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Bilder av Mittens rike

*Kontinuitet och förändring i svenska
resenärers Kinaskildringar
1749–1912*

With an English Summary



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Abstract

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The aim of this thesis is to describe and analyze the images of China in Swedish travelers' published accounts – traditional travelogues as well as diaries, diplomatic reports, letters, and geographical handbooks – between 1749 and 1912. The main problem of the study is the question of continuity and change in these images, which are seen as the result of an encounter between preconceived notions and personal experience. What is the outcome of this constantly ongoing confrontation, as prevailing ideas and expectations in travelers' minds are challenged by firsthand impressions of a complex Chinese reality?

In earlier research, it has often been 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. The point of departure here is a certain degree of skepticism about some of those findings. In my view, there has been a propensity to oversimplify the perceptions of the world held by Westerners in the Early Modern era, resulting in a possibly misleading emphasis on certain image elements at the expense of more ambiguous ideas and attitudes.

Examining the sources confirms that even in the relatively small group of authors and texts studied here, the images of China were hardly homogenous except in a very general sense. The Swedish 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. Instead, their images of the “Middle Kingdom” were characterized by ambivalence and contradictions as well as generalizations and stereotypes. Ethnocentrism is invariably present in the writings of the Swedes, and there are occasional instances of fully developed racism as well. Yet, there are also many examples of the opposite: moderation, understanding, and appreciation. Therefore, I argue that we must stress the complexity of the travelers' response, the tension between continuity and change, the encounter between the “discourse” and the individual.

Keywords: images of China, national images, orientalism, imagology, travel accounts, ethnocentrism, Chinoiserie, Sino-Swedish relations, Sweden and China