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WAN KAM LEUNG

STRIVING FOR PERFECTION

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PHOTOS **ANDRÉ EICHMAN**



SIFU WAN KAM LEUNG WAS BORN IN 1945 IN PO ON VILLAGE IN THE GUANGDONG PROVINCE OF SOUTHERN CHINA. HIS INTEREST IN MARTIAL ARTS BEGAN AT A VERY EARLY AGE AND BY HIS TEENS, HE WAS LEARNING VARIOUS TRADITIONAL STYLES OF GUNG FU FROM MASTERS IN AND AROUND THE NEIGHBOURING VILLAGES.

Sifu Wan has trained Wing Chun for more than 50 years now and is widely known to be one of Sifu Wong Shun Leung's most senior students and, ironically enough, the one who modified the Wing Chun that his Sifu taught him into something completely different and unique. Under the full consent of his Sifu, he decided to call it Practical Wing Chun.

Personally, I was very curious the first time I saw him many years ago. I had already studied the WSLVT system for almost 10 years, and the way he moved was somehow familiar to me, but at the same time it was very different, which made it even more intriguing.

Where does the word "Practical" come from?
It came to be when I started teaching part-time at the *Ving Tsun Athletic Association*. Everyone back then knew that I was Wong Shun Leung's senior student, but they also knew my style already differed from his, so when it came to promoting my classes there was a formal problem about which name I should use on the board and also on my business card.

I promised my *Sifu* that for as long as he would be alive, as a form of respect, I would never use my own name to promote myself, so Wong *Sifu* suggested using "Practical" to help distinguish my *Wing Chun* from the others, because he really respected my unique vision of the system.

I call it "Practical" not because I think that other *Wing Chun* styles are not as good, but because I listen to what my *Sifu* told me—that *Wing Chun* still has room for improvement and that you should aim to make it your own.

“In Practical Wing Chun, every movement follows on from a circular pattern, that’s why our movements are so powerful and relaxed.”

Why did you develop your own style of Wing Chun?
There were two kinds of people training with Wong Sifu—the ones who continually trained with him and the ones who trained sporadically or trained intensively for a short while and then they came back after a set period of time and wanted to keep improving.

Since I was young, I have been constantly training and have witnessed many other *Wing Chun* styles. I think the more you know, the more you can improve yourself. It’s like technology, the more you experiment and evolve, the better the outcome is—the important thing is that you keep playing all the time.

Many people badmouthed me because I made slight modifications to my *Wing Chun*, but I didn’t care much about their hearsay—since the more they talked about me, the more people became aware of my *Wing Chun*. The gossip actually made me more successful.

I never used the name of my *Sifu* to better promote myself because I created my own style and worked hard. Many people with their traditional methods have come and have felt my *Wing Chun* and could never do anything against me. This to me means that I’m on the right path, no matter what others say. *Wing Chun* isn’t a “talking” martial art, you have to show and let the people fully feel your skills—it’s not about how good you can preach.

What’s the role and ideas behind the empty-hand forms in Practical Wing Chun?

Practical Wing Chun has three empty-hand forms that define the structure of the techniques: *Siu Lim Tao*, *Cham Kiu* and *Biu Jee*. But while in the other *Wing Chun* styles they are a mixed blend of highly unrelated principles, for us, the three forms are very different and define patterns of techniques that are closely related to the same principles and fighting distance.

The *Siu Lim Tao* is the foundation of the system. It defines the basics, and the more basic a thing is, the more important it tends to be. It’s used from short distance—the one we refer to as punching distance. Once you touch your opponent, then you won’t let him go away easily. At this distance, it is easy to see every kind of attack, so you need to be very precise and the speed has to be consistently high. While you invade my area,

I will not let you simply go away, that’s why changing is so important.

The *Cham Kiu* is the complete opposite though. Once you try to come in, I will keep my distance, I won’t let you enter my guard, so I can actually make distance by using arm-locks and kicks. *Cham Kiu* is more flexible and the stance is movable. The reactions are coming from the whole body, that’s why the stance is always crucial.

The *Biu Jee* is for sudden changes of distance. It deals with very close distances, using both traps and elbows, or for long distance, where I’ll have to use finger attacks. It’s also about attacks that suddenly go up and/or down. You put pressure on the opponent, you don’t let him go easily, and this require a strong structure and lots of flexibility.

Those three forms are a special blend and cover any distance you can find in a fight, although it’s dependant on how much you can understand, apply, analyse and stick to the form’s principle and changes. Those are certainly the most important things in *Wing Chun*.

Which are the main focuses in Practical Wing Chun?
There are many things that are very important to focus on: the five centrelines and the two diagonal lines, the angles (135, 90 and 45 degrees), flexibility of wrists, shoulders and body, and of course the sinking elbow. If you can apply those different principles into your *Wing Chun* you can become really good.

If you stick to those principles, your punch, reactions and control of the centre will subsequently improve. There are so many *Wing Chun* styles that talk about the centreline but not many can really apply it efficiently, according to their angles.

Do you think Wing Chun is a linear martial art; as many say?

According to the way our joints are built, the human body has to follow circular patterns when it moves around, even if it’s moving straight. In the centrelines we have circles, in the punch we have the circles and we also do so in every single technique we perform.

A circle is 360 degrees, and if divided into eight equal parts, each part will be 45 degrees. The bigger the circle is, the more I will have to cover. The smaller, the less I will have to cover. Sometimes

we don't have to do much, 45 degrees can do a lot for us, but it has to be applied in a circular way in order to redirect or absorb the power; like in our *Gau Cha Sao* (our *Siu Lim Tao* opening technique) that defines those circles for us.

We have four circles: the twisting movement of the forearm, the circle that's created by the arm's joints while on an angle of 135 degrees, the one created from the hand while moving on the wrist and finally the one created by the torsion of the body. Each technique can contain one or more of those circles, but it always contains at least one of them.

For many people, when they execute a technique it is circular, but then they push the movement out straight instead. In *Practical Wing Chun*, every movement follows on from a circular pattern, that's why our movements are so powerful and relaxed. That's why we have remain soft and follow the centrelines in a circular way.

These are the most basics of *Practical Wing Chun*, but at the same time the most important foundation of the system.

Do you consider the footwork to be an important component of *Practical Wing Chun*?

Traditional *Wing Chun* styles have little footwork and it's pretty much a linear one and solely covers close distances. In a real fight you may need to chase people in different directions and for different distances, which is why I included many different steps into my system, and is what makes us different from the other styles of *Wing Chun*. We have short, long, back, front, diagonal, side and circular footwork in order to cover every single possibility.

When it comes to kicking, other *Wing Chun* styles have very little kicking techniques because they are very stiff and unbalanced so they can seldom apply them. They can't kick effectively because their own body mechanics don't allow them to. That's why they say there are not many kicking techniques available in *Wing Chun*.

If you tilt your stance back or lean slightly forward, you lose the side centreline. That's why we focus so much on it and the way we turn our body so it's balanced (50/50). In *Wing Chun* we say *Saam Lou Kuen* ("Three Gates to Attack"): High, Mid and Low—the last one being reserved



for kicks. That's why we have many kicks in the *Cham Kiu* and also in the Wooden Dummy form.

Why do you focus so much on relaxation?

Many don't understand that *Gung Fu* isn't all about how strong or powerful you can be, but about how relaxed you can be while fighting under extreme pressure. Chinese say *Gong Yau Lik* ("Hard and Soft Power"); so if you can change quickly from hard to soft, then in turn your *Gung Fu* will be good.

It's like having a whip and a pole. The whip is very soft and explosive. The pole is hard and

“Power is important, but it entirely depends on the way you use it. It’s like with money: no matter how much you earn, if you spend it all you’ll always be penniless. When you have structure and angle, you undoubtedly have power.”

penetrating, but the whip can surely generate more power because of its speed, changes of directions and also flexibility.

Wing Chun never crashes power—it’s nothing like wrestling. You need to use your technical skills to redirect or absorb the incoming power. That’s why you have to be soft in order to change fast and to achieve more speed. The stronger and stiffer you are, the slower you will subsequently be.

Angle is also important in order to be relaxed. If you have the right angle you don’t have to worry too much about being hit and you can easily redirect the power. Horizontal lines will always be broken by vertical lines and it’s the same vice versa.

You are also a famous *Qigong* master. Why did you feel the need to incorporate it into *Practical Wing Chun*?

I always looked for ways to improve my own techniques. If I felt my punch wasn’t heavy enough or that I was getting a little hit too much, this meant that there was still room for improvement. I realised that *Gung Fu* is about two main things: movement and energy. Usually energy is stagnant, that’s why you have to combine it with movement in order to make your techniques a lot more powerful and less rigid. Many other *Gung Fu* styles have *Qigong* in their practice but it depends how much they emphasise it and how much of it can effectively be applied. I found a way to combine it with my *Wing Chun* and so far I think I’m doing a good job.

Qi is connected to the mind and to the breathing. Realising when to breath in and out is all due to *Qi*—it is how you connect your body when you fight and how you relax under varying levels of pressure. Normally, people breathe solely to stay alive but there are many different aspects to it. Sometimes we even use it without realising it. If you focus on your breathing and study and understand how the *Qi* flows around your body while you practice, then you immediately better understand what *Gung Fu* fighters have been doing for hundreds of years already.

We need *Qigong* in our everyday life, we just don’t know how to focus and pay proper attention to it—you don’t know when and how to breathe in and out when you fight or use your techniques with timing; that’s *Qigong* and it can’t be separated from the practice of *Wing Chun*.

Do you think there is a lack of understanding in the other *Wing Chun* lineages?

Everyone has a different opinion of what good *Wing Chun* is, depending on their needs or on what they learned a long time ago. They think that *Wing Chun* doesn’t change and tend to follow the natural way of things. If you follow history you can’t keep up with evolution—we always have to move forward—we can’t go backwards I’m afraid! That’s why I don’t understand when people talk about the “original” *Wing Chun* and why they want to keep it as it was so many years ago.

If you learned it in the past, you have to look at what you didn’t learn so well. You need to improve it and make it more useful for modern applications. That’s why I evolved the techniques and the style I learnt myself, in order to make the system, on the whole, more complete.

History is for you to study but you shouldn’t remain there, you need to move forward or you will soon become extinguished. That’s why you need to keep updating your knowledge—and that’s the same with anything in life. I don’t see why it shouldn’t be the same for *Wing Chun*.

I can’t say other *Wing Chun* styles are no good, it’s just that most of them don’t focus on improvement and some don’t even focus on the good things that they have. If you focus on it, your *Gung Fu* will always improve as a result. Bruce Lee invented *Jeet Kune Do* because he was really fast, but nowadays there are many people that are faster than him. That’s why you can’t say that the *Gung Fu* of the older generation was better. Maybe it was just because they had a lot more time and fewer distractions. The system was also more closed, but nowadays you can compare because you can see exactly what the others do.

We always have to strive for perfection so the technique can overcome sheer power. I don’t say that we have the best system in place, but I can say that many *Wing Chun* practitioners are very close-minded and conservative.

How important is conditioning and physical power in *Practical Wing Chun*?

Without flexibility and endurance you can’t do many things, so it is really important that you are in good shape and maintain good health. Different age groups train in different ways—when you are



young you typically train explosively, with power and sweat a lot, but at a certain age you can't keep that same standard. Without resistance people can knock you out much more easily.

Power comes from the marriage of mind and body so you need to train both, however, you need to control it or otherwise you will simply lose it. That's why we need technical skills. If I'm very technical minded I don't have to spend too much energy. Power is important, but it entirely depends on the way you use it. It's like with money: no matter how much you earn, if you spend it all you'll always be penniless. When you have structure and angle, you undoubtedly have power.

Power is created when the weight mimics the speed. Like a bullet, if you throw it with your hands it won't hurt anyone, but if you increase its speed you can penetrate almost anything. So when you hit the wall bag you have to be fast and transfer your full power into it. That has a lot to do with the mind and *Qi* combination. You will be really surprised how powerful and technical you can become when you can perfect it.

Training equipment... how important do you think it is? The traditional training tools, like the wall bag and boxing bags, are still very much alive in *Wing Chun* for a reason. On the wall bag you shouldn't throw your whole body into it because the power will bounce you right backwards. Instead, if you are relaxed and have the right angle, that won't happen. That's why we can use power from a short distance. You just shouldn't

straighten your punches otherwise the power will be transferred to your shoulders instead of into the ground as intended. The Wooden Dummy, Pole and Knives are also important tools to develop effective angles, power, relaxation, speed and preciseness.

How do you feel about using *Wing Chun* to participate in competitions?

If you are using *Wing Chun*, this means you are in a fight—you are attacking or you are being attacked by someone. Confrontations usually start in very crowded places because people simply bump into each other, they are too close, in a queue, or someone suddenly stops or changes their direction.

That's why *Wing Chun* is the best for street fighting—we rule in close distance encounters. You have two options: we stick to the opponent or we keep him away from us. *Wing Chun* isn't built for competitions since many of our techniques are done with the hands and can't be performed with gloves on. How many times do you go around on the streets with gloves on? Real situations are much different—there are no rules or a referee to step in and stop the fight.

Why are there so many different *Wing Chun* styles? Many people nowadays teach professionally; they all follow different teachers and all of them have different techniques. It's just like cooking—same ingredients, but different approaches. Everyone has their own way.

Wing Chun is about how good and practical your techniques and forms can be, because the forms are like your dictionary and you have to closely follow the blueprint. If a technique isn't applied as in the forms, then there is something not right either in the application or in the form itself. Look at *Chi Sao*—many practitioners do it differently. It just doesn't make sense because they are not following the forms, no matter what they say or which philosophy they are desperately trying to attach to it.

Many talk about doing *Wing Chun*, but when you watch them closely they do something completely different. That's why when you watch *Wing Chun* videos on *YouTube* you can barely recognise what they are doing as *Wing Chun*! Many *Sifus* are still like this. I call what they do *Talking Wing Chun*. 🍌

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For more information about **Sifu Wan Kam Leung** and *Practical Wing Chun*, please visit the website: www.wankamleung.com