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Becoming famous in the eighteenth century

Carl-Peter Thunberg (1743-1828) between Sweden, the Netherlands and Japan

One may well ask whether the story of Carl-Peter Thunberg should be considered part of the history of the relations between Sweden and the Netherlands in the eighteenth century. For though he visited the Dutch Republic, it is not his description of it that earned him a reputation in Europe's world of letters, but rather the hundreds of pages he wrote about its overseas dependencies, the Cape Colony, Batavia and, finally, the small island of Deshima, in Japan. Of course, the link between Thunberg and Sweden on the one hand, and the Dutch Republic and Japan on the other is the 'Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie' (VOC) or 'United East India Company'. Indeed, it was this Company that launched Thunberg on his way to a small measure of international fame.

The VOC counts as one of the great institutions of Dutch early modern history. During the two hundred years of its existence, the Company sent the staggering number of ca one million Europeans to the East – of whom a quarter were of other than Dutch descent. It is often said that amongst these figured many Scandinavians. And indeed, going through the registers, one encounters such names as Bengtson, Cederborg, Fischerström and Willman.\(^1\) But it is impossible to accurately count the amount of Northerners who actually signed up for a job in Asia and to tell what was the percentage of Swedes amongst them. Yet, I think we can safely assume that most of them were simple, honest men, only, who were attracted by the prospect of a potentially lucrative career. This alone makes the case of Carl-Peter Thunberg a special one.

For Thunberg was no merchant, mariner or military man, he was a scholar. Yet one must admit that, today, his name probably would not be remembered outside Sweden if it had not been for the Company that allowed him to travel to the East. There, he gathered most of the data on which rested the most successful part of the multi-volume book which he began to publish from 1788 onwards, a book that was well-received both in the scholarly world and amongst a wider, culturally interested readership. Moreover, I think that especially that part – which dealt with Japan – served as a stimulus for a number of Dutchmen who subsequently visited Japan and, in their turn, produced vivid accounts of their own ex-

\(^{1}\) See the list in: J. Bruijn e.a. (eds.), Dutch-Asiatic Shipping in the 17th and 18th centuries, I-III ('s-Gravenhage 1979-1987).
periences, if only because they wished to emulate Thunberg’s evident success. These ‘Japan-
books’ – and the many publications describing other non-European cultures – served as
mirrors to Europe. They influenced Europeans like the Swedes and the Dutch in their view
of, albeit not always in a better understanding of themselves: their growing knowledge of
strange societies and cultures like the Japanese forced them to think about and more pre-
cisely define their own characteristics and peculiarities.2

Surgeon or traveller: the early stages of Thunberg’s career
In 1770, young Carl-Peter Thunberg left Sweden as a newly certificated medical doctor. Why
would a man like he end up travelling to the East Indies – a journey that was known to be
unattractive for its lack of even the most basic creature comforts, and even outright perilous
if only because about a third of the people aboard the East India ships did not survive the
trip?

Thunberg was born in 1743, the son of a book dealer from Jonköping.3 In 1761, at the age
of sixteen, he entered Uppsala university, first to study theology, philosophy and law, and
then, from 1767 to 1772, to specialize in medicine. During those years, he discovered and de-
veloped an interest in what was then called natural history, a broad spectrum of disciplines
including botany, biology and the earth sciences. One of the most famous Swedish scholars
in the field was, of course, Carl von Linné (1707-1778), at whose feet Thunberg often sat.
When, in 1770, Carl-Peter gained his doctoral degree in medicine, he left the university with
the ‘stipendium Kohreanum’, a scholarship that was to enable him to go abroad in order to
pursue further studies. This was no longer the absolute necessity it had been for so many
decades. The degree-granting problems between the Uppsala medical faculty and the
Stockholm-based royal college of medicine, which had forced medical students from Swe-
den to travel all over Europe in search of specialist training, were over. Nevertheless, a for-
eign degree, for example a Dutch one – Leyden and Harderwijk were popular destinations –
or one gained at the great Paris hospital of the Charité, still gave one an advantage in one’s
future career.

Armed with letters of recommendation signed by his teacher, he set out for Paris, where
he proposed to increase his skills as a surgeon. However, Carl-Peter travelled by way of Am-
sterdam, where he arrived in October 1770.

He was enchanted by the town: he liked the streets, found the canals charming and the
houses elegant, judged the general aspect clean and the atmosphere both free and prosper-
ous. Indeed, he thought Holland the epitome of civilization. Undoubtedly, this favourable
opinion was a measure of the pleasure he derived from the friendly reception he was given
in the circles of the Amsterdam elite, especially by the more culture-minded regents. Here,
his status as a pupil of Linnaeus was of no mean help: many educated Dutchmen remem-
bered the Swede, who had studied at Leyden, and had published his famous Systema Naturae
(Leyden 1735) in that town as well. Thunberg was given a very warm welcome by the grey
eminence of Amsterdam intellectual life, Johan Burman, the younger (1713-1778); the latter

2 On European views of Japan after the publication of Thunberg’s travelogue: P.J. Rietbergen, Japan verwoord. Nihon door
ederlandse ogen, c. 1600 – c. 1800 (Amsterdam 2003) 312-327.
3 According to some biographers Thunberg was the son of a Lutheran minister, but this does not follow from the most
important source for his life, his autobiographical notes, edited in 1993 on occasion of the celebration of his 250th
was both a highly prolific professor at the Amsterdam Athenaeum Illustre and, through his marriage to Dorothea Six, related to the town’s wealthiest families. Burman not only was acquainted with Linnaeus, but also had studied in Uppsala himself, and, consequently, knew some Swedish and thus was able to converse with Thunberg both in Latin and in his native tongue.

Burman asked the young scholar to catalogue his collection of specimens of natural history, mainly consisting of two ‘cabinets’, one of minerals and one of dried plants. When Thunberg had finished the job, it turned out to have been some sort of exam as well – and a successful one, too. For Burman now told Thunberg that, if the idea were agreeable to him, he would try to find the means to send him on a trip to either the West or the East Indies. The purpose would be to enable Thunberg to do research for a number of years in the various fields of his expertise. He would repay the favour by acquiring exotic American or Asiatic plants both for the Amsterdam botanical garden and for the pleasure grounds of a number of private persons – such wealthy Amsterdam patricians as the burgomasters Temminck, Deutz, Van de Poll and Ten Hoven. Also, Thunberg would provide his patrons with other desirable objects, to adorn their collections of curios.

Thunberg enthusiastically embraced the project, opting for the East Indian alternative. It would be interesting to know if his Linnaean education influenced his decision to leave the relative safety and comfort of his own world for strange and exotic climes? The professor himself had, of course, set an example to his students by the very fact that, as a young man, he had participated in the famous research trip to and through Lapland. Moreover, he always encouraged his pupils to take advantage of the growing possibilities to travel the wider world – for example by taking service with one of Europe’s colonial companies – precisely to increase their, and Europe’s knowledge of that world. Indeed, Linnaeus can be termed one of the fathers of the phenomenon of the scientific expedition.

Waiting for an opportunity to set out for the East, Thunberg, to sensibly spend the time till his departure, first left for Paris, where he passed the months between December 1770 and summer 1771 studying anatomy and gynaecology. He also profited from his stay by attending the lectures of the famous French botanist Jussieu, the director of the royal Jardin des Plantes.

Meanwhile, back in Amsterdam, Burman had started singing Thunberg’s praises, which induced a number of the town’s collectors to support his plan; they especially liked the idea that Thunberg, on his scientific mission to Asia, might even travel beyond the East Indies and visit Japan. It would enable him to enrich the city’s hortus botanicus with specimens of Japanese plants that, strange enough, it did not possess, yet. To create a proper administrative context for this project – that was not, in itself, part of the VOC’s core business – Thunberg was offered a position as supernumerary physician aboard a Company vessel, on the understanding that, if necessary, he would serve in a medical capacity though, in actual practice, he would mainly devote his time to research and collecting. To acquire some knowledge of Dutch before going on to the Far East, he would first spend some two or three years in the Company’s factory at the Cape of Good Hope.

To properly do his job, Thunberg used his remaining time in Amsterdam to qualify as a
surgeon, taking his exam just before he left for the East. On a Company ship significantly sailed by a Swedish captain, he arrived at the Cape in April 1772, there to stay till March 1775. In his travelogue he devotes some three hundred pages to his new life; these, rather than his autobiographical notes, allow us both to reconstruct his actual doings and the ways his view of the world slowly changed. He quickly mastered the Dutch language but did not like the social context in which he learned it; he described it as a milieu of profiteers. Though he dutifully worked in the Company’s Cape Town hospital, he tried to make as many expeditions as possible into the interior of the colony. There, the sober, patriarchal ways of the Boers attracted him far more than society-life at the Cape, though he was not blind to the consequences of their colonizing presence: the gradual transformation of the erstwhile open country into farmland threatened the very existence of the Hottentots - the people nowadays called by their own name, Khoisan; indeed, Thunberg writes they already lived on the brink of extinction.

Looking for new plants and animals all over the place, Thunberg was able to ship many choice specimens to his benefactors in Amsterdam and to interested parties in Leyden and Leeuwarden, as well as to his teacher, Linnaeus, and to Swedish collectors, despite the fact that he had some trouble in making ends meet: his Company salary was not paid regularly, nor did he receive the sums that should enable him to properly do his scholarly work. This must have negatively influenced his opinion of those Dutchmen who ran the East Indian establishments.

In 1775, the Company’s directors in Amsterdam wrote, or rather ordered Thunberg to consider his time at the Cape up; he now should proceed to the VOC-headquarters at Batavia. By that time, Thunberg had come to realize, as he himself noted, that by now his interest in peoples and their cultures was as great as that in plants and their natural environment. Yet, he was not sorry to leave Africa. In a very significant passage, that shows his predisposition to be pleased by what awaited him, he expressed the feeling that the Far East was more likely to be a world where he might experience the reason, culture and, in fact, humanity that characterised Europe, despite the fact that he was aware that it might be a different reason, culture and humanity.

After his arrival in Batavia in April 1775, Thunberg had to wait a few months before he could board the ship that was to bring him to his final destination - Japan. The reason, of course, was that the Dutch maritime connection with the island empire was a tenuous one: only once a year, VOC-ships were allowed to enter Japanese waters, and to trade in the shogunal port of Nagasaki. Meanwhile, his life in the capital of the Company certainly was not unpleasant, if only because he had come well armed with letters of recommendation that ensured him a warm reception in the town’s best circles. Yet, like his experiences of life at the Cape, Thunberg’s appreciation of European society in tropical Batavia was not an entirely positive one. He writes that while in former days most of the VOC’s staff consisted of the riff-raff of European society, nowadays the men searching service with the Company are those who hope to gather as big a fortune as possible in as short a time as possible - and, in fact, often succeed in doing so, if by no means always honestly. Indeed, Thunberg soon discovered that a sober and honest attitude were not what it took to make a career in this town. Yet, he doubted whether the Company’s directors in Amsterdam were wise to enlist such
men. In typical Enlightenment style he suggested that talent and industry, rather than pa-
trician or even noble birth should be the criteria for selection. One might add that when,
some twenty years later, the Company was analysed to be on the verge of bankruptcy, cor-
ruption was deemed to be one of the main causes.

Thunberg describes Batavia as a not altogether pleasant place, if only because insurrec-
tion is rife amongst both the native population and the slaves; moreover, as soon as signs of
rebellion become apparent, the Company sets its cannon against these unlucky people.
Thunberg concludes that ‘in the eyes of a true philanthropist’, this situation does much to
demean an otherwise beautiful town.

The only persons Thunberg seems to have liked were those who formed the coterie of one
of the most powerful members of the Council of the Indies, Jacob Radermacher (1741-
1783). Although Thunberg does not give his readers any details, we know that, of course,
this was the man who tried to instil some intellectual zest into the otherwise ceremonially-
stifled small-town life of this tropical metropolis, and who thought that the Company
should not limit itself to generating huge profits, only, but should serve the aims of science
and scholarship as well. In this milieu, Thunberg apparently was well thought of, for Ra-
dermacher soon tried to convince him to abandon his Japanese plans and remain in Batavia,
offering him a position as one of the town’s physicians. Thunberg, however, told him he
had to keep his promise to his Dutch patrons – perhaps privately relieved that he was not
forced to disclose his discomfort with this European society in the East.

Hence, in the summer of 1775, Thunberg set out for Japan, knowing he would have to
spend most of his time on the minute isle of Deshima, in Nagasaki Bay. This prospect was
relieved, only, by the knowledge that he was expected to accompany the Dutch ‘opper-
hoofd’ on his annual embassy of obedience to the shogunal court at Edo: the rulers of Japan,
interested in the European sciences, especially required the presence of a doctor amongst
the embassy staff. Thunberg knew this would be his one opportunity to really experience
Japan, its people and its culture, for during the rest of the year, the VOC-servants faced a
rather dismal situation: but for a few day trips into Nagasaki-town, they were confined to
Deshima for the entire year, which had caused one of Thunberg’s predecessors, the German
physician Engelbert Kaempfer, to term the island a prison. Even during these short outings
they were heavily guarded and constantly watched by their Japanese hosts, who, moreover,
made them pay through their nose for this ‘privilege’.

Thunberg’s Japanese stay lasted for nearly one and a half year, till December 1776. He
then left for Java again, but decided to sail on for Ceylon, in Winter 1776 or Spring 1777.8
Thus, he missed the earliest meetings of the Batavisch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschap-
pen. For precisely in 1778, Thunberg’s patron Radermacher, in a way typical of his day and
age, had decided to establish a learned society in the Company’s capital – reputedly the first
such European institution ever to be founded in the tropics.

After some six months on Sri Lanka, Thunberg went on his way home to Europe, arriving
in London in October 1777. There, he was feted by the members of the Royal Society, always

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161-177.
8 Actually, his memory as to the precise dates of his movements during these years seems to have been defective: see
Wallin (ed.), Carl Peter Thunberg, 13, 15.
keen on greeting scholars who returned from abroad with new information about exotic natures and cultures. On reaching Amsterdam in 1778, he was given an enthusiastic welcome by his protectors; they now could show him the curiosities he had sent them in the previous years. Finally, in March 1779, he came back to Sweden, with his scholarly luggage, containing a collection of coins, of Chinese and Japanese books, and a large amount of seeds, dried plants, stones and other specimens of natural history; some of these, he writes both in his autobiography and in his travelogue, he even had collected with danger to his own life. It is one of the moments Thunberg poses as a real adventurer-traveller; that image, of course, was meant to enhance the status of his book in the eyes of his readers.

In his home country, Thunberg's fame had preceded him: the day he arrived in Stockholm, the King received him in audience. Back in Uppsala, he was immediately given a teaching post, as well as the position of keeper of the university collections of natural history. He also was asked to help reorganize the botanical gardens first established in the seventeenth century by another well-known Swede who had studied in the Netherlands, Olav Rudbeck. Some years later, his career was crowned with his appointment to the chair of botany formerly held by Linnaeus - Thunberg actually succeeded the latter's son, Carl Linnaeus, the Younger. During the following decades, he inevitably served as a mentor to those Swedes who, in his and his countrymen's wake, travelled to the East, as, for example, young Claes Hornstedt who corresponded with Thunberg during his own four-year trip to the Dutch East Indies.

Thunberg lived on till the ripe age of 85. When he died, in 1828, he had been positively smothered with scholarly glories: in the end he was a member of some sixty academies of science. More important, perhaps, he had been a highly respected researcher and teacher, who had influenced several generations of students and, thus, had made his mark on Swedish culture.

**Thunberg's claim to fame: the description of Japan**

Yet, beyond his reputation as a botanist, which he gained through a number of scientific studies - first and foremost his *Flora japonica*, published, with subsequent volumes, in Uppsala between 1784 and 1805, and his *Flora Capensis* (Uppsala 1794, 1799, 1807-1813) - Thunberg's fame, certainly with the larger public, rested on his travelogue - the *Resa uti Europa, Afrika, Asia* (four volumes, Uppsala 1788-1794), and, more particularly, on the third and fourth volume of the book, in which he described his Japanese experiences. For precisely those six hundred pages, translated into English, French and German, were widely-read all over Europe. Why was this description of Japan such a success? Why were Europeans even mildly interested in this country at the other end of the world? Indeed, did not the better part of the known world consist of cultures obviously inferior to Europe - the proof being, of course, the increasing success of Europe's own commercial, colonial and imperial ventures.

For more than two hundred years already, there had been one very obvious exception to this conviction: China. From the late sixteenth century onwards, the European literati had

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9 Wallin (ed.), Carl Peter Thunberg, 12, 13.
10 See: University Library, Uppsala, Westins Handskriftsamling, Vol. 165 c for Hornstedt's letters, 1782-1786, and Vol. 166 for his diary.
been given a highly positive view of the Celestial Empire, a glorification almost, in a number of books written, mainly, by Jesuit authors. Unaware that the image they were fed was a manipulated and manipulating one, and that, moreover, it was created to serve the propagandistic and, of course, political aims of the Society of Jesus, only, most readers were convinced that the civilization of the Chinese matched their own; actually, according to such influential Enlightened thinkers as Leibniz, in some fields European society might even profitably emulate the Chinese ways.

The only other culture that, from a European perspective, was both an object of curiosity and, in some ways, of admiration, was Japan. This situation too had been brought about by Jesuit missionaries, more specifically by those Portuguese priests who, between 1549 and the early years of the seventeenth century, had been spreading Christianity in Japan. Reporting back on their experiences, they had created a significant body of texts that had acquainted Europe with the strange country. However, when Christianity was outlawed by the Tokugawa shoguns in the 1630s, no other Europeans remained in Japan but the servants of the Dutch East India Company. They had bought their permission to stay on with the promise they would not openly show their Christian beliefs, and by accepting their imprisonment on Deshima; for both reasons, they were despised in Europe, where not only the Roman Catholic but also the Protestant press condemned them as cowards and even, apostates.

Of course, most of the VOC-men were anything but scholars. Hence, the number of descriptions of Japan written in this milieu was very small indeed – only a handful of substantial eyewitness accounts were published during the two centuries between the 1630s and the 1830s. Consequently, Europe’s knowledge of contemporary Japan remained tantalizingly limited. Actually, all through the eighteenth century, European scholars and, also, writers, while increasingly interested in cultural comparisons, yet had to rely on two substantial books on Japan, only. The one was published by the Dutchman Arnoldus Montanus, in 1669, and soon translated into all major European languages. The other was based on a rudimentary text and extensive notes by Engelbert Kaempfer who, in the early 1690s, had spent two years in Japan. However, his description only was published in 1727. Unbeknownst to the readers, the text had been heavily edited by the young Swiss scholar-physician Johann Scheuchzer; he had been engaged to do so by the famous English collector Sir Hans Sloane, who had bought the better part of Kaempfer’s literary estate. My analysis of Scheuchzer’s edition shows that he did much to ‘enlighten’ Kaempfer’s original manuscript – which explains why, since the 1730’s, it was such a success with generations of European readers. These readers could either acquaint themselves with those translations that gave them the entire book or, if they thought such a heavily illustrated volume too costly, provided sizeable abstracts of its main contents in encyclopaedias, such as Pierre Bayle’s Dictionnaire, and, of course, Denis Diderot’s great venture, or in world histories such as Th. Salmon’s 14-volume Modern history, or the present State of all Nations (London 1725-1731), and in the many-volume travel series that became popular in the eighteenth century, as, e.g., A.G. Kästner’s and J.J. Schwabe’s 21-volume Allgemeine Historie der Reisen zu Wasser und zu Lande (Leipzig 1747-1774).

11 For the entire section that follows, see: Rietbergen, Japan verwoord, passim.
But by 1788, nearly sixty years later, the Kaempfer-book was obviously out of date and, therefore, old fashioned. Indeed, if late eighteenth-century readers were aware that Kaempfer had taken his notes on Japan in the very early 1690s, they must have known that his picture of the country almost was a century old. In short, if only because no new first-hand description had been published since Kaempfer's, Thunberg's analysis of Japanese society and culture was bound to gain a wide readership. Although the German, English and French editions of Thunberg's travels – published, respectively, in 1792, 1794 and 1794 – contained a few excerpts of his tales on his experiences in other parts of the world, for obvious commercial reasons they concentrated on Japan, while the Dutch translation even covered the Japanese part of the story, only.

The most important question is, of course, whether Thunberg's book actually added to the knowledge available already, albeit in such older works as Kaempfer and Montanus? The answer must be short: no. Both in its structure and its content, it followed its predecessors, most obviously Kaempfer. Does this mean Thunberg plagiarised them? Well, certainly not more than most travel writers did – and indeed do. Did this situation diminish the impact of his text? Not really. The eighteenth century, as much as our own age, was a time wherein knowledge aged fast. Even in scholarly circles, it can be shown that questions long before answered were asked anew and, even more amazing, that the same answers were produced with a sometimes baffling claim to originality. Moreover, the general public then reacted as it does now: a new title, especially one that was cleverly marketed, often was received as a new book – the fact that even a short visit to a well-stocked library might produce a number of other relevant titles on a given topic seems to have escaped many innocent or simply lazy readers.

What did Thunberg offer those who turned to him for information about Japan? First of all it is interesting to note that he allowed his own persona as author to enter the scene – a thing men like Kaempfer or Montanus would not have thought appropriate. This is, perhaps, indicative of the more individualistic turn European culture took in the later decades of the eighteenth century.

Whether child-like naive, more than normally arrogant or, simply, sensibly self-conscious, Thunberg tells his readers he was such a success with the Japanese because of his

knowledge and limitless disposition to inform them as well as [his] sound, kind and friendly behaviour. Of course, the reader was meant to understand this to be the very reason why Thunberg had been able to probe into Japanese society and culture as deeply as he suggested he had done. That, again, served to heighten confidence in the reliability of his information and the value of his description.

The book itself is, basically, structured as, sixty years before, Johann Scheuchzer had structured Engelbert Kaempfer's text. Indeed, to judge by Thunberg's notes to his own tale, he had found use for Kaempfer's information dozens of times, so much so that it is not always easy to determine where the German doctor's descriptions end and Thunberg's own observations begin.

Following the precepts of the *ars apodemica*, the set of rules devised in sixteenth-century Europe for the presentation of information about countries and peoples, Thunberg opens with a description of the geography and topography of Japan, giving, of course, due attention to the island empire’s flora and fauna. He continues with chapters on the economy, the people and their language, the history of the Japanese empire, the structure of society and the role of the shogunal government. In all this, he strives to avoid the judgemental stance so often taken by European travellers when confronted with other cultures – or so he says. To stress his objectivity, he explicitly tells his readers that he has tried to look both for the good and the bad, the useful and the harmful in Japan. That any comparison, or even the very categories that serve as the instruments of comparison, could be nothing but subjective, for European ones, Thunberg was unable, or perhaps unwilling to perceive.

Yet, the most striking element in the text precisely is the way Thunberg lists the positive and the negative characteristics of the inhabitants of Japan and of things Japanese. In the end, he arrives at some twenty-odd positive judgements: Japanese people are clean, friendly, if only because they are also curious about others, and, moreover, they are honest, magnanimous and brave, et cetera. Of negative aspects he notes but four or five: he has found the people to be suspicious in their dealings with others, as well as arrogant and unforgiving, and, finally, he thinks their beliefs smack of superstition. But even these traits can be explained. And it is precisely in explaining them that Thunberg shows his own colours as a critic of Europe and things European – and, more specifically, of the Dutch and things Dutch. For it is the deceitful and arrogant behaviour of the Dutch that has caused the Japanese to become suspicious and arrogant themselves, while the insults given to them by the Company’s servants have made them unforgiving. It is rather strange to note that Thunberg fails to alert his readers to the fact that the Company, while admittedly a Dutch venture, was to a considerable extent manned by non-Dutch personnel. Sixty years before, Kaempfer, too, had tended especially to blame the Dutch for their tactless behaviour towards the Japanese, though, of course, he perfectly well knew that so many of the Company’s servants – even some of those who were on Deshima with him – were French, Scandinavian or, indeed, German. A case of nascent nationalism within Europe, or of biting the hand that feeds? Thunberg feels that the one other negative point, Japanese superstition, does not result from any faults of the Dutch: it follows from the fact that some of the sciences developed in Europe are as yet unknown to Japan. To arrive at his conclusions, Thunberg also juxtaposes Japan to Europe in general: the Japanese are more polite and diligent than their counterparts at the other end of the globe, and their cleanliness contrasts markedly with the filthiness that is prevalent in Europe – Stockholm, for example, was not a specimen of urban cleanliness and hygiene.

Almost certainly Thunberg, before setting out for the Indies, had done some groundwork to acquaint himself with Japan. In all likelihood, he had read Kaempfer’s book. After his return, it took him six years to complete his travelogue; during those years, too, he must have delved into contemporary European texts on Asia, and, more specifically, on Japan.

16 Thunberg, *Resa*, 293.
17 Ibidem, 290.
18 Ibidem, 282, 284.
19 Ibidem, 286.
Thus, he was aware of the criticism that was being voiced against Japan in the eighteenth-century European debate on the role of commercial and cultural exchange in the world at large. Specifically, the seclusion policy of the Tokugawa shoguns was considered decidedly unenlightened; according to many authors, it prevented the Japanese people to learn and benefit from ‘the outside world’ – which those same authors definitely understood to be the enlightened world of Europe. But like Kaempfer before him, Thunberg defended the rights of the Japanese to protect their own culture from those influences they deemed harmful.

Also, the prevailing practice of ritual suicide, seppuku, while described almost dispassionately by an early European observer like François Caron in his True Description of the Mighty Kingdom of Japan, of 1636, in eighteenth-century Europe was increasingly seen as an inhuman trait, that seriously impaired Japan’s claims to belong to the better part of civilization and, indeed, of humankind.

Finally, Thunberg addressed the topic of the draconian laws that regulated Japanese society – first revealed to Europe, too, in Caron’s True Description, and since then more elaborately analysed by authors like Kaempfer. Thunberg took the position that, as these laws pertained equally to all subjects, they could not be termed unjust and, indeed, did contribute to the general order of Japanese society.

Precisely for his positive stance, Thunberg has been severely taken to task by some of his modern Swedish readers. Thus, in 1923, Harald Hjärne wrote that far from being an intelligent observer, Thunberg was a somewhat dim-witted visitor, easily misled by his Japanese hosts who succeeded in giving him a completely false, for far too positive impression of their country. More recently, Carl Steenstrup has castigated Thunberg for not seeing Japan as what, according to him, it actually was: an early version of a ‘colonel government running a police state under the aegis of an obscurantist philosophy’. This, of course, is very much the rather unhistorical opinion of a 1970s Swede, who seems to forget that most eighteenth-century European societies were nothing if not police states, too. As for obscurantism – was not this the very essence of the criticism voiced by so many enlightened European thinkers against their own society? Finally, a decade ago, Bertil Nordenstam argued that Thunberg was unable to really get to know Japan, precisely because the Japanese government did not want any visitor to do so and, moreover, did everything in their power to project an image of their country as wealthy and happy.

Now, I do agree that Thunberg, if only because of his vanity, may not have been the most perspicacious of men. Also, it is obviously true that for more than a century already the Japanese authorities, both in Nagasaki and in Edo, had been successful in allowing foreigners only to see that part of their country that they could not help seeing if they were to travel to the shogunal capital on their annual embassy of obedience. Yet, these factors in themselves do not offer the real explanation for Thunberg’s positive and often even outright enthusiastic description.

20 See: Rietbergen, Japan verwoord, 301–303.
21 Cf. H. Hjärne, Två svenska Japanfärjor: Olof Eriksson Willman och Carl Peter Thunberg (Stockholm 1923).
In his writings, Thunberg reveals himself to be a representative of those generations of ‘enlightened’ Europeans who had analysed their own world and had found it defective, in many ways. Yet, in order to argue and prove their point and, moreover, to actually improve that world, these intellectuals needed to construct an image of a more ideal society; given the fact that they criticised their own culture, they were unlikely to find such a society among the existing European ones. Rather than create a utopian vision, which would have been seductive but not, perhaps, very convincing, many reasoned that an example taken from a real society in the non-European world might be more effective. However, the process of re-constructing an existing world into an ideal one, was complex. Japan seemed a promising case: little of it was actually known – the Tokugawa shoguns saw to that – but that little seemed to indicate that while the country did resemble Europe in some ways, in many aspects it could be seen as a decided improvement of it. Therefore, early eighteenth-century European writers turned to the literature on Japan.

As far as first-hand analyses went, these mostly had not been produced with any scientific aim in mind: except for Caron, Montanus and, especially, Kaempfer, the few other servants of the VOC who had written on Japan simply had tried to give their audience a good read. From all these descriptions, European authors selected elements to fit their image of the empire. Thus, in Salmon’s multi-volume Modern History and its greatly augmented Dutch, German and French translations – e.g. M. van Goch’s Hedendaagsche Historie (Amsterdam 1729) – but also in J.H. Zedler’s Universal-Lexicon (Leipzig 1735), Japan became a society that was both Europe-like and, at the same time, rather more rational, happy, et cetera.\(^2\)

Soon, however, other writers, like Voltaire and the authors of the Encyclopédie, using the same material, wrote in a more critical vein about conditions in Japan. Quite obviously their interpretations often were meant to illustrate, precisely, what they considered negative in European society.\(^2\)

These two strands in Europe’s evaluation and appreciation of Japan continued until the end of the eighteenth century. Thunberg was of the former group. His experiences in and of the country were as limited as those of his predecessors. Yet, being both a university educated scientist and one of the few such ever to visit Japan, he produced a book that by these very facts achieved a respectability many ordinary travelogues lacked. It was precisely his idealistic agenda for Europe that explains the obvious idealizing bias of his representation of Japanese society: he, too, wanted to hold up Japan as a mirror to his own world, and, consequently, he, too, described it as the model society which it certainly was not, but which he very much wanted Europe to be.

In doing so, Thunberg was one of the last of a long line of like-minded European intellectuals. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, most Europeans lost their willingness to ask themselves whether any other culture could be even remotely as perfect as their own.

The fortunes of Thunberg’s Japan
This situation explains the varied reception of Thunberg’s book. As the first eyewitness account since a hundred years it was, in the last decade of the eighteenth century, by and large enthusiastically greeted – though, perhaps, less so in Sweden than abroad.\(^2\) A few Swedish

\(^2\) Rietbergen, Japan verwoord, 279-289.
\(^2\) Ibidem, 289-295.
\(^2\) Ibidem, 308-312.
treatises on world geography used some of the data he had made available for their sections on Japan. But it is perhaps significant that when Carl Almquist wrote his monumental history of human society, published in the late 1830s, he relied for Japan on Kaempfer’s description rather than on Thunberg’s – perhaps because Kaempfer’s analysis of the country’s early history was, indeed, far more extensive than Thunberg’s pages. Elsewhere, readers bought Thunberg’s book till new ones, also based on first-hand knowledge, became available once more. These were not the ones written by such Deshima Dutchmen as Hendrik Doeff and Germain Meylan, to name but a few, for they were not translated. Rather, they turned to the work of another non-Dutch physician who served the Dutch in Japan, Philip von Siebold (1796–1866); during his stay on Deshima, he actually had erected a monument to both Thunberg and Kaempfer, there! From 1823 onwards, his serial publication Nippon: Archiv zur Beschreibung von Japan updated Europe’s knowledge of Japan. It remained authoritative till, after the ‘opening’ of Japan in 1854, anyone interested in the mysterious empire could go and discover it for him- or indeed herself.

Thus, the fame of Thunberg’s book was rather short-lived. However, it still stands as a milestone in the process by which Europe got acquainted with Japan. As most travel tales do, it tells one as much about its author and his perceptions of culture – especially his own culture – as about the world he strove to describe and interpret. That, of course, is the inevitable restriction of the traveller’s condition.

29 See plate 32 in: Rietbergen, Japan verwoord, 332.