**Movie title, director's name, year of production, length (minutes)**

**For Fun *Zhaole* 找乐Ning Ying宁瀛1994 (97 minutes)**

* **Introduction (director; general interest (incl. to Medical and Health Humanities)**

Reverence for one’s elders was a cornerstone of the Confucian humanistic ethics of pre-imperial China. Society was hierarchical with elderly men at the top of the tree. But the youth culture that was at the heart of the cultural and political revolutions of 20th-century China apparently put paid to over two millennia of privilege. With a cast made up almost entirely of elderly male pensioners, Ning Ying, one of China’s most innovative post Cultural Revolution female directors, tackles the problems of ageing and displacement in a tragi-comic portrayal of the challenges of finding one’s place in the rapidly changing society of Beijing in the 1980s. Things seem to be going very badly for Old Han老韩. He has retired from his job as caretaker and cornerstone of day-to-day operations at the Beijing Opera Academy. Now that he is no longer needed at the theatre, the clashing of cymbals and cacophony of stage-managing daily performances suddenly gives way to the ticking of the clock and the bare solitude of his widower’s lodgings. As Old Han wanders the dusty streets around Di Tan Park, against a music soundtrack that suggests the quickening pace of the commercial revolution, the disdain written all over his severe face points up the fragility of his new situation. Adopting an equally displaced but comparatively cheerful and good-natured young man, probably with Down’s Syndrome (whom Old Han reprimands severely for peeping through the windows of the local bathhouse on ladies day), he happens upon a amateur group of opera fanatics – pensioners who sing arias together and argue the toss about the minutiae of vocal technique. Old Han’s supercilious and critical air soon establishes him as an authority in the art, but his young friend steals the show, as the old codgers accuse him ironically of being the one who is always *zhao le,* ‘looking for fun’. But the comfortable rhythm of the troupe’s hobby is about to change…

**Synopsis/plot**

To fill the emptiness that retirement at 65 has thrust upon him, Old Han (Huang Zongluo 黄宗洛) conceives of a new role for himself as the manager of the raggle-taggle amateurs. Enthused with the possibility of turning them into serious contenders at the New Year competition, he negotiates for a place to rehearse. The rehearsals, however, become a battlefield between Old Han’s dictatorial bureaucratic style and, notably, the casual approach of the troupe’s lead performer and opera buff, Qiao Wanyou 乔万有 (Huang Wenjie黄文杰), who plays the women’s roles. The ensuing conflict between the humourless curmudgeon of the self-appointed boss on the one hand, and the hysterical effeminate queen on the other, intensifies the film’s drama, with Old Han’s imperious barrage of stage directions reaching apoplectic proportions as they take part in the local talent show.

**Cinematography and the Medical Humanities themes**

A long slow tracking shot through the commercial streets of 1980s Beijing, with the Brecht-Weill ‘Ballad of Mack the Knife’ in the background, segues into a contrasting series of short cuts that conveys the excitement and fast action of a Peking opera production in full swing, with Old Han at the centre of the back-stage action. Next we encounter the silence of his desolate home and his total lack of family support. But the enduring image that this film leaves with us is that of the opera troupe made up for the local talent show. Their heavily made-up faces capture the pathos of their situation and the tragi-comedy of their collective failure and redundancy. Yet along the way this film has shown some unique ways in which Chinese culture in the late 20th century has dealt with some of the most pressing issues that face us worldwide. In the wake of China’s extraordinary achievements in the past 40 years, in healthcare and in substantially raising its people out of poverty, by the middle of this century some 25% of its population will be, like Old Han, over 65. And a unique burden of care will fall on both the government and the single-child carers that are the result of the one-child policy. In the past decade there has been an increasing number of films dedicated to this problem. The film represents these communities at a point when the new-found problem of ageing began to pick up pace in the 1980s. Ning Ying’s film is a snapshot of a particular Chinese urban culture at that time, when elderly people gathered in the parks to make the most of their new-found leisure time: elderly couples took up Latin American dancing, or practised Taiji quan and the martial arts; the men showed off their caged birds or played chess; choirs sang revolutionary songs, and lone singers belted out arias. With the decentralisation of welfare responsibilities to the communities in urban areas, the urban elderly have made a comeback, but the social and city structures that supported these communities is breaking down.

**Time ref?**

**Points for Discussion**

**Reviews**

New York Times, March 1994

<http://www.nytimes.com/1994/03/19/movies/review-film-festival-operatic-last-hurrah.html>

**Director**

Ning Ying is an independent female filmmaker and screenwriter who has become the main representative of Chinese ‘neorealist’ (*xin xianshi zhuyi*新现实主义) film, which combines technique with realistic storytelling. Ning Ying entered the Beijing Film Academy in 1978 and is a graduate of the Fifth Generation class of 1982 (see Fifth Generation film directors). From 1982 to 1986 she studied film in Italy, and she was Bernardo Bertolucci’s assistant director for *The Last Emperor*. After initially assisting other directors, she made her directorial debut in1990 with a comedy feature called *You ren pianpian aishang wo* 有人偏偏爱上我 (Somebody Loves Just Me).

Ning Ying is best known for her Beijing trilogy: *Zhao le*找乐 (For Fun, 1992), *Minjing gushi*民警故事 (On the Beat, 1995) and *Xiari nuan yangyang*夏日暖洋洋 (I Love Beijing, 2000). *For Fun* is a piece about retirees trying to set up a Peking opera group; *On the Beat* is a police movie in which policeman Yang 杨is ordered to exterminate all the neighbourhood dogs, and discovers that the social system is the enemy; *I Love Beijing* follows the life and loves of a young taxi driver. Her semi-documentary storytelling, use of mostly amateur actors, and appropriate technique paint a realistic picture of the contemporary Beijing of ordinary people. Her combination of social criticism and wit has become a hallmark of Ning Ying’s art as a filmmaker, screenwriter and editor, and makes her a rather unique ‘Fifth Generation’ director.

Further reading

White, Jerry (1997), ‘The Films of Ning Ying: China Unfolding in Miniature’, *Cineaction* 42.1, 2–9.