

THE MARVEL OF WING CHUN'S CHI SAO

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Introduction:

Wing Chun as a martial art was born in the South China rebellions against the regional extension of the Ching Dynasty administration into South China. The second half of the 17th century onwards saw the emergence of many martial arts groups who allied themselves with other groups who felt seriously deprived. (Wakeman :The Great Enterprise). The early teachers of the art, including at least in legend the founder Ng Mui, pruned and adapted from the existing legacy of the Chinese martial arts in creating Wing Chun. Like some other southern Shaolin arts, wing chun developed “short hand” power in its specific training, in addition to many other principles common to the Chinese arts. In its early days as a rebel art, the emphasis clearly was on economy and effectiveness in both empty hand and weapons work for individuals at close quarters when attacking or being attacked by the establishment forces of the Ching rulers. The development of the art according to the oral tradition continued on the Chinese Opera boats often called Red Junks which plied the waters of South China. One can see this in the preferred choice of the “yee gee kim yeung ma”(Chaudhuri: Defending the Mother Line), in contrast to the more common horse stance, as the foundation for all other stances because of its potential for both stability and mobility. As wing chun developed, it always retained its preoccupation with effectiveness, especially at close quarters. Members of the gentry who could analyze and articulate the principles of wing chun as well as applying them later continued the development of the art of the early rebels. The famous Fatshan doctor Leung Jan epitomizes this analytical development in addition to applying the art. Leung Jan’s fame was widespread in the Canton region in the 19th century. Two generations later, the late and famous Yip Man (died in 1972) of Fatshan and later, after the Chinese Communist revolution, of Macao and Hong Kong further added to this tradition. One of the elements that kept on being refined is the vital tool of chi sao for sharpening one’s tools. The opening of Yip Man’s school in Hong Kong brought the hitherto secretive art into the open. One of the major students of Yip Man is Ho Kam Ming of Macao and Hong Kong, who in turn taught the senior author Sifu Augustine Fong. The late Bruce Lee’s reputation also assisted in the art becoming better known, since Lee’s early foundation was in wing chun.

The popularity and the reputation of Yip Man’s wing chun has helped bringing attention to other arts with similar names but with some differing content.. However Yip Man’s version in spite of some varying interpretations by his students remains as the best known and widely admired version of the art. Yip Man distinguished between his art with its 3 hand forms, wooden dummy form, and the two choice weapons, the bot jam do (8 directions chopping knives) and the luk dim bune kwan (six and one-half point pole) and the other arts which had some other different forms.

Most wing chun systems have some form of “chi sao” or “sticky hands” as a critical, central and integral part of the curriculum. That is certainly true of the Yip Man tradition. Chi Sao helps develop the automatic reflex, combinations and flow, listening sensitivity, forward driving but softly balanced energy, center controlling timing and the proper application of wing chun motions. Without chi sao there is no wing chun and without without grounding in wing chun, chi sao loses its source and form. Wing Chun without chi sao is blind and chi sao without wing chun is an empty scheme.

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 while sparring was not. 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 extensive and profound system of sticking to one’s partner; the 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.

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 work becomes the foundation for timing at any distance.

Forms of Chi Sao:

There are many forms of chi sao. The two fundamental ones are single hand (dan chi sao) and two hand (seung chi sao) sticky hands. Then there are other single and two hand drills and the timing work known as lop sao which involves quick controlling and trapping and leverage motions. The single hand chi sao develops the detailed training of each hand. 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 persons 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...one of them called 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 at a steady energy level called poon sao. Then to stimulate forward energy a heavier chi sao or luk sao can be used or a very light version to stimulate sensory powers. All these motions makes one alert to the slightest irregularity signaling a weakness or an attack. For each player 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 linkage, blocking, attacking, throwing, chin na joint and cavity control can be experimented with. Eventually in chi sao,

fists, palms, fingers, knuckles, legs, elbows, shoulders, hips, knees , ankles and various parts of the feet can come into play.

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 siu lim tao(little idea) without much footwork. Later with the chum kiu(see Fong articles on the net) the second form which teaches motion (searching for the bridge) alternating levels of power and turning and changing, use of Lop Sao, stepping, flowing with combinations will become evident. 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---bue gee---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 creates 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.

Geometry, Lop sao and gor sao variations

Wing chun is full of geometric body shaping in different contexts, pyramid stances composed of interlocking triangles, circles, straight lines, convex, concave, axial combinations and others are involved. In chi sao two partners facing each other usually have a triangular hand/elbow structure

Pointing horizontally at the other persons chest center between the nipples. The two elbows form two

points of the triangle. The center of the axis where the elbows are pointed provides the third point of the triangle. The revolving of this triangle forward in chi sao creates a powerful control of a conical

shape which bores its way- throwing attacking forces away- provided the elbows properly control the the horizontal axis of the cone. The revolution of the two cones touching each other creates the opportunities to find openings, inside lines or the collapse of someone's shapes and structure and the resulting disarray.

The collapsing of structure can be done by another great element in the chi sao curriculum and training pattern called lop sao-grabbing/ controlling hand. Lop sao assists in finding just the right leverage point of the opponent and the timing to deal with using the leverage. Consequently, lop sao adds a special dimension to chin na, grappling, throwing, and a whole series of attacks and combinations which follow. Lop sao involves rolling and controlling the relationships between bong sao, pak sao and an

incoming force or a strike. Both partners use the lop, pak, strike circles in the contact motions. The bong sao finds the leverage point of the strike. The linked pak sao triggers the see saw leverage point, with its just enough energy for the bong sao to be immediately converted into a strike or a combination of controlled strikes, locks or throws.

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 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 blend 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.

Notes: 1. Frederick Wakeman, Jr. The Great Enterprise, The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in Seventeenth-Century China, Two Volumes, University of California Press: Berkeley, 1985.

2. Joyotpaul Chaudhuri; Defending the Motherline, Wing Chun's Sil Lim Tao. Journal of Asian martial Arts, pp71-83. Volume 4, Number 4, 1995

3. See:< <http://www.fongswingchun.com/home.html>> for articles and information on wing chun lineage, history and other related information.