

Beyond ROI: Challenges and Opportunities in Overseas Buying Trips

Mara Thacker, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
South Asian Studies Librarian



Rationale

In January 2013, I went on my first overseas buying trip to India. In preparation for my trip I searched the library literature for articles about best practices and considerations when planning overseas acquisitions trips and found very few articles. As I informally surveyed my subject specialist colleagues for advice, I saw that there were a lot of common themes but also some interesting idiosyncrasies. This became the impetus to propose a formal research project about the challenges and opportunities associated with overseas buying trips with the goal of creating guidelines for best practices for library professionals who are planning an acquisitions trips.

Methodology

Beginning in October 2013 with a projected end date of mid-November 2013, semi-structured interviews were conducted with South Asia subject specialists who had volunteered in the course of completing an online survey about their collecting practices. To date, four interviews have been completed with one additional interview scheduled to take place in mid-November.

Drawing on the participants' most recent buying trip experiences, the questions focused on the following thematic areas:

1. Pre-departure planning processes
2. Factors in selecting time, duration and locale of overseas buying trips
3. Funding for trips
4. Collection development priorities while on overseas buying trips
5. Logistical considerations for financing and transporting acquisitions
6. Challenges faced on overseas buying trips
7. Perceived benefits of overseas buying trips
8. Potential drawbacks of overseas buying trips

Interviews last approximately half an hour and are documented using SkypeRecorder as well as with handwritten notes. A qualitative analysis will pull together common themes as well as identify any anomalies in order to create best practices guidelines for library professionals wishing to propose an overseas buying trip.

Opportunities/Benefits

Professional Development & Networking

Building Unique, Diverse Collections

New Experiences & Continuing Education

Challenges

Cultural Differences

Cash & Currency Issues

Actually Finding Materials

Getting Materials Back Home

Recommendations

- Use buying trips as an opportunity to build your professional network and increase your understanding of scholarly production abroad
- **Plan your buying trip to coincide with interesting events such as conferences, book fairs or important festivals**
- **Factor the cost of shipping into your buying trip budget– shipping often costs more than the materials themselves**
- To avoid purchasing duplicates, take photos of book covers and check against OCLC prior to purchasing
- Focus your purchases on institutional priorities, rare and antiquarian materials, ephemera and items that otherwise wouldn't come through normal collection channels
- **Challenge yourself to go outside of major metropolitan areas to smaller towns involved in literary/cultural production to acquire unique materials**
- **Ideally area specialists should go on buying trips annually**
- Buying trips to South Asia and other very distant locales should last 2-6 weeks
- Keep climate and weather in mind when choosing a time for an overseas buying trip
- Report on buying trip outcomes to your home institution and/or other professional networks

“Even separate from the activities that you are doing specifically to purchase materials, just meeting with scholars and meeting our counterparts at libraries and archives is so important because it gives you this bigger context for what the state of scholarly production is in India right now and what the book trade is and what their challenges are, and what materials we are likely to get easily and what materials are likely to be missed. I feel like every trip I take is helping me see a clearer picture of what the challenges are and where I may want to put my energy.”

“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.”

“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.”

“Having figured something out about dates, coordinating to be able to perform the tasks I want to accomplish in each of the places, 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.”

“In general I think even when you are staying in a hotel, the hotel services there they just kind of take it easy, it's kind of a laid back culture so they take their own sweet time to convey all the necessary documents or to give you the information. That was the only challenge and then the challenge of carrying cash with you, which is not such a pleasant thing to do but you have to do that.”