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**Writing China from the Rest of the West:
Travels and transculturation in 1920s Spain**

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ABSTRACT

Scholarship on the representation of China in the West generally assumes a direct interaction characterized by colonial dynamics. This article shows what happens when a third agent – non-colonizer and non-colonized – enters the picture and looks at two responses from Spanish texts written during the 1920s: whereas Vicente Blasco Ibáñez's China chapters in his well-known *La vuelta al mundo de un novelista* (1924) dissolve the Spanish position into the voice of the colonizer, Federico García Sanchiz's *La ciudad milagrosa* (1926) uses an external perspective to articulate a more critical view of the Western presence in Shanghai that is nevertheless subjected to a formal style that homogenizes the narrative. I argue that both works have trouble offering a coherent representation of China that is driven by their Spanish positionality. This proves not only the ambivalence of (Spanish) representations of China in the twentieth century but also the strength of the discourse generated by colonial powers, which ends up expanding its actual scope: here, domination was not only exerted in China, but also, discursively, within the West itself. This ultimately shows that we must not completely denationalize the study of cross-cultural representations.

KEYWORDS

China; transculturation; representation; Vicente Blasco Ibáñez; Federico García Sanchiz.

Introduction

In 1992 Stuart Hall coined the expression “the West and the Rest”, which has become perpetuated as a binary in many discussions on postcolonial studies. Even if Hall alerted us to the use of *West* and *Western* as short-hand generalizations that represent “very complex ideas and have no simple or single meaning” and pointed out specifically that “the West has always contained many internal differences”, the expression became a paradigm for the academic study of the interactions between China and different countries throughout history (Hall 1992, 185, 188).

The foundations of such a binary have already been questioned. Besides Hall himself, some scholars in different fields have called for a more plural conception of the West in academic discourses. Naoki Sakai, for instance, has claimed that “we are urged to acknowledge that the unity of the West is far from being unitarily determinable”, arguing that what we understand as “the West” is in fact ambiguous and incongruous (2001, 77). The ambiguity of the West can not only be claimed in relation to concepts such as class or ethnicity, but also in relation to the different nations that are usually placed within this category. James Hevia (2003) has called for the need to develop studies about the interactions between East Asia and Western countries based on non-Anglophone and non-Francophone sources as the first step to understanding the transnational patterns of these interactions. Colin Mackerras has noted that there are parts of the West which figure but rarely in his study of Western images of China, “as total comprehensiveness is impossible” (1999, 4).

Such a plural conception of the West has also been played out in the specific field of studies on writings about China in the past few years, when attempts have been made to open up the terrain of cross-cultural understanding. The term *sinography*, coined and promoted by Steven Yao, Haun Saussy and Eric Hayot, among others, has meant to include “the study not simply of how China is written *about*, but of the ways in which that writing constitutes itself simultaneously as a *form* of writing and as a *form* of Chineseness” (Hayot 2003, 185; Hayot, Saussy, and Yao 2008). Bolder attempts at integrative studies have gone further by highlighting China as a crucial component in the development of “Western” modernity. As a result, Robert Bickers (1999), for instance, sustains that China should be incorporated into British imperial history. Eric Hayot (2009) has shown the significance of China in the development of Western imagination and philosophical modernity. Peter Kitson also argues that “the Chinese contribution to ‘Romanticism’ or the literature of the British Romantic period was in fact substantial and just as important as the later, more discussed, nineteenth-century influences of Chinese aesthetics on European aestheticism and modernism” (2013, 1). Recently, Gordon Chang has developed the idea that China was “essential for America’s fate” and the idea of China “an ingredient within the developing identity of America itself” (2015, 3).

All these efforts – the claims for the pluralization of the West, the critical reflection on the writing about China and the integration of the non-West into the development of Western modernities – can of course be read as the legacy of post-structuralism and postcolonial theory, blended with the interest of China in the world

today. They should be contextualized within the general direction taken by European and North American Humanities, which have been attempting to stretch critically their own limits. However, they still remain limited within the paradigm set up by Hall's expression: they may have pluralized the idea of China and the way we understand the relation between China and the West, but not the representation of China, which still takes the West as generally localized in Anglo, Franco or German contexts that can be characterized by a colonial (discursive) relation with China. They imply that representations travel from China to Europe or the United States and remain fixed in a central context of reception.

This article departs from that assumption by asking what happens when a third agent – non-colonizer and non-colonized – gets into the picture. Or, more specifically, what happens when “China” is represented in a nation such as Spain which has no colonial relation with China.¹ The article addresses this issue by examining two Spanish texts about China written during the 1920s that suggest two kinds of interrelated responses. Vicente Blasco Ibáñez's chapters on China included in his well-known *La vuelta al mundo de un novelista* (notes from a trip in 1923 that were published as a book in 1924) assume the perspective of the colonizer himself, even if Spain's position in China was politically irrelevant at the time. Federico García Sanchiz's *La ciudad milagrosa* (published in early 1926) adopts an external position that articulates a more critical view of Western presence in China, but still remains constrained by a formal structure that homogenizes the narrative. As a result, the images of China and the ways of portraying for a Spanish readership end up being quite similar to other European representations, while the historical context receiving these images is very different. This gap produced certain ambivalences and irregularities in both texts that will be examined in the next sections.

The traditional tension between China as an object of knowledge and China as an object of experience that characterized many Western encounters (Hayot 2003, 178) can easily be seen in both travellers. On the one hand, both works emerge following a first-hand experience of China, as both writers travelled and wrote from there. On the other hand, Blasco Ibáñez and García Sanchiz reproduce knowledge about China that circulated widely in the literature, media and arts throughout Europe. In fact, the interest in China that took place in Spain in the 1920s and 1930s derived from the extraordinary attention that was being paid to China in Europe at the time. This differed from the situation in previous decades when China had been imagined from Spain in a non-derivative way: accounts of missionaries and diplomats as well as the Philippines' connection offered a direct vision of China embedded in the Spanish reality (Davis 2015). This generated a set of representations of China that were genuinely connected to the Spanish context: from the trope for an imperial past that was expressed in the illustrated press or in Fernando Garrido's *Viajes del chino Dagar-Li-Kao* in the nineteenth century, to the critical reflections of Luis de Valera's *Sombras chinescas* in 1901 or the meticulous knowledge of Gaudencio Castrillo's *El comercio en el Extremo Oriente* in 1918 (Torres-Pou 2013; Ning 2015; Prado-Fonts, 2015). Each of these works were spurred by the specificity of a distinct Spanish positionality. They projected an

unconventional view on the relation between China, Spain and Europe that could not be encountered in any other work published around the same time across the West.

Yet when Blasco Ibáñez and García Sanchiz travel to China and write their novels – and later in the 1930s – the context for representing China is a new one in Spain and Europe. First, Spain's position in Asia is even weaker. Second, Spain's interest in China increases exponentially following the attention that Europe was paying to China due to several historical factors that, as a result, produced a very heterogeneous set of representations, shaped by multiple, diverse voices. First, there was a significant movement of Europeans to China and Chinese to Europe, including major artists and intellectuals such as Liang Qichao, Pan Yuliang, Lao She and Qian Zhongshu in Europe (1919-1920, 1921-1928, 1924-1929 and 1935-1938) or John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, Margaret Sanger and W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood in China (1919-1921, 1920-1921, 1922, 1938). Such mobility was entangled in European intellectuals' pessimism towards Western civilization after WWI. Second, the development of new journalistic practices accelerated cross-cultural contacts and also placed China in a coeval position vis-à-vis the West. Third, the proclamation of the Republic of China (1911-1912) had an enormous impact upon China's image in Western societies. China was publicly acclaimed and welcomed into the world of democracy. Only a few years after the publication of the two novels analyzed here, a general concern for gender and class issues would further increase the humanization of the Chinese population. Novels such as Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* (1931) or André Malraux's *Les conquérants* and *La condition humaine* (1928 and 1933) would have an enormous impact across Europe. For the first time in history, the Chinese people were perceived as individuals sharing problems and conditions with Western citizens. Fourth, China was also disseminated through popular culture, which amalgamated the exoticism of Puccini's *Turandot* (1924) with the "Yellow Peril" trope in Sax Rohmer's novels and movies about Dr. Fu Manchu (1912-1930s) and with all sorts of expressions of Oriental wisdom and paraphernalia in circuses, magicians' shows, or art exhibitions. The birth of the earliest Chinatowns in Europe also contributed to the visibility of China in European societies.

This climate permeated into Spanish culture. In media, for instance, while events taking place in China were regularly covered in the Spanish press, newspapers relied on informations released by foreign agencies such as Reuters, United Press, or Havas. Or, in literature, about 25 percent of the books related to China that were published in Spain between 1900 and 1930 (including poetry, fiction and non-fiction) were acknowledged translations of English or French originals and the rest generally relied (explicitly or implicitly) on foreign sources.² Following these avenues set by European translations, China became an important source of inspiration for Spanish writers: the texts by Blasco Ibáñez and García Sanchiz we will examine below are but the prelude of other notable works that became highly popular, such as *De España al Japón*, *En el remoto Cipango* and *El diablo blanco* by Luis de Oteyza (1927); Pío Baroja's *Yan-Si-Pao*, *Pilotos de altura* and *La estrella del capitán Chimista* (1928, 1929 and 1930); or, in Catalan language, Joan Crespi's *La ciutat de la por* (1930). In addition, the prestigious journal *Revista de Occidente* included in its associated book series the volumes *Cuentos populares de China* and *Domador de demonios* (1925 y 1929) and Chinese poetry was

used as a source of renovation of the lyrical canon by acclaimed Catalan poets such as Apel·les Mestres, Marià Manent and Josep Carner between 1925 and 1935. Evidences shown in *Archivo China-España, 1800-1950* indicate that the image of China in Spain in the 1920s and 1930s was more influenced by these indirect Western sources than by direct accounts by Spanish writers as Sinibaldo de Mas (1858, 1861) or Luis de Valera (1902, 1903) published in previous decades.

The writing and reception of *La vuelta al mundo de un novelista* and *La ciudad milagrosa* must be understood within this new context. The ambivalences and formal irregularities in both novels exemplify the tensions arising from the process of transculturating an image of China shaped by the European intellectual climate into a historical and political environment that was very different from these other counterparts.³ Spain was still influenced by the emotional investment in its imperialist past in Latin America, Africa and the Philippines. The two writers analysed here were strong supporters of Spain's imperial aspirations. Despite his Republican beliefs, on the same pages of *La vuelta al mundo de un novelista* Blasco Ibáñez justified Japanese imperialism as a modernizing mission (1924a, 319-20) and praised Spanish colonial legacies in the Philippines (1924b, 203-05). García Sanchiz would become one of the most representative writers of Fascist literature and, while writing about his travels around the world, aimed at awakening Spain from historical stagnation.⁴ In their representations of China, both writers do not detach themselves from their emotional attachments to imperialism. Rather, they express through "China" – a foreign geography that had not been a Spanish colony – their imperialist devotion in a way that must reconcile their experience with the visions set by Anglo- and Francophone hegemonic discourses.

Moreover, contrary to important previous texts on China with a minor circulation in Spain, such tension between first-hand experience and inherited visions had to now be resolved to reach a wide Spanish readership (and even an international one, in the case of Blasco Ibáñez) with a sound interest in China and the belief that the Chinese market was a golden opportunity to be seized by Spain in order to overcome its political decadence. This implied their own experience in China accommodating the ideas inscribed in the readers' assumptions, which had mainly been framed by foreign discourses.

I argue that, despite their differences, *La vuelta al mundo de un novelista* and *La ciudad milagrosa* have trouble offering a coherent representation of China and show how the transculturation of the discourse on China generated by colonial powers expanded its actual scope: authority from centres such as England or France was not only being exerted towards China, but also, discursively, within the West itself. In other words, these Spanish texts show how the colonizer-colonized paradigm dominates the discourse of the representation of the Other, even in non-colonizer, non-colonized cross-cultural relations, homogenizing the image of China and erasing the plurality of of the West as the agent of representation.

Both texts, then, complicate the existing Western discourse on China as they show the tensions arising from two different strategies that deal with a fundamental problem faced by these writers: How to represent China from a Spanish position that is

free from a colonial attachment to China but, at the same time, still subject to the hegemonic discourses on China that arrived from Europe and that follow a colonizer/colonized pattern. As we will see, Blasco Ibáñez confronts this issue by adopting a homogeneous conception of the West that sets up a very dichotomic and racialized image of China and the Chinese. But this position goes against his own account to find a cross-cultural commensurability through some positive aspects of Chinese society. Instead, García Sanchiz confronts the same issue by adopting a more heterogeneous conception of the West that takes advantage of the Spanish singularity to criticize social inequalities. But this position goes against the formal structure and modernist style of his work, to the point that he prefers to qualify his personal account as a work of fiction.

These tensions complicate the existing knowledge on Western discourses on China, as they point to different genealogies for a shared catalogue of representations of China and different attitudes emerging as a result. From their close analysis emerges a call for a more comprehensive understanding of Western representations of China that takes into account both the plurality within the West itself and the complex cross-cultural circulation of discourses that supersedes simple binaries. Thus, while contemporary scholarship on, for instance, world literature attempt to “denationalize literary history” (Sapiro 2011, 232) the problems found in Blasco Ibáñez and García Sanchiz can contribute to these debates with new insights and suggest that national anchorages must still be retained. Incorporating “the Rest of the West” into the analysis overcomes the limited binaries condensed in Stuart Hall’s famous formulation and empowers a more complex view of the views on China.

La vuelta al mundo de un novelista

When Vicente Blasco Ibáñez (1867-1928) visited China in 1923 he was already one of the most well-known Spanish authors at an international level. In Spain, he was much more than an acclaimed writer: he was an extremely popular figure who had been involved in the political insurrections in favor of Republicanism since the mid-1890s and who had funded initiatives such as the newspaper *El Pueblo* in 1894 and the publishing house Prometeo, which published books and novels at popular prices. As a polemical activist he had been imprisoned several times and was a member of the Spanish Parliament between 1898 and 1905. After this political career, he turned to literature and journalism, giving tours abroad and becoming an international bestselling author. During the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera (1923-1930), he stayed in France and published articles denouncing it. The English translation of *Los cuatro jinetes del Apocalipsis*, a novel arguably commanded by the President of France, became a bestseller in 1919, especially in the United States, and many of his novels were turned into Hollywood movies. It was following this success and at that mature point of his career that he set a foot in China.⁵

The visit was part of Blasco Ibáñez’s travel around the world between November 1923 and March 1924 in the ocean liner *RMS Franconia*. He went to New York for the trip’s departure point and disembarked in Monaco, next to Menton, where

he was living at the time. The journey resulted in his book *La vuelta al mundo de un novelista*, in which he offers an account of the different places he visited, including quite extensive historical details. The China section of the book has 13 chapters that follow the trajectory of Blasco Ibáñez's journey in that country: from Mukden, he travels south to Beijing (where he visits temples, the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace, the Great Wall), further south to Shanghai, and finally to Hong Kong, Canton and Macao.

The frame of reference for these China chapters is unquestionably Western. During the trip, he mingles with the rest of the passengers of the *Franconia* and the narration makes sure to depict the collective as a Western, homogeneous group, which is contrasted against China and the Chinese. There is almost no mention of the nationality of the passengers in a way that differentiates their experiences in or their understanding of China. Occasional references to specific nationalities within the group (North Americans, for instance) appear, but they are kept as anecdotal curiosities, usually related to funny characterizations.

A minor critical distancing is exhibited only when describing incidents such as the Opium War: he talks about “naciones europeas” (106) or “tropas europeas” (107) in a way that suggests that these were conflicts harmful to China but in which Spain was not involved.⁶ And he certainly denounces the “rapacidad de los invasores” and the looting of Beijing (107-10). However, while the long historical surveys he includes would have allowed him plenty of occasions to set up a specific point of view, since the Spanish position and weight in the international context was singular, they are never fully explored. Compared to the critical, deep reflections on the Western colonization of China in, for instance, Luis de Valera's *Sombras chinescas* (Torres-Pou 2013), Blasco Ibáñez does not show here any of his well-known capacity for sharp observation and critical punch.

Such a homogeneous conception of the West and erasure of the Spanish specificity sets up a very contrasted dichotomy that frames the representation of China: it depicts the reality of China in such a polarization (China vs. the West) that it makes it difficult to fully engage with the lived experienced in a nuanced way. Restrained by this frame, Blasco Ibáñez's account has trouble integrating the predetermined image of China with the reality he is actually witnessing. For him, the China he has read about is still more relevant. The discourse acquired in the past has become so strongly anchored in his imagination that it rejects the evidence gained from what he is actually living and observing day after day. In spite of all the economic and social transformations he is describing, China keeps “el prestigio misterioso y el novelesco interés que envolvió siempre su nombre” (49). This reaches almost surreal moments. He very much doubts about being in Beijing because what he is seeing is very far from what lies in his imagination, a city so remote that it is impossible to visit: “¡Es tan extraordinario vivir en esta población, cuyo nombre aprendemos desde niños, como algo remotísimo que nunca llegaremos a ver..!” (48-49). To reassure himself that he is where he is, Blasco Ibáñez decides to stay at the Wagons-Lits, the oldest hotel and the one that appeared in the readings he had done. In this way he is “más de veras en China” (59).

These predetermined images of China were not restricted to small, erudite circles in Spain. As mentioned above, representations of China were popular and easily accessible in many spheres of society.⁷ And thus Blasco Ibáñez himself addresses this widespread knowledge:

El lector conoce perfectamente la isla del ‘Jardín del Mandarín’; la conoce casi tan bien como yo que la he visto con mis ojos. No haga gestos negativos. Repito que la conoce desde su niñez. Es la isla con un kiosco, un sauce y un puente que figura en mantones llamados de Manila, en todas las cajas de laca, en todos los abanicos chinescos. (189)

His insistence testifies to the fact that he is actually describing a China that has already been assimilated by the Spanish reader and calls for certain essentializations and orientalized visions, especially on cultural topics such as Chinese language and characters or Confucian culture. He attempts to expand this information with historical contextualization following his daily experiences. His comments are quite accurate (for what could be expected from a non-specialized book) and are drawn upon sources that, although unquoted, reveal a textual origin: the summary of the Qing arrival to power is short but informative (19-20); the conflicts with Japan in Manchuria are well contextualized both in terms of international relations and internal dynamics (32-36); the syncretism and the coexistence of different religious practices in China are adequately addressed (chapter 5); the history of the Great Wall is quite rigorous (137).

It is no surprise that, in this context (that is, a homogeneous frame of reference, a dichotomous representation, the predominance of an imagined, textual China), race emerges as a significant characterizer that functions as a unifying category. There are plenty of examples through the text (related to “white” or “race”) with the clear implication that it is a representational category that divides China and the rest, which lumps Spain in along with other Western nations. This racial boundary determines the way the Chinese reality is approached. It generates a tension that, if attention is paid to the formal evolution of the text, ends up reasserting Western superiority and eclipsing some relativistic insights that in fact do try to relativize historical or cultural incommensurabilities. For instance, the narration praises the order and security in Chinese cities, which are much safer than many European cities (59); downplays gastronomic differences: “Nosotros también saboreamos manjares y bebemos líquidos que hubiesen dado náuseas a nuestros bisabuelos y tal vez a nuestros abuelos” (73-74), or “El pueblo chino ha cometido crueldades, como todos los pueblos de la tierra, pero muchas menos que las imaginadas por la ignorancia occidental” (111); and generalizes political confusion and anarchy as states that have taken place all around the world at some point (166). There is also a critical view of the Christian missionaries and an understanding of why the Chinese have had problems with them: “porque se han inmiscuido muchas veces en los asuntos políticos del país, protegiendo a terribles malhechores convertidos a sus creencias para escapar a la justicia” (93). China is often portrayed as a vigorous nation, with the potential to develop herself and modernize (163-68). However, as the racial discourse sinks in, these occasional relativistic

references are not easy to hold. The assumption of Western superiority, strongly based on racial binaries, grows throughout the text and ends up monopolizing the narrative.

As in a battle for discursive supremacy, race gradually turns the adoption of an informed, relativizing view into a monolithic conception that degrades into the animalization of Chinese people as the chapters unfold. References such as: “¿Qué importa unos chinos menos? ¡Hay tantos!” (175); or

¡Hay tantos chinos...! La fecundidad de la raza lucha con las cóleras del Océano, con las inundaciones homicidas de los ríos, con las epidemias, con los temblores del suelo, y acaba por triunfar, considerando un episodio ordinario la pérdida de algunos centenares de miles de seres (195)

precedes a final outbreak of xenophobia and animalization in the last chapters (203-04). This eruption puts very much in doubt the previous statements about the future ahead for China and its promising historical progress. The culturalist discourse (the importance of Chinese history, the splendour of Chinese past, which were what provided arguments for having confidence in the future of the Chinese nation) gets eclipsed by such racial investment, which highlights difference as animalization. In this way, the ethics of cross-cultural understanding lose credibility and, worse still, no reconciliation seems possible, as this strong racial eruption ends up in a reminder about war: “Para que el mundo de los blancos se entere de la existencia e importancia del Pacífico, será necesaria una gran guerra. Así se dio cuenta por primera vez de que existía el Japón” (206). The final chapter, when Blasco Ibáñez visits Macao, sees this attitude reaching its climax. He goes beyond sarcastic comments (227-28) and enters into a racial opposition: “Son gentes bien educadas, pero el olor especial de los chinos resulta intolerable para muchos olfatos europeos. Ellos, por su parte, declaran que nosotros expelemos un hedor de carne cruda, digna de nuestra condición de bárbaros” (228).

In sum, the formal progression in the China chapters of *La vuelta al mundo de un novelista* cannot sustain a mature, critical vision of the Chinese other. The homogenizing, dichotomous, racial discourse ends up dominating the narrative and erases any trace of a distinctive Spanish positionality. Cross-cultural incommensurability becomes reinforced and the frame of reference consolidates as homogeneously Western.

La ciudad milagrosa

Only a few months later, a younger and more determined Federico García Sanchiz (1886-1964) wrote no other than what he labelled “the first book about the totality of Shanghai that has ever been published in the world” (García Sanchiz 1926, 10). The grandiloquence of such a statement can probably be explained by his desire to gain notoriety in the 1920s. He was then starting his career as a journalist, writer and “charlista” or public speaker, who, after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936,

would support the Nationalist side and would later become one of the most representative writers of Fascist literature (Rodríguez Puértolas 2008).

García Sanchiz travelled to China as part of a journey that also took him to Japan, the Philippines and Singapore as an “intellectual ambassador” (El Profeta 1925, 276). In Manila his goal was to establish closer links between Spanish and Philippine intellectuals and unite these peoples in a new phase of Spanish history in which Spain would awaken from stagnation and become “invincible” again (277). In fact, García Sanchiz coined the term *españollear* to summarize his project:

Los siglos XIX y XX crearon y afirmaron la anti-España. Salí yo a correr tierras y, al observar la insidia con que se nos combate y convencido de que muchas de nuestras ideas y actitudes clásicas son de un valor universal y permanente, me consagré a su predicación con el fervor de un misionero, y en ello sigo. (NA 1964, 79)

Thus, the assertion of Spanish nationalism was the basis of García Sanchiz’s literary and cultural project and provides the framework to understand *La ciudad milagrosa* as it implied singularizing the Spanish position around the world and projecting it with a universal value. And this favoured a particular vision of China at the time.

García Sanchiz arrived into China in April 1925. Having re-encountered Julio Palencia, a childhood friend who at the time was the Spanish consul in Shanghai, he stayed in the city for a longer period of time than what he had planned. It was Palencia’s hospitality and, probably, all the information that through him was made available to García Sanchiz what seemed to have motivated a comprehensive critical understanding of China. *La ciudad milagrosa* is an attempt to rise above not only the usual impressionistic pieces that García Sanchiz wrote for the journal *La Esfera*, but also the kind of portrayals of China across the West in the 1920s exemplified in Blasco Ibáñez’s work. The claim for singularity that García Sanchiz himself attributes to his own piece denotes that he is well aware of what his contribution could be in the international discourses on China:

Como escritor español, he querido ofrecer a mi país las primicias del estudio de un tema internacional, universal, más que ninguno del momento. Mucho, y a veces de calidad, se ha escrito acerca de Shanghai, pero siempre de pasada, o desde especiales puntos de vista. (10)

Attempts at authenticity are also displayed through the paratext: a fine illustrated cover by modernist artist Rafael de Penagos, showing a Chinese driver pulling a rickshaw with a (Western) woman on it, and the title and the author’s name in Chinese calligraphy in the opening pages (*Shengjiishi, Fanhua zhi Shanghai* 生切師, 繁華之上海), with the indication that they were written in Chinese especially for this edition, something that was quickly remarked upon by the reviewers.

What follows behind the cover is a collection of vignettes about Shanghai in 1925. It opens with a brief introductory section, written while he was still on the steamer, that sets the tone and argument of the book: “Admirable vida la de Shanghai. A cada paso, una genialidad, un absurdo, un milagro, aunque del diablo” (16). The main section, “Shanghai, the Miracle City”, with 74 entries of unequal length (from a couple of pages to more than 20), explores this city of prodigies paying attention to all sorts of settings, characters, atmospheres and anecdotes of the Chinese city. A final section, “The Jungle”, is a report of the strike and social turmoil following the famous labour and anti-imperialist incident of May Thirtieth 1925.

Although it concentrates on Shanghai, *La ciudad milagrosa* includes also a trip to Japan. This suggests that, for these writers, the focus on a particular city was not an actual spotlight on urban issues, but rather a metonym for a larger context: China or even East Asia. In this sense, García Sanchiz and Blasco Ibáñez share such a wide scope. However, one of the aspects that contrasts most strikingly both works is García Sanchiz’s vision of the West in China, not as a homogeneous block as in Blasco Ibáñez’s, but rather as an assembly of different nations with different positions, characteristics and interests. Casual distinctions abound, such as “ingleses, americanos, belgas, noruegos, holandeses, griegos, españoles, ninguno sin su *smoking* o la chaquetilla blanca de gala” (87). But deeper disparities with larger implications appear regularly as well. Westerners in Shanghai, for instance, live in separate quarters of the city, something that denotes the existence of a cultural incommensurability among them (23). Even in a place such as the cemetery, where all Westerners are buried in the same common soil with no separate sections for different nations, the narration remarks on the difference by singularizing the family names inscribed on the tombs (59). Heterogeneity also characterizes the different religious groups and their enterprises: Spanish padres combine the evangelization with mah-jong games; British and American missionaries add a political and commercial purpose to their crusade; French priests produce statues for converts and Asian antiques for export (149). Perhaps the most significant example of such heterogeneity are the different attitudes of the Western nations vis-à-vis the labour and anti-foreign riots of May Thirtieth 1925, which are described in the final section of the book and discussed below.

Such a repeated insistence on this variety in many aspects of the city life breaks the dichotomous paradigm, China vs. the West, that underlay Blasco Ibáñez’s depiction. This point of departure – which implicitly shows the weak position of Spain in China as only one minor component within this set of nations – allows for a vision that embraces the contradictions and intricacies derived from the Western presence in China:

La vida compleja e intensísima de Shanghai es como una tromba en cuyo vértice estuviesen todas las pasiones, todas las inquietudes, todos los problemas que hoy torturan el Mundo: el oro, la raza, la sensualidad, la política, el comercio, la ambición, el colonialismo, la guerra...” (Montero Alonso 1925, 5)

This is the actual meaning of Shanghai as a “miracle city” comprising this totality. It is the epitome of the modern world. This framework overcomes the notion – so

consolidated in Blasco Ibáñez – of a textual China that monopolizes the representation up to the point of getting into conflict with the Chinese reality that the writer is experiencing at the time. A new framework makes García Sanchiz capable of describing what he sees and surrounds him in a more critical way, even if that implies leaving aside the Orientalistic stereotypes internalized by the Spanish reader. His criticism is not only targeted at Western residents *per se*: “De cada cien occidentales instalados en Shanghai, setenta son escapados de presidio, y veintinueve han hecho aquí méritos para ir a la cárcel... El otro es el único tonto que podríamos encontrar en esta maravillosa ciudad...” (89). Or at a social landscape he compares with Sodom and Gomorrah (192). His target is also colonial domination in a larger sense: *La ciudad milagrosa* often refers to how colonialism has brought corruption and immorality both to colonizers and the colonized (232), and how domination has made China lose its original charm. Colonialism and the West have even destroyed Orientalism and the textual China that had been so revered:

La invasión de los occidentales, las claudicaciones de los nativos, la misma naturaleza, adulterada, acabaron por disipar el originario embrujamiento de estas tierras, creando esa realidad absurda que en las cancillerías y en los mercados se conoce por el Extremo Oriente. (56)

Western domination has had tangible consequences upon social aspects that had traditionally been attributed to cultural inheritances. For instance, families in rural China “ya no ahogaban o abandonaban en la calle a sus hijas apenas nacidas, según uso tradicional, porque en adelante producirían dinero, dedicándolas a la prostitución en la urbe maravillosa” (65).

Whereas Blasco Ibáñez’s racial vision of China configured a homogeneous conception of the West, here the broader understanding of Shanghai leads García Sanchiz to point to social inequalities. This is most visible in the last section of the book, “The Jungle”, which deals with the labour and anti-foreign riots of May Thirtieth 1925, during which “Shanghai se transformó en una selva donde se persigue a los indígenas” (257). The narration then becomes quite journalistic. It gives an ample explanation of the direct causes of the incident (258), as well as a more contextual analysis, including the role played by Western-educated young Chinese (261-62) and by the Bolsheviks as final instigators (267). The incident is not a casual coda to the book. It is of great relevance, as it encapsulates all the contradictions described in the previous chapters. It combines a social repercussion with a more standard colonial interpretation: the coloured people have always served the white race, and the Bible recognizes and authorizes such slavery (270). Most interestingly, it shows each nation’s reaction (271-72), which does not address the actual problem: England insists on the infallibility of the British; France suggests a disproportionate zeal on the part of the British army; Japan desires war and actually welcomes the conflict; and America “con su ideología democrática, y sus miras comerciales y previsoras en la cuestión del Pacífico, manifiesta su simpatía hacia los chinos, y aboga por la abolición de la extraterritorialidad” (271). Spain – “Seneca’s grandchildren” – is also harshly criticized by its indifference (272).

Of course, García Sanchiz was not the only one to criticize the inequalities caused by imperialism in China at the time. Besides canonical writings such as Lenin's 1917 essay against imperialism and the role of the colonies in the Communist movement, criticisms abounded in British Marxism (Buchanan 2012) or in Manabendra Nath Roy's book about his experience with communism in China, which would actually be translated into Spanish in 1932. Yet what is significant in the case of García Sanchiz is that his critical view on imperialism in China is built from outside of the dichotomy colonizer-colonized, something which is facilitated by his adoption of a singularly Spanish angle that stands out from the usual parameters: a class concern emerging from a non-Marxist setting (actually, by a proto-Fascist intellectual) also allows the inequalities within the West itself to be seen. Thus, it combines the denunciation of blatant elements of colonial aggression such as slavery (68) with subtler modes of subjugation within the West itself. For instance, the case of the new type of woman based on the American model, who characterizes a new kind of colonialism imposed by capitalism: García Sanchiz denounces that there is no proletariat among the Westerners in Shanghai and women in Shanghai face the problem of life just as men do in the rest of the world, which becomes, especially for Americans, "un procedimiento de colonizar con sus mujeres" (82).

While this more nuanced analysis allows for a deeper understanding of what is going on in China and the world, García Sanchiz's account still remains constrained by a structure and style that, by trying to emphasize the heterogeneity of the Western presence in China, turn the portrayal almost fictional. This creates inconsistencies, the most obvious being that such heterogeneity and relativism are strictly related to the Western presence in China. Chinese people are generally seen *en masse*; not racial, as in the case of Blasco Ibáñez, but still a homogeneous group basically characterized by being dominated. While class might be a new concern, it ends up homogenizing the Chinese reality as well. More importantly, such emphasis on heterogeneity is accompanied by a formal structure that interacts with all these critical views and therefore affects the way China gets represented. García Sanchiz's impressionistic portrayal relies on a set of modernist techniques, such as fragmentation, montage and impressionistic rhythm. These are used to portray the histrionic, strident combination of characters and nationalities, policemen and criminals, order and chaos, good and evil, that comprises Shanghai as a miraculous *Grand Guignol* (48). Shanghai is a sensational monster that, through these techniques, becomes almost fictitious for the reader. And it is actually claimed as such: García Sanchiz insists on labelling *La ciudad milagrosa* as a *novel*. He wants to make it clear that it is neither an essay nor a collection of travel notes, literature by and for tourists (9), which he dismisses as genres too frivolous for such an ambitious, original project.

Is then fiction more adequate for representing the complexity of China? According to García Sanchiz, it is. His investment suggests that, even if presenting fiction as more adequate than "factual" genres to describe a complex reality might seem paradoxical, it does make sense when we consider how factual or "textual" China was so rigidly carved into the readers' assumptions at the time, up to the point of having lost its anchorage in reality, as in the case of Blasco Ibáñez. Fiction then becomes the genre

that allows one to transcend the readers' expectations and portray a more enhanced view of China and a critical reflection of its relation with the West. Yet, while *La ciudad milagrosa* and, by extension, the representation of China itself are then subjected to a prison-house of genre with the inconsistencies that the "China genre" implies, García Sanchiz is nevertheless able to build a critical reflection transcending the dominant discourses. He makes sure that behind the "voluptuosidades de la visión artística", the reader will find "una denuncia, que no carece de oportunidad en este día en que la mirada del mundo se fija en el Far East" (9-10, emphasis added). While these extravagances diminish the critical punch of the work, fiction becomes a realistic genre with which to depict China anew and differentiate from the dominant discourses.

Conclusion

La vuelta al mundo de un novelista and *La ciudad milagrosa* show the coexistence of different representations of China in 1920s Spain. They were part of the flux of images and information about China at the time in Europe and show how this interest had to be adjusted to different Western contexts, which were not homogeneous themselves. In Spain, the concern for China actually created a terrain where these transculturations competed in capturing and translating a China that was already vivid and fixed in the readers' minds due to the import of English and French discourses.⁸ Blasco Ibáñez and García Sanchiz exemplify this competition and the complexity in conforming a coherent representation of China framed by their specific Spanish positionality and consistent throughout a long narrative.

In their own way, these two works show how the actual scope of the discourses on China articulated in English and French went way beyond the dual relation between colonizer and the colonized. The interest in China spread into other Western contexts outside of but not alien to this tension. The discourse on the colonized was assumed by non-colonizers up to the point in which, as we have seen, text and fiction became more important than direct experience itself, and writers had to negotiate their own contribution within this fixed framework. In this process of transculturation that interiorizes the colonizer's view and voice, shifts take place: Blasco Ibáñez appeals to the concept of *race* as a unifying category that facilitates the inclusion of the Spanish position within a Western perspective;⁹ García Sanchiz brandishes instead a more heterogeneous vision that still remains subjected to formal, discursive colonial parameters.

La vuelta al mundo de un novelista and *La ciudad milagrosa* make us think critically about the idea of sinography. They claim how important it is to nationalize and historicize the writing of China in order to make visible the shifts emerging from transculturation and the triangular path that characterized the actual cross-cultural circulation of representations.

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Notes

¹ Although in strict geographic terms Spain could be placed on the Western side of the binary established by Hall's terminology, its political position in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is certainly more ambivalent. It could actually be considered "the Rest" within this general West. With this singularization, I want to pay attention to the configuration of this homogeneous West: while we tend to keep it unified for practical purposes, "the West" actually includes a vast array of diversity, and unbalanced power relations among its agents.

² See bibliographic lists at: ALTER research group, *Archivo China-España, 1800-1950*, ace.uoc.edu/publicaciones-historicas (accessed 17 July 2017).

³ I am following the notion of transculturation outlined in Tymoczko (2007, 120-127), as "a mode of cultural interface" that "includes such things as the transmission and uptake of beliefs and practices related to religion, social organization, and government from one people to another, as well as the spread of artistic forms, including music, the visual arts, literary forms, and even tale types" (120).

⁴ I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing these biographical points to my attention.

⁵ On 12 January 1924 the *North China Herald* announced Blasco was visiting Beijing as a "famous Spanish novelist" and announced a reception held at the Spanish legation.

⁶ Since the English versions of Blasco's text published in 1926 and 1927 are partial and do not include all the original chapters, all translations are mine. I have consulted the following contemporary edition: Blasco Ibáñez (2011).

⁷ Joan Crespi i Martí's *La ciutat de la por* (1930) is a case in point, with detailed depictions of Canton, even though the author never traveled there.

⁸ In fact, the competition between García Sanchiz and Blasco Ibáñez was publicly stated – in more general terms – by the media (NA 1926).

⁹ This probably explains the circulation of both works. Whereas García Sanchiz's remained circumscribed to the Spanish market, Blasco Ibáñez's was (partially) translated into English and French: *A Novelist's Tour of the World*, translated by Arthur Livingston and Leo Ongley (1926), which was then published in London (1927); and *Le voyage d'un romancier autour du monde*, translated by Renee Lafont (1928).