

Wandering Earth II: Can hard Chinese science fiction be a source of soft power?

Marina Zhang
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The Wandering Earth II (2023) is a prequel to *The Wandering Earth* (2019), providing the backstory for why, in the original production, the Earth embarked on an interstellar journey to escape the expanding Sun. China plays a leading role in an imagined United Earth Government (UEG) mission to save human civilisation. Reaching an agreement within the UEG Assembly carries myriad geopolitical tensions, paralleling real-life struggles concerning global issues, as witnessed in the recent [Munich Security Conference](#).

The movies are adaptations of a novella by [Liu Cixin](#), author of *The Three-Body Problem* that won him a [Hugo Award](#), the first by an Asian author. Born in 1963, Liu experienced the transformation of Chinese society, from Mao's era of intellectual oppression to its emergence as a superpower in science and technology. Creating innovative, futuristic scenes, Liu imprints his life experience, personal values, and worldview on his stories. His work focuses primarily on the relationships between humanity and technology, diplomacy and geopolitics, and people and culture.

The Wandering Earth II was simultaneously released in China and more than 30 other countries during Chinese New Year 2023. The movie is an ambitious attempt to advance China's global strategy. As such, it has been interpreted by audiences and judged by critics differently around the world.

China's global strategy

Following Deng Xiaoping's maxim of biding time and developing strength, for most of the past 40 years, China's diplomacy was cautious and restrained, reflecting strategic patience and avoiding confrontation with the West. In the past decade, however, China has become diplomatically more assertive as it seeks to influence the international order to better reflect its '[position of strength](#).' Its '[wolf warrior diplomacy](#)' – *Wolf Warrior* is the title of Chinese-made action/war movie series featuring Chinese foreign missions – has projected a changing, very different, image of China in the global arena.

However, this wolf warrior style of diplomacy has not been well received. As a result, the government's efforts to burnish the country's global image through initiatives such as [the Belt and Road Initiative](#) and [Confucius Institutes](#) – have been misrepresented, misunderstood, and consequentially damaged. Recently, China's 'wolf warrior' diplomat, [Zhao Lijian](#), was shifted aside, indicating the country is perhaps changing tack. Instead, emphasis is being put into building [soft power](#) through creative concepts, symbols, and narratives that reflect Chinese history, culture, and people. *The Wandering Earth* movies can be considered part of this.

Technology and humanity

Educated as a computer engineer, Liu has a deep interest in science and technology. He uses his imaginative power to create complex, thought-provoking stories that explore big themes about technology and humanity, existentialism, and the nature of reality.

In *The Wandering Earth II*, China prioritises humanity over scientific solutions. For example, when the UEG Assembly debates options to save human civilisation, Option A, favoured by the Chinese, requires the Earth, with human civilisation, to be uplifted to wander in an unknown universe. Option B, favoured by the Americans, necessitates the connection of human brains into Artificial Intelligence networks to extend human consciousness in the digital sphere. The debate is decided in favour of Option A, as shown in the original movie set 30 years later, making it clear that, for Liu, civilisation without humanity doesn't exist.

People and culture

A person's childhood can profoundly influence their values and worldview. Liu's father, an intellectual, was forced into hard labour during the [Cultural Revolution](#) (so was my mother!). In an interview, Liu discussed how his father's loss of freedom taught him to question authority and think critically about humanity.

Embedded in his own cultural assumptions, Liu depicted the protagonists in the movie as Chinese, with other groups, notably the Americans, playing a more passive role. By doing so, he projects Chinese culture as a potential source of global norms, perhaps reflecting his 'superiority complex' derived from China's continuous long history and culture.

Liu's despidal of authoritarianism and positive regard for individual freedom is depicted in the movie. One scene that has captured the hearts of audiences from all cultural backgrounds is of a father who fails to obey an authoritarian order. Using quantum computing power, over decades he trained an AI model based on his dead daughter's memories (she died aged five in a tragic car accident) and developed two minutes of her consciousness into the digital sphere. In Liu's mind, despite their different cultural heritages, humans share universal values of family, friendship, and love. It is this that underpins human civilisation. At the same time, the scene raises questions about the moral implications of developing digital consciousness and the unknown consequences of AI.

Diplomacy and geopolitics

For anyone growing up in China when material goods were scarce, it was not uncommon to have developed a zero-sum mentality – your gain is my loss. However, through *The Wandering Earth II*, Liu has gone beyond this limitation. A senior Chinese diplomat claims at the UEG Assembly: 'Humans spend too much of their intelligence on destroying one another. In times of crisis, global collaboration is needed.' Interestingly, that senior diplomat resembles China's premier Zhou Enlai, who was also China's first foreign minister. The demeanour of a controlled yet assertive diplomat perhaps reflects Liu's nostalgia for tradition.

[The zero-sum game](#) described in the movie echoes geopolitics today. Globalisation, based on the principle of comparative advantages, has enabled countries to share in prosperity. However, globalisation is under challenge because of narrow-minded protectionism and nationalism. Countries are fighting for access to critical resources, from coal to oil, and now lithium, and to control critical technologies for their own benefit, dividing human civilisation into 'them' and 'us.'

Liu's message is relevant to understanding the current relationship between China and the United States. At a time of crisis, both countries need to collaborate to fight against climate change, one of humanity's common enemies, rather than with one another.

Reflection

Liu's 'hard science' fiction meticulously adheres to known physical laws. Through a seamless fusion of real and digital effects – tremendous progress compared to the original production four years ago – in scenes of drone

swarm battles, space elevators, and nuclear explosions, *The Wandering Earth II* presents an imagined future of human civilisation.

Liu's narratives might be perceived as tools by which to export Chinese global strategy. For this reason, the movie has received divided reviews from different audiences, the divide being created not by the languages the audiences speak but by their values. We should note that perceptions of China are complex and multifaceted, and there is significant diversity of opinion both within and outside China. While there may be different interpretations, there are also opportunities for dialogue and engagement to increase mutual understanding and address areas of disagreement. The questions that Liu raises in *The Wandering Earth* – Can future technologies save human civilisation? Can humans find a new home in the cosmos? Can they achieve immortality in digital life? – are thought-provoking and important. One would hope that Chinese-made sci-fi movies would not be summarily dismissed as 'government propaganda.'

Dr Marina Zhang is Associate Professor – Research at the Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney.