
Reviews

Elisabeth Eide: *Vårt skjeve blikk på kineserne* (Our Lopsided View of the Chinese). Oslo: Aschehoug & Co., 1995. 164 pp.

The intention of the book is to "show how changeable and unstable our view of the Chinese has been by presenting a selection of texts about China in a historical context" (p. 9) and to analyze, how images of China and the Chinese have been created and broken down. Why did we at one point of time look up to China as an ideal and at another consider the country backward or even a threat? Was it determined by developments in China or just as much by developments in the West? The problem is interesting and very relevant today, although the topic of the book is historical.

The book presents a great variety of travel accounts and other written sources which have contributed to the construction of our images of China and the Chinese. In seventeenth century Europe, most descriptions of China were written by Jesuit missionaries, and they generally had a positive view of the Middle Kingdom. China was described as a civilized country with a strong central government, an enlightened and efficient official class, and public morals close to Christian ideals. In the beginning the Jesuits did not attempt to conceal the negative aspects of China (the killing of girls, widespread beliefs in Daoist and Buddhist idols, etc.) but as rival Catholic orders also began to do missionary work in China they focussed on the positive sides of Chinese society. The missionary work was politicized, and the Jesuits began to emphasize elements of Chinese society which they believed would increase the support for their mission in Europe, and which would make their own missionary work look better and more successful than that of their rivals. Late in the sixteenth and early in the seventeenth century the first travel accounts from China were published in Europe, and they also stimulated the interest for the country where gold, silver and other riches were abundant, people dressed in silk, were eating off porcelain plates, and using the most delicious spices in their food. The volume contains good examples of some of the first Scandinavian travel accounts, which were just as positive in their view of China as most other contemporary European travel accounts. Eide writes that most European travellers were deeply impressed and marveled at China.

The very fact that a mighty and powerful state with a rich civilisation existed so far away was something completely new and unexpected, and it roused the curiosity of the arrogant Europeans. The Europeans had subdued American Indians, Africans, and Indians without encountering any culture or society that could compare with their own. In China, however the Europeans had to recognize the existence of a state and a culture equal or maybe superior to their own, and this naturally gave China a unique status in the eyes of the Europeans.

In the first half of the eighteenth century China became even more popular in Europe, and the book tells us that this development mainly was a result of the work of the Jesuits and the Enlightenment philosophers. The Jesuits depicted China as a country with enlightened monarchy, an educated and efficient official class and a moral system more tolerant than the Church in Europe. This picture of China served the interests of the Enlightenment philosophers who opposed the absolute power of the King, the Church's monopoly of thought, and the fixed division in social classes. It is undoubtedly true that one important reason for the enthusiasm of China was that the existing images of China could be used in the ongoing political struggle, but Eide unfortunately neglects to discuss other possible explanations. Another reason could be economic. It seems more than likely that the profitable tea trade, which generally accounted for most of the cargo in Danish and Swedish China men and brought wealth and prosperity to Scandinavia also may have contributed to the construction of a positive image of China, but this trade and its possible implications for our view of China is only briefly touched upon in the book.

One of Eide's important points is that much of the Enlightenment philosophers' enthusiasm for China originated in their critique of European society, and that changes in this society therefore inevitably brought about changes in our view of China. In the eighteenth century, ideas about individual rights, freedom of thought and freedom of the press became increasingly popular and influential in Europe. Rousseau began to write about "the noble savages" who had very little in common with the prevailing picture of the rational, intellectual, sophisticated, but now also decadent Chinese, who long ago lost his innocence and naturalness. This meant that China and the Chinese increasingly were connected with the elements in our own history which we wanted to leave behind. Besides, China experienced a severe political and economic crisis in the eighteenth cen-

ture, whereas Europe made remarkable progress in almost every sphere of society.

The book contains many interesting and well-chosen examples of Scandinavian descriptions of China from the eighteenth century, which do not differ much from earlier descriptions. Eide writes that most Scandinavian travellers still felt their encounter with China and the Chinese as one between two almost equal if not similar cultures. They looked on the Chinese as cultured equals with morals close to Christian moral.

The European and Scandinavian image of China was relatively stable in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, but then it changed dramatically caused by growing nationalism in Europe and a romantic passion for the virgin nature and "the noble savage". China had embodied the enlightened, absolute monarchy, and when the natural, innocent and unspoiled came into fashion, other countries than China became popular. Things only became worse when Rousseau's theories about "the noble savage" were replaced by Darwin's evolutionism and theories about "survival of the fittest". Peoples and states were placed in a hierarchy with Europe on the top and China far below as a stagnant country with almost no prospects of development.

The industrial revolution was another important reason why the image of China changed. The rapid industrial development in Europe was followed by an increased demand for raw materials, urbanization and free trade. This made European great powers, like England, see Africa and Asia in a different light. Asia was rich in raw materials and a potential market for Europe's industrial products, which China's restrictive trade policy prevented Europe from exploiting. Europe demanded free trade and came into armed conflict with China. This also contributed to the construction of a new, more negative image of China.

No special qualifications are required of the reader of this book. Texts in Chinese, German, English, Danish, and Swedish are all translated into Norwegian, and special terms like "factory" and "octroi" are explained in the text. Footnotes are omitted (some sources may be found at the end of the book), and we are only told little about how the texts have been selected. The book does not intend to be strictly scholarly in form, and is very easy to read. On the

other hand, however, this also restricts its use. The book may not qualify to be used for scholarly purposes, and it is a pity, because a scholarly work on the topic is needed and because the author who is a leading Scandinavian authority in the field, could easily have written it. The author has undoubtedly been through all relevant source material and has had a clear idea when making the selection of texts. The problem is that it does not show in the book.

The book consists mostly of texts about China, but they do not stand alone. In every chapter you will find outlines of relevant European and Scandinavian history, missionary history and history of ideas, which provide a background to the texts and put them into the right context. Given the length of the book (only 164 pages) and the extensive topic it is obvious that there is only little space for background essays, but sometimes they are so short that it would have made little difference if they had been left out. This is for instance the case when the fact that the Danish king, unlike the Swedish, participated in the early trade with Asia merely is explained by saying that "apparently he had a bigger surplus than the Swedish king" (p. 30). However, the background essays in general serve their purpose, and the interested reader may find material for further studies in the selected references.

The book is entertaining and instructive. It is a pleasure to leaf through the many beautiful illustrations, and the amusing and sometimes also rather terrifying descriptions, stories and selected citations are enjoyable reading. I can strongly recommend Eide's work to anyone interested in this particular subject.

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