

Pluralizing Mobility: Women Pilgrims and Wandering Bodhisattvas

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ABSTRACT

In higher education internationalization literature, mobility has almost exclusively been analyzed with reference to study abroad for academic and professional development purposes. The cost incurred is an impoverishment of frames to guide the exchange student, to converse with the nomad scholar, and to make sense of knowledge from the borderlands. Not only has the COVID-19 pandemic been a shock to conventional expectations about mobility, but it has also presented an opportunity to engage with the justifications, ethics, and limits of travel, anew. This essay centers experiences of women's pilgrimages in medieval Europe and wandering Asian seeker scholars in the ancient world to invite inquiry into mobility as a complex, normative paradigm and an imaginative reengagement with its multifaceted implications for learning.

Keywords: internationalization, knowledge creation, mobility, pilgrimage, spiritual learning, wandering

In higher education internationalization literature, mobility has almost exclusively been analyzed with reference to study abroad for academic and professional development purposes. The reasons for this inward-gaze are two-fold: The first stems from internationalization practice in universities that has progressively "educationalized" study abroad by relying on interuniversity partnership agreements as the chief operative modality. The second is the thrust toward empiricism in research, triggered by the vogue of evidence-based educational policymaking. Critical internationalization discourse has commendably broached questions about directions of flows and their hegemonizing and colonizing predilections,

yet underlying assumptions about the place of travel in learning and self-realization remain unexamined. Mobility has been reduced to an epiphenomenon because of such approaches, and rigorous, ongoing investigation into the human motivations behind its occurrence has not, somewhat counterintuitively, been a prime concern for practitioners and researchers alike. Not only has the COVID-19 pandemic been a shock to conventional expectations about mobility, but it has also presented an opportunity to engage with the justifications, ethics, and limits of travel, anew.

In this essay, I aim to expand ideas about mobility and its relationship to learning by revisiting the wanderings of women pilgrims in medieval Europe and scholars motivated by spiritual learning journeying throughout Asia in ancient times. These instances of wandering take us back to an epoch when mobility was far less “expected” and as such the pilgrim and the seeker scholar were pathbreakers and norm setters. Wandering evokes a more open-ended quest, marked by curiosity, but intentional nonetheless. Wandering presupposes that traveling is learning, thereby alleviating the burden of educationalizing the experience further. And yet, due regard must be paid to the kind of knowledge creation that such wandering brought to fruition if we are to upend the simplistic assumptions about “experiential learning” that pervade study abroad discourse.

WOMEN UNDERTAKING PILGRIMAGE

In “Wandering Women and Holy Matrons: Women as Pilgrims in the Later Middle Ages,” Craig (2009) explained that “Pilgrimage is a broad term, which, for medieval Christians, embraced a variety of activities” including “devotional prayer, short trips to local churches, long journeys to the Holy Land, and the process of human life itself” (p. 79). The parallel between pilgrimage and the journey of life spotlights openness to experience as a learning tool inherent to human nature. Pilgrimage as a “marvellously flexible kind of ritual, with meanings that suit many needs” (Craig, 2009, p. 9) caters to the varied motivations behind travel, even in educational contexts. Craig surveyed a whole range of circumstances informing medieval women’s pilgrimages—seeking healing and changes of fortune, escaping difficult domestic environments, and unwillingly accompanying the husband or family among them.

As a practice shared by many cultures, pilgrimage denotes shared meaning amid diverse and dynamic ritual enactment. Focusing on women’s experiences as pilgrims yields insights into how travel might disrupt established norms. Prevailing misogynistic tropes surrounding the

wandering woman reflect the ways in which social norms governing mobility have dictated who is allowed to be mobile. The medieval European female pilgrim was thus a pathbreaker, and her stories are a reminder that mobility is often at odds with conformity and therefore has the potential to drive meaningful change. Her experiences represent continuity across the many ages of globalization, including the current neoliberal variant, where the right to freedom of movement is always disproportionately enjoyed by some and beyond the reach of others.

An important source of historical accounts about wandering women are the miracle stories that served as the basis for canonization. Miracle stories represent a form of knowledge production where the visitor and the local co-create a record of events, involving “at least one intermediary, usually a clergyman, who recorded her story in a collection of similar stories” (Craig, 2009, p 79). This process of co-creating an account for posterity decimates the hierarchy between the traveller, the seeker, the researcher as the subject and the destination or the host society as the “knowable” object—a familiar feature of the colonial epistemic paradigm.

For internationalization practitioners, the miracle stories open an avenue for reimagining study abroad and reorient participants from “competence” to “receptivity,” from “deficit” to “pluriversality” and from “analyzing the other” to “reflecting on the self.” The idea of study abroad as setting out in search of a miracle counters ethnocentric othering and hierarchizing impulses and infuses educational mobility with curiosity and intention. Craig (2009) viewed miracle stories as representing “a community’s consensus memory of a series of events, which, as best it could, met the varying needs of belief, individual memory, promotion, and legal scrutiny” (p. 87), pointing to a framework of inductive social study based on firsthand observation and a reaching across the abyssal line (see Unkule, 2021) of subject object to co-create. Miracle stories exemplify “learning with” local social actors and making space for other ways of knowing (see Wane et al., 2019), testing, and validating. As a form of historical record, the stories embody a dynamic of responsibility and are testament to the values based on which legitimacy and respectability (sainthood) is ascribed in society. Upon return to the home institution, the miracle stories thus co-created during study abroad might be used to test theoretical abstractions in academic literature.

ASIAN SEEKERS IN ANCIENT TIMES

In the ancient world, many a wandering scholar from East and Southeast Asia visited India, often as part of delegations of merchants and diplomats, over time becoming the mode of transmission of Buddhist philosophy and

Hindu mythology and contributing to a civilizational consciousness. The records of these journeys vividly document how ideas intermingle with local specificities and morph as they travel. The wanderings themselves were grounded in the counterhegemonic and learner-centric beliefs that “spiritual practice of enlightened beings is not to be found in any one place or embodied in any single individual” (Shashibala, 2015, p. 243) and that “there are no shortcuts to enlightenment” (p. 237). Drawing on depictions in Indonesian and Chinese art, Shashibala described the pilgrimage of Sudhana whose teachers known as “kalyanamitras” included laypersons, monks, and divine beings. Sudhana’s is an education achieved through contact with a broad cross-section of society and a two-eyed seeing that invests not only the intellect but also the spirit in learning (see Bartlett et al., 2012). As a knowledge creator, the seeker scholar’s practice was to return to the homeland with Buddhist texts and translate them in the local language. The art of translation—not to be confused with uncritical assimilation and wholesale transplantation—allows the wanderer to seamlessly blend the global/universal with the local. It is thus that principles such as “*tathagathagarbha*”—meaning Buddha nature is the essence of all beings and attainable by all—become unifying ideals of a region with a formidable cultural and geo-political sprawl (see Ahn 2013). *Tathagathagarbha* serves as the axiological prior of an Asian concept of learning as knowing oneself. Frost (2011, p. 11) found this ideal still resonant in the age of European empire among Asian intellectuals who believed that “the human intercourse of the wandering Indian Ascetic and the Japanese peasant traveller, whose cultural contributions were born out of harmonious interaction with nature and their fellow man, was what made Asia distinct.”

In the early twentieth century, Asian thought leaders like Rabindranath Tagore, Kakuzo Okakura, and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy drew heavily on the spread of Buddhism throughout Asia to arrive at a conception of Asiatic modes of discovery and dialogue from which to further derive grounds for solidarity. Thinkers of this generation had to contend with the fact that India, which once was the core of this ideational sphere of influence, was in their time a colony of the British empire. Their sensitivity to the mutual interplay of the local, national, and global and their express concerns about ascendance and assertion of one over the other, strike as prescient—notwithstanding the test of the essentializing proclivities of orientalism and occidentalism that their legacy has subsequently endured.

CONCLUSION

It is hoped that the above examples will inspire interest in the phenomenon of mobility and the nature of knowledge created through travel among studies concerning international students. The Asian experience of ancient cultural links has been discussed as a counterpoint to the European mission civilisatrice that presupposes superiority and universality of the western worldview. Probing deeper we find, however, that the desire to make one's own beliefs influential is corollary to the very idea of civilization and mobility, indispensable to the venture.

Conceptualization of mobility in existing research heavily relies on the ideal type of the European male explorer. The experiences of female pilgrims in medieval Europe and Asians traversing the continent on journeys of spirituality and solidarity challenge the embeddedness of a singular narrative, its selective portrayals, and its constricted conceptual and practical potential. Research on internationalization and international students has shied away from investigating the ethics of mobility. Craig (2009, p. 9) noted that by the later Middle Ages, the image of pilgrims was tarnished, and they were accused of “using a purportedly penitential practice in order to escape the tedium of home rather than bring themselves closer to God.” Similarly, the spread of Buddhism across East and Southeast Asia demonstrates that while mobility yields hybridity, it could also conspire in the destruction of pre-existing local ways and practices. Within the structural parameters of neoliberal globalization, mobility is a foregone conclusion with an aspirational gleam—assumptions that bypass considerations of relationality, responsibility, and reasonable restrictions. Education and research have appropriated this myth of mobility as commonplace to further the ends of commerce and expedience, but the cost incurred is an impoverishment of frames to guide the exchange student, to converse with the nomad scholar (Lock et al., 2022), and to make sense of knowledge from the borderlands. The examples used in this article invite inquiry into mobility as a complex, normative paradigm and an imaginative reengagement with its multifaceted implications for learning.

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