



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Wondering about the futures of the Wandering Earth: a comparative analysis of Liu Cixin's 'The Wandering Earth' and Frant Gwo's film adaptation

Vuren, M. van

Citation

Vuren, M. van. (2020). Wondering about the futures of the Wandering Earth: a comparative analysis of Liu Cixin's 'The Wandering Earth' and Frant Gwo's film adaptation. *Science Fiction Research Association Review*, 50(2-3), 168-175. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3719557>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

License: [Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3719557>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Wondering about the Futures of the Wandering Earth: A Comparative Analysis of Liu Cixin's "The Wandering Earth" and Frant Gwo's Film Adaptation



Mitchell van Vuren

Leiden University / Netherlands

FRANT Gwo's big-budget film *The Wandering Earth* (2019) hit Chinese cinemas big as the acclaimed first science fiction blockbuster from Chinese soil (Kuo) and has become one of China's highest-grossing films of all time ("The Wandering Earth"). The blockbuster also gained global visibility through its international distribution on Netflix, presenting an apocalyptic future scenario to the world through Chinese eyes. The film directly builds upon the universe conjured by the science fiction author Liu Cixin in his short story "The Wandering Earth". Liu has been lauded for his imaginative mixture of philosophical and scientific contemplations, earning him multiple national Galaxy Awards for best science fiction work and even the international Hugo Award once for best science fiction work ("Liu Cixin"). However, the short story and the film differ radically on several aspects and portray very different visions on the way humanity needs to change its ways to reach a happy ending at the end of their stories, including the required transformation of humanity to meet the demands of a dystopian future.

In this paper, I will clarify these differences through a comparative analysis between film and short story to abstract the different visions on the required changes humanity is in need of to save itself from extinction. Before doing so, I will briefly discuss the various genres the two works position themselves in and the process of adaptation. Then, I will describe the representation of the future world in the works and the ethical dilemmas posed by these narratives. After having clarified the main subtextual differences between the two works, I will reflect on the implied and different ways whereby humanity needs to transform itself to be able to survive the same fictional apocalypse.

Liu Cixin himself names as the source and most prominent element of science fiction the beauty of science itself. He says: "Science-fiction novels are thus bridges to this beauty, freeing it from formulas and displaying it for all to see" ("Beyond Narcissism" 23). This love for science expresses itself profoundly in his works, and not

the least in "The Wandering Earth". The narrative reveals the life of the protagonist as a small part of a detailed macro-history: the gargantuan project of maneuvering the entire Earth to Proxima Centauri. The subjugation of the character development to the scientific macro-details is characteristic of Liu's variant of science fiction, but these descriptive macro-details are in the film replaced by visual spectacle and dramatic turns.

From the considerable historical period Liu describes from initiation of the project to the abandonment of the solar system, the film only takes place during a small part halfway-through Liu's story when the Earth passes Jupiter. In the high budget film, the tale of the Earth's journey with its scientific specificities is substituted by an accessible disaster narrative that borrows many masculine and upbeat genre conventions from the action film. The distillation and popularization of the story comes to no surprise when the intended broad target audience of the film is juxtaposed with the niche sci-fi audience, but, in Liu's intended sense, the film's narrative is only part of a sci-fi tradition through the world it finds itself in and not specifically through narrative genre conventions.

At this point, we come to the issue of adaptation. Commonly, film adaptations are conceived as inferior to the books they are derived from. However, it is not my intention to approach these two works in a hierarchized relation of lineage. I will rather conceptualize them as two stories in a transmedial storyworld (as theorized by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon), where audiences can enter this universe through multiple platforms and narratives that do not always find coherence. Although issues such as medium specificity or fidelity to a source text are conventional topics of discussion in Adaptation Studies, the implications of the stories' subtextual elements are of most importance to my analysis to come to a conclusion about the differing morals of these stories and the suggested transformations of which the world is in need. To abstract these differing subtextual elements, I will focus in my textual comparison on ethical questions posed to humanity and the following decisions, with special attention to China as the focalizer of humanity in these narrated, apocalyptic futures.

Liu's story starts when the Earth stops rotating. The birth of the protagonist coincides with this first step of controlling the planet and transforming it into humanity's vehicle, and alongside the character's coming of age, the Earth changes more and more on its millennia-long journey. During a school trip around the world,

the protagonist and his classmates witness the colossal Earth Engines that serve as the Earth's motor, the catastrophic effects of the project on Earth's ecology, and their first splendid sunrise after years on the dark side of the Earth. The supranatural, technological achievements of humankind are constantly brought into ambivalent juxtapositions with the terrifying splendor of nature in Liu's descriptions. An example of this can be found in the protagonist's first thought when seeing an Earth Engine for the first time ("The Wandering Earth" 6). While marveling at the immense scale of the blue plasma beam, he is reminded of a riddle about an infinitely tall and broad wall.

What is the wall?

Death. (6)

Here, the conventional technocratic faith in technology to relieve humanity of the burdens of nature, and particularly of death, is lost when the power of technology becomes synonymous with the sublimity of death. During the following years, the expenses of technology to fuel the Earth's journey leave their mutilating traces on the Earth, slowly transforming it into an unrecognizable and lifeless place.

The contrasting of the horrors of technology and nature serve a higher purpose than solely description in the story, which is expressed most clearly when the children see the Sun for the first time. The Sun, normally the source of life, has now turned into the Earth's doom due to its predicted violent explosion in the near future, called a helium flash. When the children see the celestial body for the first time, they are struck with terror when they encounter humanity's biggest threat. But, when the children and their teacher gaze at the starlit sky later on, hopeful tears well up in their eyes when the teacher points out Proxima Centauri, "their new home!" Among the stars, "[o]nly one star held steady; it was the beam of a distant lighthouse over dark and stormy seas. . . . That star had taken the place of the Sun in our hearts. It was the only pillar of hope for one hundred future generations as they navigated a sea of trouble" (13). Already from a young age onward, the children are taught to direct their hopes at the promises of technology and to abandon the symbols of life from the past.

The global process of accelerating the Earth to gain enough speed to leave the solar system also incorporates the people of Earth in its self-transformation. Genetic

engineering (16) and birth control (26) have enabled humankind to regulate and evolve its members to unknown standards to meet the harsh conditions of the millennia-long project, but this has happened at a cost. For current generations, it is unimaginable how people in the past could have attached so many emotions to matters unrelated to planetary survival, including adultery (18). What is needed in the new world are reliable and docile persons, who can function optimally inside the world-encompassing Earth apparatus. Inessential subjects for this global cause, such as art and philosophy, are removed from school curricula (16), which leads to the solving of ethical dilemmas based on statistics in the name of the greater good. For example, when the underground hometown of the protagonist is hours away from being engulfed by magma, the rescue of young people is unquestionably prioritized regarding their higher beneficence to the global cause. Thus, it becomes too late to save the elderly, including the protagonist's mother, following a naturalized social Darwinist logic. Every form of individual agency or reflection disappears in the collective because of their shared burden of saving humanity, while they gradually lose their own humanity along the way.

When the Earth passes the hellish "behemoth" (34) of Jupiter in Liu's story, the film's primary storyline begins. The gravitational pull of Jupiter leads to the malfunctioning and destruction of many Earth Engines and raises the danger of planetary collision. Liu Qi, the protagonist of the film, travels through China and beyond its borders to help reactivate the Engines. At the same time, his father Liu Peiqiang tries in the International Space Station (ISS) to avert hopelessness by the United Earth Government (UEG). Liu Qi shares many similarities with the protagonist of the short story, such as a father in space and an uncle from Shanghai, but his character arc and the events in the film differ to such an extent that inconsistencies arise between story and film. The differing plots also have a profound effect on the overall morale of the works. While Liu's sci-fi shows the fragility and possible futility of humanity's project, the film portrays several hardheaded characters that refuse to lose hope and keep on striving to survive.

This ultimate impossibility of defeat despite hardships, which is the norm in the disaster film and the action film with few exceptions, comes to the fore the most when the film poses an ethical dilemma to Liu Peiqiang. The UEG has decided at the perceived point of no return in the wake of collision to activate the Helios Project: the launch of the ISS as an arc, containing numerous samples of animal and human

life, towards Proxima Centauri to act as the last means for humanity to survive. But, in a final attempt to avert collision, Liu Qi and his companions have, against the UEG's orders, called for the help of many national rescue teams on Earth. They have the plan to shoot a plasma beam from an Earth Engine towards Jupiter to ignite its atmosphere and blast the Earth away (in full accordance with the action film genre).

Liu Peiqiang in the ISS stands before the choice to subjugate himself to the plan of the UEG and to watch the Earth be destroyed below him, or to fly the ISS into Liu Qi's plasma beam that is just a few miles short of igniting Jupiter and to hope that the plan of the newly formed coalition of national rescue teams, under the leadership of the Chinese, will save the Earth. Liu Peiqiang chooses the latter and rebels against the UEG in a final attempt to save the world. In an emotional last dialogue between father and son, they forget their preceding conflicts and are reconciled as a family, just before the ISS explodes and Liu Peiqiang sacrifices himself for the greater good, ultimately saving his son and the world. The plan of the newly proposed world governance succeeds and Liu Qi survives, continuing to serve the purpose of *The Wandering Earth* with firm belief and in good spirits.

In Liu's story, the Earth bypasses Jupiter without technical complications, but not without social unrest. A conspiracy theory maintains that the Sun is not dying at all and that the entire journey is a hoax. A rebellion against the Coalition, the current world government, starts to take shape and divides the world into two groups: the ones who have held hope in the project and those who have lost it and desire to return to the earlier state of heliocentric orbit. The protagonist sides with the Coalition, motivated by his family's history in the military and not by his own conviction *per se*, but starts to slowly believe in the hoax as well after a long and violent period of war injuries and alcoholism. He deserts with other militaries on a hospital ward and helps to overthrow the last stronghold of the Coalition.

The rebels celebrate their victory and punish the remaining leading figures of the Coalition cruelly. During their last walk of shame, the remnants of the Coalition are spat upon and humiliated by all layers of society, including a little girl with "the wild rage in her eyes searing through her mask" (42). Then, the nuclear batteries from the prisoners' thermal suits are confiscated, and they are left to freeze to death on the ice-cold surface of the Earth, with the people of the rebellion watching. Every standard of moral order seems to have been forgotten. During the painfully slow submission to the cold by the last figures of the Coalition, the rebels start to sing

'My Sun' to praise their giver of life in the sky. Faith in the Sun and in the natural course of life seems to be restored, until suddenly the helium flash occurs. Then, "[a] red dim sphere had replaced the Sun. From our vantage point, it slowly swelled until it reached the size of the Sun of old, a strange memory from Earth's original orbit... But, it was no longer our Sun" (44). The rebellion shows itself to be built on an illusion. Their hope of return is shattered and their future is uncertain. The Sun has died, but "[f]ortunately, we still lived" (44).

In the last chapter of the story, half a century has passed and the protagonist has grown old. The Earth's journey has been continued towards the dark emptiness of space beyond Pluto. However, the protagonist is not overcome by despair or pessimism and sees before his mind's eye visions from life in Proxima Centauri. "I see my great-grandchildren, one hundred generations removed, playing and laughing on green grass". While faith in the original Sun has faded and the errors of technology have been discovered, he directs his beliefs at "the three golden suns of Proxima Centauri" (46). Hope has not been lost, although humanity has been forced to transcend its earlier moral and technological boundaries and a long and tough road is still ahead for many generations to come.

Despite both texts' happy endings, the morals of the two narratives give a very different estimation of the new status of humanity after the hardships of the project. In the case of Liu's story, humanity's morale is busted and battered, but a shimmer of hope remains in the envisioning of a very distant and utopian future. The demise of the faith in technology and the following failed rebellion show that humanity is in dire need of self-transformation to find a new form that is fit for the conditions of the technological world of the future. Liu Cixin argues that humanity has to move beyond an anthropocentric narcissism in the far reaches of space, in which we are nothing but "a cosmic speck of dust" ("Beyond Narcissism" 22). Science fiction shows itself to be a genre well fit to challenge this central self-conception and to rethink the position of the human in relation to the ungraspable immensity of the universe and to the unthinkable potential of technology.

The film, however, has fewer moral bumps in the road to Proxima Centauri. Following the three-act model of Hollywood blockbusters, several obstacles are defined in the generic plot that need to be overcome to guarantee a happy ending. The plot-driven story designates the natural environment of Jupiter as the antagonist (at a certain point, a character even decides to futilely shoot a machine gun at it

while cursing the gas giant), against which the Earth is in need of defense. Frictions between different characters and nations obstruct productive collaboration, which is only achieved when a shared goal is found and the previous form of world governance is overthrown under the new Chinese leadership. Humanity has not undergone a moral transformation but has only experienced a changing of the guards in its global governance.

In conclusion, Liu Cixin writes in accordance with his own principles concerning sci-fi by addressing the moral status quo of humanity as it is focalized by China. Through allegorically positioning characters and nations, he tells a tale of the world and envisions how humanity can change her own self-conception in relation to science to be ready for the challenges of ecological disasters and other sci-fi scenarios in the maybe not-so-distant future. Frant Gwo's film does not question the core of humanity but rather the position of China in the world. The film utilizes the rebellion in its narrative to indicate the fallacies of the current world governance, and imagines how humanity can only be saved, and its utopian future far away can only be reached when China's methods are followed. Although the film has international allure through representing the territories and populations of many nations, it ultimately tells a story of China as the world through its claimed monopoly to guide the world towards survival. The film's moral, just like its narrative, seems to remain stuck halfway through Liu's story, where the wavering of hope has not set in just yet. Hopefully, the announced sequel of the film will divert from just making a political statement and will correspond more with Liu's sci-fi storyworld through engagement with the moral dimensions of the near future and the ensuing challenges in it for all of humanity, instead of merely redrawing national borders.

Works Cited

- Kuo, Lily. "China Challenges Hollywood with Own Sci-Fi Blockbuster." *The Guardian*, 11 February 2019, www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/11/china-first-blockbuster-sci-fi-film-wandering-earth.
- Liu, Cixin. "Beyond Narcissism: What Science Fiction Can Offer Literature." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2013, pp. 22-32.
- Liu, Cixin. "The Wandering Earth." *The Wandering Earth*, translated by Holger Nahm, Head of Zeus Ltd., 2017, pp. 3-47.

“Liu Cixin.” *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, October 4 2019. www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/liu_cixin.

Ryan, Marie-Laure and Jan-Noël Thon. *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*. University of Nebraska Press, 2014.

“The Wandering Earth.” *Box Office Mojo*, n.d., www.boxofficemojo.com/release/r13710223361/weekend/?ref_=bo_rl_tab#tabs.

The Wandering Earth (流浪地球; *Liulang diqiu*). Directed by Frant Gwo, China Film Group Corporation, 2019.