Chinese Science Fiction Movies' Innovations and Development Analysis

— Take the Series of The Wandering Earth as an Example

Shilin Tan[1,a,*]

[1]*Beijing Royal School, Beijing, 102200, China*
a. tanshilin@st.brs.edu.cn
**corresponding author*

Abstract: With an increasing output of Chinese science fiction movies in recent years, there are many innovative and creative strategies among these movies, taking the series *The Wandering Earth* as an example. It is considered to be valuable to analyze each new strategy of narrative and filmmaking technology in order to find out the proper ways for the future development of Chinese science fiction movies. Especially for the high competence of the Hollywood movie industry from its monopoly of genre movies, it is full of challenges to surpass the great achievement and influence of Hollywood. This paper is going to provide a summarization of the movie creativity of the series *The Wandering Earth* by reading literature. These summarized innovations will then be along with appropriate analysis which is targeting to explain their exact influence on filmmaking, the film market, and the audiences. As a result, future developing suggestions for Chinese science fiction movies are presented based on the recent movie industry status quo.

Keywords: Chinese science fiction movies, *The Wandering Earth*, film innovations

1. Introduction

With the gradual recovery of science fiction movie production in the Chinese market, except for the increase in the number of films, many innovations and attempts have also been made in various aspects of film production-for example, the integration of science fiction films. Due to the audience popularity and relatively high box office of Chinese comedy films in 2022, *Mozart from Space*, and *Moon Man*, which was released this year, successfully entered the film market by integrating science fiction elements with comedy elements and achieved a good response. Furthermore, the release of *The Wandering Earth II* in the Spring Festival in 2023 also brought surprises to domestic and foreign science fiction followers, making China's future science fiction film development more hopeful.

From the influence of the second season, the study of it will allow future science fiction filmmakers to learn from the experience and become a great reference. It is possible to emulate the beneficial creativity and avoid or improve on the negative ones. In this paper, trying to fulfill "realities" based on two aspects of scientific knowledge and film and television is one of the innovations in The Wandering Earth II. The construction of a worldview set in this season may help be a model for other science fiction movies' production. In addition, the creativity of the all-around expansion of the image

field to produce more plot directions could act as a reference in other science fiction movies. Furthermore, the creativity among audition and rhythm and technological elements will be discussed and with analysis. Except for the creativity among *The Wandering Earth II*, the paper will also compare and analyze the Western and Chinese concepts of science fiction films in terms of their plots. Lastly, suggestions for the development of Chinese science fiction movies will be presented.

2. The Definition of Science Fiction Movies

Many scholars believe that science fiction is the artistic expression of the combination of cinematic means, artistic imagination, and science fiction concepts to a certain extent [1]. For the audience, it is a specific type of movie that tries to satisfy people's psychological needs with the unknown and to scientifically present people's surreal imagination through this artistic product [2]. In the development of world movie history, the films that are considered masterpieces of Chinese science fiction movies include *The Wandering Earth* series, *Mozart from Space*, and *Moon Man*. Along with the improvement of the country's scientific and technological power and the increasing maturity of the domestic movie industry, Chinese science fiction movies have begun to appear in the public eye and have great development space and prospects.

3. Development of Chinese Mainland Science Fiction Movies

In 1938, the first science fiction movie in the history of Chinese cinema, *Sixty Years Later Shanghai*, was created by director Yang Xiaozhong. However, it is challenging to classify it as science fiction due to the lack of a scientific conception and explanation of "dream imagination [3]." In 1958, the *Ballad of the Ming Tombs Reservoir* was created under the "Leap Forward Project," featuring technical elements like video telephones in the latter third of the film. Still, its plot setting contradicts the scientific rationality upheld by science fiction, leading to it not being considered a science fiction movie [3].

In the 1980s, Death-Ray on *The Coral Island* was genuinely known as the first science fiction movie in mainland China through its makers' precise positioning of the genre and their strict adherence to the logic and laws of science fiction movies [3]. With the nation's desire for intellectual liberation and the country's comprehensive reform, science fiction culture began to flourish, and a community of "science fiction fans" began to form. Most of the science fiction movies of this period share the characteristic that they were created in a mode of integration with other genre elements, such as *Indulge in the Wildest Fantasy*, *Wonder Boy*, *The Head in the House*, *Dr. Invisible*, and others [3].

From 2000 to 2008, most of the science fiction movies made in this period were small-budget, such as Peking Monster in 2006, which completed the whole movie using various low-budget filming methods, such as clay animation and paper-cut painting. From 2009 to 2018, film people began to focus on big productions, but under the impact and anxiety of Hollywood films, the phenomenon of emulation emerged, allowing the scientific nature of some films to be replaced by fun. This has led to polarization in word-of-mouth for certain films that are difficult for the public to identify with, for example, 2010's *City Under Siege*.

With the gradual maturity and steady development of the Chinese film industry, *The Wandering Earth I* took to the silver screen in 2019 as the first hardcore science fiction movie in Chinese film history, and the overwhelming response has elevated and recognized the entire Chinese science fiction movie at home and even internationally. The second season of *The Wandering Earth* was also successfully released during the Chinese Spring Festival in 2023, which is another leap and breakthrough following the first part in the country as well as in countries around the world.

4. Innovations of the Series of *The Wandeirng Earth*

4.1. Struggling to Satisfy "Realities"

In science fiction films, "realities" includes two aspects. On the one hand, it refers to realism based on scientific mechanism, scientific logic, and scientific spirit [4]. On the other hand, it is the sense of reality in film and television, which is not the same as reality, but rather the artistic and exaggerated version of these "realities", thus creating a spectacle [4]. Only when the "reality" of film and television is successfully established can the audience accept the story of science fiction movies on this basis [4]. After acceptance, the scientific knowledge in the movie can be seen if it is reasonable and logical. This results in making the "reality" among scientific mechanisms, logic, and spirit become the relatively dominant factor. Although these two "realities" have a successive influence on audiences' viewing, it may be creative and beneficial to combine these two "realities" in the movie simultaneously, and *The Wandering Earth II* can be seen as a representative.

Chinese audiences' expectations for domestic science fiction movies mainly focus on combining scientific knowledge and prospects for future development with modern methods of film shooting [5]. In other words, Chinese audiences expect more detailed scientific connotations and more realistic film effects [5]. This is the conclusion of large-scale market research conducted by the production team of *The Wandering Earth* series after the release of the first film. It seems to be inferred that Chinese science fiction movies at that time did not combine these two aspects well, which led to the demand of Chinese audiences for this fusion model. *The Wandering Earth* team jumped at the chance. In the second season, in order to make the science, drama, and visual reality, the film production team added a more professional content team to support all stages of the film production so that the immersive sense of the apocalypse is reflected in the film [5]. For example, due to the rapid development of artificial intelligence in recent years and the emergence of ChatGPT, the film's setting of the degree of evolution of MOSS (a kind of electronic calculator) is not lack "reality" in terms of science, drama, and visual senses [5]. In addition, the way the space ladder is built in the film is a breakthrough in new material technology, and this way has appeared in the novel "Three Bodies" nanomaterials also for its sense of "reality" [5].

4.2. A Worldview with a Global and Culturally Modern Setting

Chinese sci-fi movies have been frequently on screen in recent years, except for *The Wandering Earth* series, Mozart from Space, and Moon Man, all of which have made various innovations and breakthroughs in several fields. Nonetheless, only by meeting the level of marketization and industrialization of Chinese sci-fi movies the goal of making the sci-fi culture penetrate the hearts of Chinese people and reach the status of Hollywood international influence is capable of being achieved.

Serialization is an indispensable element and product in the industrialization of the film industry [6]. It seems that serialization is a method to industrialize movies [7]. As for serializing movies, the main worldview set in a movie is a dominant determinant which is a space carrier for the imagination to unfold [7]. The setting of the worldview of *The Wandering Earth II* may provide some inspiration and contribution.

Firstly, the imagination of the entire movie series is under the grand hypothesis of a future human catastrophe unfolding in a close-up view [7]. Except for this, its worldview set is a breakthrough in the Chinese film industry typical of a "Deficiency of Imagination" [7]. The origin of the deficient imagination is the traditional Chinese culture, taking Confucianism as a representative [8]. This traditional culture may result in a lower strength of support for people's imagination at home, school, and in society. Also, science fiction filmmakers are restricted from freely expressing their creativity in their works because of the contradictory relationship between the film market and policy [8]. The

imagination of the director, as well as the screenwriter, is inevitably limited after limiting the specific line of development of the film's plot. Finally, the "Deficiency of Imagination" may be further exaggerated.

4.3. All-round Expansion of the Imagination Field

The field of imagination has taken a step forward with *The Wandering Earth II*, which expands externally and delves into psychological and conscious imagination [7]. Outwardly extending imagination is more common in Chinese science fiction films, but there is no inward imagination innovation like the ethical issues discussed in *The Wandering Earth II* for digital human life or for choosing between reality and virtual fate [7]. On the one hand, exploring inward imagination can help the creative team develop the plot and move closer to the goal of serializing *The Wandering Earth* movie franchise [7]. On the other hand, for the audience, their psychological feelings will play a more important role than their five senses [9]. To satisfy the audience's psychological needs, it's crucial to leave room for imagination, such as allowing them to speculate about the plot's direction [9]. If the plot is not easily predictable, it creates more room for imagination, and the audience will enjoy deducing it after watching the movie, making it more entertaining.

4.4. Audition and Visual Rhythm

In addition to referencing the audible and visual rhythms of Hollywood science fiction films, *The Wandering Earth II* allows audiences to see the figure of today's digital network with its fast-paced, high-density information [10]. This innovative rhythm is a Hollywood rhythm for the audience in the process of watching the film, but on the other hand, it also makes the rhythm consistent with the familiarity of today's fragmented but dense information that people live. This familiarity is one of the requirements for reaching a moderate distance between the work of art and the aesthetic expectations of the audience [11]. In other words, this familiarity in the audience's expectation makes this feeling close to people's ordinary life, reduces the psychological distance between the characters and the viewers, and finally creates empathy [11].

4.5. Technology Elements Innovations

Firstly, the China Space Station Telescope (CSST) reveal to the public for the first time through *The Wandering Earth II* and seems to represent that in the future of science fiction culture is no longer only Hubble Space Telescope (HST) and the James Webb Telescope being the only stars in science fiction films [12]. Additionally, it could show that the future science fiction culture will have more combinations of these newly-invented technological elements. *Secondly,* it is the first time this technological element is shown in the science fiction movie Space Staircase, which connects Heaven and the Earth. When the Space Staircase is illustrated to the audience by *The Wandering Earth II,* the feeling of shock, astonishment, and incomparable smallness comes to the audience's minds.

5. Innovative Expressions of Chinese Ideas in Science Ficiton Movies

5.1. Embodiment of Perseverance

The core storyline of the movie series "take the earth to wander" makes audiences associate it with the allegory in Lie Zi [7]. The main content of which is that Yugong and his family were faced with a towering mountain, which seemed an impossible task, but they never gave up and persevered every day until they finally succeeded in removing it. Similarly, in this series of movies, people are also trying their best to defend their homes through a series of saturated

action; even if it is going to die, but also still hold on to the Earth, showing the home of the unrelenting. In comparison, the survival mode of the West in the face of this crisis is to "build Noah's ark to wander", showing more wandering and adventurous spirit [7].

5.2. Embodiment of Corporation

Faced with the crisis moment of joint collective rescue, the way Han Duoduo took in the first part was to use the power of the Internet to seek help from other rescue teams. This approach can reflect a sense of belief that success can be achieved through a combined effort, which is a reflection of the value of collectivism [13]. On the contrary, if it is under the concept of Western individualism, in this critical moment, most of the plots in film and television are to portray a heroic figure or a group of heroes to save all mankind, to meet the realization of self-worth in individualism [13]. For example, in the Avengers film series in the United States, a group of heroes and Loki fight with the exterminator [13].

"Collectivism individual interests seem insignificant in the collective interests" is a concept of collectivism. In the first season, the Wang Lei rescue team sacrifice their lives ("individual interests") to save the lives of three hundred and fifty thousand people in Hangzhou [13]. In the second season, this collectivist Chinese social ideology is also reflected in one of the episodes as a "cultural symptom" [7]. For example, Sha Yi's Zhang Pengxiong shouts, "Chinese space flight squadron, over 50 years old, out of line!" when recruiting personnel to carry out the lunar explosion mission. A film climax can be reflected in the collective interest of the older generation for the ability to save the world and the relatively small-time frame, the choice to go on this mission to die should be given priority to this age group as a priority, even if there is the phenomenon of young people actively involved. In addition, the audience for this scene of the viewing comments is also on the moving and tearful side.

6. Suggestions and Discussion for the Future Development of Science Fiction Movies

6.1. Further Suggestion on "Digital Humanized"

In the film, Andy Lau's Tu Hengyu almost stood in the position of the opposite side of the law to give his deceased daughter "a full life" to make up for his guilt. Although his act of making up for this almost caused the entire human race in danger, the film has set the father and daughter as the heroes of relief. Such a bold innovation leaves audiences with a question: what is the relationship between the digital man and human beings? Furthermore, the concerns about the autonomous evolutionary system of digital life make it more than just a living system, and there is no consensus on the definition of "life state" and other similar concerns. Finally, the realization of being more indistinguishable from the digital man has occurred. The question "What are the implications of setting up a character who has offended the moral ground as a savior in the film?" is also being worried about [7].

6.2. Future Development of Chinese Science Fiction Movies

Creating a series of IP-based and boosting by "new" movies can both contribute to the development of science fiction movies in China. The cooperation between *The Wandering Earth II* and 52TOYS co-founder and president, Huang Jin, has led to an explosion of IP-related derivatives in China, bringing Chinese toys closer to the mature overseas IP industry [14]. This not only benefits toy engineering and other related industries but can also help in film serialization and promote the development of science fiction movies. Therefore, integrating science fiction movies with IP-based is an appropriate way to kill two birds with one stone. Additionally, although innovations can bring more meaning to the science fiction movie industry, producing more similar new films can further

improve and optimize the basis for future growth [1]. Therefore, a science fiction movie that has just made an innovation to produce more movies with the same type of creative elements can also help the previous one to continue to walk the road not finished.

7. Conclusions

In summary, through the analysis of *The Wandering Earth* series, this paper finds that the innovations of "realities", a worldview set, all-round expansion of the image field, audition and rhythm, and technological elements in the second season have been illustrated. Appropriate correlation with concepts about movies and audiences of these creativities is presented. To help readers better understand that these may have advantages on filmmaking. In addition, a comparison of the Chinese and Western ideas on the plots of science fiction movies concentrated on their difference in survival mode and the importance of individual interests. This comparison could allow readers to have a basic understanding of what exactly Hollywood-like movies is different from Chinese Science Movies. For the final part of the paper, a specific discussion on digital life is based on the character set of Tu Hengyu. Also, the example of Huang Jin's toy career does present a good explanation that IPization is a plausible choice for developing series movies, like science fiction movies. However, this paper does not put a lot of effort into analyzing the creativity in every episode and narrative setting of *The Wandering Earth II*. Also, researching innovative technological elements in the movie is not fully completed. Future research can be further developed from these two directions.

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