

The Centerline Theory of Wing Chun

- The shortest distance between two points is a straight line.
- If you are face to face with an opponent, the shortest distance to the opponent is a straight-line path from your center to the opponent's center.
- If you put your palm toward your opponent's vertical axis you occupy the center line. Two physical objects can't occupy the center at the same space at the same time. So if one person occupies the centerline the other person doesn't. If a straight-line punch comes toward your face and you stick your hand in the center then that punch will be deflected away from the centerline.
- There is a vertical centerline which runs parallel to the vertical central axis of the body. There is also a horizontal centerline which runs from your vertical centerline to the opponent's vertical centerline (if you are facing your opponent).
- In Wing Chun we try to always face our opponent's central axis. We don't let the opponent get to our side. This is called proper facing. In a fight we can't always maintain this facing, so then we are in recovery mode to get back to that way of facing.
- When face to face with arms in contact, we have a saying that no one takes our arms off the centerline. If you point towards the opponent's central axis and they push or deflect your hand (arm) away from the centerline, then you are in recovery mode and return back to the centerline just like when pushing on a springy twig or pushing on a ball floating in water.
- When an opponent's arms drift off the centerline, they have a structural weakness in their defense. A hole is created and they'll be hit because a straight-line attack will come in so fast there won't be enough time to recover from such a mistake. If the opponent's arm disengages, we hit straight forward, along the shortest distance path, since that would be our best chance against an opponent with a slight timing advantage from moving first.
- When you have a perfect center position, as taught in sticking hands, it's difficult for an opponent to penetrate this position with any kind of attack.
- If an opponent disengages to do a circular hit, he'll be hit first with a straight-line hit.
- If an opponent tries to grab, he'll cross himself and be trapped.
- If an opponent uses brute strength to break down the center, he'll be stiff and can be pushed, pulled, jerked or easily unbalanced. The other option is that the opponent's strength will encounter emptiness from your relaxed, soft feeling. Or when their hard force comes we pivot or shift so the hard force is redirected. The opponent will face the wrong way and we will point at their central axis.
- If an opponent attempts to kick, this attempt can be felt in the hands and a pushing/pulling force or stepping in will unbalance them. (Note: however, Kenneth Chung showed how he can kick with no signals given.)
- If an opponent retreats we chase in such a way that arm contact is maintained. Once in contact it's difficult to shake off a person with good sticking skills without destroying your own good center position.
- In sticking hands/rolling hands we try to detect when the opponent has deviated from the centerline position. As soon as this deviation occurs we hit. When an opponent's centerline position is good, we may try to destroy that good position with a variety of pushing, pulling, jerking tactics, but these create defects in our own defense which can be taken advantage of. A beginner is too slow to react and can't accurately sense centerline mistakes, so anything works against them.

- Some Wing Chun people try to blast their way through the center, which works well against an inferior opponent. Against an advanced opponent he will either be counter-bladed, if the opponent is stronger, or more ideally will encounter sudden emptiness and be hit.
- Since we are human, mistakes are made, so we lose because of thousands of kinds of mistakes. Mistakes include:
 - unstable stance
 - off center to the left
 - off center to the right
 - hands too high
 - hands too low
 - hands too stiff
 - hands too soft
 - not sensitive
 - slow reactions
 - contact between the arms too loose

These mistakes and hundreds more are studied so they can be countered instantly.

- When two people are in double-arm contact, nearly everything can be defended by maintaining a good stance and smothering the opponent's attacks by sticking to their arms. However, when the opponent goes off the centerline we don't stick, but attack in a straight line or else we'll be open to attack. The idea is not to stick with and chase arms wherever they may go.
- The first form of Wing Chun teaches ideal positioning. The positions taught in the first form are mathematical ideal positions or structures, when you are face to face with an opponent. Since we are all built differently, we can only approach these ideal concepts and have to compensate in other ways if we can't physically apply the math concept. E.g. if you aren't flexible enough to keep the elbows on the centers you can compensate by being more sensitive with the hands or forearms, or by shifting more.
- When our force limits have been exceeded then body shifting is used to redirect the force. So ideally, we either stay put, shift (turn) or step forward. In reality we sometimes have to back up or even duck. The second form of Wing Chun teaches the mechanics required to coordinate the hands with the feet. This means we learn when to turn or advance depending on what we feel.
- In real fighting nothing is ideal. Our good mathematical centerline positions may be totally destroyed. An opponent may have our elbow pushed off to the side, or grabbed us or have us bent over, or pinned us to a wall, or there's not one opponent to face but several. In this case your perfect center-facing position against a single opponent has been lost and you are therefore in recovery mode to regain a good position. The third form of Wing Chun teaches how to regain the centerline or how to get back into a good position as taught in the first and second forms or dummy forms. Because of this it makes no sense to learn the third form of Wing Chun before having mastered the others. How will you know what position to recover to if you don't understand the subject of positions and structures?
- The wooden dummy is a device which forces you to have correct position because the arms of the dummy are in fixed locations. So the wooden dummy is like a teacher who forces you to have correct angles. The wooden dummy is used for secondary reasons to enhance speed, power and to condition the arms. It also doesn't make much sense to study the dummy before having learned the first form, because you won't understand

what a correct position is. And the wooden dummy movements can't be applied without an understanding and adeptness in sticking hands skills.

- In Wing Chun we try to gain a correct position based on centerline concepts. From hundreds of hours of rolling hands (Poon sau) practice we can detect when an opponent's position is off. We must be relaxed and sensitive to detect these things, then we must have the timing to attack with speed and power.
- When close range skills are mastered there is no fear of arm contact with an opponent. After that, total concentration can be given to how to make contact with the opponent. This involves the study of structure and entry methods, and most of all, timing. The second form of Wing Chun, the wooden dummy and free style sparring teach how to enter properly so the sticking hands skills of Wing Chun can be applied.
- From a few simple concepts, such as "the shortest distance between two points is a straight-line" and the concept of economy, quite an elaborate art has evolved.
- Someone knowing the ideas behind Wing Chun can create counter-concepts just as in Chess, where some players occupy the center and others try to destroy it from the flanks. This is part of the fun, to outwit each other. However, once in contact there is not much room for error, not much time to change from this move to that move.
- Many if not all of the center control theories of chess also apply to Wing Chun. Fencing does not use the concept of placing something in the center or they will get beat fast (another discussion). Some other Chinese styles think like fencing people and tend to sweep attacks aside from one corner of the four quadrants instead of from the center position. Using two arms instead of having one fencing foil changes the rules of the game.

These are just a few quick thoughts which are in no way a complete or hole-proof theory. Another topic not discussed is the location of hitting targets along the vertical center line. Also, in fact, there are many lines of balance which are used, as explained above, even during sweeping, off balancing and while ground fighting. Different Wing Chun lines may have different viewpoints on this subject. Tai Chi is also a center searching art, but the mechanics are not the same and probably conflict with Wing Chun theories.

We would view Tai Chi as violating some of our principles but we say that the Tai Chi system probably has ways to compensate for what we consider a weakness. From the Tai Chi point of view the elbows in the center do not seem like a good idea, but we have ways to compensate for this weakness perceived by the Tai Chi practitioner.

- Ray Van Raamsdonk