Bassai Hyung History

Most Hyung have well defined origins. Bassai, one of the most (if not the most) common form across the martial arts, has a history clouded in mystery and speculation. After researching the history of this form, herein I present some of the most common beliefs as to where this form originated, how it spread and what it means. Nobody can be certain, these are just some thoughts, observations and opinions concerning one of the most dynamic forms in martial arts history.

First, let’s talk about the name.

Okinawan, Japanese, and Korean styles know this form though various names: Bassai, Passai, Bal Se, Pal Che, Palsek, Bal Sae, Ba Sa Hee, Bal Sak, and Bal-Chae. Although there is some tendency for Okinawan styles to use Bassai and Japanese to use Passai, this is not a hard fast rule. Korean styles may use any of the names listed above.

So the name is not based on the country of origin for particular styles. Even individuals may change their opinion over time. Gichin Funakoshi, founder of Shotokan Karate, used the name Passai in his book in 1922 but in 1936 changed his identification of the form to Bassai.

Confusing enough? For sake on consistency, and because of my belief of the lineage of the style, I will refer to the form as Bassai throughout this document. At least I can agree with myself on that.

Now that we've settled on the name (or not), what does the name mean?

Chang Shi Ja Hwang Kee believed that the original name was Pal Che, interpreting that as “collection of the best choice” – Pal means “best selection” and Che means “to collect”. But Pal also means “fast” so some interpret the name as “Collection of Fast Moves”.

One researcher, Akio Kinjo, believes that the name of this form in Chinese means 'leopard-lion’, and was pronounced as 'baoshi' in Manderine, 'Baasai' in the Fushou dialect and 'pausa' in Quan Shous dialect (kinjo 1999). Kinjo, a respected researcher, believes that the movements of the kata also resemble leopard boxing of China.

The Japanese would pronounce this baoshi as Batsu-Sai. Batsu means “pull out or extract”. In Chinese, Ba means to “seize or capture” and Sai means a “fort or place of strategic importance”. The 1973 translation of Karate-do Kyohan lists Funakoshi’s explanation of the form name as “Breaking through an enemy's fortress.” The most common interpretation of the name Bassai seems to be to penetrating or breaking through a fortress. For reasons discussed later, I am divided between the two concepts of “breaking through a fortress” and “extracting from a fortress” although both are intimately related as we shall see.
Where did Bassai originate?

As previously stated, Akio Kinjo believes that Bassai reflects the influence of the Leopard Boxing and/or Lion Boxing styles of Kung Fu associated with Guangdong and Fujian Provinces. Other historians have noticed the resemblance between some parts of Passai and Wuxing Quan ("Five Element Fist") of Xingyi Quan Kung Fu. Others suggest a connection between Bassai and Crane Boxing from the Southern Shaolin temple in Fujian Provence. These theories all seem to agree on the Fujian Provence Southern Shaolin Temple as being the place of origin.

Evidence of this Chinese origin is seen from form initiation – the right fist covered by the left open hand. This was common to many Chinese forms and was a popular greeting by the Chinese people. Additionally, the fast flowing movements are typical of Southern Shaolin forms as opposed to the “hard” movements from the Northern Temple styles.

If most agree Bassai came from one source, Fujian Provence, why are there so many different versions?

The reasons for so many different versions is that there was not just one path of development of this form. While most agree that Bassai originated in Fujian Provence, there are at least three different routes whereby Bassai came to the martial arts. Each of these routes had different emphasis, influenced and modified in deference to their newly associated styles.

The first route (Shuri Passai) involves Sokon “Bushi” Matsumora – founder of Shorin Ryu. Matsumura studied under Sakagawa (Okinawan) and Kusanku (Chinese) yet there is no evidence that either one of these taught any version of Bassai. Matsumura also studied under Takara Peichin and Ason and had trained with Iwah for many years. Iwah came back from China to Okinawa with Matsumura and helped train Okinawan martial arts practitioners. Matsumura also trained with Annan – a shipwrecked Chinese sailor from whom, or in honor of whom, it is postulated that the Chinto Form was developed by Matsumura.

As a result of the heavy Chinese influence in his training, the Matsumura version of Bassai was light and fast, using broad, circular sweeping motions as opposed to the more direct, power oriented movements of other versions. Typical of the Sokon Matsumura style of Suri-Te, emphasis was placed on using the hip to generate speed and power in the techniques. This style of Bassai was passed on through his grandson Nabe Matsumura and his, perhaps, most famous student - Ankoh Itosu (Master Idos).

Itosu also passed this form on to his greatest student, Gichin Funakoshi. Funakoshi was the founder of Shotokan Karate and a student of Ankoh Itosu and Ankoh Asato. This version is sometimes referred to as “Japanese Passai”.

The second major route of Bassai (Tomari Passai) was passed down through Teruya Kishin from Tomari. It has been stated by several historians that Kishin learned the Bassai form from a Chinese martial artist residing in Tomari, Annan, but others say that he had traveled to China and learned the form during his training there. Regardless of which version is correct (most references support the first theory), Kishin passed the form down to Matsumora Kosaku and Oyadomari Kokan. The Kishin version was more “Okinawanized” - that is, the emphasis was more on fast, direct, powerful movements as opposed to the light, flowing movements in the Sokon Matsumura version.
Another lesser known version, Nakamura Passai, came through Nakamura Shigeru. Nakamura was a student of Choki Motobu and Choyu Motobu.

Choyu Motobu, older brother of Choki Motobu, was born in Shuri studied under, among others, Sokon Matsumura. Choki Motobu studied under Sokon Matsumura and, at times, Ankoh Itoh, Sakuma Pechin, Kosaku Matsumora and Tokumine Pechin.

Choki Motobyu had a little less of a structured martial arts lineage and was more of a street fighter. That having been said, he was excellent in his performance because he tested his technique on the streets. His instructors were varied – first was Kosaku Matsumora from whom he learned Tomari Passai and Naihanchi kata. He then studied briefly under Ankoh Itoh and then Tokumine Pechin.

I think two predominant reasons for the proliferation of Bassai is that, first, it is a very dynamic form and, second, it spread out through Okinawa. Okinawa is small and had three major martial arts hubs at this point in history – Shuri, Tomari and Naha. One could easily travel from one area to the other with minimal expenditure of time or effort – all three situated within about a 1 ½ mile radius. There were many “Masters” there and three budding martial arts styles – Shuri-Te, Tomari-Te and Naha-Te. Investigating the training history of any of the masters of that day and we find that they all trained with each other or had one or more instructors in common. What is also important is that the underlying movements of these styles were really not that different – they just had different emphasis of technique.

What is Bassai all about?

As noted earlier I think there are a few interpretations of the name Bassai that seem to embody the bunkai of Bassai. I said that the translation I prefer is along the lines of “Extracting from a Fortress” or “Penetrating a Fortress”.

The reason the “Extracting from a Fortress” makes sense is that Sokon “Bushi” Matsumura was the chief martial arts instructor and the body guard for the 17th, 18th and 19th kings of the Ryukyu Sho Dynasty (Sho Ko, Sho Iku and Sho Tai). A bodyguard for a king, especially during a time of occupation, would always be concerned about having to defend the castle and possibly remove the king to safety in the event of an attack.

The latter definition, “Penetrating a Fortress”, likewise makes sense if the king (or other officials) had been captured and a rescue attempt was warranted.

Extracting from a Fortress:

The article from bunkajitsu (listed in the references) has a good explanation of this theory. In short, your castle has been attacked and you are surrounded by people attempting to either capture or kill the king. As in the first part of the form, your movements will be fast, “blocking” movements used as strikes or ways to release the grip of anyone that has grabbed you. You will use your movement to disrupt them and reach anyone who may have a weapon before they have time to load. You are constantly changing direction, attacking whoever you can easily reach – you are attacking the attackers! Although these seem to be defensive (blocking) movements, they are actually striking techniques and this is a very aggressive, offensive form as would be necessary to protect a king and extract him from the attempted siege.
*Penetrating a Fortress:*

Similarly, if you were attempting to rescue a captured king or other noble, you actions would be much the same – fast, multi-directional movement during the initial attack. As opponents are overcome or flee, you have few to fight and more space so your actions (and the form) increase movement in linear directions with multi-component attacks and defences.

*Penetrating the Opponent's Fortress:*

Another theory is that the “Fortress” is actually the body of your opponent and you job is to penetrate their defenses. Although an entirely different interpretation, I thought that this theory had merit and deserved as much consideration as the other theories. I like the idea but it does not support the movement of the form. Besides, isn't that the idea behind *all* techniques – to penetrate the opponents defense and secure victory in your offense?

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