

The Culture and Citizenship of the Sri Lankan Chinese Dental Technicians

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The Sri Lankan Chinese, who were formally stateless, were granted citizenship under the 2008 “Grant of Citizenship to Persons of Chinese Origin” Act. Citizenship was granted to persons of Chinese ethnicity who have had permanent residence since 15th November 1948. Within this purview, Chinese dental technicians are the first dental practitioners in Sri Lanka who still practice as dental technicians in most towns in Sri Lanka. It should be noted that unlike the dental surgeons who specialise in surgery and cleaning and filling teeth, these dental technicians only engage in constructing and repairing dentures and other dental appliances including crowns and bridges. As the current dental technicians are either third or fourth generation migrants, they are legally recognised as “citizens” of Sri Lanka. Yet, as they are ethnicity-based tradesmen from a minority ethnicity, it is important to examine how their “culture intersects with their citizenship today” (Rosaldo, 1997: p. 256). Through purposive and snowball sampling methods to identify participants, the study is conducted focussing on a sample of ten dental mechanics who are based in the main towns in Sri Lanka. Considering the qualitative nature of the study, semi structured interviews were conducted to obtain information. The data gathered were analysed against Rosaldo’s (1997) notion of Cultural Citizenship: a way of understanding how citizenship is informed by culture, the way that claim to citizenship are reinforced or subverted by cultural assumptions and practices. The entire study was conducted under the purview of the Faculty of Humanities project, “Documenting Discourse Communities in Sri Lanka”. The study focussed on the degree of homogeneity, assimilation to the dominant culture, religion, language and gender identities of the sample. It was found that the participants employ several mechanisms to voice their concerns in the public sphere. It was also clear that cultural assimilation has resulted in the participants speaking the language of the dominant culture. While only Chinese men expected to continue the trade, women too are tangentially involved. Religion too is decided by the immediate culture they are exposed to.

Key words: cultural citizenship, language, religion, gender based identity, Sri Lankan Chinese dental technicians