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Conversation with Contemporary Scholar, Dr James Simpson

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Abstract

PGR Helen Robinson talks to Dr James Simpson about his new academic role in Hong Kong which has opened up interesting research opportunities. James' areas of expertise comprise, inter alia, language education and migration, adult ESOL, multilingualism, and language education and development. Covering some of these areas in the context of challenges posed by moving countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, this conversation offers insights into work-life dynamics in strangely different circumstances. With an interdisciplinary audience in mind, it is hoped that this will not only encourage current and future researchers to push boundaries in the pursuit of knowledge and development of collaborative partnerships, but also to reflect on the human side of academia, occasionally navigating troubled waters.

To read James's up-to-date profile and publication list, see:

<https://huma.hkust.edu.hk/people/james-simpson>

Introduction: 2020 – a year to remember?

The constraints of COVID-19 on academia since 2020 have become the subject of numerous papers and conferences, with many including the words 'pandemic' or 'challenging' in their titles. In the area of language and migration studies, as many others, the crisis has presented a rich research field – much of which in the early stages necessitated a speedily learnt shift to online working – a balancing act which in some cases made career progression and research output grind to a halt. This semi-structured conversation, the first of its kind for Hillary Place Papers, follows the journal edition's theme of 'flexible research in mind-bending times', looking back on the past two years through a longer lens, framing language and migration in the context of academic mobility and reflecting on the practical and political tensions involved in research development. Helen's questions in direct speech are in bold print (**H**). James's direct responses are in italics (*J*).

Following the now-traditional form of a transnational TEAMS dialogue, our conversation began just after my English breakfast as the academic working day in Hong Kong was drawing to a close. On March 23rd 2022, exactly two years after the first UK lockdown, my supervisor Dr James Simpson kindly agreed to discuss his

recent appointment as Associate Professor of Humanities at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST), including the personal intricacies of taking his family across the world to a politically volatile country in the middle of a global health hiatus. Some HPP readers may have known James in person as Senior Lecturer in Language Education at Hillary Place since his arrival in 2004, or, in the context of their own education studies, may have read his work but, having experienced only two visiting professorship posts away from the UK during his period of employment at Leeds – both in Jyvaskyla, Finland – James was ready to move on. I was interested first in the impact that the pandemic had had on his work at Leeds and if this was a factor in his decision to move.

Teaching and research output in pandemic mode

James described how he had found the move to online teaching a useful and interesting experience: In the midst of what he termed as *'traumatic industrial action'* (with which, he emphasised, he was in full support) adding to the stress of the time, the virtual classroom became a physical reality within the space of about a week and for many staff the spare room transformed overnight into the office. This had obvious effects on family and work-life routine but, when not teaching online, James said that he and his wife actually enjoyed the challenge of supporting their three boys – all at different stages of education – Masters, A levels, and GCSEs. But how did research and writing fit into this? James explained how his *modus operandi* had changed:

J: Once I decided to put research to one side and focus on teaching, it enabled a lot more thinking time, forcing me to concentrate on content and delivery. I was scripting lectures, as were many others, and it did make me think carefully about what I was trying to convey and how best to convey it, so in some ways it was a very useful experience. In fact, in Hong Kong, people have been working online since Autumn 2019 because the pro-democracy protests forced campuses to close. There are students here who have barely spent any time on campus at all.

Mobility and resettlement: from Leeds to Hong Kong

Academic papers do not usually include details of the practicalities of career progression but I was curious to know how James had coped after seventeen years at Leeds, clearing out the office, packing up his vast library, and I wanted to understand what 'migrant researchers' could expect when moving abroad to work, not just to study. James described how, after three full carloads, his work zone in Hillary Place was finally empty and its contents packed off to Hong Kong in July 2021. Then, an unforeseen and disastrous shipping experience left him and the family high and dry

when just before Christmas they discovered that the container was still in the UK! Fortunately they were able to cancel the shipment and send it back to their home in Leeds but, consequently, James hasn't got all the physical literature he is used to. Nodding at the depleted bookshelves behind him in his new office, James admitted that this makes him feel less permanent than he would like, preferring hard copies to online reading for inspiration.

H: So, did the pandemic conditions precipitate your decision to leave Leeds?

J: No, in fact, it was a decision taken pre-pandemic. In migration policy people talk about 'pull and push factors', but it's never quite that straightforward. Leaving Leeds was at least in part because seventeen years is a long time in one place; coming to Hong Kong was fundamentally a family decision – we all wanted to try something new at a point in our lives when we still could. Before family responsibilities increased, my wife and I considered ourselves very mobile people. I'd lived and worked in Greece and the Gulf; my wife had grown up in Spain and had lived in Turkey and Singapore, so it was quite shocking to realise that we had been in Leeds for so long and were not particularly mobile after all. We wanted to experience life in another country, in a very different place, and we didn't want to wait until we were too old to enjoy it.

This caused pause for reflection upon the forced migrant research participants with whom I myself am working, who have no choice but to leave their home country and find a safer haven. James was in fact choosing a much more *unsettled* part of the world to migrate to. I queried his motivation for this:

H: What made you choose to move to Hong Kong in its current heightened state of unrest?

James explained that he was invited to consider the position in early 2020 by a former Leeds colleague now based in Hong Kong. After applying and being accepted, the family decided together that this was a good idea, but between that point and their departure, they faced regular household debates regarding whether or not it was right to set sail. This was not just a matter of relocating possessions and jobs, but involved a shift of ideological context which, as James reflected, could have more than serious implications for him as an academic:

J: It did feel like a huge decision, not just moving in the middle of a global health crisis but because of the politics in Hong Kong. The region has pivoted politically to align with Beijing in the last two to three years since the suppression of the Pro-Democracy

movement and the introduction of the national security law, which came into force in June 2020, bringing with it sweeping but vague powers. Vague in the interpretation of concepts like sedition, and sweeping in the sense that it can encompass more or less anything, plus, the punishment can be as harsh as the government wants.

Hong Kong had become a much more authoritarian place politically in between applying for the job and arriving in the country, and this, James acknowledged, did cause him several sleepless nights. So in fact, the political context was much more of a concern than health and family worries during the pandemic.

Migration journey and resettlement challenges

I asked James how this uncertain context, (including enforced close confinement with his teenage son initially), had shaped his first impressions of his new home in Summer 2021:

J: That was an interesting initial experience, but not necessarily one to repeat in a hurry! My youngest son and I had been due to fly to Hong Kong ahead of my wife, so that I could start my job and my son could start school. Then, flights were cancelled, pandemic restrictions put in place, and you could no longer fly directly from the UK but had to stay in a country from which you were allowed to travel into Hong Kong.

James and his son therefore spent three weeks in Greece where they could at least move about freely in what has become known as 'the washout'. On arrival in Hong Kong, three more weeks were spent together, this time in hotel quarantine. (Hong Kong has some of the most stringent anti-coronavirus-spreading rules in the world which kept the virus out effectively until early 2022). This made James's arrival context much more restrictive than he had anticipated, stepping out of quarantine straight into his new role, welcoming lecture theatres full of students to their new university, which was quite a shock. There was no time to get used to the idea of being in the country and work out the political situation before starting work.

H: How did this turbulent situation affect you as you settled in?

J: My wife and I had always said we would never move anywhere permanently without spending some time there first but the pandemic made this impossible. It did feel very hectic at first and I was probably not as calm as I had hoped I would be, starting my new job.

Academic freedom

This led me to reflect further on James' migration choices and how his academic voice had been affected. As a respected western academic, seeking to stretch and refresh his work, his migration experience, although testing, had not been soul-destroying. Mobility, after all, 'constitutes a characteristic of Homo sapiens' (Piller, 2017, p.101). To migrate is human, it might be said, and James had already emphasised how *unsettling* he had found it to be so settled in Leeds. I wondered how his voluntary relocation to such a politically charged environment had affected his freedom of speech and movement as an academic.

H: Is the new national security law of concern to you now in your working life?

J: It hasn't affected me personally at all but it's a really interesting question. The way that it's framed for academics here is always around academic freedom and self-censorship. Academic freedoms are protected, and nobody is obliged to adjust their teaching or research development, but within a political context, it's reasonable to suppose that academics are bound by the same laws as everybody else. The fact that academics don't seem to be a target is good, but it still causes me great discomfort to be in a place where journalists, lawyers, opposition politicians, etc. can be – and are – jailed.

Although James said that he himself does not feel particularly restricted, he admits that, as nobody really knows where the red line is in terms of criticising the Hong Kong government, it would not be advisable to be the one to cross that line just to find out.

H: How far does your work veer towards that red line? Are you in any danger of serious reprimand?

J: Although my research area of language and migration does bring me into political territory, I don't think I do the kind of work that would cause the architects of the national security law any great concerns.

As a humble UK postgraduate researcher, I had to confess that these responses were quite startling and I could not immediately imagine working under these conditions. James' work is progressing nonetheless and in fact, unexpected liberties are cropping up for him, as we shall see.

Developing research in challenging contexts

One of James' new key roles is directing the Masters programme in International Language Education alongside an undergraduate course in Language and Migration. It's a very different working atmosphere and I was keen to know if it was worth the trouble of all the upheaval.

H: So how does the Hong Kong context differ from your role at Leeds in practice?

J: The teaching and administrative loads are certainly lighter in Hong Kong. With a full-time personal administrator looking after that side of the programme, this leaves more time and space to develop a research programme in a brand-new context, which was one of my main aims in coming here.

H: What research foci have you taken with you and how are these developing in Hong Kong?

J: Much of my research at Leeds was in the area of language education for adult migrants in the School of Education. In Hong Kong, I explicitly wanted to broaden out into language migration more generally, exploring other areas of concern in the sociolinguistics of mobility and migration. I do retain an interest in education, but it's no longer my main research theme. I particularly want to look at labour migration and language policies as they relate to migration, for instance. I'm especially interested in the notion of belonging as the social dimension of identity.

From a sociolinguistic migration perspective, as James highlighted, identity is a crucial concept in the study of language migration. Wanting to explore the relationality of identity to a variety of factors in more depth, James has been granted 18 months' funding from October 1st 2022 for a project entitled "Navigating Belonging: Exploring settlement of South Asians in Hong Kong through narrative and participatory geography". I wondered how this notion affects everyday settlement processes in Hong Kong's troubled context:

H: Given the more pressing political concerns you have raised, is identity such an important consideration for everyday Hong Kong residents?

J: In my background reading about the history of Hong Kong, I recognised that the South Asian population was (and always has been) really important to its past as to its future. It's a useful starting point for exploring notions of identity and belonging in such an interesting place.

Prompted by discussions with colleagues and others, and in answer to recurrent key questions such as ‘what is Hong Kong identity?’ and ‘who is a Hong Konger?’, James has initiated the *Belonging Research Network* (<https://nexusbrn.hkust.edu.hk/>) which he hopes will open up important conversations in the coming months, as he observed:

J: The concept of belonging is such a big one but discussing it in relation to the geographical and political space of Hong Kong gives us some structure. Our interest in the intersection of language, creative practice and narrative education helps to frame our thinking.

Within this framework, James explained, there is much scope for some genuinely interesting and productive discussions. It is hoped that the new *Belonging Research Network* website will include a series of events and seminars exploring understandings of belonging in contemporary Hong Kong at a time of major political change during and in the aftermath of a global health emergency, all this, James stressed, in a globalised world so often in turmoil.

James had prior experience of establishing a number of important ventures in the UK, notably the ESOL Research Forum for researchers and teachers interested in adult migrant education, and the *Migrant English Support Hub (MESH)* a charity connecting teachers and learners to accessible English classes in Yorkshire and the Humber. I was interested to learn how heavy the bureaucracy in Hong Kong was compared to the UK and if leaving Britain meant that grant-seeking for such ventures was more arduous. I was surprised by James’ answer to my question:

H: How do the processes of setting up research initiatives such as the *Belonging Research Network* compare in Hong Kong to the experiences you had in the UK?

J: It’s very much easier here when you’re exploring ideas and wanting to create links between academia and support organisations. Everybody is delighted, both within the institution and beyond, that the questions I’m interested in about language and belonging in Hong Kong, are being explored from an academic perspective in a way that bridges researchers and research participants. Funding and support are easier to secure and finding people to work with is less of a problem. If you have a good idea, it’s easier to get an initiative off the ground.

Of course, Hong Kong is a smaller place, and the bureaucratic structures are less embedded. My university here is younger – only 30 years old – and richer too, comparatively.

Research flexibility

Tempting though it was to explore further the notion of why such processes are easier in Hong Kong, our time was limited, and I wanted to ask more about flexible research methods in Hong Kong, in line with our publication title.

H: What personal or professional adaptations have you had to implement since moving, in terms of work/life balance?

J: I'm still involved in the Migrant English Support Hub (MESH) and I still manage the ESOL Research Forum. These are labours of love really – things that I'm most proud of during my time at Leeds, which in the end became activities outside my university role. Online communication makes such things possible. We wouldn't be talking now if it weren't for digital technology, but the different time zones can make things difficult.

James explained that he has a permanently full, two-hour window in his daily schedule between 16h00-18h00 Hong Kong time where he can meet with colleagues in Europe without disturbing work or family routines. He outlined a large project funded by the EU with which he has been able to continue online.

J: The Carewell TF Project (<https://research.reading.ac.uk/transnational-families/>) is an interdisciplinary endeavour on which I was co-investigator before leaving Leeds and with which I am still involved even though I'm in a very different, distant place. The project concerns transnational families in Europe caring for family members across generations. As a transnational person myself now, this topic is close to my heart. Back in March 2022, not long after I had moved, my parents both came down with coronavirus and I thought that I'd have to be involved in transgenerational, transnational care. Both parents are fine now, but it did bring it home to me that the concerns being investigated on this project are shared by many people worldwide.

The technological flexibility which the pandemic has brought has facilitated many projects across the globe and James is also working with colleagues in the UK and

Europe on a project funded by the IELTS Research Fund. (IELTS, as many will know, is the International English Language Testing System which speakers of languages other than English must hurdle to gain access to higher education). James explained more:

J: Leeds colleagues have been quite successful in the past in getting small but prestigious grants for such projects. My colleague, a former Leeds PhD researcher, is in Italy, I'm in Hong Kong, but we're carrying out mainly online research in the UK investigating potential barriers that IELTS presents to forced migrants aspiring to higher education in the UK.

This is a particularly timely venture, given the number of forced migrants in the UK who want to access universities to continue their career progression and regain lost forms of capital. So, home and abroad, it is possible to maintain fluid research pathways with collaborative teams even though online dynamics can be a little patchy. But how has James' own sense of belonging as a researcher in a country not (yet) his own developed?

Belonging and communication

For many migrants – especially forced migrants to the UK – there is an obligation to learn English as an immigration status requirement and this can be problematic in terms of 'integration' (see Favell, 2019; Schinkel, 2018) into UK society. "No language - no integration", some politicians would argue (see Simpson, 2021). For James, now living and working in a country where English is not the main dominant language, I asked how he feels about his own sense of belonging and ability to settle when he knows little of the language most residents use to interact?

J: I'm careful about how I talk about my language learning. In the past I have been very critical of my lack of competence and abilities but then I realised that I was talking and thinking about myself in ways that I would never dream of doing about anybody else struggling as a language learner, so I thought – why be so unfair on yourself? I do find your work (Helen) on language learning and communicative repertoire, and that of your PhD colleague, Ana, whom I also supervise, on investment in language, really useful here. Working with colleagues, doctoral students, and examining PhDs in

this area, I'm gaining a deeper understanding of such concepts, particularly motivation and investment in language learning.

I could not avoid drawing the contrast between the privileged voluntary migration of (often white) migrants from the global north, usually referred to as 'ex-pats', and forced migrants from the global south. The economic, linguistic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991) the latter have accrued over time are often lost in the migration process (Blommaert, 2010; Piller, 2016). One might assume that James' journey was quite the opposite, given his high status as an academic, and that his existing forms of capital travelled with him. Was this an accurate assumption? I was not expecting James's reply:

J: I do in fact feel I've lost linguistic and cultural capital – I don't speak Cantonese, and I don't really understand a great deal of what's going on here, culturally and socially.

H: So, in terms of language investment and finding your bearings in a new place, are you trying to pick up Cantonese?

J: Yes, trying! I tried Cantonese lessons and an online course when I arrived here. Although neither of them went particularly well, I am determined to try again. I don't just want to be able to speak Cantonese, I want to engage better in the learning process, chat to my neighbours, interact in shops and have proper conversations. I'd like to learn how to read Chinese too, because I think that I miss a great deal by not being able to read the language at all. Considering what's going on in Ukraine right now, I think the English medium Chinese press is printing some very different stuff for outside consumption than what's printed in Chinese for locals.

H: From my own research into the deployment of personal communicative repertoire, I'm interested to hear how you interact with people at the linguistic stage you are now, not yet having the spoken or written language to a standard you feel is adequate. Does this gap in communication affect you?

J: Oh, very much so but it's not insurmountable. There are plenty of people here who don't use Cantonese, such as many of my MA students from the Chinese mainland. It's possible to get by in English, as Hong Kong has a trilingual bi-literacy language policy where the spoken languages are English, Putonghua (Standard Mandarin Chinese) and Cantonese. English and Chinese are the written languages and although

a high proportion of people here are Cantonese-speaking Chinese people, English is widely used and understood.

I had not considered the effect of loss of capital from James' perspective as an academic. This prompted questions about how highly qualified migrants, proficient in dominant languages other than English, regain lost linguistic and cultural capital when resettling. How appropriate are language learning opportunities provided for such learners? How is identity affected by this loss and recovery of capital? What effect do mono- or multilingual practices have on learners in these contexts? These questions echo aspects emerging from my own research among four forced migrant women learning English in the UK and how their respective sense of belonging and investment in language is linked to their motivation to communicate at deeper levels. Such questions are beyond the scope of this piece but they present stimulating areas for future research into support for highly qualified migrants who do not speak English at a level yet considered 'competent'.

Research motivation

Turning to James' own research output, the conversation returned to flexibility of research during the pandemic:

H: Anecdotally, research motivation seems to have been affected to a greater or lesser degree by the pandemic and by subsequent difficult circumstances. Has the pandemic propelled your research into new areas, or have you struggled to find motivation, after all?

J: That's a great question, and I think that the pandemic has been a very difficult thing for researchers to work through. I'm sure there are colleagues who have capitalized on the time and space that they had during lockdowns to write prolifically, but I've written very little in the last year or so – partly because of the pandemic and the demands of online teaching, and partly due to a sense of coming to the end of the line in Leeds. But the other side of that coin is the invigorating sense of renewal that comes from being in a new place, and especially such a challenging and beautiful place as Hong Kong. I don't think I would have felt that way had I stayed in Leeds. Politically yes, it's tough, and the pandemic seemed to just drag on and on with very severe social restrictions, and of course it's difficult to be a long way from friends and family, but it's also very exciting and I do feel fortunate to be here.

Advice for would-be movers

I find the notion of ‘an invigorating sense of renewal’ appealing. I sense this factor alone could be a constant pull from and to *anywhere*, yet in these difficult times, it is not easy to make such enormous decisions: politics; wars and rumours of wars; pandemic unknowns across the globe; family ties ... I asked James what advice he would give to researchers contemplating leaving familiar waters at this point, pondering their next academic ports of call. Here are his three key (and very honest) takeaways:

- #1 *Firstly, it does seem to be the wrong time to be half a world away from nearest and dearest. So do think very carefully about whether such a big move at such a difficult time is actually what you want. Obviously, we did think about that, but hard on the heels of that question was: “If not now, then when?”*
- #2 *Secondly, if you’re determined to take the plunge, make sure you find out much as you can about what you’re taking on, what you’re entitled to and if that’s going to enable you to live or not. I’m very fortunate, I have a good contract at a good university, but I’ve heard horror stories about people taking jobs in Hong Kong and finding out that the very high cost of living cancels out any immediate or even longer-term benefits of what on paper looks to be a very generous salary.*
- #3 *Thirdly...I remember when I first moved to Greece aged 22, for my first teaching job abroad. I was there for four years in the end. I absolutely loved it and was completely distraught when I left but I had forgotten how difficult I found the first six months and how terribly homesick I had been. Similarly, for the first three months or more here in Hong Kong, I thought I’d made the biggest mistake of my life and it was very tough indeed. Not yet belonging here did make me long for home. As the weeks and months go on – I’ve been here for nine months now (March 2022) – those feelings are receding. So, I suppose, my advice would be – be prepared to tough it out. See how it goes. If you persevere and think positively enough, even somewhere as difficult and as problematic as Hong Kong right now, there are gains as well as losses from being here, and actually – swimming against the stream is often quite exciting. People are leaving Hong Kong in their thousands. To be moving in the other direction is an interesting experience.*

H: So, persistence and positivity can bring unexpected benefits in spite of inevitable homesickness?

*J: Yes, these experiences all develop resilience. Also, if we hadn't have come, we would possibly always regret it. Asking quite a few people before I came what the benefits would be, knowing what a problematic place it was politically, the best response was from my own former PhD supervisor who said: "Well, what possible benefit is there to Hong Kong if you **don't** go?" which I found extremely helpful.*

It is encouraging to hear that there is a continuing and robust academic presence in Hong Kong. As we neared the end of our conversation, I threw James a light-hearted curved ball:

H: If you could return to any point in history, where would you migrate back to and why?

J: Oh, there are probably all sorts of clever answers I should give, but I'm a big Bob Dylan fan and it's exactly 60 years since the release of his very first album. I would probably give anything to be in Greenwich Village, New York in the early 1960s. The excitement of the beginning of the sixties in America must have been really something.

What an interesting migration destination! In closing, I asked James if he feels the proverbial prevailing wind might ever bring him back to the UK?

J: Well, we still have great attachments to friends, family and place – Otley is still my home more than Hong Kong is but, thinking in rather crass, crude terms about pushing and pulling, I think that there would have to be something terribly amiss here pushing me away rather than something really tremendous in the UK that would pull me back. But I will be very pleased to have been here, even if it turns out to be only for a couple of years.

With that telling final comment, I thank James for his time after a busy working day, for sharing so many generous and helpful insights into his work and current experience in Hong Kong, and for giving such valuable advice to those making difficult career choices.

Time and space do not permit a more detailed academic discussion here of the many factors affecting language and migration, mobility and resettlement, identity and belonging – but our discussion has provoked interesting questions about the ways in which host countries deal with highly qualified forced migrants as they struggle to achieve requisite levels of language proficiency, for example. We hope this conversation has also prompted readers not only to look beyond current comfortable harbours to explore research from a novel compass point, but also to consider the part they themselves can play in other academic contexts that might benefit extraordinarily from their expert input. And to observe – sometimes from afar – the unexpected and flexible research opportunities presented by ‘mind-bending times’.

多謝 一會見！ (Thank you and see you soon!)

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Bio



A Y3 PGR at Leeds researching language learning and communicative practices in the resettlement processes of women refugees in rural UK, Helen’s teaching experience spans secondary, community and HE contexts. She has a BA Hons in French, a PGCE in French/German Leeds, an MA Translation (English/French) and is

a CELTA-qualified English language teacher. Helen's own research field shifted from France to the UK due to the pandemic, necessitating some interesting flexibility.

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