

A Perspective on Augustine Fong's Wing Chun Gung Fu
by
Joyotpaul Chaudhuri

No one represents Augustine Fong but Master Fong himself. Further- he discourages negative remarks about other people's kung fu. But as a student of Fong Wing Chun since 1976, I have seen Sifu, his art and my understanding of the art grow steadily over the years and I now share some thoughts that have jelled over time. Any misrepresentation of Fong Wing Chun is my fault. Further this essay intends to provide a window on the art and is not intended to be comprehensive or detailed. That would take more than a book. The art is a window on nature and understanding nature is a continuous evolving task.

Wing chun is a southern Chinese art and it's roots are in Chinese culture. From that culture emerged the art which wove it's way through many aspects of Chinese thinking –it has it's own synthesis of the I-Ching, of the dialectics of ying and yang, of the Art of War and related strategies, of Chan discipline, Five elements conceptions, Chinese pathways of energy and historically-a Confucian respect in relationships. Good teaching and learning over time points towards these factors and one need not be lost in theory or verbiage. The art is based on continuous analysis and empirical knowledge and experience over time.

Early Roots

The history of wing chun is problematic-much of it is oral history. In contemporary times there is much in writing that is basically political agenda setting by one school or another. Obviously like many arts wing chun did not begin ex nihilo but evolved out of other arts and refers to historical or mythical founders of the art such as Ng Mui and his or her student Yim Wing Chun after whom the art is named. Supposedly, the art like several other arts arose out of the civil tumult accompanying the southern penetration of the Ching dynasty in the late 17th century. Symbolism abounds in wing chun oral history.

Wing Chun can be forever spring, Ng Mui can be the plum blossom which can survive year round in harsh circumstances. Other historical symbols and metaphors can be seen in the stories of fast mouse walking footwork, plum blossom stepping and snake and crane style contrasts and synthesis.

Modern Era

Modern wing chun can be traced from the 19th century through the herbal doctor and famous martial artist Leung Jan of Fatshan (Foshan). Leung Jan synthesized the teachings of his two main teachers Leung Yee Tai and Wong Wah Bo. The two teachers had at one time been members of a Red Boat operatic troupe.

Ip Man

We come now to the great Ip Man (1893-1972) who began to teach openly in Hong Kong in 1950 after escaping from the mainland. Ip man initially learned from Chan Wah Shun, a student of Leung Jan and from senior students of Chan Wah Shun. Later as he stated he learned a deeper version of wing chun from Leung Bik a son of Leung Jan. Ip man synthesized the disparate teachings of Chan Wah Shun and Leung Bik. Ip man was a superb fighter but teaching wing chun helped him to understand and convey the principles of his art.

Ho Kam Ming

While Ip man had many students- one had to learn regularly for years in apprentice fashion and practice systematically to understand Ip man's art. One person who did just that is Augustine Fong's teacher Ho Kam Ming who learned daily and intensely for over seven years and then stayed in regular touch with his teacher till Ip man's death in 1972... Master Ho saw Ip Man even on the day Ip man died. When Ho got back to Macao- Ip Ching –Ip Man's second son called him to inform of Ip Man's death. In 2011 Ho kam Ming is in his late eighties.

Ho Kam Ming has had excellent students who understood principles, developed good foundations and rounded it all out with fighting experience. Best known among his students is Fong Chi Wing-Augustine Fong of Tucson, Arizona.

Augustine Fong

Master Fong began his wing chun journey at Ho Kam Ming's school in Macao. around 1960 and also helped teach In Ho's Hong Kong facility. He has practiced daily and regularly since then. Fong has had extensive and serious fighting experience. He moved to Arizona in 1968 and began to teach first in Nogales and then to Tucson where he still lives and teaches at the Fong's health Center on Craycroft.

Good practitioners are not always good teachers. Master Fong is a major exception. Coming straight out of Cantonese speaking Macao and Hong Kong into an American linguistic and educational environment and teaching a completely Chinese art required considerable adjustment. American students are not always quiet recipients of information. The good ones want to understand the principles and the analysis. The net evolutionary result was that Fong went about seriously analyzing the principles and concepts of the art, began to share his understanding freely and went about systematically explaining and teaching the art, creating an organized curriculum in the process. Without sacrificing the principles and concepts of the art he has expanded both the implications and the applications of the art. For serious students he spends time making individual adjustments rather than using a cookie cutter. Disinterested and casual or know it all students-he does not insult them-just leaves them alone.

He struggled in the early years and has always worked hard. Finally with his own property on Craycroft the school became very stabilized with his wife and family and students helping out.

As a result of his experience, practice, teaching and experimentation and evolution, Fong has made changes in the way that he teaches over the years. His is not a stagnant approach.

Some Elements of Fong's System: Some Principles

Fong's wing chun harmonizes with natural forces including gravity. The vertical "mother line"- 'jung sum sin' is the axis of the human body. The details of the main stance –the yee gee kim yeung ma- teaches the understanding of the gravitational path of the body. When this is deeply understood and felt and becomes reflexive- one can move and understand the gravitational relationships of the moment. A mechanical technique is no substitute for this understanding. One's motions should be as natural as one can make it.

The horizontal axis crosses the vertical at the dan tien in yee gee kim yeung ma. For development of equal balancing of both sides of the body understanding the horizontal axis and it's dynamics supplements the understanding of the mother line. The sinking of the shoulder and the elbow in sil lim tao is related to this understanding. So is the sinking of the spine, the correct head position and the tailbone making the body structure functionally straight yet springy.

Making distinctions is an important part of learning, the difference between the vertical and horizontal planes is a distinction. There are functional distinctions as well. A major one is the distinction between development and application. An important component of the idea of development is uniting the body as a whole and also making sure that each motion has the correct angle, direction and balance. Applications involve variations in terrain, environment and adjusting to the empirical aspects of the direction of particular forces, what an opponent or opponents is or are doing and other variations in context. Thus facing square on or moving forward involves one set of relationships between hand and feet- a sideway shift can involve a different angle and a

different set of hand-foot relationships. A competent teacher is necessary to guide a student in these distinctions. Learning involves seeing both similarities and differences.

Some folks make too arbitrary a distinction between an external and an internal art. Those terms are relatively recent about a 100 years old and pushed by taiji, hsingi and pakua folks. Fong's wing chun has both external and internal elements and both have to be fused together. Analytically, one can classify some elements like bone structure as external and silence- quieting the jitterbugging mind as internal... but both those elements and other internal-external things have to be fused together, That is not the case in many people's wing chun- when they depend primarily on musculature.

Master Fong has listed 13 inter-related but initially distinguishable principles for wing chun development, With practice and experience these 13 principles are merged together.

The greatest principle is "adjustment" ... but adjustment of what? The other 16 provide the answer. The principles are ordered in a circle- because they eventually merge together.

To begin on the left side of the circle are- posture, position, timing, distance and power- after that comes decision, reaction, aggressiveness, guts, ... then you move on to the way, control, reserve and adjustment is at the top of the circle and is the bead which is the center piece of the thread that runs through all the beads.

Some Implications of Principles

Each principle in Fong's wing chun gets its meanings in the details and a good teacher can show the empirical and operational; meanings of each principle. It is not the intention here to write a book but point out some key features of Fong's wing chun.

Each principle has its own components. Thus the term structure has piece by piece details in its construction- the net result is neither a steel

rod or a wet noodle. Position too has its variations and its relationships with different stances. Understanding the details of the contact points and the resulting dynamics when someone touches you is important in Fong wing chun. There are different kinds of timing and different functions performed by the repertoire of timing. Sifu Fong spends much time repetition to get across differences in timing. Without good timing techniques can break down. Further there are different kinds of power to be used in varying contexts. Among other kinds of power there is the explosive powers of bau ja geng or bau ja lik (Cantonese)---wing chun's version of what is called fa jing in Mandarin. There are other forms of power that are used depending on the context.

In the more internal dimensions of wing chun there are, the dimensions of fast decision making, developing automatic reactions based on pattern recognition and the other person's motions. Wing chun is not a passive system- full aggressive intent is necessary if the decision is to fight. There is no fuzzy world that lies between fighting and not fighting. And guts is required as part of the mind frame.

Control is an important factor in Fong wing chun.. paraphrasing Sun Tzu—controlling yourself is half the battle, controlling the other or others is the rest of the battle.

In the development process a wing chun person can extend his hand in a punch and release all his power. But in application, the elbow hinge stays bent and also one reserves power for the changes that can follow.

Adjustment is the final principle in Fong wing chun. Each principle has to be operationally linked and adjusted to fit with the others. Take for instance- the relationship between distance and power. At very close distance explosive “short” power can be appropriate in a punch. But at slight greater distance perhaps with more than opponent involved, a more long arm motion from the biu jee form may be appropriate. Also, when standing, the standard yee gee kim yeung ma posture can be appropriate-but when great power is incoming a degree of compression

and sinking can be the adjustment.

There is also the challenge of adjustment to different persons depending on their size and structure and timing. You think in terms of targets in wing chun. When attacking a much taller person you aim for the closest target which could be the midsection rather than the head of a person. Normally in applying wing chun the hands come out more often than the feet. But if you hands have a reasonable degree of control of the opponent – you can quickly adjust and use a kick...often these are called “invisible kicks”- difficult to see what is happening below.

Chi sao

Chi sao is a complicated subject but it is vital part of wing chun training. It could take more than a book to discuss chi sao. Ho Kam Ming was one of Ip man’s favorite chi sao partners in Hong Kong. Many of Ip Man’s students really did not have much of an opportunity to do chi sao with Ip Man. Ho Kam Ming worked incessantly to build up the chi sao skills of his students. Fong has continued that tradition and excels in it. Chi sao is usually translated as sticky hands. In Fong’s system you don’t deliberately try to stick – instead you deal with the sticking of your opponent to you- you control that first contact and meet it with your structure..

Chi sao goes beyond doing forms. It is among many other things a laboratory for testing all the principles of wing chun with different partners and sensing different timings so accumulative understanding of different types of contact, power, speed, timing, attack and defense lines are learned and adjusted. You can break off contact and re-engage (lat sao) You can use the entire repertoire of footwork and stances (mah bo) You can attack, defend, neutralize the other persons power. You have single hand chi sao—with different timings, you can several different positions in two hand chi sao. You can hap lop sao and you can combine it with kicks.

Chi sao is not fighting but it evolves with skill development into very intense simulation of things that can happen in a fight.

In addition to extensive chi sao Fong's wing chun has additional timing work with legs- His approach to what is called chi gerk. Chi gerk does not create new fundamental principles but sharpens leg usage within the circle of wing chun principles.

The Hand Forms and the Wing Chun Dummy

The Sil Lim Tao is both the basic form of wing chun. It is also an advance form because you keep discovering skills as you keep advancing in understanding wing chun. The pyramid like stance of Ho Kam Ming and Fong's form creates a very stable, strong but flexible structure. Master Fong lectures and spends a great deal of time adjusting the details of structures. Even if people spend a lot of time on wing chun, if they do not do the siu lim tao well...the weakness will show up and get can be blown away or taken down by a strong force. The stability is not rigidity.

Well designed earthquake proof buildings, long lasting pyramids or the force diverting interlocking triangles based geodesic dome of Buckminster Fuller are adjustment mechanisms that can be built into a good stance. Fong has put his own stamp on his form...without violating wing chun principles. There is a "seung kuen" double punch at the beginning of the two hand section of the Fong form to teach balancing horizontally as well as vertically from both shoulders.

Chum Kiu is the second gem in the interconnected 3 form set of Ip Man, Ho Kam Ming and Fong wing chun. The form takes the structure built by the sil lim tao and then teaches turning, stepping and kicking and developing and issuing power by turning (chor ma) without wobbling the mother line i.e. the axis of the body. Fong points out that there is some misunderstanding on the best meaning of the term "chum kiu". The confusion comes from the variances of the characters for chum kiu

and the nature of the tones in pronouncing Cantonese terms. Rather than the more common interpretation of “searching for the bridge” Fong prefers “sinking of the bridge”. The bridge is “kiu”- the less muscled bony front part of the forearm beyond the wrist and before the dense musculature of the forearm. It’s a strong bridge between the elbow and the hand. A little sinking of the bridge can result in explosive power in the elbow, the hand and the bridge itself. Many of the key motions of chum kiu involve sinking the bridge.

Fong’s principle based innovation includes doing a side kick in chum kiu and ending with kicking from each of the legs again for balancing both sides. There are some other unique details in Fong’s chum kiu.

Ip Man taught relatively few people the third form- biu jee- shooting fingers. Nowadays by imitation biu jee is fairly common in the sense of a sequence of motions- not always with understanding the key meanings of the motion or their usage. Fong got corrected by Ip man himself once when he was using the biu motion of the fingers in a wrong way. Of course Fong went on to become a master teacher himself. Among Fong’s own innovations is ending the form with a foot motion and then again repeating it on the other side for balance.

Two thirds of the way into learning the hand forms—is a good time to learn the mook yan jong -wooden dummy form. Originally on the mainland the dummy was planted into the ground. Ip Man moving to Hong Kong resulted in changing the way the dummy began to be mounted. Ip man again was selective about teaching the dummy. There is the story where Ip man would not allow Bruce Lee filming him doing the dummy motions. Later when Ip Man was old he allowed some filming of his motions just before his death. Though feeble at the time—the remnants of power and skill were still visible to a discerning eye... including his kicks. Ho Kam Ming learned to keep up with him in handwork and foot work but Ip Man’s kicks would come out of nowhere. Ip man began wing chun when he was much younger than Ho and retained considerable kicking flexibility. Master Fong also started

young and attained and retained great power and flexibility in his kicks. Fong's dummy form is a little longer than most partly because he has integrated more foot motions in his form...each with a purpose. Some folks are puzzled by some "hanging" leg motions on the dummy. Among the purposes of those movements is developing the sense of regaining one's balance in an emergency situation and not falling.

The Weapons of Wing Chun

For an advanced range of skill development Ip Man wing chun, Ho Kam Ming wing chun and Fong wing chun uses two weapons- the bot jam do double eight slash knives and a 8 foot pole (kwan). They are no longer used for actual fighting but they are of immense help on developing wing chun skills. Less than four people were taught both weapons directly by Ip Man. Ho Kam Ming was one of those few people... Others learned a few of the moves or learned from one of the four persons. Ho Kam Ming's advanced students including Fong learned from Ho. Fong is adept with both weapons and teaches them when he wants to do so. Again, without sacrificing wing chun principles- Fong has extended the understandings of the two wing chun weapons. He may well be the first person in the Ip man tradition to put the motions of the pole into a form which covers footwork on all the eight baqua directions.

Training regimens

Fong's web site contains some examples of his contributions to learning wing chun. There is an organized curriculum with progression based on mastering key wing chun skills. The curriculum helps sort out who has learned what and how much of wing chun.

Also, he has listed a fairly elaborate dictionary of Cantonese wing chun terms. Traditionally in the old days wing chun sifus did not use labels too much and the students did not ask as many questions as they do now.

Fong's systematic approach lists families of punches, palms, elbows, fingers, shoulder, knees, feet and moving stances used for attack or defense.

Tactics and Strategy

It would take a book to do justice to Fong's approach to tactics and strategy, Important in tactics are keeping one's triangular structures and adjusting them sufficiently to deal with incoming forces and one's own balance. Also, training helps seeing open lines or creating and opening lines and always keeping focus on a target and controlling structures not just the hand. Remembering also that one's wing chun flexible structure is best used when upright but one can adjust to horizontal situations as well depending on conditioning, training, balance, flexibility, patience, timing and above all presence of mind. Thus one can keep developing along the wing chun path while keeping an eye open to what others are doing and above all- playing one's own game. Not just wing chun techniques but characteristics including guts plays their martial roles.

Fong often reminds his students that wing chun is not just for fighting but the long run journey includes the integration of physical, mental and spiritual development. The latter is not sectarian but involves ultimately the control of energy.

Joyotpaul "Joy" Chaudhuri <http://www.tempewingchun.com> lives and teaches in Tempe, Arizona, he has been studying Fong Wing Chun since 1976 and is also an Emeritus Professor at Arizona State University In Tempe.