

Prospects of the Chinese "Imagination" Movies with Sci-Fi as a Striker

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Abstract—"Imagination" movie, as the opposite direction of the reality movie, may become one mainstream in the future in China. Science fiction movie is currently undervalued, but in fact, it has great value, and Chinese science fiction movies are gradually sprouting. The reason for the excellent box office and evaluation for the works represented by *The Wandering Earth* is their unique culture kernel and sophisticated audiovisual language. In addition, the sci-fi movie has a special form — sci-fi animation, which can make up for shortcomings such as creativity, capital, and strength. Fantasy is the current trend, because the younger audience is extremely powerful in accepting new forms of art, and the types of various realities have been fully explored. The life of the "imagination" film lies in the script and the audience. It should not be too indulgent in the effect of the picture. Instead, it should focus on the insight into human nature and the creation of the story. It should show a reasonable world view in the spectacle world built for the audience.

Keywords—Chinese film; science fiction movie; *The Wandering Earth*; fantasy; prospects; "imagination" movies

I. INTRODUCTION

In the current Chinese film market, the "imagination" movie, as the opposite direction of the reality movie is gradually growing, becoming a major category that cannot be ignored, and may even become one mainstream in the future.

II. THE CLASSIFICATION OF "IMAGINATION" MOVIES

"Imagination" movies can be divided into sci-fi, fantasy, "xuanhuan", and magical fantasy.

Science fiction, the key words are science and fantasy. Science fiction is a mainstream type in the world, and there are many excellent works belonging to this category. Many superhero movies can also be classified as such.

Fantasy, which means singular and illusory, like sci-fi movies, there are many successful series in this category, such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

"Xuanhuan" is a unique species in China. It refers to the theme of re-innovation or integration into other fantasy content based on oriental mythology. It is mainly composed of self-cultivation, eccentricity, Xianxia, and Singular worlds. There are also many shoddy works. It is worth noting that

"xuanhuan" has promoted the rise and prosperity of Chinese online literature. It still occupies the mainstream of Chinese online literature, and many IP works belong to this category.

Magical fantasy is built on magic, such as the *Harry Potter* series. There are many similarities between this type and fantasy, so sometimes the two are confusing, such as the *Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, trilogy by the British writer JRR Tolkien, who is recognized as the father of modern magical fantasy novels, are all classified as fantasy.

III. SCIENCE FICTION MOVIE IS UNDERVALUED

Among the four categories, one type is seriously undervalued and bearish, that is science fiction movie. Science fiction, fantasy and magic fantasy have many similarities, so they are easily confused in their creation. Lu Chuan once said that what he did in the *Chronicles of the Ghostly Tribe* was to establish a type between science fiction and magic.

As it known that Chinese science fiction movies are underdeveloped. Before *The Wandering Earth*, the champion of 2019 Spring Festival was born, no matter whether box office or evaluation, the good works are very few. Many movie industry workers and scholars have explained the reasons, and some experts are pessimistic about Chinese science fiction. For example, in the "meeting of Chinese type film creation" forum hosted by "Writer Gang" in April 2017, screenwriter Song Fangjin believed that science fiction films and superhero movies are difficult to succeed in China today, and even "in twenty or thirty years, even in the lifetime of the audience, Chinese science fiction films will not succeed." His evidence is that China does not have the soil for these two types of films: "What is the basis of science fiction movies? It is science. In a country with a lack of scientific awareness and poor scientific results, it is a very sci-fi thing to shoot sci-fi movies [1]. On the other hand, the traditional education of the nationals is "everyone sweeps the snow from the front door, and does not care for others." This is also contrary to the spirit of superheroes.

Teacher Song's point of view is very real and reasonable, but it is also debatable. First of all, China's current scientific achievements are relatively fruitful, and many progresses have been made at the national and civilian levels, and some are still in the forefront of the world. In fact, many excellent

sci-fi works don't necessarily rely heavily on sci-fi settings, and have distinct sci-fi themes. Sci-Fi is a very broad category that includes not only hard sci-fi and soft sci-fi, but also as an element into other types. If it is too early to assert that Chinese sci-fi has no future, it is too pessimistic.

Secondly, compared with the past, Chinese science fiction films are gradually sprouting. The *Star Core*, *Contradictory War*, *Bleeding Steel* released in 2017, and the highly popular *The Three-body Problem* is all proclaiming this. The maker of the first Chinese mech space film *Star Core* said: "What is missing in Chinese movies? Lacking of technology? Lacking of talent? No, it's the lack of courage, and lack of big movie can stimulate the audience's adrenaline. It can be said that the Chinese science fiction movie is a value land that has not been fully developed and has great prospects. This has been fully proved in the *The Wandering Earth*."

The Wandering Earth is Liu Cixin's original novel. It was published in the 7th issue of *Science Fiction World* in 2000. It was widely acclaimed at that time and won the highest award of the Chinese Science Fiction Award - the Galaxy Award. The film was not optimistic at the beginning of the filming, and the number of filming sessions was much less than that of the *Crazy Alien* and *The New King of Comedy* in the same period, but it came to the fore and the tablet was gradually increased by word of mouth and a lot of "voluntary fans". Eventually it becomes the champion of the Spring Festival. In the case of the overall decline in the number of people watching the Spring Festival, *The Wandering Earth* broke through 3 billion yuan in only 9 days and 16 hours, which is shorter than the 10 days and 15 hours when *Wolf Warriors II* broke through 3 billion yuan in 2017; Under the premise of screening only 64 cinemas, it took 31 days to harvest the North American box office of 3.82 million US dollars. Although the absolute number is not large, the single-income and attendance rate is several times that of the box office champion, and the Chinese film has been on the summit for nearly 5 years in Box office list. The film tells the story of human beings building a large number of planetary engines with the Earth fleeing the solar system at the moment when the sun is about to explode. Once it is released, it has set off the attention and hot discussion of the wind and the waves. The relevant analysis and commentary articles are coming to the fore. *The People's Daily* praised it. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying made a recommendation at the regular press conference. *The New York Times* website launched a special report, and even James Cameron sent it on his social media and gave some wishes.

The reason for the success of *The Wandering Earth* lies not only in its exquisite film language, cool visual effect spectacle, but also in its homeland with Chinese characteristics, its unique cultural core and spiritual core, and a large number of Chinese native culture support. Compared with the sci-fi escape strategy of Western science fiction, *The Wandering Earth* chose to take the Mother Earth together, and at this time, it will bring together people from all walks of life in all regions of the world to "live the earth and humanity" for the same goal. The common struggle, the idea

of concentrating power to do big things, is laughed by netizens as coincident with the national attributes of our infrastructure madness. "The Great Universe of the World" was originally the ideal society of "everyone is for the public" promoted by Confucianism. It is the bottom of the mind of Chinese society. It is about "all brothers within the four seas". All ethnic groups should be like one family and love each other. It is the highest realm pursued by Confucianism and represents the beautiful vision of mankind for the future. This is the connotation of the community of human destiny, which consistently reflects China's conscious construction of a harmonious world. Therefore, *The Wandering Earth* is not only a breakthrough in the level of Chinese science fiction production, but also a good Chinese story, spreading the cultural confidence of China.

The success of *The Wandering Earth* is also inseparable from the meticulousness of the crew. Director Guo Fan and his crew have made great efforts to build a complete and self-contained doomsday world in order to make the details more realistic. According to the original article "The Birth of *The Wandering Earth*: I made this movie, I can boast a lifetime" from the media WeChat public account *Pick up the Legacy*, Zhongying has found many famous directors before Guo Fan, but no one is interested, then they found the unknown Guo Fan. At the first, they did the following things: First, build a rigorous world view; second, prepare a hundred-year chronicle; third, make 3,000 conceptual design drawings; fourth, adapt the script; then officially took over the production. 3000 concept drawings, 8000 shot's drawings, 10,000 items, 100,000 square meters of real scene, 2003 special effects shots, the hardship is self-evident, this is the basis for quality. And the rapid investment of 100 million, the addition of tens of millions of pots to sell iron is still not enough. Wu Jing gave up the remuneration, but also brought 60 million as investment. It's very embarrassed. Just like Bing Xin's poem: "Successful flowers, people only stunned her current bright! But at the beginning of her bud, it was soaked in the tears of struggle, and sprinkled the blood of sacrifice."

Honestly, *The Wandering Earth* has some shortcomings in the narrative level, such as the shaping of characters, the performance of actors, the coherence of plots, and the depth of trial of human nature, but the maturity of the Chinese film industry is a gradual process. Compared with foreign countries, the foundation of the Chinese sci-fi movie industry chain is still quite weak, especially the hard-core science fiction. From concept to system to practice, it poses a severe test for the creators' thinking ability, imagination ability and design ability. What is gratifying is that *The Wandering Earth* has finally opened up the first year of Chinese science fiction movies which is waited too long. It's not only left a very valuable experience for the latecomers, but also boosted our confidence. In addition, a group of films such as *Pathfinder* and *Shanghai Fortress* that talking about attacking the earth by aliens in the alien desert are being prepared or produced, so there should be more patience, at least the new future is coming.

It is worth mentioning that the *The Wandering Earth* novel is numerous selling now, and the science fiction novels

have become the most popular reading category in the Spring Festival of 2019, but its early draft fee is low, which is the highest price of *Science Fiction World* at that time - 120 Yuan per thousand words, and the bonus of the Galaxy Award Special Prize is only 2,000 yuan. Lenovo's masterpiece *The three-body problem* was rumored to sell copyright only for 100,000 yuan. Although Liu Cixin personally blamed it, it is undeniable that for a long time, China's science fiction novels have only been popular in a small area, and the prices of a large number of undeveloped works are low. Besides, it's Liu Cixin, Wang Jinkang, Han Song, He Xi, Hao Jingfang and other outstanding sci-fi writers. It's good news for the film industry that is keen on IP adaptation. In fact, many excellent science fiction movies are adapted from science fiction. For example, *Blade Runner* released in 1982 was adapted from Philip Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, *War of the worlds* released in 2005 Adapted from the novel of the same name by H.G. Wells, *The Martian* released in 2015 was adapted from Andy Weir's novel of the same name, and *Annihilation* released in 2018 was adapted from Jeff Van der Mill's *Annihilation*, as well as *Arrival*, *Ready Player One*, etc., similar cases are too numerous to enumerate. It can be said that the excellent local science fiction writers in China have buried a large number of treasures of good value and good quality, and do not dig into the violent things.

Similarly, in the superhero film, the hot *Wolf Warriors II* also shows that although the story is flawed and the details are insufficient, the nationals are still very enthusiastic about this type. Therefore, what Lu Chuan said during his interview was thought-provoking: "Chinese films are exploring in the low light, it requires some process. Everyone should give the innovator an innovative space to be tolerant, rather than eager to ridicule those people who dare to innovate." [2]

In addition, there are two major ways to make science fiction movie - the frontal attack hard sci-fi, the side-attack soft sci-fi, if the current Chinese sci-fi is not strong enough, there is also a special form of sci-fi type that is sci-fi animation. This is a branch that is not available in other types of movies, and it is also a special advantage. It is precisely because the "fantasy" works have created a "fantasy" world for the audience, the shooting is difficult, and it is often inconvenient to use the real person to demonstrate, so the animation takes over this feature and turns the disadvantage into an advantage. Two-way adaptation of science fiction animation and film or television are often used now, which means, many film and television works are adapted from animation, and can also be adapted into anime.

At this point, some film and television drama works can give us inspiration. The Chinese *The Three Body Problem* movie is said unfinished, the fans couldn't help but made two adaptations of their own animations. One was the 14-minute student's work *Waterdrop*, and the other was the *The Three Body Problem in MC* that had been updated in the second season. Wang Ren is an international student, who has been the three roles of screenwriter, director and production of *Waterdrop*. It took 3 years to make, but made an amazing effect. It won the highest score in Short film of Douban

website in 2015, and was highly praised by Liu Cixin. *The Three Body Problem in MC* is a fan-made MC work. The author is Shenyoubafang. According to the box style in the game, *The Three Body Problem* has been adapted into an animation. At present, the broadcast volume of Tencent video has reached more than 8 million times, Douban scores goes to 9.5. It has no revenue at all, yet it is all done by the gods and the same good, and even has nothing to recruit investment sponsors and animators, distribution and other types of work at the end of the film. These two works prove that the animation is less difficult to make, less invested, less risky, and less popular than the costly and cumbersome real-life sci-fi. It can be used as a preliminary work to accumulate experience.

There are more cases abroad. *The Kennel* (also known as "いぬやしき") was originally a comic book by Japanese cartoonist 奥浩哉 (おくひろや), and was adapted to be an animated version released in Japan in October 2017. The live-action movie version was released in April 2018. The story tells that the elderly office worker dog house was neglected by the company and the family, and was diagnosed with advanced cancer, but suddenly the UFO that was dropped was involved and turned into a mechanical body, and at the same time gained the power far beyond humans; the high school lion who also suffered an accident The gods, but began to use the power he gained, including killing; the old and the poor, the good and the evil, began to compete. There is also the *Rick and Morty*, which is called the genius drama. Because the plot is too ridiculous and cannot be interpreted by real people, it uses an animated form. Another example is *the Ghost in the Shell* which has both animated films and live-action movies. These tell us that if you are interested in creating sci-fi movies, but you still lack excellent creative resources, you may want to find a way out for science fiction animation. Maybe it can make up for creativity and shortcomings in terms of capital and strength.

In short, the film industry has developed to a new stage, "fresh meat", "small fresh romance" or comedy are not enough to support such a huge market. As a genre, science fiction literature brings us the imagination of Utopia and dystopia. It constantly stimulates and disturbs us: what is fantasy, what is reality, what is classic or classical literature, what is sub-genre or literature outside the classic — constantly creating new ways of thinking [3]. This also brings new growth points.

IV. FANTASY MOVIE IS THE CURRENT TREND

Fantasy is also a popular category in China. Not only many famous directors are trying to create such works, such as the fifth generation director representative Zhang Yimou's *The Great Wall*, Zhang Kaige's *Legend Of The Demon Cat*, and many fantasy movies. The box office and word of mouth double harvest, looking at the mainland movie box office list, in addition to foreign introductions, before the dark horse *Wolf Warriors II* came out, and *The Mermaid* and *Monster Hunt* have always occupied the first and second place. Looking down, *The Ghoul*s and *Journey to the West: The Demons Strike Back* also entered the top ten in China. It can

be seen that in addition to the reality, the fantasy theme is also a type that the people like to see and hear more easily.

This trend is easy to understand from both the audience and the work. First of all, the current Chinese movie audience is young, and Yin Hong, executive vice president of Tsinghua University's School of Journalism and Communication, explored and prospected the film *Chronicles of the Ghostly Tribe* and Chinese Fantasy Films held by Peking University in November 2015. "The academic seminar pointed out: "The 20-year Internet history has trained a group of audiences. They have now become the main audience. There is a very broad space of such subjects, indicating the emergence of such a market, and young people are beginning to break away from reality. The suffering is to imagine the hypothesis of the world, and even the demand for overhead is higher than the need for realistic understanding. This kind of imaginative consumption power is unprecedentedly powerful. [4]" Young viewers born in the 1980s and beyond grew up in the commodity society and the Internet. Their acceptance of new forms of art is extremely strong. Together with the holographic illusion created by the film and the audio-visual wonders beyond the daily experience, the audience seems to enter the dream. To experience the experience of dreaming in life [5], they are more willing to quickly break away from reality through fantasy movies.

Secondly, from the history of Chinese movies, the types of various real-life themes have been fully explored. Youth, martial arts, anti-war, comedy and other works abound, and even the wind has piled up a lot of bad films, the audience has produced aesthetic fatigue. At this time, the fantasy works can be said to be a clean stream, and Chinese filmmakers began to explore this new type and make up for the shortcomings.

Therefore, many experts and scholars believe that this type of surreal reality is likely to emerge in the future. At the *Chronicles of the Ghostly Tribe* seminar, Li Xun, a researcher at the China Film Art Research Center, said that the *Chronicles of the Ghostly Tribe* represents the future in terms of type, technically speaking, it is the benchmark for domestically produced blockbusters; Vice President of the School of Art, Peking University Chen Xuguang said: "The film's IP conversion, cultural integration, and miscellaneous types of robbery novels are likely to cause a wave of Chinese fantasy movies."

V. THE LIFE OF THE "IMAGINATION" MOVIE: SCRIPT AND AUDIENCE

"Imagination" movies are the same as other types, and scripts and audiences are very critical factors. However, for "imagination" movies, some people still have misunderstandings, such as paying too much attention to visual effects and letting stories and characters retreat. This is a very wrong tendency, and it is also a place where *The Great Wall* and *Legend of The Demon Cat* have been criticized. Special effects are very important for "magic" movies, but it should be insisted that, compared with other types, "imagination" movies should pay more attention to the

insight of human nature and the creation of stories, which should be displayed in the spectacle world built for the audience. A reasonable world view, rather than indulging in the so-called picture effects cannot extricate themselves. This is more evident in the soft sci-fi type. Perhaps, this low-cost Chinese network big movie *The Kelp* can explain some problems. At present, the film has a score of 6.6 in Douban, which is already higher than many cinema movies.

The Kelp is a soft science fiction, and the full-length sci-fi special effects lens is less than five minutes. In the title, the male lead catches kelp, it will move and talk, and will open a spaceship, saying that he is from an alien, the kelp star will invade the earth after 13 days, the earth will be destroyed. Since then, the whole film has basically no special effects, and the absurd story revolves around the male lead. Everyone does not believe what this mentally ill person said, and family and experts deceive him as a fool. The whole piece is full of irony. First, it satirizes human self-righteousness and selfishness. Second, it satirizes the convenience brought by technology to make people lose vigilance. The third is to satirize the annihilation of individual will in the group voice. Although the film is relatively rough, the portrayal of human emotions is deeper, and the revealing of humanity such as greed and fear is also in place. The film has no special effects, no flow of fresh meat, no hair in place, but some of the drama *Black Mirror* style, showing another possibility of science fiction movies.

At the audience level, Tsinghua University professor Yin Hong pointed out: "A generation of sci-fi movies has really entered the cinema. The film that is grounded in the air will soon encounter obstacles. China needs more industrial-grade movies in the future." In 2014, there were 5 Hollywood blockbusters in the top ten box offices in China, all of which were science fiction themes. China has a huge "imagination" movie market. Although there may be many shortcomings in the early Chinese "imagination" movies, it is commendable to take the first step of the attempt. And for a long time, the global "imagination" film has cultivated the viewer's appreciation, the audience is relatively mature, and also cultivated the habit of watching movies, and their expectations for Chinese "imagination" movies are flourishing. Therefore, as long as you can firmly grasp the subject and object of the work — the script and the audience, the audience will give enough rewards if they give the audience enough sincerity and respect.

VI. CONCLUSION

Zhang Yuwu, a professor at the Chinese Department of Peking University, said: "Hollywood has helped us to cultivate our audience. In the past 20 years, Chinese audiences have been cultivated into mature commercial audiences. I don't think it is necessary to use fantasy, magic, science fiction to distinguish and use imagination movies directly... Now it is a world of high-concept, high-emotion, high-tech. Everything is beyond our original understanding. It may be the most anticipated audience at this stage. [6]"

Someone once complained that "China's first year of science fiction" was delayed from 2015 to 2019. But through

the facts, the "imagination" movies represented by science fiction and fantasy are growing rapidly. The Chinese audiences who are tired of the boring reality are hungry for them. It is optimistic to see the prospects of "imagination" movies should be patient to "wait for flowers".

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