Strong views on multiple race identities

Options signify diversity, but some question if race is still relevant

BY CLAIRSA OON, CAI HAOXIANG & LETTER KOK

EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD student Sarah Lim Ting Al-Idress, classified as “Arab” on her identity card, bristled at the suggestion that she might change her race to “Chinese” for pragmatic reasons.

“I’m proud of my ancestors,” she said.

The daughter of a Syrian Arab father and a Singaporean Chinese mother.

Instead, with a new proposal to allow double-barrelled race classifications, Ms Lim will change her race to “Arab-Chinese,” putting “Arab” before “Chinese” for alphabetical reasons.

“It’s only fair that my parents are in the same identity card,” she said.

Children of mixed marriages will soon have greater flexibility over how they want their race to be recorded on their identity cards, where before they had no choice but to take their father’s race.

However, for a double-barrelled race classification, they and their parents must decide which race is listed first. Administratively, the child will then be identified with that race, Senior Minister of State for Law and Home Affairs Ho Peng Kee told Parliament on Tuesday.

More details will be announced later.

Sociologists interviewed say it will be difficult to choose which race comes first, as the child is more likely to identify with both his parents’ ethnicities, or see himself simply as “Singaporean”.

Practical considerations like which mother tongue to take in school could be the deciding factor in the choice.

In successive years, one unintended consequence could be an increasing amount of negotiation and challenges by parents and their growing children seeking to get out of any constraints resulting from this policy, or to extract the maximum personal advantage from it.

Analysts believe a good number of these parents are likely to adopt a hyphenated race classification for their child, as a better reflection of their heritage.

In Singapore, mixed marriages made up 10.4 per cent of all marriages in 2007, compared to 8.0 per cent a decade earlier.

Children of mixed marriages are themselves the product of mixed marriages, but they plan to register 23-month-old son Raphael Isodore Tan Yi Ming as Chinese, ST FILE PHOTOS

Challenger Jeremy Tan and wife Lynandra Lewis are themselves the product of mixed marriages, but they plan to register 23-month-old son Raphael Isodore Tan Yi Ming as Chinese, ST FILE PHOTOS

“Out religion, Christianity, plays a part in shaping their identities,” he said.

“Moreover, when curious Chinese aunts and uncles ask them for their race in public places, they describe themselves as Singaporean, rather than Indian or Chinese,” he added.

Dealing away with racial categorisation will be a more accurate reflection of diversity in Singapore, he said.

For the record, however, his 21-year-old daughter Melody would like to change her racial identity from “Indian-Chinese” to “Indian-Chinese”.

“It would be more accurate,” she said.

“People keep asking if I’m Malay.”

Other observers are concerned that the flexibility that children of mixed parents may enjoy could create envy in those whose parents are of the same race and thus cannot “pick and choose” their race.

National University of Singapore (NUS) sociologist Tan Ern Ser says given an example of a Chinese-Malay child. “If Chinese is considered a more difficult language, and he is allowed to choose Malay as a second language, would his Chinese-Chinese friends feel unfairly treated?”

And for the adult Chinese-Malay, “What if he chooses to be Chinese to maximise his chances of buying a flat in a particular HDB precinct?”

Other analysts think, however, that these concerns are overblown. They believe that the authorities are likely to restrict the number of changes a person can make to his race classification, and that once decided on, that classification will have to be used for all situations.

On ethnic quotas in Housing Board estates, NUS sociologist Chau Beng Hwaat thinks those with a double-barrelled race classification should not be given a choice. For example, a Chinese-Indian should be placed on a Chinese quota, rather than given a choice to use “Chinese” or “Indian” to purchase flats, which could give him a strategic advantage over others.

What of candidates in a general election in a group representation constituency (GRC)? The law requires at least one to be from a minority race. Will a Chinese-Malay count as one, or will he be considered a Chinese?

SMU law lecturer Eugene Tan believes the first listed race will continue to underpin the GRC policy.

Overall, the debate stirred up by the change is healthy, Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser believes.

“It forces us to think about whether race is indeed something we should continue to emphasise,” he said.