

Wing Chun's Kicking Origins

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Walk into most Wing Chun schools around the world today and you get the strong impression that it's a martial art focusing almost exclusively on fast, short-range hand fighting techniques. But it wasn't always that way. In fact, Wing Chun has a number of maxim's extolling the equal importance of kicking, both in training and combat.

In Yip Man's own teachings, he was reported to have said, "In Wing Chun, we actually train our legs twice as hard as our hands. There is a saying in the martial arts: 'the hands are like swinging doors, the power comes from the legs,' meaning the hands are for opening, entering, contacting, distracting and controlling — the real attack comes from your legs."

Some of the old masters of the Wing Chun system clearly saw a special place for kicks in their fighting strategies, a role they deemed no lesser or inferior to that of their fists. This is because they believed that being skilled in kicking and having firm leg-control gave the Wing Chun fighter both dynamic balance and energetic footwork, along with the ability to launch "shadowless" kicks below an opponent's radar screen.

No one knows this better than Sifu Chow Tze-chuen, one of Yip Man's longest running students from the 1950s and 60s. Like many of his generation, Sifu Chow was introduced to Yip Man through his friends at the Kowloon Motor Bus Company. At the time, he had no special interest in martial arts, nor did he think there was anything particularly special about Wing Chun. But he felt it was his destiny to

be a Wing Chun adherent and disciple of Yip Man as a result of his personal relationships and chosen career.

Now 90 and only recently retired from teaching and running his own school in Kowloon, he was one of the “three musketeers” who helped Yip Man teach his classes. According to Sifu Chow, who studied with Yip Man for over six years, the typical class was not big, with less than 10 students at any time. Yip Man would teach students how to chisau in the early stages of training, but he typically would not chisau with them. He left that up to his senior students, but was always there to correct and guide.

One area where Sifu Chow was fortunate to have had direct training from Yip Man was in kicking, which earned him the moniker among his classmates, the “king of kicks” or “gerk wong” in Cantonese. Yip Man felt that because Sifu Chow was short, he should focus his training on kicking and footwork. Similar to Yip Man in build, the sifu was usually chosen as his partner when the grandmaster demonstrated Wing Chun kicks in class or in public.

He recalls that Yip Man’s kicking training was just as intense as that of hand fighting. One area he particularly focused on was hip power, which Yip Man considered the essence of the Wing Chun kick. To develop such power, Sifu Chow was taught to use a traditional rattan stick that, when bent, served as a kind of spring. The exercise involved pulling down on the stick with his kicking leg and then launching a kick onto the wooden dummy. He said that this was one of the mainstays of Yip Man’s kicking training.

Yip Man also taught Sifu Chow a range of other training techniques, with the basic conceptual premise being that the hands and legs were interchangeable. These included front and side kicking, solo leg kicking (facing front and kicking high, low, right and left), tan sau against jut gerk drills, sticking leg or chi gerk (similar to single-hand

chisau), continuous tan-gerk-fook low front kicks against the wooden dummy, plus all the kicking techniques in the wooden dummy sets, which he extrapolated to form a separate, single wooden dummy kicking form.

Sifu Donald Mak, the Chairman of the International Wing Chun Organizations (IWCO) in Hong Kong, has been one of Sifu Chow's longest running and closest students. He explained how the passing down of these techniques and training methods from Wing Chun elders was such an enigmatic yet rewarding experience, provided one had the patience.

As a student of Sifu Chow's from 1979 to 2000, Sifu Mak had asked him on many occasions how to best improve his Wing Chun kicking. For years, even after having completed the entire Wing Chun system, Sifu Mak never got an answer, until one day almost 10 years into his training, he was invited for private lessons on a Saturday afternoon. Sifu Chow started off with chi gerk training, followed by drilling (kwan sao against kicks), and a range of other methods Sifu Chow learned from Yip Man, including incorporating kicking and counter-kicking into chisau. Asked why he didn't teach kicking earlier, Sifu Chow simply responded, "If I had taught you earlier, you wouldn't have been able to control your legs."

Another area where Sifu Chow was known for excelling in Wing Chun was in his footwork. Many practitioners say Wing Chun has no footwork and in some schools it is even anathema to step back or retreat. Often, the extent of movement many schools teach is simple turning. But Sifu Chow has long been a strong advocate of the attributes of footwork in Wing Chun. He argues that, "There's already a lot of it in the wooden dummy. Bear in mind also that much of Wing Chun footwork is simply a combination of the two forms, Chum Kiu and Biu Jee, which already gives you both straight line and circular movements."

Sifu Chow learned his basic footwork from Yip Man, who had taught a form of “triangular footwork,” derived from Chum Kiu and Biu Jee. But the Sifu said he took Yip Man’s training one step further with the development of “complex patterns,” often drilling his students 20-30 minutes at a time in various footwork exercises. Sifu Chow is also a firm believer in training on the mui-fa-jong, which he learned from Yip Man. Often translated as “plum flower posts,” the mui-fa-jong is one of the oldest training tools in Chinese kung fu and can help practitioners improve their balance, stance, and angles of attack.

Interestingly, Sifu Chow never formally taught footwork to his students. At the beginning of every class, he would do his own footwork training solo, and it was up to students to come early and follow along if they wanted to learn this skill. Despite this, and largely owing to his own mastery of Wing Chun that served as a model, most of his students have been able to excel in both footwork and kicking.

But while kicking is his forte, Sifu Chow also has his other favorite Wing Chun techniques, such as jut sao. While it’s mainly a defensive technique, jut sao complements and pares nicely with other attacking techniques, said the Sifu. He thinks it’s best used as a way to distract your opponent while the other hand is launching an attack. Jut sao can also be used in combination with various kicking attacks in certain circumstances. His other favored technique is kwan sao as it’s good for covering oneself in really close range combat situations, while its use also creates many opportunities for attacking. Kwan sao also comes in various forms — for example, it can be more soft or absorbing or take on a more aggressive forward posture.

Asked what he thinks of Wing Chun or chisau competitions that are now popular in Hong Kong, China, and Europe, the Sifu said he believes that this is a good development for Wing Chun. He recalled

that similar competitions were quite common in the 1960s and 70s in Hong Kong. As early as 1971, the Hong Kong Chinese Martial Arts Association organized the first competition to test the standards of Wing Chun against other Chinese kung fu styles. The Ving Tsun Athletic Associations (VTAA) had also organized a competition among different Wing Chun schools. Some of Sifu Chow's own students competed and won a number of fights in those early days, and Sifu Chow himself suited up in protective equipment to train his students.

Sifu Chow formally stopped teaching in November 2014. His school in Sham Shui Po, a working class neighborhood in Kowloon, is now run by one of his students, but the "king of kicks" is not allowing us to forget easily Wing Chun's kicking origins. He still goes to his old school once every couple weeks to give guidance when he can and tries to keep in touch with his students both near and far.