

The Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Chinese Science Fiction Films: Perceptions and Evaluations of *The Wandering Earth* by American Audiences

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The film *The Wandering Earth*, which won the 32nd China Golden Chicken Film Award and the 15th China-US Film Festival, has received overwhelming praise since its release on February 5, 2019. It has even gained recognition in over 190 overseas countries, becoming an important symbol of Chinese science fiction films going global. According to the comments from major American media and authoritative film review websites, the impression this film left on foreign audiences, including American viewers, mainly falls into three categories: film production technology, Chinese elements, and shortcomings. Although *The Wandering Earth* was generally not satisfactory, there is still room for improvement. It is hoped that the analysis of the comments from overseas audiences can provide reference for future Chinese science fiction film production and better realize the international dissemination of Chinese culture.

Keywords: *The Wandering Earth*, American audiences, film production technology, Chinese elements

Introduction

The film is set against the backdrop of the human survival crisis caused by the aging of the sun. It depicts various unexpected situations encountered in the early stage of the implementation of the “Wandering Earth” project to save the Earth, as well as how humans, with the collective strength, enable the Earth to continue its journey in search of a new home. Less than three weeks after its premiere, *The Wandering Earth* has successfully entered overseas markets as the first Chinese film to have its global streaming rights purchased by the global streaming giant Netflix except for the Chinese mainland, and has attracted the attention of overseas audiences with its excellent film production technology. Since then, science fiction films are no longer an area that is difficult for Chinese films to venture into. At a time when China is implementing the strategy of promoting Chinese culture to the world, this film shoulders the important task of cultural dissemination and strives to spread Chinese elements, such as the sentiment of family and country and the Chinese spirit to the world. Therefore, our focus should not be limited to the status of *The Wandering Earth* in the minds of Chinese audiences. We also need to understand the evaluations of foreign audiences, so as to further promote the exchange of cultures between China and foreign countries and better facilitate the international dissemination of Chinese culture. This article takes American audiences as an example and combines the evaluations of *The Wandering Earth* by two mainstream American media, namely, Cable News Network (CNN for short) and Forbes China, as well as two authoritative American film review websites, ROTTEN TOMATOES and IMDb. This paper analyzes the views

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of American audiences on this film from three aspects: production technology, Chinese elements, and deficiencies, and explores the acceptance of the film's dissemination in the United States. It is hoped that through the analysis in this article, it can provide reference significance for the development of Chinese science fiction films.

Film Production Technology

The release of *The Wandering Earth* has completely shattered the stereotypical impression of Chinese science fiction film production technology, especially special effects technology, held by audiences at home and abroad. In order to better complete the complex film special effects, director Guo Fan of the film led the production team of *The Wandering Earth* to meticulously craft every link from shooting, scene design, special effects to post-production, striving to present a grand visual feast to the audience. For this reason, *The Wandering Earth* was awarded the title of "China's hardcore Science Fiction Film" shortly after its release, successfully capturing the hearts of countless science fiction fans overseas, and American audiences were no exception. Even in the eyes of professionals in the field of American science fiction films, *The Wandering Earth* is a well-made science fiction blockbuster. James Cameron, the director of the famous film *Avatar*, believed: "*The Wandering Earth* proves that Chinese filmmakers can be compared with any other country in the world in terms of visual effect production" (Cameron, 2019). China is ready to enter this market. In this regard, Jerry Zhang, the content purchasing manager of Netflix, expressed his agreement. He believed, "*The Wandering Earth* is well-made and has a superb narrative. We are convinced that it will surely be loved by science fiction fans all over the world" (Forbes China Editorial Department, 2019). Film producer Josh Grossberg, after roughly acquaint himself with information, such as the post-production effects, special effects production, and the number of specially made props of this film, proposed that "the effect brought by the production scale of *The Wandering Earth* deserves the vigilance of Hollywood" (Grossberg, 2019).

There are also many authoritative films review websites in the United States that affirm the production technology of *The Wandering Earth*. Richard Kuipers, a film critic on Rotten Tomatoes, not only affirmed the superb special effects technology of this film, but also particularly emphasized Michael Liu's wide-screen photos, believing that the photos in the film belong to the top production level (Kuipers, 2019). Another film critic on the website, Tasha Robinson, was full of praise for the details of the film: "The most outstanding aspect of this film is the magnificent landscapes in it" (Robinson, 2019). The director's handling of details in this aspect is extremely exquisite. For instance, when people stand on the Earth and look up at Jupiter, the splendid surface of Jupiter is truly breathtaking. The netizen Kuro S on this website also expressed his views on the production technology of *The Wandering Earth*, believing that whether it is the scene design, props, or special effects, this film belongs to the top level.

Chinese Elements

In addition to its exquisite production techniques, *The Wandering Earth* has left a deep impression on American audiences, including Chinese elements, such as the patriotic sentiment of "wandering" the Earth and the Chinese spirit. Every aspect makes Chinese audiences feel close and also enables American audiences to deeply experience the unique cultural core of China.

On the IMDb website, the rating of the film *The Wandering Earth* once reached 8.1 points, which can be compared with some blockbusters of Marvel in the United States. For a relatively inexperienced Chinese science

fiction film, this is a good result. It can be seen from the comments on this website that the patriotic sentiment revealed in *The Wandering Earth* is what has charmed American audiences. Netizen ReddingtonRed expressed deep feelings about the patriotic sentiments in *The Wandering Earth*: “When we were confronted with the issue of genocide, we chose to take our homeland with us instead of cruelly abandoning it—we realized that the environment we live in is an inseparable part of us”. Josh Grossberg pointed out in the article that when facing the crisis brought by the sun, China adopted a humanitarian approach to save the Earth. This scene is likely to resonate with all human beings living in the same homeland and also leaves a distinctive impression of China in the minds of American audiences (Grossberg, 2019).

Furthermore, the netizen swan_suibei on this website perceived the spirit of unity in *The Wandering Earth*: “There are no superheroes in the film. There are only thousands upon thousands of ordinary people working together to fight against the impending disaster”. This is quite different from the scenes in American science fiction films where superheroes merely save the Earth, and it also brings a new experience to American audiences who are tired of American plans. Another netizen on the website, David S, discovered that the film was permeated with the spirit of dedication of the Chinese people. “It is precisely with the spirit of dedication to the country and family that humans have formulated plans to protect their home planet, installing thousands of engines on the Earth’s surface and taking the Earth to search for a new home”.

Another point that deeply touched the users of IMDb is the spirit of “harmony in diversity and a world of great harmony” that China has always advocated for cultural diversity, which is reflected in *The Wandering Earth*. Choseoneforme said, “In the film, people from different countries communicate in their native languages. The most common ones are Mandarin, Russian, French and English. Japanese, Korean, Indonesian and Hindi are also used”. Furthermore, when facing despair, the measures taken by people from different countries are all in line with their background cultures. Choseoneforme highly praised this, saying, “The successful activation of the engine at the end of the film is the result of the joint efforts of people from different countries. This is the best part of the entire film”. ReddingtonRed said: “In this film, internationalization transcends nationalism; it elevates the consciousness of a community with a shared future for mankind”. Perhaps this is the standard of a good film that director Guo Fan pursues: “A truly good film is not about how well it is shot, but about the audience being able to see themselves in the film and be able to empathize and be moved” (Guo, Sun, Lv, & Xia, 2019, p. 95).

The scene design with Chinese logos has been recognized by CNN. The article on the website pointed out that this is the first time that Beijing and Shanghai, two very representative Chinese cities, have been destroyed in a film. For American audiences, this is a breakthrough for Chinese films. *The Wandering Earth* narrates human disasters from a Chinese perspective. The landmarks presented must be centered around Chinese cities, naturally with Beijing and Shanghai as the main cities. For American audiences, what is reflected here is a unique perspective of Chinese narration, which is genuine and attractive.

Many ordinary netizens on Rotten Tomatoes are very fond of the narrative perspective that integrates Chinese culture in this film. David S mentioned: The greatest appeal of this film lies in that it uses some details related to families or the celebration of the Spring Festival to present a unique Chinese perspective and thereby tell a space story. Netizen Henri C highly praised the unique perspective of this film, which reflects the love and hope existing among human beings. From this perspective, *The Wandering Earth* successfully stepped out of China’s borders, won the recognition of American audiences in the form of a Chinese science fiction film, and successfully conveyed Chinese culture to overseas audiences.

Shortage

Overall, *The Wandering Earth* represents the successful entry of Chinese science fiction films into overseas markets. Whether it is the production technology or the Chinese elements, this film has been praised by mainstream media and American audiences. However, it is still necessary to pay attention to the predictions of American audiences on the development prospects of Chinese science fiction films and the shortcomings of the film they pointed out, such as some contents violating objective scientific facts and the lack of profound character development.

The article on CNN analyzed the future development trend of Chinese films and believed that China is likely to become the world's largest film market in the coming years (Xiong & Westcott, 2019). However, in the analysis of *The Wandering Earth*, this article also pointed out that as a form of cultural soft power dissemination, the film still has a long way to go to truly catch up with Western films, because "the production technology level still needs to be improved", and "Chinese films are overly restricted by the censorship system".

In addition to entertainment, American audiences also pay attention to whether films respect objective scientific facts. Hollywood journalist Elizabeth Kerr believed that *The Wandering Earth* still has areas that need improvement, such as some contents violating the laws of physics (Kerr, 2019). Netizen Paul P agreed that not following the laws of physics is the flaw of this film: "No planet will explode under the sudden gravitational force". The character development in *The Wandering Earth* is also a major flaw for Elizabeth: The protagonist, Liu Qi, always complains inappropriately and acts like a fool at critical moments. Tasha Robinson also had some complaints about the portrayal of the characters in this film. He believed that especially the protagonist, as an inexperienced driver, always acted overly arrogantly, making the film seem silly. This also offers inspiration to Chinese science fiction films: Apart from special effects and narrative, attention should also be paid to the shaping of character images to make the films more deeply rooted in people's hearts (Robinson, 2019).

Of course, Richard also pointed out the flaws of this film: "It combines the content of classic disaster films from the 1950s in the United States. Many familiar scenes are presented in *The Wandering Earth*". This is undoubtedly an aspect that needs improvement for Chinese science fiction films. However, it also inspires Chinese science fiction films to make greater efforts in innovation in the future.

To sum up, in the minds of American audiences, the film *The Wandering Earth* still has considerable room for improvement. If Chinese science fiction films are to expand their overseas markets, they still need to make more efforts. However, the shortcomings of *The Wandering Earth* in the minds of American audiences also pointed out the direction for the subsequent production of Chinese science fiction films and provided more space for development.

Conclusion

Overall, both mainstream American media and authoritative film review websites have expressed their recognition of the special effects, scene design, narrative of *The Wandering Earth*, as well as China's solutions and Chinese spirit in the face of disasters. Some even believe that this Chinese film has reached the level of American science fiction films. This is a good achievement for Chinese science fiction films. However, it is also necessary to be aware of the opinions raised by American audiences about this film, such as the violation of scientific facts in the film, the lack of depth in character development, and the problems in subtitle translation. Only after comprehensively considering these evaluations can we fully understand *The Wandering Earth* in the

minds of overseas audiences, better promote the development of China's science fiction film industry, and more effectively promote Chinese culture to go global and reach the world.

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