

## Using Themes in Area Studies Collection Descriptions to Assess Strength

Ambra Gagliardi, Assistant Librarian, University of Utah

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### Introduction

Area studies collection development in academic libraries requires unique collecting approaches. Language and subject expertise are vital throughout the acquisition process of these multidisciplinary materials – from selecting to cataloging and eventually liaising to departments. While some large generic databases and journal packages support area studies disciplines, much of the material collected is unique and often unavailable via mainstream library purchasing channels.<sup>1</sup> The acquisition approach may involve international trips or relationships with global vendors, publishers, or colleagues.<sup>2</sup> The unique nature of area studies collection development, lean library budgets, and limited staffing make supporting area studies centers and programs challenging.

Understanding the characteristics of area studies collections and how they differ from institution to institution is essential for supporting their development in academic libraries. This paper aims to support this work through a qualitative thematic analysis of collection descriptions found in grant narratives. By exploring themes and patterns within these descriptions, we can learn how each institution defines its area studies collections, how collections develop over time, and how institutions assess the strength of their collections.

Many institutions nationwide receive United States (U.S.) Department of Education Title VI National Center Research (NRC) grants. These grant narratives, which are public information, provide a wealth of insight into area studies collections. Especially insightful are the narrative sections that address the grant program's eligibility requirement that each institution "maintain specialized library collections." In these sections, institutions describe collection statistics, unique holdings, subject and language foci, cooperative agreements, budget allocations, acquisition initiatives, staffing counts, and expertise.

This paper uses qualitative and thematic text and image data analyses from these narrative sections within the NRC East Asian/Pan-Asian grant category. Title VI grants are essential for the health of area studies collections, and attention to them in collection development can help guide library professionals responsible for building and maintaining them.

Additionally, collection development assessment approaches in academic libraries often lean heavily into quantitative methods and metrics. This paper provides a qualitative approach, which can be especially helpful in assessing inherently interdisciplinary subject collections like

area studies. For example, collection counts, like the number of volumes held, are standard quantitative figures defining collection size and can imply collection strength or how well a collection covers a particular subject(s). However, figuring out which materials should be counted based on their subject matter (and not necessarily Library of Congress classification) can be challenging for area studies collections, where materials span many subjects and languages. Quantitative collection counts also don't tell the whole story of how these collections meet user needs and enhance curriculum and research.

The research questions that guide this study include:

1. What central themes and patterns are found in area studies collection descriptions from Title VI NRC proposal narratives?
2. What can these themes and patterns tell us about how area studies collections develop?
3. How can these themes and patterns help institutions assess the strength of their area studies collections and their impact on teaching, learning, and research?

### **Brief overview of Area Studies, Title VI, and NRCs in Higher Education**

Before discussing the methodology, it is worth defining area studies in higher education and explaining more about Title VI grants. Area studies, or international studies, are interdisciplinary fields focusing on a given geographical location or particular demographic group. Interestingly, the earliest known uses of the word came about in the 1940s, around the start of the Title VI program.<sup>3</sup>

Since the 1950s, the U.S. Department of Education has funded area studies centers and programs within higher education institutions nationwide through the International and Foreign Language Education Office's (IFLE) Title VI grant programs.<sup>4</sup> These grant programs support interdisciplinary geographic and language-learning instruction and research. As described in this paper, Title VI grants have indirectly supported and helped establish area studies collections in academic libraries.

The IFLE's National Resource Center (NRC) grant program, the focus of this study, has substantially impacted area studies collections. This program began during the Cold War era, when the global geopolitical climate prompted a need in the U.S. for international experts, particularly those trained in less commonly taught languages. At the time, these experts were in short supply. This spurred federal funding to build foreign-language and area studies programs at U.S. higher education institutions via the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958.<sup>5</sup> In the most recent NRC grant funding cycle (2022-2025), fifty public and private universities and colleges were awarded grants for their area studies centers and programs.<sup>6</sup>

## Methodology

I chose qualitative thematic analysis (TA) methodology for this assessment to help add context to the quantitative data we gather regularly in collections. Qualitative TA can be used to identify themes and patterns in a large dataset and has a flexible theoretical approach. I lean into the constructionist worldview by unpacking the realities expressed in the dataset to understand the world we live and work in<sup>7</sup>. I also appreciated TA's emphasis on the reflexive process, in which researchers are encouraged to consider and acknowledge their beliefs and position concerning their project.<sup>8</sup> A reflexive approach suggests that rather than trying to eliminate the impact of our beliefs and the wider society, we should acknowledge and discuss them to try and understand their influence on the research process.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, I wanted to test the TA methodology in the library collection assessment.

In the spirit of reflexiveness, I identify as a white woman, able-bodied, and cisgender. I'm from a working-class family. I have young children and limited time. All these things influence my worldview. Additionally, I am a relatively new collection development librarian, and I do not have a background in area studies. My background is in Anthropology and Library Science. This lack of formal area studies training influences my project, as I am limited in what I read and learn through experiences.

Perhaps most importantly, area studies collections regularly consist of materials taken from ancestral and original lands and away from Indigenous and local peoples, often through oppressive historical processes like colonialization. My limitations in understanding the value and importance of these materials to their ancestral homelands and peoples are apparent. Learning how to ethically collect and manage inclusive collections with Indigenous and local peoples is something I think a lot about and an important driver for this work.

At my institution, we do not have dedicated area-studies librarians or bibliographers. Instead, we have liaison librarians who wear many hats and often serve multiple campus departments. I approach this project from a support angle to help these liaisons with area studies-specific collection development. In qualitative research, I consider the insider and outside perspectives to be on a continuum. So, I'm an outsider in some ways, like not having a background in area studies. I'm an insider in other ways because I know how to build academic library collections, but I recognize that I do so from a Westernized approach.

Institutions applying for NRC grant funds must submit a full proposal, including a lengthy narrative. Within the narrative is a required section entitled "Strength of the Library." Institutions are scored on how well they address this section during the grant's review process. The criteria instruct institutions to describe their collections and the institution's financial support to the library to manage the collections. They must also explain how their collections

are accessible beyond their library. These sections average about four double-spaced pages each.

Institutions can apply under several NRC geographical categories, including:

- Africa
- East Asia/Pan-Asia
- International
- Middle East
- Russia, Eastern Europe, and Eurasia
- South Asia
- Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands
- Western Europe
- Western Hemisphere (Canada, Latin America, and Caribbean)

The dataset for this study focuses on the East Asia/Pan-Asia category for the most recent funding cycle (2022-2025), for which my institution receives funding. Furthermore, institutions that are part of the Greater Western Library Alliance (GWLA), a consortia of research libraries, were selected as a subset. The purpose of the subset was to identify actionable collaborations from the study's findings, as my institution is a member of GWLA. This study was presented to GWLA members in April 2024, but no actions have been taken to increase collaboration on collecting area studies. The institutions that make up the subset include:

- University of Arizona (UA)
- University of Hawaii (UH)
- University of Kansas (KU)
- University of Utah (UU) & Brigham Young University (BYU) – awarded jointly
- University of Washington (UW)
- University of Colorado Boulder (CU)

The dataset was pulled from the Department of Education's NRC website.<sup>10</sup> I used a combination of physical and electronic versions of the data to conduct the analysis. I found it easier to mark up the physical copy as I identified codes and then transferred the markup to a spreadsheet, where I began organizing the codes. The physical copies of the dataset also became a practical way to quickly look into the context surrounding the codes as I refined them and eventually put them into buckets that became themes. The analysis spanned about three weeks and initially produced about three hundred codes. TA is a reiterative and reflexive process, so codes came and went as I reflected on the data through my world lens.

In TA, themes are generated by the researcher and do not emerge from the data as if they are waiting to be found - remember reflexivity. Themes have "a shared, multi-faceted meaning, patterned across a least some of the qualitative dataset; encapsulates several related analytic insights, unified by a central organizing concept or idea, developed by clustering codes."<sup>11</sup> When organizing codes into buckets, I eventually designed six overarching themes. In TA, there is no

correct number of themes to strive for. Still, anything beyond six stretches the analysis to a less meaningful point when using the information to inform decision-making.

### Analysis and Discussion

The chart below lists the six themes identified from the subset of the East Asian/Pan-Asian NRC collection descriptions. Each theme is discussed in more detail with data extracts.

Theme	Characteristics
Claims to legitimacy	Claims by institutions to be the largest in a particular subject(s).
Interdisciplinary nature of collections	The interdisciplinary nature of collections makes it difficult to separate holdings, budgets, and staffing.
Geographical and topical subject strengths	Highlighted geographical and topical subject holdings are the heart the descriptions and show real strength.
Vernacular language holdings in Chinese, Japanese, Korean (CJK), and beyond	Collection counts identified in charts with a focus on vernacular language holdings that include CJK and beyond.
Age and growth of collections	Collection age and speed of growth is used to imply strength.
Connected sharing among institutions	The many ways institutions share collections and expertise.

The “claims to legitimacy” theme appeared in all the institutions' descriptions except for the UA. In this theme, each institution claims to be the largest or most prestigious collection owner of an East Asian/Pan-Asian subject(s) within a specific U.S. geographical area. Some of the boundaries identified by institutions are ambiguous, and there is some minor overlap amongst the claims. Given the grant program's competitiveness, it makes sense for institutions to use size to argue for “strength.” The codes that make up this theme are generally found at the beginning of the narrative section or at the point where they describe their collections in detail. Some data extracts related to this theme include:

- BYU: “BYU has the best AS library between the Mississippi River and California.”<sup>12</sup>
- UU: “The ME library (Aziz S. Atiya Collection), one of the largest in North America...”<sup>13</sup>
- CU: “It curates the largest collection of Asia related materials in the Mountain West and Southwest.”<sup>14</sup>
- UW: “It holds approximately 825,286 items in EA languages, including print and electronic books, serials, databases and audiovisual materials putting it among the top 12 largest collections in the U.S.”<sup>15</sup>
- KU: “The KU East Asia Library serves a wide range of users and patrons with the largest EA collection in the Great Plains.”<sup>16</sup>

- UH: “Okinawa: Most comprehensive outside of Japan, anchored by the Sakamaki-Hawley Collection of over 5,000 items, most consisting of Ryukyu Era source materials.”<sup>17</sup>

In the “interdisciplinary nature of collections” theme, institutions describe how their East Asian/Pan-Asian collection materials span multiple disciplines like humanities, social sciences, science, and technology. This broad coverage makes it challenging for the library to separate collection counts, budget allocations, and personnel specifically for asian studies from other disciplines. This theme signals a need for libraries to recognize that data on some subject collections cannot rely on traditional quantitative measures. The codes for this theme are found in parts where the institutions describe their budgets and staff. Some data extracts related to this theme include:

- BYU: “...120 additional databases dedicated to the humanities, social sciences, and intl business analysis that provide some Asian content.”<sup>18</sup>
- CU: “Seven additional faculty librarians from disciplines in the humanities and social sciences collaborate with Asian studies librarians or procure vernacular and English contents...”<sup>19</sup>
- UW: “TEAL holds a small collection of Western language materials, while the main and branch libraries hold large collections of English-language EA studies materials.”<sup>20</sup>
- UU: “MLIB further allocates roughly \$552K annually to support databases and an estimated \$20K annually for journals specific to AS.”<sup>21</sup>

The “geographical and topical subject strengths” theme gets to the heart of what makes an East Asian/Pan-Asian collection strong. The institutions with codes identified in this theme describe collection details beyond statistical counts and budget allocations and highlight the strength of library collection holdings in a particular subject, language, or geographic region. Collections housed beyond the library and managed by campus or community organizations are also highlighted. These collections supplement the library’s holdings and provide users additional materials and expertise. Codes are generally found in visual charts and in the sections where they describe their collections in detail. Some data extracts related to this theme include:

- UU: “...3,700 rare books in Arabic and Persian (many unique to the UU), largest Arabic papyrus, parchment, and paper collections in the US...”<sup>22</sup>
- KU: “...the Chinese collection provides broad coverage of social sciences in general, and particularly deep coverage in women's studies, and the following historical periods: the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties (1260-1912)...”<sup>23</sup>
- UA: “U Arizona also has relevant special collections of EA-related materials housed in other units around campus. Its Poetry Center, for example, ... includes nearly 200 anthologies and 250 author editions of contemporary East Asian poetry in translation.”<sup>24</sup>

A common pattern in the “vernacular language holdings in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, (CJK) and beyond” theme is that institutions use charts to list collection counts. Charts focus on vernacular East Asian/Pan-Asian languages and include various material types. These figures give insight into the language strengths of the library’s holdings. Chinese, Japanese, and Korean dominate the lists, but other less commonly taught languages are included, especially in the Pan-Asia collections descriptions from UU/BYU and CU. Figure 1 is an example of a chart from CU’s collection description.

Figure 1.

Table F.1.a.2. VERNACULAR HOLDINGS, January 2022					
Language	Books	eBooks	Serials	Multimedia*	Microform
Chinese	76,336	1,388	7,467	1,557	1,265
Japanese	37,169	192	6,636	1,204	2,045
Urdu	362	2,428	37	26	0
Arabic	2,936	372	245	451	18
Hindi	1,417	609	89	369	1
Korean	3,026	2,415	1,935	658	22
Tibetan	1,103	27	32	67	0
Languages of India (except Hindi)	492	1,873	33	127	1
Farsi	1,472	63	166	225	0
Languages of Indonesia	98	425	144	90	2
Other Asian Languages	2,211	965	2,769	1,481	22
<b>Total</b>	<b>126,622</b>	<b>10,757</b>	<b>19,553</b>	<b>6,255</b>	<b>3,376</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>					<b>166,563</b>
* Includes all physical and digital maps, graphics, video, photos, and art					

Figure 1. A chart outlining vernacular language holdings from the University of Colorado Boulder's 2022-2025 NRC grant narrative.<sup>25</sup>

In the “age and growth of collections theme,” institutions acknowledge the age of their East Asian/Pan-Asian collection and, in some cases, explain how the collections were established using Title VI funding. Some collections are well-established and have been around for decades, while others are relatively young, having grown in recent years through Title VI investment. This theme attests to the importance of building relationships between the library and the Title VI funded centers, as it can be a source of revenue and expertise for collection development. Codes in this theme are generally found in the narrative sections where institutions describe their collections in detail. Some data extracts related to this theme include:

- UU: “The ME library....is recognized internationally as a major center for research.”<sup>26</sup>
- CU: “The collection is one of the youngest in the U.S., only formally founded in 1989. It has grown rapidly since its inception through close ties between the faculty librarians and research and teaching faculty.”<sup>27</sup>

- KU: “The Korean collection has rapidly grown with support from Title VI and the Korea Foundation since the East Asian Library established the Korean collection program in the mid-1990s.”<sup>28</sup>

The last theme, “connected sharing among institutions,” was the most apparent within the dataset and had the most associated codes. This is likely because institutions were asked to describe how they share their collections in the narrative instructions. Institutions describe ways their library shares its East Asian/Pan-Asian collections and expertise locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally. Library networking and collaborative sharing are done via consortia memberships, resource sharing, outreach, cooperative acquisition programs, and open access. Resource sharing is essential for area studies collections as no institution can collect everything, especially unique and challenging to acquire materials. These codes are found where the institutions describe their collections in detail and how collections are accessed. Some data extracts related to this theme include:

- UU & BYU: “MLIB and HBLL have maintained a cooperative acquisition arrangement for area studies since the 1970s (BYU focuses on AS, and UU focuses on ME).”<sup>29</sup>
- UH: “During the 20-21, EA interlibrary loans accounted for 553 titles to North American institutions.”<sup>30</sup>
- KU: “KU ScholarWorks includes 833 open access items produced by KU faculty, students, and staff, and the East Asia Languages and Cultures “community” has 65.”<sup>31</sup>

### **Conclusion and Future Work**

Given the small sample of NRC narratives analyzed in this study, the findings discussed should be viewed within the context of the larger dataset. Only six of the nineteen East Asia/Pan-Asia collection descriptions of the 2022-2025 funding cycle were analyzed. A future, more comprehensive thematic analysis project could include other geographic NRC categories (e.g., Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East) to understand if collection descriptions vary by subject.

East Asian/Pan-Asian collections, and arguably all area studies collections in general, are interdisciplinary, and the materials within them are difficult to separate from other collections when pulling statistics. Instead, detailed subject descriptions written in narrative format are better identifiers for subject strength for area studies collections. Additionally, Title VI funding supports collection growth, and the library, if not already doing so, should foster relationships with area studies centers and programs. Lastly, the importance of sharing area studies resources amongst libraries cannot be understated, and collaborations among libraries are essential in serving user needs.

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- <sup>2</sup> Yurong Yang Atwill and C. David Hickey, "Area Studies Librarians and International Book Fairs: The Hong Kong Book Fair Experience," *Library Collections, Acquisitions, & Technical Services* 27, no. 1 (March 2003): 97–105, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649055.2003.10765898>.
- <sup>3</sup> "Area Study, n. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary," accessed February 7, 2025, [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/area-study\\_n](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/area-study_n).
- <sup>4</sup> "History of Title VI and Fulbright-Hays Programs | U.S. Department of Education," U.S. Department of Education, December 1, 2024, <http://www.ed.gov/about/ed-offices/office-of-postsecondary-education/history-of-title-vi-and-fulbright-hays-programs>.
- <sup>5</sup> "History of Title VI and Fulbright-Hays Programs | U.S. Department of Education."
- <sup>6</sup> "International and Foreign Language Education Application Narratives | U.S. Department of Education," accessed February 8, 2025, <http://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/grants-higher-education/ifle-application-narratives>.
- <sup>7</sup> John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, Sixth edition (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2023).
- <sup>8</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (London: SAGE, 2022).
- <sup>9</sup> Andrew Gary Darwin Holmes, "Researcher Positionality - A Consideration of Its Influence and Place in Qualitative Research - A New Researcher Guide," *Shanlax International Journal of Education* 8, no. 4 (September 1, 2020): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v8i4.3232>.
- <sup>10</sup> "National Resource Centers | U.S. Department of Education," accessed February 9, 2025, <http://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/grants-higher-education/ifle/national-resource-centers>.
- <sup>11</sup> Braun and Clarke, *Thematic Analysis*.
- <sup>12</sup> University of Utah, Application Narrative of Funded NRC Grant FY 2022-2025, P015A220053 (Brigham Young University), page 27-32, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/iegpsnrc/fund-apps/p015a220053-utahbyu.docx>.
- <sup>13</sup> University of Utah, Application Narrative, page 27-32.
- <sup>14</sup> University of Colorado Boulder, Application Narrative of Funded NRC Grant FY 2022-2025, P015A220067, 2021, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/iegpsnrc/fund-apps/p015a220067-cuboulder.docx>.
- <sup>15</sup> University of Hawaii, Application Narrative of Funded NRC Grant FY 2022-2025, P015A220068, page 23-26, <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/programs/iegpsnrc/fund-apps/p015a220068-hawaii.docx>.
- <sup>16</sup> University of Kansas, Application Narrative of Funded NRC Grant FY 2022-2025, P015A220124, page 26-28, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/iegpsnrc/fund-apps/p015a220124-kansas.docx>.
- <sup>17</sup> University of Hawaii, Application Narrative, page 23-26.
- <sup>18</sup> University of Utah, Application Narrative, page 27-32.
- <sup>19</sup> University of Colorado Boulder, Application Narrative of Funded NRC Grant FY 2022-2025, P015A220067, page 27-29, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/iegpsnrc/fund-apps/p015a220067-cuboulder.docx>.
- <sup>20</sup> University of Washington, Application Narrative of Funded NRC Grant FY 2022-2025, P015A220017, page 24-27, <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/programs/iegpsnrc/fund-apps/p015a220017-washington.docx>.
- <sup>21</sup> University of Utah, Application Narrative, page 27-32.
- <sup>22</sup> University of Utah, Application Narrative, page 27-32.
- <sup>23</sup> University of Kansas, Application Narrative, page 26-28.
- <sup>24</sup> University of Arizona, Application Narrative of Funded NRC Grant FY 2022-2025, P015A220099, page 24-26, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/iegpsnrc/fund-apps/p015a220099-arizona.docx>.
- <sup>25</sup> University of Colorado Boulder, Application Narrative, page 27-29.
- <sup>26</sup> University of Utah, Application Narrative, page 27-32.
- <sup>27</sup> University of Colorado Boulder, Application Narrative, page 27-29.
- <sup>28</sup> University of Kansas, Application Narrative, page 26-28.
- <sup>29</sup> University of Utah, Application Narrative, page 27-32.
- <sup>30</sup> University of Hawaii, Application Narrative, page 23-26.
- <sup>31</sup> University of Kansas, Application Narrative, page 26-28.