

CHUA KAH JOO

The Endless Journey

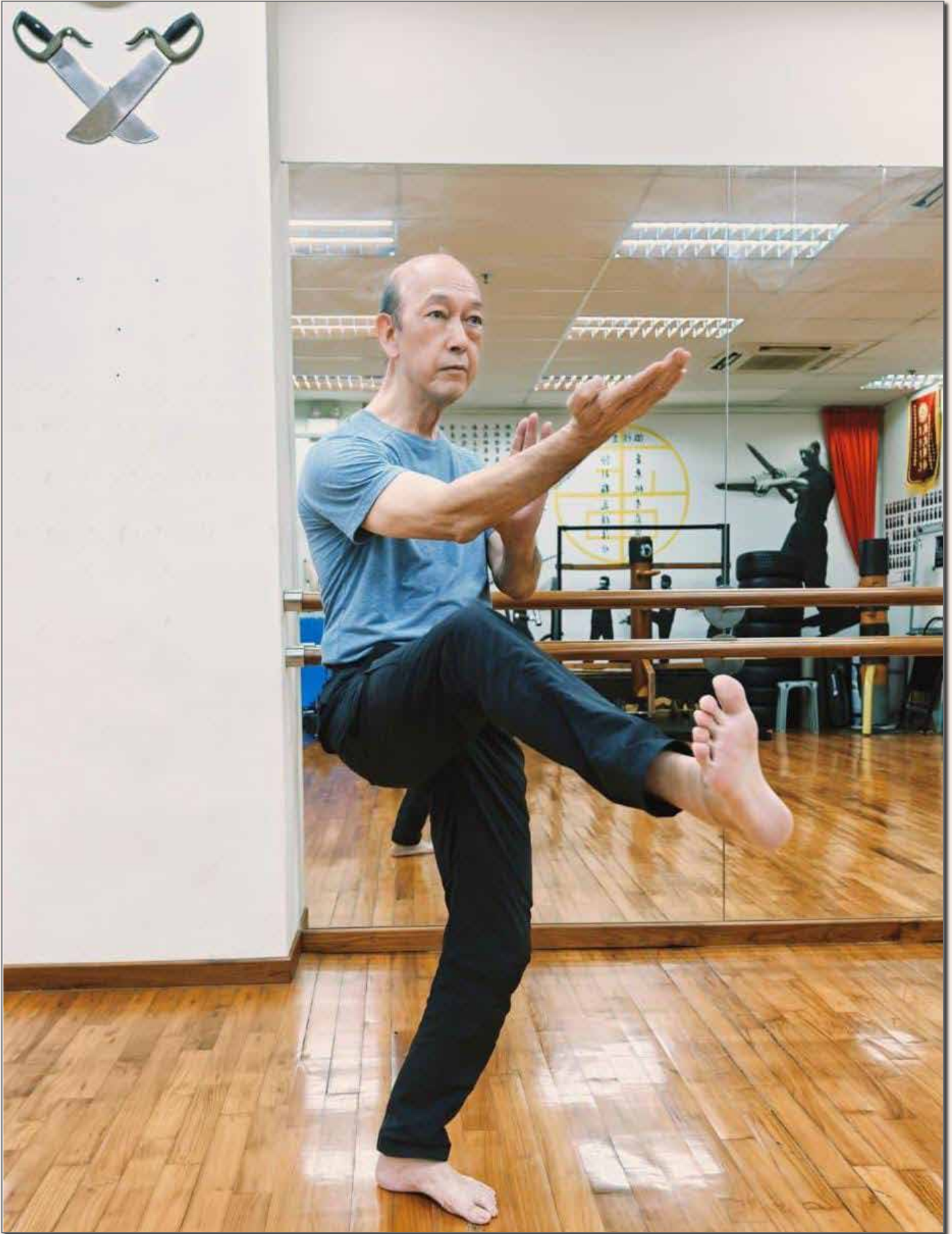
By Jose M. Fraguas



Chua Kah Joo is a revered Wing Chun Kung Fu Master whose dedication and contributions have left a lasting imprint on the martial arts world. Born in Singapore, Sifu Chua began his martial arts journey at a young age, drawn to the practicality and efficiency of Wing Chun. Over decades of rigorous training and relentless pursuit of mastery, he emerged as a leading authority in the art, blending traditional principles with modern applications.

Beyond his technical expertise, Chua is celebrated for his teaching philosophy, which combines discipline with an approachable demeanor that fosters a sense of camaraderie among his students. He has mentored martial artists across various skill levels, inspiring them not only to refine their physical techniques but also to embrace the philosophical aspects of Wing Chun, such as self-control, mindfulness, and respect.

Sifu Chua's approach is marked by a commitment to preserving Wing Chun's traditional roots while encouraging his students to adapt its principles to contemporary contexts.



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How long have you been practicing the martial arts – Wing Chun - and who was your teacher?

I have been training in Wing Chun since 1971. My first teacher was sifu Joseph Cheng. In 1980, I met sifu Nino Bernardo and continued to train under him. The art of Wing Chun has become a part of my life ever since. It has been more than 53 years.

How many styles of kung fu or other methods have you trained in?

In my teenage years, I first learnt Shao Lin Martial Arts and assisted my sifu to teach Hung Gar Kung Fu. I also explored other martial arts and trained in Karate-do, Tae Kwon Do, Tai Chi and many other styles for knowledge and comparison.

“Without Siu Lim Tao, there is no Wing Chun.”

What are the main principles intrinsic to the three empty hand forms? Do they inter-related with each other and how?

Yes, definitely they are interrelated. The three forms in Wing Chun are related to each other in many ways. First, Siu Lim Tao is the whole of Wing Chun system's core structure. Without Siu Lim Tao, there is no foundation. Without Siu Lim Tao, there is no Wing Chun. Cham Kiu is the training for the footwork movement and variation of stances. While Biu Jee is just a form for action based on the culmination of all the training in the Wing Chun system which has its core in Siu Lim Tao. Biu Jee gathers all the energy into one point and strikes like a needle to disable the opponent so as to overcome a dangerous situation.

Would you tell us some interesting stories of your early days in kung fu?

It was by chance that I met Nino Bernardo through a friend who – like me - was also a ballet dancer. When I was in London, I used to train with Frankie Au who was a disciple of sifu Wong Shun Leung. We were practicing on our own and felt like we had reached a plateau and couldn't improve further. Then one day, Frankie said to me that he had met someone who also learnt from sifu Wong Shun Leung. Frankie was jogging in Finsbury Park and this guy saw Frankie and asked him if he practiced kung fu because he saw that Frankie was wearing kung fu shoes. They discovered they were fellow disciples of sifu Wong Shun Leung. After that we started training with Nino Bernardo.



How hard did you find the training at those early stages of your development as a martial artist?

In the old days, when my sifu gave corrections, all of us just held the position while he adjusted a student even though we were trembling with fatigue. None of us dared to come out of the position. Otherwise we would be whacked. We would practice one technique until we could master it. The sifu never taught the next move till he was satisfied that we could execute that specific technique properly. So there was a lot repetition which modern day practitioners may find boring. If we skip training for a day or a week, we see the difference because we will fall behind our classmates. It was everyday training. Non-stop...seven days a week. There was no excuse for missing classes. Training was tough. When I was training with Nino Bernardo, I travelled from South London to North London every day. It was a one-hour train journey to get there and another one-hour trip to get back home.

Nowadays, in Singapore, I can't teach the same way although I do try because I realize some of the students cannot and won't withstand the hard training. They do not want that. They rather hear me telling them stories of the old days of students working hard rather than putting in the hard work for themselves. People's priorities are different nowadays.

Were you a 'natural' at kung fu? Did the system's movements come easily to you?

I was not good at academic studies but I had good psychomotor skills. I could pick up martial arts movements very fast and remembered easily what sifu was teaching in class. So maybe you can say I was "natural"...if that concept really exists that is!

How your personal kung fu has developed over the years?

After I learned from my teachers of the Wing Chun system, all other martial arts 'became' Wing Chun to me. I see them through the lens of Wing Chun. For example, Mike Tyson's boxing is like Biu Jee. Same for Karate and Tae Kwon Do, their theories are based on the central line. This is my point of view. No offense to other martial arts! Training of other arts is a way to find different routes to achieve the same goal which is to defeat the opponent in the fastest and most direct way. Over the years of training, certainly there are changes in my approach to Wing Chun. I have merged what I have learnt from other martial arts into the Wing Chun method.

In 2010, I started incorporating Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) into my Wing Chun training. Because Wing Chun is an internal martial art, it needs the practitioner to understand the anatomy and the intrinsic energy flow of the body. Practicing qigong and TCM helps to heal the body. Qigong is connected with TCM in many ways and they both focus on understanding what happens inside the body and how the meridians and qi flow in harmony. Linking Wing Chun with qigong and TCM helps to cultivate the internal energy and actually enhances the striking power employed in the Wing Chun's techniques.

What are the most important points in your teaching methods today?

Wing Chun martial arts theory and the structure of the forms are not to be modified. The way I teach and how other sifus teach may be slightly different but the main theory is the same. For example, when we do Huen Sao (Circular hand), some other sifus may teach the circular movement with a three quarter turn and then hold fist before pulling back but I teach it with a full circle of the hand because it hardens the bones of the forearms (Iron Bridge). These are minor variations but all Wing Chun sifus emphasize the main points of Wing Chun technique like elbow tucked in and the central line. To achieve proficiency in Wing Chun style, a student needs to practice Chi Sau (Sticky Hands) to develop "listening strength" (Teng Gain) as well the practical application of the forms.

The main quality of the student must be a thinking person. He must not be so inflexible that he simply sticks to the moves taught by the sifu in a rigid way, because in a fight situation, he will have to adapt his moves according to the situation to defeat his opponent.



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If he is not flexible but rigid and insists on doing the right so-called “technique” and loses the fight... then he is not practicing real Wing Chun.

It is important to practice the Wing Chun forms diligently until they are assimilated and internalized so that the body can respond automatically accordingly to the specifics of that fighting situation.

With all the technical changes during the last 30 years, do you think there are still ‘pure’ styles of kung fu?

After Ip Man, there were a lot of changes because he had many great disciples who all specialized in some Wing Chun techniques and areas so therefore they will teach in the way that they think best. So when you watch Ip Man’s grand disciples, you can see the different styles and tell which Ip Man’s disciples they learnt from because they all taught distinct styles. So yes, it is not ‘pure’ but it is not a negative development or something bad. It is the way things evolve. If anything, this makes the Wing Chun method more colorful and exciting.

Do you think different ‘styles’ are truly important in the art of Wing Chun?

To begin with, they use different names and spelling. For instance “Wing Chun” sounds like “toilet” and that’s why Leung Ting changed it to “Wing Tsun”. So the other teachers also modified the name but actually when you write it in Chinese, it is still the same (Wing Chun, Ving Tsun, Wing Tsun, etc.). I still use the term Wing Chun but they are all the same.

What is your opinion of Full Contact kung fu tournaments and MMA events so popular these days?

Competition creates excitement and people get to see how the techniques can be applied in a fight real contact situation. Some competitors are very powerful and skilled. It is very entertaining if you like “blood-thirsty” sports.

Actually, I was surprised that “One Championship” presented me with a Pioneer Award for Mixed Martial Arts in 2016 when they were promoting the One Championship in Singapore. I graciously accepted it and thanked them for it.

How different from other kung fu styles you see the principles and concepts of Wing Chun?

The moves in other kung fu styles may look different than the ones used in the Wing Chun styles. Some emphasize long circular striking chopping moves, or jump before kicking. If they hit their target, they are effective. But Wing Chun focuses on closing up to the opponent to be able to strike easily. The Wing Chun way is not to hit and run but to strike and stick inside of the opponent in an attempt to offset his balance. Most of the other martial arts teach basic techniques so the body can move to counter and attack. Kung Fu styles in China are just too many but we can narrow down to two fundamental types - internal and external styles. Wing Chun is very unique. In other kung fu styles, the sifu teaches that if the opponent throws a straight punch, you are to use a sideway block but in Wing Chun, we use a straight punch - directly going in - to counter it. The straight punch is simultaneously a defense as well as an attack. In Wing Chun, we use the “soft” way to counter a hard attack so in fact we are using less energy to counter a strong attack.

The footwork in Wing Chun maintains variations of the triangular stance throughout. In other martial arts, there are more diverse variations in the way you move but Wing Chun does not see the need for the other stances. The emphasis is on simplicity and effectiveness.

But in all martial arts be it Xing Yi, Ba Gua or Tai Chi Quan, it is important to practice the foundation properly and to understand the concepts in depth. So if the three forms

“The Wing Chun way is to strike and stick inside of the opponent in an attempt to offset his balance.”



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in Wing Chun are not practiced and applied correctly, they will also not be effective in a real situation.

Do you think that kung fu in the West is in the same technical level that in China?

This is a very difficult question to answer. There are many Chinese kung fu masters who have gone to the West and passed down their knowledge to the Westerners who follow the training and became superb. In Hong Kong, they are also open to challenging each other and they are also excellent. However in China, they are hidden in the mountain and seldom challenge outsiders. We may not see the real masters there.

Do you feel that there are any fundamental differences in approach or physical capabilities of Chinese kung fu practitioner in comparison to European or American practitioners?

China is a very big country. It is a "Hidden Dragon Crouching Tiger". Many masters do now reveal themselves. It is a misconception that the Chinese are physically smaller than the Westerners. If you look at the Chinese from certain parts of China, they are also tall and powerfully built.

Westerners are very scientific in their approach to learning kung fu and they are very devoted to the art. They practice diligently. I have to say that some Chinese are not as dedicated because they place other priorities over kung fu practice. Some may use kung fu as a stepping stone to stardom. For most, it is just a hobby. But the Westerners seem to treasure the Chinese culture more and are willing to devote the time and effort to improve their kung fu for its own sake. I know of Westerners who will drop everything and go to Hong Kong, China or Taiwan just to learn to kung fu or to learn the Chinese culture. This is unthinkable for most Chinese.

The true kung fu masters in China are mostly Taoists who live away from the crowd and lead a spiritual life. They are rare.

Kung fu is nowadays often referred to as a sport (wu shu). Do you agree with this definition?

Any form of physical exercise can be considered sport. Now, let's talk about kung fu and wushu specifically.

Wushu is a new term that modern China used to refer to all forms of martial arts. Wushu is a fighting art but it is also good training for physical exercise. Many wushu champions become film stars and so it becomes a trend. It is a door for some to enter in the film industry. And with its flowery moves, it is beautiful to watch. Yes, it is a martial arts sport. The training has developed the practitioner's speed, strength and flexibility; they are very skillful but their training does not focus on punching and kicking with power against a solid object. If they were to use a weapon against a kung fu practitioner they have an even chance of beating them. However if they decide to switch to true kung fu training, they will be invincible because they have already built the physical foundation.

In the past, people in China learnt kung fu for patriotic reasons to protect the country. But later in South East Asia, some families will not allow their children to learn kung fu because of their association with gangs and Triads. But when China developed the term wushu and it became known as a sport, then kung fu became very popular. So kung fu has evolved and become a popular activity where millions of people are learning it.

Do you still have further to go in your studies of the art of Wing Chun?

Definitely. I can tell you that I still practice every day. Joseph Cheng, my sifu, said to me a long time ago, "to keep practicing and don't think about achieving anything." Although I am practicing the same moves, there are always new discoveries and details. The practice is endless. When you "touch hands" with another practitioner, you realize your skill has reached another level.

How do you see Wing Chun kung fu in the world at the present time?

There are teachers sharing the art of Wing Chun all over the world. And although there are many lineages, it is all one family.

Does the weaponry aspect of Wing Chun [long pole and butterfly knives] enhance the student's empty hands ability or are those two completely non-related skills?

They are definitely related because only when you have mastered the empty hands techniques, the weapons become extensions of the hand.

How important is the training with the Muk Yan Chong in the skill development of the student?

Muk Yan Chong is very important and if you practice the techniques correctly, you will understand why the movements are practiced that way. Commonly we know Muk Yan Chong is a piece of wood with the four smaller pieces of wood to represent the arms and leg. Hitting the Muk Yan Chong will harden your limbs and improve penetration power. If you were to practice with a partner, you cannot hit full power. We have to hold back because sifu always says to take care of each other when we are training. Muk Yan Chong will also help to perfect your alignment and structure. If you practice with a live partner, if his structure is incorrect or if you break his structure, you can enter his defense. However with the wooden dummy which you treat as your opponent, its structure is perfect so if you practice incorrectly, you realize that you are open to attack. In order to enter, you need to move to a position that



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makes the wooden dummy's structure "imperfect".

When teaching the art of kung fu – what is the most important element for you; self-defense, health or tradition?

Self-defense is my priority. That is why we learn kung fu in the first place. Good health is a bonus. Tradition is the culture we try to preserve. Nowadays, people talk about "Evolved Martial Arts" and the traditional training and side of martial arts is diluted. To me, I am a very open minded person, therefore tradition is important and I follow that way. That is, respect for my sifu and senior brothers. Recently, my sifu Joseph Cheng who is from the China Fujian Chang Le came for our 25th Anniversary Celebration. He emphasized the traditional aspect that we are to respect our seniors and to take care of each other as a family. Even when we were taking group photographs, he was particular about the positioning of the members according to seniority.

Forms and Chi Sao, what's the proper ratio in training?

The forms must be taught first before even introducing Chi Sao. So it is 100% forms first. Then after they have learnt Siu Lim Tao, they can start to Chi Sao. So for the senior disciples, they can actually go straight into Chi Sao without practicing the forms when they come to class. Preferably they should practice the forms at home every day but once they come to the studio, they should take the opportunity to practice Chi Sao with their classmates. Both are important so one should always practice the forms and understand them well. Initially when you first learn Wing Chun, the student would have to spend more time on the forms but after they have learnt the forms and have been introduced to Chi Sao, I would say they are equally important.

When I was younger, I felt that Chi Sao practice was more important but as I got older, I realized the forms are actually more important to me. This is my personal feeling. For my students, I would tell them both are equally important but always take the opportunity to practice Chi Sao with their classmates.

Do you have any general advice you would care to pass on the practitioners in general?

I always say to my students that they should train with all types of practitioners; with different physiques and temperaments - tall, short, strong, weak, female, male, aggressive, gentle etc. This is so that you know how to respond to different opponents and situations. Always look for someone to train with and experiment.

Some people think going to China to train is highly necessary to achieve mastery in the art. Do you share this point of view?

I think they should come to Singapore too! Seriously, it will open up their minds. Chinese have a saying, "if you just stay in your own comfort zone and not see what is happening in other parts of the world, you are 'a frog in the well'." That means you think the sky is only as big as the well opening. The sky is boundless. So yes, travel and do explore!

What do you consider to be the major changes in the art since you began training?

There have been big changes in Wing Chun because Ip Man had many great disciples who developed Wing Chun to the next level in their own way. There are many ways of practicing the forms. For example some teach Tarn Sau with the forearm and palm parallel to the floor. While others teach it with the forearm making a smaller angle with the upper arm with the wrist higher than the elbow. In Bong Sau, most teachers teach that

“Self-defense is my priority. That is why we learn kung fu in the first place.”

the wrist should be lower than the elbow but there are others who practice it with the wrist higher than the elbow. Nevertheless, they do not deviate from the central line theory. The main theory is still intact. But the practice is now is very diverse.

Who would you like to have trained with that you have not (dead or alive)?

I definitely would have liked to train with Ip Man the Grandmaster because he is the greatest. Another master is Tang Yik whom I saw practicing the pole form in an online video. He was a contemporary of Ip Man. He was just impressive. Watching him inspires me. Another master is Wong Shun Leung's disciple, Ng Zhan Hong. When my sifu Nino Bernardo goes back to Hong Kong he will always meet up with Ng Zhan Hong and train together. I did one personal lesson with Lee Sheng and he taught me Tan Sau and it has been the way I have been teaching my students Tan Sau. I also looked for Wong Shun Leung but I didn't train with him. I ordered 3 wooden dummies from him because he had the contact for the maker who supplied wooden dummies to Ip Man. I didn't feel like training with Wong Shun Leung. He had a cigarette in his mouth when we met and I couldn't breath. I guess it was not meant for me to learn from him although he was a great and excellent master. After all he was my Sigung, Nino Bernardo's sifu.

What would you say to someone who is interested in starting to learn Wing Chun kung fu?

I will say, "you have made a very good decision!". Because Wing Chun is not just a form of martial art but a practice that can accompany you for the rest of your life. Philosophically, the training is "Tao." It means that if you learn Wing Chun, when you read Lao Tze, you will understand it better. Martial Arts will lead you into philosophy and make you a happier person.

What is it that keeps you motivated after all these years?

If I had learnt only the physical aspects of Wing Chun, I may not have kept on going. But as I practiced, I delved deeper into the internal training of the body. There are always new discoveries about each movement and how they can be applied in different scenarios. The development of intrinsic energy increases the power and sensitivity of each contact.

Do you think it is necessary to engage in free-fighting to achieve good self-defense skills for the street?

Yes, of course. It trains your courage and skills in handling unpredictable situations to tackle danger.

What is your opinion about mixing kung fu styles? Does the practice of one nullify the effectiveness of the other or on the contrary, it can be beneficial to the student?

One should focus on one style first and excel in it but it is also important to understand other styles and their methods to combat. You can try out other kung fu styles but there should preferably be one chosen kung fu method for your main practice.

What is your philosophical basis for your kung fu training?

It is Tao based on Lao Tze's philosophy. It is our Chinese culture and has been passed down through the ages. Our Chinese nation and values are based on Lao Tze - "Yin Yang Wu Xing" (the two opposing complementary forces plus the five elements of wood, fire, earth, metal and water). Tao permeates all the things we do and study. We believe that what exists is nature so we should just follow the way. Nowadays, people use science and technology to create new inventions and think that they can improve life. But Tao's think-



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ing is that everything is Nature. Everything has its own path. In martial arts, we must flow with it so if the force comes towards you, you receive it and let it pass you by deviating it. I don't fight force with force unless I am stronger than the opponent. Then I can use my greater force to beat the opponent. Also remember never underestimate the opponent.

Do you have a particularly memorable kung fu experience that has remained as an inspiration for your training until this day?

It was when I was watching my Sihing (senior brother) free sparring with sifu Joseph Cheng. It was so tough that Sihing was so tired. He stopped and turned his back to Sifu and wanted to walk away. Then Sifu Cheng gave him a side kick on the back! Till now the image still remains on my mind. It was an important lesson which

inspired me. Never turn your back to your opponent regardless of who he is.

After all these years of training and experience, could you explain the meaning of the practice of kung fu?

Chinese education according to Confucius' teachings is that martial arts are one part of the learning curriculum. Kung Fu trains our will power and develops the body to be strong and agile. It builds courage and cultivates mindfulness. I believe in this.

How the Chi Sao aspects of training are related to the practical application of the Wing Chun techniques used in the three empty hands forms?

Chi Sao applies the techniques of the three forms but when you are sparring with a partner, it develops muscle memory, sensitivity, and psychomotor skills to react automatically to a situation.

Is there anything lacking in the way martial arts are taught today compared to how they were in your beginnings?

In the past, a practitioner's punch could break a brick or tile for sure but now people train the form and movement without developing the punching power. Training was much tougher in the past and we went through a lot. I think nowadays the ability to really fight is lacking unless you are training to fight in the cage or ring. Most people who want to learn Wing Chun are not prepared to take the beating part of the training.

Could I ask you what you consider to be the most important qualities of a successful kung fu practitioner and martial artist in general?

Intelligence, dedication and "wickedness" in a mindful way. Intelligence because you must adapt the techniques learnt to different situations. Dedication is always required for practicing really hard every single day. And you need a bit of "wickedness" because you must be prepared to whack your opponent.

What advice would you give to students on the question of supplementary training (running, weights, et cetera)?

Supplementary training is very important. It must be energizing but not exhausting. Running is good for strengthening the heart and lungs and for good stamina but it must be done at your own pace and not be overdone. Weight training builds up strength. Flexibility training is also important. If there is equipment that can assist in your practice, use it. If there is nothing available... you improvise. I have jars of coins at home to train my gripping strength, wooden chopsticks to hit my forearm and shin to harden them, etc. We used to have the thick telephone directory which I use it to practice punching I also use qi gong training.

What do you enjoy the most about the practice of Wing Chun?

Practicing with my partner because I learn that we can trust each other so much that we know we will take care not to hurt the other person. We develop skills and friendship. But remember, never turn your back to the opponent!



Why is it, in your opinion, that a lot of students start falling away after two-three years of training?

I think this is quite common that people tend to drop out after 2-3 years. In the first place, these students are just following the trend. They may not be dedicated to the practice and do not understand the meaning of Wing Chun. They just want to learn the forms and the sequences. I notice the ones who stay are the students who practice hard and have experienced success when sparring and are able to enter their partner. So when they see their own improvement, they will stay on. Those who leave are those who cannot do the forms well and cannot Chi Sao so they get bored and then give up. I always say that Wing Chun is a thinking person's martial art so may be those who leave did not apply their minds to their practice. So simple are the forms but so difficult to excel.

In modern days, it is easy to learn martial arts, it is not like the old days where the sifu may not be willing to accept the students so we appreciated more the opportunity to learn from the sifu. There was a lot of respect for the sifu because sifu means "teacher-father". Nowadays, sifus may be called trainers, coaches or instructors so students think of themselves as clients, customers or athletes. In the past, we believed that it takes 10 years to master any kung fu style but nowadays, it is speeded up and people think they can graduate after 3 years of practice! It is almost an "instant gratification".

Have been times when you felt fear in your kung fu training?

Of course! If you are training with a new person the feeling is "weird" because when you face a new opponent, you do not know how skillful he is. So I become very alert. Maybe you can call it "fear". But if it is your regular partner, there is no fear at all. Also when you are teaching beginner, I am especially alert because they can do an unexpected, odd movement and hurt the sifu. There is an old Chinese saying, "reckless student kills old sifu!".

What are your thoughts on the future of the art?

I think all martial arts will do well especially Wing Chun because scientists discovered that moderate exercise is better for longevity. As Wing Chun is also an internal martial art just like tai chi and qi gong, it will remain popular. 🐉