



PBRC UPDATE

SOKA UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA, ALISO VIEJO



Photo Credit: Elena Nava

Interview with PBRC
Faculty Fellow
Esther Chang

New PBRC Junior Scholars

Student Photo Contest Winners

PBRC Jr. Scholars Field Reports

SPRING 2026 NO. 48

www.soka.edu/pbrc

Table of Contents

INTERVIEW WITH PBRC FACULTY FELLOW #3 **6**

Esther Chang, Professor of Psychology

MEET THE PBRC JUNIOR SCHOLARS **10**

Ten new scholars joined the program 2025-26.

STUDENT PHOTO CONTEST WINNERS **14**

Ten photos are awarded in this year's photo contest.

FIELD REPORT FROM PBRC JUNIOR SCHOLARS **17**

Blair Tran '27 and Richmond Acquah '27

PBRC FACULTY FELLOWS RESEARCH LECTURES **19**

Dr. Monika Calef, Dr. Diya Mazumder, and Dr. Sijia Yao

PBRC UPDATE

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Program Coordinator

Kayo Yoshikawa

Post Doctoral Fellow (2025-26)

Yang Allen

Faculty Fellows (2025-26)

Monika Calef

Diya Mazumder

Sijia Yao

Advisory Committee

Garry Brewer, Yale

Shabbir Cheema, East-West Center

Edward Feasel, SUA

Ian Read, SUA

Michael Lofchie, UCLA



FROM THE DIRECTOR

Greetings from the PBRC as we begin 2026, Year of the Fire Horse. Recently, a student posed a question I consider vital to our purpose and to the broader liberal arts endeavor: "What is the meaning of 'human development' in the Center's mission?" My attempt at an answer, which I'm paraphrasing here, may offer some insight into the Center's goals and the fundamental purpose of liberal arts education.

Our individual development starts with a growing understanding, a process that ultimately leads to what we often call the pursuit of knowledge itself. From birth, we are always learning, always discovering, always rewriting what we thought we knew. Within a university community, this expresses itself primarily in two modes: the shared accumulation of knowledge that takes place in the classroom and in all of the different skills and activities connected to each course, and the individual pursuit of knowledge, whether a student writing an essay or a faculty member engaged in research. At a liberal arts institution, these modes support each other; whether a classroom discussion that inspires an instructor's thought or a course activity that engages a student to pursue new perspectives, the processes of extending knowledge directly and indirectly reinforce each other.

Another form of development lies in the interpersonal connections we create within this community: the ties that form in varied moments of campus life, from conversations in the cafeteria to exchanges in the hallway. These everyday interactions connect us to each other and help us grapple with larger questions: What does it mean to live well? How do we navigate the world together? Through these encounters, we create meaning by learning to see ourselves reflected in one another's experiences and perspectives. As participants in campus life, we learn from each other, and this mutual learning serves the greater purpose of the university itself. One way we support this purpose at the PBRC is by enhancing connections between people and places by inviting scholars and practitioners to share their knowledge with us, or sending

students and faculty out into the world to investigate different cultures and places. Through these exchanges, we develop our understanding of others as a pathway to knowing ourselves more deeply.

Then, to my mind, comes an even greater development, one that emerges from those I've mentioned above yet surpasses them in importance: the development of humanism itself. The longer we spend investigating what we know and, most importantly, what we don't know, the further we move from our received notions of what we think is true and false. The greater the distance we must travel mentally and socially when communicating and learning from others whose experiences are far different from our own, the more our respect for the great variation of human experience grows. Through that experience, we can learn what it is like to experience the world in ways we did not previously comprehend, either as a person or as an intellect. In other words, through deep investigation of what we are not like and what we do not know, we emerge stronger, wiser, and more aware. The development of our knowledge may begin with our own curiosity about the world outside us, but ultimately it returns to our own nature: by studying and engaging with what we are not, we learn more about who we truly are as individuals and as a global collective.

My own experience at SUA has illustrated these patterns many times, but perhaps none so vividly as this current semester, when I am teaching a course on Murasaki Shikibu, the author of *The Tale of Genji*. Her novel is not only one of the first works I taught when arriving at SUA, but also one of the first classes I ever taught when I started university teaching thirty years ago. It is a work I have returned to constantly throughout my life, and every time I read it, I get a little closer to what the author may have been trying to tell us about the world she inhabited a thousand years ago in Japan. But it has also continued to teach me not just about the lives of men and women in her era, but about the minds, aspirations, and experiences of the students with whom I have read this book. When we sit at the seminar table and read it together, I am not just reading the experience of people who long ago passed into history. I have also joined the lives of all those who have read this book and all those with whom I've talked about it throughout the years.

I know this experience of a shared development of mind and spirit is not uncommon for students and instructors alike at SUA. It is my continued hope that the center can be of service in assisting this continued strengthening of the pursuit of knowledge in all its forms, whether academic, cultural, or personal. I also hope that you will be able to join us for the varied events we're hosting this semester, including presentations from this year's Faculty Fellows and our Montgomery Postdoctoral Scholar, Yang Allen. This newsletter also includes updates from our many outstanding Junior Scholars, and a recent Faculty Fellow interview with Esther Chang, concerning her recent research and her own experiences as a student and a professor engaged in the liberal arts.

With our best wishes for your spring semester,



John Pavel Kehlen

ESTHER CHANG

PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

I recently interviewed Esther Chang, SUA's Professor of Psychology, about her recent research made possible through a PBRC Faculty Fellows grant. Here's an excerpt from our discussion, which you can read in full on our website at www.soka.edu/pbrc.

J P Kehlen

Today I am here with Esther Chang, Professor of Psychology. She joined SUA in 2007, so she ranks as one of our veteran faculty members. Thank you for agreeing to a PBRC interview.

Esther Chang
Thank you.

Can I ask you about your experience in education before SUA and your experiences as a teaching academic?

I have to say that education was a big part of my world growing up. I'd have to point to my Korean culture and to my parents; their coming to America was the major motivation I have for education.

Immigrant parents are really intense about education.

Very intense. They sacrificed and they didn't make it a secret that this was the only reason why they persisted in America. So it was a big part of my history, and when I went to Oberlin College, they were shocked and surprised. But I



thought that doing that was very consistent with how they raised me.

For our readers, I should add that Oberlin is one of the great liberal arts colleges in the US.

Yes, and it used to be well-known for its curriculum and academic rigor. So — I tell this story a lot just to make the point — I thought that you went to college to get married. That's why I went to college. And when I got there and I realized that there was more to college than just getting married, it really made me think more like a person. And I'm



very grateful for the education I had at Oberlin, it really added a different dimension to who I am. I would not be who I am without those two forces in my background, my parents and my culture, but also Oberlin College and the liberal arts aspect that I didn't get from my parents. They wanted me to be educated so I could marry well and be rich, to be stable and go up the social ladder, but Oberlin turned everything on its head and showed me that that's not really the purpose in life. And for someone growing up in that culture, that was that was a new idea. Those two are the most important forces to understand who I am. And those really brought me to Soka.

When I came to Soka I saw that was really connecting me to the student body. Here we're all kind of global in our backgrounds, and people understood what kind of parents and culture I came from, especially the students. I could really identify with them. There was a very strong connection between us and also just the liberal arts aspect, the Gen Ed curriculum.

My father, himself a professor for more than 40 years, once told me that if you become a liberal artist you can't get rid of it; it becomes part of you.

Yes. I mean I had to learn a lot through psychology. It was hard to become part of a discipline. But they never took away that kind of broader, liberal arts thinking. They didn't value it, but they never took it away. And my research is actually very similar to the life story that you're hearing. A lot of things brought me to graduate study in psychology, but the biggest was understanding the achievement gap.

This interview was held in February 2026 in Professor Chang's campus office. It has been condensed and edited for clarity.

MEET OUR NEW PBRC JUNIOR SCHOLARS!

The PBRC Junior Scholars have interests mirroring those of the PBRC humanistic development in the Pacific Basin. The program reflects the PBRC's goal of deepening its ties for Soka students, whose energies and ideas can shape the direction of the Center.



Yuji Ishiyama '26

I am Yuji Ishiyama, a senior student from Japan, concentrating in Humanities and International Studies. As I go through the interdisciplinary curriculum at SUA, my interests in politics and cultures in East Asia have grown. I was selected as a student research fellow at Soka Institute for Global Solutions (SIGS) for three years and explored measures to develop peaceful relationships in East Asia, where divergent perspectives on political, historical, and ideological issues undermine the regional coherence. I am currently working on the capstone project about “the parents also didn’t want their children to return to the village. For them, sending their children away from the village meant sending them away from life’s hardships.”

Maelgwyn Hallatu '26

Hailing from Indonesia, I had entered higher education with a commitment to tackling complex urban challenges. I developed an interest in realizing SDG 11: sustainable city planning, in my home country. Pursuing a liberal arts education has provided a robust foundation through several major projects across disciplines, including parsing historical archives, visualizing environmental data, and conducting social research. Such diverse training has solidified my commitment and ability to realize humanistic development, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, a critical hotbed of contemporary urban development. My upcoming capstone will build on this interest by exploring the emerging study of megaprojects in this part of the world, analyzing their outcomes and future viability as drivers of social and economic change. I look forward to sharing these research goals with the Junior Scholars and the PBRC.



Mai Le Hanh '27

Mai Le is an Economics student from Vietnam with a strong interest in international economics, trade dynamics, and how global policy decisions shape markets and business performance. Growing up between Vietnam, Japan, and the U.S. gave her a firsthand view of how deeply countries' economic choices are interconnected. At Soka University, she applies her analytical training using different tools to study topics such as tariff impacts, financial risk, and industry competitiveness. She hopes to pursue a career at the intersection of global economics and business strategy, translating complex international events into clear, actionable insights for companies.



Kailash Pariyar '27

Passionate about international studies, education, and community development, Kailash Pariyar thrives at the intersection of global engagement, research, and service. In addition, he is passionate about exploring nature, writing stories, and learning new languages. Currently pursuing an international studies degree with a focus on Spanish at Soka University of America, he is dedicated to leveraging education and policy to drive meaningful change, particularly in underserved communities.

Beyond his academic work, Kailash remains closely connected to his home community, co-founding a youth initiative known as Bishramko Chautari (Station for reflection) and leading projects such as Project Illuminant, which empower marginalized students in rural Nepal through monthly essay writing and dialogue practice. He is not only focused on expanding his professional experience in education, policy, and global development but also open to collaboration and discussion on research, community empowerment, and innovative solutions to global challenges. Feel free to connect!

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Sampson Apenteng Osei '27

Sampson Apenteng Osei is a Life Sciences student passionate about using biomedical research to address global health disparities. He has a strong background in both biology and chemistry, with research spanning genetic regulators of thrombosis at the University of Michigan Frankel Cardiovascular Center, nanoparticle filtration optimization, and the synthesis of anticancer compounds at Soka University of America under the supervision of Prof. Zahra Afrasiabi. Growing up in a region heavily impacted by preventable disease shaped his commitment to improving health outcomes across the Pacific Basin.

As a PBRC Junior Scholar, he aims to advance research that uplifts communities and fosters equitable access to care. Sampson has presented his initial research findings at the American Chemical Society National Conference in 2024 and 2025. He plans to pursue a Ph.D. in biomedical science and continue bridging research with impactful global health solutions.

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Chihiro Imajo '28

Chihiro Imajo is an international student from Japan and a second-year undergraduate student at Soka University of America. She is concentrating in Social and Behavioral Sciences. Through her coursework in Cultural Anthropology and Psychology, she has developed a strong interest in how culture and mind interact to shape empathy, cooperation, and cultural values that drive social progress across diverse societies. Her academic work explores how cultural values, memory, and social narratives influence behavior and decision-making. She has conducted ethnographic observations of campus cultural life and analyzed indigenous resistance movements across the Asia-Pacific region, examining how moral leadership, community identity, and collective meaning-making support peaceful and equitable forms of social change. From a psychological perspective, she is particularly interested in how empathy, moral judgment, and cooperative behavior emerge and contribute to social harmony.

Inspired by PBRC's mission of peaceful and humanistic development in the Asia-Pacific region, she hopes to contribute to PBRC's interdisciplinary work by integrating cultural and psychological insights to better understand how public policy and community well-being can be shaped through compassion, cultural humility, and cross-cultural understanding.

Emma Finch '28

Emma Finch is a sophomore student concentrating on International Studies. Growing up biracial between Los Angeles and Japan, she became particularly interested in the intersections and bridges between cultures. Her on-campus courses as well as an international learning cluster in South Korea, reflect her deep commitment to history preservation, human rights, and identity studies. Time abroad in Egypt and Turkey shifted her focus to Middle Eastern studies, and during her time at Soka University, she hopes to connect her background in East Asia with her new region of interest. Her specific points of study include the politicization of religion, documentary filmmaking, and cultural analysis. She speaks English, Japanese, and is currently studying Chinese at college.

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Miyuki Sase '28

I am Miyuki Sase, a second-year student from Japan. I am passionate about social and developmental psychology and hope to contribute to peace and reconciliation in East Asia through a psychological lens. Based on this motivation, my main research interest is in forgiveness and apology within East Asia. I aim to analyze how historical narratives led by the government influence public attitudes and enhance negative emotions, preventing sincere reconciliation in the regions. Furthermore, my goal is to develop educational approaches for primary schools in Japan, China, South Korea, and North Korea to overcome these obstacles and foster reconciliation and peace in East Asia.

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Yuka Miyahara '28

I am Japanese, from the Tohoku region. My hometown experienced the Great East Japan earthquake in 2011, which ignited my interest in natural disasters and nuclear power plants. Furthermore, the SUA mission statement made me realize that natural disasters and nuclear power plants are a problem for every country, especially in the Pacific Basin. Considering today's energy crisis, using nuclear power plants is inevitable even though there are many areas to improve for security and technologies. Therefore, the PBRC fellowship enables me to research how to use nuclear power plants in a more stable and safe way, which contributes to humanistic development in the Pacific Basin.

Yumiko Kasai '28

My name is Yumiko Kasai and I am a second-year student concentrating in Life Sciences. I was born in Japan and raised in Saipan, Guam, and Torrance, California. Growing up in the Mariana Islands, I witnessed firsthand the socioeconomic inequities and limited infrastructure that undermined people's access to healthcare. This background drives me to advocate for vulnerable populations: especially, women. I am committed to using my unique liberal arts education for the better of humankind and to be able to deliver humanistic and empathetic healthcare in the future. I am excited and grateful for this opportunity to contribute to the PBRC's mission by delving into how equitable healthcare can shape peaceful and humanistic development.



2025 PBRC Student Photo Contest

CONGRATS TO THE WINNERS!



Ten pictures were selected as winners of this year's PBRC Student Photo Contest, chosen for their artistic quality, relevance to PBRC's mission, and diverse representation of themes and Pacific regions. You can view the award-winning pictures on the PBRC website as well as in the library.

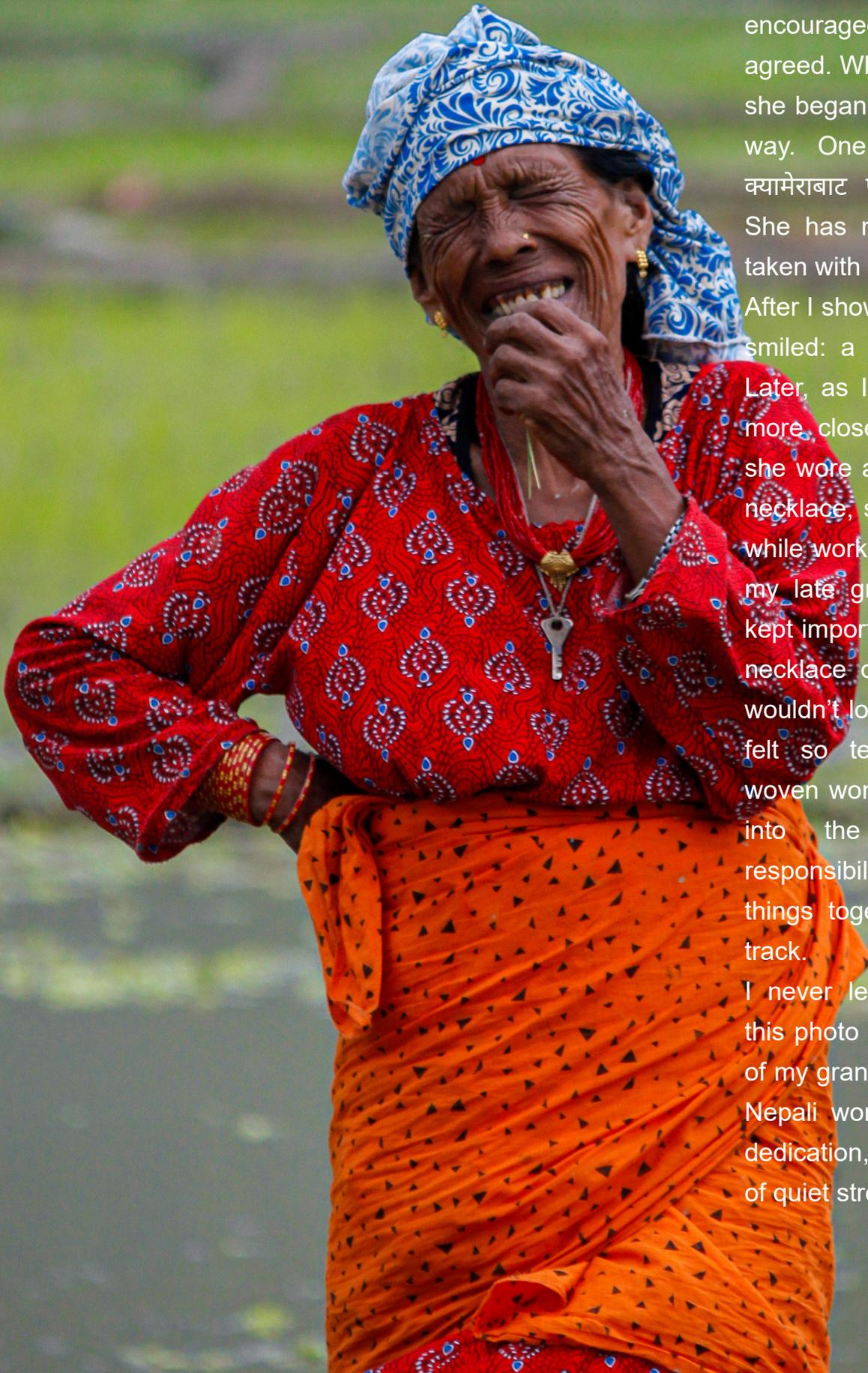
By Kriti Ghimire, PBRC Photo Contest Winner

I am honored that my photo, *Her First Portrait*, was chosen as the winner of this semester's PBRC photo contest and I am grateful for the chance to share a bit of the story behind it.

I took this photo while working on a documentary project in rural Nepal. In Nepal, as in many developing regions, rural life is closely tied to the land. Most people rely on farming for their livelihood, and daily rhythms are shaped by responsibilities to family, livestock, and field. For women especially, these duties often leave little room for leisure or self-expression. Their days are spent caring for children, tending to animals, working in the fields, and managing households.

I was there on Asar 15, a day known as Ropain Diwas, when farmers celebrate the start of the planting season. The fields are filled with people singing, dancing, and playing in the mud. Everyone comes together to mark the beginning of the monsoon planting. It was during these celebrations that I noticed her working quietly in the field.

As I walked by, one of her male family members called out, "ए: उसको पनि फोटो खिच रे"—Hey, take her picture too. I looked at her and asked if she'd like her photo taken. She was unsure at first, smiling shyly and looking to her friends for approval. I waited, and as her friend



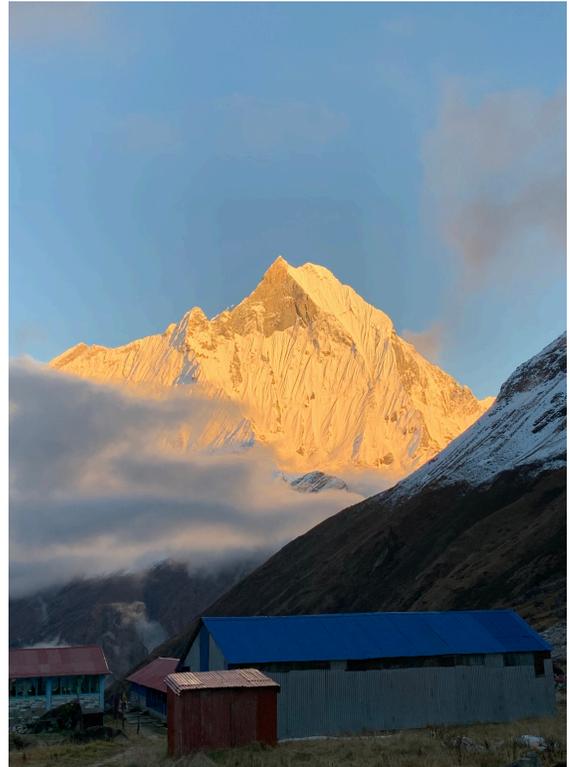
encouraged her, she finally agreed. When I lifted my camera, she began to laugh in a shy, soft way. One friend said, "कहिल्यै क्यामेराबाट फोटो खिचेको भए पो"—She has never had her picture taken with a camera before.

After I showed her the photo, she smiled: a quiet, shy happiness. Later, as I looked at the picture more closely, I noticed the key she wore around her neck like a necklace, so she wouldn't lose it while working. It reminded me of my late grandmother, who also kept important keys woven in her necklace or as bangles so she wouldn't lose it. That small detail felt so telling of how deeply woven women in rural Nepal are into the fabric of family responsibility, always holding things together, always keeping track.

I never learned her name, but this photo will always remind me of my grandmother, and of all the Nepali women who live lives of dedication, often unseen, yet full of quiet strength. ■



By Anh Nguyen, *Xuong Dong*,
Vietnam, 2025.



By Dimpi Lama, *Langtang*, Nepal, 2022.



By Anup Parajuli, *The Liquid Street*,
Venice, Italy, 2025.



By Shea Moloney, *Sandwalk*, Death Valley,
U.S.A., 2025.

FIELD REPORTS FROM PBRC JUNIOR SCHOLARS



With funding from the PBRC's Junior Scholars program, **Blair Tran '27** attended at the 2025 WRISE Leadership Conference, in Atlanta, GA. The conference focused on equipping women with the tools, networks, and industry insights—from policy shifts to technological innovation — necessary to lead the transition to a sustainable energy future.

Thanks to the generous support of the PBRC Conference Grant, I had the opportunity to attend and volunteer at the 2025 WRISE Leadership Conference, from October 14-16 in Atlanta, GA. As a conference volunteer, I moderated the keynote session “Women’s Challenges in the Energy Industry,” during which inspiring speakers shared their experiences holding leadership positions in a male-dominated field. Their reflections deepened my understanding of the structural and cultural barriers women face in the energy sector, as well as the importance of mentorship, advocacy, and inclusive leadership in advancing gender equity across the industry. A particularly memorable session for me was “How Washington and Energy Economics Are Reshaping Renewable Energy,” which offered valuable insights into policy developments, market trends, and economic factors driving the clean energy transition. Beyond the panels, I joined professional workshops on resume building, communication, and job-search

strategies for renewable energy roles, and took part in city tours exploring Atlanta’s sustainability landscape and green initiatives. The conference concluded with a beautiful dinner gala at the Atlanta Aquarium—an unforgettable evening celebrating women’s achievements in energy and the connections formed throughout the event. I am deeply grateful to the



Richmond Acquah '27 attended the Grace Hopper Celebration (GHC) 2025 Conference in Chicago, the largest annual conference in world dedicated to empowering underrepresented individuals in technology, including those working in finance and financial technology.



PBRC for making this experience possible and for supporting my continued growth in the clean energy field. ■

I would like to express my sincere thanks to the PBRC for supporting my attendance at the Grace Hopper Celebration 2025 in Chicago. It was indeed a transformative bridge between my academic studies in financial economics and the application of ethical technology. Immersing myself in a community of such innovators deepened my understanding of how humanistic judgment can be applied to the financial sector, which supports the socially responsible leadership traits in which I seek to develop.

A primary highlight of the conference was the opportunity to engage with industry leaders and visionary hedge funds, which significantly expanded my grasp of economic equity in quantitative trading. By exploring how predictive algorithms and data-driven models can be used to mitigate systemic biases, I now better understand what it takes to advance fairness and transparency in financial systems. This exposure has been a major contributor to helping me synthesize the economic theories of development that I have studied in the classroom with the practical necessity of creating inclusive innovations for marginalized groups that have historically been overlooked in asset-trading and social justice frameworks.

Moving forward, my upcoming collaborations are even more tailored. I am better equipped to work with faculty to explore how artificial intelligence and algorithmic modeling can support ethical decision-making for developing economies and strongly prioritize their participation in global financial markets. My goal is to serve as an ambassador for Soka's global citizenship values by advocating for equitable financial literacy and developing new technological branches within student organizations such as B2B and Soka Finance Society. This experience has empowered me to become a dedicated figure for financial and economic social justice, and I want to ensure that technological advancement serves the goal of human dignity. ■

PACIFIC BASIN RESEARCH CENTER

2025-2026 FACULTY FELLOW

RESEARCH LECTURES



Ikeda 400 (Grand Reading Room)
5 pm - 6 pm

Thursday, March 12
Dr. Monika Calef



**"Fire Suppression Efforts
and Their Impacts in Alaska"**

April 1
Dr. Sijia Yao



**"Transpacific Nostalgia
in Hong Kong Popular Music"**

April 23
Dr. Diya Mazumder



**"Estimate of Gasoline responsiveness to
Price Changes in India's Passenger
Transport"**

These events are free and open to the public.
Sponsored by the Pacific Basin Research Center, Soka University



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