

Navigating belonging for South Asians in Hong Kong: Challenging the single story

James Simpson, Division of Humanities, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

AAAL,

This is 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.

Why belonging?

The study of belonging has caught the academic imagination. It's a relevant issue 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.

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*. For newcomers to a country and for minoritised people, their belonging, their non-belonging, their no-longer-belonging and their not-yet-belonging relate to their legitimacy, as they navigate, successfully or unsuccessfully, society's complex systems.

Belonging in AL research

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 all of us who find ourselves 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 was brought into sharp relief too by the pandemic and by political upheaval in 2019 and 2020.

In the literature particular concerns about South Asians in Hong Kong in the literature are 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.

With a nod to the theme of our colloquium, I note that there is a tendency in this body of work to orient to what Eve Tuck (2009) calls damage-centered research, that is, research which reinforces a one-dimensional narrative (a 'single story') of minoritised groups as oppressed. Our own work follows an epistemological shift towards desire-based research which places the wisdom, hope, and creativity of participants as central, in order to upend dominant, deficit narratives about their lives.

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.

RQs

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?

Approach and methodology

This work is located in the holistic traditions of linguistic, visual and collaborative ethnography. We combine 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, and afforded reciprocity and reflexivity in the research. Photovoice is a qualitative research method that uses photography to empower participants and facilitate communication. Among its many benefits is that it centres participants' perspectives and experiences in the research process through their own photography.

Our analytical approaches are broad. I myself have an interest in narrative in interaction, and in particular in how identity and belonging are interactionally constructed.

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, Kowloon. We worked with five clients of the Centre, 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 Kowloon, with a mixed group of participants: 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 RA Christine Vicera, and supported by me and others in the team. With Christine, our participants learned some principles of photography, and took photographs of things associated with 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 Pang, to develop Digital Stories based on the photographs and narratives from earlier.

Phase 2: Challenging the single story

The second phase of the Navigating Belonging project took place – as I said – with a group of four undergraduate students from my own university. The workshop sessions were in university teaching spaces.

We'll look at 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.

Participants

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

In the second Photovoice workshop, 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.

Fieldnotes and 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.

In my fieldnotes written during the session I note that Sumeet said:

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.

Let's focus now on that participant, Sumeet, and her 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.

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

This is Sumeet's initial reflection, straight after watching the video. She notes that she immediately recalled times she's *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.

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* (9-11). She then refers to *my culture* (15) – indexing a different cultural identity, and reinforcing what for her is her non-local status.

In her account, the experience of hearing *all these stories* makes 'locals' think *India equals curry or something* (19-20). Christine's backchannel contrasts with one of the other participants confirming – jokingly – that *it does* (23).

After the session, Michelle interviewed Sumeet, and asked her about how she felt following the first two workshops. At the outset her evaluation is positive: *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 this interview, what we might call the biographical dimension of belonging.

She goes on to explain how an activity in the first workshop 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

The request to bring an object to that workshop, one that said something about her sense of belonging (line 7-9), provoked questions for her about her identity, and thoughts about what she might be able to get from the workshops. She claimed to be confused (10) because of her identity, what she should call herself (13), in relation to the two places to which she has an attachment. She explains this sense of inbetweenness as being a feeling of *either I'm both or I'm none really* (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* (21).

Transculturality

Here it's useful to think about Sumeet's talk with reference to transculturality, a notion that challenges the stability of cultural boundaries and in Pennycook's words (2007, p. 92), brings us 'beyond questions of ownership and origins.' This perspective can shed light on how the complex interplay of factors (family migration histories, immigration policies, and tensions between cultural heritage and the dominant cultural milieu of the host society) shapes the ways in which young South Asians in Hong Kong negotiate modes of belonging. Sumeet's talk indicates that she struggles to locate her belonging, in relation to two reified cultures.

For example, in common with all the participants in this phase, she uses the term *locals* to refer to Cantonese-speaking people of Chinese heritage and ethnicity in Hong Kong. She thus positions herself reflexively (Davies and Harré 1990) as a non-local, an outsider, questioning whether she is allowed to belong to the cultural group she labels Hong Konger. And in the next extract, from the very first workshop, she talks of her

learning and use of Punjabi in relation to her strong sense of belonging to her Punjab heritage.

1 and then um I think this connecting to what my **native language** is
2 because um I I don't go back home to India very often
3 **I come from Punjab** which is a state in the north
4 um but then I do still feel like I'm connected to my state
5 because I've been trying to like I can speak **speak it fluently**
6 but recent years I've been trying to also
7 **brush up in terms of my writing**
8 and um and then when it comes to anything like that
9 my grandparents they feel really proud because
10 my siblings aren't really putting in that kind of effort but then
11 when they see me doing that they they feel that **sense of pride**
12 and like they feel like **they've accomplished something**
13 like you know we were able to kind of make our granddaughter
14 **feel like you know this is where you belong**
15 and **it's important to know** where you where you're
16 **where your roots are**

Extract 3 (PV1 0:39:10-0:40:00)

She refers (in line 1) to her *native language*, Punjabi, and to *back home in India* (2); then notes that she *come[s] from Punjab* (3). She orients to her feeling of connection (4), which she relates to her knowledge and learning of the Punjabi language. She speaks this *fluently* and is *trying to [...] brush up in terms of my writing* (5-7). Her attempts to learn to write appear to be motivated by a desire to please her grandparents. The *sense of pride* (11) that Sumeet reports they feel, concerning her learning of Punjabi, is based on the idea that *they've accomplished something* (12); animating her grandparents' position, she says they have made her *feel like you know this is where you belong* (14), because *it's important to know ... where your roots are* (15-16).

In response to my query later, Sumeet notes in a text message (WhatsApp, 12/01/2025): *I was born in Hong Kong, but i suppose i always referred to Punjab as back home because that is where my family is from*. Echoing the language she used in the workshop, she continues: *so there is a sense of Punjab is where my roots are and so thats my true home*.

So belonging emerges as dependent on connections that are fostered through family ties and shared cultural markers, in Sumeet's case the literacy practices that link her to her grandparents and hence to her Indian heritage. Through engagement with, and encouragement from, others including her grandparents, her belonging in/to Punjab is strengthened and maintained. Conversely, through the interaction with those she calls *locals*, her sense of belonging in Hong Kong is exposed as contingent, and open to question. We might say that she finds navigating her belonging to be difficult, even a source of confusion, when her reference points are fixed and reified cultural entities.

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 young people in Hong Kong. Recalling Eve Tuck's call for a desire-based and

not a damage-centred research – one that places the wisdom, hope, and creativity of participants as central – our participants’ talk in the workshops is often around their resistance to being positioned as the linguistic, cultural and racialised other.

Sumeet, in the digital story she eventually produced, subverts the cultural binaries that she initially appears to be caught between. In the digital story she associates belonging, at least in its visual representation, more firmly with a culturally diverse friendship group than specifically with Hong Kong or ‘back home.’

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