New Ideas on Overseas Transmission of Chinese Movies: A Case Study of the Wandering Earth

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Abstract: With the enhancement of hard power, China now needs to promote international cultural communication, when movie makes up an important part of it. This article will try to provide new ideas for exporting Chinese culture in the new era by exploring reasons for the successful spread of the movie The Wandering Earth overseas. There are two main reasons for the success of The Wandering Earth abroad. Firstly, the movie sticks to China's original traditional values. Secondly, the movie correctly applies the empathy strategy. Two suggestions for Chinese cultural exports can therefore be drawn: the first is to establish cultural confidence and dare to export China's own fruit of thoughts in international cultural transmission; the second is to soften political tone through negotiated decoding and emphasize the role of secondary transmission.

Keywords: Cultural transmission, Chinese movies, Cultural confidence, Empathy strategy

1.   Introduction

The progress of material life is inevitably accompanied by the demand for cultural enjoyment. Professor Joseph Samuel Nye, Jr. from Harvard University once proposed that soft power is the ultimate competitiveness of a country, when culture is the core of it. Cultural soft power plays an extremely important role in national security, strength and survival. As an integral part of cultural soft power, cross-cultural communication can enhance a country's attraction and influence to other countries. Promoting cultural exchange for China today therefore becomes a must.

China has made great efforts in cross-cultural communication. Cross-cultural communication can be divided into cultural import and export. In terms of cultural imports, China has actively and thoroughly studied the achievements of western culture and applied it to enrich and develop its local culture, when in cultural exports, China is also a hardworking explorer. Among many steps China has taken, its first move is to show the world its prosperity and cultural confidence in ancient times (for example, Red Sorghum directed by Zhang Yimou). After studying the advanced western civilization in depth, China began to tell stories that contain westernism (for example, American Dreams in China directed by Peter Chan). Nowadays, China's cultural export has entered a new stage with the sufficient experience in cultural import and export, that is, telling China's story in a western way, just as The Wandering Earth did.

The Wandering Earth is a science fiction film based on the same name novel from Liu Cixin. Set in 2075, the story tells the story that the sun is about to be destroyed and is no longer suitable for

human existence. Facing the desperate situation, human beings will start the "Wandering the Earth" plan and try to flee the Earth from the solar system and bring it with them on the adventure of finding a new home. The Wandering Earth achieved remarkable success in overseas markets, whose total global box office reached US$ 699,992,512, of which US$ 5,971,413 was in the United States and Canada, which hit a record in the overseas box office of Chinese films. "With the development of Chinese-made blockbusters, Hollywood is no longer so special around the world."（IMDb）

The Wandering Earth's success abroad is of great significance to China's cross-cultural communication. This paper will discuss in detail the reasons for the successful spread of this film abroad, and new ideas for the export of Chinese film culture in the new era.

2. Literature Review

2.1. International Transmission Theory

Cross-cultural communication usually refers to communications between native speakers and non-native speakers, and meanwhile communications between any people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Brian J. Hurn and Barry Tomalin proposed that cross-cultural communication has been greatly influenced by anthropology, linguistics, philosophy and psychology in "*What is Cross-Cultural Communication?*" [1]. The main factors that hinder cross-cultural communication are ethnocentrism, ignorance, fear and laziness. To make cross-cultural communication go smoothly, three principles need to be followed: firstly, accept that there are differences between others and ourselves; secondly, accept that we do not know clearly what differences we have with others; thirdly, when dealing with people from other cultures, it should be realized that all emotions and reactions we generate come from ourselves instead of them.

With the emergence of mass media and the development of information globalization, international communication has become a major form of cross-cultural exchanges. Therefore, the media of international communication have also become the focus of attention.

In recent years, Chinese media have been making their own voices heard on the international stage, and the mainstream media have made remarkable achievements. Liu Ying, a Chinese scholar, conducted a sample assessment of the spread of seven mainstream media on three major overseas social platforms, namely Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, and established a new evaluation system for their spread effect. The system set content generation, transmission extension and issue setting as the three major first-level indicators, and assessed their spread effect from two aspects: that is, daily transmission and major campaign reports [2]. Similarly, Chinese scholars He Guoping and Wu Siyi evaluated the spread effect of the top foreign media of the country, China Global Television Network (CGTN), from four dimensions: secondary transmission, cross-platform interaction, application of new media and media operation and maintenance. They suggested that CGTN could increase fans number by promoting secondary transmission and interaction on overseas social platforms, and enhance their spread effect by enriching transmission forms and paying attention to timely content release, which will also help enhance China's national image and national soft power [3].

Scholars at home and abroad have pointed out that psychological barrier of the audience is a major obstacle for smooth cross-cultural communication. Moreover, most scholars' research on international transmission is based on a specific media organization or a specific social platform, and will be related to other disciplines such as culture, users, social science, etc.

2.2. Status of Film Research

The overseas spread of the Wandering Earth is essentially a cross-cultural communication based on movies. Among them, the conflict of whether to join in international competition or protect local films has always been the focus of research.

Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis described the conflict and dialectical thinking between film marketization and the protection of local films in China since the 1990s, and listed all kinds of efforts the government has made to keep Chinese films on a leading position in local film market in the 1990s in "Re-national China's Film Industry: Case Study on the China Film Group and Film Marketization" [4], although the author thought that this was actually an attempt to consolidate its own power through market. Diana Crane explored the global influence of American films in "Cultural Globalization and the Dominance of the American Film Industry: Cultural Policies, National Film Industries, and Transnational Film" [5], which points out that American movies still take the lead in global market, and studied the response of governments and what policies they have formulated to protect local movies around the world.

On whether to join in international competition or protect local films, Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis believed that the huge potential of the Chinese film market can attract many foreign blockbusters, but the creativity and market share of local films would thence be threatened. Diana Crane pointed out that most governments are opposed to the US monopoly of the film market and accordingly emphasize local culture when creating local films. The cultural diversity of movies around the globe also presents new challenges to Hollywood in today's market.

Chinese scholars have also shared their views on this issue. Li Huiqun suggested in "Opportunities and Challenges of Globalization for the Chinese Film Industry" that since western films [6], especially Hollywood films, have brought great impact to international film industry through globalization, China will face the dilemma of whether to cancel the quota of imported films. If the quota is abolished, the local films will face fierce competition, which on the other hand helps keep up Chinese films with the global market; if not, a favorable domestic environment would be created for local films, while they may become increasingly dependent on domestic capital and technology, and weaker to compete with Hollywood films in the long future.

3. Reasons for the Successful Spread of the Wandering Earth Overseas

Science fiction movie is still in their infancy in China, while its Hollywood counterpart has long dominated the world. As a new try of Chinese sci-fi movie, the fact that the Wandering Earth was welcomed by overseas audience deserves our thorough research.

3.1. Adherence to Chinese Cultural Tradition

The overseas spread of movies is in essence a form of cross-cultural communication, which involves the process from culture to cross-culture, how to treat other cultures and ultimately what attitude to adopt. In response, the French scholar Michel Sauquet presents a concept of "the wisdom of the other" [7], that is, when someone realizes the difference between his own culture and other culture, he fully accepts it. However, communication should be mutual. If there is only import and no export, Chinese films will be constantly imitating western films and gradually become a vassal the latter, since they have discarded their own traits in the process. The reason why the Wandering Earth does not follow the beaten track is that it adheres to China's own cultural tradition and core values. Being extremely inclusive is one of the major traits of Chinese civilization, which is fully reflected in the Wandering Earth.

Home-country loyalty has been rooted in the land of China for dozens of centuries, that is, no home will exist if there is no country, and home is the foundation and the extension of a country.

Therefore, upon the end of the world, The Wandering Earth did not choose the common western solutions, such as giving up the earth and setting up colonies on other planets (Interstellar), or establishing a last refuge in order to start from scratch (Deep Impact), but the way to roam together with the earth, which is a direct manifestation of Chinese loyalty to family and country. During the process of creation, the film director Duo Fan regards home-country loyalty as the core value of Chinese science fiction. " Chinese people regard home as a carrier of their emotion, so in the end we choose to take the whole earth and wander in space together. This idea does not originate from the west, but from Chinese culture." [8].

Collective heroism is also a highlight in the Wandering Earth. The film does embody personal heroism and values familiar to western audiences in certain scenes where He Lianke is killed by falling stones in order to protect others, and Tim breaks away from his cowardice to shoulder the heavy responsibility of protecting Liu Qi. However, collective heroism in the Wandering Earth emphasizes global action and international cooperation. Nobody takes the dominant position throughout the film;

What brings people together is a value that unites all mankind and concentrates their efforts for greater goods. At the end of the movie, rescue teams from all over the world together push the gigantic engine by hand which brings the movie to its ultimate climax and depicts the future Chinese people seek for: that is, all men can look past their differences and together pursue a brighter tomorrow. "The Verge", an American technology news website comments that the end of the film demonstrates both cultural similarity and divergence between China and the United States. "As China makes it way to sci-fi movies, we look forward to seeing how China will bring its unique values and talents to the global market." （https://www.theverge.com/2019/2/9/18218479/the-wandering-earth-review-film-

china-first-science-fiction-blockbuster-cixin-liu-netflix）

The strong inclusiveness of its culture plays a crucial role in China's course of cross-cultural communication. Since sci-fi movie was born in the west, its story background, narrative logic and shooting techniques have long been branded with strong western mark. With the help of strong cultural inclusiveness, however, Chinese filmmakers have taken in the western model for sci-fi movies as a part of themselves. The combination of western form and Chinese core contributes to the success of the Wandering Earth, which also proves that cultural inclusiveness is of great benefit to China's international cultural communication and soft power.

3.2. The Use of Empathy Strategy

Empathy is a human's innate ability to understand and share the feelings of others which has been widely studied and used in the field of communication, for it can mobilize individual emotions and stimulate the desire to share. Differences inevitably exists between different cultures, so it is normal that complete understanding can hardly be reached. However, emotional commonalities among humans enable communications transcending cultural differences and keep people away from comprehending deviation due to differences in cognitive structures and value systems.

Empathy is another strategy the Wandering Earth adopts to ensure its success. The ups and downs between Liu Peiqiang – the father and Liu Qi – the son is what millions of people experience in the real life. The scenes where Liu Peiqiang sacrifices himself to provide the earth with enough energy to flee from Jupiter and the refugees gave up their only chance of survival for the orphan Han Duoduo in the tsunami correspond to fits people's pursuit of goodness, which enables overseas audiences to understand the predicaments characters' face and emotions conveyed in the movie.

The use of empathy strategy can be rather critical in international cultural communication, which, based on common emotions, builds a bridge beyond national boundaries, gender, age and other barriers. When empathy works, the audience can give similar interpretations of one content and

generate certain desires to share, thus narrowing the distance between different cultures, on which basis their spontaneous behavior of praising, forwarding and commenting will form secondary transmission, which can effectively expand the scope and influence of information communication.

4. New Ideas for Overseas Spreading of Chinese Films from The Wandering Earth

4.1. Establish Cultural Confidence

Chinese President Xi Jinping pointed out, "we must adhere to self-confidence in path, theory, system, and, last but not least, culture." (The 13th collective study of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee on February 24, 2014) Cultural confidence is to fully affirm our own culture and values and firmly believe in their vitality, which all cultural workers in China need to establish to prompt cultural exports, build national image and enhance national soft power. A country with cultural confidence should dare to give priority to exporting its own fruit of thoughts in international cultural communication. Since Chinese films are still in a developing stage, it is necessary for filmmakers to learn patterns of manifestations of western films with humbleness and an open mind. However, the core value of their works must be Chinese; otherwise they would only produce countless western copies. In the case of the Wandering Earth, the film focuses on the expression of Chinese values such as home-country loyalty and the goodness of human nature, which distinguished itself from its western counterparts.

The expression of thoughts can decide whether the overseas spreading of Chinese films will be successful, when, honestly speaking, most of the sophisticated fruits the country has produces are from its ancient times (for example Confucianism), which exposes China's lack of innovation in the ideological field and hinders China's long-term cultural transmission. To deal with this conundrum, philosophy can best represent the true ideological level of a culture. For the long-term competitiveness of Chinese films and even the whole culture, the country must get to the root, that is, to create a new philosophy that provides a new perspective to understand the world, and push forward the fundamental progress of culture with the development of philosophy. Being unable to get rid of the influence of western values indicates a lack of cultural confidence, because a culture with firm confidence in itself should neither look up nor bow down to other cultures, but adopt a head-up attitude.

The highest form of cultural self-confidence is convey one's own values to the world in one's own way, when the influence of Confucianism on East and Southeast Asian culture would be a perfect example. There are views that to achieve this goal, China should first earn its voice on the international stage; however, the right to speak and external communication should complement each other. Exporting one's own values and striving for the right to speak are, in essence, not contradictory.

4.2. Weaken Political Tone through Negotiated Code

In 1973, Stuart Hall put forward three reading or interpretive positions of the audience in Encoding and Decoding, namely hegemonic code, oppositional code and negotiated code. The hegemonic code means a viewer completely accepts the transmitted information, which is the most ideal way for a discourse. In the case of oppositional code, a viewer understands the literal and connotative inflection of a discourse, but decodes the message in a globally contrary way. When it comes to negotiated code, the viewer agrees with the intention of a discourse and interprets the message according to their own background and position [9]. The relationship between communicator and audience is usually one-to-many in the process of publicity, where information follows a one-way linear tunnel and the communicator is in a higher position. If China still holds an over-straightforward and positive position, or fails to get rid of the "China-centered" mentality, the message it transmits can easily be

misinterpreted as being too political, which triggers the viewer's disobedience and leads to decoding in a completely confrontational way.

China needs to weaken its political tone in international cultural communication, and the negotiated code is an ideal way. However dissimilar they may be, different cultures do share common grounds, like the pursuit of kindness and beauty, and this sets the stage for the negotiated code to bring mutual understanding and put aside differences among audience at home and abroad. Li Ziqi, a Chinese cyber celebrity who has a more than ten-million fanbase on overseas social media platforms, is a positive proof. High frequency words in her comment section are mostly positive, such as "thank you", "love" and "beautiful", for her videos show the natural idyllic scenery and delicious food of China and loving family ties between a grandmother and her granddaughter when integrating traditional Chinese culture with contemporary ones. China's image in her videos therefore becomes vivid and all-sided, which not only successfully makes her works welcomed by overseas audience, but also triggers emotional resonance and perfects China's national image. Negotiated code thus proves its effectiveness in international cultural communication.

At the same time, China should strengthen communication and interaction with overseas audience by putting extra emphasis on secondary transmission. Secondary transmission is a case where the transmission of news or event after initial propagation, but continues to spread through other media, and hence possesses the characteristics of non-indoctrination, wide spreading range and unrestricted by conditions. In the era of Internet, secondary transmission can be conducted without difficulty based on audience's understanding of the original message through negotiated decoding, and achieve large-scale dissemination in a short period of time through forwarding, reprinting, collecting and integrating, and thus plays a significant role in promoting cultural communication. Take "Bing Dwen Dwen" as an example – "Bing Dwen Dwen" is the mascot of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games, which has not only won great attention in China, but also gained numerous praise from overseas athletes, media and netizens. The "Bing Dwen Dwen" video American athlete Maddie Mastro uploaded to TikTok has amassed more than 8 million views, and a Google search for Bing Dwen Dwen can receive more than 10 million results. Tsujioka Gidō, a Japanese reporter from Nippon TV, expressed his affection for "Bing Dwen Dwen" in his pre-Olympic report, and turned his live call into a "Bing Dwen Dwen" on-site recommendation meeting. Thanks to secondary transmission, the influence of "Bing Dwen Dwen" has been greatly expanded, which also benefits the shaping of China's national image.

5. Conclusion

Movie is an important part of cultural export. Compared with western movies, Chinese movie is still in a start-up stage; in the process of learning from the former, Chinese filmmakers have long been transmitting western values through western forms in their own works, while the Wandering Earth is an attempt to convey Chinese values, which, with the correct use of empathy strategies, made a success overseas. The successful spreading of the film has brought more possibilities for international cultural transmission of the country.

When making a great step in "going global", there are also limitations about Chinese films and cultural export. For example, China should weaken its political tone and put the establishment of cultural confidence in the first place; for a radical cure, the country needs to promote ideological progress from the source, that is, the development of philosophy. This requires China to create a new philosophy that provides a new perspective to understand the world, and enables overseas audiences to know about the world from the country's own perspective. Philosophy level stands for the fundamental height of a culture, for which China needs to strive for a long time.

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