

Qi Sao, the Soul of Wing Chun by Gregory E. LeBlanc

Several hundred years ago a martial art was born in southern China, its founders pooled their collective knowledge into a uniform method of training allowing its practitioners to benefit from generations of martial arts development. The training was designed to transmit only the best of their combined experience, leaving out anything that was not directly applicable to combat. This system deliberately began with the most fundamental, streamlined and central concepts of martial knowledge, eventually bringing its students to the most advanced methods and abilities. The core purpose in training was always the same, to stop the enemy with the most *direct*, *economical* and *simple* means possible.

Tradition holds that this martial art was developed to fight off the invading Qing dynasty. The training being specifically designed to counter the techniques of Qing soldiers, and applied primarily for urban guerrilla warfare and political assassination. Also another oral tradition links it's founding to martial arts masters from the southern Shaolin Chan Buddhist temple, and then later being disseminated by their disciples through the traveling Red Junk Opera. Whatever the styles original and true history is, **Wing Chun Kung Fu** has become one of the worlds best known and most widely practiced martial arts of the 21st century. Perhaps its chief distinguishing feature is the training practice known as *Qi Sao* (sticky hands), often called the soul of Wing Chun.

Qi sao is the bridge in Wing Chun training from learning concepts and techniques, to putting them into practice and then ultimately being able to fight with them. It provides a platform from which the practitioner can safely develop his/her abilities and test the abilities of others. In its early stages Qi Sao training is done in a prescribed manner, usually practiced without the benefit of *footwork* techniques. Each practitioner begins by positioning his/her arms into a forward locked position (called fok, tan and bon); the legs are placed in a parallel, triangular training position. From this training stance each practitioner performs a variety of techniques; such as Cover hand, Pak Sao, Lap Sao and Tan Da to name only a few. Also the more dynamic free style Qi Sao practice is developed from this position, providing the basis for all of the random two person training including the brutal Qi Gerk training (sticky leg) and eventually free sparring (San Sao).

At its most advanced levels Qi Sao becomes an exercise in the training of skills such as *control* and *feeling*, the *yin and yang hands (soft/tight)* and developing the ability to fight *naturally*. Of paramount importance in a Wing Chun student's advancement in Qi Sao training is the development of the Yin and Yang hands (yin within yang and yang within yin), the two hands being used in opposite ways for the same action. An example of this would be making one hand tight and the other soft, such as when using the hands in combination for

a simultaneous attack and defense action. Other examples of *yin/yang* hands are using a disturb and attack combination, switching the power point emphasis, changing the opponent's correct facing combined with an attack, becoming soft/tight when facing tight/soft and being able to switch between both hands as needed.

The highest levels of Qi Sao practice rarely involves striking, and always focuses on the natural fighting style developed when a practitioner has mastered the form of his/her art and now acts and re-acts in a flowing, spontaneous manner. Grandmaster Yip Man was said to never have used crossing hand techniques (i.e. striking) in Qi Sao, rather he would only control the action and movement of his opponent. Qi Sao practice is considered a kind of playing; it is definitely not a form of street fighting. Nor is Qi Sao a type of challenge fighting (beimo), Qi Sao is a friendly training match between fellow practitioners. It is said that being a good fighter does not also mean being good at Qi Sao, but if you can become proficient in both then you have a special ability indeed. Ultimately contact training in Wing Chun can be broken down into 4 separate categories, of which Qi Sao is only one part:

1. Two person technique training
2. Qi Sao (sticky hands)
3. Beimo (challenge fighting)
4. Fighting for ones life (self-defense)

These 4 levels categorize the main differences in how a Wing Chun practitioner views his/her contact training experience. This ranges from pre-arranged practice to a life or death situation, of course fighting for your life is not technically a training experience. But it is important to mention because the mind set is very different at each of these levels.

In the first level of contact training the basic movements and concepts of Wing Chun are practiced with a partner. There is no feeling of competition or of anything to win or lose. This stage involves learning and developing the various sets of techniques and drills, such as the well-known Pak Sao counter drills (partially shown by Bruce Lee in Enter the Dragon). Here we develop the basic habits of Wing Chun; such as sitting from the ground with our movements, keeping the elbows down, controlling the centerline and facing our opponent squarely, to name a few. This is the foundation for building the skills that define Wing Chun, if this level of learning is skimmed over, you may appear to be doing Wing Chun, but the later actions of Qi Sao will lack the qualities and habits that are at the heart of properly practiced Wing Chun.

The second level of Wing Chun contact training brings in the elements of wanting to make the hit (a.k.a. crossing hand) and to not be hit; here the classic Qi Sao training takes place. Ego rears its ugly head and the full force of Wing Chun character development begins to work its magic. My teacher Sifu Gary Lam (Lam Man Hoc) always says that everyone must go by the same road, and Qi Sao for most of us is when the road starts getting bumpy. The most common mistake made here is viewing this stage of training as fighting. Qi Sao should be a little playful, trained with a generous spirit. Sifu Lam says that you need to have a big heart to do Qi Sao effectively. At this level the problem is not being able to hit someone, but rather can you control and feel his or her actions instead. Sifu Lam says this control of our opponent is the key to progressing to higher levels of ability in Wing Chun; the techniques used advances from striking our opponent only, to more sophisticated ways of fighting. Additionally doing Qi sao in this fashion involves controlling the distance and power applied in practice, if we trained with uncontrolled strikes, Qi Sao would not last very long and dental bills would be very high. Thus we not only strive to control our opponent's actions, but equally important we endeavor to develop an ability to control our own actions as well. The skilled practitioner on first contact with his/her training partners arms can sense their strengths and weaknesses, being able to feel their physical structure and level of development immediately. A master of Qi Sao can predict an opponents every move, using a highly developed ability that almost seems to mimic a sixth sense. Qi Sao is as much a contest of cunning and a test of intelligence, as it is a physical challenge of skill. Sifu Lam continually emphasizes throughout the Qi Sao training experience that without being able to control our own mind, emotions and actions, as well as control our opponent's actions, the higher levels of Wing Chun usage will be beyond our grasp.

The third level of contact training in Wing Chun is where things acquire a significantly different nature, we leave the protected world of true training and venture into less than charted lands. This level represents an actual fight, but this fight is arranged ahead of time and is between trained participants (Beimo or skill comparison). Here there is a real danger of injury, people can lose teeth and get bones broken. This is the activity that after 60 victories in beimo made the late Wong Shun Leung (Sigung) so famous, having been given the nickname "king of the challenge fight". It was also the real brutality of beimo that convinced Sigung Wong to eventually stop fighting, having accidentally blinded his final opponents left eye. Under generally controlled conditions and among opponents who respect one another, beimo can be the ultimate experience in testing a practitioner's skill. This is not street fighting, but the control that was exercised in Qi Sao training is put aside. We want to win against, but not seriously injure our honored opponent. Some of Sigung Wong's life long friends were former beimo opponents, having gained mutual respect and admiration for one another through the experience.

The last level of contact training is not really training at all, unless of course you happen to be a professional soldier. This level is mentioned only because in each of the three above categories the attitude was different; here the experience gained from hard training is summoned in a cruel totality. In the first level we had an open, receptive approach; our goal was to master the basics of technique. In the second level we ideally wanted to have a generous spirit focused on training and development of skill; the only person you should have been competing with was yourself. The third level can be called a kind of free fighting tournament experience (beimo); rules or rounds do not govern this stage of training. Beimo is an actual fight, but the big difference is that the participants fight for the experience of it, not to deliberately injure or maim the opponent. Accidents can happen in this fighting environment of full power strikes'; this is as dangerous as so-called "training" can get. The last category of the four types of contact training is mentioned here for the purpose of discussion only. The mind set here is appropriate only when defending your life, for whatever reason. The practitioner adopts a cruel, vengeful attitude. This is using Wing Chun in its most direct and powerful way, here you will see emergency techniques from the formerly secret Bil Jee form, designed for one thing only, to neutralize our enemy! This is life or death, kill or be killed. Here words like butcher and destroy come to mind, this is the tooth and nail of human nature, honed to a fine edge through years of training. This kind of application is probably most like the original intentions for Wing Chun usage, that being for revolution, revenge and assassination. As members of a good and civil society, and dedicating to fostering the same, these kinds of techniques are not emphasized in normal training and are taught only to advanced students.

Qi Sao as it is practiced in Sifu Lam's school provides an opportunity to develop, enhance and as he calls it "upgrade" our abilities. One of the most profound examples of this, and possibly the highest ideal trained for in an entire career of practice, is the essence of the Wing Chun song "loi lou hoi sung, lat sao chay chun". Roughly translated this refers to the ultimate accomplishment in the Wing Chun fighting style; to embrace/hold what comes, escort/send off what leaves and when contact is lost attack to the center/weak point immediately. This lofty skill can only be developed under pressure, in the crucible of Qi Sao. Being able to apply it at will, going with and guiding your opponent, fighting in the natural style of an expert who has transcended the form of his art, this is the highest accomplishment realized in action. Here at this level there is no Wing Chun, you are Wing Chun. You fight without thought for correct or incorrect technique; your response is automatic and instinctive. Exhibiting an icy calm and a seamless combination of key attributes (called jun/accuracy, wan/stability, fai/speed and geng/power) that comes from years of experience, skills are demonstrated that are the stuff of legends. This was the legacy left by the founders of Wing Chun Kung Fu, nothing less than true martial arts mastery. The road to finding that legacy begins with Qi Sao, the soul of Wing Chun.