

# Reason for the Success of The Wandering Earth

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## ABSTRACT

Little Sun, created in the 1960s, was considered the first Chinese science fiction film. Sixty years have passed, but science fiction had never been a major stream in Chinese film-producing history. There had been several attempts but no one had received wide popularity. Until 2019, appeared a film called The Wandering Earth, which won a ¥ 4.6 billion box office[1] worldwide and was considered as the “ actual starting point of Chinese sci-fi films”. This essay adopts film critic and data analysis skills to explore the film’s story structure, box office and cultural elements involved. It can be concluded that the reason behind the huge success of The Wandering Earth is its unique story.

**Keywords:** Science Fiction, Film, Culture

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2019, The Wandering Earth, adapted from Liu Cixin’s (known for his The Three Problem) novella, was on in China for the first time. Defined as a science fiction film, it talks about a story that happens in 2075. Because of the decaying sun, humans construct engines on Earth’s surface to propel Earth escape from the solar system. The film received a wide range of popularity, both domestic and exotic. By analyzing the story structure, box office and unique Chinese cultural elements involved, this study wants to find out the reasons behind The Wandering Earth’s success, and provide suggestions for future Chinese science fiction films.

## 2. THE HISTORY OF CHINESE SCIENCE-FICTION FILMS

It is well-acknowledged that the first-ever made science fiction film was A Trip to The Moon (Le Voyage dans la lune) directed by Georges Méliès (French) in 1902, which marks the starting point of all science fiction films.

In 1963, China produced its first local sci-fi film called Little Sun, which talked about a story that a group of children created a sun and launched it into space to make spring come earlier.

In the late 1970s, the Shanghai Film Studio released a science fiction film named Dead Light on Coral

Island, which also became a relatively influential early science fiction film in China.

But after that, Chinese science fiction films disappeared briefly for a while. It wasn't until the mid-1980s when the Xi'an Film Factory put the science fiction feature film Dislocation (1987, Huang Jianxin) on screen, there was a small climax in Chinese sci-fi film production, followed by Wonder Boy (1988, Song Chong), The Ozone Layer Vanishes (1990, Feng Xiaoning), etc.

But this short-lived excitement only lasted until the early 1990s. Since then, Chinese science fiction movies have become almost rare, and it is difficult to find their trace. The only several attempts, for instance: Chang Jiang Qi Hao (2008, Zhou Xingchi), Crazy Alien (2019, Ninghao), were not hardcore sci-fi films and didn't receive wide popularity.

## 3. THE STORY

The story of The Wandering Earth follows a commonly seen three-act structure.

### 3.1 Background Environment

In the 2030s, the sun is rapidly degenerating and continuously expanding. As announced by the United Earth Government, the Wandering Earth Project was purposed to solve the problem. Humans construct 10,000 Earth Engines on Earth’s surface, providing power for the Earth to escape from the solar system and relocate in a new livable environment.

At the same time, the "Navigator Platform International Space Station" was built in space to safeguard the Earth's voyage and provide the necessary help. Aerospace elites from across the world were selected to work in the station.

In addition, due to the deteriorating environment, underground cities were built under each Earth Engine for people to live in.

### **3.2 Act 1 - Story Set-Up**

Liu Qi, the protagonist, secretly drove his grandfather Han Ziang's Cargo truck and took his sister Han Duoduo from the underground city to explore the Earth's surface as a Spring Festival gift. But on their journey, they were arrested for illegal operations, and their grandfather was also locked up.

Just at this point, due to Jupiter's gravitational spike, an earthquake happened and 4,771 Earth Engines were shut down, the Earth was about to collide with Jupiter in 37 hours.

Grandpa took Liu Qi, Duoduo, and their newly met "prison mate" Tim to escape from the prison.

Liu Peiqiang, who is Liu Qi's father, called Liu Qi and Han Ziang from the space station to tell them about the incident and find the nearest refuge for them.

However, on their way to the refuge, they ran into a rescue team that was on their mission to transport the "Lighter Core" to restart Planetary Engine in Hangzhou. Han Ziang's vehicle was requisitioned. At the crisis moment, the low consumption mode of NPISS was activated, and Liu Peiqiang was about to enter the sleep mode.

### **3.3 Act 2 - Confrontation**

Liu Qi and the others followed the rescue team to transport the "Lighter Core" to Hangzhou. Because of the road blockage in Shanghai, they need to transport the Lighter Core to the top of Shanghai Tower. However, Han Ziang died during the mission, unfortunately. Liu Qi and Wang Lei (the team leader) had conflicts over his grandfather's death.

At the other end, Liu Peiqiang got rid of the sleep mode and broke into the control center, trying to stop the voyaging NPISS and save his son and the Earth.

The mission to restart Earth Engine in Hangzhou failed, while Liu Qi and the rescue team encountered a

new task, which was to restart the Torque Engines in the equatorial zone.

The squad finally rushed to the destination and found all the Torque Engines had been restarted by other rescue teams. However, the Earth still couldn't escape the gravitational pull. Moss (the AI control system of Navigator) made a global briefing that the "Wandering Earth" project had failed and the "Helios" project started. The Earth seemed to have lost all hope and about to be tear up by the strong force; mankind was about to face tragedy.

### **3.4 Act 3 - Resolution**

Liu Qi came up with an idea - using the flame of Torque Engine to ignite Jupiter, thus the shockwave of Jupiter's combustion could propel the Earth away from Jupiter, which became the last hope of mankind. Everyone cheered up and worked hard for the new goal, and rescue teams across the world all came to help. But the flame produced by the engine did not reach Jupiter, and the Earth rescuing plan was about to fail.

In the end, Liu Peiqiang decided to sacrifice himself and use NPISS to ignite Jupiter.

Eventually, Liu Qi and his teammates succeeded and the Earth continued its voyage to escape from the solar system.

### **3.5 Story Analysis**

The film only depicts the part of Jupiter Crisis from the novella *The Wandering Earth*, which helps to limit down the plot and pave way for potential series.

The story follows the three-act structure. During the process, it doesn't follow a "destined to succeed" path. Instead, using mission failures, it precisely controls the hope and fear among the audience, revealing the weakness in people while also emphasizing the hope of humankind's effort.

## **4. BOX OFFICE**

The *Wandering Earth* was on in China on the fifth of February in 2019. On the first day, it received a total of ¥190 million box office. On the second day, its box office soared to ¥260 million and continued to climb. In the end, it received a 4.6 billion box office.[2]

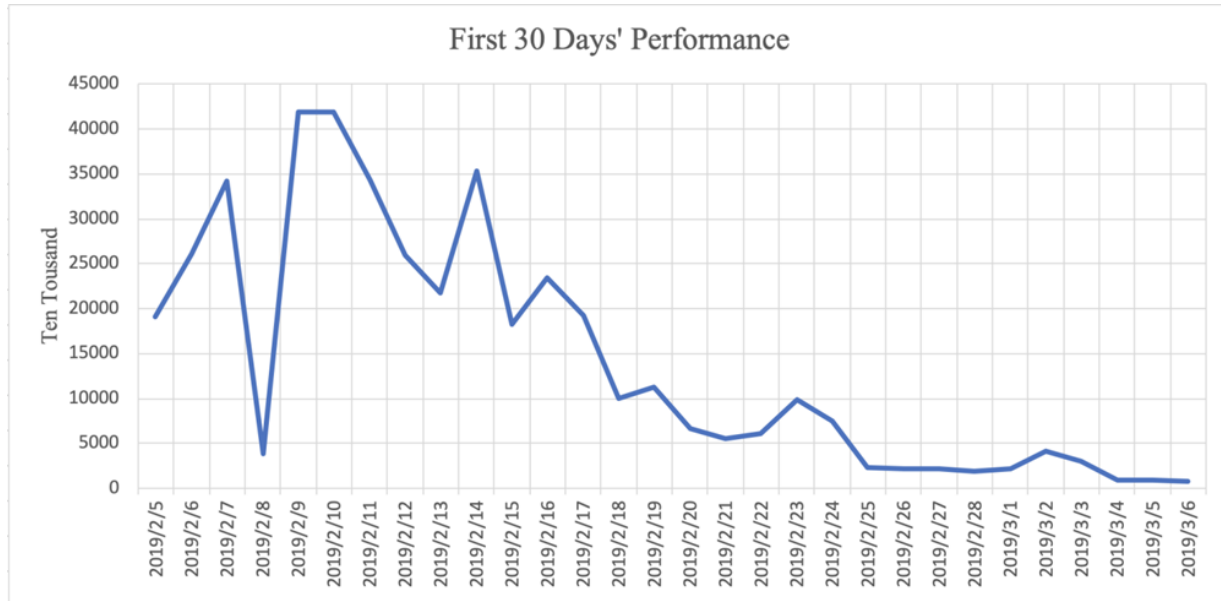


Figure 1 The Wandering Earth's First 30 Days' Performance

On exotic box office performance, The Wandering Earth won a total of \$7.7 million across the world,

\$5.97 million in North America, \$1.2 million in Australia.

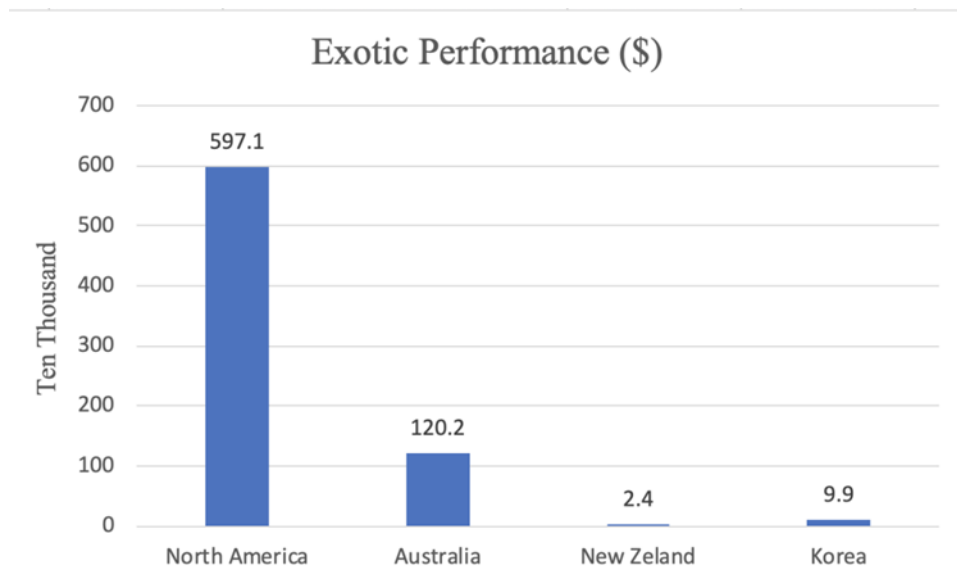


Figure 2 The Wandering Earth's Exotic Performance

In the end, The Wandering Earth won a total of ¥4.6 billion box office and ranks 4th in China's box office history. [3]

These numbers reflected the well-received popularity of The Wandering Earth. Moreover, compared to other films, it reveals great progress in both Chinese film export and science fiction maturity.

Wolf Warriors 2, which now numbers first in China's box office history, received ¥5.7 billion [4] in total, but its exotic box office was only \$4.59 million and won only \$2.72 million in North America. This evidence states that The Wandering Earth made big progress in exporting local story towards the world.

Moreover, compared to the ¥4.2 billion box office won by Avengers: Endgame [5] in China, The Wandering Earth still has a winning face, which reveals that it made a breakthrough in attracting local audiences as a sci-fi film.

The study believes that the most important reason behind its box office success is telling a story that roots in China.

## **5. CHINESE CULTURAL ELEMENTS INVOLVED**

### **5.1 Concept of Home**

In Chinese culture, “Home” means more than a place where people stay, where his or her family lives. More specifically, it means a unique place where people grow up, where people have memories, which shapes a person’s personality. It is widely believed that no matter how successful one is, no matter where one is, one should always remember his homeland and go back annually. For Chinese people, “homeland” can be family, community, village, city, province and country.

Thus, it is a very important custom for Chinese people to have a reunion with their family on big days, for example, the Spring Festival, the Lunar Festival. And it is very crucial that one has a feeling of belonging and pride towards its homeland.

Under the background of Hollywood dominating the science fiction film field, the screenwriters of *The Wandering Earth* need to create a story out of the commonly seen norms.

The goal of science fiction films in the West is to search beyond the stars or search under the sea, but in fact, the Chinese are not very used to looking up at the stars or facing the sea, instead they are more used to focus on the land they live.[6]

Different from commonly seen western sci-fi films, when facing a crisis, elites are sent on a spacecraft into outer space with a mission to discover a new place for humankind to live, often carrying genes and seeds from Earth. A famous instance is *Interstellar* (2014, America), the film follows a group of astronauts who travel through a wormhole near Saturn in search of a new home for humanity. [7] Although it is the same theme of “home”, the Chinese will show a special community emotion - and here comes the idea of “wandering with the earth”.

“The idea of wandering Earth comes from the ‘home’ concept in Chinese culture,” said Frant Gwo, director of *The Wandering Earth*. The story is set in the background of the Spring Festival, which is an important Chinese festival that emphasizes the idea of “home”. In the final scene where Liu Peiqiang used the idea of home to convince the UEG to agree with the final project of igniting Jupiter.

Moreover, the setting of “the underground city” also represents this idea. With the engine above the ground, the original citizens were placed in the underground city right under the engine, they continue to live in the land where they belong. To present the idea of “home” under the Spring Festival setting, the film also used elements like lanterns, neon lights, colored lights, small restaurants, etc in scenes of the underground cities.

With the idea of “home”, the screenwriters of *The Wandering Earth* successfully create a unique story based on Chinese culture. The idea of “taking the Earth to voyage” can give the audience a new experience. This helps the film to attract both domestic and exotic audiences. Moreover, because this film was first on in China during the Spring Festival, it could also arouse nostalgia emotion and identity recognition among the local audience.

### **5.2 Familiar Locations**

The film used a lot of familiar locations in China as scenes to present the disaster. For example, the frozen Beijing and Shanghai, Hangzhou submerged in lava. With the familiar places being destroyed, it’s very easy to make the audience compare them with their present status, there in return, arouse sympathy among the audience and feel connected to the disaster.

### **5.3 Cooperation**

The idea of cooperation plays a very important role in Chinese culture. It is believed that all humankind is connected. This idea is also reflected in the film. First is the setting of the “world rescue squad”. The *Wandering Earth* Program includes not only Chinese but also American, Japanese, Russian, Indian, etc. The space station recruited elites from all over the world. Meanwhile, the final mission of restarting the Sulawesi 03 Torque Engine to ignite Jupiter was an effort by rescue teams all over the world.

In line with the global setting of the story, the characters of each country speak only their native languages, mainly Mandarin, supplemented by Russian, French, English, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, etc. The characters communicate through headphones with real-time translation. The language and the plot arrangement emphasize that this is not just the story of a Chinese hero saving the world, but the struggle of human beings working together for the planet. The movie is about Chinese people, but the humanistic concern transcends national and racial perspectives.

With the Cooperation idea, the film became not only China-centered (eg. *Wolf Warriors*), but up to a world level, which helps the film to export.

## **6. CONS & PROS**

### **6.1 Pros**

The heart core for *Wandering Earth*’s success is that it tells a unique story that is different from the commonly seen science fiction films. It doesn’t follow a “destined” path: destined to succeed; destined one or a group of heroes to save the whole world; destined to escape from Earth. It reveals the weakness of

humankind instead of pure “we are destined to succeed”. Instead, it uses the fresh concept “wander with the Earth” and the idea of the whole world’s cooperation that is rooted in Chinese local culture. Thus, the idea helps to attract an audience, bring a new experience to the viewers and deliver to the world.

## 6.2 Cons

However, there are still flaws in this film. Mainly in the story part.

First is the not fully-grown characters.

Comparing with *Interstellar*, its father-daughter relationship is laid through the foundation of the relationship with the daughter as a child, culminating in the father’s plunge into the black hole to change time and space, and ending with the reunion at the space station; the whole process is layered and naturally incites emotions

However, in *The Wandering Earth*, after the death of Hang Ziang, the protagonist, who has been busy challenging authority, is suddenly immersed in sadness. This can be understood, but from the story part, as the audience, we can’t see the past between the grandfather and grandson, thus can’t connect to the feeling of sadness.

At the same time, the number of supporting characters is too high, and the two-hour film cannot provide a fleshed-out character and backstory for each character, which causes the depiction of many characters to become too flat. Differing personalities, as well as opposing objectives, can set conflicts in motion. [8]The lack of personality development results in the not fully grown characters, making it sometimes hard for the audience to connect to the story.

Secondly, the film focuses too much on Liu Qi’s family and makes it overly emotional. Instead, the parts that need more depiction like the personal growth of Liu Qi, and the final rescue mission process are not fully grown.

## 7. CONCLUSION

From analyzing the story structure, box office received and Chinese cultural elements involved in *The Wandering Earth*, it can be concluded that the most important reason for *The Wandering Earth* to reach success is that it has a unique Chinese story different from commonly seen norms. Though there are downsides in the film, *The Wandering Earth*, as a milestone in Chinese sci-fi filming history, shows future Chinese sci-fi filmmakers the importance to create a story that is rooted within Chinese culture.

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