

Blasco Ibañez's Visit to Asia During His Tour of the World

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Abstract

In 1923 Blasco Ibañez began his tour around the World. He travelled aboard the *Franconia*, a luxury cruiser from which he would disembark to visit countries in four continents. Right after he returned home, he started writing the account of what he had seen. He did not intend to be factual; if anything his goal was to write as if he were dealing with a novel. The countries that impressed him the most were those he visited in the Far East. It is worth noting that he observed from a distance. This is not only because he was always on the move and did not have time to linger in one place long enough to be familiarized with it, but also because he was afraid to get close to people he considered very different from him.

In 1923, Blasco Ibañez started his cruise around the world aboard the *Franconia*, a cruiser for millionaires. He was fifty-six years old and enjoyed international fame and prestige. The success of his novel *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* in the United States of America in 1918 opened his work to a market of millions of readers that made him wealthy. Since that time his life had never been the same. Whereas prior to 1918 his life had been conditioned by his financial need to produce new works constantly in order to gain an income, now money was not a problem and he could therefore fulfill the dream of his youth and travel round the globe.¹

His plan was to write a travel book once he completed his trip. He traveled in a group that followed such a demanding schedule that he hardly had enough time to fully appreciate the sights he visited. This did not seem to be a problem since he could rely on information he gained from his comprehensive reading about those places. In addition, he made it clear that he traveled as an artist and intended to delineate this experience in the same way he wrote his novels; that is, giving a vision of his experiences the way they came out after they went through his temperament.² In this

¹Vicente Blasco Ibañez, *A Novelist's Tour of the World*, Valencia, Prometeo, 1924, vol. I, p. 12: "... since the first readings of my youth I dreamt of seeing the world and I don't want to leave it without having had the chance to travel around its roundness."

²In 1918, Blasco wrote a letter to Julio Cejador, "Biographical Note," *Collected Works*, Madrid, Aguilar, vol. I, p. 17. He talked about the role of temperament in the writing of a novel:

creative process it was not imperative to see everything; to the trained eye of an artist like himself, it was enough to know a part of it and to guess the rest by induction. As the title of this travel book shows –*A Novelist's Tour of the World*– all he wrote is art and therefore subjective. The description of what he saw reflects his personality. In consequence, this book enables one to understand the author as much as the places he visited.³

Itinerary

To accomplish his voyage around the globe it was indispensable to have good health, enough time and a lot of money. With an exception of his health, one can say that Blasco was well equipped for this voyage. Moreover, he was going to travel with his partner Elena Ortúzar, a woman not used to any kind of hardship. It is not surprising then that, in order to diminish the hardship of this kind of voyage, he chose to travel in a luxurious cruise ship, the most comfortable way available in his time.

The *American Express* was the company that organized this cruise. It started in New York in November 15, 1923 and lasted for four months. The boat's name was *Franconia*, an ocean liner owned by Cunard that would be making its maiden voyage around the world. Everything was being taken care of. Blasco only had to choose from the different land itineraries offered by the company.

Although *A Novelist's Tour of the World* contains no map, the detailed descriptions of the itineraries that Blasco provided should suffice to offer the reader with a mental map. When he was offered the possibility of doing a land route, he always explained in detail the places he would visit and reasons why he chose to disembark or why he decided to remain aboard and continue the voyage by boat. He never forgot to inform the reader about the length of the land tour and to include a lot of details about the means of transport to be used before he returned to the *Franconia*. This way his readers have an accurate idea of the kind of journey that lay ahead. It is worth pointing out that he never criticized the company nor questioned the itinerary.

At the beginning of the voyage nothing was really new to him. New York was a city he knew very well since his first visit to the United States in 1919. Similarly,

"Between reality and the work that reproduces that reality there exists a prism that twists everything, gathering its essence, its soul, enlarging it: the temperament of the author. To me, what is important in a novelist is his temperament, his personality, his special and unique way of seeing life. This is truly his style, in spite of the fact that he may write carelessly".

³In Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, *A Novelist's Tour of the World*, vol. I, p.15, Blasco states: "My plan is to travel as a novelist. I don't plan to write a political or economical analysis about the countries I will visit. I plan to talk about what I see and I will do so my way, as if I were describing people or landscapes of a novel, the difference is that both will retain their real names".

Havana in Cuba could not stir his fascination. Next, he stopped at Panama, a country he had never been to, but he was there only for a few hours. It could be said that San Francisco, a city that he was also familiar with, marked the real beginning of the voyage. It was then that the *Franconia* set course for Asia, the continent in which he felt more interested. He stopped over in Hawaii and Honolulu, and eleven days later he arrived at Yokohama, Japan. During this long leg of the trip he busied himself attending lectures given by specialists about the countries he was about to visit.

Once he reached Yokohama, he decided to leave the cruiser and travel by land. The plan was to explore Japan first, then visit Korea and finally China. This would be a voyage of intense sixteen days that would keep him extremely busy. Now that he would have a chance to take a closer look at the exotic countries he had read and heard so much about.

The pace of his travel during these sixteen days was so fast that he, as well as fellow travelers from the liner and several guides, were able to cover twelve cities in the three countries. His description of this adventure was so rich in information about each place that the reader gets the impression that he had stayed long enough to familiarize himself with its true nature. On the one hand, it was partly because of the readings he had done to prepare for this voyage. On the other, because of his very keen powers of observation. But the truth is that, with the exception of Tokyo, Kyoto, Seoul and Peking, he had only spent barely enough time in most of the visited cities to see some of their most important sights.

A closer look at his descriptions allows us to discover that the span of time between the moment he left the *Franconia* and the moment he got back onboard once in Shanghai was shorter than the addition of days he said he spent traveling from place to place and visiting each one. Somehow his imagination took control, and reality succumbed to the needs of a novelist trying to convey this exotic experience.

The next port was Hong-Kong. In the three days and two nights he had at his disposal he found time to travel to Canton and to Macao. This seemed to be the most adventuresome part of the whole trip, for there was civil unrest in the first place, and the possibility of a pirate attack was high when traveling to the Portuguese colony. But these were risks he was willing to take. His adventurous spirit is disclosed in a reply he gave when he was asked not to go there: "In spite of the stories I have heard next morning I come aboard the boat which will take me to the Portuguese colony. Others can resist the need to know Macao but I have been born in the Iberian Peninsula and in addition to that I am a writer."⁴

From Hong-Kong he went to the Philippines. The *Franconia* docked in Manila two days later. This was a quick but meaningful visit for him. The welcome he was

⁴Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, *A Novelist's Tour of the World*, vol. II., p. 175.

given was unlike that in any other places. However, he had to leave the next day, feeling sorry because he had no time to get to know this country the way he wanted to.

After that it was six days of sailing before he arrived in Java. This was, together with Japan, China and India, one of the places he visited with most interest. Although he only had two days to enjoy the marvels of this island, the experience was unforgettable. What attracted him most is the fact that its culture was still untainted by the influence of the western civilization although it was a colony of the Netherlands.

Next were Singapore and Burma. As usual, Blasco kept the reader informed of the itinerary. At this point there was a change that he pointed out because of its significance. His arrival to the Indian subcontinent signaled the start of a new phase in his tour. From now on what he would see did not have much in common with what he had experienced in East Asia. Burma was the gate to this new world. Here people had similar features to those in western countries. He noticed this as soon as he set foot in Rangoon, but his visit lasted only a few hours. It would be five more days before he arrived in India and had the time to observe in detail this new reality. Once in Calcutta there was another opportunity to do a land tour. He had three different options to choose from that he explained in detail:

Some travelers will visit Calcutta for three days before returning to the boat. Others will visit Benares but will be back in time to get onboard the *Franconia* to sail to Ceylon and circumnavigate the Indian peninsula. A few will give up Ceylon and will continue their land tour through India to meet our cruiser in Bombay.⁵

He chose the second option because crossing India by land would not be as rewarding as traveling by boat to Ceylon and then to Bombay. This way he would have the chance to see with his own eyes more famous sights. This meant that he had three days to travel to Benares and get back to Calcutta. What the reader discovers from the account that Blasco also had the time to travel north to Darjeeling to see the Himalayas from a distance. Again, as it happened with the description of his first land tour in Asia, he seemed to talk about more places than he could possibly visit given the limited amount of time he had at his disposal. It seemed impossible to cover in three days the long distance that separated Calcutta from Benares and back and then to Darjeeling and back again and still be on time to board the river boat which would sail down the river to take him to where the *Franconia* was docked. His narrative –“In the following days I discover that the main task of foreign consuls in Calcutta is to deal with the production of jute”⁶– suggests that Blasco the novelist had taken over Blasco the travel writer. He

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 323.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 327.

had only three days in Calcutta, so there was no way for him to get familiar with the activities of the consuls.

After this first experience in India the *Franconia* traveled to Ceylon as planned. This time his schedule was more relaxed. He only visited Kandy, a city four hours from Colombo if you travel by car.

Back in India he disembarked in Bombay. His plan was to travel inland to visit Delhi and Agra. Once again there was a long distance to cover, so the travelers would have to spend most of the time traveling from place to place by train:

We will cross a big part of northern India so we can visit the most important cities of the Old Great Mongol Empire. We will have to spend six days in the train, sleeping on top of a thin mattress that we have bought and bear the troubles of India's railway system.⁷

After leaving India, Blasco re-boarded the *Franconia* on his way to Sudan. There he disembarked again and traveled north by train through this country to cross the border into Egypt. Once he arrived in Egypt, he continued by boat on the Nile towards Cairo and Alexandria.

It is noteworthy that his experience in Egypt was totally different from that in Asia. Whereas he found those Asian countries exotic albeit rather under-developed, his encounter with Africa turned out to be disappointing. To him, Africa lacked the attractiveness of eastern civilizations. African countries, Egypt in particular, were within easy reach for European tourists, thereby being much influenced by eastern civilization.

Prior to his arrival in Africa, Blasco had not met with any other travelers and he had always enjoyed the privilege of traveling to exotic places beyond western influence. Now he lost both the feeling of being far away and his interest in this trip: "After our long voyage to follow the Nile seems to us no more than an insignificant excursion [...] We can say that we have completed our voyage."⁸ This feeling became more noticeable as he got closer to the Mediterranean Sea. By the time he boarded the *Franconia* again in Alexandria, he had the impression that he was on one of his usual trips throughout Europe. When the cruiser arrived in Naples, he considered himself already at home. After all, his home was in Menton, France, which was one day away.

When he finally returned home after having been away for four months, he could hardly believe he had accomplished this long voyage. He had been around the globe traveling towards the West from New York to Monaco. In all this time he had never been in the same place for longer than three days. He had visited at least forty

⁷Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, *A Novelist's Tour of the World*, vol. III, p. 106.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 263.

cities in fifteen countries. It had been such an exhaustingly intense experience that it seemed more like a dream to him.

It is worth mentioning that his original plan was to write an account of his voyage up to India. It was later on, when he was in the process of writing the book, that he decided to include his experiences in Africa. This explains why he published the first and second volumes in August 1924 and the third one five months later.

Countries

Through he had visited about fifteen countries in his voyage around the globe, Blasco Ibáñez gave a description on only five. These were the ones he had the chance to visit with more time when he left the *Franconia* and traveled by land for a while. In general, he tended to describe only the coastal cities he visited and their surrounding area. This was because his main means of transportation on this voyage was a cruiser which followed a very strict schedule –let us not forget that the circling of the globe was to be completed in four months. The hurry that characterized his visits did not allow for time to wander around and familiarize himself with the country. In a way, his journeys resembled those of the explorers of past centuries that, due to the dangers of hostile populations, only had the chance to see the coastal areas of the countries they discovered. It is not surprising then that cities, rather than the countries they belong to, are the feature predominantly in his descriptions. This is evident in the titles of many of the book's chapters, for example, "Taking a Walk in Tokyo", "Shanghai the Rich and Happy" and "The Sacred Benares".

However, there is an exception to Blasco's inclination to highlight the cities in his travel narrative. That is, he focused on the countries only in his account of Japan, Korea, China, India and the Philippines. Here it is important to note that these are the Asian countries whereas his description of the cities can be found in the account of his voyages to the United States and Africa. To Blasco, Asia was the only place where he could experience absolute exoticism. Given the curiosity of Westerners in his time about the history, people, and cultures of exotic places, Blasco attempted to offer readers the comprehensive representation of those exotic places and his vivid experiences of being there.

Japan

The first country he visited in the Far East was Japan. This was a very important experience for him for he had dreamt about it since his childhood. His description was enriched with the information he had collected from his abundant readings and from what he was told by the people that escorted him during his stay.

He was especially interested in traditional aspects of this ancient country. He needed to satisfy his curiosity and make sure that everything he had read in many books and seen in photographs was true. In a way, he went in search of a society completely unaffected by western influence; that was why he visited temples, monuments and cities that only in recent times had reluctantly received some western influence.

This did not prevent Blasco from paying attention to the present situation of the country. As a matter of fact, when he spoke of the general impression he had of Japan, what he stressed the most was the instability that affected its society as a result of the clash between modernization and tradition that was taking place at the time of his visit: "There are two Japans: one that has joined the trend of modernization and other that, because of internal policies and inertia, wants to keep traditions alive."⁹

In his opinion this was an anomalous situation that needed to be settled by choosing one of the two trends. His vision was not neutral. When he was having a walk in Kyoto he felt victimized of the resentment of its population against foreigners, and this feeling conditioned his opinion. After that experience, he was no longer so inclined to accept tradition regardless of the consequences. That was why he said that if Japan was so willing to import technology from the West, it would need to accept changes and open itself to the world. What Blasco found unacceptable was a society that crushed any manifestation of western influence but, at the same time, wanted to import technology and benefit from it:

The traditional organization is still strong and has deep roots; but there is evidence that its leaders have lost the confidence of former times. The Japanese government shows its insecurity very often by suppressing with extreme cruelty any sign of change. The police has not only killed several advocates of Socialism but also members of their families who didn't sustain such ideas."¹⁰

Korea

After Japan, Blasco Ibáñez visited Korea. In this case he did not show any special interest in what he saw. He only spent three days in Seoul before resuming his journey. At the time of his visit Korea was a country subdued to Japanese dominance and this fact conditioned his description. Japanese influence was evident, even for a passing traveler:

⁹Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, *A Novelist's Tour of the World*, vol. I, p. 307.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 308.

Today the kingdom of the Morning Calm is a continental extension of Japan. In the first years of occupation, the Japanese were brutal and cruel. Afterwards, once they took control of the whole country with the acquiescence of all the nations, the Japanese government has changed its attitude focusing now on its agricultural and industrial development.¹¹

He did not pay too much attention to the diplomatic efforts for the independence of the Korean people. He was convinced that, given the international situation at the moment, the Japanese occupation of Korea was irreversible. The possibility that the United States could do anything to change the status quo was not urgent; in his opinion the States would have to solve first its own delicate situation with two Spanish ex-colonies: "Before the people in Washington can demand the liberation of Korea from Japanese dominance they will have to deal with their own position regarding Puerto Rico and the Philippines."¹²

It is obvious that, in spite of his genuine interest in the countries that he visited, Blasco's passion for anything that was pertinent to his own country remained prevalent. That was why he showed much more interest in the independence of the Spanish former colonies than in the occupation of the Korean peninsula by the Japanese. To him, what might happen to Korea was something secondary that hardly deserved his attention.

China

China was one of the countries that interested Blasco Ibáñez the most. Thanks to his readings, he had an image rich in detail about what it looked like even before setting foot on its soil. During his stay he could not help comparing what he had imagined while reading with what he actually saw. Generally, he felt captivated by this ancient culture which he found truly exotic. Its people, architecture and traditions were interesting. Moreover, something else drew his attention even more. The fact that China was not an empire¹³ anymore but a republic was an achievement that he observed with utmost attention. Blasco had been a republican all his life. For many years he defended his political ideas from both sides of the law. He went to jail because of his actions as an activist, and he was also a Member of Parliament for many years. At the moment of his visit, the President had not had real power yet; he was a puppet for the generals that took control over the provinces they ruled with iron hand. However, Blasco's

¹¹*ibid.*, p. 329.

¹²*ibid.*, p. 334.

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optimism for the President's future enabled him to dismiss the fact that the change in China had not been completed yet.

In Blasco's opinion, the present situation could not last forever; it would change as soon as the whole country became aware of the change and the benefits it would provide. In China, as well as in Japan and the rest of Asia, modernity and tradition had not found a balance. Instead the two forces were fighting to gain control over the country. But in this particular case of China, Blasco showed a more benevolent attitude and believed that it was only a matter of time before the China of the past, with its ancient traditions would give way to the one that made possible the advent of the "Yellow Republic".

At the moment China was a vulnerable country, and Japan was waiting to take advantage of the situation and conquer it. In Blasco's view, the conquest of China by Japan could adversely affect Western powers. He viewed that China's friendship with the United States was necessary for the Chinese's political stability. In his opinion, the Chinese were excellent soldiers, but they needed western officers to teach them discipline and to show them bravery:

Let's conclude by saying that nowadays China is a strong and huge organism that lacks a nervous system and this forces it to remain motionless. Japan dreams of becoming its directing brain. Five hundred Chinese, in the hands of the Japanese...What a menace for the rest of the planet!

The United States, in order to avert the famous "yellow threat" [...], does its best to keep China independent from any kind of foreign influence so it can grow by itself and develop the modern soul that it still lacks.¹⁴

The Philippines

After China, Blasco sailed to the Philippines. This was an experience unlike any other during his visit to Asia. In this occasion he had the opportunity to meet numerous Spanish colonists as well as North American authorities. He was given a special welcome because of his fame and prestige in both countries. He was so busy attending numerous receptions organized in his honor that he hardly found the time to familiarize himself with the attractions of Manila.

Blasco found the political situation in this country very different from what he had seen up to now. That he was visiting the country with strong links with Spain made him feel very close to what he saw. One important issue for Blasco was that what used to be a Spanish colony was now under the rule of the United States. When he

¹⁴Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, *A Novelist's Tour of the World*, vol. II, p. 129.

attempted to portray the political situation of the Philippines, Blasco was faced with a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, the United States was a country which he admired and to which he owed much of his fame and his wealth: "For many years I have felt a deep sympathy towards the United States of America."¹⁵ On the other, the Philippines was close to his heart due to its links with Spain: "At the same time the people of the Philippines inspires fraternal feelings in me."¹⁶ This situation forced him to be very careful when choosing his words. He did not want to offend the people from the United States while he was very much in favor of the independence of this country: "After my visit to Manila I admire its faith and tenacity in obtaining an independent existence and I hope it achieves its goals."¹⁷

Further on in his text he was more categorical. To an argument that it was not the time yet to grant independence to the Philippines, he responded: "For a country to prove its ready for independence you have to grant it first."¹⁸

After a visit of twenty-four hours he returned to the *Franconia* bound for Batavia. It was a short time, but he had been so busy it seemed he had accomplished so many things –as if he had been there for months. His description shows how proud he was of Spain and its role as a colonizing country. After all Spaniards did provide the people from the Philippines with the basic rudiments of culture that weaned them from savagery and made it easy for the North Americans to educate them. Blasco did not forget to remind the reader that, unlike most other occupying forces of the time, the Spanish did marry natives, formed families, and settled in this country.

India

With India Blasco also tried to convey an image of the country that went beyond what he had seen during his stay. This country, like Korea and the Philippines, was under the control of a foreign power, in this case Great Britain. Although Blasco did not openly deal with this political issue his stance was revealed in several remarks that he made in his description. At this point it was pretty clear that, with an exception of the Philippines, although he disagreed with the existing situation of colonization at least, he did not criticize it in an open way. He considered to be positive the European influence upon colonized countries where traditions inhibited progress.

When he described India, he pointed out something that had already caught his attention when visiting Japan and China: the problematic co-existence of progress and tradition in its society. This time the contrast was more noticeable: "In this country

¹⁵*ibid.*, p. 206.

¹⁶*ibid.*, p. 206.

¹⁷*ibid.*, p. 206.

¹⁸*ibid.*, p. 212.

the mixture of advanced civilization and millenary traditionalism is unparalleled."¹⁹ The former was imposed upon Bengal by Great Britain while the latter was represented by indigenous states that made up the rest of India, each one ruled by a prince with the help of an English adviser.

In Blasco's view India was victim of its own idiosyncrasy. The plurality of races, religions and castes generated a tremendous chaos that prevented a coordinated action in order to improve its situation and rendered this country an easy prey for Great Britain.

Blasco found it difficult to be optimistic unless some radical policies were implemented. He mentioned specifically problems derived from religious conflicts which seemed the most difficult to solve: "Unification in India is little more than a useless geographical expression. There are as many Indies as there are religions. And, of all human groups, those that have to do with religion are the hardest to reconcile."²⁰ He was aware of the efforts made by Gandhi, but he regarded them as useless given the nature of its inhabitants. He could not foresee that in 1947 the tenacity of this man would make the dream of independence come true.

Another thing that Blasco considered characteristic of India was the hunger that devastated its population in spite of the efforts of the British to eradicate it. He mentioned this phenomenon in the hope of making it understandable to the occidental. It was not an easy task since it was incredible for anyone who had not witnessed it with his own eyes. In his opinion this famine was caused by a system of castes where the majority of the population was oppressed by the authority and exploitation of the *rajās*:

The kind of misery that this people endure is unknown in the West. Even the poorest of the poor in our countryside or the shabbiest beggar in any of our cities couldn't survive a week the sober existence of this people. This poverty is too much for a white man.

Maybe this hunger explains why this people have always lived as slaves throughout history.²¹

Once Blasco Ibáñez left Asia, there was a sudden change in his attitude. As I have mentioned before, he no longer showed an interest in describing his experiences equal to that which he had while visiting Japan, China or India –to mention a few examples. Once in Africa, the thrill he had felt while traveling in Asia was gone. What he saw did not seem to have the same kind of appeal. From now onwards, he preferred to

¹⁹Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, *A Novelist's Tour of the World*, vol. III, p. 171.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 58.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 175.

travel in time and describe the monuments he visited in Egypt in relation with their golden age. He did not enjoy reality so much.

Since the fact that Blasco Ibáñez traveled by boat affected his experience in a meaningful way, I think it is important to take it into account when analyzing *A Novelist's Tour of the World*. Although he had traveled for four months, he spent a great deal of this time out on the sea, away from any country. In addition, the tight schedule set by the organization –it was the only way to cover so much in such a limited period of time– meant that when he disembarked he needed to rush from place to place with hardly enough time to enjoy what he visited. Another factor to bear in mind was the fact that he traveled with a group of people and had a lot of social activities both when sailing and after a journey of sightseeing. All this explains why he often derived his descriptions on information from books and sources, such as conversations with guides or expatriates living in the places he visited. Despite what he said about being an artist and having the ability to know by intuition what he could not see while traveling, Blasco still needed to rely on those sources.

It is evident that Blasco Ibáñez preferred to observe from the distance. He was a millionaire who wanted to verify with his own eyes what he knew from his readings. What attracted his attention were monuments and traditions, not individuals. This was not only because of the circumstances that conditioned his trip but also of the fact that he was not at all interested in mingling with the natives in the streets. He only talked with those of higher class he met in balls and other social gatherings held in exclusive hotels.

What he observed was conditioned by his belief of the superiority of Europe and the United States over the rest of the world. This explains the contrast between his description of cities such as New York or San Francisco and that of Asian countries. Although he was anxious to experience the exoticism of these ancient cultures, many times his remarks show clearly what he thought. These could be in part a pose– after all, what he wrote was primarily addressed to his home culture and to his public in general– but it seems to be his conviction.

In the past, when traveling through western countries, he had always made it clear how proud he was of being Spanish. Now that he was visiting countries with cultures that had very little to do with Europe or America, he showed how proud he was of being Occidental and Spanish. This may explain why he held such a positive opinion about the influence of western countries in these societies. He was optimistic about China's future because its ruling class, trained in Great Britain and the United States, embraced western influence and criticized Japan because of its reluctance to open up.