



## An Ecological Alarm Bell: Liu Cixin’s Science Fiction *The Wandering Earth*

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### Abstract

*The Wandering Earth* is another masterpiece of Liu Cixin after *The Three*, and later adapted into a film. After its release, the film has won high reputation at home and abroad. It can be regarded as a milestone of Chinese science fiction movies. From the perspective of Western eco-criticism, the future ecological environment described in the work is fragmented; the earth disaster which has been redeemed by human beings continues, and finally falls into ruins; human beings abandon religious ethics and humanistic arts, and their spirit falls into confusion and fear. The work provides us with the possibility of the future development of human living environment and spiritual thought, aiming at awakening human’s ecological consciousness and restoring human’s respect for natural ecology.

**Key words:** *The Wandering Earth*; Ecological criticism; Ecological picture; Spiritual dilemma

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### INTRODUCTION

Liu Cixin, a representative writer of the new generation of Chinese science fiction, won the Hugo Prize for Best Long Story in 2015 for *The Three*. He is the first Asian writer to win the highest prize in the world of science

fiction literature. His short and medium-length novel *The Wandering Earth* was published in 2008, and has been reprinted by different publishing houses many times. The box office of the adapted film of the same name surpassed 1.6 billion in 2019, and the response at home and abroad was enthusiastic, which could be regarded as a milestone of Chinese science fiction film. This work surpasses ordinary sci-fi literary works in both grand imagination and meticulous details of science and technology, and can be regarded as a literary classic. In addition to the grand narrative, we should also pay attention to the realistic problems, the development of natural ecology and the ideological dilemma of human beings. The story is full of humanistic care. The work tells the story of mankind having to start the “Wandering Earth” project because of the destruction of the sun, trying to escape the solar system with the earth and find a new home for mankind. From the perspective of ecological criticism, this typical disaster science fiction provides a possibility for the future development of human ecological environment and human thought. In reality, with the ecological destruction caused by modernization and the ecological changes caused by greenhouse effect, the environment on which we live is gradually changed and threatened. When human beings encounter the challenge of survival, human civilization and spirit have changed greatly in essence. As mentioned in the novel *the Wandering Earth*, human beings have lost civilization, abandoned religious ethics and humanistic arts, and entered the edge of ideological collapse. The work mainly explores the value development and ideological dilemma of human beings when facing the challenge of survival, and tries to find a way out. It emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between human self-development and the fundamental interests of protecting the ecological environment in order to arouse human’s awareness of environmental concern and protection.

## 1. THE CORE, CATEGORY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF ECOLOGICAL CRITICISM THEORY

The term “ecological criticism” was proposed by William Rueckert in his 1978 paper *Literature and Ecology*. It clearly advocates the combination of literature and ecology, and emphasizes that critics must have an ecological perspective. (Wang, 2013) Eco-criticism is influenced by Romanticism, pastoral literature and transcendentalism, aiming at reflecting on the relationship between human beings and nature. Eco-criticism theory has typical interdisciplinary thinking, which combines progressive chemistry, ecology and literature, and challenges traditional literary theory. Besides literature, it also concerns the fields of drama, poetry, teaching, and film and television creation. Eco-criticism advocates “reading text with eco-criticism” or “reading with eco-orientation”. It includes not only comments on contemporary works that predict and imagine future ecological disasters, but also reviews of historical classics. (Cheng, 2006) Eco-criticism aims at excavating the new connotation of the works from the ecological point of view and continuing the vitality of the works on the basis of traditional literary reading methods. The significance of eco-criticism is to remind people not to put literary perspective in the narrow category of “society”, but to discuss literature in the broader category of “nature”. Eco-criticism means examining literature and other arts in the context of society and the earth. If we confine literary discussion to literature itself, it will block the important link between literature and other disciplines. (Hans, 1990) It will limit the extra value of literature. Some people regard literary research as a subordinate, elegant, useless and socially unrelated profession. Scott Slovic (2010), an American eco-critic, strongly opposes it. He believes that literature is a lens through which we can deepen our understanding of the most important issues in the world. He believed that environmentalists and literary critics were “working for life”. Eco-criticism reconnects literary research with human survival issues, awakens human natural consciousness, hopes that human beings will assume the responsibility of protecting nature, warns human misconduct, and ponders the consequences of the destruction of nature. Grott Fieldy, the first professor of literature and environmental studies in American universities, profoundly points out that the most important mission of ecological criticism is to re-examine human culture through literature, carry out cultural criticism and excavate the ideological and cultural roots leading to ecological crisis, which is the main complaint of ecologism. (Wang, 2013)

## 2. WANDERING EARTH: A FUTURE ECOLOGICAL PICTURE

Since the 1980s, eco-criticism has expanded the definition of “nature” from the perspective of scope and region, from the four areas of “wilderness, spectacular scenery, rural and man-made beautiful scenery” to “green and brown scenery” (suburban scenery and urban industrialized landscape). Lawrence Buell (2001) pointed out that the imagination of the environment should extend to all the threatened “natural” and “urban” environments in the world. In terms of “natural” and “man-made” world categories, the comparison between the future ecological landscape presented in *The Wandering Earth* and the large-scale earth engine of man-made landscape is a typical contrast between “green and brown landscape”. The author has described many times the ecological changes and destruction of the green landscape. In the works, the earth encountered alternating changes of extreme cold and hot climate on the wandering journey, as the text written: “Sometimes the whole surface is covered by ice and snow wilderness, the sky is gray, dust is like fog covering the whole universe, the surviving tall buildings on the surface of the earth are standing on the ice, hanging long icicles. Sometimes they are hit by floods and magma from extremely hot climates.” In the words of the protagonist teacher: “When it’s cold, spit a mouthful of saliva and it doesn’t fall to the ground, it freezes into small ice cubes; when it’s hot, it turns into steam before spitting and falling to the ground.” (Liu, 2017) What echoes the “green scenery” in his works is the “brown scenery” - the spectacular scene of the earth engine. Liu (2017) describes the giant engine in this way: “Imagine a huge palace, as big as the temple in the Acropolis of Athens. There are innumerable giant pillars in the palace, each of which glows blue and white like a giant sunlight lamp.” When viewed at close range, the Earth Engine “is a metal mountain, standing in front of us, occupying half the sky. Compared with it, the Taihang Mountains in the West are like a series of small mounds of earth. Some children marvel that it is as tall as Everest. The engine is 11,000 meters high, more than 2,000 meters higher than Everest. People call it God’s Blowtorch. We stand in its great shadow and feel its vibration through the earth.” The damage of the engine to the earth’s ecology is also undoubted. The engine brings the extreme heat, leading to outdoor temperatures as high as seventy or eighty degrees. When rainstorm occurs, the raindrops will burn people after being heated by the high-temperature light column of the earth’s engine. The ecological picture of the future depicted by *The wandering earth* is grey and desperate, the comfortable earth environment suddenly becomes lethal. It also throws a question worth thinking to readers: what message does the novel want to convey? What is the implication? Where will mankind go in the future?

### 3. WANDER PLAN: REDEMPTION OR DESTRUCTION

Man and nature are opposite in western philosophy, showing a binary relationship. Man is the subject while nature is the object. Man has unlimited power to conquer nature. Man and nature form a tense antagonistic relationship in the western philosophy system. On the contrary, the oriental philosophy pays attention to the unity and harmony between man and nature. The most important "Tao" in the model of oriental philosophy *Tao Te Jing* is to follow the natural law, it means that man should follow the natural law. Western ecological criticism is similar to the theory of "harmony between man and nature" in oriental philosophy. It advocates that human beings can abandon human-centered "self-consciousness" and turn to "ecological consciousness". It believes that human beings are no longer the dominant of nature, but a member of the land, sharing life and death with other members of the natural world. With the progress of science and technology, we human beings can proudly say that we have the ability to control nature from the macro or micro level, but the consequence of the change may be to create a planetary environment more unfavorable to human survival. The act of saving the earth in this work is to change the nature through human power, and man and nature are binary opposites, showing the relationship between conquest and conquered. However, in the process of conquest, human beings also brought countless disasters to nature. In *The Wandering Earth*, in order to save the earth, human beings have designed a plan of escape for 100 generations, which can be divided into five periods: the braking age, the escaping age, the wandering age I, the wandering age II and the new solar age. The braking age has just ended, and its impact on the earth has been shocking: "the tides caused by the acceleration of the earth's engine have engulfed two-thirds of the major cities in the northern hemisphere, and the global high temperatures brought by the engine have melted polar glaciers, making the floods worse, affecting the southern hemisphere... Our planet is totally different before we set out." (Liu, 2017) In the era of braking, human beings have never seen night, stars, spring, autumn and winter. The human history of that era was called the pre-solar era, a fascinating "golden age". (Liu, 2017) The second stage of the "escape period" of the Earth has been devastated, and disasters continue. "Since the sixth orbital transition period, magma infiltration disasters have occurred frequently in the dungeons of continents." (Liu, 2017) The final prediction of the work also states that the Earth will accelerate continuously during the "wandering period", and that the engine is expected to use half of the mountains on the Asian continent as fuel for the next 500 years of wandering. At that time, there were only bare rocks and hard frozen soil on the earth. High-rise buildings in the pre-solar period were ruins. Cities and vegetation

disappeared, and the surface became a desert like Mars. Vagrant plans and large engines are great inventions of human science and technology and advanced tools to save the earth. But it is desperate that the earth has been destroyed and the homeland that mankind finally acquired after thousands of years of redemption has become a ruin. The savior becomes the destroyer. The work satirizes the arrogance, pretension and cleverness of human beings.

### 4. HUMAN SPIRITUAL DILEMMA IN THE WANDER PERIOD

In the 2500 years of wandering on the earth, human beings can only live in dungeons. They can not see the sunshine all day. They say goodbye to the blue sky and white clouds, and there is no alternation of seasons. The dungeon in the author's eyes is described like this: "What does a city look like? Only the intricate branch holes, and the numerous sealed doors on the wall of the cave, which were constantly passing, were seen in monotonous metallic blue under a row of floodlights on the top of the cave. We are sad to think that most of the rest of our lives will be spent in this world." (Liu, 2017) *The Wandering Earth* expressed many times the confusion and fear of human beings when facing the deterioration of the natural environment. Because of the harsh environment, the law stipulates that only one couple of every three newly married spouses has the right to bear children, and it is decided by lottery. When the protagonist's wife Jiadaizi got the right to bear, the protagonist did not know what it was like. He was not sure whether it was lucky or unlucky for their children to live in this miserable age.

In the future world described in the novel, human beings have mastered the advanced science and technology which they are proud of, but they can only survive in the dungeon, a harsh living environment. The human passion for art has disappeared, leaving only the desire for survival. It is a luxurious desire to see the scenery of birds and flowers and the sun in the morning. It is ironic. The work mentions: "In the pre-sun era, to be a noble person, one must have money, power or talent, but today, as long as one has hope, hope is the gold and precious stone of this era." (Liu, 2017) It can be seen that the human desire for survival has reached its peak. In this busiest era of mankind, everyone has endless work to survive, school education is focused on science and engineering, art and philosophy education has been compressed to the minimum, human beings have no leisure to care about the humanities. At that time, people also abandoned ethical care. "When the flood comes, only one man can be saved, whether to save his father or his son" is not an ethical issue they can understand. Similarly, people of that era could no longer understand the movies and novels of four centuries ago. They could not understand why people in the pre-solar era poured

so much emotion into the issue of life and death. Apart from the threat of death and the desire to escape, nothing really attracts their attention, which essentially changes the psychological state and spiritual life of human beings. The protagonist's mother seemed inexplicably calm, even cold about the fact that her husband fell in love with other women, but she was extremely excited and sincerely praised the fireworks from the sun. Human love, ethics, art and philosophy are worthless in the face of the belief of "living" and collapse with the earth's ecology.

In the end of the fiction, when the earth wandered 40 generations, mankind accumulated too much despair, suffering and sadness in the long process of wandering. They were overwhelmed and could not keep their reason. So they rebelled against the coalition government and, like mobs, put 5,000 coalition government people and all of them to death. In the future, human beings will not only lose ethics and art, reason and emotion, but also become ignorant and angry in fear. The climax of the end also indicates the complete collapse of human spirit.

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### **CONCLUSION: AWAKENING OF HUMAN NATURAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

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In the fiction, the earth was badly damaged and totally disfigured; human beings were confronted with rebellion, confusion and finally spiritual collapse. Liu paints a picture of the future of mankind in crisis. In a slightly different way, the adapted film of the same name focuses on the awakening of human natural morality, such

as Liu Peiqiang's resistance to artificial intelligence, which indicates that human morality and emotion have overcome the cold artificial intelligence procedure, and demonstrates human's determination to abandon scientific and technological manipulation and defend nature. Both the original fiction and the movie have set an open ending. The earth, our homeland has been destroyed yet survived. It continues to wander through the long river of 100 generations of human beings in search of the last utopia. The author wants to tell us that there is still hope for the earth, there is still tomorrow, and mankind has a future. The work alerts and enlightens us on the relationship between human beings and nature, hoping that human beings can regain their "ecological consciousness" and safeguard the earth, our homeland.

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