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*The Swedish Conquest of Tibet:  
Sven Hedin's Moral Mapping of White Unexplored Patches*

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### Significance

As the twentieth century began Sweden found itself in the midst of a national crisis and harbored doubts about the virility of its race: the kingdom had no colony abroad; Sweden had lost Finland to Russia; part of the Swedish population had emigrated to the United States and Canada. Finally, Norway was gaining its independence and effectively closed the venue for maritime and polar expeditions by Swedes. Terrestrial explorations of the Asian continent remained possible however and a number of ambitious Swedes went to Siberia, Central Asia and China, as missionaries or as officials working for the Tsarist government.

The Swedish desire to claim a leadership role in the sciences manifested itself at the same time as British, French, German and Russian imperialist politics reorganized the world. These colonial powers created institutions (museums, research institutes and geographical societies) that invested heavily in finding scientific rationale for the European domination of the Orient. It is against this political background of conquest and competition that Hedin's cartographic campaigns in eastern Turkestan and southern Tibet and his mountain ascent of Mustagh Ata (7,546m) in Pamir assume national and international significance.

Sven Hedin (1865-1952) was one of Baron Ferdinand von Richthoffen's students at the University of Berlin. A geographer with artistic skills and a gift for self promotion, he wrote a considerable number of travel books for the general public and scientific reports intended for a scholarly audience. In addition, he was a popular lecturer who toured throughout Europe and was received by numerous heads of state, most notably the king of Sweden. He charted the last unknown areas of Central Asia during the course of ten journeys between 1885 and 1935, focusing much of his work on positioning and retracing the changing history of lake and river systems.

This book project will argue that the scholarly conquest of Tibet by Sven Hedin acted as a crucial element for the scientific articulation of race and culture during the first decade of this century. Hedin's 1909 lectures in London, Paris and Berlin announced the intellectual domination of Tibetan space and proclaimed the advent of the universal reign of imperialism. To the delight of crowds of dignitaries, he described the ruses he had used to fool mistrustful Tibetan, Turk or

Chinese administrators and penetrate spaces legally closed to foreigners. He cast himself as a hero who violated superstitious prejudice in order to map the unknown and forbidden. The quest for knowledge, he explained, justified these transgressions:

"My geographical moral is quite different from my ordinary moral. When it comes to geographical matters, my moral is very, very bad." (Loud laughter.) Sven Hedin's lecture at the Savage Club, London, July 1, 1909.

### Methodology

The project will focus on the materials, especially pictorial and cartographical, yielded by the 1906-1908 expedition in Central Asia. During these years Sven Hedin surveyed the mountains north of the upper Brahmaputra, which he called the Transhimalaya range. He began his journey in Simla and Leh, stopped in Shigatse where he visited the Tashi Lunpo monastery and eventually returned to India, via Amritsar. He was received by the Panchen Lama in the religious city of Shigatse, a visit which so impressed him that eighteen years later he drew from memory the city's fortress, Shigatse Dsong. The holy mountain Kailash, Lake Manasarowar and the sources of the Brahmaputra and Indus rivers were the areas Hedin mapped most extensively. After he had solved what he called "the most important and magnificent geographical problem," he went back to Simla where he was again Lord Kitchener's guest.

During the Third Expedition Sven Hedin undertook, without the assistance of any co-worker, the topographical and geological mapping of the entire route of his caravan and collected astronomical, meteorological, hydrographic and botanical data. He took photographs of the environment and people of Tibet, drew landscape panoramas, religious rituals, individual portraits, camps and buildings, in order to document the ethnographic study of "the religious beliefs of the semi-savage tribes." Over time, the pictorial information he gathered during this expedition has proven to be of great value to scholars since he documented the material culture of pre-communist Tibet. The Third Expedition was also the one in which he refined the interdisciplinary methodology that would later be applied to the Fourth Expedition (1927-1935), a much bigger undertaking with several groups of Swedish, German and Chinese scholars working

together in Inner Mongolia and Eastern Turkestan. The research program of both expeditions covered a wide range of natural and social sciences.

In order to study the articulation between orientalism and nationalism I will perform three types of analysis : I will analyze the intellectual steps followed by Sven Hedin in compiling the atlases of southern Tibet, I will examine the scholarly reactions to his findings at that time, and I will study the public lectures he gave about his work after he left British India. I do not intend to question the legitimacy of his cartographical work, question his theory about climatic changes or renew the discussion about Sven Hedin's notorious pro-Nazi positions, thirty years later. Instead I will focus on the academic context of the early 1900s in order to assess the originality and complexity of Sven Hedin's addition to the knowledge of Central Asia possessed by the "civilized world."

### Expected Results:

Largely thanks to the support of the scholars I met at the National Ethnographic Museum of Stockholm, I completed enough work during summer 1996 to feel confident that my defined research objectives may be reached by the end of next academic year. The very obliging staff of the Sven Hedin Foundation has granted me access to Sven Hedin's personal library and map collection. I now believe that my major hypothesis will be confirmed: that the mapping of an obscure area of Central Asia was perceived as a significant contribution to national identity and further proof of the superiority of Western science. A Summer Research Assignment has been approved by the Faculty Development Program of the University of Texas in order to let me spend summer 1997 in Stockholm. I am convinced that my research in Stockholm and Seattle will greatly advance discussion of the internationalization of geographical studies and the history of radicalization in area studies.

My goal is to complete the draft of a manuscript and submit it to an academic publisher as a future book tentatively entitled: **The Swedish Conquest of Tibet**. I see geography and cartography as essential participants in the elaboration of national identity, a theme which I have explored in several publications. My articles so far have focused on the Chinese cultural interpretation of space, as for instance in the geomantic maps of Hong Kong and the Chinese maps of Antarctica. In this respect **The Swedish Conquest of Tibet** will continue the reflection I engaged in my previous book, **Mapping Chengde** (University of Hawaii Press, forthcoming) on the representation of landscape of domination.

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