

# Value Concepts in Contemporary Chinese Cinema Based on Anglophone Reviews and Commentaries on Films

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**Abstract:** The paper studies eventive value parameters of cinematic discourse, and analyses representation of eventive value concept SPACE in Chinese film spatial evaluation language. The main focus is to study value parameters and cultural significance of SPACE concept in Chinese culture and global community, as well as emotional and evaluative aspects of texts on films about the space in cinematic discourse; linguistic markers referring to film as an event of social and cultural relevance are analyzed. It is suggested that value dimension of cinema art is an integral part of eventive value parameters in culture that includes cinematic discourse reflecting social and cultural worldviews of society.

## 1. Introduction

The paper analyses linguistic representation of eventive value concept SPACE in cinematic discourse by cinema critics and bloggers who provide their assessment of Chinese films about the space. Hereby what we mean the science fiction movie *The Wandering Earth* and animated short-length cartoon *One Small Step* are endowed with life only after China's space industry has made a breakthrough.

The aim of the study is to analyze the plethora of ways to represent eventive value parameters of concept SPACE in cinematic discourse. Our linguistic analysis pursues to fulfill specific goals in order to find out: (1) how concept SPACE is elicited in by cinema critics in their texts; (2) linguistic markers showing that a film is interpreted as an event of social and cultural importance; (3) how cinema critics and bloggers express their assessment and sentiments about the film in their texts; (4) parameters of cultural value concepts enshrined in cinematic discourse by western cinema critics; (5) the evidence that the film plot unfolds paradigmatically according to general trends in contemporary Chinese and international filmmaking.

The approach and topic proposed in our language study is innovative, as it is an unprecedented attempt to analyze language representations in order to elicit common trends both in eventive paradigmatic development of Chinese cinema and in the general development of culture and science on a global scale. The significance of our study is justified by the fact that it allows to identify and describe value and eventivity as categories formulated by cumulative opinion of evaluating subjects – cinema

critics and audience – on a particular film. The study relevance is justified by the implementation of contemporary language analysis to identify and describe patterns in cinematic discourse that elicit common humanitarian values declared by authors, as well as their national, cultural, and international impact on social and individual worldviews irrespective of mindsets and identities. Our hypothesis is that value dimension of film art is an essential part of eventive value parameters of society's culture because its semiotic space embraces cinematic discourse that, in turn, reflects social and cultural worldviews of the filmmaker, the audience, and society at a particular time of its paradigmatic development.

## **2. Methods**

The research is based on cinematic discourse encountered in the Internet, movie blogs, reviews by cinema critics, filmmakers and the audience, i.e. a collection of various semiotic space markers that communicate eventive value dimensions of discourse on film, its pragmatics, as well as emotional evaluation. By doing so, we conclude that value events and surrounding realities are reflected in the language of art as perceived by the filmmaker and the recipient, considering individual and social values and cultural identity. For the purpose of this study we used the following methods: linguistic description, discourse analysis, lexical and semantic analysis, pragmatic and communicative analysis, cognitive and conceptual methods, based on emotional and evaluative aspects in the language of cinematic texts. The object of this study is value concept SPACE and its eventivity as a category expressed in cinematic discourse. The multi-aspect evaluation procedure of film by cinema critics and audience elicits the film message that in fact affects eventive worldviews of individuals and society. The subject of our analysis is language representation of eventivity as a category of Anglophone discourse on Chinese films.

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

Individual worldview is a system of knowledge and opinions derived from the perception of processes and events in surrounding environment. This system manifests itself in language and is shaped by geopolitics, technological and industrial development of society and culture that an individual belongs to. Another important factor is such parameters as gender, age, education, upbringing, religion, occupation, and social status. In modern science culture can be understood as the totality of communication practices and systems of meaning [1]. It presupposes that language is not used simply to organize action or to describe events and their relations, and it is also a resource for the creation and maintenance of social relations and value systems [2]. Perception and interpretation of art works, including the significant input of cinematic discourse, depends on the parameters of an individual's value worldview and its prevailing value concepts. As N.N. Boldyrev noted, their differentiation is a result of conceptualization and categorization by way of comparative procedures, evaluation, and interpretation based on individual's knowledge and experience obtained from cinematic discourse, among others [3].

In contemporary linguistic research the notions and concept of value attract increasing academic attention. As a product of human cognitive activity, the category of value together with the category of concept produce a value concept – a highly demanding notion in contemporary academic tradition. Value concepts are closely linked to speech and cognition to communicate fundamental cultural properties through language [4]. Value properties of an eventive category are affected by on-going transformations in social factors. Those are advances in science and technology, developments in public relations, and transient geopolitical climate which drive changes both in value meanings, their role priorities and social dominance and, consequently, in human mind and worldviews [5]. An event is traditionally defined as a transformation in social and natural realities within specific time, space, and causality. Having transformed into a mental image in subject's mind, a material event undergoes evaluation in order to find its place in individual's value worldview [6].

Represented by the dominant eventive value concept, an event can provide the subject framework for cinematic text or discourse to be analyzed by pragmatic, communicative, lexical, and semantic methods.

Therefore, the eventivity category functions as a text-generating factor for all manifestations of media, online publications, and art narrative, including cinematic or theater discourse and fiction. As soon as art reflects all forms of social and cultural activity in the society, artworks have almost unlimited impact on life which it prescribed by social meaning of art.

Cinematic discourse and its meanings are highly demanded by public mindset and are the result of cumulative creativity of the cinematic text author, film director, actors, cinema critics, and the audience, the latter discovering new meanings in film based on existing social and historical experience and knowledge. Produced by author's imagination, science fiction relies on an array of real events, views and expectations of the society.

Our cases in point are two brand-new Chinese fiction films on the space released in 2018-2019, that have been very well welcomed by the audience and international cinema critics. Hereby we refer to *The Wandering Earth*, a full-screen fantasy and science fiction film, and *One Small Step*, an animated parable running 7 minutes only. These films about the space were produced by Chinese cinema industry to reflect science and technology progress and latest advances in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in space exploration. In 2011 PRC successfully launched its first space station 'Tyangun-1', while in December 2018 a rocket with a robotic space probe station was launched. China was the first country in the world to land a moon-walker on the far side of the moon. Therefore, contemporary Chinese cinema has presumably addressed to films about the space to naturally echo the national science and technology progress. This has generated extensive public responses that were reflected by the discourse of scientific, technical, public, and political texts, as well as texts on culture and humanities.

Thus, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) news described the rocket launch as follows:

- (1) *China has launched the first mission to land a robotic craft on the far side of the Moon, Chinese media say. (BBC News)*

The eventive situation is primarily expressed by temporal and aspectual verb form *has launched*, thus emphasizing the significance of the rocket launch or the present, as well as the relevance of this event for the development of society. Another eventive marker is adjective *first* that highlights the event significance and outlines it in the flow of current affairs. Internet magazine *Space* described the rocket launch as follows:

- (2) *The first-ever surface mission to the far side of the moon is underway. <...> Chang'e 4 marks the latest step in China's ambitious, long-term moon-exploration strategy. (Space)*

Word *underway* indicates eventive aspects of the situation that has been persisting for a long time. This is echoed by adjective *first-ever* that emphasizes how innovative and unique this event is both for China and global community. Together with adjective *ambitious* with its expressly positive connotation, such language allows to identify both eventive and value aspects of the situation. A review published in *New York Times* also referred to PRC conquering the space as an eventive situation:

- (3) *China was a latecomer to space exploration, and in the movies, it has been a latecomer to science fiction, too. That is about to change. The country's first blockbuster set in space, "The Wandering Earth," opens Tuesday amid grandiose expectations that it will represent the dawning of a new era in Chinese filmmaking. (New York Times)*

Parallel structures in the first sentence indicate that there is a strong link between the real event of space exploration and production of films about the space. Meanwhile, phrase *the dawning of a new era* refers to advancing transformations both in China's space industry and fiction films about the space; together with word combination *grandiose expectations*, that demonstrates the importance of this film for Chinese culture, the news on the release of a new blockbuster is ascribed eventive value parameters.

Such value event showcasing high level of technological, economic, and industrial development has justly contributed to national pride and was not unnoticed on the global scale to be therefore echoed by

contemporary Chinese film art and cinematic discourse. This explains the fact that arts and humanities in 21<sup>st</sup> century Chinese culture are dominated by value concept SPACE which is apparently demonstrated through cinematic texts in films that attract attention of audience of all ages, genders, and social backgrounds to a similar degree.

Before proceeding to linguistic analysis of cinematic discourse, we need to say a few words about cinematic discourse itself, the boundaries of its meaning, as well as its conceptual and terminological parameters. Traditionally linguists study cinematic discourse within pragmatic and communicative approach. As R.W. Janney mentioned, the concept of cinematic discourse invites us to focus on film as a communicative process [7]. Most important elements of cinematic discourse are cinematic text (feature film), as well as discourse practice that includes its production and perception. Cinematic text is a polycode text, i.e. a text of heterogeneous structure with its various – verbal, visual, aural – components interacting between one another in a complicated way. This interaction explains deeper perceptive processes and the strong persuasive effect.

Cinematic text production is a crucial component of discourse practice which comes into effect at a particular historic timeframe under the impact of national, cultural, and social factors. All these factors formulate a complex semiotic space and shape its value meaning. Perception and understanding of cinematic text, as well as the vector of its emotional and evaluative interpretation and its creation process are largely determined by recipient's social, national, and cultural identity. On the one hand, it attempts to decipher the code enshrined in the cinematic text by its authors; on the other hand, it imposes its own meanings, which allow to expand the semantic potential of cinematic text in the course of perception [8].

Thus, in the perspective of cognitive and communicative approach, the concept of cinematic discourse includes cinematic text, its creation, perception and interpretation processes. At the same time, there is a somewhat different approach in defining the notion of discourse as a collection of thematically associated texts. From this perspective, cinematic discourse can be viewed as a set of co-related texts that include cinematic text itself, screenplay, interviews with film-makers, reviews and commentaries by film critics and bloggers, scholarly research on cinema, as well as other texts. One may confidently claim that the integration of these two approaches for discourse analysis opens up broader academic prospects for a more profound insight into cinematic text as a significant socio-cultural phenomenon in order to study represented eventive value concepts.

#### 4. Language Analysis of Cinematic Discourse

Concept SPACE is a hyperconcept that combines a set of other concepts by way of associations that are linked to the topic of the space and derive from the hyperconcept. The nature of relations among the concepts, linked by the topic of the space, is formulated through pragmatic and cognitive analysis, as well as analysis of definitions. By analyzing definitions in dictionaries and representative words of SPACE concept, we can reveal how this concept interacts with derived concepts within its lexical and semantic structure.

Cambridge Dictionary defined *space* as follows: *the empty area outside Earth's atmosphere, where the planets and the stars are (Cambridge Dictionary)*. Hereby, words *Earth*, *atmosphere*, *planets*, *stars* are lexical units of thematic relevance for noun *space* and, in turn, represent respective concepts. Thus, we can conclude that concepts EARTH, ATMOSPHERE, PLANETS, STARS are derivatives of hyperconcept SPACE. A similar definition analysis of any derived concept allows to identify the next set of derived concepts that – for the sake of convenience – can be referred to as derived concepts of the second level. By analyzing the Cambridge Dictionary definition of word *earth* (*the planet third in order of distance from the sun, between Venus and Mars; the world on which we live*), we can conclude that SUN, VENUS, MARS, and WORLD are second-level concepts of hyperconcept SPACE. Thus, concepts having an association bond to hyperconcept SPACE establish a conceptual paradigm with a high degree of interdependency and semantic links across all concepts. As noted above, the eventivity of SPACE concept

is determined by global current affairs, in particular the advances in the space industry. The space conquest is, thus, considered here as a value event that, on the one hand, meets the main eventivity criteria, such as transformation of situation and salience for what is happening in real space and time [9]; on the other hand, it satisfies the main criterion of worthiness, i.e. the significance of this event for society.

It is noteworthy that in feature films concept SPACE acquires value on social and individual level, thus becoming a symbol of dreams coming true not only for all mankind, but also for individuals. Eventive value properties of SPACE concept and its derivatives are reflected in texts by foreign – in particular, English-speaking (Anglophonic) – cinema critics as a response of global culture to a value event in Chinese cinema. SPACE concept not only helps to introduce the setting of the film, but also organizes the placement and development of the current action and provides a pragmatic time frame for the relative semantics of the events [10]. To identify eventive value properties of Chinese films about the space, we suggest analyzing the language of reviews and commentaries by critics and bloggers. The first part of analysis should prove that SPACE concept is represented in texts of cinematic discourse as a value concept.

*The Wandering Earth*, which is popular among people of all ages in China, is a blockbuster; its main storyline is about human civilization struggling to survive on the earth planet that has transformed into a giant spaceship wandering in the space to find a new planet suitable for life. Cinema critics describe the film as follows:

(4) <...> *Once you get past the ridiculous central conceit and all the info dumps, the film is a sturdy romp with several cool set pieces of the frozen **world**, some **stellar** interpretations of **Jupiter's Great Red Spot** and a **pleasantly hopeful, humanitarian message**.* (Hollywood Reporter)

In this case SPACE concept is represented through words representing derived concepts WORLD, STAR, and PLANET, i.e. *world*, *stellar*, and *Jupiter*. The worthiness of film events on space is represented by word combination *pleasantly hopeful humanitarian message*. Here word *humanitarian* corresponds to value concept HUMANITY. Worthiness of this concept is expressed by word *message*, whereas, according to the review author, this film is bound to provoke value-related emotions of humanitarian nature. Another manifestation of worthiness of HUMANITY concept is word combination *pleasantly hopeful* indicating that the concept-representing word has positive connotation as an unalienable parameter of its worthiness. In this context concept SPACE is associated with concept HUMANITY that represents the properties required for mankind to survive in space. Apparently, in this case word *space* is a metaphor, because the film refers to fantastic fiction events, while value concept HUMANITY represents the key film idea that the Earth is a spaceship wandering across the space with human civilization on board and that humans are compelled to take care of it. Thus, here concept SPACE creates meaningful space where different common human values come into effect.

The following words by a cinema critic are another example of value category:

(5) *More to (former) SARFT standards, the film presents a **collective, global effort that appeals to our better natures, values heritage** and respects authority.* (Hollywood Reporter)

Here worthiness is expressed by *values heritage*, whereas value concept COLLECTIVENESS is represented by words *collective global effort that appeals to our better nature*. Word combination *better nature* brings up a positive connotation and therefore conveys the value-related dimension of this sentence. Discourse on this film is extensively focused on the value concept of PEOPLES' FRIENDSHIP.

(6) *It was also refreshing to see **other countries** playing a part alongside China — **Russian, French, Indian, and Indonesian** crews also make an appearance in *The Wandering Earth*.* (Cinema Escapist)

This passage, for example, welcomes multicultural backgrounds of filmmakers. Thus, value aspect representation of *The Wandering Earth* in language of reviews and commentaries is associated predominantly with value concepts of a global nature. Meanwhile, in cinematic discourse concept SPACE represents a physical space where the film events take place, as well as conveys semantic space to

represent human values. It is noteworthy that words representing concept SPACE in film reviews under consideration often have expressly positive connotation, which underscores the importance of evaluative and emotional component in the value dimension of concept SPACE. As a rule, the topic of space stirs viewers' imagination by referring to what is unexplored, exciting and fascinating, i.e. it provokes bright emotions, which is reflected by texts of cinematic discourse. As a result, linguistic representation of SPACE concept in texts of reviews brings about specific emotional and evaluative context where other concepts acquire value.

Thus, according to most film critics, the topic of the space helps to unveil the main message of *The Wandering Earth* which is multiculturalism, cohesion, and unity of efforts by representatives of different cultures in their struggle against global catastrophe. The film focuses primarily on universal humanitarian values that demonstrate great social significance and high degree of relevance today, when the ability to confront global problems of our time entirely depends on cohesion in global community.

In contrast to the cinematic discourse of *The Wandering Earth*, the short-length animated cartoon *One Small Step* released in 2019 introduced a more personal concept SPACE representing individual human values. The film is based on memories of the first women astronauts and tells the story of a girl of Chinese-American origin who dreams of becoming an astronaut. Her pursuit finds support with her father, a shoemaker. Reviews on this cartoon are also full of references to value concepts, though completely different ones. Thus, the following statement is the epigraph to one of the reviews:

(7) *If one were to design a **world** to encourage **space exploration**, one would give it a **moon** like ours. (Eye For Film)*

In this case, concept SPACE is represented by words *world*, *space exploration*, and *moon*. This statement expresses romantic mood of the film. MOON concept, which is related to the concept of inspiration, has undoubted worthiness in this passage; this is supported by verb *encourage*. It is important to note that in *The Wandering Earth* the space provides the framework to develop the eventive perspective of the film in order to draw attention to global problems of our time. SPACE concept shares the field for global socially significant values to come into effect.

Texts of *One Small Step* reviews consider concept SPACE as an independent value concept linked to other value concepts – DREAM, MOON, FAMILY – by context:

(8) *Luna is in love with **the Moon** from early childhood. She longs to go there. So her cobbler father makes her a special pair of boots with **stars** on them and climbs into a cardboard box with her so they can imagine it's a **spaceship**. (Eye For Film)*

Phrases *in love with the Moon* and *longs to go there* add contextual value to concept MOON – a derivative of hyperconcept SPACE. This excerpt also represents FAMILY value concept, thus adding a more personal touch to SPACE concept. Concepts FAMILY and DREAM are represented along with concept SPACE in the following text:

(9) *One Small Step also looks at the sacrifices of **parenting**, but from the vantage point of a **child**. Obsessed with all things outer space, a young girl dreams of becoming an astronaut while her hardworking **father** does his best to financially and emotionally support those dreams. (SD City Beat)*

Words representing FAMILY concept are *parenting*, *child*, and *father*. The integrity of context that includes words of positive evaluation – *dreams*, *hardworking*, *does his best*, *support* – grants worthiness to this concept. Since noun *dreams* in this passage is a contextual synonym of *becoming an astronaut*, concept SPACE is straightforwardly associated with value concept DREAM and supported by concept FAMILY; the reason is that, as the quote says, the girl's hardworking father is the one who supports her in her dream of becoming an astronaut. The film refers not only to personal, but also to social values. Thus, for example, the following passage deals with gender equality as an apparent value priority in developed countries:

(10) *It's also great to see a young woman as the protagonist inspired by the moon landing, as we almost never get to see that event outside of a male perspective.*

In addition, PEOPLES' FRIENDSHIP value concept is also represented in this film.

(11) *Luna is a vibrant young **Chinese American girl** who dreams of becoming an astronaut.*

This passage highlights the girl's origin as half American and half Chinese.

## 5. Conclusions

Thus, SPACE concept draws the film focus to the value of international cohesion, common goals, dreams and pursuits to allow the meaning of PEOPLES' FRIENDSHIP concept to come into effect. While in *The Wandering Earth* this concept has a universal global nature and appears in combination with words representing concepts COLLECTIVENESS and HUMANITY, *One Small Step*, on the contrary, represents this concept on a more personal level by combining it with concepts FAMILY and DREAM within a single context. This can be explained by communicative and pragmatic objectives of film directors. The former film is produced predominantly to entertain the viewer by demonstrating special effects that are bound to visualize global catastrophes; the latter film is addressed to children by and large to nurture them in the context of social and human values that are based or tightly linked to personal or family values. In its turn, concept SPACE is one of the pivotal concepts in reviews on both films; however, the former film represents this concept as a semantic space for values under concern to come into effect, whereas in the latter film SPACE is an independent value that introduces other value concepts.

The linguistic analysis of concepts identified in cinematic discourse of Chinese films allows to suggest that humanitarian concepts HUMANITY, COLLECTIVENESS, PEOPLES' FRIENDSHIP, DREAM, FAMILY, as well as concepts belonging to 'the space' paradigm – SPACE, WORLD, MOON, STARS – demonstrate the unique identity of modern Chinese cinema and exceptionally rich national culture, embodied by future-looking individuals.

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