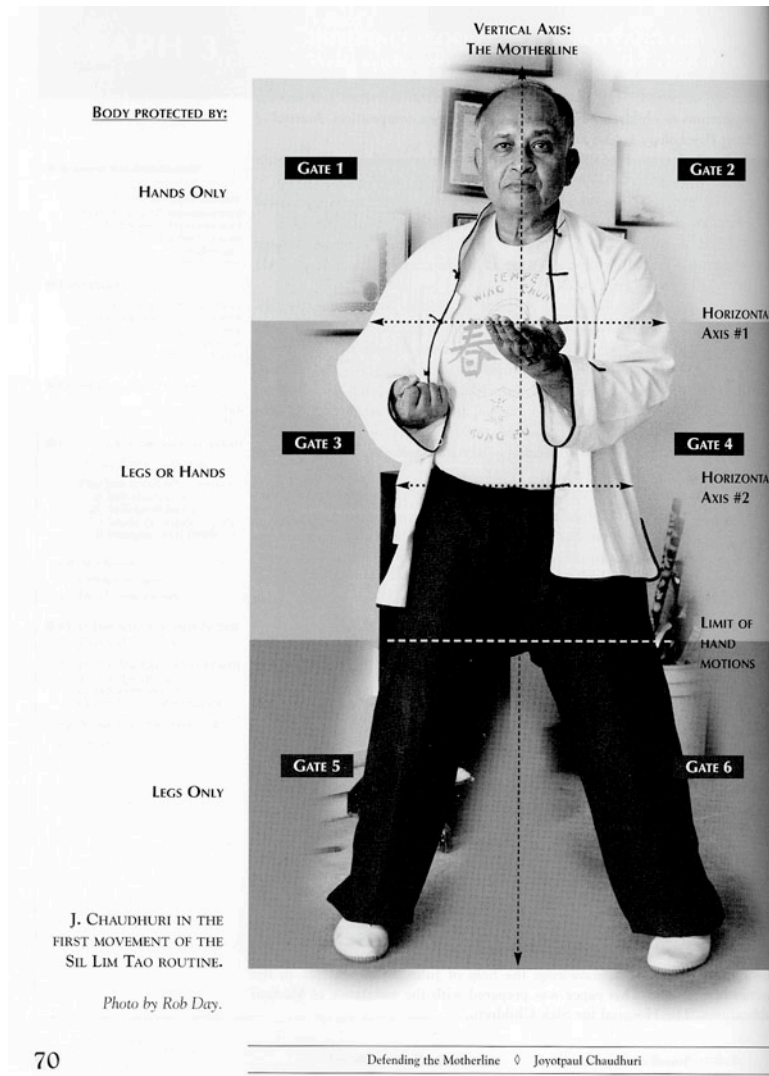


Defending the Motherline
Wing Chun's Siu Lim Tau
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Wing chun Cantonese, wing chun; Mandarin, yong chun) is a southern Chinese martial art that has been spreading in the British Commonwealth, the United States and parts of Continental Europe and Asia. We can thank the Chinese Revolution as a factor in this dispersion. The late Grandmaster Yip Man escaped to Hong Kong in 1950 and eventually began teaching publicly what was a fairly closed and disciplined tradition which veered off from southern Shaolin (Cantonese, Siu Lum) style over three centuries ago. The Bruce Lee

phenomenon in movies and in the martial arts provided an additional early stimulation to the spreading of wing chun in America. Unfortunately, the spreading of wing chun was accompanied by considerable miscommunication and resulted in uneven quality control and a proliferation of hasty adaptations. Some of this confusion is understandable.

Yip Man, who died in 1972, was the major source of information on wing chun, yet his public teaching lasted less than fifteen years (1950-1964). He taught privately for several years afterwards.¹ Despite his profound understanding of wing chun, Yip Man was a reluctant teacher who did not directly or consistently correct all of his students. Hence, the beginning of the profusion of perceptions in the evolution of wing chun. Not all of the perceptions are of equal validity any more than a student's lecture notes in an American university are as valid as those of an instructor's even though both might pass the course.² Economic necessity drove Yip Man to teach; otherwise, as a man of property, he probably would have remained a leisurely patriarch practicing wing chun in Fatshan in southern China. The legacy that is left, however, is a deep, intriguing and virtually inexhaustible martial way of uniting body, mind and spirit.

Discussing all aspects of wing chun is not possible in a journal essay. The author's focus here is to share a glimpse of the system through an analysis of the structure and function of the primary stance of wing chun in the first form, sil lim tao (Cantonese; Mandarin, xiao nian tou, a little idea), which instills the relational structure of bone, ligament, joint, tendon, muscle, line and angle, while also teaching the inner virtues of softness, stillness, sinking and emptiness. Hopefully, through this discussion the reader himself will understand the underlying logic of the subject, thereby minimizing a reliance on the statements of other authorities alone.

Now sixty-two years old, I have been interested and active in both Eastern and Western philosophy and martial arts for most of my life. For the last nineteen years, I have focused my studies on wing chun. My main teacher has been Augustin Fong, who is the most distinguished student of Ho Kam Ming, who, in turn, was one of the most distinguished students of Yip Man. Ho Kam Ming studied with Yip Man for over fifteen years and was personally very close to the Grandmaster until his death. With a background in comparative philosophy and martial arts, I questioned all aspects of wing chun's theory and practice. Some insightful answers came from related literature, Augustine Fong, and seminars with Ho Ham Ming, Wong Shun Leung, Chu Shong Tin, Victor Kan and others. I obtained additional information from visiting wing chun schools in the United States mainland, Hawaii, and Hong Kong. Thus, I obtained many perspectives on the art. However, despite these authoritative sources, much is based on common sense regarding the subject.

A Martial Way

The structure of wing chun as a way to truth uses the practice of self-defense as a search for wisdom.² The conquest of fear is part of the journey of liberation and understanding the Self is a key to its defense. As in the Dhyana-Chan-Zen Buddhist perspectives in the arts, one progresses through various spiritual stages, e.g., through samsara, nirvana and then to the

Void. In the martial wing chun way, one conquers the delusions and misperceptions and then sees the problematic situation as it really is before one begins to understand the Void. Of course, as in many Chinese contexts, the Chan perspective may have an overlay of Daoist nomenclature as well (such as the Five Element Theory) or a Confucian schooling structure for martial arts study, such as master-student or elder-brother/younger-brother relationships. But the Dhyana-Chan-Zen perspective is a sufficient guide for understanding the principles of wing chun.

Sil Lim Tao: The Roots of Wing Chun

Many of the principles of wing chun come together in the primary stance of the sil lim tao form. The stance includes a complex of geometrical shapes, including interrelated triangles, circles and lines. Externally, they form a stable pyramid-like structure with broad triangles visible from the front, the back, or the sides. The center of gravity is not as low or as wide as in some horse-riding stances nor as narrow and high as in Western boxing. The feet are sufficiently pigeon-toed to form a base triangle and the turned-in knees point toward the apex of the base triangle. There are other horizontal triangles at the hips and the elbows. There are vertical triangles from the shoulders toward the heart, the dan tian, and the middle-line between the knees. This last elongated, vertical, downward-pointing triangle meets the upward-pointing, shorter but broader triangle coming from the feet. The two triangles meet at the knees. The coordinated turns, initiated at the knees, control the motion of both the base triangle and the longer, inverted triangle from the shoulders down. The torque around the center-line by the base delivers tremendous energy to the top so that the hands can move quickly. The base is strong but potentially very mobile while the top can turn and spring faster, thereby providing fluid power and multiple, nearly simultaneous actions. Hence, the traditional designation: “Feet like a mountain; hands like lightning.”

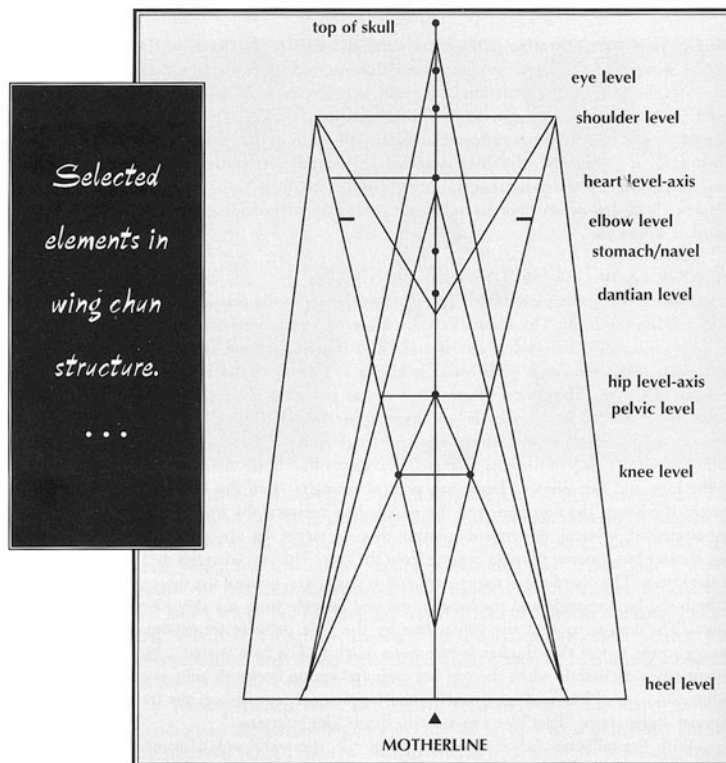
With the tailbone tucked in with a pelvic tilt, the sacral area is rooted like a shovel stuck into the ground at a slight angle. The middle part of the back rests straight while the upper back tilts slightly forward. The head and neck are straight with the chin tucked in. This makes for a functionally straight spine so energy can flow evenly along its pathway. The feeling is that of hanging from a string while being rooted to the ground.

The entire structural pyramid has several lines which are the key to the mobility of the wing chun structure. The most important line is called the “motherline,” which is the axis from the apex straight down through the middle of the pyramid to the ground between the legs. The motherline acts like a pivotal rod or axis and every fluid motion involves a visible or imperceptible turn of the motherline. In the first form, since the feet remain stationary, the motherline does not shift sideways or back and forth. However, even though the lower body is stationary in the sil lim tao, the sensitive student becomes aware that there is a lot of internal movement in the first form. While the motherline is vertically straight and stable, the punches, palm strikes and other movements all emanate from the motherline, which create various lines going out like spokes from the hub of a wheel. And everything is interrelated. When the left hand moves, there is a compensatory balancing move on the right side because of the circular action of the central axis, or motherline. The entire person is

essentially a bundle of energy formed around an axis, with the dan tian below the navel being the center of the bundle. A wise martial artist simply protects his or her motherline, conserves energy at the center and attacks or controls the motherline of the other person.

All of the triangles, lines, circles, and geometric shapes are connected to the motherline. The vertical motherline has a series of connecting points which serve as axes for horizontal lines and planes. One axis is at the heart and another one is in the pelvic area. These two horizontal lines cross the motherline creating six so-called “gates.” The two top gates above the heart are protected by the hands. The two middle gates can be protected by the hands or the legs. The two bottom gates are protected by the feet alone (see page 70). There are additional lines and planes located at the dan tian, shoulders, elbows, hips and knees. Awareness of the lines and the axes and being able to turn them without breaking the structure creates a very mobile and flexible system. The structure is effective when standing, moving forwards, backwards, sideways, sitting, bending, or lying down. But learning how to stand and understand the motherline is the prelude to all motion. Hence, the importance of the first form sil lim tao (Mandarin, xiao nian tou) “a little idea” of an extensive system.

Like all art, there is an element of both science and physics involved. But in Asian arts, there are also aspects of the esoteric, intuitive, aesthetic and denotative components and meanings in the proper uses of the wing chun structure. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Hence, as in other Asian arts, a knowledgeable guide or teacher is important, particularly in the beginning of the journey, which includes understanding of the motherline.



The Motherline: A Comparative View

Understanding the motherline and all her horizontal and vertical children coming out of the axis is fundamental to learning wing chun. There are unlimited possibilities of combinations and techniques. But adapting and modifying wing chun techniques without understanding the principles limits the character and usefulness of imitated techniques.

Brief comparisons of the structure of wing chun with other, better known systems should help in understanding the nature of the legacy of wing chun. Among taijiquan styles, for example, the Chen Style is the oldest. Like wing chun, Chen taiji can be approached from a variety of perspectives for learning, i.e., self-defense, health, art, philosophy, and wisdom. Chen style has an explosive compactness. Learning the two traditional forms leads to a comprehensive set of applications. In addition to striking techniques made with the hands, elbows and feet, the Chen style includes blocks, controlling motions, and throws flowing from movements following circular and linear patterns.³

A major source of the great moving energy in the Chen style comes from uncoiling, spiralling-upward movements with the waist playing a major role. When applied to push-hands routines, this energy manifests in circular motions similar to hula-hoop gyrations. There are, however, small side-to-side motions, which result in the swaying of the

motherline. In wing chun, while the motherline remains sufficiently supple, it does not sway; it revolves on its axis, creating a drilling, rifle-like motion.

In many other martial arts, various parts of the motherline are used from the hip up or the waist up. This appears to be the case for boxing, judo and karate. In contrast, awareness of the entire motherline and flexible stability is emphasized in the sil lim tao. Later the student learns how to turn, step, move and use the horizontal lines and the connecting axes in the second and third forms of wing chun.

The pre-eminence of the motherline in wing chun is also seen in training with a wooden dummy as well as with weapons. While one works with the arms and legs of the wooden dummy, the real focus is on the motherline of the dummy's trunk. The arms and legs and the slats have some give, but basically the dummy's trunk and motherline are stable. This practice trains one's movements to search for the dummy's motherline without destabilizing one's own motherline. Not understanding this, improperly trained enthusiasts indiscriminately beat on the dummy's arms and legs rather than learning the relationships between the lines represented in the motherline theory.

Then there are martial art styles in which practitioners collapse their motherlines by acrobatic flying leaps, jumps, and spins, often with kicks resulting from these motions. Wing chun has lots of kicks, but they are applied without destabilizing the motherline. Often, wing chun kicks occur when one has some control of the opponent through touch so that contact with the opponent's structure is maintained. There are some small hopping motions in wing chun, but they are intended to regain control of the line, i.e., the relationship between one's motherline and the opponent's. The orientation toward the integrity of the motherline and its axis is a singular characteristic of the art of wing chun.

Motion in the Sil Lim Tao

Once the structure and function of the stance in sil lim tao is understood, a brief overview of the hand motions is in order. While the stance is being learned and strengthened, the hand motions provide an introduction to both internal and external principles. The first movement involving palm up, defensive hand, and twisted hand are done very, very slowly so that the mind understands the right amount of energy to use, the movement on the correct line, and the even control of energy flow. At the same time, the importance of the elbow, its drilling motion and its control of the line is developed.

After the first slow sections, the remainder of the 108 movements are done at a more rapid but controlled pace. However, the elegance and simplicity of the system can be seen from the fact that all the hand motions of wing chun are derived from three basic hand motions palm up, defensive hand, and twisted hand and these three motions, in turn, involve three stages of circular, forward and drilling motions around the chest-level axis, directed by the elbows.

Chi Sao

The three hand motions are the elements of chi sao the unique sticky-hand motion of wing chun, which develops endless skills, including timing, appropriate power and reflexes, sensitivity, knowledge of the lines, structure, weaknesses, and strengths. Chi sao develops sensors which provide a wealth of information immediately upon contact. Chi sao has many varieties: several single sticky-hand motions and several double sticky-hand motions. In turn, sticky-hand can be done in different contexts: standing, sitting, moving, blindfolded, and with or without various single-leg, double-leg, and sticky-leg motions. All these chi sao motions can flow into each other and also flow into grabbing arm motions. In turn, the chi sao motions can provide the occasion for experimenting with families or formations involving different openings and endings and defenses against them. And chi sao can be done with a rich variety of wing chun footwork.

Chi sao's drilling (not up and down) motions are different from the more side-to-side motions of taiji's push-hands exercises. Chi sao is sometimes imitated by modified or eclectic systems. But there cannot be good chi sao without understanding wing chun and there cannot be good wing chun without chi sao. The theory and the practice go together in the development of the applications and the evolution of individuality and spontaneity.

With learning the sil lim tao, how to turn and step, and then developing the sensitivity of chi sao, the wing chun student is well on the way to effective self-defense. However, a word of caution is in order. People with actual fighting experience have some basic initial advantages. But compensating with lots of chi sao is the appropriate long-run training remedy. The learning curve of only fighting can be steep but short, declining with injury and age. In contrast, the wing chun learning curve, because of chi sao, continues steadily upward. Yip Man remained formidable until his last illness and Ho Kam Ming remains formidable in his seventies. The key is chi sao for which one should always be prepared to learn something new every time it is practiced.

Some Key Applications and Guidelines

A brief discussion of applications follows regarding the structure, function, motions, and principles of wing chun and the practice of chi sao. There are endless possible applications, since there are many permutations and combinations that can occur between different people in different places and situations. But some select examples of operational principles will hopefully illustrate the practical results of the theory of the lab work.

Motherline

Always protect your own motherline. If the gates to the motherline are closed, the opponent has to take circuitous routes, leaving the wing chun person to effectively control shorter, more direct lines to the opponent.

Center

The ultimate target is the opponent's motherline. Destroying the motherline will cut off the

necessary energy links of potential techniques.

Inside Line

In every situation, if at all possible, capture the inside line. Doing so neutralizes the opponent's speed and power. For example, if the opponent throws a straight jab at the face, a rising straight punch between the jab and the path or connection between the opponent and your own motherline captures or wins the inside line. This is truly an intercepting fist when it can be a block which continues into an attack.

Kicking

Kick only when your structure is stable due to proper balance or due to borrowing your opponent's structure by controlling the contact point, i.e., by grabbing, blocking, touching, or even hitting. Then the kicks can be "invisible" or "shadowless," i.e., cannot be seen by the opponent unless he foolishly looks down and thereby gets into greater difficulties.

Force Relations

If the attacking force is weak and you have the inside line, then attack. If the attacking force is close to parity, deflect with a turn while attacking. If the opposite force is stronger than yours and you have to defend yourself by fighting, use one of the wing chun sidesteps and turn and attack. Also, when stopping a stronger force at close quarters, the right amount of giving and softness will prevent a breakdown of your own structure. The same principle applies when spring-nets and lines on the decks of U.S. Navy aircraft carriers stop a landing plane in a short distance.

Combinations

When your structure is sound, you can launch multiple attacks with one motion of the structure. A very short step or turn can launch both hands and a leg if the balance is right.

Trapping

Wing chun is known for its trapping. But imitations of wing chun often do not go beyond trapping with hands. With progressive chi sao there is far more to trapping. With the development of the feet, the martial artist learns how to go beyond the hands to the trapping of the motion, the energy, the stance, the structure, and ultimately, the intentions or emotions of the opponent. And if the opponent's emotions are successfully directed away from the developing conflict, then indeed one has won without fighting the ultimate victory.

Conclusion

We have given some applications of wing chun in self-defense situations. These include

protecting the motherline, attacking the opponent's motherline, capturing the inside line, multiple actions or combinations and finally, trapping. These applications emerge from the theories of wing chun and the laboratory of chi sao. The major path to knowledge in the wing chun system is in the form of the sil lim tao 'the little idea.'

It is possible to be like Miyamoto Mushashi, to gain wisdom through reflection, meditation, and the study of martial arts. But Mushashi himself was a guide and in great disciplines like wing chun it is better to have a guide. While great art has a foundation in denotative science shared with other arts, it is also full of connotative and esoteric meanings. Wing chun has both its science and its art. The sil lim tao binds the rings of earth, water, fire and wind with the void in a profound way.⁴__

Notes

1 See Yip Man's notes on "The Origin of Ving Tsun," pages 8-10 and Lok Yiu's essay, "Development of Ving Tsun Kung Fu in Hong Kong," pages 12-20 in *The genealogy of the ving tsun family* (1990). Hong Kong: Ving Tsun Athletic Association.

2 For an excellent treatise on the relationship between martial activity and wisdom, see Nagaboshi, T. (1994) *The Bodhisattva Warriors*. York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, Inc.

For a source book on wing chun theory, see Fong, A. (n.d.). *The complete systems of wing chun gung fu: Wing chun theories and concepts vol. 7*. Tucson: Fong's Health Center.

Also, see Fong, A. (n.d.). *Wing chun kung fu: History, concepts and philosophy*, Video No. 8. San Clemente, CA: Panther Productions.

For a discussion of the conceptual linkages between India and China in the martial arts, see Chaudhuri, J. (January, 1991). "108 step: The Sino-Indian connection in the martial arts." *Inside Kung Fu*, pp. 48-49 and 81-82.

3 The author was introduced to Chen Style taijiquan by Jin Hengli, a national wushu champion from China. Additional corrections to the author's practice were made by Chen Xiaowang during his first trip to Phoenix and Tucson, Arizona.

4 See Kaufman, S. (1994), *The martial artist's book of five rings*. Boston: Charles E. Tuttle Co. Within the circle of extant martial art systems, Mushashi's esoteric teachings appear to have considerable congruence with wing chun principles.