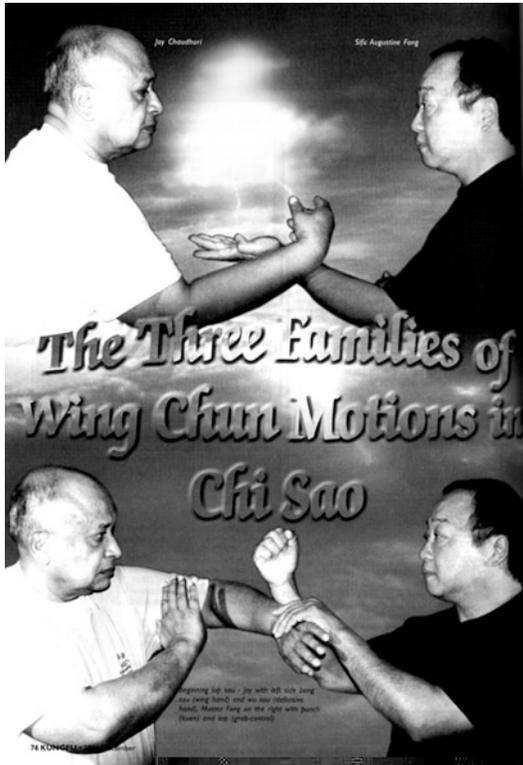


*The Three Families of Wing Chun Motions in Chi Sao*  
*Augustine Fong and Joy Chaudhuri*  
*(Copyright. Also courtesy of Kung Fu/QiGong Mag)*

The intent of this essay is to focus on one of the key features of chi sao (sticky hands): the synchronized use of the three main families of motions in wing chun gung fu. The complexity of chi sao cannot be covered in a single essay, but some key points can be helpful in martial development.



### **The three families of motions**

Three fundamental motions are sometimes called the “seeds” or “the three families” of Wing Chun motions. Despite oblique references to the three families, there are not always clear enough published explanations of their full meanings: why there are three, how they are related, and why they are important in martial activity. The questions are certainly important in Wing Chun, but some of the physiological implications may inform other arts as well.

Physiologically, the first section of the forearm immediately after the wrist is less muscled than the section closer to the elbow. This first section is used

extensively in many styles. In Wing Chun the first section is often referred to as the “bridge” and is very important in the art. Conceptually, this “bridge” performs many important bridge like functions. The bridge can be a crossing -guarding one’s structure. It is also an important platform for delivering power and energy to an attack. When in contact with anything it’s a crossing that has to be controlled. Given these and many other functions, it is no wonder that the bridges are important in many things including Wing Chun’s unique learning tool, called chi sao or sticky hands.

In addition to chi sao, the bridge is an important element in Wing Chun attacks and defenses. Alignment of the bridge with the correct pathway for energy and power is important for all hand motions, which in turn, must be properly linked to the rest of the structure. The bridge or the sleeve part of the forearm is somewhat

of a flattened oval section with a middle section and an outside and inside bony edge on the thumb side and the pinky side of the hand. The bridge therefore can be seen as having three sides: the two edges and the middle. These three sides provide the foundation of the three families of all wing chun hand motions—namely the basic tan, bong and fok. Micro-circles controlled by the elbow link these three families: depending on the side of the bridge being used. The legs also have similar names for motions, which are not discussed here. The tan family of hand motions all emphasizes the usage of the side of the bridge with the thumb at the end. The bong family of motions all use the pinky side of the bridge and the fok family generally uses the middle of the bridge for energy, power delivery, and initial contact (e.g. in the basic punch).

The genius of Wing Chun is it understands the simplicity of the three sides of the bridge as the key to control and efficient hand motion. A proper turn of the elbow can effect a quick transition from fok, bong, or tan. The circle of connections between the three families gives a complete repertoire of all possible usage of the arms in hand to hand work...empty-handed or with weapons. The next logical step was to devise a training method for effective transitions, adjustments, and control of the three sides of the bridge. This is an essential foundation of chi sao, where the transitions are done with sensitivity, control, efficient structural adjustment and, coordination and timing. This indeed is one aspect of skill development in chi sao, the major laboratory of Wing Chun. Both persons in chi sao exercises end up improving their timing, power, adjustments and control. Both persons' bong fok and tan motions will improve, if chi sao is taught correctly and done right.

Chi Sao should be differentiated from sparring. Sparring can help many things, but Chi Sao is a more comprehensive development method. . Without Chi Sao, sparring can be a haphazard way of learning

Wing chun motions. Chi Sao with the knowledge of the extensive members of the three families deeply trains one for understanding the widest possible array of forces, vectors, angles, and lines. Chi sao however, without sustained good teaching and practice can deteriorate into a much less useful set of muscular pushing and pulling and exchanges without learning.

The synchronization of the three families with the three parts of the bridge, prepares the reflexes for the variations of the bong, tan, and fok motions at various angles and levels. Thus the classic biu jee (shooting fingers) motion, using the pinky side of the arm, belongs to the bong sao family and can carry the bong sao banner to attack or defend at many levels including the top of the upper gates. The chi sao training will automatically prepare one for explosive bong sao family's biu jee when needed. Similarly, the low gan sao can perform bong sao family work at the belt or below the belt levels, with minimal muscle tension and without having

to lean forward or bending down. The same principles apply to the high, medium and low applications of the tan and the fok family of motions.

### **Antecedents and Development:**

In the evolution of Chinese martial arts, many systems developed two person routines and simulations for empty hand and weapon work. Many of the routines were pre-arranged and different from the spontaneous aspects of sparring. Some of the styles developed elements of sticking routines. Hung Gar has a two-person bridge (sleeve section of forearm) control exercise; Tai Chi has its well-known tui shou (push hands). Several other styles claim that they too have similar motions.

As a complete and mature art, wing chun has its own extensive and profound system of sticking to one's partner; or surrogate opponent. The intense hand use of wing chun has its trademark chi sao (sticky hands) as a vital sharpening tool. In a way it is a logical progression from prearranged two person drills leading to the edge of spontaneous self-defense.

Chi sao also has an equivalent practice for the legs-chi gerk, for the knives-chi do and for the poles-chi kwan. But chi sao remains the fundamental building block for all other sticking and two or more person timing efforts and improvements. Chi Sao close quarters contact work becomes the foundation for timing at any distance since irrespective of styles any system has to come to terms with actual contact.

Chi sao is wing chun's way of learning the mastery and control of contact.

### **Forms of Chi Sao:**

There are many forms of chi sao. The two fundamental ones in the Yip Man tradition are single hand (dan chi sao) and two hand (seung chi sao) sticky hands. When coordinated two-hand chi sao is relatively developed, then lop sao (grabbing/controlling with palm) work can be introduced. And later integrated into chi sao. Single, double and lop sao, each has variations of timing routines. Each of these three platforms can be used for learning timing and timed attacks and defenses. They are all eventually integrated into moving stances and footwork. A skilled person can move back and forth between single, double and lop platforms in sticking.

The single hand chi sao develops the detailed training of each hand and develops the right amount of relaxation on each side. The less active hand with a closed fist stays drawn back by the elbow at the side. It is not stiff but stays alive and gently

adjusts to the vibrations of the active hand. The active hand of each person meets on the same side...one person's right against the other's left. One person takes the top position with a fok sao (a controlling hand with slightly bent back fingers).

The other person with the bottom position makes contact with a tan sao (a palm up hand). The positions can be easily reversed with a circling hand motion... a huen sao. Each person's hand attempts with slightly forward semi circular motion to control the shield in front of a person protecting his centerline. Each elbow 's position and motion is the key to this control. One can make a move with the inactive hand and switch doing single chi sao on the previously inactive side thereby controlling the other half of the vertical circle of energy in ones front. The entire circle is controlled by the next development -double chi sao, involving both hands of each player.

Two handed chi sao is best done after reasonable mastery of single chi sao. Initially in two handed chi sao it is important to just learn and use the rolling motions (poon sao) at a steady energy. Then a bit more forward energy a heavier chi sao can be used or a very light version to stimulate sensory powers and adjustment. All these motions make one alert to the slightest irregularity signaling a weakness or an attack or an open line. Each player needs to make good transitions between the three families of wing chun motions the fok (control with fingers bent in a bit), the bong (wing hand) and the tan (palm up). All wing chun motions come from these families. Basic poon sao will involve the partner with both hands underneath using a bong sao on one side and a tan sao on the other. The other partner will ride on the top with two fok saos one higher than the other...then the rolling will begin. Without knowing the three hand motions well, one will have poor imitations of chi sao and wing chun. Without good chi sao, the development of timing, transition and cooperation between the full range of techniques will remain arrested.

In the rolling poon sao stage lots of major principles are at work such as the balancing of negative and positive energies. There are also balancing both sides of the body, right level of relaxation, not raising the shoulders or stiffening up, using minimal muscle, balancing soft and hard, proper stancing, spatial distance control, eye focus, proper closing, varying timing, adjusting to forces at work, right leveraging and much more.

After initial rolling, one can vary the position of the hands to one on top, the other on the bottom, thereby making combinations of bong and fok or fok and tan all working together. The extended laboratory work of chi sao allows experimentation with the entire rolling circular shield in front, thereby looking for openings in the others shield while avoiding leakage in ones own. Maximizing control at all times is one of the payoffs of chi sao. When it is learned properly, one can do chi sao

standing, moving, sitting, walking, on tables or posts, turning or even lying down, breaking away and then closing in (lut sao) to learn timing, and contact. With sufficient practice, chi sao becomes a mobile platform, from which a variety of attack combinations can be attempted: blocking/attacking linkages, blocking, attacking, throwing, chin na joint and cavity control can be experimented with. Eventually in chi sao, 3 fists, palms, fingers, knuckles, legs, elbows, shoulders, hips, knees, ankles and various parts of the feet can come into play provided proper control has developed.

The development of lop sao completes the progression of chi sao from single, double to lop.

Lop sao involves close cooperation between both hands. The lop sao cycle involves the bong (wing) and Wu (defensive hand) on the part of one partner who defends against a punch and lop (grab) by the other. Then the roles are reversed and the cycle goes on. Since chi sao functions as a laboratory, the use of the instruments will vary with the skill level of the participants. Some are likely to use the skill level of the first form only, the sil lim tao (little idea) without much footwork. Later with the chum kiu the second form which teaches motion (searching for the bridge) there will be turning and changing. Then the use of Lop Sao, stepping, flowing with combinations will emerge. The beginning of gor sao (crossing hands/contact work) attacks and defense emerging out of rolling will occur. With wing chun wooden dummy work, solid groundwork and sitting down work will improve. With the third form—shooting fingers---biu jee—multi person work, take downs, joint locking, sticky leg work, man sao (asking hand) and trying different energy (jing) combinations will develop. Then the sticking skills with adjustments will come in handy in controlling motions in knife and pole work. The beauty of chi sao is that the advanced work keeps on enriching the fundamental work and vice versa ...it is truly a continuous circle of enrichment and learning. One is never really done.

Chi sao is not actual fighting. But lots and lots of chi sao create a constantly upward learning curve.

This by passes the initial advantage and long run disadvantages of street fighting. Fighting experience can indeed be invaluable. But enough of it creates diminishing returns and as Thomas Hobbes knew: the life of man becomes nasty brutish and short. Constant chi sao with different partners, strategies and tactics creates as realistic an approximation to actual fighting that is possible within the rule of law. In old China and later in Hong Kong the old “bei mo” challenge system involved real dueling with almost no rules.

After rolling for a while chi sao players can begin experimenting with attacks and counters from lop sao or double chi sao or single chi sao. Depending on the skill of the players, the attacks can involve varying combinations delivered from different angles and stances and moving platforms. The attacks will really show the leaks in ones energy shield. All the major principles of wing chun come into play in this gor sao---crossing-hand phase. This includes not only stance, positional, and timing issues but also the other internal principles; sayings and formulae of wing chun. A flavor of the latter, a vast subject in itself includes; linking offense with defense, controlling whatever comes and attacking as the line opens, not hitting randomly without sensing a clear opportunity when lines are not open, finding the inside line, protecting the mother line, among others. Many of the sayings often called kuen kuit sound esoteric at first but they come alive in chi sao, including the related gor sao and lut sao.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Lots of chi sao play experience keeps on elevating the skills of the wing chun players to higher and wider levels of awareness. Adaptation, coordination, the erasure of dichotomies (external/internal, soft/hard.) and the control of contact from the moment it occurs are all part of the continuing development. The qualities of emptiness, stillness, listening, blending a powerful but springy structure with the right blends of hard and soft are all part of chi sao. The complete or near complete wing chun person can move smoothly with ease between the variations of chi sao, single, double, lop, chi gerk, two person, and multiple person relationships and situations.

Chi Sao is wing chun's well-developed prelude to actual or any martial communication. Without it wing chun skills will remain blind without a compass and sans reflexive spontaneity, individuation and even freedom.