Encountering the Alien: Alterity and Innovation in North Korean Science Fiction since 1945

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From the translations of Soviet sci-fi and biographies of foreign scientists published in popular science magazines after Liberation, to the exotic settings and strange technologies of contemporary novels, the history of science fiction in North Korea is marked by an engagement with the strange, the foreign and the novel. Retracing the history of the genre from 1945 to the present time, this paper attempts to understand how North Korean science fiction has managed its constitutive alterity. In so doing, it explores tales of space travel fused with socialist realist production novels, how Hollywood blockbuster tropes met North Korea’s nationalist rhetoric, how and how Juche literary theory assessed the legacy of writers such as Wells, Orwell and Van Vogt.

The production of works of science fiction in North Korea has evolved in relationship with the country’s cultural, social and ideological trends. As such, this article highlights how the political stakes of scientific progress have influenced the themes and narrative structures of the genre. Nonetheless, North Korean literature’s politicization has not excluded tensions and ambiguities, innovation and change, external influences and curiosity towards the other. The international or interplanetary settings of science fiction novels have thus allowed for the introduction of hitherto unseen affects, characters and plot devices.

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