



# Wang Shu in Tang Soo Do

*A short white paper on what can be stated with confidence,  
what remains tradition, and why that distinction matters*

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## Executive summary

My conclusion is straightforward. Wang Shu in Tang Soo Do is best understood as a Korean preservation of an older Okinawan kata usually called Wanshu or Wansu, later renamed Enpi or Empi in Japanese karate. The strongest evidence supports an Okinawan to Japanese to Korean transmission line. The name is traditionally linked to the Qing envoy Wang Ji, who is historically documented as having visited Ryukyu in 1683, but the exact claim that he personally created the kata cannot be proven with certainty.

## Why this question deserves a careful answer

In martial arts, stories travel quickly and certainty often arrives long before evidence does. That is especially true with the form we call Wang Shu. Over the years, many practitioners have heard some version of the same claim: that this is an ancient Korean form, or that it was directly created by a Chinese master named Wang Ji and then passed intact into Tang Soo Do. The historical record does not support those stronger versions.

What it does support is more interesting and, in my view, more honest. The form belongs to a long chain of transmission. It is tied to older Okinawan karate, later appears clearly in Japanese karate under the name Enpi, and then survives in Korean systems such as Tang Soo Do under names like Wang Shu and Yun Bi. The story is not weaker because it is complicated. It is stronger because we can actually trace most of it.

## What can be stated with confidence

First, the broader environment matters. Karate was systematized in Okinawa and then imported into Japan in the 1920s. That much is standard history and gives us the larger framework in which forms like Wanshu were transmitted and renamed. In modern Tang Soo Do, many forms likewise entered Korea through postwar karate-influenced kwan traditions rather than through an unbroken purely Korean kata line.

Second, Wang Ji is a real historical figure. Multiple historical and museum sources identify him as a Qing envoy connected with Ryukyu in 1683. That matters because it confirms that the name behind the tradition is not fictional or legendary in the loose sense. There really was a Wang Ji, and he really was tied to Ryukyu in the right period.

Third, the kata lineage itself is best documented in Okinawan and Japanese usage. In Okinawan karate the form appears as Wanshu or Wansu. In Japanese Shotokan it appears as Enpi or Empi. The

Japan Karate Association still lists Enpi in its official technical material and describes its movement quality as suggestive of a swallow's flight.

Fourth, Tang Soo Do preserves the form under Korean naming. Modern Tang Soo Do references continue to identify Yun Bi as having originally been called Wang Shu, and technical terminology references list Wang Shu in Korean usage along with the hanja associated with the name.

## **Where the uncertainty begins**

The traditional claim is that Wang Ji either taught the methods that became Wanshu or inspired the kata so strongly that it was named after him. That tradition may preserve a real memory, but it should still be presented as tradition, not as settled fact. The problem is not that Wang Ji did not exist. He did. The problem is that the surviving evidence does not let us prove that he personally authored the kata in the exact form later practiced in Okinawa, Japan, and Korea.

That distinction is important. Martial arts history is often passed through oral tradition, translation shifts, and later retellings. If we say too much, we stop doing history and start repeating folklore as if it were documentation. A better approach is to say that the name and tradition point toward Wang Ji, while the actual technical development of the form almost certainly took place through later Okinawan practice and adaptation.

## **The Okinawan bridge**

Several karate historians and technical writers note that Wanshu circulated in Okinawan traditions closely associated with Tomari-te. They also note that two branches are commonly discussed in later karate literature: Matsumura-Wanshu and Itosu-Wanshu. Even if every detail of that branching cannot be reconstructed with perfect precision, the larger point is clear. By the time the form enters the modern karate record, it is already an Okinawan kata with variant lines of transmission.

That matters for Tang Soo Do practitioners. It means Wang Shu should not be treated as something that appeared whole and unchanged in Korea. It is better understood as a form that had already lived, adapted, and differentiated in Okinawan practice before later being carried forward by Japanese and Korean systems.

## **From Wanshu to Enpi, then into Tang Soo Do**

The Japanese stage of the story is one of the most verifiable parts. Gichin Funakoshi renamed a number of kata as karate moved from Okinawa into mainland Japan, and Wanshu became Enpi or Empi in Shotokan usage. The Japan Karate Association's technical manual preserves both the name and the form's characteristic imagery, describing movements suggestive of the flight of a swallow.

Tang Soo Do then carries forward this family of forms under Korean naming. Some groups still use Wang Shu. Others prefer Yun Bi, often translated in relation to the swallow image that became prominent in Japanese naming. That is why Tang Soo Do schools sometimes inherit both an older name and a later interpretive meaning. The form is the same family, but the naming history carries layers from different cultures and periods.

## My conclusion

If I were explaining this to students, listeners, or readers on a website, I would put it this way: Wang Shu in Tang Soo Do is not best understood as an originally Korean form. It is best understood as the Tang Soo Do preservation of an older Okinawan kata, Wanshu, later transmitted through Japanese karate as Enpi and retained in Korean martial arts under names such as Wang Shu and Yun Bi.

And if I wanted to go one step further, I would add this: the traditional link to Wang Ji should be respected, but it should also be described carefully. He is historically documented. His connection to Ryukyu is real. His direct authorship of the kata, however, remains a matter of tradition rather than proof.

For me, that does not diminish the form. It deepens it. Wang Shu becomes more than a single-origin legend. It becomes a living example of how martial knowledge moves across cultures, languages, and generations, while still keeping a memory of where it may have begun.

## Practical teaching note

For modern instructors and content creators, the safest and most responsible summary is this: the form's historical line is Chinese association, Okinawan development, Japanese renaming, and Korean preservation. That wording stays faithful to the strongest evidence while leaving room for tradition where the record remains incomplete.

## References

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3. Tokyo National Museum, Heritage of Ryukyu exhibition list. Lists a poem by Wang Ji dated about 1683, further confirming Wang Ji as a documented historical figure connected to Ryukyu.
4. Japan Karate Association, Technical Manual for the Instructor. Lists Enpi among established Shotokan kata and describes movements suggestive of the flight of a swallow.
5. Budo no Kukyo, "Kata Focus - Enpi" by Dermot O'Keefe. Summarizes the commonly transmitted karate history that Wanshu developed in Okinawan practice, that Matsumura-Wanshu and Itosu-Wanshu are later branches, and that Funakoshi renamed the kata Enpi.
6. Western Tang Soo Do Federation, "Hyungs (Forms)." Notes that Yun Bi was originally named Wang Shu in Tang Soo Do usage.
7. Wilton Martial Arts, Terminology Reference PDF. Lists Wang Shu, the Korean reading, and the associated hanja, with cited book references including Hwang Kee, Ho Sik Pak, and Gichin Funakoshi.
8. Wikipedia, "Tang Soo Do." Used only for the narrow point that early Tang Soo Do kwans were founded by practitioners who had studied Okinawan karate, and that many Tang Soo Do forms

were taken mainly from Japanese Shotokan karate. This source should be treated as supporting context, not as primary evidence.

## Source URLs for verification

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