

Supporting the Changing Research Practices of Asian Studies Scholars at The University of Texas at Austin

Bonnie Brown Real, Mary Rader, Meng-fen Su

University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX

INTRODUCTION

As a part of the Ithaka S+R Research Support series of reports on particular disciplines, The University of Texas at Austin was one of many institutions invited in 2017 to participate in research on the state of the field of Asian Studies¹. One supposition informing the project is that Asian Studies as a discipline is undergoing tremendous changes and as such libraries and librarians who support it might need to reconsider their roles and responsibilities in actionable ways. The demonstrated strength of Asian Studies at UT Austin compelled the University of Texas Libraries to participate in this research.

Asian Studies scholarship at UT Austin is anchored in the Department of Asian Studies, the Center for East Asian Studies, the South Asia Institute and the Center for Asian American Studies. The Department of Asian Studies in the College of Liberal Arts supports research and teaching on East Asia (Greater China, Japan, and Korea) and South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Afghanistan) from all time periods and offers degree programs in Asian Cultures and Languages at all levels. It includes more than 30 tenured and tenure-track faculty members and 20 full-time language lecturers. The Center for East Asian Studies promotes research on East Asian cultures, societies, and languages (primarily contemporary) and encourages interdisciplinary collaboration on East Asia. The South Asia Institute, a federally-funded National Resource Center, unites more than 50 faculty members across a number of schools and departments to promote an understanding of South Asia and the study of contemporary South Asian languages. The Center for Asian American Studies promotes the interdisciplinary study of Asian Pacific American issues and communities and draws upon 22 affiliate faculty and 7 lecturer members from across campus.

The University of Texas Libraries supports Asian Studies through collections, staff and services related to East Asian, South Asian and Asian American Studies; Southeast Asian Studies is not directly supported by The Libraries. Unlike many other large research libraries, the Asian collections are interfiled with the general collection and are housed throughout central campus libraries as well as in storage; there is no separate reading room or special collections area for Asian collections. The Asian languages collections at UT Austin

¹ For the purposes of this study, “Asian Studies” is defined as a “multi-disciplinary field spanning philosophy, the arts, history, literature, the social sciences, and cultural studies. The geographic scope of Asian Studies is also broad and varies widely from institution to institution, in some cases referring to one or more areas that may include East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Tibet, and the Asian American diaspora, among other areas.”

are the largest in the Southwest; the South Asian collection the 2nd largest in the United States. Actively collected languages include Bengali, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Malayalam, Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu. Digital collections are of increasing importance, both those commercially available and those The Libraries partners to create. The Libraries have 2.65 FTE to support East Asian Studies, 1.75 FTE to support South Asian Studies, and .1 FTE to support Asian American Studies.

Our research findings, described in more detail below, highlight major topics that have direct bearing on library priorities:

- UT Libraries will never have everything needed by every researcher in Asian Studies on our campus. We will never be comprehensive. However, it is very clear that **we need carefully selected and curated material available locally to allow researchers to both conceptualize and scaffold their work.**
- “Asian Studies” as a discipline is potentially undergoing reconception, both in general and at UT. In fact, to many, it has always been an artificial yet necessary concept to channel human, physical and financial resources. As such, most researchers expect it to morph and evolve through time. **Asia as a subject of and context for study, however, will continue to be critical, perhaps growing in importance on our campus.**
- Format is not a driver for researchers in Asian Studies. They are **collectively conversant and comfortable using multiple research tools and methodologies—for example, analog, digital, archival, ethnographic—and we will need to support them all.**
- Asian Studies researchers rely upon others. They thrive in collaborative contexts and recognize both their own and their home institution’s roles within those mutually supporting landscapes. In particular, they emphasize the importance of sharing resources (in the field, through interlibrary loan, etc.) to be successful. **Institutional as well as information partnerships and collaborations at the local, national and international level, particularly those facilitated and supported by librarians, are critical to Asian Studies research success.**

METHODS

This qualitative study at UT Austin was conducted in tandem with several other US-based higher education institutions with Asian Departments, as coordinated by Ithaka S+R, a not-for-profit research and consulting service that helps academic, cultural, and publishing communities. The methodology for the study was guided by Ithaka S+R, and approved by UT Austin’s Institutional Review Board. The anonymized, aggregated data and the analysis in this report from UT Austin will be used with those from the other institutions to create a broader capstone report on Asian Studies written and made publically available by Ithaka S+R.

Aiming for representation across faculty rank as well as research methodologies and geographic areas of study, our research team sent targeted recruitment emails to faculty doing Asian Studies research in multiple departments, which included Asian Studies, History, Government, Anthropology, English, Sociology, and Radio-TV-Film. Over the course of one month, we conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with 15 respondents from this selected pool. This small-scale, exploratory approach does not aim to be statistically representative of any particular research area or geography; rather, it allows for investigation across the field

and can serve to identify avenues for further study. The interview questions (see Appendix 1) were designed by Ithaka S+R, and covered topics in research focus, information access and discovery, publishing and dissemination, and the broader state of the field. The interviews lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes and were audio recorded. Confidentiality and anonymity has been guaranteed to the participants.

An external service group at UT Libraries transcribed the audio files for our team's analysis. Individually, each of the three members of UT Library's research team applied an open coding approach to every transcript, and then grouped and ordered the codes to draw out themes. Then, collectively, we compared our analyses to select core themes and perform more targeted coding to form conclusions for this final report.

FINDINGS

Asian Studies Researchers Insist Upon Multidisciplinarity

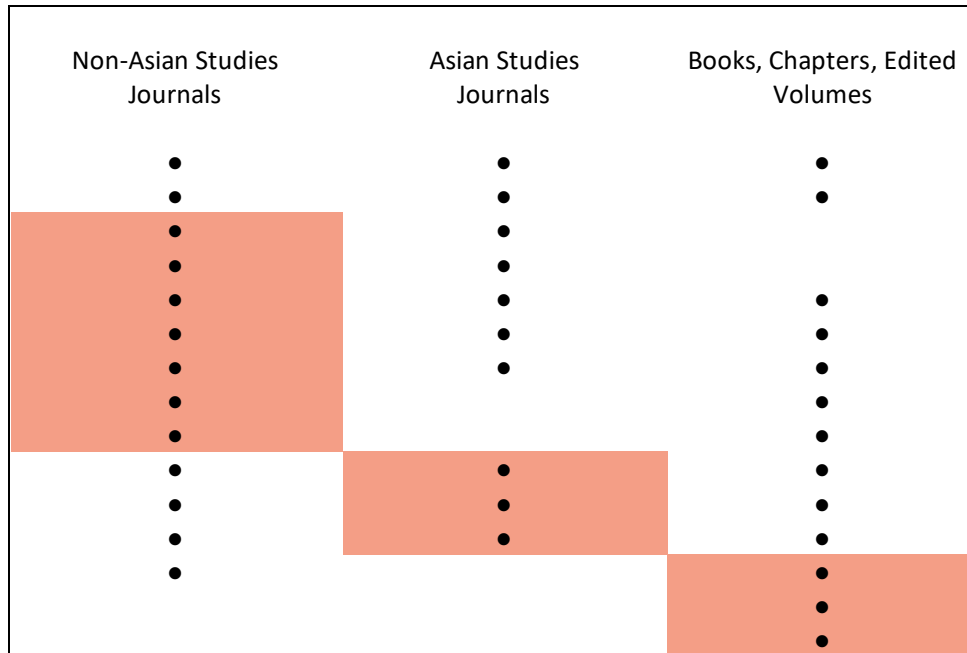
"Well I think all of us who have been doing serious research have known from time immemorial that good research has to be interdisciplinary."

Researchers indicated time and again the complexity of being a scholar in Asian Studies: It is multi-lingual, multi-geographic, and multi-temporal but above and beyond all it is multidisciplinary. It is perhaps not surprising to note that an "area studies" discipline draws from many different methodological approaches across social sciences and humanities; what is more striking from this research is how that multidisciplinary is evidenced both within a single researcher and across the field.

UT Austin has an Asian Studies department but "Asian Studies" as demonstrated and explored here is not limited to one disciplinary focus or department. Within the research at hand, the following methodological approaches to Asian Studies were cited: anthropology, history, political science, sociology, economics, translation studies, literature, culture studies, Asian American studies, philosophy, religion, film studies, gender studies, psychology, linguistics, performing arts, ethnomusicology, comparative literature, LGBT studies, medicine, urban studies, communication, media studies, law, engineering, climate studies, agriculture, security studies, classics, philology, geography, education, government, and art. Each and every researcher interviewed cited at least three different methodological approaches within his/her own work. Strikingly, most researchers also indicated more than one country as the subject of their research, which presents challenges for linguistic competence and for research-based travel, among other things.

There is a clear tension between an informed and nuanced audience for Asian Studies research and the demands of professional trajectories. All stated that they appreciate and value the scholarly connections that can be made in more interdisciplinary Asian Studies-type venues: research in the field itself, area-focused conferences, workshops, and the like. Conversely, other than those in humanistic fields, researchers stated that for their research to "count," it needed to be published through recognized disciplinary channels: "high reputation" distribution networks such as university presses, scholarly association journals, and so on. As such, it was clear that for many, research and collaboration might occur in Asian language(s) and with a particular geographically-oriented cohort group(s), but scholarly publication and professional discourse happens in English and in the disciplines.

Most reported publishing activity that included all of the following: articles in peer-reviewed journals, single-author books, and editing or contributing to books and series. On the ends of this spectrum were two who frame their work entirely in terms of books, and two who publish almost exclusively in journals.



A tally of the publishing venues mentioned by the 15 interviewees. Shaded cells indicate a primary or emphasized venue for that interviewee (e.g. “I mostly publish in Asian Studies Journals”).

A notable trend is how much of the output is occurring outside of Asian Studies per se, especially with journal articles. Many leaned toward publishing heavily in their methodological disciplines, such as political science, anthropology, geography, and history. Those who did report publishing primarily in interdisciplinary Asian Studies journals and journals specific to their region and cultural focus, always published in some journals outside of these arenas as well.

In some cases, this seems to reflect one of the challenges of the multidisciplinary nature of the work. There is an understanding that when one’s scholarly record comes before a department review or tenure board, it will be forced through the narrower lens of that discipline.

Western university presses are the nearly exclusive channel for books, monographs, and volumes, with a repeated focus on Oxford, University of Hawaii, University of California, University of Michigan, and Stanford. While we note that much of the interviewees’ research efforts occur overseas and utilizing non-UT resources that may vary in language, we observe most of the scholarly output of these efforts occurs domestically, in English.

“Surviving in research universities, such as [ours], we are supposed to publish with the leading university presses ... if we move down the scale from that tier of university to second tier, or even to the third tier of universities, you put your standing in the field, and you put your promotion to tenure in jeopardy.”

There was not a consensus regarding the future of the field of Asian Studies as such. While one scholar confessed, “I’m not sure that the field is going to exist for much longer, to be quite honest,” another cited its local growth: “I think the field is expanding. It is expanding and growing in Texas. So I think the perspective is very bright.” Each and every interviewee indicated the critical importance of the study of Asia but were less uniform in what method or institutional location that study might take into the future, including morphing into new cross- or pan-regional networks or becoming one of many possible sites for theoretical exploration. “‘Asian Studies’ was a convenient way of bringing together a region and managing it in a scholarly way,” said one researcher, “but we have to think of Asia in a more expansive way.”

Complicating the difference in opinion about the future of Asian Studies was a repeated concern of a disconnect between their work and that of institutional decision-makers. Many express concerns over the alarming trend of funding reductions—they not only worry about their own research funding, but also that the next generation of researchers would not be able to get adequate training.

“...we risk losing an opportunity to tell students about the importance of Asia as this big entity that finds Asia as an important thing to represent and make sure it gets taught in a responsible way.”

These anxieties regarding both university and federal support at the individual, departmental and institutional level were shared by all researchers.

Asian Studies Researchers Thrive on Networks

“I feel that my entire existence is collaboration.”

The very nature of Asian studies warrants active connections with researchers and research collections around the world. Comparatively small local research cohorts demand inter-institutional collaborations and robust peer-to-peer networks with colleagues with similar research interests from outside institutions. This networking is extremely valuable to Asian Studies researchers. Likewise, raw data and primary resources are produced, collected and generated in Asia itself and a great percentage of them are only available there. Traveling to Asia is a norm for Asian Studies researchers and most of them travel regularly, often annually, and often for months at a time.

Methodologies employed by Asian Studies researchers further demand collaboration. Ethnography is often used by Asianists, either as a primary or secondary research method and researchers cited both deep interconnections with their subjects (participatory action research) as well as with their research assistants

(translators, field site coordinators, etc.). Scholars travel to research sites to do face to face interviews, phone interviews, participant observation, and to generally involve themselves in events. “I do lots of participant observation,” said one scholar. “I go there, so I visit the government agencies and ask the civil servants to interview with me, or I visit the, just, mom and pop stores in the region and ask people, the residents to interview with me ... lots of feeling insignificant about myself in the field, which is good because that generates a kind of anxiety that leads to good observations because you're so unsure of what it is that you've observed, you keep doing more and more. I also follow that up with interviews, open-ended, casual conversation-like interviews.”

Archival research is another core primary and important secondary research method to many Asianists. To the delight of many researchers, a few archives have been digitized and made accessible online, but for most, the archive is still available only on site, in Asia. Even when archival material is available online or through surrogates, some researchers (particularly those in literary fields) find it beneficial to be immersed in the climate, street scenes, and local atmosphere to do better literary work (translation, author studies, etc.). “I like to go to [place of research focus],” said one researcher, “and read whatever I'm working on in context, especially if it's contemporary, but even in my work on classical [literary genre], I prefer to go and do all of my translating there, mostly because you have immediate access to [the research context].”

“Archives at the national level, archives in the case of [Asian country], at a provincial level, at a municipal level, at a new county level, and so on. Every institution, every company, every factory, and even every small town has its own archives. There are lots of such original materials.”

While research abroad is clearly normative practice for scholars in Asian Studies, there are many challenges to research abroad, including those that take up much of the researcher's time. As residents in the United States, a short term or even a two-months stay in Asia is frequently cited as not sufficient to do all one would like to accomplish. Established and healthy local connections are valuable, critical even, to one's research. For example, as many ethnographic researchers are not long term residents of the research site(s), they often have difficulty assembling groups of interviewees, especially if the topic is sensitive. Archival researchers also struggle until and unless they have established viable and reliable personal connections at research institutes/libraries/archives that provide entry to valuable collections. Some researchers cited the benefit of working with assistants or other field work support, including establishing networks of scholars.

“I visit different universities in [Asia] every summer. I lecture there. I teach there. Of course, I was educated in [there], and I have a social network, academic network out there. I guess my work has been known to lots of my colleagues, so we have different ways to get to know, and to work together.”

Multiple respondents cited the critical importance of interlibrary loan for their research, which can be framed in the continuum of their collaborative work—while having immediate local access to resources (shelf browsing, online database subscriptions, etc.) clearly has value, they also recognize that they will always need to rely on other collections to be thorough in their work. As one researcher said, interlibrary loan is an “absolutely crucial and wonderful” resource that “has made all the difference in the world for making my research possible, because there is no need for my physical library to have everything, so long as I can get it

from elsewhere.” While most respondents mentioned using interlibrary loan regularly and successfully, some found it too slow or were unclear on the extent of the service. Others indicated a cultural/disciplinary lack of bibliographic citation practice as a hurdle to effective interlibrary loan.

“You don't have to have the number one Asian studies library to have the number one Asian studies library because you can get everything from either online or the other libraries that do have exactly what you need.”

Beyond robust sharing through interlibrary services, we discovered varying attitudes toward open access. Some supported the idea of open access for its potential to broaden the reach of their work, but some felt it did not seem feasible to publish outside traditional venues, and some perceived that they were limited by publishing agreements. Several mentioned academia.edu as a viable sharing mechanism but were not able to nuance its value—nor its legality—as compared to other repositories, including UT Austin’s institutional repository (Texas ScholarWorks). Those who publish in venues where data sharing is mandatory followed the guidelines for those venues. Sharing or archiving data outside of that process was not a practice anyone in our study was seeking.

Finally, the scholars in our study mentioned some engagement and cooperation outside of academia as a form of outreach and networking with a broader community. This included public talks to local organizations and museums, op-eds and media interviews on relevant current topics, and books and pieces that had risen to attention beyond the scholarly domain. One respondent who gives many such talks explained it was to raise awareness of immigration and how it relates to Asian-American history: “... [it’s] to, overall, promote better understanding of migration and how it actually is a significant tie between different countries and societies and the stakes in it for people who actually migrate, which I think helps to normalize and diffuse a lot of the sense of threat and invasion associated with migrants.”

Asian Studies Researchers Need Assistance/Assistants

[Interviewer]: “If I gave you a magic wand that could help you with your research and publication process [except for more money or time] – what would you ask it to do?” [Respondent]: “More humans to help.”

Beyond the navigating the dominant challenges of non-local resources identified above (finding and gaining access to archives and government data, setting up interviews for ethnographic research), many of the research needs expressed were grounded in the physical and digital legwork needed to review literature, manage citations and save notes. It was in these areas that there seemed to be some disconnect between the obstacles at hand and library resources available for support.

Multiple respondents mentioned the desire for a research assistant who could help them stay atop the existing literature in their research topics and navigate the multi-lingual searching needed for their projects. At a broader level of discovery of secondary information, one interviewee recalled a library website that was helpful in listing the databases related to his or her area, but had not accessed it lately and in the meantime cited challenges with access to papers, newspapers, and books that may actually be retrievable through various channels of the library.

In both the physical and digital realms, nearly all scholars are using “files and piles,” as one interviewee put it, to gather and store their research ephemera. The systems used to sort and index these materials are entirely personal, and in the case of digital content rely mostly on generic file storage platforms—personal drives, Google Drive, Dropbox, Box—rather than specialized software. Conversion from one format to the other was also common, in both directions—several researchers scanned things expressly to store and back them up electronically, while others printed out all electronic material in order to further organize and manipulate it.

“I have four computers. I have a laptop at home, and a desktop and an old laptop, and this. I have not quite merged all my articles yet. At least I know that I have them somewhere. But that's how I save them. I just create folders and most of the PDF files, I save in them.”

While the organic and idiosyncratic nature of these systems was not necessarily identified as a problem to their owners, there were some instances where it was suspected that better technology or solutions were available, but had not been pursued. One researcher admitted to relying on Gmail draft folders to save scanned files, knowing that it was not the most reliable method—but that it was the easiest in their circumstances. Saving web pages in particular was highlighted as a particular technical problem for multiple respondents, with no known optimal solution.

CONCLUSION

Findings from this research suggest a number of actions for UT Libraries’ support of and services for Asian Studies:

We need carefully selected and curated material available locally to allow researchers to both conceptualize and scaffold their work.

Recommendations:

- Continue to support staff expertise in Asian Studies across UT Libraries. This includes skilled liaisons as well as technical support staff to build, curate, describe and mediate our local collections and services.
- Maintain collection development budgets and the flexibility of their use in direct support of Asian Studies, lest the local collections are no longer in support of the national/international collection upon which researchers rely.
- Create appropriate spaces to house and service our collections, particularly for those with limited or inadequate description, as well as those we seek to highlight as distinctive. Discovery of and access to Asian Studies collections are predicated on ample and accurate metadata, especially those in storage or in restricted spaces.
- Develop and refine skill sets across the library to identify, license and/or create digital resources.

Asia as a subject of and context for study will continue to be critical, perhaps growing in importance on our campus.

Recommendations:

- Explore increasing collections and expanding services to currently underrepresented Asian Studies areas on campus, including those associated with global studies.
- Build support for Asian Studies into our existing and evolving UT Libraries general services, not as an outside case or exception but as part of the norm.

Researchers are collectively conversant and comfortable using multiple research tools and methodologies; we will need to support them all while recognizing and supporting the individual differences amongst them.

Recommendations:

- Develop, refine and recognize difference in library staff skill sets in support of methodologies, be they archival, bibliographic, or digital.
- Create community training opportunities for digital methodologies, including library staff, UT students, faculty and researchers, and the general public at large.
- Develop library-based training programs for citation and file management.
- Make robust referrals when the library is not the solution for researcher needs (long-term preservation of individual research data, certain forms of file management, resource-intensive digital projects, etc.).

Institutional as well as information partnerships and collaborations at the local, national and international level, particularly those facilitated and supported by librarians, are critical to Asian Studies research success.

Recommendations:

- Develop engaged liaisons at UT Austin.
- Create opportunities for library staff to join and participate in local, national and international research networks, including those of scholars, information repositories.
- Support and demonstrate national and international library staff networking through conferences, workshops, cooperative collection development, international acquisitions and networking trips.

APPENDIX 1

Interview Questions

Research focus and methods

1. Describe your current research focus/projects.
2. How is your research situated within the field of Asian Studies? [Probe for how/does their work engage with any other fields or disciplines?]
3. What research methods do you typically use to conduct your research? [Probe for how those methods relate to work done by others in Asian Studies/in the other fields they engage with]
 - a. Do you collaborate with others as part of your research? [If yes, probe for what these collaborations entail, who typically works on them and what the division of work is]
 - b. Does your research elicit data? [If so, probe for what kinds of data typically elicited, how they incorporate this data into their final research outputs and how they manage and store this data for their ongoing use]

Information Access and Discovery

4. [Beyond the data your research produces] What kinds of primary information do you rely on to do your research?
 - a. How do you locate this information?
 - b. What are the greatest challenges you experience working with this kind of information?
 - c. How do you manage and store this information for your ongoing use?
5. What kinds of secondary information do you rely on to do your research? E.g. monographs, peer reviewed articles.
 - a. How do you locate this information?
 - b. What are the greatest challenges you experience working with this kind of information?
 - c. How do you manage and store this information for your ongoing use?
6. Think back to a past or ongoing research project where you faced challenges in the process of finding and accessing information.
 - a. Describe these challenges.
 - b. What could have been done to mitigate these challenges?
7. How do you keep up with trends in your field more broadly?

Dissemination Practices

8. Where do you typically publish your scholarly research? [Probe for kinds of publications and what disciplinary audiences they typically seek to engage with].
 - a. Do you disseminate your research beyond scholarly publications? [If so, probe for where they publish and why they publish in these venues]
 - b. How do your publishing practices relate to those typical to your discipline?
9. Have you ever made your research data, materials or publications available through open access? (e.g. through an institutional repository, open access journal or journal option)
 - a. If so, where and what has been your motivations for pursuing open dissemination channels? (i.e. required, for sharing, investment in open access principles)
 - b. If no, why not?

State of the Field and Wrapping Up

10. If I gave you a magic wand that could help you with your research and publication process [except for more money or time] – what would you ask it to do?
11. What future challenges and opportunities do you see for the broader field of Asian Studies?
12. Is there anything else about your experiences as a scholar of Asian Studies and/or the Asian Studies as a field that you think it is important for me to know that was not covered in the previous questions?