

From the Fiction to the Film: The Adaptation, reconstitution and recreation of *The Wandering Earth*

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ABSTRACT

With the development of science and technology, people have gradually entered the "image era". The ever-richer media mediums have built a larger space for the film adaptation of literary works. Meanwhile, film adaptations are easily accepted due to their figurative expression, enabling the dissemination of literary works of different times and regions across language and cultural barriers. "Wandering Earth", a box office success in 2018, is a "phenomenal" film adapted from science fiction. While it brings the audience an intuitive and convenient way to appreciate the work, it also generates continued public debates: Can the film depict the connotation of the original work? Is the adaptation of "Wandering Earth" both literary and artistic? How should the gains and losses of the adaptation of "Wandering Earth" be viewed fairly? What insights does its commercial success offer for film adaptations of literary works? These are the questions this paper attempts to explore.

Keywords: Wandering Earth; Adaption and reconstruction; Aesthetic expression; Text and image

INTRODUCTION

As time changes and the development of film industry, the film adaptation of fiction has gradually become an important topic in academic circles. Fiction and film, as two different types of artistic expression, have different regulations though with similar narrative theory. Zhou Anhua has pointed out that "novel can be regarded as the art matrix of the film and is the home of its spirit and aesthetics." [1] Since story setting, narrative style and expression skills may change during the adaptation process, the film adaptation of fiction can be regarded as a kind of "re-creation", reflecting the fusion and collision between image and text. This paper takes *The Wandering Earth*, which has opened the "First Year of Chinese Science Fiction Film" as an example, to analyze the narrative transformation in the adaptation process of fiction, looking forward to the future of the adaptation.

The Wandering Earth directed by Frant Gwo is considered to be a successful adaptation of Liu Cixin's original fiction with the same name. It became the black horse of the Spring Festival season in 2019

with a box office of 4.655 billion yuan, starting a heated discussion among state medias and numerous film critics, incessantly praised as "the first work of Chinese science fiction blockbuster", "entering the history of Chinese film", "comparable to Hollywood films" and so on, it also won the Golden Rooster Award for best story. Its success was not only due to the film's technological breakthrough, high-level special effects, the local values therein or the Chinese elements; also couldn't do without the absorption, reference and rational adaptation from Liu Cixin's original fiction; while there were some problems in the adaptation process, which had changed or even weakened the original cultural appeal, aesthetic value, public opinion liquidity, and more. This paper takes the narrative transformation that occurred when *The Wandering Earth* was adapted from the fiction into the film as an example, to analyze the fusion and regeneration of the two artistic forms.

THE FILM ADAPTATION OF *THE WANDERING EARTH*: THE SHIFT FROM "DESPAIR" TO "HOPE"

Liu Cixin's fiction *The Wandering Earth* tells the story that three centuries ago, the rate of conversion of hydrogen into helium in the sun suddenly accelerated, and the forthcoming helium flash would cause the whole earth to vaporize and die out in an instant, leading to the extinction of mankind. Faced with the threat from the universe, various countries cooperated to form a coalition government and decided to embark on a 2500-year grand plan: build a planetary engine to push the earth away from the solar system, to the nearest star, Proxima Centauri, and then park it in the orbit to become its satellite. This plan is costly. "The tide caused by the acceleration of the earth's engine engulfed two-thirds of the major cities in the northern hemisphere, and the global high temperature brought by the engine melted the polar glaciers, making the flood even worse and spread to the southern hemisphere"[2]. Facing the threat of death, human beings had become pessimistic and helpless, and the doomsday mentality bred: 'In an age when the threat of death and the desire to escape are so overwhelming that nothing but the current state of the sun and the position of the earth can really catch their attention and move them,' ... But after the earth had wandered for more than 300 years and passed Jupiter safely, people found that the size of the sun had not changed, so they began to suspect that the "solar helium flash" theory and the "wandering earth" plan were just conspiracies of the coalition government. Finally, one day, the increasingly growing rumors and incessantly spreading suspicion ignited the fire of rebellion spreading around the world. After the rebels won, they executed the elites who had protected the continuation of the human race in the most cruel way. But just as they were put to death and people were dancing with joy for the uprising victory, the solar helium flash erupted ... The novel highlights the helplessness, pain, fear and despair of people who have nowhere to live when facing the destruction of their homes, reflects the insignificance of human being in front of nature and the universe, shows how human society will change under the extreme conditions and focuses on depicting the scene of "people in the disaster".

The story in the film *The Wandering Earth*, different from that in the novel, took place at a certain time in the future when the sun was aging rapidly and expanding continuously, Within 500 years the entire galaxy, including the earth, will be swallowed by the sun. To save the planet, mankind formed a global coalition government and launched the "Wandering Earth" plan. The plan continues with the settings in the novel, which also aims to push the earth away from the solar system and fly to the nearby star 4.2 light-years away to build new homes on Proxima Centauri in 2500 years. But in the movie, the international space station, which escorts the "Wandering Earth", is added, to fly with the earth at a relative position of 100000 kilometers away, providing early warning, navigation

and communication support for the earth. Unlike in the fiction, all the wandering trajectories of the earth were accurately controlled by scientists through calculation. In the film, due to the calculation error, the earth moved away from its trajectory influenced by the surge of Jupiter's gravity in the 17th year after the start of the plan, and a large number of planetary engines failed and stopped running, resulting in the earth and Jupiter about to collide. To avoid such a disaster, mankind started transporting flint, hoping to restart the planetary engines and save the lives of 3.5 billion people on earth. However, the operation was unsuccessful, so the space station was evacuated, and the coalition government reported that the "Wandering Earth" plan had failed, and replaced it with the "Kindling" plan. But the Chinese rescue team did not give up any hope, trying to ignite the atmosphere of Jupiter with planetary engines, and push the earth away from Jupiter by the explosive thrust, to avoid the collision. The team, playing as the leader in the whole process, called on the rescue teams of all countries to work together and fight hand in hand. When rescue teams from all over the world made concerted efforts to reignite all the steering engines, they found that the jet flames were still not high enough, which frustrated the ignition plan. At this critical moment, Chinese astronaut Liu Peiqiang piloted the space station into Jupiter in a self-sacrificing way to complete the ignition task, and the earth was pushed back by the huge shock wave and separated from Jupiter. The film focuses on the depiction of "people in the disaster", showing the wisdom and unity of people in the face of the disaster, highlighting the power of hope and the emotional appeal among people.

As mentioned above, the symbiotic relationship between film and novel is not just a simple use of cameras and performances to film and visualize the novel, but a "re-creation" based on which the director and screenwriter, with their own understanding, adapt the novel according to the law of film and re-interpret it. A deep exploration of the "tension zone" between language text and visual text can reveal rich and complex cultural connotations.

When it comes to The Wandering Earth, we can find that there are two narrative clues in the adapted film: the space station navigators clue represented by Liu Peiqiang and the ground rescue teams clue represented by Liu Qi. The intersection of these two clues is "the hope for the future". So there were a series of actions that Liu Peiqiang left the dormancy warehouse without permission and went to the main control room with Makarov, tried to get in touch with people on the earth after learning the truth about the "Helios Project" and the impending collision between the earth and Jupiter in the dialogue with Moss, and finally sacrificed themselves to save the earth; on the other hand, Liu Qi, Han Ziang and other Chinese rescue team members on the ground transported flint to the underground city at all costs, tries their best to send distress signals to the whole world by themselves alone after discovering a new way to save the earth ... In the process of racing against time, countless people fight courageously regardless of personal danger, one after another, in order to continue the hope of survival for generations.

In the film, the director focuses on the courage of people persevering with hope and being towards death, while in the novel, Liu focuses more on people's numb and hopelessness in the face of disasters: They are fear of death, meanwhile gradually get used to the threat of death. They are indifferent to life, then become psychological alienation gradually, feeling confusion and anxiety about the future. The novel constantly emphasizes that "death" was common to "me", and for fear of death, "I" dared not even go to the ground; for fear of death, the government strictly controlled

the population; also because of fear of death, people gave up art, philosophy and religion and paid more attention to practical science and engineering ... This kind of fear directly led to their indifference to life and psychological alienation: mother didn't care about father's infidelity, and then accepted his return in a bland way. "I" and Kayoko married without love, and it seemed that who "I" lived with and how "I" lived were no longer important when "living" was the ultimate goal. And the worries of human beings losing their homes and having nowhere to live ran through the whole text, highlighting the irresistible disaster and the insignificance of mankind in front of the universe and nature. Liu Cixin's focus in the novel was disaster, its occurrence, development, results and influence, especially the impact of the disaster on human society -- and people's mentality and situation in the disaster were depicted as the elements that reflected the cruelty of the disaster, intended to reflect the author's rational cognition of the ice cold universe law: in the face of the disaster, man is just a weak and small life without resistance.

The fiction focused on describing the fate that people couldn't choose and reverse when facing nature and the universe, as well as the panic, struggle and despair of people in the face of the disaster, while the film emphasized, in the adaptation process, the people in the disaster, and their attitude, thinking, efforts, unity and hope: many people sacrificed, but there were still countless hands push little Han Duoduo to Han Ziang; Liu Peiqiang died, but he got understood by his son and saved countless lives on the earth; Though Liu Qi and the rescue team faced the threat of death for many times, they still kept on fighting, and worked together to find ways to avoid the collision; at the last moment, the helpless Han Duoduo won the support of rescue teams from many countries around the world with her trembling voice, and united with them for the highest level of self-rescue. Film is a kind of art style closely combined with society. To some extent, it can play the roles of realistic propaganda, value orientation and public opinion guiding, even bringing people together and restoring hope. Therefore, the focus of the adapted film is different from that of Liu Cixin's original novel in story setting. It not only add more narrative clues and multiple (or even multi-national) character relationships, present the international joint rescue under the leadership of the Chinese rescue team, and embody the great power consciousness, global vision and the interpretation and expression of the concept of the community of shared future for mankind; but also shift the focus of attention from "disaster" to "human", from the description of desperate situation to the portrayal of hope and struggle, it changes the novel's intentional depiction of severe disaster, reminding human beings to face up to their own insignificant and fragile ideas, and emphasizing human courage, wisdom and efforts in the face of the disaster, and perseverance in the survival dilemma in turn ... "Wherever the end result leads to human history, we choose hope." In a word, it take the characters' emotions and behaviors as the main thread to inject warmth and hope into the original indifference and despair of the film, and make the movie viewers feel the call of the future and the hope for tomorrow. The clear narrative clue, reasonable narrative rhythm, and the distinctive image of the hero made the emotional energy smoothly conveyed to the audience and aroused resonance.

THE NARRATIVE TRANSITION FROM THE FICTION TO THE FILM: THE DELETING OF PLOT AND SUSPICION SPIRIT

Although the main narrative was still based on the plot of Liu Cixin's novel, the screenwriter made some narrative adjustments when adapting it into the film. In addition to the above mentioned shift of narrative focus from "the despair of disaster" to "the hope in disaster", there were several plot simplifications in the film, reflecting the changes of cultural value and aesthetic tendency:

At the end of the original fiction, the author Liu Cixin set up the "rebellion" section, describing people's suspicion about the prediction of helium flash when the earth was breaking away from the solar system. They collect solar images and find that the sun had not change for centuries in terms of luminosity, pixel arrangement, pixel probability, hierarchical statistics and other parameters. So rumors spread that the "Wandering Earth" plan is a lie made up by the coalition government, behind which lie the conspiracy that the government attempted to control mankind. Hence people revolt and demand to return the earth to the solar system. More and more people join in the rebel camp, and the original government forces also change side wave upon waves. Finally, the rebels attack their earth pilothouse. The government could hold out until the end, but it would cause irreparable damage to the earth, so they choose to give up their resistance. After the rebel won, they exile more than 5000 scientists and government staff to the freezing ground and leave them frozen to death. Just as the rebels rejoice in the victory and sang loudly, the sun's helium flash erupt, people realize that they were stupid and the government was right.

In this section, Liu Cixin took the masses who did not know the truth and the government who suffered from humiliation as the theme, and satirized the evil in the deep human nature that people were inspired by the limitation of cognition and the loss of reason. When the ignorant people spread their wrong inference, and executed the elites who tried to protect the earth and continue human existence, "take away the heating atomic batteries in the encapsulating suit of every person sentenced to death, and then throw them onto the ice surface of sea, letting the freezing temperature of minus 100 degrees Celsius slowly take their lives." [3] These people had no pity when they saw their kind being executed, and even sang triumphant songs with spirit. Their ignorance and indifference were almost comparable to those of the spectators in Lu Xun's literary works, "Human blood steamed buns" are no more than that. However, this part of content was directly deleted in the film after adapted. Although this practice of clearing up the dark side of human nature was convenient for the film's concentrated narration, it also made the adapted film lose the original the spirit of doubt and philosophy in the novel.

It has to be said that the "rebellion" in the novel conforms to the reality of human nature. In the 2500-year task with successive one hundred generations, it was very difficult to maintain the people's trust in the coalition government from day to day. Coupled with the harsh environment and their panic, the people were easy to fall into depression. Therefore, it was possible for the rumors in the novel to cause rebellion. On the contrary, the absence of suspicion and rebellion will make us feel that the logic is not rigorous enough. For example, when the steering engines were turned on, the earth stopped rotating, bringing about a huge tsunami and causing a sharp decline of the global population by half; these engines exerted huge pressure on the earth's crust, causing continuous earthquakes, which resulted in magma seeping into the underground city from time to time, and killed a large number of people. In this case, would the rest of the people undoubtedly and wholeheartedly support the "Millennium Plan" of the government? Or because the rescue team didn't arrive in time, 350,000 residents of the Hangzhou underground city were wiped out. Even so, no one questioned their plan? No one doubted whether there was a problem with the design of the underground city and whether anyone was responsible for these tragedies? Why was flint placed so far away from those planetary engines? The audiences tends to have such questions when watching the movie.

Of course, there are different opinions on whether the plot should be abridged or not, but the huge controversy of the audiences on this issue suggests that we should carefully consider whether to abridge or keep the skepticism and reflection in the original works when we make fiction adapted into film. From this point of view, the author will discuss the continuity of ideology and the change of cultural value and aesthetic tendency in the process of adaptation from novel to film.

There is another case worth focusing. In the novel, when the steering engines are turned on, the earth stop rotating, causing a huge tsunami, the world's population plummet by half, and the left half move to the underground city. This cruel process has been mentioned by the author quite briefly without much description, as if the author considers this as an inevitable sacrifice. This idea continues in the adapted film: at the beginning, the number of human beings on the earth have been sharply reduced by half due to the extreme weather caused by the earth's stopped rotation; as the plot unfolded, there are more casualties; and at the end of the film, 3.5 billion people on the earth have been directly abandoned, the coalition government turn to "Helios Project". It seems that human sacrifice and death are not worth mentioning in front of the survival of the whole earth, the sacrifice of the general public can be easily ignored, which hides a huge cruelty and indifference to living lives. For example, as Gang Zi, a member of the rescue team, sacrifices himself to save Liu Qi's grandfather when transporting flint, Liu Qi's emotion changes could hardly be seen in the film; when Russian astronaut Makarov unfortunately fall into space in the adventure to accompany Liu Peiqiang to rescue, people can hardly see Liu Peiqiang's grief in the movie, while he just continue to go to the main control room calmly and cautiously to implement his rescue plan. Of course, when he faces the life-or death decision, he doesn't hesitate to devote his life. The thought "the sacrifices are necessary" plays an important role in the film, which makes the characters sacrifice their lives without any complaint or regret in the film, and the choice that sacrifice for the sake of others is promoted as the main spirit of in the movie, and also be regarded as the echo of Chinese traditional spirit of sacrificing life for righteousness – as if sacrifices are necessary condition for rewarded, and in the exchange of small sacrifices for great gains, from which human beings could see hope. But is it reasonable to continue this idea from the novel to the movie?

Back to the beginning, when scientists discover that the conversion of hydrogen into helium accelerate in the solar interior, more than three centuries before the sun's helium detonation, they design and implement the "Wandering Earth" plan that killed half the earth's population. Liu Cixin seems to presuppose a logic here: if some people are saved, somebody else have to die, people can survive only at the expense of others. What we didn't realize is that when the plan begins to be implemented, half of the people on earth sacrificed, accordingly, what is sacrificed by this plan is infinitely rich possibilities and our future, the future of ourselves and our generations. Who knows in more than three centuries, there would not be more professional and greater intellectual elites than these scientists at that time? Who knows that the descendants of the sacrificed people cannot come up with a plan that is more meticulous and saves more people than the "Wandering Earth" plan? Whereas, the thinking "the sacrifice is necessary" is shining faintly behind Liu Cixin's text and Guo Fan's film.

Fortunately, the movie "Wandering Earth" made some corrections to this. As a husband, Liu Peiqiang gives up treating his wife for the sake of his child and father-in-law. This seemingly "have to do so" approach triggers Liu Qi's strong dissatisfaction with him -- Although his father decide to stop his mother's treatment from a rational point of view, Liu Qi believes that no one has the right

to decide the lives of others – this can be seen as an in-depth reflection on "the sacrifice is necessary" and "who is responsible for the abandoned lives". This kind of thought is more obviously expressed in the second call between Liu Peiqiang and Liu Qi. Liu Peiqiang asks the rescue team Captain Wang Lei to send his son to the nearest Jiaxing refuge, but Liu Qi resolutely replies: "What rights do you have to make decisions for me? My mother's death was your decision!" "The proposal of " What rights do you have to make decisions for me " was the film's response and reflection on the sacrifice issue of the fiction. This reminds us consider that why people died in the terrible tsunami caused by the ceasing of the earth engines lost their rights and possibilities of free choice so early in the fiction? We can see the significance of film adaptation from this perspective. There are thousands of astronauts and all the historical records, civilization achievements, animal and plant embryonic cells and DNA maps of the earth in the space station, which are enough for them to carry out the "Helios Project" under the leadership of cold-blooded AI machine Moss, and go to Proxima Centauri to rebuild an earth civilization. But when Moss ask everyone in the space station to go dormant, the protagonist Liu Peiqiang break free and overcome obstacles to walk to the main control room together with the awakened Russian astronaut. Later, Liu Peiqiang resolutely burns Moss and sacrifices himself to save the earth where all human survivors are living now, firmly says that "a civilization without men is meaningless." Although many film critics criticize it for being superficial, while the film actually highlights the emotional appeal of human nature and the perceptual examination of rational thinking from the perspective of revising and rewriting the original fiction, reflecting a novel idea in the adapted film on life and death, as well as the continuity of civilization.

CREATIVE RECONSTRUCTION: THE FUTURE OF FICTIONS' CINEMATOGRAPHIC ADAPTATION

Susan Hayward indicated in her *The Key Concepts* that "the adaptation of literature into film is a tradition established from the moment when film was born ... Fiction adaptation has brought film respectable features and made it an entertainment product with artistic taste ... Fiction adaptation will create a new story, which is different from the original one, but takes on a new life." [4] The film adaptation *The Wandering Earth* is a new annotation and interpretation of the original fiction, triggering us to think a lot about film adaptation of fiction from its narrative transformation, and the resulting gains and losses.

Focus on the aesthetic tendency of the audience

The book *Novels into Film* dealt with the importance of the audience: "the difference between fiction and film in content cannot be fully explained by their difference in material. Because these two means depend on specific (though the composition itself is mixed) audience (readers) separately; the requirements of this audience (readers) influence the contents of the art as well as its form." [5] The success of Liu Cixin's fictions is based on his consideration about mass culture and reader's aesthetics. "He always regards himself as a fan of science fiction, thinking, feeling and creating in the way of a fan." [6] The success of *The Wandering Earth* directed by Frant Gwo is no exception. It is precisely because the understanding of the audience's expectation about a mature and successful "hard science fiction film", the director make use of the "Hollywood" heavy industry visual effects, then make the film with extreme rigor and professionalism, the preparation and shooting of the special effects in "medium-scale display of astronomical spectacles such as the highly completed gravitational slingshot scene in outer space, Roche limit, etc." [7] According to his self-statement in *How to Make Science Fiction Movies in China*, during the four years of preparation, he said that the team invited four experts from the Chinese Academy of Sciences to participate in the film design,

completing the 100-year chronicle design, more than 2000 special effects shots, 3000 conceptual design drawings, over 8000 sub-lenses rough sketches, and more than 30 minutes of dynamic preview, and meanwhile, taking a lot of time and energy to make more than 10,000 props to meet the shooting needs, and restore the original scene as far as possible.[6] From as small as helmet parts and spacesuit construction, to as big as the building of the ice field, space station, underground cities and other scenes, the film team has tried their best. The satisfaction of audience's expectation is the reason why the film can win a loud chorus of praise and break through the circle with a high box office at a low cost.

In a word, the success of a film mainly depends on the audience's response when watching movies. For films adapted from novel or fiction, its audience includes not only people passerby but also those fans of the original work. During the viewing process, this kind of the audience may constantly compare their reading experience, existing memory to the adapted film, thinking about the continues and changes occurred in the film and judging whether the visual presentation in line with their expectations about the visual adaptations.

Focus on the creative construction of visual adaptations

From the text to the screen, *The Wandering Earth* has been re-read and reinterpreted constantly, it has been given new meanings after corrections and deletions. In this process, how to preserve the reflection of the original fiction on reality? How to continue the philosophical thinking in the text? These are inseparable from the creative construction of the original language text by the screenwriter and director.

As mentioned earlier, the movie *The Wandering Earth* caused great controversy because it deletes the original doubt and rebellion related contents. Many critics criticize that the film adaptation for deleting lots of the original contents that promoted the development of the plot and confronted social problems, simplifying the plot into a touching story with family relationship and the family and national righteous cause as the main content, greatly reducing the depth of the original theoretical criticism. But obviously, from a practical point of view, in a Lunar New Year film that had limited duration and promoted positive energy, it was necessary to make a simpler ethical statement that was also closer to contemporary values; and, it seemed that saving the earth and "letting more people survive" at the expense of the minorities was an helpless choice for men when the whole society was in a desperate situation. When theoretical speculations deviated from the needs of reality, what should we do?

The author believes that we can try to spend more duration to show the ethical predicament and dilemma faced by the protagonist. For example, as a well-trained and rational soldier, it was not impossible for Liu Peiqiang to give up his wife to save his son, but the screenwriter could use more words to describe his inner contradictions, guilt and reluctance at that time; or let his father-in-law Han Ziang join in and talk with him, highlighting the protagonist's psychological fluctuation and dilemma, rather than taking it for granted to show the forbearance of "Chinese-style father". This will make the audience feel more empathy and make it more in line with the ethical expectations of the public. Similarly, before the plot that Liu Peiqiang crashed into Jupiter in the space capsule, which was carrying the essence of human civilization, including embryo library and text, the film may take more seconds to highlight the protagonist's hesitation and dilemma between social

responsibility, public awareness and the narrowness of family ties. Although these kind of argumentation process might not affect the development of the film, it would help to emphasize the protagonist's difficulty and helplessness, helping the audience understanding the characters' behavior and development of plot. Meanwhile, the nobleness and tragedy of characters in the face of crisis could also be given prominence to in the argumentation process.

Behind rich interpersonal relationships are complex emotional entanglements and inner fluctuations. Only based on cohesive plots and abundant details, the emotions, thoughts, behaviors, decisions, choices, etc. of the characters will not be simply dealt with in a complanate way.

SUMMARY

The vigorous development of the film industry marks the progress of the society and the change of the public's aesthetic needs. The rise of hardcore science fiction such as The Wandering Earth inspired people's imagination and expectation of the future about science and technology. The adaptation, reconstruction and re-creation of The Wandering Earth from the fiction to the film not only make us find out the diversity of human nature, the fusion and reconstruction of art, but also remind us to pay attention to the dilemma when making choice between rationality and sensibility, as well as consider multiple approaches of film adaptation.

Nowadays, it is common for us to see films which are adapted from literary works. While how to make successful adaptation without destroy the main story line of the original text? How to make proper revisions and deletions based on the characteristics of the emerging media? How to retain the original reflective attitudes when making adaptations in the commercial capital market? How to catering to the audience's populace aesthetic while instilling a correct and healthy value ...all of these are important issues that cannot be ignored in the process of adaptation. Zhou Anhua pointed out that the adaption of literary works, as an important source of recent films, "is not only the concept of IP, but also a kind of culture in place, an inner temperament... Once the original novel scenes and the post-set movie scenes are connected, the rich implication hidden in the original work will be scattered like electric sparks, this will strongly touch the hearts and emotions of the audience."7 Therefore, an excellent film adaptation is a reasonable construction based on the essence of the original work, which should not only continue the ideological content of it, but also properly fill in the plot loopholes and emotional gaps as well, meanwhile, consider the audience's aesthetic expectations according to the characteristics of the media.

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