An Exclusive Interview with Action Director Leo Au-yeung



Interview by Mike Fury

Leo Au-Yeung is a renowned Wing Chun Master with the unique credentials of being the only appointed Wing Chun instructor for the hugely popular Ip Man movies. Born and raised in Hong Kong, Leo travelled to the UK to study at University. As a heavily devoted practitioner of Wing Chun, he trained under some of the best instructors in the world. It was through his connections and impressive teaching abilities he was invited to assist Sammo Hung on the original blockbuster, Ip Man, working as the Wing Chun Consultant and Assistant Action Director. Based on the great success of the movie and Leo's strong contributions to the film, he was invited to work on the newly released prequel, The Legend is Born: Ip Man. Now, with the Ip Man legend more popular than ever and fans all over the world craving more, we can exclusively reveal that talks of Ip Man 3 are underway. Leo was kind enough to discuss his work on this hugely popular series of films and share some news on what's coming next.

Jade Screen: Leo, how did you come to be involved in the original Ip Man?

LAY: I started my Wing Chun training with Master Ip Chun 15 to 20 years ago. After two years I came to England but would still visit Master Ip Chun and train with him every summer. During this time I went to all the classes and trained around eight hours a day! I could speak English so I would also translate everything he said in his classes to westerners who visited Hong Kong and took an interest in doing some Wing Chun training. When I finished my degree at University, I got a job in Preston, Lancashire, and met Master Samuel Kwok. Since we lived so close together and I was seeing him five or six days a week, I became his teaching assistant. When he was away, I would teach his classes and therefore had the chance to train with him very intensely for four years. Later I came to London and met Master Sin Kwok-lam who taught me a lot of other Martial Arts styles as well as Wing Chun. He was also responsible for getting me involved in the first Ip Man movie.

JS: Sammo Hung was the Action Director on the first film. Could you describe your relationship working with him?

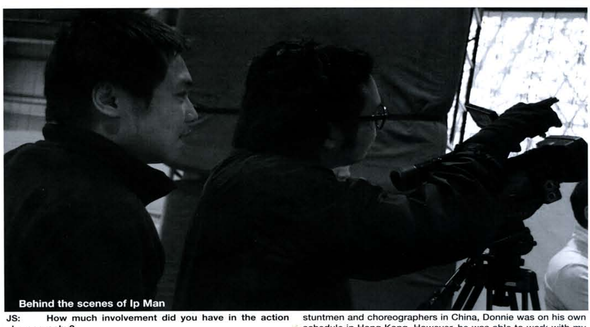
LAY: I worked as the Wing Chun Consultant on Ip Man and he was working as the Action Director. Sammo talked about how he'd used Wing Chun before when he made The Prodigal Son, but wanted to try some new ideas this time. My job was to refresh his understanding of Wing Chun because it was so many years ago that he made The Prodigal Son, back in 1981! I also had to teach Wing Chun to the actors and stuntmen to make sure they could pull off the look of being Wing Chun experts. This meant I was working closely with the choreographers of the movie and particularly Sammo Hung.

JS: How were you able to make the fight action look 'real'?

LAY: As many of the stuntmen and action actors were already Martial Arts experts and had been training for years, it was easy for them to learn and copy the movements. So it was a case of showing them a lot of attacks and defence moves, such as how you defend a hooking punch or roundhouse kick. I gave them the understanding and concepts to use so when we got into the choreography they could pick up and use these techniques. This was my approach in making the film look real: giving them the right tools for the job.

JS: Some critics said that while the action was good, it lacked authentic Wing Chun. What are your thoughts on this?

LAY: At the end of the day, the Ip Man movies are not Wing Chun study material. The goal is to bring more people into the Martial Arts but at the same time show some nice characteristics of the style. Obviously there has to be a compromise because Wing Chun movements are often so small it can be very difficult to capture them on camera. The camera likes to see big movements which really show off the power and while you can still show some small movements with a close-up from the camera, there still needs to be a big demonstration of the more powerful moves. I think Sammo was great for this because he has so much experience making great Martial Arts movies. After I gave the actors and stuntmen a broad understanding of Wing Chun, Sammo was able to make it look really good on camera!



Behind the scenes of Ip Man

JS: How much involvement did you have in the action choreography?

LAY: When the storyboards are created, we know in advance how many minutes and seconds each fight scene will last, where it takes place, how many people are involved and every other detail. So before we do anything, we understand what the motivation and purpose is behind each fight scene. For example, whether Donnie Yen is going to be very aggressive, or hold back and only touch his opponent. During the choreography, Sammo would ask me when the opponent attacks Ip Man in a particular way, how a Wing Chun expert would defend it. From there I'd show a variety of different applications and he'd pick the one he thought would work best, both in the story and in capturing it on camera. The fights were constructed in this way one stage at a time. There's so much time and planning that goes into creating these scenes. For example, the first fight scene from Ip Man only lasts about 30 seconds but it took one week to generate and coordinate everything!

JS: Did you work with anyone who you found particularly impressive?

LAY: I was really impressed by Tony Leung Siu-hung who was one of the Action Directors. He's very experienced and talented and I have a lot of respect for him. In the first movie he was Sammo's right hand man and worked closely with him during a lot of the great action scenes. For The Legend is Born: Ip Man, Tony worked as the Action Director so it was great to work with him again. He's definitely in the top list of names for Hong Kong action! I was also really impressed by all the stuntmen who learn their moves and sequences so quickly and are really dedicated to getting it right and working as a team. Fan Siu Wong who acted in both the original Ip Man and the prequel was really nice to work with as well because he's very hard working and puts in a lot of time and energy. To be honest, I was impressed with the whole team behind the Ip Man movies because filmmaking is a team effort. They all deserve credit.

JS: Did you spend much time with Donnie Yen?

LAY: Unfortunately I didn't have much contact with Donnie because while I did a lot of preparation work with the actors, stuntmen and choreographers in China, Donnie was on his own schedule in Hong Kong. However, he was able to work with my teacher, Master Sin Kwok-lam, in preparing for the movie. They trained for a whole six months before filming any of Donnie's scenes. It was a shame not to work more closely with Donnie but good that he was able to train this much for the movie.

JS: The prequel, The Legend is Born: Ip Man, has recently been released in the UK. What did you hope to do differently with this film?

LAY: For this movie, we really wanted to show the audience why Ip Man is a legend and how he learned Wing Chun. In terms of the fight scenes we had a very strong objective which was to make the action better than what we had seen in the first film! To do this we took a step back and decided to examine everything you can do in Wing Chun. For example, Wing Chun in short distance or close-quarters fighting, Wing Chun against ground fighting and basically showing the style against different Martial Arts. We show Wing Chun against Karate, Boxing, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and of course Wing Chun itself. We also wanted to show more of the traditional weapons because the first film didn't go into too much detail about the long pole or using knives. It was an opportunity to pull out everything we missed before and bring something fresh for fans of the first film.

JS: Could you describe the story?

LAY: This film follows Ip Man's life from when he was 18 to 28. It looks at how he learned Wing Chun and where he learned it from. It looks at his early training in China right through to his father sending him to study in Hong Kong. He met a guy called Leung Pak who inspired him in his training and took his Wing Chun to the next level. In this movie, Ip Chun plays Leung Pak. Even though a lot of facts are covered, being a movie and not a documentary we had to change some parts of the story to create good guys and bad guys. Ip Man obviously plays the good guy and Fan Siu-wong will be returning as a bad guy, playing a different character from the first movie. In the story, they start as brothers at the same school but when Ip Man leaves for Hong Kong, Fan Siu-wong's character leaves to study Japanese Martial Arts and learns Karate, using swords, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and other styles of combat. When they face off, this is how we



Leo on set with Yuen Biao

were able to apply the different styles and show something new. The story also shows how Ip Man met his wife and gives the background to their relationship.

JS: Yuen Biao, action legend and long-time collaborator of Sammo Hung and Jackie Chan also acted in the movie. What was it like working with him?

LAY: Yuen Biao and Sammo Hung both have acting roles in the film playing kung fu brothers. Yuen Biao plays Ip Man's teacher in Mainland China. We even have a fight between Yuen Biao and Sammo demonstrating different techniques within Wing Chun! So that's something the fans love, to see those guys go head to head! Yuen Biao would sometimes watch the fight scenes we were choreographing and make some comments or add ideas. He was a good guy and it was nice to work with him.

JS: How long were you working on the The Legend is Born?

LAY: I was there for nearly two months in total. The work ethic I followed was similar to the first film. First I worked with the actors, teaching them the main techniques and movements of Wing Chun. I didn't spend as much time on this stage as many of the actors and team were returning from the first movie and already had a good understanding. However, for The Legend is Born, I had a lot more involvement in the choreography, compared to the first movie. For the original, I was only involved in the choreography for roughly half the fight scenes. In The Legend is Born, I was involved from start to finish and was a lot more personally involved in the fight coordination.

JS: What is your best experience working on the Ip Man movies?

LAY: My best experience would have to be gaining a real understanding of filmmaking and seeing how movies are a team effort. It's never just about the star. People like Donnie Yen are obviously brilliant but there are so many other people supporting him like the director, choreographers, stuntmen and so many others. It really made me appreciate the team effort and respect every single person working on the movie, no matter what the job title is. Something else I learned to appreciate was each and every fight sequence. Going back to that fight scene which lasts 30 seconds on film but took one week to setup, it made me realise all the work that goes on behind the scenes. I'm also really happy to have made so many new friends like Sammo and Tony and to have had the opportunity to work with them all.

JS: These two films have done extremely well and Ip Man 2, which was a huge hit in Hong Kong, will also be released in the UK in February 2011. Is there potential for more in the series?

LAY: If the demand is there, I'd definitely like to see more. I can reveal that Ip Man 3 is in the very early stages. The story would focus on Ip Man's four most famous students, their lives, how they learned Wing Chun, their relationship with Ip Man and how they helped bring Wing Chun to the masses. Those involved have almost finished working on the story but I don't believe any stars have been confirmed yet. They will start filming around September 2011 and the movie will be released in 2012.

JS: Is there anything else you're working on at this time?

LAY: Since so many people know and associate Ip Man with Wing Chun, we were thinking about a movie to portray Hung Gar. Everyone is already familiar with Jet Li playing Wong Fei Hung in the Once Upon a Time in China movies so we didn't want to repeat that. Wong Fei Hung's senior student, Lam Sai-wing had a student called Lau Cham. Lau Cham was similar to Ip Man in that he brought Hung Gar to Hong Kong. He was also the father of Lau Kar-leung, the legendary Shaw Bros filmmaker and actor. Since Lau Kar-leung is also my Grandmaster, we'd very much like to get him involved. I was very keen to try something different. I practice and teach Hung Gar already and Ip Man made Wing Chun popular with a lot of people so we thought it would be nice to do the same thing for Hung Gar because it's a very nice system as well. Hopefully we could get started on this within the next year!

JS: Thanks for talking to Jade Screen magazine, Leo.

LAY: My pleasure.