



History of the Pinan Kata



The Pinan were originally created by 'Anko' Yasutsune Itosu Sensei in 1905.

The word 'Pinan' historically has been translated as 'Peaceful Mind' in Karate, but more recent research has confirmed the correct translation should be "Safe from Harm".

Pinan(Heian) is written using two characters. The first character (平) is pronounced "ping" in Chinese Mandarin and the Okinawan dialect, and "hei" in Japanese. The character originates from a pictogram denoting plants floating on the top of water and means "flat, level, even; peaceful, clam".

The second character (安), which is pronounced "an" in all the languages mentioned, originates from a pictogram denoting a woman underneath a roof and means "peaceful, tranquil, quiet, content".

However, when these characters are combined (平安) things get interesting. Read on! In Japanese, the two characters together would be pronounced as "Heian" and translate as "peace and tranquillity". Although, in Chinese they mean something very different!

The characters used for writing "Pinan" and "Heian" mean "safety" or "safe and sound". Similar translations "safe from danger" and "safe from harm" are used by speakers of Mandarin. These translations all communicate the same sentiment and are in effect interchangeable. It is commonly used in China when seeing someone off.

Anko Itosu Sensei most probably would have used and meant "safe from harm" when naming the kata, he created, to honour the Okinawan and Chinese roots of his karate, and not use the translation from mainland Japan.

TŌDE (CHINA HAND)

Similarly, at the time Itosu Sensei created the Pinan series, "karate" was written in Okinawa using the characters for "Chinese" (pronounced "Kara" or "to") and "hand" (pronounced "te" or "de") 唐手 giving us the reading "Tōde".

KARATE (EMPTY HAND)

It was when the art spread to Japan that the character for "empty" (which can also be pronounced as "Kara") 空 was widely substituted, in order to make the art easier to promote in mainland Japan, as it indicated that the Japanese wished to develop the combat form in Japanese style, and differentiate from the Okinawan and Chinese roots. Thus, it became "Karate".

So, it would make natural sense that the characters Itosu Sensei also used for Pinan would follow the same principle, and so it would mean "Safe from Harm", rather than "peaceful mind." Which makes even more sense if you practice the kata, as there is nothing peaceful about them, but the Bunkai included will keep you safe from harm!

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