

# CLOSE-RANGE FIGHTING

## THE NEED FOR DISTANCING SKILLS

BY DONALD MAK & MARTIN MURPHY PHOTOS MARTIN MURPHY

**O**NE OF THE biggest challenges in *Wing Chun* is how to get close to your opponent and capitalise on close-range fighting capabilities.

In some martial arts, “close range” means coming into contact with your opponent’s forearm, but in *Wing Chun*, this is still considered “long range.” One result of fighting at this range is that many practitioners tend to “chase hands” or only attack their opponents’ arms, as they remain at a distance

to get into contact with our opponent’s arms. *Wing Chun*’s body structure and techniques do not cater to this long-range fighting platform.

A second or middle range is where opponents can reach each other’s extended arms. This is *Wing Chun*’s First Gate, located at the palm and wrist areas where opponents can apply punches, palm and finger strikes, and kicks and knees. The best way to gauge this range is by determining different entry points (Diagram 1).

詠  
春

WCI  
38



Diagram 1

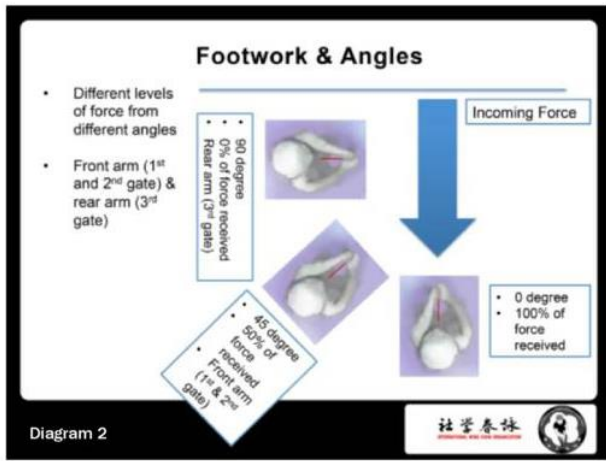
When the opponent is in a neutral position, *Sifu Mak* (in white) enters the First Gate at the apex of the triangle. When the opponent is in the fighting stance, the entry point is the opponent’s leading left leg.

where they can’t reach their target or destroy their opponent’s structure—one of the chief aims and attributes of *Wing Chun*’s close-range fighting.

So, how do you get closer to your opponent, without getting hit, and what do we mean by “close range”?

Different martial arts stress different ranges. For example, some prefer long-range fighting, requiring distancing to enter and exit a fighting range, e.g., *Taekwondo*. For *Wing Chun*, this “pre-fighting” range is not our preferred platform. Because *Wing Chun*’s strength is in hand and arm sensitivity, we need

In the *Wing Chun* fighting stance, it’s important for the head to be slightly back behind the elbow line. Because of this, *Wing Chun* has a shorter reach, but we can compensate for this by relaxing our joints and body structure and springing forward with our hips, in coordination with our arms, to get sufficient distancing to strike our target. Done properly, the *Wing Chun* practitioner can gain a fist’s distance or more without compromising structure by manipulating the hips. The punch at such a distance may not guarantee you a knockout, but it creates an entry point for Second and Third Gate attacks. Of course, turning and pivoting will also give you that extra reach and power.



These three ranges form an overall fighting strategy whose aim is to intrude on an opponent's comfort zone by forcing him to lean or fall back, which may create an opening for an attack. One way to unbalance your opponent's central axis is with forward-pressure from advancing with your body structure and footwork.

Without well-developed footwork, however, the ability to manipulate the three ranges will be limited. When body structure is unable to neutralise a forceful attack, good footwork becomes essential, as it enables you to maintain a strategic range vis-à-vis your opponent, while creating angles of attack and defence and the ability to return to the centreline.

Diagram 2 shows different levels of force received in relation to different facing angles, demonstrating the importance of footwork in formulating one's fighting strategy. A 90-degree angle may be ideal but requires higher skills to control your opponent. Footwork can also neutralise a head-on (0-degree angle) attack by retreating slightly, while using *Gum* or *Jut Sao* and punching simultaneously, borrowing the incoming force to deliver a more powerful strike.

Since straight-line attacks can have limited efficacy, however, other strategies need to be employed. One effective way is with angling footwork, which is a kind of "Circular Cross Step" or "Arc Step" from the Wooden Dummy form that enables you to angle in toward your opponent. In using such footwork, it remains important to cover and defend at the same time (Diagram 3).

Another form of footwork to gain proximity is the *Juen Ma* "Step and Turn." From *Chum Kiu*, this involves stepping forward, while turning in toward your opponent, as practised

Diagram 3

Avoiding his opponent's kick head-on, *Sifu Mak* arc steps to the left, creating an angle facing his opponent's central axis. Now at an advantageous position, he delivers a kick to the opponent's supporting leg.

While this distance may appear safer, it is not the ideal range for *Wing Chun* fighting. Many practitioners tend to stay in this range and end up striking their opponent's arms without being able to get closer. Or, they overextend their arms and upper body in an effort to reach their opponent, sacrificing both structure and power. What they need to do instead is develop skills that enable their entire body structure to move forward and close in on their opponent, i.e., fight at the Second Gate range.

This is where opponents are in a continuous state of contact and can reach each other with short-range attacks. Perhaps, the best weapons here are the numerous types of *Wing Chun* elbow strikes. However, *Wing Chun* has an even closer range.

At the Third Gate (the "Sticky Body Range"), additional footwork and the use of a supple body structure is needed, since this is where takedowns, *Chin Na* and *Kaau* are best employed. *Kaau* means "to lean" in Cantonese, but in *Wing Chun*, it refers to "bumping" or attacking using the shoulders, rear arms, elbows, hips and knees.





Diagram 4

Sifu Mak enters his opponent's Third Gate by stepping away from the incoming attack at an angle with his left leg, while blocking with *Chuen Kiu* (the first technique in *Chum Kiu*). Using mainly his waist, he then turns in toward his opponent, while hitting the ribs with an elbow strike (*Paai Jaang*) and controlling him with his right hand.

in the first part of the form, with elbows at chest level (Diagram 4). "Stance Swapping" from the "Butterfly Knives" form is another effective method to gain closer distance by swapping out the leading leg (Diagram 5).

Other footwork training includes simple forward stepping, stepping at an angle from the *Yee Ji Kim Yeung Ma*, and a four-directional rear leg stepping drill (an idea from Long Pole training). *Tor Bo* ("Dragging Step") and *Biu Bo* ("Thrusting Step") from *Chum Kiu*, *Huen Bo* ("Circular Footwork") from

Diagram 5

Sifu Mak enters his opponent's Third Gate by bringing his right leading leg back, while replacing it with his back leg. The back leg is now the front leg and has entered his opponent's Third Gate, where he can take down the opponent.



In any form of *Wing Chun* training, the arms should never be tense or hard at whatever range.

*Biu Jee*, and *Sam Kok Bo* ("Triangular Footwork") for creating angles for entry and retreat are also effective.

These techniques can be separated and trained intensively. However, when using any type of footwork and distancing, it's important not to let your arms and hands lead. It should be your legs and body that lead, while your arms follow slightly behind. In any form of *Wing Chun* training, the arms should never be tense or hard at whatever range. "Softness" is the basic requirement of *Wing Chun* because, without it, there is no "stickiness" (attaching to or controlling your opponent), which is particularly important in moving from the First Gate to the Third Gate.

The value of distancing and footwork to our *Wing Chun* elders has been time-tested and can be summed up neatly in this *Wing Chun* maxim: *Yuen Kuen, Kan Jaang, Chi Sun Suet*, which roughly translates as "Long range use punch, middle range use elbow, Sticky Body takedown."

For more information about Sifu Donald Mak and the International Wing Chun Organization, please visit the websites: [www.hkwingchun.com](http://www.hkwingchun.com) & [www.iwco.info](http://www.iwco.info)