

THEMED INTERVENTION

Worlding geography, area studies and the study of area

Han Cheng¹  | Deen Sharp²

¹Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin, Germany

²Department of Geography & Environment, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

Correspondence

Han Cheng, Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Boltzmannstraße 22, Berlin 14195, Germany.
Email: hc446@cantab.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper introduces the collection of five short papers written by scholars from Egypt, Russia, Singapore, China and South Africa that advance this journal's 'Geography in the World' initiative through a more robust engagement between geography and area studies. Geographers have increasingly addressed the troubled relationship that their discipline has with the field of area studies. Less registered, however, in Anglophone debates are the presence and politics of other geographical traditions of area studies. In this themed intervention, we propose a reoriented critical geography of 'area' by closely assessing non-Western geography's relationship with its area studies counterpart across a range of (geo)political, economic, institutional and cultural contexts beyond the Anglo-American 'core'.

KEYWORDS

area studies, geographical knowledge, geopolitics, milieu, other geographical traditions, postcolonial

1 | INTRODUCTION

Geographers have increasingly addressed the troubled relationship that their discipline has with the field of area studies (Cheng & Liu, 2022; Cheskin & Jašina-Schäfer, 2022; Child & Barnes, 2019; Jazeel, 2016; Powell et al., 2017; Sharp, 2019; Sidaway, 2013; Sidaway et al., 2016). This scholarship has examined how geographers have often misunderstood the content of area studies scholarship (Sharp, 2019), the importance of the situatedness of knowledge production (Cheng & Liu, 2022; Cheskin & Jašina-Schäfer, 2022), the rise of post-colonial and de-colonial epistemologies (Jazeel, 2016) and the impact of the simultaneous deepening and splintering of globalisation (Sidaway, 2013), along with its protracted crises.

These analyses make a powerful case for examining the uneven West/non-West relationships of geographical knowledge production. However, there is a risk that these analyses overlook the dynamic interconnections among non-Western social spaces and the complexity of such connections. Less registered in Anglophone debates are 'other geographical traditions' (Ferretti, 2019) of area studies produced through 'South-South', 'East-East' and 'East-South' relations. To borrow Mawdsley's (2012) incisive argument, the neglect of such flows and relations is revealing about the dominant psychology and representational regime of Anglophone geographic knowledge production. The presence and politics

The information, practices and views in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG).

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2025 The Author(s). *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Royal Geographical Society (with The Institute of British Geographers).

of non-Western area studies represent a challenge to the dominant self/other imaginaries by transgressing established spatial-discursive-material hierarchies of who maps and who is mapped. The non-Western geographies of 'area' constitute one arena within which the West-Rest binary becomes prised open and materially and discursively disrupted, but they remain under explored.

This themed intervention seeks to reorient Geography's engagement with 'area' by inviting scholars to closely examine the relationship between non-Western geographies and their area studies counterparts across a range of (geo)political, economic, institutional and cultural contexts beyond the Anglo-American 'core'. The contributors ground their analyses in China, Singapore, South Africa, Egypt and Russia. In doing so, this intervention contributes to the emerging area studies turn in geography (Sharp, 2019), while also underscoring the need to 'provincialise' the geography of geography by shifting attention away from dominant Occidental centres of knowledge production (Cheng & Liu, 2022). This reorientation requires re-tuning geography from treating non-Western areas as 'being primarily objects of analyses', to become what Chen (2010, p. 216) calls a 'means of transforming knowledge production' (Sidaway et al., 2016, p. 780). Such transformation involves not only the refusal to be no longer subject to Oriental Sinology and Egyptology, Sovietology or African and Tropical Studies, but also the presentation of alternative regional/global themes in world geographical knowledge production.

We advance this journal's 'Geography in the World' initiative and make a modest attempt to redress the epistemic hegemony by recovering previously marginalised sites/sights of geographical knowledge production and their place-based particularities (McFarlane, 2021, 2023). The themed intervention foregrounds the embeddedness of academic scholarship in a postcolonial moment and challenges the parochialism and Anglo-Americanism in 'the geographical tradition'. Following the initiative, we take the idea of the 'world' seriously and explore how non-Western geography 'is of the world, composes worlds, reflects worlds and is worlded' (McFarlane, 2021, p. 3) through engagements with area studies and variegated world-writing projects. Furthermore, while it is inevitable and indeed desirable that extant contributions in this initiative chiefly focus on the discipline, the themed intervention eschews disciplinary boundaries and examines geography's relations with area studies to consider broader questions about geography's disciplinary identity and institutional conditions.

We invited five scholars whose work is anchored in Egypt, Russia, Singapore, China and South Africa to reflect on the challenges and opportunities of area studies from their own situated viewpoints. While not all are based in the regions they study, their scholarship is shaped by distinct positionalities, some working within Anglo-American institutions, others from beyond, each bringing their intricate and analytical insight into the entangled geographies of knowledge production.

Each scholar was initially approached to participate in the themed intervention because of their academic engagement with the geography-area studies interface. Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Maano Ramutsindela bring decades of research expertise, institutional memories and personal experiences from within Singapore and South Africa. Aya Nassar, Vera Smirnova and Han Cheng are part of an emerging generation of Egyptian, Russian and Chinese scholars who engage critically from overseas, partly due to the limits imposed by domestic political regimes, yet with 'insider' perspectives and reflexivity. All contributors have studied and worked in both their 'home' and Anglo-American contexts, whose travelling geographies (Cheng, 2024) have led to the probing and provoking discussions that follow.

By carefully analysing the geographically specific experiences, trajectories, roots and routes of non-Western geography and area studies, papers in the themed intervention have sought to discern the situatedness of the complex entanglement between geographies of knowledge and territorial attachment. Specifically, we asked contributors to assess the personal, institutional and epistemic issues shaping non-Western geography's relationship with respective area studies, by addressing questions including but not limited to the following:

1. How do you understand the current relationship between geography and area studies in your specific regional context? What are the key academic and non-academic forces that have shaped the relationship? Is geography still structured by a 'systematic' and 'regional' divide?
2. From your regional perspective, what geographical knowledges of 'area' are being produced? Do you encounter an area studies milieu, including a common set of institutions and networks such as associations, annual meetings and journals? How does this engagement manifest itself, and what types of power relationships are associated with these engagements?
3. How can geography benefit from a stronger relationship with area studies? What are the most effective sites of connection between geography and area studies? What barriers exist to geography and area studies scholarly communities from interacting more rigorously?

The collection is a set of ongoing reflections, and here we introduce them by attending to three key themes: the role of geopolitical logics and geographical imagination in shaping knowledge production of other peoples and places; the influence of geography's historical formation and spatial priority in contemporary engagements with area studies; and the social settings that accompany non-Western geography and area studies.

The first theme is the role of geopolitical logics and geographical imagination in shaping knowledge production of other peoples and places. On China, Cheng (2025) discusses the contemporary revaluation of spaces outside Chinese borders that are viewed in terms of strategic significance and capital accumulation, especially in relation to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), invoking earlier contours of spatial ambition during the Mao era that too was global in scope. On Russia, Smirnova (2025) traces a series of events and processes from the Soviet period to the present day that have underpinned the evolution and consolidation of Moscow's meta-geographies, including the Eurasia idea, that are mobilised to depict spheres of influence and a statist civilisational imaginary with Russia at its centre. The Chinese and Russian states' geopolitical and economic interests become the basis for funding particular divisions of knowledge in the context of geostrategic 're-emergence'.

Chinese and Russian geographical/area studies are intrinsically caught up with the need to reassess the tenor of its bilateral relations, and tasked with filling the vacuum of geo-knowledge about vast 'friendly' and 'unfriendly' global spaces. While Chinese and Russian geographical/area studies are discursively different from their Cold War counterparts, their present incarnations evoke similar geopolitical logics of constructing a globally oriented knowledge base. Pletsch (1981, p. 384) persuasively argues that, 'it was the sudden appearance of the Soviet bloc in Western strategic calculations that gave rise to the three worlds scheme, modernisation theory and the systematic division of social scientific labour'. Yet as with the Cold War area studies map that excluded the United States (Mirsepassi et al., 2003, p. 2), nor do Chinese and Russian geographical/area studies include China and Russia because they are envisioned as the 'new' centres of geographical/area scholarship.

The role of geopolitical logics and geographical imagination extends to Nassar's (2025) reflection on Egypt. As post-colonial and post-independence moments orchestrated the sociospatial reconfiguration of transnational connectivity, a shifting regional geographical imagination became necessary as the desire to consider Egypt as Europe's 'gateway to Africa' waned with a rising anti-colonial sentiment. In this process, we can discern the displacement and reordering of the geographical boundaries of Egyptian scholarly inquiry into areas, occasioned by watershed changes in the geopolitical economy. The spatial expansion of the post-independence regime's foreign policy and scalar relations engendered the revaluation of Egyptian studies of its multiple spheres (Arab, African, Islamic). The identification of geographical worlds thus constitutes, and is constitutive of, a spatial definition of the national self. Invoking Said (1978, p. 17), there is 'a distribution of geopolitical awareness' into symbolic spatial constructs such as 'spheres' and 'circles' which often have less to do with overseas places than they do with national worldviews.

A second theme that speaks to various contributions is the ongoing influence of geography's historical formation and spatial priority in contemporary engagements with area studies. On South Africa, Maano Ramutsindela (2025) argues that geography's predominant focus on domestic spaces, taking the form of regional studies, has led to the disconnect between geography and area studies in pre- and post-independence South Africa. For him, the 'domesticated regional studies in geography' in South Africa has to do with the territorial architecture of the apartheid state and its state-centric domestic regionalism that compartmentalised the country into discrete units and empirical sites of geographic analysis. The extensive involvement of geographers in post-apartheid regional planning, while contributing valuable expertise for understanding dynamics unfolding within the country, has produced an inward-looking tendency that insulates geography in South Africa from the rest of the continent and beyond.

A similar trajectory can be observed in China. Cheng (2025) notes that for the most part of its recent history, Chinese geography has been preoccupied with issues such as spatial planning and urban-regional development, with limited attention paid to area studies. Since the 1950s, a major focus in Chinese geography has been so-called 'comprehensive regionalisation' (*zonghe quhua*), which divides domestic 'macroregions' based on physical geographical conditions, to inform state-led development and planning. In recent years, supported by BRI projects and funding, Chinese geographers have applied the comprehensive regionalisation approach to spaces outside Chinese borders. These cartographies are grounded in a positivist 'territorial system of human-environment interaction' (*rendi guanxi diyu xitong*) tradition within Chinese geography, conceptualising regions as spatially bounded analytical containers for explaining the interconnections between human and physical factors.

The cases of South Africa and China show that the real or imagined 'needs' of constituencies outside academic institutions have strongly shaped the contours, contents and boundaries of non-Western geography and area studies. In South Africa and China, the maintenance of the domestic, or domesticated, mode of geography as 'policy science' and 'regional

studies' has had enduring impacts on the processes and nature of geographical knowledge production. The tendency to reify and fix geography's disciplinary identity, epistemological framework and spatial priority hinders its engagement with area studies that is more firmly grounded in the humanities and social sciences.

The domestic–foreign entanglement is further complicated in the case of Russia. Smirnova (2025) contends that Russian area studies emerged in the late-nineteenth century to study Russia's own Orient and its colonial tactics towards the multinational resource frontiers. Its reorientation towards foreign nations took shape under the auspices of the Soviet Comintern and was consolidated in the postwar period to reflect the Soviet Union's strategic interest in the decolonising world. To connect itself to the global anti-colonial struggle, Moscow actively compared Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus with the 'foreign East' and Soviet republics became a cornerstone for conducting 'countryology' (*Stranovedeniye*) under the gaze of Moscow. Distinct forms of spatiality thereby emerged out of these locations of area knowledge, providing discursive legitimisation for the rendering and mapping of internal and overseas 'others' in pursuit of changing diplomatic orientations.

The third theme is the social settings that accompany non-Western geography and area studies, that is, the milieu within which knowledge production literally *takes place*. All contributions have attended to the significance of academic (and non-academic) practices, imaginaries and materialities in shaping the processes of knowledge production and the constitution of such knowledge. These are important elements in the common set of institutions and networks, including, inter alia, scholarly societies, meetings, academic journals and teaching programmes. Specific sights/sites of disciplinary formation, histories and positionality have been discussed in detail. These include but are not limited to the Egyptian Geographical Society and its *Arab Geographical Journal* *المجلة الجغرافية العربية*, the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, the Department of Geography and Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore, the Geographical Society of China and its major conferences, as well as the Society of South African Geographers and the African Studies Association of Africa.

Notably, Yeoh (2025) and Ramutsindela (2025) discuss the role of academic journals in shaping geography–area studies interfaces, or lack thereof, drawing on their experience as long-time editors. On the *South African Geographical Journal* (SAGJ), founded in 1917, Ramutsindela (2025) provides a detailed account of the journal's transition from a regional outlook in the early and mid-twentieth century, to a more nationalist one in the early 1990s, as part of the efforts to deracialise geography, promote Black South African geographers and search for geography's relevance in a democratic South Africa. He argues for approaching Southern Africa as the entry point for a more robust geography–area studies dialogue, by steering the SAGJ towards becoming an 'African' journal beyond the Limpopo River, treated as more than a river boundary between South Africa and its neighbours, but as a heuristic device for placing South African geography within the (sub)continent. On the *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* (SJTG), Yeoh (2025) coins the term 'critical bedfellows' to describe how the SJTG has sought to promote a geography–area studies partnership that serves to galvanise both domains of knowledge to emancipatory action. Recognising the enduring imaginative geography associated with 'the tropics', the journal since its founding in 1953 has wrestled with the 'geographies of knowing' (van Schendel, 2002). In this light, the SJTG has turned the question on its head and made a case for itself by studying the tropics as an area through subverting tropical histories and as part of postcolonial and decolonial endeavour within the geographical discipline.

In attempting to construct the wider cases, all contributors have been able to delve into the different profiles of the diverse array of various strands of geography and area studies. Collectively, they caution that opening spaces for the complex and rich experiences and scholarship of other geographical traditions does not assume the 'innocence' of postcolonial subjects, as they too may involve 'racial' and political hierarchies. Indeed, Cheng (2025) and Smirnova (2025) remind us to attend to the contextual fluidity, diverse legacies and internal tensions inherent in any geographical tradition. As the Chinese and Russian cases attest, area knowledge production informed by classic geopolitical ideas and empowered by twenty-first-century geospatial technologies occludes more grounded, embodied and accountable scales of analysis that have been rendered peripheral or invisible. Rather, it runs the risk of underwriting and reinforcing elitist uneven representations based on gendered-racial-class forms of spatial difference. The contribution to greater epistemic justice within global inequalities is recognised for more progressive possibilities, but it cannot entirely obscure the non-innocence in intensifying old or engendering new politics and hierarchies.

While Eurocentric horizons will remain the key locus of epistemic inequality and resistance for many years to come, the challenges and opportunities of non-Western world-writing are (re-)asserting themselves. They too need to be provincialised for different voices and subjectivities to co-exist in their ongoing and unfinished writing projects. In opening themselves to alterity with a greater degree of epistemological reflexivity, non-Western geography and area studies have much to gain from relational interactions and comparative conversations with plural epistemologies from 'other' worlds,

in every sense of the term. A greater engagement with diverse non-/Western scholarship could be an important step in provoking a serious questioning of one's own standing and a series of dis/locating investigations. In that regard, this themed intervention contributes 'less familiar' examples of inter-referencing across non-Western 'areas', as Yeoh (2025) advocates in her paper, to actively ensure that the geographical enterprise continues to imagine the world differently.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the journal's editors and reviewers for their engagement and feedback, and our contributors for participating in this themed intervention. Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

ORCID

Han Cheng  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4076-3793>

REFERENCES

- Chen, K.S. (2010) *Asia as method: Toward deimperialization*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Cheng, H. (2024) The possibilities of internationalism: Producing traveling geographies in a time of trouble. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 14(2), 278–282. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/20438206231177063>
- Cheng, H. (2025) Global China's spatial ambition and area studies with geography. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, e70027. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.70027>
- Cheng, H. & Liu, W. (2022) Geography, area studies and Chinese world-writing. *Progress in Human Geography*, 46(4), 1065–1085. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325221096179>
- Cheskin, A. & Jašina-Schäfer, A. (2022) Relational area studies: Russia and geographies of knowledge. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 47(4), 1044–1057. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12551>
- Child, E.C. & Barnes, T.J. (2019) American imperial expansion and area studies without geography. *Journal of Historical Geography*, 66, 43–54. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2018.08.001>
- Ferretti, F. (2019) Rediscovering other geographical traditions. *Geography Compass*, 13(3), e12421. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12421>
- Jazeel, T. (2016) Between area and discipline: Progress, knowledge production and the geographies of geography. *Progress in Human Geography*, 40(5), 649–667. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132515609713>
- Mawdsley, E. (2012) The changing geographies of foreign aid and development cooperation: Contributions from gift theory. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 37(2), 256–272. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2011.00467.x>
- McFarlane, C. (2021) Editorial: Geography in the world. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 47(1), 2–8. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12497>
- McFarlane, C. (2023) Geography in the world part 2: Editorial. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 49(2), 1–4. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12655>
- Mirsepasi, A., Basu, A. & Weaver, F. (Eds.). (2003) *Localizing knowledge in a globalising world: Recasting the area studies debate*. New York, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Nassar, A. (2025) Egypt's geographical tradition: The post-independence moment and shifting regional imaginations. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, e70032. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.70032>
- Pletsch, C. (1981) The three worlds, or the division of social scientific labor, circa 1950–1975. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 23(4), 565–590. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500013566>
- Powell, R.C., Klinke, I., Jazeel, T., Daley, P., Kamata, N., Heffernan, M. et al. (2017) Interventions in the political geographies of 'area'. *Political Geography*, 57, 94–104. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2016.03.004>
- Ramutsindela, M. (2025) Beyond the Limpopo: Geography and the worlding of south(ern) Africa. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, e70028. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.70028>
- Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism*. New York, NY: Pantheon.
- Sharp, D. (2019) Difference as practice: Diffracting geography and the area studies turn. *Progress in Human Geography*, 43(5), 835–852. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132518788954>
- Sidaway, J.D. (2013) Geography, globalization, and the problematic of area studies. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 103(4), 984–1002. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2012.660397>
- Sidaway, J.D., Ho, E.L., Rigg, J.D. & Woon, C.Y. (2016) Area studies and geography: Trajectories and manifesto. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 34(5), 777–790. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775816656520>
- Smirnova, V. (2025) Constructing and contesting meta-geographies in Russian area studies debates. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, e70031. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.70031>

- van Schendel, W. (2002) Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: Jumping scale in Southeast Asia. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 20, 647–668. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1068/d16s>
- Yeoh, B.S.A. (2025) Geography and area studies as critical bedfellows? The view from Singapore. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, e70030. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.70030>

How to cite this article: Cheng, H. & Sharp, D. (2025) Worlding geography, area studies and the study of area. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 00, e70025. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.70025>