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From Patricide to Patrilineality: Adapting *The Wandering Earth* for the Big Screen

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Abstract: This paper discusses how Liu Cixin’s 2000 novella “The Wandering Earth” was adapted into a family melodrama that ultimately reinforces the authority of the Father and the nation-state. It analyzes the complex mechanisms, such as *mise en abyme* and scapegoating, that serve to condone the patriarch’s power, as well as the intertextuality tying the film to the socialist culture. This paper analyses the social context that foregrounds the conversion from symbolic patricide (breaking the established system) to symbolic patrilineality (integration into the social order) in the film and also discusses the inherent tension between the radical apocalyptic vision offered in the original science fiction story and the cultural industry serving the interests of the established order.

Keywords: science fiction; *The Wandering Earth*; patricide; patrilineality; adaptation; nationalism

1. From Apocalyptic Sci-fi to Family Melodrama

The first mainstream science fiction film made by the Chinese, *The Wandering Earth* (dir. Guo Fan, a.k.a. Frant Gwo, debuted on Chinese New Year’s Day (February 5) in 2019 and became an instant hit, grossing \$560 million at the box office in the first two weeks.¹ To this date, the film remains the third highest grossing film of all time at the Chinese box office, only behind the 2017 blockbuster *Wolf Warrior 2* (dir. Wu Jing) and the 2019 3D animation *Ne Zha* (dir. Jiaozi).² A Chinese viewers’ satisfaction survey showed that the film ranked no. 1 of all films released in China during the spring of 2019 (Zhang 2019). The film *The Wandering Earth* was adapted from the titular novella by Liu Cixin (1963–), who became an internationally renowned sci-fi writer after his novel *The Three Body Problem* won the Hugo Award in 2015. Originally published in 2000 in the Chinese magazine *Science Fiction World* (*Kehuan shijie*), “The Wandering Earth” is one of Liu’s early sci-fi stories and remained relatively unknown until Liu rose to fame a few years ago.

Liu Cixin’s “The Wandering Earth” is an apocalyptic tale of a post-national, post-familial, and even post-human world. The novella is narrated by the nameless protagonist and covers the time span from his birth to old age. The protagonist is born at the end of the Earth’s “Braking Age” (*shache shidai*), grows up in the “Escaping Age” (*taoyi shidai*), later witnesses the human’s revolt and the helium flash that marks the end of the sun, and becomes one of the survivors on the Earth fifty years later in the “Wandering Age” (*liulang shidai*). Liu Cixin depicts the dissolution of the family during this long historical journey when the solar system is in crisis. The narrator’s grandfather dies of an illness before people take shelter in the underground cities at the end of the “Braking Age”; his mother is buried alive in an underground city during an earthquake during the “Escaping Age”; later, his

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2019/02/17/box-office-wandering-earth-how-to-train-your-dragon-lego-taraji-henson-liam-neeson-kevin-hart/#38ea2d897970>.

² <https://www.endata.com.cn/BoxOffice/BO/History/Movie/Alltimedomestic.html>.

father is killed by a meteor in his airborne mini-spaceship. The radically different world has forced human societies and interhuman relationships to rapidly evolve. Nations no longer exist on the dislocated Earth, all resources are controlled by the United Earth Government (UEG) so the latter can lead the biggest escape plan in human history. Every kind of human bond has been destroyed by the looming catastrophe, and humans' desires and emotions have evolved with the crisis-ridden world too: The protagonist's father leaves home to live with another woman for two months, and his mother reacts indifferently to this affair. The emotional attachments among family members are diluted by the desire for survival. The protagonist only feels a tinge of pain when his mother dies and is completely apathetic when he hears about his father's death. Toward the end of the story, when an increasing number of people believe that the sun will never explode and that all human beings have become victims of a big conspiracy plotted by the UEG, they quickly form a rebel army in order to bring the Earth back to the solar system; even the protagonist's Japanese wife abandons him and their son to join the rebel army. The sun's helium flash, however, suddenly occurs right after the rebel army executes the 5000 UEG members, killing most inhabitants on the Earth. In the face of capricious and ruthless nature, nothing is permanent, human authorities collapse, and the father figures lose their protective and disciplining power. Common sense and the established authorities are repeatedly challenged throughout the novella, making the text a field of symbolic patricide. It is precisely this symbolic patricide—the radical departure from common sense and established social order, as well as the resistance to endorse any human, social, or spiritual authority—that makes Liu Cixin's "The Wandering Earth" a thought-provoking story.

An apocalyptic fiction often reveals an end time scenario for the Earth, but the revelation offered by the apocalyptic fiction can go deeper than merely depicting the immanent crisis. In "Thesis on the Philosophy of History", Walter Benjamin proposes a different way to understand apocalypse: it should offer "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the suppressed past" (Benjamin 1968, p. 263); it must help us arrive at a concept of history which teaches us that "the 'state of emergency' in which we live in is not the exception but the rule" (ibid., p. 257). It is only in this way that the apocalypse can produce knowledge, which begins with the knowledge that "the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable" (ibid., p. 257). Benjamin's thesis has opened up a second and deeper meaning of the apocalypse: it leads us to see the real culprit of human crisis in the homogeneous history, and it stimulates people into revolting against history, or, in Benjamin's words, "blasting a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history" (ibid., p. 263).

The film *The Wandering Earth* does an impressive job in simulating an apocalyptic scenario caused by nature with its stunning visual effects; however, it deliberately deviates from the second meaning of the apocalypse about the rule of the homogeneous history. When transposing *The Wandering Earth* from book to screen, the director Guo Fan and his team, consisting of himself and six other young screenwriters, adapted the novella into a Chinese father-son story featuring the relationship of three generations of Chinese men. While the novella's central plot covers more than an eighty year time span, the film only focuses on a small fraction of chronology that takes place at the end of the Earth's "Escaping Age" in the novella, when the Earth is trying to escape Jupiter's gravitational field. The central plot of the film happens within a short span of twenty-four hours. The two father figures, Liu Qi's grandfather Han Zi'ang and his father Liu Peiqiang, who only receive passing mentions in the novella, both have a conspicuous presence in the film. Han Zi'ang's and Liu Peiqiang's heroic deaths are two climaxes of the film that serve the important function of bringing the rebellious "wandering" youth, Liu Qi, back to his family and the Chinese community.

This radically narrower chronology dominated by the father figures not only creates a concentrated dramatic space, it also serves as an ideological apparatus that induces the viewers' identification with the present, which is represented as the eternality in the film. The future, it seems, will be no different from the present, in which Liu Qi and his peers will play the heroic roles, like their fathers, to preserve the status quo. The adaptation thus basically turns a profound apocalyptic (in the Benjaminian sense) sci-fi story into a family melodrama that seeks to cement the authority of the father. Here, I use Chris

Berry's notion of "the family melodrama", which "focuses less on the individual in conflict with the family and more on the family as a collective in crisis" (Berry 2008, p. 235). The film deals with the collective crisis of an extended family consisting of three generations, and also of the national and international "families" composed of unrelated people of different ethnicities living in the same "home"—the Earth. The reduced chronology and enhanced emotional transactions in the film create a self-absorbed narrative that diverts the audience's attention and thinking away from the course of history and human destiny, both of which figure prominently in the novella.

A great science fiction work such as Liu Cixin's novella commits symbolic patricide with its radical departure from the homogeneous history. The film *The Wandering Earth*, by contrast, restores the symbolic patrilineality by castrating the radical historical vision represented in the novella and integrating it with the cultural industry dominated by self-perpetuating technology of production and governance. In *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse warns us of a one-dimensional society where transcendental ideas, aspirations, and objectives are "either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe;" as such, "qualitative differences of conflicting interests appear as quantitative differences within the established society" (Marcuse 1991, pp. 14, 23). If "The Wandering Earth" is a text of symbolic patricide, the filmic adaptation restores the father's authority by reaffirming the order of "this universe." This paper illustrates how this conversion from patricide to patrilineality is accomplished in the adaptation by taking a close look at the narrative mechanism it employs and the intertextual network it weaves to revamp meanings and wield authoritarian power. As much as this process shows the media industry's avid support for cultural hierarchy as evidenced in the film's marketing and publicity strategies that emphasize consumers' national identity and cultural self-improvement, it also invites people to take note of the sophisticated and complex mechanism that has turned the most unlikely text into a validation of the patriarchy.

2. From Patricide to Patrilineality

Against the background of the unprecedented crisis of the solar system, the core plot of the film *The Wandering Earth* is the young protagonist Liu Qi's (played by Qu Chuxiao) inner journey from denouncing his father Liu Peiqiang (played by Wu Jing) to internalizing the father, after the father sacrificed himself to save the Earth. Differently from Liu Cixin's titular sci-fi story, the film is a Chinese father-son story, featuring the relationship of three generations of Chinese men. In the film, when only half of the earth's population are allowed to continue to survive in underground cities, Liu Peiqiang decides to prematurely terminate the life of Liu Qi's mother, who is terminally ill, and to give her life slot and Liu Qi's guardianship to his father-in-law Han Zi'ang. Later Liu Peiqiang leaves to work in "The Navigation Platform" international space station far away from the Earth, leaving Liu Qi to be raised by his grandfather Han Zi'ang, from whom the boy learns how to drive the truck. By the end of the film, Liu Qi becomes the incarnation of both Han Zi'ang and Liu Peiqiang. As I will discuss henceforth, this multi-generation patriarchal family is full of Chinese characteristics and is at the same time full of nationalist overtones.

We have learned from historians like George Moss and Benedict Anderson that nationalism favors a distinctly homosocial form of male bonding, and is typically represented as a passionate brotherhood.³ For the same reason, the progression of national history can often be found in father-son stories, especially for a civilization like China that puts utmost importance on the patrilineal family values. Confucian ethics demands the sons be filial and submissive to the father, and for thousands of years Chinese rulers have used filiality as a form of governance, in which the ruler would regard himself as the father of his people. It is actually difficult to conceptually separate the Chinese family from the Chinese state. In Chinese, the term for the state is *guojia*, literally meaning "state-family". Based on the Confucian teaching, the father-son relationship in the family should be regarded as a model

³ See (Moose 1985; Anderson 2006).

for the subject's relationship to the state, as both should be natural and appropriate.⁴ A masculine subject's different social roles are thus not pitted against each other in traditional Chinese culture, but are consistent with and complementary to each other. This imagined community is different from Western culture, which defines the subject as a product of many forms of tensions between love and duty, the heart and the mind, desire and fear, as well as the private and the public. The Confucian teaching, in other words, offers a non-confrontational model for conceiving the father-son relationship at different levels. The driving force of Western civilization, on the contrary, is often represented by the Oedipus complex: the struggle between the father and the sons. As Sigmund Freud depicts in *Totem and Taboo*, civilization started when a band of pre-historic brothers joined forces to kill their father and took over all his females (Freud 1919, p. 210). The Oedipal tension is regarded as a mainspring of human behavior in Western culture and has had a "pervasive presence [. . .] in the most influential storytelling medium" since the modern period (Winkler 2008, p. 67).

One of the major legacies of Chinese modernity in the early twentieth century was the reception of the Western concept of history. In modern China, the revolt of the sons (and daughters) was frequently used as a cultural metaphor to challenge the old political power and bring out radical changes in history. During the Chinese New Culture Movement (1915–1924), radical intellectuals who waged a war against the traditional Chinese culture were a cohort of symbolic patricides. Mao Zedong himself was an advocate of symbolic patricide too: his vision of a new China was predicated on the revolt against the established values and authority, a revolt that culminated in the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The postsocialist period was kick-started in a surge of patricidal desires found in root-seeking literature (*xungen wenxue*) and avant-garde literature (*xianfeng wenxue*), which showed a strong urge for bidding farewell to the revolutionary "fathers" from the socialist period. The patricidal desires continued in the cinematic works of the Fifth-Generation directors. Scenes of violent killings of the fathers in Chinese cinema first appeared in Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* in 1986 and *Ju Dou* in 1990, and reoccurred in Chen Kaige's *The Emperor and the Assassin* in 1999 and *Sacrifice* in 2010.

A Chinese father-son story can oftentimes be read as a "national allegory" (Jameson 1986), projecting a political dimension of the collective unconsciousness. On the one hand, the patricidal urge registers the Chinese intellectuals' obsession with the Western historical model of revolution and progress; on the other hand, it denotes China's new latecomer/subaltern self-identity in the modern world. Rey Chow comments that "the repeated associations of patricide typical of Oedipalization—the physical impotence, symbolic castration, and ultimate death of father—constitute a reading of China's modernity and 'ethnicity' that is a *self-subalternization*: we are made to feel that, being fatherless, China is deprived of power; China is a subaltern in the world of modern nations" (Chow 1995, p. 148). In this sense, symbolic patricide is at odds with the building of the Confidence Doctrine that has been a widely promoted Chinese nationalistic discourse since 2012.⁵

The Wandering Earth starts off as a potential story of patricide. As the film shows us in the beginning, Liu Qi denounces his father, scooping out Liu Peiqiang's face from the family photo and planning to leave home before the latter's return to the Earth from the international space station (Figure 1). This patricidal urge is only resolved through a *mise en abyme* mechanism. In the film, there are actually two family stories, one within the other. In the larger story the Earth is in crisis; all men, including the son and the father, have to join forces to save it. Liu Qi finally calls Liu Peiqiang "dad" only after the latter sacrifices himself to save the Earth. In the end, Liu Qi is fully integrated into the patrilineal history: he becomes a truck driver like his grandfather Han Zi'ang, and is wearing the

⁴ The famous Confucian saying "Junjun chenchun fufu zizi" 君君臣臣父父子子 (let the king be a king, the minister a minister, the father a father, and the son a son) rectifies the names of each social roles and at the same time shows the parallel relationship between those roles.

⁵ The Confidence Doctrine refers to the "four matters of confidence" (*sige zixin* 四个自信), proposed by Xi Jinping in 2012. "The four matters of confidence" include the self-confidence in the path, theory, institution, and culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

medal “Hero of the Earth” (*Diqiu yingxiong*) like his father Liu Peiqiang. The two dead fathers continue to live in the bodies of the younger generation.



Figure 1. Liu Qi has scooped out Liu Peiqiang’s face from the family photo.

The conversion from patricide to patrilineality is made possible through a narrative device that suppresses the past (which is associated with the dead mother) and amplifying the present (which is a stage for displaying the heroism of the fathers). In the first story, the son fails to save his mother, whose life was given up based on the calculation of her chance of survival. In the second, larger story, the sons of the Earth (a group of men including Liu Qi, Liu Peiqiang, Han Zi’ang, Wang Lei, Li Yiyi, etc.) have saved Mother Earth against an impending doom. In many ways, Liu Qi’s ailing mother is symbolic of the Earth that still provides shelter to human beings despite her own ecological disaster. Liu Qi’s family story is thus sublated by the Earth story, and his family tragedy overwritten by the triumphant story of saving the Earth. The mourning for the death mother, which fueled Liu Qi’s patricidal desire in the first story, is replaced by his guilt and respect for the father who sacrificed his life in the second story. As a result, the son is reintegrated into the patrilineal family and becomes a new guardian of the patriarchal authority. There is a revealing detail by the end of the film: the younger sister Han Duoduo has been calling Liu Qi “Hukou” (Liu Qi’s first name Qi 启 is combined with the two characters 户 and 口, so Han Duoduo gives him this nickname); however, after Liu Qi becomes the “Hero of the Earth,” he outright rejects this nickname and asks Duoduo to call him “Big Brother” (ge 哥).

Compared with the novella, in which humans finally realize that the “state of emergency” has become the rule, like Benjamin suggests, and pick up weapons to revolt against the government, the film stages the reconciliation between the father and the son, creating a homogeneous family, community, and history that revolve around the patrilineality. In this sense, the film is a skillful anti-Oedipal work that aligns with the trendy concept of “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) that has been emphasized by the Chinese Communist Party leaders since 2004.⁶ All the screenwriters are young people born in the 1980s, so perhaps they are more susceptible to the Party’s socio-political vision that was instilled in their minds during their formative years.⁷ However, the choice of the screenwriters is not an isolated case; it reflects the transformation of China’s cultural industry and the changed

⁶ The concept “harmonious society” was introduced by Chinese President Hu Jintao in 2004 and has been inherited by the current Chinese leader Xi Jinping, who promotes “harmony” as a core socialist value. http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2018-07/25/c_1123173737.htm.

⁷ Individual experiences may have played a role in the film’s depiction of the father–son relationship too. For example, the director Guo Fan said in an interview that the passing of his father a few years ago changed his antagonistic view of the father. See (Li 2019).

Chinese consumers' preferences in recent years. The rise of cyber-nationalism and fandom nationalism in China in the 21st century, for example, indicates that some young Chinese enjoy the performance of nationalism and defending authority due to a "collective yearning for grandeur and heroism in a postheroic, disenchanted world" (Yang 2019, p. 7). As a result, the Oedipal tension is replaced by a moral and emotional imperative to defend the father and reestablish the authority in the family and society. Just two days prior to the release of *The Wandering Earth*, Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered a New Year's talk in the Great Hall of the People, in which he devoted a whole section to emphasizing filial piety's important role for the family and the nation: "It is the noble tradition of the Chinese nation to be filial at home and loyal to the country. Without the prosperity and development of the nation, there would be no happy family. Likewise, without millions of happy families, there would be no prosperous and developed nation" (Xi 2019). The traditional Chinese hierarchy of positionalities is once again used to support the 21st century Chinese nationalism, which, allegedly, benefits both the individual and the nation: the nation gets the loyal supporters/builders and the individuals get to share the greatness of the nation. *The Wandering Earth* has endorsed this traditional father-son relationship too: in the film, the reconciliation between the father and the son is not represented as a compromise; instead, it is a double win, as it condones the father, empowers the son, and makes the son a better citizen in the imagined community.

3. Patricide and Scapegoating

The *mise en abyme* setting allows the father Liu Peiqiang to have two different roles in the film: in the story of the small family, he is the father who took the mother away from the son; however, in the larger story of the Earth, he is one of the sons saving the mother Earth from the rational decision made by the UEG. The UEG is a form of public power at the international level. The rule of the UEG is justified by the "state of emergency" caused by the looming natural disaster. In the name of the Earth's crisis, the UEG has dominated all human and natural resources as it leads the Earth's massive escape project.

The UEG remains a bodiless voice throughout the film, but it has a physical enforcer, the AI with the name MOSS. When the calculation shows that the survival chance of the Earth is too low, MOSS implements what the UEG has told him: giving up the Earth by aborting the Wandering Earth plan and embarking a new plan called Helios. The Helios plan is supposed to save the civilization of the Earth and the humans on the Navigation ISS (including Liu Peiqiang), so that humans can start anew on another habitat in the universe. However, Liu Peiqiang chooses to disobey the order this time. While MOSS tries to stop him, he burns out the AI processor with a bottle of liquor (Figure 2).

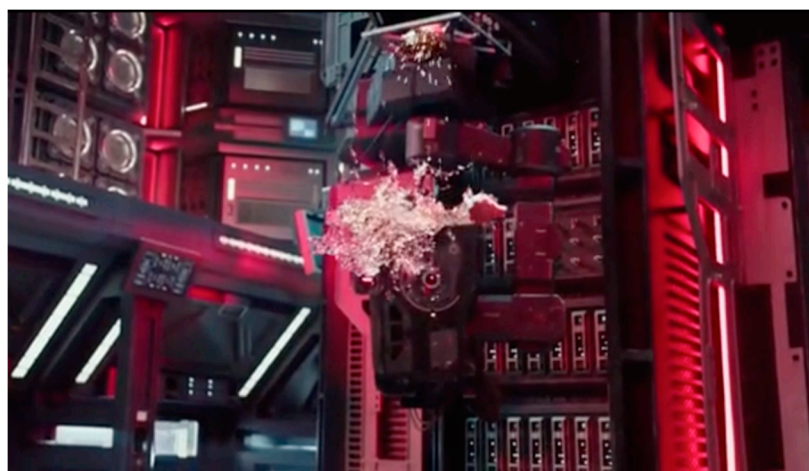


Figure 2. Liu Peiqiang sets MOSS on fire.

Can we call this heroic act of Liu Peiqiang an act of patricide? It is true that MOSS seems to be the avatar of the inhuman rationality that kills people in the film. However, the logic of MOSS is completely predetermined by the UEG. The screenwriters of *The Wandering Earth* decided to add the character MOSS following their favorite sci-fi film, Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001, A Space Odyssey* (the screenplay was written by Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke).⁸ In the latter, a 9000-series computer named Hal acts crazily and dangerously, and is terminated by the protagonist, Dr. David Bowman. However, David later finds out that Hal was trying to faithfully carry out what was programmed in him (in this film, this revelation coincides with Hal's regression into a babbling machine). In *The Wandering Earth*, MOSS does not have his own will either—he is merely an enforcer of the will of the UEG. Therefore, by killing MOSS, Liu Peiqiang has not committed patricide, but rather has killed a scapegoat of the authoritarian rule.

Interestingly, if we go back to the small family story, Liu Peiqiang himself is also a scapegoat. Liu Qi resents Liu Peiqiang for the death of his mother, but the mother's premature death was the direct result of the UEG's decision to leave half the population on the Earth to die. Liu Peiqiang is merely an enforcer of this order, which is also based on rational calculation. When Liu Peiqiang kills MOSS, he is virtually killing his earlier self (as an enforcer of the UEG). The act thus has a double meaning: on the one hand, it is seemingly revolutionary, suggesting the revolt of the Earth's son against the inhuman machine; on the other hand, it is redemptive of Liu Peiqiang's past decision to prematurely end his wife's life based on a rational calculation. However, the ultimate maker of the social order (the UEG) remains unchallenged in both stories.⁹ The important question that is not asked in the film is, since humans have succeeded in saving the Earth against all odds, why couldn't such hope and courage be used to save half of the population (including Liu Qi's mother) years ago?

Killing the scapegoat of the authoritarian rule and sacrificing himself allows Liu Peiqiang to "return" to his son as a true hero. Liu Peiqiang's death has a double meaning too: on the one hand, his death saves the Earth; on the other hand, he dies as a scapegoat of the UEG's earlier decision to sacrifice half of the humans on the Earth, including his own wife. Therefore, Liu Qi instantly forgives and fully identifies with his father after he witnesses the latter's sacrifice. This is the moment when Liu Qi is elevated from the son of a biological mother to the son of the Mother Earth, in the human community of shared destiny. This scene is reminiscent of the revolutionary film *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961, dir. Xie Jin): when Wu Qionghua witnesses the sacrifice of the hero Hong Changqing, she fully identifies with him too. It is noteworthy that in *The Red Detachment of Women*, Wu Qionghua also learns to think from the point of the oppressed multitude (the larger family) rather than from her own family. The socialist revolutionary rhetoric works as a spectral didactic structure in the sci-fi film, guiding the audience's reception with familiar tropes, narratives, languages, and scenes.

In Liu Cixin's original novella, the UEG is held responsible for their decisions. In the film, however, all of the UEG's questionable decisions are scapegoated onto the enforcers of those decisions, be it Liu Peiqiang, MOSS, or Wang Lei (who puts the UEG order to save the planetary engine over individual lives), all of whom died in the film. Yet the UEG remains intact and unchallenged. After Liu Qi identifies with the dead father, he seems to have reconciled with the authoritarian rule behind his father too. In the end, Liu Qi is fully (and happily) integrated into the human community under the same authoritarian UEG.

In the film, the UEG is represented by a soft-speaking voice in French. Michel Chion calls the voice from the radio "acousmatic" ("the acousmètre"). The acousmatic, according to Chion, has "the ability to be everywhere, to see all, to know all, and to have complete power. In other words: ubiquity; panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence" (Chion 1999, p. 24). In *The Wandering Earth*, the crisis of

⁸ Stanley Kubrick's *2001, A Space Odyssey* is the favorite film for Liu Cixin, Guo Fan, and Wu Jing. <https://tech.sina.com.cn/d/s/2019-02-11/doc-ihrfqzka4806207.shtml>.

⁹ In the film, the UEG later changed its mind and authorized Liu Peiqiang's suicidal mission, making Liu still an enforcer of the order from this invisible father figure.

the solar system has granted the UEG the supreme power to allocate all resources on the Earth. While Liu Qi used to challenge this supreme power, over the course of the film he has gradually become a successor of the array of father figures (in sequence, Han Zi'ang, the scientist He Lianke, Liu Peiqiang, and the soldier Wang Lei) who sacrificed their lives by following the UEG orders to save the Earth. While the Earth continues to wander around in the universe at the end of the film, the wandering youth has finally returned home—not only returning but also voluntarily submitting to the order.

Therefore, although *The Wandering Earth* starts off as a potential patricide story, no real patricide takes place. The film actually shows the triumph of the ubiquitous, panoptic, omniscient, and omnipotent Father. As if driven by the need to differentiate itself from the Hollywood family story that always unfolds in an Oedipal space, *The Wandering Earth* has added a new character: the 16-year old girl Han Duoduo, an orphan rescued and adopted by Han Zi'ang. Han Zi'ang named the girl Han Duoduo after his deceased daughter (Figure 3). In the film, one of the most important missions for Liu Qi is to protect his younger sister, who has the same name as his mother. Rather than serving as an object of masculine desires, Han Duoduo is a symbol that forbids sexual desires. The replacement of the mother Han Duoduo with the young girl Han Duoduo in the film effectively blocks the circuit of the Oedipus tension between Liu Peiqiang and Liu Qi: after Han Zi'ang's death, Liu Qi becomes the sole custodian for Han Duoduo—in this way, the mother–son relationship in the familiar Oedipal story is converted into a big brother–younger sister relationship, facilitating Liu Qi's development into a new patriarchal figure. This remarkable addition is key to the resolution of the Chinese family melodrama in *The Wandering Earth*.



Figure 3. Han Zi'ang names the orphan girl after his deceased daughter Han Duoduo.

4. The Specter of Nationalism

The Wandering Earth deliberately appeals to the heightened nationalistic sentiments among Chinese viewers, who showed unprecedented enthusiasm for *Wolf Warrior 2*, which remains the highest grossing film of all time in Chinese box office. *Wolf Warrior 2*, directed and starred by Wu Jing, is replete with nationalist messages and patriotic tropes, and was praised by Chinese state media as a successful film that advocates “the mainstream ideology of the Party, the nation-state, and the society” (Zeng 2017). The decision to ask Wu Jing to play Liu Qi's father Liu Peiqiang in *The Wandering Earth* sends a strong message of the sci-fi film's major nationalist appeal. Critics of the nationalistic propaganda called the film “Wolf Warrior in Space” (*Taikong ban Zhanlang*) and vowed to boycott it (*The New Lens* 2019). However, more Chinese viewers supported this film precisely because it shows the rise of China's national power. The film was not only marketed as the first Chinese sci-fi blockbuster featuring a “Chinese team” saving the Earth, the producer also extolled the “all Chinese team” for the film's visual effects (Suofeiya-Dupang 2019). The film seems to be a grand display of China's rapid technological

developments and the “Made in China 2025” (*Zhongguo zhizao 2025*) strategic plan that aims to help the nation gain a dominant place in high-tech manufacturing by the end of 2025. The release of the film was thus a sensational event that fed into the growing national pride in China.

However, all of these nationalist sentiments had to be grafted to a post-national setting of the sci-fi story. Liu Cixin’s original story unfolds in a post-solar era where there is only one government, the United Earth Government, for all human beings. The film keeps this setting, but persistently leaves the Chinese nationalist branding in its characters and plots, creating a special form of nationalism that is not bound to physical space but rather to the psychic space of the characters.

Both Liu Qi and Han Duoduo become orphans during the crisis of the solar system. In modern Chinese revolutionary films, orphanhood was employed to construct the nation-state as a big family without blood ties. For example, in the 1970 revolutionary model opera *Red Lantern* (*Hongdeng ji*), three generations of unrelated people have formed one revolutionary family. In *The Wandering Earth*, Han Zi’ang and Liu Qiu have also formed a family with the unrelated Han Duoduo—this family is not a kinship family but a national family. Although as a sci-fi film, *The Wandering Earth* is supposedly concerned with the fate of the human race as a whole (especially the fate of humans after the dissolution of nation-states and families), it has utilized every opportunity to advertise a form of (deterritorialized) nationalism behind the semblance of internationalism. Aside from the many Chinese elements (the Chinese national flag, the Spring Festival, the Chinese voice prompts in the car radio, the school uniform, etc.), the film also tries to appeal to the overseas communities by adding one mixed-blood character (Tim, played by Mike Sui) in the main cast. Tim functions as a comic figure in the film, but also as a conspicuous sign of the global reach of China’s encompassing power.

In the film, the grandfather Han Zi’ang can be viewed as a symbol of the traditional Chinese concept of the benevolent and protective nation-state family (*guojia*). Han Zi’ang is a nostalgic character, constantly bringing back memories of the solar-age Earth, of the traditions and hierarchies of China’s national culture. This senior father figure remains blameless in the film, even though Han Zi’ang has tacitly endorsed Liu Peiqiang’s decision to terminate Liu Qi’s mother—his own daughter. Han Zi’ang is frozen to death in a tall building in Shanghai that he built with others long time ago, shortly after he emotionally recollects his old family life. His death is symbolic of the moment in which nationalism is freed from the territory. Han Duoduo’s question after Han’s death reveals this old male character’s symbolic function in the film: “Without grandpa, where is our home”? This “home”, the psychic space for the family and the nation, has been transferred from Han Zi’ang to Liu Qi after the former’s death.

Displacement and the loss of territory, therefore, do not mean the disappearance of nationalism. Giles Deleuze points out that deterritorialization “constitutes and extends” the territory itself (Deleuze 1987, p. 372). After Han Zi’ang’s death, Chinese nationalism becomes a specter that can take any shape and possess any character. This specter of nationalism sometimes joins hands with the public power of the UEG to establish more authoritarian father figures in local communities (e.g., Liu Qi), sometimes it reminds the audience to view *The Wandering Earth* as a chauvinistic demonstration of the CCP’s achievements, and sometimes it is appropriated by the political discourse as a clarion call to strengthen the family-nation.¹⁰ The deterritorialized nationalism works like the “acousmatic”: it is ubiquitous, panoptic, omniscient, and omnipotent. It can more effectively “nationalize” individual feelings, such as Duo Duo’s longing for family, and communitarian sentiments, such as the culture of the underground city. It is ironic that despite the post-national sci-fi setting, the film is fraught with nationalist symbols, sentiments, memories, rituals, and narratives. Perhaps it is due to the lack of a true global vision that *The Wandering Earth* failed to have a remarkable performance in the international film market. Nathan Hao, CEO of distributor Times Visio, says that although “Chinese sci-fi is capable of attracting audiences abroad”, he doesn’t think “it’ll happen in the short term” (Davis 2019).

¹⁰ Coincidentally, on the same day of the debut of the film *The Wandering Earth*, *People’s Daily* (*Renmin Ribao* 2019) published an editorial titled “Vigorously Promoting the Family-Nation Complex in the Whole Society.”

5. Conclusions

It seems that the adaptation of the novella “The Wandering Earth” into a big screen feature has a preset teleology: the victory of the father. The film is deeply imbedded in the discursive network of postsocialist China and is pre-determined by the exigencies and interests of this society. As a result, the viewers are presented with a Chinese father–son story displaying the multiplied and insidious forms of the patriarchy enabled by transnationalism and technology: the Father can be an individual, a collective, disembodied, reincarnated, or displaced, but the Father always prevails. One can only become free by struggling against the established society. By upholding an infallible father, the film thus forecloses any possibility of radical revolutions of history by preemptively “castrating” the son.

Toward the end of the film, the audience sees a 2-min sequence in which the camera follows Liu Qi walking through the Chinese community in the underground city, where he receives people’s respect and greetings, before going to the surface of the Earth (Figure 4). The back figure of a faceless man bears many specters of fathers, who emerge victoriously in this film. The gallant voice-over and the speeding truck in the end have further transformed an apocalyptic disaster story into a mainstream blockbuster bristling with positive energy. It seems that in the end of the film, the characters have forgotten about the continuing crisis of the Earth (and the tragedy of the mother), and instead revel in the consolidated patriarchal system, which is more powerful than ever.



Figure 4. Liu Qi walks out of the underground city.

In recent years, the Chinese Bureau of Radio, Film, and Television has tightened its film content checks and only sanctioned those with “mainstream themes” (*zhu xuanliu*) and “positive energy” (*zheng nengliang*). The adaptation of *The Wandering Earth* obviously satisfies these directives. In fact, the film may have been viewed as an excellent model for future Chinese sci-fi films: the Bureau released a new set of guidelines on sci-fi films in August 2020, asking all future Chinese sci-fi films to “highlight Chinese values, inherit Chinese culture and aesthetics, cultivate contemporary Chinese innovation” as well as “disseminate scientific thought” and “raise the spirit of scientists” (Davis 2020).

The Wandering Earth tells a story of how a Chinese family leads the grand endeavor to save the world. The ancient Chinese philosophers believed that great chaos must be followed by great governance, and great governance must be followed by great prosperity.¹¹ China’s top leader Xi Jinping proposed the “Community of Common Destiny” (*renlei mingyun gongtongti*) as the motivating force of China’s future foreign policy, which shows China’s ambition to wield national power into a

¹¹ The original saying is derived from *Huainanzi* (The Writings of Huainan Masters), a Chinese classic written in the 2nd century BC.

global, totalizing domination during the potential global crisis. As Benjamin tells us, however, the “state of emergency” that is utilized to strengthen the authoritarian rule should not be treated “as a historical norm”; we need to “bring out a real state of emergency” that can lead us to a radical future (Benjamin 1968, p. 257). By castrating the projected radical future in Liu Cixin novella, the film *The Wandering Earth* has fully endorsed the existing rule.

According to Marcuse, the “technological transformation is at the same time political transformation, but the political change would turn into qualitative social change only to the degree to which it would alter the direction of technical progress” and bring about “the catastrophe of the established direction” (Marcuse 1991, p. 232). Through his imagination of radical technological, social, and political changes, Liu Cixin’s novella has indeed brought about such a catastrophic departure from the established social order; however, the film *The Wandering Earth* only “wanders” within the established trajectory.

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