

Chinese Values in The Wandering Earth II: A Case Study Analysis

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Abstract: *The Wandering Earth II* is a Chinese science fiction film released in January 2023. Using Hollywood's industrialised films as a model, the film was a practice for gaining overseas box office market, but the result was not ideal. This research employs the case study method to explore how Chinese values are integrated into the film from the filmmaker's perspective. It decomposes the movie into three parts: geographical space, characterisation, and storyline structuring to analyse the effects of Chinese values and uncover the reasons behind the distinct Chinese characteristics portrayed in this film. According to the research, Gwo's team manipulated contemporary Chinese multipolarity, the Confucian concept of "universal harmony" and traditional family-state values to illustrate a global field with Chinese logic. Secondly, they utilised images of Chinese-style heroes driven by moral principles and collectivism in Chinese values. Furthermore, the concept of "a community with a shared future for mankind" served as a catalyst for the film's premise. Subsequently, the Chinese homeland complex, calamity concept, and pragmatism were woven into the story's framework, which inevitably sinicises the narratives. This research holds significance for future Chinese films involved in cross-cultural communication, as it sheds light on the origins of cultural misunderstanding and barriers.

Keywords: *The Wandering Earth II*, Chinese values, film structure

1. Introduction

The Wandering Earth II showed a polarised phenomenon between the Chinese and overseas film market. As a commercial film, *The Wandering Earth II* has achieved high box office. According to an authoritative Chinese cinematic database, Maoyan, the movie earned over 4 billion RMB, approximately 554 million US dollars, keeping a top-ten position in the historical Chinese box office records since January 22, 2023 [1]. However, overseas markets, including America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia Pacific, only obtained 8.85 million US dollars based on data from Box Office Mojo [2]. Compared with *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the film seems another abortive cross-communicational try. Frant Gwo, director of *The Wandering Earth II*, illustrated his ambition for the international market, yet he had a limited effect on the global cinema.

Chinese filmmakers striving for the global market have explored various paths of cross-cultural communication. Early Chinese films with cross-communicational intentions tended to portray tragic individuals oppressed by old authoritarian societies or focused on illustrating perspectives of seeking

novelty, but contemporary Chinese mainstream repudiates this self-orientalising behaviour [3,4]. Hong Yin and Huiming Shi of Tsinghua University proposed that Chinese films should care more about universal cultural values in their storytelling stories and respect the Chinese national image [3]. *The Wandering Earth II* exemplifies this approach, as Gwo intended to discuss the survival crisis of all humanity and organised a global action to attain universal cultural values. However, in his pursuit of highlighting the Chinese national image, Gwo inadvertently neglected universal values, thereby constraining the film's appeal to a national context. Critics from *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* even regarded the film as political propaganda. Therefore, this research seeks to understand why *The Wandering Earth II* transformed from addressing a worldwide issue to being perceived as a national cinema.

1.1. Literature Review

Since its global release in 2023, several cinematic scholars have undertaken research on *The Wandering Earth II*. However, these studies are mainly concentrated on Mainland China. The research topics mainly focus on narrative, sci-fi special effects, cross-cultural communication, political geography, Chinese culture, themes, hero shaping, and comprehensive film analysis. Scholars such as Chengjian Sun analyzed the film's science fiction elements and the relationship between parents and future generations in characterization [5]. Xuguang Chen pointed out that the film was affected by Chinese values macroscopically and highlighted the principle of community with a shared future for humanity [6]. Traditional Chinese culture's role in the film was explored by Meichen Guo and Yu Chen [7]. From the perspective of biopolitics, the film's depiction of Chinese sacrifice, as discussed by Ning Zhang, also underscored the influence of Chinese values [8]. Yang Shang and Lei Zhao delved into the challenge of cross-cultural communication, explaining why Western audiences may misunderstand Chinese values [9]. Compared with Hollywood films, *The Wandering Earth II* is deified as "De-Hollywood" in terms of local consciousness, sacrifice and harmony [10]. Furthermore, collectivism and the inheriting spirit of Chinese values were also mentioned by some scholars [11]. Based on Chinese values, Zihan Li pointed out that the film contributed to a global perspective through its theme, character development, and narrative. Yet, there exists a cultural discount in cross-communication [4]. Indeed, *The Wandering Earth II* created Chinese-type heroes and redemption in a science fiction film [12].

Chinese researchers analysed the Chinese values shown in *The Wandering Earth II* through various lenses. However, they focused on plots and ignored the logic of the film structure. Finding Chinese values in a film only provides evidence to prove its Chinese background but cannot explain why *The Wandering Earth II* or other Chinese national films are different. This research adopts an opposite approach by examining the film through the lens of the filmmaker's intentions, exploring how Chinese values shape the film's construction. Additionally, it seeks to unravel the reasons behind the film's confusion on an international level.

1.2. Research Method

Using *The Wandering Earth II* as the visual-auditory source, the article analyses its image, sound, and film text to explore how Chinese values are embedded in the film. Employing a case study research method and drawing on William Indick's screenwriting psychology [13], this research incorporates classical screenwriting theories by Syd Field and Robert McKee to explain the underlying Chinese logic behind the film's story structure [14,15]. Furthermore, film space construction perspectives from Andre Gaudreault and Francois Jost are integrated into the analysis [16].

The analysis is divided into three main aspects: geographical space, characterisation, and storyline structure. It aims to explore the role of Chinese values in filmmaking. At the level of film space, Chinese multipolar diplomatic concepts and Confucian ideals of “universal harmony” are the main guidelines ideas, and they create a Chinese-style global field influenced by Chinese family-state concepts. Regarding characterisation, the profound influence of traditional Chinese values, including moral principles and collectivism, is clearly evident in the portrayal of characters, encompassing the design of protagonists, antagonists, and their relationships. On the part of storyline structure, this research uncovers how various Chinese values, such as the Chinese homeland complex, pragmatism, calamity concept, and the concept of “a community with a shared future for mankind”, have influenced screenwriting elements, including premise development, intrinsic motivation, conflicts, and resolutions.

2. Geographic Space

In the realm of cinematic narratives, the structuring of spaces is a consequential factor [16]. Some filmmakers choose to build a unique space for their films, while also incorporating real-life landscapes to lend authenticity to narratives rooted in actual geographical locations. The portrayal of genuine geographical spaces in both films and their corresponding settings holds considerable significance. From the perspective of film geography researchers, these spaces provide a canvas to analyse social issues portrayed on the silver screen, which combines multiple perspectives, artistic imagination, objective and subjective qualities, geographic information, and geographical creativity [17]. For films, specific places can be recognised as repositories of symbolic and metaphoric meanings. From the perspective of film geography researchers, these spaces provide a canvas to analyse social issues portrayed on the silver screen for representing a cultural field [18]. The prerequisites of narratives and the underlying principles of *The Wandering Earth II* demand that the film must represent a global cultural field. Thus, constructing a worldwide geographical film space becomes crucial. Against the backdrop of various cultural and political values, filmmakers from different regions offer distinct international perspectives. As a Chinese filmmaker, Gwo and his team structured a global field in the film affected by Chinese values, which can be analysed from three angles: geographical locations, nations, and languages.

2.1. Geographical Locations

More than twenty regions are shown in the film via landscapes and subtitles, which includes a diverse array of spaces spanning six continents represented by India, Iceland, Canada, Columbia, New Zealand, and the Republic of the Congo. While films often offer glimpses of different cities, this comprehensive representation is rare. The filmmakers aimed to illustrate a global crisis on the surface, but such a multitude of places is excessive in traditional film languages. The phenomenon finds its roots in Chinese values.

The Chinese central government claims to be committed to upholding multilateralism all the time. To portray the Chinese understanding of this multipolar viewpoint, the film required representation from as many regions as possible. This aim proves challenging to achieve by focusing solely on well-known landmarks from metropolitans. Under the Chinese version, regions except Antarctica must be mentioned, and the film did it. Indeed, numerous regions represent the cosmopolitan humanistic concern in Chinese logic, akin to the concept of “Universal Love” in the Mohist School of thought. Nationalism and Great-state Chauvinism were pointed out in some media critiques because the film indicated that the United States was openly hostile to the international community and built the space elevator in Gabon, while the Chinese capital, Beijing, is submerged in water [11]. A key insight emerges when viewing the film through the lens of Chinese values – a perspective that addresses

these critiques' misunderstandings and biases. The direct evidence is that Chinese filmmakers built the space elevator in Libreville and the USG government in New York City, contrasting with the flooding of Beijing. The geographical locations depicted in the film only contribute to a global cultural field with Chinese expression.

2.2. Nations

Similarly, viewers encounter more than twenty national flags in *The Wandering Earth II*, such as those of Brazil, Thailand, Israel, Spain, Monaco, and South Africa. Beyond the reasons for structuring geographical locations, the deep-rooted Chinese thought is quite interesting. Hollywood films tend to choose actors and actresses from diverse racial backgrounds, showcasing their respect for different races or catering to overseas box office appeal. However, the pattern proves less effective for Chinese films because most Chinese audiences cannot discern different cultural backgrounds based on appearances and accents. If national flags were removed, the average Chinese audience would grasp only an abstract understanding of "Chinese", "African", "Westerner", and "Indian" identities. Gwo, however, ensures that his primary audiences receive more than mere generalisations. This aligns with the film's objective of constructing a global cultural landscape.

Moreover, Chinese society emphasises a solid family-state concept, understood as family-state isomorphism and a way of identifying. An enduring idea of ancient Chinese society continues to influence contemporary China [19]. Thus, when the Chinese illustrate a global field, the momentous factor is nations. In Chinese values, the concept of the global is synonymous with all nations. The film weakens the significance of race but highlights the importance of nations. National flags, as the most emblematic symbols of nations, become Gwo's preference.

2.3. Language

Languages in films cannot be only defined as actors' lines because they contain more information, such as accent, tone, and speed. In the visual-audio language area, languages show great potential to shape characters. One of the linguistic functions is to denote cultural affiliations. Fourteen languages in *The Wandering Earth II* serve this cultural role. Compared with nations, languages span broader boundaries. After the establishment of geographical locations and nations, using a multi-language framework is the way to expand the edges of global space in the film again. Hollywood films tend to contribute to an English-centric environment, but *The Wandering Earth II* does not imitate this form. Instead, the film creates an efficient simultaneous interpretation system, preserving a multi-language environment to emphasise global spaces.

This audacious approach not only portrays the film's premise but also reveals a facet of Chinese social etiquette, known as "the ways of the world" in Chinese. Its core value can be summarised as comprehensiveness. In other words, if Chinese directors aim to achieve "universal harmony", as advocated by Confucianism, they must try their best to respect the guests invited by films. Indeed, this is also a way to show respect to their overseas audiences.

3. Characterisation

Gwo pointed out that the script of *The Wandering Earth* follows Syd Field's concept [20]. However, when evaluating the film from either McKee's or Field's concepts, characterisation appears to be lacking. Without unique personalities and Character Arc, they do not have intrinsic motivations to drive the narrative. Briefly, characters have weak relevance to the story. Despite Gwo and most Chinese screenwriters being familiar with the teachings of McKee and Field, they still created characters like those in *The Wandering Earth II*. The underlying reason is rooted in Chinese values.

3.1. Indistinct Antagonists

The role of protagonists in stories is universally understood, as their desires and conflicts serve as the narrative's core. Thus, shaping antagonists is arranged in a crucial position in screenwriting as they provide the essential opposition that protagonists require [21]. McKee also mentioned that protagonists and their stories can only be as intellectually fascinating and emotionally compelling as the forces of antagonism make them [14]. Within the psychological framework of screenwriting, an antagonist serves as a shadow for the hero's persona, creating a relationship known as duality [13]. Briefly, the purpose of shaping an antagonist revolves entirely around the protagonists.

Antagonists in *The Wandering Earth II* are hard to recognise. The only prominent conflict maker is natural disasters. Supporters of Digital Life and Moss cause some trouble for the main characters, but they are not strong enough to achieve the level of true antagonists. Ultimately, they even assist the main characters in solving the crisis. The portrayal of indistinct antagonists reflects a strategic reversal of their roles to that of helpers, aligning with the current Chinese principle of win-win collaboration.

Concurrently, the traditional philosophy of the "Golden Mean" is another influential factor. "Golden Mean" is a standard of moderation that one should follow in dealing with others and in one's everyday conduct. Under this highest Confucian virtue, Chinese people have developed a more inclusive and tactful evaluation criterion. This indistinct narrative edge is adaptable and easily adjustable. Thus, *The Wandering Earth II* created noncommittal characters to add depth to the script with Chinese values.

3.2. Collectivists

The plot of blowing up the moon is unforgettable for Chinese viewers. The root of the action is collectivism, a theme that not only appears in a unique plotline but also permeates throughout all aspects of the narrative. Under the influence of collectivism, the characterisation in the film develops two apparent features: grouped protagonists and desireless individuals.

Masters of screenwriting, including McKee and Field, consistently emphasise that the importance of protagonists. The protagonist serves as the nucleus around which the rest of the cast revolves, with other characters establishing relationships or providing insights into the dimensions of the protagonist's complex nature [14]. The protagonist's desires and conflicts drive storylines. However, *The Wandering Earth II* does not have a protagonist mentioned by McKee but has a group. The narrative has three branches, but all characters share striking similarities in their desires and actions. Identifying a single protagonist becomes a challenge due to the unified group-protagonist persona. Gwo deliberately downplayed the individual roles while amplifying the collective entity. Under collectivism, personal identities are subsumed by the group, with the collective taking precedence. Thus, the focus lies in shaping collective protagonists with shared sensibilities.

The portrayal of desireless individuals represents another facet of the collectivistic image. In typical Hollywood films, the individual interests of protagonists usually maintain consistency with the majority. Instances of dissent often propel protagonists to develop their personalities and then make the final decision. In this situation, audiences witness either a sacrifice akin to Robert Neville in *I Am Legend* or an alternative solution as embodied by Neo in *The Matrix*. However, in Chinese films, heroes usually accept to sacrifice without struggle. Characters of *The Wandering Earth II* are typical Chinese heroes who can ignore their benefits to satisfy the group. The foundation of collective interests, inherent in Chinese values, is evident here. The solid family-state concept mentioned above is the critical reason for collectivism because it caused the formation of collective interests [19]. During the past millennial ancient society, the idea of "Deny Oneself and Returning to Propriety" has long been upheld as a virtue in Confucianism, influencing the collective mindset across time. In

Chinese cinematic logic, desireless individuals are typical. This is evident in instances such as Peiqiang Liu's refusal to board the return capsule, Hengyu Tu's commitment to passing on 550A, and 300 astronauts' unanimous choice of sacrifice. Although Chinese people might question the fairness of the concept, they respect and appreciate desireless heroes.

3.3. Elders and Posterities

Although the primary purpose of personal desires is sacrificed, each main character harbours them, albeit without the capacity to propel them. Instead, these desires play a functional role in explaining the characters' actions. Moreover, the desires reinforce the idea of grouped protagonists, but the reason for formation has no relationship with collectivism. Initially, these personal desires are rooted in the aspirations for future generations. Interestingly, relationships become the crucible for creating desires in the film's characters. Liu, driven by his son, wants to contribute as a navigator. Tu's only focus centers on his daughter. As an embodiment of the national image, Zhou pushes the *Moving Mountain Project* for the benefit of generations to come. Even over fifty-year-old volunteers join the perilous mission to protect younger astronauts. The core principle controlling those desires is a Chinese moral compass – “human relationships”.

The family-state concept emphasises not only the nation but also the family. Family involves three types of relationships of “human relationships”: father and son, husband and wife, and siblings. In those relationships, father and son are on the top list because of another two core Chinese traditional values, filial piety and inheritance. In this conventional morality, fathers are required to care for and protect sons, and sons are required to obey their fathers and continue their names. This ancestral continuum seeks to achieve spiritual immortality through the bloodline. Under the concept of “human relationships”, the willingness of the parental generation to sacrifice their interests for the younger one is widely expected in Chinese people. Consequently, the logic of “human relationships” creates and explains each character's intentions in *The Wandering Earth II*.

4. Storyline Structure

Field divided a script into several parts in his screenwriting framework. Each section is connected by critical factors and driven by the protagonist's motivations. Similarly, McKee also figured out some decisive elements for structuring stories, which coincidentally corresponded to Field's viewpoint [14]. Based on the model, multitudinous scripts have been created by different dramatic needs from diverse premises. As another practice of Field's model, *The Wandering Earth II* portrayed a science fiction story that is different from Hollywood because Chinese values provided the second option in those critical factors.

4.1. Premise

The Wandering Earth II was inspired by President Xi's concept of “a community with a shared future for mankind”, which was mentioned in his speech at the Palace of Nations in Geneva in 2017. It reflects contemporary Chinese values that emphasize unity and collective responsibility for future generations [22]. This premise becomes the driving force behind the character's actions and relationships in the film [10]. The idea conveyed in the speech can explain the motivations of Zhou and the nation he represents. Under the premise, the film tended to illustrate a multicultural field where protagonists with a collectivist mindset and generational relationships are prominent.

4.2. Intrinsic Motivation

As mentioned above, Guo created a group image with three actors, namely human beings, Moss, and the natural disaster. With this perspective, the protagonists' intrinsic motivations can be easily found. It is "the Wandering Earth Project". Compared with the traditional solution of building spaceships, wandering with the Earth is quixotic. However, the project is unrealistic but romantic in Chinese minds because the fantasy originated in the Chinese homeland complex.

Over four-thousand-year agricultural civilisation had led the Chinese to become highly dependent on land, which developed into the homeland complex [23]. Chinese people consider land as the origin of life and the destination after death. Meanwhile, homelands are also regarded as spiritual hometowns in traditional Chinese values. People believe that homelands have been protecting and blessing them. Moreover, regional identities play an important role in Chinese socialising because people care more about where they come from [24]. Briefly, Chinese logic has been influenced by the homeland complex that is the root of "the Wandering Earth Project".

The former name of "the Wandering Earth Project" is "the Moving Mountain Project", named after an ancient Chinese fable named *The Foolish Old Man Who Moved the Mountain*. It extols perseverance, determination, and eagerness to surmount difficulty. Keywords in the fable are humans, nature, imparting and inheritance, and homeland complex. The fable represents a Chinese concept that advocates using the efforts of several generations to excavate high mountains at the entrance of houses rather than leaving the hometown. This is a reasonable explanation for the 2500-year "Wandering Earth Project" in the film.

4.3. Conflicts

To oppose the "Wandering Earth Project", Moss and natural disasters are leading conflict makers in the film. This calamity concept originates from Chinese perspectives on the relationships between climate, geography, and humans. Chinese ancestors divided the cause of disaster into two categories, natural and man-made calamities. Compared with the natural, man-made one is more devastating, which breaks the balance of "harmony among people" [25]. Without such "harmony among people", favourable climatic and geographical conditions are useless.

Traditional Hollywood fantasy films often depict conflicts through invasions by different races, such as aliens, animals, zombies, and mutants. This portrayal represents racial issues in America. However, China's unique history and national conditions lead to a different approach to Chinese fantasy films, which rarely follow the Hollywood formula. Throughout history, several calamities that nearly destroyed Chinese civilisation were caused by human action. This perspective explains why Moss and its supporters are depicted as more destructive than nature in the two crises of *The Wandering Earth II*.

4.4. Solutions

Addressing the two crises in the film, the space station crashes and the lunar crisis, the solutions are practical yet irrational, judged by Field and McKee's screenwriting knowledge [13,14]. The apparent deficiency is the absence of a "Character Arc" and changes during the problem-solving process. Field and McKee's screenwriting principle emphasises character growth, especially internal transformation driven by significant mental struggles, to enhance personalities and enable protagonists to resist crises. However, *The Wandering Earth II* does not depict character development because no character deliberates or challenges the solution in the film.

One of the reasons for this lack of development is the absence of intrinsic motivations caused by collectivism. Another factor is the less scarce speculative abilities of Chinese pragmatism. Chinese philosophy schools, such as Confucianism, Mohist and Legalist, have historically tended to research

practical methods of governance rather than abstract speculation. As the mainstream value in China, Confucianism does not delve into the origin of the universe or the ultimate meaning of life, and it even weakens the exploration of these issues by Taoism and Buddhism [26]. Due to modern Chinese history and contemporary national conditions, pragmatism has always remained strong in current society. Under pragmatism, a feasible solution is more critical than contemplating origin and structure. Consequently, in *The Wandering Earth II*, attention is given to how to successfully accomplish arduous missions, rather than exploring complex character arcs. This reflects a typical Chinese logic in which characters are offered solutions for crises without deep deliberation, as depicted in the film *The Wandering Earth II*.

5. Conclusion

It is obvious that Gwo and his crews structured *The Wandering Earth II* with Chinese logic. Thus, even if *The Wandering Earth II* followed the usual film construction methods used in Hollywood commercial films, there is still a significant difference. Chinese values primarily influenced the setting of the plot and characterisation. Events that may be ordinary to Chinese audiences become sources of confusion for others. This disparity is not a matter of right or wrong but rather highlights the importance of prioritising cross-cultural communication for Chinese films aiming to penetrate the global market. This study focused on Chinese values that shape *The Wandering Earth II*, yet it did not comprehensively compare similarities and differences between various cultures. Not all Chinese values will cause cross-cultural misunderstandings. Future research could pay more attention to which types of Chinese values are more likely to cause confusion. Moreover, extending this analysis to contemporary Chinese films could further enhance the cross-cultural communication capabilities of Chinese cinema.

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