

Challenges, Opportunities, and Best Practices in Overseas Buying Trips

An Interview Study Focusing on South Asia Specialists

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Overseas buying trips are a way that area specialist librarians acquire unique international materials. They may also provide other opportunities and benefits to individuals and institutions. This qualitative study, based on interviews with nine South Asia-area specialist librarians, attempts to examine the challenges, benefits, and opportunities in overseas buying trips and establish a set of best practices guidelines. Although this study is grounded in the South Asia context, the best practices may be applicable in other contexts to help librarians plan effective overseas acquisitions trips.

Area studies specialists are tasked with building unique collections of materials in a diverse array of formats and languages from countries around the world. These materials are not always readily discoverable or available via typical acquisitions methods such as working with vendors and ordering from online bookstores. Buying trips are one effective tool to help area specialist librarians, and other librarians whose collection development responsibilities include an international component, build rich and unique collections. However, institutional support for overseas acquisitions trips varies between institutions as administrators consider whether the benefits of overseas buying trips outweigh the associated challenges and expenses. Peer-reviewed professional literature on the topic is scarce and this study was undertaken as a preliminary attempt to describe the opportunities and challenges associated with overseas buying trips.

For the purposes of this study, overseas buying trips are defined as trips to a country outside of the location of a librarian's home institution in which collection development and acquisitions activities take place. It is not necessary for collection development or acquisitions to be the primary purpose of the trip, nor do materials have to be purchased, but there should be evidence of deliberate activity that occurred during the trip relating to collection development and acquisitions. Examples of deliberate activity can include attending book fairs, visiting vendors or publishers, visiting libraries and cultural institutions with an eye towards identifying materials to acquire or make accessible by other means such as digitization, receiving free materials that will be added a library collection, etc.

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This paper is a case study of nine South Asia subject specialists, and in addition to describing opportunities and challenges in overseas buying trips, it also attempts to develop a framework of best practices for librarians preparing to embark on a buying trip. The development of the study's central questions and the framework for best practices was also informed by the researcher's own experience undertaking overseas buying trips. The questions covered topics such as logistical considerations in planning a trip, including funding, time, and location questions, plus direct questions about the challenges, opportunities, and perceived drawbacks to both the individual embarking on an acquisitions trip and the institution sponsoring it.

Like any skill, implementing a successful buying trip can be improved through practice, preparation, and through following best practice guidelines. While it is probable that some of the issues revealed in this study will be specific to South Asia, it is expected that many of them will also be applicable for buying trips to other geographic regions. It should also be noted that all the interviewees are employed by large, doctoral-granting institutions. These types of institutions are more likely to have libraries of a size and scope to dedicate resources to building area studies collections and services, and therefore are more likely to have area specialist librarians who would undertake overseas buying trips. Exact data on the frequency with which smaller institutions fund overseas buying trips is not available, however. This paper is intended to help area specialists who are planning a buying trip to maximize their experience, or as one interviewee put it, to help area specialists figure out "what is normal" for an overseas buying trip. This paper is also meant to help facilitate discussions about the benefits and drawbacks of funding such trips so that library leadership can make informed policy decisions.

Literature Review

A thorough search of the last several decades of peer-reviewed library science journals reveals a small handful of papers focused solely on overseas acquisitions trips. The paper with the largest scope and a focus on best practices is a paper written in 1982 by Samore. He writes of "Third World" countries where the will to publish and educate their citizenry is hindered by technological barriers, intense poverty, and the need to attend to basic survival needs. He uses this context to preview a range of major difficulties that fall into six categories: (1) bibliographic control; (2) publishing and book trade practice; (3) monetary and trade restrictions; (4) language barriers; (5) shipping and postal service procedures; and (6) political and social conditions.¹ While some of the issues stand the test of time, much has changed in the last thirty years. Even the preferred nomenclature

has changed from "Third World" countries to developing countries or, occasionally, the Global South. On a more practical level, in the age of the internet and email, librarians no longer have to wait months for responses to handwritten letters as Samore laments in his paper. Furthermore, while foreign currency exchange remains a challenge, online banking, credit cards geared towards international travelers, and the proliferation of ATM machines have mitigated some of those challenges.

More recent papers on buying trips are narrower in scope and present the experiences of individual librarians on overseas buying trips as case studies. In 2003, Kistler recounted his experiences on a five-week buying trip to Benin in West Africa. He reported many challenges, including language barriers, cultural barriers, payment issues, health and stress issues, and difficulty in shipping or carrying the materials back home. Despite the challenges, he lists many more advantages, including the ability to assess items in person, discovery of items from small publishers that are often excluded from approval plans, acquiring rare and ephemeral materials, circumventing the risk of shipping rare and valuable items by carrying them back in one's personal luggage, browsing libraries and governmental organizations to develop acquisitions wish lists, and gaining new insights into another culture.²

The challenges faced by the group of librarians who attended the Hong Kong Book Fair in 2001 were somewhat different. They were sponsored by the American Library Association (ALA) to attend the fair and were assigned assistants who facilitated introductions to publishers, helped them prepare order lists, and escorted them around the fair. Some of the librarians from smaller institutions found the lack of reliable internet to be a challenge as they were unable to check their online catalogs to make purchasing decisions. These librarians made fewer purchases but found developing their network of overseas vendors to be valuable. Like Kistler, they also found it advantageous to be able to assess items and publishers in person, and the book fair setting alleviated some of the language and cultural barriers, making it possible to meet with more vendors and publishers in a shorter time period with less local travel.³

In addition to the modest selection of peer-reviewed papers pertaining to overseas buying trips, a recent post on the *International and Area Studies Collections in the 21st Century (IASC21)* blog features interviews with two area specialist librarians who espouse the value of overseas acquisitions trips.⁴ One of the interviewees, Pushkar Sohoni, also published a widely circulated blog post on his experiences on an overseas buying trip in August 2013.⁵ A third blog post in 2016 posted on the *Seminar on Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials (SALALM)* page also discussed the value of overseas buying trips in the context of attending international book fairs.⁶ All three blog posts emphasize the

value of these trips not only in acquiring unique materials but also as a mechanism for identifying new vendors and staying informed about the state of publishing in a particular area.

Several recent articles on area studies collecting focus on acquisitions for individual areas. The methods used by area specialist collectors varies by the community of librarians associated with that geographic area. The author's 2015 study found that the most widely used acquisitions method by South Asian studies librarians was membership in the Library of Congress (LC) Cooperative Collection Development plans. She further found that about half of South Asia area specialists used buying trips.⁷ In comparison, a 2005 study of Slavic and East European selectors found that fewer than 15 percent of the selectors in this area attend book fairs or take buying trips.⁸

Method

During the 2013–14 academic year, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five South Asia subject specialists who had self-selected and volunteered in the course of completing an online survey administered by the author about their collecting practices. The interviews were classified as semi-structured because although a list of framing questions was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the instrument allowed for flexibility in asking additional follow-up questions relating to the themes of the study as described in the IRB application. Both the online survey and the interviews that comprise this study were approved by the University of Illinois's IRB as an exempt research study involving human subjects. The online survey, which was the basis of a study on the collecting practices of South Asia area specialists, was distributed to the members of the Committee on South Asian Libraries and Documentation (CONSALD). CONSALD is the professional organization for South Asia bibliographers. According to the CONSALD membership directory, there are thirty-two South Asia bibliographers who were eligible to participate in the study, representing a total of twenty-eight North American institutions. In total, nine were completed and usable surveys were returned. While this may seem like a relatively small number, given the small pool of eligible participants, this actually indicates a nearly 33 percent response rate. Of these nine respondents, five reported taking an overseas buying trip within the last five years and volunteered to be contacted for a follow-up interview.

After completing the first five interviews, to have a more robust and credible study, the researcher amended the IRB protocol to allow recruitment of additional volunteers from the CONSALD membership. Four additional interviewees were successfully recruited via targeted emails to members of the CONSALD directory and all four interviews were

completed during the spring 2016 semester. All four volunteers were South Asia subject specialists at North American research universities who had taken an overseas buying trip to South Asia and who had, for various reasons, declined to volunteer in the course of the online study described above. The nine interviews, which were completed between October 2013 and February 2016, are the basis of the present study. The interviews were conducted via Skype and recorded using the SkypeRecorder software program. The researcher also took handwritten notes during the interviews.

Drawing on the participants' most recent buying trip experiences, the semistructured interviews focused on a few key thematic areas. While the researcher used a list of twelve framing questions to guide the discussion, the IRB protocol allowed flexibility in asking follow up questions or additional questions addressing the main thematic areas (see appendix for the full interview protocol). The main thematic areas were the following:

- planning for the trip
- time, location, and duration considerations
- travel and materials funding
- acquisitions, payment, and shipping
- collection development priorities
- logistical considerations for financing and transporting acquisitions
- challenges
- benefits
- drawbacks

Results

For convenience, the cases are briefly described here and a more nuanced look at the themes is provided in the subsequent analysis section. Each description provides the date when the interview took place, a brief description of the trips described by the interviewees, and the number of years of experience of the interviewee at the time of the interview. Additionally, the Carnegie Control type (public/private status) for the institution is also included.⁹ The Control type is the only category of Carnegie classification listed individually because all institutions included in this study are considered large, doctoral universities with highest research activity. All these institutions are also members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), which connotes a certain size and prominence of the libraries at these institutions.

Please note: To preserve the anonymity of the research subjects and to create a more pleasant reading experience, all interviewees have been assigned the gendered pronoun of "she" regardless of their actual gender in the results and discussion section. The actual gender ratio included six female interviewees and three males.

Case 1

The first interview took place in October 2013 with a South Asia subject specialist from a private university. She had held the position for roughly four years. In her interview, she described two buying trips to India that she had taken over the past year. Her trips were self-funded and combined with personal trips to India.

Case 2

The second interview also took place in October 2013 with a South Asia specialist from a public university. She had served in that role for more than nine years and had been on two buying trips in the past. In the interview, she focused on a 2011 buying trip to Kolkata and Delhi in India.

Case 3

The third interview took place in October 2013 with a South Asia specialist from a private university. She had served in that role for roughly four years. She described two recent trips to South Asia—one was a personal trip to Karachi, Pakistan, in June 2013 in which she acquired some free materials for her institution, and the other as a buying trip to India in March 2013.

Case 4

The fourth interview in October 2013 was with a South Asia specialist from a private institution. She has served in that role for nearly ten years, and had a total of nearly twenty years of experience as a South Asia specialist. She described a 2013 trip to India and the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal.

Case 5

The fifth interview took place in November 2013 and was also duplicated in May 2014 due to an issue with the audio recording. The interviewee was from a private institution where she had served as the South Asia specialist for roughly four years. Her interview focused on a 2013 buying trip to New Delhi, India.

Case 6

The sixth interview took place in January 2016. The interviewee was from a public university where she had served as an area specialist for more than twenty-six years. Her primary specialty is the Middle East but she also did collection development for South Asia. She described two buying trips—a trip in November 2015 to Turkey and a December 2013 trip to Delhi and Agra, India. The trips to the Middle

East are included in the discussion because the issues raised by those trips are not dissimilar from the South Asia trips reported on in this study.

Case 7

The seventh interview took place in February 2016 with an area specialist librarian from a public university. She had been at her current institution for two years, though she had accumulated a total of eighteen years of professional experience as a South Asian studies librarian. She described a January 2016 buying trip to Delhi and Chennai, India.

Case 8

The eighth interview took place in February 2016 with a Tibetan studies specialist from a private university. She had served in that role for nine years. In her interview, she described a trip to Dharamsala and Delhi, India, and Kalumpang, Malaysia, in December 2015 through January 2016.

Case 9

The final interview took place in February 2016 with a South Asian studies specialist from a public university. She had more than ten years' experience in that role. Although her most recent buying trip took place in 2006, the data from her interview was retained as, given the subjective nature of many of the questions, many of her answers were still sufficiently relevant to the study.

Analysis

Planning for the Trip

Questions on the pre-departure planning process were intended to identify variations in institutional requirements in terms of submitting an application for a buying trip and how librarians might consult with their faculty and plan their itinerary. The pre-departure planning process varied widely between the interviewees depending on the primary purpose of the trip (which was not always acquisitions), the funding sources for the trip, and the regulations of the employing institution. Some institutions require a proposal to be submitted to get approval or funding for the buying trip. The paperwork may be submitted to library administration or, occasionally, another academic unit or center that may be providing funding for the trip. One interviewee mentioned that her institution requires all librarians going on an overseas buying trip to request funding support from their associated academic unit or center, though they are not required to receive outside funding to receive library

funding. Typically, this paperwork requires a proposed itinerary and a budget request and justification for either the travel or the acquisitions, or both.

Other institutions may only require reports upon completion of the trip. For two interviewees, there was no application process because funding for buying trips had been negotiated as a condition of an employment or retention contract. In one case, the interviewee reported that there was no formal paperwork to be submitted because her trips had a different primary purpose other than acquisitions. In all cases, the trips were usually planned around a specific strategic date or location.

All of the interviewees mentioned some level of outreach to their faculty prior to departure on the trip. In some cases, this was to gather requests for specific materials or topic areas in which to collect materials. In other cases, it was to obtain assistance in identifying contacts and institutions to visit during the trip. One other method to identify contacts and institutions to visit is to take advantage of visiting scholars and publishers who might be presenting or in residence at a local institution. One interviewee recounted an instance where she met a visiting activist from Syria who gave a presentation on a women's magazine she edits and facilitated introductions to some of her contacts in the region that ultimately resulted in the collection of many uniquely held Syrian materials.

Two interviewees also made very practical pre-departure suggestions during their interviews. One unique suggestion was to use the smart-phone application WhatsApp to facilitate contact with individuals prior to departure, saying that it is used by many people in the developing world and often garners more responses than email, phone, or Facebook contact. The other useful suggestion was to run a report of holdings in languages or on topics that will be targeted for purchase and store those reports on the hard drive of a computer that will be brought on the buying trip. This allows for checking for duplicate holdings even in the absence of a reliable internet connection.

Timing, Location, and Duration Considerations

Without exception, all interviewees mentioned climate and convenience as primary factors for choosing the timing of a buying trip. South Asia is notoriously hot during the summer, and monsoon season can make travel more difficult, so there is a strong preference for planning a trip during the cooler, drier winter months. In contrast, for specialists who are planning a trip to the Himalayas, they must take into account that the Himalayan region is less accessible during parts of the winter. Other important factors included timing a trip to minimize being absent during the busiest parts of the semester or scheduling a trip around familial obligations. Many interviewees also mentioned timing their

trips to coincide with conferences, book fairs, or interesting cultural events.

Some of the same factors that impact the timing of the trip also impact the selection of the location. For example, some interviewees choose a location to visit based on a conference, an interesting cultural event, or opportunity to develop professionally. In some cases this can mean avoiding a particular location that might be overly congested or shut down due to a special holiday or regional event. One interviewee said, "I like to leave some time to go to a place that I've never been before or do something that I've never done before as kind of ongoing explorations, my continuing education." Another interviewee went a step further, saying that the contacts she cultivates in the region are equally important as acquiring physical materials, because she relies on those contacts to assist students and faculty who are going on research trips.

The experience level or the personal preference of the person undertaking the acquisitions trip may also impact the choice of the location. One specialist who had completed two buying trips to India expressed an interest in going to Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal, but was concerned about bureaucratic challenges in visiting Pakistan and a lack of an established network in Bangladesh and Nepal. A second specialist also mentioned sticking to major metropolitan areas due to a lack of contacts in other smaller cities. A third person mentioned that she had been interested in going to Chennai but was daunted by the possibility of needing to speak Tamil to communicate effectively.

There were differing perspectives on whether to visit major cities or smaller towns. Eight of the nine interviewees went to Delhi for reasons varying from attending the Delhi World Book Fair or an academic event, to feeling more comfortable or familiar with the city as opposed to other locations, to the presence of many major publishers and vendors within Delhi. Major cities are also more easily accessible by air travel. One subject, however, makes it a point to visit smaller cities and towns that are sites of literary and cultural production but whose materials may not be as readily available through mainstream vendors and therefore will be more rarely held.

One other important consideration when choosing location is the type or genre of materials being targeted for acquisition. While all interviewees mentioned that a buying trip is typically specifically for rarely held or unique materials, sometimes a buying trip is also an opportunity to get a large quantity of materials to serve as the foundation for a new collecting subject or new language.

In terms of the duration of a buying trip, the shortest trip reported was only a week long, while the longest trip was over a month. The average trip lasts two weeks. Three of the participants reported taking a buying trip every two years, another three reported going one or more times per

year. Of the remaining three, one person averages a trip every three years, and the other two go irregularly.

Travel and Materials Funding

Funding models varied widely between the participants' institutions. One interviewee reported getting no travel funding but said she undertook acquisitions activities voluntarily because "we are in a profession where it is impossible to turn off your collecting instincts." Another interviewee also reported going on trips to South Asia for personal reasons during which she took advantage of a convenient opportunity to acquire materials for her library, though she also went on institutionally funded trips.

For the interviewees who received funding from their institutions, three reported regular recurring funding—one came from an institution where all subject specialists were awarded funding every two years, another had negotiated an annual buying trip to be written into her contract when she was offered the position, and a third had also negotiated recurring travel funding as a condition of employment. The other five interviewees who took institutionally funded trips either received funding to attend a conference or as part of grant-funded project work, or applied or coordinated with their library director on an ad hoc basis. In some of these cases, the project-based goals or the conference were the primary purpose, but some time was devoted to acquisitions activities. For most institutionally funded trips, the costs of the trip are theoretically fully covered, but several interviewees mentioned that they habitually incurred out-of-pocket expenses. One interviewee mentioned that often around 10 percent of the cost of the trip ends up being paid out of pocket.

Acquisitions were typically funded via the interviewees' regular acquisitions budget. Two interviewees mentioned obtaining additional acquisitions funding from a Title VI National Resource Center grant for South Asia. Several interviewees mentioned that the cost of shipping can exceed the cost of the materials themselves and needs to be factored into creating a budget for the trip.

Acquisitions, Payment, and Shipping

Broadly speaking, there are four models used to pay for materials: (1) paying out of pocket for reimbursement later; (2) receiving a cash advance; (3) working with approved vendors who can bill the institution directly; and (4) using a university issued credit card. For the subjects who paid out of pocket for later reimbursement, cash was a frequent payment method though credit cards and wire transfers were also used. Credit cards are mostly only an option in larger cities, and one interviewee mentioned that in cities where cash payment is the norm, it may also be difficult

to find working ATMs. This interviewee said she avoided using ATMs and instead used Western Union to wire herself money prior to leaving the United States, which she would pick up upon arrival in India. Another interviewee offered an opposing viewpoint, stating that ATMs were readily available in most cities she has visited on buying trips. A third interviewee mentioned an instance where she had no option other than to use PayPal to make a payment.

Two interviewees reported receiving a cash advance from their institutions, and another had access to an institutional credit card. Like the subjects who had to submit receipts for reimbursement, the interviewees who received the cash advance had to submit itemized receipts to reconcile their expenditures. In fact, the interviewee who had access to an institutional credit card mentioned that the itemized receipt submission process for the institutional card was far more complex than using her personal card, so she often chose to use her own credit card and apply for reimbursement. Two people mentioned that it can be useful to bring a blank receipt book for instances where the vendor is not otherwise prepared to offer an itemized receipt.

Working with approved vendors who could bill the institution directly was a popular payment method. In fact, one interviewee who would have otherwise had to pay out of pocket and wait for reimbursement would get an approved vendor to purchase materials back from her for which she had paid cash, and then sell the materials directly to her institution at a modest mark up. She felt that this was an ethical gray area but also that there was no viable alternative.

These same approved vendors, as well as the LC field offices, were also often called upon to assist with shipping. All but one of the interviewees who shipped materials home had at one time used the assistance of the LC field offices in Delhi. One interviewee noted that a drawback to using LC for shipping is that due to their policies regarding consolidating shipments to have a full load, it can take up to six months to receive materials despite being only marginally less expensive than using a private vendor. Many also mentioned working with private vendors such as D.K. Agencies to help with shipping. Interviewees rarely attempted to handle the shipping themselves given the complications of packing materials and negotiating customs for international shipping. Instead, the next most popular option after taking assistance from a vendor was to carry items home in one's own suitcase.

Collection Development Priorities

All nine interviewees mentioned using overseas buying trips to acquire materials that are not easily available through mainstream channels. Examples include out-of-print and antiquarian materials, ephemera, minor publications, popular and "middle-brow" literature, first editions, and publications from small literary societies and religious institutions.

This can also mean materials that are likely to be missed by LC's field office in New Delhi, which includes popular cultural materials and, sometimes, controversial materials such as publications from extreme political movements. It should be noted that there is some controversy over acquiring antiquarian materials, especially manuscripts. One interviewee in particular mentioned a shift that she has observed over the course of her career as librarians embrace a postcustodial archiving model. The Society of American Archivists defines this model as "the idea that archivists will no longer physically acquire and maintain records, but that they will provide management oversight for records that will remain in the custody of the record creators."¹⁰

Another interviewee noted that

in theory one is looking for old and antiquarian things but actually with the prevalence of digital reproductions on places like Google Books and then also other sort of electronic projects, investing heavily in older and rare materials doesn't seem to be a really good use of resources. I mean first editions, who really needs them these days? What I'm really mostly looking for are small things, either actually ephemeral or publications that are so minor and unpriced that nobody else is likely to get them to me.

She recommended that librarians on overseas buying trips should go to places other than major cities and then focus their collecting as locally as possible.

A second interviewee cautioned against focusing solely on older and archival materials, noting that items in brittle or poor condition would overburden her institution's preservation department. Her institution had gone so far as to impose a two- to three-year ban on librarians bringing back archival materials from overseas buying trips. She also mentioned that acquiring materials in vernacular languages could pose problems for her technical services department.

Beyond acquiring rare materials, one interviewee cited buying trips as an opportunity to build up a new collection from scratch. Her example was building a brand new art history collection to support a new faculty hire. Another interviewee sought out periodicals to fill in gaps in a serials collection. Finally, one interviewee takes the opportunity to acquire anything she happens upon that looks interesting.

Challenges

Avoiding the purchase of duplicate materials was a concern for many of the interviewees. A very limited number of vendors have computers available that can be used to check for local and national holdings of a given item. An interviewee mentioned that one strategy she uses is to collect catalogs

and check them from her hotel room and then return the following day to make purchases. Other times, though this method is not preferred by most vendors, she may just purchase the books on the spot with the understanding that if there are multiple duplicates she may return them by mail for a refund after her return. Another interviewee mentioned the value of running a holdings report prior to leaving on a buying trip so that she has a locally stored copy on her laptop that she can check offline for duplication.

Another major challenge theme noted by several interviewees was related to cultural differences and planning. More than half of the interviewees mentioned the difficulty in scheduling meetings in advance due to challenges in getting people to respond to email and phone calls, or just having contacts not show up or cancel at the last minute. One solution was to use social media such as Facebook or WhatsApp to schedule meetings, and another is to be flexible and show up unannounced. One specialist said, "Planning can be disastrous. You know you can plan all you like and it's just not going to work because the other person doesn't commit to appointments the same way." For this reason, the subject does not call ahead to institutions or publishers with whom she does not already have a personal contact, rather she shows up with an open mind.

For one interviewee, being a female presented challenges both in terms of safety issue and as an issue of assertiveness in business meetings. She also mentioned that she felt that she received special treatment as a foreigner, both in positive and negative ways. A second interviewee mentioned that while she does not feel particularly unsafe as a solo female traveler, she occasionally takes precautions by deliberately choosing to travel with a group or identifying a friendly male to walk with if she feels uncertain in a given situation. A third interviewee mentioned that as she has gotten older and past the age of fifty, gender-based harassment has become less of a problem.

One additional challenge that was discussed by multiple interviewees was dealing with the perception of buying trips as a "free vacation." One interviewee mentioned that, in contrast to this idea, she often gets very little personal time because after a full day of meetings, book fairs, and vendor visits, she is often responding to email, checking for duplicates, and doing other work tasks when she returns to her hotel room. Another interviewee specified that it took more than three weeks after she returned from her most recent buying trip to finish all reports and tasks related to the buying trip and return to a normal workday. A third person added that all the tasks related to the buying trip feel like they are in addition to her normal responsibilities, and that if she is not there to perform her daily responsibilities, she has to find someone else to fill in.

Benefits

Despite the challenges, one interviewee noted that librarians have an easier time gaining access to materials and cultural institutions than other scholars because of the simpler and clearer nature of the transaction of exchanging money for a specific good. One interviewee said,

A lot of people have issues with the notion that we are foreigners who come and take their materials, take their information, including ethnographic information and go back to our countries and become rich and famous professors. And what do they get out of it? There is a suspicion that their cultural patrimony is vanishing whereas merchants are a bit less concerned by and large.

Therefore, buying trips may allow US scholars to access materials that they would not otherwise be able to access even if they planned a research trip to South Asia.

More generally, buying trips provide an opportunity to get more unique and rarely held materials. This is important not just for an individual's local institution but also when considering the notion of a national collection. One interviewee said,

As opposed to everybody buying the same six flavors of ice cream there is a bit more variety in our collections and I think it's important to have that because for a long time everybody was buying from the Library of Congress. The pool of books that were acquired were all the same in North America. To have diversity in the kinds of materials is very important.

In addition, she said that contrary to what one might expect, many vendors are willing to give good discounts and prices (a few interviewees even reporting receiving occasional free donations of materials) because they are proud to have their materials held in overseas institutions. Where possible, they are often willing to check your institution's catalog to avoid duplication. Overseas buying trips provide an opportunity to meet with vendors with whom one usually only corresponds from a distance. "It's almost like an inspection for them—they need to match up certain expectations you have for your vendors," one interviewee stated.

The institutional benefits extend far beyond access to materials. While several interviewees mentioned the value of building their professional network, one interviewee specified that the contacts she establishes on these trips are perhaps as important as the physical acquisitions. She uses her network of overseas contacts to assist scholars who want to undertake research in the region. Several others

noted that buying trips are valuable because they allow the individual to remain in touch with the academic output in institutions in the country, and the homegrown concerns about certain publishing houses and vendors. In addition to benefiting one's local institution, there are also professional benefits to the individual. These include building more meaningful relationships with library directors, vendors, and organizations, doing something one has not done before, and gaining opportunities to present at local institutions where one can exchange ideas with colleagues in South Asia. Two interviewees mentioned that these overseas trips also lend valuable credibility to the librarian taking the trip when she is dealing with her area studies faculty. One subject noted that the benefits to the individual and the institution outweigh any challenges and drawbacks to such a degree that she believed area specialists should take at least one buying trip per year.

Drawbacks

None of the interviewees felt that any of the drawbacks associated with overseas buying trips were significant enough to outweigh the benefits. The two drawbacks that were mentioned by several interviewees were the out-of-pocket costs incurred, and the sheer amount of work needed to plan, implement, and then report out on these trips (this second point regarding the amount of work was identified by some interviewees as a challenge and by some as a drawback, therefore it is being mentioned in both places). All but two interviewees explicitly mentioned that these trips incur out-of-pocket costs. The reasons these costs were incurred included (but were not limited to) an inadequate per diem for all of the ground transit and food costs, inability to include foreign exchange fees when requesting reimbursement for costs incurred on a personal credit card, accruing interest fees on a personal credit card due to the length of time it takes to receive reimbursement, additional unexpected or non-reimbursable costs such as taking people out for meals in gratitude for their assistance, or the cost of doing laundry (because the traveler packed light to leave room in the luggage to carry materials back in their personal suitcases).

One additional drawback noted was potential liability issues for the institution, especially in the event of an overseas medical or security crisis. To that end, one interviewee mentioned that her institution had purchased an institutional subscription to a service called International SOS and implemented an International Travel Planning Policy, both of which provide assistance to students and employees in the event of an overseas emergency. She used the International SOS service when she experienced a health emergency in India, and highly recommends that other institutions that send students and faculty overseas for research, buying trips, or study abroad invest in such a product.

Despite the drawbacks mentioned, all interviewees felt that institutions should be funding area specialists to take annual buying trips, or at minimum, a trip every two years. This is related to one additional drawback named by an interviewee—if regular funding is provided for buying trips for one group of specialists, the institution may be called upon to fund buying trips for everyone.

Discussion

One issue that came up in a pronounced way, particularly during the second round of interviews, is how to define an overseas buying trip or to distinguish it from other types of overseas fieldwork. As is reflected in the analysis above, there are often multiple, sometimes competing but often complementary, goals and activities for a given trip. Should it be considered a buying trip if the primary activity is presenting at a conference or taking a personal trip and book buying happens to occur? What if the librarian is meeting with vendors and attending a book fair and does not make a purchase? Anecdotally, the author had a tenth prospective interviewee who did not feel she had taken an overseas buying trip despite having been on work-funded trips to South Asia in which she undertook many of the same previously described activities. This question is an important one insofar as it can impact which funding sources are available, the amount of financial support available, and expectations of particular outcomes on the part of the funding institutions.

Definitions of buying trips aside, distilling these conversations into a set of best practices is made easier by the general consensus around planning practices and individual and institutional benefits. The preplanning process is to a certain extent dictated by local institutional requirements so that anyone planning an overseas buying trip should first check with their library administrators about relevant policies. Some institutions fund buying trips on an annual or bi-annual basis as a matter of course, and others on an ad hoc basis, but in any case, good communication with administrators and local faculty is useful, if not required. Best practices in which there was general consensus include the following:

- Ideally, area specialists should take buying trips annually to facilitate both unique acquisitions and important individual professional development.
- Planning a buying trip to coincide with relevant events such as conferences, book fairs, or important festivals may facilitate additional professional development and networking opportunities.
- Buying trips to South Asia and other distant locales should last two to six weeks to maximize the return on the investment of the cost of airfare.

- Visiting major metropolitan areas can be more convenient for travel purposes and often gives access to a more concentrated volume of publishers, vendors, and cultural institutions.
- While more logistically challenging, it is worth visiting smaller towns involved in literary or cultural production to acquire particularly rarely held materials.
- When email and phone will not work to set up appointments, use alternative means such as WhatsApp, Facebook, or other social media, and make cold calls to vendors, publishers, and institutions.
- To avoid purchasing duplicates, take photos of book covers and check against OCLC, or collect catalogs and check your local catalog prior to making purchases, or run a report of holdings in languages or on topics that will be targeted for purchase and store those reports on the local hard drive of a computer that will be brought on the buying trip to allow for duplication checks even in the absence of an internet connection.
- Work with established vendors to benefit from their value added services and to check on their operations, but be aware that many of the materials they are selling may already be readily available from overseas.
- Factor the cost of shipping into your buying trip budget—shipping often costs more than the materials.
- Focus your purchases on institutional priorities, rare materials, ephemera, and items that otherwise would not come through normal collection channels.
- Consult with technical services and preservation staff to verify their capacity to handle fragile, brittle, and damaged materials, plus vernacular language materials requiring original cataloging.
- Report on buying trip outcomes to your home institution and other professional networks.

There was more variation in the challenges reported, which in some cases can be attributed to the different nationalities, ages, and gender of the interviewees. Though it is a sensitive subject and some interviewees did not want to speak in depth on the topic, traveling to South Asia as a solo female traveler can pose safety issues, although some of those issues can be mitigated based on the age and experience level of the traveler. These issues, both specifically pertaining to India and more generally about international fieldwork, are well documented in literature from other disciplines including anthropology and tourism.¹¹

Nationality is an issue only insofar as in being a foreigner in some locations in South Asia can make one conspicuous. Aside from the usual concerns about getting good prices, being a conspicuous foreigner can lead to mild irritations such as well-meaning individuals wishing to take photos with you or attracting stares while on public transportation. Typically, these types of incidents are harmless

and foreigners do also occasionally benefit from preferential treatment.

Related to nationality, language barriers can be a challenge though it was not discussed in detail with any of the interviewees. One reason may be that many interviewees specifically target cities and countries where they are comfortable communicating in the vernacular language. In areas where they do not speak the vernacular language, they will face some limitations and need to use an interpreter or work with vendors that are fluent in a common language. In terms of assessing and purchasing materials in an unfamiliar language, specialists will need to rely on their knowledge of the quality of the publisher or author, or depend on the advice of a reliable vendor.

Generally speaking, it is important to understand safety concerns for any foreign country and to plan accordingly. If one is going to a country for the first time, try to make a connection with a colleague or local counterpart there to have an established contact in the event of an emergency. It is also important to check the US Department of State's website for current travel warnings. In addition, librarians may ask if their institutions subscribe to a service like International SOS to assist in the event of an emergency.¹²

While a different cultural context may provide different challenges than the South Asia context, many of the best practices should be generalizable across regions. For example, it is true that in many countries it is both more convenient to travel to major metropolitan areas that will likely have a higher concentration of vendors and publishers than smaller towns, which may have more rarely held materials. It also true that including a conference, festival, or book fair as part of the itinerary may allow for additional professional development opportunities. Finally, consulting with technical services and cataloging staff and local faculty to shape collection priorities, and reporting on trip outcomes is necessary for anyone planning and implementing an overseas buying trip.

There are a few items, however, which may not be applicable outside of South Asia. For example, for travel to areas that are geographically closer to the United States (such as Latin America and Europe), more frequent, shorter trips may be preferable. Shipping may also be less expensive and less challenging in other cultural contexts. Finally, in areas with more reliable wireless internet, it may not be as much of a challenge to check for duplication on the spot.

It is worth noting that all of the interviewees in this study are area specialists with language abilities and previous experience traveling to and studying in South Asia. All of these specialists are also from large research institutions, all of which are ARL members, which signifies a certain level of commitment to building large, comprehensive collections. Buying trips may present different challenges for subject specialists who are not also area specialists or who are from

smaller institutions. At this time there is no data available about the extent to which smaller institutions support buying trips, but given that they are less likely to employ dedicated area specialists and may have more limited resources and funding, it is likely that support for overseas buying trips at those institutions is limited. For smaller institutions that lack an area specialist with language and cultural expertise but want to build unique international collections, it may be worth exploring cooperative or shared buying trips. A future study on cooperative buying trips and buying trips in the context of smaller institutions would be useful in addressing this question.

Conclusion

Overseas buying trips are an invaluable tool for building distinctive international collections whose benefits to the individual and the institution generally far exceed the associated costs and challenges. Benefits include not only building unique collections that can make institutions a destination for scholars, but also in providing access to materials that researchers may not be able to access even from the original source. In some cases, materials may also be more affordable when procured directly from the source as on an overseas buying trip. For example, a full set of Amar Chitra Katha comics that retails for \$399 plus shipping on the international version of the publisher's website was procured for approximately \$147 at the Delhi World Book Fair. A future research study could look for feedback from researchers who have benefitted from materials procured on overseas buying trips, and also incorporate experiences from librarians specializing in areas other than South Asia.

Beyond cost savings and collection building, the value of buying trips as a mechanism for area specialists to maintain subject expertise and develop effective professional networks cannot be overestimated. Many area specialists are expected to provide research support and liaison services for faculty and students at their institutions. To do so effectively, it is important that they cultivate a strong ongoing connection with their geographic area of specialty. This allows them to be seen as authoritative and current by their faculty, and on a practical level enables them to connect their local scholars with the right institutions and experts overseas to further their research.

While institutions with large research libraries should make funding these trips a priority, it may also be time to expand the notion of a buying trip into "overseas fieldwork" to more accurately depict the range of professional activities undertaken on these trips. In any case, to fully reap benefits, librarians should plan carefully and take into account best practice guidelines.

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Appendix. Questions for Semi-Structured Interview

1. When was your last overseas buying trip and which places did you visit?
2. How do you plan a buying trip? Describe your process.
3. On average, how often do you go on overseas buying trips?
4. What factors influence which places you visit?
5. What factors influence your decision about the timing of an overseas buying trip?
6. How are these trips funded (including travel and cost of materials)?
7. What kinds of materials do you typically try to acquire on overseas buying trips?
8. How do you get materials acquired overseas back to your home institution?
9. How do you handle payment for materials on an overseas buying trip?
10. What are some common challenges you've faced when on an overseas buying trip?
11. What are the benefits to yourself and your institution by going on an overseas buying trip?
12. What are the drawbacks to yourself and/or your institution by going on an overseas buying trip?