

Chinese and Other Aliens: How European Writings on Chinese Have Helped Shape Conceptions of Alien Languages in Science Fiction

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which Western conceptions of the Chinese language have influenced the development of science fiction in English. I argue that, as the ultimate “Other,” Chinese civilization was conceived as utterly alien to Europe and America. Whether viewing China through rose-tinted glasses or with a distempered spleen, Europeans and North Americans have long treated China as different, not just in degree but also in kind. When it came to trying to imagine extraterrestrial Others, China and the Chinese thus naturally functioned as a model. While this was true in regard to a wide variety of aspects of Chinese culture, this paper focuses on language and the ability to communicate with the Chinese as a template for later descriptions of contact with extraterrestrial alien civilizations. I will demonstrate that this holds true for both the written and the spoken language, and is bound up with the search for a universal language, discussions of pidgin English, and the invention of Basic English in the early twentieth century. Finally, I will demonstrate that this discourse has also found expression even in science fiction written in Chinese.

Keywords

science fiction, translation in; Chinese language, Western conceptions of; John Brunner; Frederik Pohl; Pohl Anderson; Robert Heinlein; Michael A. Foster; Liu Cixin