



# Narrative Structure Analysis of Chinese Science Fiction Films

Liu Chang<sup>1</sup>, Roopesh Sitharan<sup>1</sup> and Vimala Perumal<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Multimedia University, Persiaran Multimedia, 63100 Cyberjaya, Selangor, Malaysia  
1191402527@student.mmu.edu.my

**Abstract.** Compared with Hollywood, sci-fi films are increasingly popular all over the world with their sophisticated production and powerful special effects, becoming the biggest winner at the global box office. Chinese sci-fi films have always been considered a shortcoming of the Chinese film industry. The development of Chinese sci-fi films lags for many reasons, including ideology, lack of cultural soil, and lack of specialization and industrialization. This article analyzes Chinese sci-fi films from the perspective of narratology and narrative structure, and finds out the reasons for the insufficient narrative and existing problems in Chinese sci-fi films to provide reference and thinking for its development.

**Keywords:** Chinese Sci-fi films, narrative structure, Chinese culture

## 1. Introduction

With the continuous development of science and technology, the Chinese film industry continues to improve, which promotes the continuous innovation and improvement of narrative strategies in Chinese science fiction films. Regrettably, Chinese science fiction films have always been in the embarrassing situation of sluggishness. With the birth of “The Wandering Earth 2019”, this situation has improved slightly, but the box office and reputation of “The Wandering Earth 2019” have a good harvest, but it still can't change the overall downturn of Chinese science fiction movies.

The narrative mode is a key element of fiction that refers to the method and style of description used by the author to convey the story to the reader. Robert McKee in his book “Story”, once said: “STRUCTURE is a selection of events from the characters’ life stories that is composed into a strategic sequence to arouse specific emotions and to express a specific view of life. [1]” This discussion reflects the necessity of narrative model research. In 1969, the French scholar Tsvetan Todorov carried out a structural grammatical analysis of the “Decameron” in “Grammaire du ‘Décaméron’” and used “narratologie” for the first time [2]. In 1928, the famous Russian folklore expert and linguist Vladimir Propp published “Morphology of the tale, Leningrad” [3], which introduced the concept of “function” from anthropology, and obtained a relatively stable structure, namely 31 functions of the story. So far, the narrative mode has become an important research object in literary works. A good Sci-fi film must need the content to highlight the uniqueness of the form, and the narrative is its core.

This paper summarizes and summarizes all Chinese science fiction films from 1938 to 2022 and Hollywood science fiction films in the same period, and selects representative cases for text comparison and analysis. The Chinese science fiction films involved are Shanghai After 60 years (1939), Ballad of Ming Tombs Reservoir (1958), Little Sun (1963), Dead Light on the Coral Island (1980), Hidden Shadow (1981), Displacement (1986), The Synthetic Man (1988), Atmospheric Disappearance (1990), Poison Kiss (1992), Dangerous Intelligence (2003), CJ 7 (2008), Metallic Attraction Kungfu Cyborg (2009), Future X-Cops (2010), Impossible (2015), Shanghai Fortress (2019), Crazy Alien (2019), The Wandering Earth (2019), Moon man(2022) etc.

The objective of this study is to summarize the applicable narrative modulus of Chinese sci-fi films. Specifically, it is divided into three parts, which are to explore the development process of Chinese science fiction films, measure the narrative elements that contribute to the success of Chinese science fiction films, and finally propose a narrative adaptation model for Chinese science fiction films.

## 2. Why Chinese science fiction films are so “difficult to produce”?

One of the main reasons why the *Wandering Earth* 2019 has received so much attention is that the genre of science fiction film is very attractive in the current film market in China and even the world. Seven of the top 10 films in the world’s box office history are science fiction films [4]. Such as the *Star Wars* series, the *Jurassic World* series, the *Transformers* series, and the *Marvel Universe* series, etc., will trigger a movie viewing boom whenever they are released. In contrast, there is an obvious imbalance between the production and demand of Chinese science fiction films.

### 2.1 Sci-fi films based on Hollywood as a template are ideological in Western countries

“Since the 1930s, sci-fi films have become an independent film genre, and new sci-fi styles continue to emerge. In Western countries represented by the United States, sci-fi films have gradually become popular... The basic genre characteristics of sci-fi films have emerged. [5]” The emergence of genre films has deep social roots behind it, for example, the epic deification of the American development of the West. Although science fiction films are not as unique as western films, they have long dominated the world as a benchmark for science fiction films. No matter different stars, varieties, disasters and adventure, they inevitably mark the brand of reality and reflect their own ideology. As for the classification of Hollywood science fiction movies, in the book “Selected Introduction to World Famous Science Fiction, 1982 [6]” edited by Japanese writer Ishikawa and Norio Ito, they are divided into :

1. Works with the theme of the universe and alien creatures;
2. Works on the Future-oriented works.
3. Works on the theme of monsters;
4. Works on the theme of time and dimension;
5. Works on the theme of human evolution;
6. Works on the theme of ecological destruction and the end of the earth;
7. Works on the theme of adventure, detective, thriller works;
8. Works on the theme of satire, humor, social works;
9. Works on the theme of hero growth, epic works;

These kinds of sci-fi movies with different contents all have obvious western ideological features. One is science fiction movies involving alien races, which often imply key words such as war consciousness, aggression and expansion. “Hollywood’s science fiction film products in the 1950s reflect the contradictions, conflicts, and arguments in a wide range of American politics that accurately touched the American fear and desire of the Cold War. [7]” The background of this kind of story construction is incompatible with China’s foreign policy.

Compared with Western sci-fi movies, Chinese sci-fi movies are characterized by the ethics of entering the world to digest the anxiety of the future. On the one hand, this refers to creating images of robots, artificial humans, and synthetic humans based on current daily life, rather than previewing future dramatic conflicts, such as “*Wonder boy*, 1988”, “*The Invisible Doctor*,1991”, “*Poison Kiss*,1992” and so on; On the other hand, these films tend to use Chinese-style life ethics, moral etiquette and other social norms to think about issues that may threaten the destiny of mankind, such as “*The Synthetic Man*,1988”, “*Haunted House Beauty Head*,1989”, “*A Man’s World*,1987” .

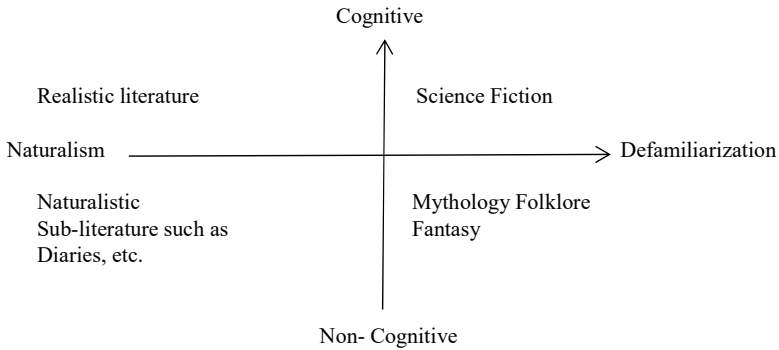
### 2.2 China lacks the cultural soil for science fiction films

When talking about Chinese sci-fi films, many people tend to attribute the backwardness of this genre to lack of imagination. In fact, Chinese films, including the entire Chinese literature and art, are not lacking in imagination. For example, there are a large number of magical films based on imagination. Another type of film with unique Chinese characteristics and full of imagination is martial arts films. But there are almost none in Hollywood. Does it mean that Hollywood has low imagination in this regard?

In the final analysis, Chinese literature and art have always been not good at using imagination in the field of science, which is a matter of cultural characteristics. The prevalence of magic movies, on the one hand, there are a lot of resources that can be drawn from the treasure house of Chinese history and culture, such as the “*Painted Skin* 2008” series, the “*Di Renjie* 2010” series (Tsui Hark), “*The*

Great Wall 2016”, etc., as well as the tomb-themed movies created in the present; on the other hand, gods, ghosts and ghosts occupy an important position in Chinese culture, deepen the national aesthetic consciousness, and have a unique Chinese-style imagination.

The definition of science fiction movies is very simple. Darko Suvin’s cognitive estrangement theory from a brand new system to tell us what is science fiction[8].



**Figure 1.** The Definition of Science Fiction summaries from Darko Suvin (1979)

From the Figure 1, the vertical axis represents the level of cognition, and the horizontal axis represents the different stages from naturalism to defamiliarization in aesthetics and poetics. It can be clearly seen from the figure that the theme of Chinese magic (oriental fantasy) is close to science fiction, but it is different from science fiction and lacks the cognition of the real world. In addition to talking about imagination, sci-fi movies also need to be able to find corresponding scientific principles from reality, which seems to be possible in the future; or the existing science cannot answer it, and it is unlikely to happen in the future, but it can still be solved from the present. Imaginative stretches of known science. This kind of reality requires film creators to have sufficient scientific literacy, and then to exert artistic creativity, which is exactly what Chinese films are extremely lacking.

Science is a serious matter in China, and the environment does not allow make wild guesses about unknown scientific fields, and rarely bring them into artistic creation. The government often issues bans on the film and television industry[9].“The Wandering Earth” is regarded as China’s first hard sci-fi movie. There is no authoritative explanation in the academic circles about the definition of hard sci-fi and soft sci-fi. It is generally believed that hard science fiction is based on hard scientific principles, promotes the development of narrative, and implements the film from beginning to end. Soft science refers to the fact that creators do not have professional scientific knowledge, but only use a certain scientific knowledge as a background and add it to mature types of movies such as romance movies and action movies.

### 2.3 The successful experience of Wandering Earth 2019

Compared with previous domestic science fiction films, The Wandering Earth has taken a considerable step forward, leaping from a lower level to rival Hollywood. Its success has injected a shot in the arm to Chinese films and provided valuable experience for the creation of domestic science fiction films in the future.

The disaster is packaged in Chinese style and replaces western religious thought with “Chinese spirit”. Under the core of hard science fiction, “The Wandering Earth 2019” interprets a space version of Chinese-style protest or disaster relief, which fits the “Chinese spirit” in the aesthetic consciousness of Chinese people. Hollywood science fiction films like to show individual heroism, while China pays attention to the spirit of collectivism.

“The Wandering Earth 2019” can arouse the emotional resonance of domestic audiences, and at the same time attract great interest from Hollywood partners. According to director Guo Fan, “Take the Earth to Wander” fully embodies Chinese-style emotions, which has also become a domestic science fiction film. A topic that movie buffs love to talk about. In Western cultural thinking, when the earth encounters a doomsday crisis, it first chooses to escape, looking for another planet suitable for human habitation, without this burden. “Take the earth to wander” is based on the Chinese people’s deep feelings for “home”. “Going home” is mentioned many times in the film. This “home” is not in the physical sense, but in the cultural sense. Thousands of years of farming civilization have allowed Chinese people to relocate and protect their homes. This emotion is transplanted into the film.

The success of “The Wandering Earth 2019” is worthy of recognition, and it also provides useful experience for the further development of Chinese science fiction films. However, the concept of the so-called first year of sci-fi movies cannot be blindly admired. People in the industry generally believe that Liu Cixin has single-handedly promoted Chinese science fiction to the world level. There are very few sci-fi IPs for Chinese movies to choose from.

### 3. Establishing a narrative: Selection of Themes for Chinese Science Fiction Films

The research and analysis methods and theories of film narratology benefit from the theories and methods of literature, but present a new trend. As early as the 1970s, the method of analyzing film narrative with theories of structuralism and semiotics had been established. Because the world of science fiction is different from the real world, we need to analyze its narratives with special cosmology, morality, and worldviews that are suitable for space science fiction worlds.

J. Hillis Miller also said, “The reason why we need to tell a story is not to make things clear, but to give a symbol that is neither explained nor hidden. [10]”

“Imaginary signifier [11]” is a unique definition of Metz’s definition of film image ontology. He first regards film as a symbol, because in linguistics, text symbols are defined as the common composition of signifier and signified, so the image of film, it can also consist of a signifier and a signified.

Looking at the sci-fi movies produced in China from 1938 to 2022, From Structural Semiotics to Psychoanalysis, the themes can be roughly divided into four elements: Dream, Backtracking of History, Underground World and Science and technology martial arts hero.

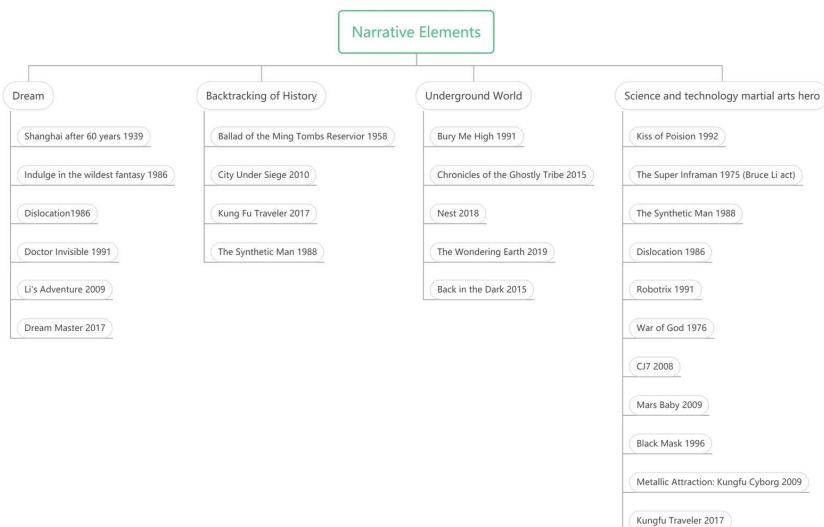


Figure 2. Summary of themes of Chinese science fiction movies

At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, Chinese society was in the transition period from “political society” to “civil society”. Film creation covered a wide range of cultures, and individual expressions and artistic aesthetics appeared in mass culture. There is friction between ideological and spiritual changes and social transformation. People are eager to understand and need emotional catharsis. However, through the use of dream consciousness, it is the subjective consciousness of the characters in the story that strongly hints at the subconscious activities of his dreams. The role is also for the creator to reflect the hope that is difficult to express and realize in reality in the dream, so that the viewer can complete the self-identification and reflection from the plot and the characters in the story. The 1986 sci-fi movie “Indulge in the wildest fantasy 1986” was shown in a dream. The opening scene of the film showed many pictures of sci-fi elements, such as: robot villains, aliens ET, etc. The protagonist of the story is a fantasy addicted in Wuxia novels, is a young man who lives in a daze. In fact, his subjective consciousness is to hope to succeed and be respected. Therefore, once a day, the protagonist accidentally fell into a dream, and in the dream all kinds of “brain-opening” subconsciousness: obtaining superpowers, defeating aliens, heroes saving the beauty and other seemingly unconstrained plots, but everywhere reflect the protagonist’s innermost. Using “dreams” to construct the science fiction world is a common creation technique of science fiction films. The reason why Chinese sci-fi dream-themed movies are not as good as “Inception 2010” at the box office is not only the difference in visual effects, but also the simplification of the narrative method.

Since China’s accession to the WTO in 2000, the degree of opening up to the outside world has expanded, and films have also firmly stepped on the road of industrialization, commercialization, and internationalization. Since the introduction and research and development of digital technology and the cooperation with excellent production teams at home and abroad, the production level of domestic science fiction films after the new century has been unprecedentedly improved.

Heroism is always closely linked with precarious plots such as confrontation and disaster. For example: The 2003 co-produced film “Fee Inn 2004” is a science fiction film with a large investment and production close to the international level. The theme and character setting are imitated by Hollywood science fiction film “Batman”.

In 2009, “Metallic Attraction Kungfu Cyborg 2009” was influenced by the Hollywood sci-fi film “Transformers”, and wanted to create a “Transformers” with Chinese characteristics, so the film incorporated oriental elements-martial arts kung fu. After 2000, it was also a hot period for Hollywood sci-fi movies, with well-produced blockbusters emerging one after another, and the poor imitation of Chinese sci-fi movies did not spark a splash at the box office.

## 4. Narrative structure

On the basis of combing detailed materials and combining the reality of film narrative, many scholars divides Chinese science fiction films into three periods: embryonic period (1938-1966), exploration period (1978-2001), and diversified development period (2002-2020) [12]. The narrative of Chinese science fiction films is distinct in the three periods. In the embryonic period, the narrative of Chinese science fiction films is a “Utopian beautiful imagination” of the future, most of the film’s narrative structure is a single-linear narrative. In the exploratory period, China’s modernization degree increases rapidly, and the public can more rationally examine the double-edged sword of scientific and technological progress. Chinese science fiction films convey “the sense of crisis of science and technology” in the crisis narrative. The narrative structure developed to multi-clue interwoven plots narrative. During the period of diversified development, the public began to have some demands for the spiritual life supported by intrinsic value, so they prefer the films that reflect the practical problems and are both entertaining and popular. Therefore, the narrative structure began to be more diverse, and a large number of commercial science fiction movies focusing on the shaping of non-realistic characters and superpowers became popular.

### 4.1 A single- linear narrative

Clear plots - Throughout the Chinese science fiction film and television works, they are all told in a sequential manner without exception, but the narrative structure of the old works is relatively simple. From the 1930s to the 1960s, Chinese sci-fi films were influenced by the social politics and economy at

that time, and the plots were all expectations for the future development of the motherland. Therefore, most of the film shows the changes brought about by future high-tech to people's production and life. The story is simple, the plot is single, and it belongs to the linear narrative structure. Example of : "Sixty years later Shanghai Beach 1938", "Ballad of the Ming Tombs Reservoir 1958".

#### **4.2 Multi-clue interwoven plots narrative**

Chinese sci-fi films created in the 1980s and 1990s come from two sections: the first section is original screenplays; the second section is adaptations based on literary works. In terms of narrative structure, they are still dominated by causal linear structures. However, at this time, domestic science fiction films are no longer single-line narratives, and are beginning to explore new narrative structures—multi-line interweaving, and each line often have conflicts. Example of : "Death-Ray On The Coral Island 1980", There are two lines of good and evil. Whenever describing the scientific research of scientists (good), the big consortiums who want to steal scientific research results and control the world (evil) will definitely obstruct, resulting in dramatic conflicts.

#### **4.3 Non-realistic character building**

After the 2000, the shaping of the characters is the key to the plot creation, which undertakes the narrative task of the whole film. In sci-fi films, there is a special kind of character, which not only has the characteristics of ordinary characters, is related to the main theme and style setting of the film, but also constitutes contradictions and conflicts and the development of the storyline; it also contains the behavioral characteristics and symbolic meaning of unconventional logic. This is the unrealistic role that science fiction films often set, providing the main body for the unrealistic plot design, example of "CJ7 2008".

#### **4.4 Super Power**

The superpowers presented in Chinese science fiction films have Chinese characteristics, mainly borrowing from the magic of ancient mythological figures and the martial arts practiced by heroes in martial arts novels. But a characteristic of Chinese sci-fi movies is that the characters who acquire superpowers are always normal people. These characters with superpowers not only add interest to the plot narrative, but also project the inner desire of human beings in terms of connotation: they want to obtain superpowers to change the current situation. Superpowers become a shortcut to success and break the original rules. In the narrative plot, part of the story tells a farce, and part of it shows a plot that disrupts social order and causes discomfort and chaos.

### **5. Conclusion**

Although sci-fi movies are imported, Chinese sci-fi movies have been intermittently undeveloped from early exploration to mid-term imitation to current innovation. People's lives are changing, and in this change, the discussion of social politics, ethical values, and technological development will eventually be implemented in the creation of science fiction movies. Chinese sci-fi films have been developed for more than 70 years. Regardless of the theme performance or the specific production of the film, they are constantly being updated and adjusted. With the increase of film types, the expansion of the market, and the advancement of technology, there is no doubt that Chinese sci-fi films will move towards the mainstream film genre. In the creation, more detailed and creative ideas will be used to infiltrate political culture, question social issues, and show the humanistic spirit.

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