

# Technologizing Orientalism



## An Introduction

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A century has passed since British author Sax Rohmer introduced the character Dr. Fu Manchu, whose particular brand of Eastern mysticism wedded with Western science both terrorized and titillated readers and audiences alike. Appearing in 1912, the character is perhaps one of the earliest and most potent instances of techno-Orientalist expression. A figure of unnatural, unknowable peril who must be kept from acquiring knowledge lest it be used against the Western subject, Dr. Fu Manchu is at once brilliant and technologically challenged. In one part of the serial, Dr. Fu Manchu plots to strengthen China by kidnapping European engineers, suggesting the Orient's lack of technological prowess and desire for Western technology. Yet, in another, he is described as possessing "all the cruel cunning of the entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources of science, past and present."<sup>1</sup> Both of the past and the future, his monstrous form captured Western ambivalences toward what it regarded as the mysterious power of the East, manifesting in strange contradictions.

Throughout the twentieth century, variations of that premodern-hypermodern dynamic in speculative visions of Asia and Asians have been recycled numerous times.<sup>2</sup> Exemplars include the villainous Khan Noonien Singh in Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* universe, the leader of a group of superhumans who

attempt to take control of the *Starship Enterprise*; the Chinese scientist Dr. X in Neal Stephenson's novel, *The Diamond Age* (1995), a counterfeiter using "a galimaufray of contraband technology" (73) to steal Western innovations; and most recently The Mandarin in *Iron Man 3* (2013), a clear revival of Dr. Fu Manchu played cleverly by Ben Kingsley in a tongue-in-cheek fashion.<sup>3</sup> But Western speculations of an Asianized future are not always consolidated in a singular fictional figure as in Fu Manchu, Dr. X, or The Mandarin. The yellow peril anxiety of an earlier, industrial-age era embodied by Fu Manchu found new forms across cultures and hemispheres as Asian economies become more visible competitors in the age of globalization and rapid technological innovations. One needs to witness only the speculative fictional worlds of Maureen McHugh's novel *China Mountain Zhang* (1992), Joss Whedon's television series *Firefly* (2002), and Gary Shteyngart's novel *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) to trace persisting anxieties over the past three decades of a China-dominated future. All of these worlds feature Western protagonists struggling to navigate a sociopolitical landscape in which China is the dominant global empire with a superior technological edge. Beyond the focus on China, paradigmatic works such as William Gibson's Japan-based oeuvre (including *Neuromancer*), Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, and the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* films have also burnished in the Western consciousness Asian-influenced visions of the future underpinned by a familiar yet estranged mixture of Orientalist sensibilities.

These examples perfectly illustrate our definition of techno-Orientalism: the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hypertechnological terms in cultural productions and political discourse.<sup>4</sup> Techno-Orientalist imaginations are infused with the languages and codes of the technological and the futuristic. These developed alongside industrial advances in the West and have become part of the West's project of securing dominance as architects of the future, a project that requires configurations of the East as the very technology with which to shape it. Techno-Orientalist speculations of an Asianized future have become ever more prevalent in the wake of neoliberal trade policies that enabled greater flow of information and capital between the East and the West. Substantial criticism of techno-Orientalism emerged in the mid-1990s when cultural theorists began to trace its manifestations and theorize its causes and implications. Kevin Morley and David Robins, Toshiya Ueno, and Kumiko Sato, principal trailblazers of the field, laid much of the valuable groundwork. Morley and Robins's *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes, and Cultural Boundaries* (Routledge, 1995), in which a definition of "techno-Orientalism" first saw print, remains the most cited in critical assessments of technological and Orientalist discourses; however, Ueno has probably written most extensively about techno-Orientalism as a discursive cultural phenomenon in the era of what he identifies as the

“post-Fordist social environment of globalization” (223). “The basis of Orientalism and xenophobia is the subordination of Others through a sort of ‘mirror of cultural conceit,’” Ueno explains. “The Orient exists in so far as the West needs it, because it brings the project of the West into focus” (223).

Whereas Orientalism, as a strategy of representational containment, arrests Asia in traditional, and often premodern imagery, techno-Orientalism presents a broader, dynamic, and often contradictory spectrum of images, constructed by the East and West alike, of an “Orient” undergoing rapid economic and cultural transformations. Techno-Orientalism, like Orientalism, places great emphasis on the project of modernity—cultures privilege modernity and fear losing their perceived “edge” over others. Stretching beyond Orientalism’s premise of a hegemonic West’s representational authority over the East, techno-Orientalism’s scope is much more expansive and bidirectional, its discourses mutually constituted by the flow of trade and capital across the hemispheres. As Ueno observes, techno-Orientalism is first and foremost an effect of globalism. “If the Orient was invented by the West,” he writes, “then the Techno-Orient was also invented by the world of information capitalism” (228). Technological developments, driven by the imperial aspirations and the appetites of consumerist societies on both sides of the Pacific, propel the engines of invention and production. In its wake, Western nations vying for cultural and economic dominance with Asian nations find in techno-Orientalism an expressive vehicle for their aspirations and fears. Our volume, *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*, documents past and current constructions of the role of Asia in a technologized future and critically examines this proliferating phenomenon.

Dr. Fu Manchu illustrates just one way in which techno-Orientalist imagery pervades Western cultural productions in the early twentieth century. The principal locales of techno-Orientalist projects as they developed in the late twentieth century have primarily been Japan and China. Ueno, whose influential analyses of “Japanimation” in the mid-1990s seeded the field of techno-Orientalist studies, observes, “In Techno-Orientalism, Japan is not only located geographically, but is also projected chronologically. Jean Baudrillard once called Japan a satellite in orbit. Now Japan has been located in the future of technology” (228). Morley and Robins put a finer point on the temporal dimension of the spatial construction: “If the future is technological, and if technology has become ‘Japanised,’ then the syllogism would suggest that the future is now Japanese, too. The postmodern era will be the Pacific era. Japan is the future, and it is a future that seems to be transcending and displacing Western modernity” (168).

Whereas Japan’s dubious honor as the original techno-Orient was bestowed in the eighties with the help of the cyberpunk movement, the techno-Orientalizing

of China occurred roughly a decade later.<sup>5</sup> China was not yet a competitor in the global economy in the 1980s, when the West focused its wary gaze on what it saw as an invasion of Japanese capital investments and imports into Western economies. When China was recognized as a newly industrialized country (NIC) in the 1990s and its influence in the global economy increased, it, too, became once again a target of techno-Orientalist fashioning. The discourse on China's "rise" in the U.S. context, consistent with techno-Orientalist contradictions, has focused on constructing its people as a vast, subaltern-like labor force *and* as a giant consumer market whose appetite for Western cultural products, if nurtured, could secure U.S. global cultural and economic dominance. This dual image of China as both developing-world producers and first-world consumers presents a representational challenge for the West: Is China a human factory? Or is it a consumerist society, like the United States, whose enormous purchasing power dictates the future of technological innovations and economies?

Japan and China are thus signified differently in the techno-Orientalist vocabulary. Both are constructed as competitors and therefore threats to the U.S. economy; but while Japan competes with the United States for dominance in technological innovation, China competes with the United States in labor and production. To put it in starker terms, Japan creates technology, but China *is* the technology. In the eyes of the West, both are crucial engines of the future: Japan innovates and China manufactures. And as Asia, writ large, becomes a greater consumerist force than the West,<sup>6</sup> its threat/value dualism commensurately increases. These differences in the technological signification of Japan and China manifest themselves in the fictive forecasts of the Asian-tinged future. If Japan is a screen on which the West has projected its technological fantasies, then China is a screen on which the West projects its fears of being colonized, mechanized, and instrumentalized in its own pursuit of technological dominance.

India, another NIC, has also found itself under the techno-Orientalist gaze as a consequence of U.S. outsourcing practices. As a much maligned business strategy, outsourcing has provoked extremely negative public sentiments in the United States. These opinions find expression in a particular strand of techno-Orientalist discourse that consolidates China and India as the chief threats to the U.S. service and labor sectors. These Asian nations serve as the scapegoats for corporate decisions to move service and manufacturing jobs abroad and bear the brunt of the resulting xenophobic antipathies. Chinese and Indian workers, for instance, are routinely portrayed in techno-Orientalist and technophobic vocabularies; call center employees in India adopt Western Christian names and mimic the linguistic and idiomatic style of Americans, a practice so ubiquitous as to be parodied cinematically in romantic comedies such as *Outsourced* (2006), conjuring images of Dickian androids (or *Blade*

*Runner's* “replicants”) who simulate human behavior and threaten the distinction between “real” and “fake” Americans. Glossy spreads of endless rows of Chinese workers in corporate factories and towns in mainstream magazines such as *Time* and *Wired* seal the visual vocabulary of Asians as the cogs of hyperproduction. In the NIC contexts, techno-Orientalist discourse constructs Asians as mere simulacra and maintains a prevailing sense of the inhumanity of Asian labor—the very antithesis of Western liberal humanism.

### Discursive Conspicuity, Critical Invisibility

As this collection demonstrates, techno-Orientalism occurs across genres and disciplines—history, art, literature, film, television, video games—but the majority of the *criticism* coalesces around literature and film, particularly in the genre of speculative fiction (SF). This is unsurprising; techno-Orientalism finds some of its most pervasive expressions in SF because of the genre’s futurist *esprit* of contemporary existential, racial, and technological anxieties. Nevertheless, we identify a disciplinary narrowness to SF in the extant scholarship that our project attempts to broaden.

Even as techno-Orientalism in SF has been documented by several incisive studies in recent decades, critical studies of Orientalism in the long history of



FIG. 0.1. Factory workers in China. *Source:* Photo by Steve Jurvetson. Licensed under Creative Commons 2.0.



SF are scarce. A survey of the essays published in the genre's flagship journal, *Science Fiction Studies*, founded in 1973, confirms the critical neglect. A search with the term "Orientalism" in the journal's archives yielded only nine substantive essays that address Orientalism, four of which are book reviews. A search with the term "techno-Orientalism" yielded, even more negligibly, two review essays. Similar searches in *Extrapolations*, another major academic venue for SF criticism, yielded equally scant results. And when *PMLA*, the lingua franca of academic scholarship in literature and languages, published a special issue on science fiction in May 2004, no mention of Orientalism could be found—this despite the fact that SF's propensity for projecting and amplifying contemporary racial and imperialist attitudes is well documented.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the conceptualization of techno-Orientalism as a recognizable discursive effect of the postindustrial age may have been the clarion call for addressing this gap in the genre. Orientalism in SF during the pre-cyberpunk era may have suffered critical neglect because of the perception that the "yellow peril" has been kept in check by the mechanisms of immigration and exclusion acts that were in place for much of the midcentury. It took the repeal of the immigration acts in 1965, coupled with the entrance of Japanese capital and imports into the U.S. economy in the late seventies, to precipitate a renewed wariness toward all things Asian, onto which the West once again projected agendas of cultural hegemony and technological dominance. Cyberpunk, with its fetishizing gaze upon Japan as a seductive and contradictory space of futuristic innovation and ancient mystique, sharply focused the SF critical and creative lenses upon Asia.

Substantial criticism of techno-Orientalism thus emerged in the mid-1990s with the contributions of Morley and Robins, Ueno, and Sato. Critical momentum continued with Takayuki Tatsumi's 2000 historiography of Japanese SF in *Science Fiction Studies (SFS)*, and a 2002 special issue of *SFS* on Japanese speculative fiction, guest edited by Takayuki Tatsumi, Christopher Bolton, and Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., introduced Japanese SF and cyberpunk visions to the Western audience. Sato's important and incisive 2004 intersectional analysis of what she describes as "the four different categorical spheres, namely, Western cyborg philosophy, American cyberpunk, Japanese cyberpunk, and Japanese theory of uniqueness known as *nihonjinron*" (335–336) and Christine Cornea's chapter "Techno-Orientalism and the Postmodern Subject" in Jacqueline Furby and Karen Randell's *Screen Methods: Comparative Readings in Film Studies* (Wallflower Press, 2006) sustained the necessary critical interest in the field.

These studies, however, constitute the bulk of the critical history of techno-Orientalism. Other studies in recent years, such as Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu's *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America* (Duke, 2007), Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Lynn Joyrich's 2009 special issue of *Camera Obscura*, "Race and/as Technology," Chun's *New Media, Old*

*Media: A History and Theory Reader* (Routledge, 2005), and Lisa Nakamura's *Cybertypes* (Routledge, 2002), made significant contributions to critiques of Orientalism in popular culture and mainstream media. Yet, despite techno-Orientalism's growing prevalence in the Western cultural consciousness, and in SF more specifically, it has been generally ignored in academic and popular cultural spheres.

A special issue of the literary journal *MELUS*, titled "Alien/Asians" (2008) and edited by Stephen Hong Sohn, expanded the critical scope of the phenomenon and drew it closer for theoretical scrutiny. Sohn's introduction persuasively conveys the urgent need for vigilant documentation and analysis of the ever-growing techno-Orientalist vocabulary. The eight essays in the issue examine a range of techno-Orientalist instantiations in SF within U.S., Japanese, Chinese, and Indian contexts, from "a cyberpunk-inflected Asian future" to "the cyborg technologies intertwined with Asian American bodies" (Sohn 15). The essays, Sohn writes, "investigate how alternative imaginaries provide fertile terrains to consider the prospects of racial subjectivity and identity" (15). The essayists take a hard look at the work of SF luminaries such as Philip K. Dick, Ursula K. Le Guin, William Gibson, Neal Stephenson, and William S. Burroughs, whose work consciously or unconsciously traded in techno-Orientalist tropes, as well as the work of Asian American and Asian Canadian writers such as Karen Tei Yamashita, Amitav Ghosh, and Larissa Lai, who mount metafictional critiques of techno-Orientalist tropes in SF.

*Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*, therefore, has two objectives. The first is to continue the work begun by the aforementioned predecessors, to "consider the prospective thesis that cultural production is still invested in parsing out how the yellow peril continues to be a mode to draw from, write against, challenge, negotiate, and problematize" (Sohn 6–7). The volume argues that while Orientalism defines a modern West by producing an oppositional and premodern East, techno-Orientalism symmetrically and yet contradictorily completes this project by creating a collusive, futurized Asia to further affirm the West's centrality. The second objective is constructive. While we critique the dehumanizing effects of the techno-Orientalist gaze, we also see an opportunity for critical reappropriations in texts that self-referentially engage with Asian images; indeed, as an example, Asian SF writers have already taken to the trope to create the SF cottage industry in which the subject and setting are Eastern. There is of course the danger that Asian and Asian American creators might internalize techno-Orientalist patterns and uncritically replicate the same dehumanizing model. However, thanks to its global and mass appeal, the speculative imagination in television, graphic novels, or science fiction is by no means the purview of single national traditions. Even as techno-Orientalism has become more pervasive, it has also engendered counterdialogue in those same cultural and political spaces.

## Global Consumption

While Orientalism as a critical lens describes how Western discourse discursively catalogues or frames the East, it has always been trained on domestic—that is, Western or U.S.—configurations against the Orientalized Other. Edward Said notes his “real argument is that Orientalism is—and does not simply represent—a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world” (12). *Techno-Orientalism*, with a vision of the future that is global in scope and reach, adds a wrinkle to the critical commonplace that Orientalism actively produces and reproduces an oppositional East to cement Western hegemony. Particularly within the realm of SF, techno-Orientalist tropes have been absorbed, reenvisioned, and replicated by other sites of cultural production, with interesting geopolitical implications.<sup>8</sup> For example, Sato writes that Japan’s entry into cyberpunk SF reinvigorates *nihonjinron*, the idea of an essentialist Japanese superiority that was integral to its imperialist project. With Japan’s surrender in 1945, however, the idea of *nihonjinron* lost currency—that is, until it was reenabled by cyberpunk fiction in the 1980s. Sato observes that it was cyberpunk that resurrected the idea of Japanese essentialism: “This proud announcement of revived Japaneseness requited through the cutting edge of American culture means that the two separate histories of the West and Japan—the former modernizing, the latter behind—coincide in the discovery of Japan in American cyberpunk” (346). That proves troublesome, she argues, because it assumes Japanese essentialism as the primary reason for Japan’s economic and technological achievements. For example, two paradigmatic cyberpunk works, *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and Chōhei Kambayashi’s novel *Yukikaze* (1985), have strong female cyborg leads paired with weaker, male companions. While Western cyberpunk seeks to claim liberal humanist subjectivity and modernity, having a female cyborg subject allows Japan to circumvent the question of subjectivity and modernity altogether. In both works, the male (Western) subject is deflated and removed from the center, while the cybernetic female embraces technology over humanity, allowing the insertion of Japan-as-signifier of futurity based on the constructed image of the West’s Othering of technology and Asia. In other words, a Japan manufactured by the West can further ethnocentric or nationalist projects on both fronts. Techno-Orientalist discourse, in this case, has been reified in another nationalist context, further demonstrating its discursive hegemony as it serves a site other than its point of origin.

The Western fixation on Asian futurism indicates just how important it is to approach techno-Orientalism from several vantages. William Gibson is perhaps the most renowned exemplar of the West’s fascination with the technologized Asian subject, evident in his unapologetic rhapsodizing in a 2001



issue of *Wired*, but even he merits a second look: “Dining late, in a plastic-draped gypsy noodle stall in Shinjuku, the classic cliché better-than-*Blade Runner* Tokyo street set, I scope my neighbor’s phone as he checks his text messages. Wafer-thin, Kandy Kolor pearlescent white, complexly curvilinear, totally ephemeral looking, its screen seethes with a miniature version of Shinjuku’s neon light show. . . . Tokyo has been my handiest prop shop for as long as I’ve been writing: sheer eye candy” (Gibson, “My Own Private Tokyo”). Gibson’s meditation touches upon the multipronged reach of techno-Orientalist discourse—he references the dystopic, Asianized cinematic vision of Los Angeles; he admits drawing upon Tokyo’s luminescence for his literary well; and it is the “ephemeral looking” mobile phone that inspires him to imagine new media, as he did with cyberspace in *Neuromancer*. Essentially, Gibson admits that the futurism he reads in Tokyo is largely superficial (“sheer eye candy”); the phone appears to be futuristic simply because of its alien surroundings, and his own somewhat tautological belief in Tokyo as his futuristic “prop shop.”

But more interestingly, Gibson credits Japan’s encounters with the West as the central reason for its present status as a site of the future. He explains, “[T]he nation of Japan [swallowed] whole the entirety of the Industrial Revolution. The resulting spasms were violent, painful, and probably inconceivably disorienting. The Japanese bought the entire train-set: clock-time, steam railroads, electric telegraphy, Western medical advances. . . . The result of this stupendous triple-whammy (catastrophic industrialisation, the war, the American occupation) is the Japan that delights, disturbs and fascinates us today” (Gibson, “Modern Boys and Mobile Girls”). That is, to understand Japan as the site of the future, one must first read its historical introduction to technology by (and, to the Western eye, its embrace of) the West. In a wonderfully circular way, Gibson touches upon the tautological aspect of techno-Orientalism: the Japanese are technologically advanced and therefore culturally fascinating now because of past Western modernizing interventions in the Eastern sphere. In Gibson’s history, the West has created a hyperfuturistic Japan; and in this vision, Japan is now, in a sense, more West than the West, a simulacrum that threatens the foundational fiction of the West as Future.

It would be easy to dismiss Gibson’s liberties with Japanese culture as a symptom of his misreading of his muse, but our instinct tells us that would be too simple. Instead, we are interested in the potentials for contrapuntal dialogism in such engagements. Parodic and reciprocal appropriations of techno-Orientalism in Asian cultural productions, for example, have opened up spaces for artistic and intellectual critique. Yet some remain skeptical of the effects of such appropriations. Ueno regards techno-Orientalism as a metanarrative that has become “an epistemological apparatus for Japanese to misunderstand themselves, and for Westerners to misunderstand others” (qtd. in Oda 250).

Elaborating on Ueno's skepticism, artist and cultural anthropologist Masanori Oda observes in an essay on what he calls "the present Post-Orientalist moment," "Japanese *anime*, *manga*, and *games* are becoming a kind of 'contact zone' for the West to meet the latest Japan/ese. What is different from the old Orientalism is that both parties (Japanese and Occidental) hold a kind of reciprocity. This means that the Japan/ese often appear as 'as you like,' self-fashioned figures to the West, not only to satisfy their own gaze, but to disguise the real portrayal of their own nature or desires, as if to say, 'This figure is not so bad for me'" (250). Oda's skepticism rests chiefly with the mediatory capacity of techno-Orientalist discourses. "There may be a contact between both parties," he cautions, "but there is never an encounter, much less an uncanny experience. Thus, mutual misconceptions accumulate" (251). Indeed, numerous examples of Oda's notion of "contact without encounter" are identified and critiqued in the essays collected in this volume. It is this effect of "contact without encounter" produced by techno-Orientalist discourses that our volume seeks to call out and counteract. If technology has come to mediate "contact" between East and West through techno-Orientalist discourses, how, then, might we fashion representational technologies that engender "encounter" rather than empty contact?

## **Expanding the Fields: Techno-Orientalism and Asian American Studies**

If SF and its variants in historiography, cinema, and new media provide the content of techno-Orientalist expressions, we believe that Asian American studies equips us with the best critical and theoretical toolboxes for documentation and interrogation. Asian American studies has always attended to constructions of culture, race, and the body partly because U.S. techno-Orientalist imagination has its roots in the view of the Asian body—the Chinese body, most specifically—as a form of expendable technology, a view that emerged in the discourse of early U.S. industrialization.

From the earliest era of Asian peoples in the United States, their technical abilities were both lauded and erased. An exemplar is the Chinese men who composed more than half of the labor force that completed the transcontinental railroad's western portion over the high Sierra Nevada mountains to Promontory, Utah, in 1869. In the campaign to extend the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the American Federation of Labor argued in their publication, *Some Reasons for Chinese Exclusion, Meat vs. Rice, American Manhood against Asiatic Coolieism: Which Shall Survive?* (1902), that the Chinese male body differed radically from the American male body. The publication argued that the Chinese laborer could withstand physical deprivations that American and

European laborers could not (American Federation of Labor et al. 5, 14, 16, 18). This constructed difference rationalized discriminatory policies against Chinese railroad workers. *Meat vs. Rice* did not argue the Chinese had particular technical skills that were *valuable* for constructing the transcontinental railroad. On the contrary, the publication claimed the Chinese body simply did not require the conditions of safety, sustenance, and shelter that bodies of European descendents required. Implicit in their argument is a threat to the superior European laborer's way of life or culture by a kind of unfeeling superhuman antithetical to the West's liberal humanist credo.

The U.S. techno-Orientalist imagination is thus rooted in this view of the Asian body as a form of expendable technology—a view that emerged in the discourse of early U.S. industrialization and continued to evolve in the twentieth century. In 1982, a twenty-seven-year-old Chinese American named Vincent Chin was beaten to death by two white men in Detroit. The attackers, Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz, were autoworkers in a U.S. auto industry that was losing market share to Japanese cars. Though Chin, a drafter, did not work in automobiles, Ebens and Nitz viewed him as representative—indeed, an embodiment—of Japanese auto manufacturing as they beat him with a baseball bat, reminiscent of Americans smashing Japanese-made cars in reaction to increasing auto imports in the early 1980s.<sup>9</sup> The callous brutality of Chin's death evinces something more than racial hatred; Chin not only was perceived as a convenient stand-in for the Japanese automotive industry, but embodied its traits—unfeeling, efficient, and inhuman. In Ebens and Nitz's eyes, they were Luddites striking down the automatons that had been sent in to replace them. Techno-Orientalist discourse completed the project of dehumanizing Vincent Chin by rendering him as not only a racialized Other, but a factory machine that had to be dismantled by Ebens and Nitz to reclaim their personhood, subjectivity, and masculinity.<sup>10</sup> The shock and outrage over Chin's murder served as a critical rallying cry under which a coalition of ethnic-specific groups joined as *Asian Americans*.

In the twenty-first century, the perceived economic threat of Japan and its automobiles has given way to China. Despite the fact that China does not have a particularly strong reputation as a high-tech nation, techno-Orientalism's robust flexibility allows for seamless transplantation to another national site. China's rapid economic rise is largely credited to its vast manufacturing base, which, coupled with cheap labor and less regulation, has made it an attractive production location for many tech companies, including Apple and Dell. And although the vast majority of Chinese cannot afford the iPads and iPhones they produce, we see in U.S. media a representational shift, using techno-Orientalist conventions, transforming Chinese from mindless workers to sinister agents. For example, in October 2010, a U.S. PAC called Citizens Against Government Waste uploaded a commercial titled "Chinese Professor" on YouTube.



FIG. 0.2 *Chinese Professor: Citizens Against Government Waste*. Source: YouTube.

Set in Beijing, China A.D. 2030, the commercial depicts a male professor lecturing in a large hall accompanied by high-tech gadgets. The lecture consists of conservative talking points regarding the decline of the United States. As colorful images of fallen nations scroll behind him, the professor explains, “America tried to spend and tax itself out of a great recession. Enormous so-called ‘stimulus spending,’ massive changes to health care, government takeovers of private industries, and crushing debt.” He concludes, “Of course, we owned most of their debt, so now they work for us.” With echoes of Fu Manchu, the professor smiles directly into the camera, eliciting his students’ mirth. By presenting the Chinese professor, the students, and the lecture as moving seamlessly between the lecture hall technology and the tablet screens that students hold in their laps, this video implies that China now leads the world in technological production *and* consumption. The encoded secondary message of the commercial sidesteps the reality of China’s still developing technological penetration by projecting a present-day existential fear into a vision of the future, with technology supposedly rooted in U.S.-based innovation. It is an elegant solution that effectively alarms the uninformed viewer by using a pan-Asian technological conflation to elide reality and implicitly accuse China of stealing U.S. intellectual property. Thus, although the national actors and the details are quite different from the automobile industry of the 1980s, we have a similar techno-Orientalist narrative: U.S. jobs and manufacturing are being stolen by inorganic, technologically infused persons who threaten not only our economic but humanistic integrity.

SF’s techno-Orientalist tendencies have become so common as to merit incisive parody. The animated series *Futurama* takes place a thousand years in



FIG. 0.3 *Futurama*. “Attack of the Killer App.” Source: Comedy Central.

the future, and both skewers and pays homage to SF conventions. In an episode from the sixth season, *Futurama* depicts the launch of the new “EyePhone,” a jab at Apple’s handset, as a pillory of modern consumerism. The series’ white protagonist, Fry, asks a retail clerk of South Asian descent, “you’re from one of those ethnicities that knows about technology; why is it called an EyePhone?” (Sandoval). Depicted in the show as having an intelligence level on par with Homer Simpson, Fry is not meant to be taken seriously, and often acts as a vessel for twentieth-century ignorance in a progressive future. What is notable in this exchange is how the producers of *Futurama* have Fry explicitly verbalize a familiar techno-Orientalist trope—Asiatic bodies functioning as gatekeepers, facilitators, and purveyors of technology. In this episode, the South Asian clerk literally acts as the final node on the assembly line that has been largely produced by robotic arms—the clerk reaches through the drapes to pull an EyePhone from a pile and we see mechanical limbs swinging about the factory. He is an assembly line automaton with a human skin, and his affectless, bored intonation belies his true nature as a machine. A less self-aware show might leave it at that, but Fry’s graceless pronouncement underscores the techno-Orientalist trope, taking SF to task while simultaneously paying ironic homage to the genre.

This same technologizing convention that *Futurama* so sharply satirizes is found in numerous literary works, including David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004). Mitchell’s six stories link together characters and narratives spanning past, present, and distant future. Consequently, Mitchell’s novel has the unenviable task of repeatedly establishing the framing for each separate story line. An economical method for quickly thrusting the reader into the speculative future is to use a technologized East Asia, as he does in the story “An Orison of



Sonmi-451.” The setting of *Nea So Copros*, the “corpocracy” of what appears to be a unified Korea sometime after the twenty-second century, is where we are introduced to our enslaved narrator, Sonmi-451, a cloned “fabricant” designed to serve in a fast-food restaurant. Mitchell paints Korea as the setting for high technology, enforced consumption, and excessive advertising; and his larger social critique lies in the mirroring of the fabricants who must serve and the “purebloods” who must constantly consume, a master-slave dialectic that relies on cannibalism, erased from view, and technology, projected into high visibility. Sonmi-451 eventually gains self-awareness, knowledge, and power to create a declaration of rights for enslaved fabricants and oppressed classes, but only after she reads the classics of Western civilization (187, 193). Thus, Mitchell’s novel reinforces both the perception of Asia as the definitive site for technophilic and technophobic speculations of an oppressive future and the view that only a Western-coded subject can truly realize liberal humanism in such an environment.

Digital spaces abound with reinscribed racial tropes and stereotypes; these are sites in which racialization is more likely to be reinforced than challenged (Nakamura, *Cybertypes* 227). However, we argue that techno-Orientalist conventions in new media are complicated by the fact that the medium is closely associated with Asia on several levels—as a manufacturing base, as a source of technological innovation, and as a conduit for cultural exports. In new media, the Asian subject is perceived to be, simultaneously, producer (as cheapened labor), designer (as innovators), and fluent consumer (as subjects that are “one” with the apparatus). This has the effect of schizophrenic significations of the techno-Orientalized subject in the realm of new media—games in particular. In 2011, for instance, Blizzard Entertainment announced an expansion



FIG. 0.4 Screenshot from “Mists of Pandaria” expansion pack. *Source:* Blizzard Entertainment.



pack, called “The Mists of Pandaria,” for their immensely popular MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role playing game) *World of Warcraft*. MMORPGs generally have strong roots in the fantasy and SF genres, which grant room for characters and creatures with attributes that often reflect racial stereotypes.<sup>11</sup> The Asian-themed world of Pandaria—described as “mysterious” and “ancient”—and its high-flying, kung-fu-fighting Pandaren—warriors in a nonthreatening form—continue in the tradition of portraying Asian culture and subjects as exotic realms to be explored and manipulated. Within the same game is a curious mirroring of globalization, in which first-world gamers looking to accrue in-game capital (gold) more quickly hire gamers—many of whom are young Chinese men—to “farm” gold, thereby miming offline conditions in which first-world consumers gain economically by cheapened high-tech labor. At the same time, an acceptance of the Asian subject’s reputed digital literacy brings about a sense of wonder and even admiration of their gaming skills—the global rankings of gamers are often dominated by Korean players, for instance. We question, however, whether that is not another symptom of the stereotyping of Orientalized cyborg bodies predicated on a presumed seamlessness with technology.

But not all accounts of Asia’s development of machine, computer, and robot technologies can be said to bear the stamp of techno-Orientalism, of having been authored or mediated by the Western techno-Orientalist lens. Japan’s own narrative accounts of its postwar national renaissance, for instance, have always emphasized its status as a premier robotics innovator in the global context; such accounts cannot always be read as appropriations (self-conscious or not) of Western techno-Orientalism. The International Robot Exhibition (IREX), the largest robot trade fair in the world, has taken place biennially in Tokyo since 1973. The 2013 Expo slogan, “Making a Future with Robot,” expresses Japan’s construction of itself as the author of the future, to be written with the technology with which it has almost become synonymous. The slogan not only resonates with Nam June Paik’s famous declaration “the future is now,” but also reverberates throughout East Asia as China and South Korea vie for leadership in high-tech innovation and consumerism.<sup>12</sup> Is techno-Orientalism still Orientalist if contemporary techno-discourse is being authored principally by Asians, seemingly without regard for the Westerners who look on with a mixture of anxiety and envy? Can its patterns be adapted to preserve and facilitate an ethnocentric discourse with its own set of problematic racial politics?

## Instantiations and Reappropriations

Our volume provides an array of cultural and media reference points from which to interrogate and negotiate representations of “Asia” in our projections

of the technologized future. The essays in Part I document and analyze instantiations of techno-Orientalism over time and across genres, while those in Part II examine ironic and self-referential texts that seek to recuperate anti-imperial, anti-Orientalist critical and representational stances via techno-Orientalist reappropriations.

Part I begins with Kenneth Hough's "Demon Courage and Dread Engines," an examination of how early techno-Orientalist discourse during World War II exaggerated the military technology and prowess of Imperial Japan—some of which was completely fabricated—and promoted wartime hysteria with techno-Orientalist tropes, including automaton-like Japanese soldiers forming human pyramids to scale walls. Jason Crum follows with "Out of the Glamorous, Mystic East," in which he traces a different strain of wartime Orientalism in a discussion of U.S. radio serials from the 1920s to 1940s. Unlike the exaggerated rhetoric that Hough documents, Crum argues that these programs deny rather than exaggerate the technological prowess of Asian Others and depict Asian subjects as culturally fixed in the past.

Whether Asians figure into U.S. speculations of a future utopia at the onset of the Industrial Revolution is the subject of Victor Bascara's "*Looking Backward*, from 2019 to 1882." Bascara juxtaposes the complete absence of Asians in the late twentieth-century future envisioned in Edward Bellamy's 1887 speculative novel *Looking Backward 2000–1887* with their pervasive presence in that of *Blade Runner* (1982), directed by Ridley Scott, to make the point that for both Bellamy and the film, Western utopian futurity is contingent on "the obviation of racialized and/or immigrant labor." Warren Liu picks up a similar gesture of erasure in his examination of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine*. In "Queer Excavations," Liu insists that techno-Orientalism's presence need not be signified by Hong Kong's neon skyline or Shibuya's noodle bars; instead, he reveals that the very absence of Orientalist images underscores an obsessive conflation of race and technology that has been sublimated into the key technological plot device—time travel—and the very structure of the novel.

In "I, Stereotype," Seo-Young Chu bridges Masahiro Mori's theory of the "uncanny valley," used to describe the unease of viewing human-like figures bordering on verisimilitude, with the stereotyping of Asian bodies. Chu contends that while technology may be used to create humanoid robots that fall short, stereotypes as *techne* have the opposite effect—rendering entire peoples less than human. In each case, the viewer's humanity is reassured, due to the existential anxiety produced by the very presence of an uncanny Other. Like Chu, Abigail De Kosnik traces the ways in which American popular cinema functions as what she calls "mnemotechnics," or "memory technology," by registering the evolving stages of anti-Asian sentiment over the course of the twentieth century. De Kosnik constructs a persuasive historiography of the ways in

which *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, *Son of Sinbad*, and *Star Wars* capitalized on the antagonisms of the decades in which the United States was at war with an Asian nation by deploying techno-Orientalist tropes.

Jinny Huh's "Racial Speculations" provides an illuminating reading of the cult television series *Battlestar Galactica* (2003–2009) within the rhetoric and practices of contemporary assisted reproductive technologies. Huh argues that the series engages in a speculative exercise in determining the look of a future master race by resolving anxieties about racial mixing via a future populated by the offspring of acceptable gendered racial pairings (i.e., Asian female-white male) and by expunging blackness, both male and female, from the process.

Steve Choe and Se Young Kim's "Never Stop Playing" offers a chilling look at the discursive powers of techno-Orientalism in rendering Asian video gamers as objects of knowledge for Western subjects. In their examination of *StarCraft* and professional South Korean players, Choe and Kim note the ways Western journalists and gamers seek to comprehend, while belittling, the popularity of video gaming as a national pastime. And finally, Dylan Yeats's "Home Is Where the War Is" reminds us that in the U.S. entertainment industry, techno-Orientalism remains a unidirectional exercise. Drawing on Said's view of the Orient as a Western fantasy, Yeats explains that the smooth switch from "space wars" to "cyber wars" indicates the primacy of U.S. policy in creating an enemy Orient.

If the essays in Part I reaffirm Orientalism's stranglehold on representations of Asia in the technological age, the essays in Part II provide vital, sharp counterdiscourses via ironic, self-referential, and recuperative narrative strategies. Julie Ha Tran, in "Thinking about Bodies, Souls, and Race in Gibson's Bridge Trilogy," contests prevailing techno-Orientalist criticism by arguing that William Gibson creates a self-aware dialectic between Eastern and Western conceptions of posthumanist subjectivity. Tran reworks techno-Orientalism by arguing that Gibson self-consciously reflects techno-Orientalist discourse back onto itself as a bidirectional force.

Kathryn Allan's "Reimagining Asian Women in Feminist Post-Cyberpunk Science Fiction" contrasts cyberpunk fiction, which objectifies and Orientalizes female cyborgs, with works that attempt to reposition them as the subject. In a reading of Tricia Sullivan's *Maul* and Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*, Allan articulates a "feminist post-cyberpunk" subgenre that creates a space for non-white characters due to globalization and reorients the subject matter around issues of gender and race, moving such characters from the periphery to the center. In "The Cruel Optimism of Asian Futurity and the Reparative Practices of Sonny Liew's *Malinky Robot*," Aimee Bahng also moves the periphery to the center by examining forms of survival, if not reappropriations, necessitated by the human cost of the spread of neoliberalism in Asian economies in recent decades. Drawing on Lauren Berlant's elucidation of the fallacies

of “aspirational normativity” in *Cruel Optimism*, Bahng’s reading of Sonny Liew’s graphic anthology *Malinky Robot* (2011) teases out the ways in which techno-Orientalism and neoliberal policies have colluded to produce an Asian future in which dispossession and displacement of a permanent underclass are rationalized.

Douglas Ishii’s “Palimpsestic Orientalisms and Antiblackness” takes Joss Whedon to task for rendering settings infused with techno-Orientalist artifacts but troublingly depopulated of Asian people in the cult television series *Firefly* and *Dollhouse*. In these Orientalist palimpsests of future Whedonverses, Ishii argues, Asians and blacks remain illegible, subjugated, instrumentalized, or objects of emancipatory efforts in order to evoke and rationalize white-defined human rights discourses and liberationist fantasies—or, as Ishii puts it, “to keep freedom white.” Like Ishii, Tzarina Prater and Catherine Fung target techno-Orientalist influences in cult films by reading Larissa Lai’s short story “Rachel” (2004) and her poem “rachel” (2009) as critical reappropriations of the Orientalized android in *Blade Runner* and in Philip K. Dick’s novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968). Prater and Fung challenge what they call the “tyranny of the lens” by asking, “How does one contend with the history of image making in which one is the abject object?” They situate *Blade Runner*’s and Dick’s female replicants and male characters of color within transnational racial contexts, with an illuminating connection to British “blackness,” as signifiers of all who are not labeled “white” and therefore not human.

Perhaps the most self-referential and potently parodic gestures toward techno-Orientalist imaginaries can be found in the work of media artist Nam June Paik. Charles Park examines how Paik’s work illustrates the creation of hybridity and “the fluidity with which cultural and technological exchanges occur” across transnational sites. Park argues that Paik, as an artist who practiced uncanny “self-Orientalizations,” is not simplistically trying to bridge East and West, especially as the distinction itself fixes the two in time and place, but instead illustrates what Park calls “multiple cultural modalities” that encompass a variety of cultural exchanges.

Such modalities, we believe, constitute the current state of the techno-Orientalist discourse as it circulates and evolves with the flow of cultural and informational capital across the hemispheres. And precisely because it continually evolves with the vicissitudes of globalization and technological advancements, techno-Orientalism must undergo continual assessment and critique.

## Notes

1. Sax Rohmer, *The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Manchu* serial (1912–1913).
2. For a discussion and more examples of premodern Orientalist tropes in postwar

and contemporary U.S. science fiction, see Betsy Huang's "Premodern Orientalist Science Fictions."

3. The original comic book version of *The Mandarin* is bereft of satire—he is portrayed in earnest as a maniacal villain from China.
4. See Niu's "Techno-Orientalism, Nanotechnology, Posthumans, and Post-Posthumans in Neal Stephenson's and Linda Nagata's Science Fiction" (74).
5. We could argue that the fear of Chinese command over science and technology began in the nineteenth century concerning the Chinese men who built the transcontinental railroads in the United States and Canada. The Chinese brand of techno-Orientalism recycles familiar Orientalist stereotypes prevalent in the early days of Chinese immigration to the United States. The Chinese have always been perceived as laborers (or "coolies"—a strictly Western construction), beginning with the railroad workers as instruments of manifest destiny, continuing with the domestic and service industries as repetitive laborers, to the present-day image of vast fields of Chinese factory workers, likened to well-oiled machines in the Western imagination. In 1881, California Senator John Miller described Chinese workers as "machine-like . . . of obtuse nerve, but little affected by heat or cold, wiry, sinewy, with muscles of iron; they are automatic engines of flesh and blood; they are patient, stolid, unemotional. . . [and] herd together like beasts" (qtd. in Chang 130).
6. Forecasts by government and private-sector economists show that China's economy specifically, and Asia's more broadly, will become the top global economy by 2030. The National Intelligence Council projects in a December 2012 report that China's economy is likely to surpass the United States in less than two decades, while Asia will overtake North America and Europe combined in global power by 2030 (Zakaria; National Intelligence Council).
7. In *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* (Routledge, 2009), Isiah Lavender notes that "throughout most of its history, SF has reproduced rather than resisted racial stereotypes" (Bould et al. 188); in the same volume, Michelle Reid writes, "SF imagines encounters with the Other (the alien, the strange newness brought about by change), typically from the perspective of the dominant Self" (257). As Lavender and Reid posit, the genre has a propensity for mapping wide-ranging racial and colonial anxieties upon fictional alien bodies.
8. Takayuki Tatsumi discusses a brief history of Japanese SF in "A Very Soft Time Machine" (250–252).
9. See Renee Tajima and Christine Choy's 1987 documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*
10. Takeo Rivera's in-progress dissertation theorizes Chin's death at length.
11. Orcs, for example, have physical strength but low intelligence, following much of the mythology of orcs, but the game designers inexplicably have the Orcs break dance, racially linking them with African Americans. Goblins are a mercantile race, whose only loyalty is to commerce, which can be read as a Semitic caricature. Humans, of course, are the default Anglo-Saxon warrior race. See Langer.
12. While one could read Japan's embrace of robotics as part of its modernity project, that conveniently elides more complicated racial politics. One might read its investments in robotics as a means of addressing its impending population crisis, and with the labor pool shrinking, it will soon be unable to sustain Japan's economy. While other countries might relax their immigration policies to counterbalance the labor shortfall, Japan sees robotic workers as a means of solving its gerontological problems as well as preserving monoethnicity.