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Abstract:	This paper is about an arts-based research project on the theme of belonging carried out with forced migrants in Hong Kong. The project Navigating Belonging: Exploring Settlement for South Asians in Hong Kong combined the study of oral interaction with participatory photography and digital storytelling to examine how people from South Asian backgrounds narrate and construct their belonging. In the project's first phase, the research team worked with five women, all clients of a refugee support centre, to explore understandings of belonging in weekly research workshops. The paper presents perspectives on the project's contexts: the concrete and physical space; the interactional space where meaning is generated; and the meeting point for methodologies. Then we analyse interaction involving one project participant. Findings shed light on how the project brought different lifeworlds into contact, and how the physical space of the project's activities became a place of interaction and meaning, and where static understandings of both "South Asian" and "Asylum seeker" could be challenged. Our conclusions concern the utility of a creative practice project for understanding dislocation and relocation in Hong Kong. abstract revised_240426_no track changes.docx

Belonging and collaborative language-and-arts research with forced migrants in Hong Kong

Introduction

This paper is about an arts-based research project on the theme of belonging carried out with forced migrants in Hong Kong. The project *Navigating Belonging: Exploring Settlement for South Asians in Hong Kong*[1] combined the study of narrative in oral interaction with participatory photography and digital storytelling to examine how people from South Asian backgrounds narrate and dynamically construct their belonging. In the project's first phase (of three), the research team worked with a group of women, all clients of – and recruited through – Hong Kong's Centre for Refugees, a refugee and asylum seeker support centre. The aims of this paper are to consider first how belonging is achieved in the physical and interactional spaces where the research took place; and second how collaborative research practice contributes to the co-creation of this belonging. We meet these aims through a study of one project participant, Rosie (a pseudonym) and her interactions on the project. In so doing, we shed light on how the project brought different lifeworlds into contact in the space where the project activities happened, and – in turn – how the physical space for these activities became a place of interaction and meaning.

Our conceptual and a methodological contribution relates to the theme of this special issue (*Transcending Boundaries: Collaborative, Participatory and Arts-Based Methodologies in Migration Research*), offering an opportunity to demonstrate how specific features of our approach foreground the complexity of – and challenges to – identity and belonging. In our case, a focus on one participant enables us, in our analysis of her talk around her arts practice, to problematise dominant understandings of both "South Asian" and "asylum seeker" as imposed and othering categories and markers of identity. The collaborative nature of the project infuses the topic of the research (belonging in Hong Kong), the setting (the Centre for Refugees in Kowloon, Hong Kong), the dynamic interactions of the participants (refugees in Hong Kong) and the university-based researchers, and the relationship between the authors of this paper (the project PI [Author 1] and two external advisors, [Author 2] and [Author 3], themselves long-term collaborators). The project is thus part of a recent and growing body of research spanning arts and language study whose concern is to understand the nature of inclusive and collaborative relationships, processes and outcomes (see Moore et al 2020).

Outline of the paper

We next introduce the project, explaining the significance of the overall theme of belonging in our work, and we meet our participant, Rosie, whose interactions are the main concern of our analysis. We then elaborate on our understanding of the research context. We conceive of this as comprising contact zones of different types: a concrete and physical space; an interactional space where meaning is generated; and a meeting point for methodologies. In the course of this section, we describe salient features of the research design and process. We then analyse how Rosie constructs and expresses her identity in relation to the people and groups she belongs to, and to those she rejects. In line with our aims, we explain in this analysis, and maintain in our subsequent discussion, how our collaborative research practice enables the emergence of complex belonging.

Project background

The Navigating Belonging project explored how belonging emerges in and through participatory photography, posing the question of what it means to belong, for people from South Asian backgrounds in Hong Kong. Data were generated in three phases over a calendar year. The first phase, upon which this paper draws, was with a group of five women – all originally from countries in South Asia, and otherwise from diverse social, economic, personal, professional backgrounds and legal status – who were clients of Hong Kong's Centre for Refugees, and the project work took place in the Centre. The second phase involved a small group of undergraduate students from a public university in Hong Kong, and the third phase was carried out with a multi-generational group of graduating high school students and white-collar professionals ([Author 1] and [XXX], forthcoming, 2026). Each phase comprised a series of eight weekly or fortnightly ethnographic research workshops. These were led by the project PI [Author 1] and two research associates, [XXX], who has a background in photography and film making, and [XXX], with expertise in web design. They were supported by a cross-disciplinary team of volunteers and student research assistants.

The researchers' backgrounds are diverse. [XXX] migrated to Hong Kong as a young child from the Philippines, and [XXX] is a locally-born Hong Konger. Research assistant [XXX] was born in Hong Kong as well, and his parents are from Tamil Nadu in India; he himself spent periods of time through childhood and early adulthood in India, Singapore and Malaysia. [XXX], attached to the project as a volunteer, arrived in Hong Kong from India as

a young adult, for his postgraduate studies. Student research assistant [XXX] also came to Hong Kong to study, in her case from northern Mainland China. Attention to researchers' backgrounds is useful, as it draws attention to a feature of collaborative arts-based research. While the relations between the various researchers is ostensibly asymmetrical, in the interactions in the workshop spaces these epistemic and relational hierarchies are lessened. The same pertains between researchers and researched-upon, as we see in the later analysis.

Similarly, it is worth considering the relations between the authors of this paper. [Author 1] moved from the UK to take up an academic post, 18 months before the workshops began. Co-authors [Author 2] and [Author 3] have roles as project advisors. [Author 2] has worked extensively with forced migrants, including in a participatory photography project. [Author 3] carries out collaborative ethnographic research that explores everyday creativity. Both are from the Global North and neither live in Hong Kong. They have visited the region, however, and – in [Author 2's] case – have met some of the participants and listened to their stories. Their peripheral position allows them a measure of distance not felt by the participants and the team members. This – combined with their expertise – enables insights that cannot be gained by the researchers on the ground due to their very proximity to the setting and research activities. Indeed, and invoking the Bakhtinian notion of outsideness (*vnenakhodimost'*), this particular positionality whereby authors are located outside the research emphasises the intensely relational nature of meaning-making. As Bakhtin (1986: 6) writes, "Our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people because they are located outside us in space and because they are others."

The motivation for the Navigating Belonging project was to achieve a greater understanding of the complex, fluid and flexible concept of belonging (Antonsich, 2010; Lähdesmäki et al., 2016). In the research we adopted a constructivist understanding of belonging ([Author 1 & Author 3], 2024), viewing it as produced and negotiated through linguistic, semiotic and material modes, symbols and corporeality (Kraus, 2006; Guibernau, 2013; Blommaert, 2014; Baynham & Lee, 2019). The idea of belonging as a symbolic, emotional, and affective attachment to communities and places (Probyn, 1996; Wright, 2015) is important in research such as ours that relates to immigration and diaspora. Indicating its multifaceted nature, "belonging" can also refer to a sense of external connectedness, grounded – as Mahar and colleagues put it (2013) – to the context or group to whom one chooses, wants and feels permission to belong. Belongings are plural: a person can simultaneously belong to any

number of entities, whether they are social, material, virtual, or translocal (Aydemir & Rotas 2008; [Author 2] et al., 2020). One has and develops multiple belongings in everyday domains: in families, with friendship groups, in schools or universities, at work, in online communities. Centrally relevant to our research, belonging (note Butler & Spivak, 2007) is anchored in memories. It is dynamic and contested, particularly as it intersects with politics, ideologies, and discursive power relations (Yuval-Davis, 2011) – a perspective that is also relevant to our work. In many cases the legal dimension of belonging, i.e. political citizenship, is racialised (Ramanathan, 2013; Loring & Ramanathan, 2016). Other challenges to belonging can come from any direction, be it (im)mobility and migration (forced or otherwise), rapid political change, family trauma, or a global health emergency. Alongside belonging, one must thus consider non-belonging, exclusion through structural means or through discursive practices, such as an insistence on monolingualism in a particular setting, that have an othering function. Non-belonging can nonetheless also be a consciously chosen outsider position, positively liberating and voluntarily adopted (Hiltunen et al., 2020).

Belonging in relation to minoritization and social integration is central to much critical scrutiny in Hong Kong and a concern in debates about migration and citizenship worldwide. The often-overlooked ethnic diversity of Hong Kong highlights the longstanding settlement of migrants and the descendants of migrants from South Asian backgrounds, the object of research and public policy moves designed to address issues of social cohesion (e.g. Arat et al, 2022). It also draws attention to the presence of more recent arrivals from South Asian countries who are in Hong Kong as forced migrants obliged to leave their homes against their will (Hynes, 2021), often through fear of persecution. The five participants in the first phase of our project have this experience in their personal histories. Belonging, as noted, is also a two-way street, involving acceptance by, and legitimation from, already existing group members. Like many others in Hong Kong, however, our participants know at first hand of the systemic discrimination and unequal access to public services experienced by many if not most Hong Kongers who are members of cultural and linguistic minority communities. Moreover, as asylum seekers they are subject to a prohibition on employment and even volunteering, thus not being allowed to belong in a workplace, with colleagues. In fact in Hong Kong one cannot formally claim asylum: Hong Kong does not apply the 1951 Refugee Convention. Authorities instead process non-refoulement claims, i.e. claims not to be returned to a place where they face torture, persecution, or other serious harm (Song, 2020, ch. 5). An applicant must first be liable to removal, usually through overstaying the visitor

visa issued on arrival, and then surrender to the Immigration Department; people holding valid visas generally cannot lodge a claim. After a claim is filed, the applicant is typically detained and then released pending the assessment of the claim. This can take many years, and success rates are low (Lau & Gheorghiu 2018). If the Immigration Department finds the claim "substantiated," deportation is suspended. Torture-based claims lead to a discretionary stay, while persecution-based claims are normally referred to Hong Kong's UNHCR office for refugee status determination and possible third-country resettlement under a UN-administered scheme (Choy & Shi, 2021). While waiting, claimants like the participants in this research receive only minimal support (currently HK$3,200 per month in food coupons and for housing and transport) and are legally barred from working. This pushes many into irregular work and/or dependence on NGOs such as the Centre for Refugees (Mathews 2023). For them, therefore, the notion of social integration as a bi-directional process wherein newcomers and host societies adapt to each other is a chimera.

Introducing Rosie

Rosie was one of five participants in the first phase of the project, all female clients of the Centre for Refugees. The Centre staff who recruited the participants presented involvement to them as an opportunity to discuss questions of what it means to belong in Hong Kong, given the challenges that they face in the process of attempting to legally belong. The project intended to question understandings of belonging specifically for South Asians in Hong Kong, and the first phase had an explicit focus on the experience of forced migrants. From the earliest discussions about the work, the plan was to undertake this first phase in the Centre for Refugees, with its clients. The team were guided by the Centre staff towards the decision to recruit an all-women group (the Centre had been promoting activities for women around this time) and the choice of these participants, all of whom had the time and enthusiasm for involvement. All had been in Hong Kong for some years. All but one were fluent English speakers: this participant shared linguistic resources with other participants, who supported her with informal interpreting throughout the phase.

All participants had much to say about facets of their lives in the past, about their here-and-now in Hong Kong, and about their hopes for the future. They offer a fresh perspective both on seeking asylum and on being South Asian in Hong Kong. We are especially drawn to Rosie's case because of how – to an extent – she resists those common-sense categories (and hence some of the assumptions), albeit that they underpin the research. At the point when we

carried out the fieldwork, we still remained oriented to the categories of asylum seeker and South Asian, and the normative assumptions that informed them. In a working paper developed from fieldnotes from the project, we introduce Rosie:

> Rosie is originally from Sri Lanka and Tamil is her first language. She used to run a restaurant business before she left for Hong Kong fleeing political persecution. Her family, including her three sons and their wives, are here with her in Hong Kong. All three sons have been brought up in Hong Kong and have gone through the local education system. […] Rosie's appeal for refugee status was successful and she is currently waiting to receive the final documents that will allow her case to be closed. Once she receives a work permit from the Immigration Department, she hopes to open a restaurant business here in Hong Kong
>
> (Author 1 et al 2024)

In those earlier notes, we mention Rosie's family status, work history, professional aspiration, and ambition to remain in Hong Kong (despite this being unlikely under current immigration law), and we foreground her identity as a Sri Lankan asylum seeker.

This kind of positioning will not be unfamiliar to Rosie. The racialised dimension of her belonging in Hong Kong is firmly present in her everyday experience. As a South Asian migrant in Hong Kong, and like other people from non-white ethnic groups in Hong Kong, she is labelled in political and public rhetoric with the category of 'Ethnic Minority', commonly shortened to 'EM', a normalized systemic othering that positions her as a perpetual outsider (Gao et al. 2019, Gube and Halse 2023). In the team's interactions with her during the project's workshops, however, she identifies herself differently. Some of her talk is about her current struggle for political belonging and the problems she has encountered recently with her legal case. But most of her stories index her status as a family member, a spouse and mother, a former and aspirational businessperson, a middle-class tourist in the past. As we shall argue, the spatial and interactional features that are at play at any one time during the project enable these identities to be constructed and developed.

Contexts: The contact zone

Bringing together people from a range of backgrounds in a space explicitly for adult forced migrants, at a pivotal time in Hong Kong's history, invites us to consider the contexts of the

project in terms of types of *contact zone*. In her research in postcolonial literature, Mary Louise Pratt (1991, 2008) coined the concept to frame processes of transculturation which emerge from the cultural encounters between subjugated peoples and their colonisers, defining contact zones as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (1991, p.28). Appropriately enough for our project, the idea emphasises contact (in contrast to community), the way subjects are constituted in and by their relations to one another as their trajectories intersect spatially and temporally, and how these relations can be highly asymmetrical in terms of knowledge and social power.

The concept is widely applied in postcolonial studies and geography (Askins and Pain, 2011). For example, Yeoh and Willis (2005: 271) suggest that migrants construct contact zones that are both physically located in geographical spaces, and socially and culturally located in metaphorical spaces. In this respect, the concept is allied to other critical analytical approaches to space and spatial practice adopted in the sociolinguistics of mobility for understanding how migrants experience and negotiate social realities (cf. de Certeau 1980/2011, Harvey, 2001, Li, 2011). Additionally, contact zones are fluid, challenging static concepts of Self and Other (Morrisey, 2005). They are interactional, polyvocal sites, interpreted differently by those within them (Clifford, 1997).

Connecting the research contexts to this framing, we relate our work to different perspectives on the contact zone, as experienced in our study. First we consider it as a physical place. The setting is post-colonial Hong Kong, in downtown Kowloon, in a building called Chungking Mansions, and in the Centre for Refugees, on the upper floors of that building. This location – at all these scales – is not only a point in space; it is imbued with historical and social significance, with meanings and memories which are inevitably individual and personal to participants and researchers. Second, the workshops constitute and are constitutive of an interactional contact zone, where meaning is generated discursively and collaboratively between participants and researchers on the project. Features of the research design and implementation imply certain types of interaction, a certain quality of talk. Third, the project is a meeting point for methodologies, where language (the sociolinguistic study of narrative) and arts-based methods (participatory photography) come into contact. We elaborate on these three perspectives on context here, and then, in the light of them, study interaction on the project.

Physical space

The workshop sessions took place in the premises of the Centre for Refugees (hereafter CFR) in Chungking Mansions, a 17-storey building – in fact five interconnected tower blocks – on Nathan Road, the busy main thoroughfare that runs south to north through the densely populated centre of Kowloon, the area that spreads inland from the harbour to form the northern part of the urban centre of Hong Kong. Chungking Mansions is in the commercial district of Tsim Sha Tsui, commonly known as TST, the bustling heart of Kowloon, close to the terminal where the Star Ferry takes commuters and tourists across the water to Hong Kong Island. TST has been a focal point for South Asian migration to Hong Kong since the mid-19th century, following the start of British colonial rule in 1841, and remains so. There is a substantial and well-established Indian Muslim community in the area: Chungking Mansions is across the road from Kowloon Mosque, Hong Kong's biggest mosque, with Kowloon Park behind. For many migrants from South Asia, TST figures in one way or another in their personal histories.

Chungking Mansions itself is a highly storied building, famous if not infamous in Hong Kong's public imaginary as a site of crime and delinquency. In popular culture it is the setting for Wong Kar-wai's 1994 movie *Chungking Express*, which glamourised Hong Kong's dark underbelly. Today the building is well known for its mix of low-cost electronics and phone shops, currency exchange offices, textile and luggage stores, barbershops, food outlets, rental apartments and guesthouses, most of which are run by African and Asian entrepreneurs. For many new arrivals, the apartments, shops and cafés of Chungking Mansions feature prominently in their early experience of Hong Kong, a port within a port. It is certainly a distinctive space when considered in juxtaposition with the high-end shopping centres and retail outlets that are characteristic of this area of Kowloon. A recent linguistic landscape analysis by Wang and Liang (2024) shows how the building differs from those which surround it, with signage in over twenty languages highlighting its multicultural and multilingual character. Chungking Mansions has been the focus of studies of territorial stigmatization and linguistic diversity, foremost among them Gordon Mathews' (2011) anthropological work. Mathews critically examines the racialized portrayal of Chungking Mansions as a "ghetto", describing it as a "low-end globalization" hub (p. 24) functioning as a crossroads where goods, money, and people from the Global South intersect. Mathews notes that the building offers affordable shelter, work, and opportunity for marginalized

groups, such as forced migrants, undocumented workers, or traders who are excluded from mainstream economic and social systems in Hong Kong.

The CFR inhabits physical space on the top two floors of Chungking Mansions, with offices, workspaces, meeting rooms, and a kitchen, accessed via staircases and a small, in-demand elevator. An arm of the international NGO Christian Action, and funded through donations, it is Hong Kong's only drop-in community centre for forced migrants, supporting around 600 people a month, and providing humanitarian aid, medical support and counselling, education and training. When this paper's first author arrived in Hong Kong in 2021, he developed a collaborative partnership with the Director and employees of the CFR. The preliminary activities of the Navigating Belonging project (a stakeholder seminar, discussions with researchers) took place there, as did some of the planning for the workshops when the project got underway. The research participants, as clients of the CFR, were familiar with both Chungking Mansions and the Centre, having accessed its services and studied on courses there. Those courses took place in the same meeting room as our workshops: with its moveable tables and chairs, whiteboard and smart screen, the room bears some resemblance to a classroom, a theme to which we return.

Collaborative interactional space

The meeting room was tangible and concrete, and also had an abstract dimension: it became a place with potential for meaning, through its activities, and through the participants' and researchers' varied histories and trajectories articulated and narrated in the talk surrounding the activities. This was a collaborative interactional space, where people with different histories, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, migration statuses, and social positions came into contact. Participants and researchers met together to critically explore and negotiate our sense of belonging, and our understandings of what belonging might be, and to generate new meanings and identities that contest dominant narratives of belonging. To borrow from Husserl (1936/1970), the *I-subjectivity*, the individual lifeworlds of the participants and researchers, interplayed in the workshops with the shared *we-subjectivity* of collective belonging, the intersubjective lifeworld. Thus an individual sense of belonging would be brought along to the workshop, and in the collaborative workshop talk, a collective belonging was brought about.

To begin with, the relationship between the researchers and participants appeared asymmetrical. The research team pre-planned the structure of the workshops and rehearsed the activities together in preparation for fieldwork. The image of the workshop space as a classroom may have primed, for participants, expectations that the workshop experience would resemble schooling. Before the first session, one participant mentioned that she thought the researchers would be like teachers and the participants like students taking part in a course ([XXX's] fieldnotes, Workshop 1). The first session began with setting ground-rules, doing nothing to detract from this assumption. [XXX], who led the first five sessions, introduces the behavioural expectations thus:

> okay great um so xxx by just giving you a brief outline of what we'll be doing today so we've done our introductions um and now we'll be going into the next section or shortly after I go through the outline um which is setting group norms (.) so ah I think something we value as a team is making sure that this is a safe space for everyone so this activity

(Photovoice Workshop 1, audio recording)

Five minutes later she reads aloud from the sticky notes written by participants and researchers, listing the features of the safe space that they prioritise:

> I'll go through each of these to be patient (.) understandable from the heart be honest show compassion care and love um not being judgmental being kind try to be in their shoes yeah that's a good one um understand appreciate them telling stories value privacy and appreciating blank spaces in our sharings I like that one um sometimes it's about hearing people rather than providing solutions (.) I would like to know more about Hong Kong […] Hong Kong people mmm OK safe environment and reliable person (.) knowing that if we say something in confidence it will be kept secret (.) nice

(Photovoice Workshop 1, audio recording)

From the content and also the pronoun use (*their / them*), we can suppose that the researchers' notes included *be patient*, *be honest*, *show compassion care and love*, *not being judgmental*, *being kind*, *try to be in their shoes*, and *appreciate them telling stories*.

Articulating her motivation for joining the project, a participant contributed *I would like to know more about Hong Kong people*.

The early workshop sessions also had a didactic element, as [XXX] instructed participants on new skills in photography such as lighting, composition, and framing. The participants were given activities to complete at home, to practice their photography skills and to provide content for the next session. As the sessions went on though, the workshop space was collaboratively negotiated, modified and re-created by the participants as well, making the process reciprocal. For example, the participants were asked to bring to the first session items that in some way indicated a sense of belonging. They practiced their photography techniques by taking pictures of their objects, and they talked about them too, explaining their significance. It became clear that these objects were important. As Mahmud (2025, p.295) notes, objects are not just things: they hold personal and cultural significance. Rosie brought a bamboo plant, which provided her with an initial stimulus for telling the group her story of her home in Hong Kong, and thus to negotiate her identity. The use of personal objects – material tangible items (Hiltunen et al, 2020) – thus served as an impetus for sharing personal experiences, fostering a sense of belonging and understanding within the group, and creating a connection among participants. Furthermore, the integration of material objects into the session encouraged the participants to reflect on their own identities and experiences, potentially leading to new insights and perspectives.

A meeting point of methods

Keying into the theme of this special issue, we connect to the idea of a methodological contact zone, a place where methods meet. The orientation for our project is creative inquiry ([Author 3 and XXX], 2019; Leavy, 2018), with creative and artistic practice woven into the research, and bringing together participatory photography, digital storytelling and narrative.

The research material we study to explore how Rosie articulates her experience of belonging in Hong Kong, from the first five of eight research workshops, comprises audio-recorded interactional data from the workshops, semi-structured interviews with Rosie, Rosie's photographs, [Author 1's] and [XXX]'s fieldnotes, and recorded team debriefings. In these five sessions, participants took and discussed photographs of people, places and objects significant to their sense of belonging. In the last three workshops, the photographs that were taken, and the talk and activities around these, were remediated through the epistemically

inclusive creative approach of digital storytelling (Davey & Benjaminsen, 2021, Gubrium & Turner, 2011), and the digital stories were published on the project website.

The plans and content for the informal but carefully structured workshop activities were adapted from a community storytelling programme at be/longing, an arts-for-education NGO in Hong Kong co-founded by [XXX] [URL]. The decision to incorporate participatory photography into the research design was driven by the idea that co-experiencing photographs is (as suggested by Rowsell, 2024, p.208) a relational act. Photography changes fieldwork, and a photograph affects the quality of interaction and potentially deepens engagement in the object of discussion. The specific approach, Photovoice, was pioneered by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris (1997), originally to examine environmental health risks, explore community resilience, and understand the experience of marginalized populations. Wang and Burris cite Paulo Freire in their argument that the visual image is a means of "enabling people to think critically about their community, and to begin discussing the everyday social and political forces that influence their lives" (1997, p. 370).

Photovoice has the purpose of empowering individuals and communities by enabling them to articulate their experiences and concerns through photography. Participants are active knowledge producers as they photograph situations, environments, or objects that reflect their perspectives on topics such as living conditions or social challenges. These images are then discussed in pairs or groups, generating narratives and deeper insights. In many cases, including ours, participants acquire new technical and visual skills through the process. This and similar collaborative photography methods have proven valuable in research with marginalized groups such as young refugees (e.g., Gillespie et al., 2024; [Author 2] et al., 2020), for example in examining how they navigate belonging in host societies and asylum systems.

Overall, a creative inquiry orientation in applied linguistics research allows researchers to acknowledge the limitations of words to communicate the complexity of experience (Harvey et al., 2022; [Author 3] et al., 2026). This is often unsayable (The May Group, 2025): that which cannot be put into words, and even that for which words might not only not be enough but might yet be disrupted and disturbed through words. The arts, the creative, the collective, all work to acknowledge difference; the decentring, but not erasure, of language moves attention away from perceived boundaries in the contact zone, evoked and embedded in bounded notions of language.

On a practical note, a particular challenge in participatory arts production that is also research lies in documentation, because researchers are active participants in the process. The creation processes of the Navigating Belonging project were documented by the research team, using photographs, video, and written fieldnotes to capture these from different perspectives. The writing of fieldnotes is difficult though, not least because it can potentially disrupt or derail the process itself, undermining what the research team has worked to create. So notes were also written or audio-recorded in transit, or after the workshops, or created through audio-recording conversations after research meetings, workshops, walks, and other research activities. These methodological restrictions impact upon the nature of the research, forcing an epistemological rethinking (Harvey et al., 2021) and team reflexivity. In this case, audio-recorded team-based debriefs and discussions after each workshop session, including reflections on methods and approaches, were built into the research design.

Analysis

We return to Rosie and her interaction over the first five sessions of the project, bearing in mind how these contextual features shape our work. In a project about belonging, questions of political non-belonging were raised in the workshops, particularly when participants spoke about their reasons for migration. Rosie, for example, mentioned at times her legal claim and problems she had had with lawyers. These discussions did not emerge during the photography or digital storytelling activities, however. So in our analysis we aim to show how the characteristics of our research allowed different aspects of her identity – including those beyond *South Asian* and *forced migrant* – to become salient at points.

Interactional spaces of belonging

The workshops, based in the Centre for Refugees, also spread into the local area. On three occasions, all participants with most of the researchers walked and took photos in the public spaces among the shops and cafes on the ground floor of Chungking Mansions, in the surrounding streets and in nearby Kowloon Park. One purpose of these hour-long Photowalks – as the team called them – was to allow participants to practice their photography, develop their skills and try out techniques they had been learning. The walking and talking also brought experiences to the fore that staying in the CFR would not have allowed. Moreover, the Photowalks, and the sharing and discussion of photos afterwards, enhanced a sense of conviviality and ephemeral belonging across the participants and researchers in the group.

Our Photowalk in the fourth workshop began in Chungking Mansions itself. For some participants, the ground floor of Chungking Mansions, crowded with shops and cafés, resonates positively with their memories of the town and city spaces where they had spent their earlier lives, with the sights and smells provoking happy comparisons with other places and times. Lakshmi, on return to the CFR and talking about her photo of a Chungking Mansions café, describes:

> small small tea stalls in every road so xxx like many people they can enjoy having tea and eating snacks and like same over there ((laughs)) when we order the snacks people in many places now this is the same like this tables are there same portions are there like sitting style is same xxx we are Indian belonging

(Photovoice Workshop 4, audio recording)

Rosie, however, felt differently about Chungking Mansions, and the reminder of the home that she had left behind her provoked unsettling feelings. As [XXX] wrote in her fieldnotes, *She didn't want to take photos of Chungking […] focus on the now as opposed to her past*. Talking about the pictures she had taken when walking with the group in the green spaces of Kowloon Park, however, prompted more positive, if fleeting, memories from past life. In the extract below, she describes one of her photos in our discussion back in the CFR:

(R: Rosie; J: [Author 1])

R: this one I take really for how he doing his work yeah cleaning man

J: yes that's good yeah I like that (.) a photo of somebody working

R: yeah in the park yeah so that's what I (.) same like my country people who do same thing so that's what I focus xxx

J: can we find road sweepers everywhere

R: yeah

J: most places

R: yes yes (.) this ((laughs)) a lot of photo for is each other how they make love and peaceful life so walking around ((laughs)) (.) I like the plant always so (.) that's what I take photo of ((laughs))

(Photovoice Workshop 3, audio recording)

Notwithstanding how the photos prompted memories of earlier times, the project team were keen for participants to feel under no obligation to describe their own journeys or experiences of forced migration. The emphasis in the project was on belonging in Hong Kong, as [Author 1] reflects in his fieldnotes:

> We are not explicitly probing into people's migration history, their reasons for mobility and (in the case of our first phase participants) having to leave, or the progress of their legal battles. Nonetheless personal histories and trajectories, and ongoing efforts to legally belong will inevitably relate and intertwine with their sense of belonging, their own subjective experiences of belonging in Hong Kong

(Photovoice Workshop 3, [Author 1] fieldnotes)

Personal histories, though, are evident in the sometimes surprising ways that a photograph can evoke memories. This is the case with Rosie's photograph of a waterfall in Kowloon Park, as documented in [Author 1's] fieldnotes:

> Rosie 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.

(Photovoice Workshop 3, [Author 1] fieldnotes)

(Rosie's photograph of the waterfall)

Back in the CFR, Rosie describes the image in the photo: *and one is very important one this one this this waterfall I remember for 28 years back*. Recognising its importance, [Author 1] asks Rosie to talk more about the waterfall, and she contextualises it with reference to the earlier visit with her family:

(J: [Author 1]; R: Rosie)

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

(Photovoice Workshop 3, audio recording)

Rosie tells the group that she will seek out the original photograph and bring it along next time. She does just that, as [Author 1] notes:

> Today's atmosphere in the workshop is very friendly, familiar. Rosie 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…

(Photovoice Workshop 4, [Author 1] fieldnotes)

The research generated multiple perspectives on this specific image: the fieldnotes; the photograph itself, as taken on the Photowalk; the actual walk during which Rosie came across the waterfall; the talk about the photograph back in the workshop. These all then connected across time, evoking for Rosie a memory from an earlier period in her life. The new image taken during the Photowalk, when set alongside the old, printed, stained one, linked Rosie visibly with her past, indicating that a specific place, with its distinctive ornamental feature, had held different meanings at different times. The image of the waterfall, with its echoes of earlier, thus became the focus of the collaborative talk, and staked a claim on the workshop

space. The original photographic act coupled with its repetition decades later allowed Rosie to speak of other times and to indicate her long-term relationship with Hong Kong. Rowsell (2024: 208) refers to "co-experiencing affect through photo sharing during ethnographic research." This is the case here: the walk that took Rosie to the waterfall, the image in the photo taken on the walk, and the historical photograph from nearly 30 years ago feature across the data from week to week, with the team later reflecting on how Rosie projected her feelings onto the Photovoice activity when telling the story of her son and her previous visit to Hong Kong, as a tourist and with her family. This co-experience of the space, the Photowalk, the waterfall, creates an "affective pull" (Rowsell, 2024: 209) for Rosie, with her memories called forth.

Embodiment and epistemic hierarchies

The research space is embodied, peopled by the participants, the research team, and the staff from the CFR. Through the study of the team members' and participants' emergent relations and alignments, as evident in their moment-by-moment unfolding talk encouraged by their photography activities, we might know a little of the historical bodies that inform the space.

The participants are asylum seekers in Hong Kong, and by stating this, we contribute to an extent to a deficit positioning of minoritised ethnic groups familiar in policy and policy-related literature. Such a framing is open to critique. While it might be useful for informing inclusive policy interventions, it can nonetheless be associated with what Eve Tuck (2009) calls damage-centred research, i.e. research which reinforces a one-dimensional narrative (a 'single story') of minoritised groups as oppressed. The characteristics of the workshops and their activities allow other aspects of participants' identities to be foregrounded. Here Rosie discusses a photograph of a family group in the park:

(R: Rosie; C: [XXX]; P: Participant)

R: why I do this photo I'm xxx first of all I'm girlfriend boyfriend with my husband when yes and then second step I'm wife and husband and then xxx you to mother level my son so that's what I like

C: so like your different identities as a girlfriend as a wife and [mother

R: [mother yes

P: girlfriend who

((laughter))

R: girlfriend boyfriend and then wife husband and mother father this is my message

(Photovoice Workshop 4, audio recording)

She takes an opportunity to sketch out her roles within her family, in relation to other family members, and over time: she was her husband's girlfriend, then wife, and then mother to her son.

Moreover, knowledge production through arts and creative practice with a participatory orientation affords an alternative to conventional research relationships. Creative practice in research centres participants' lived experiences and enables researchers too to acknowledge the personal connections that they have with their work. The Navigating Belonging project also highlighted the experience of Hong Kong shared by participants and the research team alike. Some of the team members have been subject to minoritisation in Hong Kong, and are users of languages that neither have official status nor are dominant there. Through sharing understandings of being in Hong Kong as migrants, then, as well as through the creativity and collaboration inherent in the arts-informed approach, hierarchies of knowledge between researchers and participants might be lessened.

In the next extract, [XXX] actively invokes a shared experience in the very first workshop. As a prompt for discussion, she offers an anecdote about hearing a familiar language on the MTR, Hong Kong's metro system. In this extract and the one that follows, lines in the transcript are numbered for ease of reference.

(C: [XXX]; P: Participant)

1. C: do you do you experience that's too for me

2. just to give you some things to think about

3. like when I'm on the MTR and then I'm walking ba-

4.		cause I don't speak well we do speak Tagalog
5.		I'm from the Philippines right the main language is Tagalog
6.		but then where I'm from we speak a dialect it's called Bisaya
7.		and so sometimes I'm on the train and then I hear it
8.		like I hear Bisaya and it's like wow I feel like I belong
9.		t- to that moment
10.	P:	mmm mm
11.	C:	you know
12	P:	that's true

(Photovoice Workshop 1, audio recording)

[XXX] mentions speaking Bisaya, which she refers to as a dialect. Also known as Cebuano, this is a variety used in the central Philippines, including the island of Negros where she was born. She positions herself as a migrant (5-6: *I'm from the Philippines* / *where I'm from*): in fact she arrived in Hong Kong with her family at the age of two, spending childhood holidays with extended family in the Philippines. The belonging she claims to feel is associated with hearing a language of the Philippines in Hong Kong, and hence with her connection to a migrant group. One participant concurs (12: *that's true*).

[XXX] begins this anecdote by asking if participants share this type of knowledge, aligning her own experience with theirs. A participant might also offer their outsider perspective on an aspect of Hong Kong life, which then allows them to establish a claim to a greater level of knowledge about this. Rosie owned and managed a restaurant before migrating, and at points throughout the workshops tells us that she would like to open one in Hong Kong. Later in the discussion in the first workshop, she describes how she identified a distinctive flavour (a *taste*) familiar throughout Hong Kong's restaurants.

(R: Rosie; C: [XXX]; P: Participant(s))

1. R: even my food recipe very secret and then not outside
2. you can't find in outside I make er curry powder by myself
3. C: your own recipe
4. R: yes yes
5. C: your own
6. R: yes xxx (.) there's a secret ingredient
7. ((laughter))
8. R: yes and different taste
9. P: yeah yeah
10. R: when you go in Hong Kong most of the restaurant have same taste
11. ((laughter xxx))
12. R: yeah same
13. P: ooh:: that's so [bad
14. R: [yes I have experience I'm in thirteen
15. years in Hong Kong so I I taste everywhere same taste
16. but only different
17. C: same same but not same

18. ((laughter xxx))

19. R: only name xxx different but taste is same

20. ((laughter))

21. R: that's what I want to change something different meaning

22. xxx taste taste

(Photovoice Workshop 1, audio recording)

Rosie positions herself as a person who is both knowledgeable about cooking and experienced in life in Hong Kong, as a basis for arguing that she can and will provide *something different* in her eventual restaurant (21). She explains that her curry powder has a *secret ingredient* (6), prompting laughter from the participants and researchers. The episode continues in the same light-hearted vein, as Rosie notes that there is a uniformity of flavour in Hong Kong's restaurants (10: *most of the restaurant have same taste*). This provokes more laughter, and the comment *ooh:: that's so bad* (13), suggesting that Rosie might have touched on a taboo topic, a criticism of Hong Kong's famed cuisine. She goes on to explain that – although she is an outsider – she has long experience in Hong Kong (14-15 *I'm in thirteen years in Hong Kong*). This comment, together with her earlier claim of expertise, provides a warrant for her to present herself as being knowledgeable, and indeed more knowledgeable than the other participants and the researchers in the room, at least about the flavours of Hong Kong.

The researchers strive to lessen the distance between themselves and the participants through the flattening of epistemic hierarchies. This is done through offering personal experiences that might be shared, as in [XXX's] case in the earlier example. Rosie reduces the distance in a different way: she positions herself as someone with insights about cooking and Hong Kong cuisine that the researchers and other participants do not have, thus upending established relationships by presenting herself as more knowledgeable, at least in this regard. To an extent she turns the tables on the power hierarchy inherent in (or at least familiar to) traditional understandings of the researcher/researched.

Discussion

We have explored how notions of belonging were actively constructed and negotiated through collaborative activities within an arts-based research project. Our analysis of Rosie's talk and interaction reveals how the physical and interactional space provided participants and researchers alike with opportunities to engage in practices of doing belonging. Moreover, we have shown how incorporating creative methods into the research supports a challenge to essentialist, fixed, and bordered understandings of belonging. Rather than adhering to predefined and potentially deficit identities, participants co-constructed belonging through dialogic engagement, artistic expression, and reflexive interaction.

Creative inquiry in the context of language(s) research includes a focus on artistic outputs, also associated with post-humanist approaches to research (Pennycook 2018; Ros i Sole, 2024) which acknowledge the agency of objects and artefacts such as photographs in people's everyday lives. The Navigating Belonging project demonstrates too that the actual processes and experiences of artistic production – participatory photography in this case – are also significant, not least for their meaning-making and exploratory potential. The acts of collective production, for example walking and taking photographs on the Navigating Belonging project's Photowalks, with research participants in dialogue with the research team, was experienced differently by those involved, all of whom brought and took different meanings to and from the creative processes. These experiences were tightly bound up in notions of place and time, and were saturated with memories of lived experiences. With their focus on belonging in Hong Kong, and on the everyday, these were not the narratives of loss and trauma generated through research practices widely criticised for perpetuating epistemic violence (e.g. Chatzipanagiotidou & Murphy, 2022). The creative and artistic space of the research eventually extended beyond the photography described in this paper to storyboarding and digital storytelling. In this 'research-creation' (Loveless, 2019) the photographs taken by the participants were collaboratively remediated as digital stories. They therefore continue to travel, allowing for future interpretations, rethinking and re-evaluation by those who see and experience them.

Conclusion

We end by asking how an expanded understanding of belonging through collaborative arts and language research practice might support the amplification of participants' voices in the

spheres of policy, practice and public debate on social integration. We have noted that refugees and asylum seekers in Hong Kong are positioned in political and public discourse as outsiders, as not being allowed to belong. The success rate for asylum claims in Hong Kong is very low. Even when approved, an applicant's case will be referred to UNHCR, which might then assist an individual to move to another country. That process can take many years, inevitably entailing a further dislocation, and in the meantime an applicant will not receive a Hong Kong identity card. Asylum seekers and refugees therefore occupy spaces of non-belonging, where Hong Kong's other – and othered – people are viewed not as being a positive feature of society but as a threat to be removed. Conversely the spaces of the research, be they understood as physical, institutional, embodied or interactional, can potentially become spaces of belonging, where participants can negotiate the legitimacy of their belonging, where they might challenge the limited account of belonging that is typically available to them in Hong Kong, and where they can reject habitual identification through an asylum policy lens. The research, and specifically the focus on collaborative relationships, contributes therefore to an inclusive approach to understanding and addressing dislocation and relocation.

Note

1. [Information about grant]

2. Transcription conventions used in this paper

(.)	short untimed pause
(( ))	description, commentary and translated text
[…]	omitted text
[	overlapping turns
xxx	indecipherable talk
::	stretching of the preceding sound

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Dear Prof Jaspers

Thank you for the further comments on our paper. We would like to thank the reviewer too for their helpful critique.

We list your requirements below and summarise how we have addressed these in the new submission. We also list the reviewer's major and minor concerns. We have read their major comments in conjunction with your guidance. You have indicated that your own comments should be the main shapers of our approach to the revisions. We have also made every effort to address the reviewer's more minor concerns.

Reviewer comments	**Response**
Editor	
E1. Explain that the paper investigates how belonging occurs in physical and interactional space (i.e. how is belonging achieved?)	This is done in the revised introduction.
E2. Explain that the paper investigates how a collaborative research practice can contribute to such belonging (i.e. how is belonging co-created by means of applied methods?)	This is done in the revised introduction.
E3. Consider the contact zone as context or a finding, to introduce after Rosie, as another aspect of ethnographic setting. This avoids thinking of contact zone as a lens through which to interpret belonging and collaborative research practice.	We now use the contact zone as a frame for presenting and describing the contexts of the study.
Reviewer	
The paper lacks a clear structure: - There is repetition. - There are different descriptions of the same thing. - How the paper relates to the project as a whole is not clear. - How the RQs of the paper relate to the aims of the project is not clear.	We have revised the introduction so the relationship between the project and the paper is clearer. We have moved reference to methodological issues to the section on 'a meeting place for methodologies', thus addressing the main source of repetition. We have worked to identify and remove smaller instances of repetition throughout.
The paper lacks a coherent focus: - The article should be streamlined to address the contribution, i.e. to the literature on language and arts-based research.	We now consider the contact zone as a framework for understanding the contexts of the study, rather than as a lens through which to interpret belonging.

- Hence the focus on migrants' belonging should be downplayed. - The aim of showing how our specific method allowed the creation of a contact zone and problematize static understandings of migrant identity should be argued step-by-step through the different sections. - The argumentation should be more integrated in the literature, and needs to be more precise (and the reviewer offers examples). - The claim that arts-based methodology can reveal how belonging is complex and can de-essentialise migrant identity: this needs to be better substantiated; we need to show how this research does this differently than other methods. - An example, that could be revised: Rosie wants to talk about her interactions with her lawyer but didn't do so in the workshops.	We have clarified that the paper is about how collaborative arts practice can contribute to belonging. As our participants are adult migrants and asylum seekers in Hong Kong, their belonging remains very relevant. Our revised section on contexts enables a clearer understanding of how contextual features contribute to the generation of particular types of interaction (the section on analysis). We now argue more clearly in the text that Rosie's focus on other aspects of her identity – beyond that of asylum seeker – provides evidence of how the arts-based activities open up new opportunities for identity expression.
Theoretical framework: the conceptual articulation of the contact zone is not convincing: - Data analysis could reveal the interaction during the workshops to constitute a contact zone. - Hence the CZ would be a finding rather than a pre-imposed framework (see E3). At present, the sections CZ as physical space and CZ as meeting point are very descriptive.	We now consider the contact zone as a framework for understanding the contexts of the study (see E3). We have worked to sharpen up the discussion of the three aspects of context covered in the contact zone section.
Reviewer smaller comments	
p.2-3 Introduction of project team: Resembles to the reviewer a positionality statement, and could be relevant if we want to argue how arts-based research makes for less asymmetrical research relations. This should be built into the analysis though.	This is revised to explain positionality and its relevance further.
p. 3 revise statement about insights being 'not allowed'.	Revised and re-phrased.

The discussion of outsideness and the Bakhtin reference are not convincing. The reviewer does not understand what this part of the paper is trying to do.	Revised and clarified.
The last sentence of the description of the legal situation of refugees needs more explanation. This section could be used to argue that arts-based research attends to identity aspects other than the deficit ones that are often the focus.	Revised the beginning of this section so that the end makes more sense.
Why include the vignette from fieldnotes, and not just introduce Rosie? The choice of one case study should be more convincingly argued.	A better explanation is provided of why this vignette is included.
p.10 Elaborate on the observation that the room looks like a classroom set-up, and how this brings along expectations and asymmetries.	This is now discussed in more detail with reference to the second aspect of context, the interactional space.
p.11 The concept of we-subjectivity should be more clearly explained with reference to the data. How is we- vs I-subjectivity relevant to explain the group dynamics in the case study?	A sentence is added to clarify the relevance of this to the project.
p.12-13 reads too much like a literature review: the references and the ideas about arts-based research can be applied to what happened in the project itself.	The 'contact zone as context' section is revised to relate more closely to the research itself.
p.14 The concept of dis-citizenship comes out of the blue.	Reference to this notion is now removed.
p.19 Terminology: "Asylum-seeking refugees" – is this accurate? A contradiction in terms? Also, we use 'forced migrant' in the title. Problematic? Are we contributing to the deficit positioning by mentioning the legal status of the participants?	Terminology has been checked and clarified throughout. The legal status of the participants is integral to their participation, and mention of this is needed to make the argument about arts practice encouraging other aspects of identity and belonging.
p.25 and other references to policy: This paper doesn't really speak to policy. The contribution is situated more on a conceptual level.	Mention of the policy implications, though not removed, is played down in the conclusions and elsewhere.