

SIFU DANA WONG

“IF YOU DON’T EMPTY YOUR GLASS, THERE IS NOTHING FOR YOU TO LEARN” by Costas Argyriadis

I met with Sifu Dana Wong some time ago at Mister Panayiotis Brebos' school in Ano Liosia, a truly beautiful venue, which fills a gap which existed in that particular area, as far as Wing Chun is concerned. The famous American-Chinese sifu, who was a guest of the representative in our country for 14 days, made an exceptionally positive impression on me. Sifu Wong is one of the simplest and most accessible important personalities I have met, during my 25 year old career as a martial arts journalist and he did not hesitate to show me a series of techniques, as he explained what he was telling me in the following interview. It must be mentioned that, during the interview, Sifu Yiannos Christoforou, the Chinese Sifu's representative in Cyprus. Sifu Wong had stayed with him in Nicosia, for a week.

MZ: Tell us a few words about your Wing Chun beginnings.

DW: I began practicing Wing Chun at the age of 11, in Boston USA, with Chinese teacher Gilbert Lam of Hong Kong, who was in turn a student of Wong Shun Leung. However, i gave up my involvement with martial arts when i went to high school because i thought that my studies should be my priority. Later on i went to University and after my graduation i found a good job and led a secure but dull life.

MZ: How did the contact with William Cheung come about?

DW: Having lived like i describe above for a few years, i kept saying to myself: "I am too young to be feeling this old". In 1982, i decided to write a letter to the well known grandmaster William Cheung, addressed to his headquarters in Australia, because i wanted to start wing chun again. I told him that i lived in Boston, USA,

and asked him if he could recommend a good teacher in my area, who teaches his system. The main reason I turned to William Cheung was because I had learnt that he taught Wing Chun with footwork and this seemed very interesting to me. To my great surprise, the grandmaster replied that he wanted to meet me in person. "I nearly fell off my chair, this person is a legend and who was I for him to come and teach me?" In early 1983, William Cheung, while in the States for some seminars, came to Boston and that is how I became his student, but I also kept my job.

MZ: When did you take the big decision to dedicate yourself to Wing Chun completely and move to Australia?

DW: In 1988, at the age of 33, I thought: "If I don't change my life now I will never do it" and therefore I asked the grandmaster to accept me as his student, at his headquarters in Australia. My aim was to become a sifu and then return to Boston to open my own school. I had initially planned to stay for a year or two, but I eventually settled in Melbourne, where I still live, I got married there and had my family in my new country, Australia. I was a chief instructor at William Cheung's headquarters for 15 years and I taught all departments. We would usually host guest instructors at the school and they did some complimentary training in Wing Chun and usually I dealt with them, when the grandmaster was abroad.

MZ: Why did you become independent from William Cheung in 2002, after all those years as his right hand man, and opened your own school?

DW: There were many reasons. One of the most important had to do with the very essence of Wing Chun, as the grandmaster had taught it. The most important thing in a fight, in my opinion, is the way you close the distance towards an opponent, without taking blows. Despite the fact that I had learnt angles and footwork from William Cheung, which helped me create an

advantageous position before getting close to an opponent and do chi sao, there were, in my opinion, some gaps. When you go in, the opponent will try to hit you in an unorthodox manner, push you, grab you. As I understood William Cheung's system, I was missing "weapons" to counter an opponent as the time of penetration, at the stage where we close the gap between the opponent and us. I always asked myself: "why didn't the grandmaster give greater emphasis on chi sao, as the old teachers did". William Cheung's response was that in the material he taught, he gave emphasis on how to handle the "engagement" with the opponent before contact, using footwork. His system teaches you to always end up on the opponent's side, control the elbow, being on his "blind side" and away from his other arm. My question had to do with the situations when, for example, the opponent was trained in fighting and he is making it difficult for you to reach his "blind side". William Cheung did not teach how to play the center, using your penetrating force. Every time someone exerted more force, the other would learn to step away, instead of coming in. Nevertheless, when we did chi sao with the grandmaster, I knew very well that he possessed the technique of the penetrating force. But I never understood why he didn't include it in the material he was teaching.

MZ: I read in your CV that for two years, 2007 and 2008, you traveled to China, to the town of Foshan, the birthplace of Yip Man, the "father" of modern Wing Chu, seeking the roots of the system in its original form. Did you find answers to your questions there?

DW: I visited Foshan, basically for two reasons: Firstly, to find out whether wing chun, as practiced there, had differences with the one taught in Hong Kong, as both of my teachers Gilbert Lam and William Cheung, came out of Yip Man's lineage in Hong Kong. My biggest question was, as I said, had to do with chi sao and how you can exploit to the maximum the "weapons", which that technique gives you, at the right time and under the right circumstances. The second reason was to meet master Kwok Fu, one of the last two remaining first

generation students of grandmaster Yip Man, at the time. Yip Man himself had stated publicly, when he was in Hong Kong, that if you are in Foshan to learn Wing Chun, visit Kwok Fu. You have to know that there are at least 15 major Wing Chun schools there. Master Kwok Fu was the only one who did not have a website, in contrast to the others, who advertised themselves online using statements like: "Come to Foshan to learn the art of Bruce Lee", offering at the same time, whole packages with accommodation and a series of programs to choose what you wanted to learn. What made a tremendous impression on me, was that his man had one of the biggest schools in Foshan, but did not have his own website. Why? The reason was that he did not care to commercialize the art and also because he was a very humble man. Master Kwok passed away in 2011 at the age of 90 and today, his son, Kwok Wai Chan, who is now in his 60's, has taken over the school. Yip Man taught only 6 persons in Foshan, as he basically did not want to teach because he was wealthy and did not have to work. That was probably the reason why he became such a great practitioner, since he had the time and the means to visit and be trained by many great teachers of the time. Master Kwok, had hosted Yip Man in his house when the Japanese conquerors persecuted him, as too the Communists did later on, having banned martial arts. Kwok Fu hid Yip Man from them. You should know that the Japanese had tortured Kwok but he didn't talk and the communists had broken his legs when he refused to reveal Yip Man's hiding place. From all these, he was left with serious mobility dysfunctions, but because of his special relationship with Yip Man, the latter had taught him so much and he became a great master.

MZ: What was the most important thing you learnt from master Kwok Fu?

DW: Undoubtedly, those elements you need to successfully face the high tension of close-range fighting. I arrived at the conclusion that William Cheung's style, ultimately emphasizes mid-to-longer range fighting and not so much close range fighting. His technique was like a bridge. This could be very strong, but it is not flexible enough to withstand a tornado, an earthquake etc., it will collapse. But if

the bridge is too flexible and it is lacking stability, it will again, collapse. The human body is the same thing; this is what master Kwok taught me. Everything has to do with the laws of physics, like gravity and speed but also on how to use levers to create power. The differences between two systems of Wing Chun as taught by grandmaster Kwok Fu, on the one hand and that taught by William Cheung, on the other, are, the weight on the back leg and footwork. Chi sao is also different. Kwok Fu's system teaches you to play the center. Both systems, in my opinion, contain excellent elements, one complements the other and they together bring a more effective outcome.

MZ: Your headquarters in Melbourne is named “Qian Li Dao” Academy. What does this mean and why are the words Wing Chun omitted from the name of the school?

DW: “Qian Li” means, “hidden talent” or “hidden skill”, whereas “Dao” means “path”. We all possess more capabilities than we think and Wing Chun shows the path with which we can discover our hidden talent. When someone comes to you on the street to grab you, hit you or push you, an instinctive move is to put your arms up, between yourself and the other person. For this reason, I teach, from the very first lesson, chi sao. Even if, in the beginning, most students don't understand what I am teaching them, their body slowly begins to get used to contact with another person in a non-threatening environment and in a controlled form. Then we proceed and I teach them exercises with stronger attacks, grabs, pushes etc., initially the average student is afraid. In a while though, they become used it and they are no longer afraid, because in their mind they know it is just an exercise at the school. The ultimate goal for the involvement of students with Wing Chun must be self-knowledge and how to learn to use their abilities. If the only reason you practice martial arts is to learn self-defense (unless you are always in a dangerous environment), for me, it is not worth the time to focus on this and it is not even worth the money. Through the teaching procedure of something that it is difficult for you, you discover that you have more potential

than you thought. During a lesson, I push my students to exceed their limits. Something, which may seem impossible for you to do today, at some point later on, you will be able to do it. If you managed to do it once, then you'll be able to do it again. I try to transmit to my students the message that they have to think positively, because that is where there is room for their personal development and improvement. Wing Chun is simply the means, which I use to reveal my students' capabilities, that is why I don't emphasize it so much in the name of my school; I could have used any martial art to draw out one's inner potential.

MZ: How and when did you meet Sifu Panayiotis Brebos?

DW: I knew of Panayiotis Brebos, because he was once a student of William Cheung and my grandmaster spoke very highly of him. Our first personal contact was in February 2012, when we met in Italy, in a seminar I was conducting through my representative there. We trained together for many hours, over the course of two weeks. I discovered that he has excellent knowledge of Wing Chun but also that he is a very good person and an excellent teacher. We clicked, in the sense that he also felt that something was missing from his Wing Chun, as I had felt before visiting Foshan. I have the opinion that "if you don't empty your glass, there is nothing for you to learn". I like Panayiotis because he was a recognized teacher in his country and from the first moment, without hesitation, to rethink as a student, he did not hesitate "to empty his glass"! The same goes for Yiannos Christoforou of Cyprus, also a great person and teacher.

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