

# Training With Sigung Chu

By Mark Spence

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On the intersection of two major roads in Hong Kong, there is an old apartment block. The traffic is constant and the air is thick with pollution. Down a narrow corridor, one of two decrepit lifts leads to the centre of the wing chun world.

It occurred to me, that although thousands upon thousands of wing chun students around the world follow the teaching of Sigung Chu Shong Tin, a relative few have had the chance to experience his teaching method in person. In this article I hope to give readers an insight into the inner sanctum of this remarkable man. The way he interacts with his students, and the atmosphere that he generates around him is fascinating. I will not attempt to explain the kung fu, as Sigung does that much better than I will ever be able to. I hope to describe what happens, and what it is like to be there, in that tiny room, with this living legend and his closest students.

I first trained with Sigung in Hong Kong some 17 years ago. I was lucky enough to be introduced by my sifu, the late Grandmaster Jim Fung. On my first trip I traveled with Graham Kuerschner, at that time, a senior at the Adelaide branch of GM Fung's Wing Chun Academy. I was the manager for South Australia but Graham was very much my senior in wing chun. He is now one of the foremost martial artists in Australia, and owns his own school in Adelaide. I will always be indebted to Graham, not only for the instruction and friendship that he gave me, (Graham is actually godfather to my son, Kane), but also for the fact that he organized this first trip. That first contact with Sigung, in his own environment, changed my views on wing chun absolutely and forever. The following photos and comments are based on that first trip to Hong Kong in 1991.



*Two extraordinary martial artists. Sigung teaching Graham Kuerschner.*

On my introduction to the wonderful world of Sigung's school, I was struck by the lack of formality. I was coming from a background where the correct wearing of uniform was almost a basic tenant of kung fu. God help the student who showed up without the appropriate badge fixed in the correct spot. If you forgot your uniform you were assigned to lower grades for that evening's training. I remember a certain manager at one school, who seemed to spend about 75% of his working day, prowling the training floor, ensuring that the students had their shirts tucked in! I guess improved grooming was his legacy to the school. In Hong Kong, students wore whatever they liked and, unsurprisingly, it had no adverse effect on their training.

At my Australian school I had been required to bow on entering, and then to pictures at the start and finish of class, and of course to any senior instructor who passed by. Training partners would also bow. I spent a lot of time bowing. When instructors spoke to a student, the student was expected to adopt his stance, like a soldier standing to attention in front of his commanding officer. All this and many other rituals were presented as following authentic Chinese kung fu customs. I was never comfortable with it, and the lack of ceremony at Sigung's school was refreshing.

There are no set classes at Sigung's school. He opens at 5pm and closes at 11pm, from Monday through to Friday. Students come and go as they please. Many train for the whole 6 hours every day. Others train less due to working times or other circumstances. Each student usually enters and cheerily greets Sigung before starting training. There is absolutely no pomp or ceremony. He is treated as a much beloved and revered father or grandfather.

On our first day, we made the perilous lift journey and Graham knocked on the door. Sigung actually ran to the entranceway and seemed delighted to see us. I got the impression that he was keen to do some wing chun. People who have met him, will understand when I say, that Sigung has the warmest smile in the world.



*That fabulous Sigung smile.*

So, happily out of uniform, and already feeling some love for Sigung, it was time to start training. My prior experience in western schools was that a senior student would stand on a stage, shout angrily at students, (after we had completed our bowing, etc of course), and then take us through the warm-up. This consisted of some stretching, jumping around and endless sit-ups and push-ups. Generally there would be more angry shouting to accompany this. After that, with stiff aching muscles and drenched in sweat, we would be told to relax as we did the sil lum tao form. This had to be done in unison with the rest of the class, or one risked incurring more angry shouting. Problem was, I had trouble relaxing after doing 50 push-ups.

Sigung's method was different. On the first day he asked our group of half a dozen or so to stand around him and he took us through the sil lum tao form. (You can find that moment, from all those years ago, in our video section). I noticed how closely he was watching us. One of the striking things about Sigung is passion for teaching. While his manner is informal, there is nothing casual about his will to pass on the art. I felt humbled that his determination to teach me outshone my commitment to learn. As all good teachers do, he inspired me to try harder and dig deeper. He still does.

After doing sil lum tao, Sigung started to correct our movements. Once again this was very different to my experience in western schools. Generally the approach would be, 'this is how you counter a straight punch, or whatever'. We would be shown the appropriate movement from sil lum tao and

set about trying to use the movement, the harder and faster the better. Corrections to the actual movement would consist of 'hold that higher, make this angle different, stay relaxed, and keep your guard up'.

Sigung corrected us, hands on. Starting with stance, he would poke certain muscles, and gently adjust our clumsy bodies into something more wing chun-like. Relax took on a whole different meaning. You can see him doing this with me on the video. (I am the poor bugger with the fashionable ponytail, but hey it was the early 90's)!



*Sigung teaches 'hands on'.*

Also he would demonstrate. He imitated our attempts perfectly and then let one or more of us try to hold him as he did it correctly. I was astounded. Until that day, I had not realised that the power in wing chun could seem almost supernatural. He would move his arm in any direction at any speed and I could not have any effect on him, let alone stop him. Still can't, damn it!

Even more exciting was the fact that he could set us up to do these movements ten more times powerfully than before. After a few minutes of his magical adjustments, things that we had been practicing for years suddenly became super-charged. I started to wonder how I could have got it so wrong before. I know now that part of learning is feeling. Without being able to actually feel Sigung's power, I would never have got the point.

In many western schools, students are afraid to ask questions. If the instructor is insecure about his ability, he may perceive any persistent questioning, or a failure to understand, as a challenge to his authority. Sigung was completely open to any questioning and would explain his points with tremendous good will and without a trace of impatience. You can see an example of this in the video section, as he teaches us while Sifu Susana Ho kindly translates.

Throughout the day, laughter filled the room. Sigung would laugh when we got it wrong, (in a way that was never embarrassing or hurtful), and he would laugh with delight when we got it right. His joy is infectious. I wanted to be around him all the time, and still do!

His determination to spread the art of wing chun is palpable. I have heard other sifus talk about the importance of keeping some things secret, so as to maintain their superiority over other schools. Nothing could be further from Sigung's philosophy. He has a unique gift in both skill and understanding and wishes to share it with the world. Not out of vanity, but rather through a sense of duty. To share something beautiful is a very cool thing.

At one point, one of Sigung's students arrived and handed him an envelope containing his monthly fees. Sigung quietly opened the envelope and frowned a little. He removed a portion of the cash and returned it to the student, waving his hand to indicate that the amount was too much. I started to

realise that here was a man who genuinely had no care for material things. It seems a small matter, but given my experience of how western martial arts schools are sometimes run, I was enthralled.

Later in the evening, senior students started to arrive. Now was the time for trying to transfer the same feeling we felt in sil lum tao into our chi sau. It was also time for some fun. The students were all friendly and happy to chi sau with us.

One of them stood out, even in this highly skilled group of wing chun players. He never seemed to tire, and would be up all night playing chi sau with anyone who dared. He never hurt us, but to this day I have never felt more helpless when playing sticking hands. His name was Ah Kuen, and I was fortunate enough to train with him many times on that trip and over the coming years. He had trained under Sigung for a long time, and I could see that Sigung loved him. Recently, in the same week that GM Jim Fung passed away, Ah Kuen was killed in a motorcycle accident. I can only imagine the pain that Sigung felt at that horribly sad time.



*Ah Kuen and I playing chi sau. I'm the helpless one.....*

Sigung has had a greater influence on my life than anyone. His effect is not brought about by just his wing chun skills. His personality and moral strength are just as important to me, and provide a wonderful model of how to live a good life. Here is one example.

Recently, Nima, a one of my closest friends, who now lives in Hong Kong to train with Sigung, developed a hernia. He mentioned it to Sigung. The next day at training, Sigung gave him a protective belt that he gone out himself and bought. He seems to take personal responsibility for those who train under him. The feeling is genuine, and his actions, as with all great men, mirror his heart. That is the kind of kung fu master that inspires me.

That first 3 weeks in Hong Kong, all those years ago, seem like yesterday. For me, it was a life changing experience and one that I will always be grateful for.

These days, I visit Sigung for training twice per year. He is still teaching in that same room. Apart from his breathtaking skill in the art, Sigung has a passion and love for wing chun that exceeds that of any person I have met. (And believe me I have met quite a few wing chun fanatics over the years!). He teaches 5 days per week, 6 hours per day. Now in his mid-seventies, he recently started to take a week of rest once per month. The room that he teaches in is actually his home. Each night during training, he sits with his wife and family at a small table, and eats his evening meal as his

students train around them. Sigung lives and breaths wing chun. Sigung is wing chun!



*Three wing chun greats, Sigung Chu Shong Tin, Graham Kuerschner and the late Ah Kuen.*

– Mark Spence - 2008

