

Visual Culture of the Indian Ocean: India in a polycentric world

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Just about the time Pliny the Elder complained that Roman fondness for Indian pepper drained the Empire of fifty million *sesterces*, about a ninth of the cost of supporting the entire Roman army, India was functioning as intermediary in the silk trade between China and Rome, serving the tastes of the very wealthiest women whose fondness for this luxury good was unbounded. But evidence of trade between Rome and India, indeed across the entire Indian Ocean, extended to a great deal more than consumable goods such as food and textiles. And that exchange, documented by visual materials, extends long before Roman times (Morrison 1997). In a polycentric world, India most certainly was a center, a very important one.

It is a colonialist trope to imagine India as the recipient of what art historians too loosely call influence. Influence, of course, is carried by human agents and received by those who have reason to do so. One can, after all, be exposed to an idea or a visual form and pay it no attention. In fact, of course, India both absorbed ideas from the broad world with which it long engaged and lent ideas, including visual forms, to distant cultures across the Indian Ocean and beyond.

Third century BCE

After a period of some 1,700 years during which not a single work of Indian art survives, we see the sudden appearance of great stone pillars inscribed with the edicts of the emperor Ashoka (c. 262–239 BCE). These pillars are crowned with naturalistically rendered animals placed upon a round platform that in turn sits on a bell-shaped capital that is, in fact, modeled on a lotus flower, as if the pillar and its capital actually derive from the lotus stem and flower, a motif commonly used as a pedestal in the art of India.

There is considerable debate regarding the source of these pillars, but despite much about them that is unquestionably Indian, we must look beyond the Indian cultural realm for the very idea of such stone pillars and for the motifs on them. Just as India imported foreign luxury goods such as olive oil and wine from the Mediterranean, so ideas were imported but sometimes to very special effect. Nowhere else are lone pillars used outside of an architectural context to carry royal edicts. But nowhere before in India's long history were there monumental works of any sort carved from

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Plate 1. Bull capital from Rampurva, India. Presently located at the entrance of Rashtrapati Bhavan, New Delhi. (Photo: Frederick Asher).

stone. We thus must look to India's neighbors, perhaps most specifically Achaemenid Persia, for the idea of working in such durable material as stone. That is not all, I would argue, that Ashoka derived from his Persian neighbors.

Some of the surviving Ashokan pillars support an abacus adorned with distinctively Indian motifs, for example, geese symbolizing universality – they traverse the three realms, from the subterranean waters to the land and into the heavens – and animals or wheels with distinctive Buddhist associations. Others, however, carry vegetal motifs that, equally distinctively, originate in the Mediterranean (Schlumberger 1960). For example, a bull capital from Rampurva (Plate 1) in the far north of Bihar state, about 30 km south of the Nepal border and probably on an ancient route from the Buddha's birthplace to Ashoka's capital, is carved with a honeysuckle motif that is distinctly Adriatic in origin. Terms such as "derivative," bearing the notion of dependence, are often used to describe India's borrowings from distant places, a notion too often applied to third-world art that participates in a polycentric visual environment but would not be applied to Western adaptation of motifs from distant places, for example, Picasso's incorporation of African masks in his early painting. There may be other ways, then, of understanding the Indian adaptation of Adriatic motifs.

Ashoka ruled an enormous domain, larger even than British India. If we take the extent of his inscriptions, extending from Kandahar in the west to the Bay of Bengal in the East, from the Buddha's birthplace in modern-day Nepal in the north to the southern parts of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, it was enormous and diverse. So diverse was it that his inscription in Kandahar was written in both Greek and Aramaic, not Magadhi, the language used for most of his other inscriptions. Despite the size of his empire, however, he was bordered by powerful kingdoms, particularly to the west, where the great Seleucid empire constituted a vast territory extending right to the Mediterranean. How, then, might Ashoka proclaim some degree of control over his western domain? As artists in India did many times subsequently: by appropriating the visual forms from

that realm. For example, the eighth century Malikarjuna and Virupaksha temples at Pattadakal so closely replicate the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram that some have suggested that the Pallava royal architect was taken by the victorious Chalukyas when they defeated the Pallavas of Kanchipuram so that they might visually underscore their domination of the vanquished ruling house.

How might these foreign motifs have been known so they could be copied with such remarkable precision? They could have been copied from some easily portable material, for example vases used to ship wine or olive oil. But the rendering of the floral motifs on the Rampurva bull capital, and on other pillar capitals of the time as well, so well replicate the sculptural form of the motifs, as known on architectural components from Greece and the Seleucid realm, that it is hard to imagine a visual model on which Indian artists might have relied. Rather, it seems perfectly possible that Ashoka imported the sculptors. And in doing so, if he did, he followed a precedent established by the Achaemenid rulers of Iran. There Darius proclaimed, for example in his multi-lingual foundation inscriptions at Susa, that he had brought the very most talented workers and very best materials to his realm. Similarly, by using motifs from other centers, possibly carved by artists from those distant centers, Ashoka was proclaiming his ability to purchase the very best that money – and authority – could secure. He did so, however, visually, not verbally.

Although the bull capital was the product of one empire, and in many ways symbolized the reach of that empire to other centers, it today stands at the entrance to Rashtrapati Bhavan, a building that ironically has strong imperial connotations. Until 1947, it was the residence of the Viceroy, the ruler of colonized India, but it is today the ceremonial residence of the President of the Republic of India.

Begram in the second century

Today generally spelled Baigram, this extraordinary site in Afghanistan is now the home of a US airbase, one that threatens the integrity of the excavated area. When it was revealed in the course of French excavations during the 1930s and 1940s, one building was found to have two rooms with an enormous cache of objects that had come from all parts of the world with which India was connected. Among the works discovered were magnificent ivories that likely came from central India, some carved with representations of women standing beneath gateways, others with incised renderings of voluptuous seated women. But other works in the Begram hoard came from much farther away: a small bronze sculpture of Serapis and another representing Harpocrates (Plate 2) probably originated in Alexandria; glass vessels such as one enameled with a scene of harvesting may have come from Egypt or Syria; and lacquer ware had come from China, at least one piece closely related to a work inscribed with a Han dynasty date equivalent to the year four of the common era (Mehendale 1997). This may have been the house of a very rich person who collected luxury goods from the many centers with which India was connected. It may have been a warehouse in which goods from these centers were stored temporarily and readied for redistribution to other centers along the Silk Route in the course of trade that included many more items than silk alone. It is, in any event, clear visual evidence of India's engagement with a polycentric world.

A significant number of the ivories were preserved in the Musée Guimet, Paris, brought by Joseph Hackin, who served both as the principal excavator of the site and at the same time Director of the museum. Others, however, were preserved in the Kabul Museum and, like the site itself, became victims of war. When the museum was bombed in 1993, looters had easy access to the collections, which have turned up in centers around the globe, often far more distant centers than those from which Begram's objects originally came.

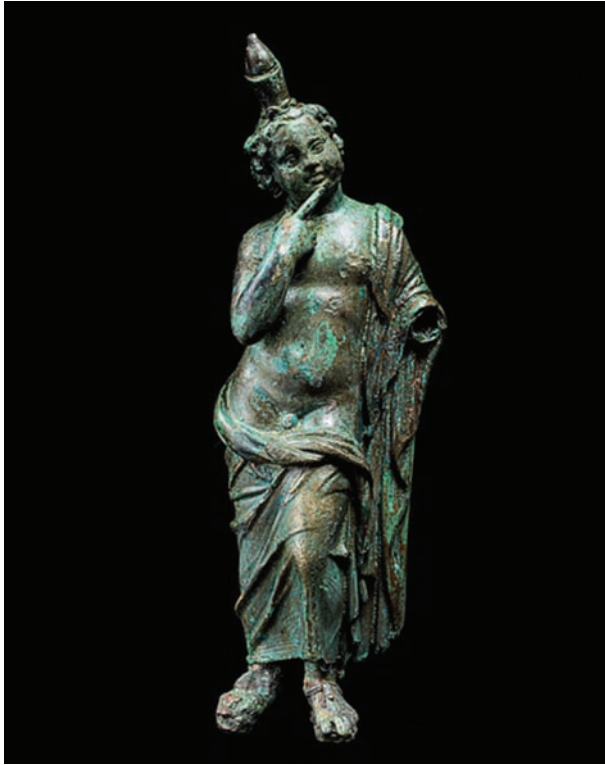


Plate 2. Bronze statuette of Harpocrates from Begram, Afghanistan. 24.1 cm. National Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul.

Other works attest as well to India's exchange in luxury goods with distant centers. A magnificent and intricately carved ivory female figure (Plate 3) was discovered in a building in Pompeii dubbed the Casa della Statuetta Indiana. Often described as an image of the goddess Lakshmi, but much more likely a secular figure, the statuette may have served as the leg of a low piece of furniture or, more probably, as the handle for a mirror. One could imagine this ivory figure resident at Begram, awaiting overland transport to Pompeii, where it would live a relatively short life, used only until the eruption of Vesuvius in the year 79. It may, however, have traveled by ship, since comparable ivory works are known in western India, found at the site of Ter. In that case it could have been shipped from a number of the ports along the west coast, where we know Greek and Roman boats made regular journeys, documented both in writing (McCrinkle 1879) and by remains such as coins and ceramic ware (Ray 2003).

Pilgrimage and its impact on visual culture

As Buddhism spread beyond India, pilgrims sought to visit the homeland of the faith, particularly the places associated with the life of the Buddha. They came, as inscriptional and other literary evidence shows, to the site of his birth, to the site of his enlightenment, the site of his first sermon and the establishment of the Buddhist order, and the site of his death. They came to many other places as well, but these were the sites the Buddha specifically had admonished his followers to visit.



Plate 3. Ivory figurine discovered at Pompeii, Naples Archaeological Museum.

Faxian, who was in India during the first half of the fifth century, left an account of his travels, including his return to China from the port of Tamralipta on the Bay of Bengal. He carried with him both copies of sacred texts and “impressions” of images, as it says in the translation of his travels (Beal 1869: 147–8). But much more than impressions of images must have reached China from India, and at least some that came were not from eastern India but rather must have traveled overland from the northwestern part of the subcontinent, from the kingdom of Gandhara. The earliest Chinese images of the Buddha so precisely replicate Gandhara images of the second and third century that at first glance they appear to be Indian, not Chinese (Plates 4–5).

Xuanzang, who came to India in the seventh century, stayed a great deal longer than Faxian had. He was there from 630–645, returning to China with some 657 Buddhist texts which he presented to the emperor. Might some of them have been illustrated? Possibly, although no Indian manuscript



Plate 4. Gilt Bronze seated Buddha, c. 4th century, China. Harvard Art Museum/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, 1943.53.80.A. Photo: Michael A. Nedzweski © President and Fellows of Harvard College.



Plate 5. Seated Buddha, from Sahri Bahlol, Gandhara region of present-day Pakistan. Peshawar Museum, accession number PM_03145.



Plate 6. Mahabodhi temple, Bodhgaya, site of the Buddha's enlightenment. (Photo: Frederick Asher).

earlier than the eleventh century survives. We also might guess that his caravan of twenty horses was sufficient to carry a few small Buddhist images. At least some Indian sculptures dating about this time at least reached Tibet, where they were photographed in monasteries in the 1930s; and some of the Indian bronzes of the fifth or sixth century that came to the market in the 1960s might have been carried out by Tibetan monks fleeing persecution.

For pilgrims visiting the sites associated with the life of the Buddha, the one that seems to have been most important – and to have attracted the largest number of pilgrims – is Bodhgaya, the site where the Buddha achieved enlightenment, thereby becoming the Buddha. But about the twelfth century, with the fall of the Pala dynasty, travel to the sacred sites became significantly more difficult. The Palas were Buddhists, but that was not so much what facilitated the travel of pilgrims from distant lands. Rather, it was the long period of peace that prevailed in the Pala realm, the location of most of the sites associated with the life of the Buddha.

To compensate for the sites' inaccessibility surrogate sites were developed. That is, in places distant from India sites closely modeled on the pilgrimage sites were formed. By far the one most commonly replicated was Bodhgaya, the site of the Buddha's enlightenment. Thus in Myanmar, Nepal, Thailand, and China, among other places, large temples closely modeled on the Mahabodhi temple (Plate 6), the emblematic structure of Bodhgaya, are found. In Chiang



Plate 7. Mahabodhi Paya, Bagan, Myanmar. (Photo: Frederick Asher).

Mai, Thailand, for example, Wat Chet Yot, constructed prior to 1477, when a Buddhist council met there, includes many features found on the Mahabodhi temple, among them an identically shaped pyramidal superstructure with four similar structures at the corners of the temple. Similar is the Mahabodhi Paya temple in Bagan, Myanmar, built during the reign of a king who ruled 1211–1234 (Plate 7).

Today both of these monuments are also marked with signage indicating the spots where the Buddha spent his first seven weeks, much as we also see in the compound of the Mahabodhi temple at Bodhgaya. Nothing about the signage at either place suggests that they are replicas. For example, just north of the temple at Wat Chet Yot is the place identified as the Jewel Walk, where the Buddha paced during the second week after his enlightenment; it is also just north of the Mahabodhi temple at Bodhgaya. Signage at Wat Chedi Jot does not suggest that this replicates the Jewel Walk at Bodhgaya. Rather, it is identified as *THE* Jewel Walk. And the signage further invokes archaeological evidence, noting that “from the excavations in AD 2002 the archaeologists discovered two brick paths from the north of the Bothi throne ...” In a sense, then, Bodhgaya comes to be located at Chiang Mai, as it is in Bagan. It is a moveable locus, not a place with fixed coordinates. Thus one can perform pilgrimage to Bodhgaya without traveling to India to do so.



Plate 8. Model of Mahabodhi temple, Bodhgaya, found in Tibet. C. 12th century
London, British Museum, 1922, I215.7. © Trustees of the British Museum.

How would architects in places distant from Bodhgaya know the appearance of the Mahabodhi temple at least well enough to replicate it? They could have traveled to Bodhgaya, difficult though travel had become after the twelfth-century. But more likely they knew visual models of the temple, ones that have been found in Tibet and elsewhere and very closely replicate the form of the Mahabodhi temple (Plate 8). Initially they may have been made as souvenirs for pilgrims who actually made the long and arduous pilgrimage. But likely even these small replicas came to serve as surrogates for actual pilgrimage and then as models for the large-scale temples, though none of them as large as the Mahabodhi temple itself.

These are not the only works modeled on sites associated with the life of the Buddha. At several places images of the Buddha's demise, his *parinirvana*, are shown. Often these are enormous figures, far larger than figures depicting the other events in his life. In Cave 26 at Ajanta, for example, is a fifth century image more than seven meters long, while at Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka is a similarly enormous twelfth century image of the Buddha, more than 14 meters in length, reclining on his right side, as he did when he died (Plate 9). The largest known figure of the Buddha, however, was at Bamiyan in Afghanistan, site of two enormous standing Buddha images that were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001. The seventh century Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang reported the piece about



Plate 9. Death of the Buddha and Attainment of Nirvana. Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka, c. 12th century. (Photo: Frederick Asher).

twelve or thirteen *li*, that is, about six to eight kilometers east of the cliff in which the two famous Bamiyan Buddhas stood. Archaeologists reported that they unearthed this piece in 2008, though in fragmentary condition, and say that it is some 19 meters in length (BBC 2009). All these *parinirvana* images very likely were intended to replicate the main image at the very site of the Buddha's demise, Kushinagar, where a fifth century image more than six meters in length is enshrined in a modern temple.

India before the dawn of global capitalism

The impressive work of Philip Curtin (1984) has told us a great deal about the process of cross-cultural trade. Trade Diasporas, as he described them, resulted in the establishment of traders' colonies in foreign lands populated by a small group of merchants who could facilitate trade between their home country and the host country in which they settled. They straddled a cultural boundary, for example, maintaining their own languages and religion while at the same time gaining fluency in the languages of their hosts and marrying local women. They also were responsible for the transmission of culture, including the visual, across more common cultural boundaries.

We know a fair amount about India's role in such trade Diasporas not only from widespread Indian communities across the Indian Ocean – in East Africa and across Southeast Asia – but also from surviving documents. The best known of these are the records of a Jewish merchant whose family was from Fustat (Old Cairo) and Aden, long settled on India's west coast. Records of his correspondence with family and colleagues at home were preserved in the geniza of the Cairo Synagogue and have been deftly turned into a brilliant study by Amitav Ghosh (1993a), who



Plate 10. Detail of Pillar at the Kaiyuan temple, Quanzhou, originally from Shiva temple dated 1281. (Photo: Frederick Asher).

subsequently used those same records to still further amplify the life of this trader in his novel, *In An Antique Land* (1993b).

But the most interesting material evidence for Indian Trade Diasporas comes from the remains of a south Indian style temple dated 1271 in Quanzhou, China, the Zayton of Marco Polo, who was there in all probability while the temple was standing and very much in use by the Indian community of this port city. In a wonderful dissertation, Risha Lee, who has just completed her doctorate at Columbia University, shows that the temple is the product of a south Indian merchant guild. Whether they imported the artists or used local Chinese masters is a matter of art historical debate based largely on style. Clearly whoever fashioned the sculptured panels, however, was thoroughly familiar with styles in the realm of the Chola dynasty in India and created a temple that must have felt entirely familiar to the Diaspora community of China. Today parts of the temple are built into the Kaiyuan Buddhist temple (Plate 10), while other parts reside in the Maritime Museum, under the attentive care of the Director, Yuling Ding, herself descended from another Diaspora community.

It may very well have been merchants, more than pilgrims, who were responsible for the extension of Indian culture to Southeast Asia. Inscriptions on monuments in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Java, among other parts of Southeast Asia, written in the distinctive floriate style seen in the realm of the Pallava dynasty in southeast India, may result from the travel of merchants, for whom



Plate 11. Temple of the Southern Group, Sambo Prei Kuk, Cambodia. (Photo: Frederick Asher).

written records were a great deal more important than they were for priests. So, too, the temple forms, particularly the early brick temples of Cambodia and Vietnam, have close ties to forms seen in Pallava India, although with evident local flourishes, as if to suggest a collaboration between a foreign source and indigenous taste. This is especially evident in the Cambodian brick temples of Sambo Prei Kuk (Plate 11), which date to the seventh and eighth centuries, notably inland, not on the coast where Trade Diasporas likely were resident.

Still today Indian artists travel to meet the needs of Indian Diaspora communities. As Indians who were brought to Southeast Asia as indentured servants gained economic independence, the tin-roof wooden temples they initially constructed were replaced by grand structures constructed in durable materials, ones following so closely the architectural and sculptural forms of southern India that they clearly were designed and built by Indian artists working abroad. And when these temples are in need of repair, the temple management committees turn to the best-known artists in India for new designs and new sculptures. The artist Ganapati Stapathi, Principal of the College of Architecture and Sculpture at Mamallapuram and largely responsible for the revival of traditional artistic practices in that part of India, has become a figure so much in demand that one often has to settle for one of his subordinates. The Ruthra Kaliamman Temple in Singapore (Plate 12), for example, was able to attract Ganapati Stapathi for consultations in about 1980, but the temple committee had to rely on Nagaraja Stapathi for the most recent renovations.



Plate 12. Ruthra Kaliaman temple, Singapore, 20th century. (Photo: Frederick Asher).

Still, Nagaraja Stapathi traveled from India to Singapore much as other artists from India have been the source for the design and execution of temples for the Diaspora community around the globe. In fact, at least one architect, Muthiah Sthapath from Chennai, has made a career of designing temples for the Diaspora community in places as distant from India as Houston, New York, Maple Grove, Minnesota, and London.

India and print culture

In India books were not for reading. Mass illiteracy was not a problem because there was no need for people to read. Rather, texts were internalized by committing them to memory. It was instead the Europeans who brought prints to India and in turn brought back representations of India. Jesuits, in particular, often Portuguese coming to the Mughal court in north India and to Vijayanagara in the south, brought illustrated Bibles, which served as a source of inspiration to Indian artists. Some artists, for example, the ones responsible for the borders of an album of early seventeenth century paintings known as the *Muraqqa Gulshan*, today in the Gulshan Library, Tehran, literally incorporated European prints, among them works by Hans Sebald Beham, into the borders around paintings executed by Mughal artists who had copied European works (Beach 1965). This does not represent slavish copying but rather a fascination with the very large world of which India was a part. There are ample other examples that demonstrate Mughal artists' interest in European subjects, among them religious scenes as well as secular ones. For example, the Mughal artist Bichitr produced a painting of Jahangir (1605–1627) seated on an hour glass, as if controlling time itself (Plate 13). Among those before him, though notably on a lower level, is the unmistakable image of



Plate 13. Bichitr, *Jahangir Preferring a Sufi Shaikh to Kings*, from the St Petersburg Album 1615–1618. Freer Gallery of Art.

James I of England, copied doubtless from a print that a European traveler had brought to the Mughal court. The British monarch is clearly represented in European style, with the full modeling that a European painting of the time would show, but quite different from the characteristic style of Jahangir's time. Similarly, a painting of Jahangir looming over the Persian Safavid monarch Shah Abbas shows the foreign king in distinctive Safavid style, following a practice dating back at least to the second century BCE, when foreigners have been represented in foreign styles.

But it was not just Indians who incorporated foreign paintings and foreign styles in the work. As part of a polycentric network, India lent as much as it derived. Beside Indian forms incorporated into British buildings such as the Royal Pavilion at Brighton, Rembrandt copied Indian paintings, freely drawing them. The British Museum holds his drawing of *Four Orientals Seated Under a Tree* (Plate 14) that copies almost precisely a Mughal painting executed in the last year of Jahangir's reign, 1627 (Slatkes 1983). Indian paintings traveled, carried as souvenirs by traders and clerics, even if there were no prints available for wider circulation.

It was Europeans who brought printing presses to India, presses intended to make possible the dissemination of news, to print books, and print religious literature in "native" languages in the



Plate 14. Rembrandt, *Four Orientals Seated Under a Tree*, drawing. London, British Museum. PD 1895-9-15-1275. © Trustees of the British Museum.

hope of converting a native population. But the first lithographic press was not introduced until 1822, about 24 years after the invention of the technique. Soon thereafter, in 1826, Sir Charles D'Oyly established the Behar Lithographic Press in Gaya, a source of a great many prints that were intended not so much for an Indian audience as for a British one, those who sought mementoes of long experience in India and intended to translate visually their Indian experience to an audience at home. In other words, a sense of India's appearance was transmitted from one center to another, from the place that had become a colony to the metropole.

The daguerreotype process was formally announced in 1839, and just a year later it reached India. It was, like lithography, a medium for artistic representation, but it soon became a means of documentation, a mode of colonial understanding. Just as the British created a census to enumerate the Indian population and commissioned drawings of the diverse castes, tribes, and professions of India (Archer 1992), so photographs came to be used to document the colony. James Fergusson, an indigo planter turned architectural historian, proudly based his knowledge of Indian temple styles on his massive collection of photographs and demeaned his Indian colleagues who relied on Sanskrit texts and readings of inscriptions for their knowledge (Fergusson



Plate 15. Deen Dayal, *Lord and Lady Curzon with First Day's Bag in Camp near Nekonda, Hyderabad 1902*, The British Library, Oriental & India Office Collection. © The British Library Board, 433/33 (26).

1974). But Indian photographers emerged, most famous among them Deen Dayal (1844–1905), who in 1875–1876 recorded the Indian tour of the Prince and Princess of Wales and then in 1885 was appointed Photographer to the Viceroy of India. He held that position only for a year before moving to Hyderabad to become the court photographer of the Nizam of Hyderabad (Plate 15). His photographs circulated globally, especially traveling to Britain, where they were received as marking both a sense of exotic India but also a record of accomplishments on the part of the Raj.

Print culture impacted India and Indians most directly, however, with the work of Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906), a painter who initially worked in a strongly European style but established the Ravi Varma Fine Art Lithographic Press in 1894. Its production of popular images of Indian deities (Plate 16) established a style still popular today with works commonly called calendar prints for their common reproduction on Indian calendars. Their global circulation has been facilitated by the Indian Diaspora, whose temples around the world almost invariably feature prints whose style may be traced to Ravi Varma if they are not, in fact, reproductions of Ravi Varma works.



Plate 16. Ravi Varma, Lakshmi, Oleograph print after 1896 painting in Maharaja Fatesingh Museum, Vadodara.

Conclusion

Too often the notion of things global conjures images of a worldwide Western infiltration into every aspect of culture and politics. As this survey should indicate globalization is a reciprocal process, one involving multiple centers, not simply a single transmitting one and multiple receiving ones.

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