

Navigating Belonging: Exploring settlement for South Asians in Hong Kong through narratives and participatory photography

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1. Introduction

Today I'm introducing a new project aiming to understand how people in South Asian communities in Hong Kong define, find and negotiate their belonging. The project is called Navigating Belonging, and it asks: What does it mean to belong, for people from South Asian backgrounds in Hong Kong? The project combines linguistic ethnography and creative practice, with a focus on oral narratives and participatory photography.

The understanding of belonging on which the research is based recognises its intersectionality, its complexity and its dynamic nature. Belonging has a political dimension too, and is relevant and important because it offers a perspective on public debates on social integration and inclusion, and on policy discourses about the legal processes of citizenship.

1.1 Navigating belonging for South Asians in Hong Kong

South Asians in Hong Kong experience discrimination, unequal access to education, employment, and public services, and barriers to participation in civic activities. The minoritisation faced by Hong Kong's South Asians has been brought into sharp relief too by the pandemic and by recent political upheaval.

There is a groundswell of academic interest in South Asians – and especially in South Asian youth – in Hong Kong, in areas allied to belonging, its construction and its navigation. Particular concerns have been their identity as Hong Kongers, the learning and use of Cantonese in relation to identity, the representation of South Asians in the media and online, language-based minoritisation in education policy, racial discrimination, in general terms, and South Asians' agency to challenge their marginalisation. The focus on young people and their education eclipses the idea that belonging in Hong Kong is an intersectional concern, and indeed one that can be examined through the study of arts practice as well as language.

1.2 Belonging: A personal concern

Belonging is a person's experience and expression of identity in relation to affinity with a place, a space or a community. As such, it's becoming a central concern in the sociolinguistics of mobility, as well as for the lived experience of people who are or have been on the move. This includes myself: I moved to Hong Kong from Leeds in 2021, uprooting from a settled environment, mid-pandemic and in the aftermath of profound social and political upheaval in Hong Kong. My own belonging has been challenged as, in some ways, I both no longer belong to a place I have left, and do not yet belong to a new one.

The Navigating Belonging project brings together my interests in belonging, narrative, participatory collaborative research using creative methods, and a long-standing interest in the Indian diaspora, originally motivated by research into digital literacy practices that I carried out in Gujarat in the 2010s. When I moved to Hong Kong, I became interested in the history of Hong Kong's South Asians, and I also began to understand how the concerns of South Asians there are tied to the broader fate of Hong Kong.

Our research asks: (1) How does belonging emerge in and through narrative and photography? (2) How can we develop innovative approaches to researching belonging? and (3) How can our understandings of belonging be used to inform policies, practices and debate on social integration?

In the rest of this session I describe the project's methodology, and discuss emergent themes and early data. I finish by outlining the process of stakeholder engagement that informs our aims, and that have evolved into a vibrant research network.

2. Approach and methodology

We locate our work in the holistic traditions of linguistic, visual and collaborative ethnography. Our approach combines sociolinguistics-informed narrative research, photovoice and digital storytelling. We're building on the methodology developed in a series of projects in the UK and associated with the TLang project, which generated a critical mass of work at the boundaries of applied linguistics and arts-based practice.

2.1 Phase 1 Participants and setting

Our project runs in three phases of fieldwork, comprising weekly workshops. Each phase is with a different group of participants.

Our first phase was at the Centre for Refugees in Chungking Mansions, TST, and has just ended. The CFR is our main project partner, and they helped us recruit five clients, all women who are forced migrants in Hong Kong, from a range of South Asian countries.

For the first five weeks of fieldwork, in January and February this year, we ran Photovoice Workshops, led by my colleague the researcher and photographer Christine Vicera, and supported by me and others in the team. With Christine, our participants learned some principles of photography, and took photographs relating to their own belonging, in the workshops themselves, on Photovoice walks in particular places in the area, and at home. In the workshops they described and talked about the photographs, and related them to their developing understanding of belonging, in carefully structured but quite informal discussions with the project team. In the last three weeks of the phase, which finished just last week, the participants worked closely with another researcher, Michelle Pang, to develop Digital Stories based on the photographs and narratives from earlier. These will be displayed online on the project website, and will comprise the public-facing visual record of the research.

3. Emergent Themes

I'd like to point to some potential directions we might take in our analysis.

3.1 Engaging with belonging through photography

It can be difficult to express, perform and reflect upon one's belonging with referential language. *Where or how do you belong?* is a hard question for everyone, even when linguistic resources are shared. Arts practice is a site of creative encounter, where participants can come together and think together, where they might engage with belongings they already carry, and simultaneously make these anew. We find that arts practice provides an important space for critical reflection, 'offering a public site for the abstracted discussion of contentious issues' (Stupples & Teaiwa 2016:11), for example the issue of what it is to belong.

I'll illustrate how we do this through an example from phase one. I've chosen an episode in our third workshop, where we did a Photowalk – trying out the techniques we'd been learning, on a walk around Kowloon Park. Participant Rosy (I'm using the pseudonym she chose herself) took a photo of a waterfall there, and talked about it when we got back to the Centre.

Here are my own fieldnotes from the workshop alongside Christine's post-workshop notes:

Data 1 JS fieldnotes from Workshop 3

Rosy took a photo of a waterfall in the park, and **tells us of being at the same place 28 years ago, when she accompanied her husband to HK on a business trip. She took a photo there at the very same place with her son who was 3 years old at the time.**

Data 2 Christine's post-workshop notes from Workshop 3

Photowalk

Teaching them the photolock on the phone + lighting

- As we were walking to Kowloon Park, we noticed how Sam Bhai opened up a new store. A and D stopped by to see the pani puri stall.

- Suggestion that we do our next photowalk at CKM

- A agreed saying that there are things at CKM reminds us of home

- Rosy says she'd rather not think about Sri Lanka, home is where she is now. Home was painful for her, the kidnapping, the torture

R's photo of the waterfall and her story about her visiting Hong Kong with her son and husband in the 1980s

This is the actual photo that Rosy took on the Photowalk.

Data 3 R's photo of a waterfall

[Photo S1 here]

When we returned to the centre, we uploaded our photos so we could see them on the screen and talk about them. Here is an extract of what Rosy said when invited to talk about her photos.

Data 4 Post-walk discussion with Rosy from Workshop 3, 09:00

4a

R: **and one is very important one this one this this waterfall**
I remember for 28 years back (.) when I my son [was

J: [really really

R: yeah when my son elder son three years so we will come back
to the Hong Kong to visit

J: yeah

R: **then that time same place I took the photo I have with me**
next time I will bring in show to you

She goes on to say how she took this photo when she and her son were on the trip to Hong Kong with her husband, many years ago.

4b

J: tell us more about the first time you saw this pho- this
waterfall

R: waterfall really my son very loudly and he said mom I want
take photo come come then yeah he's very young and small yeah
three years old (.) that time

J: was this when you first arrived in Hong Kong

R: no no my son yeah 28 years back when my son was three years
old so my husband take us visiting to Hong Kong

J: so you visited

R: [yes

J: [like as a tourist

R: yeah 2000 80 yeah 1980

J: yeah

R: yes

C: oh wow just visiting Hong Kong

R: visiting I went many times (xxx) yeah Singapore Malaysia Thailand India and China Hong Kong so er that time I carry with my son also because he's alone three years old so my husband always used to bring me and my son together when he was doing business

J: so he was working and you were with your son just to be tourists in Hong Kong

R: yes because my son er order goods from China you know there so many material and er textile we have shop also in [home country] so that time my son want to purch-

J: [your husband

R: [my husband want to purchase in there in China

J: yeah

R: so he's ask me to okay let's go together three of us then visit Hong Kong and go China and

J: did you just come once to Hong Kong

R: er two time before then

Finally she tells us how she liked Hong Kong and decided that it would be the place to come to when she had to leave her home country.

4c

J: and did you like it when you [visit it

R: [yeah yeah really

J: yeah

R: I I thought safe that's that's ri- that's the reason I came back to again

J: and that's why you came here

R: yeah came

J: you what you thought of [Hong Kong as a place to come

R: [yeah yeah yeah

J: when you left XXX

In the next workshop, Rosy brought the first photo she'd taken, on that much earlier visit, as I noted in my fieldnotes:

Data 5 James' fieldnotes from Workshop 4

Today's atmosphere in the workshop is very friendly, familiar. **Rosy brought in photos of her family in HK from 25 years ago**, when she came as a tourist/accompanying her husband on a business trip. She took photos of her little son, then aged three, in Kowloon Park. Last week, we took photos in precisely the same place, 25 years later. The photos she showed us were old, battered, water-damaged...

And here too is that original photo.

Data 6 R's original photo of a waterfall

[Photo S2 here]

3.2 A translanguaging space of belonging

Work on belonging in contexts of migration foregrounds the relationship with space and place. Our workshops prompt me to consider how space is socially constructed, and to think of the workshops themselves as socially-constructed spaces of belonging. In the multilingual and multimodal environment of the workshops, we can relate this to Li Wei's understanding of a translanguaging space, "a space for the act of translanguaging as well as a space created through translanguaging" (2011:1223).

This is evident in the Digital Stories part of our activity. Our participants are developing a storyboard for their digital stories, drawing on the narratives and themes that they have already been discussing in the earlier part of the project. Here is what three of them have produced.

Laxmi makes effective use of colour, and foregrounds her religious identity as being inextricably intertwined with her sense of belonging.

Data 7 D's storyboard from DS1

U has engaged with her lack of political belonging, alongside notes about the inequities of being an asylum seeker in Hong Kong. She too makes interesting use of the visual.

Data 8 U's storyboard from DS1

KK has used Panjabi, the language in which she is literate, to develop her story board.

Data 9 K's storyboard from DS1

3.3 Narratives of (non-)belonging

So what of the exploration of what it is to belong, in the discursive, translanguaging space of the workshops? It might be useful to think of our participants' belongings, and how they talk about them, as a series of concentric circles. This is perhaps a traditional understanding that relies a lot on scale.

For example, in the workshops participants will talk about their earlier belongings in other places, and about the challenges of belonging in Hong Kong, doubtless a problematic place in terms of its asylum policy.

So here is A, talking about what we might term her political non-belonging in Hong Kong. She's describing how she wanted to join a gym at a community centre near her home.

Data 10 Workshop 1 interview with A, 09:30

A: when you are starting to pull yourst- pull yourself er to what you want to do and then you see **oh my god I'm refugee I cannot because I don't have Hong Kong ID** (.) time step back (.) not forward

C: oh

A: because it's it is you don't lost that you are not refugee just your identity (.) you lost your your encouragement you're your thoughts

C: yeah

A: what being you so then then I feel so:: sad (.) I go I go ho::me and I think that oh:: I (.) because then li- I try to contact with my other friends who who join the gym or other (.) **so they said they apply with the passport copy or something like that so my passport has expired so so I feel that no way there is no way** because m- because many years I also f- er er searching for for erm study or some courses like I I I am interested but there is no [hh] so er:: so that's why I'm no I'm just waiting I I still have hope I in the future I will do

The political decisions at scales beyond the local restrict access to services only to those with the right documents, to those who are politically legitimate. A articulates how the lack of the correct documents – no ID card and an expired passport – relates in a clear and personal way to not being able to join the gym and beyond that to her sense of *just waiting*, albeit accompanied by a sense of hope.

And here is U, describing the challenges of navigating the asylum system, articulating the same sense of waiting and of being in limbo.

Data 11 Workshop 2 U 1:45:15

U: so well um life is still on um just like the sea it sometimes high and low tides (.) right now we're going to immigration cases we are going through challenges with housing and education um kids are growing older (.) spaces are getting smaller um no vacations no (xxx) **eight years in Hong Kong and still you're in the same situation the same living condition has have been** so that is I am working on those ones

There are counter-discourses as well. Rosy regards Hong Kong as a place of sanctuary. In the same discussion she talks about how she moved to Hong Kong.

Data 12 Workshop 2 Rosy 1:47:33

R: because I am er facing problem about my case giving (xxx) every time (xxx) but they asked me but not satisfied argument fighting because keeping focusing talenting to my case it will be success otherwise cannot (.) so:: (.) that's what I got success so **I am happy and my children are (.) have good life in Hong Kong so really I am very satisfied for everything about my life** (.) thank you

Rosy also appears to be grateful to the HK government and in turn the people of Hong Kong for providing her with an immigration lawyer.

Data 13 Workshop 2 Rosy 15:08

R: yeah this is the one happening in Hong Kong government where's the money come from (.) **that's what government paying to us (.) finding lawyer** (.) that is the truth

Some of our participants also talk a good deal about their belongings in the countries they have left. Here, in this tiny extract, A is talking about how she had chapati in Hong Kong, and the emotion it released:

Data 14 Workshop 2 interview with A, 15:10

A: then we came here in Hong Kong and first time I eat er chapati again at er [xxx's] home and she give us you know like like a **I just take a one er piece of roti and I am crying** [hh]

The interaction that is contingent and locally produced is heavily influenced by the large-scale global processes and inequalities of forced migration and asylum, and also by the sense that belonging elsewhere – a translocal belonging – sits just beneath the surface.

3.4 Ethics and our collaborative research

Since the start of our project, we've been talking about the ethics of collaborative community-based research with people subject to social exclusion, and about our own positionality as researchers. With this in mind, we have become aware of the relevance of – and the relationship between – research ethics and coloniality. Working as we are now with forced migrants from South Asian countries in Hong Kong, we are sensitive to how coloniality persists in the near-universal acceptance of the legitimacy of the nation state, a dominant discourse that can make one blind to the cruelty of the bordering practices involved in migration where people are forced to be on the move. The dynamics of bordering operate at an individual and very human level for people for whom belonging is neither “no more” nor “not yet”, for those for whom the politics of asylum is a daily and embodied concern.

We have also considered coloniality at a more micro scale, in research practice itself. How might we understand the place of epistemic decolonisation in the broader project of decoloniality? Linda Tuhiwai Smith's work is helping us to understand how – as she puts it (2013: 20) – ‘Decolonization is a process which engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels. For researchers, one of those levels is concerned with having a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values which inform research practices.’

This echoes a concern raised by our participants, which – in a nutshell – is that the well-meaning people they meet continually ask them what they *want*, but never follow it through with action. How, then, with our participants and in the context of our research, can we begin to address social issues within the wider framework of decolonization and social justice? We reject “objectivity” which in our case would be read as emotional indifference to the participants with whom we're working. We involve our participants as speakers in the public events we're part of, in Hong Kong. One of our participants is recording a podcast interview with us where she talks of her experience of Hong Kong's

asylum system. Our participants will contribute meaningfully to the production and authorship of outputs beyond their digital stories.

4. Stakeholder engagement

Finally we have a commitment to making our research relevant in the broader public sphere. Our third research question reads: How can our theoretically-grounded understandings of belonging be used to inform policies, practices and public debate on social integration? While I've no appetite for engaging with the central Hong Kong government, at local level we're discussing our research with District Officers, who have a community engagement brief. More productively perhaps we are involved with the active network of charities and NGOs of which the Centre for Refugees is a part.

Tangential to the project, but important for our project team, is the way these connections work at different levels: for example members of the team volunteer with the Centre for Refugees on the ground to support refugees and also migrant domestic workers made homeless during the pandemic, distributing food parcels and so on. We've been instrumental too in setting up a sanctuary scholarship scheme: two clients of the CFR will be joining my institution, the University of Science & Technology, as undergraduate students in computer science later this year.

Finally let me talk for a minute about the Belonging Research Network. One piece of advice I can offer to those planning a new project is 'get your stakeholder engagement in early.' Soon after I arrived in HK, I held a stakeholder event to support the development of the bid for the Navigating Belonging project. The success of that event prompted me to set up the Belonging Research Network and to instigate a seminar series that explores the theme of belonging in Hong Kong from a range of perspectives at the intersection of language, arts practice, migration and education. I work with a core team of five other people and a floating population of around another five. Our Nexus website is the online home of our activities, and we now have an Instagram account.