



Acting Self, Performing National Films: Comparing Song Kang-Ho and Ge You in Their Screen Images

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Abstract. South Korean actor Song Kang-ho and Chinese actor Ge You are often compared with each other, not only because they both won the best actor in Cannes Film Festival (there have been only four Asian actors achieved this accomplishment), but also due to the similarity with regards to their performing styles and screen images. Despite of their international recognition and similar early acting career, it is noticeable that Ge You's stardom has been fading from the public attention while Song Kang-ho's popularity has been growing from South Korea to the world in recent years. This essay will focus on these two Asian actors, Ge You and Song Kang-ho, in a detailed comparison of their acting, role positioning and some other aspects. Furthermore, I will also examine in depth their screen image transition paths, as well as how the different paths impact their domestic and international reception.

Keywords: Song Kang-ho · Ge You · Chinese Film · South Korean Film · Actor Comparison · Self-performance · Little Character · Screen Image · Transition of Screen Image

1 Introduction

Ever since the 2019 South Korean film *Parasite* gained critical acclaim at Cannes and Academy Awards, one of the movie's leading actors: Song Kang-ho has also received massive international recognition. Song has been widely well-known for his screen image of “xiaorenwu” (little characters) in Korean society, such as the characters in *The Host*, *Memories of Murder*, and *A Taxi Driver*. Song was often considered as Ge You's counterpart in China, not only because both was awarded Best Actor at the Cannes Film Festival. They also share quite a few similarities in their star vehicles, as well as performing style. Ge You and Song Kang-ho will be closely compared in this article from their screen images and performing styles. I will argue that although Ge and Song resemble in their screen images and performing styles in their early films, their acting careers also show a separate development, especially when they seek to transition to more diverse star vehicles as well as to open up the international market.

2 Self-performance

Acting is one of the most prominent elements that can determine the stardom of an actor. Both Song Kang-ho and Ge You conducted self-performance, an acting technique that reduces the gap between the status quo (what is) and the ideal (what should be) in their films. Guangchao Duan [1] interpreted the concept of self-performance from the perspective of two “inner-self.” According to him, self-performance is a process when an actor resonates his/her inner self with the film character’s “inner self” (14). And these two phenomena—the consistency of the actor’s on-screen persona and the similarity between the actor and roles—are crucial for self-performance. Moreover, the two “inner self” can be balanced through acting skills and a comprehensive understanding of the roles. Song Kang-ho has emerged as one of the most representative national actors in South Korea, because of his sophisticated portrayal of ordinary Korean people. In her article South Korea’s everyman: Song Kang-Ho’s performance in Bong Joon-Ho Films, Nandana Bose [2] once described Song Kang-ho that he is “known for perfectly portraying typical Korean everyday man character. His appearance and demeanor resonate with Korean audiences as a typical everyday man.” (Bose [2]) While Korean wave has brought a group of good-looking idols to the global attention which seems disturbs the Western audiences’ understanding of Korean people, Song’s physical appearance and temperament on the other hand represent ordinary Korean people. That is why the Korean public refers to him as “the face of our time”. As a result, Song Kang-ho usually casts ordinary Korean roles with blue-collar jobs in his films such as *Memories of Murder*, *A Taxi Driver*, and the most recent huge hit *Parasite*. Song Kang-ho has successfully portrayed the “Korean everyday man” by reflecting his authentic self in the character.

Similarly, Ge You’s screen image also shows conformity with his status quo. That is why Guangchao Duan [1] describes Ge You as a self-performing actor. In terms of his appearance and language, Ge You’s onscreen persona closely resembles his offstage image. Ge You’s popularity among the Chinese audience is primarily because of his approachable appearance that makes him look like our close friends. Ge You has a typical everyday Chinese appearance, with his bare head serving as the only distinguishable feature. When he speaks in a Beijing dialect and wears casual clothing in the movie, he resembles a neighbor or relative that anyone could encounter in our daily lives. Ge You also fits the roles well because his personal image does not conflict with the movie characters. Whether he is playing a jobless guy in his first leading role in *The Troubleshooters*, a working-class in *Cala*, *My Dog*, or even a laid-off photographer Yoyo with Canadian famous actor Donald Sutherland in the *Big Shot’s Funeral*, all of these roles share a similar background and storyline, which results in formalizing Ge You’s screen image in terms of his appearance and mentality. As a result, Ge’s screen images show a coherent pattern, which can be considered a successful self-performance example. As we have discussed so far, both Song Kang-ho and Ge You conduct self-performance due to the conformity of their appearance and the film characters. In the next section, we will further examine that Song and Ge not only vividly represent the quotidian men from Korean and Chinese societies, but also overlap significantly in their memorable screen images.

3 Performance Characteristics

The close-up of Song Kang ho's facial expression is unquestionably the most remarkable aspect of his performance. The famous Korean film director Bong Joon-ho, who has worked with Song Kang-ho a few times, is also good at showing this aspect of Song Kang-ho's acting. This is similar to how Ge You used his unique performance traits to shine in the films directed by Chinese director Feng Xiaogang. Song Kang-ho is mostly well-known for his final scenes in the South Korean film *Memories of Murder*. His character Park Doo-man, learned that the murderer he was unable to catch had returned to his area after speaking to a young girl who was passing by. For the first time, Park experienced the frustration of repeatedly losing out while feeling so close to the murderer. The camera zooms in, capturing a close-up of Song Kang-ho's face. His face is grim, and his eyes have a mixture of reluctance and determination. In addition to conveying the most genuine feeling in the entire film, this close-up also impresses the audience with goosebumps. In other words, this shot not only reflects the sophisticated emotions of a South Korean police officer who has been working for years to find the murderer, but also speaks to the irritated audiences who still pay close attention to this unsolved murder case. In *The Host*, Bong Joon-ho also employed this silent acting technique to its best performance. For instance, when Park Gang-Doo (the character played by Song Kang-ho) witnesses his daughter being taken by the monster, the audiences are drawn to the close-up of his face. After a brief moment of confusion, Park Gang-Doo slowly opened his mouth wide and appeared to be shouting silently. His eyes straightly gazed in that direction to where his daughter disappeared. Such scenes closely catch the audiences' eyes as they were wondering if Song's daughter was really caught by the monster. Song Kang-ho's performance in portraying a quotidian person is successful as he is good at using natural facial expressions and conveys just the perfect amount of emotion that accumulates in their daily lives. As a result, the viewers can perceive the feelings that leak out from the little character who has been disregarded and bullied.

Ge You uses this distinctive acting technique to depict the quotidian life of the characters while also enhancing their images with a sense of humor and authentic Beijing dialect. This is similar to how Song Kang-ho used his unique performance traits to shine in the films directed by South Korea director Bong Joon-ho. Ge's funny language expressions can be seen as the most distinguishable feature of Ge You's performance. Ge You's first major success, *The Troubleshooters*, is a movie adapted from Chinese author Wang Shuo's novel with the same name, in which Ge You plays a jobless Beijing local. Language plays a crucial role in this film for Ge You to portray the "playful" feeling. In the entire film, Ge You speaks the natural Beijing dialect, which brings forth the great comedy of that metropolis. In addition to being one of the most widely spoken and understandable regional languages in China, the Beijing dialect is also one of the few Chinese dialects with an approachable sense of humor. As a result, it is highly appealing to Chinese-speaking audiences. And occasionally, buzzwords from the time occur in the movie lines to spice up Ge You's character traits. In the film *The Troubleshooters*, for example, there is a scene that Professor Zhao and Yang Chong (played by Ge You) were eating dinner together. When Professor Zhao asks Yang Chong if Yang Chou and his friends worked in the same office, Yang immediately raised his head, with a mouth full of food that he had not yet swallowed, and he responded: "I am just a Sha Bo Yi, you

do not need to care for me.” “Sha Bo Yi” is a phrase invented by the screenwriter Wang Shuo. Although the audience has never heard this word before, they laughed to tears by seeing Ge You’s funny facial expression of wide-opened eyes. This scene shows that Ge You is capable of adding a layer of funny atmosphere to the character no matter what the script is. After his success in this movie, Ge You continued this performing strategy of exploiting his Beijing dialect in the majority of his collaboration with the renowned Chinese filmmaker Feng Xiaogang. For instance, Qin Fen, Ge You’s character in Feng Xiaogang’s *If You Are the One 1* started with an internal monologue to reveal to the audience the content of his posted comments on a dating website. Moreover, Ge You made the character relatable to the viewers by using rustic words and authentic Beijing dialects. Finally, the scene reached its peak of ridiculousness when Ge You read his own post, “San Wu Wei Hai Gui” (the three-No’s fake overseas returnee) This gave the audience an instant sense that the character was somewhat ludicrous. As Jing Xing [3] writes: “Although Pin Zui (garrulous) language is not considered profound, it has a lot of plebification characteristics that make it respected by the public.” (23). Through this unique language charm, Ge You have not only left a lasting impact on the audience but also succeeded in depicting the role of the “nobody (xiao ren wu),” and the quotation person in his movies in a realistic way.

4 No Body and the Civilian Characters

The on-screen images of Song Kang-ho and Ge You are comparable not only in the positioning of the roles but also in how the plot of the movie is developed to portray the “citizen hero.” Song Kang-ho and Ge You’s position of the role is more like nobody, and the civilian hero is one category of nobody. A civilian hero is based on nobody, but one that is defined because he or she will do something that will have a positive impact on society and does not care about their sacrifice. *The Host*, a most iconic films, is one of the best examples. Due to the Unity State military base at the beginning of the film, Americans threw all of the expired chemicals into the Han River, which eventually gave rise to the Han River monster. Additionally, this monster genuinely reflects Korea’s poor socioeconomic state while it is under American rule. When the Han River monster initially appeared, the South Korean government first turned the problem over to the Unity State’s government to manage, and in the end, the Unity State just hid the fact. The intercut sequences in the middle of the movie highlight the brutality of the US government and the inefficiency of the Korean government in addition to the primary plot of Park Gang-Doo’s family going to rescue their daughter. Therefore, Park Gang-Doo and his family are the only individuals in the entire movie to go in search of the monster and kill it, even if it was merely for the personal benefit of saving Park’s daughter. Moreover, the heroic image of Song Kang-ho’s character Park is particularly evident at the end of the film: Park Gang-Doo inherited his father’s shop on the riverside and keeps a vigilant eye on the front with his shotgun. As a result, he becomes not only the protagonist of the movie but also a real-life hero who stands for the peaceful resolution of the irrational conflicts in Korean society. Both the image of the hero who is still silently defending all of South Korea after valiantly defeating the monster with his family and the image of the common South Korean citizen who was working as a

handyman in his father's shop earlier in the film combine flawlessly into a true civilian hero. The character of Song Kang-ho in the film implicitly represents the civilian hero found in many movies. For instance, the character of Kim Man-seob in *A Taxi Driver* risked his life to save the foreign journalist in order to save the people of Gwangju and his own country, whereas the affluent father who was slain in *Parasite* portrays the bourgeoisie that does not value the lower class people. South Koreans internalize Song Kang-portrayal ho's of a heroic civilian on Screen.

To make the characters more stunning, Ge You typically follows the same pattern in his movies. The fate of the Ge You character from the film is also discussed in Zhao Heng's [4] article *Performing Gentleman Serious Comedy*: "...The civilian characters they play often have unconventional life trajectories or career paths that are different from the protagonists' class. This sense of the disparity between the character's attributes and behavior creates a chemical reaction that makes it easy to create a 'civilian hero'" (12). Zhao Heng [4] noted that in order to highlight the contrast between the characters in the majority of movies, the characters portrayed by Ge You and Song Kang-ho are always set up with a variety of challenges or encounters. In the film *Big Shot's Funeral*, for instance, Ge You played Yoyo, a regular laid-off photographer who was given permission by international director Taylor to hold his funeral. And when Yoyo had to rely solely on advertising to pay for the funeral, he unexpectedly refused the pirate DVD company and instead replaced them with utterly unprofitable public service advertisements. Yoyo is evaluated by Lucy, in the same way: "Never expected a bum to know about protecting intellectual property." In this difficult situation of not able to being afford the huge cost of the funeral, and not even knowing whether the funeral would be held as scheduled, Yoyo made the choice to choose the former from morality and profit. He was instantaneously changed from an ordinary person with humor to the personification of a citizen hero by the strong sense of contrast.

5 Transformation of Screen Image

The biggest difference between Song Kang-ho and Ge You is the transformation of the screen image. Song Kang-ho's performances are immersive in different film genres, but Ge You's comedic image dominates all his screen images. This makes Song Kang-ho look richer in the layering of some films and characters, it's like the final evaluation of him after listing all the movies he has acted in: "...all testament to his extraordinary range, versatility and relatability." (Bose [2]) Among Song Kang-ho's early notable films, such as *The Foul King* in 2000 and *No. 3* in 1997 both were in the comedy genre. But even if he became famous through comedy, Song Kang-ho did not limit his screen image and movie genre to this field. In the following years, he began to experiment with more different types of films. For example, the aforementioned film *Memories of Murder*. Even though the character played by Song Kang-ho still has a certain element of comedy in the setting. However, the up-and-down moments and the kind of complexity of the nobody character's performed by Song Kang-ho make the overall character more realistic and delicate. Therefore, it will not be abrupt in this suspense-based movie. The character of xx, played by Song Kang-ho, is also a typical quotidian character in the

Memory of Murder and is one of the most common types of roles played by Song Kang-ho. In addition to the above-mentioned “quotidian character” and “civilian hero”, Song Kang-ho’s serious or eccentric roles are still deeply rooted in people’s hearts.

Song Kang-ho creates an indescribable sense of genuineness in each of his roles with no barrier between him and the audience. The role he played always gave people a “natural” feeling because of his “uncharacteristic” acting skills. One of the main reasons is Song love to improvise, which is preserved from his early experience in theatre. This reason is also the key to creating the natural feeling of his performance: in order to be able to completely rely on his feelings to integrate himself into the character, Song must use his subconscious understanding of the character to perform. As in *Somewhere* between Anti-Heroism and Pantomime: Song Kang Ho and the Uncanny Face of the Korean Cinema has described him: “Song has accumulated a living repertoire of stored characters that he wears as layers—when he moves, they move with him.” (Yecies [5]) Therefore, there are many “common” little motions and expressions in Song’s acting in the movie. For example, in *The Host*, when he carefully holds up his daughter’s school bag while trotting, this action immediately conveys the impression of a warm-hearted but little dorky father. Also in *Memories of Murder*, when Song started singing the theme song while watching TV with the interrogating prisoner and started shaking his leg unwittingly, a loose sense of a cop is shown. The small details of these performances also highlight Song Kang-exceptional ho’s character comprehension and depth of life experience. Also can help Song performance the role vividly while can led the audience has a strong sense of engagement in life. Song is also keenly aware of the fact that this seemingly “too common” acting skill can be applied to all types of movies. Therefore, he did not stick to comedy only but made the common characteristics of all types of characters more comprehensive. Finally, Song Kang-ho can be cast in a variety of movies and roles because of his subtle performing characteristics.

Following the performance characteristics of the peak period, the screen image of Ge You into a “dilemma.” Jing Xing [3] reviewed Ge You and Feng Xiaogang’s movie *A World Without Thieves*: “...His language style is also a continuation of the orthodox official language of Feng’s films in the reverse comedy effect, it is because Feng wants to attract fans with the comedian charm of Ge You.” (23) Jing Xing [3] has used Ge You’s two films directed by Feng Xiaogang, *A World Without Thieves* and *The Banquet*, as representatives to criticize the film for continuing to follow the previous comedic language style of Feng’s films. Whether as a serious thesis film *A World Without Thieves* or set in the ancient Chinese era in *The Banquet*, comedic or modern language style can not be suitable for the style of these two films. Moreover, Ge You, as the most representative actor of Feng’s films, further uses such comedic language style in those unbecoming film genres, which undoubtedly does not further deepen the solidification of his image. As in the late interview with Ge You about *The Banquet*, Ge You replied: “But after this will still the laugh that I can not understand, then I can only say, well, my comedian effect turned out to be so strong” [6]. In an interview afterward, Ge You revealed that he could not understand why the audience “laughed” at him in the movie. One of the main reasons is the language style of the film and the depth of the screen image in the people’s minds. The reason why Ge You has such a “strong” comedic image, in addition to his cooperation with Feng Xiaogang in the mutual benefit to reach the peak

of the film, but also because Ge in other types of films did not reach the height of the comedy film he was in. Ge's best known for his two serious film images, namely Yuan Shiqing in *Farewell My Concubine* and Xu Fufui in *To Live*. However, even though these two famous films have had a great international response, censorship problems have prevented mainland audiences from seeing another peak of Ge's screen image. This has further weakened the effect of Ge You's screen presence on mainland Chinese audiences beyond comedy.

6 Conclusion

Although Ge You and Song Kang-ho are not from the same country, there are many similarities between them that makes it worthwhile to compare these two actors. Both Ge You and Song Kang-ho are well-known for their self-performance by balancing their real self and their characters' self. Moreover, they have been able to use similar acting techniques in different movies to add nuanced characteristics to their roles while making them memorable to the audience. Also, their classical screen images are all centered around the role of the "little character," and even their starred movies have some similarities in the plots. The similar acting skills and the positioning of their roles may explain why they have achieved great success in the film industry. However, the differences between Ge and Song are closely related to their subsequent completely opposite career development. Unlike Song's screen image diversity, Ge seems to pause in the transition of his screen image. On the one hand, the few films in which Ge shows a successful transition in screen image were forbidden in mainland China. On the other hand, Ge is consistent in his performance techniques, which is consistent but lack changes, mainly for preserving his stardom among Chinese audiences. This eventually led to Ge You and Song Kang-ho embark on very different paths in the later stages of their respective acting careers.

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