

BACK-ALLEY & BUT



An interview with Wing Chun grandmaster Wan Kam Leung

Thrown in the deep end by his sifu to fight challenge matches against other kung fu stylists and boxers alike, Sigung (Grandmaster) Wan Kam Leung learned a long time ago that when it comes to learning self-defence, pressure-testing is the only way. A protégé of famous Yip Man student Wong Shun Leung, Sigung Wan recently visited Australia from Hong Kong to run seminars on his Practical Wing Chun system. He also took some time out to chat to *Blitz* about those early days of learning and fighting in Hong Kong, and how his system of Wing Chun works.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW COLLINS

BATTLES

BUTTERFLY SWORDS

It's said you used to go out and test your Wing Chun skills against fighters from other schools, and in doing so you learned lessons that changed the way you did Wing Chun. Can you recall an example of one such incident and the lesson that resulted from it?

Over the years I tried my skills out with many different styles. I remember one time when a foreigner came to our school and wanted a challenge fight with my sifu, Wong Shun Leung.

My sifu said to the guy, "As you've only trained in tai chi for three years, you are not qualified to fight me. Try to fight with my student..." and then Sifu approached me to fight this man on behalf of our school.

I noted that the man was very big and strong, so as soon as he was ready in his tai chi stance, I instantly moved in and punched him in the head. He flew back, landed on and accidentally broke the furniture of my sifu.

This taught me that your surroundings also influence how you decide to move and the potential outcome of a fight. Are you fighting in an open or narrow space? Is it free behind you or are you up against a wall? All this has influence on how you act, react and move during a fight.

Another time, I fought a stylist from Northern Praying Mantis, which is characterised by long-distance fighting. He had

different pre-fighting positions and methods of attacking, so I had to be aware of how to move my body in order to gain and maintain an advantage for effective counter-attacks. For me to succeed in my objective of turning it into a close-range fight, I depended on my experience in closing the distance and out-positioning my opponent.

Do challenge matches still go on today among Hong Kong martial art schools? And do you encourage or discourage your own students to make such challenges to others?

There are still challenge matches in Hong Kong these days, but they differ considerably from my experiences in the early 1960s and '70s. Both Hong Kong's and the global martial arts community have become more open-minded.

Today, martial artists can arrange meetings through modern mediums such as mobile phones and the internet. The agreeing parties meet and exchange skills publicly without the hatred of opposing systems, such as in the old days when I fought. Today's generation are not locked into one style or berated for simultaneously practising a mixed range of systems.

I believe that these types of challenge matches, if undertaken without malice, are a good thing, because through this type of experience you will make

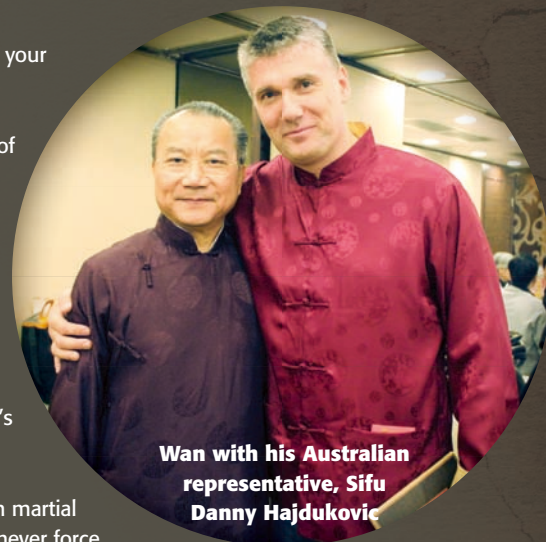
breakthroughs within your own skill.

Without challenge matches or any type of pressure-testing, I do not believe you can truly understand or appreciate any fighting system and you'll never get the truth regarding your current level of skill. Without the 'doing', it's all hearsay.

Of course, each student has their own martial journey and I would never force this objective onto anyone that chooses not to walk that path.

Hong Kong in the '60s and its martial arts scene was a different beast back then. We didn't have much in the way of entertainment, so to alleviate the boredom we fought challenge matches. Challenges between two schools were considered a big deal and very illegal in Hong Kong at that time, so nobody went public and there was no consideration or responsibility taken for resulting serious injuries.

You've said before [in a Blitz interview — see under 'People' at www.blitzmag.net] that after three years of training, Wong Shun Leung matched you with a boxer and you "realised there was a lot you still had to learn". What specific problems did you encounter against the boxer,



Wan with his Australian representative, Sifu Danny Hajdukovic

and what were the lessons you learned that day?

One of my earliest experiences had made a deep impression on me, because not only did I get beaten up, but I got knocked out as well.

At this stage of my training I had about two or three years under my belt and my Wing Chun skills were limited.

My sifu, Wong Shun Leung, encouraged me to fight and said that I would easily win just by making use of the straight-line punches and stepping into the opponent. The Western boxing style was completely foreign to me, with different rules and protocols.

I had to wear huge boxing gloves, which made it very difficult to make use of all Wing Chun's strong points in

controlling and attacking the centreline. I did, however, possess a young man's fearlessness and over-confidence, which made me unaware as to what was about to unfold.

As soon as we started, I tried applying the straight-line punches, but the gloves made it difficult to generate enough power and I was now in trouble against an opponent with a much bigger arsenal of punching techniques and fighting experience at his disposal.

I was knocked down the first time... Managed to get back up... Then knocked out completely moments later.

Chun punching found throughout the system, ensuring the potential for an effective counter-attack against almost any type of assault.

How did you feel when you either lost or won a match?

Winning and losing is all part of the game. Muhammad Ali, Mike Tyson, Bruce Lee, etc. are all great fighters who have lost at one point or another. This does nothing to discredit them in any way, nor detract from them being among some of the greatest fighters of our time.

So you could imagine us back then as mere learners of the martial arts; win or lose, I would always analyse everything post

What were the most important and memorable lessons you learned from Wong Shun Leung himself?

I was right there with GM WSL from the beginning of his teaching career. It was 50 years ago when I saw Master Wong actually painting the name of his Wing Chun school, 'Wong Shun Leung Wing Chun Kuen Kwoon' on a wooden board to be ready for use for the opening of his new school.

At that time in Hong Kong, very few kung fu teachers would boldly hang a sign outside the school to show the school is a boxing gym specialised in teaching fighting skills. If you did, other masters might come to challenge you. But Master Wong was no ordinary man and was very confident in his kung fu fighting ability.

From then on he was my sifu, and remained so.

to have a sifu so generous of his time and knowledge.

He was a very genuine person and would never be fake towards you. In my initial training, I mostly only heard the glory stories of my teacher's victories and only recently found out about some challenges he lost. He took part in a kung fu competition held in Taiwan, when he was beforehand quite exhausted and only weighed 120lbs [54kg] at the time. Although he lost the match, the students were still so very proud that their sifu had shown true guts, determination and belief in his kung fu.

I learned from Wong Shun Leung since the beginning of the '60s and continued non-stop for the next 10 years before I started teaching also. After that I was drawing from my own fighting experiences and could also reflect on my sifu's sound



Wan works on the wooden dummy in his Hong Kong kwoon

This taught me that bigger movements were needed, just like in boxing, in order to make use of your power as a whole, and this can be missed if your training limits you to only placing your hands directly in front of you before launching a punch, making you both predictable and vulnerable.

I took this loss as a positive, in that it gave me profound knowledge, a lasting impression and invaluable experience.

As a result, my style today focuses on seven types of Wing

match so as to constantly improve myself and strive for new heights with my kung fu skill. If I won, I would think of my own strong points and in what way I was superior to my opponent, and if I lost, I would be even more diligent in my comparison — e.g. why did my opponent win? What kind of attacks did they use?

How in future can I counter and emerge the victor?

The lessons learnt from victories and defeats are the building blocks for a sound and capable martial artist/fighter.

“My sifu encouraged me to fight and said I would easily win just by making use of the straight-line punches and stepping into the opponent”

Sometimes I helped my sifu take care of his school while he was teaching out of town. I had very few hobbies in those days so I would spend most of my time learning and training with my sifu.

I was one of the students who always left the school very late. We [the students] cleaned the school, washed the windows, dishes and so on. If Sifu was invited for any gatherings, we would stay at school until he came back. I remember one time he came back and I was still cleaning the floor and he still took the time (while changing clothes) to explain in detail how to maintain balance within the stance. I felt very lucky back then

advice on many occasions. Those early days are very precious and valuable to me.

Master Wong would frequently share his views on martial arts with me and on occasion we would also disagree on certain things. For example, when I told my sifu I wanted to learn qigong, he told me that such a thing as qigong didn't exist. He said qigong was like hypnotising and not real. But I hadn't changed my mind and decided to learn it anyway.

Some time later at one of my classes at the Wing Chun Athletics Association, my sifu paid me a visit before one of his meetings and decided that he would try me out... You all know

what that means!

In short, I had applied a Wing Chun technique while utilising my new qigong skills and was able to lift my sifu up and backwards.

After that, my sifu openly admitted that he believed that qigong not only existed, but that it made me much more powerful than before.

I was very flattered with my sifu's honest response.

Grandmaster Wong was a great man and a great teacher. He had profound knowledge in kung fu. His approach to practising and teaching Wing Chun was so practical and realistic that his teachings are evident in my methods today, whereby I'm constantly looking to improve myself even at 66 years of age, rather than resting on my laurels.

Grandmaster Wong Shun Leung will always play a special part in my life.

In what fundamental ways is your Wing Chun method different to that taught to you by Wong Shun Leung, and to him by Yip (Ip) Man?

The fundamentals in my Practical Wing Chun kung fu system were born from my understanding and deep analysis from many years of practising and fighting using Wing Chun. I was, and still am, on a constant mission to improve the style by regularly reexamining all potential weak points that may need reconsideration. I have focused deeper and analysed every movement in Wing Chun, then tested the practical application of every single technique and movement within all the forms, and finally made the changes that I found necessary if a particular technique failed under duress across multiple attack-and-defence scenarios. From that comes my Practical Wing Chun.

Our basic theory utilises five centrelines that cover the front, side, stance, and distance control

of your opponent. Keeping the elbow in, angling the arm at 135 degrees, keeping the shoulders soft and wrists flexible. Practical Wing Chun forms should be practised in an effortless and relaxed manner with no tension added, so as to learn how to generate real explosive power when you fight.

Within our *chi-sau* [sticking-hands drills], we can call upon and interchange between any technique from either of the forms and apply them realistically when controlling an opponent's centre.

Yip Man's Wing Chun belongs to a different generation to my sifu's. Wing chun went through many changes since the passing from Yip Man. The style (as we all knew) was constantly evolving from sharp minds. As my sifu said, the more you practise martial arts, the more changes will be made and should be made through skills comparisons with other styles, in order to know what works and what doesn't.

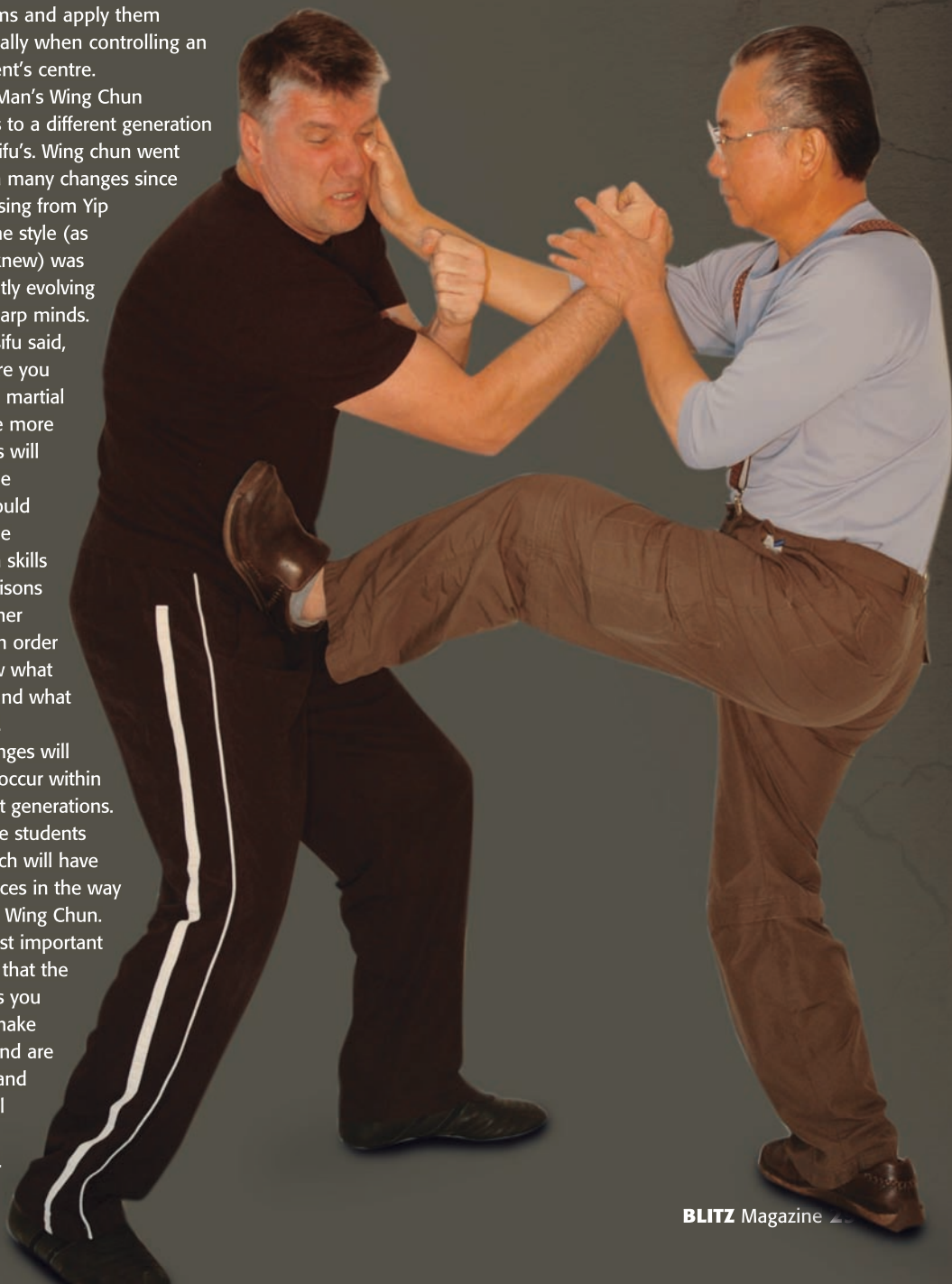
Changes will always occur within different generations. Even the students you teach will have differences in the way they do Wing Chun. The most important thing is that the changes you made make sense and are logical and practical when applied.

In most forms of Wing Chun, horse-stance is not a big feature, but you've said before that in his teaching Wong Shun Leung "emphasised horse-stance". In what ways was it trained, and how was it used in a combative sense?

My sifu strongly emphasised footwork and developing a strong core from practising your horse-stance. He not only focused on forward and retreating movement, but very much on

balancing the stance [weight distribution] 50/50. We did a lot of training working towards this, one method being by standing on a board above the floor doing chi-sau, trying to stay balanced at all times.

Still today, I focus heavily on the different kinds of footwork in Wing Chun. This will be trained as a partner exercise or solo. We try to always unify the body as a whole when practising and delivering our techniques by





All photos:
Sigung Wan at the recent
seminar in Canberra



utilising the stance and correct footwork to complement our techniques and fighting ability.

A lot of Wing Chun out there has remained static and robotic, with very little fluidity. Based on the teachings of my sifu and my own fighting experience, that could prove disastrous dealing with a modern-day aggressor.

Realistic and correct training in the areas of movement, stance and positioning should match up appropriately to what technique is the most suitable at any time and situation, ensuring it becomes part of your natural motor skills, producing instinctive, effective and natural movement patterns.

Practical Wing Chun uses five centrelines, but other Wing Chun styles use only one. Can you briefly explain this concept and how it works?

At the start of all three empty-hand Wing Chun forms, the student commences learning the lower and upper variants of 'crossing hands' [to define the centreline]. It is from this initial sequence that you start immediately developing an

understanding the location and application of the five centrelines that divide your body into left/right, up/down, back/forth and side components. When this is physically demonstrated to a student, they gain hands-on knowledge and an understanding of how the five centrelines intersect and align with each other in a live scenario, so they can generate soft yet powerful simultaneous attack and defence combinations, while maintaining a sound yet fluid structure.

From the first form, *Siu Lim Tao*, you learn to occupy these centrelines. The techniques from *Siu Lim Tao* are suited for a close-distance fight, so the five centrelines are a very important part of *Siu Lim Tao*, both in *chi-sau* and *sansao* [fighting]. When it comes to *Chum Kiu* and *Biu Jee* forms, which make greater use of distance and leverage, an advanced applied knowledge of the five centrelines can greatly enhance the success of delivering the devastating techniques found within those forms.

Traditional Wing Chun

is known for its formidable trapping and strikes at close range, but in my experience has a limited and rudimentary ground-fighting component — is there any attention given to fighting on the ground in Practical Wing Chun?

I believe that all styles have their own ways of dealing with different attacks, etc. In Wing Chun we deal with three body levels: the upper, mid and lower parts. From distance, groundfighting has all three levels, but when they physically attack you they make use of techniques generally from the mid-to-lower parts of the body. In Practical Wing Chun we're taught to be aware of different attack patterns to all three body levels and which counter is best suited.

When facing a groundfighter, you should become aware of their attacking patterns and what techniques in Wing Chun would be most suitable for dealing with these attacks. You should make use of your footwork and elbows when positioning yourself [to defend] a takedown.

Grapplers and groundfighters are experts in their field and should be respected for that skill, therefore Practical Wing Chun students should logically train to stay on their feet and utilise sound footwork and positioning for the delivery of powerful disabling strikes to the groundfighter's weak areas and weapons — e.g. hammer-fists, palm-strikes and elbows into the temple, shoulder joints and bicep muscle may suffice when dealing with such an opponent. As always, training against these specific attacks with an actual grappler/groundfighter will give you invaluable insight and experience on how to deal with this kind of style. The more you test by comparison, the more you learn.

All the Practical Wing Chun forms have relevant techniques at your disposal for you to study, train and apply.

Check out the January issue of *Blitz* for part two of this interview, covering Wing Chun weapons and Wan's experiences with Yip Man. **BLITZ**