

# BACK-ALLEY

PART 2

# & BUT



## An interview with Wing Chun grandmaster Wan Kam Leung

Having begun his kung fu journey in an era where challenge matches between fighters from different martial arts were commonplace in Hong Kong, *Sigung* (Grandmaster) Wan Kam Leung has taken his fair share of lessons at the School of Hard Knocks. A protégé of Wing Chun grandmaster Wong Shun Leung — himself a student of the world-famous Yip Man — *Sigung* Wan today teaches his own brand of the style, under the unassuming name of Practical Wing Chun. During a recent visit to Canberra to run seminars for Australian chief instructor Sifu Danny Hajdukovic, *Sigung* Wan chatted to *Blitz* about his storied life in kung fu and the principles of his combat system.

BY BEN STONE  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW COLLINS

# BATTLES

# BUTTERFLY SWORDS

**S**igung Wan, can you tell us how your journey in kung fu began and how you ended up training under Grandmaster Wong Shun Leung?

I've loved kung fu ever since I was a kid. I was very young when I came to Hong Kong — that was around 1959 — and back then there were many different styles of kung fu being taught in the city. I tried out a few of them for short periods of time, from just one month to six months or so. Eventually I was shown Wing Chun from my elder brother in Wing Chun kung fu [meaning a senior in the kwoon, not an actual brother], who at that time was learning the art from Se Fu Cheng.

At first I didn't actually like Wing Chun; I thought that it wasn't very fluid, which came from standing in the same stance and doing *tan-sau* [palm-up block], *bong-sau* [wing-arm block], moving the hands up and down, and that's it. Then Se Fu Cheng introduced me to Grandmaster Leung Sheung and I was able to learn Wing Chun under him for around six months.

I thought they tended to overuse *pak-sau* [slapping/deflecting with the palm] to stop the opponent's punches and I thought there should be more techniques and skill in Wing Chun that could actually be used effectively, rather than just a

small portion of the techniques that were in the forms.

I began to think I should search for another Wing Chun master whose style could suit me more, and my elder [kung fu] brother told me that Master Wong Shun Leung was the most outstanding of Grandmaster Yip Man's students. He said Wong's style was more realistic and practical, as Wong had learned [Western] boxing also. Bruce Lee and Grandmaster William Cheung were also Master Wong's close friends at that time, and they always shared their Wing Chun

experiences and fighting skills. My elder brother offered to take me along, and I soon became a student of Master Wong.

**Is Wing Chun training and culture in Hong Kong the same now as it was when you started practising?**

There is a difference today both in teaching and learning Wing Chun. Time has changed and everything is improving for the better. Science is continuously improving, so people are now able to compare different styles by multiple means such as television and,

more recently, the internet.

People can now pick and choose the martial arts system they wish to train in and what's best suited for them because of the massive amount of information available at the drop of a hat. Secrets are a thing of the past and I say that this transparency within the martial arts is a great thing, as the potential students are armed with enough knowledge to sort out the real masters from the fakes.

The culture within martial arts has also changed today. Back then you became a disciple almost as soon as your sifu accepted you, but today you start out as a student, just like going to an education facility, and this has changed the view on apprenticeships. This generation is surrounded by a lot more entertainment than the old days and the young students of today might not have the same patience in learning martial arts as in the old days, so quite often they appear to be disinterested in learning and cultivating a deeper understanding of their chosen style.

Many aspects of today's society have changed and it all influences the martial arts and how you view it, approach it and practise it. My view is that it is impossible to stay the same, and you cannot but change the style and improve it. Regardless of what the future holds, we will

**"There is a difference today both in teaching and learning Wing Chun. Time has changed and everything is improving for the better."**



**Sigung Wan teaching at a seminar**



**Butterfly-sword training in Hong Kong**



**Sifu Hajdukovic (third right) with other Wan disciples in Hong Kong**

always progress forward and aim for the best and better.

**How did you change your view on traditional Wing Chun through your challenge matches?**

Back then my sifu [Wong Shun Leung] told me that you will understand the strong and weak points in martial arts when you've trained it for a long time. You will learn the weaknesses, strengths, advantages and disadvantages. During my time with my sifu, he opened my view on these matters. Even when I learned for a short time with Leung Sheung, I saw a difference in the two styles. They had different techniques and different applications for the techniques, but I thought that Wong Shun Leung's style was more flexible in the movements and [he was] willing to modify more – and he himself was a very experienced sifu.

Through my matches I realised that fighting against the same style and a different style are two different things. With the same style you already have an idea of techniques and movements, and you are also able to do *chi-sau* ['sticking-hands' contact-reflex drills], but with another style you don't have any idea of what sort of attacks they would launch.

With all matches I learned a lot and my experience got richer; I learned from experience what I was missing and what I did well, and I learned the same about my opponent. All my focus back then was on martial arts and I had a great interest in it; my goal was to compare my kung fu with all other styles, so the result from that experience made my Wing Chun differ from other traditional Wing Chun styles.

**“I launched a series of punches towards Grandmaster Yip Man, but he was so quick, he just used a few pak-saus to deflect all my punches.”**

**How much contact did you have with the famous Wing Chun grandmaster Yip Man, the teacher of your teacher, Wong Shun Leung?**

When I first started training in Wing Chun under Master Wong at around 17 or 18 years old, we [kwoon members] often had lunch or dinner at a Chinese restaurant with Grandmaster Yip Man. He was around 60 years of age but his body was still in great condition.

**We have heard some interesting stories about yourself and Yip Man, including one where he taught you a lesson on awareness. Can you tell us about that?**

My sifu told me Grandmaster Yip Man liked joking, and one day he said, “Tonight I'm going to play mah jong with Grandmaster Yip Man,” and he asked me to clean up the table ready for their game.

So straight after work, I went to Sifu's home and prepared everything for their game that evening. I was really quite excited.

Then the doorbell began ringing and did not stop. I knew it must be Grandmaster Yip Man at the door, so I ran to open it for him. As soon as I opened the door, the Grandmaster thrust-kicked me very hard – so hard that I fell to the ground. As I got up he said to me: “You have no

awareness! How did you learn kung fu that way? If I was a robber or thief, you would have been killed!”

I knew the Grandmaster was right, and I told my Sigung [Wong Shun Leung] that in future I would be smarter, and I'd be ready next time.

After a few days, Grandmaster Yip Man came to play ma jong with Sifu Wong again. The doorbell started ringing over and over again – but this time, I was ready for him to attack. When I opened the door, I launched a series of punches towards Grandmaster Yip Man, but he was so quick, he just used a few pak-saus ['slap-blocks', or the common open-palm parry] to deflect all my punches. I didn't touch him at all, but he said that this time my response was much better. Grandmaster Yip Man was great – he was so fast.

**As sparring and other random contact-reflex drills are seen as the cornerstones of most practical martial arts training, how do you learn to effectively apply the butterfly swords or dragon pole against an adversary – is there sparring with these weapons too in your system?**



In Wing Chun you only deal with two kinds of weapons. One is the eight-cutting knives [butterfly swords] and the other is the long pole. Comparing the two, the techniques of the knives comes from the three empty-hand forms, so when you apply the knives it is similar to the application of hand techniques, with advanced subtleties in the transference of power.

The long pole, on the other hand, has nothing to do with the three forms. It is said to be something added to the original Wing Chun. The long-pole techniques are quite similar to other southern Chinese styles, with little differences. Only when applying it against another practitioner of the long pole can you become more skillful.

The difference is much bigger if you compare the sword techniques between the different Southern styles, because the techniques from the knives in Wing Chun have their origin within the forms.

Within Practical Wing Chun, we are very strict in ensuring that the student is extremely well versed in the application of skills within all the other

forms before being taught the pole and knives. The student needs to show they have a deeper understanding of our Wing Chun system and all its applications, and in addition, the student has to demonstrate a certain level of maturity and integrity before they are taught both of these forms.

After you master the empty-hand forms and the wooden dummy, learning the knives will give you further wrist power and total-body power because you have to unify power from the arms, stance and waist. The pole works with body power differently and trains your footwork differently. There are fewer techniques in the pole form than the swords. When you have learned the two forms, you need to do further sparring: knives against knives, pole against pole and then knives against pole.

**Given that knives are illegal to carry and the long pole is not something one would have at hand in a fight, do these weaponry systems have any practical combat application these days, or are the benefits simply in conditioning and**

#### **learning skills that will improve empty-handed fighting ability?**

Training the two specific forms is part of the tradition in Wing Chun, but carrying two swords on the street today will be impossible. The same goes for the long pole. But if you truly understand the two weapons forms, you would be able to wield an inanimate object similarly in a critical situation. Think of everyday tools such as broomsticks, an ornamental Samurai sword or butterfly swords placed in your home as decoration – they could still prove useful in helping save yours or your family's life from a threatening home invasion, robbery, etc.

Mastering the swords and pole will improve your actual fighting skills as it improves your power and flexibility. So learning the two forms will definitely be beneficial to you.

*Check out another interview with Sigung Wan Kam Leung, in which he recalls his sifu's fight with Bruce Lee, at [www.blitzmag.net](http://www.blitzmag.net) – click the 'People' tab and go to 'Kung Fu'.* **BLITZ**

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