Summary

Images of the Middle Kingdom: Continuity and Change in Swedish Travelers' Accounts of China, 1749–1912

China has something of a special place in the history of Swedish relations with non-European cultures. Mostly – but not exclusively – that is due to the activities of the Swedish East India Company in the Eighteenth and early Nineteenth centuries. At a date when both America and Africa were virtually unknown in Sweden, the Company's maritime expeditions brought thousands of sailors, priests, and merchants into direct, regular contact with the Chinese empire and its people. After the Company's demise in 1806, Swedish-Chinese connections became tenuous, but from the 1830s onwards relations between the two countries were gradually restored and have remained unbroken until today.

One of the most tangible results of these contacts was the publication of accounts about the Chinese and their country by Swedish travelers. Not only did they write traditional travelogues, they also described their impressions of the "Middle Kingdom" in other types of texts: diaries, diplomatic reports, letters, geographical handbooks, and so on. The aim of this thesis is to describe and analyze the images of China conveyed in these writings from 1749 to 1912. The main problem is the question of continuity and change in the images held by the Swedes.

On the one hand, travelers read the accounts of their predecessors. This creates a whole array of expectations and preconceived notions that, in one form or another, are passed on to ever new generations of readers. On the other hand, travelers are given the opportunity to confront all their received knowledge with personal, first-hand experience

of a place and its people. That is, after all, how travelers are defined, the quality that lends them the peculiar authority they have always enjoyed in describing foreign lands: that they are eyewitnesses speaking with the voice of experience. What is the outcome of that encounter between prevailing ideas and experience, when preconceptions meet the reality behind the image? That is the issue at the heart of this study.

Research efforts dealing with questions of cultural encounters and national images have expanded rapidly in the last twenty years or so, often focussing on the influence of powerful "discourses" on individual writers. In some scholarship there has been a marked emphasis on the growth of certain discourses into an impenetrable mass of prejudice and stereotypes with little resemblance to reality. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is perhaps the most clearly influential argument in this direction. Following him, many have argued that the essential characteristic of Western images of other cultures has been their ethnocentrism and tendency toward derogatory generalizations about "the other," including elaborately racist ideas.

One point of departure for this thesis is a certain degree of skepticism about some of this research. In my view there has been a propensity to oversimplify the perceptions of the world held by Westerners in the Early Modern era. Perhaps that should be expected, too, considering that the very purpose of much scholarship has been to uncover the influence of stereotypes and generalized national images in European culture. In part, that has been done out of an ambition to trace the historical roots of present racist ideologies, and partly to show the key importance of ethnocentric and racist ideas in legitimizing Western policies of colonial expansion. As such, these might be worthy goals, but often they result in a possibly misleading emphasis on certain elements in the images at the expense of more ambiguous perceptions and attitudes.

It is against this background that I have chosen to closely study a narrowly defined group of sources – Swedish travelers' accounts of China in the form of printed books and pamphlets – over a long period. It soon became clear that the output of this material has varied greatly over time, peaking in certain periods of heightened Swedish interest in Chinese matters. Hence, the examination is divided into three sections, covering the years 1749–1781, 1847–1872, and 1890–1912. Sixty-four accounts comprising a total of 12,600 pages have been studied along with some additional supporting material.

In my analysis, I have relied on Swedish historian Eva Block's definition of *image*, which emphasizes the totality of perceptions and attitudes conveyed in the sources. Also, Block stresses the importance of distinguishing between three types of image elements: factual statements (whether true or false), emotional responses (attitudes) and recommendations for action. In addition, I have tried to place each group of authors in their historical context rather than to cut across the chronological divide and follow the development of individual ideas or attitudes throughout the period from 1749 to 1912.

Examining the sources confirms that the image of China was largely characterized by ambivalence and contradictions as well as generalizations and stereotypes. Even in the comparatively small group of authors and texts studied here, the image of China – or rather, *images* – was (were) hardly homogenous except in a very general sense. Travelers agreed on many issues and shared many perceptions, but it was never as simple as their accounts being wholly dominated by certain assumptions and sets of values common to all Westerners. Thus, one cannot see their images of China solely as a collective phenomenon. Rather, these images make up a complex mosaic of old and new misconceptions, more or less accurate information, clichés, and deeply rooted prejudice. In many ways the images were also dynamic: they changed over time as new elements became prominent and old ones faded away, again in an intricate pattern that seems to defy simple explanations.

This is not surprising, considering that we are dealing with a multitude of individuals, having different backgrounds and interests, and going to China for a variety of reasons. Once arrived in the "Celestial Empire" the authors had their own unique experiences, affecting their general attitude toward the people and the culture, and they conveyed their impressions in writings of different character geared toward different readers. Even within the same book, pamphlet, or article by one author, close examination often reveals inconsistencies and outright self-contradictions in the travelers' image of China.

That said, certain key image elements and recurrent themes are common to many (if not all) travelers, and it is these topics and patterns that shape the results of this study in a more concrete sense. Let us now turn to them.

On the most basic level, one should note that the flow of information increased tremendously between 1749 and 1912. The sources from the first period make up a total of fifteen hundred pages over a span of thirty-two years, while the material from the third period includes more than seven thousand pages published over the course of twenty-two years. Not only were these writings greater in number and length, they also provided an unprecedented richness of detail and in-depth coverage of many topics.

As Åke Holmberg and others have shown, that does not necessarily result in more understanding or tolerance. On the contrary, Holmberg concludes that there was a real growth in Swedes' knowledge about non-European parts of the world in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, while at the same time the degree of openness to "the other" diminished. Here, the findings in that regard are less clear-cut. A constant of the entire period in question, 1749–1912, is the presence of exoticism, the "otherness" as such of the Chinese, which often (but not always) in itself carries a negative connotation. Exoticism, however, is what the accounts of travelers are all about; the purpose of such writings is to describe encounters with the unfamiliar, "the other," for the benefit of readers who have not had the same opportunity. Hence, what is interesting is not that they depicted China as different or strange, but *which* exotic phenomena they discussed and *how* they described and evaluated them, and which criteria or underlying assumptions governed those characterizations.

In the Eighteenth century accounts of China, for instance, the cultural divide between the Swedish travelers and the environment they found themselves in was evident, yet their comments about the Chinese were usually not very judgmental. The exception was in certain areas important to the self-perception of the Swedes, particularly religion. There, the difference between "we" and "they" led to a depreciation of the Chinese which had a major impact on an otherwise fairly positive image. What made the Chinese truly strange, as it were, was that they did not share the Swedes' Christian faith. So, even though the travelers stressed the Chinese people's ability and ingenuity in agriculture as well as in crafts and commerce, the final assessment became one of disdain.

A few generations later, exoticism is among the most striking features of the writings of the Swedish China travelers. The classic ingredients of travel literature dominated these accounts: local customs, colorful depictions of the physical and cultural environment, and the character of the people. The concept of *civilization* had also become a crucial determinant of the descriptions of China, where the "Celestial Empire" was measured against Europe or "the West" as a comparable, but far from equal, entity. It was from that perspective the Swedes were observing China, as a sort of potential, yet in the end clearly inferior, competitor in the clash of civilizations. Here, we also see the phenomenon noted by Said in the case of "the Orient": a fictional China arising from the wishes and expectations of the travelers themselves. "Oriental" lasciviousness and depravity, a despotic, decaying society, and enslaved women all became part of an "otherness" of the Chinese that was no longer neutral but a source of contempt and ridicule.

The final period of the investigation, the years around 1900, saw a rather different kind of China accounts. In these texts, there was an entirely new level of closeness to Chinese everyday life, not least due to the sometimes detailed portrayals of individual people rather than "the Chinese" as a vague, abstract concept. Another difference was that the travelers were more heterogeneous than ever before: not only did they differ in social backgrounds and in their reasons for coming to China, but some of them had lived there for many years and made it their home. What lends this period its true distinction is that more than half the authors (and many other China Swedes) were missionaries.

At this time, the last few decades of the Qing dynasty, the image of China in the Swedish texts is full of contradictions. On the one hand, travelers cultivated old stereotypes even further. On the other hand, a growing number of authors questioned and criticized these same inherited clichés. In a similar vein, the sections devoted to Chinese "national character," so commonplace in earlier periods, became more rare. Instead, along with the concrete descriptions of China as physical place and cultural environment, a global geopolitical perspective came to the foreground in the accounts, where many travelers discussed "The Chinese Question" with a mixture of fear and fascination. Fairly consistently, they described China as an unraveling society, while at the same time the prospect of the "Yellow Peril" – a joint Japanese and Chinese assault on the West – greatly worried some writers.

What sets the final years of the study apart in a deeper sense, however, is that the image of China was no longer rooted in an all-embracing, axiomatic solidarity or identification with a homogeneous "West" or "Europe." Instead, there were now competing "Western" perspectives, as shown by the occasionally pointed tension between missionaries and other groups of Westerners. In this period, complexity and contradictions become the essence of the image of China in Swedish travelers' accounts. This image was still very much influenced by the observers' own desires and interests, but clearly it was now a question of *varying* desires and interests coming into play.

In topics and themes, then, there were clear changes over the years covered by this study (some of them quite major, too), but we also find many examples of continuity. For one thing, certain clichés and ideas have a conspicuous tendency to recur throughout the entire 163 years studied here: the "pigtail," long nails, bound feet, that Chinese is written from the top down rather than left to right, the yearly spring plowing ceremony of the Emperor, the buttons on the hats of "mandarins," and the trained birds used for catching fish. Some of these subjects appear as mere curiosities, while others were taken as a starting point for more substantial discussions of Chinese society and culture. Such discussions included, e.g., the difficulty of the language, the subservience of women, the frequency of infanticide, and the deep respect for learning.

Regarding continuity and change, the fluctuations in the image of China outlined earlier were not caused primarily by the addition of new elements or the disappearance of old ones. Rather, they were the result of displacements *within* the prevailing image, thus changing the relative prominence of different elements in the accounts of China (cf. Block). A related observation is that travelers *described* certain topics or subjects similarly over time, but how they *valued* them changed to such a degree that the overall impression became very different. In particular, this is the case with the perception of Chinese society and administration, where the Swedes viewed the hierarchical element and the alleged stability of the social order favorably in the Eighteenth century, a time when

Europe had long suffered from war and social unrest. A century later, authors interpreted the same qualities – hierarchy and stability – as suffocation and resistance to “progress,” which had become the catchword of the day during the West’s Industrial Revolution. Ironically, the whole idea of China’s stability had originated with the country’s own governing class of scholar-officials; in their Confucian outlook the absence of change was a sign of order and prosperity.

When it comes to basic value systems governing the images of China in the Swedish travelers’ accounts, full-fledged racist ideas never played a crucial role. Vulgar clichés revolving around yellow skin, flat noses, and slanting eyes – collected around 1900 into the stereotypical figure of “John Chinaman” – were elements with clear racist characteristics, especially perhaps during the final period of 1890–1912. However, it was rarely (and hardly at all during the 18th century) a question of the more elaborate, biologically based determinism of fully developed racism.

Instead of race, the Swedish travelers’ dominant identification was “Europe” or “the West,” although as shown earlier the meaning of those terms was not always self-evident. “Europe” and “Europeans” were designations used throughout the period covered here without any doubt about what they referred to: Europe both as a geographical area and a distinct civilization embodying certain qualities. The concept of “the West” became more frequent in the middle of the Nineteenth century, when it was an even more self-conscious way of referring to European culture *as opposed to* another civilization, i.e., “the East” (cf. Said).

However, there were also other loyalties and frames of reference that were reflected in the travelers’ writings. A faint but perceptible trend from the first travelers to the last is that Swedish national awareness gradually increased, even though it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when this awareness evolved into nationalism in the modern sense of the word. What is clear is that Eighteenth century travelers referred to a kingdom or a state rather than a people when they talked about Sweden. Later, “Swedishness” progressively assumed cultural and ethnic meaning, and in the last years of the study authors would sometimes erupt in nationalist outbursts praising the excellence of Swedish sailors or the incomparable beauty of Norrland’s rivers.

Sometimes this national awareness also turned sharply against other Europeans, in part by sketches of their national characters no less derogatory than the stereotype of "John Chinaman," and in part by critical remarks on certain countries' colonial policies. The latter was a recurrent theme in the accounts of China from the 1740s onwards, but it was perhaps only in the late Nineteenth century that some authors began questioning colonialism as a matter of principle rather than just criticizing the behavior of individual countries.

Along with nationalism, finally, a very important dimension was the religious perspective. The strength of religious identity fluctuated, but it seems to have weakened over time; by 1900 it was all but non-existent among non-missionary writers. As suggested earlier, there even appeared an open rift between an increasingly secularized group of travelers on the one hand, and devoted missionaries on the other. The friction between Catholicism and Protestantism, a constant throughout the period from 1749 to 1912, also showed that "the West" was not an entity free from internal tension. Interestingly, during the last years studied here some secular writers explicitly rejected earlier criticism of Catholicism while Swedish missionaries (all Protestants) intensified their attacks in that direction. The diverging views on that issue became a part of the greater conflict between missionaries and other China Swedes.

In a very general sense, the outcome of this study largely agrees with the conclusions reached in earlier scholarship, especially perhaps the findings of Åke Holmberg. This is particularly true regarding the general trend of Swedish attitudes toward non-European cultures (in this case China). Thus, the Eighteenth century travelers had relatively open minds and did not hesitate to express admiration for other cultures when it seemed warranted, China being a prime example. In the following century the negative elements grew stronger and the stereotypes more prominent, a development that climaxed around 1900. The last years of the Qing dynasty saw a minor re-evaluation of China in a positive direction, while some authors began questioning many traditional elements of China's image as prejudiced and erroneous.

Nevertheless, the impression of this study as a whole differs quite substantially from earlier researchers' conclusions. It is true that here, I have tried to emphasize inconsistencies, reservations, and contradictory views, but their very presence in the sources casts doubt on the merit of a generalized discussion of the travelers' image of China. If anything, this image is largely characterized by ambiguity, from the first authors in the 1740s until the last in the final years of the Chinese empire. Another basic trait is, again, the complexity of the image of China conveyed by travelers, particularly apparent during the period of 1890–1912.

Ethnocentrism is constantly present in the writings of the Swedes, as well as occasional, fully developed racism. Yet, as Sinologist Jonathan Spence has pointed out in a wider European perspective, there are also many examples of the opposite: moderation, understanding, and appreciation. With that in mind, is it possible to determine what the travelers "ultimately" thought on various topics or how they "really" viewed China and the Chinese? Are we not obliged to emphasize the presence of negative *and* positive, generalizing *and* qualifying elements? In my view, we are so obliged. Otherwise we would be guilty of the very type of emotionally charged, judgmental generalizations we claim to have uncovered in the authors we study.

Instead, we should stress the complexity of the travelers' response, the tension between continuity and change, the encounter between the "discourse" and the individual. The Swedish authors examined here neither rejected nor accepted prevailing Western images of China. Rather, they accepted some parts while questioning others. In that process, their point of departure was their own impressions of Chinese reality, a confrontation with the alien and "the other" that for many was a powerful experience.