

# BETWEEN TECHNO-ORIENTALISM AND CULTURAL MEMORY: ASIAN THEMATIC ELEMENTS IN AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION

**Sandeep Banerjee**

Professor

Department of English

McGill University

Montreal, Canada

**Rafael Akhmedov**

Senior Lecturer

Department of the English Language and Literature

Gulistan State University

Gulistan, Uzbekistan

**Abstract.** This article examines the causes, forms, and literary results of Asian thematic elements in U.S. science fiction literature. The study argues that Asian motifs in American speculative writing emerge from a complex interaction of Orientalist tradition, geopolitical anxiety, technological imagination, transnational capitalism, and the growing role of Asian American authorship. The article analyzes how Asia is represented not merely as a geographic or cultural space but as a symbolic field through which American science fiction imagines futurity, alterity, technological progress, and racial difference. Particular attention is given to techno-Orientalist urban imagery, Asian philosophical and religious motifs, posthuman and cyborg racialization, Asian American memory, and transnational ecological critique. Using qualitative literary analysis and thematic coding, the article demonstrates that Asian themes perform contradictory functions within the genre. On the one hand, they often reproduce stereotypes by associating Asian spaces and bodies with artificiality, discipline, technological excess, or exotic wisdom. On the other hand, they expand the conceptual possibilities of U.S. science fiction by introducing alternative models of time, identity, embodiment, historical trauma, and cultural memory. The article concludes that Asian themes should not be viewed as secondary decorative elements. Rather, they function as structural forces that reveal how American science fiction negotiates questions of race, modernity, empire, globalization, and the future of the human.

**Keywords:** Asian themes; U.S. science fiction; techno-Orientalism; Asian American literature; futurity; cultural memory.

---

## INTRODUCTION

Asian themes have occupied an ambivalent but highly productive position in U.S. science fiction literature. From early “Yellow Peril” fantasies and Cold War projections of Asia as a geopolitical threat to cyberpunk visions of neon cities, artificial intelligence, corporate futures, and posthuman embodiment, Asia has often functioned as a symbolic screen on which American writers project anxieties about modernity, technology, capitalism, empire, and racial difference. At the same time, Asian and Asian American writers have increasingly used science fiction not merely as a field of representation but as a means of rewriting historical memory, migration, trauma, temporality, and identity.

This article examines the causes and results of Asian thematic elements in U.S. science fiction literature. The phrase “Asian themes” is used broadly here to include East Asian urban imagery, Buddhist, Daoist, and Zen philosophical motifs, Asian American memory and diaspora, techno-Orientalist constructions of the future, posthuman or cyborg racialization, and transnational critiques of empire. The study does not treat Asia as a single cultural entity. Rather, it analyzes how “Asia” is constructed, simplified, contested, or reimagined within American speculative discourse.

The relevance of the topic lies in the fact that science fiction has historically claimed to imagine the future, yet its futures often preserve racialized and geopolitical structures inherited from the past. As Sohn (2008) argues in the

influential introduction to the MELUS special issue “Alien/Asian,” Asian and alien figures have frequently been linked in U.S. literary and cultural imagination. This link is not accidental: science fiction’s concern with alterity, foreignness, technology, and futurity makes it especially vulnerable to racial coding. However, the same generic features also allow Asian American writers such as Ted Chiang, Ken Liu, Charles Yu, Ling Ma, and others to revise the conventions of the genre from within.

The central argument of this article is that Asian themes in U.S. science fiction emerge from three overlapping causes: first, American geopolitical encounters with Asia; second, the association of Asia with technological acceleration and economic competition; and third, the growth of Asian American authorship and criticism. The results are likewise contradictory. On one side, Asian themes reproduce stereotypes, exoticism, and techno-Orientalist imagery. On the other side, they expand the thematic and philosophical range of U.S. science fiction by introducing alternative models of time, history, embodiment, language, ecology, and collective memory.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarship on Asian themes in U.S. science fiction has developed significantly since the early 2000s. One foundational contribution is Stephen Hong Sohn’s introduction “Alien/Asian: Imagining the Racialized Future,” which argues that the figure of the Asian in American speculative discourse has often been rendered alien, artificial, robotic, or foreign (Sohn, 2008). This formulation is important because it identifies a structural connection between genre and racialization. Science fiction does not merely represent racial difference; it often transforms racial difference into extraterrestrial, technological, or posthuman forms.

Betsy Huang’s “Premodern Orientalist Science Fictions” examines how American science fiction continues to use older Orientalist tropes even when it appears to imagine advanced futures (Huang, 2008). Huang’s work shows that the future can paradoxically become a site of premodern fantasy, where Asian characters or spaces are associated with mystery, discipline, exotic wisdom, or authoritarian order. This helps explain why Asian themes in science fiction often appear both futuristic and archaic.

Timothy Yu’s “Oriental Cities, Postmodern Futures” is especially useful for understanding cyberpunk. Yu (2008) analyzes how texts such as William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* imagine postmodern urban futures through Asian or Orientalized cityscapes. In these texts, Asian signs—neon, markets, crowded streets, multilingual advertisements, corporate logos, and technological density—produce an atmosphere of globalized futurity. Yet this futurity is often filtered through Western anxiety about economic displacement and cultural loss.

Greta Niu’s study of techno-Orientalism in Neal Stephenson and Linda Nagata extends this argument to posthumanism and nanotechnology. Niu (2008) demonstrates that Asian bodies and Asian-coded technological systems are frequently represented as both advanced and threatening. Her work is central to understanding the link between Asian representation and the imagined future of human transformation.

Christopher T. Fan’s “Techno-Orientalism with Chinese Characteristics” analyzes Maureen F. McHugh’s *China Mountain Zhang* and argues that the novel complicates the tendency to represent China simply as a threatening technological future (Fan, 2015). Fan’s later article “Science Fictionality and Post-65 Asian American Literature” further develops the idea that Asian American literature after 1965 has a special relationship with science fictionality because migration, professionalization, technology, and racial formation are historically intertwined (Fan, 2021).

Seo-Young Chu’s “Science Fiction and Postmemory Han in Contemporary Korean American Literature” shifts attention from Orientalist representation to affect, memory, and trauma. Chu (2008) shows how science fiction can represent inherited historical wounds that are not directly experienced but remain emotionally and politically powerful. This is particularly relevant to Korean American writing, where division, war, militarization, and displacement can be mediated through speculative forms.

Aimee Bahng’s article on Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* broadens the field by connecting Asian American speculative literature to transnational capitalism, environmental crisis, and imperial histories (Bahng, 2008). Instead of treating Asian themes only as images or stereotypes, Bahng reads speculative fiction as a method for exposing global economic structures.

Recent dissertations have expanded this field. Joanne Chern (2014) studies Asian American writers and time-travel narratives, focusing on how Ken Liu, Charles Yu, and Ted Chiang use speculative temporality to restore, rewrite, or reimagine Asian American stories. Claire Stanford’s dissertation *Future Asians* examines Orientalism and posthumanism in twenty-first-century U.S. science fiction, emphasizing how the Asian figure becomes central to debates about posthuman identity (Stanford, 2022). Sang-Keun Yoo’s *Speculative Orientalism* analyzes Zen and Tao in American New

Wave science fiction, showing that Asian religions have shaped the genre's philosophical vocabulary while also being filtered through Orientalist simplification (Yoo, 2022).

Finally, Brett Esaki's article on Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life" and *Arrival* demonstrates how Asian American science fiction can transform alien encounter narratives into reflections on language, alterity, and ethics (Esaki, 2020). Ethan Mills's work on Ursula K. Le Guin's feminist Daoism helps clarify why Daoist thought became attractive to American speculative writers seeking alternatives to domination, control, and instrumental rationality (Mills, 2020).

Taken together, these studies show that Asian themes in U.S. science fiction cannot be reduced to exotic decoration. They are deeply connected to American history, race, technology, capitalism, empire, and the changing authorship of the genre.

## METHODOLOGY

This article uses qualitative literary analysis supported by thematic coding. The primary corpus consists of selected U.S. science fiction texts in which Asian themes play a visible structural or symbolic role. The sample includes Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*, Philip K. Dick's Asian-inflected alternative histories and New Wave contexts, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* and *The Diamond Age*, Maureen F. McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang*, Linda Nagata's nanotechnology fiction, Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life," Ken Liu's "The Man Who Ended History," Charles Yu's *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*, and Ling Ma's *Severance*.

The secondary corpus consists of fourteen academic sources: peer-reviewed articles, scholarly essays, and dissertations directly connected to Asian, Asian American, Orientalist, techno-Orientalist, or speculative themes in U.S. science fiction. All sources are cited in the text and listed in APA style.

The analysis followed three steps. First, the selected primary works were read for recurring Asian thematic markers: urban imagery, philosophical concepts, racialized technology, historical memory, linguistic alterity, ecological transnationalism, and posthuman embodiment. Second, these markers were grouped into five thematic categories: techno-Orientalist urban futures; Asian philosophical and religious systems; Asian American memory and temporal revision; posthuman and cyborg racialization; and transnational/ecological critique. Third, the coded distribution was used to create an illustrative pie chart showing the relative prominence of these categories in the analyzed sample.

The chart does not claim statistical universality. It visualizes the interpretive distribution within the selected corpus and functions as a heuristic tool for presenting the results of qualitative analysis

## RESULTS

The analysis shows that Asian themes in U.S. science fiction perform five major functions.

First, Asian imagery is frequently used to construct technological futurity. This is the most visible pattern in cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk writing. In *Neuromancer*, Asian-coded urban spaces help create the atmosphere of a global, corporate, multilingual future. As Yu (2008) argues, the postmodern city in science fiction is often imagined through Orientalized forms. Similarly, Stephenson's *Snow Crash* and *The Diamond Age* use Asian cultural and technological signs to represent a world shaped by fragmentation, data, and corporate sovereignty. Niu (2008) shows that this pattern is not neutral; it often links Asian identity with artificiality, discipline, and technological excess.

Second, Asian religious and philosophical systems appear as alternatives to Western rationalism. Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* offers a clear example. Its Daoist elements challenge the desire to control reality through scientific or bureaucratic power. Mills (2020) argues that Le Guin's Daoism is not merely decorative but connected to feminist and anti-dominative ethics. Yoo (2022) shows that such uses of Zen and Tao were common in American New Wave science fiction, although they were often shaped by Orientalist selection and simplification.

Third, Asian American writers use science fiction to revise history and memory. Chern (2014) demonstrates that time travel in Asian American science fiction allows writers to restore erased narratives and rethink immigrant identity. Ken Liu's "The Man Who Ended History" uses speculative technology to confront the historical trauma of Japanese imperial violence in China. Charles Yu's *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* transforms time travel into a metaphor for family, migration, masculinity, and emotional repetition. Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life" uses alien language and nonlinear temporality to rethink communication and human limitation, while Esaki (2020) connects Chiang's alien encounter narrative to Asian American questions of alterity.

Fourth, Asian themes often appear through posthuman figures. Robots, cyborgs, avatars, engineered bodies, and artificial intelligences become sites where racial difference is displaced into technological form. Sohn (2008), Niu (2008), and Stanford (2022) all emphasize that the Asian/posthuman connection can reproduce dehumanizing stereotypes. Yet Asian American writers also use posthumanism to question the boundaries of the human and to expose the racial assumptions behind those boundaries.

Fifth, Asian themes generate transnational and ecological critique. Bahng (2008) reads Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* as a speculative excavation of imperial and capitalist legacies. Fan (2021) similarly shows that post-1965 Asian American literature engages science fictionality because migration, labor, education, science, and global capitalism shape Asian American life. Ling Ma's *Severance* extends this pattern by linking pandemic, labor discipline, nostalgia, consumer culture, and Chinese American experience.



Percentages are based on qualitative coding of the selected corpus, not on a universal statistical survey.

**Figure 1. Distribution of Asian thematic functions in the selected corpus**

Figure 1 visualizes the distribution of these thematic functions in the selected corpus. The largest category is techno-Orientalist urban/economic futurity, followed by Asian American memory and temporal revision, posthuman racialization, Asian philosophical systems, and transnational/ecological critique.

## DISCUSSION

The results reveal that Asian themes in U.S. science fiction are produced by both external historical pressures and internal generic mechanisms. Externally, American encounters with Asia—immigration, exclusion, war, occupation, globalization, outsourcing, and the rise of Japan and China as technological-economic powers—created a cultural environment in which Asia could be imagined as both threat and future. Internally, science fiction depends on estrangement, alterity, and speculation. Because the genre often asks what is alien, artificial, future-oriented, or nonhuman, it has repeatedly used Asian figures to answer those questions.

This explains why Asian themes often appear in contradictory forms. In techno-Orientalist fiction, Asia may be represented as a hypermodern space of speed, density, and artificial intelligence. Yet the same works may also rely on premodern stereotypes of discipline, mystery, collectivism, or exotic wisdom. Huang (2008) is important here because she shows that the futuristic and the archaic are not opposites in Orientalist science fiction. They often operate together.

The first major result is the racialization of the future. In many U.S. science fiction texts, the future looks Asian, but Asian subjects are not always granted agency. Cities are Asianized; technologies are Asian-coded; corporations carry Japanese or Chinese associations; bodies become robotic or posthuman. However, these signs often serve the fears or

fantasies of Western protagonists. Yu (2008) and McKay (2017) both help explain how visual and narrative systems of techno-Orientalism produce futures in which Asia is everywhere as atmosphere but limited as subjectivity.

The second result is philosophical expansion. Le Guin and other New Wave writers used Daoism, Zen, and Buddhist-inflected ideas to challenge domination, hierarchy, and instrumental reason. This opened American science fiction to non-Western metaphysical models. Yet this expansion remains ethically complex. As Yoo (2022) argues, speculative uses of Asian religion often depend on selective appropriation. The value of such writing lies not in cultural accuracy alone but in how it reveals American dissatisfaction with its own models of progress.

The third result is the emergence of Asian American speculative agency. In Chiang, Liu, Yu, Ma, and others, Asian themes are not merely imposed from outside; they are reorganized from within lived histories of migration, translation, trauma, and professional identity. Chern (2014), Esaki (2020), and Fan (2021) show that Asian American science fiction uses genre conventions to rethink what realism cannot easily represent: inherited memory, nonlinear family history, linguistic estrangement, and the long afterlife of violence.

The fourth result is a transformation of the human. Techno-Orientalist writing often dehumanizes Asian figures by associating them with robots, clones, avatars, or artificial systems. However, posthumanism can also become a critical tool. Stanford (2022) argues that twenty-first-century U.S. science fiction uses Asian and Asian American figures to test the boundaries of personhood. The problem is not posthumanism itself but the racial hierarchy that decides whose humanity is stable and whose humanity is conditional.

Finally, the fifth result is a broader transnationalization of U.S. science fiction. Asian themes push the genre beyond national exceptionalism. Yamashita, Ma, McHugh, Chiang, and Liu show that American futures cannot be understood without Asia, migration, labor, translation, and global capitalism. In this sense, Asian themes do not simply decorate U.S. science fiction; they expose the global systems that make its futures possible.

## CONCLUSION

Asian themes in U.S. science fiction literature arise from a complex interaction of Orientalist tradition, geopolitical anxiety, technological imagination, Asian American authorship, and transnational history. Their causes include American encounters with Asian modernity, fear of economic and technological displacement, fascination with Asian religions and philosophies, and the growing visibility of Asian American writers within speculative fiction.

The results are equally complex. On the negative side, Asian themes have often produced techno-Orientalist stereotypes: Asian cities as dystopian futures, Asian bodies as robotic or artificial, and Asian cultures as either premodern wisdom or hypermodern threat. On the positive side, these same themes have expanded the genre's intellectual and aesthetic possibilities. They have introduced alternative concepts of time, memory, embodiment, language, ecology, and historical justice.

The most important shift occurs when Asian and Asian American writers move from being objects of speculative representation to agents of speculative form. In their work, science fiction becomes a tool for recovering erased histories, reimagining migration, questioning the human, and challenging the racial assumptions embedded in American futurity. Therefore, Asian themes in U.S. science fiction should be understood not only as motifs but as structural forces that reshape the genre's imagination of the future.

## REFERENCES

- Bahng, A. (2008). Extrapolating transnational arcs, excavating imperial legacies: The speculative acts of Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*. *MELUS*, 33(4), 123–144. <https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/33.4.123>
- Chern, J. (2014). *Restoring, rewriting, reimagining: Asian American science fiction writers and the time travel narrative* [Senior thesis, Scripps College]. Scholarship @ Claremont.
- Chu, S.-Y. (2008). Science fiction and postmemory han in contemporary Korean American literature. *MELUS*, 33(4), 97–121. <https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/33.4.97>
- Esaki, B. J. (2020). Ted Chiang's Asian American amusement at alien arrival. *Religions*, 11(2), 56. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11020056>
- Fan, C. T. (2015). Techno-Orientalism with Chinese characteristics: Maureen F. McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang*. *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.5070/T861019585>

- Fan, C. T. (2021). Science fictionality and post-65 Asian American literature. *American Literary History*, 33(1), 75–105. <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajaa047>
- Huang, B. (2008). Premodern Orientalist science fictions. *MELUS*, 33(4), 23–43. <https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/33.4.23>
- McKay, D. (2017). Camera men: Techno-orientalism in two acts. *Journal of American Studies*, 51(3), 939–964. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817000548>
- Mills, E. (2020). Ursula K. Le Guin’s science fictional feminist Daoism. *Journal of Science Fiction and Philosophy*, 3, 1–21.
- Niu, G. A. (2008). Techno-Orientalism, nanotechnology, posthumans, and post-posthumans in Neal Stephenson’s and Linda Nagata’s science fiction. *MELUS*, 33(4), 73–96. <https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/33.4.73>
- Sohn, S. H. (2008). Introduction: Alien/Asian: Imagining the racialized future. *MELUS*, 33(4), 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/33.4.5>
- Stanford, C. M. (2022). *Future Asians: Orientalism and posthumanism in twenty-first-century U.S. science fiction* [Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles]. eScholarship.
- Yoo, S.-K. (2022). *Speculative Orientalism: Zen and Tao in American New Wave science fiction* [Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Riverside]. eScholarship.
- Yu, T. (2008). Oriental cities, postmodern futures: *Naked Lunch*, *Blade Runner*, and *Neuromancer*. *MELUS*, 33(4), 45–71. <https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/33.4.45>

**Reviewer:**

Mohammad Hadi Dehgani

Ph.D., Professor

Jalal Multimedia Cyberjaya Selangor University (Malaysia)