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WING CHUN VISIONARY

Wan Kam Leung on challenge fights, the
Ip Man legend & Wing Chun's future



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KUNG FU

Evolutionary

Wing Chun Grandmaster Wan Kam Leung

With a reputation as one of Hong Kong's most revered martial artists, Grandmaster Wan Kam Leung continues to travel the world teaching his unique, real-world Wing Chun style to students across four continents. While many an 'old master' will quickly brush aside new methodologies and modern training methods in favour of the tried and true approach passed on to them coming up the ranks, this grandmaster is not one of them. Today, Practical Wing Chun — Wan's own progressive brand of the classical kung fu art — continues to flourish, with a new school recently opening in Brisbane to a rousing reception. With the grandmaster Down Under to teach a series of seminars, *Blitz* caught up with him to talk about training in Hong Kong, the intricacies of Practical Wing Chun, and why martial artists should aim to be the facilitators of their own evolution.

INTERVIEW BY BEN STONE | IMAGES BY PENGHUYN

Grandmaster, as Practical Wing Chun continues to grow in Australia, why do you think people are taking to your form of the art so positively given there are several other Wing Chun branches already well established here?

Firstly, my style is fairly new in Australia; there are styles that have been in Australia for decades. For some people, it feels refreshing to try another Wing Chun style that is so different to other Australian Wing Chun styles. Secondly, I have branches and instructors

in Australia who continue to promote my style here.

In terms of the standard, how do Australian students compare to those from Hong Kong? And if there is a difference, what is the reason behind this?

I believe that both Hong Kong and Australian students are hard working and put a lot of effort into learning the style. Australians are different, though, as they are Westerners and their body size generally is bigger than the Chinese. Also, they naturally have better body condition than the Chinese, [particularly] in terms of power.

Chinese people are smaller in size, so they need to focus very much on technical skills.

Do you think training in Hong Kong is essential if you want to excel in Practical Wing Chun, or the art in general?

Coming to Hong Kong is very important, as Practical Wing Chun is my creation. Coming to Hong Kong to learn from me is very important if one wants to gain a deep knowledge in my system.

Given that all masters from the Ip Man lineage recognise the renowned ability of Ip Man as a fighter,

why is it that most of his direct students or second-generation students like yourself are now teaching different incarnations of Ip Man's Wing Chun, with different names?

Whether Ip Man is a good fighter or not, neither of us will truly know — we have seen this through movies and sayings we hear. I can't confirm or deny, as I have not been a witness myself. I've seen his training skill and been in contact with him but never seen him actually fighting. As part of evolution, Wing Chun is under constant change for [the purpose of]



Wing Chun vs Sucker Punch



1 As the aggressor enters Sigung Wan's personal space...



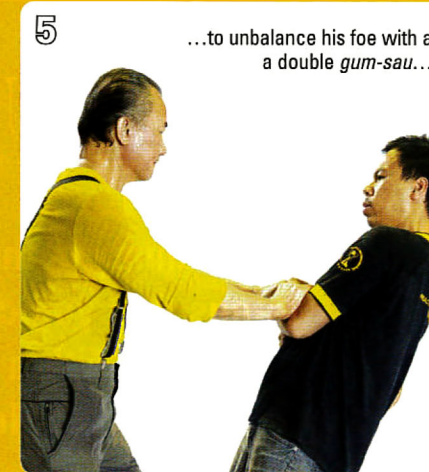
2 ...Wan acts, using upper crossing hands from the *Siu Lim Tao* form to make contact and cover.



3 As soon as the hands touch and the opponent tries to fire his other hand, Wan simultaneously changes to *on-sau*, meeting the incoming arm as the attacker turns, jamming him up.



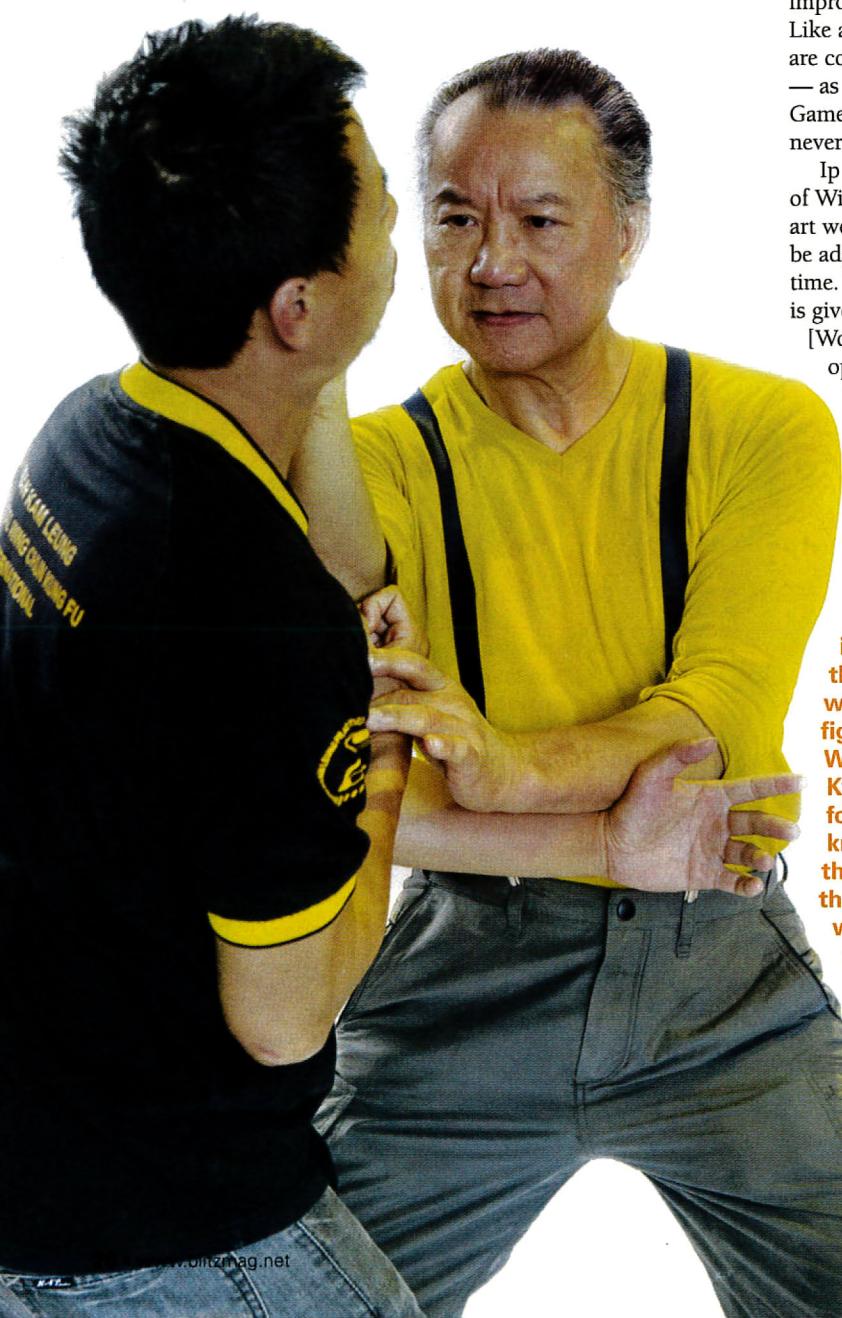
4 As the attacker tries to throw his right hand, Wan uses a left-hand *hoi* technique (from section two of *Siu Lim Tao*), moving forward with pressure...



5 ...to unbalance his foe with a double *gum-sau*...



6 ...and expose his head for a finishing palm-strike — or multiple strikes — to the face.



improving the combat art. Like any other sports, there are constant improvements — as there are in the Olympic Games, or else there would never be new world records.

Ip Man is an important part of Wing Chun history but the art we brought with us should be adaptive for the modern time. The name of my style is given by my own master [Wong Shun Leung] when I opened my own school, and today, Wan Kam Leung Practical Wing Chun is not the same as Yip Man Wing Chun or WSL Wing Chun.

There is always much debate in the martial arts about which style is more 'effective' than another, and when an exceptional fighter such as Ip Man, Wong Shun Leung or Kyokushin's Mas Oyama, for example, becomes known, people flock to their system in the belief that it is the best. Others would say, though, that these are just exceptionally talented individuals and the style of combat is secondary — i.e. these individuals simply 'fit' their chosen

style in body type and mental approach, and were exceptionally talented and dedicated in equal measure. What's your opinion; should people be judging a system's efficacy simply by its best representatives or some other means?

I believe that both statements are correct. There are some styles that aren't suitable for everyone to learn or the system is not complete as a system, but they have exceptional fighters. In this case, the system is secondary. There are systems that are more suitable for the average people; the teacher, though, might not be an exceptional fighter, but can teach the system very well. Like in boxing, a lot of the time the instructor is not better than the boxer. The ideal way would be having an exceptional fighter representing an exceptional combat style.

It has been suggested that many instructors of Wing Chun, especially in the West, have not studied the art in its entirety, and consequently find it lacking when they apply it, and this is why so many are adding elements from kickboxing, grappling and other arts to their Wing Chun. Do you share these opinions or have a different view?

Some like to mix the style

and some like it to be pure. I prefer that Wing Chun doesn't turn into a mixed martial art system. It is very important to be very familiar with Wing Chun, the principles and theory, and what Wing Chun is made for. Some might not be familiar enough or haven't trained enough — as a result, the Wing Chun they learnt to start with wasn't complete so they decide to add other elements. Some add other elements simply because they prefer them or want to attract more people.

In relation to this, I've heard it said that Wing Chun has an 'internal' element that many fail to grasp, or which has become largely lost outside Mainland China, hence the need to add from elsewhere and reshape the system. Do you think this is true? And is that 'missing link' the reason you went to study qigong yourself?

Mainland Wing Chun doesn't necessarily have an internal element in their style. It's easy to say that one has qigong but not easy to prove. I believe that internal practice is an important part of Wing Chun.

Can you tell us more about your qigong study and how it has changed the way you practise and apply your Wing Chun?

All sports use breathing. Qigong is about breathing and benefits all martial arts, not only Wing Chun. I feel it benefits my Wing Chun a lot. Besides health benefits, it reshaped my way on how to generate power.

Has qigong become part of your syllabus or influenced its development? How has it altered from the WSL Wing Chun system you learned originally?

When I learned from my sifu, there weren't any internal elements in the system. However, when I saw the benefits of this to Wing Chun, I implemented it in my system. There are basic internal elements added to my Wing Chun, but if one wants to deepen [one's skills] in qigong, I offer a specialised course in that.

As time goes on, do you think the 'original' HK Wing Chun style as taught by Ip Man will eventually be wiped out, or at least develop into something not recognisable as Wing Chun as we know it today?

I don't think it will be completely wiped out, but it's constantly evolving, I believe. The principles will still resonate strongly within.

How important is the wooden dummy in Wing Chun? Can you master the system without it?



Above: Sigung Wan performing Wing Chun's butterfly sword form
Below: A candid moment during a class in Hong Kong

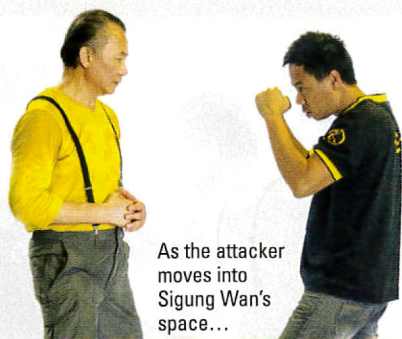


GRAHAM GREEN

GRAHAM GREEN

Wing Chun vs Hook Punch

1



As the attacker moves into Sigung Wan's space...

2



...Wan intercepts his strike at the launch, stepping in with a left-hand *hoi* and right hand *gum-sau* to the near wrist.

3



Trying to break through, the attacker fires an uppercut, but 'sticks' to the arm and redirects it to the inside with a *hub-sau*...

...and continues forward as the attacker tries a left punch, jamming and redirecting his strike across to the outside of Wan's centreline.

4



As the attacker tries to throw another right, Wan is already firing forward with a *tiu-dar* (simultaneous block and punch).

5



“THE DUMMY IS ALREADY FIXED.”

The dummy is there for you to practise things that you cannot necessarily do safely with a partner, like power, controlling angles and precision.”

Wooden-dummy training is a very important element in Wing Chun. The dummy techniques are techniques from the three forms (*Siu Lim Tao*, *Chum Kiu*, *Biu Jee*) mixed together and put into the dummy (application techniques). The dummy is also your training partner and tool to practise applied techniques, power, footwork, angle and precision. So if you speak of Wing Chun and all its syllabus, then yes, you will require the wooden dummy skills and knowledge as part of mastering the system.

Speaking again of evolution, many Wing Chun masters of evolved Wing Chun systems, including yourself, have said that their primary reason for altering Wing Chun was to make it less rigid and more adaptable to deal with other systems. Given the dummy is rigid and immobile, do you think it, too, will – or should – undergo a major modern redesign to suit the way Wing Chun is being practised now and into the future?

The dummy is already fixed. The dummy is there for you to practise things that you cannot necessarily do safely with a partner, like power, controlling angles and precision. You can also say that the dummy, on the other hand, cannot replace the sensitivity, reaction and flexibility that you get from training with a partner. No amount of redesign of

the dummy can substitute a live partner, so it's better to train on the dummy in the most efficient and practical way possible as to enhance your overall skills.

In your last interview with *Blitz*, you spoke about how your fight with a boxer in the very early stages of your training really changed your perspective on Wing Chun. Has the emergence of MMA had any influence on how you look at Wing Chun or martial arts and combat as a whole?

All combat styles are constantly evolving and constantly improving. That is no exception regarding Practical Wing Chun. I haven't changed my perspective on Wing Chun because of MMA but rather from looking at combat arts as a whole.

Given the popularity (and thus the threat) of grappling and groundfighting arts nowadays, largely due to MMA, how do you address this area of threat in the Practical Wing Chun syllabus?

All styles have their own strong and weak points. Training in BJJ makes you good on the ground, there is no doubt about that. However, it might not be so suitable on the street where you might face multiple opponents, as fighting on the ground in BJJ is a one-on-one fight. Wing Chun is good for self-defence, in which the focus is



on protecting yourself, your belongings or the people around you, but it also might not be suitable in the ring. Practical Wing Chun deals with the defence against a 'committed and real' attack.

What are the main tactics or principles a PWC practitioner will apply if he finds himself on the ground during combat?

For Wing Chun it is not an advantage [to be] on the floor. Avoiding the floor is essential to effectively using our Wing Chun. If that happens, there are

techniques that we have for that. However, the best defences on the ground, respectfully, belong to those systems that specialise in this arena.

If you use a Wing Chun close-quarter technique as a preferred stand-up technique, then out of respect, admit it. The same applies if you use a BJJ ground technique: out of



Wing Chun vs Round-kick

“ ALL SPORTS USE BREATHING.

Qigong is about breathing and benefits all martial arts, not only Wing Chun. I feel it benefits my Wing Chun a lot. Besides health benefits, it reshaped my way on how to generate power. ”

respect, admit it rather than copying it and calling it your own.

You've told us in the past that challenge matches of the type that existed in your early days, between kung fu schools, are no longer common and instead, people are more open, training together to share skills rather than simply competing. Do you think this is better for kung fu folk in general, in terms of advancing everyone's ability, or did that old competitive rivalry and serious fighting do more for the arts' development?

The old challenge matches were more about consolidating a school's reputation. Each kung fu system's syllabus and skills were much more closely guarded and never fully understood or appreciated. One of the few benefits back then was it tested your fighting resolve and spirit, but it could also cause a negative physical and mental impact if your skills weren't at a high enough level to cope with your opponent.

For the purpose of improving skills, today's methods allow both parties to improve more rapidly and safely. This is a more friendly approach to allow alternate systems and stylists to improve their techniques, defences and attacks without being closed-minded, and to allow each system to evolve with the times. There are far safer and beneficial skill-comparison methods and arenas these days for martial artists to improve their skills.

As times change, have you noticed any changes in what people look for in their martial arts training?

I think that people today look for something that is practical, makes sense, is logical and can be analysed

and discussed. Something that also benefits one's health as well as self-protection is also popular.

How has your training and approach to combat application changed as you've got older?

My focus is even more on being soft and not using force against force, [but rather] borrowing force and using technical skills than can actually be used effectively and practically in a real-life situation.

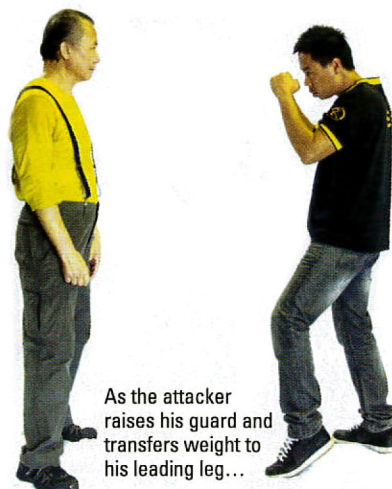
You still do the traditional bai-si (tea ceremony) to induct official 'disciples', as you've done with your Australian representative Danilo Hajdukovic. Given you have actively modernised your Wing Chun in the areas of training and application, why do you consider this kind of traditional practice important even today?

Modernising or evolving the art of Wing Chun is part of Wing Chun history; nothing has stayed the same, so this is a natural happening in the evolution of Wing Chun. The Chinese family culture is another thing; it is a very important part of Chinese culture. Accepting Danilo as my closed-door student is not a simple thing — it is accepting him as my extended son and disciple in Practical Wing Chun. It is a lifelong commitment from both me and him.

Where do you see Practical Wing Chun going in the years to come?

I see a constant evolution and promotion of the style of Practical Wing Chun where it will never rest on its laurels but constantly improve so that the name 'practical' resonates as the system's truth for generations to come. ■

1



As the attacker raises his guard and transfers weight to his leading leg...

2



...GM Wan shifts to the inside and turns his hips...

3

...and beats the attacker's circular kick with a straight one, applying the centreline theory via a front-kick from Wing Chun's Chum Kiu form.