

Audio-visual Spectacle and National Identity Construction in Chinese Sci-Fi Films

-- A Case Study of The Wandering Earth Series

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the new century, especially after the promulgation of the Film Industry Promotion Law in 2016, China's film industry has flourished. In the realm of science fiction films, "The Wandering Earth" series is a pioneering work with a "hardcore" flavor, marking the beginning of the "metaphysical development" era of Chinese sci-fi films. The film focuses on humanity's panic and courage in the face of the end of the world, showcasing multiple emotions such as patriotism, family bonds, and friendship, allowing audiences to feel the radiance of human nature in the tense and thrilling plot. The success of this series lies in its integration of grand narratives, profound themes, stunning visual effects, delicate emotional depictions, and unique cultural expressions, achieving a win-win in both box office and critical acclaim, and rising to become a phenomenal blockbuster that has garnered both praise and popularity in recent years.

Keywords

Sci-fi film, The Wandering Earth, grand narrative, visual spectacle.

1. Introduction

"The Wandering Earth" film series directed by Guo Fan is hailed as the pioneering work of Chinese sci-fi cinema. Adapted from the eponymous novel by Chinese sci-fi writer Liu Cixin, it tells the story of humanity escaping the solar system with Earth to seek a "new home" in the face of a massive survival crisis as the sun ages and Earth is on the brink of destruction. "The Wandering Earth" presents the audience with a cinematic world of Chinese-style sci-fi, establishing a sci-fi standard and narrative model with Chinese characteristics. It bridges the gap between traditional sci-fi films represented by Western Hollywood and Chinese culture, paving the way for Chinese sci-fi cinema to reach the world.

2. Ingenious cinematic language

Cinema is an art form that tells stories through visual storytelling. The selection of framed content, colors, lighting, and angles, as well as the arrangement and interplay between shots and sequences, all depend on the director's mastery and application of cinematic techniques. "Typically, these techniques not only enhance narrative or non-narrative elements, but in feature films, they can also catalyze causal chains, create parallel contrasts, manage the relationships between storylines, and maintain the narrative flow"[8]. In "The Wandering Earth" series, director Guo Fan exemplifies this aesthetic through fluid camera movements and spatial choreography, achieving a seamless narrative expression.

2.1. Camera Movement and Realistic Setting

The moving shot is a distinctive cinematic technique that employs camera movement or focal length adjustments to dynamically alter viewpoints, spatial compositions, and visual elements without editing. This technique creates multiple compositions and visual layers within a single frame, enhancing the sense of motion and expanding the visual field while serving specific narrative, emotional, and expressive purposes. In "The Wandering Earth", the director's masterful use of moving shots achieves a seamless integration of hard-core sci-fi aesthetics and realistic cinematography.

In films, a protagonist's residence often serves as a window into their personality, lifestyle, and inner world. When introducing the main character Liu Qi, the director strategically uses his home to shape the character's image. The camera first focuses on Liu Qi's living space, accompanied by a voice-over news announcement: "The first group of navigators is about to return." A photo of his father Liu Peiqiang appears on the TV news. As the camera tracks the sound source, it moves to the television screen. A pull-back reveals expanding visuals and increasing content, until the TV suddenly turns off. The camera continues its movement, guiding viewers to locate the protagonist who turned off the TV. A sustained right pan shows a critical prop—a safety airbag design sketch—highlighting the character's creativity and practical skills while foreshadowing future plot developments. Below the sketch hangs a recruitment poster for the "Wandering Earth Project," hinting at the protagonist's military aspirations. Adjacent to the poster is a "Today's Credit Exchange Information" notice, depicting the basic social structure of the "Wandering Earth Era": paper currency is abolished, and people earn credit points through labor to obtain necessities. The camera then slowly pans left, revealing the leftmost prop—a heavy-duty vehicle driver's license of Grandpa Han Zi' ang—while the right side shows Grandpa holding his granddaughter Han Duoduo. Finally, the camera descends to reveal a family photo of Liu Peiqiang's three members, with his face painted black—a detail that subtly suggests strained father-son relations. The camera slowly pulls back, revealing the array of tools and instruments on the table, which also shape the character's appearance. Then, a hand enters the frame from the left, and the shot continues to pull back until the protagonist's full figure finally appears. At this point, the camera cuts to a wide shot, completing the protagonist's entrance.

Film theorist Rudolf Arnheim's "Partial Illusion Theory" posits that when films capture essential elements of reality, audiences can create complete impressions through creative perception, achieving full illusion without naturalistic realism. When screen characters' behaviors and life experiences closely mirror real-life counterparts, and visual representations closely resemble physical objects, viewers project their own experiences onto screen characters[2]. This creates a sense of authenticity, resulting in highly concentrated and artistic imagery without requiring live actors or physical objects. By skillfully applying this theory, directors use complex motion shots to fill in character backstory during protagonist introductions. These uninterrupted shots, devoid of dialogue, vividly depict the family's complete picture: the elderly grandfather driving a cart, the school-going sister, the duty-bound father, and their strained father-son relationship.

The director employs a wealth of information-rich props—such as a vehicle driver's license, credit redemption charts, and conscription posters—to construct the sci-fi world of "The Wandering Earth". Close-ups of safety escape airbags, the cluttered tools on Liu Qi's desk, and the heavy metal aesthetic of his living space, blended with dim greenish tones, collectively define the film's hard-core sci-fi aesthetic. Through concise cinematography, the director drives the narrative: establishing settings, revealing character dynamics, and shaping personalities—all while saving substantial screen time for "The Wandering Earth" expansive storyline.

Moreover, visualizing familiar elements and concepts remains a significant challenge in sci-fi filmmaking. Through exploring cutting-edge technologies and implementing plausible yet bold concepts, sci-fi films uncover the aesthetic allure of their narratives. By employing innovative visual styles, they craft futuristic landscapes that transcend their era[3]. The 2.55:1 widescreen format aligns perfectly with the human eye's natural viewing perspective, effectively showcasing futuristic machinery with industrial precision and exceptional depth of field. Scenes like the vibrant underground city during the Spring Festival, the oppressive Shanghai Olympic Tower, Hangzhou's bottomless urban depths, the bone-chilling underground rift valley, and the grand tidal wave explosion on Jupiter's surface—all these atmospheric details are preserved with remarkable accuracy through the widescreen format. The visual impact of these epic scenes is truly awe-inspiring. From the transport vehicle's journey to the Navigator Space Station, accompanied by thunderous music and the tremors of air currents, the film ignites adrenaline in viewers, making them cheer for the grandeur of sci-fi.

Through the use of 25mm-50mm telephoto lenses, the film creates a closer connection between audiences and characters, enhancing viewer engagement. It powerfully portrays resilient human nature, warm familial bonds, and the underlying national cohesion during apocalyptic crises. "The Wandering Earth 2" strives to create "science fiction reality" by using post-apocalyptic scenarios as a narrative backdrop, addressing social issues and patriotic sentiments while appropriately expanding the real-world context. The film vividly depicts the protagonists' life journeys and growth processes, emphasizing emotional elements like family ties, kinship, and teamwork to enrich spatial storytelling and emotional expression[4]. Throughout, the work maintains a strong humanistic touch, using themes of "patriotism" as narrative pillars. Through details like ancestral memorial rituals, street food scenes, and longing for hometowns, it showcases the gentle and profound Eastern charm. Built on a warm narrative foundation, the film deeply moves viewers through emotional details like the father-son bond between Liu Peiqiang and Liu Qi, as well as the intergenerational connections between generations.

2.2. Tone Color and Emotional Projection

The purpose of color in cinema is to enrich the overall visual effects and narrative style, creating aesthetic appeal through visual presentation. Colors in films blend with temporal and spatial transitions, serving not only as a technological advancement for authentic representation of reality but also as the core expression of the film's essence—a visual art form that enables audience engagement and communication[5]. In "The Wandering Earth," director Guo Fan masterfully recreates the post-disaster landscape through icy blue continents, the chilling gray-blue spaces of the space station, the heart-stopping rescue mission, and the tender moments between Liu Peiqiang and his son. Each color carries symbolic themes, inviting viewers to perceive and interpret the underlying meanings within the film's chromatic language.

First, the color red. Its role in the film is undeniable. On the surface, it represents the colors of motion and the objective reality of the visuals, but fundamentally, it serves as the ideological portrayal of the film's theme and the emotional expression of its characters. In the movie "The Wandering Earth 1" when Liu Qi and Han Duoduo enter the underground casino, the entire space is bathed in red. The casino owner's smoke fills the air, with a pale red haze blurring the vision, creating a sense of impending danger that foreshadows the conflict. After leaving the underground city, as Liu Qi, Han Duoduo, Grandpa, and the CN171-11 rescue team arrive at the Shanghai Tower, the bottomless elevator shaft is illuminated red by a spotlight. The close-up of the pulley plummeting rapidly conveys a sense of urgency, hinting at the approaching collapse of the building. This intensifies the tension and heightens the audience's unease. When the team members are struck by the elevator, the scene is filled with blood-red. As they deliver the firestone to the Shanghai underground city, a magma eruption engulfs the entire structure, filling the space with vibrant crimson. This intense color not only pushes the plot to a new

climax but also foreshadows the fates of characters—including Grandpa, the fallen team members, and countless underground city dwellers—all sacrificing themselves for the firestone, a theme that runs throughout the film. Through the interplay between visuals and narrative, red becomes a key element that fuels the story's conflicts. It represents the film's spatiotemporal relationships—creating atmosphere, establishing color tones, and guiding the temporal flow. Simultaneously, it shapes the characters' personalities, psychology, consciousness, and emotions, fully realizing the significance and application of red[6].

Secondly, blue. This color typically evokes associations with oceans, skies, water, and the cosmos. Its pure hue conveys beauty, calmness, rationality, serenity, and vastness. Blue also symbolizes timeless eternity transcending time and space, representing the seamless integration of tradition and the future—a characteristic most vividly portrayed in films. In terms of spatial composition, blue manifests in two distinct forms. On one hand, it represents oppressive blue. In the film, as the elevator ascends rapidly, blinding sunlight streams through the observation window, casting Liu Qi and Han Duoduo's subjective perspective onto a desolate, snow-swept blue landscape filled with infinite melancholy and sighs, evoking a bone-chilling coldness. On the other hand, it combines futuristic heavy metal aesthetics with technological settings. The Su-style heavy industrial vehicles appear crude and stern, moving across expansive roads where characters appear disproportionately small. In the space station, rebellious robots gradually replace human roles, their cold, sharp gazes monitoring every movement within the station, diminishing humanity's sense of agency and control over the future. The overall visual palette leans toward cool tones. Thus, blue in films not only represents its primal semiotic meaning but also signifies a broader, apocalyptic humanistic reflection transcending audiovisual language.

Finally, orange. This secondary color holds a unique position in color theory, appearing to oscillate between red and yellow without distinct hue characteristics. Yet it masterfully blends the attributes of both colors—vibrant, open, passionate, and energetic—transforming intense red into warmth and bright yellow into comfort. Orange can be described as the perfect balance between red and yellow. In art and design, it ranks among the most visually penetrating colors. While embodying positive imagery of friendliness, enthusiasm, frankness, openness, and health, it also carries complex emotions like loneliness and indifference. During the film's opening phase, the classic "orange-green palette" subtly foreshadows the emotional threads of three generations. The sunlit beach displays a warm, soothing orange that contrasts sharply with the azure sky and sea, their different luminances and gradual transitions creating natural separation. Liu Peiqiang, clad in an orange-yellow jacket and blue jeans, embraces his child—a scene where color clashes achieve perfect harmony and warmth. However, in later scenes, orange's emotional connotations starkly diverge from its earlier tender expressions. Whenever orange appears, it is accompanied by explosive, tension-filled scenes: heavy metal-toned space stations, planetary engines, and solar systems. The most impactful moment is when Liu Peiqiang ignites Jupiter with 300,000 tons of fuel from the Navigator Space Station. A vast golden-orange light scatters across the screen, creating a visually devastating language that not only fits the film's setting but also symbolizes humanity's triumph in adversity. The "Wandering Earth" series masterfully employs a chromatic palette rich in heavy metal hues, creating a visually striking impact. Here, color transcends mere visual symbolism—it subtly guides the audience's psyche, expanding their imagination and fostering an aesthetic resonance between emotions and psychology. This not only demonstrates the continuous refinement of contemporary film visual design aesthetics, but also exemplifies how color language effectively serves narrative and emotional expression.

2.3. Acoustic Landscape Focus and Detail Overlapping

American scholar Scott Buchtman observed: "Most sci-fi films grant audiences the privilege of experiencing a fantastical future world at specific narrative moments, showcasing the city's uniqueness through dazzling yet familiar sensations[7]." Director Guo Fan aims to enhance the cinematic experience with authentic soundscapes and sci-fi elements. For instance, he employs heavy, resonant sound effects to emphasize the mechanical nature of planetary engines, while layering multiple sound elements to create immersive, technologically sophisticated audio experiences. Additionally, stereophonic pickup techniques are used to capture the whistling wind and glass-crashing sounds during high-speed vehicle movements, allowing viewers to vividly perceive the environment through auditory cues. These meticulous sound design details are crafted to deliver a more realistic viewing experience.

"Sound focalization" creates immersive atmosphere. In terms of sound design, "The Wandering Earth 2" emphasizes auditory elements like sound perception, imagination, and emotion, capturing emotionally charged "sound focal points" to enhance specific scenarios and evoke resonance. For instance, the iconic Jupiter impact scene by Liu Peiqiang employs a minimalist approach—eliminating most background music and sound effects, leaving only piano notes and vocals. This deliberate "subtraction" not only focuses the sound but also intensifies emotional impact, sparking deeper audience imagination.

Sound creates ritualistic resonance. According to sound theory, all auditory elements except human voices and music are categorized as sound effects. In cinematic narratives, sound serves not only as iconic imagery but also as functional markers. When audiences internalize the synergy between sound and visuals, the recurring sound becomes a ritualistic auditory symbol. Films often amplify this symbolic resonance to deepen their thematic layers. In "The Wandering Earth 2", a deathly monotonous tone emerges through the rescue team's watch: its initial single-frequency chime signifies the fading of life's last traces during Liu Qi's rescue operation in the elevator shaft, the second occurrence marks the death of a colleague, and the third occurs when Captain Wang Lei sacrifices himself. The tone gradually fades from intensity to silence, symbolizing life's irreversible loss. This design establishes the sound as a potent metaphor for sacrifice, creating a ritualistic auditory narrative that leaves an indelible memory in the audience's consciousness when life's traces vanish.

3. Ideological Construction of "Family-State Community"

Fei Xiaotong mentioned in "China": "Our nation is inseparable from the soil." The Book of Han once said: "To cherish one's homeland and value migration is the nature of the common people; to be closely bound by kinship is the desire of human nature." From the beginning of rural society, the family was the collective of people's lives, and the land was the unbreakable lifeline of life. In rural civilization, the attachment of individuals to their homeland and the desire to reunite with family are deeply rooted in the spiritual genes of the Chinese nation. In the face of disaster, Westerners boarded Noah's Ark to escape the earth, while Chinese-style romance chose to wander with their homeland, seeking new hope.

3.1. Family Ethical Narration from "Home" to "Country"

Mencius said: The foundation of the world lies in the state, the foundation of the state lies in the family, and the foundation of the family lies in the individual. The cinematic narrative of family stories and ethical relationships is not only a visual expression of the collision between China's traditional culture and modern culture, but also a vehicle for contemporary Chinese family ethics allegories. China's traditional family ethics emphasize taking "home" as the "foundation," where the family is an inseparable source of emotion in the cultural bloodline of the Chinese nation, symbolizing the continuation and inheritance of life. The story of "The Wandering

Earth" portrays the fate of all humanity through the struggles of three generations—Liu Peiqiang and his grandson Liu Qi—facing disaster.

Under the narrative lens of "homeland and family as isomorphic," the underlying narrative logic of "The Wandering Earth" revolves around familial bonds. Every action of Liu Peiqiang—his rebellion against MOSS, his mission to ignite Jupiter with the "Pilot" space station, and his ultimate self-sacrifice—always stems from his longing and concern for his son. Beneath his selfless love for Earth lies a selfish desire for his family: the hope that his son on Earth will survive. When the rescue team led by Liu Qiduo sought engine support from the United Nations for the transfer to Sulawesi, Liu Peiqiang secured all nearby assistance with the phrase "for our children." Later, at the space station, Makarov and Liu Peiqiang agreed to take the children fishing for salmon on Lake Baikal together in the future. However, the ice on Lake Baikal would take thousands of years to melt. Liu Peiqiang said, "It's okay. We have children, and children will have children. One day, it will surely melt." This intertextuality with the "Mountain Moving Plan" in "The Wandering Earth 2" highlights the traditional concept from China's ancient myth *The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains*: "the descendants of descendants are inexhaustible." This concept originates from the family ethics and inherited stories formed by the Chinese nation over millennia. "The Wandering Earth" writes a modern myth under the narrative model of China, revealing our unwavering commitment to our homeland, our unbreakable ties to family, and the humanistic spirit of inheriting and continuing life and mission.

A retrospective examination of Mencius reveals his fundamental perspective: he regarded both the individual and the family as the smallest units of the state, deriving the ideal of "all under heaven as one family" through this hierarchical reasoning. Mirroring traditional culture's view of the state as an aggregation of countless families, where familial "affection" is extended to the world as benevolence, "The Wandering Earth" series focuses on two families embodying humanity's shared tragedy. Liu Peiqiang, who sacrifices himself to save his wife and son, and Tu Hengyu, who dedicates his life to his daughter, both exemplify a selfless love for family that evolves into a greater love for all humanity. Here, "selfishness" is not pejorative but rooted in human nature, grounded in the sage-like benevolence of "all under heaven as one family."

The enduring warmth and value-based bonds that permeate the narrative breathe life into cold technology. Family affection stands as the most radiant emotional thread, with Liu Peiqiang and his son Liu Qi's relationship evolving from estrangement to mutual understanding—a connection that transcends cosmic distances like a resilient "thread" weaving individual choices into humanity's shared destiny. This human touch transforms technological commands from mechanical to emotionally charged. The global cooperation concept elevates humanistic values to a universal level, where nations and ethnic groups set aside geopolitical disputes to advance under the vision of a "community with a shared future for mankind." Rescue teams worldwide risk their lives to restart engines and transport firestones, embodying core humanistic values of inclusiveness, solidarity, and mutual aid. This collective effort forms a powerful force to safeguard civilization and solidify its enduring foundation.

3.2. From "Nation" to "World" of the Construction of the Community of Shared Future for Mankind

Hegel once said: "The Chinese people regard themselves as both children of their family and children of the nation[9]." Since modern China, from the "Boxer Rebellion" to the "May Fourth Movement," from the "War of Resistance Against Japan" to the "War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea," countless heroes have built the life of our nation with their blood, closely linking their personal destiny with that of the nation. This is a consistent spiritual tradition of the Chinese nation, and our profound concern for the fate of the nation stems from the Confucian ethical concept of "kinship." Confucius regarded "kinship" as the foundation of all things,

meaning to love one's own family and relatives, and to consider one's kin and family as the top priority. "Kinship" is the basis for extending kindness and benevolence. Traditional Chinese culture views the nation as countless families, and by extending the concept of "kinship" to "family" across the world, it promotes "benevolence." For this reason, the notion of a "community" bound by blood and geographical ties is deeply rooted in our national consciousness.

"The Wandering Earth" leverages the genre advantages of science fiction to create an extreme natural environment, presenting all humanity with a shared and immense survival challenge. This crisis, transcending nations, races, and classes, forces the entire planet into a "community of shared destiny," where the ideal value of "a community with a shared future for mankind" is expressed through this narrative. In the "Moon Hunt," "The Wandering Earth" demonstrates how past divisions have created significant obstacles to resolving today's crisis. Humanity applied its most advanced classified technology to nuclear weapons, rendering the nuclear code uncrackable on schedule, ultimately forcing national air forces to rush to the moon for manual detonation. The film uses sci-fi techniques to "expose the essence of human society," using the future to metaphorically convey the crucial significance of "peace" and "unity" in current society for global development and human progress. As early as 2011, China proposed the concept of "building a community with a shared future for mankind" internationally. "The Wandering Earth" shapes the national image through cinema, offering the world a China solution to the era's question of "where human society is headed," showcasing China's wisdom and demonstrating the demeanor of a major country advocating "the world as one family."

While fueled by boundless imagination, sci-fi films ultimately delve into profound reflections on humanity's existential challenges. As Theodore Sturgeon aptly noted, these films explore "the dilemmas confronting humankind and the solutions to them[10]." The Wandering Earth masterfully projects environmental crises, resource depletion, and survival struggles into an extreme future scenario, compelling viewers to contemplate humanity's destiny. Departing from Hollywood's conventional hero narratives—where protagonists undergo clear emotional journeys—the film presents collective heroes. Its narrative expands from individual families to a shared human destiny, demonstrating how "family as the foundation of the world" forms the core of community. This approach continually reshapes audience expectations, sparking emotional resonance and collective celebration.

In "The Wandering Earth", the "Wandering Earth Project" was originally named the "Mountain Moving Project". Just like the Chinese classical allusion "The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains", "Generations of descendants will never run out, yet the mountains will not grow taller—why should they not be leveled?" The "Wandering Earth Project" is a plan experienced by generations over a thousand years. It is not a flight of fancy but stems from China's millennia-old national consciousness and collective imagination. In Chinese traditional culture, the spirit of the Chinese nation rooted in Confucian thought is deeply embedded in the hearts of the masses, emphasizing collectivism, harmony, and the Doctrine of the Mean. It also boldly absorbs and assimilates foreign elements to create independent realities suited to its own survival and development. Combining the spirit of the times with contemporary science fiction, it showcases the Chinese people's attachment to their homeland and the tradition of valuing their roots, their respect for life, and embodies a uniquely Eastern poetic aesthetics.

Through the continuous repetition of imagery, nationalism can be fostered, forming an imagined national community. The grand scenes in "The Wandering Earth" employ a combination of real locations and special effects, making the visuals more magnificent and spectacular, and the audience's audio-visual experience reaches its peak, subtly influenced by China's traditional culture. For example, in the film, "mountains" can be moved, but "homes" cannot be relocated at will, because the land cannot be taken away, and the "world" left by ancestors cannot be easily erased. In the film, besides the two fathers, Liu Peiqiang and Tu

Hengyu, there are also multiple images of "fathers." Master Zhang Peng has always been protecting Liu Peiqiang, and Teacher Zhou will give the opportunity to speak at the joint government to the young Hao Xiaoxi, allowing her to gain experience. Years later, when Hao Xiaoxi becomes an elder, she also encourages Xiao Zhang to take on the responsibility alone. In this chain of inheritance, we see precisely how the Chinese people understand "fatherly responsibility" —that is, providing guidance and education for the younger generation, helping them grow, and "continuing" their own lives in them. It can be said that in a society based on ethics, the Chinese people have no personal concepts, only a sense of responsibility and mission from "the duty of a great nation" to "caring for the world."

4. Conclusion

The Wandering Earth series is like a brilliant star streaking across the sky of science-fiction cinema. With its grand narrative, stunning audio-visual spectacle, and profound philosophical thinking, it has left a distinctive and memorable Eastern mark on the global landscape of sci-fi culture. Nevertheless, while its flaws do not overshadow its virtues, the series still has room for improvement. Some details in its sci-fi settings are less than perfect. For instance, although the concept of propelling Earth with planetary engines is grounded in scientific ideas, it lacks sufficient precision in energy calculations and popular scientific explanations, which may raise doubts among professionally oriented audiences. Meanwhile, when rendering massive scenes, the level of detail in distant architecture and machinery is slightly inferior to that of top Hollywood productions, and its micro-level textures remain to be refined. All in all, these imperfections are merely footnotes to its growth, and its pioneering value far outweighs its flaws.

The "Wandering Earth" series is rooted in national spirit and Chinese cultural soil, demonstrating concern for the fate and future of all humanity through the Chinese people's spirit of sacrificing the small family for the greater good. As conveyed in the film, "A civilization without people is meaningless." For China's new mainstream sci-fi films to achieve transformation, the way forward lies in continuous innovation, with the key being reliance on technological power. Any art reflects reality, and observing and reflecting reality are the main characteristics of cinematic art. To stand independently among the world's cinematic arts, China's film art must develop its own artistic spirit, using China's distinctive artistic expression to address profound questions of human existence while integrating the latest technological elements, thereby achieving innovation and continuous breakthroughs in China's new mainstream sci-fi films.

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