczowe:** karate, turystyka sztuk walki, Okinawa, Japonia, tradycja, komercjalizacja

### Streszczenie

Tło. Od początku roku 2010 rząd Okinawy prowadzi znaczące działania mające na celu rozwój, profesjonalizację i promocję

turystyki karate na Okinawie, rozumianej jako istotny sektor dla gospodarki wyspy.

**Problem i cel.** Dotychczas nie przeprowadzono usystematyzowanych badań nad kształtem turystyki karate na Okinawie. Niniejszy artykuł oferuje kompleksowy przegląd historycznego rozwoju turystyki sztuk walki na Okinawie, omawiając najnowsze wydarzenia związane z karate jako niszą turystyczną sztuk walki i jej postępującą instytucjonalizację.

**Metoda.** Metoda badawcza prezentuje i analizuje korpus instytucjonalnych i publicznych źródeł informacji na temat turystyki karate dostępnych w sieci. Należy zauważyć, że obecność w sieci jest jednym z wiodących kierunków działań rządu Japonii i Okinawy, a tym samym stanowi cenny zasób informacji, co więcej, biorąc pod uwagę brak konkretnych odniesień naukowych w tym zakresie. W celu zbadania tematu w artykule wykorzystano literaturę akademicką dotyczącą turystyki sztuk walki oraz innych istotnych rodzajów turystyki sportowej i kul-

turowej, a także zbiór opracowań japońskich i okinawskich. Wyniki. Stworzenie oficjalnego przemysłu turystycznego karate na Okinawie jest odpowiedzią na japońskie plany gospodarcze i kulturalne, mające na celu przyciągnięcie większej liczby turystów do kraju, a tym samym zwiększenie ogólnych przychodów i wspieranie rewitalizacji regionu. Jednakże okinawskie karate jako sztuka walki i sektor turystyczny jest również uwarunkowane przez potężne czynniki globalne i transnarodowe nałożone na lokalne interesy.

**Wnioski.** Turystyka karate jest aktywnie promowana przez rząd japoński i rząd prefektury Okinawy jako forma turystyki sztuk walki, łącząca aspekty kulturowe i sportowe. Pomimo tej zbieżności celów ekonomicznych, istnieją hierarchiczne napięcia, ponieważ okinawskie i kontynentalne definicje tradycyjnego karate i jego kulturowego znaczenia różnią się, co wymusza debatę na temat obecnego procesu instytucjonalizacji turystyki karate.