

Buying books or building collections

Bibliographers for Asian Studies in research libraries in the United States face a daunting task of documenting the cultures and intellectual productions of countries, or even entire regions, and must do so with what always seem to be inadequate funds. With increasing emphasis in the US academy on interdisciplinarity, comparative studies, and original research, even within the undergraduate curriculum, the range of materials that libraries need to provide are already expansive.

Judith Henchy

THE ADVENT OF NEW FORMS of scholarly and popular communication – Flickr, YouTube, Blogs, not to mention the universe of e-books, journal databases, web-based publications and PDF formats – add an exponentially expanding dimension to this responsibility. Providing physical examples or virtual guides to even a small glimpse of the primary cultural production of a country is an ambitious, even hubristic, undertaking. However, this enterprise also has to be coordinated with reference to the vibrant secondary source publishing market, which is now increasingly global, and which continues to drive trends in scholarship and the machinery of the academy.

In balancing these responsibilities, the bibliographer's task is to maintain close relationships with the faculty and students whom they serve, attend department and scholarly meetings and read the professional literatures of the discipline. Some selection decisions about academic publications are easily determined by the priorities of the scholarly departments served, by critical developments in the field, or fads in the classroom; others can be based on the more intangible intersections of contradictory criteria: between providing core lower level undergraduate materials and highly specialised research resources; between serving current faculty interests and projecting a future comprehensive collection, either across a wide range of scholarly topics or within a focused area of existing collection strength.

Library purchasing: Whose choice?

In addition, general trends in library collecting are increasingly encroaching on the autonomy of the subject librarian, as a growing proportion of central budgets is being committed to ever more expensive packages of online resources, decreasing discretionary funds for individual subject selection. Fewer of these large packages serve the social sciences and humanities in general, and area studies in particular, while funding for specific area studies online resources are often not forthcoming centrally.

It is critical that academic departments and individual faculty and students participate fully in the opportunities provided by libraries to influence their collection decisions and planning, through whatever feedback channels are available.

While most academic libraries in the United States employ a large cohort of specialist librarians to select for the range of disciplines represented in the collection and on the campus, most also contract with a book dealer, with whom they establish a profile to supply all relevant new publications on a specified range of subjects on an approval plan. This means that many librarians have diminished control over the materials that are purchased by the library. These profiles are detailed and complex, often including certain *caveats* that trigger bibliographer scrutiny: like high cost, revised editions, translations of foreign publications, and others. Under these profiles, the university press materials are likely to be the least restricted; trade publications, co-published works, and titles published as part of a series are more likely to be subject to more scrutiny. For smaller publishers, it is worth contacting these major approval plan dealers to ensure that their lists are represented; the major players in this field are Blackwell North America, Yankee Book Peddler and Coutts.

Sometimes individual presses are excluded from the range of materials that are automatically sent to the library on approval. Many of the European trade, and even some university press publishers may fall into this category, since their prices are very high in comparison with what the US market is used to. A hardcover-only publication – libraries now tend to favour cheaper soft cover editions to save money, even if these present a binding issue later – from a European trade publisher selling for \$150 or more on the US market is going to face a hard time getting selected by an area studies librarian. Some of the subject selectors in the social science disciplines are more accustomed to such prices, but in these changing economic times, such a book may be purchased by fewer libraries.

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The unpredictable exchange values of European currencies in the last few years have exacerbated this problem. Indeed, it is the excessively high prices of some European journal titles that has triggered an increasingly energetic movement in US academic institutions to promote open access alternatives to creative works as a new framework for scholarly communication. Many non-profit university presses are also interested in consortial models and collaborations with research libraries that can distribute intellectual content within a different, and more sustainable, economic model.

Giving voice to area studies

As libraries move towards increasingly quantitative methods of assessment to guide the future distribution of their diminishing collection resources, Asian studies, and other area studies titles, come under increasing pressure. Foreign language resources, with their relatively small user-base, do not fare so well in these types of analyses.

Because of these pressures, it is critical that academic departments and individual faculty and students participate fully in the opportunities provided by libraries to influence their collection decisions and planning, through periodic assessment surveys, or whatever feedback channels are available. Graduate students, who will determine the future direction of scholarship, can be proactive in working with librarians to discuss their research. All members of the academic community should make their voices heard regarding the types of material that will serve their discipline into the future. The selection task within a given library may in fact be shared between an area studies bibliographer and a subject bibliographer, raising the potential for differing long and short term perspectives on faculty and student priorities, but also offering the opportunity for more channels of representations for faculty.

While the fields of Asian studies themselves have thrived within their shifting boundaries and definitions, many research libraries have not adapted their purchasing structures well to accommodate these ill-defined parameters; decisions about the funding of interdisciplinary or border-crossing topics often falls into an underfunded budgetary category, or are subject to negotiation between selectors.

Writing Asian studies into the future

Current wisdom from an academic publishing industry that is facing serious economic turmoil is that more general scholarly interpretations appropriate as undergraduate teaching texts are more economically viable. Clearly, the number of teaching institutions with general Asian studies undergraduate programs is larger than those with highly specialised graduate programs across the full range of disciplines. It is, of course, tempting to think that a very specialised historical or political science text could be written with such clarity, and indeed brevity, to make it cheap to produce and appealing to a general audience or as an undergraduate text, but this trend toward cost-cutting can damage the quality of scholarship in the market, and the academic edifice it sustains. Libraries are still committed to purchasing specialist works, and are in fact consciously seeking out works which present new research on topics not already represented in our collections, and which make a solid contribution to a scholarly or discipline-specific argument, with adequate space to present the necessary supporting data or other non-textual evidence (including expensive to produce photographs). It is, however, also possible that changes in scholarly communications may open up access to repositories of research data that can be used in conjunction with a leaner published volume.

It may be true that such specialist works are less likely to be adopted as lower division undergraduate teaching texts, but they constitute a large percentage of the average research library's holdings. It is worth keeping in mind that most US institutions now have online access to dissertations, and are less likely to purchase a specialist research work that is a minimally revised dissertation with a less developed theoretical framework; on the contrary, it is greatly to an author's advantage if they can make their dissertation research address a specific disciplinary or theoretical questions which cross disciplinary boundaries, thereby making it invaluable to both a disciplinary and an area studies audience.

In fact, the increasing focus on interdisciplinary in the undergraduate curriculum has helped promote area studies – which is by its very nature an interdisciplinary enterprise – as a rich comparative scholarly terrain. Young scholars should remain confident that there will be a place in the libraries of the academy for any well-researched and theoretically informed contribution to knowledge.

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