

Lili Körber's Travel Reports from the Far East China and Japan in the Eyes of an Emancipated Woman

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How to cite this paper: Saletta, E. (2026). Lili Körber's Travel Reports from the Far East China and Japan in the Eyes of an Emancipated Woman. *Advances in Literary Study*, 14, 159-175.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/als.2026.143012>

Received: June 23, 2026

Accepted: July 26, 2026

Published: July 29, 2026

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Abstract

Körber's (1932) accounts from the 1930s—namely *Eine Frau erlebt den roten Alltag*, *Begegnungen im Fernen Osten* (1934), and *Sato-San, ein japanischer Held* (1936)—address social, political, and cultural aspects of her travels to Russia, Japan, and China in a striking, vivid manner. Körber highlights differences from European culture while simultaneously emphasizing the distinctiveness of an autonomous past rich in cultural heritage within the countries she visited. She acknowledges the societal and industrial efforts to align with the Western process of modernization. All these observations enable Körber to establish an intercultural, comparative vision of the Far East—one in which her own political stance and convictions, her perspective as a woman, and her Jewish-European background as an anti-fascist exile remain constantly visible.

Keywords

Exile-Literature, Totalitarianism, Women-Literature, Travel-Literature, Orientalismus

1. Introduction

When considering German literature as an anthropological encyclopedia, one is certainly struck by the diversity in the descriptions of the image of Orient, particularly the image of China and Japan. One simultaneously engages with chivalric heroes, miserable coolies, ideal emperors, and silly mandarins, and thus oscillates between a willingness to convert deep xenophobia, the dream image of the enlightened despot, and the destabilizing distorted image of the racist “Yellow Peril” myth. This striking difference in the literary representation of this motif leads to a depiction that intensively examines the multiple cultural paradigm shifts and

their Western-Oriental significance. The individual texts are viewed as part of a particular and contingent discourse through which concrete historical subjects are modeled, represented and integrated into society. At the same time, they are embedded in research as arguments in European New Historicism debates within specific culture-centered discourses and contexts of argumentation (cf. [Al-Fahad, 2023: pp. 79-99](#)). According to these theories, the genesis and reception of the image of Orient are closely linked to the emergence of a new type of traveling observer, regarded as a knowledgeable scholar or gentleman, driven less by a thirst for adventure and business interests than by a knowledge desire, a missionary mandate, or a diplomatic purpose. The result is a widespread production of foreign imagery and colonial knowledge, which examines encounters and interactions as well as perceptions and judgments of the acting observer towards the foreign cultural environment (cf. [Huang, 2021: pp. 19-35](#)). These also include debates about wildness and civilization, progress and decadence, power and justice, wealth and poverty, women rights and happiness. There is on one hand the restrictive European travelers' vision of a primitive Orient and on the other hand the motif of European colonial despotism and cultural stagnation of less representation countries like China and Japan. These are both nations which in the course of the 18th and 19th century lost luster in the eyes of European intellectuals due to the increasing scientific involvement, changing value interpretations, new travel experiences and the rise of Eurocentrism. China became therefore a model of constitutional principles and political economic innovation for the West due to the opening of Asian ports in the second half of the 19th century even though the Western went on considering it a dangerous symbol of the racist "Yellow Peril" myth due to the Asian immigration movement. This renewed encounter between East and West influenced cultural history, as China and Japan altered the tastes of the Western world so intensely that European fashion and art trends were revolutionized. There was a manic spread of passion for products from the Far East, as well as an almost hysterical mania for meticulously collecting Chinese and Japanese objects. The cheapest and most precious folding screens were collected alongside silk kimonos and hand-painted vases, initially appearing as merely a trivial superficial phenomenon but later expressing a specific cultural trend that empathically emphasized the feeling of the Far East. These excesses of renewal from Orient were clearly observed in Belle Epoque painting and literature, where Japanese techniques influenced the French Impressionists and the Austrian writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal (cf. [Ptak, 1991: pp. 122-125](#)). The situation changed at the beginning of the 20th century when oriental studies intensified their interest in China and Japan, mostly due to the expansion of colonial economic interests by Western colonial powers, the new means of transport and the post World War I sense of disorientation for non-Western regions. Not only missionaries, educators, and researchers but also writers traveled to the Far East dealing with geographical, artistic, and cultural dimensions of the ancient traditional image of Orient. They also came across those revolutionary Oriental cities and regions, whose

descriptions were sometimes first published in newspapers and then released in book form. This is why the term travel report no longer referred solely to the factual representation of authentic travels, but more to a broad descriptive space between authenticity and fictionality. Factuality and fictionality were not contradictory opposites, but rather functional dimensions whose boundaries often overlapped. While fictionality is associated with the poetry of a literary work, factuality and the resulting authenticity refers to the journalistic informative report (cf. [Detering, 2010](#)). Although the mostly exotic-colored narration relativize the reporters' subjectivity and their factual dynamic communication, the authors were responsible for the truthfulness and accuracy of their representations. Objective factuality and subjective fictionality play a complementary role, as this strategic travel narrative binds the constructed slice of social reality to the public values and norms of the readership. The East becomes a dreamlike refuge serving to evade war, inflation, and isolation but also a possible hope for a Western-oriented emancipatory revolution. The reference goes to the emerging emancipated New Woman, who distanced herself from the traditional role of a housewife, studied at the university and worked in the press or as a freelance writer. One of the best examples is Lili Körber, whose texts show little difference from those of male authors, except for certain themes such as the focus on women's emancipation and child exploitation in the workplace. Also the usage of mobile photography, as a means of truthful and immediate impression of the described scenes from distant lands, makes the difference. Lili Körber's innovative combination of text and image emphasizes the authenticity of the multimedia travel reports of the Weimar Republik, which also appeared as an illustrated, almost tourist-oriented narration. All these socially and historically gendered contextualized aspects will be analyzed in this paper through a literary explanation of Körber's main travel recollections on China and Japan. As supporting texts, the paper will also undergo, in a literary comparative gendered perspective, Körber's "Sato-San" novel together with her travel experience in the Russian region of Birobischan.

2. Lili Körber's Travels in China—A Woman's Recollection

As one of the so-called New Women of the mid-1920s, Lili Körber—a Moscow-born Austrian Jew and exile—belongs to that cohort of emancipated European women who completed university studies, worked in the socialist labor press, and ventured alone to exotic lands. Collectively, these actions represented a distinct and sharp break from the traditional female roles of housewife, mother, and spouse. At the same time, Körber strove to travel the world as systematically as possible, aiming to report on her experiences with both expertise and strong opinions. Her political stance as a committed communist always remained central to this endeavor. Through her ideologically driven narrative approach, Körber maintained a certain distance from the countries she visited. Stylistically, her work straddles the line between reportage and grand narrative, incorporating the montage of newspaper clippings, political slogans, and radio broadcasts. She employed

a collage-like blend of narrative fiction, documentation, and factual background to present readers with a contemporary narrative rooted in anti-fascism. Körber's (1932) accounts from the 1930s—specifically *Eine Frau erlebt den roten Alltag*, *Begegnungen im Fernen Osten* (1934), and *Sato-San, ein japanischer Held* (1936)—chronicle her travels to Russia, Japan, and China, addressing social, political, and cultural aspects in a striking, bold manner. She highlights contrasts with European culture while simultaneously emphasizing the distinctiveness of the autonomous, culturally rich past of the countries she visited. She also acknowledges the societal and industrial efforts to align with the Western process of modernization. All these observations enable Körber to establish a cross-cultural, comparative vision of the Far East, in which her own political stance and convictions, her female dimension, and her Jewish-European background as an anti-fascist exile remain constantly visible. Körber's travels and travelogues concerning Asian countries highlight the social contrasts of the early 20th century, where traditional gender roles and structures overlap with new developments. The issue of women's emancipation serves as a prime example. Körber approaches this complex cultural topic from a dual perspective: that of a European woman vis-à-vis Asia, and that of a modern woman regarding a non-European culture still largely entrenched in patriarchal structures. The result of this double perspective is a realistic, gender-conscious comparative portrayal of European and Asian women, enabling Körber both to identify cultural differences and—through literary means—and to reveal the political tensions between Asia and Europe. Consequently, she repeatedly focuses on Western capitalist structures of Asian exploitation through political power dynamics. It is precisely this that gives Körber's travelogues their distinctive incisiveness. She does not shy away from looking closely at the very places where the observer's view threatens to be obscured by the trappings of exotic tradition. Asia's rich cultural tradition serves merely as an aesthetic—artistic and social—façade, behind which subjugation and exploitation continue to be practiced without scruple. Through the photographically precise, matter-of-fact language of her montage technique, readers of Lili Körber's travelogues gain a sober insight into the social reality of Asia—rendered through a literary lens—at the dawn of the modern age (cf. Lemke & Körber, 1999: p. 123). Although her travel period from June to August 1934 was after the rise of National Socialism, the situation, especially in China, had not seen much visible change for Western travelers in comparison. The Second Sino-Japanese War was already underway due to the attacks and provocations of the Japanese army in some Chinese cities, while the Communist Party of China had already issued declarations calling for resistance as early as 1931, well before the July 7th Incident in 1937, which marked the nationwide outbreak of the war.

At the invitation of one of the two Japanese translators of her successful work *A Woman Experiences the Red Everyday* (1932), Körber fled to Asia in 1934 also forced by the difficult political situation in Austria—Hitler was about to proclaim the Austrian annexation to the Third Reich. During her journey, a part of her travel reports was published in newspapers beforehand and was printed after-

wards in book form in 1936 under the title *Encounters in the Far East*. Körber's journey to Asia must have been a hurried one, not only because the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Austria failed in the struggles against the Dollfuss government during the Civil War in Vienna (February 1934), but also because she unexpectedly received in the spring of 1934 a copy of her book *Eine Frau erlebt den roten Alltag* (1932) in Japanese translation along with an invitation to visit Japan. Since there is no calendar with detailed information on her trip to Asia, the route by train from Moscow to Japan can only be reconstructed according to her autobiographical sketches and hints in her travel reports. In Japan, Körber was allowed to stay for less than 40 days, even though she obtained a twenty-day permit that was successfully extended for another twenty days. Her deportation from Japan may be due either to her participation in the demonstration on May 1st in Osaka or to the fact she had written a book about Russia, or possibly for both reasons. Since Körber experienced the state funeral of Admiral Tōgō Heihachirō (1848-1934) on June 5th, she must have arrived in Japan at the end of April and departed early in June after witnessing the events. As a purpose for her trip to Shanghai, Körber stated, according to her report in the Japanese Foreign Department of the Police Headquarters, that she wanted to study ancient Chinese culture. When it was pointed out that there was no ancient Chinese culture in Shanghai, she responded that she had an aunt, Mitzi Oberwassermayer, who was a missionary in Shanghai, a name that is obviously faked. Before the end of June, she reached Shanghai, where she saw the film *Das Lied der chinesischen Fischer*, which premiered on June 14th 1934, and ran for over 84 days. After a long stay in Shanghai, she traveled via Nanjing to Beijing and spent Emperor Franz Josef's birthday in Beijing, where she concluded her journey in China. From there, she set off for Birobidschan and traveled back to Vienna via Moscow in September 1934. As a traveler far from home, Körber describes a feeling of discomfort that gradually grows and cannot be suppressed, posing the question of whether this is what one calls homesickness. Not only after her return from China but also during the journey, Körber wrote reports mostly about Japan and China, which appeared starting in May 1934 in *Die Neue Weltbühne*, from June 1934 in *Prager Tagblatt*, from September 1934 in *Der Wiener Tag*, and from November 1934 in *Pariser Tageblatt*. The manuscript in book form, titled *Begegnungen im Fernen Osten* (1936), was completed only after her trip, containing minor changes and new information like a Reuter report from 1935. Since she did not find a publisher in Austria, Körber published the book in 1936 with Biblos, a newly founded Hungarian publishing house whose competence in the German language was very poor. Numerous typographical errors and inconsistent spelling of names indicate the unprofessional quality of the edition. Nevertheless, the book was assessed in the few contemporary reviews as an extremely vivid document of the time, and Körber was praised as a keen observer who vividly describes her travel impressions in engaging and fluent language. However, the book received little attention overall, as it does not fit the image of the anti-fascist writer and has not been re-

printed for a long time. It was only in September 2020 that a new edition was released with the added subtitle *Eine Reise nach Japan, China und Birobidschan* (1934) and a preface by Hertling (1987) from the Vienna publishing house Pro-media in the Edition *Frauenfahrten* (Rusch, 2013).

As the subtitle of the book suggests, Körber's travel reports include a section on Japan and another on China, along with a brief appendix about Birobidschan. In research, the section on Japan is often analyzed in connection with Körber's next novel *Sato-San, a Japanese Hero. A satirical contemporary novel* (1936). Compared to other female writers who have engaged with Orient as a literary theme, Lili Körber is not only counted as an observer of the enormous changes in the country but also as a participating affected individual. At the end of her China reports, it is indeed noted how Körber's personal feelings were a source of inspiration to explain the Far East and its colonial provocations to the West (cf. Lili Körber, 2020: p. 259).

But one thing is certain: it is not for everyone to live in colonies, mute and deaf and feel comfortable besides. Gradually, a discomfort arises, grows and grows, and cannot be held down [...] And one fine day, you shake hands with your new friends—white and brownish-yellow—and embark, with a heavy heart from the melancholy of farewell and the fate of a foreign people. (Körber, 1936: p. 254)

Körber seeks reconciliation between the foreigners and the locals, as she feels a sense of belonging and responsibility towards the Chinese people. She aimed to share authentic reports of experiences from the working world of Japan and China, as well as to contribute to political changes. In her descriptions of what she experiences and witnesses in these changing countries, Körber repeatedly focuses on women's emancipation and child exploitation in the metropolitan workforce, as well as the impoverished marginalized poor beggars and farmers in the countryside. The way in which she connects her meeting with Miss Slow, her first landlord in China, and Siu-Dachen, her companion in Shanghai, is among the peculiarities of her writings.

Only Miss Slow can handle them [the porters at the train station]; in her bright green dress, she shouts at one or the other, and at me in between, who now falls under her control. I know no one in Shanghai, and the night before, in the cabin, Miss Slow rented me a room in her house with a bath and veranda and full board, and at a price that only seems half a gift compared to the cheap Japan. (Körber, 1936: p. 145)

When the Red Army marched into our village, I [Siu-Dachen] was employed as a washerwoman. [...] Well, you are a countrywoman of mine [Mr. Battalion Commander], so I won't have you shot for now; I will send you to a higher authority, to the division commander, and he can do with you as he pleases. (Körber, 1936: p. 186)

Dramatically, the working conditions of children and women at the textile factory Poo Yeh in Shanghai is to be seen in the children

Lying in dirt and dust on the damp floor from 6 AM to 6 PM, while their moth-

ers pull silk threads out of boiling water for a wage of 38 Mexican cents with scalded fingers. (Körber 1936: 152)

and in the youths,

Including many apprentices, [who] work twelve hours with a half-hour lunch break for so-called “rice money,” that is the price for a bowl of rice. (Körber, 1936: p. 153)

The unbearably hot, stinking air of the weaving factory, which appears like smoke, reflects the inhuman poverty of the workers’ settlement, where there are no houses, only tents with torn, dirty canvas, as well as boats that appear like floating coffins covered with straw in the foul-smelling and greasy canal. All around, only begging children, impatiently lifting their lean, dirty hands and chattering something incomprehensible as they eagerly ask the tourists with hungry slit eyes. But hardship and poverty do not prevent thoughts of the Chinese dream,

That all Chinese have completed an agricultural school and become masters of the land and life, without bloody struggle and war. (Körber, 1936: p. 175)

Brotherhood and solidarity remain firm feelings of the hopeful future utopia of China, where Japan and the USSR are potential conquerors. Japan demands colonization, Russia Bolshevization and China advocates more for this second option, as this allows the country to still exist, while under Japanese control, China would no longer exist as an independent nation but rather as a subordinate colony. Alongside the Japanese and Russians, Körber also analyzes the Europeans with an embarrassingly brutally factual language,

Who for the Chinese are merely a thing, an embarrassing natural event, with which one does not first engage, a barbarian [...] (Körber, 1936: p. 182)

This description refers more specifically to the Germans, who, according to the Germanic model of the Nibelungenlied, are stereotyped in the sense of a modern Siegfried (Körber, 1936: p. 183). Körber’s lexical choices, which sometimes sound so incredibly inhuman and mistakenly even almost racist, stem from her firm decision to report on social issues journalistically and objectively, beyond any narrative entertainment or manipulated poetic softening. In this sense, Körber also highlights the positive elements of being European as she emphasizes the revolutionary technological innovation of the West in China (cf. Detering, 2009). Right in this sense, Körber notes that

When the old customs of China have changed, when women today stop being slaves, that is also a credit to Europe and, not least, to the missions. (Körber, 1936: p. 200).

However, Chinese modernity is not viewed solely as an emancipation wave through the imported European technology but also through the intense cultural engagement of the Chinese, who, albeit helplessly, covered in rags, let shine the brilliance of a culture filled with beauty and ancient wisdom. The heights and depths of such peculiar cultural traditions remain mostly closed off to the West due to the complexity of the language. Examples of this are the splendor of sunken dynasties, coexisting side by side with the dreadful everyday poverty and the Western

elegance of the diplomatic quarter; the harmony between nature and spirit, “which we Westerners only rarely achieve, only in peak performances” (Körber, 1936: p. 231). Also the theater, whose masks and costumes, in their variegated colors, conceive the movements of the actors as charming dances and psalmodies, so that body and voice, tone and step are regulated according to traditional conventions. Körber’s depiction of China sharply highlights both the traditional aspects of Chinese cultural life and the modern influences, such as European fashions, visible in urban centers. It notes the fashionable images of women with bobbed hair, which was also popular among German women during the Weimar Republic, as well as the sporty girls among Chinese women. It addresses not only the right to abortion and women’s disenfranchisement in social life but also the common tradition that women did not have both their own will and the right to walk alongside their husbands on the street (cf. Körber 1936: p. 240). In this context, Körber reads Zeng Baosun’s essay *The Chinese Woman in the Past and Present* (1917-1928) before writing her report, quoting the opinion of this important Chinese educator to highlight the groundbreaking significance of opening the first girls’ schools by missionaries in China. As Zeng writes in this essay published in Shanghai in 1931, many thoughts and ideas about freedom from the West are introduced through education, which has contributed to women’s emancipation. (cf. Zhu, 2019: pp. 47-57) As a result of this new development, Körber observes that young Chinese women with black wavy bobbed hair and high-collared dresses with opening slits are visiting the French Concession to celebrate the Storming of the Bastille. Körber critically notes that the women’s collars are buttoned up and that the slits on the left and right are not too long, as prescribed by the movement of New Life, so as to maintain the old Confucian morals. In the report *A Chinese Doctor in Shanghai*, published in the *Parisian Gazette* on April 26th 1936, Körber noted that a Dr. Lee, at the age of 28, is still unmarried and works independently, which firstly contradicts Körber’s notion that all Chinese women are engaged from a young age and secondly highlights the traces of new developments in the city (cf. Leader, 1973: pp. 55-79).

Körber also pays significant attention to the working conditions in Shanghai’s silk spinning mills and textile factories. During visits arranged by a member of the Young Women’s Christian Association in China, Körber documented long working hours (12 hours with a short break), low wages, and harsh conditions, including the lack of protective gloves, which she likened to a prison-like environment. Her account depicts extremely difficult working conditions for women in these mills (cf. Kumar, 2023: pp. 186-195). Körber describes in more detail the lives of the weavers, who move around in long cotton trousers and smocks despite the heat, as they strictly adhere to moral standards. In addition to the factories, Körber also visits the settlement of the female workers, where the poor residents live in various rooms. According to Körber, those who work at the pressing and cleaning machines, in textile factories and weaving mills, can afford the luxury of closed living spaces, while others live in dim, shabby houses or tents made of torn, dirty

canvas, where miserable household items are clearly visible. Although life in this way is clearly no luxury, Körber presents it in contrast to the lives of even poorer people who live on the boats in the canal.

In fact, the canal is full of boats, some of which are covered with straw mats, making them look like floating coffins. Flags of poverty flutter on poles, alongside drying laundry. The boats are black with people, and the canal is greasy and foul-smelling like dishwater (Körber, 1936: p. 185).

The boats on the canal, which Körber experiences as a visitor to the workers' settlement, reflect both in content and language the harsh conditions of everyday life in Shanghai for the urban poor. The extreme poverty of the people, even their struggle for survival, is associated here with the symbols of death, darkness, and hopelessness. Darkness and hopelessness are not concealed but rather openly demonstrated through the laundry hung out to dry, the density of people, and the pollution of the canal. The poor have neither money nor motivation to cover this harsh conditions. Even though there is a currency exchange in this settlement, like everywhere in China, "where paper money is exchanged for copper coins" (Körber, 1936: p. 185), it is rarely used because the poor workers do not possess capital to exchange. What Körber personally sees in the settlement and reports in her articles stands in stark contrast to what, as mentioned above, *i.e.* Europeans or Americans claim, namely that "the Chinese are doing splendidly" (Körber, 1936: p. 180).

To present the living conditions of Chinese workers more convincingly, Körber cites a Chinese Yearbook, which must refer to the volume *The China Year Book 1934* published by H. G. W. Woodhead at the then Shanghai publisher The North-China Daily News and Herald, Ltd. According to a review, it concerns the sixteenth volume of the series and provides "an authentic survey of the year's developments" in the areas of "economy, trade returns, public health, labor, transportation, communications and shipping, finance, government, and international relations". The volume was published on January 1, 1934. It is possible that Körber read the book before or during her journey; in any case, it belongs to her reading for the preparation of her own reports on China. With a clear journalistic character, the publisher collects "exciting stories about these small creatures" (Körber, 1936: p. 186), namely about these poor workers, especially children. Körber cites a project on unified Chinese occupational safety legislation from 1929, which yields only suggestions instead of regulations. Within the framework of the project, Körber focuses on demands for reducing working hours to 10 hours, banning night work, setting a minimum age of 12 for young workers, planning a factory council, as well as compensation for workplace accidents, illness, maternity benefits, and statutory rest days. However, due to the interests of factories under foreign control, no decisions are made regarding these issues, and thus none of the problems are solved (cf. Körber, 1936: pp. 186-188). Neither a memorandum from the inspectors sent by the International Labour Office in 1931 nor the Chinese delegation's request for assistance before the International Labour Office in 1933

could effect any change. Körber finds it very curious that the arguments presented by the Japanese against the ban on night work, it should continue in China because women in the surrounding villages live outside the factories, making it unsafe to send them home alone after ten o'clock in the evening, which Körber ironically describes as a "delicate consideration". (cf. Körber, 1936: pp. 186-187) Körber refutes the general opinion of those Europeans living in China that the Chinese are thriving due to their low living costs and more than modest demands with statistics from the aforementioned yearbook. This shows that workers in Shanghai and Beijing earn too little on average and are malnourished. While the quality of life of workers is already compared in the report about their visit to the settlement of poor Chinese to that of the coolies, Körber also finds it important here to explain that the situation in other cities like Tianjin or Wuxi appears to be even worse. Furthermore, it also compares the income level of the Chinese with that of the Japanese and Americans to demonstrate more clearly the low amount in China (cf. Körber, 1936: p. 189). So far, it can be noted that Körber observed the poor working and living conditions of the workforce in Shanghai very closely during her trip and reported on it in detail. She criticizes the Europeans who do not intervene but even allow the strike leaders protesting against their companies to be abducted by criminals (cf. Körber, 1936: p. 190). She admires that despite everything, many trade unions already exist in China and can also lead strikes. As a conclusion of her visit to the workforce, she notes in connection with the fighting Chinese in the city

It's no wonder that China today resembles dry firewood, from which the flames occasionally leap (Körber, 1936: p. 190).

It can be inferred that Körber considers the revolution in China as a clear possibility for a necessary development especially in the Chinese countryside. She describes the farmers' poverty, where mud huts, corn, rice, or grain fields, as well as irrigation facilities, can be seen along with naked children and old peasant women (cf. Körber, 1936: p. 270, 277). In Körber's eyes, this rural poverty in China is "not veiled by Oriental romance like in Japan" (Körber, 1936: p. 271), as Körber notes that even during a rickshaw ride through the villages around Shanghai, she saw not only houses mostly made of mud or bamboo but also the landscape with burned yellow stubble and the graves of ancestors (cf. Körber 1936: p. 204). Instead of an idyllic picture of nature that is often associated with rural landscapes, Körber's reports depict the dramatic poverty of the farmers, who do not want to abandon their ancient traditions. This is illustrated in her accounts of a procession organized in the Shanghai villages, featuring drums, cymbals, and dragon dances, where young farmers carry dragon heads and tails made of painted cardboard and long bodies made of silk on wooden frames to ask for the blessings of water divine spirits (cf. Körber, 1936: p. 204). Körber also consistently draws attention to the backwardness of women in the countryside, particularly regarding the custom of foot binding from childhood, which persisted until the mid-20th century despite government prohibitions. According to the report, Körber's companion Siu-Da-

chen in Shanghai had her feet bound by her mother, who firmly believed that otherwise, she would have no chance of getting married (cf. Körber, 1936: p. 268). Although Siu-Dachen's identity cannot be proven, Körber uses this character to explain the underlying thought of this custom, namely that small, triangular feet were considered beautiful by men in ancient times. The custom is thus a consequence of the patriarchal societal structure. Through several passages in dialogue form, Körber analyzes the reasons behind the poor situation of farmers and presents experimental projects in China aimed at developing agriculture by training young people in agronomy and then sending them to the villages to reorganize farming.

Körber's writing style differs when she examines Chinese cities, which appear as places where the Chinese population encounters colonial intruders from the West and their influence in the areas of economy, military, and politics. Western Europeans enjoy their privileges in the city without being troubled by the injustices faced by the Chinese inhabitants, justifying themselves with the argument that the Chinese, due to their low needs, are doing splendidly—a point that Körber criticizes. Although she is forced to behave as a proper Western lady, she empathizes with the oppressed Chinese workers, coolies, beggars, and farmers who have fallen into poverty. She is particularly outraged by the countless Japanese provocations in China, which she exemplifies and criticizes through the specific case of Nanjing (cf. Körber 1936: 223-240). Instead of addressing these conflicts, Körber seeks reconciliation between the foreigners and the locals. In the city of Beijing, where the splendor of fallen dynasties coexists with the most horrifying poverty and the Western elegance of the diplomatic quarter, she outlines a scene of reconciliation in the story of the Chinese boy Ss-Dja and the Little Marco Polo, positioning herself against the actions of the colonial strangers and urging both sides to cultivate more understanding and trust towards each other. But alongside this vision of ideal development, Körber also acknowledges that it will take decades, even centuries, before communication can defeat mistrust. In Körber's eyes China in the 1930s was a highly volatile society that can be ignited and can explode at any moment.

3. Lili Körber's Travel to Japan—Her Narrative Political Approach

In parallel to the image of China, Körber also portrays the image of Japan in her memoirs from the Far East, summarizing it under Bernard Shaw's motto "I expected to find a fairyland in Japan, but I found a nightmare" (Körber, 1936: p. 29). Körber's personally experienced disappointment contains mixed, contradictory feelings of unfreedom, dominance, curiosity, and surprisingly vibrant daily life. The landscape itself already provides a perfect reflection of this contrasting harmony, where "Japan takes pride in combining ancient customs, virtue, and decency with modernity" (Körber, 1936: p. 48). The result is that Japan is a "strange country where the Middle Ages continue to live on in the twentieth century"

(Körber, 1936: p. 23). The still largely agrarian everyday structure of village life, where one breathes a whimsical mix of romantic medieval and advanced Western culture, causes poverty and distress, as exemplified by the still inadequate wages of Japanese textile workers, who earn only a third of what their English counterparts earn. Körber documents these existential contradictions through statistics, which lend a striking note of journalistic authenticity to the narrative dynamism of her report. Even more exemplary is Körber's account of young underpaid and exploited weavers and farmers—they are constantly victims under the grip of fear of their employers' absolute bullying.

They are treated almost like prisoners, not allowed to go out without special permission, even after their working hours, and this permission is very hard to obtain. In many cases, their barracks are surrounded by barbed wire. If a strike breaks out, they are imprisoned and may not receive any food (Körber, 1936: p. 28).

Interestingly, Körber also points out a common cozy atmosphere of life that can be found particularly in familiar and private contexts, such as those of home furnishings. Here, people play a central role, while things serve only as a decorative purpose. For instance, there is the case of the women's kimono, whose colorful silk brings life, beauty, and satisfaction to bare spaces, as do the flowering branches and flowers that can never be absent in a Japanese house (Kojima-Ruh, 2007). This Japanese life philosophy of cozy living, which is both strictly essential towards self-referential purposeless home decoration and full of well-maintained symbolic details, is also evident in Körber's portrait of the geisha. In Osaka, where the author spends 20 days in a European hotel (cf. Körber, 1936: p. 22), she encounters the figure of the geisha for the first time. The geisha, an artist and not a prostitute, is a beautiful, elegant, and refined dancer and actress whose role is to entertain men in public. She is a highly respected cultural protagonist in the social amusement of men, without losing her self-esteem as an emancipated woman (cf. Stanley, 2013: pp. 539-562). The geisha is neither shy nor reserved; she is determined, self-confident, and proud of her artistic role in Japanese society and culture.

She is about twenty years old, wearing a beautiful silk kimono: purple and yellow stripes on a white background, embroidered with blue flowers, and printed with pink flowers. The neckline features a pink and silver embellishment [...] then the wide obi (belt), made of white silk, richly embroidered with orange flowers and green leaves, grows into a stiff, large bow at the back, and this bow, too, is richly embroidered. Her hair is elaborately arranged in peaks and valleys, adorned with sparkling decorations like those on a Christmas tree; on the obi, there is a beautiful silver brooch set with green stones—it depicts a floral branch. Raspberry-colored side knots peek out over the obi [...] By the way, the undergarments of the Japanese woman are not made of silk—she wears a cotton undershirt; what else she is wearing is difficult to ascertain, as no display window informs us about Japanese women's lingerie. (Körber, 1936: p. 37)

And furthermore

The second geisha, who slides into the room on her knees with a shamisen (lute), is not as pretty, she is older—about 25. Her clothing is not as luxurious [...] She sits cross-legged and adjusts the lute—it is the oldest folk instrument, which [...] originates from China. She plays on the three strings with an ivory pick. The young girl [...] lifts her kimono so that the green silk cuffs and the red and white underskirts can be seen, and starts to dance—or rather, to sway. [...] Occasionally, she casually claps her hands and moves her arms, the sleeves of her kimono fluttering like two large wings. No passion ignites the stylized poses, no movement alters the photographer's smile of the young girl. Finally, she sings a peculiar tune while dancing and everyone claps their hands in rhythm, so calmly and measuredly, as if they were fulfilling a serious task. (Körber, 1936: pp. 37-38)

From this portrait, Körber emphasizes how the girls interact seriously and professionally without flirting or attempting to capture the attention of the men. They are not barmaids in the European sense; they are true artists who showcase their craft with professionalism so to “provide company to men who never take their wives to celebrations, seasoning their meals with wit, charm, and artistic performances; that and nothing else is included in their hourly wage” (Körber, 1936: p. 38). It is clear here that the geisha is a professional and simultaneously an equally emancipated woman (cf. Körber, 1936: p. 85), who is paid for her artistic work, although Körber reminds us that the fate of the geisha still remains that of a slave to her master. It is true that the geisha is not available for the sensual pleasure of men, as that is satisfied by prostitutes in an Oiran or in the red-light district of Yoshiwara. The geisha is a mixture of art and kitsch, of oriental moral tradition and European modern emancipation (cf. Bardsley, 2012), without embodying the shamelessness of European women (cf. Körber, 1936: p. 101). She is a spiritual and entertaining cultural art attraction, a living Gesamtkunstwerk that offers the man only elegant and refined companionship without communicating erotic signals, as eroticism remains in the hands of the prostitutes of the Oiran (cf. Körber, 1936: p. 41), while household duties and progeny are left to the legitimate wife. This one actually takes on all household responsibilities and has no civil or political rights; she stays at home with the children without property rights and may not demand divorce under any circumstances; she must remain faithful to her husband even if he is syphilitic, as Japanese law requires marital fidelity only from the woman, not from the man. Körber also confirms such social behavior of women through the narration of Countess Tomomura, who states that “the girls are still married according to the wishes of their parents, to a man they hardly know or do not know at all” (Körber, 1936: p. 98).

Male patriarchal, authoritarian, and despotically politically oriented, is the image of the Japanese dictator Sato-San, who arises from Lili Körber's novel *Sato-San. A Japanese Hero* (1936). The character Sato-San from this satirical contemporary novel is to be understood as a sarcastic allegorical Oriental embodiment of Hitler. (cf. Lemke & Körber, 1999: pp. 165-185) Körber's depiction emphasizes the strong contradictory coexistence of the ancient Japanese legendary tradition

of the samurai past and modern colonial industrialization, which has questioned the consolidated and well-balanced life order of the Far East. The disharmony between then and now, order and chaos, value balance and value deterioration, constitutes the suitable social context for disseminating the political ideology of Sato-San. It is immediately understood how the figure of Sato-San serves as the perfect parody of Hitler, just as Sato-San's Japan mirrors Germany in the Weimar Republic. (cf. [Kojima-Ruh, 2008](#)) In such a moral deterioration, Sato-San's protest to proclaim the motto Asia for Asians is not complex. Sato-San advocates for a symbolic radical Endlösung (final solution) to all Western influences that have contaminated the genuine Oriental roots with depravity and uncontrolled modernity, and thus longs for the return of all those primitive values that are strictly traditional and purely Oriental. Boldly, heroically, and rebelliously determined, Sato-San is described by Körber as the one who presents to the people his political program for the rebirth of Japan in the sense of a modern resurrection of the samurai Middle Ages.

Isn't that the famous Sato, who has instigated a great conspiracy against the government because it is not radical enough for him? [...] But Mister Sato, called the excellent man, is by no means a Bolshevik, [...] he only wants to help the little man against the rich and save the traditional craftsmanship, which is also gradually threatened in Japan by the establishment of large enterprises. Furthermore, he plans a strong government, an annexation of China, and a war against the Soviets. ([Körber, 1936: p. 23](#))

Evident here is the reference to Hitler's ideological program, which brutally and violently realized at first the struggle against communism and capitalism and then the glorious victory of the Germanic people over other races. A cunning traitor, dreamlike idealist, and ruthless careerist, whose biographical notes spoke of "an upright citizen, who, coming from a poor family, did not shy away from starting from the bottom and travelling through the villages as an intermediary of a lantern industry" as "he lived a very reclusive life with his wife from an old samurai family and his little son", which makes him a perfect father and husband ([Körber, 1936: p. 99](#)). Sato-San, along with his patriots, "full of youthful fire and burning love for the homeland" ([Körber, 1936: p. 100](#)), is also the author of the manuscript *Mein Werden und Wollen* (My Wish and Will). The reference to Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is also clearly readable here. Sato-San "glorified his past and set the course for the future, [as well as] articulated his worldview and assigned good and bad grades to the whole world; [...] a masculine work that did not spare coarse expressions and did not first awkwardly support value judgments with scientific evidence" ([Körber, 1936: p. 252](#)). In Sato-San's patriarchal worldview, the new Western-influenced emancipation of Japan plays a central role. According to Sato-San, Japan's Americanization or value-colonization marks a demonically tempting human degradation that slowly leads to the death of the ancient essence of the Japanese soul, functioning almost like a Western addiction to modernity. But this imperialist vision of Sato-San only partially considers the reciprocal advantages that East and

West could experience in a complementary perspective of living beings. Partially, because in Sato-San's colonialist conquest dystopia, the West serves merely as an idealized source of emancipation without having a concrete impact on daily life; otherwise, traditional Eastern traditions would be destabilized. If the West is the main model for Japan's material independence in finance and industrialization, women's fashion—not men's fashion, which is tolerated in Europe—along with women's roles, romantic relationships, and women's work remain strictly conservative, as Confucius' philosophy of life underlines.

[...] *and one preferred to adhere to the good old custom which provided for a strict division of labor for all the needs of men. His married wife presides over the household and cares for the children's education, the geisha provides him with mental distraction, while the girls from Yoshiwara provide other amusements, who, by the way, have recently faced sharp competition from Bar Florida in Ginza and other similar establishments.* (Körber, 1936: p. 54)

And furthermore

[...] *I must wait until I am elected, and then I can say yes or no with my parents' consent. [...] They taught her (the woman) from childhood that a married woman must never be jealous, never oppose, and never make accusations. The virtue of the woman was symbolized by three monkeys: one monkey covering its ears, one monkey closing its eyes, and one monkey covering its mouth.* (Körber, 1936: p. 67)

Even in the workfield, Japan remains strictly patriarchal as women do not appear in theater.

The typical of Kabuki as well as No is the absence of women on stage, replaced by the Oyama, the male actor for female roles. (Körber, 1936: p. 33)

Given these premises, it results that Sato-San's image is that of a good father and husband as well as a patriot who fights for the preservation of Eastern tradition against the Western cultural impoverishment and massification of the capitalist individual. Lili Körber also emphasizes Sato-San's inner contradiction as a freedom fighter and national hero of Japan but also as a traitor to the people, who arrested him, sent him to prison, and judged him guilty in the trial. The end of the novel finds a fascinatingly fitting solution to overcome this contradiction: Sato-San's incredible and unexpected escape from prison. In this sense, it is understood that Lili Körber considers Sato-San's heroic, almost fairy-tale-like nature more than his concrete political totalitarian value. Seen this way, Lili Körber imbues the novel with an exotic, somewhat magical, and surreal dimension that aligns with the European collective evaluation of the Far East. Despite its effective historical story between capitalist Western dominance and Eastern traditional striving for the preservation of antiquity, the Far East remains a place of Western imagination and empathy, where one constantly experiences a magical ambivalence of the new and the old.

4. Conclusion

This contribution has pointedly addressed how Körber deals with differences to European culture while emphasizing the independence of an autonomous, culturally

rich past in the countries she visited. Indeed, she recognizes the societal and industrial efforts to adapt to the Western modernization process. All these observations allow Körber to establish an interculturally comparative vision of the Far East, where her own political stance and conviction, her feminine dimension, and her Jewish-European heritage as an anti-fascist exile remain ever visible. Körber's travels and travel books about Asian countries highlight the social contrasts of the early 20th century, overlying older gender-specific role models and structures. Körber approaches this complex of themes from a dual perspective, that of a European towards Asia and that of a distanced modern woman from a non-European culture still largely caught in patriarchal structures. The result of this perspective is a gender-specific realistic depiction of European and Asian women, which allows Körber to name cultural differences and to illustrate political tensions in the relationship between Asia and Europe through literary means. For this reason, Körber repeatedly focuses on capitalist exploitation systems, political power structures, archaic conditions, ancestral traditions, and rooted lifestyles. This indeed contributes to the distinctive sharpness of Körber's travel reports. A special report of Lili Körber's anti-fascist and socialist convictions in a postcolonial framed criticism reflects the discordant coexistence of Orientalist and Eurocentric biases in her travel memories. This contradiction, seen from various angles like the Civilizing Gaze or the ideological lens categories of Soviet-style socialism and Western democracy, tends to limit the harmonic description of a unified narrative perspective as Körber tends to judge the Far East not on the basis of its own internal dynamics, but on the evaluation of how backward or forward it is in relation to Western standards. The same limiting approach is to be found also in her reportage when the author describes the Asian population through clichés of exotic and inscrutable Otherness, which reminds of Edward Said's definition of Orientalism. (cf. Said, 1993: pp. 20-25; 62-80; 240-245) Clear example is here Lili Körber's Idealization of the USSR in her description of the Jewish Autonomous Russian Region of Birobidschan. The author takes on paternalistic, almost colonial overtones, in order to characterize the inhabitants of this independent republic as Jewish Robinsons. The use of Jewish pioneer rhetoric, that brings civilization to wild territories, supports both the colonial European concept of cultural improvement and the value rehabilitation of a marginalized collective minority like the Jewish people in the totalitarian Europe (Körber, 1936: p. 261). As a result, Körber's example of the Jewish colonized Birobidschan justifies and also legitimizes any European-style colonial approach, that transforms primitivity into modernity (Körber, 1936: p. 262, 264, 272).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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