



Media Portrayal of Techno-Orientalism

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Abstract. Techno-Orientalism involves the strategic use of various means to evoke emotions such as anxiety, shame, and indignation in order to gain supporters. It also aims to convey the eventual victory and superiority of the West over the developing East, thereby empowering supporters with confidence and pride. The narrative formula entails the recognition of the superiority of East Asia. However, in order to prevent being at a disadvantage, they employ discriminating legislation, attitudes, and narrative speeches to belittle countries in East Asia.

Keywords: Techno-Orientalism, East Asian, Stereotype, Race, Hollywood Cinema

1 Introduction

Amidst the pandemic in 2020, several Western politicians (headed by Trump) asserted that China was responsible for intentionally creating the pandemic. This accusation sparked discontent and received disapproval from the Chinese population and individuals of Chinese descent. In the same year, the United States government implemented a prohibition on WeChat and TikTok, which are owned by Chinese corporations Tencent and ByteDance, respectively. The U.S. government asserted that these two Internet programs posed a risk to national information security. Interestingly, several university specialties that include advanced technology were exclusively limited to Chinese students. Undoubtedly, this is an adverse consequence of a "trade war" between China and the United States (Mahoney, 2023).[1] However, Siu and Chun (2020, p. 425-426) contends that this phenomenon might be attributed to a concept known as "Techno-Orientalism," which has gained traction in Western societies since the 1980s. [2] The accelerated progress in technology and economy in East Asia has generated unease among individuals with Orientalist perspectives. Consequently, the Western society utilized the perceived "threat" as justification for engaging in discrimination, oppression, and hostility towards the Eastern "Oriental-Other".

Roh (2019, p.2) provided a scholarly explanation of techno-orientalism as the concept of portraying Asia and Asians in either excessively or insufficiently technological terms in cultural works and political discussions. Roh highlighted that the concept of "Techno-Orientalism" also has an impact on the discussions around media, literature, fiction, and filmmaking. Some examples of these books include "Neuromancer" (1984),

"The Difference Engine" (1990), and "The Diamond Age" (Roh, 2019, p.2). Park (2010, p.1) contended that the portrayal of individuals of East Asian heritage in Hollywood films consistently persists as a stereotype, with the film "Blade Runner" (1982) being a prime example. Despite their diverse areas of expertise, Siu, Roh, and Park, as East Asian scholars, share a common perspective on "Techno-Orientalism": the discourse of "Orientalism" may appear to have vanished, but it has actually been replaced by another discourse model known as techno-orientalism. Both models perpetuate the same discourse of diminishing the East, asserting ownership over the East, and seeking to dominate the East (with the East primarily referring to East Asian countries in the present era).

Techno-orientalism encompasses the intersection of race, class, and gender (Yadav, 2024), making it a pertinent social issue that warrants investigation by humanists and cultural academics.[3] Hollywood filmmakers inadvertently create tale narratives and aesthetic trends that contribute to negative effects, including the perpetuation of misconceptions about the East Asian community. Paradoxically, these films exert a significant impact and achieve high ticket sales in East Asia. Examples of cyberpunk sci-fi films include "Blade Runner" (1982), the "Matrix" series, the "Star Wars" series, the "Star Trek" series, Marvel's superhero series. East Asian viewers are willingly embracing this stereotype, discrimination, and "Other" identity. Nevertheless, these consequences will only exacerbate, as seen by the emergence of trade wars and political isolation. This research seeks to examine the societal concerns associated with techno-orientalism and how they were depicted or described in Hollywood films. The author plans to utilize a qualitative methodology to study the films "Blade Runner 2049" and "Doctor Strange".

2 Historical Review of "Techno-Orientalism"

Exploring the history of techno-orientalism is essential for comprehending its context, emotional impact, goal, and gaining a more profound grasp of its definition. Techno-orientalism is a term that combines the words "Technology" (Techno-) and "Orientalism" (-Orientalism). In 1978, Edward Said (1978) introduced the concept of "Orientalism" to refer to a cognitive discourse and cultural phenomenon in the Western world.[4] This phenomenon involves portraying the East as a fascinating historical realm, while treating its people and cultures as commodities that may be consumed. Said (1978) posited that the Western "us" employs the concept of "Orientalism" to exert influence over the economic, political, and cultural spheres. The Western "us" continues to wield power in this regard, implying that the West dominates or surpasses the East in all respects. "Orientalists" depicted the East as a submissive and objectified foreign female, while the West was portrayed as a dominant and manly male. One can contend that in the debate around "Orientalism" in Western societies, the intention is to diminish the East.

The concept of techno-orientalism originated in the 1980s when David Morley and Kevin Robins (1995) coined the phrase to refer to the emergence of anti-Japanese and anti-East Asian racist beliefs and speech during Japan's economic boom.[5]

"Orientalists" contended that this poses a threat: they associate the unfavorable perception of modern technology with the concept and stereotype of the "Yellow peril," which has evolved into a new notion known as "Techno-Orientalism" (Park, 2010, p.143-173) in relation to East Asians. Whereas, McInerney (2024, p.1) coined term "Yellow techno-peril" to 'connote how older European and Americans fears of being overrun or controlled by China are reproduced in the AI arms race'. [6] According to Ueno Toshiya (2002, p.223), techno-orientalism refers to a discussion and cultural occurrence in the "global post-Ford social environment". [7] Roh (2019, p.4) contend that began ten years later, in the 1990s, the process of disparaging techno-orientalism shifting its focus from Japan to China. China poses a formidable challenge to the West in terms of mass manufacturing, global banking, infrastructure, and scientific progress. Simultaneously, the increasing purchasing power of China has instilled apprehension among Americans over future global marketplaces (Huang, 2020). [8] The techno-orientalists perceived Japan as a formidable competitor in terms of technological advancement, while China posed a challenge in terms of abundant labor and large-scale manufacturing. Roh (2019, p.4) argued that Western techno-orientalists perceive Japan as the pioneer of technology, but China is seen as the embodiment of technology itself. [9] This type of description constitutes a dual comparison and is negative towards the reputation of China.

Techno-orientalism has become prevalent in the realm of culture and arts since the 1980s, as previously stated. The body of work is extensive, with the most exemplary pieces falling under the genre of science fiction, particularly cyberpunk. This kind of fiction or film primarily explores topics such as contemporary existentialism, racism, and technological unease (Fernandez, 2023). [10] Cyberpunk as a sub-genre of hard science fiction that emerged in the early 1980s and became an established cultural phenomenon (Sanders, 2023). [11] Chun (2006) establishes a comparison between the virtual environments of cyberspace and the fictionalized Orient. Chun (2006) argues that cyberpunk literature and movies portray cyberspace as a distinct Oriental realm, characterized by Asian symbols and corporations. [12] Furthermore, the protagonist is able to "explore" this "Oriental" realm. Chun, Sanders and Park utilized the science fiction novel "Neuromancer" to illustrate a distinction between "Techno-Orientalism" and "Orientalism". In one case, the main character relies on advanced East Asian technology, while in the other case, they have the freedom to explore Oriental settings and environments.

Academics have contended that techno-orientalism has a significant impact on literary and creative works, particularly in relation to three key issues: race, class, and gender. Park (2010) contended that the concept of race is a construct that gains legitimacy by its acknowledgment and repetition by individuals belonging to both the dominant and marginalized groups. An illustrative instance is when East Asian men, particularly when they engage in martial arts, are regarded as more genuine compared to their Asian American counterparts. Put simply, "race" has evolved into a means by which dominant groups exert control over marginalized communities within the framework of Western-centric rhetoric. Balibar and Wallerstein (1991) contended that our perception of race is shaped by preconceptions or racial indicators, which in turn influence our judgments. [13] The dominant group's stereotype serves as a reflection for the marginalized group, compelling them to form a community. This argument highlights that the issue of race

can be understood as a manifestation of class conflict, with the ironic twist that the very notion of "class" is likewise a construct devised by the dominant group. In the subsequent sections, the author utilized a contextual analysis approach to investigate how the aforementioned topics are portrayed in Hollywood movies.

3 Styles of "Techno-Orientalism" in Hollywood Cinema

3.1 Invisible East Asian

In "Blade Runner," Park (2010, p.82-83) characterizes the East Asians as "invisible," implying that they are difficult to perceive and recognize. This portrayal suggests that they are deliberately created to occupy a lower social status and remain marginalized from positions of authority and influence. While the author does not hold the belief that the working class is of lesser value, the East Asian laborers shown in the narrative of "Techno-Orientalism" have been intentionally portrayed as "slaves" who cater to the Western Orientalists. Hollywood's portrayal of East Asians in this picture perpetuates the notion of techno-orientalism, suggesting that they will forever be subjugated by the Western "us". This narrative fosters a sense of pride among Western Orientalists. Techno-orientalism is characterized by stereotypes and demeaning designs, which the author argues are also present in "Blade Runner 2049".

Considering the film's narrative design, "Blade Runner 2049" lacks East Asian actors in significant roles that directly impact the plot. Therefore, it can be inferred that the film does not address or explore topics related to East Asian individuals, East Asian communities, or East Asian culture. The answer is negative. This is because upon observing the two primary characters in the film, particularly replica policeman K and a Wallis company employee (also a replica) named Raff, a particular group of individuals frequently emerges, referred to as the "invisible" East Asian. Officer K resides in an outdated apartment. As he ascended the stairs, he encountered a multitude of East Asian individuals who were gathered in the corridor, dressed in unassuming attire. As officer K patrolled the dimly lit streets, the audience also noticed the presence of East Asians who appeared unremarkable, simply walking or sitting alone. While K was getting ready to join the "Rebellion", the director captured a panoramic image of the members. However, upon close examination, it was discovered that the members did not belong to the East Asian ethnicity. In the role of Raff, the opponent, a metaphorist from Eastern Asia, made a brief appearance. Despite the director's use of a panoramic lens for the shot, which lasted only about four seconds, the audience still failed to establish any sense of connection or emotion towards this character. These are all the instances in the film where East Asian individuals are present. In the initial scene, the entire apartment is heated, but the lighting is dimmer. The East Asians are not positioned directly under the light source; rather, they are in the shadows and only make up a small section of the image. In the second scene, the entire street is adorned in a blue hue, reminiscent of the first "Blade Runner" film from 1982. This blue color serves as a metaphor for the Asian culture, symbolizing its unassuming and inconspicuous nature. In the third scenario, the director employs a substantial quantity of gold to symbolize Wallace's supreme

dominance in the film. However, the Eastern Asian servant, Raff, remains obscured in darkness and is depicted as kneeling in servitude.

3.2 "Techno-Oriental Other"

Both Orientalism and techno-orientalism categorize East Asians as "others": the adversary and the subjugated group. Park (2010) introduced the concept of the "techno-oriental other," which encompasses two main archetypes: the oriental monks, who possess advanced technology or intelligence and assist white men in their journey to become heroes, ultimately surpassing the monks themselves; and the East Asian "sidekick," who willingly accompanies white men due to friendship, benevolence, or admiration for their character, also aiding them in their heroic endeavors.[14] The oriental monk also has a counterpart known as the oriental villains. These villains possess advanced technology or knowledge, but ultimately succumb to the white men, who then emerge as the heroes. It is worth noting that East Asians typically do not have romantic partners in their narratives. Put simply, filmmakers do not create romantic narratives specifically for characters of East Asian descent. This rhetorical style aims to demonstrate the might of the "other" while ultimately benefiting the Western "us". Its purpose is to convert feelings of "shame" into feelings of "pride".

The film "Doctor Strange" is a highly profitable entry in the Marvel film business that incorporates East Asian cultural components and offers a thought-provoking narrative for cultural specialists. The author will subsequently initiate a relevant discourse on the specific content of "Doctor Strange" based on the aforementioned scenes, aiming to demonstrate that the film, while partially deviating from the original, has managed to enhance the portrayal of East Asian individuals by reducing stereotypes. However, it remains susceptible to the impact of techno-orientalism and continues to perpetuate stereotypical notions about East Asian communities and cultures.

In the film, the character Ancient One assumes the position of Dr. Strange's Eastern monk. Originally, this character was a man but was changed to avoid any connection with "Fu Manchu". The film's designer specifically chose this role for Ancient One, who is renowned as the "Supreme Magician" and resides in Kamatagi. In the movie, the Ancient One's role in supporting Strange goes beyond teaching him mystical practices. The Ancient One also plays a crucial role in shaping Strange's vision of the world and his personality. Upon their initial encounter, the Ancient One conveys to him: "The world is an enigma to you, as your existence is dedicated to surpassing your own boundaries, yearning to gain deeper insights and broaden your understanding." Now, as the authorities become aware that their boundaries can be surpassed to an extraordinary extent, you are refusing to accept this possibility. During the ensuing conflict with the rebels, the venerable sorceress successfully fulfilled her assigned task of instructing Dr. Strange in becoming a hero from start to finish.

Throughout the whole "Doctor Strange" series and even in "The Avengers", Wang hails from a lineage committed to safeguarding the Magician of Justice, who possesses expertise in martial arts, oversees the administration of mystery books, and is a master of magical knowledge. The character Wang is Doctor Strange's primary companion, and actor Benedict Huang, who portrays him, stated in an interview that he will not be

a subordinate or servant. Although Wang is not a manservant, he has consistently played the role of an assistant in Doctor Strange's development. This is due to both narrative reasons and the fact that he cannot be a monk or master. In contrast to the original cartoon, the Wang also took on the responsibility of generating moments of laughter. While this may not be directly related to techno-orientalism, it is indisputable that Asian actors frequently find themselves cast in comedic roles within American society.

Although played by a white actor, the character Cassius in the final film exhibits his oriental identity through his background (as the Ancient One's former apprentice), his skills (connected to oriental mystery), his appearance (relating to East Asian Buddhism), and his philosophy (associated to Zen). Following Doctor Strange's victory over Cassius, he emerged as the preeminent "Supreme Magician" of the new generation. This aligns with the conventional notion of techno-orientalism, where Asian-originated martial arts, knowledge systems, and skill combinations are ultimately surpassed by white males.

4 Conclusion

The concept of techno-orientalism presents a paradoxical pattern: it showcases the progress and modernity of East Asia, while also suggesting that the West would ultimately dominate, possess, and exploit the East (East Asia). Techno-orientalism is reinforced by the juxtaposition of conflicting emotions of "shame" and "pride" and further bolstered by the notion of a "Western Center". The films "Blade Runner 2049" and "Doctor Strange" have made significant progress in portraying East Asian stereotypes compared to many Hollywood films of the twentieth century. However, filmmakers have consistently been unable to fully address the problem of racial discrimination, resulting in international viewers developing biases towards East Asian identity and image. This perpetuates a harmful cycle where these biases are reinforced through shared film experiences, ultimately impacting international trade and political cooperation. This has particularly negative consequences for humanity's future and the development of a unified Chinese language community.

Techno-orientalism refers to the phenomenon where social classes, interpersonal relationships, and cultural iconography are influenced by stereotypes and racial issues related to East Asian people. This confusion often obscures the authentic cultural identity of East Asians. In order to address the issues faced by East Asians, such as the rise in anti-Asian sentiment, various approaches have been suggested, including social movements like "Stop Asian Hate." However, Park argues that a more effective solution lies in adopting a new model of rhetoric and cognitive theory. This entails two key aspects for filmmakers who aim to depict East Asian stories: exploring both the overt and covert aspects of East Asian culture, and employing exceptional narrative and audiovisual techniques that are characteristic of East Asian traditions.

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