

# 21ST CENTURY WING CHUN

STORY & IMAGES BY GRAEME GREEN

## Wing Chun's Grandmaster Wan Kam Leung

Nestled in the heart of the bustling Yau Ma Tei district of Kowloon, is the headquarters of one of Hong Kong's most respected Wing Chun Masters, Grandmaster (Sigung) Wan Kam Leung. One of the earliest students of the late Sigung Wong Shun Leung, he is the former Wing Chun instructor to the Royal Hong Kong Police G4 (VIP Protection Unit), a Master of qi gong and the founder of his own system, which he calls Practical Wing Chun. In this exclusive interview, Sigung Wan gave *Blitz* an inside look at his early days of training with such legendary figures as Sigung Wong Shun Leung and Bruce Lee, and explained the evolution of his Practical Wing Chun system.

In person, Sigung Wan Kam Leung cuts an impressive figure. At 64 years old, he only looks to be in his late 40s. Fit and agile, he moves with the energy of a man half his age. Those who have locked hands with him in training can attest that he's possessed of a skill that some might call extraordinary. However, while he has been called *Dai Si* (Great Grandmaster) he prefers the more humble title, Sifu.

A genuine innovator, Sifu Wan has carefully modified his style in an effort to make the techniques of Wing Chun, widely touted for its effectiveness at close range, even more practical in the modern age. Sifu Wan explained that when he was younger, he would go out and challenge the top people from every other style, and sometimes he would win, and sometimes he would not. When he did not, he would examine the technique that failed him — usually a technique that always worked against a fellow Wing Chun man. This was the beginning of Practical Wing Chun.

This constant evolution has so improved the style that Sifus and students from all around the world are travelling to Hong Kong to experience it for themselves. This has resulted in branch schools now in Australia, Germany, Denmark, Holland and France.

**Sifu Wan, thank you for talking to *Blitz*. First, can you tell us how and when you became interested in martial arts, and why you chose Wing Chun?**

When I was young in China, around 13 years old, I witnessed lots of different styles of martial art. At that time, I did not know of

Wing Chun. In 1959, I emigrated from China to Hong Kong. My older brother introduced me to Wing Chun. My first sifu was Leung Sheung, Yip Man's first student. Later on, when Wong Shun Leung opened his own school, I was in the first group of students at the new school. In the beginning I didn't like Wing Chun; it didn't seem very exciting or attractive. But my brother explained the difference between application and appearance, and then I could see the value in it.

**Have you studied any other styles besides Wing Chun?**

I have touched on a lot of different martial arts but I have not studied them seriously. By that I mean, in Chinese culture, when a master takes on a student seriously, they undergo a tea ceremony. The master accepts the student and the student accepts the master. I underwent the tea ceremony with Sigung Wong Shun Leung, but not with any other teacher. That's what I mean by touching on different styles: I studied them, but not seriously. I only studied Wing Chun seriously.

**What is your opinion of other styles? Is there one you particularly like more than others?**

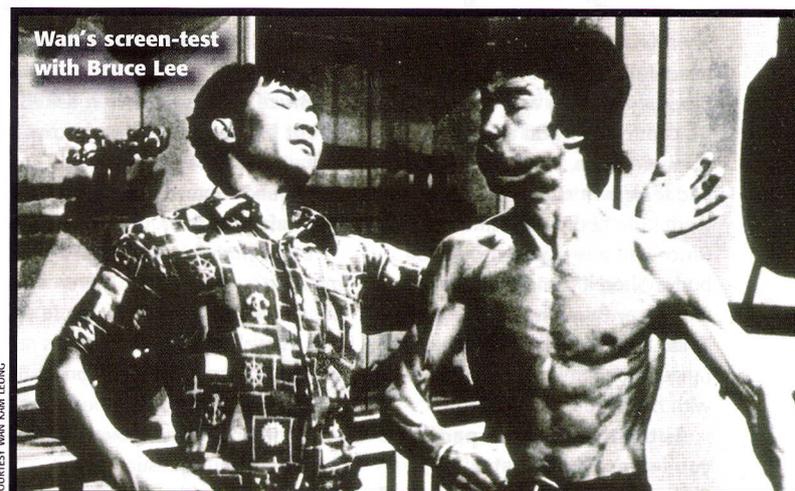
When I was young I liked all different styles of kung fu but when I discovered how effective Wing Chun was, I didn't like the others anymore.

**When did you meet Sigung Wong Shun Leung and what was it like training with him? What aspects of training did he emphasise and how many years did you train?**

I knew Wong Shun Leung socially, but I did not know how

to approach him. In 1960, Wong Shun Leung opened his own school, that's when I was able to get to know him. Wong Shun Leung emphasised horse-stance and using the waist to increase the power of the punch. He also emphasised keeping the elbow in for maximum power behind the punch. I trained with Sigung Wong Shun Leung for 20 years.

doing pure Wing Chun, he was developing his own style. When Bruce's first movie came out, he rang Wong Shun Leung and asked, "Did you see my movie?" Wong Shun Leung said, "No." So Bruce bought tickets and took us to the movies. Bruce asked Wong Shun Leung, "What do you think of my style?" Wong Shun Leung said, "Your kicking is very good, but

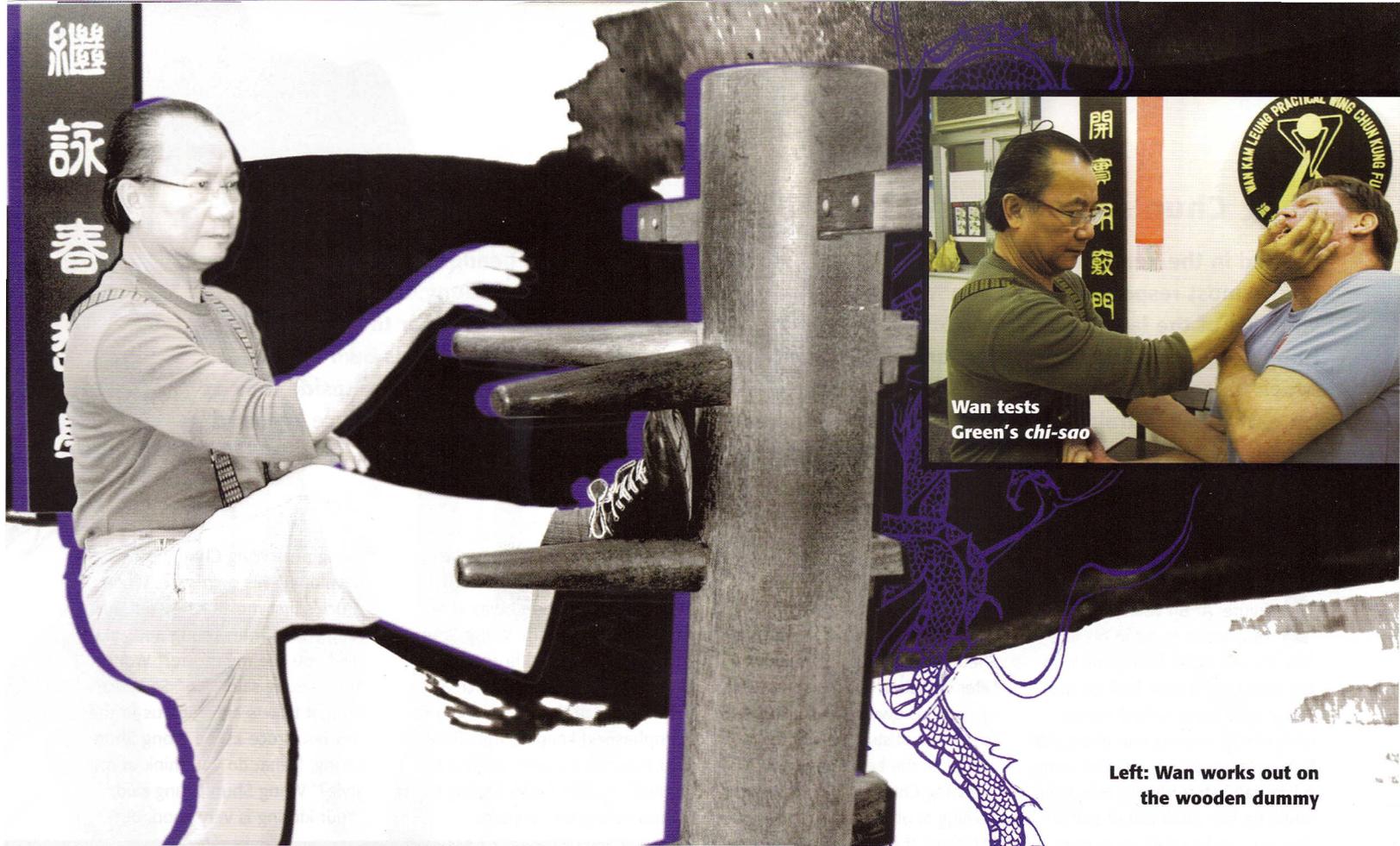


**We have all heard many stories of Bruce Lee when he was young. Sifu, can you give us your recollections of training with him and tell us about the time Sigung Wan and Bruce fought?**

He wasn't there very long before he left for America, so I didn't train with him a lot but whenever he returned to Hong Kong he would contact Wong Shun Leung, so then we got to train together. His inside fighting, his chi-sao, was not very fast. But he had developed his method of fighting at long range, which is not pure Wing Chun, and then he was very fast at closing the distance. At this time, Bruce was no longer

you are pulling your punches back faster than you throw them." Bruce said, "Yes, but only for the movies. In real life the punch has more power going out."

We then went back to Bruce's house in Kowloon Tong. He had a special room set up for training. There was a floor-to-ceiling ball — a very small ball, at about nose-height. Bruce could kick it three times even though it was bouncing around. Then he picked up his towel with his foot and wiped his face with it. Ha, Bruce liked to show off. Wong Shun Leung and Bruce then fought. Bruce was very fast in his movements back and forth, but when he kicked, Wong



**Left: Wan works out on the wooden dummy**

Shun Leung stepped inside him beautifully with tan-da (palm-up block and punch) and controlled his centreline. If you ask me to compare them, I have to say they had their own strengths. They were both about the same size but Bruce had a very well developed body. When it came to kicking, I would say Bruce was better. But when it came to fighting at close range, Wong Shun Leung's skill with his hands was better.

**Is there anything in particular you learned from watching Sigung Wong and Bruce fighting?**

I learned a lot from watching them fighting, like defence and offence, distance, timing and rhythm and how to apply Wing Chun technically to real fighting.

**Can you tell us about the photo of you and Bruce?**

One day Bruce came to Wong Shun Leung's school to invite him to screen-test for his next movie. It happened to be there so he said, "Bring Wan along." So we went to Golden Harvest Studios and Wong Shun Leung tested first. Then it was my turn. We did chi-sao and fought in front of the camera. That's when the photo was taken. Shortly after that, Bruce died. Later on I did appear in one

movie called *The Life and Death of Bruce Lee*.

**Bruce once said, when asked about his speed, "I have known many people faster than me." Sifu Wan, do you know who he was referring to?**

Bruce probably wasn't just referring to Wing Chun. There are all different styles of kung fu and they all have their strengths and weaknesses. When it comes to speed, it depends on the environment – who moves first. To answer your question about someone faster than Bruce, I would say no, but Wong Shun Leung was just as fast with his hands.

**Sigung Wong Shun Leung reputedly fought between 50 and 60 challenge matches. Sifu Wan, can you tell us how a challenge match is conducted and if you have fought them yourself?**

No, Wong didn't fight that many. After Wong Shun Leung started teaching, he didn't accept challenges anymore. He would get myself or one of the other sishings (senior students) to fight. When Wong Shun Leung was a student of Yip Man's, whenever Wing Chun was challenged, he would fight the challenger. He once went to Taiwan to fight and

another time he went to Japan. A challenge match is conducted this way: the two fighters sign an agreement saying that if one of them is seriously injured, they can't hold the other one responsible. There are three ways a challenge match can end: by a fighter being knocked out, by surrendering, or if a fighter is too badly injured to go on.

**Is this when you started to develop Practical Wing Chun?**

No, that came later. After three years of training, Wong Shun Leung matched me with a boxer and I realised there was a lot I still had to learn. At the time, I did not have much experience of fighting, so I thought there was more I had to learn about Wing Chun. I was always thinking of ways that I could be better. I was only trying to improve myself.

**What was the most difficult style you came up against?**

Every style of martial art has its own speciality; it's how you deal with it. For instance, you know a Wing Chun man will come straight on with chain-punches, a Choy Lay Fut man will use circular punches, a taekwondo man will use kicks. So there is not one that is more difficult than another.

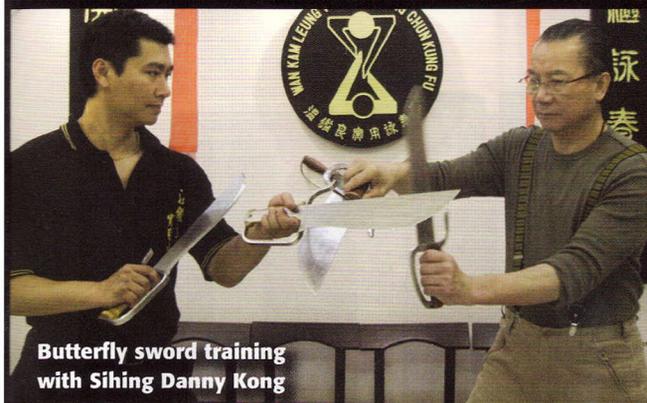
**Sifu Wan, when did you start teaching full-time?**

I had given my word to my Sifu Wong Shun Leung that I would not open my own school while he was alive. So I used to teach part time at the Ving Tsun Association in Prince Edward. Out of respect for my sifu, I did not open my own school until he passed away. That was in 1997.

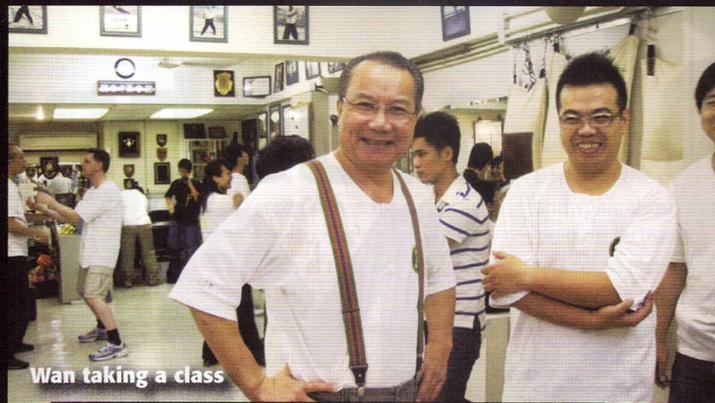
**Can you explain the main differences between Practical Wing Chun and the other styles of Wing Chun?**

The main differences are:

- 1) Practical Wing Chun uses five centrelines, other styles use only one.
- 2) The Practical Wing Chun stance is a more natural, balanced one: the inside of the feet in line with the outside of the shoulders; toes not pointed in as much; legs bent at 135 degrees; weight distributed 50/50 on each leg; and the back kept straight.
- 3) Practical Wing Chun maintains a 135-degree angle to the arms. This ensures maximum control in all techniques and covers four of the five centrelines.
- 4) The Practical Wing Chun punch is also different. It is thrown



Butterfly sword training with Sihing Danny Kong



Wan taking a class



Wan's modified Wing Chun punch

with the elbow in and the fist angled at 45 degrees. This ensures maximum power behind the punch.

5) In some other Wing Chun schools you do what your sifu says, sometimes with no explanation of what you are doing, or how to apply it in a real situation. And you are only taught one use for each technique. In Practical Wing Chun, it's not so much about changing everything, it's about improving it and being able to explain the application of every technique from the three forms, so that the student knows exactly what they are doing, and that every technique has many different uses.

**What did Sigung Wong think of the changes you've made?**

Wong Shun Leung always said, "When you have done Wing Chun for a long time, then your Wing Chun must change, because you know more, you understand more." History is for the past. You should learn from the past but not live in it. You should always move forward.

**You've just returned from Europe, where you conducted a series of seminars for your students in France, Sweden,**

**Denmark, Holland, Germany and the UK. How did that go?**

It went very well. I was able to show them the true application of Wing Chun. They were adding a lot of different styles to their Wing Chun because they didn't understand how to apply it properly. They especially liked my method of punching with the elbow in and the fist turned in at 45 degrees. They had only seen the straight punch with the elbow out. They liked my Wing Chun and were very supportive of it.

withdraw some money from a bank. As we were getting into the car, we were attacked by three men with long knives. I was jumped from behind and struck on the head with one of the knives. I spun around and used *bong-sao* (wing-arm block) against the next knife and grabbed his arm. Then they got scared and ran away. Their mistake was in attacking one at a time; if they had attacked together, it might have been different.

**In some Wing Chun schools you do what your sifu says, sometimes with no explanation of what you are doing, or how to apply it..." - Sifu Wan**

**Sifu Wan, all martial artists train for that one time when they may have to fight for their life. Thankfully most of us will never have to experience that, but you have. Can you tell us about the incident that left you with the scar on your arm?**

A long time ago, back in the '70s, I was helping a friend

**Having survived a life-or-death encounter, what advice would you give to someone facing a similar situation?**

When they come from the front, you have time to escape if you can. But when attacked from behind, you just have to react. There is no time to think. What saved me was my Wing Chun

training and experience of fighting. Because I showed confidence and remained calm, the attackers panicked and ran away.

**In closing, what advice would you give to a new student on choosing an instructor?**

When choosing a sifu, it's important to know the lineage of that sifu. When you ask a question, if the answer is not logical or he cannot answer it, you should be wary. Kung fu is not a father-to-son thing; just because the father was good at kung fu, doesn't mean the son is. It's about the effort the person has put in to learn it properly. A new student does not know how to tell if a sifu is good or not, so they have to go by reputation. If a sifu has a good reputation, then you should be alright. Remember, it's better to learn and understand one style completely, than to learn bits and pieces of lots of styles.

*About the author: Graeme Green has been a martial artist for 33 years, having trained in judo, tai chi, karate, Muay Thai and boxing. He has been a Wing Chun exponent for 22 years and currently trains under Sifu Alan Graham in Practical Wing Chun. **BLITZ***

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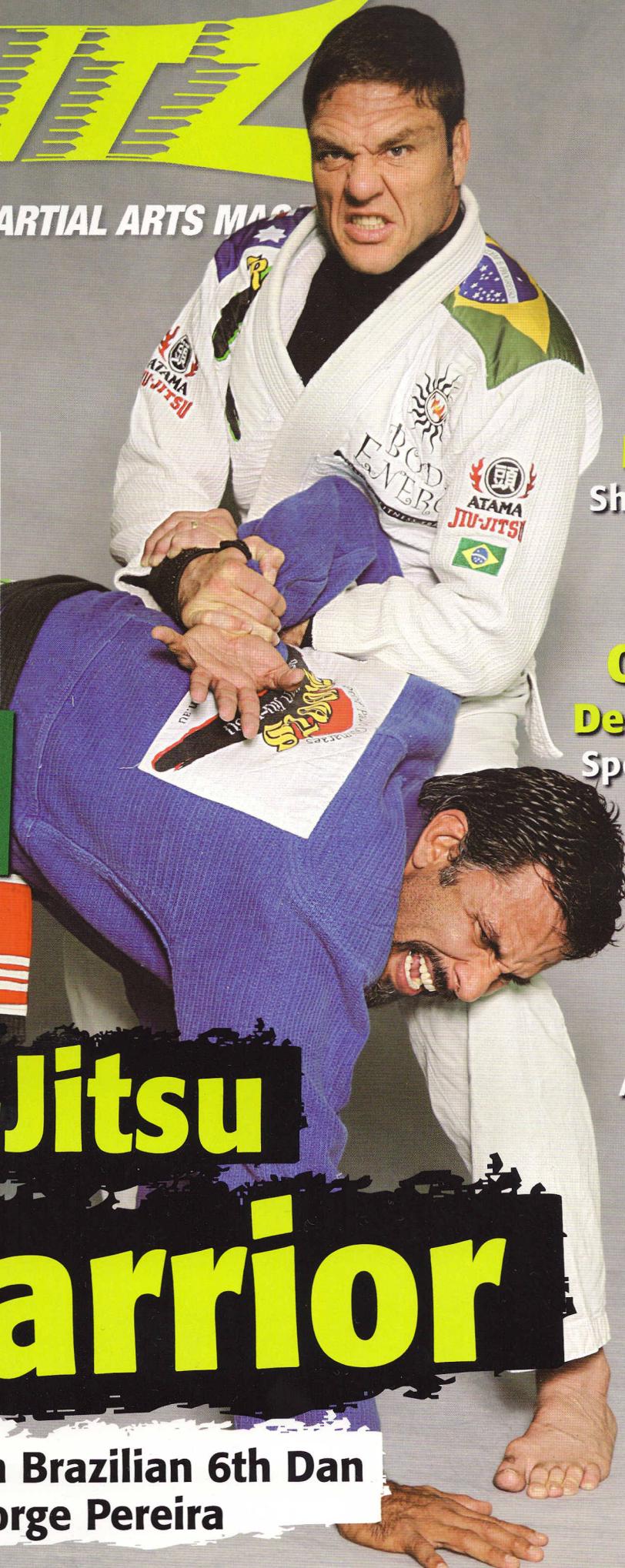
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