

# GEOGRAPHICAL DISTANCE AND CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE: WRITING ABOUT CHINA IN NINETEENTH- CENTURY LATIN AMERICA

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**Abstract** || To what extent is the production of knowledge of foreign cultures affected by geographical distance? This article explores the porous boundaries between ethnography, geography and fiction in the narrative *Viaje de Nueva Granada a China y de China a Francia* (1860) by the Colombian Nicolás Tanco Armero. A rare document of exchange between antipodal regions of the planet in the nineteenth century, *Viaje...* combines the language of the coolie trade, tourist guidebooks and journals of pilgrimage, opening a form of writing about China that considers the rhetorical strategies of peripheral epistemologies. This text inquires into the forms of universalism that prevail over local histories in discussions of modernity, and casts fresh light on discourses of orientalism produced from other allegedly exotic geographies. My claim is that *Viaje...* evidences a form of writing of China where national identity is at the service of a cosmopolitan form of identification. Geographically, imaginatively and ethically, China becomes a figurative region that transcends the Latin American's point of enunciation and, in turn, redefines the traveler subjectivity in relation to different forms of production of geographic knowledge: cartography, tourism and pilgrimage.

**Keywords** || Travel in China | Tourism | Latin America | Travel writing | Coolie trade | Cultural geography

## 1. Introduction

It is December 1857 and the ports of Southern China open to foreign trade are mobilized for the bellicose events of what will later be known as the Second Opium War. An attack is imminent. After three years of living in China and exhausted by the unrest and the fear of being killed on the streets, the Colombian Nicolás Tanco Armero reflects in his journal upon the specific circumstances pertaining a foreigner in wartime China:

Excusado es decir que las repúblicas del continente sud-americano no tienen representantes en China [...] En grandes aprietos se vería un americano del sur para librarse de las dificultades y conflictos a que en estos países se exponen los extranjeros: felices los ingleses y franceses que pueden dar la vuelta al mundo seguros de hallar en todas partes sus gobiernos representados, y el abrigo de sus respetables banderas que los ponen á cubierto de injusticias y tropelías. (1861: 120)

Needless to say that the republics of the South American continent do not have representatives in China [...] The South American would find himself in serious predicaments to escape the difficulties and conflicts to which foreigners are exposed in these countries: happy the English and the French who can move around the world confident of finding their governments represented there, and the shelter of their respectable flags to protect them from injustices and outrage<sup>1</sup>.

The observation on the vulnerability of the South American in China helps Tanco make a more general statement about global travel in the mid-nineteenth century. He uncritically celebrates the fact that European imperialism facilitates planetary mobility and, furthermore, he covets its overseas infrastructure. According to Tanco, a citizen from a peripheral nation is more exposed to the injustices and outrages of faraway lands (“these countries”) than one from a metropolitan one, since the latter is more likely to resort to some office, or colonial post for protection. Yet, it is not quite clear from this quote what kind of provenance Tanco assumes for himself, since he ambiguously uses the reflexive third person singular “himself,” and not the first person plural “ourselves” to complement the subject of the clause in: “The South American would find *himself* in serious predicaments.” Like Tanco, his readers are left to speculate which flag after all is supposed to shelter an exiled Colombian hired by a Spanish company based in Cuba with the mission to dispatch coolie workers from China.

In “Our Orient is Europe,” Graciela Montaldo suggests that since 1492 (and thenceforward, always), Latin America has had to think of the ways to insert itself in a centered map of the world, delimiting its space through military, diplomatic and textual strategies (Montaldo, 1999: 66). Initially confused with India in the diaries of Christopher Columbus, then portrayed as the Garden of Eden in the Crónicas

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1 | Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

de la Conquista, and later turned into an object of scientific research by explorers like La Condamine, Charles Darwin or Alexander von Humboldt, the geographical imagination of South American territories was continuously codified in accordance to foreign eyes. In the context of the new geographic awareness produced by the acceleration of travel and communications in the nineteenth century, it is worth considering what kind of attempts there were to map the world, not *in* relation to Latin America but *from* a Latin American perspective. How did Latin America's peripheral position in the Eurocentric map of the world play out in the region's own mappings the world? More specifically, how did the marginal place in the world republic of letters, a considerable distance from the metropolitan centers of production of knowledge of foreign cultures and an oscillating place in the Ibero-American colonial networks determine Latin America's conditions of production of knowledge of China in the nineteenth century?

This article explores the strategic place of enunciation of the Latin American traveler in China in the narrative *Viaje de Nueva Granada a China y de China a Francia* (1860) by the Colombian Nicolás Tanco Armero.<sup>2</sup> A rare document of exchange between antipodal geographies in the nineteenth century, *Viaje...* opens a form of reading China by considering the rhetorical strategies of peripheral epistemologies: it offers an inquiry into forms of universalism that prevail over local histories in discussions of modernity and casts a fresh light on discourses of orientalism produced from allegedly exotic geographies. My claim is that *Viaje...* evidences a form of writing of China where national identity is at the service of a cosmopolitan form of identification. Geographically, imaginatively and ethically, China becomes a figurative region that transcends the Latin American's point of enunciation and, in turn, redefines the traveler subjectivity in relation to different forms of production of geographic knowledge: cartography, tourism and pilgrimage. I conclude that rather than a particularistic view of China, this Latin American writing of China exploits the literary potential of the relation between travel, knowledge and geography.

## 2. Latin American writings of China

Numerous texts about China circulated in the American Viceroyalties during the time of the Spanish Empire. Conventual and episcopal libraries acquired recently published books on Asia, such as the voluminous *India oriental* (1601-1607) by Johann Theodor de Bry (1561–1623) and Johann Israel de Bry (1565-1609) or the extravagant *China illustrata* (1667) by Athanasius Kircher (Bailey, 1997: 41). Jesuit missionaries based in New Mexico and Peru like Alonso Sanchez (1547-1593) or José de Acosta (1539-1600) also

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2 | The first edition of *Viaje de Nueva Granada a China y de China a Francia* was published in Paris in 1860, shortly after Tanco's return from China. *Viaje...* is often referenced in works about the Oriental imagination in Latin American in general, although only two articles have studied it in detail to the day (Fombona 2008 and Hincapie 2010). In 2006 the Beijing Library Press translated an extensive chapter for a collection on Western travel writing in China (See Nicolás Tanco Armero *Through the Smoke of Opium* 穿过鸦片的硝烟 = *Viaje de Nueva Granada a China y de China a Francia* / translated by Zheng Kejun. Beijing: Beijing Library Press, 2006). Also, the Cuban novelist Marta Rojas Rodríguez published a fictional account of the relationship between Tanco and a Chinese servant in Havana. (See Marta Rojas *El equipaje amarillo*. Havana: Editorial Letras cubanas, 2009).

dedicated significant part of their work to ethnographies of China based on their travels or doctrinal studies (Hosne, 2012). Of particular mention is *Historia de las cosas más notables, ritos y costumbres del gran reyno de la China*, by Augustinian friar Juan González de Mendoza (1540-1617) who never set foot on Chinese territory but compiled data and accounts from early explorers who stopped in Mexico on the way back to Europe. As Carmen Hsu notes, because of Mexico's jurisdiction over the Pacific, New Spain played a crucial role in imperial diplomacy over China since the reign of Phillip II (Hsu, 2010).

Yet, the beginning of the nineteenth century evidenced a shift in the cultural traffic between China and South America. The Spanish American wars of independence put an end to the imperial trade route of the Manila Galleon, which had been the main source of communication between Manila and Acapulco since the establishment of the Spanish settlements in the Philippines in 1565. Besides, the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1767 had already affected what had been a remarkably illustrated trans-imperial bibliographic network.

It was only in the second half of the century that young businessmen and politicians from the newly established South American republics began venturing into China in the search of a new good: Chinese people. With the abolishment of the slave trade in the 1840's, plantation owners followed the British in what was becoming an established human-trade network and began implementing Chinese indentured labor, commonly known by the derogative term "coolie." It is estimated that between 1847 and 1874, vessels of twenty Western nations transported over a quarter of a million male Chinese to the Caribbean and tropical South America (Meagher, 2008: 61).<sup>3</sup>

It should come as no surprise that South American republics did not possess diplomatic delegations in China in the 1850's, since most of them were overcoming the long civil wars that followed the independence from Spain in the early decades of the century. Actually, the dominant paradigm of travel was then organized around Europe and the United States, where Western modernization served as the model for their young governments. "Chineros," as the Chinese traders were called in Cuba, mostly negotiated with British or Spanish companies who had a solid commercial infrastructure in the ports of Southern China or Macau. Even if there is evidence that many South Americans did travel to China to pursue this clandestine business, only few records of these voyages remain today.

Due to the rare combination of a document of trade, a tourist guidebook and a journal of pilgrimage, *Viaje de Nueva Granada a China y de China a Francia* (1860) by Nicolás Tanco Armero is

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3 | The case of Brazil is an exception to the massive importation of Chinese manpower to the Americas. Even if African slavery continued to be the main slave workforce until 1888, the "Chinese Question" was heatedly debated in Congress since 1810. For more on this see Lesser, "Chinese labor and the debate over ethnic integration" (1999) and Conrad "The Planter Class and the Debate over Chinese Immigration to Brazil, 1850-1893. (1975)"

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a profoundly rich document to explore geographic imagination of China in nineteenth-century Latin America. Tanco writes under the awareness of being a lettered Colombian traveler in China, and thus his narrative place of enunciation oscillates between the particular geographic provenance of Colombia he represents and the universal symbolic horizon of Christianity and European culture to which he aspires. By doing so, his narrative evidences the complex dynamics of geography and imagination in the criollo modern mindset, but mostly, he affirms the literary potential of the porous boundaries between writing, knowledge and geography.

### 3. The cartographer

Born in 1830, Nicolás Tanco Armero (see Fig. 1) belonged to a traditional family at the service of the Government of Gran Colombia, Simón Bolívar's short-lived republic. Like most of the nation's elite, he was educated in New York and Paris, where he studied under the supervision of Jerome A. Blanqui (1798-1854). Upon his return to Bogota in 1847 he joined the Conservative Party but was quickly imprisoned for his open criticism of the liberal Government. Exiled to Cuba in 1851, he joined a Spanish trading company that dispatched coolie ships from the Chinese port of Amoy (Xiamen) and left to China in 1855, where he stayed for three years altogether.

Mapping is a central strategy by which Tanco structures his travelogue. *Viaje...* consists of six hundred pages organized around his worldwide itinerary: the departure from Bogota to Europe, the impressions of China, and finally, the return to Paris through Palestine. In the typical form of travel accounts of the period, the text includes Tanco's personal notes on the trip and descriptions of Chinese culture. In the second part of the book, he proudly enumerates the miles trodden and the countries visited before the arrival in Hong Kong. In a few lines, he renders the cultural and topographical diversity of the planet as experienced through the many stops of his long expedition:

Las transiciones son rápidas, violentas: no bien se han abandonado las playas de la virgen América cuando ya se está entrando en el seno de las opulentas capitales europeas, en el foco de la moderna civilización, a poco ya se halla uno transportado al teatro de la historia antigua, al golfo de esos países llenos de tradiciones y de recuerdos; y cuando apenas ha acabado de palpitar el corazón y de respirarse la religiosa atmósfera, ya nos encontramos en las selvas de Asia, en medio de hombres de melena suelta, semi-salvajes, que se abandonan pronto para reemplazarlos por los aún más raros habitantes del misterioso suelo del Imperio Celeste. (1861: 202)

[Transitions are fast, violent: no sooner one abandons the coasts of the virgin America than one enters into the heart of the opulent European capitals, in the focus of modern civilization. Soon, one is transported to

the theatre of ancient history, to the gulf of those countries laden with tradition and memories. Immediately after the heart stops beating and the scent of the religious atmosphere vanishes, we find ourselves in the jungles of Asia, amidst semi-savage men with loose manes, which are swiftly replaced by the even stranger inhabitants of the mysterious land of the Celestial Empire.]

According to the traveler's words, the world has distinct regions arranged asymmetrically in spatial and temporal terms. At the center lies the heart of modern civilization: Europe and its powerful capitals. To one side, what is described as a picturesque Middle East, the "stage" of ancient times where tradition, memories and signs of the past are mere souvenirs of arcane times. Further down, Ceylon is described as a primitive space, where undomesticated nature (jungles) and "semi-savage men" seem to be the salient elements of the scenery. Beyond the subcontinent, hermeneutics fail: the territories of China belong to the realm of the uncanny and mysterious. This utmost ignorance of such region also corresponds to the portrayal of the Americas, described as a single territorial entity (America), lacking any trait or history ("virgin"), and referenced only by its exterior boundaries ("coasts"). This map reproduces a predominant nineteenth-century Eurocentric notion of cartography, which ignores local histories and defines the world in terms of its relation to the European idea of progress: as distance from the civilized center increases, so does material and social development. Tanco, a member of the Colombian conservative elite, assumes this view. As Jacinto Fombona contends in "Travel and Business: The First Colombian in China" (2008), his narrative can be characterized all along as empiricist and articulating a faith in progress, which in Spanish America is later associated with scientific positivism. Marked by writing, *letrados* established and constructed the discourses of the ideal rational city from which conquest, colonization and later, nation-building efforts stemmed. This is, even if his provenance is Colombia, Tanco assumes the voice of the elite and thus projects a Eurocentric progress-oriented world mapping. Exiled from New Granada and banished to an unfamiliar land in Asia provides him with a singular position of enunciation from where to articulate his political voice.

By tracing additional lines to the map, Tanco contributes to the edification of a then scarce Latin American archive about Asia. However, rather than a scholarly project sustained by a scientific methodology in the form of the emerging disciplinary studies of foreign cultures in Europe, Tanco's mapping of China is marked by subjective impressions:

Cuándo se habían de imaginar que era un viagero que venía desde las selvas americanas a estudiar las costumbres asiáticas? (1861: 328)

[Who could have guessed that I was a traveler coming from the American jungles to study Asian customs?]

Allí sentado, cual planta exótica, era un anacronismo en medio del conjunto que me rodeaba (...) ¡Un granadino en el fondo de la China, obsequiado por una de las principales autoridades del imperio, asistiendo a un banquete de mandarín en el Imperio Celeste a seis mil leguas de su patria! (1861: 332)

[Sitting there like an exotic plant, I was an anachronism amidst the group (...) A grenadine in the backlands of China, hosted by one of the main authorities of the Empire, participating in a mandarin's banquet of the Celestial Empire six thousands leagues away from my homeland!]

Tanco conveys a sense of estrangement by juxtaposing regions of the world that are so far apart. Stated in the form of rhetorical questions, these juxtapositions suggest that such contact transcends reason: "Who would have *guessed*?" imagination: "How could they *imagine*?" and time reference "I was an *anachronism*." These depictions of world geography chart areas even further than the ones provided by the initial fragment about the centrifugal map of the world. When identifying his American provenance, Tanco looks beyond the coastline and refers to the "jungle" and the "pampas," two staple landscapes of South America. About China, he now mentions the backlands, implying an even greater sense of wonder in a land initially defined by mystery and strangeness.

If China had operated as the paradigm of the faraway in general (Hayot, Saussy and Yao, 2008), as the "typical case of border situations, of maximum distance and most radical estrangement" (Jullien, 1988: 34), Tanco explores the literal dimension of distance: China is further away from South America than Europe; as the quote reads, "the Celestial empire is *six thousands leagues* away from his hometown". This statement displaces the axis of the centrifugal map previously analyzed and instead places South America as the vantage point. Both the vantage point (South America) and the charted region (China) that appear in extreme poles of the new map are defined entirely in environmental terms (pampas-jungles) rather than by urban, "civilizational" criteria. This alternative bipolar map explores the notion of "distance decay," a geographical term which describes the effect of distance on cultural or spatial interactions. The distance decay effect states that the interaction between two locales declines as the distance between them increases (Harvey, 1989). Once the distance is outside of the two locales' activity space, their interactions begin to decrease. By combining two referential axes, Tanco not only overcomes the effect of distance decay, but challenges the notion that physical distance is in fact an obstruction to produce cultural knowledge.

## 4. The tourist

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Travel writing on China in the mid-nineteenth century supposed an innovation in many ways. Firstly, after many centuries of closure to the rest of the world, China had been forced to open and allow the circulation of foreigners within its borders. Also, masses of Westerners had begun travelling extensively beyond Europe thanks the new industry of tourism. Mapping was no longer an exclusively humanistic enterprise of metropolitan agents (officers, missionaries, diplomats) in the overseas colonies, but rather a leisure activity of citizens of different provenances who published about their voyages abroad. Together with the changes in travel, the rhetoric of geographical knowledge was also significantly transformed.

Yet during the time of the Opium Wars, China was still far off the map of Oriental tourism. The European colonial emergence in the Mediterranean facilitated the incorporation of the Middle East as a holiday destination, but none of the amenities for leisure travel—luxurious railways, comfortable accommodation, monetary services and guidebooks—were promoted in China until the early twentieth century (Searight, 1991: 43). In fact, the main tourist operator of the time, Thomas Cook, first visited China in 1872 as part of an inaugural around-the-world tour, but was not impressed with what he saw. In his letters from Shanghai, he wrote:

narrow, filthy, and offensive streets, choked and almost choking bazaars, pestering and festering beggars in every shape of hideous deformity; sights, sounds, and smells all combined to cut short our promenade of the “native city,” to which no one paid a second visit, and the chief part of our short stay at Shanghai was spent in the American, English, or French concessions. (Cook, 1998: 45)

There was a sharp increase in China’s appeal to tourists during the first decades of the twentieth century, as there is evidence of brochures of travel to China in 1909 (see fig.2), Yet, Cook’s first guidebook to China (*Cook’s Handbook for Tourists to Peking, Tientsin, Shan-Hai-Kwan, Mukden, Dalny, Port Arthur and Seoul*) was published as late as 1910. As far as offices were concerned, Thomas Cook opened the first Chinese branch in Hong Kong at the end of 1906. Basic infrastructure for foreign population in China started developing in the middle of the nineteenth century, after the end of the First Opium War, when China was forced to authorize the establishment of extraterritorial concessions and approve the permanent residence of foreign consuls and their families in several coastal cities (Hevia, 2003: 5). Subsequent wars and treaties expanded this presence: British residents built their own suburbs, constructed clubs and churches, stores and shipyards, and established municipal administration and police forces. By the 1930’s there were some twenty thousand

British nationals residing in China outside Hong Kong, while tens of thousands visit as merchants, Royal Naval seamen, or in military postings (Bickers, 2003: 6).

Tanco was not the first Latin American to visit the Middle East, although he claims to be the first one in China. It had become common for Latin American travelers to include a diversion to Palestine during their grand tours to Europe.<sup>4</sup> While the trips to “the Orient” were shorter, they occupied more space in the narratives than the long sojourns in Europe (Martínez, 1996: 34). Yet, Tanco distances himself from other South America travelers. At a stop in Egypt, he glances through the pages of a hotel guest-book and observes:

Observaré que no encontré ni un solo individuo de Sur-América. Yo puse a mi turno: “N.N. natural de Santa Fe de Bogotá, en la América meridional, se dirige a la China.” (1861: 235)

[I will note that I did not find a single individual from South America. When my turn came, I wrote “N.N., native of Santa Fe de Bogotá, in Meridional America, in route to China.]

It is clear from this quote that Tanco intends to distinguish his signature from the others. Regardless the veracity of his claim, the fact he brings the South American traveler (or the lack of it) to the picture is revealing. To identify himself, Tanco provides the full name of his city of origin (Santa Fe de Bogotá), but omits his own name (“N.N.”), suggesting that it is provenance, not onomastic what determines identity in this region of the planet. It is worth noting that he also includes his destination, as if announcing the trip to China makes his touristic travels all the more extreme, given that China was still a place infused with connotations of adventure and danger.

This attitude of differentiation is symptomatic of the development of tourism as a standardized practice and the correlative new consciousness emerges in travel literature. Ralph Pordzik argues in *The Wonder of Travel* that on the tracks of international travelling, self-differentiation and rejection of mass tourism became a guiding purpose, and many a traveler desired to put a distance between himself and the burgeoning droves of commercial tourists. Subjected to the “twin pressures of feeling both “one of the crowd” and “late on the scene,” visitors to Europe, Africa and the Near East found themselves at pains to find anything new to say about the hallowed sites opened to them” (Pordzik, 2005: 9).

Tanco recurs to his marginal provenance to enhance geographical distance from China and thus define his traveler subjectivity in these two ways. He “arrives early on the scene,” since he ventures further than the usual destinations of other European travelers, and, also, he is not “one of the crowd” because he has first-hand access to places

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4 | See, for example: *De Adén a Suez* (1855) by Lucio V. Mansilla. *Viaje á Oriente: de Buenos Aires a Jerusalén* (1873) by Pastor Servando Obligado; *Egipto y Palestina: apuntes de viaje* (1874) by José López Portillo y Rojas or *Viaje a Oriente* (1883) by Luis Malanco. An invaluable source of travel to the Middle East is the narrative and photograph collection of Dom Pedro II, Emperor of Brazil, who travels between 1876 and 1877 through Arab regions of the Ottoman Empire.

where his fellow countryman have not yet arrived. In this respect, the long distance granted by his geographic provenance helps him define his travelling identity in negative terms: he is a South American traveler, but an exceptional one.

Once again, the narrative point of enunciation shifts between the local and the universal; between the participation in an imagined community of travelers from South America (lettered, leisure travelers) whose furthest end is the Middle East and a community of European travelers (merchants, diplomats, missionaries) who, regardless of the routes of tourism, have indeed some access to the Far East. It is precisely by oscillating between these two that the narrative voice constructs its own exceptionality.

## 5. The pilgrim

So, Tanco constructs his voice as a letrado mapmaker that uses both Colombia and Europe as a point of cartographic reference, and also as a traveler who belongs to both a South American and a European community of wanderers. Furthermore, his professional identification in China is ambiguous throughout the text. It is striking that in the six hundred pages narrative there are only few allusions to his business in China, usually in vague notes about “immigration issues,” “business related to the Asiatic emigration,” or “shipment of coolies to Havana.”<sup>5</sup> Upon his departure from the port of Marseille, the reader gets a sense of Tanco’s attitude toward his motives for being in China:

No teniendo en mira hasta aquí más que los conocimientos que pudiese adquirir y las utilidades que reportarían las grandes especulaciones que me llevaban a esas tierras, jamás me había detenido a contemplar los riesgos de mi penosa peregrinación. (1861: 195)

[Keeping in sight nothing but the knowledge that I might acquire and the earnings that might stem from the major speculations that took me to those lands, I had never stopped to consider the risks of my pitiful pilgrimage.]

The language of this quote eludes any specificity of Tanco’s musings in China, yet reveals its tone. In the prologue to the book, his friend Pedro M. Moure informs the readers that he goes to China to operate business related to Asian immigration. Moure celebrates Tanco’s humanitarian drive in the decision to embark to China, “without contemplating pecuniary estimations, nor compromising his own interest,” since he claims that the Spanish company that hired him to go to China genuinely intends to replace African slave force for Asian free labor:

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5 | “regresar a la colonia inglesa centro de la emigración china que se dirigía a Cuba” (1861: 403); “aguardaba mi llegada para darse a la vela hacia el puerto de Fu-tcheu en donde debía cargar para la Habana” (1861: 404)

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El señor Tanco no pensó como nosotros y aceptó inmediatamente tan delicada comisión, sin detenerse en cálculos pecuniarios, sin temer comprometer sus intereses, fijándose solamente en que la inmigración iba a destruir la esclavitud: tenía delante una cuestión humanitaria. (1861: xxv)

[Mr. Tanco did not reason like us and accepted such delicate enterprise on the spot, without delving into financial calculations or compromising his own interest; his mind was fixed on the idea that immigration would destroy slavery: he had a humanitarian issue in his hands].

Yet, Tanco himself is less exalting towards the motives of his enterprise. He does not refer to any “humanitarian” affair and instead acknowledges it as a high-risk and high-revenue transaction product of speculative operations. Finally, he summarizes the nature of his trip as a “pitiful pilgrimage,” an expression that suggests it is rather a religious enterprise. In other words, to conceal his participation in what was already an infamous human trade, he re-fashions his traveling persona from that of a “chinero” (coolie trader) to that of a Christian pilgrim. The particularity of his South American identity that had served elsewhere to grant a further distance in the mappings of the world, and further distance from other South American travelers is erased here to remove any association with the coolie trade in the Caribbean, and in turn, is replaced by the universalistic identification of religion. The trip’s initial purpose of trade is supplanted with the purpose of pilgrimage.

Described as a *bildungsreise* in the prologue (“the author departs as a young fellow and comes back turned into a man”), the trip starts with a scene of banishment from his native land and concludes with a religious journey to the Palestine. Tanco moves between familiar lands at both ends of the trip: the hometown (New Granada) he is forced to leave behind due to exile and the Holy land (Jerusalem) he aspires to eyewitness as a fervent Catholic. In this respect, China and America are laid out as extremes in the previously mentioned “bipolar” map of the world, but not in the ends of his itinerary. Therefore, the last chapter of *Viajes* about Palestine can be read as if the whole trip to China were a mere diversion to enhance the toil (and thus profit) of the formative and religious travel, to be published back home. Frederic Martinez argues that the Catholic Church in Colombia overtly encouraged the publication of travelogues to the Orient as an instrument of resistance to the liberal government’s secularization project (Martinez, 1996: 34). As an exiled conservative willing to exercise his letrado duties, Tanco describes China as a heathen space that stands between him and the sacred land. Tanco’s pilgrimage differs from his countrymen’s in the sense that it extends the route of the pilgrimage to the Holy Land (through Europe, China and Palestine) and inverts the coordinates of conventional directions, making it a westward peregrination.

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As a good pilgrim, Tanco is an active observer of the foreign lands he crosses on his way to the sacred destination. His gaze of China is then projected from the dogmatic framework of Catholicism, namely, an exercise of Christian pedagogy (Hincapie, 2010: 31). Once again, distance is used to emphasize the insurmountable differences that define cultural aspects of Chinese: “I could conclude that the civilization of the Middle Country is entirely antipodal to ours” (Tanco, 1861: 374). Tanco provides an informed description of the Chinese legal system, marital customs or religion, always indicating an opinion and judging it from his progress-oriented framework. The only way to shorten the distance with China is through conversion:

Francia, foco de la civilización europea, o mejor dicho, occidental, debe serlo con el tiempo de la oriental: en el mar de la India, en la China, en la Corea, en el Japón, por todos esos países tiene intereses y debe conservar y sostener su influencia, protegiendo las misiones católicas, únicas fuentes de donde debe correr la futura civilización de estas comarcas. (1861: 402)

[France, focus of European civilization, or rather, Western civilization, must become in due time the center of the Oriental one: in the seas of India, in China, in Korea and Japan, all around those countries she has interests and must sustain her influence, protection of Catholic missions, those unique sources from which the next civilization will stem from.]

Here emerges a unique version of Christian imperialism, not organized as a horizontal missionary network, but in terms of a political/cultural hierarchy. Once again, the Latin American provenance is blurred for the sake of a Eurocentric map of the world that defines the civilizing mission of Christianity centered in France, and focused on a European—desired—modernity. It is precisely because of statements like this that Latin American travelogues of China challenge the traditional rhetoric of orientalism. When Edward Said discusses “orientalism” as a referential set of discourses about the Orient, he recognizes that a single strategic location—a way of describing the author’s position in a text regarding the oriental—is crucial. He explains how the fact that travelers, politicians and philologists that wrote about the Middle East projected an imperial position, that implied hierarchy and supposed domination from the author’s culture to the Oriental one, allows for the formulation the Orient as a consistent imaginative geography. Yet, because of the Latin American’s letrado’s self-imposed Occidentalism, his strategic location oscillates between a statement of solidarity with an exotic China but at the same time, an imperative for domination in the hands of European nations. Tanco’s ambivalent strategic location throughout the text thus creates two simultaneous maps of the world (centrifugal and bipolar), two communities of travelers (South American and European), and defines two aims of the trip (bring Chinese laborers and a reach a religious destination). It can be concluded then that Tanco delimits geographical space through textual strategies.



Fig. 1 Nicolas Tanco Armero posing in a photo studio in Bogotá. Source: Biblioteca Virtual Luis Angel Arango (Bogotá, Colombia)  
<<http://www.banrepcultural.org/blaavirtual/biografias/nicolas-tanco>>.

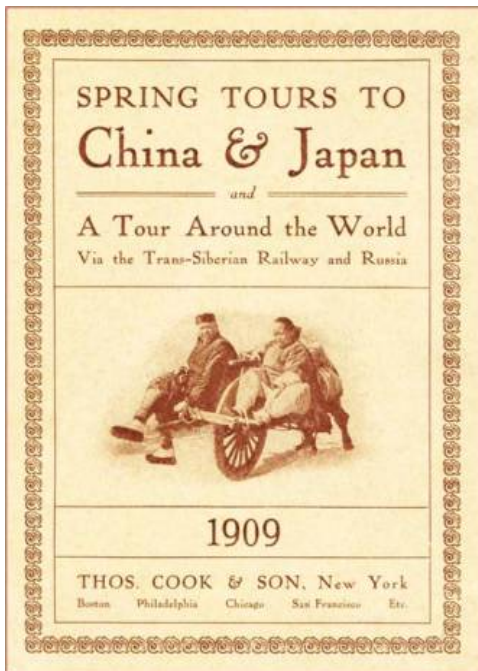


Fig. 2 *Spring Tours to China & Japan and a tour around the World via the Trans-Siberian Railway and Russia*. There are China-related brochures in the Thomas Cook's archives before 1909, but the first guidebooks of China are from 1910.

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