

Appeal of 'The Wandering Earth II' has nothing to do with ideology

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"PLEASE send me a convincing and informative photo from 'The Wandering Earth II'."

It was an unusual request from a friend in Hong Kong who was planning to make the trip to the neighboring city of Shenzhen to watch the movie.

This was just days before the film was officially released in Hong Kong. He needed the stills to convince his friends to make the trip to Shenzhen to watch it.

The film has its appeal. Nearly three weeks after its release, "The Wandering Earth II" is still sparking debates, from the various details fans discovered after watching for the second, third, or even fourth time and their thoughts on a third sequel to the nuanced implications of whether a digital life counts as living or whether artificial intelligence is on the side of humans.

I sent him a picture of the little girl in the movie, with the four buttons on her sweater representing the many crises that humans are alerted in the film.

The rabbit pattern on her sweater was "smiling" in real life as opposed to "crying" in digital life. The last time I recall movies requiring such keen eyes for the enormous number of concealed subtleties were "Inception" and "Interstellar," back when sci-fi blockbusters essentially meant Hollywood.

"The Wandering Earth II" came in a close second at the box office on the Chinese mainland in January. It has been screened in many foreign countries, including the United States.

Surprisingly, it garnered nearly identical ratings on the Chinese and English

user-aggregated review sites, 8.2/10 on Douban and 8.0/10 on IMDb.

On Rotten Tomatoes, the film has a 78 percent critics' approval rating and a 97 percent audience approval rating. It appears that there is more disparity between critics and audiences than between audiences of different countries.

Even the reviews in Chinese and English are nearly the same.

Those who gave it high marks, including 10/10, praised it for its dazzling spectacle, which is comparable to any Hollywood sci-fi movie and serves as a solid base for the grandeur of the epic setting of a 2,500-year journey in space and the wild imagination of a near future with a space elevator and seemingly omnipotent door frame robots.

Those who gave it the low marks saw it as a promotion of Chinese ideology and subtle political subtext.

I know of friends who wanted to watch the movie but worried about being brainwashed by the Chinese ideology supposedly contained within.

I tried to figure out what the Chinese ideology is in the film. Chinese rescuing the planet along with others? When it comes to rescuing Earth, shouldn't we be fulfilling the mission together at any cost?

Or, what is the non-Chinese alternative? Not rescuing the world and going extinct? Fighting each other and dying together?

So, then, I prefer Chinese ideology.

Watching movies was so much easier before. Years ago, when I watched "Independence Day," I wasn't troubled by America saving the globe, with a few minutes



Movie fans are discovering all kinds of hidden details, such as the four different buttons on Yaya's sweater.

saved for its British allies. I was never concerned by the American president's motivational speech, in which he said that "the Fourth of July will no longer be known as an American holiday" before hopping on a fighter jet and firing missiles at an alien spaceship.

It was an entertaining film, and I rewatched it again after the awful sequel.

"The Wandering Earth II" is equally entertaining and saves humanity along with everyone else. When I watched the film for the second time, I tried to count the number of languages and badges of nationalities that appeared in the film.

I gave up after 30 minutes because it was simply impossible.

The film begins with a monologue by an Indian scientist. One can hear English, French, Russian, Spanish, Portuguese and other languages as well throughout the film.

Another debate demonstrates its success: Many audience members wonder why it didn't take the top spot at the box office in January.

It's difficult to imagine that the first "The Wandering Earth" smashed the box office record in 2019 despite several budgetary constraints.

The fact that many people

were surprised that a Chinese big-budget sci-fi blockbuster didn't top the box office this year was unfathomable before 2019, when the first of "The Wandering Earth" series emerged as a surprise winner.

It was only five years ago that a Chinese film producer told me that making a big-budget Chinese sci-fi picture was "doomed to be a disaster," and that many established directors had shunned such projects.

Dozens of Chinese sci-fi films and TV programs have been canceled in the last 10 years, including a cinematic adaptation of "The Three-Body Problem," due to a lack of money and, ultimately, confidence that it could actually be made.

Not anymore. Following the success of "The Wandering Earth," quite a few projects, from small to big-budget, took off. Some flopped, but a few others enjoyed relatively moderate success.

The critically acclaimed small-budget sci-fi/fantasy, "Journey to the West," is set for an April release. The film is produced by Gong Geer, who also produced "The Wandering Earth," and is directed by Kong Dashan, who also worked on the blockbuster.

"If we can say the first one initiated the grandiose journey of China's sci-fi movie, then this one marks a flamboyant honking on the world stage," Liu Cixin, author of the original short story on which the films are based, said on his Weibo account after seeing the film a second time.

"We all know that Chinese sci-fi has a long way to go, and fortunately, people like the creators of 'The Wandering Earth II' are pushing ahead, relentlessly."

novels were published.

Science fiction was slower to develop in China's movie industry, partly due to lack of expertise in special effects. It's not that the Chinese lacked imagination but rather the mechanics of turning it out for the big screen. That has changed.

"We're proud that the mechanical devices and precision electronic components in many scenes of our movie were made by Chinese creators," said director Gwo.

Still, there is more to be done. More creators need to be nurtured to adapt new technologies to the needs of science fiction plots.

Additionally, the number of professional sci-fi writers in China is still small — with only about 160 novelists in the genre on the Chinese mainland and only a third of them keep writing top-quality fiction. That contrasts with an estimated 1,500 original sci-fi writers in the US.

Professor Shi Chuan, vice president of the Shanghai Film Association and a film expert from the Shanghai Theater Academy, said Chinese sci-fi writers and directors need to reflect on subjects about a shared future for mankind and offer persuasive Chinese solutions to them.

"They also need to improve their capabilities of cross-cultural communication," Professor Shi added. "Their stories should be rooted in the reality and culture of China, but told with a global perspective."