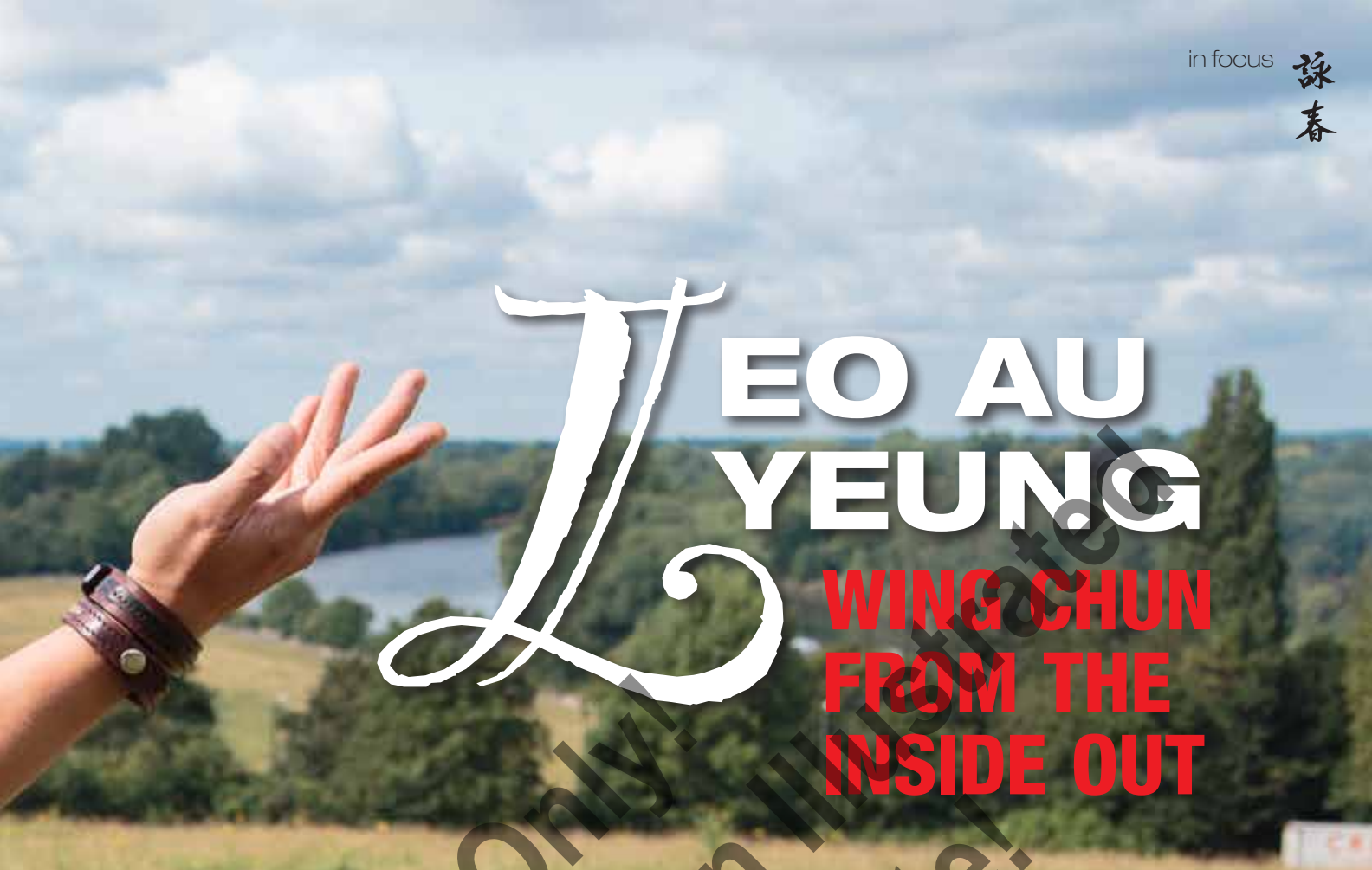


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SIFU LEO AU YEUNG HAS BEEN PRACTISING *WING CHUN* FOR OVER TWENTY YEARS AND HAS TRAINED UNDER SEVERAL WELL-KNOWN *WING CHUN* TEACHERS IN HONG KONG AND THE UK. HE WAS THE *WING CHUN* CONSULTANT/ASSISTANT FIGHT CHOREOGRAPHER ON THE MOVIES *IP MAN* (2008), *THE LEGEND IS BORN: IP MAN* (2010), AND *IP MAN: THE FINAL FIGHT* (2013).

BY **KLEBER BATTAGLIA**
PHOTOS **CHRIS PATMORE**



LEO AU YEUNG

WING CHUN FROM THE INSIDE OUT

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In addition to teaching *Wing Chun*, *Sifu* Leo also teaches other forms of martial arts, including *Chinese Kickboxing*, *Tai Chi* and *Hung Gar*, and the use of various weapons.

What kind of art do you believe *Wing Chun* to be?
Wing Chun is a close-range martial art. By staying in a close-range distance, a smaller person has the advantage of matching their opponent. For example, at close range, the *Wing Chun* practitioner will have better control of the opponent's body, which makes it easier to perform takedowns. Another advantage given to the smaller practitioner is the use of continuous attacks; at farther distances, they wouldn't be able to reach their opponent. To use it to full effect, the practitioner must be able to close the distance, without getting hit. If the practitioner stays at a mid or long distance, then they will misuse this art's basic concept, thereby giving the opponent the upper hand.

What do you believe to be the main advantage of using *Wing Chun*, compared to other arts?
Wing Chun allows a small person to develop great power. The key to this is to generate short inch power and transfer any incoming force into the ground, without letting the opponent know your intentions. Other martial arts rely on the shoulders to generate power. *Wing Chun* minimises large movements to allow a smaller practitioner to use both arms at the same time, which enables them to stay ahead of the game.

Many believe we shouldn't use force against force in *Wing Chun*. What is your take on that?
I believe this to be one of the most misunderstood principles. It's true that many in the *Wing Chun*

"If you understand the internal side of *Wing Chun*, you can destroy someone's balance when you receive contact."



"If you understand relaxation, then you can tense only your internal muscles, while keeping your external muscles relaxed."

community emphasise not using force against force. However, if that's truly the case, then the bigger, stronger fighter will always overpower a much smaller fighter. Instead, taking the opponent's power and transferring it into the ground, redirecting it away from your own body is a key element in winning a fight. Knowing how to redirect or use your opponent's energy against them will always give a smaller person a chance of a fair fight, since they need not rely on using force, deriving from tension or size.

So, according to this, what are your ideas on relaxation?

Finally, the last principle, the one that acts as a base for all others: relaxation. For relaxation, people think they have to relax their body totally. However, that's only the basic part of the training procedure. The real purpose for relaxation is: If you learn how to relax, then you can learn how to control your muscles. If you understand relaxation, then you can tense only your internal muscles, while keeping your external muscles relaxed.

When the practitioner can control his or her own body, it gives the practitioner the ability to generate short, explosive power through internal acceleration, and that will allow the practitioner to change direction, even under pressure. Not only does relaxation provide additional power, but it also gives the practitioner more sensitivity. This means the practitioner can adapt his or her defences more efficiently. During a fight at close range, the practitioner with the better sensitivity will always have the upper hand and can control the opponent. You must be able to control your body correctly through the training of relaxation, then you can use *Wing Chun* to its full potential.

You have become known lately for your cross-training with other martial arts. Can you tell us about this journey? What insights did it give you?

After twenty years of training in *Wing Chun*, I felt there wasn't much room to make any more improvements to the art—to make it more efficient. It crossed my mind, to continue to upgrade *Wing Chun*, I had to cross-train with other arts and see if there was anything I could add to the system. At the same time, I had to stay loyal to my art; I couldn't divert from *Wing Chun*'s core concepts.

Every other kind of martial art has something to offer, and if you study it correctly, you will see there are similar theories among *Wing Chun* and other styles. Studying different styles means I can combine different training methods and improve my *Wing Chun*, while helping to speed up the training of my students to help them achieve their goals in a shorter while. A good example would be, if a student remains tense all the time, then I might revert to *Tai Chi* exercises to help them relax. If the student is weak in their physical abilities, I could teach them *Hung Gar* or *Muay Thai* to build their stamina and strength.

I have posted many videos on my *YouTube* channel on all the martial arts I have trained in. Before I share my experience with the viewers, I make sure I've trained to a certain standard, so I've a fair knowledge on the art. To ensure my training matches the highest quality, I'd travel to the birthplace of that style and meet one of the

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masters to see if I could find any improvements and set a new benchmark for myself.

How do you combine your knowledge in *Muay Thai* into your *Wing Chun*?

Muay Thai has given me a better understanding of distance control in sparring. During a sparring situation, a fighter must know which body part to use, depending on the distance to their opponent. When at close range, striking with an elbow will cause serious damage to the opponent. Trying to kick the opponent at close range wouldn't work, since you don't have the distance to set up a powerful kick. Instead, your legs could get tangled up or, even worse, the opponent could grab onto your leg and perform a takedown.

At mid-range, the most effective weapon is punching. Punching allows a practitioner to attack from different angles. Not only does it provide a different range of punches, like a hook punch or straight jab, but also it builds a combination of different attacks. Depending on the distance, a punch could lead into a kick or knee attack. Kicking at mid-range might hit your opponent, but it will lack power, causing no serious damage. An elbow strike becomes useless at mid-range, because it doesn't have the reach to do any damage.

For long-range fighting, kicking is the most effective and causes the most serious threat. Not only is it a powerful weapon for attack, but it's also a good weapon for defence, as it helps to keep the opponent away.

Other than attacking, *Muay Thai* will allow you to understand how to defend yourself in different distances and set up your game in sparring. At long range, you may want to concentrate on defending a kick, until a gap opens up for you to go in, and when fighting a shorter guy, keep him at a long-range distance to immobilise his weapons and make it more difficult for him to close you down. If you develop a good sense of distance control, you will understand when to attack or defend and be able to do the right thing at the right time.

Another important aspect is stamina. Without stamina, people will find it difficult to train *Muay Thai*, because training sessions are very intense, and without stamina, a practitioner can suffer from exhaustion.



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"Breathing allows you to build inner tension you can use to release explosive power."

You also cross-trained in the Russian martial art of *Systema*. What insight did it give you to improve your vision of *Wing Chun*?

Systema is a military-based martial art that specialises in soft techniques. It teaches someone to fight on the ground, take a fall, break body structures, strike pressure points, defend against knife attacks, and lock and break joints. It's an art that's very effective in a real-life scenario. The beauty of the art is it allows the practitioner to achieve a lot in a short while. Unlike Chinese



"*Tai Chi* has had a big influence on my path to improve my *Wing Chun* by using more Internal Power."

martial arts that take at least a couple of years just to perfect the foundation, after training two years in *Systema*, you will have a solid foundation to use the art for self-defence. For somebody who has no martial arts background, it's good for him or her to start with *Systema*. It covers a lot of ways to fight and gives you the tools you need to handle most scenarios in a combat situation on a day-to-day basis.

Did you see any similarities with *Wing Chun* during your training in *Tai Chi*?

The principles and theories of *Tai Chi* are very similar to *Wing Chun*, because it's also a style that emphasises relaxation. It's good for people to use it to learn to relax, because when practising, you start relaxed. Then, you learn how to stretch the inside of your body, without causing external tension. The concept of *Tai Chi* teaches you how to be soft externally, like cotton wool, but it also teaches you to be strong in the inside, like steel. Due to the slow speed of the movements, it gives you more awareness of balance, posture and breathing.

Other forms of training contain Pushing Hands with a partner, which focuses on finding the person's centre and learning to control their balance. To your benefit, it can be crossed over to improve your *Chi Sau* in *Wing Chun*. For many years, I thought *Tai Chi* was just based on softness, but you have to be able to use the inside of the body to generate energy and redirect it back to the opponent. This means somebody could be sent flying at a distance with a gentle touch. *Tai Chi* has had a big influence on my path to improve my *Wing Chun* by using more Internal Power.

What did all this cross-training give you?

Training in these different styles allowed me to understand my own art better. I also learnt that each student has a different requirement for learning, due to different body sizes, etc. By considering this, I have set different methods for different students for me to teach them to their best level.

Do you believe power and speed to be important principles of our style?

These days, loads of videos on *YouTube* show people using power and hand speed. Their emphasis is that, if you are quick and powerful, then you will have the upper hand on the opponent. For me, the important aspects of *Wing Chun* are angle, positioning and sensitivity.

As people age, their speed will decline, so you have to look into the internal aspect of *Wing Chun*.

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If you understand the internal side of *Wing Chun*, you can destroy someone's balance when you receive contact. When the opponent has no balance, he or she cannot fight to their full capacity. If you continuously control the opponent's balance, you will always have the upper hand, since you are limiting his or her movements. While the opponent tries to regain balance, it allows you to open a "window" to attack.

According to your understanding, what's an internal approach in a martial art?

An internal approach teaches you to use your body differently and has three levels to reach. The first level is when you're using internal muscles, so you are learning how to stretch and not tense up. It also allows you to connect your arms and legs to your body, which means you can use the whole body to fight or defend. You learn how to use separate muscle groups to produce multi-directional forces to help you defend and attack in one movement.

The second level is how to use breathing to enhance your power. Breathing allows you to build inner tension you can use to release explosive power. Breathing doesn't allow you to form explosive power; it could also help you in defence. When breathing out and expanding your body, it's like forming an air cushion between the skin and organs, so you can use it to protect yourself. For defence, we can use breathing to pull somebody in and absorb his or her energy. For attack, we can use the expansion of our body, while breathing out.

The third level is how to use the mind to control the direction of where the force is going and to increase power. The mind gives you more focus to produce additional power if you are thinking about going through the person you are attacking during your daily practice. Then, in a real-life situation, you can produce instant penetration power each time when you strike an opponent.

What is the difference between an internal approach and an external one?

By using an internal approach, you are using less movement. Therefore, you are making it less obvious for your opponent to see what you are doing. An internal approach allows you to control different muscle groups, which allows you to attack, even when you are under pressure.

When people use their muscles, or external sources of power, they are relying on their speed to give them power, and it's not constant, but with Internal Power, you're able to separate your body to do different things at the same time. For example, you can use part of your body to transfer the incoming force into the ground, but at the same time, you can maintain the constant pressure to your opponent, while you're manoeuvring to a better position for attack.

Many talk about Body Structure. What is the difference between Body Structure and using Internal Power?

People usually explain Body Structure in *Wing Chun* as the alignment of the skeleton, and that it helps to overcome incoming pressure. The difference between using Body Structure and using Internal Power is the internal method has no fixed structure. It allows you to take pressure from any part of your body and transfer it to the ground; however, with external Body Structure, you can only take the pressure from one direction. The key is you can move the centre mass internally. Normally, the centre mass is set in the middle, but by using Internal Power, you can put it elsewhere to make it more difficult for someone to attack you. This way, you can minimise movement, while maximising stability.

"As people age, their speed will decline, so you have to look into the internal aspect of *Wing Chun*."

For more information about ***Sifu* Leo Au Yeung,** please visit the website: *www.chinesekungfu.co.uk*

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