

## Wooden Man Training - Fighting the Shadow Enemy by Gregory E. LeBlanc

Almost synonymous with Wing Chun Kung Fu is the Muk Yan Jong or wooden man (a.k.a. the wooden dummy). Well known but often misunderstood, the Muk Yan Jong is considered Wing Chun's most powerful tool for developing true mastery of the art. Sifu Gary Lam, an expert in the Wong Shun Leung Wing Chun lineage, describes the Wooden Man as essential for the refinement of a Wing Chun practitioners advanced skills. The goal of wooden man training is the goal of Wing Chun itself, that is to integrate and harmonize all of one's training into a coordinated and unfixed expression of the concepts and skills that define the form of Wing Chun Kung Fu. Sigung Wong would often say that it is a mistake to be controlled by Wing Chun, that Wing Chun was only a name and not some kind of dogma. This point is paramount to the true mastery of Wing Chun, to not see it as a static and rigid approach to martial arts, but rather as a form for allowing us to develop and explore the concepts and skills that are common to all of the highest expressions of martial arts. The wooden man training is one of the essential steps to understanding and achieving this lofty goal, of going beyond the outward appearance and form of Wing Chun and instead freely working with its fundamental nature in a spontaneous and undetermined way.

The Muk Yan Jong's construction presents three positions for the arms, one position for the legs and of course the center trunk representing the opponents body. It is traditionally mounted on a wall or implanted in the ground. This provides a stable three-dimensional training surface, allowing for the practice of movements against the inside and outside angles of an opponents body. The traditional form has 108 separate movements; this has been expanded upon, and now boasts 120 techniques. Changes like this take place because Wing Chun is not a static martial art, it is always seeking to improve and develop itself, and innovations have occurred. Innovations such as these come from a teachers experience in application. For example Sifu Lam's teacher Wong Shun Leung made certain changes to Wing Chun, with Grandmaster Yip Mans approval, that were based on years of winning challenge matches (beimo).

Sifu Lam denotes four essential qualities needed for the mastery of Wing Chun techniques and application. Sifu Lam sees these four key ideas as the common denominator in any type of mastery, not only in the practice of martial arts. Those four qualities are paramount to having a level of ability not often seen but never forgotten. Siheng Mitch Grimm, a 220 pound body builder and Sifu Lam's senior student, when asked by a peer what kind of Wing Chun he was learning, he responded "scary Wing Chun." Wing Chun at this level is a product of these four qualities of mastery working in unison, as one seamless action. These four qualities are:

1. Jun - Precision

2. Wan - Stability

3. Fai - Speed

4. Geng - Power

To reach the highest levels of ability and someday become a graduate of the Gary Lam Wing Chun Kung Fu program, the student must make these qualities his very own. The Muk Yan Jong provides a controlled, deliberate opportunity to enhance and bring together these four qualities of mastery. A hidden fifth quality is sometimes spoken about and that is cruelty. This fifth quality is not a physical attribute per say but instead is an attitude necessary for combat, a commitment required for survival.

The basic wooden man training introduces a series of movements that teach the fundamental techniques, delivering a rudimentary understanding of how to move on the dummy correctly. Ideas essential to practicing in accordance with Wing Chun concepts and skills are also introduced; ideas such as facing the dummy squarely and standing correctly, also always chasing the dummy's centerline and never chasing the dummy's arms. Then the form itself is taught, consisting of 120 movements and broken into three distinct sections of training, students learn step by step each series of techniques. The first section is devoted to the basic techniques and structural alignment of Wing Chun. By this point in a students training many of these movements have already been seen in the solo form training (i.e. Siu Nim Tao, Chum Kiu, and Biu jee), what has changed is the students opportunity now to train position, timing and his body's structural alignment. Sifu Lam often says that a Wing Chun fighter wins with his structure and angle and not with brute force; otherwise there would be no point to developing martial ability. The second section of the dummy form focuses on chance actions. These techniques involve different types of pushing and pulling actions, used to destabilize and disrupt an opponent's balance and structure. These movements are usually done only when the opportunity presents itself, used instinctively as the opponent is in motion. Sifu Lam calls these types of techniques helping actions, used typically as a second movement to a primary hand. In this case primary hands are direct strikes to an opponent's vital targets and the helping actions assist in this effort, or are used to injure the opponent by projecting him into obstacles in the environment. The third section is devoted exclusively to training the footwork. Here the techniques of stepping, kicking, trapping, and leg brakes are honed. The techniques involve a combined use of the hands working in concert with the footwork applications, this develops powerfully dominating actions that pull, trap and seize while at the same time attacking the stomach, knee and ankle joints.

Sifu Lam calls the wooden dummy your second coach (or second Sifu). This is due to the fact that as you train on the dummy it will correct your actions,

your position, help you develop power and when applied properly train your timing. Practicing at his full potential the student should be thinking about what the dummy is doing, visualizing himself in an actual confrontation. He should unite his actions with his intent and endeavor to harness his emotional power (Sam Yi Hap Yat). The student trains hard and soft actions (yin and yang hands), this often depending on when and why his limbs loose connection with the dummy. He develops an ability to apply soft and tight striking power (yin within yang power and yang within yin power) and how not to let that power pass over and therefore miss his target. Crucial to proper training is creating a springing movement in the dummy, by matching the footwork with that movement the student uses the dummy's recoil to train timing and position. The Muk Yan Jong, as with many things in Wing Chun, appears simple, but in application can take years to master.

Additionally the wooden man is essential to developing tight focused power (the bodies power points) and to closing the gates to your own vulnerabilities, while at the same time seeking the opponents gaps no matter how protected they are. This means that as in two person training the Muk Jong practitioner must always be putting pressure forward towards the trunk of the body and not against the dummy's limbs. Wong Shun Leung often said, never chase your enemy's hands always chase their centerline. The exception to this rule is if they are armed. Once in Sigung Wong's school a student during training had broken an arm from a Muk Yan Jong, thinking Wong would be pleased he presented the broken arm ready to be praised. Instead of being praise he was severely chastised. Sigung Wong scolded him in no uncertain terms, not only had he broken a perfectly good dummy arm but he was also chasing hand and not the centerline. This goes to show that Muk Yan Jong training is very specific and capitalizes on the sound principles of Wing Chun open hand concepts for training. The wooden dummy trains students on how to fight smarter, not harder.

Finally students train Muk Yan Jong by practicing away from the dummy, done by going through the movements in the air. This training perfects control in the form and helps to point out where any obvious mistakes or lapses are. Wooden dummy training ultimately becomes a challenge match with a shadow or thinking enemy. The training routine is imagined as a real encounter, the practitioner sees each move as a response to an enemy's attack; this deeply impresses perfect control of the actions and their automatic application in combat. The Muk Yan Jong is not a piece of wood to toughen the students arms and legs on, rather when used properly is a sophisticated tool for developing and mastering the most advanced skills in Wing Chun. It has a unique and profound place in martial arts training, being an essential study in the training of the best Wing Chun fighters for hundreds of years.

Today teachers like Sifu Gary Lam carry on this important martial arts tradition, developing the next generation of practitioners and teachers. Wing

Chun's roots are as a martial technology of revolution and military political solutions, today it continues to flourish and grow for the benefit of society and the development of individual character.

Sifu Lam teaches at his training institute in Monterey Park California, carrying on the Wing Chun Kung Fu tradition. He is one of a hand full of Sifus authorized to teach the complete Wong Shun Leung system.