

A Conversation with a Wing Chun Gung Fu Master: Augustine Fong *Interviewer: Joy Chaudhuri*

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Master Augustine Fong teaches in Tucson, Arizona where he also runs the Fong's Health Center. There he deals with a full range of Chinese health practices, martial arts, chi gong, lion dancing, training tapes, books, equipment and supplies. The interview is based on conversations in November and December 1997. The interview covered a wide range of topics including Wing Chun weapons, Wing Chun history, theory vs. practice, sticky hands, the physical and the spiritual, and student/teacher misunderstandings. The interview format highlights Master Fong's views on particular aspects of Wing Chun.

Q. You are a respected voice in contemporary Wing Chun Gung Fu. Could you highlight some important landmarks in your Wing Chun journey?

A. That could involve a long answer. Briefly I began learning Wing Chun in 1960 with Ho Kam Ming in Macao. Next, I moved to Hong Kong and later, came to the United States. I maintained and still maintain a close relationship with my teacher. Communication between a dedicated teacher and a student in a way is a long and continuing relationship.

Q. What was Ho Kam Ming's relationship with Yip Man?

A. A very close one. My Sifu Ho began with Yip Man in the fifties as a regular tuition paying student attending classes and then continuing with chi sau and other aspects of Wing Chun after classes. Master Ho was in his thirties and understood things in a mature manner. He regarded his relationship with Yip Man as a familial one. Because of the similarities in height Yip Man and master Ho did lots and lots of chi sau together. Master Ho's relationship with Yip Man- one to one- remained strong to the end. When Yip Man couldn't teach anymore he turned over his private students to Master Ho for further instruction. Master Ho carried Yip Man to the hospital when Yip Man asked him to do so.

After learning all the Wing Chun forms completely and directly from Yip Man and doing chi sau with him, Master Ho continued to learn the fine points of theory in conversations till Yip Man passed away. Master Ho is a fairly conservative person when it comes to publicity and media relations. But his knowledge of Wing Chun is very deep. When I was looking for a kung fu school I was very lucky that Master Ho was teaching in Macao because I was determined to learn good Gung Fu.

Q. What was the basic environment in which you learned from Master Ho and do you teach in the same way?

A. I learned the old fashioned way required a lot of patience on my part and his part. For learning a simple but deep art it helps to have complete faith in the teacher, to practice hard and long, to listen and understand and also to test and see if the art works. Thus when a good student is ready a good teacher will teach him things.

Just as Master Ho learned all the forms from Yip Man so I learned all the forms from Master Ho including the sil lim tau, chum kiu, bue gee, mok jong, butterfly knives and the long pole.

Just as Master Ho had a long relationship with Yip Man so also I have had a long relationship with Master Ho which has continued to this date. The nature of both relationships were and are such that some of the teaching has been public and the rest private. That is not uncommon in the Chinese Gung Fu teaching tradition.

Teaching methods however can be adjusted given changing conditions and the background of the students. Yip Man had to adjust from the mainland to the Hong Kong environment. Ho adjusted for Macao. I had to deal with different conditions in the US. So I ended up organizing a curriculum carefully, giving more explanations and illustrations for purposes of communication in the USA. While I have adjusted my teaching methods, the Wing Chun principles are the same. Again, when the student is ready, I show them greater depths of the art.

Q. Do you do your forms in exactly the same way as Yip Man and Ho Kam Ming?

A. Depends again on how you look at it. For Americans I have tried to organize the teaching curriculum so that they can follow a little better than they would otherwise. As part of the organization of the curriculum, I have put back some things in the forms here and there that they would otherwise miss. In the old way you eventually got everything. In today's context it helps to have a curriculum. The principles of Wing Chun are exactly the same. The principles of Wing Chun were created by a long line of teachers. But teaching methods vary: the expressions have aspects that are unique to the specific teacher.

Q. What are some specific examples of things in your weapons forms that are unique?

A. Many teachers have their own little signatures in their forms. My "opening" in the bot jam do form is mine. But the opening move involves applications that I learned from Ho Kam Ming. There are some applications there that I didn't want my students to miss. I give full teaching credit to Ho Kam Ming.

In my time, I have seen many styles and forms but when I do Wing Chun, I teach what has come down from Yip Man through Ho Kam Ming to me. I have seen Mok Poi's form in 1983 and learned it quickly and I have seen Hawkins Cheung's form. But my knife form is based on my learning from Ho Kam Ming and includes some applications that I learned from him. Some applications I put back into my form for teaching my students. My own early video of the form was filmed in 1978. The one under the Panther label was filmed in 1982.

I also continue to teach special applications that you do not see in the videos to individual students when they are or were ready. Teaching has an individualized element. I learned the pole first, when I was learning chum kiu and I began the bot jam do when I was learning bue gee. But again, I organized my teaching to adjust to students in a contemporary setting where it helps to have a linear and sequenced curriculum. Videos, films and student notes capture aspects of a teacher but there is much more to a teacher and to teaching. I learned the pole applications from Ho Kam Ming first and absorbed them thoroughly. Then for teaching purposes I put important motions in a logical fashion into a form for organized teaching. Forms are textbooks and teachers organize texts for the same subject sometimes differently.

Q. Are weapons the most important things in Wing Chun?

A. I do not think so. In the first place weapons were added to Wing Chun after the development of the hands. If you are not good with your stances, motions, steps and hands you will not fill in the gaps by learning weapons. The pole adds power when the stances and turns are properly learned. The knives add to the footwork after the fundamentals are fully absorbed. In gung fu you can tell when someone's foundation work is poor though they can go through the externals of many forms and styles.

Q. Are there other unique elements in your Wing Chun teaching forms?

A. Again, yes there are applications that I put into the appropriate places in the curriculum. I put the double punch drill back into the first form, because I think it is important for balance and two handed motions. Often in the old days the dummy motions would be shown initially only on one side. You learned the rest in application drills. So I made sure that in an organized curriculum for our times that students learn the balanced motions on both sides. Again, forms are texts and teachers always work on organizing the text for the same subject for their students.

Q. Do you think much about the history of Wing Chun?

A. The subjects of history and history itself often changes. Look at the People's Republic...they have their own versions of Chinese history. In Wing Chun gung fu, the important thing is learning well right now so that you will have something to pass on to students. The good part of history is already there in the teachings of a good teacher.

Q. How do you see the relationship between theory and practice?

A. Wing Chun has deep theoretical foundations. But some students waste their time talking theory. Others in criticisms and lineage politics. The important thing is doing Wing Chun.

Q. How important is sticky hands?

A. Very important, It provides the important tools. It links all the important principles of Wing Chun together including timing, feeling and the right power/distance relationships. When you touch and feel an elephant and become familiar, you do not have to touch it again in order to recognize it. You know it immediately from a distance. Sparring gives you some isolated experiences of timing and power, but sticky hand helps you learn the linkages between all the principles and the related control. Sticky hand makes your practice grow and enriches what you learn from trying out things and experiences.

Q. Do you think Wing Chun is purely a physical art?

A. No. Conquering the physical part of Wing Chun heightens your own personal internal growth. That is what I mean by spiritual...not dogma. Both in doing well in the physical and the spiritual you have to learn how to conquer your ego. Do not be greedy in hitting or a slave to a technique and you can perhaps see the universal law of personal truth, kindness and patience. People sometimes miss seeing aspects of their teacher. Whatever Yip Man's shortcomings may have been he didn't criticize other martial artists or his contemporaries.

Q. Do students sometimes feel misled by their teacher?

A. Nowadays sometimes students think that the Sifu is holding back or deceiving them. It's not necessarily true. Sometimes the student is not ready for the teaching. When the student is ready the teacher is there. Not everyone learns at the same rate, nor do they have the same attitude, always to learning the depths of an art.

Q. Thank you very much. Do you care to make a closing comment?

A. Yes. A great art like Wing Chun provides us with a method of looking deeply into yourself. You won't learn if you are always envious of someone else's learning. By practice rather than criticism or politics, you will progress faster and learn good self defense.