

CHI-SAU

From Kwoon To Street

Understanding chi-sau's place in combat

Chi-sau, or 'sticking hands' training, is arguably the cornerstone of Wing Chun kung fu and the skill by which practitioners are most often measured and judged in the kwoon. And yet, this skill — given much street-cred' by the late Bruce Lee and the legendary feats of his teacher, Ip Man — is often misunderstood and criticised for being impractical or irrelevant to the type of fighting that takes place in the streets of the 21st century. Here, the Australian chief instructor of Practical Wing Chun, Sifu Danny Hajdukovic, sheds some light on the key components of effective chi-sau and how these skills should be applied when fists start flying for real.

INSTRUCTION BY DANILO HAJDUKOVIC

Chi-sau is a partnered contact-reflex exercise that should be continuously practised and perfected throughout a Wing Chun student's entire training life cycle, right through to mastery of the art and thereafter. The English translation of 'sticking hands' or 'sticky hands' is not a direct translation of chi-sau but a name that has (pardon the pun) 'stuck' over time, probably due to the visual it creates, of the practitioners' arms sticking to one another during practice. However, this 'sticking hands' component is merely a piece in the whole chi-sau puzzle.

In my experience as a teacher, I often see that chi-sau quickly becomes one of the most desired skills a beginner wants to attain and, given that students only begin chi-sau practice once they reach an intermediate level, it can be a struggle to instil the importance of patience and perseverance in students (particularly the younger ones) when these days they are constantly surrounded by offerings of quick fixes and rapid results.

Many may not understand

nor care to explore Wing Chun's chi-sau and its vast potential for enhancing combat efficiency, because in comparison to the more visually exciting or physically engaging drills and training regimes employed in some other martial art systems, chi-sau can seem a little too tedious and technical to some. Comprehension of its functionality, in terms of the attributes it develops in the fighter (in large part through advanced sensitivity to touch), is near impossible without actually partaking in the practice, so it's easy for outsiders to miss the point and pass poor judgement. This isn't to say that all chi-sau practice should be exempt from criticism, because over many years I have personally witnessed and sampled my fair share of it, ranging from the absurd to the sublime. And with the internet nowadays flooded with footage of such varied examples, it's no wonder people get a little confused and disillusioned when seeking truthful and accurate information on the method. The right information is certainly out there, it's just a shame that some

of the more heavily promoted material is all about looking and sounding like it's 'the business', when in reality it's about as useful as a knife in a gunfight.

A Wing Chun student will ideally commence their training in chi-sau once they have a proven sound knowledge (both theoretical and practical) of all the primary principles of the system, including the five centrelines (unique to the Practical Wing Chun system), the first form (*Siu Lim Tao*) and the use for each and every technique within that form, all punching and kicking styles, all body angles, stances, structure, positioning, footwork, movement, technique combination drills and *dan* chi-sau (single sticking hands).

The chi-sau drill begins with both parties facing each other in their neutral stance with their arms interlocked in a set manner. Their distance from one another is where the third and fourth centrelines intersect — in traditional Wing Chun systems this distance is considered 'the bridge'. As they rotate their arms, each person will have one arm in a *fook-sau* (hooking

hand) position and the other arm will interchange between *bong-sau* (wing arm) and *tan-sau* (palm-up), gauging each other's energy/force throughout the drilling process. They must also remember to train both left and right sides so as to become more ambidextrous and fluid with the interchange of techniques in attack and defence.

This is where the fun begins: from the basic rotation drill, both participants are free to attack at will with any technique whatsoever — hence things can

get pretty hairy and competitive in the initial stages, when the students don't yet possess the right amount of control to safeguard each other from injury. It's also common that students

CHI-SAU IN COMBAT ≡

As the attacker (right) raises his fists, the Wing Chun man clasps his forearms to enable control by contact-reflex...



...and as the attacker tries, naturally, to pull away, the defender releases, parrying the near arm aside with a *pak-sau* while moving forward with a simultaneous throat-grab or strike.

③ If the attacker still tries to hit, the defender continues forward and jams it with *hoi da*, a combined upward elbow-strike and inside-arm deflection.



CHI-SAU DRILL



Chi-sau starting positions: at right, *fook-sau* and *tan-sau*, and left, *bong-sau* and *tan-sau*

From the initial rotation of the arms, one man enters with a trap across his opponent's forearm and biceps, and simultaneously strikes over the top.



COMBAT APPLICATION



Facing an aggressor, the Wing Chun man controls the centre, keeping his hands raised in a passive 'fence' position.



As the attacker moves to throw a rear-hand punch, the defender makes contact and redirects the incoming arm on a different angle (not fighting the force), counter-striking simultaneously.

will favour certain techniques, which is fine so long as that is due to their physical attributes (relative height, etc.) rather than their lack of skill with certain techniques. To ensure even development of Wing Chun's technical arsenal, sometimes a set attack and response will be drilled rather than it being a completely random exercise.

At the advanced stages of chi-sau training, you can make the exercise more difficult by alternating between just attacking or defending, enhance the touch-sensitivity aspect by working with eyes closed or covered, and wear protective head gear and small bag gloves to train with greater degrees of contact, including full contact.

It's critical to remember that chi-sau is not really a drill but very much alive and spontaneous. The aim of chi-sau is to make the practitioner a more complete fighter through application of their skills under the pressure afforded by working at close range with no set attacks. Both parties are forced to attack and defend while in close proximity and maintaining contact — and although it may not be the same as a real fight, just like the real thing there are

no predetermined rhythms or techniques, and no height and weight criteria in place (meaning no limitations on strength, power and speed). Chi-sau is a vehicle to test and enhance your ability to stick to (no pun intended) the Wing Chun principles of using soft energy, economy of movement and redirection of oncoming force to develop skills and power that can be applied in a real fight.

To this end, when engaging in chi-sau, the delivery of the techniques should at all times encompass 'soft' energy to enhance explosive power, as well as the ability to 'give way' and redirect the opponent's force. The idea is that your intention/energy should always be directed forwards — ready to fill any hole presented in the opponent's arm structure with a strike — but that there be no discernible level of force flowing from your arms in any particular direction (unless you apply force for the purpose of drawing a particular response from your opponent). If the shoulders start to burn, this is a sign of tension, and a concerted effort to relax is required to obtain consistent fluid motion in attack and defence. Shoulder pain is more

common among beginners, who are often 'heavy' on each other's arms in the rotation, but once they begin to recognise and release that downward pressure to flow around their partner's arm with a strike, chi-sau will no longer be a 'grind'. Likewise, as their partner learns to do the same, the beginner will cease to be so heavy on their partner's arm, knowing that if they commit their force in one direction they'll be hit.

Importantly, chi-sau should be treated as a learning process rather than a competition, because if you're afraid to fail, you will never try new approaches and techniques, and won't get the full benefit of the exercise. If you can put your ego aside, it's one of the best exercises around to develop subconscious motor skills and touch-reflexes whereby you will no longer need to think before responding, hence increasing your success rate in a real fight. As the saying goes, if you have to think, then you've already lost.

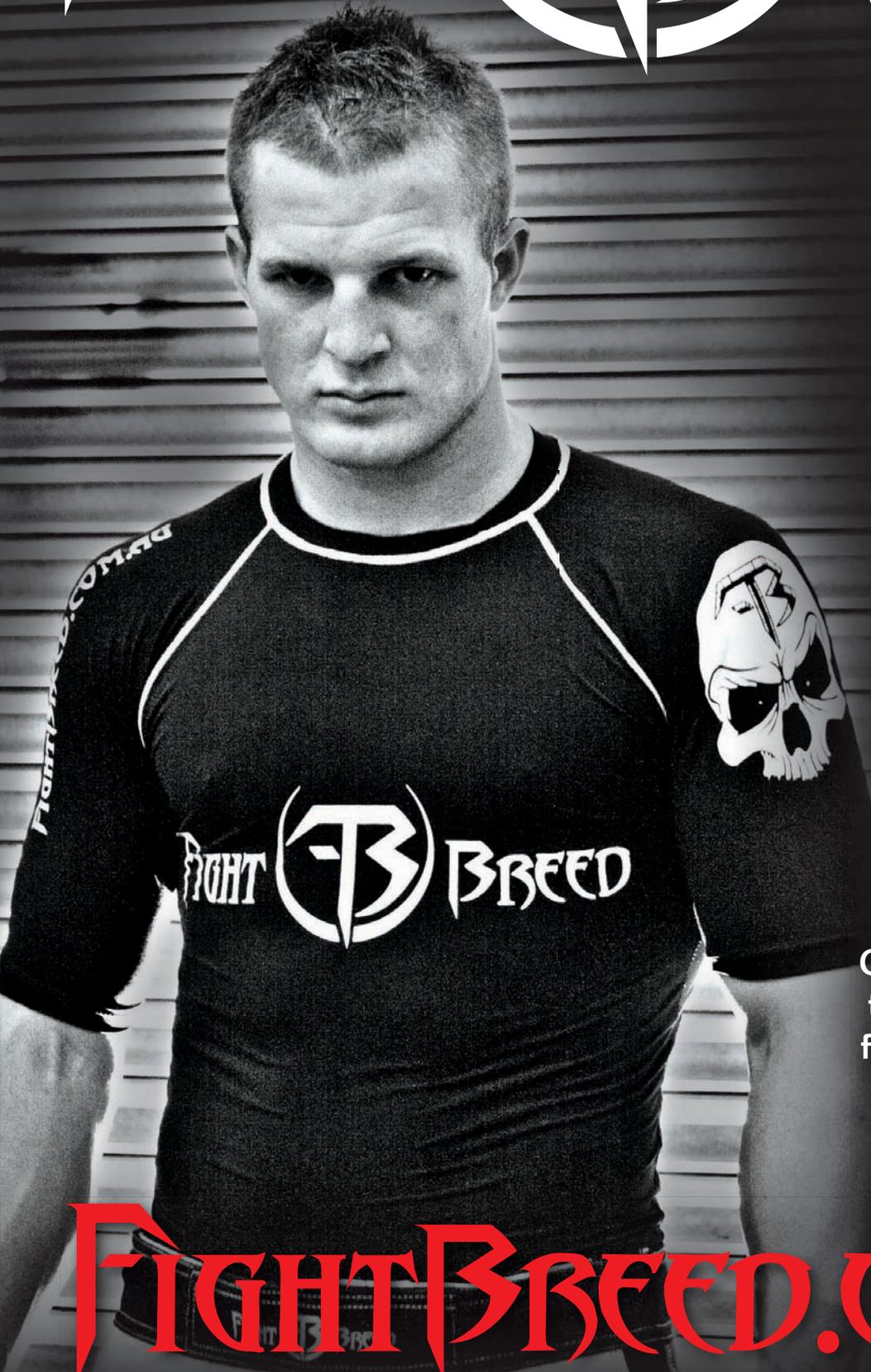
Every technique within all the empty-hand Wing Chun forms should be utilised (with care) in chi-sau practice. You must question your execution

of any technique that has failed under pressure and endeavour to improve your understanding and delivery of the technique until it works — beyond that, you may even question the validity of that technique itself, in terms of its practical value to you.

The true test of whether your chi-sau skills will be of use in the broader context of combat comes from practising *gor-sau* (breaking and regaining of contact) within chi-sau and incorporating realistic footwork when doing so. This will also enhance your ability to locate and maintain control of 'the bridge' (fighting distance) between you and your training partner. It's a good test of speed and reaction time when your opponent person launches a sudden attack and you must immediately intercept by absorbing their incoming force and simultaneously regain contact and, if possible, control of their centreline to give them limited, if any, follow-up options. Essentially, if you can't achieve contact without exposing your targets or putting yourself in an unfavourable position, your chi-sau will have limited use.

This approach to training has

FIGHT BREED



**PASSION
TO
PERFORM**

IT'S HERE!

Australian owned fight gear and fight wear, specialising in MMA, Boxing and Muay Thai.



SPECIAL OFFER!

Find and Like us on facebook for a 10% discount off all stock.

Go to fightbreed.com.au for the best deals in quality fight gear and fight wear.

Clubs, enquire about wholesale deals on info@fightbreed.com.au

FIGHTBREED.COM.AU

CHI-SAU DRILL ⇩



This arm-break technique from *Chum Kiu* form is executed from the chi-sau flow drill...



...and followed up with a *lai-da* (forearm-strike) and simultaneous cover as the opponent turns to counter.

COMBAT APPLICATION ⇩



As the attacker grabs his shirt, setting up to strike...



...the defender seizes the wrist and attacks the arm, turning his opponent...



...and enters with a forearm-strike to the jaw/neck while smothering the attacker's attempted counter-strike.

worked for me several times in real life, whereby the reduced reaction times and motor skills afforded by chi-sau training made my response faster than the attackers' and I was able to place each attacker on the back foot and gain control of them and the situation.

An example of this is when I was working night shift as a security guard at a Canberra hospital. I received a code-red alarm from the accident and emergency area, as a drug-fuelled man possessing extreme levels of adrenaline and strength was threatening physical harm to other patients and staff. Upon arrival at the scene, I noticed that the man was keeping several staff and another guard at bay, screaming threats and swinging wildly with a medical cutting instrument in each hand.

I decided to be proactive and placed myself in his direct line of sight, then once I got his attention, I launched forward using *seung ma* footwork and simultaneously clasped onto his forearms to feel and control any pending attack while forcing him backwards. Sure enough, the man went berserk and charged like a bull, attempting wild swings, but contact reflex enabled me to deflect his attack and use his force to pull him to the ground face-first. This enabled me to pin him to the floor so medical staff could sedate him and pump his stomach.

Another incident in which chi-sau skills proved advantageous was when I pulled my car over to try and defuse a road-rage incident between four youths in one car and a middle-aged workman in another. This backfired on me (note the lesson here) and both parties ended up attacking me instead.

Two of the youths had already left their car and were advancing toward the other man, who was at this stage still sitting in his car, watching them through his rearview mirror.

To them, I was merely interested in my attempts to

calm things down, so the more brash youth threw a cheap shot at me. I deflected his punch and simultaneously delivered a *pai-sau* (135-degree bar-arm) to his cheekbone, which launched him into his friend, sending them both to the ground. They then scrambled back to their car and drove off.

Thinking the worst of it was over, I turned to check if the other man was okay, only to find him facing up to me with a metre-long metal pipe in his hand. He was very angry with me for apparently intervening and denting his masculinity — go figure! Understandably, I was experiencing elevated levels of fear at this point and tried to calmly retreat to my car; however, the man must have sensed my fear and seemed to get a buzz out of it, so he came at me all the same.

Again, the Wing Chun training kicked in and to his surprise, as he started to swing his pipe I leapt forward and administered a *hoi da* (inside deflection and elbow-strike) with enough force to stop him.

It was my advanced contact reflex training — primarily, chi-sau — combined with the ability to bridge the gap and make contact that enabled me to emerge safely from both encounters.

To see an example of the fine martial instrument you can become by giving chi-sau the deserved respect and training time, take a look at the skills of the old masters; better yet, touch hands with one of them. I cannot think of a more awe-inspiring scenario than seeing me, a veteran of martial arts for over 35 years at age 44, standing six-foot-five and weighing over 100kg, being completely and effortlessly outclassed in chi-sau by my 67-year-old sifu, who stands at five feet eight inches tall and weighs around 55kg.

With chi-sau, it's not so much about what you see but more about what you feel, and with its mastery comes a true fighter. As the incomparable Bruce Lee once said, "Don't think, feel." ■