

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

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Introduction

Today we're discussing a project that aims to understand how people from South Asian backgrounds 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.

Belonging

The study of belonging has caught the academic imagination. It's a relevant issue for people who are on the move, for diasporic communities, and for times of change and uncertainty. Belonging has emerged as a major concern in recent years in public and political debate too, associated as it is with arguments about citizenship, social integration and immigration policy. For newcomers to a country, their belonging, their non-belonging, their no-longer-belonging and their not-yet-belonging are prominent as they navigate, successfully or unsuccessfully, political, public and employment systems, attempting to attain legitimacy as members of society.

Belonging in AL research

The question of what it is to belong relates therefore to political belonging in a place, to finding a job, to attending language classes, school, university. But it is more than this. The study of belonging recognizes it as translocal, complex, dynamic and intersectional. Across applied linguistics and sociolinguistics – especially the sociolinguistics of migration and mobility – it requires and has attracted a broad focus of attention.

What is more, the salience of belonging is not restricted to new arrivals who might 'no longer' or 'not yet' belong – in an official sense – to a nation state. Belonging seems to resonate as a metaphor for everyone who finds themselves in a new or a difficult situation.

Importantly for our project, we recognise that people express, represent and enact their belongings interactionally, through multiple means, sometimes but not always including language.

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 minoritization faced by Hong Kong's South Asians has been brought into sharp relief too by the pandemic and by political upheaval in 2019 and 2020.

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 minoritization 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.

Belonging: A personal concern

The shorthand definition of belonging that we've developed for the project considers it *a person's experience and expression of identity in relation to affinity with a place, a space or a community*. So as well as becoming a concern in the sociolinguistics of mobility, it's central to 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. Certainly in my early time in Hong Kong I felt that I both no longer belonged to a place I have left, and did not yet belong to a new one.

I am back and forth though, and I spend time in other places where I feel I belong. Here, for example. Increasingly therefore, the translocal experience of belonging is prominent.

Back to the Navigating Belonging project. The 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 its research workshops. I introduce the Digital Stories that our participants produced, and discuss emergent themes with reference to narrative data. I finish by making some comments on research ethics in relation to the project

Approach and methodology

We locate our work in the holistic traditions of linguistic, visual and collaborative ethnography. Our approach combines narrative research informed by sociolinguistics and cultural studies, photovoice and digital storytelling. Photovoice, a technique developed by Wang & Burris, was particularly productive on the project. Photovoice is a

qualitative research method that uses photography to empower participants and facilitate communication. Among its many benefits is that it enables participants to express their perspectives and experiences through their own photography, giving them a voice in the research process.

Our analytical approaches are broad. My colleague Christine is from a cultural studies background and is interested in how our approach challenges the colonality of the research process. She adopts participatory narrative inquiry in her work.

To examine the production of the digital stories that I'll talk about in a little while, we are drawing on mediated discourse analysis in the tradition established by the Scollons, Rodney Jones and others.

I myself have an interest in narrative in interaction, and in particular how identity and belonging are interactionally constructed. My work with the project data mainly draws on these ideas now.

Participants and settings

Our project ran in three phases of fieldwork, comprising eight workshops that took place weekly or fortnightly. Each phase was with a different group of participants.

Our first phase was at the Centre for Refugees in Chungking Mansions, in the area called Tsim Sha Tsui, in Kowloon. 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.

The second phase took place at my university, the Hong Kong University of Science & Technology. The participants were four undergraduate students.

The final phase was in a co-working space in Lai Chi Kok, Kowloon, called Dream Impact, and the participants were a mixed group of young people in their final year of high school and older professional people.

Each phase followed the same pattern, broadly.

Photovoice and digital storytelling workshops

For the first five sessions we ran Photovoice Workshops, led by Christine, 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 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, the participants worked closely with another researcher, Michelle, to develop Digital Stories based on the photographs and narratives from earlier. These are displayed online on the project website, and comprise the public-facing visual record of the research.

To give you a sense of the research workshops, I'll talk about the first phase, and refer to the experience of one of the participants, Rosy.

Phase 1 CFR

The international NGO Christian Action has a strong presence in Hong Kong, and among its activities is to staff and run the Centre for Refugees (CFR). This was the home of the first phase of the Navigating Belonging Project. The offices, workspaces, meeting rooms and kitchen of the CFR are spread over the 16th and 17th floors of Block E of Chungking Mansions.

This famous – perhaps infamous – building is on Nathan Road, in the heart of Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon, a bustling space for tourists and shoppers. Built in five tower blocks and on 17 floors, the building is a linguistically and culturally diverse space. English is prominent as a lingua franca, as people from globally-spread backgrounds interact with one another for their business.

The lower floors have shops selling groceries, electronics, phones, luggage, and cafes and restaurants serving South and South East Asian, Middle Eastern, and African food. There are barbers, clothes shops and tailors, shoe shops.

From the 4th floor and up there is a constellation of privately owned units. Here there are numerous guest houses, a popular choice for backpackers and budget travellers, including, for three days last year, Sari Pöyhönen. NGOs have offices in Chungking Mansions too, one of which is the Centre for Refugees, a support centre for Hong Kong's refugees and asylum seekers.

In the first phase of the Navigating Belonging project, we recruited five of the centre's clients who identified as 'South Asian'. They were motivated to discuss questions of what it means to belong to Hong Kong, given the socio-political challenges to belonging that they face in the process of claiming refugee status. We understood that they would also be keen to take the chance to tell their own stories in a way that suited them.

Engaging with belonging through photography

Where or how do you belong? is a hard question for everyone, even when linguistic resources are shared. Arts practice, in our case photography, offers an important space for the discussion of belonging.

To offer an example, I'll talk about our participant Rosy, and her experience of a Photowalk – trying out the techniques we had been learning, on a walk around Kowloon Park. Rosy took a photo of a waterfall there, and talked about it when we returned to the Centre.

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

12.58 We have uploaded our photos to the Padlet, and end the session by talking about it.

A, talking about her photos, comparing HK with home (Pakistan). Inevitable comparisons? She makes these spontaneously. More or less everything she says, it seems, prompts her to compare HK with 'my country'.

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.

(JS fieldnotes 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

(CV post-workshop notes from Workshop 3)

And this is the actual photo that Rosy took on the Photowalk:



(R's photo of a waterfall)

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

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

(Post-walk discussion with Rosy from Workshop 3, 09:00)

She goes on to say how she took this photo when she and her son had joined her husband on a business trip, a habitual occurrence.

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

(Post-walk discussion with Rosy from Workshop 3)

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.

- 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

(Post-walk discussion with Rosy from Workshop 3)

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

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...

(James' fieldnotes from Workshop 4)

And here is that original photo:



(R's original photo of a waterfall)

The photographs that our participants take are not just generative of narratives but are integral to their telling. As with the familiar practice of leafing through a family photo album, the stories that emerge are about the photographs we are looking at, and would not have been told without them.

Challenging the single story

The second phase of the Navigating Belonging project took place with a group of four undergraduate students from my own university.

Here is a photo – I just want to point out that yours isn't the only university in a nice location.

The second phase differed from the first phase in a number of ways, not least in that the sessions took place in teaching spaces within the university.

I am focusing on narratives that were generated in the multi-party collaborative talk of the workshops and in interviews.

I adopt a 'narrative as practices' approach in my analysis. This enables insights into how participants negotiate the legitimacy of their belonging, and how they challenge the single story of belonging typically available to minoritized students in Hong Kong.

There were four participants in this phase, Sid / Divi / Khalil / Sumeet.

I'm showing here screenshots of the Digital Stories that they each eventually produced.

In common with the other phases, the workshops took place over eight sessions, five Photovoice workshops and three Digital Stories workshops.

In the second Photovoice workshop, in May last year, Christine as the facilitator showed an extract from a TED talk from 2009 by the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie called *The Danger of a Single Story*. We included it in the workshop to stimulate a discussion about multiple identities.

Here is an extract of notes I took during the session, and Christine's mention of showing the video in her post-session written reflection.

In the lecture Adichie shares an anecdote about her roommate in her US university who regarded her with a "patronising well-meaning pity." The roommate only had a single story of Africa, a single story of pity. There was no room in the story for an African being similar to her in any way.

My fieldnotes written during the session:

4.36 Chimamanda's TED talk - Christine will show us the first five minutes. The danger of a single story. Khalil has seen this video - he thinks on a marketing course.

How is it today? Participants are busy in their lives, and are giving up quite a lot of time to be here?

4.42 - that was the excerpt I wanted to show you ... what are your initial thoughts?

Sumeet: The roommate was not being racist, it's just that they only have one story about me. When people hear that I'm Indian, they tell me how much they like curry. I don't think that's racist.

Christine's fieldnotes written after the session:

Why My Story Matters?

As usual, we started off this segment of the workshop by showing them the first 5 minutes of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's talk. When they shared what struck them the most it became apparent that they were able to pick up and even resonate with a lot of what she said. Not necessarily because they were more "proficient," in English, but because the decision to include this video in the NavBe (and be/longing) workshops was intentional. We wanted to target youth and young adults who went through the Hong Kong schooling system which had an emphasis on the "canon" of English literature

[...]

Khalil mentioned that his takeaway from this was the issue of unconscious bias. Sumeet on the other hand shared her experience about Indian food being pigeonholed into the category of "curry" to which Sid agreed. I recall Meenakshi's poem, "Curry" which came out of the pilot workshops. It might be worth sharing this with our participants at one point. Khalil then shared about how he himself was also guilty of understanding folks around him from the single story he knows about them.

I focus now on our participant, Sumeet, and the reflections on the experience recounted in Adichie's TED talk, that both Christine and I picked up on in our fieldnotes. Here is the extract.

Slide and recording

PV2, whole group discussion. S: Sumeet; C: Christine; P: other participant

0:56:56

1 S: I think this whole time (.) one thing I noticed
2 was how she:: was able to identify that (.)
3 her partner was not being racist and her roommate was
4 not being racist (.) but rather it was just the one story
5 that she knew of Africa (.) and immediately that made
6 me think of anytime perhaps **I've communicated with**
7 someone who was a local (.)
8 C: mm
9 S: and they told me they loved curry [cos they
10 C: [oh no
11 S: thought I was [Indian
12 P: [laughs
13 S: and so it was really:: like at that point like
14 I don't get offended or anything cos I assume that's
15 just all that they know about **my culture** but then
16 C: yup
17 S: but then (.) it's now that I know OK it's because of
18 all these stories (.) that they've possibly heard from (.)
19 people around them that makes them think OK **India**
20 equals curry or something
21 C: yeah yeah
22 S: [and it
23 P: [it does
24 all: [[laughter]]

Analysis

Here is some of my analysis of this extract. This is Sumeet's initial reflection, straight after watching the video. She notes that she immediately recalled times *I've communicated with someone who is a local* (lines 6-7) – by which we assume she is referring to a Hong Konger from a Cantonese linguistic and Chinese cultural and ethnic background. In saying this, she positions herself as someone who is in some way *not* local, despite having lived her entire life in Hong Kong.

She reports the response that she says is typically made – that *they told me they loved curry* because, as she says, *they thought I was Indian* (lines 9-11). She then refers to *my*

culture (line 15) – indexing a cultural identity not as a Hong Konger but as someone from an Indian background, and reinforcing what for her is her non-local status.

She presents her interpretation of this recurring event in the light of her listening to Adichie's TED talk, prompted perhaps by the repeated use of the word 'stories' in the talk. In her account, the experience of hearing *all these stories* makes 'locals' think *India equals curry or something* (19-20). The supportive backchannel from facilitator Christine contrasts – to the amusement of all – with one of the other participants confirming – jokingly – that *it does* (line 23).

After this second workshop, we also conducted semi-structured interviews with some of the participants, including Sumeet. She continued to talk about her sense of belonging, particularly in relation to the Cantonese language and to her educational experiences, from kindergarten through primary school to secondary school.

Michelle interviewed Sumeet, and asked her about how she felt after the first two workshops.

At the outset (lines 1-4), when asked how she is enjoying the workshop experience, she begins with a positive evaluation: *I'm loving it honestly*.

1 S: I'm loving it honestly like it's it's been one journey
2 like I said earlier actually like which allowed me
3 to kind of reflect on (.) how my past experiences have
4 possibly changed or how I felt about belonging

She summarises her feelings so far about the workshops in relation to her sense of belonging. She points to the theme that dominates the interview, what we might call the biographical dimension of belonging.

The next extract shows how – as she reports to Michelle – the very first activity led her to feel confused about her sense of belonging.

6 S: um and honestly like the very first workshop like um
7 I know we were supposed to bring like an object right
8 M: mhm
9 S: so like something that tells you about the sense of belonging
10 but then **I was so confused** because I was like
11 I don't really know if like
12 M: mm
13 S: do I really like call myself a Hong Konger: or like an In:dian
14 M: mm
15 S: because I- I felt like you know it was (.)
16 even others touch upon this topic it's like you know
17 that feeling of (.) either I'm both or I'm none really
18 M: mm:
19 S: so it was just that and then I'm really hoping maybe
20 by the end of this workshop series **I'll be able to know**
21 what exactly belonging is or how I want to define it
22 M: mm
23 S: so I'm looking forward to more yeah

She notes how participants were asked to bring an object to the first workshop that said something about their sense of belonging (line 7-9). For her, this provoked questions about her identity, and thoughts about what she might be able to get from the workshops. She claimed to be confused (line 10) because of her identity, what she should call herself (line 13), in relation to the two states to which she has an attachment, India and Hong Kong (note, not China). She was born in Hong Kong, to parents from India. She explains this sense of identity as it relates to nationhood as being a feeling of *either I'm both or I'm none really* (line 17). These are the kinds of questions she hopes the workshops will help resolve: *I'll be able to know what exactly belonging is or how I want to define it* (line 21).

In the next extract she expands further, and mentions an activity called Rivers of Life that took place in the second workshop.

- 24 M: do you feel like you're starting to get a better sense of
 25 that or are you even more confused
 26 S: oh [both laugh] I feel like it goes both ways [because um
 27 M: [mm
 28 S: when we do like exercises like **the river thing** so
 29 M: mm
 30 S: like when you're thinking back you're like okay **I definitely**
 31 see in different phases of my life
 32 M: mm
 33 S: I identified as a different like with a different community
 34 M: mm

In this activity we invited the participants to picture their life so far as a river, which might have smooth gentle stretches, but also rocky phases, rapids, unexpected twists and turns. She reflects on the Rivers of Life activity (*the river thing*, line 28) and – primed by that reflection – remarks that *I definitely see in different phases of my life I identified as a different like with a different community* (lines 30-33).

Then in her summarising comment for this episode in the interview interaction she both resolves and complexifies the question.

- 35 S: but then when you start to realize that you're like okay
 36 so maybe I can define where I want to belong but then
 37 at the same time it doesn't really help you get
 38 a clear picture as to (.) what that looks like for you

She maintains that she can define belonging for herself, in relation to the geographical locus of belonging (line 36). In doing this, it doesn't make the picture of belonging any clearer (37-38).

Summary

A focus on the narratives emerging in the interaction in our workshops and interviews enables insights into how participants negotiate the legitimacy of their belonging, and – importantly – how they challenge the single story of belonging typically available to minoritized students in Hong Kong. A lot of the participants' talk in the workshops is around their resistance to being positioned as the linguistic, cultural and racialised

other. We can conclude that established ideas of belonging in terms of cultural and linguistic homogeneity are inadequate in the Hong Kong context.

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 marginalisation, 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.

I'm referring particularly to the first phase of our work, with the clients of the Centre for Refugees.

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. Tomorrow three of our participants will be taking part in a symposium about the digital stories, that we're hosting online.