

Images

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But what if we all started blogging again?: acrlog.org

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written fall 2025 by Zoë McLaughlin

Finding Zines in South and Southeast Asia



Zines in Asia

Boellstorff, Tom. "Zines and Zones of Desire: Mass-Mediated Love, National Romance, and Sexual Citizenship in Gay Indonesia." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 63, no. 2 (2004): 367-402. www.jstor.org/stable/4133390

Horton, Brian A. "Between the Sheets: The Queer Sociality of Bombay Zines." *South Asian Popular Culture* 21, no. 2 (2023): 205-221. doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2023.2232180

Sophie Mahakam Anggawi. "Products of Protest? The Creative Protest Potential of Zines on Bali." *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 23, no. 1 (2022): 59-77. doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2021.2001033

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Further Reading

Zine Librarians Code of Ethics: www.zinelibraries.info/code-of-ethics

Zines at the MSU Libraries: libguides.lib.msu.edu/zines

Learning with Zines

DeVoe, Lauren and Sara Duff, editors. *Zines in Libraries: Selecting, Purchasing, and Processing*. ALA Editions, 2022.

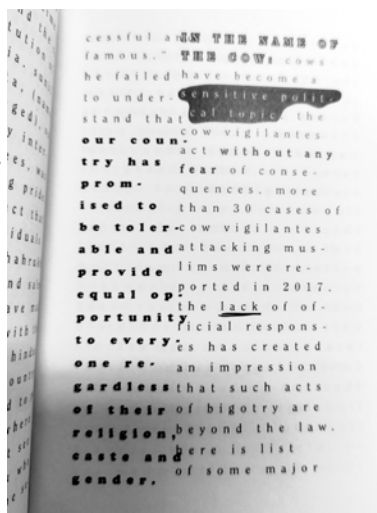
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Thomas, Susan. "Zines and Teaching: A Survey of Pedagogy and Implications for Academic Librarians." *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 18, no. 4 (2018): 737-758. doi.org/10.1353/pla.2018.0043

Tinio, Jerilyn and Melissa Chomintra. "Zines as Praxis: Making Space for Participatory Culture in the Academic Library." docs.lib.purdue.edu/lib_fsdocs/305



Area Studies: A Brief History

I call myself an area studies librarian, which, I admit, is an old-fashioned term. These days, you're more likely to hear international studies or global studies. To be honest, I'm not very interested in the discourse surrounding which term is best. They're all the same to me: terms for a discipline that grew out of colonialism, was further shaped by the Cold War, and has now entered a new phase contending—at least sometimes—with these histories.

Area studies began with colonial powers seeking to learn more about the people in their colonies, with an eye on further control. Dutch philologists, for example, were instrumental in creating narratives to justify VOC presence in Java, but that's a story for another time. (See Nancy Florida's "Writing Traditions in Colonial Java: The Question of Islam" in *Cultures of Scholarship*, edited by S.C. Humphreys for more on this.)

As the United States rose in power, it too engaged in area studies work, first in the Philippines as anthropologists studied the new acquisition, and then following the end of World War II and stretching into the Cold War. During this time, area studies programs flourished with the backing of government funds. Academic libraries also saw an influx of international materials added to their collections, also often backed by government programs. (See Ralph D. Wagner's *A History of the Farmington Plan* about one of these programs.) Librarians were necessary to oversee these collections, which is how I eventually got my job as a South and Southeast Asia librarian.

About Me

I'm currently the South and Southeast Asia librarian at Michigan State University, which means I'm responsible for building the library's collections from and about these regions and for helping interested people from campus and the community find and access these collections.

Though I'm responsible for almost twenty countries, my background really is in Indonesian studies, which can reasonably extend to Malay world studies and somewhat less reasonably extend to Southeast Asian studies. South Asia was assigned to me when I took this job, and while I have spent time working on building knowledge of the region, it's not where my background is.



What does this mean for the future of Asian Studies as a discipline and for Asian Studies library collection development?

At some point, everything is just speculation, but for me, zines illustrate how Asian Studies can include the personal, whether it's the personal found in a perzine or the personal found when a researcher connects, on some level, to their subject of research. Zines offer quick entry into the personal and open up little windows of opportunity for connection for both a first-year language student and an experienced researcher encountering something new.

Zines also illustrate the importance of unique materials in research libraries. In an age of shrinking budgets and ever-increasing costs, no one library can afford to buy everything. Instead, libraries can focus on working together to bring materials presenting unique viewpoints into systems connected through interlibrary loan, adding interest to local collections while also enhancing a broader, imagined collection.

Perhaps zines represent a future based on relationships and the personal, where we can learn from and communicate with each other, across distance, across disciplines, and across mediums.



As was rapidly becoming a pattern, the Thai graffiti artists asked where else I planned to visit. When I said I was flying out of Singapore, they had a shop recommendation, which was how I found myself wandering around an old Singaporean tower complex looking for a store that had once been a locksmith's shop. There, I of course found more zines, including one I knew the faculty members who study Indonesia at my institution would certainly want to get their hands on. And the person running the shop referred me on too—to an art bookstore that didn't have more zines but did have some books on the Muslim experience in Singapore, which I also wanted to buy.

The moral of the story, for me, is that collecting zines for libraries is about people. It's about building relationships and asking for permission to enter into communities. It's about explaining yourself and figuring out how to treat the zines and their creators with respect. It's about giving back where and when you can, either monetarily, or through favors and other means of strengthening relationships. It's about getting the zines into the hands of library users, either through good description or through outreach and programming that can ultimately bring library users into dialogue with zinesters—even when they're halfway around the world.



Michigan State University's Zine Collection

MSU began collecting zines long before I arrived, at first because of their connection to comics, but eventually for what they have to offer as their own unique genre. Knowing this was already a collection strength, it made sense for me to also collect in this area. Over time, I've developed some methods that work specifically for me, collecting in my specific geographic areas of the world, for this specific collection. All those caveats aside, I hope you find some ideas here that you can implement yourself or that you can use to think about zines in new ways.



Zines at a distance

The main thing I know about acquisitions in a university library is that it's complicated. There are specificities of payment, system details, and complex forms that make becoming a vendor supplying a library potentially difficult. These issues make it challenging not just for zinesters, but for small presses and small vendors in general to sell their publications to university libraries. MSU, for example, requires a form related to US taxes before money can be transferred. This makes sense on the bureaucratic university end, but I've also had small presses flatout refuse to fill out the form because it's unnecessarily complicated on their end.

All of this means that buying zines from Asia while you're sitting in the US can be very tricky. Getting to know what's possible on your acquisitions end is important: can you purchase things from Etsy? Can you use a credit card on any website? The next step is probably to find vendors, most likely distros selling zines from multiple different creators.

I have not personally tried to purchase a zine from an Asian zinester while seated in the US. I can imagine it being possible, but the hypothetical complications make the scenario tricky. Instead, I've had luck with distributors focused specifically on zines, indie bookstores willing to ship overseas, and (to a certain extent) Library of Congress field office programs.



In Thailand, I felt more out of my element than in Indonesia. My Thai is okay, but nowhere near the level of fluency I have in Indonesian, so it seemed I was putting myself in the hands of fate as I arranged to meet with the Thai graffiti artists. But my anxieties were unfounded and the meeting went very well and, because their English was better than my Thai, I was even able to give my spiel about zines in libraries in English. They took me around to several stores selling zines in amongst streetwear and other odds and ends. And, in case my interest in zines was flagging (it was not), they also showed me an anti-royalist zine (not for sale) that really illustrated why zines are important, for zinesters and their audiences and for researchers and students looking to understand more about both lived experiences and political movements.



A Collecting Anecdote

In July 2024, I traveled to Indonesia with the partial goal of finding zines. I had already collected some Indonesian zines through friends and random happenstance, but I was traveling to Yogyakarta, a city known for being a cultural hub, and I wanted to branch out into communities I'd never talked to before. The first part of my trip consisted of attending the Association for Asian Studies in-Asia Conference, held at Gadjah Mada University. There, I attended a panel talk by graffiti artists from Yogyakarta, and that was my entry into a cascade of zine-related situations.



After the panel, I approached one of the panelists to let her know I was a librarian and interested in zines. She called over another person from the graffiti community who was attending in support and told me he was the person to talk to. And he was—he put me in touch with several different zinesters in the area and I was able to collect a variety of Yogyakarta zines. I also spent a night driving around the city and visiting a graffiti supply store and an afternoon at a graffiti exhibit and workshop aimed at children. The story here is to say yes to things. Ultimately, after hanging out with the graffiti artists for long enough, the artist who'd put me in touch with the zinesters originally also offered to connect me to one of his friends in Bangkok, seeing as I was headed to Thailand next.

Where to buy zines

Distros: My example for this is Shrub (shrub0128.com), located in Singapore. This shop sells zines from around Singapore and Asia and is willing and able to ship overseas. Obviously one small distro won't have everything, but it's a good way to get a variety of zines in one place.

Indie bookstores: There are lots of independent bookstores out there, one example being everything's fine (@everythingsfineph on Instagram), which is actually a small press in Manila. They also run a bookshop and their bookshop carries zines. This is a sneaky way to get a potentially more legitimate vendor into your acquisitions system, especially once you've located one that you know carries similar subjects to those you're looking for.

Library of Congress field offices: There are several Library of Congress field offices located around the world that purchase materials for LC. Libraries can also sign up to purchase books through them. For zines, this is a bit of a wildcard because LC staff don't always know where to find zines, so you might not get a lot and you also won't know what you're getting before it arrives. That said, if you're facing a lot of bureaucracy, this could be a way to get some titles in the door because LC does know how to work with university libraries.

A note on shipping: Shipping costs are the other really big complication when ordering zines from overseas. Zines are generally cheap, but shipping is not. This is another reason why purchasing from distributors might make more sense than buying from individual creators.



Zines in person

Given how complicated it is to acquire zines at a distance, I've always done most of my zine purchasing in person. This comes with its own set of complications, starting, once again, with university bureaucracy. In my case, and likely most others, if I buy a zine (or any other book or periodical for the library), I have to purchase it upfront and then request reimbursement. I'm personally able to do this and, luckily, my library's acquisitions department has been very accommodating, but this is nevertheless a procedure that is not without its risks.

There are, however, also benefits. Purchasing zines in person solves the problem of paying large shipping charges for a single zine. Instead, you can cut shipping out altogether by hand carrying zines back, or you can distribute the cost more evenly by shipping all your acquisitions at one time.

Purchasing zines in person also allows for direct interaction with zinesters. This is extremely important as it opens up avenues for discussing what sorts of zines you're looking to collect and what it means for zines to be housed in an academic library. When I meet with zinesters to purchase their work, I make sure to ask for permission to archive them in the library and tell them that students and researchers will have access to the zines. It's important to head off any misunderstandings before they have a chance to happen, as there have been instances of zinesters encountering their work in academic libraries and being displeased. (See Joshua Barton and Patrick Olson's "Cite First, Ask Questions Later? Toward an Ethic of Zines and Zinesters in Libraries and Research" in *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* volume 113, number 2 for more on this.)

I also cannot overstate how rewarding it is to meet zinesters in person and talk about the work I'm doing and what it means to have zines in libraries.



Online Interaction

- Explore zines that are available online and the ways that zinesters communicate with those in their community and internationally.
- Create electronic zines.
- Explore the interaction between online zine communities and the materiality of zines.

Traditional Research with Zines

Research projects can be designed either to focus on zines or to incorporate them as one type of source. As with any kind of research, the focus could begin with a geographical area such as South India or a topic such as contemporary queer identities. Students can be encouraged to use zines as part of their research. As librarians, we can also work with faculty to bring zines into their courses and assignments as one sort of source for students to explore.



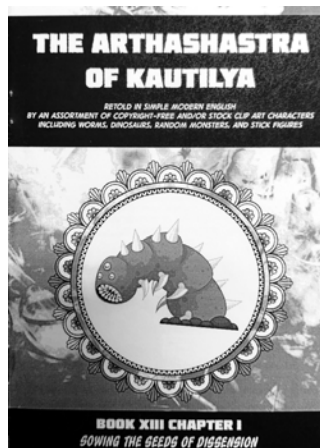
You got your zines back to the library. Now what?

Advertising the Collection

- Write about the collection in campus or community newsletters.
- Get zines posted on your library's social media.
- Put up an exhibit about zines.
- Mention specific zines to faculty when you're socializing.
- Use zines as part of the work you're already doing. For example, bring them into instruction sessions when they're relevant to the topic you're discussing.

Programming with the Collection

- Host events around zine exhibits.
- Zine-making workshops: Bring some zines as examples and some zine-making supplies and let attendees loose to create what they like. But also be ready to help some attendees brainstorm about what they might want to create.
- Zine-making workshops over multiple sessions: Attendees can first analyze zines and see how they work artistically or rhetorically before making their own zines, either following the principles they identified or breaking these principles and creating new ones. Sessions could also include brainstorming, drafting, and experimenting with materiality.
- Partner with a faculty member to help students produce zines as a class project.



How to Find zines

Social media: You first need to understand the social media landscape of the country or region you're targeting. Indonesians, for example, are heavy users of Instagram and most communications occur not through email but via DM or WhatsApp. Once you know where people are likely to post, start searching, start looking through followers, and start looking at posts. Social media will lead you both to individual zinesters and to zine fests, discussed more below.

Random searching: When all else fails, general interest searches for your location and zines might be helpful. This could lead directly to zinesters, bookstores, or zine festivals but I have also found news articles or blog posts this way that then tell me who I should look for on social media.

Bookstores: Look for independent bookstores or left-leaning bookstores in the area you're visiting. It's never guaranteed that they carry zines, but it's likely that you might find a few, if you've chosen your bookstore well. Art and design bookstores might also have zines, though depending on your collecting focus, they may or may not be the zines you're looking for.

Zine festivals: Obviously, zine festivals are places where you can find many different zines very efficiently. The tricky thing is finding when and where they might be happening. I keep a spreadsheet of every zine festival I find in the areas I cover, including location and time of year. Some zine fests do not publicize their dates very far in advance, but the spreadsheet at least helps me monitor things. Depending on the area, following art book festivals might also be a good idea.



Meeting Zinesters

As is the case when doing any sort of international travel, first, and most important, recognize that you are a guest in the country you're visiting and behave accordingly. There's no way for you to know every cultural norm and social faux pas, especially if you're new to a country, so the most important things are to be upfront with where you're coming from and to pay attention to the signals people are giving you.

I often pull out the story of how I spent a year sitting in the corner of a room mostly silent because my language skills were so poor in order to make friends in Indonesia. You most likely don't have a year to spend learning about the local zine scene (or if you do, lucky you!), but I would still suggest taking as much time as you can to show that you're not just interested in taking the zines and running, you're also interested in building relationships.

When I visited Kolkata in 2024, a city I knew nothing about, I messaged a zinester introducing myself and asking to buy some zines. We arranged to meet at a queer book reading event, where it would have been easy for me to drop in, buy some zines, and leave again. Instead, I stayed and chatted with the other attendees, introduced myself, and discussed books. I was in town to attend the Kolkata International Book Fair, which provided a great topic of conversation as the other event attendees were able to offer me both tips for attending and critiques of the fair. I did commit one faux pas: I should have brought my own zines to trade!

Though I didn't have zines, I did bring other gifts, which I encourage you to do too. MSU's library has stickers that we give away at events and they're always a hit when I'm zine hunting. If you don't have ready access to stickers, other small trinkets with the name of your school or city are possibilities. You could also bring small food items, but depending on location it's probably a good idea to take into consideration dietary needs. I bring halal snacks to Indonesia.

It's also always helpful to say what sorts of zines you're looking for. Especially when I'm meeting with a press or larger creator, I let them know the kinds of content I'm particularly interested in and ask them to give me a rundown of the zines they have available and to pitch me some titles. This really helps to make decisions when you can't buy everything you see, and I find it also helps to better explain what it means that I'm collecting zines for a library and how the zines might be used.

The last thing I want to touch on here is payment. I've run into situations where people want to just give me their zines, but, whenever possible, I encourage you to use the power of the institution behind you and pay as much as you can.



A note on networking: I despise the concept of networking, but I'm forced to reluctantly admit that building a network has helped me find some underground zines. But here's what I will say, at least in an Indonesian context, where I have the most experience: networking isn't surface-level creation of connections. For me, at least, it's making friends. There are people I've known for a decade that I knew to call on when I started collecting zines and who were willing to help me out. I also see them when I'm not looking for zines. What I'm describing here is friendship. This isn't commonly spoken of in the context of academia, where we fall back on formality and objectivity, but I believe friendship is extremely important for building true connections and an understanding of the region. Friendship transcends the simple business transactions of purchasing library materials and also transcends things like institutional affiliations. Your friends are your friends no matter where you work—don't forget that.