

**DANCE ON THE SCREEN  
MOVEMENT BEYOND THE LENS**

## Ng Sai-fun



A lively character in his 80s, Ng Sai-fun wielded a pair of wooden sticks used in *yingge* dance. While he said he is good at demonstrating dance, he is even more adept at teaching it. He received training in ballet, and studied folk dance while on the mission of collecting folk materials in China. Ng worked for the Great Wall Movie Enterprise for more than 30 years, during which he created choreography for countless films and conducted training for actors. He was an active presence both onstage and backstage, and his work encompassed Cantonese opera, Mandarin-language films, Cantonese-language films and musicals. In the 1990s he retired and emigrated to Canada, where he has lived a leisurely life since. Today, he still brightens up while talking about dance. Anyone who has the opportunity to watch him demonstrate dance moves and listen to his tips for studying dance can see why he became the dance teacher to various stars.

Date of interview: 23 October 2016

Location: Ng Sai-fun's apartment in Vancouver

Recorded and noted by: Lam Heyee

### **From the army to ballet school**

I was born in 1930. After the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War, I moved from Shantou to Hong Kong in 1945 to stay with some wealthy relatives. As I could only speak Teochew and a bit of Mandarin but not Cantonese, I found it hard to adapt to life in Hong Kong. I also felt I was idling the days away in my relatives' home, so I went back to Shantou a little over a year later. After I returned home, my mother, who was a dentist, relocated to Hong Kong. I was not willing to move to Hong Kong with her, so I stayed in our hometown. In my second year in junior high school, I enlisted in the National Revolutionary Army (NRA) of the Kuomintang. With my large stature, I was able to lie about being 18 when I was 16, and I was accepted into the training unit of the Republic of China Military

Academy where I was trained in sending telegrams. At age 17, I became a second lieutenant and joined the seventh army commanded by Huang Baitao. I took part in the Huaihai Campaign, during which I was captured by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Because of the circumstances I fell into, I had no choice but to defect to the PLA where my former NRA comrades became the enemies. Fortunately, I was assigned to the post of first-aid officer in the army, and my duty was to dress the soldiers' wounds. Since my mother was a dentist, I had a bit of knowledge in first aid. Yet I felt ill at ease in the army, and I decided to desert. One night I left the army camp. While on the road, I saw that the *zhengqi jingju tuan* (the Righteous Beijing Opera Troupe) was recruiting performers. I applied for a place in the troupe, and they picked me for being a finely built young man. I had bit parts as soldiers in their performances. I had no previous exposure to Beijing opera, but I had been interested in the art form from a young age. The days passed, and I missed my mother. My father passed away when I was three years old. My desire to be with my family was growing stronger, so I left the troupe. In 1948, I travelled along the train track all the way from Xuzhou to Hong Kong. The war had broken out in the Mainland; the country was in chaos, and

the train had stopped running. I joined a group of people who were on the run; we drove along one section of the train track to the next in a repair car, and made our way from the north to Hong Kong.

After I arrived in Hong Kong, I joined some dance activities in local societies. There were no ethnic dance activities back then, and we did mostly folk dance and group dance. I was studying the dances and giving classes at the same time. I remember that at the Chinese Reform Association (Hong Kong Chinese Reform Association, HKCRA), there were classes run by volunteers from left-wing labour unions. My mother supported me financially, and I did not have to get a job. Later I got to know Stephen Kwok and he knew I loved dance, so he brought me over to Carol Bateman's ballet school at The Helena May<sup>1</sup> to take some dance classes. Stephen Kwok was an accountant at the school, where he also helped out as an interpreter and demonstrated some dance figures for the children. I did not speak English, but I could understand it as I had learnt

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1. Carol Bateman School of Dancing. Founded in 1948, it was the first registered ballet school in Hong Kong. Since its founding, its main branch has been located at The Helena May, 35 Garden Road, Central.

many dialects on the army's expeditions. The school charged very high tuition fees, but male students were exempted from paying tuition and admitted on the basis of their potential. Jean M. Wong and Christine Liao were my classmates, and Jean and I were dance partners. My mother had never objected to my love of dance, and she did not think it was peculiar that boys would study ballet. Raymond Liao had taken up ballet before I did. He was the first male student; I was the second, and Stephen Kwok was the third.<sup>2</sup> The male and female students were placed in the same class: We had the same training in the fundamentals, and we practised on different sides of the classroom. The majority of female students were British. The Chinese ones were mostly from wealthy families, and they were dropped off and picked up in a limousine to go to classes. I lived around Nam Pei Hong (Bonham Strand in Sheung Wan) at the time. It was a 20-minute walk to the school, and I had lessons twice a week. In the 1950s, the tuition fees were around HK\$40 to HK\$50 per month for one lesson per week. In those days, the monthly salaries of domestic

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2. According to the recollections of another interviewee Stephen Kwok, the first male ballet learner in Hong Kong was Raymond Liao, and the second was Stephen Kwok himself.

maids were only around HK\$20 to HK\$30. Besides Carol Bateman, I remember there was a ballet teacher from Belarus who ran classes in Tsim Sha Tsui. With the subsequent rise in living standards and people's income in Hong Kong, there were more people studying ballet and the piano, as these activities came to be regarded as symbols of social status.

I believe ballet poses higher technical demands than Chinese dance. Carol Bateman also had high expectations for her students. I had an authentic education in ballet techniques; I obtained a Royal Academy of Dance certificate, and I performed at the Emperor Theatre in North Point. During that period, I also gave evening dance classes in local societies, where most of my students were young people. At the time, it was mostly left-wing schools and societies that would devote the resources to setting up a dance unit. They organised folk dance activities, or group dance, as they called it in the Mainland, which were all very simple and mass-oriented. Dance was a form of entertainment rather than performance, and it was a pastime for young people who went picnicking in the countryside during the holidays.

### **Collecting folk materials in rural China**

In 1954, the Great Wall Movie Enterprise (Great Wall) had plans to set up a song and dance troupe and was looking for an instructor. I plucked up my courage and applied. During the interview, I performed a Russian dance routine; I flaunted all my skills, doing high leaps and splits. Finally, I was selected out of four or five candidates. At the same time, I had also applied for a place in the *huanan gewu tuan* (the South China Song and Dance Troupe) in Guangzhou and they had made me an offer. I accepted the offer from Great Wall because I wanted to stay in Hong Kong. While working at Great Wall, I continued studying ballet with Carol Bateman for another decade or so, as I wanted to enrich my knowledge and further my professional education. I had a different attitude than many of my female classmates, who saw dance as entertainment and left it behind once they got married. From 1955 to my retirement in the 1980s, I worked for Great Wall for more than 30 years. It was very busy at work, and I also had many students. All left-wing actors of the time were skilled dancers, since they had to take dance classes by order of the film companies. We held annual performances for National Day celebrations, and I was in charge of

the choreography. I believe dance is beneficial to a person's development, which is why many people feel it is essential to learn dance. For instance, in the 1960s, I was invited to teach dance to female police officers at the Hong Kong Police College. The college told me they would like the female police officers to be more graceful in their movement while controlling traffic, as well as in their walk.

In around 1956 or 1957, Great Wall arranged for me to study choreography with the *Guangzhou huanan gewu tuan* (the Guangzhou South China Song and Dance Troupe). In those days, one would only be afforded the opportunity to study with the troupe through official arrangements. My move coincided with the outbreak of famine in the Mainland; I joined the troupe in visiting rural areas to give dance performances for the farmers, learning and working along the way. I visited Zhanjiang and Chaoshan; in Chaoshan I studied the famous *yingge* dance with local teachers. We studied a piece which was an ode to the 108 Liangshan heroes, wielding the wooden sticks while we danced. Once I saw a *yingge* dance performance featuring over 1,000 performers at a square in Chaozhou. Later there were actors, like the renowned Teochew opera actor Chen Chuhui, who taught

Teochew opera in Hong Kong. I spent quite some time in the rural areas in southern China, and we called our mission “collecting folk materials”. I had no problem adapting to the lifestyle. While resources were scarce, I was young and I could brave the day even on an empty stomach. I still remember this triple-steamed rice we made, where the rice was steamed three times so that it would expand in size. It was filling while we ate it, but our hunger always returned soon. I learnt a great deal of folk materials during my time there. They were rather old-fashioned, and I had to refine them before using them in my own work after my return to Hong Kong. During my time there, I also taught ballet in the song and dance troupe.

### **Dance teacher to the stars**

Some time later, Great Wall was in need of a choreographer for a film production that was about to start, and they sent a telegram requesting my return. It was a film by Cheng Bugao, but I have forgotten the title—I worked on so many productions over the years that many of them have slipped my mind. My job was to create different choreographies based on the themes of the works. For instance, I would choreograph classical dance

routines for a Chinese opera-themed film. It mainly depended on what the director had in mind; I created the choreography around the content they sought to express as well as the music (Plates 1 and 2). Once I was asked to choreograph a “Black Dance” scene that would evoke the oppression suffered by blacks at the hands of whites and the ensuing black resistance. I remember visiting the Information Office of the U.S. Consulate General in Hong Kong to watch the video of a dance performance by the Dance Theatre of Harlem.<sup>3</sup> While watching the video, I tried to memorise the choreography, especially the final movement. Another work that stood out was *Qu Yuan* by Bao Fong.<sup>4</sup> I went to a Chinese department store to look for some ancient porcelain dolls to get an idea of how they were styled. For the choreography I also borrowed some ideas from illustrations of classical dance in reference books. My work received much acclaim, even earning praise from the then President of the Xinhua News Agency. The mask dance in *Qu Yuan* also left an impression on the audience. Later when I was on a field trip to Xi’an, the choreographer of a local dance troupe

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3. The American dance company Dance Theatre of Harlem, founded in 1969.

4. A period drama film directed by Bao Fong and Hui Sin, released in 1975.



(From top to bottom) Plates 1 and 2: Ng Sai-fun (right in Plate 1, left in Plate 2). During his days at the Great Wall Movie Enterprise, Ng Sai-fun worked as the choreographer for its films and dance teacher to many of its actors. Years unknown. Photos courtesy of Ng Sai-fun.

told me he had taken inspiration from the dance scene for his own work. Apart from Mandarin-language films, I also took part in choreography for Cantonese-language films, such as the *Tragedy of the Poet King*.<sup>5</sup> I also performed in a number of films, including the *Storm Petrel*<sup>6</sup> and *Qu Yuan*.

In 1959, Bak Sheut-sin invited me to coach new talents for the Chor Fung Ming Cantonese Opera Troupe (Chor Fung) which was to be founded later on (Plate 3). The audition for Chor Fung was hosted at the Lee Theatre and it attracted close to 1,000 applicants. We selected 40 plus candidates after the initial audition, 22 after the second one, and four after the final one. I was in charge of the performances and the selection of new talents. I would assess if the candidates had agile joints and limbs to see if they had the right physique for dance. For instance, the big toe is crucial to a dancer's jump, and someone who has a long second toe does not have the ideal physique for dance. Many people were impressed at how it took me only a few months to groom the young Chor Fung talents into strong

Plate 3: Ng Sai-fun (left) and Bak Sheut-sin (centre).  
Year unknown. Photo courtesy of Ng Sai-fun.



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5. A Cantonese opera film starring Yam Kim-fai and Bak Sheut-sin, released in 1968.

6. A musical film directed by Tong Lung and Chu Fung, released in 1970.



performers on stage, and they sought me out as a dance teacher afterwards. These people included many Cantonese opera stars such as Yam Kim-fai, Bak Sheut-sin, Nan Hong, Ng Kwai-lai, Lee Heung-kam and Yu Lai-zhen. I would help my students with their stretching. I would carry students on my back to stretch them, if they promised to refrain from kicking me as I increased the stretch. If they kicked me, I would stretch them even harder out of reflex. I also had a special method for teaching the splits, and I coached Nan Hong, Ng Kwan-lai, Lee Heung-kam and Fei-fei (Lydia Shum) on how to do it. Even the Beijing opera masters were not versed in teaching the splits (Plate 4). Studying dance is different from studying Chinese opera. In Chinese opera, the performer may strike a pose and it may look less than elegant. I call that “broken arms”. In dance, one has to take into consideration the dancer’s styling and the composition in creating a beautiful movement.

A skilled dance teacher is one who employs the right methods in her/his teaching. Most importantly, she/he must know how to prevent students from sustaining injuries, as students do not always have the skills to control the level of force they exert in performing a movement. It all comes down



Plate 4: Besides his role as a choreographer backstage, Ng Sai-fun also performed on stage. Year unknown. Photo courtesy of Ng Sai-fun.

to experience. In the past, some teachers would beat their students when the latter did not get the hang of what they were learning. That is not the right approach. For decades, I was in charge of teaching dance to the actors at Great Wall. I used different approaches for teaching male and female students, and I was good at giving demonstrations. When it comes to learning dance, I think talent is key, while an outgoing personality is also important. With the intense competition in the entertainment industry, the stars had to work hard to up their game, and I offered them some advice. Roman Tam was also my student. In the *Golden Eagle*,<sup>7</sup> we performed a Mongolian dance routine together. In 1982 he was cast in the musical *The Legend of the White Snake* which featured choreography by me. The musical had a run of 24 performances which were all sold out (Plate 5). Later I was approached by several Miss Asia winners who wanted to study dance, and I coached Nina Li and Eva Lai on how to walk with poise in Qing Dynasty costumes. There were many people who sought me out as a dance teacher because of my reputation, including some who came from Southeast Asia. I did not keep an archive of my teaching materials; many people urged me to create one, but I was too lazy to tend to the task

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7. A Mandarin-language film directed by Chen Jingbo, released in 1964.

Plate 5: Outside of film production, Ng Sai-fun worked as the choreographer of the 1982 musical *The Legend of the White Snake* starring Roman Tam. *The Legend of the White Snake* album poster. From Ng Sai-fun's personal collection.



after I retired. Of all my works, I think *Qu Yuan* and *The Legend of the White Snake* are fine creations.

I also created new choreographies for Great Wall's annual National Day Celebrations performance, which was sold out every year because of the star-studded line-up. The Singapore government also invited the South China Film Industry Workers' Union<sup>8</sup> to perform in Singapore. Our ensemble went on the performance tour to Singapore under the name of The Movie Star Arts Troupe.<sup>9</sup> The arts troupe was jointly founded by two Mandarin-language film companies, Great Wall and Feng Huang, and the

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8. Established in 1949, the South China Film Industry Workers' Union was formed by a group of left-wing film practitioners.

9. An arts troupe formed by the choir, dance unit and band of the South China Film Industry Workers' Union in the early 1960s. The troupe had over 60 members, most of whom were from the artistic teams of film companies including the Great Wall Movie Enterprise, Feng Huang Motion Picture Co, Sun Luen Film and Flying Dragon Films, as well as Clear Water Bay Studio. According to the information in a commemoration publication of the Union, the troupe presented many public performances in Hong Kong and Macau; however, the troupe's greatest legacy lies in its many performance tours to Southeast Asian countries. Due to its "pro-China" background, the troupe was regarded as a community ambassador and a bridge of friendship from the Chinese government. See *yongyuan de meili—huanan dianying gongzuozhe lianhehui liushi zhounian jinian 1949-2009* (*Eternal Beauty—Commemoration of the 60th Anniversary of South China Film Industry Workers Union 1949-2009*) (Hong Kong: South China Film Industry Workers Union, 2009): 136.

Cantonese-language film company Sun Luen. We presented a variety show featuring song-and-dance acts, and I led an ensemble of actors to perform in the *Red Ribbon Dance*. I remember the tour took place in around 1965 or 1966.<sup>10</sup> While in Singapore, I watched the news about the riots over the Star Ferry fare increase in Hong Kong.

### **From left-wing film company to the Hong Kong Dance Federation**

When I started out at Great Wall, I had a monthly salary of HK\$150 and accommodation. I had the lowest salary, and even our minor film stars had higher salaries than mine. Our pay trailed far behind what was on offer at Shaws (Shaw Brothers [Hong Kong] Limited), where everybody owned properties and cars. It was the same at left-wing banks and department stores. In my youth, I believed we were making a contribution to our

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10. The Movie Star Arts Troupe went on a performance tour to Singapore in April 1966 at the invitation of the National Theatre of Singapore. See *yongyuan de meili—huanan dianying gongzuozhe lianhehui liushi zhounian jinian 1949-2009* (*Eternal Beauty—Commemoration of the 60th Anniversary of South China Film Industry Workers Union 1949-2009*) (Hong Kong: South China Film Industry Workers Union, 2009): 137.

country. Shaws often approached me about joining them. Raymond Chow invited me to meetings, since Shaws was also making musical films. They made me a very attractive offer which I declined. When the Singapore National Theatre was setting up its song and dance troupe, they extended a very generous offer to me. I was unwilling to leave because of my patriotic sentiments, which I think were shaped by my experiences during the Second Sino-Japanese War in my childhood. In the early 1960s, we went through this phase of receiving a 20% reduction to our salaries when our country was in penury. I lived a hard life with the song and dance troupe in the Mainland; we had congee for breakfast and stayed hungry for the day, and we had a monthly salary of just a dozen dollars. Yet I was very happy working for Great Wall, as the company gave me a lot of freedom. I was able to give coaching to star actors outside of my job. The lesson fees were not fixed, and my students would offer me whatever amount they saw fit. I was not comfortable with setting a fixed fee since I was rather young then. After the 1967 Riots, the audiences for our films declined, as did our output and our films' overseas box office. There was some staff restructuring in our company, with new leaders at the helm who had been sent from the Mainland. There was also a marked change in the

content of our films, which I felt was too left-leaning. There was a greater degree of creative freedom with our previous productions. At that stage, all film scripts had to be submitted for censorship approval. Our company also made some documentaries at the time. During that period, united front work was the sole agenda for our film production, and audience appreciation ceased to be a consideration. Overall, my job was not affected by this shift. It was only when the June 4th Incident happened that my situation changed. Otherwise, I would not have emigrated overseas. I did not agree with the way in which many things were run in the company, and I became less involved in production. In 1993, my entire family moved to Toronto.

I am one of the co-founders of the Hong Kong Dance Federation.<sup>11</sup>

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11. Hong Kong Dance Federation is a non-profit dance organisation which was formally registered in October 1978. Founding members include Cheng Ya-ching, Pearl Chan, Stephen Kwok, Helen Lai, Lau Siu-ming, Ng Sai-fun, Tania Tang and Wong Ngai-yum. Together with Jean M. Wong, Wong Lee Pui-shan, Lau Chak-bun, and Lo Liu Yiu-chee, they formed the first committee of the federation. The mission of the Hong Kong Dance Federation is to carry forward the art of dance, encourage the development of dance and the dance community in Hong Kong, create connections among dance organisations in Hong Kong and worldwide for information exchange and organising performances, as well as promote cultural exchange. See the Hong Kong Dance Federation website: <http://www.vhkdf.org.hk>. Accessed 16 June 2018.

Back then there was a “Mrs Lee”<sup>12</sup> at the Recreation and Sports Services Department who wished to foster greater cohesion in Hong Kong’s dance sector. She brought together seven or eight esteemed figures in the dance sector including Pearl Chan, Stephen Kwok and Lau Siu-ming, and, from what I remember, Tania Tang and Lau Ting-kwok. The Association of Hongkong Dance Organizations<sup>13</sup> was established some time later. We were the ones who introduced the Beijing Dance Academy Graded Chinese Dance Examination offered by the Dance Federation,<sup>14</sup> and I was then chairman of the committee. The examination system was modelled after ballet examination systems. It had not yet been implemented in the Mainland, and it was first introduced in Hong Kong. I remember

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12. Research findings indicate that “Mrs Lee” may be Lee Chan Po-chi. (*Hong Kong Dance Sector Joint Conference* (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books Ltd., 2000): 111.

13. Planning for the Association of Hongkong Dance Organizations, a non-profit arts organisation, began in 1989; the organisation was established in 1992. The mission of the organisation is to create connections among Hong Kong dance organisations, promote academic exchange and collaboration with arts organisations in the Mainland and overseas, as well as foster the development of dance culture. See the Association of Hongkong Dance Organizations website: <http://www.assn-hkdc.org.hk>. Accessed 16 June 2018.

14. With the authorisation from the Beijing Dance Academy, the federation introduced the Chinese Dance Graded Examination in 1988. See the Hong Kong Dance Federation website: <http://www.hkdf.org.hk>. Accessed 16 June 2018.

that in the 1970s the examiners from the Mainland requested very high pay for the job. We had discussions with Beijing (Dance Academy) and proposed the examination syllabus. As all the applicants were supposed to be amateur dancers, I removed from the syllabus some movements that would require the children to do the splits.

There are 56 ethnic groups in China. Each ethnic group has its own distinctive dance, and it is difficult to learn about all the ethnic dances. I think Chinese dance is vibrant and diverse, and it is richer in movement and facial expression than ballet. Ballet feels like a classier dance; like golf, it used to be a pastime for the rich. I also love watching Chinese dance. These days I watch the programme *The World of Dance* on CCTV-3 every Friday, but it seems the quality of the show has declined. The choreography they feature now is a strange fusion of International Standard dances, Western folk dance and Chinese elements. I think it is fine to include different elements in the choreography, but it should not be such an awkward mix.

(Translated by Nicolette Wong)