

Oishi Shinkage-ryū Kenjutsu

By Morimoto Kunio and Andrew Bryant

Introduction:

Oishi Shinkage-ryū kenjutsu (大石神影流劍術) originated in the *Yanagawa-han* (柳河藩) during the late Edo Period, spreading throughout southern Japan based on the notoriety of its founder, *Oishi Susumu Tanetsugu* (大石進種次), and his son, *Oishi Susumu Tanemasa* (大石進種昌). Both won many *shiai* (試合) duels and became famous for these *taryū-jiai* (他流試合) matches against swordsmen of other schools and domains.

The exact date of the founding of Oishi Shinkage-ryū is unclear, but *mokuroku* and *denshō* (scrolls and documents) bearing the name of the school have been found, starting in 1842. It is thought that the founding of the school occurred sometime between 1837 and 1842.

Historical Roots:

The primary origins of the school are from *Aisu Kage-ryū tōjutsu* (愛洲陰流刀術), founded around 1490 by *Aisu Ikōsai Hisatada* (愛洲移香齋久忠) in southern Japan.

The Aisu Kage-ryū was brought to the Yanagawa Domain by *Murakami Ittō* (村上一刀) sometime in the early to middle 1700s. Murakami was a *rōnin* from the *Ōka* Domain and brought the art to the Yanagawa Domain, along with *Oshima-ryū* (大嶋流) school of *sōjutsu* (spear) and *Okuyama Shinkan-ryū jūjutsu*.

The Oshima-ryū sōjutsu was another school to influence Oishi Shinkage-ryū. The Oishi family were prominent Oshima-ryū sōjutsu instructors (*shihan*) to the Yanagawa clan and were tasked with guarding the border between the Yanagawa-han and the adjacent *Miike* Domain (三池藩) to the southeast. The Miike-han was a very small domain in the region and the Daimyō were relatives of the Yanagawa Daimyō. Because of this closeness between the two clans, the Oishi family also served positions as spear instructors within both domains.

The grandfather of the founder, *Oishi Yuken Tarobei Taneyoshi* (大石遊劔入道種芳), was born in 1742 and died in 1822, at the age of 80. He was adopted into the Oishi family and was previously named *Shiomi Matsuji*. He became a student of Murakami Ittō in Aisu Kage-ryū and received the *Kiri-mokuroku* (截目録) of the school in 1759 at the age of 17 years old. In 1765, Oishi Taneyoshi received *Menkyo Kaiden* (license of complete transmission in the art) in Aisu Kage-ryū from Murakami. In addition to Aisu Kage-ryū, he also held *Menkyo Kaiden* in Oshima-ryū Sōjutsu and was a *shihan* of the domain. After his retirement, he assumed the name of “*Yuken*” (遊劔), or roughly, ‘one who prays with a sword’.



Aisu Kage-ryū tōjutsu kiri-mokuroku of Oishi Yuken (courtesy of the Oishi Family)

The father of the founder (i.e., Oishi Susumu Tanetsugu) was born in 1772, and like Oishi Yuken, was also adopted into the Oishi family (from the *Tajiri* family). He assumed the name of *Oishi Tarobei Hachizaemon Taneyuki* (大石太郎兵衛尉種行) after adoption. His biological father was a friend of Oishi Yuken and also received Menkyo Kaiden in Aisu Kage-ryū from Murakimi Ittō. Oishi Taneyuki received Menkyo Kaiden in Aisu Kage-ryū from his father, as well as Menkyo Kaiden in Oshima-ryū. His position (job) in the clan was listed as “*Odai Kan Yaku*” (exact responsibilities of this position are unknown) as well as being a sōjutsu shihan. Oishi Taneyuki died in 1825 at 53 years of age.

Oishi Susumu Tanetsugu, The Founder:

Oishi Susumu Tanetsugu was the son of Oishi Taneyuki, and the founder of Oishi Shinkage-ryū kenjutsu. He was born in 1797 and died in 1863 (66 years of age). He was 210cm in height (approximately 7 feet tall). Like his father (Taneyuki) and grandfather (Taneyoshi) before him, he was an Oshima-ryū sōjutsu shihan of both the Yanagawa and Miike clans. Oishi Susumu received instruction in Aisu Kage-ryū from both his father and grandfather. It is said that he received Menkyo Kaiden directly from his grandfather, but is listed as receiving the transmission from his father on lineage charts and mokuroku.

Oishi Susumu is recorded as having a match (shiai) in 1822 with *Naganuma Musōemon* and his students. Naganuma was a Menkyo Kaiden of the so-called “*Nakanishi-ha*” *Ittō-ryū* (i.e., Ono-ha *Ittō-ryū*) from the *Nakatsu* Domain. The matches lasted for a period of eight days. For the first seven days, Naganuma let Oishi Susumu engage in matches with his disciples. On the eighth day, Naganuma fought Oishi Susumu himself. During the match, Oishi Susumu executed a thrust to Naganuma’s *men* (helmet), which broke through the iron cross-bars protecting his face and gouged out Naganuma’s eye, so that it was left hanging from the socket. One year later, Naganuma visited Oishi Susumu and became his student in Aisu Kage-ryū. It is further recorded that following his match with Naganuma, Oishi Susumu travelled to the *Kurume* Domain and engaged in matches with 40 samurai. None of the swordsmen could beat him.

Oishi Susumu was ordered to *Edo* (modern Tokyo) in 1832, and early in the year 1833 he engaged in taryū-jiai with swordsmen of other domains and schools. During these matches, no swordsman could best him. Of this period, Oishi Susumu wrote down in the terminal license (Menkyo Kaiden) of Oishi Shinkage-ryū, the *In-no-Maki* (陰之巻), that during these matches, “every thrust succeeded; every torso cut succeeded; and everyone surrendered”.

One of the most famous swordsmen Oishi Susumu engaged in taryū-jiai with at this time was *Otani Nobutomo Seiichiro* of the *Jikishinkage-ryū* (直心影流). It is said that under the influence of practice with the father of *Katsu Kaishū* (*Katsu Kokichi*), Otani changed the style of *Jikishinkage-ryū gekiken* from beginning in *jōdan-kamae* to starting in *chūdan-kamae*. The match between Oishi Susumu and Otani Nobutomo lasted two days. On the first day, Susumu’s thrust that had proven so successful in previous matches failed against Otani, because Otani swung his head from side-to-side to evade it. This first day ended in a draw between the two swordsmen. During that night, Susumu meditated and deeply considered how to defeat Otani, eventually gaining insight. On the 2nd-day, Susumu redirected his stab to Otani’s chin, rather than his face, and succeeded in besting Otani Seiichiro.



Grave of *Oishi Susumu Tanetsugu*
(courtesy of the Andrew Bryant)

According to the Oishi family, when Susumu returned to Yanagawa, he left Edo during the night over concerns he may be ambushed by those he defeated in taryū-jiai. Afterwards, many samurai in Edo began to use longer shinai, and the modern shinai was adopted over the previously used *fukuro-shinai* (leather covered bamboo sword). Within Oishi Shinkage-ryū, the proper length of shinai is measured from the ground to the height of one’s shoulder. Therefore, for Oishi Susumu, being just under seven feet tall, the use of a 160cm shinai (approximately 5.3-shaku) was likely appropriate, and consistent with the teachings of Aisu Kage-ryū.

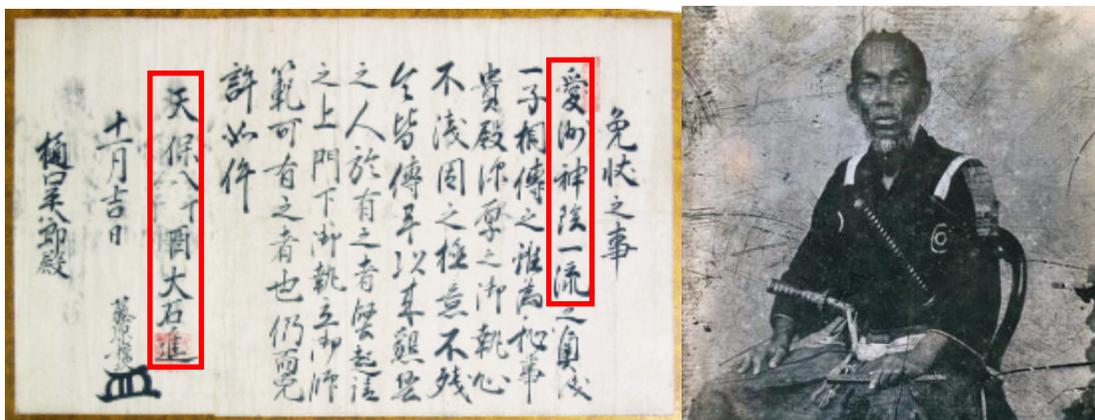
Oishi Susumu returned to Edo in 1838 and stayed for one year (until the same month in 1839). During his duty there, he was called in front of the *Shōgun’s* council of elders (*Rōjū*) by *Mizuno Tadakuni*, who was Daimyō of *Hamamatsu* Domain. There, Oishi Susumu was asked to demonstrate his school’s paired-forms practice (*kata-geiko*) and shiai because it was different from other schools. He was then asked to have matches against Mizuno Tadakuni’s own samurai, who all lost against him. Afterwards, Oishi Susumu was asked to have a match with a high-ranking subordinate of the Shōgun, *Iba Gumbei*, *Sōke* of *Shingyōtō-ryū* (心形刀流). After the match, Mizuno asked him to teach Gumbei. Mizuno also asked Oishi Susumu to engage in bouts against five samurai without a break. He beat them all. Next, Mizuno ordered sōjutsu

shiai (spear) against Susumu and none of the challengers could beat him with a spear. At the conclusion of the matches, Mizuno asked the victorious Oishi Susumu what his salary was. He answered “60-koku” of rice (very low for his fame). The other domain’s lords on the council were shocked and agreed his salary was too low. The lord of Yanagawa Domain subsequently agreed to raise Susumu’s salary to 100-koku. In reality, after his return to Yanagawa, this salary was reduced to 70-koku, “except in time of war”.

After his return home to *Shirogane-mura* (modern *Ōmuta City*) in 1839, Oishi Susumu continued to refine the techniques of *Aisu Kage-ryū*, making several improvements to the protective gear (*bōgu*) and *shinai* used in shiai. Based on all of his matches against various samurai (from 1822 onward) his “Oishi Shinkage-ryū” began to take shape. Undoubtedly, Susumu made changes to the existing techniques of *Aisu Kage-ryū* well before 1839, but documents bearing the name *Oishi Shinkage-ryū* exist from 1842 onwards.

Due to his prowess in *taryū-jiai*, Oishi Susumu’s fame spread throughout Japan, and he attracted many students. It is recorded in his *eimeiroku* (英名録) that he taught over 655 formal students. Of these, 233 students came from the *Kyushu* region (excluding those in the Yanagawa Domain); 71 from *Chūgoku*; 76 from *Shikoku*; 10 from the *Kinki* region; and 12 from various other regions. Out of the students from *Chugoku* (71), approximately 43 were members of the *Chōshū* Domain (from *Hagi-shi*), and of the 76 in *Shikoku*, 60 students were from the *Tosa* Domain (*Yamauchi-clan*). It is well known that *Oishi Shinkage-ryū* was taught in the *Tosa* Domain and was practiced by many samurai alongside the famous *Hasegawa Eishin-ryū* school of *iai* (sword-drawing).

Some of the most famous students of Oishi Susumu from *Tosa* were *Kataoka Kenkichi* (片岡 健吉), a renowned *Meiji-era* politician and former member of the *Tosa Jinshotai* (迅衝隊). Another famous *Tosa* student was *Higuchi Shinkichi* (樋口真吉). He became a student of Oishi Susumu at the age of 23 and was a close friend and biographer of *Sakamoto Ryōma*. Shinkichi received *Menkyo Kaiden* from Oishi Susumu in “*Aisu Shinkage Ichi-ryū*” (愛洲神陰一流) in *Tenpō 8*, or the year 1837. It is said that he taught around 1,000 students various military arts (including *kenjutsu*) in the *Hata* District.



Higuchi Shinkichi with “*Aisu Shinkage Ichi-ryū*” (愛洲神陰一流) *Menkyo Kaiden*

After the Founder:

Oishi Susumu's successor was his son, *Oishi Susumu Tanemasa* (大石進種昌). By all historical accounts, Tanemasa was close to the equal of his father. He was born in 1824 and died in 1878. In addition to being the successor of Oishi Shinkage-ryū, he held Menkyo Kaiden in Oshima-ryū sōjutsu and continued the family tradition as a shihan in the Yanagawa Domain.

In 1852, Tanemasa traveled to teach in the Tosa Domain. While there, *Yoshida Tōyō* (吉田東洋), founder of the famous *Chidōkan* (致道館), became a student of Oishi Tanemasa. Yoshida was a pivotal figure in Tosa and influential minister of the domain. He was ordered by *Daimyō Yamauchi Toyoshige* (山内豊信) to modernize the domain in 1853. He was assassinated in 1862 during the *Tosa Kinnoto* incident by conservative activists. Yoshida described Tanemasa's kenjutsu in terms of western science, where "it is ever changing and evolving into a new and more refined form of swordsmanship".

Under the influence of Oishi Tanemasa, many samurai of Tosa began using *tsuki* and *dōgiri* in shiai, or thrusting and cutting techniques against the face, throat, and torso of the opponent.

It was written that Tanemasu used *jōdan-kamae* (overhead posture), *shinken-kamae* (middle level posture, or *chūdan*), and a variation of *chūdan-kamae*, unique to Oishi Shinkage-ryū, called *tsuke-kamae* (a position that is slightly more open in *hanmi* than *chūdan-kamae* with the rear hand cupping the *kashira* of the hilt).

In 1849, by the order of the Yanagawa Daimyō, Tanemasa traveled to Edo. During his tenure in Edo he engaged in taryū-jiai like his father and defeated many opponents. One of his most famous matches was against *Chiba Eijirō*, son of *Chiba Shusaku*, the founder of *Hokushin Itto-ryū* (北辰一刀流) who was well-known for his skill in swordsmanship.

He also won a match against *Monoī Sōhachirō* (桃井直正), 4th successor of *Kyōshin Meichi-ryū* (鏡新明智流), a very famous school of the *Bakumatsu* period (1853-1868). The *Shigakukan* of *Kyōshin Meichi-ryū* was one of the most prominent dōjō in Edo at the time.

In 1851, Tanemasa was ordered to return to Edo. On May 19th, the Daimyō of *Tsu* Domain called for a match. During this official shiai, he had a rematch with *Monoī Sōhachirō* and won again. He was also victorious in a match with *Amano Shōsō*, student of *Otani Seiichiro*.

After the death of Oishi Tanemasa, his youngest brother, *Oishi Yukie* (大石雪江) assumed leadership of the school.



Oishi Yukie (courtesy of the Oishi Family)

Oishi Yukie was born in 1839 and received the *Kiri-mokuroku* (截目録, “half-catalog”, the shōden level) of Oishi Shinkage-ryū from his father, Oishi Susumu in 1854. Later, he received the *Yō-no-Maki* (陽之巻, “Sun Scroll”, the chūden level) of the school from his brother, Oishi Tanemasa in the year 1858. During this period, Yukie traveled to teach kenjutsu in *Takeo-ryo* within the *Saga Domain* in the northwest part of Kyushu. Yukie received the *In-no-Maki* of Oishi Shinkage-ryū in 1868.

During the Meiji Restoration he participated in the *Boshin Civil War* (1868-69) against the *Shōgunate* (i.e., Bakamatsu). In 1870 (after the Meiji Restoration), he went on a *kaikoku (musha) shugyō* (traveling/warrior pilgrimage) in *Saga* and *Kurume Prefectures*, engaging in many matches with former samurai. In 1880, after the retirement of Oishi

Tanemasa, Yukie became headmaster (i.e., sōke) of the *Oishi Dōjō* and taught both kenjutsu and *Oshima-ryū sōjutsu*. Two years later, Oishi Tanemasa died in 1878. Yukie himself passed away in 1904 at the age of 65.

After Oishi Yukie, the school passed to someone outside of the Oishi family, Itai Masumi (板井真澄), who was a student of both Tanemasa and Yukie. Itai was born in 1854 and was a son of a prominent shihan of *Kagawa Nen-ryū Kenjutsu* and *Hōzōin-ryū sōjutsu* in the *Yanagawa Domain*. He received the *In-no-Maki* of Oishi Shinkage-ryū at the age of 30 from Yukie and *Imamura Hiryokado* (a senior shihan at the Oishi Dōjō). Itai lived in the Oishi home in *Shirogane-mura* (i.e., Ōmuta-shi) and took care of Tanemasa’s grandson, because his own adopted son (son-in-law) and biological daughter both died young. He also became caretaker of the Oishi Shinkage-ryū and Oishi Dōjō during this time. He died in 1936.

The Modern Era:

After Itai Masumi’s death, Oishi Tanemasa’s grandson, *Oishi Hajime* (大石一) taught Oishi Shinkage-ryū as the 5th headmaster. Hajime was born in 1872, and died in 1951. He was raised by Itai Masumi, who also taught Hajime kenjutsu. During his life in Ōmuta City, he was an elementary school principal and mayor of *Miyabe Village*. He had over 800 formal kenjutsu students. Unfortunately, Hajime had not learned the complete curriculum of the *Oshima-ryū* and did not teach it, so it died out in the Oishi Dōjō.

After Oishi Hajime, his grandson, Oishi Eiichi (大石英一) became the 6th headmaster of the school. He also became the ward of his grandfather (Oishi Hajime) after his father died when Eiichi was a baby. Oishi Eiichi’s education in the family’s tradition of kenjutsu was rather strict,

and he studied everyday with Hajime after returning home from school. Oishi Eiichi became a hotel proprietor in his professional life and is presently retired at the age of 82 years old. In addition to teaching Oishi Shinkage-ryū, he was a prominent Kendō teacher in Ōmuta City. The current sōke (7th) is Ms. *Oishi Kei* (大石馨), the granddaughter of Oishi Eiichi. She assumed the position of sōke during a special ceremony held on April 20, 2008.



Itai Masumi with Members of the Oishi Family
(courtesy of the Itai Family)



Oishi Hajime with Members of the Oishi Family
(courtesy of the Itai Family)

The most senior student of Oishi Eiichi is *Morimoto Kunio* (森本邦生), who received In-no-Maki from Eiichi in 2010. Morimoto sensei is currently the only active shihan of Oishi Shinkage-ryū kenjutsu teaching students in his *Kanōkan* (貫汪館) school, located in *Hatsukaichi*, southwest of Hiroshima. In addition to Oishi Shinkage-ryū, Morimoto Sensei is the successor of *Musō Shinden Eishin-ryū lai-heihō* (無雙神傳英信流拔刀兵法), and 5th successor to *Shibukawa Ichi-ryū Jujutsu* (澁川一流柔術). Morimoto Sensei holds *Kyōshi* in both *Jukendō* and *Tankendō* (fixed and unfixed bayonet), and served in the *Japan Air Self-Defense Force* (JASDF) as a commissioned officer. He is currently a member of the *Nihon Kobudō Kyōkai*, *Nihon Kobudō Shinkōkai*, and prestigious *Japanese Academy of Budō*, of which he serves as the Shikoku Branch director.

Curriculum of Oishi Shinkage-ryū:

Within the Oishi Shinkage-ryū, the training swords (*bokutō*) utilized for practice are standardized. The *ōdachi* is 3.8 shaku (*tsuka*, or handle, is 9-sun, 5-bu), and the *kodachi* measures 1.8 shaku (*tsuka* is 4-sun, 5-bu). *Saya* (scabbards) with *sageo* (utility cord) are utilized with both long and short swords. These must be made by the user due to the unique size and shape of the wooden training swords.

There are a total of 80, formal, pre-arranged forms in the school, called “*tekazu*” (手数), which are divided between several sets. The first set of *tekazu* students are taught is named the *Shiaiguchi* (試合口) set, or “Opening Match”. Although, to an outsider, the movements of this

set of five forms seem rather basic, many of the deepest teachings of the school are contained within the Shiaiguchi (not an uncommon practice among the various *kobudō* schools).

In this set, students focus on the *kihon* (fundamentals) of *shisei* (posture), *te-no-uchi* (sword grip), *kamae* (sword postures), *kokyū* (breathing), *munenmusō* (clear mind), and *wa* (unity, or harmony with the partner).

A unique feature of this set of basic techniques is *kurai wo miru* (位をみる), in which the *shitachi* (protagonist) and *uchitachi* (receiving sword, or “antagonist”) attempt to control center when their swords cross in *chūdan-kamae* at *issoku-ma* (distance of a single step). Incidentally, this is now common practice in modern *Kendō*. Within the Oishi Shinkage-ryū, *kurai wo miru* allows the student to begin development of their own *seika-tanden* (躰下丹田), or body’s center, and with time, feel the *seika-tanden* of the *uchitachi*.

Among the basic cuts and thrusts of Shiaiguchi, there is also an important technique of the school learned by students called *Haru* (張る). This is a deflecting and *suriotoshi* (downward sliding/camming) movement used in many of the techniques found within the school and teaches the important, and subtle use of *te-no-uchi*, or the sword grip.

After the Shiaiguchi, students are introduced to the *Yō-no-Omote* (陽之巻) and *Yō-no-Ura* (陽之裏) sets. Each of these contain ten *tekazu*. Along with the Shiaiguchi, these sets form the three foundational sets of the school. Therefore, students of the tradition practice these 25 paired-forms more than any others (regardless of initiation into the ryū). The *Yō-no-Omote* introduces students of the school to intermediate techniques, including the use of *Noru* (乗る), or a suppressing and covering movement that ends many of the techniques in this set. This movement utilizes correct *te-no-uchi*, and most importantly, proper use of the *seika-tanden*. The companion set of the *Yō-no-Omote* is the *Yō-no-Ura* set. This set continues to introduce students to intermediate teachings of the ryū, but emphasizes the importance of *wa* (和), or unity/harmony with the *uchitachi*.



Andrew Bryant (left) & Morimoto Kunio Sensei (right)

After the *Yō-no-Omote* and *Yō-no-Ura* sets, students are initiated into the *Sangakuen-no-Tachi*, or “Sword of Three Teachings” (三學圓之太刀). Correct execution of the *tekazu* found in this set requires a significantly more refined use of *te-no-uchi*, power generation from the *seika-tanden*, and *kaiten taisabaki* (回転体捌き), or rotational movement around the vertical axis of the body.

Within the Oishi Shinkage-ryū, intermediate level students learn additional weapons, including the *yari* (spear), *bō* (stick/staff), and *naginata* (halberd), as well as sword drawing techniques (*saya-no-uchi*), the use of two-swords together (*nitō*, long-and-short swords), and the *kodachi*, or short sword alone.

For advanced students, the techniques of the founder are studied in the *Tengu-no-shō* (天狗抄), or “Teachings of the Winged Goblin”. These teachings are based on the practical techniques Oishi Susumu used to win many taryū-jiai matches (and likely refined by his son, Oishi Tanemasa, and grandson, Oishi Yukie). They are simple techniques on the surface but require mastery of all the previous kihon to be executed correctly.

The final set of teachings are the most important, and only taught to the highest-level students who receive the terminal license (menkyo kaiden) of the school, or “In-no-Maki”. This set is named the *Shindensaiso* (神傳截相) and includes 13 tekazu that focus on the use of the mind and complete unity with the opponent.

Licensing System:

Licensing in the school includes three levels of initiation and formal licensing. They are: *Shōden Kiri-mokuroku* (初伝截目録 Initial Transmission, “Half Catalog”), *Chūden Yō-no-Maki* (中伝陽之巻, Middle Transmission, “Sun Scroll”), and *Menkyo Kaiden In-no-Maki* (免許皆伝陰之巻, License of Complete Transmission, “Moon Scroll”). The final scroll is awarded following the student’s satisfactory initiation into the essence of the aforementioned Shindensaiso of Oishi Shinkage-ryū.



Oishi Shinkage-ryū shiai

Legacy of Shiai (Shinai-geiko):

Finally, in addition to the formal kata-geiko of the school, students of Oishi Shinkage-ryū also maintain the school’s tradition of engaging in free-practice with protective armor (*bōgu*) and bamboo swords (*shinai*), or *shinai-geiko*. Practice is conducted in the manner of Edo-period shiai, which is quite different from modern Kendō shiai. In this practice, the swordsmen do not run past each other when executing cuts, but maintain *zanshin*, with their *kensen* (sword tip) brought to the opponent’s face after a successful cut or thrust. Further, no judges or referees are employed, as shinai-geiko in the school is not viewed as a sporting activity. Students attempt to utilize the *waza* (or *gihō*;

techniques) of Oishi Shinkage-ryū and each swordsman is responsible for admitting defeat when their partner executes a clean cut or thrust.

Conclusion:

Today, the Oishi Shinkage-ryū is a very small and close-knit school, practiced in only a few places around the world. In fact, up until a few years ago, it was taught and practiced almost exclusively in Hiroshima Prefecture (Hatsukaichi) by Morimoto Kunio Sensei, with a few branches in southern Japan. Morimoto Sensei has slowly opened practice to a few students around the world, most notably, in Australia, England, the United States, and Trinidad and Tobago. Without his efforts, the school would likely have faded away. Given its historical importance in the early development of what became modern Kendō (shinai-geiko), this would have been a tremendous loss. Fortunately, the school continues to survive, thanks to the efforts of Morimoto Kunio Sensei.

End.