Review Article

Korea, Its People and Customs as Seen by the World Renown Novelist Vicente Blasco Ibañez (1923)*

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This article examines the image that the famous Spanish novelist Vicente Blasco Ibañez offers of Korea, its people, and its customs based on his writings derived from his stay in the country in 1923 during the period of Japanese occupation. It discusses his descriptions of Korea's dress, weather, and customs, as well as his praise for the Korean people. In the same way, it addresses the subtle perceptions and well-documented readings that the author makes of different periods of Korean history, including the compassion he shows towards the last prince of the Yi dynasty and his apologetic vision of Queen Min for her resistance against the Japanese colonial power. It is a new look at the novelist's trip to Korea, highlighting unknown aspects which were silenced or poorly interpreted, and adds new sources for his study.

Keywords: Korea, Joseon, Spain, Korean people, Blasco Ibañez

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Introduction

Vicente Blasco Ibañez (1867–1928) was a world-famous writer and a renowned politician. Specifically, the film adaptation of his book *Sangre y Arena*, which starred Roberto Valentino, catapulted him to the level of world celebrity (Blasco Ibañez 1919). According to Emilio Sales, this work became a real phenomenon in the United States; in fact, the translation of *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* exceeded 200 reprints (Blasco Ibañez 1918), "so that, if each print run consisted of ten thousand copies, more than two million books were sold" (Sales Dasi 2019). In addition, his trip to America in 1919 ended up turning him into a media figure whose journalistic articles enjoyed enormous prestige (Ramos and Martínez, 2015).

A widely unknown facet of the famous writer is his time in Korea in 1923, a journey on which he wrote in his last work: *A Novelist's Tour of the World*,[1] published in 1924 (Blasco Ibañez [1924] 1976). This volume is divided into three books, in the first of which he recounts his time in the United States, Cuba, Panama, Hawaii, Japan, Korea, and Manchuria. Specifically, Blasco Ibañez dedicates Chapter XXV to Korea, dividing it into the following sections: "The Kingdom of the Quiet Morning-A Bad Night over the Waters that Witnessed the Great Battle of Tsushima-The Cold of Korea-The Grotesque Costume of the Koreans-Their Two Hats-How Japan Took Over the Kingdom of the Quiet Morning-Murder of the Queen by the Japanese-Dilated Horizons-Processions of Ghosts-Crows and Tombs-In Seoul-The Generous Illusions of a Patriot." [2] In addition, Blasco Ibañez's stay in East Asia was reflected in the Korean press of the time, which published some news about the Spanish novelist in the first half of the twentieth century. Specifically, the newspaper *Chosun Ilbo* echoed his death on January 30, 1928 with a magnificent obituary

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1. Blasco Ibaañez, Vicente. *La vuelta al mundo de un novelista*. (A Novelist's Tour of the World) Plaza & Janés Editores, Barcelona, [1924] 1976, pages 265–295. Book one: United States-Cuba-Panama, Hawaii-Japan-Korea-Manchuria, Chapter XXV: "The Kingdom of the Quiet Morning-A Bad Night over the Waters that Witnessed the Great Battle of Tsushima-The Cold of Korea-The Grotesque Costume of the Koreans-Their Two Hats-How Japan Took Over the Kingdom of the Quiet Morning-Murder of the Queen by the Japanese-Dilated Horizons-Processions of Ghosts-Crows and Tombs-In Seoul-The Generous Illusions of a Patriot." From now on, all quotes in quotation marks in the text related to Blasco Ibañez's trip to Korea refer precisely to the page interval between 275 and 295 of the aforementioned edition in Spanish, but we will not quote the specific page number each time so as not to make reading tedious. The co-author wants to thank her 92-year-old father for the gift of this edition that he treasured in his personal bookstore.

2. We are currently working on an article about the impact of the life and work of Blasco Ibañez on the Korean press.

in which the literary and political facet of the author is praised, treating him as a "writer of international renown," and which was published only two days after his death (*Chosun Ilbo* 1928).[3] Therefore, in this article, we deal precisely with his stay in the kingdom of the quiet morning—that is, in Korea—which was under full Japanese occupation. We also analyze his impressions of the country, as well as the descriptions he made of its people and their customs, offering a unique perspective.

We also want to break with a certain pro-Japanese profile of Blasco Ibañez, an image previously pointed out (Muñoz Garcés 2018) and that, in our opinion, is erroneous. Among other reasons, in the account of his trip to Korea, the subject of this study, he not only places the Koreans above the Japanese, praising them in various paragraphs, but also empathizes with the attempts of Queen Min (Myongseonghwanghu) to oppose "the absorbing management of Japan." He also took pity on the conditions in which Prince Yi Eun, heir of Korea, found himself. Blasco Ibañez had the opportunity to meet the Prince and explains that he was forced to marry "a Japanese woman of a great family, to have him in the most absolute submission".

Landing of the *Franconia*, the Great Luxury Cruise Ship of Cunard Lines

Vicente Blasco Ibañez embarked on one of the first luxury cruise ships that went around the world. The *Franconia*, one of the flagship ships of the legendary Cunard company, sailed from New York in January and returned to the city of skyscrapers at the end of May, after four and a half months of cruising. The scale of luxury on board was such that travelers wore tuxedos for meals. Blasco Ibañez was traveling with his lover, who was a Chilean billionaire, and her Spanish maid. The fourth Spanish speaker of *Franconia* was, curiously, a young cook of the ship, a native of Valencia, and therefore, a countryman of the famous writer. As a curiosity, it should be noted that the aforementioned chef baptized every day some of the dishes on the menu with the name of a novel by Blasco Ibañez and even personally took care that "the English typographers did not disfigure the Spanish words with orthographic nonsenses." As for the rest of the travelers, all were Americans except for three English passengers.

Already in Japan, after having passed through Cuba, Panama, and Hawaii, Blasco Ibañez announces to the reader of his next stop in Korea: "We are

3. The Japanese press also talked about his trip to East Asia (George, 2014).

approaching Korea, a peninsula that when detached from the Asian continent receives on its back the cold breath of the winds of Siberia." Winds are characteristic of the winter on the Korean peninsula and make the temperature drop well below zero degrees and the wind chill even colder.

Meeting with Prince Yi Eun and Compassion for His Desperate Situation

During Blasco Ibañez's stay in Japan, or more specifically during the train journey to the port of Shimonoseki from where he would later embark to the port of Busan, he encounters a passenger he calls "an unexpected travel companion." He further notes that "their presence attracts official influence to all major sojourns." It is, precisely, Prince Yi Eun (Crown Prince Uimin), the last heir of the Joseon Dynasty,[4] who, like our writer, was heading to Seoul to spend a season. At this moment, Blasco Ibañez addresses the reader to explain: "This crown prince is nothing more than a title. There is nothing to inherit anymore, for the Kingdom of Korea was definitively annexed by Japan in 1910." We see, therefore, that the Spanish novelist was fully informed of the situation in this part of East Asia.

Likewise, Blasco Ibañez alludes to the ceremonious greetings that the "forgotten prince" receives on the platforms of stations from groups of soldiers and adds "without being inspired by a real curiosity." At the same time, he indicates that ordinary Japanese were not concerned about this reception, which he describes as "monotonous and cumbersome."

When getting off the train, in Shimonoseki, snow-covered passengers to their knees. And, crossing the white landscape, Blasco Ibañez describes the curious picture of a procession of lanterns, a luminous parade that was nothing more than the procession that surrounded the prince. He explains that there was a large number of policemen, some dressed in uniform and others in civilian attire, who were advancing through the snow "each carrying a round paper lantern." And between the two rows of "red and yellow glows dancing on the white ground" emerged the figure of the prince, dressed as a Japanese general, looking to one side and the other, and smiling shyly. While the prince was restless and misplaced, his Japanese wife walked with "a military petulance, swinging her arm martially, standing up to look taller" and he also tells us that

4. It should be noted that a co-author of this article, personally met a descendant of the Yi Eun family in the city of Suwon.

she was dressed in a traveling costume with a European fashion hat. She was accompanied by an officer, to protect her from the snow, carrying an open umbrella "of shiny cardboard." Actually, it was she who attracted everyone's eyes, while her dethroned husband followed her almost as a part of her entourage.

And it is here when he stops to describe to us the political circumstances that surrounded the prince. He aptly describes him as an "heir without a crown" and indicates that he had been installed in Tokyo, near the government, obviously to closely monitor his movements. Likewise, he tells us that he was married to "a Japanese woman of a great family" to keep him "in the most absolute submission." This practice of forcing princes and kings of the Korean peninsula to marry princesses from other kingdoms was not new in Korean history. At different times in their past, such as during the *Mongol Yuan* invasions in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, kings had been forced to marry Mongol princesses to undermine their power and keep them under the control and influence of the Mongol Empire. In this way, Korean princes became puppets in the hands of invading powers as they were used to appease the people and the rebel armies under the pantomime of supposed independence and the maintenance of the royal family and its offspring.

On the Japanese Torpedo from Shimonoseki to Busan

The journey from Japan to Korea, or more specifically from Shimonoseki to Busan,[5] crossing the Tsushima Strait was made on a narrow Japanese vessel, which Blasco Ibañez describes as a powerful torpedo designed for speed without thinking about passengers. The waves were violent in the strait and the ship accused the movement of the waves, so much so, that the passengers had to hold on tightly so as not to lose their balance. In the dining room, the dishes crashed to the floor, with the corresponding "din of broken earthenware" that forced the Japanese waiters to do everything possible to recover the pieces and clean the floor. The gelidity of the night and the snow perched on the deck of the black "torpedo" contrasted greatly with the luxurious cruiser to which they were already accustomed. In fact, Blasco Ibañez blames the Japanese ship more than the fury of the sea and comes to compare it to a coffin while describing the journey as a bad night, where the icy snow in contact with his body reminds

5. In Blasco Ibañez's original in Castilian, "Pusan" is used, instead of the Busan Romanization, because this would be its pronunciation in Spanish.

him of the cold of death.

In the hall of the Japanese torpedo, as if they were visiting, Blasco Ibañez meets again with the entourage of the prince, "the courtiers of the prince of Korea and, at the same time, his guardians." He notes that the military has not shed its medals, its gold cords, its gallons, and its sabers to the belt. He also notes that civil servants still wear their long cross levite, while their top hat rests on their knees. He is surprised that they live oblivious to the waves and the cold, remaining inert, like figurines without feeling, without hardly exchanging words. And he reminds us that the prince lives under the Mikado, or Japanese Emperor, having lost all his credit in his own kingdom. But he adds: "no one can guess the future, and riding the guard next to the heir without inheritance, they watch over the security of Japan." In this sentence, Blasco Ibañez seems to tell us that the Japanese were still afraid that, by some chance of fate, Prince Yi Eun could return to the throne, hence the heir was so closely guarded. In the morning, after such a hectic night, they woke up in the port of Busan on the southern tip of the Korean peninsula. The difficulties in understanding Korean led Blasco Ibañez to confuse the initial letter of the city and he spelled it in Spanish as "Fusán" instead of Busan. However, he is aware of its importance, as he calls it "the largest port in Korea." Once disembarked at the port, the tourists from the *Franconia* waited for a long journey of ten hours by train that would take them, at last, to Seoul.

First Impressions of Korea: Korean Dress and Hats

From the first moment Blasco Ibañez steps on Korean soil he is captivated by traditional clothing. The first thing that catches his attention is the preponderance of the white color of Korean men's clothes, a white that dyes the urban horizon with light, accentuating the feeling of cold when melting with the snow. And he describes this men's dress as "a robe or wide shirt up to the heels, which flaps in the wind." He also makes it explicit that under the white robe, they wore trousers attached to the ankle, also white.[6] For centuries white clothing has characterized the Korean people, coming to be referred to in some historical texts as the people of white clothing (Soh 2011, 25–36). The third century Chinese text *Samgukji* (Records of the Three Kingdoms) in the chapter Dongyi 東夷 describes the inhabitants of the Korean peninsula with reference to their white dress. This tradition was maintained throughout the centuries, during the

6. Blasco describes them using the word "underpants," with the connotation of underwear.

Figure 1. Photograph of the German traveler Ernest Hesse-Wartegg, 1902
Source: Hesse-Wartegg (1902, 616)

Goryeo (918–1392) and Joseon (1392–1910) times, and the first Western visitors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in their descriptions of Koreans mention without fail this characteristic aspect, as does Blasco Ibañez. Although some authors have wanted to relate this aspect to the poverty and mourning of the Korean people, an argument also defended by the Japanese authorities and pro-Japanese academics, the reality is that the use of white in daily dresses is related to the ancestral and religious beliefs existing in the peninsula that have shaped the Korean aesthetic. White is identified as the color that best reflects the natural (*sosaek*); that is, color without artificial modifications, natural white (Seo 2015).

The workers do not go unnoticed by Blasco Ibañez's gaze. He dedicates a few words to the workers of the port of Busan, pointing out that, in addition to the robe, they wore a balaclava, which he describes as "a woven helmet that reaches up to their shoulders and masks a part of their face."

But, without a doubt, the Korean garment to which he devotes the most attention is hats that are extraordinarily genuine and that he describes as implausible headdresses. Thus he says: "Everyone wears a top hat whose size does not reach half of their head" and adds that it is held in place thanks to "flanges tied below the lower jaw." The description could not be more perfect; Blasco Ibañez wants us to see the hats through his words. He could not show us a photograph because the books of the time hardly included images, but he puts all his effort into describing with extreme realism the type of headdress he finds

in Korea. And he also wonders what their purpose will be and concludes: "This hat is useless." It seemed to Blasco Ibañez that these headdresses could not protect them from the rain or free them from the sun. Moreover, he reasserts that they did not completely cover the head so they had to hold them with the aforementioned ties. And yet, he is aware that the "little hat" (*gat*), in his words, maintained the same kind of shape, but, at the same time, underwent modifications according to the time of year. Specifically, he points out that in winter, they put inside a kind of rubber sheath that he describes as "shiny," while in summer, they lacked such wrapping, to remain in a skeletal form, that is, converted into "a gauze rubberized with a wireframe." Likewise, he notes that this is not the only type of hat worn by Koreans, although it is the most common. He describes another headdress, less common, which was used to express mourning and which he describes as a kind of "straw gate with the mouth inverted, a kind of plate with edges so wide that it almost touches the shoulders of the wearer, leaving his face invisible," in reference to the type of hat called *bangnip*. These hats were worn by low-ranking government officials during the early part of the Joseon Dynasty and were later used as a sign of mourning.

We can observe the spirit of a social anthropologist that emerges from the descriptions that Blasco Ibañez makes of the Korean people, always concerned with offering us ethnological information, and capturing the material culture of the inhabitants of Korea. In this same line, our writer highlights another element typical of Korean men, the very long bamboo pipe (*jangjuk*) that accompanied them everywhere. In this eagerness for anthropological description, he points out that the bowl of the pipe consists of a small clay stove where barely a pinch of tobacco fits. And again, he looks at the workers and stresses that neither the peasants nor the construction workers abandon the pipe to till the fields or to build buildings in the cities.

The Cold of Korea

Blasco Ibañez was used to the sweet climate of Valencia (Smith 1972), a Spanish coastal city whose beaches have attracted and continue to attract thousands of tourists. But, as a good Mediterranean Spaniard, he suffered at the slightest drop in temperatures. In 1923, the year of the visit to Korea, the most outstanding climatic event in the writer's hometown, was torrential rains which resulted in the flooding of some rivers and an impact on the citrus production of Valencian orchards (*Las Provincias* 1923). Moreover, the average annual temperature in Valencia ranged between 15 and 17 degrees, with a maximum of

23 degrees and a minimum of 10 degrees. Let us bear in mind, therefore, that his "acute feeling of cold" response is on the one hand due to the differences in climate between Spain and Korea, and on the other, due to the winter season in which Blasco Ibañez set foot in Korea. The winter cold is something that always impresses foreign visitors and that our author indifferently made repeated comments about the low temperatures and how its inhabitants endure it with seemingly little impact on their daily tasks. Therefore, he is very surprised that, as cold as he perceived it, Koreans were dressed in white cotton clothes, which he identifies as a type of clothing more appropriate for the Spanish summer.[7]

The Siberian wind penetrates through the dresses and produces that feeling of a polar cold, but being a dry cold, it can be endured despite its harshness. Something that Koreans have developed to counteract the cold over the centuries is heating systems of which they are very proud. *Gudeul* or *ondol* are traditional heating systems that use passages located under the floor to circulate hot smoke from a boiler located outside or in the kitchen of the house. This system has conditioned the way Koreans sit and sleep at home. With the floor being the warmest part of the house, most of domestic life is carried out as close as possible to the floor of the home. This also leads to another tradition to which Blasco Ibañez refers, the taking off of shoes in the house and leaving the shoes at the entrance.

Praise of the Korean People and Anti-Japanism

Several scholars have created an image of Blasco Ibañez as pro-Japan, including Laurentis, who refers to the admiration of Blasco Ibañez due to "the modernizing task carried out by Japan in the peninsula" (De Laurentis 2008, 190). For his part, Taeyeong Kim, quoting the Hispanist Park Chul, says that Blasco Ibañez shows "the negative and dark aspects of Korea," rather than the positive aspects, and also says that he "defends the colonial policies of Japan" (Kim 2018, 308).[8] However, in our opinion, none of this is correct, because, from Blasco Ibañez's writings, it is clear that he sympathizes with the Koreans since his arrival on the Korean Peninsula, and that, at the same time, he shows animosity towards the Japanese invader. In fact, he praises the Korean people, using the following expression: "Their advantaged stature still seems taller when

7. "It is incomprehensible that in a land whose winter is one of the harshest, its people go dressed in summer, white cotton," p. 278.

8. This refers to the Master's Thesis of Park Chul (1982).

they pass by their Japanese dominators." He continues: "These disciplined, active and energetic pygmies, dressed in grey, do not have the majesty of haughty Koreans in their white robes." And later, he considers that Koreans have a "solemn air," in such a way that the observer ends up getting used to the small hats "and finds a certain beauty to their long faces, with a somewhat crushed nose, pale complexion and straight beards."

Undoubtedly, Blasco Ibañez is attracted by what he calls the majesty and beauty of Koreans, in whom he perceives a certain patriotic pride. Perhaps this way of behaving, which Blasco Ibañez attributes to the Korean people, is related to the emphasis that Confucian philosophy makes on one of the 5 virtues, *li* 禮, which emphasized the formality of manners and the way of behavior, something that, at that time, was still very present in Korea.[9]

On the other hand, he is also able to appreciate the open character of Seoul, when he says: "In the capital of Korea we meet the cosmopolitan Far East." He points out that the shopping streets of the Korean capital find types and ethnicities that he had already noticed at the door of his hotel upon arrival, mostly Chinese, Mughals, and Russians.

And about the political aspects of the Japanese occupation, Blasco Ibañez considers that Korea "is only Japanese because of the impositions of force" and recognizes its deep-rooted national character when he writes that "many years of tranquility must pass for it to truly merge with its dominator." Moreover, when he describes the Japanese, at a certain point, he says, "this people has been over-praised, flattered too much." And he has no qualms about clarifying to the reader that Japan's goal is to dominate most of Asia, and adds that this could not be carried out without the support of what he calls "the white powers," which were fundamentally for the writer Great Britain and the United States, who had not so long ago settled in the Philippines and Hawaii.

Regarding the anti-Japanism of the Spanish novelist, it should be noted that Blasco Ibañez usually resorts to irony when it comes to criticizing the Japanese. For example, to allude to the occupation of Korea and to note the extraordinary number of casualties caused, he says: "The Japanese, who are the most courteous people on earth, do not recognize obstacles when they propose the realization of a wish. These laughing, flower-loving little men regard death as an unimportant accident." In addition, without mincing words, he explains that the Japanese

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9. "Yen Yüan asked about benevolence. The Master said: 'To return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self-constitutes benevolence... Do not look unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not listen unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not speak unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not move unless it is in accordance with the rites'" (Confucius 1979, XII, 1).

were cruel and brutal during the occupation "Today the former kingdom of the Morning Calm is mainland Japan. In the first years of the occupation, the Japanese were brutal and cruel." And to a certain extent, he reproaches the non-intervention of the rest of the international powers, especially Europe, but recognizes that, over time, the Japanese government was modifying its cruelty, since it needed to extract the mining wealth of Korea, for which it had to promote industrial plans. He also noted the Japanese development of agriculture for the exploitation of the fertile Korean fields. "Later, when they became absolute owners of the country with the acquiescence of all nations, the Japanese government has changed its conduct, dedicating itself to its industrial and agricultural development."

It should be noted that Blasco Ibañez is one of the few European writers who does not get carried away by the ethnocentrism prevailing at the time, something that distinguishes him from other European travelers and scholars.[10] In general, he tries to put himself in the shoes of his interlocutor, even more so in the case of Koreans. For example, Blasco Ibañez feels the need to explain to readers the Eurocentrism applied to the nomenclature used to designate both the capital and the country, and therefore, he says: "I need to clarify. Korea and Seoul are names that only whites use and Koreans do not know. The real name of Korea for those in the country is Joseon and Seoul is called in Korean Keijo."

Likewise, Blasco Ibañez shows a great interest in the traditions, customs, and history of Korea, but also tries to enlighten readers so that they are on an equal footing with the Korean population he describes. It is a rare prospect for European travelers of the time, who often tend to present themselves imbued with a certain superiority. This is evident when describing the names of Asian empires, which he considers to carry "poetic" names, which he understands are generally related to geographical issues, but also patriotism. Thus he points out that the Japanese called their country the "Empire of the Rising Sun" because they see the sunrise on the Pacific side, but that, always from their location, in an ethnocentric way, they called China the "Empire of the Setting Sun." He says that the Chinese accepted the nomenclature used in Japan, but not the one that had been imposed on them because they saw the sun descend beyond their domains, with which they chose to call themselves "Empire in the Middle." After these explanations, he tells us that Korea is located, precisely, between the Empire of the Rising Sun and the Empire in the Middle. So, there was "no title available" for Korea and so It was called "Cho-Sen," which means "Quiet Morning or Cool Morning," and, therefore, is also related to the sunrise. The

10. See for example Eckardt (1929) and Hesse-Wartegg (1895).

name Joseon, the name of the last Korean kingdom before the Japanese colonization, was the term used by the first king of the Joseon Dynasty, King Taejo (1392–1398), to name the new kingdom to symbolize the change of era and connect the new Joseon Dynasty with the Old *Joseon*, that is, with the first foundational kingdom to appear in the Dangun myth.[11]

Apology of Queen Min and Vindication of Her Figure during the Visit to the Palace of the Kings

Blasco Ibañez's praise of Queen Min (Empress Myeongseong, 1851–1895) is powerfully striking, almost identifying with her in the struggle against Japanese power. In this way, he turns her into a kind of heroine of her time, a woman who tried to protect her country from the Japanese aggressor. Queen Min can be considered the most politically influential woman of the Joseon Dynasty (Kim Y. 1976, 116). Queen Min's apologetic account begins with the following elegant and revealing paragraph: "There was a queen in Korea who, in 1895, tried to oppose Japan's absorbing dealings. They were taking over the country with disguise, and the queen, to counteract their influence, made a nationalist policy, frankly Korean."

These two sentences are very revealing, they indicate from the beginning that Queen Min was a character with determination, intelligence, and awareness of the real situation of her country. A woman not fooled by the falsely generous

11. This founding myth of the Korean people appears in the classic work, *Samguk Yusa* (Memoirs of the Three Kingdoms), and narrates it by saying how the Lord of Heaven, Hwanin, had a young son named Hwanung. He desired to descend from heaven and possess the world of men. His father, realizing his son's intention, descended upon the three great mountains and saw that men would benefit from his son's action. He gave his son the three *cheonbuin* and ordered him to leave and rule the human beings. Taking with him three thousand subjects, Hwanung descended on the top of Taebaek Mountain under the tree where the altar was located. Hwanung along with the Count of the Wind, the Owner of the Rain, and the Master of the Clouds, oversaw agriculture, the maintenance of life, the cure of diseases, punishments, and the difference between good and evil, in all 360 types of men's work. A bear and a tiger were living together in a cave. They continually came to beg Hwanung. They wanted to be transformed into human beings. Then the god gave them a piece of sacred mugwort and twenty pieces of garlic. And he told them to eat just that and not see the light for a hundred days. If they fulfilled it, they would receive the human form. The bear and tiger took the plants and ate them. The bear received a woman's body. The tiger who was not able to fast did not take on the human form. But since there was no one the Ungnyeo woman could marry, she went every day under the tree where the altar was to pray for a son. Hwanung changed his form and handcuffed her. She became pregnant and had a child. He was called Dangun Wanggeom. Dangun ruled the new kingdom of Joseon for 1500 years. After leaving the throne he became the Mountain God (Iryeon 2007).

theories of Japan and who had a strong patriotic sense. In a context in which neither the European powers nor the United States, which Blasco Ibañez usually calls "the white powers," showed special interest in their land and aware of the inability to emerge victorious alone, Queen Min considered seeking support from the Russians, who, faced with the apathy of others, had shown interest. This search for a new ally who could stand up to Japanese power on the peninsula would cost her life at the hands of Japanese soldiers (Bishop 1898, 273–274).

Returning to Queen Min, and always according to Blasco Ibañez's account, the Japanese sent to the capital of the kingdom of the quiet morning the Viscount Miura Goro (1847–1926), a soldier of the imperial army, with the clear objective of planning the murder of the sovereign. A few days later, they placed several Japanese soldiers at the gates of the Seoul palace to prevent passage, and in this way, hired thugs who took over the building. Blasco Ibañez goes on to describe how Japanese militia officers (and here he specifies: "sabers in hand") accompanied the murderers. And later, he exposes the dramatic result: "And the queen of Korea fell to pieces under a deadly blade." In any case, if we look at the wording, Blasco Ibañez does not directly blame the Japanese military, since they were accompanied by hired assassins, but he suggests that they could have been the architects of such a sad event, pointing out that they carried sabers and that the queen died of a fatal knife. And, in the last line of this paragraph, indicates that they took the body of Queen Min to the forest located in the vicinity of the palace.

Blasco Ibañez points to this murky episode as the turning point of Korea's submission to Japanese power. The episode culminates with the war between Russia and Japan and leads to the definitive establishment of Japanese power in Korea. A work, which according to our author, was forged sometime before the assassination of Queen Min, whose death was part of a long-elaborate strategy.

But, perhaps the most interesting episode that Blasco Ibañez tells us about is the silencing of the role of Queen Min during the Japanese occupation. During the visit to the Palace of the Kings of Korea, Blasco Ibañez feels the urgent need to see the room where Queen Min was murdered. These thoughts, which must have become more and more pressing as the polyglot guides were describing the benefits of the palace, led him to inquire about this question. However, to his surprise, the cosmopolitan cicerone lost their speech. Moreover, Blasco Ibañez says they lost even their ears, turning a deaf ear to their question. Imagine the Spanish novelist, protected by his international fame and self-confidence, asking: Could you tell me in which room exactly Queen Min was murdered, please? And he settles the question, with the following very brief and eloquent sentence, which puts an abrupt and revealing end to his interest: "No one

knows which queen I meant."

The Recent History of Korea according to the Work of Blasco Ibañez

It should be noted that the ancient kingdom of Joseon and, in general, the history of Korea was not so unknown in Spain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as one might suspect. In fact, articles were published that addressed the history of Korea from before Christ to the end of the nineteenth century in newspapers of great circulation in Spain such as *El Globo*. *Liberal Illustrated Journal*.[12]

Concerning the references that Blasco Ibañez makes to the history of Korea, it can be said that he makes a very successful historical tour that shows a clear interest in the history of Korea. He is aware that Korea was practically a mystery to the rest of the world until the late nineteenth century. He says that the few European missionaries who preached in the Peninsula were more concerned with souls than with narrating and conducting physical and geographical studies or simply reporting on the nature of the country. And he adds that the well-known French geographer Élisée Reclus (1830–1905), author of a well-known work in Spain at the time, the *Géographie Universelle* (Reclus 1876–1883), admitted his limited knowledge of Korea, and collects a phrase from Reclus warning that Korea "had tried to remain in oblivion without intervening in the history of Asia." Therefore, the information that the Europeans of the time had about Korea was relatively inaccurate but directly fabled. And perhaps what had been most publicized were aspects related to the martyrdoms suffered by Christian missionaries who did not do justice to the history of Korea. However, Blasco Ibañez highlights the fertility of Korean farmland or the quality of its mines, aspects, he says, that are well known to the Japanese.

Later, the Spanish novelist emphasizes that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, three great powers (China, Russia, and Japan) were fighting for control of the Korean Peninsula. He stresses that Japan's overpopulation was one of the reasons that led the Japanese to expand their territories, saying that the Empire

12. There is a long article by Vicente Sanchís (1898), of which we only reproduce the beginning and end here: "The ancient kingdom of Joseon had about 43,000 square miles and 8,000,000 inhabitants roughly. Korea was incorporated into China in the year 107 BC, its territory was divided into three han or geographical sections, whose names were *Shin-han*, *Ma-han*, and *Ben-han*, composing the first and third sections of 12 tribes each, and 54 the second (...) Finally, the campaign of 1894 that determined the current situation in Korea, has a very recent date."

of the Rising Sun was "eager to spread its excess population on Asian soil" and that it set its eyes on Korea to achieve such expansion. In this sense, he considers that Japan sold the idea of freeing Koreans from "Chinese tyranny" during the war in 1894 when it was forced to recognize the independence of Korea. When the Russians tried to take over Korea, they fought them, in 1902, always under the discursive umbrella of their support for the independence of "poor Korea." And, later, in 1910, the Japanese annexed the territory, making Korea their colony, to which Blasco Ibañez ironically adds that they did it so that no other country would try to impose itself in the kingdom of the quiet morning. The narration of these episodes of Korean history culminates with the following sentence, very elaborate, full of meaning and feeling: "Rarely has so much apparent generosity been seen in history covering up such cynical hypocrisy."

In addition, our writer is well aware of the difficulties that the first Catholics had in the country in the nineteenth century and expresses it in the following terms: "No Asian people were as cruel as this in the persecution of Christian missionaries. The martyrdoms of Korea are the most appalling of all." And he continues: "Forty years ago nothing more, the propagandists of Christianity still dragged horrifying torments by cautiously circulating on this land, visiting the groups of Koreans who secretly professed that religion." Moreover, he points out, in order not to raise suspicions, the missionaries were forced to disguise themselves in Korean costumes and wore Korean mourning hats that allowed them to hide their faces more easily.[13]

Likewise, his deep knowledge of the history of relations between Spain and Korea is striking, dating back to the sixteenth century. He very accurately points out that the first European to penetrate the country was a Spanish Jesuit, Gregorio de Cespedes (1551 Madrid–1611 Kokura). Indeed, Father Cespedes was on the Korean peninsula in 1594, a date that Blasco Ibañez records in his text. But, in addition, he adds: "He could not go beyond the surroundings of *Fusán*, where we are now."

Father Gregorio de Cespedes studied at the University of Salamanca and entered the Society of Jesus in 1569 to later be part of the group of missionaries that Father Alessandro Valignano instructed to send to East Asia. He was taken to Korea, during the Japanese invasion, accompanying his brother, a doctor, to

13. Catholics would suffer persecution until the end of the nineteenth century at the hands of the Neo-Confucian government, which saw this new doctrine as a threat to the state. The last great persecution lasted until 1871 and during it almost half of the total number of Catholics died, about eight thousand. After this period of persecution and during the decades of the 1870s and 1880s, the Catholic Church achieved a certain recovery with the increase of Korean priests and the arrival of foreign missionaries.

perform humanitarian work. The reason for his trip to Korea is that he had been claimed by Christian soldiers and officers. We have news of his life through several preserved letters,[14] as well as some historical documents.

Obituary of Blasco Ibañez in the *Chosun Ilbo*

The *Chosun Ilbo* was founded shortly before Blasco Ibañez arrived in Korea, in 1920, and quickly became one of the most widely read newspapers in the country. The obituary to which we refer is entitled: "The internationally known social writer, Vicente Blasco Ibañez, dies" (*Chosun Ilbo* 1928). Indeed, the Spanish writer died in his villa in Menton, France on January 28, 1928, a few years after his passage through Korea.

The article explains that a telegram had been received from France, in which it was pointed out that the famous Spanish writer had died due to chronic diabetes at the age of 62. And the article adds that after the World War, he attacked the government "for the sake of humanity and cosmopolitanism." Interestingly, the journalist who wrote the article stresses that he was arrested more than thirty times by "post-war government officials" and that "he was deported abroad." He also points out that later, when he returned to Spain, he led the citizens with the publication of *El pueblo*, which was a republican party newspaper." Indeed, this newspaper bore the subtitle "Diario Republicano de Valencia (Republican Newspaper of Valencia)" and was founded by Blasco Ibañez himself in 1894. *El Pueblo* became an organ of propagandism of Blasquian ideas and turned out to be a public success.

The Korean obituary goes on to underline that Blasco Ibañez was elected to the Congress of Deputies and continued his political activity with more ferocity, which is true since he won the election by surprise in 1898, shortly after publishing *La Barraca* that same year. He was reelected to his seat in the Congress of Deputies 6 more times from 1898 to 1907.[15] Later, the *Chosun Ilbo* notes that Blasco Ibañez "published academic journals, novels, travel essays, and translations, creating a great sensation every time his work was published." The description of his work could not be more accurate, since it collects all the genres that the writer caressed, in addition to pointing out attention his

14. Gregorio de Cespedes wrote his letters from Korea between 1593 and 1597. Those that have come down to us are preserved in the Library of Ajuda (Lisbon) and the Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (Rome).

15. Historical Archive of the Congress of Deputies. ACD, Electoral Documentation Series, 111, number 53, 113, number 45, 115, number 45, 117, number 45, 119, number 45, 121, number 45.

Figure 2. Obituary of Blasco Ibañez
Source: *Chosun Ilbo* (1928)


世界的社會文學者
『이바네쓰』翁逝去
◇三十餘回의國國外追放

Figure 3. Excerpt from the Obituary Blasco Ibañez
Source: *Chosun Ilbo* (1928)

publications garnered around the world each time one was released. And finally, the Korean obituary ends by recalling what it considers the most outstanding

works of the writer, specifically *Souls of Purgatory* and *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, which are described as "his eternal masterpieces."

Regarding the author's burial, it should be noted that the City Council of Menton organized an emotional tribute to the Spanish writer, which was attended mainly by republicans exiled in the Gallic country (*Le petit Niçois* 1932). But, the Spanish writer had expressed his desire to be buried in Valencia, his hometown, in a political speech delivered in 1921 in a Valencian neighborhood (Blasco-Ibañez 2016). However, his wish could not come true until very recently, specifically, on April 6, 2021, when the coffin was finally transferred to the General Cemetery of Valencia.

By Way of Conclusion

In conclusion, by returning to the Korean connections of Blasco Ibañez, we sought, through this article, to recover this important part of his memory, his character as a global writer, who crossed the European and American borders, reaching the Korean Peninsula, an aspect until now quite unknown of the life and work of the writer. We believe it has great relevance, not only for the detailed way it describes Koreans and their customs but for the amount of information it offers about the country and the Japanese occupation. Remarkably, the press of the time reflected the resonance that the author and his work had on the Korean Peninsula.

As we have been able to verify, through the insightful eyes of Blasco Ibañez, we can have a careful and meticulous portrait of the situation in which Koreans lived in the 1920s and their relationship with the colonizing power. He also makes a very revealing description of those cultural elements that he had the opportunity to know during his stay in Korea, demonstrating how well-read he was and his interest in knowing the reality of the Korean people whom he identified as suffering under colonial oppression.

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