

Wing Chun Seven Star Footwork 詠春七星步法

by Michael Tse



When studying Wing Chun Kung Fu 詠春功夫, most people concentrate on hand techniques and do not consider good footwork. No matter how good you are, no matter what techniques you use, if you only concentrate on hand techniques then your skill will not work when you come across someone who has a better skill level or who is stronger than you.

Imagine someone punching your face or chest. If you use Taan Sau 攤手 or Bong Sau 膀手, even with Jyun Ma 轉馬 (turning to the side and pronounced “Joone”) you will still use a lot of energy as their attack will be very powerful. If you step back a little, or even better, step a little to the side to avoid the strike, then you will be able to receive their energy better and you will almost not need to use any energy yourself to contact their hand. If we do not step, then our opponent, who may really want to hurt us, will definitely be able to reach our face or chest.

No matter what hand we use, for instance Taan Sau 攤手, Bong Sau 膀手, Gaan Sau 耕手, if we do not move, we are still using strength against strength. Power that comes forward is always stronger than receiving power. Even if we can block it we will still need to use a lot of energy. Just using Jyun Ma is not enough to receive that power easily and even though we might divert it, the next attack will be even harder as the opponent comes forwards. If we remain on the same spot, whatever techniques we use, we will still get hit. Therefore the best thing to do is step, so good footwork is very important in Wing Chun.

Some people say “Wing Chun cannot step back, only step forwards.” I do not know who said this or where this concept has come from. I have never heard of Grandmaster Ip Man 葉問 saying this and my Sifu, Grandmaster Ip Chun 葉準 definitely does not say that. When my Sifu does Chi Sau 黏手 with students he often steps back. When we are small and our opponent is bigger and has longer arms than us, how can we not step back if we do not want to get hit?

One of Wing Chun principles is that a straight line is the shortest distance to attack our opponent. Another it to use less strength to overcome more strength. This is when soft overcomes hard and this is a high level of martial arts. Stepping back allows us to get a better position and use less energy to receive our opponent's stronger energy coming towards us. In Chinese history, 234 BC, Sun Bin 孫臏 (a famous strategist and relative to Sun Tzu) pretended to lose to his opponent, Pang Yuan 龐涓 by and luring him into a forest at night and then defeating him.



This is a very famous story from history. Chinese history has many stories like it. Chinese

strategy also uses stepping back as a method to win as do a lot of other Chinese martial arts. There is a spear technique called “Returning Horse Spear 回馬槍” in which you pretend to lose and retreat and suddenly strike back with the spear. This is very hard to defend against. Therefore we have a Chinese saying “Defeated enemy - without another choice - do not chase them hard 窮寇莫追.” This is because when an opponent has no other choice, they will fight back with all they have and so if they turn to run, then be careful and do not chase them too much in case it is a trap. The best way is wait until they are exhausted.

For myself, I love to train Wing Chun footwork. In order to help make training more organised, I have arranged all the footwork in Wing Chun into what I call, “Wing Chun Seven Star Footwork 詠春七星步法”. These seven kinds of footwork will help us in many different situations and will make our skill level good so that we can cope with any kind of opponent and situation.

1. Jyun Ma 轉馬

Jyun (pronounced June – as in Tune) means turn and Ma means stance. So it means turning stance. How do we turn the stance? All the turning is done on the heels as our root is on the heels and power also comes from the heels. When we turn we turn on the heels and do not lift up our toes or the front part of the foot. We turn 45 degrees. We can turn 180 degrees, but the feet only change 45 degrees on both sides, and the rest of the change is on the body. Ideally when an opponent punches at us we turn 45 degrees to avoid the punch. Then we can use Taan Sau, Bong Sau, Gaan Sau to counter.



In each movement we need to learn how to connect the upper and lower body and hands together to create strength and we must also be able to let go of any part of the body. When we can connect everything together, we can be strong or hard. When we use energy everything connects together. When we defend, all the energy, muscles and joints connect together in an attack. When we defend, we can make any part of the body relaxed or soft without it affecting our centre of gravity or our centreline.

Then the opponent cannot use our own energy to affect us, for example, by pulling us or slapping (Paak) our hand. If we let go so there is no strength, then opponent cannot pull the whole body. However, remember no matter how we turn, the distance between the feet must remain shoulder width and cannot be wider or narrower.

2. Waahng Ma 橫馬

Waahng (pronounced with a low pitched ‘ahhh’ sound) means horizontal or level bar. This means horizontal stance but in this situation it means to move sideways. So when time we are walking in Waahng Ma we walk sideways.

When we are fighting we sometimes need to walk sideways. It is not really walking sideways though, it is really walking around with your opponent. We can see this walking in Tsum Kiu 尋橋. For example, our opponent punches with his right hand. We should walk around to the punching side (ie the right side) of the opponent to avoid the punch and at the same time get closer to him. Our position is now on the outside and we are closer to our opponent. This means we can use both hands to attack him whereas he can only reach us with the hand he has punched with as his left hand is too far away and inconvenient for him to reach us. This is the advantage of Waahng Ma when we use it to

walk around the opponent and get the best position to defend ourselves from.

Remember, when we practise Waahng Ma we should step with the front foot first, keeping it as close to the ground as possible and once the foot lands as quickly as possible, we should drag the back foot into position. We always step forward from the heel not from the toes. The movement should be very quick and once it is finished both feet should be shoulders width apart.

During any stepping movement, while we are moving only one leg is firm and the other is mobile. It means that only one leg holds your centre of gravity and so this is dangerous. The opponent can use this and make us lose balance. We must therefore move quickly and make sure the feet are as close to the floor as possible so we do not have a long period of time where we are on one leg. Once we have finished the step, both legs must be firm and also in a position where we can move again as quickly as possible and this is why there is a shoulder width distance between the two feet.

3. Jun Ma 進馬

Jun (pronounced Jun as in Sun) means forwards. So the movement is called Forward Step and so it is walking forwards. The principles are the same, feet shoulder width apart and the weight on the back leg. The front toes should face forward and the back foot should be turned 45 degrees. Both heels should be inline. When we walk forward we step with the front foot, toes pointing forward but keeping it close to the ground. We then quickly drag the back leg forward towards the front, stopping when the feet are shoulder width apart.

When we are practising we can keep walking, doing do as many steps as we like and we should keep doing it until it becomes natural and our position is perfectly correct. Having a good Jun Ma will save our energy and allow us to get close to our opponent so we can continue to attack. How do we attack? We continue until the opponent is finished. It is not in a competition where there is a judge to stop you. Wing Chun Kung Fu is for real fighting in all kind of circumstances.

4. Teui Ma 退馬

If we have Jun Ma for stepping forwards, then we must have Teui (pronounced like Toy) Ma for going backward. As I said before, some people believe that in Wing Chun we only ever go forward and never go backward. This may work if you are fighting a weaker opponent but not on someone who has a good skill level. Someone who has good footwork will use our forward energy to defeat us. So stepping back does not mean we have lost. In fact, it is actually an important strategy to be used when our opponent is attacking us. We often need to step back but we should remember that we must not step back in a straight line because our opponent will be able to come forward and continue attacking us as going forward is always faster than backward.

So we must step a little bit to the side but not too far away from our opponent because even though we are stepping back, we are planning to hit back. Avoiding the opponent's attack in this way will give us a good opportunity to attack, waiting for our opponent to over-commit, use too much energy or leave himself open. When we move back out of reach of an opponent, most of the time they will continue to attack and use even more power.

Therefore, we keep stepping back. However, when it comes to their third attack, if we continue stepping back in the same way, we will become predictable and then we will be in a weaker position. This is the time to attack back. We can wait until the fourth attack, but

on the third is the best. In history a lot of wars have been won when one side pretends to lose first and then lets their enemy come in, trapping them and then defeating them.

5. Biu Ma 標馬

Biu means shoot or thrust. So Biu ma means Shoot Forward Step. From the name it is obvious that we shoot forwards very quickly. In Chinese strategy we say “Soldiers are best when fast. 兵貴神速”. This means that when soldiers are used in war to attack the enemy, their attack must be fast. So Biu Ma should be used when we attack our opponent and they are not even expecting it.

Surprise attacks are the best attack. When two people confront each other, whoever attacks first usually wins but that attack needs to be so fast that the opponent does not have time to defend. In many martial art techniques we expect that the opponent will attack us first and then we deal with them. This is just the opposite, we attack first, why wait?

Biu Ma is a bit like a kind of jumping forwards towards an opponent but we must never try this if we are more than two steps as more than this is too far. Too far away is dangerous as our opponent will have time to defend. Our Biu Ma must be very a fast one or two steps that bring us in front of our opponent. We must also remember that we need to stop very quickly. If we do not brake our forward movement quickly or are not strong enough, then we can fall into the opponent who will then attack us and we will lose our balance. Perhaps you both may fall to the floor and that is a big mess.

Biu Ma is not like Jun Ma where we need keep the same foot at the front. In Biu Ma, we can step with the left then right or even step forward with both legs. Whichever way we do, it needs to be fast. The first step needs to be big as possible and the second step will be need to bring us closer to the opponent, like a fine tuning step. At the end both feet should be shoulder width apart, not too wide and not too narrow. From there, a lot of the time we can use Laap Sau 攔手 (Grab Hand) to catch our opponent's hands so he cannot attack us and this is the safest way. When both hands are being controlled, we can attack with a fist, palm, chop or even a push. Then it is finished.



Most people will be surprised by such a quick attack and do not know how to react. Then we can easily finish them. Biu Ma needs strong legs so we can shoot forwards very quickly and are able to brake suddenly. To practise, we can find a target and stand about two metres away. Then using Biu Ma, shoot towards it as fast as you can. The more we practise, the better we will get. Then we can try to stand up to three meters away. Then our Biu Ma will be fast and powerful.

6. Faai Ma 快

Faai (pronounced Fai rhyming with Tie) means quick so Faai Ma means Quick Step. Actually no matter what stepping we are doing, having fast and clear footwork is best. In Faai Ma we can move forward or we can move backward. Obviously, when we are moving

forward we are attacking. We can attack as many times as we want and Faai Ma will help us move forward very quickly. Just as we reach our opponent, we start to attack continuously, using our forward energy to keep our hitting energy going forward, almost as if we were trying to go *through* our opponent.

In the end our opponent will be defeated and lose his balance. When Wing Chun attacks, we go for the opponent's centre of gravity and so we knock them down. When anyone is off balance, then any attack they try will be weak or of no use. Faai Ma makes our attacks very powerful.

We can also do Faai Ma backward when an opponent attacks us. It is the same as Teui Ma and we step back and making a little sideways angle but not too much. Remember, when we go backwards, we should not do more than three steps as after the third step is the best time to attack.

Whether we go forward or backward using Faai Ma, we need to change the feet to step with the left foot and the right foot (or the vice versa). We do not keep the same leg in the front and back as this is too slow. Faai Ma and Bui Ma are the same in this respect; we use the left leg and then the right, but in Biu Ma the first step is as big as we can and the second brings the feet to shoulder width apart. This is the principle of Wing Chun footwork and we must remember this as this is no other way. With Faai Ma we do not usually walk more than three steps as with three steps we should be able to get to our opponent and be able to defeat him.

7. Jih Yauh Ma 自由馬

Jih (pronounced Jee) means myself and Yauh (pronounced like Yow to rhyme with Cow) means free. Jih Yauh Ma literally means "My Way Free Style Steps", but we call it Free Style Stepping. This is the last method of training after we have done the other six. It means we can use Jyun Ma, Waahng Ma, Jun Ma, Teui Ma, Biu Ma and Faai Ma to step in whichever direction we want. Jih Yauh Ma is not fixed; we need to be free to do whichever step we want and have control of our footwork.

When we are walking we need to be able to turn left and right, step forwards or backwards, move fast or slow, step with keeping the same front and back leg or step using the left and right legs. No matter what we do we must keep the feet shoulder width apart when we complete the step. Jih Yauh Ma trains our footwork to a high level as we can move in whichever direction we want at the same time keeping the foot clear and precise.



Many people think that everybody should be able to do this but most people stand in a imbalanced way and do not know where their weight is. A lot of people have their feet the wrong distance apart, sometime too wide, sometimes too narrow and the upper body may be leaning forwards or backwards. Many do not use their heels to turn and walk on the balls of their feet, all kinds of wrong ways.

If you are just walking down the street this might be all right, but this kind of walking is very imbalanced and you can easily trip and hurt yourself. Today there are many people who fall over when simply walking and when we get older it is even more dangerous if we do not have balance or an understanding of our own body coordination and presence.

When fighting, this situation is even more dangerous. If we walk the wrong way when we are fighting, it guarantees that we will lose so every step needs to be right. No matter how our opponent attacks us, we must have good footwork so we are in a good position and then we will not lose. In Wing Chun we like to make our opponent lose his balance and so we go to his centre of gravity.

Training Jih Yauh Ma will allow us to find just the right place. Big steps or small steps should not affect our footwork. Using Jih Yauh Ma, we keep moving in all directions and ways so we are always comfortable. All our weight should be on our legs. Legs need to be powerful and the hands need to be light to read the opponent's energy. Then we can decide the way to respond and attack. During a fight, the time is very fast and we cannot think. In a second we can be beaten or we can beat the opponent. It all comes from the right training and reactions. We do not know what will happen but it all happens at the right time. Even when you beat the opponent you might not believe it or know how you did it but the longer you train the more you will train how to use the skill at the right time, in the right situation and with the right energy. If you try to repeat that skill again, it might not work as the situation is not exactly the same. This is high level. When we have trained so hard, when the situation is just right it will happen very naturally and effortlessly.



Seven Star Footwork has come from my 40 years of experience of Wing Chun training, and Chi Sau with over a thousand people. Ninety percent of these people have been Westerners who were bigger and stronger than me. I have learned to think about the Wing Chun skill a lot in order to improve myself and find a better way to Chi Sau with more people. Every person is different and each Chi Sau is different so the more we do the better we get.

In the beginning we might get beaten and slowly we learn to defend ourselves and get hit less until other people cannot hit us. Then we can attack them. In the beginning our attacks may not work, but slowly we find the way and learn how to attack in certain situations. Then we develop certain favourite attacks which work quite easily. In the beginning we use a lot of energy and this makes us tired and so eventually we learn how to use our energy and position. Finally we find ourselves in good positions and our defence is very good. Ordinary skill levels cannot hit us but we can hit them. Whatever they do does not work on us but we can use their energy to hit them back.

At this level, people will be impressed by your skill and you will find that you are faster but use less energy as you have powerful Gung Lihk 功力 (Internal Power), the key to which is high level footwork and a strong stance.