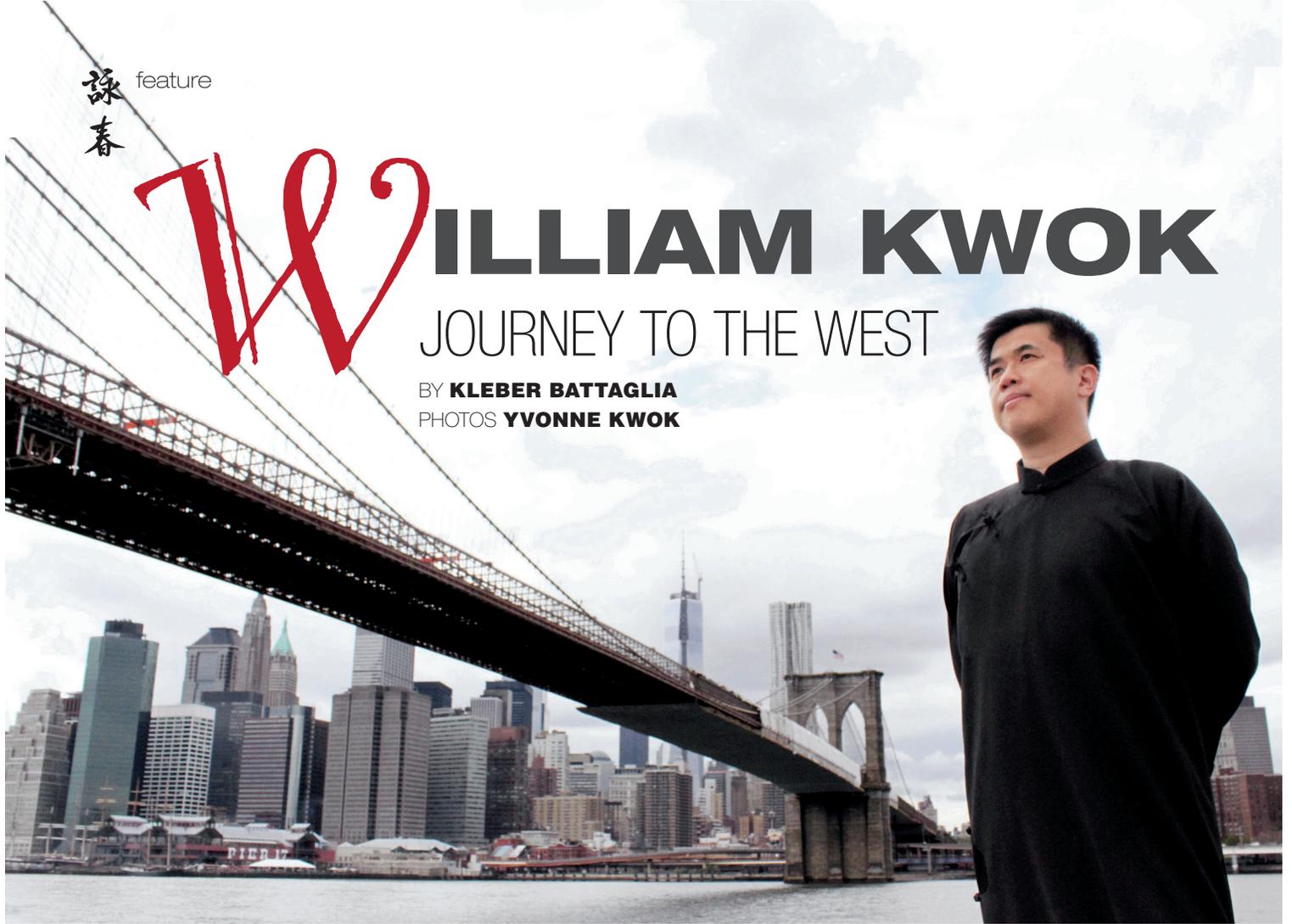


WILLIAM KWOK

JOURNEY TO THE WEST

BY **KLEBER BATTAGLIA**
PHOTOS **YVONNE KWOK**



WHEN I MET *SIFU* KWOK FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME A FEW YEARS AGO IN HONG KONG, I FOUND IT EXTREMELY INTERESTING THAT HE WAS A CHINESE MAN TEACHING AND BRINGING CHINESE *GUNG FU* AND ITS CULTURE TO THE MOST WESTERNISED COUNTRY IN THE WORLD—THE UNITED STATES; AND HOW HE ALSO MANAGED TO COMBINED THOSE TWO CULTURES IN A VERY INTERESTING MIX WHERE BOTH COULD GAIN FROM EACH OTHER.

Like the famous monk Xuanzang in the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, who journeyed to India in quest of the Buddhist scriptures, *Sifu* Kwok helps bring *Practical Wing Chun* to the USA, teaching Westerners how to understand and decode this ancient, yet still modern, *Gung Fu* style. Being a foreigner myself, teaching *Gung Fu* in China, I couldn't help but consider him to be my opposite and I simply had to find out how he manages to put himself in the middle of two different cultures.

How did you get to know the art of *Wing Chun*?
My father was a senior instructor of Physical Education at the Chinese University of Hong

Kong. When I was just seven years old, he sent me to an *Aikido* club where I began my 30+ year odyssey in martial arts.

For a few years, I casually experimented with various martial arts. When I was fourteen years old, my father introduced the art of *Wing Chun* to the university as an extracurricular activity. This programme was my first real exposure to *Wing Chun*. Intellectually, I appreciated the principles of *Wing Chun* (e.g. not using force against force), but I didn't see the practical application in the system of *Wing Chun* taught in that programme.

After I moved to New York from Hong Kong in 1991, I focused my martial arts training primarily on traditional *Taekwondo*. In 2000, I was a third degree Black Belt candidate, and it was at that time that I had an important revelation. From my observations and experience, it appeared to me that size and strength were both deciding factors between practitioners of relatively equal skill, and I was interested in exploring an additional martial art that would greatly level

the field for all participants regardless of their body type and strength. I recalled the *Wing Chun* principles and decided to explore different *Wing Chun* systems whilst still practising *Taekwondo*.

In 2005, I met my *Sifu*, Grandmaster Wan Kam Leung, and I immediately gravitated to his system of *Practical Wing Chun* and committed to intense training in his system.

Also, being an expert of *Taekwondo*, how did the study of *Wing Chun* modify your view or approach to another martial art?

As we are all lifelong learners, I never really consider myself an “expert,” but more a practitioner—even my *Sifu*, with over 50 years of *Wing Chun* experience, never stops learning, improving and evolving both himself and his system.

Choosing a martial art is a very personal decision to make. Each person must decide for himself/herself which martial art is best suited to him/her, both intellectually and physically. No martial art is deemed to be necessarily better than another, but each has its own strengths and weaknesses. Knowing one martial art may provide better understanding and analysis of other martial art systems, but focus and full immersion are the keys to becoming truly fluent in any particular martial art.

What is the main difference between the traditional *Wing Chun* you’ve seen in Hong Kong and the *Practical Wing Chun* developed by *Sifu* Wan Kam Leung?

Whilst distinguishing between “traditional” *Wing Chun* and *Practical Wing Chun*, I want to be clear that there is no “right” and “wrong” way. The *Practical Wing Chun* system was specifically developed by Wan *Sifu* to address those typical everyday situations in which *Wing Chun* can or should be applied. His system still wholly encompasses the aspects of the traditional system, but he has expanded (or developed) where he believes changes can be useful (e.g. five centrelines versus the traditional one centreline, 135-degree angle arm punch versus traditional straight-arm punch).

It’s important to note that all of the modifications introduced by Wan *Sifu* are grounded in the traditional *Wing Chun* system and its principles, for example, he wouldn’t introduce a boxing hook punch because it does not follow the basic principle of *Wing Chun* centrelines.

What would you consider to be the core essentials of *Wing Chun*?

Wing Chun emphasises body structure and mechanics of the motions within the techniques over the application of force. In *Practical Wing Chun*, good structure is defined by aligning all movements along the appropriate centrelines. In addition, it is essential for the practitioner to keep his/her shoulders “relaxed,” their wrist “flexible,” the elbows along the first two centrelines, and importantly, observe a 135-degree angle at the completion of every motion.

When properly applied, *Wing Chun* helps a practitioner to develop faster reflexes and better control of the body and mind to allow movements to become seemingly effortless and innate. As a practitioner advances, he/she builds confidence in self-defence abilities, especially for use in real-life situations. Like any martial art, fluency in *Wing Chun* will only be obtained with discipline, hard work, and a commitment to training.

For more information about *Sifu* William Kwok and *Practical Wing Chun*, please visit his website: www.newyorkwingchun.com

“I’m proud to be Wan *Sifu*’s first Closed Door Disciple who has both completed the *Practical Wing Chun* system and subsequently taught professionally outside of Hong Kong.”



Sifu Kwok and Master Wan Kam Leung.

“Choosing a martial art is a very personal decision to make.”

Being Chinese, how do you feel bringing this part of Chinese culture to a Western country?

I'm proud to be Wan *Sifu's* first Closed Door Disciple who has both completed the *Practical Wing Chun* system and subsequently taught professionally outside of Hong Kong. I have always admired those early East Asian pioneers who introduced their country's art forms to other parts of the world, and I humbly appreciate my own role in doing such similar work.

Have you encountered any difficulties in mixing two different cultures?

In Hong Kong, I learned *Practical Wing Chun* in an “open” training structure, in which the students are primarily self-directed with informal direction sometimes provided by the instructors. Such a format is typical for traditional Eastern schools but almost foreign to Western schools, whom mainly utilise formal teaching structures and where training is primarily directed by a head instructor. To adapt the East to West, I developed a teaching curriculum and ranking system to provide students with a structured learning path. The teaching curriculum is constantly being modified.

In your many years of teaching what is the most memorable moment(s)?

In May 2013, Wan *Sifu* visited the United States for his first ever New York seminar. Participants came from all over the world to attend it, and I was humbled to see how far and wide *Practical Wing Chun* had spread.

Wan *Sifu* also presided over the *Bai Si* (Induction) ceremony for three of my students. It was a proud and unsurprisingly emotional moment for me to witness how far my students had come since they first began their training.

Would you please tell us more about your relationship with your *Sifu*?

My relationship with my Wan *Sifu* has developed into a relationship that's experienced between a father and son. I always seek his advice, both in *Wing Chun* and throughout my life. He has helped me develop a greater level of self-awareness and has ingrained in me the importance of continuous improvement, both in myself and in my practice of martial arts. Some even joke that I have instinctively adopted his mannerisms!



He entrusted me with the responsibility of promoting *Practical Wing Chun* throughout the United States, and despite the massive distance between New York and Hong Kong, we are in contact with each other almost daily.

What has the *Wing Chun* training taught you in life?

Practical Wing Chun has taught me to look “forward” and to focus on the future, as this system is predicated on adapting the past to ultimately prepare for the future. As the key to *Chi Sau* is changing techniques to adapt to different situations, I have also learned to remain flexible in life and therefore better adapt to life changes. As *Chi Sau* is also about observing and responding to our training partners, I have further learned to be more considerate and mindful of others during the course of my life.

How would you like to see *Wing Chun* develop in the modern world?

I would like to see the continual spreading of *Practical Wing Chun*, all the while preserving the true nature of *Practical Wing Chun* and its *Wing Chun* lineage. It's not a sport, but a system intended for self-defence, it's also an ideal martial art in close distances meant to finish a conflict as quickly as possible. The philosophies behind *Wing Chun* can and should also be applied equally to life outside the school.

I'm hoping that *Practical Wing Chun* will be made available to many more people, and that we can create a method of teaching that is consistent and accessible for people of all varying skill levels, body types and ages. Additionally, as *Wing Chun* is rooted in Chinese culture, I'm hoping that students will further come to learn and admire the Chinese culture responsible for producing this martial art form. 🌀

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