

## **‘I’m Ugly, but Gentle’: Performing Little Character in Post-Mao Chinese Comedies**

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Stars are often associated with glamour and beauty. This can be verified by glancing at the mass media’s obsession with enumerating celebrities on the basis of their physical traits and sexual appeal, such as celebrity magazine *People*’s annual special issue naming ‘World’s Most Beautiful People’ and numerous lists such as ‘The 10 Most Beautiful Male Film Stars’ (*The Telegraph* 2013), ‘50 Most Beautiful Female Celebrities’ (*Los Angeles Times Magazine* 2011), ‘The 100 Sexiest Movie Stars’ (*Empire* 2013), ‘Most Stylish Men of the Week’ (*GQ* 2014) and many more. Highlighting a star’s glamorous appearance, either through the discourse around his or her physicality or make-up and dress, this type of seemingly unintellectual publicity nevertheless reveals a very common view of beauty in the discourse of stardom and charisma. In his discussion of stardom, Richard Dyer quotes sociologist, I.C. Jarvie that stars become stars because of their talent, which includes ‘striking photogenic looks, acting ability, presence on camera, charm and personality, sex-appeal, attractive voice and bearing’ (1998, 16). Although Dyer does not entirely agree with Jarvie’s argument, his discussion of star charisma suggests that it is not uncommon even among academics that stars are treated as endowed with exceptional quality, such as ‘the most beautiful, the most expensive, the most sexy’, that set apart them from ordinary people (1998, 43).

As beauty is often used to signify a star’s extraordinariness, it is also the case that Western cinema inclines to reject the idea of associating stars with the notion of ugliness. Instead, the term ‘cult stardom’ is adopted to refer those whose images are not an easy fit with mainstream tastes regarding star beauty, a point I will discuss in more detail in next section. In comparison to Western cinemas’ negation of ugliness in star discourse, Chinese cinema more willingly embraces the idea of linking a star with ugliness. During the late

1980s and early 1990s, Chinese mass media quickly adopted the word *chouxing* to refer a number of male actors, such as Ge You, Chen Peisi, Liang Tian, Xie Yuan in Mainland China (see Yang 1994, 495; Chen 2004, 32; Zhou 2005, 291; Qian 2007, 83). Translated as ‘ugly’, the attributive adjective *chou* not only indicates that the aforementioned actors were not seen as handsome or good-looking, but also highlights the aesthetic negligence of ugliness in popular star discourse around. Yet how the idea of ugliness relates to stardom, as an aesthetic as well as a sociocultural concept, is under acknowledged. This article takes Ge You as a case study to explain how ugliness is adopted as a constructive concept to normalise ordinariness in Chinese stardom.

Among the aforementioned *chouxing*, Ge is arguably the one who has the most successful screen career up to date in terms of the commercial appeal and critical achievement. He is the first Chinese actor to win the Best Actor at Cannes Film Festival as a result of his performance in *To Live* (Zhang Yimou, 1994). In 2010’s New Year season, Ge starred three Chinese blockbusters *If You Are the One II* (Feng Xiaogang, 2010), *Sacrifice* (Chen Kaige, 2010) and *Let the Bullets Fly* (Jiang Wen, 2010) and the commercial success of these three films saw Ge become the first Chinese actor whose films generated over 1.3 billion RMB at the China domestic box office within a short period of three months (Zhang H. 2011, 59). With a very slim physique, thin upper lip and protruding lower lip, uneven teeth, small eyes and a receding hairline even in his twenties, Ge’s appearance could hardly be described as handsome in the conventional sense either from a Chinese or Western perspective. As with many other *chouxing* who have attained fame during the contemporary period, Ge established his stardom by playing *xiao renwu* (little character) in films set in contemporary China. However despite his career achievements, Ge is relatively unknown to the general public beyond Chinese territories in comparison to his domestic popularity. Accordingly, it raises question why Ge’s *chouxing* image has not travelled far beyond China’s borders. Through a discursive discussion of Ge’s career trajectory and a detailed analysis of his screen roles, this article examines the cultural and national specification of Ge’s *chouxing*’s stardom in relation to star performance and global mobility.

### **Beauty, Ugliness and Star Charisma**

In terms of a star’s public appeal, Dyer agrees with E. A. Shils’s argument that a given person’s charisma is inseparable from their ‘connection with (including possession by or

embedding of) some *very central* feature of man's existence and cosmos in which he lives. The centrality, coupled with intensity, makes it extraordinary' (1998, 30). However, although Dyer's study highlights the importance of recognising wider social and cultural registers in the discourse of star charisma in relation to social crisis, gender differences and racial diversity, he does not explain why it is the notion beauty, rather than ugliness, that is widely adopted in the West as a register of a star's extraordinary charisma. As in the mass media's discourse around stardom, the aesthetic concept of ugliness is simply neglected from Dyer's discussion of a star's public appeal. To understand why ugliness is overlooked in star discourse, a quick review of Immanuel Kant's influential theory regarding aesthetics that deals with the nature of beauty and taste might provide an answer. As many scholars have summarised, Kant's definition of beauty is primarily based on the values *par excellence* that give rise to the feeling of pleasure (Steenhagen 2010; Kuplen 2013, 261; McConnell 2008, 207). For many of these scholars, Kant's obvious omission of a detailed discussion about ugliness is due to its correlation with aesthetic disvalue. Being associated with displeasure and negative aesthetic judgments, ugliness thus has been regarded as 'worthless' (Kuplen 2013, 1) and 'not deserving much attention' (Steenhagen 2010, 261).

How applicable Kant's aesthetic theory is to the Western perception of beauty might be difficult to estimate, but it is certainly not difficult to find evidence in the arts and even through European supermarkets' attitude to 'ugly' fruit and vegetables (see BBC 2008, Vidal 2012, Merrill 2014). The consensus is that beauty and ugliness have been widely treated in the West as two opposite categories of aesthetic value. Ela Przybylo points out that ugliness is often seen as destructive, subordinate and abnormal in the binary structure of aesthetics, a source of pain and discomfort (2010, 2). In other words, ugliness is associated with otherness, abnormality and the despicable, whilst beauty is the ideal, norm and desirable. The binary structure of beauty and ugliness to some degree explains the reason why stars are rarely related to a discourse of ugliness in the Western media, as being associated with ugliness breaches the aesthetic understanding of star charisma, in which extraordinariness is the norm for public desire.

The critical neglect of star ugliness is by no means a suggestion of a lack of fascination with ugliness in film and television. *Ugly Betty* (2006-2010), in which America Ferrera is

made less attractive through over-sized spectacles and braces on her teeth to play the protagonist, is one of the frequent cited examples. Yet, as Przybylo points out, in the TV series ‘the protagonist needs to shed her ugliness in order to advance both in her profession and in heterosexual love’ and thus ugly bodies are still treated as ‘worth-less’ (2010, 9). One might also argue that ugliness is embraced in Western cinema, as it has been suggested that the high profile Academy Awards often favour actors playing ‘disabled, mentally ill, gay, or ugly’ characters (Murphy 2014). It is no surprise for a reader to encounter articles titled like ‘Getting Ugly for Oscar: For Hollywood’s Most Beautiful People, Masking Their Looks Can Help Win Awards’ (Ellen 2004). Such kind of publicity might suggest that becoming ugly could be interesting in the cinema. However, as James Murphy (2014) forcefully argues in a *Vanity Fair* article, the Academy’s positive response to actors playing ugly character does not mean a cinematic acceptance of ugliness, but a reward for roles ‘in which actors stretched themselves.’ In other words, a character can be ugly but the star remains beautiful. The distance between the character and star serves to demonstrate a star’s acting ability. Thus, media discourse of a star playing ugly is not to appreciate the star becoming ugly but is a celebration of the extraordinariness of an actor’s professional skills of transforming into other people on the big screen. The Western media’s negation of ugliness in star discourse could also be seen in the numerous comments about red carpet disasters. Very often delivered in a tone of sarcasm, pitifulness, cynicism, or shock, remarks about a star’s red carpet disaster serves as a jeering of a star’s failure to achieve the norm of beauty that they are expected to have, reinforcing the correlation between ugly appearances and undesirability.

Sean McConnell argues that judging beauty and ugliness is based on feeling when ‘estimating an object that exhibits an inherent, apparent, yet not objectively known, rule; it must be universally valid for all beings that share our cognitive set-up; and it must be put forward as an exemplary judgement for all who share our cognitive set-up’ (2008, 207). What exactly is the inherent, apparent, yet not objectively known rule in McConnell’s argument? It could be interpreted as the mainstream thought that is shared by the majority in a society, or a social value defined and imposed by the dominant power. Nevertheless, the judgment of beauty and ugliness is rather arbitrary and subjective. One object might be regarded as aesthetically beautiful, but seen by others as ugly. In this regard, McConnell is right to point

out there is ‘no pure judgement of the ugly’ (210). Indeed, one’s taste is not fixed, and neither is the social value. Along with the changing of time and cultural space, tastes shift too. Therefore taste varies widely from society to society, group to group, individual to individual. Taste variation accordingly creates many sub-groups of film consumers and star followers whose cognition of beauty may or may not be in accordance with the mainstream aesthetic in a specific film market. Under this context, it is not rare to see a star’s image whose image challenges the mainstream perception of star beauty.

The term ‘cult stardom’ has been adopted to refer to those whose image does not fit with the idea of beauty as defined by dominant mainstream society. Unlike ugliness, which is regarded as undermining star quality, the word cult often refers to the ‘subcultural’, ‘alternative’, and ‘niche’ (Egan and Thomas 2013, 2-4). Being a cult figure thus is not to negate an actor’s star quality, but to emphasise a star’s image as being different. The label of cult stardom is thus accepted as a constructive notion, mapping out the variation in aesthetic tastes as well as helping cinema to construct a hierarchical structure of mainstream and niche, dominant culture and subculture, conventional and exceptional, centre and marginal. It is under this paradigm that many Chinese mainstream stars, such as Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li have been labelled as cult stars when they first caught Western audiences’ attention in the global film market (see Hunt 2003). Just as Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton point out, while those Chinese stars are deemed for bringing something new and different to the global film market, their extraordinary bodies also become an exotic spectacle for the Western gaze (2011, 121).

While ugliness is treated as a destructive value in the West, does Chinese cinema’s embracement of *chou* suggests ugly stardom is accepted as a culturally linguistic variation form of cult stardom in the East? The concept of *chou* is indeed not at all new to Chinese cinema. Borrowing from Chinese theatrical types, *chou* has been commonly associated with a character, as in the case of *choujue* (ugly character), rather than with the performer.<sup>1</sup> Such a tradition to some degree corresponds with the Western media’s fascination of stars playing ugly. However, the word *chouxing* explicitly directs public attention from a character’s presented appearance to an actor’s physicality *per se*, and thus raises a question around why there was a need to coin the word. Given that our judgement of physical beauty and ugliness

is a rather subjective matter, why have some actors in particular had the idea of *chou* imposed upon them? It might be easy to suggest that the cinematic emphasis of an actor's ugly appearance is simply an inversion of mainstream image-making, in which case *chouxing* could be regarded as a culturally linguistic variation of cult stardom, stressing their marginal, different and yet extraordinary star image. However, I would argue through Ge's case that *chou* is deployed in Chinese cinema and the Chinese mass media as a constructive idea to normalise ordinariness in association with star charisma during the post-Mao era when international travelling has become increasingly frequent across the country's borders. Signifying ordinariness, commonness, and normalness, Chinese cinema's acceptance of ugliness problematises the Western understanding of star charisma that either normalises beauty or provides cult fandom a pleasure in gazing at extraordinary otherness.

### **No Man is Perfect: The Shifting Meaning of *Chou* in Post-Mao Chinese Cinema**

Born in 1957, Ge You spent his youth during the era of Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), a chaotic period in China's modern history. Like many other 'rusticated youth', Ge moved to a rural area and got a job as a swineherd during the mid-1970s.<sup>2</sup> In order to return to the city, he applied to numerous arts academies and institutions after the government allowed rusticated youth to rehabilitate back to the city via job transfer or by being enrolled at a higher education institute. After being rejected by many professional art academies and institutes, including but not limited to the Beijing Film Academy, the Central Academy of Drama, the China National Experimental Theatre, the People's Liberation Army Academy of Arts, and E'mei Film Studio, Ge finally received an offer from the ACFTU (All-China Federation of Trade Unions) Arts Troupe in 1979. During the following decade, Ge worked as a walk-on stage actor and played some minor screen roles, such as a disabled husband in *Mountain's Daughter* (1985). It was not until the late 1980s that his performance as an unemployed young man in *Troubleshooter* (Mi Jiashan, 1988) brought Ge some initial fame, as well as his first nomination as Best Supporting Actor at China's Golden Rooster Awards. However, Ge's film career did not really take off until the mid-1990s when his performance in television sitcom *Stories from the Editorial Board* (Beijing Television Art Centre, 1992) received nationwide attention. Since then Ge has gradually become a household name, in particular through his collaboration with director Feng Xiaogang on a number of New Year celebration films, such as *Dream Factory* (1997), *Be There or Be Square*, *Sorry Baby* (1999),

*Big Shot's Funeral* (2001) and *If You are the One* (2008). In many of these films, Ge plays a *xiao renwu*, literally translated as little character. However, *xiao renwu* is by no means a minor role but rather stresses the character's identity as an average man, in contrast to *da renwu* (big shot).

Many Chinese scholars believe the rising popularity of *chouxing* during the 1980s and 1990s was the result of a cinematic backlash against cultural practice during the previous decades (see Zhang 2003, 183; Liu 2003; Chen 2004; Qian 2007, 83). In the 1960s and 1970s film was often used as a propaganda tool in Mainland China. Story and character design became highly formulated as a result. Such cinematic practice and tightened media censorship became particularly intense during the decade of Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Under such a context, a character's physical appearance often served to visualise his or her moral standard that was defined by the Communist Party's revolutionary agenda. Within a binary framework of creating revolutionary film during the period, physically attractive (or at least pleasing-to-the-eye) actors were predominantly cast as the main protagonists as their appearance served as part of the cinematic strategy of highlighting the leading man's desirable positive image.<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, those actors whose physical appearance was not deemed as appealing were more likely to be cast as *choujue*-type characters, such as Chen Qiang in *The Red Detachment of Women* (Xie Jin, 1961), Ge Cunzhuang in *Zhang Ga, The Soldier Boy* (Cui Wei and Ouyang Hongyin, 1963), Zhong Xinghuo in *Li Shuangshuang* (Lu Ren, 1962). The majority of *choujue*-type screen roles during the Mao era can be grouped according to two archetypes, either as a villain who must be defeated by the communist hero or as a communism-ignorant outcast who needs to be educated by the revolutionary proletariat class, both of whom often made fools of themselves on the big screen.

The formulated image-making demonstrates Barry King's argument that typecasting tends to favour a strategy of creating a character based on their physical type and 'let these physical attributes mean in and of themselves' (1991, 143). In order to enhance the political message that *choujue* represents those whose behaviour deviates from the party's revolutionary agenda, the portrayal of this type was often delivered through an actor's performance of self-deprecation. Make-up and props, such as false bulky teeth, extra-thick spectacles, a receding hairline, a hunchback or toothbrush moustache, were often used to dramatise the character's physical ugliness. The cinematic portrayal of a *choujue*'s physical ugliness in Chinese propaganda films served as a visual signifier of the character's stupidity and anti-revolutionary political views. As such, *chou* was imposed both characteristically and physically to signify the character's otherness and defectiveness. Within such a context, many

of the aforementioned actors became a victim of Chinese propaganda cinema's adoption of physiognomy that invited audiences to judge a character's personality from their physical appearance. Although many of these actors were recognised for their supporting screen roles, they rarely had a chance to lead a film during the period.

Such a rigid binary typecasting strategy continued to influence Chinese cinema during the following years. Some of Ge's early film roles can be seen as examples, such as his bandit Black Bone in *Ballad of the Yellow River* (Teng Wenji, 1991) and terrorist Zhang Xianping in *Codename Cougar* (Zhang Yimou, 1988). However, there were signs that the situation was gradually changing from the mid-1980s. After a decade of Deng Xiaoping's Open Door Policy and economic reform in Mainland China, the country became more tolerant to different social and political views as well as screen types in comparison to Mao era representations. One development was relaxed censorship. After more than a decade of being banned from public screening, many early films portraying little characters, such as *Today, I Rest* (Lu Ren, 1959), *Magician's Adventure* (Sang Hu, 1962), and *Big Li, Little Li and Old Li* (Xie Jin, 1962), were re-released to the public either in the cinema or through television. Additionally, an increasing number of foreign films and television programmes from non-communist countries, such as US drama *Garrison's Gorillas* (American Broadcasting Company, 1967) and French film *La Grande Vadrouille* (Gérard Oury, 1966) were imported in the 1980s (see Xia 2006, 37; Bai 2007, 80). In some of these re-released Chinese films and imported screen programmes, the leading character was no longer a handsome hero. Although censorship was still in force and not all the imported programmes were released to the general public without a struggle, Chinese audiences were able to access different types of screen images that were severely restricted on the Chinese big screen during the Mao era, such as the average man with his shortcomings.<sup>4</sup>

It is within this context that Ge and many other *chouxing* attained stardom. Unlike the handsome leading man of Chinese revolutionary cinema whose physical attractiveness and heroic action combined to create 'perfectness' for public admiration, Ge's little characters in the new era rarely appear to embody notions of honour, courage, self-sacrifice or moral excellence. Contrastingly, his little characters often explicitly show weakness, such as derisiveness and cowardice, which would have been despised in previous decades. Importantly, Ge's little characters, such as his roles in the *Dream Factory*, *Be There or Be Square*, *Sorry Baby* and *Big Shot's Funeral* often experience various hardships and crisis that ordinary people encountered during a period when China was undergoing significant social changes and economic form, such as unemployment, redundancy, and troublesome family

and social relationships.

Not only are Ge's characters presented as average men who lack outstanding merits but Ge himself is often considered in similar terms. Lin Hongtong notes that Ge was deemed by his friends and family as an unsightly kid who was shy, bashful, showing no talent, and too ordinary to be an actor (2011, 68). Yet Lin also argues that this ordinariness is exactly what contribute to Ge's star charisma, as there is a perfect fit between the actor's off-screen persona and his on-screen image (ibid.). Lin is not alone in his observation. The actor's inadequacies, such as his intensive fear of flying that stops him from travelling abroad as well as his many failed attempts to join a professional acting academy in the late 1970s, are emphasised in the Chinese media and promotional publicity, including the star's staff profile page published on the website for ACFTU (ACFTU 2010; Fang 2014). Such examples reinforce Lin's observation that Ge's star charisma is not built upon the discourse of extraordinariness but on ordinariness.

Ge and his on-screen little characters project everyday living conditions in a fast-changing China under economic and social reform. Whilst Ge's physical appearance externalises his little characters' unremarkable lives, it also emphasises ordinariness in the construction of film stardom. Indeed, the binary casting practice of associating physical attractiveness with heroes and ugly physical features with *choujue* during the 1960s and 1970s promoted an elite culture (Qian 2007, 84-85). Unlike those 'perfect' heroic protagonists in previous decades whose image is glorified for admiration, *chouxing* and their little characters are more likely to be identified by audiences as playing themselves because of their association with notions of imperfectness and ordinariness. Ge's *chou* appearance thus helps to close the distance between star and audience.

Qian Chunlian (2007, 84-85) argues that a *chouxing* represents those marginalised youth who were outcast from the mainstream society. According to her, Ge's star image and his performance of little character speaks for the rebellious younger generation who refused to play the role of a 'perfect child' according to government-controlled social values. However, considering the context that economic and social reform is the cornerstone of the government Open Door Policy and has become a mainstream concern in post-Mao China, Ge and his screen images actually support, rather than go against the values encouraged by the government. In many of Ge's films, his little character either has lived in a foreign country, very often America, for an extensive period, or is involved in a relationship with a friend or romantic partner from abroad. In this regard, it is probably more accurate to argue that Ge's popularity projects the younger generation's sensitivity to social change brought about by

economic reform and globalisation in post-Mao China (Zhang Y. 2011, 15).<sup>5</sup> So far this article has considered how Ge's physical appearance and his on-screen little character has been celebrated in popular and critical discourse for his ordinariness, which acts as a rejection to the extraordinariness created by the propaganda films and thus challenges the revolutionary elite culture promoted during the Mao era. In the next section I will detail how Ge's *chouxing* image is a signifier of naturalness in recent Chinese commercial comedies. Chinese cinema's normalisation and naturalisation of Ge's *chou* provides a counter case to the Western perception that ugliness is 'a subject of an aesthetic taboo that condemns it', resulting from 'the negation of nature', 'antithesis of the beautiful', and confrontation of autonomy (see Huhn 1988, 142).

### **The Power of *Chou*: Signifying the Superiority of the Average Man in Chinese**

#### **Consumer Society**

As detailed in the previous section, during the Mao era *choujue*-type roles were often laughed at or punished because their behaviours deviated from the mainstream values acknowledged and upheld by the dominant social power. Unlike *choujue*-type roles, Ge's little characters are often rewarded a happy ending for their commitment to mainstream social values and thus he invites audiences to laugh with him, rather than laughing at him. In *If You Are the One*, Ge plays Qin Fen, a middle-aged man who intends to find a romantic partner. Qin registers with a dating website and his personal ad is worth quoting at length:

Don't reply if you are looking for a handsome guy or a wallet. Neither should you have a postgraduate degree, or are a female entrepreneur (except small business woman) so we don't disappoint each other. A perfect man like Andy Lau or Tom Cruise, who is wealthy and good-looking, would not seek his bride here. Surely, I am not expecting a Notting Hill story either. Even if you are indeed an angel, I won't be able to handle you. I am not expecting that you look like a cover girl whose [beauty] crushes people's souls. An average person: stylish outside but conservative inside, with fit body and mind, will just do; even better if you're genteel and refined...Now, let me introduce myself for you. I'm no longer young, living a moderately well-off life...I went abroad as a student and spent more than a decade living overseas, but never attended a real education. In wasting time, I learned all sorts of ways to make a living. I returned with few accomplishments. To be frank, I'm the so-called a 'Three No' returnee: no company, no stocks and no degree. My character is neither good nor bad. I am not an angel, but I am too cowardly to commit any crime. All in all, I would classify myself as a man who is beneficial and harmless to

mankind and the society.

Qin's marriage advertisement attracts many responses and those he arranges to date include an acquaintance who turns out to be a gay, a saleswoman who uses the date to sell cemetery plots, a middle-aged amnesiac, a Miao ethnic girl from a remote clan, a frigid young widow, a pregnant woman who seeks a surrogate father for her unborn baby, a stock trader who regards sexual relationships as investments and the film's leading female character Liang Xiaoxiao (Shu Qi), a beautiful air hostess who has recently emerged from a love triangle.

Conforming to the mainstream image making, the film quickly inscribes naturalness, normalness and effortless into Ge's little character through the media discourse of Ge's physical appearance and the cinematic narrative of Qin's first dating with a candidate called Jasmine whose original name is Jianguo. Although the film explicitly comments on Qin's unattractive looks in a few occasions, the film's media publicity stresses that the star does not need any make up or costume in the film ("Ge You's Image in *If You are the One* Returns to Naturalness", 2008) and Ge is performing himself in the film, i.e. 'Qin Fen is Ge You' (see Chen, 2011, 77), contrasting to the popular media publicity of those western mainstream stars who is playing the ugly. Such kind of media discourse suggests that Chinese media embraces Ge's ugly appearance as a sign of being natural and authentic. In contrast, the film discourse and publicity related to Jasmine/Jianguo emphasises the character's unnaturalness and artificialness, and such examples include but not limited to the discourse of Jasmine/Jianguo's plastic surgery, costume design of the character's outfit, make-up of using eyelid tape, heavy foundation, polishing fingernails and shaving eyebrow, as well as the actor's theatrical performance style (see Wang, 2009; Zeng 2010). The cinematic dramatisation of Jasmine/Jianguo's unnaturalness accordingly double negates the character's sexuality and physicality on and off the big screen, making him a fake object to be laugh at.

By contrast, embodying authenticity and effortless naturalness, Ge's *chou* is endowed with an orthodox power, enabling his little character to inverse of those 'offbeat' characters as well as voicing social anxieties on behalf of ordinary Chinese men. . By citing Andy Lau and Tom Cruise, two film stars known for their handsome looks and successful careers, Qin's ad and dating experiences acknowledge these anxieties by portraying some women as ones who regard marriage as a trade opportunity, financial investment, or way of finding a patron. While Qin's encounters with these women mocks the impact of consumerism on post-Mao Chinese society, Qin has already eliminated two types of women from his list of potential dates from the very beginning in specifying women with a higher education qualification and female entrepreneurs need not apply. Whereas some women are often labelled as *nü qiangren*

(strong woman, superwoman) because of their educational and professional achievements, the term also suggests that female intellectuals or career women are not ordinary from the patriarchal perspective because they have entered into a world that has been traditionally dominated by men. Explicitly crossing these two types of women off his dating list, Qin reinforces the social prejudice that professional and well-educated women are not sexually attractive. It is clear that Qin's vision of the gender relationship in a marriage conforms to a hierarchal and patriarchal structure.

Qin's advertisement and his dating experiences however deliver a rather ambiguous social perception of gender roles in today's China. He rejects those dependent women who seek security, protection and financial support through marriage but he also discriminates against those independent women who might have a higher professional status than him. This contradiction can be explained by both the influences of sexual liberty brought about by global consumerism and patriarchal conservatism enforced by the revival of Confucianism in today's China. Chen Xiaoyun notes that from the 1920s to 1940s, Chinese cinema created a new modern woman who walked out of the household to fight for their freedom, although traditional womanhood in the form of the loving mother and loyal wife was still a prominent feature of the Chinese screen (2013, 93-96). However, the independent new woman went to the extreme during the Mao era. As Zhou Xuelin (2013, 181-182), Jin Danyuan and Xu Su (2013, 192-193) and Cui Shuqin (2003, 91) respectively point out, under Mao's slogan 'women hold up half the sky' the cinematic promotion of gender equality was achieved at the cost of eliminating female beauty. Promoting the ideal woman as a *de facto* sexless soldier or worker, Chinese propaganda cinema politicised the female body during the 1960s and 1970s by denying female desire and desirability according to these film scholars (see Zhou 2013, 181-182; Jin and Xu 2013, 192-193; Cui 2003, 91).

Yet since the 1980s, a number of Chinese mainstream films feature women's desire to leave home. In *After Separation* (Xia Gang, 1992) Ge plays a man whose wife goes to Canada as a self-funded student and never returns back home. Global travelling was still relative rare in China during the early 1990s, and it was deemed by many as a privileged experience. With this backstory, the film tackles a new emerging social problem: how global mobility destabilises family relationships and how those being left behind cope with their emotional struggle and loneliness. In the film, the majority of characters who show an eagerness to go abroad are women. The film's sentimental tone and Gu's loneliness thus reveal an ordinary Chinese man's anxiety that the dominant masculine position is threatened as a consequence of women gaining global mobility. If Ge's performance in *After Separation*

demonstrates an unprivileged Chinese man's anxiety during an era of global mobility, his comedies allow average men to regain the dominant position in gender relationships regardless of their disadvantaged social status. Unlike the woman in *After Separation* who leaves the home (and China), Ge's comedies often pair his little character with a woman who either comes or returns from abroad, from America in *Be There or Be Square*, from Singapore in *Sorry Baby* and a Chinese-American woman in *Big Shot's Funeral*. These female characters often fall into a similar type that fulfils Qin's definition of ideal womanhood: financially independent but emotionally dependent.

Tamar Jeffers McDonald suggests that audiences enjoy romantic comedy as a film genre because those films allow for 'escapism, comfort, wish-fulfilment or irony' (2007, 6). McDonald's argument might explain Ge's appeal for male viewers identifying themselves as average, as his little character image projects a fantasy of regaining power. But where is the appeal for female audiences in watching Ge's comedies? Jo Berry and Angie Errigo argue that female audiences could often get pleasure out of watching romantic comedies, 'as long as the leading man is handsome or the story—no matter how cheesy—makes us laugh, makes us cry, or makes us hot' (2004, 1). While undoubtedly applying to numerous romantic comedies, Berry and Errigo's argument becomes problematic when we look at Ge's star persona and his appeal as a romantic lead, as neither Ge's physicality nor his little characters' unprivileged social status could provide female audience with a Cinderella-type fantasy. Instead, Ge's little character often warns against the fantasy. In *If You are the One*, for example, the female lead Liang is in love with Xie Ziyang, a rich and handsome man who appears to be a 'perfect' man in terms of his appearance, professional achievement, income and social status. Xie has almost everything that Ge's Qin lacks. However, Xie is also portrayed as a selfish and dishonest character; he is already married and has no intention of divorcing his wife or giving up his established social status. The film thus undermines the fantasy of marrying a conventionally desirable man. Ge's Qin by contrast, although not having an appealing appearance or successful career, finally wins over the beautiful Liang. As such, the ordinariness and naturalness inscribed in Ge's *chou* suggests that a romance with an average man is more realistic, secure and stable.

Qin's appeal for the female protagonist often rests on his personality and the traditional social and family values that he stands for. In contrast, those ideal men, who surpass Ge's little character in terms of physical attractiveness and social standing, represent the seduction to some women who seek a man who can provide them with a comfortable material life. Qin thus voices the concerns of ordinary Chinese men regarding how their relatively poor

financial backgrounds and physical ordinariness may deprive their chances of pursuing a long-term romantic relationship and threaten their dominant position in a heterosexual relationship in today's Chinese society. In this sense, Ge's happy ending not only helps to strengthen the position of the average man in mainstream society but also mocks those women and men who pursue materialism.

The rise of *chouxing* in the Chinese cinema since the late 1980s offers a challenge to the Chinese star system during the Mao Era. Ge's physicality on and off the big screen is highlighted in order to manifest the character's imperfectness, ordinariness and naturalness. Nonetheless, in spite of the fact that the cinematic emphasis of a star's unattractive appearance often signifies the little character's unprivileged social status, it neither marginalises the character nor makes him a social outsider. Instead, it endows the average man with power as an insider in today's Chinese consumer society. Unlike the Western perception that regards ugliness as destructive to star beauty and extraordinariness, Ge's *chouxing* image and his on-screen little character demonstrate that accepting ugliness does not necessarily account for negative judgment of taste. The ordinariness and naturalness inscribed in the discourse of ugliness could also be constructive to star power. The ugliness inscribed in Ge's stardom problematises Western mainstream star image-making, which normalises star extraordinariness. Signifying the normal and natural self, Ge's *chou* thus explains the reason why the star's popularity is rather restricted within the borders of the Chinese film market as it does not provide the cult spectacle of being marginal and different that is often associated with ethnic stardom in the global film market dominated by Hollywood.

## Notes

1 *Sheng* (men), *dan* (women), *jing* (painted face male character), *mo* (old men) and *chou* (clown) are five major role types in Chinese theatre tradition. The classification of those roles is often standardised and appearance, including physicality, makeup and dress, is one of the most explicit signifiers of the role's category.

2 During the 1960s and 1970s, many young people willingly left or were forced to leave the cities and went to live and work in rural areas under the national 'Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside' movement of promoted by Mao. Those young people are often referred to as 'sent-down youth' or 'rusticated youth'. It is estimated that nearly 18 million people became rusticated youth between 1962 to 1978. For further detail see Riskin 2000, 37.

3 Chinese propaganda cinema's casting strategy was rather different regarding the

physiognomy of its male and female characters. In contrast to handsome male leads, feminine beauty was deliberately deprived from female heroines who were often de-sexualised. Beauty was more often associated with seduction and the honey trap set up with female espionage, such as Wang Xiaotang in *Intrepid Hero* (Yan Jizhou and He Guang, 1958) and Lu Lizhu in *The Eternal Wave* (Wang Ping, 1958).

4 *Garrison's Gorillas* was broadcast to China's general public by Central China Television Station's channel in the 1980s. However, the programme was suddenly cut short after 11 episodes due to concerns that the entertainment programme's immoral values would have a negative impact on Chinese youth. It was not until 1992 that CCTV completed the broadcast of this programme. For further detail see Xia 2006, 37.

5 Since 1978, China's economic and Open Door policies have encouraged privatization and foreign investment, which radically reformed Mao's planned economic policy. In 2001, China formally joined the World Trade Organisation, and the restrictions on foreign investment on banking, financial services, insurance, mass media and telecommunications were also loosened up. China not only continues to encourage foreign investment and global trade, but also encourages Chinese business to invest overseas. For further detail see Branstetter and Lardy 2008, 657.

### **Notes on Contributor**

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