

## *The Wandering Earth: A Device for the Propagation of the Chinese Regime's Desired Space Narratives?*



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### Introduction

THE anticipated film adaptation of Liu Cixin's short story *The Wandering Earth* [流浪地球] was released in Chinese and American cinemas at the beginning of last year, and quickly became one of China's highest grossing movies of all time. In order to allow for a smoother adaptation to the big screen, the plotline and characters of the film greatly differ from those in Liu's original story. Additionally, the Earth's political state is only lightly touched upon in Liu's story, whereas a more detailed account of international relations and cooperation is weaved into the film. Recognising the "soft power" potential of Chinese science fiction as it grows in popularity around the world, the Chinese government have encouraged authors of the genre to include elements that assist in propagandizing the rejuvenation of the Chinese state as a global power. The acquisition of soft power, or the ability to achieve foreign policy goals through attractive and persuasive means, was adopted under the leadership of Hu Jintao as a long-term national strategy. Tools used to gain soft power traditionally include attractive cultural products and the construction of compelling and credible narratives that present the nation in a positive light (*The Soft Power* 30). Science fiction, acting as both a cultural product and a vehicle for the proliferation of constructed narratives, presents itself as ideal device for assisting in the achievement of national soft power objectives.

This paper argues that the world constructed for China's science fiction hit *The Wandering Earth* was greatly influenced by the regime's call for science fiction to benefit the country's rejuvenation aims, particularly to portray the Chinese space programme as a peaceful and cooperative venture that has the potential to benefit all of humanity. Through an examination of the production choices made during the creation of the film, this paper shows that *The Wandering Earth's* promotion of transnational cooperation in space works as a device aiming to create a positive international perception of its space capacities. This in turn has made the science

fiction adaptation favourable with the Chinese government and exemplary of what the regime seeks to find in China's science fiction creations.

This paper shall first outline the issues that China faces in regard to the reputation of its space endeavours, and how the state is seeking to replace the prevalent threat narrative around its space programme with a more positive one. Based on these contextual foundations, this paper shall discuss elements of *The Wandering Earth* film in relation to China's political aims surrounding the perception of its space programme.

### **Conflicting Narratives: The Chinese Space Threat vs. A Tool for Humankind**

The focus placed on national rejuvenation and economic development by the government since the start of the century has proven sufficient in generating support for the Chinese Communist Party at home. However, many people and governments of the world believe that the China's unceasing growth should be feared by all who seek to uphold the values of the world's longstanding political superpower: the United States (Chen and Garcia; Halper). The China Threat narrative maintains that the nation's authoritarian regime of antihumanitarian policies and expansionist ambitions cannot peacefully co-exist with the democratic ideals purported by the United States government (Broomfield). The narrative is primarily propagated by the US and its allies, who state that China's re-emergence represents a threat to both US security and to the survival of democracy worldwide. In recent years, the China Threat criticism has extended to one of the country's most treasured projects: its national space programme.

The significance of China's latest outer space achievements cannot be understated. Yet since its conception, observers and critics of China's political regime have suspected that the Chinese space programme may endanger the freedom of the US and allied nations to operate in outer space. Concerns have ranged from China's potential militarization of space, to the assertion of resource nationalism over celestial objects, to the fear that China could overtake the US as the world's dominant space force (Johnson-Freese; Vasani; Erwin; Goswami; Thompson).

The US government asserts that China's activities in space pose a very real threat to its national security. Less than a year before the Eastern giant landed its rover on the far side of the Moon at the beginning of 2019, President Trump declared that

the US would not allow itself to be surpassed by China as the world's dominant space force ("Trump Vows"). A few month later, Vice President Pence named China's space activities as one of the main threats to US security ("Pence Unveils Plans"). The China space threat narrative has been used by Trump's administration to justify the creation of the US Space Force, and due to fears of espionage, China remains the only country with whom NASA is not permitted to collaborate.

The proliferation of such a narrative may lead to its widespread acceptance, which in turn may cause damage to China's aims of repositioning itself as a global leader. Should the international community accept the narrative that China's space programme is a threat to the status quo, there will be less support for it. Instead of financing space-based projects in partnership with China, countries will instead side with nations that they perceive to be more accountable, transparent, and reliable technological powers (Flagg). Furthermore, should China's space aims continue to be portrayed as a tool for enhancing the regime's grip on the world stage, feelings of distrust for China's technological development may hinder transnational relations.

Recognising these challenges, China's central government have made attempts to demonstrate that its space programme is not a threat to those values shared by the US and its allies, nor is the programme an attempt to grab power in the space arena away from the US. To counter fears that China's technological rise will threaten the autonomy and interests of other nations, the Chinese government are actively attempting to change the prevalent threat narrative to one that asserts its space programme as a tool for the benefit of humankind.

In the face of criticism, China's chief administrative authorities continue to maintain that it is opposed to the weaponization of outer space, and that its space programme is for the benefit of the international community ("China's Military Strategy"). Every five years, China's State Council releases a White Paper outlining the nation's space activities in order "to enable the world community to better understand China's space industry" ("Full Text of White Paper"). A large part of the Paper is dedicated to summarizing China's transnational space cooperation, and continuously states that the purpose of the programme is "to utilize space for peaceful purposes" and to "benefit the whole of mankind" ("China's Military Strategy"). China is an active member of the UN Office of Outer Space Affairs, asserting the nation's adherence and dedication to the peaceful uses of outer space as outlined by the various treaties adopted by the General Assembly. China has also extended

an invitation to all UN member states to use its forthcoming space station for the purposes of scientific experimentation, demonstrating that Chinese diplomacy in space extends further than that of the US, who do not allow China to participate in the ISS project.

While the Chinese government have taken great efforts to sponsor and coordinate space research and technical programmes with multiple international institutions, such diplomacy only affects government officials and researchers working in the area of space technology. Where China's space science diplomacy has been lacking is in its access to international populations at large, whose trust often remains in the China threat narratives purported by their own governments and national media (Sun).

The rising popularity of Chinese science fiction worldwide was soon recognised by the government as a potential ideological mouthpiece. As a genre that strongly showcases the imaginative visions of the future of Chinese technologies, government agencies devoted to promoting China's image sought to utilise science fiction as a vehicle to more artfully promote its own desired narratives and ideologies to the international public. Should creators insert into their stories representations of China's technological endeavours that are in line with the state's narrative aims, these notions would be propagated to a wider international audience that the state has been less successful in reaching through direct government publications and higher level dialogues.

### **The Wandering Earth as an Incorporation of State Space Narratives**

According to Gwennaël Gaffric and Will Peyton, Chinese science fiction literature and film has been “placed at the forefront of a nationalist project both inside and outside China,” where Party members have encouraged science fiction authors to inspire the nation's youth through their stories to fulfil the Chinese dream of renewed global leadership. China's state media has continued to hail the international success of Chinese science fiction as representative of “the rebirth of a great nation,” and has already taken steps to establish science fiction authors as representative and supportive of China's scientific developments (Gaffric and Peyton). For instance, following the increasing international popularity of Liu Cixin's work, particularly his science fiction epic *The Three-Body Problem* [三体], the author was invited to act

as a consultant for the China National Space Programme (Liu), as well as an official ambassador of China's Mars exploration programme (Gaffric and Peyton). Liu has also been invited to be involved in a number of high-profile national space events, including giving a speech at the unveiling of the Five-hundred-meter Aperture Spherical Telescope (FAST).

However, the increased connection between science fiction creators and state organs gives rise to conditions in which new works are expected to promote elements of the regime's official narrative on China's technological developments and capabilities. China's publishing industry has been recognised as a tool that will allow the political regime to appropriate the science fiction genre (Gaffric and Peyton). This means that government agencies have an important role to play in the in selecting narratives that align with China's foreign policy agenda. Sociotechnical imaginaries, or visions of society centred on the realisation of certain technological developments, that do not fit with the government's technological development narrative may therefore be discounted or suppressed by these agencies. However, those imaginaries that fit with the regime's political narrative may also be promoted and held up as exemplary sinofuturistic stories and models.

The argument presented here is that the success of *The Wandering Earth* and its promotion by state organs can be considered to comprise elements that are representative of the narrative that the regime seeks to propagate. Specifically, it is those elements surrounding the portrayal of its space capabilities and the role of the Chinese astronauts in global affairs that are favoured by Chinese officials.

The worldbuilding choices in *The Wandering Earth* film incorporate the government's own purported narrative that its space endeavours are based on ideals of international cooperation and the enrichment of humankind.

While a Coalition government is mentioned in Liu's original short story, details of the internationality of the Earth's new government or its space forces do not feature heavily in the story. However, within the context of the film, while individual nations and nationalities are still recognised, there are no national space forces. Instead, all nations of the world have combined their space technological expertise under a United Earth Government for the purpose of saving the planet.

According to director Guo Fan, political aspects of the film were strongly considered, and the choice was made to incorporate a peaceful coalition government with a unified space force into the story (Li). Within the production notes for the

film, one of the foundational ideologies of the world in which the film is set is that humanity exists as “one big family” and the astronauts of Earth’s various nations work together as a team for the good of humanity (Shuo). The global society shown in the film was not an arbitrary choice, but a carefully considered and purposeful decision on the part of the production team, which allowed for the portrayal of China as an important actor within a global community.

Equally, the decision to ensure that the Earth is eventually saved from the clutches of Jupiter thanks to the sacrifices ultimately made by Chinese protagonists further demonstrates that the power of the Chinese people is not self-interested. Instead, it tells the audience that the Chinese people see themselves as part of a collective humankind, that its capabilities will be used to protect this collective, not to challenge or compete with it for survival.

While it is ultimately Chinese characters who save the world, as Song explains, *The Wandering Earth* did not separate China from the rest of the world, but allowed China to be representative of humanity (Song). The heroism displayed by the Chinese protagonists was not led by nationalist interests, but by the widely supported value of protecting humankind. While such principles are represented here in a fictional future, they are the principles that the Chinese regime desire to be associated with their space programme in reality. Given the real political context in which the film was created, such key production choices were likely included in the film in order to align with state purported narratives that would show the Chinese nation in a positive light.

In addition to these narrative additions, the audience is consistently reminded of China’s role as a valued member of the united coalition through aesthetic choices. The space suits that are worn in the film were meticulously designed, involving over 1,000 separate parts (Li 2019). The decision to include the logo of the new coalition’s space force, designed to appear very similar to the UN’s well-known emblem, was again unlikely to have been an arbitrary choice. Placed on both the arms and the fronts of the suits and clothes worn by the characters, the symbol is frequently shown on screen, including during the important ending scene where a Chinese character sacrifices himself to protect the Earth. The presence of the symbol next to China’s national flag on the suits of the characters is also symbolic of China’s first space flight, when taikonaut Yang Liwei held up the flag of the UN alongside the Chinese flag to represent mutual aims and values for space exploration. The presence of the



symbol in the film acts as a permanent reminder to the audience that while the main characters are of Chinese origin, the work they do is ultimately for the benefit of humanity.

While the film does not explicitly condemn any nation as the antagonist of the story, the underlying ideology of the film is favourable towards the purported Chinese values of space exploration, and hints at a rejection of common US values associated with space exploration. According to Guo, Western science fiction portrays a sense of longing to escape Earth in favour of worlds beyond our own. While the American notion of space is one of an 'endless frontier' waiting to be explored, the Chinese mindset conversely does not desire to leave the home that it has identified with for thousands of years. According to Guo, the US mindset is that if Earth is experiencing a crisis, it is possible to run away from it. The Chinese mindset differs from this as exemplified in *The Wandering Earth* (Li). Instead of running from Earth in the face of crisis, Chinese science fiction demonstrates a different ideal of remaining with and protecting the planet. While not explicitly stating so in the film, the underlying narrative of wandering with the Earth instead of from it suggests that Chinese philosophies offer a leadership style that seeks to defend the planet and the heritages of its people. Chinese do not run from crises, but will remain and help where it can. This key theme in the movie suggests that China's technological development can only serve to further its capacities to help, and had the state not pursued the aim of advancing its space programme, the Earth's collective space capacities would have remained underdeveloped. In turn, the world would not likely have been able to save itself from the crises presented in the film.

The film adaptation of *The Wandering Earth* has already proven to be a production favoured by the central government. The film has been recommended by the Ministry of Education to be shown to school students throughout China ("Sci-Fi Blockbuster"), and its financial success and award wins have been covered extensively by Party mouthpieces such as *Xinhua* and *People's Daily*. The film has also been continuously dubbed by the state media as "China's first homemade sci-fi blockbuster" ("First China-Made Sci-Fi Blockbuster"). The decision of the state media to promote *The Wandering Earth* as the nation's "first domestic sci-fi epic" is one that does not recognize China's history of science fiction film productions, ignoring films such as *Deformity Sci-Fi* [残废科幻] (2013), *Reset* [逆时营救] (2017), or *The Secret of Immortal Code* [伊阿索密码] (2018), to name only a few. *Death*

*Ray on a Coral Island* [珊瑚島上的死光] (1980) is widely considered to be China's "first science fiction film" (Zhang), but is again overlooked by the state in favor of presenting *The Wandering Earth* as China's first.

The key feature that differentiates film adaptation of *The Wandering Earth* from its science fiction predecessors is that it actively promotes the government-purported narrative that China's technical capabilities are for the benefit of humanity as a whole. While *Death Ray on a Coral Island* sets China and Westerners as rivals, *The Wandering Earth* presents a more peaceful and diplomatic relationship between China and the world. Showcasing Chinese imaginaries of the nation's space capabilities as beneficial to the international community, the film conforms to the desired narrative that the state seeks to purport.

The regime recognises that *The Wandering Earth* portrays "a community of a shared future for mankind," a key quality it seeks to promote of its space ambitions (Chung). Most notably, the Wang Xiaohui, who acts as both the Executive Deputy Head of the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the Director of the Film Bureau of National Radio and Television Administration, reportedly praised the film for its portrayal of "the Chinese people's non-utilitarian, cosmopolitan and cooperative spirit" ("China's Film Authority").

Seeking to put its best foot forward on the international stage, the marketing of *The Wandering Earth* as China's first science fiction film intends to send the message that the nation's technological development has always been with the welfare of the international community in mind.

## Conclusion

In the face of criticism by the US, the film adaptation of *The Wandering Earth* presents China as a technologically responsible, cooperative, supportive, and reliable actor in space that seeks to benefit of all of humanity. While the US has adopted more neoisolationist policies over the last few years, coupled with its assertion of dominance in space through the creation of the US Space Force, the film purports a more peaceful and cooperative narrative of China's space activities that fall in line with official state narratives. It is likely that these narrative additions to Liu's original short story were made with consideration given to the state's call for science fiction creators to incorporate and reinforce the government's real-life policy narratives.



In turn, the Chinese regime adopted the film as a state favourite, promoting it through a variety of methods and asserting it as representative of Chinese thought on the nation's technological development. However, with the global popularity of Chinese science fiction still its infancy, it remains to be seen how effective these incorporated state-approved narratives are at swaying the opinion of the international public on China's space affairs.

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