Speculative Asias
Mon/Wed 11:40AM-1:00PM
Course location: English House Lecture Hall

FALL 2026
Instructor: Professor Sophia J. Mao (she/hers)
E-mail: sjmao@brynmawr.edu
Office hours: Mondays and Wednesdays 9:30-10:30AM; in-person English House 212 OR via Zoom;
Office hours sign-ups here: https://calendly.com/sophiajmao-bmc/15min

Cover art to Franny Choi's *Soft Science* (2019)

Course Description:

From Seoul as the glittering metropolis of Korean music, fashion, and cuisine to TikTok and the "Turning Chinese" trend that celebrates Chinese consumer culture, we seem to be firmly in what scholars have deemed "The Asian Century" of East Asia's economic and technological ascendence. Yet in Ridley Scott's classic cyberpunk film *Blade Runner* (1982), Asia is the setting of a regressive future in which synthetic humans are cloned as a source of cheap, disposable labor.

This course examines how Orientalism, or the West's racialized imagination of the East, intersects with anxieties around the Asian Century. We will trace how Techno-Orientalist tropes emerge through a range of English-language speculative genres including novels, poetry collections, graphic novels, and films, moving from 19th century fears around the Yellow Peril to 21st century engagements with these tropes by authors of Asian descent. Our reading practice will cohere around two, interrelated poles: how to critique appropriations of Asia in the western imagination by reading against the grain, and how to identify re-appropriations, looking backward to search for futurity, collectivity, and hope. By the end of the semester, you will be given the opportunity to analyze a speculative Asian text of your own choosing.

Course Objectives:

- Survey major speculative fictions where Asia and Asians feature as a background, setting, character, and/or plot device
- Apply an ethnic studies framework to speculative fictions, past and present
- Learn about key moments in Asian American and global Asian history from the 19th century onwards
- Engage in comparative analysis between primary and secondary texts

Course Assignment Breakdown:

- 10% - Regular class attendance and participation
- 5% - Class care web – collective class note-taking
- 10% - Event write-up – 2-3-page summary/presentation reflection on any public event you choose to attend at or beyond Bryn Mawr related to race and ethnicity **(Due by Fri 12/11 by 5PM on Moodle)**
- 20% - Midterm exam – passage IDs and short essay questions based on key historical events, concepts, and texts **(In-class Wed 10/07)**
- 15% - 2-3-page close reading paper on Franny Choi's *Soft Science* **(Due Th 10/29 by 5PM on Moodle)**
- 25% - Short comparative essay – 5-7-page close reading essay that applies a secondary concept introduced in class to a primary text **(Due Th 12/01 by 5PM on Moodle)**
- 15% - Final creative project – Open format that engages with a Speculative Asian text of your choosing **(Due Mon 12/07 by 5PM on Moodle)**

*****Further guidelines about each of the assignments will be shared in class and on Moodle*****

Course Reading Schedule:

- Readings are listed on the day they are "due." You can generally expect what feels like 100-200 pages of "reading" a week, which will be split between reading primary and secondary sources and viewing films.
- Readings can be found on Moodle (PDF excerpts and online links), as course reserves at Canaday Library (hard and some electronic copies of texts), and at the campus bookstore.
    - *Note:* If you experience any barriers to accessing or purchasing any of these course texts, please do not hesitate to let me know.

- There may be slight adjustments on the readings throughout the semester, so I do not recommend you read too far in advance. Watch out for e-mail announcements!

UNIT ONE: Orientalism & Techno-Orientalism

We will learn about the racialization of Asians in the West through key moments in the history of Asian immigration and labor (Orientalism); we will then learn how to map this history onto the speculative genre (Techno-Orientalism).

Week 1—Introduction

Mon 08/31 Introduction, overview of the course
In-class: Astria Suparak, "Virtually Asian" (2021)
Wed 09/02 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978), excerpts
William Gibson, *WIRED*, "My Own Private Tokyo" (2001)

Week 2—Chinese Exclusion & Coolie Labor

Mon 09/07 Labor Day, no class meeting
Wed 09/09 American Federation of Labor, "Some reasons for Chinese Exclusion; Meat vs. Rice. American Manhood Against Asiatic Coolieism; Which Shall Survive?" (1906)
In-class: Sax Rohmer, *Fu Manchu*

Week 3—Japan Panic

Mon 09/14 Watch: Christine Choy and Renee Tajima-Peña, *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1989)
Watch: William F. Wu, *Twilight Zone*, "Wong's Lost and Found Emporium" (1985)
Wed 09/16 Shaun Tan, *The Arrival* (2006)

UNIT TWO: Cyberpunk, Critical Re-appropriations

In this core unit, we will learn about how a key genre of speculative fiction, cyberpunk, often features Asia or Asians and examine the figure of the (Asian) cyborg, thinking about its implications for race and gender.

Week 4—Cyberpunk and Cyborgs

Mon 09/21 Watch: Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner* (1982)
Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985)
Wed 09/23 Leslie Bow, *Racist Love*, "Asian ● Female ● Robot ● Slave: Techo-Orientalism after #MeToo" (2021)

Week 5—Cyborgs, cont.

Mon 09/28 Franny Choi, *Soft Science* (2019), P1
Wed 09/30 Franny Choi, *Soft Science* (2019), P2

Week 6—Midterm

Mon 10/05 Open office hours during class time
Wed 10/07 In-class: midterm exam

Week 7—FALL BREAK

Mon 10/12 Fall Break, no class meeting
Wed 10/14 Fall Break, no class meeting

Week 8—Critical/Creative

Mon 10/19 Franny Choi, *We Radiant Things* (2026), P1
Wed 10/21 Franny Choi, *We Radiant Things* (2026), P2

UNIT THREE: The Asian Century

We will wrap up the semester by turning to the "Asian Century," considering how the rise of the East Asian Tiger Economies intersects with the globalization of labor and capital. While the influence of Techno-Orientalism continues into the present, we will consider what happens when the West no longer forms the center of cultural imaginations.

Week 9—Asian Tech

Mon 10/26 Andrew B. Liu, *n+1*, "Lab Leak Theory and the 'Asiatic' Form" (2022)
Wed 10/28 Janice Lobo Sapigao, *Microchips for Millions* (2016)

Due Th 10/29 2-3-page close reading on Franny Choi's *Soft Science*

Week 10—Tiger Economies

Mon 11/02 Ken Liu, "A Brief History of the Trans-Pacific Tunnel" (2013)
Wed 11/04 Watch: Jessica Kingdorn, *Ascension* (2021)

Week 11—Ecological Speculation

Mon 11/09 Karen Tei Yamashita, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (1990), P1
Wed 11/11 Karen Tei Yamashita, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (1990), P2

Week 12—Revolutions

Mon 11/16 Eugene Lim, *Dear Cyborgs* (2017), P1
Wed 11/18 Eugene Lim, *Dear Cyborgs* (2017), P2

Week 13—THANKSGIVING BREAK

Mon 11/23 Open office hours during class time
Wed 11/25 Thanksgiving Break, no class meeting

Week 14—Pop Culture

Mon 11/30 Tara Fickle, *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities*, "Mobile Frontiers: Pokémon After Pearl Harbor" (2019)
In-class: Pokémon Go
Wed 12/02 Watch: Silka Luisa, *Blade Runner 2099*, first episode

Due Th 12/01 by 5PM on Moodle: Comparative essay

Week 14—Wrapping Up & Gratitudes

Mon 12/07 In-class: final project presentations
Wed 12/09 In-class: final project presentations & gratitudes

Course Policies:

E-mail policy: I typically respond to e-mail within 24 hours, Monday-Friday from 9AM-5PM. Weekends are my time to recharge (and I also encourage you to cultivate a healthy relationship to school and work obligations)! so I am much slower in responding to messages.

Office hours: I am always available to meet you during my regular office hours (listed above). While my office hours are appointment-only, **I will be hosting two open office hours during the semester for group conversations (Monday, 10/05, and Monday, 11/23 during class time).**

If my office hours times do not work for you, please e-mail me directly to set up a separate meeting. **Please note that I do not read entire drafts of essays in office hours OR via e-mail in which I "pre-grade" papers, generating substantive feedback on the spot.** If we are discussing your writing, please plan to present your questions and concerns to me orally, identifying specific passages of note.

> **Letters of recommendation:** Writing students letters of recommendation to support them in their continued career development is an important part of my job as faculty member. However, please review my letter of recommendation guidelines (found on Moodle) before requesting a letter from me. Please note that I will not be able to provide recommendations before the end of the Fall 2026 semester – it takes time to get to know you!

Attendance and participation: Weekly attendance and active participation are essential to a successful course. Please arrive to each class on time and be ready to discuss the readings with your classmates. You are allowed **two excused absences** during the semester for life events. Additional absences will impact your participation grade or will necessitate special circumstances that should be discussed with me in advance. As much as possible, please let me know *before* class meets if you need to be absent from class, as we will all miss you!

> **Tech use:** No laptops or phones are allowed in class unless otherwise stated, except for tech use for accessibility reasons. Please bring **hard copies** of all the readings to class.

Late assignments: I am generous with extension requests due to life circumstances. **All writing assignments have an automatic 3-day grace period after the official deadline.** After that, you will need to e-mail me for additional extension requests. Late assignments without an extension will be docked 1/3 a letter grade a day.

> **Writing Resources:** I encourage you to make use of the Writing Center to discuss, plan, and revise drafts of your writing assignment. You can schedule an appointment by going to www.brynmawr.edu/writingcenter or clicking on "Make a Writing Center Appt" from the

Library and Academic Support dropdown menu at the top of every Moodle page. For multilingual writers, I highly encourage you to reach out to the Director of Multilingual Writing, Kelly Franz: kfrantz@brynmawr.edu

Accessibility: Bryn Mawr College is committed to providing equal access to students with a documented disability. Students needing academic accommodations for a disability must first speak with Access Services. Students can email accessservices@brynmawr.edu to request an appointment to begin this confidential process. If eligible for accommodations as per Access Services, students should schedule an appointment with the professor as early in the semester as possible to share their verification form and make appropriate arrangements. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and require advance notice to implement. More information can be obtained at the Access Services website. (http://www.brynmawr.edu/access-services/)

Any student who has a disability-related need to record this class must first be found eligible to do so by Access Services and must share this eligibility with me, the instructor. Class members need to be aware that this class may be recorded.

Academic integrity and collaboration: You are more than encouraged to collaborate with others over the course content and assignments. However, all individual assignments must reflect your own work and all outside sources (including content from class discussions)! must be properly cited. Plagiarism will not be tolerated and will result in a failing grade for the course. If you have any doubts about the academic integrity of an assignment, please speak to me before you submit it. You can review Bryn Mawr College's Honor Code here: https://sga.blogs.brynmawr.edu/honor-board/honor-code/

Generative AI: While AI may be consulted as a source of initial inspiration, for summaries of topics and texts, and for help with editing papers, it should never be a complete substitute for your own thinking process or for engaging with your faculty and peers. Using Generative AI to render the bulk of any assignment for you will result in a failing grade for the course.