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# 6

## Rising, Becoming, Overcoding: On Chinese Nationalism in *The Wandering Earth*

Jeroen de Kloet

*It is unreasonable to expect humans to stay reasonable.*

The Wandering Earth  
Frant Gwo (2019)

*One thus always needs to ask: who are the people? And what is the difference between 'the old' and 'the new'? While the nation sees itself in the singular, it is always in the plural.*

Peter van der Veer (2016: 149)

### Rising

The third decade of the twenty-first century commences with mayhem: a series of fires in Australia that threatened to burn infernally and eternally, the global COVID-19 pandemic and on top of that the climate crisis. For

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the more dystopian-inclined among us, these may well be signs that the end of the world as we know it is almost here, with health hazards and ecological disasters ringing the death knell for the Anthropocene. Fear is rising: of contamination, of destruction, of the unknown, of the Others. Ironically, the alleged origin of the virus was traced to a country that is seen as a rapidly rising global power—China. Amidst this sense of deepening crisis, I was reminded of a Chinese blockbuster screened in the winter of 2019, *The Wandering Earth* (流浪地球).<sup>1</sup> In this movie, now also available on Netflix, we are catapulted forward forty years, to the year 2061. Directed by the Beijing Film Academy alumnus Frant Gwo (Guo Fan) and loosely based on a novel by Liu Cixin (2000), the story revolves around the imminent danger that the earth will collide with Jupiter. The movie follows a group of astronauts kept busy by guiding the earth away from an expanding sun. The name of their spaceship is quite telling: *Made in China*. The earth has by then been transformed dramatically: cities have disappeared, the earth is frozen and its population has largely been wiped out by catastrophic tides. People now live in underground cities. The looming collision with Jupiter, portended by devastating earthquakes, can only be avoided by igniting Jupiter's atmosphere of hydrogen.

The movie, its sci-fi aesthetics, its dramatic plot and its bombastic soundscape not only bring to mind a strong Hollywood genre style, they also conjure up memories of a host of Hollywood sci-fi successes, particularly the 1998 release *Armageddon* with Bruce Willis in the leading role. This movie features a Texas-size asteroid that is predicted to collide with planet earth in eighteen days. While I was watching *The Wandering Earth* in a Beijing cinema, I was also thinking about this earlier version and about how in general I considered science fiction a Hollywood-inflected genre. I felt somehow guilty for this denial of coevalness, for positioning the Chinese movie as a late and seriously delayed translation of a Hollywood blockbuster. And I was not alone. Indeed, both within and outside China, *The Wandering Earth* has been criticized as a rather soulless imitation of Hollywood. In the *New York Times*, Ben Keningburg (2019) wrote:

It certainly proves that the Chinese film industry can hold its own at the multiplex: It is just as awash in murky computer imagery, stupefying exposition and manipulative sentimentality as the average Hollywood tentpole. Although the film is based on a story by Liu Cixin, it draws on a barely digested stew of planetary-cataclysm movies, with the eco-catastrophe and invasion films of Roland Emmerich serving as the most obvious spiritual guides.

And in his review of the movie, David Ehrlich (2019) claimed:

It's almost impressive how Gwo manages to rip off *Gravity*, *Sunshine*, and *2001*, all at the same time. His secret: blending those inspirations together with such frantic cuts that he completely loses sight of why those movies were worth stealing from in the first place.

The cultural arrogance in both reviews smacks of the worn-out mantra that the West is the best—and will be well into the future. This view seems to be shared in China as well, as a professor at the Beijing Film Academy confided in me: 'It's just a copy. We need to make movies with Chinese characteristics; we need our own style.' As I show later in this chapter, others already saw Chinese characteristics in *The Wandering Earth*, praising its humanistic underpinnings and reading the movie as articulating quite a specific Chinese worldview. In both cases—whether negative or positive, whether it is considered a copycat or a specifically Chinese product—what I want to emphasize is that a comparative framework is at work. *The Wandering Earth* is read vis-à-vis Hollywood science-fiction cinema. For the critics the Chinese rendition is certainly a bleak translation at best, whereas in the more upbeat assessment, we detect a desire for a cultural product with Chinese characteristics. It is this comparative approach, in relation to thorny issues of cultural translation and their cultural and geopolitical ramifications, that I wish to engage with in this chapter.

This brings me to the work of Peter van der Veer.<sup>2</sup> In his 2016 book *The Value of Comparison*, he makes a forceful argument for a comparative approach, rightly claiming that we are always driven by comparisons, which we nonetheless tend to ignore. Our ignorance makes us favour

locally specific studies that are ‘concerned with cultural specificity and cultural diversity’ (van der Veer 2016: 3). The book’s strong plea for a comparative approach comes with a simultaneous warning against falling into the trap of producing generalizations. He observes: ‘there is a seemingly indomitable desire for generalization in the name of theory that has revived an interest in large data-sets’ (ibid.: 4). Van der Veer’s scepticism of such generalizing approaches is quite wonderfully evident in his critique of the work of the Sinologist Edward Slingerland. Using a distant ‘scientific’ reading of religious texts, according to Slingerland, it is wrong and orientalist to assume a direct opposition between Western dualistic thought and Chinese holistic thought (2013). This makes Slingerland conclude that for comparative research ‘an approach that combines the best knowledge and practices of both the sciences and the humanities is our most promising way forward’ (2013: 43–44). Van der Veer could not disagree more. It is worth quoting him at length, as his words attest to his lucid, critical and, dare I say, rather direct, presumably Dutch way of engaging with his interlocutors, a way I admire and that has inspired me a lot.<sup>3</sup> He writes:

Surely, the sinologist Edward Slingerland is right in arguing that the early Chinese did not lack concepts of body-mind dualism but wrong in thinking that he has found anything significant. His entire debunking of the way leading sinologists have assumed a radical difference between Western (dualist) and Chinese (holistic) thought by showing evidence that dualism also existed in China is based on the premise that one can reduce complex arguments to simple oppositions. (Ibid.: 6)

This is a devastating critique eloquently substantiated by showing how the method of distant reading, in combination with ideas about universal human propensities, produce abstract generalizations that indeed have little or no significance. Van der Veer subsequently questions the generality inscribed in totalizing ideologies like nationalism and religion, just as he questions the idea that a Confucian civilization unifies all of China (ibid.: 7).

The point that we are *always* driven by a comparative approach is an important one that is manifested, inter alia, when we use ‘Western’

concepts to analyse 'Asian' realities: we study Chinese rock music, as the genre is haunted by its allegedly Western origin (de Kloet 2010), and for quite similar reasons we watch *The Wandering Earth*, as I have already shown earlier. To cite him again:

there is no escape from comparison when we deal with 'other societies' as historical sociologists or anthropologists, since we are always already translating into Western languages what we find elsewhere, using concepts that are derived from Western historical experience to interpret other societies and other histories. (van der Veer 2016: 8)

Van der Veer's argument for a comparative approach that resists generalizations comes with a plea to treat anthropology as the discipline par excellence. Anthropology is primarily, in his view, 'an engagement with "difference" and "diversity"'; it has a 'fragmentary approach to social life', it opts for holism instead of generalism and it 'has always taken the body (...) as a focal point of the study of society' (ibid.: 9–10). He writes, 'anthropology is highly equipped to engage problems of translation and of bridging different semantic universes. Its contribution is therefore not to utter always the qualifier *but* when social scientists are generalising, but rather to contribute to radically new and open ways of understanding reality' (ibid.: 11, italics in original). It thus comes as no surprise that the first chapter of the book is titled 'The Comparative Advantage of Anthropology'. Now, being somewhat of a 'fake' anthropologist myself (see note 2), I beg to differ regarding this view of disciplinary privilege. In my view, 'fuzzy' fields like cultural studies and cultural analysis are equally well equipped 'to contribute to radically new and open ways of understanding reality'.<sup>4</sup>

In analysing *The Wandering Earth*, I would like to bring van der Veer's comparative, anti-generalist approach together with Rey Chow's writings on cultural translation. In her 1995 essay, which appears as the closing chapter of *Primitive Passions*—a book that has accompanied me throughout my PhD years, just as Peter van der Veer did—she links the work of Walter Benjamin with the cinema of Zhang Yimou. The idea of translation often alludes to a 'true' and 'authentic' original, the translation of which is ideally approximating to the original as closely as possible. An

example of the commitment to the value of the original as the authenticator can be found in an analysis of the subtitles of *The Wandering Earth*, in which one can clearly find this still dominant paradigm. After discussing different types of ‘mistakes’ in the subtitles of the film, Li and Liang conclude:

for translators, the most important thing is to reduce translation errors as [much] as they can. When translating Chinese subtitles, the first ability a translator should possess is to be proficient in both Chinese and English and be familiar with the culture of [the] source language and target language. (2019: 63)

For these authors, it is important that ‘[t]ranslation with high quality [will] effectively disseminate Chinese culture and improve the soft power of national culture’ (ibid.: 63). Clearly, a generalizing comparative logic is at work here, one that denies the complexities and contradictions of both language and culture.

Drawing on Walter Benjamin, Rey Chow warns us against this danger of reifying the origin as the real and most truthful source when analysing cultural translations (I return to this later). The notion of translation refers etymologically not only to tradition but also to betrayal (Chow 1995: 182). ‘It is assumed that the value of translation is derived solely from the “original”, which is the authenticator of itself and of its subsequent versions’ (ibid.: 184). Inspired by Benjamin’s essay on translation, Chow argues instead for an interpretation of translation as ‘primarily a process of putting together. (...) A real translation is not only that which translates word by word but also that which translates literally, depthlessly, naively’ (ibid.: 185–186). Here the words of Deleuze and Guattari suggest a similar approach towards translation; they write:

Translation should not be understood simply as the ability of one language to ‘represent’ in some way the givens of another language, but beyond that as the ability of language, with its own givens on its own stratum, to represent all the other strata and thus achieve a scientific conception of the world. (1987: 62)

Consequently, translations may produce meanings that remain invisible or unspoken in the ‘original’. In Chow’s formulation, ‘[t]ranslation is a process in which the “native” should let the foreign affect, or infect, itself, and vice versa’ (Chow 1995: 189). Translation from one culture to another thus does not ‘presume similarity between or substitutability of the two: translation is not at the service of comparison; comparison is in the service of translation’ (Ahmad 2017: 13). In an earlier publication, also drawing on Chow’s work, I analysed three Chinese cultural products: a hip-hop band, an artwork and a movie. In my analysis ‘the native is infected by the foreign, just like the foreign is infected by the native—thereby polluting the “origin” that has never been pure in itself. A translation consequently transforms and infects, contaminates, as it were—rather than copies—an already and necessarily impure original’ (de Kloet 2007: 135). Van der Veer’s take on translation resonates with Chow’s, as the former sees translation as an interactive and reflexive process (2016: 148).

To summarize: in the time of a rising crisis as well as a rising China—and given the uncanny connection between both risings—the Chinese science-fiction blockbuster *The Wandering Earth* predicts a looming ecological disaster that endangers the future of planet earth. Its aesthetics bring to mind Hollywood’s sci-fi predecessors—as such, the experience of watching *The Wandering Earth* is always haunted by a comparative logic. I connect this aesthetic logic of comparison to van der Veer’s plea for a comparative anthropology. However, I add cultural analysis to that mix, in particular Rey Chow’s ideas about translation, in which the copy can be as complex, fragmented and multifaceted as the alleged original, if not more.

Let us now return to the movie itself and see how this cultural translation, or what some may see as pollution, is played out in its aesthetics and its narrative. As I will show, *The Wandering Earth* translates the sci-fi genre, with its strong imaginary links to Hollywood and China. Despite attempts to claim its Chineseness, such articulations are bound to fail. This fallacy of Chineseness is emblematic of contemporary Chinese cultural practices—which I will, however, read in a rather positive vein.



## Becoming

*The Wandering Earth* is billed as China's first blockbuster sci-fi movie. The privilege of being the 'first' can also be explained by the fact that science fiction was for a long time banned in China—the Communist Party used to monopolize the country's future, in practice as well as imagination, and considered science fiction a potential threat to that monopoly. Following the eco-critical narrative of the movie, it is not Aliens (whether from the United States or the Moon)<sup>5</sup> that threaten the world, but climate change. *The Wandering Earth* articulates different becomings on both textual and meta-textual levels.<sup>6</sup> On the meta-textual level, it is hailed in China as a sign of China becoming on a par with Hollywood; on the textual level, it presents the earth as becoming frozen and barren post-Anthropocene.

My analysis of these processes of becoming is inspired by a question van der Veer poses in the conclusion to his book, one that also serves as the motto that opens the current chapter. Let me reiterate: 'One thus always needs to ask: who are the people? And what is the difference between "the old" and "the new"?' While the nation sees itself in the singular, it is always in the plural' (Van der Veer 2016: 149). Following the translation trajectory, I find it productive to translate this question into notions of time, place and the people. In the ensuing admittedly rudimentary textual analysis, I ask: what does the movie tell us about time, about its locations and about the people—and what kind of comparative, translational logic can we observe here? Van der Veer describes the nation as being always in the plural. Thus, when Benedict Anderson coined the term 'imagined communities' (1991, originally 1983)—and this chapter is also indebted to that phrase for its inclusion of the role of media—it is important to observe that he too writes in the plural rather than singular. But 'who imagines what' is the question posed by Prasenjit Duara in his *Rescuing History from the Nation* (1996: 7). For Duara, the heterogeneity of the nation is undermined by the hegemonic construction of a causal, evolutionary history. In his view, 'national history secures for the contested and contingent nation the false unity of a self-same, national subject evolving through time' (p. 4). While his concern is to rescue history

from the nation, my concern in this chapter concerns the future: how can we rescue the future from the nation? We can do so, I argue, by probing into the comparative logic that is at work in *The Wandering Earth*.

First, time. Set in 2061, the movie shows how planet earth has turned into a desolate, frozen and barren landscape. In an unliveable world, what remains are large underground cities. While the expanding sun endangers the earth, 10,000 engines have been built to help propel the earth further away, and the cities were constructed under these engines. The right to live in one of the 10,000 cities is decided by lottery (a practice banned in the Maoist era but later allowed; cf., He Xiao, this volume). The movie plays with the known and mixes it with the unknown, which resembles existing genre conventions. In the words of Cornea (2007: 4), 'the reader of science fiction is caught between that which exists outside the laws of a known world and that which might be read as a logical extension of the known world'. References to the old are juxtaposed to those of the new. In the opening sequence of the movie, we see astronaut Liu Peiqiang on the beach with his four-year-old son Liu Qi having a BBQ together with the latter's grandfather. The scene evokes a sense of nature, of being at one with the environment, a sense that is imbued with family values. The scene references the 'here' and 'now'. Looking more closely, one sees a steel structure in the background, like a future or somewhere futuristic. And when little Liu Qi and his grandfather look at Jupiter through a telescope, the father explains to them that he is about to embark on a long space mission, only returning the moment they are able to see Jupiter with the naked eye. Seventeen years later this space mission is about to end and Liu Peiqiang should return home around the time of Chinese New Year. The old and known also returns in a sequence of television news images that are presented from known and familiar channels like the BBC, CNN, KNS (Korea), NHK (Japan) and a Russian channel—all reporting on global warming, the approaching sun and the disasters that are looming and will sweep away the cities. Here, the combination of channels creates a sense of worlding, presenting the imminent disaster as a global crisis that cries out for global measures. Hence, a United Earth Government (UEG) has been established, reminiscent of the United Nations. As the voiceover proclaims, 'mankind united as never seen

before'.<sup>7</sup> The engines are meant to propel the earth out of the sun's orbit, a process taking 2500 years.

In oscillating between here and there, between the old and the new, between now and then—in building on highly contemporary ecological concerns around climate change—*The Wandering Earth* plays around with reason, science and technology (cf. Sontag 1966), reworking an imaginable future and thus injecting science fiction with an assumed dose of reality. It is a story of banal cosmopolitanism, the assemblage of multiple screens from networks around the world (though African and Latin American networks remain absent), the establishment of a UEG—all of which attest to a sense of worlding that the movie tries to evoke.<sup>8</sup> The American genre of science fiction is thus translated by a Chinese sci-fi movie in order to articulate a banal cosmopolitanism in which humanity overrules the nation state. At the same time, such translations are fraught with inconsistencies and contradictions; when we look at how place is being articulated and what characters feature in the movie, this global humanism is shot through by strong sparks of Chineseness.

In times of crisis, we thus witness a double move, one towards globalism-cum-cosmopolitanism and the other towards nationalism. When we move back in time from 2061 towards the contemporary period, a similar paradox can be observed in the COVID-19 pandemic. While we are facing a truly global crisis, amplified by the movements of people and thus of viruses, we simultaneously see a retreat to what I, together with Lin Jian and Chow Yiu Fai, have called biopolitical nationalism. Viruses do not have passports, but despite this it is nation states that are competing with one another to control the virus. As we have argued elsewhere, biopolitics is now 'turned into an aspirational category: we want to be controlled, we want to be controlled more and more effectively, and we are angry that some states have failed to do so! Geopolitical entities are ranked according to their governance and containment success' (de Kloet et al. 2020: 639). Thus, as global crises trigger a chauvinistic nationalism, it should come as no surprise also that in *The Wandering Earth* the global goes hand in hand with ample articulations of Chineseness.

Second, place. While the opening sequences perform a sense of worlding, a banal cosmopolitanism, the movie continues in much more confined spaces, of space stations, underground cities, cars and frozen

highways. And it is here that we are again confronted with multiple signifiers of Chineseness. The world may be one planet, but what we see in the movie are individual Chinese who are destined to protect and save it. Here again, one cannot but draw a comparison with Hollywood, in which it is always the U.S. that is summoned to rescue the world. Whereas in the opening sequence we still see other cities like Tokyo and the pyramids in Egypt, during the movie we mostly encounter Chinese(-inflected) sites, places where people play mah-jong and where the 串 (*chuan*) sign indicates the sale of BBQ meat. We see the Central Business District in Beijing literally frozen in time and the broken stadium of the 2044 Shanghai Olympics caught between huge mountains of ice. Textually too, references to Chinese places and Chinese reality are inserted; for example, Liu Peiqiang tells his son Liu Qi that he will be a star in the sky. Now that Liu Qi is old, he says, '[L]ater I realized it was all a lie: in Beijing, there is no star to be seen', a reference to the heavy air pollution in Beijing. At another point, the grandson asks his grandfather, when seeing the remains of the Olympics site, what happened. The grandfather responds, 'This was grandpa's home. A lot of people used to live here. No one cared about the Sun. Everyone was concerned about the thing that is called money. Grandpa couldn't make a lot of money then, but I was happy every day.' The articulation of place—the remains of Shanghai—comes with a critique of the present reality, in which people are obsessed about money. Again, the future is used to critique the present.

The plot's driving force is the longing to return home. And home has two different articulations: home as your family, and home as the nation that is China. The ambivalence or conflation of them both is embedded in the Chinese word for country, *guojia* (国家), which literally means nation (*guo*) and home/family (*jia*). This conflation is, of course, not particularly Chinese. As Irfan Ahmad points out in a comparative study of Islamophobia in Europe and India, 'The fantasy of nation is driven by the idea of an orderly, nice, cosy home where the heart resides and which heart longs for when it finds itself distant from home' (2013: 241). In the apocalyptic narrative of the movie, the protagonists wonder, 'where is our home?' In any case, the way to return is hope: they claim that 'hope is the only way to guide us home'. And there, you have to 'hug your parents' and 'gather with the family'. The fact that the movie was released around Chinese New Year

and that this is also the scheduled moment for Liu Peiqiang to return home in the movie are both nods to the importance of the family in creating a sense of home. That the spaceship is named *Made in China* also comes as no surprise, just as the ubiquitous presence of Chinese flags throughout the movie continues to remind the viewer that this is Chinese science fiction. Thus, family norms continue to be articulated, along with clear markers of Chineseness. This translation of an American genre consequently comes with an eager emphasis on a specific locality, as well as on family values. These values are, of course, anything but typically Chinese; they could equally and easily be part of a Hollywood counterpart. After all, doesn't Bruce Willis also want to return home to his wife and kids?

Third, the people. Family relations are central, and at the end of the movie the father, Liu Peiqiang, sacrifices himself to save humanity. With the exception of just a few other nationalities that appear in the movie (in which national stereotypes are often used, like excessive vodka-drinking Russians claiming that Russian cosmonauts are invincible in space), it remains a predominantly Chinese world. We see little of other places around the globe. The French are audible when talking to Liu Peiqiang, but they are not rendered visible. One character has a mixed background: 'My dad is from Beijing, my mom is from Melbourne'. Others refer to him as a foreigner and ask, 'why is there a foreigner in your unit?' But, he responds, 'who is a foreigner? My father is from Beijing. I am an authentic Chinese.' It is noteworthy that it is patriarchy that grounds national identification. The movie we are watching is about saving the world, but the people it shows doing so are above all Chinese.

In other words, while the framing of a global environmental disaster and references to the establishment of a United Earth Government all gesture towards a banal cosmopolitanism, the places depicted in the movie, as well as its characters, are by and large Chinese. The professor from the Beijing Film Academy, whom I referred to earlier, also confided in me that he felt the movie lacked character development: there was no love story. Furthermore, he thought that characters were too flat to make it a good movie. One can also read this flatness as a way of deviating from Hollywood conventions, as well as being a way to foreground the larger ecological concerns the movie tries to convey. This, then, brings me to my final step in the analysis: how was the movie received in Mainland China?

## Overcoding

At the start of this chapter, I quoted some dismissive reviews from Western film critics. These reviews are overcoded by a belief that the West is the best when it comes to the production of popular culture. What about reviews of the film in China? Van der Veer's warning about the danger of generalizations in pursuing a comparative approach (and, as we already know by now, we are *always* driven by a comparative approach, in particular when studying 'other' cultures) becomes urgent when reading such reviews. When the negative ones are overcoded by a generalizing logic in which the West is framed as the best in the field of popular culture, in China we see this generalizing logic being flipped, producing equally overcoded narratives. Following Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 41), overcoding refers to 'phenomena of centering, unification, totalization, integration, hierarchization, and finalization'. In a way, it is a term that resonates very intimately with van der Veer's notion of generalism. In the case of China, overcoding often involves articulations of what is assumed to be a unified and unifying long history of 5000 years of a civilizational discourse in which Confucius plays the leading role, and a multiculturalist discourse of 55 ethnic minorities all living peacefully together with the Han majority. The overcoding machinery of the state is mapped onto the China Dream, as it is in the constantly recurring narrative of *X with Chinese characteristics*, in which X may be communism, socialism, capitalism, urbanism, modernity, postmodernism and so on. And, as I will now show, X can also stand for science fiction.

The Chinese critic Zou Songlin (2019: 43) hailed the movie for its homecoming narrative:

What Guo Fan has done is to tell a story about Chinese people returning home on the scale of space. At the core of this story is the emotional attachment and attachment to the homeland in Chinese values. Going back home is the core of Chinese culture, which has been related to our farming civilization for thousands of years. We are a land-locked civilization, so it is very different from the western island and maritime civilization. Here you can see the uniqueness of Chinese culture and help us build our cultural confidence.

We see a clear totalizing, generalizing narrative being mobilized here, one in which Chinese civilization is considered essentially and fundamentally different from ‘Western island and maritime’ civilizations. Here, it is not Confucius but geophysical elements that are used to explain civilizational differences. In the end it produces the idea that Chinese culture is unique and, above all, one.<sup>9</sup>

For the critic Yao Lifan, the movie is nothing less than a declaration that the world is becoming Chinese, connecting Chinese aesthetics as described above to a real space mission from China:

China became the first country in the world to land space probes on the back of the moon. This is a historic step in the international exploration of the moon. Thus, *Made in China* seems to be reasonable. The Chinese elements in the dungeons are looming, dancing dragons, pinching sugar people, and mahjong ... all of them are waiting for the promise of Chinese culture. (Yao 2019: 112)

Finally, Zhan Qinchuan and Wu Gongheng also read the movie as an expression of the China Dream, of a dream that is now mapped on to the world writ large. They write (2019: 93):

*The Wandering Earth* not only embodies the ‘Chinese Dream’, but also defines the ‘reality’ and ‘illusion’ of the world we live in. This film answers what China is like from the perspective of China’s contemporary history. It can be said that the film constructs a future world view belonging to the Chinese. This future world view is based on China’s five thousand years of culture.

The movies’ banal cosmopolitanism, its strong connection with what is globally perceived as a quintessential American movie genre, is exactly what drives Chinese critics to articulate its Chineseness, not only to reclaim the genre itself but also to show how China is perceived as playing a leading role in the world.

The overcoding machine also functions in Chinese academic analyses of the movie, which not only univocally applaud the movie; they are also keen on stressing its unique Chinese characteristics. Characterizing the

movie as a milestone in Chinese science-fiction cinema, Li observes, 'Man and nature form a tense antagonistic relationship in the western philosophy system. Conversely, oriental philosophy pays attention to the unity and harmony between man and nature' (2019: 61). And it is this Taoist philosophy, Li argues, that *The Wandering Earth* propagates, something that Western ecological criticism has taken on board. Li and Liang (2019: 6) commend the movie for promoting the movie industry and gaining international recognition. They write:

This film has become an important factor in promoting the development of China's science-fiction film industry and has been put on the international screen. The film shows a concern for the great history of mankind, which combines science, the common concern of mankind, the common feeling of mankind, [and] the ethical consciousness and values of the Chinese people together well. It has led our film industry to a higher level of development either in art or in the industrial production of the whole film. Such an excellent science-fiction film is also popular abroad and wins a good reputation.

In their analysis, a comparison is made between mankind (unspecified, but most likely referring to the West) and the Chinese people. It is the paradox of nationalism seen through the prism of banal cosmopolitanism and, in the case of this movie, a global ecological humanism. It demonstrates, first, how it is indeed a comparative logic that underpins productions like these and their reception; second, how an overcoding logic is imposed by different parties upon the movie; but also, and third, how such overcoded ideals of the nation in the singular, and of the people as united, are bound to be constantly betrayed.

## Conclusion

I must confess, when watching the movie the first time, I too felt as if I was watching a delayed version of a Hollywood movie. However, watching it again, I started to value it more for its attempt to engage with environmental issues, for its naïve but still relevant articulation of a banal



cosmopolitanism, for its playing with national, including Chinese, stereotypes and for its brief outbursts of criticism, for example, of the air pollution in Beijing or the obsession with money that has overtaken contemporary Chinese society (see He Xiao, this volume). Paraphrasing Prasenjit Duara, I have asked in this chapter, 'how can we rescue the future from the nation?' I think we can start by probing into the comparative logic that seems to be at play at all levels, in my value judgement of the movie as well as in my reading of the movie itself. This comparative logic is also at work, as I have shown, in the film's reviews, whether in the West or in China. And, as Peter van der Veer has argued so convincingly, it is important to delve more deeply into this comparative logic, without, however, retreating to the safe grounds of generalism, universalism or what Deleuze and Guattari describe as 'overcoding'.

Comparison involves cultural translation and, as Rey Chow has argued in *Primitive Passions*, translation always involves betrayal. Drawing in particular on Walter Benjamin, Chow shows how Chinese filmmakers like Zhang Yimou are like the translators of Chinese culture for a global audience: what they reveal is not depth but surface, merely showing the violence with which Chinese culture is 'originally' put together. Critics will say that they do not show the real China, that their works lack depth—but for Chow they become today's ethnographers, the object recorded being 'the West itself as mirrored in the eyes and handiwork of its others' (Taussig in Chow 1995). In the end, such translations betray rather than confirm the idea of a singular Chinese culture; they resist the overcoding idea of 5000 years of Chinese history.

The movie is at once so Hollywood and so Chinese. It shows that Hollywood is not necessarily located in the United States, just as China is not always in the East. It is this confusion, this pollution, that in the end makes it a translation that betrays both its assumed origins and the copy. In the impossibility of being Chinese, or of being American, the movie resists overcoding, resists being caught by generalism. In its superficiality, it confronts its audience with the made-up-ness of that fuzzy idea of 'Chinese culture'. In the end, the point I want to make is much broader, as I hope to have shown here. It might not only be anthropology that can help us resist generalism and that can, through its comparative logic, 'contribute to radically new and open ways of understanding

reality'. It might just as well be a superficial, banal, commercial science-fiction blockbuster from China. In a world where reality is profoundly mediated, where we live life in the media, rather than with the media (Deuze 2013), it is important to include the media in our analyses and to give them a close reading. And for that, closely associated disciplines like cultural studies and cultural analysis are pivotal. They allow not just people, but also objects and media texts to talk back to us (Bal 2002), allowing us to try and tweak reality a bit, towards alternative risings and different becomings, and to continue to resist overcoding.

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## Notes

1. According to Wikipedia, 'the film grossed US\$700 million worldwide. It is China's third highest-grossing film of all time and the third highest-grossing non-English film to date'. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Wandering\\_Earth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wandering_Earth), accessed 20 January 2020.
2. Van der Veer supervised my PhD (1996–2001) on Chinese rock music. Being a theme that was considered rather strange at that time, I remain grateful to van der Veer for his openness and curiosity in supporting such an obscure topic explored by a student who lacked an anthropological background and did not even speak Mandarin. I have come to realize over the years that such openness and versatility are quite unique in academia.
3. It is worth mentioning that van der Veer comes from Groningen, the northern part of the Netherlands, a province famous not only for its left-wing leanings but also for its directness and frankness in communication.
4. Although this chapter does not quite provide a case in point, I do think that disciplines like cultural studies and cultural analysis could (and sometimes do) work very well in tandem with anthropology and that they can learn in particular from anthropology's ethnographic methods and field-

- work practices. Likewise, anthropology can learn from cultural studies and its practice of close reading, in which it is objects rather than people who talk back.
5. 'Alien' is a quite common term used for foreigners at border control and visa documents.
  6. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 239), 'Becoming is a rhizome, not a classificatory or genealogical tree. Becoming is certainly not imitating, or identifying with something; neither is it regressing-progressing; neither is it corresponding, establishing corresponding relations; neither is it producing, producing a filiation or producing through filiation. Becoming is a verb with a consistency all its own; it does not reduce to, or lead back to, "appearing," "being," "equaling," or "producing."'
  7. All direct quotes from the movie are based on the subtitled version.
  8. Van der Veer rightly points to how cosmopolitanism is entwined with a Eurocentric universalism and always already entangled with nationalism, in his words, 'instead of perceiving cosmopolitanism and nationalism as alternatives, one should perhaps recognize them as the poles in a dialectical relationship' (2002: 166). A banal cosmopolitanism refers to the experience of 'globality' embedded in everyday life (Beck 2002). However, whereas Beck claims that in banal cosmopolitanism, 'everyday nationalism is circumvented and undermined and we experience ourselves integrated into global processes and phenomena' (Beck 2002: 12), both my analysis and van der Veer's show they merely go hand in hand.
  9. This mapping of civilization on to territoriality brings to mind Deleuze and Guattari's geophilosophical thinking about homogenous striated space, a result of 'the overcoding, centralization, hierarchization, binarization, and segmentation of the free movements of signs, particles, bodies, territories, spaces, and so on' (Bonta and Protevi 2004: 151–152).

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