

# **The Structure and Sensitivity of Wing Chun Kuen**

*an introductory article by Mark Stoddard and Kathy Jo B. Connors*

The Southern Chinese martial art of Wing Chun Kuen is a style of kung fu designed for close range fighting. The art is optimized to allow a smaller, weaker person to gain advantage against a larger stronger one.

In legend, Wing Chun was created by a woman. The nun Ng Mui, taught her style to a young woman named Yim Wing Chun. The young woman in turn used the art to defeat a much larger, stronger bandit. Yim Wing Chun, also taught the style to her husband, who then named it after her. It is doubtful anyone can historically prove whether or not this is the true genesis of Wing Chun. While the largest proportion of Wing Chun practitioners are men, the art retains a feminine essence embodied by the legend.

Wing Chun is a conceptual and practical martial art. Its hallmarks include directness, economy of motion, conservation of energy, emphasis on one's own and the mutual centerline, precise positioning, balance, sensitivity, and calmness. It is a system of movement which develops and relies on relaxation and a properly aligned body structure. Applying Wing Chun principles, the practitioner aims to defeat an attacker by "borrowing" their strength and using it against them, in a natural and relaxed way.

In contrast to many other styles of kung fu, Wing Chun develops skill in the use of small, subtle movements, rather than large, strong motions that may rely on youthful strength or athleticism. Defensive and offensive motions are executed within the practitioner's own range. There are no high punches and no kicks higher than the waist. Wing Chun prefers a standing position, rather than ground fighting or grappling.

The Wing Chun training system includes 3 empty hand sets, a wooden dummy set, and two weapons forms including long pole and butterfly knives. The first training set is called "Siu Lim Tau" which means "The Little Idea." This set introduces the Wing Chun body posture and basic hand positions. The underlying posture is always to be maintained, and recovered immediately if lost. The posture is based on the centerline, which can be envisioned as an axis that runs vertically through the center of one's body. Training is aimed at refinement of this posture and centerline awareness, which provides the basis for controlling an opponent and generating relaxed but powerful attacks.

There are five key check points in the basic posture: sink in the stance, knees in, hips forward, head up, elbows in and down. Sinking of the stance lowers the center of

gravity and helps to "root" and stabilize the practitioner. The "knees in" stance develops the legs for proper Wing Chun movement, and provides protection for the lower body. With hips forward, the pelvis is tilted just enough to vertically align and stack the spine. When the head is up, it is as if suspended from a string; this improves balance, and offers some protection for the chin and neck. The shoulders must be relaxed; with practice over time, this has a calming effect on both body and mind. With the elbows in and down, the body is protected for defense, and in proper position for generating structural, non-muscular attacks. Wing Chun does not rely on upper body strength, brute force, or youthful athleticism, so there is no need for pushups or pumping iron.

Relaxation, awareness, and sensitivity of body and mind are fundamental aspects of Wing Chun. Relaxation allows the Wing Chun practitioner to feel and respond to the opponent without signaling or "telegraphing" one's own intentions. The resultant awareness and sensitivity allow the practitioner to respond quickly and according to circumstances, rather than with over commitment or emotion.

Wing Chun is a physically and intellectually stimulating endeavor, offering a lifetime of cultural and personal enrichment. It is also a lot of fun!

Any and all insights I may have are owed to our teacher, Kenneth Chung. Any shortcomings in my understanding or expression belong wholly to us.

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