



# THE RISING ASIA REVIEW OF BOOKS

REVIEW BY PFOKRELO KAPESA  
*University of Allahabad*

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## THE UNBEARABLE UNJUSTNESS Of Being Stateless

Chen Tienshi Lara, *Stateless*, translated by Louis Carlet (Singapore: NUS Press, 2023), 256 pages, SGD36.

**S***teless* by Chen Tienshi Lara is riveting work on statelessness and stateless people. The book is an auto-ethnographic work in which the author uses her own experience and those of others she met in the course of her research on statelessness. The author Lara's narrative is based on the experience of stateless people to provide a human and people-centric understanding of the issue of statelessness. While the book largely explores the notion of statelessness and what it means to be stateless, the author questions the justness/rightness of the concepts of citizenship, nationality, and the nation-state in determining the fate of real people.

The book is divided into twelve chapters with a prologue and an epilogue. The twelve chapters are accounts of the author's experiences with statelessness and her encounters with stateless people in the course of research and activism on the issue. The prologue introduces the issue of statelessness and highlights the extent of stateless people as global issue.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a stateless person as one “who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law.” Some people are born stateless, but others become stateless.<sup>1</sup> International efforts at mitigating statelessness includes the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. In 2014 the UNHCR launched the Campaign to End Statelessness within 10 Years.<sup>2</sup> Statelessness is far from eradicated and at best can be described as ‘a distant dream.’ According to the UNHCR website at least 10 million people are stateless at present, and “they are told that they don’t belong anywhere. They are denied a nationality. And without one, they are denied their basic rights.”<sup>3</sup>

Chapter 1 lays the context of how Lara came to be stateless. In 1971 Japan entered into diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC), severing diplomatic ties with Republic of China (ROC, now Taiwan), leaving 9,200 Chinese residents, citizens of Taiwan stateless. Chen Tienshi Lara was one of them. Lara’s maternal grandfather was a general in the Kuomintang Republic (ROC) and so her mother’s family like many supporters of the Kuomintang Republic moved to Taiwan when the PRC was established in mainland China (p. 2). Her father was born in Manchuria and had bitter memories of the time when Japan tried to set up the puppet Manchukuo state in northeast China as his school was shut down and he recalls walking down the street

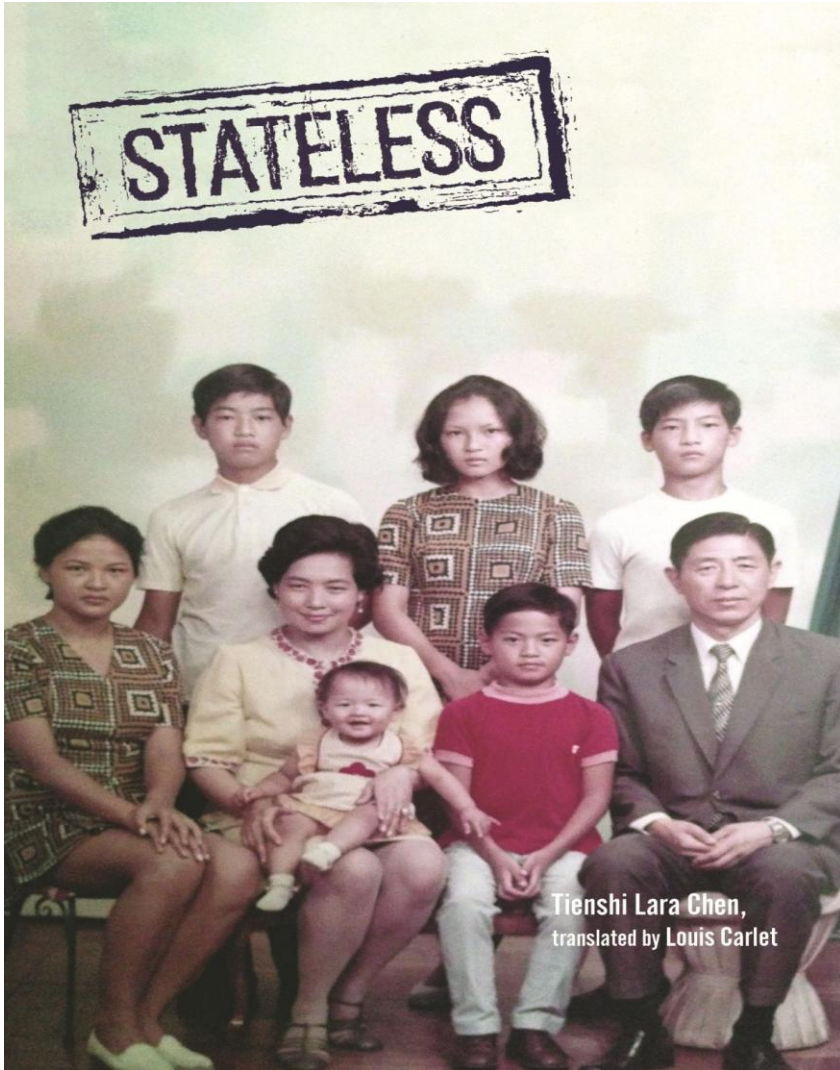
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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, About Statelessness, <https://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/about-statelessness/>

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, UN Conventions on Statelessness, <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/protect-human-rights/ending-statelessness/un-conventions-statelessness>

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, Statelessness around the world, <https://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/statelessness-around-the-world/>

with extreme fear (p. 2). Years later when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) gained strength in the Civil War (that would establish the PRC) and turned against landowners, he remembers fleeing his hometown for Taiwan with no time to even change clothes (p. 3).



As a result in 1972, when the Chinese community in Japan were given three options: hold on to their ROC passport and live in Japan as citizens



of a country Japan had no diplomatic relations with; acquire a PRC passport and live in Japan as citizens of a country which had diplomatic relations with China; or naturalize as Japanese citizens (p. 8), Lara's family opted to be stateless (p. 9).

Chapter 2 through 5 offers a detailed account of Lara's experiences with statelessness, highlighting the different challenges that she encountered as a stateless person. These slices of personal history are, in a sense, a coming-of-age account as the author began to grasp the meaning and the depth of what being stateless meant. From being denied admission in a private Japanese girls' school to studying in an ethnic Chinese school, her experience with systemic/institutional discrimination unfolded one after the other. A growing sense of alienation culminated when she had to register as a "stateless foreigner" as her identity card issued by Japanese authority read, "This girl is a non-Japanese foreigner who belongs to no country" (p. 30).

She discusses at length how her being stateless limited her options and choices in terms of scholarships to study abroad. When she finally managed to avail a scholarship program to study in the United States, studying abroad and meeting different people broadened her perspectives about identity and nationality. The author also explains how her experiences in Chinese majority Hong Kong (p.56) and the United States as a Chinese-born person brought up in Japan (p. 66) made her realize how one's identity becomes even more ambiguous and complex. She further explains just how disadvantaged stateless people are when she could not apply for a job at the United Nations without citizenship. Lara wonders what would happen to stateless people around the world if even the UN systematically kept out stateless people. All these experiences motivated her to study stateless people (pp. 66-69).



Chapters six and seven discuss Lara's experiences with learning and meeting other stateless people in Japan and Asian countries. While discussing the case of Amerasians, people born of American and Asian parents, caught in a citizenship maze, the author identifies the contradictory conditions for citizenship. She discusses in detail how children born of mixed parents often become stateless because of *jus soli* (the right of nationality or citizenship acquired by being born in a place) and *jus sanguinis* (the right of citizenship in a nation acquired by being born to a parent or parents with citizenship in that nation). She laments how people have very little control over their identity and fate, making them legally invisible (p. 94). While listing the varied factors leading to statelessness, she argues that many people cannot seek legal recourse as most stateless persons do not have the required resources and emotional energy for the process, leaving them helpless (p. 104).

In chapter eight the author details the process of her naturalization for Japanese citizenship, and how she made her peace. She concludes that with citizenship she could avoid all the hurdles and complications in travel and border crossings and thereby contribute more to her research and activism on stateless people (p. 139).

In chapter nine, the author raises a very important question on the relationship between the law, lawmakers, and the people these laws regulate, and she wonders if the lawmakers had any idea about the suffering and pain such laws cause people (p. 142). While discussing the case of ethnic Chinese in Brunei, the Vietnamese in Thailand, and the Japanese in the Philippines, the author discusses the moral and ethical dilemma of researching the subject of statelessness. While advocating on the subject of statelessness is of the utmost importance, the researcher is also faced with the possibility of exposing the people to danger to their



lives and livelihood (p. 159), raising a very pertinent point on research ethics.

In chapter ten, based on her research and activism on stateless people and the precarious lives of stateless people, Lara raises the question—if refugees and people fleeing their home countries and living as stateless people had really won their freedom (p. 167).

Chapters eleven and twelve discuss the issue of statelessness in a global context while also highlighting the legal contradictions that confound the subject. Among others, the Rohingyas from Myanmar (p. 195) and the Palestinians in the Golan Heights (p. 210) represent mass stateless people. The author argues that it is the very nature of sovereign states to “cleave the population into citizens and foreigners” (p. 196), raising the bigger question of concepts of sovereignty and state-system around which the world is organized.

In the Epilogue Lara argues that such abstract concepts of nationality, nation-state and citizenship as regulating systems are not only unjust but also untenable in the long run as they are far removed from ordinary people.

The book is a remarkable work of auto-ethnography. It is a very important addition to the existing literature about statelessness and stateless people. The significance of the book stems from the method the author has adopted. Beginning as personal account of her own experience with statelessness like a drop in the ocean creating ripples, the author skilfully develops the subject as a global issue by bringing in the experiences of other stateless people.

While the book can be easily read by anyone interested on the subject it requires a lot of attention and patience to fully appreciate the book. As the book is a work of auto-ethnography based on the author’s own experience as a stateless person and her encounters with other



stateless people, the essence lies in the details. One must be really patient and attentive to glean the essence of the issue of statelessness and stateless people.

Another important contribution of the book is the question of the nation-state, nationality, and citizenship. The author argues that abstract concepts of the nation-state, nationality and citizenship which regulate individuals are far-removed from real people and yet have real impact on them. These concepts serve as the basis to ‘include’ or ‘exclude’ someone and give them an identity that will determine their lives. The author is, however, hopeful that with globalization, the number of people who have come to be able to cleave part of their identity from their nationality has slowly begun to increase (p. 220).

### ***Note on the Reviewer***

**Pfokrelo Kapesa** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of Allahabad, India. She has a PhD in Diplomacy and Disarmament from Jawaharlal Nehru University. Her research focuses on Conflict Studies, India-China relations, and Indigenous studies. She was a Swedish Institute Fellow established by the Swedish Government (2015-16), and recipient of the Cariplo Foundation Scholarship by Network for the Advancement of Social and Political Sciences, Italy (2018). She has presented at the Belfast Colloquium on “Political Organisations of Crossborder Minorities” held at the Queen’s University Belfast, and Ventana Conference on “Decolonial Dialogues from Within and Beyond the Global Margins” held at the University of York. She was invited as plenary speaker to the Sustainable Research and Innovation Congress/Sustainability Science Days 2024. She is a Regional Co-Lead for Asia and Oceania on Global Indigenous Youth Summit on Climate Change (GIYSCC). She has published widely in academic journals, edited

books, and in the media. She has most recently reviewed *Understanding the India-China Border: The Enduring Threat of War in High Himalaya* by Manoj Joshi in *International Affairs*, Volume 99, Issue 1 (January 2023).