

The Travel Diaries of Albert Einstein: The Far East, Palestine & Spain 1922-1923

Edited by Ze'ev Rosenkranz

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To better understand the past, the voices of the past should be heard. However, the number of participants and eyewitness we can listen to eventually shrink to zero over time. While oral, first-hand accounts certainly add humanity to the otherwise stolid historical record, it is nonetheless true that memories of the distant past, even those that were highly distressing or life-threatening, can be forgotten or misremembered—the fidelity of memories to actual events is poor. Instead, perhaps records left by those who were there are reasonable sources of historical documentation. However, “fake news” and ideologically driven reporting have deep roots. Prior to accepting any historical record, acknowledging the author’s motivations and biases could help to derive a document’s true value.

Perhaps the best historical records are from those who has no stake or vested interest in observed events—a traveler who just happens to be passing through. The travel diary of Nobel Laureate Albert Einstein could be considered a contemporaneous record of 1920’s Asia, especially of Warlord Era China and Taisho Era Japan. Einstein had been contacted by a Japanese publishing firm on giving a series of lectures across Japan. Initial negotiations broke down in early November 1921. At the time, Einstein stated that “The Japanese are real swindlers. They can get lost for all I care...” The Japanese later gave Einstein a new offer and in March 1922 Einstein wrote that he was now “unable to resist the sirens of East Asia.” Neither a trained anthropologist nor a social scientist, perhaps Einstein could be thought of as a disinterested observer—his interest in Asia was to give lectures and to greet fellow members of his Jewish community in Asia.

Hints of Einstein’s attitude towards Asians before his trip to Asia are suggested by Editor Ze'ev Rosenkranz’s introduction of the diary. Concerning the Chinese, Einstein’s view was vague at best. In a 1919 letter to a friend, Einstein noted the pillage of Russia by “leaders of thieving gangs... mostly recruited among the Chinese. Fine prospects for us too!” While Rozenkranz suggests that this is evidence of Einstein’s xenophobia, it should be noted that China at the time was a collection of warlord fiefdoms and entirely lacking in central authority. Thus, a disjointed China was certainly unlikely to be a threat to Europe. Perhaps Einstein did not know this and that his pre-Asia tour musings were nothing more than reflexive.

While Rosenkraz suggests that Einstein held typical contemporaneous Western attitudes towards the Far East, as a place of “little houses and dwarves,” it is likely that he had no deep preconceived notions. For example, stating in an article he wrote two weeks into his visit of Japan, “All the things I knew about Japan could not give me a clear picture.”

What did the Nobel Laureate see? On his arrival in Hong Kong on November 9, 1922 he made the following comments of the Chinese:

... stricken people, men and women, who beat stones daily and must heave them for five cents a day. In this way, the Chinese are severely punished for their fecundity by their insensitive economic machine. I think they hardly notice it in their obtuseness, but it is sad to see. (p. 125)

The next day, he and his wife visited the Kowloon Peninsula:

Industrious, filthy, lethargic people. Houses very formulaic, balconies like beehives-cells, everything built close together and monotonous. ... Chinese don't sit on benches while eating but squat like Europeans do when they relieve themselves out in the leafy woods... Even the children are spiritless and look lethargic. It would be a pity if the Chinese supplant all other races... Yesterday evening, three Portuguese middle-school teachers visited me, who claimed that the Chinese are incapable of being trained to think logically and that they specifically have no talent for mathematics.¹ I noticed how little difference there is between men and women; I don't understand what kind of fatal attraction Chinese women possess that entralls the corresponding men to such an extent that they are incapable of defending themselves against the formidable blessing of offspring. (pp. 129-131)

On his arrival in Shanghai on November 14, 1922, he took a "stroll through the Chinese quarter", the streets:

... becoming ever narrower. Swarming with pedestrians, rickshaws, caked with dirt of every kind, in the air there is a stench of never-ending manifold variety. Impression of ghastly fight for survival by meek and mostly lethargic-looking, mostly neglected people... We visited a theater... Decent filth everywhere... Even those reduced to working like horses never give the impression of conscious suffering. (p. 135)

Einstein then visited a "highly amusing village," "almost throughout, cheerful impressions along with filth and stench; I shall remember it often and with pleasure."

Following his six-week lecture tour of Japan, Einstein returned to Shanghai on December 31, 1922. He was driven out to see "the city environs":

... Chinese dirty, tormented, lethargic, good-natured, stable gentle and—healthy. All are unanimous in praising the Chinese but also in regard to his intellectual inferiority in business skills; best evidence: he earns ten times lower wages in an

¹ In contrast to the opinion expressed by the Portuguese teachers in Hong Kong, Einstein expressed his belief "in the future contribution of Chinese youth to science," at a speech in Shanghai, November 14, 1922.

equivalent position, and the European can still compete successfully with him as a business employee.² (p. 193)

Returning to Hong Kong on January 5, 1923, Einstein's commented on observing "groaning" Chinese hauling bricks up a hill: "Most pitiful of people on Earth, cruelly oppressed and abused, treated worse than cattle; their reward for modesty, gentleness and frugality."

Einstein made his comments following observation of the Chinese in their natural environment, with little or no prior exposure to the Chinese in Europe. There are others who have unflinchingly reported on pre-war China, such as Ralph Townsend³, who has been called "Sinophobic" and "insensitive." Fictional portrayals of pre-war China, such as Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*,⁴ have been attacked as condescending—by the Chinese themselves. One cannot, however, get away from a common observation in Einstein's writings and the writing of "Sinophobes" and "sentimentalists", and that is the breadth and depth of poverty and corruption in nominally democratic, pre-war China.

One could raise the point that because he was paid by the Japanese, that Einstein would have nothing but favorable comments concerning them. In fact, however, Einstein fluctuated between finding the Japanese agreeable and irritating. During his voyage to the Far East aboard the *SS Kitano Maru*, there was a celebration of the Emperor Taisho's birthday (*taisho-setsu*). Einstein commented that the national anthem (*Kimigayo*) "sounds very alien and is strangely structured." Later, at a Japanese performance held onboard, Einstein wrote that, "One man sang and wailed like a tomcat whose tail has been stepped on." He later heard "...another one singing away again to the point of making me dizzy." On arrival in Kobe, November 17, 1922, he described the Japanese as "... unostentatious, decent, altogether very appealing." With respect to the intellectual capacity of the Japanese, after a few weeks of lecturing and visiting academic institutions, on December 5, Einstein wrote, "Intellectual needs of this nation seem to be weaker than their artistic one—natural disposition?" While appreciative of Japanese art, based on his wide-ranging thoughts on the Japanese, one cannot claim that Einstein was definitely a Japanophile or even remotely Sinophobic for that matter.

So far, modern media have merely wrung their hands over Einstein's unscripted musings.⁴ There are no calls, for example, to revoke his Nobel Prize or revoke his status as the "Person of the Century", as bestowed by *Time* magazine. Perhaps Einstein's Asia writings are more valuable compared to those of so-called Sinophobes. For some, perhaps subjective considerations are used to determine "value" rather than historical accuracy.

² Earlier, on November 3, 1922, during his stop-over in Singapore, Einstein noted that Chinese merchants there "enjoyed great respect..., far more than the Japanese, who are deemed unreliable." Indeed, due to Chinese "diligence, frugality, and abundance of offspring," Einstein stated that "Singapore is almost completely in their hands."

³ *Ways That Are Dark: The Truth About China*. NY, NY: Putnam's Sons, 1933.

⁴ Joseph, Y. and May T. "Einstein the Anti-Racist? Not in His Travel Diaries," *The New York Times*, June 14, 2018.