

# Realistic Fighting

By Mark Spence

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During the 90s I worked for six years as a bouncer in Napier, New Zealand. I am 1.76m tall and weigh 77 kgs, (I was a kg or 2 lighter back then), and usually the smallest bouncer in town. Although I was running my own martial arts school and had made a living from martial arts since 1988, the idea of bouncing had never occurred to me as I felt that I was simply not big enough. When the manager of one of the largest pubs in town called me to ask if I was interested in working there, I said to him that surely he needed bigger guys. He responded that the main thing was to have a good brain and be able to reason with people. I found out later that he was having trouble finding doormen as a biker gang had been warring with the pub and recently had pulled a gun on the bouncers, after which many of them quit! Anyway, I started working on the door at The Cri Bar and Grill blissfully unaware of the firearms incident.

As it turned out, apart from a little intimidation in the form of a knife being pulled and waved at us, the biker dispute pretty much settled down. If I had known about the level of risk at that time, I may not have taken on the job. I continued bouncing, going onto become head doorman of The Cri and then opening a business hiring out bouncers. Eventually almost every bouncer in town worked for me. Many of them also trained under me at my wing chun kwoon, making it a pretty tough little school! At its peak my business employed about 30 door security people in 8 different hotels and clubs. Throughout that period, I always worked the door myself along with my employees. Most of the clubs were in the same city block, and by communicating via headsets with the head bouncers I could direct personnel to dangerous situations when required. Usually I would also attend any confrontations myself. Looking back now I realise that without the hands on experience that I gained over those six years, my martial arts understanding and career would have been very different.



Me working the door at The Cri with Clinton Anaru. My ploy was to stand at the top of the stairs so as to appear as big and scary as my fellow bouncers, (didn't quite work). Clinton was my top student at that time. He went on to win an open style, full contact martial arts tournament for NZ, in the heavy weight section. Later he came to Australia to work as South Australian manager for IWCA.

Martial artists are often quick to assume that they know what works in a fight. It amazes me how sure they can be of their assumptions and how dismissive they become when asked to consider another point of view. This is particularly apparent when discussion turns to real fighting. Maybe it is because the subject is by nature emotion charged that logic is almost always put to one side and prejudices and leaps of faith are put forward as statements of fact. In my experience the most opinionated people are often the least informed. People with little or no actual experience in real fighting, (by real fighting I mean street fighting rather than tournaments), will happily put forward a view and defend it doggedly despite the fact that their views were formed from a few minutes, if that, of actual fighting. Before my bouncing experience I was probably one of those people. These days I like to think that I am more open-minded and at least can speak from experience about such matters.

Wing chun is one of the most popular styles of kung fu today and also maybe the most criticized. I can understand why too. There are many wing chun people out there who have learned their skill 3rd hand from someone who did not understand the art or did not train long and hard enough to be able to do the style justice. Even when done properly, the training methods of wing chun, particularly chi sau and the sil lum tao form, may look completely unrealistic to exponents of other styles. I can understand that and suppose I would feel the same if I had trained in a different style and/or did not come into contact with genuine wing chun. On the other hand I believe that done properly, wing chun is one of, if not **the** most street effective fighting styles existing.

Of course wing chun people can be just as arrogant as misinformed as other martial artists, probably more so to be honest! A common myth is that training for tournaments will not equip one for street self defence. I have heard wing chun artists say that boxers require brute strength, they are at a disadvantage because they do not have kicks and that they are tense. Such comments must be infuriating to tournament fighters because they annoy even me, with very little experience in that field. I encourage those wing chun people who denigrate other styles in that way to mix it up sometime with capable exponents of other styles, particularly western boxing. During the period that I was bouncing I did a lot of training both with western boxers and kick boxers. The skilled ones do not rely on brute strength, they are very relaxed and can often negate the advantages that wing chun may present.

Now I would like to present my reasons for believing that wing chun is an extremely realistic self defence. I can only explain how wing chun applies to self defence through the methods of training that I believe in and now follow exclusively. My approach is I suppose very much that of a purist. Commercial schools often seem to feel that old school wing chun based on forms and chi sau lacks something. Many if not most add a program of technique training where students pair up and practice counters to attacks and entry techniques against each other, moving from simple movements through to follow ups, then expanding into more random attacks and eventually achieving the proficiency to apply the techniques in free sparring. I know a lot about this method of training from experience both as a student and as an instructor. Much as it may annoy some people to hear this, I believe that this type of training is extremely inefficient, to the point of hampering a students ability to ever learn to fight realistically in the wing chun way. Pure wing chun offers a fascinatingly different and vastly more effective path to self defence. Before I go on, let me answer the chorus of indignant instructors out there who continually hark on about how a multitude of students that they have trained in this way have defended themselves successfully against larger and stronger opponents. That may be true, however if they had trained the way that I train, (let's call it Hong Kong style), those same students would have done even better. As well, a student who wins a fight will always rush to tell their instructors, classmates and mum all about it. It is the ones that they lose that we do not hear so much about.

So, what do we get from forms and chi sau? The first form in wing chun is sil lum tao. A lot of the criticism directed at wing chun comes from the appearance of this largely slow and unspectacular

form. The fact that the practitioner remains stationary, further removes sil lum tao from looking like something that would be applicable to fighting. There is a myth perpetuated by less knowledgeable wing chun people that by training in sil lum tao for many years a student will eventually become a capable fighter. One can hardly blame martial artists who sneer at this claim. The fact is that sil lum tao is the foundation of wing chun but does not encompass all that is required to learn to fight. Sil lum tao is a type of moving meditation that, when practiced correctly will teach one to move in a different way. The desired outcome is that the body is unified, and able to work together in an entirely different and more efficient way than it does normally. This effect can also be called structure. Muscular strength provides little or no advantage to the application of correct structure. The detail of how this is achieved is an entire article, book or library in itself, so for now I offer a very crude example of the difference in a movement with structure as opposed to one without.

Imagine some holding a broomstick, pole, whatever with one hand, arm outstretched, the object parallel to the ground. Now imagine someone walking or running into the side of the, let's call it a pole, so that they meet it at chest height. No matter how strong the person holding the pole might be, the person stepping into the side of it would not be hurt because the pole would move due to the holder's inability to keep the pole in the original position. Even if the person ran into the side of the pole at full speed little or no damage would occur. That scenario represents a blow delivered without structure.

Now imagine that the pole holder hands the pole to someone who is much weaker but has an understanding of structure. The weaker person places one end of the pole against a brick wall and holds it parallel to the ground with thumb and forefinger. The other person is now asked to run into the end of the pole sticking out from the wall. Of course they cannot because the pole now has no give, and even walking at a slow pace they will hurt themselves when they make contact.

Among other things training in the sil lum tao form can provide the student with a structure that will greatly enhance their striking power. For now, that is all we need to take from that form, (although there is much more available), to move towards developing a realistic fighting ability.

Well, powerful strikes are great, but fighting involves a lot more. One cannot stand in one spot and expect to win a fight. We need to move about. That is where the second form, chum kiu, comes in. This form, which looks much more like fighting, teaches the wing chun student to step and pivot while employing the structure and focus of sil lum tao. We did not discuss focus earlier as that is also another whole subject that I do not have time to cover in this article.

So now we have power and the ability to move. There is another essential component required before one has any chance of using wing chun realistically; reflex.

Chi sau, or sticking hands, develops the fighting reflexes of wing chun. I think a lot of the confusion about wing chun comes from other martial artists perceiving the practice of chi sau as a form of sparring. Even wing chun students sometime make that mistake. However, chi sau is a co-operative exercise. Earlier I mentioned the standard method of simple, agreed upon techniques being practiced before moving into more complicated movements, increasing speed and randomness until the exercise is close to real fighting. While I was critical of that approach, I suppose one could say that the same path is done with chi sau. The difference is that chi sau practice cuts to the chase. Wing chun fighters seek to strike their opponent while deflecting an incoming strike or guard. We start with single sticking hands and then move onto double. By moving between a set of arm positions, each of which is a strike and also a deflection or counter, students practice employing their stance while rolling the force of their partner away. It is a little hard to explain the detail of these actions but wing chun people will understand and others can see examples of chi sau on the internet, this site in fact. Developing the reflexes of chi sau does take some time, I once worked out that I have practiced chi sau for at least 20,000 hours over the last 24 years! With the development of skill students can introduce a higher degree of randomness, movement and speed until the exercise can be done quite competitively, like a game of physical chess. Each player seeks to strike the opponent, preferably while trapping his arms. It is still nothing like a real fight, however it does

develop reflexes that come out in a real situation. Only the most naïve student would think that the sometimes quite involved and lengthy combinations would work in a fight, of course they would not, but the reflex of deflecting and striking through can be used quite easily. The effect is that the wing chun person simply punches through their opponents guard or strike. Lengthy combinations of strikes, trapping and counters will only come out when training with another wing chun person.

Some schools train with open palms to the face and very controlled force, others like mine train with striking to the chest so as to prevent injury while still employing enough force to unbalance the opponent and assess the potential power in each strike. Recently I met with a couple of students from the open palm to the face type of school. They assuredly told me that if one practiced striking to the chest in training then that is what would come out in a fight. As a matter of fact it doesn't. In the countless fights I was involved in while bouncing I never once hit someone in the chest. That knowledge comes from experience rather than theory. Also, if one applies the logic to open palm style sparring, then students from their school would only be able to strike with open palms and very light force. These guys from this 'other' school were nice people but did not understand just how easy it is to develop misconceptions through not really knowing about another method but assuming that they do.

I once heard a wing chun instructor minimising the importance of sticking hands by saying that in all the fights that he had been in, (3, I think), he had never had to use sticking hands. That indicates a very basic view of the purpose of chi sau. Chu Shong Tin, in my opinion the greatest and most knowledgeable wing chun master alive today, had this to say.

Quote:

*“When some of the people discuss the sticking hands of Wing Chun, they consider that the techniques in sticking hands are effective only when there is arm(s) contact with the opponent. The Wing Chun practitioner can then feel what the opponents are doing and respond to the action and fight back. In fighting, if the opponents can avoid arm(s) contact with the Wing Chun practitioner then they think the function of sticking hands cannot be used. **This idea is due to the lack of their understanding of Wing Chun.** Sticking hands does not need to have arm(s) contact in its responses to the action of the opponent. The purpose of sticking hands are diverse and need to be coordinated together in order to achieve the best fighting result.”*

The above quote was taken from Susana Ho's excellent website [www.hchwingchun.com.au](http://www.hchwingchun.com.au) which can be found in the links section on this site. Susana trained for many years in Hong Kong under Chu Shong Tin, having met him through being a student of Jim Fung. Being a woman of slight build she is an excellent example of the fact that wing chun does not require strength to attain enormous power.

This article only covers a small aspect of wing chun. For reasons of economy I have not mentioned the remaining forms; bil gee, mook jong, bart jarm do and lok dim boon. I have tried to explain how wing chun training develops fighting ability. Proving it is another thing. I do not wish to go on to list fight after fight that I had while bouncing and build a resume of toughness and street fighting experience. I hate that style of martial arts posturing. I will say however, that I have had many experiences in real fighting, (much more at least than the average martial artist), due to my years in hotel and club door security. I myself was surprised, (and thankful!), at just how effective wing chun is in a real situation.

