

Using Oral History Methods to Document the Subjective Experiences of Statelessness

The Case of Stateless Chinese-Bruneian Immigrants in Vancouver

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Abstract

This article reflects upon the use of oral histories in uncovering people's subjective experiences of statelessness — an area that has received relatively little attention in the growing body of literature on statelessness. Through an analysis of 13 oral history interviews with formerly stateless Chinese-Bruneian immigrants living in Vancouver, this study sought to understand the emotional and material repercussions of being denied a nationality, as well as respondents' conceptions of citizenship and civic behaviour. By privileging the voices of formerly stateless people and giving them the opportunity to tell their life stories using their own words, this study advocates for the need to pay greater attention to the subjective, quotidian dimensions of this global human rights crisis.

Keywords

statelessness – Brunei – Canada – Chinese minority – immigration – citizenship – oral histories

'As soon as you're old enough to realize, you know that you're stateless.'

1 Introduction

What is it like to be stateless? How does being stateless affect people's everyday lives? How do stateless people make sense of concepts like national identity and belonging? To probe into these questions, I decided to delve into the lives of a population that has hitherto received no academic attention: stateless Chinese-Bruneians, many of whom have left their homeland and have come to

settle in Vancouver, Canada. Soon after I began this inquiry, however, I came to the realization that the difficulty did not just lie in demonstrating the academic value of understanding people's subjective experiences of being stateless. Nor was I just confronted with the challenge of building upon the very little information that exists about the ethno-political history of Brunei as a whole, much less the conditions of a minority group whose very legal existence has largely gone unrecognized. In addition to these predicted difficulties, I discovered that many of the respondents themselves simply did not believe that their own stories were worthy of being heard. My requests to speak with them about their pasts were often met with incredulity or skepticism: 'Why do you want to study such a small country?'; 'I left [Brunei] such a long time ago! What does it matter anymore?'; 'Who would care about Chinese people there?' While these reactions may partly be attributable to shyness or modesty about divulging personal details in an interview, more profound factors may have played a part in producing the self-effacing and dismissive attitudes of many of these respondents. Thus, the outcomes of this research grew to being twofold in nature.

Firstly, I sought to humanize the issue of statelessness by describing its emotional and material impacts on Chinese-Bruneian immigrants in Vancouver, and by showing how Brunei's and Canada's citizenship policies differentially mediated their civic attitudes. Secondly, by providing an opportunity for people to tell their life stories using their own words, this project served as a way for stateless Chinese-Bruneians to revalue their own histories, and to raise greater awareness about a crisis that has largely remained invisible to the public eye.

2 A Brief Background on Stateless Chinese-Bruneian Immigrants in Vancouver

The people upon whom this study focused originated from Brunei Darussalam, a small oil-rich hereditary monarchy that gained independence from Britain in 1984. Covering a relatively tiny area of 5765 square kilometers on the northern end of Borneo island in Southeast Asia, it currently has a population of 402,000 comprising several ethnicities. This includes the dominant Malay group, which forms just over two-thirds of the country's inhabitants, with the Chinese constituting the largest minority group at around 11% of the population, according to 2011 estimates.¹ Despite its multiethnic makeup, citizenship in Brunei

1 United States Central Intelligence Agency, 'Brunei' (*The World Fact book*, 24 September 2013) <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bx.html>> accessed 31 August 2011.

functions as a mechanism by which the monarchy protects the cultural, economic, and religious interests of the dominant Malay majority, often to the detriment of other groups. Those who fall outside of this category are not automatically entitled to citizenship, regardless of whether they were born on Bruneian soil. Instead, they are given stateless permanent residence status, and are issued International Certificates of Identity in lieu of Bruneian passports.² Like many other stateless peoples around the world, they are not only denied legal membership to the country in which they live, but they are also unable to make claims to fundamental civil, political, economic, or social rights.

Confronted by these constraints on an everyday basis, stateless Chinese-Bruneians have increasingly turned to permanent out-migration as a strategy for responding to this institutionalized marginalization. Along with the United Kingdom and Australia, Canada has been a popular destination country. In the present day, there are 4825 Bruneian immigrants residing in Canada, most of whom are formerly stateless Chinese who have settled in either Vancouver or Edmonton.³

To echo one of the respondents: Why study a marginal minority of a faraway microstate? For one, systemic human rights violations should not be disregarded merely on the basis of the size of the populations affected. Secondly, despite being small in number, the case of Chinese-Bruneians who have moved to Canada is instructive for understanding the connections between citizenship and migration, precisely because citizenship (or more accurately, the lack thereof) figured so prominently in their everyday lives. By comparing the ways in which stateless Chinese-Bruneian immigrants talked about their experiences in Brunei and Canada, we can also make sense of how citizenship policies can affect people's interpretations of their relationships to the State, and how these interpretations can shift as they move from one national environment to another.

In total, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Chinese-Bruneians who had settled in Vancouver, Canada, from anywhere between 1 and 38 years. The majority had naturalized in 3 to 4 years of coming to Canada, with the exception of 2 people who took 6 years and 2 who had only recently arrived as permanent residents and were not yet eligible to apply for citizenship. There were 8 men and 5 women in total, ranging from 27 to 75 years of age. The oral history method was selected in order to provide a human face to a

2 Roger Kershaw, 'Brunei: Malay, Monarchical Micro-state' in John Funston (ed), *Government and Politics in Southeast Asia* (Zed Books 2001).

3 Statistics Canada, 'Canadian Immigration Statistics, 1966-2012' <http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/202/301/immigration_statistics-ef/index.html> accessed 3 April 2012.

legal condition that has undergone little qualitative investigation. The conversations, which took place in participants' homes or in coffee shops, revolved around their memories of being raised in Brunei, the impacts statelessness had on their daily lives, their attitudes towards the Bruneian and Canadian governments and citizenship policies, their reasons for immigrating, and their experiences of integration into Canadian society. These dialogues were guided by the following questions: What are the material and subjective repercussions of being stateless in Brunei? How did statelessness factor in to respondents' strategic decisions to immigrate out? And lastly, how do the respective citizenship models of Brunei and Canada structure individuals' understandings of citizenship, civic identity, and national belonging?⁴ Through the privileging of stateless Chinese-Bruneian immigrants' voices, I argued that while Brunei's exclusive policies restricted people to an instrumental understanding of citizenship as restricting access to material entitlements, Canada's civic nationalist model guided respondents to espouse more symbolic ideals of freedom, democratic participation, and civic engagement.

3 Bruneian Citizenship: Instrumental and Exclusive⁵

In recounting their earlier years in Brunei, respondents spoke of Bruneian nationality in primarily instrumental ways. The denial of legal status was perceived as a way for the government to restrict certain groups from enjoying an array of government privileges and benefits. As one respondent put it:

Even though I was born in Brunei, I was never a 'Bruneian.' My status was a Brunei Permanent Resident, even though I was born there. It's a very weird thing because when I talk to people, they just don't understand. They're like, 'What? You're born in Brunei but you're not a Bruneian? What do you mean by that?' I honestly thought it was weird. For me, personally, I felt it was discrimination. I still don't comprehend. Because I'm born in Brunei, I should be called Bruneian! In Malay, it's called anak Brunei. Anak means child. So child of Brunei. Because my status is Brunei Permanent Resident, it's just strange when I talk to people, 'I'm from Brunei but I'm a Brunei PR.' So it just doesn't click. So that means if anything happens to me, I have no home country that I can run to!

4 See Irene Bloemraad, *Becoming a Citizen* (University of California Press 2006).

5 See Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Harvard University Press, 1998).

I identified 3 main factors contributing to respondents' instrumental attitude towards citizenship: the material constraints imposed on their life chances—particularly in the areas of education, employment, and property ownership; the lack of freedom of expression or governmental accountability; and the impossibility of fitting in to the state-defined idea of Bruneian nationality as tied to the Muslim Malay identity. Though the government-imposed restrictions which affected all aspects of people's lives, the state's emphasis on the selective withholding of material privileges allowed respondents to see themselves in a sense as free from obligation to the state. Instead of regarding being part of the Bruneian national community as performing one's civic duties in a mutually accountable individual-state relationship, respondents instead viewed citizenship as a mechanism by which the government restricted a unidirectional flow of material entitlements to the individual.

4 Canadian Citizenship: Symbolic and Inclusive⁶

Confronted by these wide-ranging disadvantages stemming from Brunei's restrictive citizenship policies, many stateless Chinese turned to out-migration as a strategy for improving their life trajectories. When asked about their reasons for obtaining Canadian citizenship, however, respondents did not focus on the material benefits that were now open to them. Rather, I observed a marked shift in the ways in which respondents talked about Canadian citizenship and their roles as citizens in the Canadian context. As our conversations progressed to their experiences in Canada, respondents' associations with citizenship moved away from material entitlements and towards more symbolic ideas of democratic freedom, civic participation, and the chance to finally belong to a nation. For example, one respondent stated, '[s]o I think the biggest difference [between Brunei and Canada] is that here you can say you are a Canadian. And we are pretty proud once we have a country to call our own, because we were never wanted [in Brunei].' To account for this change, we must look to the broader institutional contexts in which these respondents' attitudes developed.

Exposed to state-led discourses describing Canadian citizenship as entailing both rights and responsibilities, stateless Chinese-Bruneian immigrants reiterated ideals of civic participation and democratic freedom, and only considered matters of material benefits secondarily. In addition to celebrating their new-found sense of empowerment through the ability to vote and express their

6 Brubaker, 2006 (n 5).

opinions on public issues affecting them, respondents also drew upon images of Canada as a proverbial land of liberty, egalitarianism, and multicultural rights. They saw citizenship not as a tool to exclude and stratify, but as a mutually obligatory relationship between individual and the state.

This being said, more complicated dynamics underlay the apparent success stories of stateless Chinese-Bruneians finding new homes in Canada. I must point out the disjuncture that sometimes became apparent between these romanticized perceptions and the less than rosy realities of their integration experiences. This was most noticeable in respondents' accounts of trying to enter or move up in the Canadian labour market. While approximately one third of respondents managed to obtain white-collar careers and resided in middle-class neighbourhoods in Vancouver, others became stuck in low-paid jobs traditionally held by immigrants and ethnic minorities, such as those in hospital cafeterias, hotels, and car-washes. Barriers such as the non-recognition of foreign credentials, the lack of financial resources to upgrade their skills, the privileging of 'Canadian work experience', and possible stereotypical assumptions held by employers about hiring immigrants in blue-collar positions, posed significant challenges to respondents adjusting to their new lives. Despite these gaps between discourse and reality, respondents did not dwell upon these hardships. That they opted instead to highlight the more positive symbolic benefits of being part of the Canadian national community points to the power of institutionalized discourses over the way people make sense of their own circumstances.

5 Conclusion

This study marks the first attempt to critically analyze the subjective experiences of stateless Chinese-Bruneians and their attitudes towards citizenship. In addition to describing the oft-neglected human aspects of being denied the right to a nationality, findings from this project also contribute to our understanding of the interplay between citizenship policies and the ways in which individuals relate to the state.⁷ These oral histories of stateless Chinese-Bruneian immigrants in Vancouver shed light upon how formal laws and discourses surrounding what it means to be a citizen influence how individuals understand their own roles as civic beings, and how they fit themselves into their national communities. In contributing to the relatively nascent but growing body of literature on statelessness, I argue that more attention needs

7 Bloemraad, 2006 (n 4).

to be paid to human stories and the subjective, quotidian dimensions of this global human rights crisis.

6 Acknowledgements

This article is an abbreviated version of the B.A. Honours 'Changing Conceptions of Citizenship Among Stateless Chinese-Bruneian Immigrants in Vancouver' which was written by the author as part of her studies at the University of British Columbia Department of Sociology and was honoured with the 2013 UNHCR Statelessness Research Award Best Paper in the Undergraduate Category. Details of this Award can be found at <http://www.tilburguniversity.edu/research/institutes-and-research-groups/statelessness/unhcr-award/>. The author would like to acknowledge Jennifer Jihye Chun for her mentorship and guidance throughout her time at the University of British Columbia. She would also like to thank the Chinese-Bruneian community in Vancouver for their honesty and bravery in sharing their stories, and speaking out about statelessness.