

Visual Translation of Traditional Culture: On the Aesthetic Generation of Modernity in Chinese Science Fiction Films

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of China's ongoing process of modernization, contemporary Chinese science fiction film has emerged as a crucial cultural site for articulating alternative imaginaries of modernity. Unlike the Western science fiction tradition centered on technological rationality, individualism and colonial cosmology, Chinese science fiction films take the reinterpretation of traditional cultural resources as a path, presenting a "civilizational modernity" that is both technological, cultural and ethical. This article starts from the cultural logic of Chinese-style modernization and analyzes the translation methods of traditional aesthetics, traditional heroic paradigms and traditional etiquette culture in the visual images of science fiction films. Chinese science fiction films have formed a modern picture with cultural continuity and the spirit of The Times through the landscape of future landscapes, the image schema of group heroes and the construction of an emotional community with visual ritualization. Chinese science fiction films are constructing a modern narrative based on cultural subjectivity, providing a unique cultural path for understanding the spiritual connotation of Chinese-style modernization.

Keywords: Chinese science fiction films; Chinese-style modernization; Eastern modernity; Reinterpretation of traditional culture.

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Introduction

Chinese-style modernization is not only the modernization of the economy and technology, but also a process of comprehensive reshaping of the form of civilization, value system and cultural subjectivity. In this grand historical process, cultural production has become an important dimension for understanding the dynamic structure of modernization, and science fiction films, as a cutting-edge cultural form where technological narrative and cultural narrative converge, naturally carry the symbolic significance of modernity expression. Compared with the global mainstream science fiction tradition, the rise of Chinese science fiction films has not replicated the ideological logic of Western modernity, but has demonstrated a modernity path centered on cultural continuity, collectivist ethics and community values. The uniqueness of Chinese science fiction films does not only stem from technological leaps, but mainly lies in the activation and translation of traditional cultural resources. Traditional aesthetics determine the cultural background color of future visuals in Chinese science fiction films. The traditional hero paradigm shapes the logic of action and value structure, while traditional etiquette culture provides the way of organizing emotions. Chinese science fiction films have not deviated from cultural traditions but have recreated traditional culture within a modern imaging system. Chinese science fiction films are not only a symbol of the progress of the cultural industry, but also a visual expression of Chinese-style modernization at the spiritual level.

1.Future-oriented Traditional Aesthetics: Visual Translation of the Artistic Conception of Eastern Landscapes and the Concept of Home Space

Contemporary Chinese science fiction films present a different aesthetic logic in visual construction from that of Hollywood. This difference does not merely stem from industrial technology or narrative strategies, but is deeply rooted in the visual translation of traditional Chinese aesthetics and spatial imagination. Based on the traditional aesthetics of Chinese culture such as landscape aesthetics, artistic conception aesthetics, and the spatial view of "family, country, and world", the translation constitutes the Oriental future vision of Chinese science fiction. It not only provides a mainstream visual identity for Chinese science fiction but also realizes the modernity of Oriental

vision in aesthetics.

1.1 Landscape Aesthetics: The Cultural background Color of Future landscapes

The "high and distant" layers and depth, the flow of points, lines and surfaces, and the composition concept of "taking momentum through space" in Chinese landscape paintings have been translated into the visual structure of future landscapes in the context of Chinese science fiction. The re-application of form transforms the composition principles of mountains and waters, such as scattered perspective and layering of distance, into photographic arrangements for aerial photography, panoramic views and depth of field. In terms of the continuation of cultural significance, it means that even in extreme technological or disaster situations, the connection among topography, memory and identity is still retained, allowing disaster-like or alienated scenes to still be read as the mountains and rivers of national character. Take the "The Wandering Earth" series as an example. The overall narrative revolves around the Earth's thrusters and global engineering. Many surface scenes still present the interlaced and layered future urban landforms. This terrain that can be recognized by the audience not only serves the spatial narrative but also undertakes the function of visualizing cultural memory. Under such treatment, the surface that has been frozen or burned is still recognized by the audience as a home to belong to rather than an abstract ruin. When "The Assassin of the Novelist" and "Future Machine City" were constructing the scenes of otherworldly or future cities, they also used undulating mountains and curving valleys as the visual framework, making the future present an organic and flowing Oriental temperament rather than a cold and hard geometric factory aesthetic. This transformation from mountains and waters to future landscapes enables Chinese science fiction to maintain cultural recognisability beneath grand spectacles and also provides a foothold for emotional memories.

1.2 Artistic Conception Aesthetics: The handling of blank space, reality and illusion, and rhythmic images

Eastern aesthetics have always valued the subtlety and blank space of "meaning before writing", and this aesthetic tendency is mainly manifested in the handling strategy of camera rhythm in contemporary science fiction films. Unlike the continuous burst and saturated visuals commonly used in Hollywood, Chinese science fiction often employs large empty shots, slow advances and low-frequency light fields to create blank, echoing and turning emotional responses, preserving the space for emotional aftertaste within grand narratives. In "The Wandering Earth 2", the empty shots of many surface environments and the slowly following shots interweave the real space with the AI virtual space, creating an immersive experience of "the interplay of reality and illusion" similar to a Chinese ink painting. The film "The Wandering Earth 2" employs large areas of "white ground" in the lunar surface scenes and minimizes the composition of characters, creating a nearly Zen-like sense of isolation and desolation, endowing the science fiction within a comedic context with an introspective emotional layer. This strategy of artistic conception is a continuation of traditional Chinese aesthetic preferences and also a narrative choice. Through the visual rhythm of "less is more", the images guide the anxiety of modernity towards the inner emotions of the audience, thereby achieving the transformation of technological wonders into cultural implications.

1.3 Home Space Perspective: The cosmic expansion in the traditional "heaven, Earth - human" context

In traditional Chinese thought, the family and the state are not separable geographical categories, but rather an interwoven entity of ethics, history and identity. Hollywood science fiction often centers on leaving and conquering as its core spatial narrative, while Chinese science fiction tends to prioritize the maintenance of one's homeland. This is manifested in narrative strategy as a cosmic action carrying a home rather than abandonment and reconstruction. The Wandering Earth most directly visualizes this proposition. The entire promotion project is not aimed at scattering humans to other planets, but at preserving the entire Earth as a cultural carrier. In terms of image design, the distribution of thrusters, the globally collaborative images, and the preservation of commemorative landmarks all emphasize the home as an irreplaceable core. "Crazy Alien" even integrates alien technology into traditional Chinese local Spaces such as temple fairs and markets, highlighting that the future does not completely isolate daily life from the existing regional culture, but rather interweaves with it. Modernity does not follow the same thread in different

cultures. In China, modernity is more manifested in the practice of maintaining cultural coherence and a sense of home under technological conditions.

2.The Visualization of Traditional Hero Archetypes: The Eastern Body Modernity of Physical Responsibility, Group Collaboration, and National Ethics

The heroic images in Chinese science fiction films are not simply copied from the superman-style power displays in Hollywood, but have been reconstructed into an Oriental body modernity centered on physical commitment, group collaboration and ethical drive within the ethical and aesthetic soil of the national tradition. This reconstruction is not only a continuation of cultural resources but also a visual response to the predicament of modernity.

2.1 Physical endurance: A limited body dealing with extreme situations

In traditional Chinese culture, the narrative of heroes has long emphasized the ethical intention of serving the country with one's life and sacrificing oneself for the cause. Heroes do not transcend the human realm due to extraordinary talents, but rather achieve moral values at the limits of their ordinary bodies. In Chinese science fiction films, this tradition is translated as the proposition of the body taking on responsibilities in imaging. Through close-ups, close-ups, long takes and action arrangements, the film materializes the characters' exhaustion, injury, persistence and sacrifice as the core of the visual narrative, thereby transforming abstract ethics into perceptible physical representations. In "The Wandering Earth 2", the scenes of the protagonist's repeated injuries, facial and body scars during extreme missions are not merely to enhance the drama, but to visualize the load of responsibility. The camera uses blank space and slow progression to highlight the fragility of the character's body. At the same time, the cabin, instrument panel, family belongings and the character's body are symbolically juxtaposed in the shots. It emphasizes that the resolution of contemporary crises does not rely on "superhuman" power, but rather on the extreme endurance of every ordinary body. The visual strategy of the body taking on responsibilities, on the one hand, responds to the concerns in the critique of modernity about the marginalization of human nature under technological rationality, and on the other hand, establishes an emotional resonance channel for the audience. When the film places ethics within the pain and actions of the specific body, the audience no longer merely judges good and evil based on abstract rationality, but shares the emotional burden with the characters and understands the meaning of sacrifice. This body-centered approach to heroism endows the ethical propositions of science fiction narratives with greater sensitivity and ethical tension.

2.2 Group Collaboration: A visual transformation from a single hero to a group of heroes

In contrast to individual hero worship, the Eastern cultural tradition places more emphasis on the interdependent relationship among groups, families and communities. In Chinese science fiction films, this group-based approach is realized through the narrative and compositional practice of group heroism. The film places the collaboration of several ordinary individuals at the center of the rescue plan through means such as parallel composition, synchronization of group actions, and multi-point parallel cross-line narrative, thereby transforming heroism from a lone hero to a collective performance. The narrative structure of the "The Wandering Earth" series is essentially multi-threaded, with various subjects such as ground rescue teams, astronauts, engineers, and ordinary citizens forming a collaborative matrix at key nodes. The director showcases an aesthetic of collective action through cross-cutting, parallel long shots, and collective synergy shots. The common side-by-side formations, group silhouettes and panoramic corridor-like push in the visual language all make the audience perceive that the rescue project is not a solo performance of a single hero, but the fruit of social labor and collaboration. Group heroism is not only a continuation of traditional collective ethics but also a response to contemporary governance issues. In the face of environmental crises and global risks, the capacity of a single entity is limited, and the necessity of group collaboration has become a realistic proposition. Through the shaping of group portrait aesthetics, the film not only offers an alternative hero model but also aesthetically affirms the public nature and the ability of social organization,

which echoes the discussions on community governance in contemporary political philosophy.

2.3 Ethics-driven: The visual presentation of patriotism and family sentiments in actions

Traditional Chinese heroic deeds are often driven by ethical norms such as righteousness, loyalty and filial piety, and heroic actions often aim ultimately at the country and the family. In domestic science fiction films, this ethical structure has been adapted into specific action motivations, becoming an important driving force for visual narrative. In Chinese science fiction, crucial decisions are often made on the premise of serving the homeland and the survival of the community, endowing heroic deeds with social and historical responsibility. As a sci-fi film that blends comedy, "The Wandering Earth 2" achieves an emotional climax through the ethical reversal of ordinary individuals sacrificing for the public at a key plot twist. The film uses visual techniques such as close-ups, slow motion, and background music to make this sacrifice symbolic. Even the rather absurd "Crazy Alien" demonstrates the spontaneous collective actions of ordinary people in the face of external events, reflecting the self-awareness of local ethics in the face of external shocks. Ethical drive enables the modernity of Eastern heroes to have both moral argumentation and emotional appeal functions. Through contextualized ethical presentations such as family fare-ins, collective oaths, and memorial ceremonies, the images connect individual choices with the values of the community, thereby elevating the technical issues of science fiction to cultural and ethical ones. This strategy not only continues the Confucian ethical tradition of emphasizing social relations and responsibilities, but also responds to the need for value reconstruction in the critique of modernity. In a highly technological world, films attempt to redefine what constitutes public values worth sacrificing for.

Chinese science fiction has reconstructed the modern image of heroes through three paths: physicalization, groupization and ethicalization, providing an important cultural variant for global science fiction aesthetics. The recreation of heroic images in Chinese science fiction films is not only a creative application of cultural resources but also an aesthetic response to the challenges of modernity. By visualizing the traditional heroic paradigm into a trinity structure of physical commitment, group collaboration, and ethically driven, the film offers a modern imagination that is both rooted in the national context and oriented towards the global context.

3. Visual Ritualization of Traditional Etiquette Culture: From Technological Narratives to the Construction of Emotional Communities

In Chinese science fiction films, traditional etiquette is not merely attached to the narrative surface as cultural symbols, but is deeply involved in the visual narrative through visualized ritual fields, becoming a key mechanism connecting individual emotions with collective identity. Placing rituals at the center of image analysis follows the theoretical perspective of James Carey's "ritual view of communication" in communication studies, emphasizing that communication is not only a one-way information flow but also a symbolic behavior that maintains social relations. This also explains why science fiction, a seemingly highly technical genre of film, can generate a strong cultural cohesion and emotional resonance in the Chinese context.

3.1 Visual Ritualization: Construction of an Emotional Community

The stylized actions, fixed Settings and orders in traditional etiquette such as formation, salute, prayer and silence are translated in films through composition, movement, editing and sound, becoming readable rituals in future scenarios. These ritualized processing methods, through wide-angle panoramic views, symmetrical compositions, synchronization of group movements and gradual intensification of sound, create a sense of solemnity similar to that of a festival or mobilization, enabling the audience to recognize and participate in the collective ritual order at the perceptual level even when they are in a highly technological plot. In this process, ritualized images further promote the call of an emotional community through the design of emotional rhythms. The joys and sorrows of an individual are transformed into shared public emotions through slow-motion shots, long shots, low-saturation tones and close-ups of the face. The changes in the camera shots and the panoramic switches transform individual emotions into the recognition of collective emotions, promoting the audience to form an recognition of the

significance of the community at the cognitive and sensory levels.

3.2 Ritualized Narrative: The Integration of the Significance of the Technological Crisis and Cultural Identity

Visual ritualization is not merely the presentation of actions and emotions; it also integrates scattered technical issues, ethical dilemmas, and character fates into a cultural narrative thread. Science fiction films often involve complex technical details and abstract issues that span national and temporal boundaries. These problems are difficult to form a broad social consensus merely through technical terms. By placing these issues in ritualized contexts, such as emergency mobilization involving the entire population, the establishment of commemorative days, and memorial services for the deceased, abstract technological problems are concretized into cultural symbols, facilitating social resonance and ethical judgment. Films such as "The Wandering Earth" and "Crazy Alien" have transformed technological crises into cultural stories by using commemorative objects and collective actions, thereby promoting the formation of public emotions and cultural identity. Through the coordinated effect of technical elements such as symmetrical composition, long shots and steady tones, the director, cinematographer and editor have formed a kind of ritual visual grammar, enabling the audience to trigger familiar etiquette experiences in an unfamiliar technological context and generate emotional identification on this basis. Through these means, the visual translation of traditional etiquette culture in Chinese science fiction films is not only a reproduction in style, but also a process of generating cultural significance and community identity. This translation not only highlights the profound potential of traditional culture, but also provides new perspectives and dimensions for modern visual language.

4. Conclusion

Contemporary Chinese science fiction films engages with Chinese-style modernization through the visual translation of cultural tradition rather than through technological imagination alone. By reconfiguring traditional aesthetics, heroic paradigms, and ritual practices within futuristic imagery, these films articulate an alternative form of modernity that departs from linear and homogenizing models of modernization. Tradition is not positioned as the opposite of modernity, but as a generative resource in shaping modern experience. Through the future-oriented transformation of shanshui aesthetics, Chinese science fiction constructs a culturally legible vision of the future grounded in affective continuity. The visualization of traditional heroic paradigms reshapes modern subjectivity around embodied responsibility, collective agency, and ethical commitment, offering an alternative to individual-centered heroism. Meanwhile, the ritualization of cinematic images integrates technological crises into shared cultural narratives, enabling the formation of emotional communities that connect individual experience with collective identity. Taken together, these visual strategies give rise to what this article conceptualizes as "civilizational modernity," a culturally grounded mode of modernity aligned with theories of multiple modernities. By foregrounding the visual translation of tradition, Chinese science fiction film expands the conceptual horizons of global science fiction studies and reimagines the relationship between technology, culture, and the future.

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