



Doctoral Journeys-Beyond the Doctorate: Sin-Wang Chong (Part 1)

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Abstract

This article presents insights from an interview with Sin-Wang Chong, focusing on his doctoral journey and the formative experiences that shaped his development as a researcher, drawing on materials reported in Imanishi (2025a, 2025b; 2025c). By tracing his pathway, including early teaching experiences, his transition into educational research, and the challenges of completing a PhD by publication, the article offers reflections relevant to practitioner-researchers and doctoral students. A follow-up article (Part 2) will examine his professional journey in greater depth.

Keywords

1. Lifelong learning
2. Practitioner-researcher
3. PhD by publication
4. Researcher identity
5. Academic blog and podcast

AI Declaration

AI was used solely for language refinement, and the author created all content.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the content of this blog post.



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Introduction

This article reflects on an interview with Sin-Wang Chong. The full interview is available on the Spotify podcast series *Doctoral Journeys – Beyond the Doctorate* (Imanishi, 2025c). Sin-Wang's experiences resonated with me and prompted me to think about my own journey as a part-time doctoral student.

Doctoral Journey

What Does a Doctorate Mean to You?

For Sin-Wang Chong, a doctorate is not a final credential but part of a lifelong professional journey. His reflections challenge the assumption, common in teacher education, that doctorates possess universal expertise. Instead, he underscores that expertise is always situated: classroom teachers hold deep pedagogical knowledge, while doctoral researchers specialise in areas of inquiry. He also highlights that doing a doctorate involves thinking holistically and critically about a topic and developing the capacity to understand and integrate diverse viewpoints. Curiosity and open-mindedness, he argues, are essential qualities for any doctoral practitioner.

This perspective helped me rethink what it means to 'become' a researcher, shifting the focus from obtaining the doctoral degree itself to cultivating the qualities associated with research practice. I was particularly struck by his emphasis on *curiosity*, *open-mindedness*, and *the capacity to integrate diverse viewpoints*, as these are precisely the qualities I am striving to develop in my own doctoral journey. His words offered both reassurance and direction, reminding me that becoming a researcher is less about mastery and more about learning to see the world from various perspectives.

The Classroom as a Research Site

Classrooms are rich sites of research. Sin-Wang noted how teachers' challenges vary widely even within the same curriculum and that these variations can spark meaningful questions. That said, he was cautious when I expressed interest in conducting action research with students as co-researchers. His wariness highlighted the tension between the potential of educational research and the realities of school settings, where ethical approval and parental consent can make classroom inquiry particularly complex. At the same time, his comments reminded me why teacher-researchers matter: we are uniquely positioned to understand both the lived realities of school settings and the transformative potential of classroom research to improve practice.



Curiosity as the Foundation of Research

Sin-Wang's journey underscores how research often begins with curiosity rather than formal methodological training. Even without structured preparation, he followed his questions into forms of action research that later shaped his research identity. The importance of noticing particularly resonated with me, as the science teachers at my school, where scientific research is central, often encourage students to treat small doubts or moments of discomfort in their daily lives as seeds of research. Similarly, my own action research with students as co-researchers emerged not from expertise but from curiosity and purpose. His reflections reminded me that research competence develops gradually and that curiosity is a powerful starting point.

Learning Through Rejection

Sin-Wang's reflections also highlight the role of rejection in academic development. He shared how early setbacks, such as unsuccessful submissions or critical feedback, were not signs of inadequacy but integral parts of learning. He completed his PhD by Publication while navigating the dual demands of being both a doctoral student and a full-time teacher. While he describes his personal journey in detail in Chong (2020), Chong and Johnson (2022) provide a broader account of the *PhD by Publication* model, examining its policies, thesis formats, and student experiences.

Hearing his story helped me rethink how I respond to critical feedback in my own academic life. I am gradually learning to view such moments not as personal shortcomings but as opportunities to refine my thinking and grow professionally, even when the process feels challenging. As a part-time doctoral student and full-time teacher, I also recognised the emotional labour involved in balancing professional responsibilities with academic aspirations. Although I have only completed the first year of my part-time doctoral program, I already understand how demanding it can be to pursue a doctorate while working full time, even as my life has become much fuller and more exciting than it was before I began this journey.

At the same time, I admit that I initially felt shocked and overwhelmed when both of my supervisors questioned my early ideas. They expressed doubts about my plan to conduct action research with students as co-researchers and my hope to demonstrate continuity with my MA research. I had used Systemic Functional Linguistics to analyse media texts through a Critical Discourse Analysis lens. Because action research was also a key component of my MA training, both strands felt central to my developing academic identity. Although their feedback remained difficult to process for quite some time, it ultimately strengthened my determination. Their initial rejection of my ideas pushed me to think more deeply about how these strands could be carried out meaningfully within my doctoral project. This challenge motivated me to explore alternative approaches, and in doing so, I eventually found practical and transformative ways of bringing both strands of my research together.

As Sin-Wang emphasised the importance of a supportive community, I felt grateful for the Doctor of Professional Practice (DProf) students at my university and even those at other institutions, with whom I can share experiences and encouragement. When I was feeling particularly discouraged by the rejection of my initial research plans, I became



acutely aware of how essential a supportive system is for distance learning students. I realised that I could not be the only student who felt isolated, with no one nearby to share emotions, uncertainties, or practical concerns. This recognition prompted me to act. In May last year, I began inviting DProf students with a connection to Japan to form a Community of Practice as the *Japan Cohort* on Teams, which has now inspired another DProf student in a different region to develop a similar cohort for students living in that area. In addition to establishing the cohort, I have also been organising a monthly online meet-up within the Community of Practice to provide ongoing opportunities for connection, reflection, and mutual support. In this sense, just as Sin-Wang learnt from his own experiences of rejection, I too learnt from mine.

I also came to appreciate more deeply the crucial role that academic communities play in supporting doctoral students and early career researchers. In fact, I would not have been able to complete my action research with students as co-researchers during my first year without the guidance and support of *Creating Community: Learning Together 9* organised by the Global Issues in Language Education Special Interest Group, and the Learner Development Special Interest Group within the Japan Association for Language Teaching. I am equally grateful for the insights and encouragement I received from mentors in the Research Special Interest Group of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language, whose generosity and expertise sustained me during moments of uncertainty.

Closing Reflection

Earlier this year, Sin-Wang participated in an OUP-organised debate at the IATEFL conference (Teaching English with Oxford, 2025), an event that later led to an invitation from the *ELT Journal* to publish a paper. Having once experienced rejection from a well-known journal as a doctoral student, he is now a professor who can offer his students the opportunity to co-author in international journals, as demonstrated in Hashimura, McDorman, and Chong (2025). This trajectory highlights the sustained efforts he has made since the beginning of his doctoral studies. Although I had assumed that Sin-Wang's path had been straightforward, his journey turned out to be far more challenging than I expected. Learning this reassured me that it is normal to feel uncertain or imperfect as a part-time DProf student and full-time teacher, because a doctorate is always a process and what truly matters is the willingness to keep improving, experimenting, and staying curious, passionate, and open-minded. Even though I often feel that I know very little about research, his story encouraged me to keep moving forward, even while struggling, because he reached where he is today by travelling a similarly winding road, one that reminds me that progress can be gentle, slow, and still meaningful. Part 2 explores his professional journey, guided by the same curiosity and open-mindedness seen in Part 1.

Acknowledgement

I sincerely thank Professor Sin-Wang Chong for generously sharing his time and experiences for this interview, which formed the basis of this article.



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