



**Asked why he didn't teach kicking earlier, Sifu Chow simply responded, "If I had taught you earlier, you wouldn't have been able to control your legs."**

# CHOW TZE CHUEN

## HONOURING WING CHUN'S KICKING ORIGINS

BY MARTIN MURPHY PHOTOS INTERNATIONAL WING CHUN ORGANIZATION

WALK INTO MOST *WING CHUN* SCHOOLS AROUND THE WORLD TODAY AND YOU GET THE STRONG IMPRESSION THAT IT'S A MARTIAL ART, RELYING ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY ON FAST, SHORT-RANGE HAND TECHNIQUES. HOWEVER, IT WASN'T ALWAYS THAT WAY. IN FACT, *WING CHUN* HAS A NUMBER OF MAXIMS EXTOLLING THE EQUAL IMPORTANCE OF KICKING, BOTH IN TRAINING AND COMBAT.

In Ip Man's own teachings, he was reported to have said, "In *Wing Chun*, we actually train our legs twice as hard as we train our hands. There is a saying in the martial arts: 'the hands are like

swinging doors, the power comes from the legs,' meaning the hands are for opening, entering, contacting, distracting and controlling—the real attack comes from your legs."

Some of the old masters of the *Wing Chun* system clearly saw a special place for kicks in their fighting strategies, a role they deemed no lesser or inferior to that of their fists. This is because they believed that being skilled in kicking and leg-control gave the *Wing Chun* fighter both dynamic balance and energetic footwork along with the ability to launch "shadowless" kicks below an opponent's radar screen.

No one knows this better than *Sifu* Chow Tze Chuen, one of Ip Man's longest running students in the 1950s and 1960s. Like many of his generation, *Sifu* Chow was introduced to Ip Man through his friends at the Kowloon Motor Bus Company. At the time, he had no special interest in martial arts, nor did he think there was anything particularly special about *Wing Chun*. However, he felt it was his destiny to be a *Wing Chun* adherent and disciple of Ip Man, as a result of his personal relationships and chosen career.

Now 90, and only recently retired from teaching and running his own school in Kowloon, he was one of the "Three Musketeers", who helped Ip Man teach his classes. According to *Sifu* Chow, who studied with Ip Man for over six years, the typical class was not big with less than 10 students at any time. Ip Man would teach students how to *Chi Sau*, in the early stages of training, but he typically would not *Chi Sau* with them. He left that up to his senior students but was always there to correct and guide.

One area where *Sifu* Chow was fortunate to have had direct training from Ip Man was in kicking, which earned him the moniker among his classmates, the "King of Kicks", or *Gerk Wong* in Cantonese. Ip Man felt, because *Sifu* Chow was short, he should focus his training on kicking and footwork. Similar to Ip Man in build, *Sifu* Chow was usually chosen as Ip Man's partner when the Grandmaster demonstrated *Wing Chun* kicks in class or in public.

*Sifu* Chow recalls that Ip Man's kicking training was just as intense as hand fighting. One area he particularly focused on was hip power, which Ip Man considered the essence of the *Wing Chun* kick. To develop such power, *Sifu* Chow was taught to use a traditional rattan stick that, when bent, served as a kind of spring. The exercise involved pulling down on the stick with his kicking leg then launching a kick onto the Wooden Dummy. He said this was one of the mainstays of Ip Man's kicking training.

Ip Man also taught *Sifu* Chow a range of other training techniques with the basic conceptual premise being that the hands and legs are interchangeable. These included front and side kicking, solo leg kicking (facing front and kicking high, low, right and left), *Taan Sau* against *Jut Gerk* drills, Sticking Leg or *Chi Gerk* (similar to



Single-Hand *Chi Sau*), continuous *Taan/Gerk/Fook* low front kicks against the Wooden Dummy, plus all the kicking techniques in the Wooden Dummy sets, which were extrapolated to form a single Wooden Dummy kicking form.

*Sifu* Donald Mak, the Chairman of the *International Wing Chun Organization (IWCO)* in Hong Kong, has been one of *Sifu* Chow's longest running and closest students. He explained how the passing down of these techniques and training methods from *Wing Chun* elders was such an enigmatic, yet rewarding, experience if one had the patience.

As a student of *Sifu* Chow from 1979 to 2000, *Sifu* Mak had asked *Sifu* Chow, on many occasions, how to best improve his *Wing Chun* kicking. For years, even after having completed the entire *Wing Chun* system, *Sifu* Mak never got an answer until one day almost 10 years into his training, he was invited for private lessons on a Saturday afternoon. *Sifu* Chow started with *Chi Gerk* training, followed by drilling (*Kwan Sau* against kicks), and a range of other methods *Sifu* Chow learned from Ip Man, including incorporating kicking and counter-kicking into *Chi Sau*. Asked why he didn't teach kicking earlier, *Sifu* Chow simply responded, "If I had taught you earlier, you wouldn't have been able to control your legs."

***Sifu* Chow is also a firm believer in training on the *Mui Fa Jong*, which he learned from Ip Man.**



For more information about ***Sifu* Chow Tze Chuen** and the *International Wing Chun Organization (IWCO)*, please visit the websites: [www.iwco.info](http://www.iwco.info) and [www.hkwingchun.com](http://www.hkwingchun.com)



*Wing Chun* footwork is simply a combination of the two forms, *Chum Kiu* and *Biu Jee*, which already gives you straight line movements and circular footwork.”

*Sifu* Chow learned his basic footwork from Ip Man, who taught a form of “Triangular Footwork,” derived from *Chum Kiu* and *Biu Jee*. However, he said he took Ip Man’s training one step further with the development of “complex patterns,” often drilling his students 20-30 minutes at a time. *Sifu* Chow is also a firm believer in training on the *Mui Fa Jong*, which he learned from Ip Man. Often translated as “Plum Flower Posts,” the *Mui Fa Jong* is one of the oldest training tools in Chinese *Gung Fu* and can help practitioners improve their balance, stance, and angles of attack.

Interestingly, *Sifu* Chow never formally taught footwork to his students. At the beginning of every class, he would do his own footwork training, and it was up to students to come early and follow along if they wanted to learn this skill. Despite this, and largely owing to his own mastery of *Wing Chun* that served as a model, most of his students were able to excel in both footwork and kicking.

Although kicking is his forte, *Sifu* Chow is also a fan of other *Wing Chun* techniques, such as *Jut Sau*. While it’s mainly a defensive technique, *Jut Sau* nicely complements other attacking techniques. *Sifu* Chow thinks it’s best used as a way to distract your opponent, while the other hand is launching an attack. Under certain circumstances, *Jut Sau* can also be used in combination with various kicking attacks. His other favoured technique is *Kwan Sau*, as it’s good for covering oneself in particularly close range combat situations, while its use also creates many opportunities for attacking. *Kwan Sau* also comes in various forms; for example, it can be softer or absorbing, or take on a more aggressive forward posture.

*Sifu* Chow formally stopped teaching in November 2014. His school in Sham Shui Po, a working class neighbourhood in Kowloon, is now run by one of his students, but the “King of Kicks” is not allowing us to forget easily *Wing Chun*’s kicking origins. He still goes to his school once every couple of weeks to give guidance when he can and tries to keep in touch with his students, both near and far. 🌸

## ***Sifu* Chow recalls that Ip Man’s kicking training was just as intense as hand fighting.**

Another area where *Sifu* Chow was known for excelling in *Wing Chun* was in his footwork. Many practitioners say *Wing Chun* has no footwork, and in some schools, it is even anathema to step back or retreat. Often, the extent of movement taught is simple turning. *Sifu* Chow has long been a strong advocate of the attributes of footwork in *Wing Chun*. He argues, “There’s already a lot of footwork in the Wooden Dummy. Bear in mind also that much of

**Below:** *Sifu* Chow (kneeling first row left) after class with Ip Man in Li Cheng UK Estate. In 1957, Grandmaster Ip Man shifted his school from Yau Ma Tei to Li Cheng UK Estate. This period spanned from 1957 to 1962. During the Li Cheng UK Estate period, *Sifu* Chow attended class daily and was taught the complete *Wing Chun* system by Grandmaster Ip Man.

