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# IDA PFEIFFER IN CHINA: EXAMINING THE SUPPRESSION OF GENDER ROLES IN THE FACE OF EUROPEAN COLONIAL SUPERIORITY

ALEXANDER C. DOWN

“*Als eine Frau lesen lernte, trat die Frauenfrage in die Welt.*”

-Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach

As Ida Pfeiffer arrived in Macao,<sup>1</sup> China in 1846, she came not as a writer intending to travel, but as a traveller determined to record her journey. In fact, the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century has often been described as the “goldene[s] Zeitalter des Reisens und der Reiseliteratur von Frauen” (Pelz 209). However, during her experiences in China, written as part of *Eine Frauenfahrt um die Welt*, Pfeiffer identifies herself more with the superiority of colonial Europe. I will demonstrate that Pfeiffer is not recording her experiences in China as a woman of the 19<sup>th</sup> century would normally be expected to do. Rather, she remains confident of her womanhood and does not use her writing as a tool to establish herself as an individual equal to her male contemporaries nor does she engage emotionally with the subject matter, but rather she writes as European and as an individual; the dominant theme in her account is colonial superiority compared with the “primitive” and “disorganized” Chinese societies. True, her travelogue account was written from the perspective of a woman, and whilst the details may concentrate on the aspects of the native women and how they are connected with the lives of European women, the drive to affiliate herself with the politics of a strong, colonial Europe throughout her writing becomes much more relevant than her gender. In order to prove my thesis, I shall first relate Pfeiffer’s childhood experiences, which play an important role in her psychological development as she reaches

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<sup>1</sup> Macao is currently one of two special administrative regions of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In 1846, when Pfeiffer made her travels to China, these two administrative regions, the other being Hong Kong, were some of the few ports that allowed access into the Chinese mainland. Direct landing in Shanghai or other major Chinese ports was often dangerous, if not forbidden.

adulthood. Second, I shall give examples from Pfeiffer's travel writings, which demonstrate her feeling of European superiority over the Chinese native, thus leading presenting the discussion on how Pfeiffer's writing differs from the expected traditions of women's writing.

Pfeiffer was born on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1797 in Vienna, Austria. She was the only girl in her family and was raised predominantly by her father, Alois Reyer.<sup>2</sup> However, after her father's death, was she left to maternal care and fell victim to the restrictions of the socially expected "weibliche Erziehung" (Brinker-Gabler 237). On 1<sup>st</sup> May 1820, she married Dr Pfeiffer,<sup>3</sup> who was 24 years her senior. Their marriage was an unhappy one, but after he died and their sons had homes of their own, Pfeiffer was free to fulfil her childhood dream of travelling the world. Pfeiffer started her travels by visiting the Holy Land and publishing her journals in 1846. She then continued her travels, including two round-the-world trips, publishing in total 13 volumes of writing. Pfeiffer's account of China can be found in her travelogue *Eine Frauenfahrt um die Welt*.

In the last two hundred years, the voice of German-speaking women has begun to be heard to a degree that was not possible in earlier centuries. As Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach proclaimed in 1893, "als eine Frau lesen lernte, trat die Frauenfrage in die Welt" (Ebner-Eschenbach 888). These recorded words have echoed throughout the last century of German-speaking women's writing. Ebner-Eschenbach's claim that the "Frauenfrage" has become an important question to ask in literary criticism has formed the grounding for much research into the writing of German-speaking women. Yet traditional criticism still does not do women's literature justice, preferring, still, to focus on the dominant male voice. However, the assertive

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<sup>2</sup> Not much is known about Alois Reyer. He died in 1806.

<sup>3</sup> Pfeiffer's writings do not include many biographical notes, as she prefers to concentrate on recording her travels and interactions with those people she meets during the travels. All that is known about her husband is that he worked as a lawyer.

intellect and literary creativity by German-speaking women has demanded a place in society; they have written fictional novels and poetry, articles and response pieces, as well as personal journals, diaries and travelogues. Pfeiffer's travelogues provide us with accounts that bridge the gap between women's writing and traditional male authored colonial writing.

Before I can proceed to examine why Pfeiffer's writing aligns itself better with male authored colonial literature than it does traditional women's writing, it is important to demonstrate the notion of expected gender roles in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century literature. Men's literature has traditionally dominated the canon of German Studies, with the likes of Walther von der Vogelweide,<sup>4</sup> Lessing<sup>5</sup> and Goethe<sup>6</sup>. However, in the last two hundred years, the voice of German-speaking women has begun to be heard to a degree that was not possible in earlier centuries. As Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach proclaimed in 1893, "als eine Frau lesen lernte, trat die Frauenfrage in die Welt" (Ebner-Eschenbach 888). These recorded words have echoed throughout the last century of German-speaking women's writing. Ebner-Eschenbach's claim that the "Frauenfrage" has become an important question to ask in literary criticism has formed the grounding for much research into the writing of German-speaking women. Yet traditional criticism still does not do women's literature justice, preferring, still, to focus on the dominant male voice. However, the assertive intellect and literary creativity by German-speaking women has demanded a place in society; they have written fictional novels and poetry, articles and response pieces, as well as personal journals, diaries and travelogues.

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<sup>4</sup> Walther von der Vogelweide (c.1170-c.1230), the most celebrated of Middle High German poets.

<sup>5</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (22 January 1729 – 15 February 1781), was a German writer of the Enlightenment period. He is known for his philosophical writings, as well as fictional dramas representing the politics of the time, such as *Nathan the Wise*.

<sup>6</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (28 August 1749-22 March 1832), was a German writer. He was a Europe-wide literary celebrity by the age of 25 as a result of his drama *The sorrows of Young Werther*.

Although female authorship has increased in quantity, women's writing has differed significantly in style to men's writing. Mary Louise Pratt suggests that female travel writing differs from men's writing is that it is more focussed on domestic settings, due to differences in interests or expertise (Schlick 5). Travel writings are particularly susceptible this difference as it focussed on one's actual experiences rather than literary creativity. The mid-nineteenth century was a time in history that regarded women as unsuitable for the rigours of travel. It was believed that travelling would make women "discontented, assertive, and so unfit to fulfil their proper role as wives" (Howe 326). This prejudice resulted in most women learning to accommodate their journeys, and as a result, the recordings of those journeys to the accepted notions of womanhood and marriage; they would write from the perspective of their roles as the wives of soldiers, diplomats or missionaries instead of an independent objective observer. Pfeiffer's visit to China takes right in the middle of this prejudiced time during July and August 1847. Naturally, it is expected that Pfeiffer's writing would also fall into line with the expectation of female perspective, but it did not. This may be attributed to Pfeiffer's unique circumstances as a female traveller—Pfeiffer was not travelling as a companion, she was travelling as an independent woman, and she was free to travel according to her own agenda.

This freedom to travel is perhaps one of the most important elements in establishing Pfeiffer's digression from the customary roles of a 19<sup>th</sup> century woman. To say that Pfeiffer was "free" to travel the world embodies two main components. First, Pfeiffer had established herself financially. Although not a wealthy woman, Pfeiffer had managed to gather enough money to pay her fares and lodging on her journeys.<sup>7</sup> But the second and probably most important factor is

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<sup>7</sup> Pfeiffer's early travels were largely self-financed. However, as she made friends during her journeys her contacts grew in number, as did her fame. Reports of her journeys were often recorded in newspapers. *Die Gartenlaube, Abendblatt der Neuen Münchener Zeitung, Kurier für*

the freedom from her responsibilities as a woman. Pfeiffer no longer had to fulfil her roles as a wife or a mother, or as one scholar puts it: "...she felt free from all responsibilities to others and was eager to realize her dreams of seeing the world" (Watt 340). Pfeiffer did not feel obligated to write about her role as a woman, and how that was reflected in her travels. Though the extent of her travels is noteworthy, it is the style of her writing that deserves a closer look. Whilst her contemporaries, Ida Hahn-Hahn and Johanna Schopenhauer, wrote in order to place themselves alongside male travel writers and to establish themselves as individuals, Pfeiffer, a mid-nineteenth-century middle-class older woman, would explore the remotest corners of the world—and she would do it alone—not to distinguish herself as an individual woman outside of her expected gender roles, but rather, as her friend Bayard Tayler<sup>8</sup> noted in his own travel journal, because "the desire to travel was ... an inborn propensity" (Tayler 1). It is this freedom from her responsibilities as a woman, which allowed Pfeiffer to move beyond the boundaries of women's writing, and push herself into the world of colonial literature.

Strikingly common themes are apparent throughout German-speaking women's literature, but a topic that seems to appear on regular basis is the "problem" of being an unmarried woman. Indeed, in 1806, Friederike Unger wrote her own work in response to Goethe's *Bekenntnisse einer schönen Seele*, her title differing only in the added phrase *von sich selbst geschrieben*. This was perhaps not uncommon at the time, but it took on added significance as it suggested female authorship, thus contesting the originally male-authored

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*Niederbayern* and *Der Grenzbote* are just a few examples. This led to her later travels being financed by British and Dutch colonialists, as well as local sponsors.

<sup>8</sup> On page 1 of Tayler's journal he claims that Pfeiffer is a friend, although it is unknown where they met each other. Pfeiffer did travel through London on several occasions, and it is likely that this is where they began their friendship.

work<sup>9</sup>. Mirabella, the main character in this novel, dismisses her virginity as a defining attribute of her individualism when she exclaims “[w]ie ich mit den körperlichen und geistigen Eigenschaften, in deren Besitz ich gewesen und allenfalls auch noch bin, eine Jungfrau habe bleiben können? In Wahrheit, dies ist das Hauptproblem, das gelöst werden muß, wenn man mich in meiner Individualität begreifen will.“ Through Mirabella, Unger writes in opposition to Goethe, who implies that women who did not marry and bear children, were societally perceived as not really being women at all—marriage and child-birth were the duties of a woman, and to be considered as a woman, one must embrace these perceived “obligations.”

However, we must be careful with such generalizations and simplifications. Pfeiffer was proof that women could embrace the perceived male roles and still be women. However, she was not always the confident woman that she was during her travels. In describing her early years, Pfeiffer says: “Wie linkisch und unbeholfen war ich Anfangs...als ich dabei noch immer lief und sprang und mich in allen benahm wie ein wilder Junge!“ (Pfeiffer, *Reise nach Madagaskar* XIII). But this did not last. Eventually, Pfeiffer would embrace her femininity, accepting her individual role as a woman in society. She would marry and bear children. The difference, however, was that Pfeiffer never allowed these societal roles become her defining characteristics. On the contrary, having now passed through the expected stages of ‘womanhood,’ Pfeiffer was free to travel and write without criticism—in short, she was free to write as a man would.

This freedom was acknowledged and respected, but that did not stop people from doubting her abilities. As Pfeiffer departed on her first journey in 1842, just four years after the

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<sup>9</sup> I owe this particular argument to Cindy P. Brewer, as she discusses the relationship between the two works by Goethe and Unger in her article “The Seduction of the Beautiful Soul: Anxiety of Influence in Friederike Unger’s *Bekanntnisse einer schönen Seele von ihr selbst geschrieben*.” To include *von ihr selbst geschrieben*, as part of a 19<sup>th</sup> century work was not uncommon. For examples, see *Leben der heiligen Teresa von Jesus, von ihr selbst geschrieben* or *Erinnerungen der Kaiserin Katharina II. Von ihr selbst geschrieben*.

death of her husband, men were astounded to hear the announcement that a woman was on board their ship—and she was not stopping in Constantinople<sup>10</sup> as might be expected. Instead, she was going all the way to Jerusalem. Recording the surprise of her fellow travellers, she writes:

Männer hätten Ursache zu bedenken, ob ihr Körper die Mühen aushalten können, und ob ihr Geist den Muth habe, dem Klima, der Pest, den Plagen der Insekten, der schlechten Nahrung u.s.w. kühn die Stirne zu bieten. Und dann erst eine Frau! So ganz allein, ohne alle Stütze hinaus zu wandern in die weite Welt, über Berg und Thal und Meer, ach, das wäre unmöglich. (Pfeiffer, *Reise einer Wienerin* 1)

This was precisely the kind of chauvinistic remarks that her contemporaries, Unger, Hahn-Hahn, Schopenhauer and others had to deal with. But Pfeiffer was not swayed. Her first travel expedition to Jerusalem was a success, and unsatisfied with the usual “hotspots” for mid-nineteenth-century travellers, she soon planned her trip around the world.

Having established that Pfeiffer’s circumstances allowed her to move beyond the expected notion of women’s writing, I can now begin to show how Pfeiffer wrote as colonialist, embracing the styles and themes of male authorship. One of these particular themes of colonial literature is the perceived superiority of the colonials over the natives. Such was the case, for example, in 1889 as William Harvey Brown arrived in Sierra Leone, where “[he] found Africa exactly as books of travel had led us to anticipate—a land of excessive heat, lofty palm-trees, gigantic baobabs, and *naked savages*”<sup>11</sup> (Brown 3). Whilst China was a largely colonized territory, with Hong Kong and other Chinese ports being controlled by the British and the

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<sup>10</sup> At the time of Pfeiffer’s writing, Constantinople was the term used for modern-day Istanbul, Turkey. It was a common place for people to travel to in order to buy and sell at the marketplaces. It would have been expected that this would be Pfeiffer’s final destination, as for a woman to continue her journey further was not commonplace during the nineteenth century.

<sup>11</sup> Emphasis added

Portuguese—not to mention the French and the Americans who became involved—it was a relatively untravelled country. That meant that the majority of Europeans only heard about China in reports or artist’s depictions in the newspapers and journals. Directly upon Pfeiffer’s arrival in China, her first sentiments of European colonial superiority surfaced as she writes: “Ich hätte nicht gedacht, je in Wirklichkeit die Chinesen zu sehen, mit ihren geschornen Häuptionern, langen Zöpfen und den häßlichen, schmal geschlitzten, kleinen Augen.” (Pfeiffer, *Frauenfahrt* 1). The direct use of derogatory language in this description of the Chinese indicates that Pfeiffer sees the Caucasian look as being superior, for if the Oriental facial features are “ugly”, then the Caucasian features must necessarily be the “beautiful” opposites. Thus, it is an indication of colonial superiority, rather than an issue with female inferiority.

China, unlike the areas of her European travels, would prove to be a new challenge for Pfeiffer. The colonial presence caused tension between East and West, giving rise to hostility to foreigners, and especially to foreign women. Furthermore, as Patricia Howe comments, this hostility begins to “jeopardise [Pfeiffer’s] freedom and safety; it threatens to compromise her chosen role as an independent and truthful observer, and to re-impose the limitations from which she wants to escape” (Howe 325). In order to maintain her equality with male writers, Pfeiffer refuses to resign herself to writing about female suppression and inequality in China; in fact, whilst in Hong Kong she meets four German missionaries, whom she compliments on their ability to speak Chinese and to clothe themselves in such a Chinese manner as to really belong to the community. The experience of women in China, however, apparently comes as an afterthought as she notices that “auf den Straßen keine eingebornen Weiber zu sehen [waren] (Pfeiffer, *Frauenfahrt* 5); however, she does not continue to discuss the status of women in China.

Furthermore, Pfeiffer's writings express an indelicate lack of empathy with the native Chinese. Whilst travelling through remote parts of the mainland, Pfeiffer seems to view the events of Chinese life as if she were a viewer in a museum—she sees the people and their impoverished circumstances as interesting objects of observation, rather than as unhappy, starving and needful people. At one point, Pfeiffer claims “bei dem Durchgange mancher Gäßchen und Plätze mußten wir uns die Nase verhalten, und gerne hätten wir...die Augen geschlossen vor dem häufigen Anblick eckelhafter Kranken” (Pfeiffer, *Frauenfahrt* 46-47). Indeed, it is a European gaze looking at Asian oddities, but there is no empathy and most definitely no desire to help—qualities that one would usually expect from compassionate female writer, who, unlike her male counterparts, was relatively untouched by the roughness of war and the hateful sense of superiority over those they conquered.

As her journey through the Orient continues, Pfeiffer turns her attention to the Chinese lifestyle as a whole, which she describes as comparatively poor. She does not write to comment on the roles of men and women in the household. Rather, she concentrates her analysis on the quality of the homes and lifestyle, which in her view, fail to achieve European standards. She describes the life of the Chinese as being “ungemein billig” (Pfeiffer, *Frauenfahrt* 18), costing approximately 18.25 Dollars<sup>12</sup> to maintain a Chinese household, compared with the 6000 Dollars for a European household. She then goes on to remark that the choice of food eaten by the Chinese is “nicht besonders lecker — sie essen Hunde, Katzen, Mäuse und Ratten, das

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<sup>12</sup> Pfeiffer states that a Chinese household costs approximately 60 Cash per day, and 1,200 Cash make just one Dollar. 60 Cash x 365 days in a year make a cost of 21,900 Cash per year. If this amount is divided by 1,200, the total cost per year of a Chinese household is 18.25 Dollars.

A *Cash* was a type of coin used in East Asia from the 2nd century BC until the AD 20<sup>th</sup> century. The *Cash* is usually recognizable via the square hole in the middle of the coin. The *Dollar* does not refer to the US Dollar, but rather the Hong Kong Dollar (HK\$), in Chinese the representative character of a Dollar is 元 (yuán).

*Note:* the English word “cash”, meaning a form of physical currency, is an older and unrelated word.

Eingeweide des Geflügels, das Blut jedes Thieres, ja sogar...die Seidenraupen, Regenwürme und das gefallene Vieh” (Pfeiffer, *Frauenfahrt* 18). The language and tone used by Pfeiffer, as she lists what she perceives to be unclean foods, indicates a definite sense of colonial superiority; Pfeiffer is not commenting on the role of the woman in the home, nor does she make any indication that the poor choice of food might come as a result of the woman’s decisions. On the contrary, Pfeiffer is careful to compare Chinese and European *societies*, not to compare their designated gender roles. This serves to strengthen my theory that Pfeiffer is not concerned with her role as a woman, but rather with her role as a colonial European.

Interestingly, however, Pfeiffer does mention that she is most upset at the dissatisfaction of Chinese women in serving the Europeans unless they were being overpaid<sup>13</sup> (Pfeiffer, *Frauenfahrt* 14). At first this may appear as if Pfeiffer is aligning herself with the tradition of women’s writing, but this is not an argument for women’s rights, nor is she making a statement that her European contemporaries are abusing their Chinese female servants. Rather, Pfeiffer is more frustrated that a European household would allow itself to become so dependent on Chinese servitude that they had no choice other than to overpay them. Since the end of the Opium War<sup>14</sup>, resident Europeans in China were restricted: they were unable to travel by horse or carriage, and their recreational activities were restricted to walking or hiring of boats (Howe 330). These restrictions meant that colonial Europeans were largely dependent on the native Chinese to collect food from the farms and stores, as well as take care of other everyday tasks.

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<sup>13</sup> Pfeiffer doesn’t give any figures to illustrate the claim that she believes Europeans are overpaying, but it is clear from the text that Pfeiffer feels that the cost of Chinese servitude is too high.

<sup>14</sup> The Anglo-Chinese opium trade began around the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The British had trafficked opium from Bengal and British India into China for huge profits, but eventually the Qing Empire, recognizing the harmful consequences of opium, reinstated a ban on opium imports. This inevitably led to war between the Europeans and the Chinese because it stifled European profits and imports. The war was eventually won by the Europeans, and whilst the British, Portuguese and French took control of various ports in China, they were unable to stop the Chinese from enforcing restrictive laws within the cities.

Clearly, Pfeiffer is discouraged and perhaps even somewhat disappointed in her fellow Europeans for becoming dependent on the Chinese—a sentiment that could only be felt by one who considers herself superior to the people upon which her own people have become so dependent. Again, Pfeiffer displays her sense of colonial superiority rather than concerning herself with her gender.

Pfeiffer's sense of eurocentrism and cultural excellence extends beyond the lives of the native women, forcing a comparison of Chinese and European arts. We need only think of great composers like Bach, Beethoven and Mozart to recognize the importance of music in our own western culture. This advance in music comes in two pieces: first, we have advanced the use of tools and instruments in order to create more precise sounds and movements that were not previously possible. Second, our heightened knowledge of music and human emotion has lead great musicians to compose pieces that resonate with our own thinking. In fact, scientists such as Claudio Tennie and Harriet Over have argued that cultural intelligence is a key factor in considering and explaining human tool use—the more intelligent<sup>15</sup> a society is, the more sophisticated the use of tools. Thus, it may not necessarily be the lack of tools or equipment that causes inferior creation, but rather the lack of cultural intelligence, or experience, that indicates a culture's sophistication. It is apparent that Pfeiffer, too, feels strongly about how creativity and music reflects on a culture, and in keeping consistent with her feelings of colonial superiority, she almost mocks the Chinese's creation of music, claiming that “[d]ie Musik steht hingegen auf einer so niedrigen Stufe, daß die guten Chinesen hierin den wilden Völkern zu vergleichen sind. Es fehlt ihnen zwar nicht an Instrumenten, wohl aber an der Kunst, selbe zu behandeln...[sie] kennen aber weder Composition noch Melodie oder Vortrag.” It is apparent that Pfeiffer cannot

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<sup>15</sup> By “intelligence” it should be understood that it is referring to cultural advancement or sophistication rather than the education level of individuals within that society.

even begin to compare the beauty of Chinese music with what she is more familiar with in Austria—Pfeiffer’s eurocentricity has once again suppressed her innate desire to empathize with the native peoples as expected by a female traveller.

Throughout her writings, Pfeiffer repeatedly demonstrates her belief that Europe is superior to China. She provides the reader with examples that Chinese society is predominantly “primitive” and “disorganized,” whether it be with regards roles of women, the arts or cultural progression. Pfeiffer’s drive to affiliate herself with the politics of a strong, colonial Europe enables her to write not as a mid-nineteenth century woman, but as an individual. As she writes, she occupies her thoughts and writings only with the experiences she has, and draws comparisons between what she sees in China and what she knows from home. Pfeiffer’s sense of cultural hierarchy is obvious as she discusses the native Chinese’s biological appearance, their architecture and their lifestyle—Pfeiffer’s previous experience in marriage and raising of children demands no such direction in her writing. Gender equality is the primary goal of 21<sup>st</sup> century feminists, yet, in many ways, Pfeiffer is an example that this was possible in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even in the face of female inequality, Chinese servitude and hostility towards foreign women, Pfeiffer never questions her worth as a female traveller. She is free to write and record her experiences as they happen, just as male travellers would do, and this is precisely what she does.

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