

The Butterfly Hands of Wing Chun by Gregory E. LeBlanc

Wing Chun Kung Fu is possibly the best known of the southern Chinese martial arts, having a history that dates back several hundred years. In recent times it has gained a surge in popularity largely due to it being the basis for Bruce Lee's early fighting system "Jun Fan Wing Chun" and also being the system of choice for the famous Hong Kong challenge fighter Sigung Wong Shun Leung. Wing Chun primarily specializes in being a direct and extremely practical method of Chinese boxing, but it also develops a variety of techniques not specifically related to striking, perhaps the least understood is the double handed push or Butterfly Hands. The Butterfly Hands also know as Po Pai, is a technique chiefly devoted to a sharp, decisive thrust of both hands against the bodies' physical centerline. The primary goal in actions of this nature is to take advantage of the surrounding environment and use it as a weapon, choosing the sharp angle of a wall or the surface of a window for example and then projecting the opponent into or through it. Secondary applications relate to fighting more than one opponent at a time, countering an attempted grappling move, up-rooting the opponents position, disturbing balance and also using the Po Pai action as a close distance palm attack causing internal damage much in the same way that an Iron Palm strike does.

The Po Pai technique falls into the category of chance actions, in contrast to primary actions that involve a simultaneous deflection and strike. Chance actions almost always follow after an initial strike, thus they are second or third actions in a combination and usually rely on the support of a primary striking action. Chance action techniques in Wing Chun also include one-handed pushing, standing grappling, pulling and usually leg strikes. Po Pai training involves the use of virtually all other hand styles in Wing Chun, providing flexibility in usage that is not found in other techniques. Po Pai is considered a second gate style technique, training at a distance that demands that the practitioner step in deeply, totally occupying the opponent's position. Second gate actions refer to techniques that are done at the plane of the elbow and usually involve pushing, pulling or a trap and strike. Second gate fighting differs from the typical crossing hand striking range in that the distance puts the practitioner at risk and a trap or lock must be used for safety's sake, with Po Pai pushing no traps are used so a total commitment of position is necessary at the onset of the technique. In advanced training the Po Pai becomes very important in developing what my Wing Chun teacher Sifu Gary Lam calls "winning from losing." This idea of "winning from losing" refers to moving within your opponents attacking action, then at the moment when they are vulnerable using a matching counter attack. Usually this style of training involves both trainees doing Po Pai, the one doing the training action suddenly applying their own Po Pai technique in the middle of their training partners initial Po Pai action.

Developing power, timing and correct distance for Po Pai application involves partner drill training, skill at using the Wooden Dummy, weapons training and developing both explosive and internal power. Partner training begins by introducing the basic hands associated with using Po Pai and also promotes correct angle, position and timing in usage. Later partner training expands into a more free style drill, giving an opportunity to understand Po Pai's relevance as a chance action and for developing the winning from losing training. Different methods of application are also explored, such as pushing with a full step, pushing without stepping and understanding Po Pai as also a strike and not just a push. All such actions are supported by the idea of making the opponent's position, balance, stance and angle incorrect, a concept that finds its way into nearly all Wing Chun actions. The Wooden Dummy (Muk Yan Jong) is where in the system proper the Po Pai is introduced to the Wing Chun student. The chance action section of the Wooden Dummy (the middle third) trains students in concepts devoted to timing, using the entire body for power, understanding joint power application and the correct angle of attack. Weapons' training plays a vital role in developing the correct power and footwork for Po Pai usage. The Wing Chun Dragon Pole (Luk Dim Boon Gwan) helps to coordinate the entire body for the raw mechanical power needed in the Po Pai and it also promotes the explosive emotional power needed for the suddenness of action that is usually required for the Po Pai to be effective. The Wing Chun Double Eight Slash Knife (Baat Jaam Do) helps promote Po Pai excellence by developing quick changes in angle and direction and of taking up the opponent's position, which is necessary for maintaining safety and again using the whole body for power. The last quality developed and perhaps the most elusive is Internal Power. Internal power involves an understanding of how to direct the natural core strength of your body, supported by the ground and transmitted by the joints, against the opponent's physical centerline. This is done in conjunction with making the opponent's direction and position wrong, robbing them of a stable fighting posture and taking away an ability to issue joint power. The training technique crucial for developing internal power in Wing Chun is Poon Sao. Poon Sao training is done with a partner and uses the normal Qi Sao (a freestyle practice, called the soul of Wing Chun), hand and feet configurations the difference is that instead of developing crossing hand skills (striking) the goal is to find and direct the coordinated force of your own body's facing power against your partner's centerline. Done correctly the technique has the effect of launching your training partner off the ground and back several feet. Later a more advanced version of Poon Sao includes the counter action from the training partner and this is ultimately done as a fluid drill exchanging roles back and forth.

Sifu Gary Lam refers to the Butterfly hands as a lost art, rarely trained and almost never seen in Qi Sao. He considers Po Pai training a unique and powerful ability in a self-defense situation, but it is equally important in promoting the proper structure and hand/body/leg coordination that all Wing Chun techniques are benefited by. In Sifu Lam's Wing Chun the Po Pai technique is

an essential part of advanced Wing Chun training and offers an un-paralleled opportunity to up-grade the practitioner's level of expertise.