

Call for Papers

The 10th UK-China Alliance for the Humanities in Higher Education Conference

3-4 November 2026, SOAS University of London

Future Horizons: Area Studies and Global Connectivity in the Humanities

How might we rethink “areas” if we begin not with borders, but with connectivity? Across history, trade routes, empires, migrations, and intellectual exchanges have shaped both the lived experience and the imaginative construction of regions. Today, digital infrastructures and transnational networks intensify these processes, reorganising how regions are perceived, represented, and contested. Connectivity can be generative or destructive; it binds worlds together even as it produces new hierarchies and conflicts. If global connectivity names the forces that continually remake regions, the humanities render these transformations intelligible through interpretive, linguistic, and historical forms of inquiry. Bringing Area Studies into dialogue with global connectivity invites renewed humanistic reflections on how regions have been formed, how Area Studies are mediated in the present, and how they might be imagined differently in the future.

We invite proposals that engage with the following thematic strands:

1. Deconstructing Digital Orientalism: Algorithmic Bias and the Afterlives of European Empire and Colonial Legacy

European traditions of Area Studies were historically shaped by “Orientalism”, or European epistemologies and knowledge traditions grounded in philology, which produced non-European regions as objects of lingual and textual inquiry—often within imperial frameworks of classification and governance. While these legacies have been widely critiqued, their epistemic structures seem to persist in new forms.

In the digital age, algorithmic systems, large language models, and data infrastructures are reshaping how regions are represented and understood. These technologies are trained on uneven corpora and structured by dominant languages and epistemologies, raising questions about emerging forms of “digital Orientalism.”

This strand invites critical exploration of how colonial knowledge hierarchies may be reproduced, transformed, or contested within digital environments, and how scholars might intervene to promote more plural and equitable modes of global knowledge production.

2. Methodological Futures in Area Studies

Linguistic proficiency and sustained fieldwork have long defined Area Studies, grounding scholarship in situated knowledge and contextual depth. Its engagement across

disciplinary boundaries has enabled methodological plurality, even as critics have questioned whether the field possesses a distinctive method. Today, digital media, generative AI, and concerns over digital sovereignty are reshaping research environments, complicating how language competence is viewed, sources are accessed, verified, and interpreted. At the same time, ongoing conflicts and politically sensitive contexts pose new challenges to fieldwork and researcher–community relations.

This strand invites reflections on the methodological futures of Area Studies. We welcome critical and reflective contributions that examine emerging challenges, as well as papers that demonstrate innovative methodological approaches, including the creative use of digital technologies in regionally grounded research.

3. Technoscapes and Global Imaginary of Region

Regions are not simply geographic entities; they are also concepts articulated through networks of exchange, representation, and power. Trade routes, maritime corridors, and renewed geopolitical framings have long shaped how regions are conceived and connected, while technological infrastructures that sustain these networks — from seafaring and cartography to digital platforms, satellite systems, and environmental technologies — reshape boundaries, mobility, and perceptions of proximity.

This strand invites contributions that explore how much technologies, digital infrastructures, capital, government policies, and circuits of exchange shape regional imaginaries across time. How do material and technological formations generate new spatial configurations or revive older ones? In what ways can Humanities scholarship illuminate how regions are imagined, represented, and inhabited within evolving networks of new forms of connection and disconnection, and how these transformations raise questions of adaptability, sustainability, and planetary interdependence?

4. Transnational Public Sphere and Reconfigurations of Area Studies: Circulations, Intersections, Contact Hubs

Regions are not only shaped by borders, but by circulation and encounter. Cities along the Silk Road, port towns, commercial centres, diasporic communities, and digital platforms function as contact hubs—nodes within transnational networks where cultures intersect and ideas circulate. Such sites offer vantage points from which to view regions as embedded and entangled formations rather than isolated units.

This strand invites contributions that examine how intersections and networks reconfigure regional perspectives. How do transnational public spheres emerge across commercial, cultural, or digital circuits? What are the limitations? In what ways do contact hubs complicate dualistic frameworks—self and other, centre and periphery—and open new approaches to understanding regions through embeddedness and entanglement?

5. New Forms of Global Connectivity and Collaboration: AI and Transnationality

Emerging technologies are reshaping not only how regions are studied, but how knowledge itself is produced and shared. Artificial intelligence, virtual platforms, and immersive environments create both new forms of transnational collaboration and ideological silos, enabling in the first instance distributed research communities, digital heritage reconstruction, and cross-border co-production of knowledge and in the second inward looking research clusters. Yet these developments also pose fundamental questions for Area Studies. If the field has long been grounded in linguistic proficiency, immersion, and contextual depth, how might AI-mediated research reconfigure these commitments?

This strand invites contributions that explore how AI and digital technologies are transforming transnational research networks and the collaborative production of knowledge. How might human-machine interaction reshapes ideas of “region” or “area”? What role does language play in mediating AI-driven connectivity? Do new technologies dissolve borders, or generate new forms of boundary and control? How can collaborative, multi-stakeholder approaches foster more inclusive and dialogical modes of regionally grounded scholarship?

Submission Guidelines:

Submission of Abstracts

We warmly welcome submissions from all, including students and scholars irrespective of affiliation with the UKCHA alliance. Please submit abstracts to Dr Xiaoning Lu (xl1@soas.ac.uk) by 5pm (UK time) on 15 June 2026/12am (Beijing time) on 16 June 2026. Please entitle your email “2026 UKCHA Conference proposal”. Your submission should include:

- The title and an abstract of no more than 250 words addressing one of the strands outlined above or the conference theme
- A 100-word biography that includes your name, university affiliation and position
- Your email address

* Please note that you should receive an email acknowledging receipt of your abstract submission. If you do not receive a confirmation, please email your inquiry to luxiaoning75@gmail.com.