

IS THREE-YEAR-OLD ROWENA EBER:

■ Eurasian ■ Chinese ■ Eurasian-Chinese ■ Chinese-Eurasian?



THREE-YEAR-OLD Rowena Eber has a Eurasian father and a Chinese mother.

When she was born, she was given her father's race: Eurasian.

But her parents, assistant manager Christian Eber and polytechnic lecturer Josephine Tan, both in their 30s, will have the option to change her race classification to

Eurasian-Chinese when a new rule is introduced. Parliament was told yesterday that such double-barrelled race classifications will be allowed in due course.

Said Mr Eber last night: "We think a double-barrelled classification may have advantages for Rowena. It may help her connect better with the Chinese language and culture."

ST PHOTO: LAU FOOK KONG

Double-barrelled race option for children

■ **By KOR KIAN BENG**

INDIAN-CHINESE, Malay-Indian, Chinese-Malay or Eurasian-Chinese?

Parents from different races can soon pick these "double-barrelled" race classifications for their newborns, said Senior Minister of State Ho Peng Kee in Parliament yesterday.

But in making the choice, they have to decide which of the two races is to come first when registering the child's birth at the Immigration & Checkpoints Authority (ICA), said Associate Professor Ho, of the Law and Home Affairs ministries.

This is to help the child identify better and be "culturalised" with a particular race, he added.

He said the ICA will give more details of the proposed change in due course, as well as when it will take effect.

He announced the change in his reply to Mr Hri Kumar Nair (Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC), who had asked whether the Government would let parents of different races reflect both races on their children's identity cards.

Mr Nair, a Senior Counsel at Drew & Napier law firm, is married to Ms Dilys Boey, a partner at accounting firm Ernst & Young. They have a 2½-year-old girl.

He later told the House the change would lead to "long discussions with my wife".

The announcement comes on the heels of a new measure this month that gives

parents in mixed-race marriages flexibility in deciding the race of their children.

Since Jan 2, these children could take the race of the mother or the father, as long as both parents agree and can provide supporting documents. Previously, the child had to take the father's race.

These changes come at a time when mixed marriages have spiked. In 2007, 16.4 per cent of about 24,000 marriages were inter-racial, compared to 8.9 per cent of 25,667 marriages a decade earlier.

Prof Ho said the aim of the latest change, which the Government had considered carefully, was to give parents

Only two races can be listed

more choice and greater flexibility.

He also elaborated on the need for parents to decide which race should be recorded first.

One reason, he said, is that children – even of mixed parentage – will probably identify better with one race. Indeed, how they are brought up would show the race their parents want them to embrace more, he added.

Another reason he cited was ethnic-linked policies, like the Housing Board's Ethnic Integration Policy, which seeks to achieve a healthy racial mix in HDB estates by maintaining ethnic proportions at the neighbourhood and block levels within specified limits.

"So we need parents, even though they have a choice now, to still indicate the dominant race," he said.

Prof Ho later clarified that in using "dominant", he did not mean to suggest one race is superior to the other, but it is for easy reference for policies like that of the HDB.

He gave some details on how the change will be implemented. The dominant race will be registered as the first of the two race groups. For example, an Indian father and a Chinese mother who pick Chinese as the dominant race will have to register the child as "Chinese-Indian".

If the parents cannot decide on the dominant race but still want both to be reflected, the ICA will use the father's race as the dominant race, which means it will be "Indian-Chinese", said Prof Ho.

What happens if a person with a double-barrelled race classification marries someone of yet another race, or one with a double-barrelled race classification different from his?

"Then they will have to choose which two of the three or four races are to be declared as their child's race," he said.

However, there is no need for parents to rush to make double-barrelled race classifications, he added.

The reason: The record of the race at birth is provisional. It is recorded officially only on the child's identity card, which he is required to obtain at age 15.

Even then, changes of race declaration can be made at any time by the parents or by the child when he is no longer a minor.

Assistant Professor Hoon Chang Yau of Singapore Management University welcomed the move.

He had suggested recently that a double-barrelled classification – which is practised in the United States – would better reflect the identity of a mixed-ethnicity child.

The challenge, he told The Straits Times yesterday, is when a person of double-race classification marries someone of yet another race.

"This raises the question of whether racial classification is still relevant and possible in our globalised age, where there is an increasing mixing in marriages and where ethnic identity is becoming more hybridised," said Dr Hoon.

kianbeng@sph.com.sg

More Parliament reports: Home Pages B4-7