

The Graphic Narrative of Liu Cixin, *The Wandering Earth*, and its Related Ecological Problems

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Abstract: Focusing on the ideological connotations and artistic techniques of the graphic novel *The Wandering Earth*, this paper discusses its adaptation from the literary work, and reveals its thoughts on the ecological problems and the sustainable development in the Anthropocene. Images in this graphic novel do not simply reproduce the externally visible objects, but let the invisible be seen by presenting a certain way for the viewer to observe the earth. This novel organically combines science fiction and the art of graphic storytelling, which is worthy of in-depth discussion from the interdisciplinary perspective.

Keywords: *The Wandering Earth*, Graphic Narrative, Ecological Problems, Interdisciplinary Perspective, Interculturalism, Sustainable Development.

INTRODUCTION

Liu Cixin, one of the most prolific and popular science fiction writers in China, has penned in a series of graphic novels including *Sea of Dreams*, *The Wandering Earth*, *The Village Teacher*, *Yuanyuan's Bupple*, and so on. The series organized by Beijing Man-Chuanqi (漫传奇) Culture Communication Co., Ltd (hereinafter referred to as "Man-Chuanqi") and published by CITIC Press Corporation in 2020 in Chinese, and by Talos Press in 2021 in English.

As a graphic novel, *The Wandering Earth* was adapted from Liu's short story of the same name originally published in 2000 and reprinted many times since then. This graphic novel was completed jointly by Chinese and foreign artists with Christophe Bec, the writer, from France, Stefano Raffaele, the illustrator, from Italy, Marcelo Maiolo, the colorist, from Brazil, and Nicolas Vallet, the cover illustrator, from Canada. The story is about the possibility of the sun having a helium flash that would wipe out the Earth. In despair, human beings start the "wandering earth" project, trying to escape the solar system and find a new home for mankind in Proxima Centauri. It is obviously an intercultural graphic novel which

reflects the thinking about the sustainable development and the future destiny of the whole human race, rather than a single nation. Hence, the artistic techniques and ideological connotations of this novel deserve further discussion.

GRAPHIC NARRATIVE

The word "manhua"(漫画) in modern Chinese was imported from Japanese "manga" and translated into English "cartoon" or "caricature". According to Feng Zikai (1898-1975), the founder of Chinese caricature, the word "man" (漫) means freedom, and in his view, any work painted to the painter's discretion can be called a caricature (1990: 388).

On this basis, Feng made a distinction between caricature and other types of imagen reproduction. The caricature puts its emphasis on "meaning and using simple brush", the pattern on "form and using fine brush", the sketch on "form and using simple brush", and illustration on "meaning and using fine brush" (202). That is to say, compared with other image types, a caricature is more suitable for storytelling because of its focus on the expression of meaning.

The essence of graphic narrative is related to the essence of painting, on which Gotthold E. Lessing (1729-1781) made a detailed discussion in *Laocoon*. He specifically demonstrates the respective attributes and characteristics of poetry and painting, and distinguishes the differences between them. Firstly, the sphere is different because "succession of time is the sphere of the poet, as space is that of the painter" (2008: 177). Secondly, the media is different in that "the former employing figures and colors in space and the latter articulate sounds in time" (2008: 150). Thirdly, the subjects are different as "bodies, with their visible properties, are the legislative subjects of painting", while "actions are therefore the legislative subjects of poetry" (2008: 151).

Images belongs to the "spatial" art, and its specialty is to express co-existent objects, or an object whose parts are co-existent; literature belongs to the "temporal" art, and its specialty is to "express things which, either of themselves, or in their component parts, are consecutive" (2008: 150). It seems to be against its natural attribute to let images tell stories. However, Lessing points out:

All bodies, however, exist in time as well as space. It is their nature to endure, and at each separate moment of their duration, they may appear under a different aspect, and in new combinations. Each of these momentary appearances and combinations is the effect of one which has preceded, and may be the cause of one which is to follow; it will thus form the centre of an action. Painting may, therefore, represent actions, but it can only be by intimation, through means of bodies. (2008: 151)

Although Lessing distinguishes poetry and painting in his discourse, his view of "the most pregnant moment" (*Der pragnantste Augenblick*) creates an opportunity for images to tell stories. If a painter wants to narrate a story on a fixed drawing board, he should choose the most pregnant moment, i.e, the moment is "at once expressive of the past, and pregnant with the future" (2008: 152). In fact, the graphic narrative is to use the results of space to complete the process of time, so its essence is "the temporalization of space".

According to Kant's exposition on the relationship between space and time in *Critique of Pure Reason*, space and time are the forms of "transcendental aesthetic" (Kant 1998: 156). The former regulates the shape of external objects in our hearts so that they can be intuitionistic, while the latter acts on people's internal feelings to order the former. Our perceptual experience is incorporated into time from space (Zhao 2013: 161).

Thus, the basic rules of the graphic narrative are as follows: space is dominated by time, and time is revealed by space, which is to say, the spatial position of image art is arranged according to the time sequence of language as the sound art. In terms of image reproduction and language narration, graphic novels are undoubtedly the best form of illustrating the source text. The graphic novel is unfolded in the form of a series of pictures, which is similar to the coherence of the literary narrative with language as the medium. The invisible "time" is the basic clue for its continuity.

Graphic novels have the dual characteristics of novels and caricature as they have both the temporal characteristics of the art of language and the spatial characteristics of the art of image reproduction. However, graphic novels are not the simple addition of caricatures and novels. They have their own unique advantages. Different from ordinary paintings, graphic novels need to describe a complete plot, not only including the visible objects, but also the invisible objects, especially in science fiction. For

example, in *The Wandering Earth*, the "God's blowtorch" does not exist in the real world, and the novel does not describe the details of this object in a positive way. In the graphic novel, it must be described through shape and color, which converts the invisible into the visible.

ADAPTATION FROM LITERATURE

At the beginning of the original novel *The Wandering Earth*, the author develops the narrative in the following order. He states that first that "I was born at the end of the braking stage, when the earth just stopped rotating"; then that "my mother told me about our family watching the last sunset"; next that "the sun set slowly, as if it had stopped on the horizon, and it took three days and three nights to set"; after that, "there will be no day or night in the future"; and finally "in that long sunset, I was born" (Liu 2016: 123).

In the graphic novel, the artists use five pictures to express the above five levels of narration from top to bottom. The first picture is all black, with a white frame inlaid with a line of words "NEVER AGAIN WERE THERE BRIGHT DAYS OR DARK NIGHTS". In the second picture is the scene of the sunset, where in a black, a sun emits a dim light, and the words in the white box are "MOM TOLD ME WHAT IT FELT LIKE WHEN EVERYONE SAW THE LAST SUNSET". The third picture portrays the sun shining all around, and the annotation of the text is "IT TOOK THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS FOR THE SUN TO FINALLY DISAPPEAR OVER THE HORIZON". The fourth picture shows the scene of three nurses preparing to deliver babies in the spacecraft cabin and the text is "THE EARTH HAD JUST STOPPED ROTATING". The fifth picture shows the scene of a mother giving birth to a baby with the baby and the mother holding together with the umbilical cord uncut. The text next to it is "IT WAS DURING THAT LONG SUNSET THAT I WAS BORN" (Liu 2021: 1).

These five pictures constitute the content of the first page of the graphic novel *The Wandering Earth*, which is larger and larger from top to bottom. The pictures also seem to deliberately break the narrative order of the original novel. In this narrative, "the earth stops rotating" is obviously what the author wants to foreground this. It is the first message to be told in the novel and therefore is placed in the first part. But in the graphic

novel, this sentence is placed in the center, as according to people's visual habits, the first thing must be the central area. This is an important difference between the graphic narrative and its textual equivalent.

In the graphic novel, the coordination of words and images is also noteworthy. Sometimes images and words cooperate with each other, such as the first, second and fifth pictures. Sometimes this aspect is irrelevant. For example, in the fourth picture, the text tells of the earth stopping rotating, but the image is the scene of the nurse preparing to deliver the baby. Sometimes the meaning is opposite. In the third picture, the words say that the sun disappears below the horizon, while the image is a radiant sun.

These three situations reflect three different relationships between words and images and show the differences between literary narrative and graphic narrative. During the adaptation from the literary form to the graphic form, some information is lost, while other is emphasized. This process can be described as ekphrastic.

According to Zhao Xianzhang, ekphrasis is a speech that is immersed in the locution, which determines its presence relative to the locution. The image is the extension of the body, the organ in contact with the world. It acts as the intermediary between the body and the world in the visual activities. It is inseparable from the body and the world, as close as flesh and blood. Thus, seeing and being seen does not simply refer to the relationship between subject and object, but to the relationship between immersing and being immersed (2013: 148). This way of seeing and immersing is very consistent with the traditional Chinese philosophy of "looking up and down in the universe" (仰观俯察), which was expressed in *Zhouyi*, or *The Book of Changes*, one of Confucian classics (Li 2010: 134).

In order to increase the sense of being immersed, the narrator and protagonist of the graphic novel is not executed by the rebels in the original novel. However, he is cruelly executed along with 5000 persons of the last 'Earth school' in the graphic novel. The way to carry out the death penalty is to take away the nuclear energy batteries for heating from each person's sealed clothes, so that the cold can take away the prisoners' lives. The feeling of "the cold was like thousands of needles piercing my body" (Liu 2021: 106). This adaptation obviously enhances the sense of being immersed by means of these techniques. In addition, the narrative

content in the original works has been changed into dialogue in the graphic novels, which also increases the reader's sense of immersion.

Because of the intuitive nature of picture, things that need to be explained in literary novels can be directly expressed in graphic novels. For example, Liu Cixin uses a variety of words to describe the Earth engine in the original novel. The engine is so huge that people cannot have a panoramic view, so he uses a metaphorical method to let readers imagine the light column of the engine as a huge column in the Acropolis of Athens, and compare people to bacteria on the floor of a huge palace (Liu 2016: 123). In the graphic novel, there is a difference in the way of expression due to the nature of images. The literary narrative is a kind of time narrative, while the graphic narrative is a kind of space narrative. Compared with words, images are intuitive and can contain more information. An image with only one frame can contain over one page of textual information. It may take one minute or more to read a page of text, but only one second to read an image, which is an unparalleled advantage over the media based on text reading.

INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE

One may ask the question: are images reliable? In *Autonomy*, Nicholas Brown from University of Illinois makes a historical and theoretical argument on the autonomy of art from the recognized characteristics of art as a commodity. The cover of this book contains a lot of information, which is worthy of attention.

At first glance, Chanel No. 5 on the cover is a perfume box of an expensive elite product. In fact, as Jameson points out:

[T]his is not the Chanel No. 5 box at all, but rather Viktoria Binshtok's 2016 reconstruction of it as a "work of art," the original Warhol copies promoted to a whole complex aesthetic process where, in the spirit of Thomas Demand, she has completely rebuilt the original object from scratch in advance of its reproduction. (Jameson 2000: n.p).

Jameson's judgement "this is not Chanel No. 5 box" reminds us of the sentence "this is not a pipe", which is written in one of the famous pipe series by the Belgian painter René Magritte, showing the complex relationship between words and images, as discussed above in the second part of this paper.

The picture Chanel No. 5 box on cover looks really unreliable. However, in Jameson's opinion, "the deeper message of Brown's work lies in his demonstrations (across a wide range of the arts) that subversion still exists as an artistic possibility, but that it has been radically interiorized, like a virus within the no longer very autonomous work of art itself" (Jameson 2020: n.p).

This subversion shows that art is not an imitation of external objective things, but has its own unique logic. This logic makes it possible for James Cameron to "produce a solution to the problem of the time-travel film that at the same time produces the time-travel film as the problem to which the solution responds" (Brown 2019: 32). Its possibilities are "immanent to the logic of the genre rather than demands attributed to consumers" (2019: 32).

The graphic novel has the same unique logic too. Just as Chanel No. 5 in the picture is not the one on the store shelf, the image in the graphic novel is not an imitation of the external reality. The viewers will not pay too much attention to the reliability of images, because there is no ready-made object in the sci-fi novel to serve as a standard for judging whether images are reliable or not.

Then, how to guarantee the credibility of science fiction? According to Darko Suvin, Science Fiction is a literary genre "whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and the interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imagination framework alternative to author's empirical environment" (1979: 7-8), which differentiates science fiction from the realistic literature and the fantasy literature.

The Wandering Earth, as a science fiction, "is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional 'novum' (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic" (Suvin 1979: 63). It has an interdisciplinary perspective to view the world not as a copy of the realistic but a imagined one on the basis of science. As mentioned before, the narrative is about the discovery of the conversion of hydrogen into helium in the sun at an alarmingly fast rate. "It means that all the hydrogen inside will soon be used up by nuclear fusion. Then the sun will explode" (Liu 2021: 4). We can say that science is the encompassing horizon and the base of this novel.

In this way, the author has constructed a new world for the novel, which is not an addition of sci-fi factors to the world we live in, but a completely unfamiliar world that has never existed in real life. The "novum" of such a world is not only imaginary, but based on the author's scientific cognition and validated by the cognitive logic.

Aristotle distinguishes poetry from history, holding that "the poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e. what is possible as being probable or necessary" (2001: 32). Suvin further divides the possibility into "real possibility" and "ideal possibility". According to his definition, "ideal possibility" means "any conceptual or thinkable possibility, the premise and/or consequences of which are not internally contradictory" (1979: 66). He believes that only in "hard" or near-future SF does the tale's thesis conform to a real possibility—to that which is possible in the author's reality and/or according to the scientific paradigm of his culture. On the contrary, "the thesis of any SF tale has to conform to an 'ideal possibility', as defined above" (1979: 66). Compared with many other sci-fi novels, *The Wandering Earth* is obviously more in line with the "ideal possibility", which is to say, it is not the parallel transformation between real space-time and imaginary space-time, but the reconstruction of future space-time.

Of course, literature is different from science. Thus, we cannot be too strict with the authors of novels according to scientific standards. For example, some people may think that it is unscientific to stop the earth's rotation for only 42 years in *The Wandering Earth*. In addition, it is inconceivable to explain the fuel problem of the earth's engine based on the principle of heavy element fusion. This should not be the reason for criticizing the novel. This is not the task of literary criticism.

ECOLOGICAL PROBLEM IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

Beside the scientific perspective, science fiction also has the perspectives of Humanities and Social Sciences, such as anthropology, ethnology, sociology, linguistics, history and culture, among which, the ecological perspective is the most important.

In the first part, the author describes the tragic natural environment of the earth in the braking stage: 12000 earth engines cause high

temperatures, heavy rains, and tsunamis. People are forced to move underground, often threatened with death. This dystopian picture reflects the common artistic style and thematic features of science fiction, namely, disaster consciousness, tragedy consciousness, eschatological complex, and etc.

Thomas Moore's *Utopia* (1516) is a classic of Utopian literature, while Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1925), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's novel *1984* (1949) are all dystopian ones. Jameson once discussed the dystopia in science fiction in the following way: [science fiction] focuses on a single baleful tendency, one that it expands and expands until the tendency itself becomes apocalyptic and explodes the world in which we are trapped into innumerable shards and atoms. The dystopian appearance is thus only the sharp edge inserted into the seamless Moebius strip of late capitalism, the punctum or perceptual obsession that sees one thread, any thread, through to its predictable end. (2003: 76)

In *The Wandering Earth*, the author designs two time clues to present the dystopian scenario. One is the time clue of human escaping from the solar system with the earth to find a new home. The other is the time clue of the narrator as the protagonist of the novel "I" from birth to death. These two time clues are intertwined like the "Mobius Strip". Although the novel starts from the birth of "I", it also traces the migrating process of a total of 2500 years and a total of 100 generations. The first stage is braking, which takes 42 years. The second is 30 years' exodus. The third is wandering earth I, including 500 years of acceleration plus 1300 years of traveling at a high speed. The fourth is wandering earth II, which is 500 years of deceleration. The final stage is the 100 years' neosolar era.

The narrator "I" lived in an era when the braking stage had just ended, experienced a 30-year exodus stage and 20 years of the wandering earth I. The time span of "my life" is about 50 years. The description of this period is integrated with the 2500 years' immigrating process, forming a so-called "Mobius strip". For the 50 years in which "I" live, the author describes in detail, while for other times, the author writes briefly instead. "The dystopian appearance" formed by such a time structure belongs not so much to the end of late capitalism in Jameson's sense as to the end of the whole world.

Liu Cixin intends to show dystopia through 2500 years of wandering. Taking the earth to wander is by no means a "tidy solution", but a last resort. "Tidy resolution is not its ultimate goal" (Bahng 2018: 8). In fact, in the following over 2000 years, no one is sure that mankind will be able to reach the destination, that is Sagittarius, which only exists in the hope of human beings, as described in *The Wandering Earth*. The ecological problem is the biggest one. Even if humankind finally reaches the destination, it still needs the efforts of 100 generations. Moreover, for these 100 generations, they will be facing disasters and sufferings at every moment.

In the future, when more and more unstable and dangerous environment changes violently, the only way is to form an interdependent relationship between humankind and the earth. Ah-Dong's experiment proves that without the earth's environment, no matter how ecological the scientific design is, it will eventually fail. "Only in an ecosystem the size of the earth, with all of its power and splendour, can humanity prosper for generation after generation" (Liu 2021: 25). This is an ecological ethics of sustainable development in the Anthropocene. In this case, populism will be of no help. This is what *The Wandering Earth* tells us.

INTERCULTURALISM VS POPULISM

It should be mentioned once again that the publication of the graphic novel *The Wandering Earth* was organized by Man- Chuanqi, which is committed to the translation and publication of both Chinese and foreign original books. For example, they organized publishing Jiumuji (穆木计) in 2021, a graphic novel adapted from the novel *Les Tribulations d'un Chinois en Chine* (1879) by Jules Verne, a French sci-fi writer, which mainly tells a story in Verne's imagination taking place in China at the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). The adapter of Jiumuji is Julien Moca from France, Wang Jing, a Chinese painter, and Tsinghua University press in China, showing the similar spirit of Sino-western cooperation and the idea of interculturalism with *The Wandering Earth*.

Generally speaking, the graphic novel *The Wandering Earth* is true to the spirit and style of the original, in contrast to the film by Frank Gwo in 2019 adapted from the same novel. The film is considered by some viewers to be more populist, while the graphic novel seems to me to be

more intercultural. So the film “radically restructured and altered from Liu Cixin’s original short story, enough to be called a separate text in its own right” (Khan 2020: 22).

As a sci-fi disaster blockbuster with the same theme of star travel, the American film *Interstellar* by Christopher Edward Nolan shows the scene of a few people flying off the earth by ship, while *The Wandering Earth* shows the scene of billions of people taking the earth to wander. The huge difference between these two sci-fi imaginations is obvious to all. For some Chinese commentators, the root of the difference lies in the essential difference between Western and Chinese civilization. They confirm that taking the earth to wander as the core story of the Chinese film *The Wandering Earth* expresses the complexity of the homeland, which is “Chinese thinking” and “Chinese Imagination” (Zhang et al. 2021: 9).

When commentators highlight the Chinese characteristics of *The Wandering Earth* according to the Sino-western dualism, their comments intentionally or unintentionally ignore the fact that similar settings also exist in other countries’ sci-fi works. For example, the Japanese sci-fi film *Gorath* (妖星ゴラス) directed by Ishiro Honda and released in 1962 tells such a story that in the universe, there is a demon star named Gorath, whose mass is 6000 times that of the earth. After calculation, it is found that it will collide with the earth. Therefore, scientists take a bold plan to build a jet base in the Antarctic so as to let the earth become a big rocket leaving the orbit of the solar system to avoid collision with Gorath. Although the project encounters a series of changes in the process, the earth finally leaves the orbit of the solar system smoothly, avoiding the collision with Gorath, and successfully escapes. This is very similar to the story described in *The Wandering Earth* that the Earth successfully avoids colliding with Jupiter, whose mass is 6000 times that of the earth.

It can be seen that “the basic sci-fi setting of taking earth to wander does not only exist in the creation of Chinese sci-fi writers” (Lin & Chen 2019: 95). The opposing views between the so-called “Earth school” who advocates taking the earth to wander and the so-called “spaceship school” who advocates abandoning the earth and taking a spaceship to leave, do not exist between Chinese and Western civilizations, but among people in the same community, even between husband and wife. It is obviously inappropriate to discuss *The Wandering Earth* from the perspective of populism or cultural essentialism.

CONCLUSION

Science fictions are the myths of our time, fulfilling a need to ask fundamental questions: who are we, where have we come from, and where are we going? These questions are about the sustainable development and ultimate destiny of mankind in the future. The main task of the science fiction is how to let these invisible questions be seen, and to imagine the invisible by means of the visible just as Heidegger points out:

The nature of the image is to let something be seen. By contrast, copies and imitations are already mere variations on the genuine image which, as a sight or spectacle, lets the invisible be seen and so imagines the invisible in something alien to it. (1975: 226)

Images in *The Wondering Earth* do not simply reproduce the externally visible objects, but let the invisible be seen by presenting a certain way for the viewer to observe the earth. Combining the words with the images, the graphic narrative highlights this possibility of making the future world visible and defines the more visibility to human environment than the literary work.

This graphic novel, as a joint production by artists from China, France, Italy, Brazil, Canada and other countries, presents the characteristics of an intercultural novel, which not only shows the imagination and creativity of many artists, but also the common appeal of artists from different countries for the value choice and ethical reconstruction of human future.

In short, this graphic novel organically combines sci-fi literature and image reproduction, and expresses the concern and thinking of many artists on ecological problems and sustainable development in the Anthropocene, reflecting a high artistic quality and profound ideological content, which is worthy of in-depth study from the interdisciplinary perspective.

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