

## Identity and Resonance: The Vision of Chinese-style Modernization in Science Fiction Films and Overseas Audience Reception Study (Postprint)

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### Abstract

[Purpose] This study examines film as a vehicle for national culture to explore its vital functions in international communication—specifically, transmitting value concepts and shaping national image. [Method] From an overseas audience perspective, this research integrates quantitative content analysis with qualitative discourse analysis to investigate user evaluations, thematic concerns, and emotional attitudes on the global film review platform IMDb regarding “The Wandering Earth 2”. [Results] Findings reveal that overseas audiences demonstrate relatively high recognition of “The Wandering Earth 2”, focusing on four primary themes: cinematic technology, characters, narrative, and thematic core. While overall emotional attitudes are positive, variations exist across specific themes. The reviews collectively exhibit an objective and rational cognitive orientation. [Conclusion] The international success of “The Wandering Earth 2” effectively constructs three dimensions of China’s modernization vision: a technologically sophisticated “Technical China”, a magnificently imaginative “Sci-fi China”, and a “Responsible China” embodying the concept of a global community with a shared future.

### Full Text

## Recognition and Resonance: The Image of Chinese Modernization in Science Fiction Films and Its Overseas Audience Reception

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**Abstract:**

**[Objective]** This study explores how film, as a carrier of national culture, fulfills its important function of transmitting values and shaping national image in international communication. **[Method]** From the perspective of overseas audiences, this research combines quantitative content analysis with qualitative discourse analysis to examine global users' overall evaluations, thematic concerns, and emotional attitudes toward *The Wandering Earth II* on the IMDb platform. **[Results]** The study finds that overseas audiences demonstrate high recognition of *The Wandering Earth II*, focusing on four major themes: technology, characters, story, and main ideas. Their emotional attitudes are generally positive, though they vary across specific themes. The reviews exhibit an overall objective and rational cognitive tendency. **[Conclusion]** The successful international launch of *The Wandering Earth II* has constructed three dimensions of the Chinese modernization image: a technologically mature China with advanced industry, a China of magnificent sci-fi imagination, and a China bearing global responsibility as one world family.

**Keywords:** science fiction film; Chinese modernization; national image; audience reception; emotional identification

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Film is a modern art form and a crucial cultural product that embodies rich national cultural heritage and distinct value orientations, playing a pivotal role in cross-cultural exchange and national image construction. In recent years, Chinese science fiction films, represented by *The Wandering Earth* series, have risen globally and increasingly become a vital force in China's overseas cultural dissemination. In 2019, *The Wandering Earth*, which inaugurated the "first year of Chinese sci-fi cinema," was released in North America, accumulating \$5.97 million at the box office. After landing on the streaming platform Netflix, it further established the reputation of Chinese sci-fi cinema worldwide. On January 22, 2023, its sequel *The Wandering Earth II* was released simultaneously in North American theaters, achieving a cumulative box office of \$1.35 million in its first week across 142 theaters with limited screening, with an average revenue of \$9,542 per screen—surpassing other films including *Avatar: The Way of Water* and reflecting the high attendance rate for *The Wandering Earth II* [1]. This demonstrates that domestic sci-fi films have the potential to become an important growth point and new driver for the high-quality development of Chinese cinema, promoting China's advancement from a major film country to a film powerhouse and bringing new opportunities for overseas cultural dissemination and the active self-construction of China's modernized image.

## 1. Research Questions

As China's cultural exchange with foreign countries deepens, the issues of domestic films going global and national image construction have gradually attracted academic attention. Existing research has yielded fruitful results, with scholars approaching from macro perspectives or historical retrospectives to explore

how Chinese cinema constructs national images in specific periods. Regarding the construction of China's image in films since the 21st century, Chu Yanan argues that the common principle for national image construction should be to find a popular cultural logic that is reasonable, normative, conducive to realizing human freedom and social harmony, and consistent with historical trends [2]. Chen Xuguang and Che Lin examine the complex relationship between social class changes and the evolution of mainstream screen images over the 60 years since the founding of the People's Republic of China, considering issues of screen image and national image shaping across different historical periods [3]. Zhan Di, from a constructivist theoretical perspective, summarizes the experience of Chinese cinema in constructing national images across different historical periods since the 1920s, proposing that the core pathway for national image communication lies in seeking universal concepts shared by humanity, building global identity for national identity, and conveying modern consciousness that the international community can understand and is willing to engage in dialogue with [4]. As a pioneering work in Chinese sci-fi cinema's overseas expansion, *The Wandering Earth* has also attracted scholarly attention regarding its role in promoting cross-cultural communication and national image construction. Zheng Yanfang explores the film's Eastern cultural context and its grand narrative theme of a community with a shared future for mankind [5]. Wang Dong and Zhang Ce examine how the film combines the inheritance and promotion of excellent traditional Chinese culture with the requirements of international cultural communication in the new era [6].

Through literature review, we find that although a few scholars have attempted empirical research through questionnaires and content analysis [7-8], or interpretation from the perspective of online discourse analysis [9], textual analysis still dominates existing research, inevitably limiting research dimensions to the content production of domestic films themselves or single film text criticism. In measuring the overseas communication power and influence of films, domestic scholars primarily rely on evaluations from international film festival awards, senior film critics, or commercial box office performance, with less attention paid to the cognition, concerns, and acceptance analysis of ordinary overseas audiences at the communication terminal. The analysis of communication effects of domestic sci-fi films going global often remains at the critical construction level of "imagining others' imagination."

Following the successful convening of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the domestic academic community has keenly realized that "Chinese modernization" is becoming a systematic new Chinese discourse with both epochal and global significance, and that interpreting the Chinese modernization path constitutes the core content and key issue in telling China's story well [10]. Given that the discursive priority of human modernization and its development models remains in the hands of Western countries, especially developed European and American nations, breaking the Western monopoly on defining modernization and overcoming the international discourse dilemma of Chinese modernization through autonomous construction and external dissemi-

nation of the Chinese modernization discourse system will become an important issue in China's future international communication endeavors [11].

In light of the above, this study selects *The Wandering Earth II*, which is more mature than its predecessor and has attracted widespread attention in the global film market, as the research sample. Using the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), the world's most authoritative film review website, as the data source, this research collects relevant film reviews from the database, including audience ratings, titles, review content, review times, numbers of positive feedback, and total feedback counts. Based on this, a small-scale film review corpus is constructed for content analysis and discourse research to extract overseas audiences' thematic concerns, supplemented by qualitative analysis of review discourse to explore their emotional attitudes and acceptance levels. Through this approach, we can glimpse the image of Chinese modernization constructed by the film.

## 2. Data Collection and Analysis

After careful observation of the samples and reference to multiple content analysis scales, this study establishes four primary categories including rating, thematic concerns, emotional tendency, and degree of recognition (calculated as positive feedback count/total feedback count), with 20 subcategories underneath. To ensure coding rigor and scientific validity, the research team invited two trained coders to randomly select 30 reviews for independent coding, followed by reliability testing using the DiVoMiner platform. Results show that the Cohen's Kappa coefficients for 19 variables between the two coders all exceeded 0.86, indicating high consistency in coding results and good coding quality.

## 3. Research Results

### 3.1 Overall Overseas Audience Evaluation

According to the IMDb page for *The Wandering Earth II*, as of February 11, 2023, 6,718 users had rated the film, with an overall score of 8.0/10, compared to 7.8/10 for the sci-fi blockbuster *Avatar: The Way of Water*, which was released around the same time. Although the rating stability for *The Wandering Earth II* is relatively weaker than that of *Avatar: The Way of Water* due to the limited number of raters, it still reflects high recognition among overseas audiences. Ratings of 10 points accounted for 58.02%, 9 points for 16.02%, 8 points for 9.50%, and 7 points for 5.39%, showing a gradual decreasing pattern from high to low scores, as detailed in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

Based on the collected and processed review samples, the sample rating structure shows high similarity to the overall rating structure, thereby corroborating the representativeness of the samples, as shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper]. The average recognition degree values for reviews in each rating segment are shown in Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper]. The recognition degree values for reviews rated 1-8 show an upward trend, while those for 8-10

reviews tend to plateau at a high level. Reviews rated 1-6 have low recognition, with values all below 0.5; those rated 7-10 have high recognition, with values all above 0.5. This indicates that high-scoring reviews are more recognized by IMDb platform users, reflecting the general appreciation for *The Wandering Earth II* among the platform's user base, which also echoes the overall rating trend shown in Figure 1.

### 3.2 Overseas Audience Thematic Concerns

Through content analysis and word frequency analysis of the review corpus, we find that 70 reviews focus on the main ideas, involving primary thoughts, values, and ideology, with theme words including China, human, together, and nationalism; 88 reviews focus on the story, involving film length, plot logic, and narrative rhythm, with theme words including length, story, plot, and narrative; 65 reviews focus on technology, involving special effects, subtitle matching, and music usage, with theme words including special effects, CGI, subtitle, and music; and 26 reviews focus on characters, involving image shaping, acting skills, and dubbing effects, with theme words including character, emotion, acting, and dub. The relatively high attention to story and main ideas may stem from the film's Eastern narrative style and value orientation, which differs significantly from traditional Hollywood blockbusters, thereby stimulating discussion among overseas audiences. The film's technological application also opens a window for overseas audiences to understand the current state of development of China's film industry. The relatively low attention to characters may be due to most audiences' lack of in-depth knowledge of Chinese actors, with star effects being less prominent. Consequently, they tend to focus on the characters and acting itself rather than expressing personal preferences for specific actors.

### 3.3 Overseas Audience Emotional Attitudes

Overseas audiences' emotional attitudes toward the four major themes of the film show some differences, as illustrated in Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper]. For technology, positive evaluations completely overwhelm neutral and negative ones, accounting for 92.31%; for main ideas, positive evaluations also constitute a relatively high proportion at 77.14%, far exceeding the 18.47% neutral and 4.29% negative evaluations; for story themes, positive evaluations account for 60.23%, neutral evaluations 27.27%, and negative evaluations 12.5%; for character themes, the evaluation composition is relatively diverse, with positive evaluations accounting for 50%, neutral evaluations 30.77%, and negative evaluations 19.23%. The results show that positive evaluations constitute the largest proportion across all themes, followed by neutral evaluations, with negative evaluations being the least. Overall, the proportion of positive emotional attitudes in evaluations even exceeds the sum of neutral and negative attitudes.

## 4. The Image of Chinese Modernization Constructed by the Film

Through the above analysis of *The Wandering Earth II* IMDb review data and audience discourse, this study argues that the film presents and depicts three images of the Chinese modernization path to overseas audiences: a technologically mature China with advanced industry, a China of magnificent sci-fi imagination, and a China bearing global responsibility as one world family.

### 4.1 Technologically Mature China with Advanced Industry

Cinema is an art form closely integrated with technology. Reviews concerning technology fully demonstrate that the exquisite special effects and grand scenes presented in *The Wandering Earth II* have gained widespread recognition among overseas audiences. Behind this lies the support of China's currently mature film industry. Since the release of *The Wandering Earth* in 2019, its production base—Qingdao Oriental Movie Metropolis—has gradually become known and attracted widespread attention both domestically and internationally. *The Wandering Earth II* represents the most advanced production technology of this base. Two months before filming began, the script was transformed into visual animation using virtual production technology. During filming, the set featured 10 real-scene studios covering an area equivalent to over 100 soccer fields. The production team built a total of 102 sci-fi main scenes, with a total set area exceeding 900,000 square meters. The team produced 5,310 concept designs, 9,989 storyboard frames, over 6,000 visual effects shots, and 95,000 props and costumes [12]. Throughout the production process, *The Wandering Earth II* abandoned traditional production logic in favor of more advanced productization logic. As one description notes, “Whether through 3D printing, CNC machine tools, or laser engraving, components are produced as parts and then assembled in batches, which greatly improves production efficiency” [13]. All these advanced technologies demonstrate that it is precisely through these “national heavy weapons” that Chinese cinema has gained the confidence and strength to “catch up with Hollywood,” enabling *The Wandering Earth II* to ultimately present hardcore sci-fi scenes on screen. Reviews focusing on special effects constitute the vast majority, almost all affirming the remarkable achievements of today's Chinese film industry, with praises such as “visual masterpiece,” “special effects extravaganza,” and “top of the market” being countless. Among the dazzling special effects scenes, the “space elevator” received the most acclaim from overseas audiences. The film itself serves as a brilliant calling card, presenting to global audiences a spectacular, well-produced, and enchanting vision of China, winning world recognition through its magnificent audio-visual spectacle and showcasing a technologically mature China with a sophisticated film industrial system.

## 4.2 China of Magnificent Sci-Fi Imagination

As a prequel to *The Wandering Earth*, *The Wandering Earth II* continues to be adapted from Liu Cixin's sci-fi novel of the same name. The film presents a unique Chinese-style imagination of future space and constructs new power relations within this setting. Michel Foucault believed that all history is a history written by space and simultaneously a history of power—power is everywhere [14]. In the apocalyptic space setting, the film explicitly reveals the power landscape of various national governments in crisis: the establishment of the United Earth Government and the victory of the Wandering Earth Plan. Beneath the surface, it conceals the imbalance of status between humans and artificial intelligence: Moss serves as the mastermind behind the scenes testing humanity, while humans remain completely unaware. By the film's end, the spatial dimension extends into Moss's internal cyberspace, where Tu Hengyu (played by Andy Lau) and his daughter Yaya survive as digital life forms. This inadvertently aligns with Friedrich Kittler's media theory: the boundaries of the human body are no longer clear, and the body becomes an object of technology. What remains of humanity is merely what media can store and disseminate. What matters is not the information or content that organizes the spirit, but the systematic organization of sensations [15]. This imagination is not only novel but may also serve as a cautionary tale for future human survival and development.

Of course, imagination cannot exist without roots; it must be grounded in solid real-world logic and supported by scientific narrative details. Sci-fi settings are the foundation of sci-fi films, directly determining the overall structure and background of the story, and must possess creativity, scientific validity, and rationality. The vast majority of overseas audiences give positive evaluations of the film's sci-fi settings, considering the plan of “wandering with Earth” to be imaginative, possessing “a magnificent structure,” “grand pattern,” and “an amazing background,” telling the story of humanity facing dual challenges of apocalyptic disaster and survival. Many viewers are fans of the original author Liu Cixin and supplement the film's detailed settings with their own explanations and opinions. In terms of specific details, a few reviews question the accuracy of certain settings, such as whether space stations would crash to Earth's surface or whether the nuclear bomb layout on the moon could achieve its objectives—issues worthy of further investigation.

The Tiangong Space Station, quantum computers, 3D printing construction technology, intelligent construction robots, and 5G networks featured in the film are already completed technologies, while the underground city, space elevator, controllable nuclear fusion, and extraterrestrial space bases can be traced in China's ongoing “great power manufacturing” technology industries. Based on these scenes and technologies, every action of the characters in the film has detailed and specific operational plans: feasibility verification of planetary engines, quantum computer upgrades and iterations, astronaut training, lunar push and collapse plans, internet root server restart plans—these are real sci-fi scenarios where theories can be fantastical but engineering should approximate

reality. The brilliant presentation of these engineering projects and the magnificent sci-fi visual effects in the film demonstrate China's industrial strength, degree of industrialization, and the craftsmanship spirit of creation and production, while further stimulating exploration in heavy industry and translating more advanced imaginations into reality.

### 4.3 China Bearing Global Responsibility as One World Family

From the reviews, it is evident that *The Wandering Earth II* received more positive evaluations of its main ideas compared to its predecessor, which can be attributed to the film's narrative perspective, character design, and emotional expression methods, but more fundamentally to the vigorous vitality of Chinese values themselves. If we consider the film's story structure as the "skin" of a work, then its values constitute the "bones" of the work—the key to the external dissemination of China's image. In the film, the survival plan of propelling Earth away from the solar system rather than transferring humanity to a new home embodies China's deep-rooted concept of homeland and the striving spirit of the Foolish Old Man who moved mountains. The scene "Soldiers over fifty, step forward" demonstrates both China's cultural value of emphasizing inheritance and the Chinese people's patriotic sentiment of daring to sacrifice. The establishment of the United Earth Government and the approach to crisis response represent the global governance model of peaceful development and win-win cooperation advocated by the Chinese government, conveying a strong sense of "a community with a shared future for mankind" and offering a powerful echo to contemporary reality. In a context where individual heroism almost dominates sci-fi narratives, *The Wandering Earth II* stands out by championing collective heroism of "united hearts overcoming natural disasters together," conveying a spiritual core completely different from Western sci-fi. Regarding this main idea, most audiences express positive emotions, believing that the film weakens individual heroism and tends more toward grand narrative, offering a "hymn of mankind" that reflects completely different thinking about humanity's future from Hollywood films. The film conveys a hopeful message that when humanity joins hands to overcome difficulties, infinite power emerges, embodying the Chinese nation's unique vision for the sci-fi proposition of human destiny and the future world.

Behind this distinctiveness lies the possibility of mutual understanding and resonance among different cultures worldwide. Marx and Engels' communist ideology, the Stoic cosmopolitanism originating in ancient Greece, and the Chinese traditional concept of "great harmony" can all be encompassed within the emerging concept of "a community with a shared future for mankind," exploring feasible paths for world civilization development against the backdrop of profound changes unseen in a century. In this sense, *The Wandering Earth II*, building upon *The Wandering Earth*, further demonstrates Chinese philosophy in the field of global governance to the world, further conveying to overseas audiences China's in-depth consideration and sense of responsibility for "one

world family with a shared destiny,” and achieving better communication effects than its predecessor. It successfully disseminates Chinese values and China’s solutions and wisdom for resolving global crises, enabling more overseas audiences to begin recognizing and embracing the governance concept of “a community with a shared future for mankind” and China’s image as a responsible major power, representing a beneficial attempt combining localized adherence with a global perspective.

## 5. Conclusion

This study, from the perspective of overseas audiences, selects IMDb reviews of *The Wandering Earth II* for quantitative content analysis and qualitative discourse analysis. It finds that overseas audiences demonstrate high recognition of the film, focusing on four major themes: technology, characters, story, and main ideas, with predominantly positive emotional attitudes. Overall, the film’s magnificent and exquisite visual effects, realistic and relatable characters, imaginative sci-fi settings, the value concept of a community with a shared future for mankind, and in-depth consideration of technological ethics have been recognized and affirmed by most overseas audiences. An increasing number of overseas audiences are adopting rational and objective attitudes to understand China’s value concepts and ideological connotations, representing significant progress compared to its predecessor *The Wandering Earth*.

From this perspective, the process of Chinese sci-fi films going global is also an important opportunity to tell the world a true, multi-dimensional, and comprehensive story of China and depict the image of Chinese modernization for overseas audiences. It must be acknowledged that the overseas dissemination of Chinese cinema still faces two major challenges: first, the imbalance between Chinese cinema’s international status and China’s growing comprehensive national power; second, the mismatch between China’s advanced modern film industrial capabilities and the overseas communication power and influence of Chinese cinema. The international dissemination of the Chinese modernization path and Chinese values requires not only bridging the cognitive gap between international audiences and Chinese values but also better establishing China’s subject position and subject value, striving to change the fragmented, superficial, and marginal phenomena existing in international film and television communication.

Therefore, based on accurately grasping the successful practice of Chinese modernization, we must delve into its internal ideological logic and construct a film narrative discourse with Chinese characteristics that also communicates with the world, using diachronic and synchronic spatiotemporal narratives, general and specific comparative narratives, and dialectical combinations of grand and micro narratives. To break the dilemma of going global, Chinese filmmakers must pay special attention to international audiences’ cognitive preferences, emotional tendencies, and potential cultural discounts while telling Chinese stories and conveying Chinese values. On the basis of highlighting Chinese positions

and perspectives, we must interpret the characteristics of the Chinese modernization path, shifting from a “self-centered” approach to seeking consensus and constructing identity, transforming the superimposition of superficial Chinese cultural symbols into the exploration and connection of shared meaning spaces and deep emotional identification.

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