

Ansgar Gerstner

The Healing Aspects of the Chinese Martial Art Wing Chun

An initial discussion of the Siu Nim Tau, the first form of Wing Chu

Summary

There are many movements and details in Wing Chun that have no concrete and direct meaning for fighting, but that show an obvious proximity to Buddhist and Daoist methods of bodywork. This article deals with these aspects of Wing Chun and their complex healing effects.

Keywords

Wing Chun; Siu Nim Tao; Daodejing; Qigong; Neigong

Contact

Dr. Ansgar Gerstner
Martinistraße 19, 20251 Hamburg
a.gerstner@tao-moves.com

Initial publication

This article was first published in German in:

Liebl, S. & Kuhn, P. (Hrsg.; 2014). Menschen im Zweikampf – Kampfkunst und Kampfsport in Forschung und Lehre 2013. Jahrestagung der dvs-Kommission „Kampfkunst und Kampfsport“ vom 7.-9. November 2013 in Erlangen. Hamburg: Czwalina.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) and published in the [JOMAR | Journal of Martial Arts Research](https://j-o-mar.com) (ISSN 2567-8221) on 2020-07-07.
For more: j-o-mar.com

1 Introduction to the topic

In the following article I will use some selected examples to present the healing aspects of Wing Chun, a martial arts style that commonly is primarily known for its focus on close range fighting. Looking at the first form of Wing Chun, the Siu Nim Tau (Xiaoniantou 小念頭), I will explain how Chinese philosophical as well as medical concepts are put to use in the Wing Chun forms, in order to create a balanced dynamic between the mental, the emotional, and the physical aspects of one's being. I will address the naming of the style, the central and very characteristic Wing Chun stance, important acupuncture points in the practice of the Wing Chun forms, an alternative take on the fighting aspect, and selected important principles in Wing Chun. In my discussions I will also draw on the *Daodejing* (道德經)¹ as a very influential text for Chinese movement traditions, written several centuries before the common era.

2 The naming of the style

The most commonly used characters for the martial art Wing Chun are “詠春拳”, the fist of Wing Chun (Yongchun) and “永春拳”, meaning the fist of eternal spring, or eternal youth. According to the legend about the history of Wing Chun transmitted in the Yip Man lineage (葉問派) the style was named after the woman with the full name of Yim Wing Chun (Yan Yongchun 嚴詠春) who is said to have learned the essence of this style from a well-known nun with the name Ng Mui (Wumei 五枚). The given name Wing Chun, or Yongchun in Chinese Pinyin, means “singing the praise of spring” The characters for the martial art Wing Chun have the exact same pronunciation as “永春泉” which means “source of eternal spring”, or “source of eternal youth”. A person who is only slightly familiar with Chinese culture and language will know that playing with characters and their sounds, like hinting at something by using different characters that, however, have the exact same pronunciation as the character(s) they are referring to, is a common practice with a very long history in Chinese language. If you furthermore consider the fact that a larger number of movement elements in Wing Chun appear, for instance, in similar or even identical form in the Shaolin tendon method (Shaolin Yijinjing 少林易筋經), or the Yin Yang method and the Five Phases² method (Yinyangwuxinggong 陰陽五行功), two medical methods of bodywork from the Daoist tradition³, all of a sudden the healing foundation of bodywork and the name “fist/well of eternal spring” do not seem to be that far-fetched anymore.

Additionally, in the first form you find a movement being called Saam Pai Fut (Sanbaifo 三拜佛), meaning “showing threefold reverence to Buddha.” This is a movement that – together with a slow Tan Sau (Tanshou 攤手), and a slow Fok Sau (Fushou 伏手) – make up a movement sequence that time-wise accounts for the largest space within the first three Wing Chun forms combined, if you actually perform these three movements in slow-motion as is generally emphasized. This upright, fingers pointing upwards, hand position like a typical Buddhist gesture is commonly called Wu Sao (Hushou 護手) in Wing Chun, meaning

¹ This text might be more commonly known in the West in a different transcription as the *Tao Te Ching*.

² The Five Phases are more commonly known as the Five Elements.

³ These two are some of the fundamental general practices in self-healing the Daoist physician Dafu Daoren (大夫道人 in Beijing) teaches. This set of healing practices goes back to Sun Simiao (孫思邈, ca 581-682), a Daoist, and one of the very renowned physicians in Chinese medical history.

the guarding hand. The Wu Sau, the guarding hand, does, however, not only make sense in a fighting context. Particularly in connection with the name given to this movement (Saam Pai Fut) and its Buddhist setting, it also makes sense as a general attitude towards oneself, and the external world. Performing this movement in a mindful and a slow way, you internally connect with a tradition in which compassion (cibei 慈悲), and mindfully moving in the world are central contents. At the same time, performing this movement slowly calms body and mind. This is of high relevance in the Buddhist tradition, but it is also an important basis for Daoist medicine and its understanding of healing. Apart from all this, this upright hand position which on the side also notably strengthens the forearms exists in several variants in the Shaolin tendon method.

Let us now look at a stance that is central for Wing Chun, a stance in which you lift the anus while the toes and knees point inwards. This is a stance that for external observers appears quite weird.

3 The stance of the first Wing Chun form

For everyone even only marginally dealing with the topic of close range fighting it is obvious that the Yee Jee Kim Yeung Ma (Erziqianyangma 二字掛羊馬 - number two clamping ram stance), the stance most characteristic of Wing Chun in which the complete Siu Nim Tau is performed, is not a typical fighting stance. This stance might be called “number two ... stance”, because the position of the feet with the clearly inwards-pointing toes looks like the outer frame of the Chinese character for the figure two (er 二) – a short stroke on top and a longer one at the bottom.⁴ Yee Jee Kim Yeung Ma (Erziqianyangma 二字掛羊馬 - number two clamping ram stance, referring to the leg position of a bucking ram) is pronounced exactly like “二字掛陽馬” which can be understood as “number two sending impulses into the genital area stance.” Ram (Yang 羊) as well as the Yang of Yin & Yang (Yang 陽), representative of the genital area here, stand for stamina and vitality being consolidated by this stance. This is by far not just about strengthening the leg muscles or about stabilizing the lower part of the body. Some variously named and differently characterized movement elements that are essential in this stance like lifting of the anus and taking in of the abdomen (tigang lianfu 提肛斂腹), or taking in of the abdomen and contracting of the buttocks (shoufu liantun 收腹斂臀), or uplifting of the anus and clamping of the knees (tinggang qianxi 挺肛掛膝) as well as the toes taking hold of the ground (zujian zhuodi 足尖著地 / jiaozhi zhuodi 腳趾抓地 / zuzhi guadi 足趾掛地) is typical for methods of Chinese bodywork exercises of old and can be found in the Shaolin tendon method (Zhou, 2001, pp. 72-73) as well as in the Five Phases method. In the Five Phases method there is an emphasis on lifting the anus and taking hold in the ground particularly in the movement sequence of the water phase. The movements within the water phase specifically invigorate the kidney function circuit, which is essentially linked with one’s vitality in Daoist, as well as in Chinese medicine in general.

Here I would now like to discuss several acupuncture points.

⁴ If you draw a line between the heels, you get a longer line. If you draw a line between the toes, you get a shorter line.

4 Several important acupuncture points for Wing Chun

Yongquan Xue (湧泉穴): By “taking hold in the ground” with the toes the acupuncture point Yongquan Xue, the bubbling well in the middle of the rear part of the balls of the feet is being stimulated. This acupuncture point can help for instance with “timidity, ... , irritability, ..., fatigue.” (Hempfen, 1997, p. 169) Aside from the emotionally balancing effect and the meaning of the bubbling well for activating the kidney function circuit and hence an increase in vitality (Hempfen, 1991, pp. 204-206), water in general is important in Daoist thought in many respects, particularly in the context of “healing”, and the ability to have integrative and harmonizing effects: “An exceptional person is like water, benefiting all beings without competing.” (,,上善若水。水善利萬物而不爭。“, *Daodejing*, chapter 8, Chinese quote according to Gerstner, 2008, p. 53).

Laogong Xue (勞工穴): Even the clenched fist does not necessarily have to do with fighting. You find the clenched fist in several segments of the Shaolin tendon method, a method of bodywork that has nothing at all to do with fighting. This also applies to the position in which both fists are placed at the side of the body with the forearms held horizontally. This is a position that can be found in the Shaolin tendon method as well as in high numbers throughout all three of the weaponless Wing Chun forms. The two middle fingers of the fist stimulate the Laogong Xue, an acupuncture point important in traditional Chinese methods of bodywork located in the middle of the palm. The Laogong acupuncture point can help for instance with “uncontrolled emotions, ..., irascibility, timidity, ...” (Hempfen, 1997, p. 187)

Shenmen Xue (神門穴) / **Daling Xue** (大陵穴) / **Taiyuan Xue** (太淵穴): Three other acupuncture points in the wrist important for Wing Chun are the Shenmen acupuncture point on the side of the little finger, the Daling acupuncture point exactly in the middle of the wrist, and the Taiyuan acupuncture point on the side of thumb. The Shenmen acupuncture point can help for instance with “restlessness, irascibility, ..., timidity, scare, ..., mood swings, ...” (Hempfen, 1997, p. 123) The Daling acupuncture point can help for instance with “..., anxiety, scare.” (Hempfen, 1997, p. 187) The Taiyuan acupuncture point can help for instance with “..., nervousness, restlessness, ...”. (Hempfen, 1997, p. 77) These three acupuncture points are especially stimulated by the slowly performed Fok Sau (Fu Shou 伏手) in the Siu Nim Tau (see “showing threefold reverence to Buddha”), but also by every Huen Sau (Quan Shou 圈手). If you only think of fighting whenever you do a Huen Sau in the forms – and you find an incredibly high number of Huen Saus in the three weaponless forms of Wing Chun – you might easily ignore the stimulation of these three acupuncture points in the wrist and minimize their emotionally balancing effect. A fixation on fighting particularly when performing the first form, the Siu Nim Tau, leads to a marked reduction of a possible reinvigorating, but also balancing of internal strengths (energetically, organ-related, mentally, and emotionally) by your daily practice.

It is crucial in one’s own daily practice to first stimulate these acupuncture “points” – I should actually better say fields or spaces – but then most of all to also link them and to allow them to take effect in a joint constellation. In this hopefully gradually expanding constellation, however, you need at the minimum to integrate two more “points”, the Baihui acupuncture point (Baihui Xue 百會穴) in the middle of the skullcap, and the Huiyin-acupuncture point (Huiyin Xue 會陰穴) in the middle of the perineum, between the anus and the external genitalia.

As we could see above, originally there was a strong emphasis on emotional maturity and equilibrium in the practice of Wing Chun. This would also suggest a special approach to the fighting aspect I would now like to discuss.

5 A different view of the fighting aspect

Mental hygiene and spiritual development are taking such a central position in Chinese movement traditions from a Buddhist or Daoist background, because, among other reasons, they are always focused around conflict resolution, prevention, integration, and harmonization. In this context compassion (ci bei 慈悲) in Buddhism and a caring attitude (ci 慈) in the *Daodejing* play an important role. The *Daodejing* for instance says: “I have three treasures that I keep and preserve. The first treasure is a caring attitude.” („我有三寶。持而保之。一曰慈。“, chapter 67, Chinese quote: Gerstner, 2008, p. 337; English: Gerstner, 2010, p. 87).

This is one of the reasons why exercises are performed with a polite, attentive, and reverential expression on your face (gong 恭, see for instance Zhou, 2001, p. 71 regarding the Shaolin tendon method) or with a smile on your face (面帶微笑, for instance in the Yin Yang method and the Five Phases method). This caring way of looking inward and outward is anything but superficial. It is of profound physical, mental, and emotional meaning, because it is about gradually establishing harmonizing fundamental vibrations. The reasoning behind this is this: Based on a caring attitude, inner calmness, and emotional equilibrium instead of on an aggressive mindset, any dealing with problems, or any form of conflict, or fight will have a far more constructive and farsighted orientation right from the start.

I would like to provide you with a few quotations from the *Daodejing* that fit perfectly into the context of this discussion. In chapter 68 of the *Daodejing* you can read: “A good warrior is not hot-tempered.” („善戰者不怒“, Chinese quote: Gerstner, 2008, p. 343; English quote: Gerstner, 2009, p. 44) This is the reason why one’s individual daily practice and solving tensions within oneself are of such significance. In the *Daodejing* you can furthermore read: “Someone who can beat another person possesses physical strength. Someone who can beat oneself is strong.” („勝人者有力。自勝者強。“, chapter 33, Gerstner, 2008, p. 187) True strength, or a person who has found inner peace have no need to permanently proving themselves. The need to constantly parade one’s own power simply points towards deficiencies for which a person tries to compensate. Accordingly, you can also read in the *Daodejing*: “People of harmony know themselves, but they do not put themselves on display. They take good care of themselves, but they do not overvalue themselves.” („是以聖人自知不自見。自愛不自貴。“, chapter 72, Gerstner, 2008, p. 357)

When practicing the form focusing too heavily on defeating opponents and on close-range fighting neutralizes the effect of emotionally balancing movement segments within the Siu Nim Tau. People practicing Wing Chun with an exclusive focus on fighting will often from the outset only superficially practice those movement details with emotionally balancing effects, because they cannot discern any immediate benefit for close-range fighting. The possible positive personality stabilizing effects of the form will then not come into full play.

Paradoxically, the dynamic and speed of one’s own movements will also increase, even if you specifically practice the Siu Nim Tau under the aspect of healing, neglecting the

fighting aspect. In keeping with the above-mentioned idea of constellations, you establish complex coordination between arms and legs, hands and feet, and the above-mentioned acupuncture points, and you moreover train and strengthen the intuitive abilities of the body. Adopting such a way of practicing the form, the focus will not be on technique, and individual techniques do not become stronger, because they are trained in an isolated way, but because one overhauls the whole framework, they are embedded within.

6 Suppleness and dynamic

Even the suppleness and dynamic that play an important role in Wing Chun also have roots in philosophy, and in one's daily practice these two concepts should therefore also not be restricted to the physical sphere.

The Wing Chun principles “deflecting incoming force” (xie li 卸力) and “borrowing incoming force” (jie li 借力) are based on the Daoist concept of suppleness, i.e. “to overcome hardness with softness” (以柔克剛). This principle of the strength of softness was first expressed in the *Daodejing* („守柔曰強“, chapter 52, Gerstner, 2008, pp. 262-266) and it was widely seized upon in many martial arts traditions, not only in China. It plays an important role in Aikido (合氣道), for instance, and in Judo it even is the central component of the name (柔道). On a philosophical level, it is about not clinging to one's ego, but to trust one's intuition, to integrate, to let oneself in for things, to become one with the whole (bao yi 抱一).

In Daoism water is a recurring model: “Nothing in the world is softer and weaker than water, but in terms of its ability to attack the firm and strong, nothing can surpass it. This is because there is nothing that can change it” („天下莫柔弱於水。而攻堅強者莫之能勝。以其無以易之。“, *Daodejing*, chapter 78; Chinese quote: Gerstner, 2008, p. 379; English quote: Gerstner, 2009, p. 52). Not letting oneself become entangled, allowing one's inherent abilities to bear fruit, and to preserve one's initial (infant-like) softness and openness, all this is regarded as strength. The more a person has found inner peace the easier it is to deflect incoming forces, but also to transform existing energies with as little effort of one's own as possible and to make use of them.

As Yin and Yang are combined in the Taiji symbol (☯), there are dynamic and calm elements in the Siu Nim Tau. I already discussed calm elements like “showing threefold reverence to Buddha” above. The dynamic movements contain two aspects in a healing context: The first aspect is the expression of pure vitality and pure interest in life – though it is not that easy to instill a holistic kind of dynamic into every single movement of the Siu Nim Tau. The second aspect is to strengthen or to awaken vitality and the interest in life from deep within. In doing the Siu Nim Tau, it is important to focus on developing a balanced relation between calmness and dynamic, and to find tranquility in movement, but also to be able to activate motion from within stillness („動中有靜。靜中有動。“). The *Daodejing* writes: “Who is able to make something that is turbulent gradually clear again through tranquility? Who is able to gradually awaken something that is still to life through long enduring motion?” („孰能濁以靜之徐清。孰能安以久動之徐生。“, chapter 15; Chinese quote: Gerstner, 2008, p. 88; English quote: Gerstner, 2009, p. 124).

7 Concluding remarks

In this paper I wanted to illustrate Wing Chun's rootedness in healing and spiritual traditions based on a few examples. The more intensively I analyze and compare Wing Chun movements, for instance with the Shaolin tendon method, the Yin Yang method, and the Five Phases method, the more it seems to me that original Qigong movements were later also used as fighting movements, or they were enriched and combined with fighting movements. On the other hand, such an origin is not that difficult to explain. One effect of these healing exercises – no matter whether in Wing Chun or for instance in the Shaolin tendon method – is that with a certain practice you can eventually release a strong dynamic from within every movement, and not just with the help of a specific technique. Vitality is supposed to find an expression not just within a limited small number of channels. In the end, it is the mindset with which you practice, and the atmosphere you create with your daily training routine that decide upon what you get out of the Siu Nim Tau in your daily practice.

Literature

- Gerstner, A. (2008). *Das Buch Laozi*. Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller.
- Gerstner, A. (2010). *Das Tao im Management: Fernöstliche Weisheiten für das Geschäftsleben*. Weinheim: Wiley-VCH Verlag.
- Gerstner, A. (2010). *Kung Fu. Mehr als nur dynamische Bewegungen*. *Paragrana - Internationale Zeitschrift für Historische Anthropologie*, 19 (1), 267-280.
- Hempfen, C.-H. (1991). *Die Medizin der Chinesen. Erfahrungen mit fernöstlicher Heilkunst*. München: Goldmann.
- Hempfen, C. H. (1997). *dtv-Atlas Akupunktur*. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag.
- 周信文 Zhou Xinwen (verantwortl. Hrsg.). (2001). 第六章 易筋经. In, *推拿功法学 Tuina Gongfa Xue* (S. 70-83). 上海: 上海科学技术出版社.