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## The New Taiwanese

By SIMON MONTLAKE

SHIH-DING, Taiwan -- Three to a table, the children bend to their coloring books, their tousled black hair absorbing the winter light from the window. It's chilly in the unheated classroom, but Hsu Wen-zhen has kicked off her pink flip-flops and is circling words with a yellow crayon. She looks up and flashes a cheeky smile.

At playtime, Wen-zhen blends in with her classmates at Shihding Elementary School. But on this once-homogenous island, she represents change: She's half-Vietnamese, her mother part of a surge of foreign brides over the past two decades. Taiwan has registered 420,000 marriages to foreigners since 1987, the vast majority between a Taiwanese man and an overseas woman.

At this school, 20 of the 80 students have a foreign parent. In Wen-zhen's first-grade class, says her teacher, it's close to half. They are the new Taiwanese, growing up among an ethnic-Chinese population of 23 million that is more accustomed to outward than inward migration.

They don't stand out physically from other Taiwanese kids; their mothers are generally ethnic Chinese or lighter-skinned women from Southeast Asia. Nor do they stand out culturally: Many husbands expect immigrant wives to fully assimilate, not to impart their own culture and language to their new family.

"The immigrants came alone and got incorporated into Taiwanese families," says Lan Pei-chia, an associate professor of sociology at National Taiwan University in Taipei.

So, where in an immigrant society like the U.S. or Australia, the children might constitute a distinct social subset -- bilingual, with a foot in two cultures -- these "new Taiwanese" so far seem not so different from the old.

Yet, some immigrant mothers perceive prejudice, and are beginning to push back by asserting their rights and those of their children. And the children themselves may discover their roots, and bond with their fellow hybrids, later in life.

"This is a beginning for Taiwanese society," declares Ke Yu-ling, executive director of the Pearl S. Buck Foundation in Taipei, a nonprofit that helps foreign brides coming to Taiwan with issues such as legal rights, accessing public services and learning Mandarin.

Fear among some conservative Taiwanese of an overwhelming wave of mixed-nationality children has faded; studies show that most mixed-nationality couples have one or two children, in line with their all-Taiwanese counterparts.

"It's actually kind of disappointing for demographers," says Dr. Lan.

Today, conservatives are more likely to fret about the lack of newborns than the nationality of the mothers. Taiwan's birth rate is among the world's lowest. With prosperity and education, more Taiwanese women have embraced the freedom of single life, leaving more men casting around overseas for wives. In the 1990s marriage brokers began organizing trips for single men, mostly to Vietnam, Indonesia and mainland China.

But, in part because of tighter visa controls and a crackdown on brokers -- in 2008, Taiwan banned for-profit brokerages after some were caught trafficking Vietnamese women to brothels -- marriages to foreigners now are actually in decline. They accounted for 15% of marriages in 2008, less than half their 2003 share. The percentage of newborns in Taiwan with a foreign parent also is declining, to about one in 10 in 2008 from about one in seven for 2003 to 2005; it continued to drop in the first 10 months of 2009.

Still, those earlier unions mean a surge of mixed-nationality children is now moving through public schools, presenting challenges. It's most noticeable in rural communities like Shihding, a former coal-mining village in Taipei County, where immigrant-born students account for 17.5% of enrollments. And in competitive, test-obsessed Taiwan, where school performance is a constant worry, they raise a red flag.

"Taiwanese moms have eagle eyes to check homework," says Ms. Ke of the Pearl S. Buck Foundation. "Foreign mothers care a lot for their children, but what they can do is more limited."

Sophia Wen, an education professor at National Taiwan Normal University, says that tests given in the sixth grade show the mixed-nationality children lagging behind the average in math and science, though not in Chinese. Overall, they far outperform those born to Taiwan's small, marginalized aboriginal population. (Performance comparisons are complicated by the fact that many foreign brides marry blue-collar, small-town Taiwanese, whose children are less likely to go to the top schools that churn out straight-A students.)

The Ministry of Education offers counseling for immigrant children and parents as well as teaching materials and workshops for teachers. Mixed-nationality students can also attend after-school programs originally designed for low-income families that can't afford "crammer" schools, test-preparation classes seen as essential to getting ahead.

"These students will be Taiwan's future, so we want them to live like Taiwanese students," says Kuo Lin-ju, a ministry official.

But the spending on the programs is only about NT\$50 million (US\$1.6 million) a year.

"Teachers must train to teach immigrant children," says Dr. Wen. "They must also have the educational tools to inspire them."

At Shihding Elementary, two older children are stomping around the playground in costumes of gray-bearded Chinese gods, trailed by a dozen children wearing conical bamboo hats, part of a traditional tea dance. The dance ends, and two rows of children line up to play a song on plastic Chinese flutes. Some schools have added textbooks that teach students about Thailand, Indonesia and other countries, but the emphasis is still on Chinese traditions.

School principal Tseng Chun-kai says his mixed-nationality children do fine at their studies, and points out that his two top students are half-Filipino. There's no stigma to being mixed-race, he says.

"Children are naïve -- they don't think about these matters," he says. But Dr. Wen contends that children quickly catch on to differences and may squirm at being categorized as partly foreign in a largely homogeneous, conformist society like Taiwan's. "We find that these children will keep silent when we ask them about their mothers," she says.

To integrate foreign brides, a government program offers services such as language classes and telephone hotlines that dispense advice in six languages on legal rights, parenting and how to access public services. Since 2005, the National Immigration Agency has budgeted US\$10 million annually on these programs.

"The most important thing is to make sure new immigrants are part of Taiwan. They're citizens here," says Peter Hu, the agency's director.

Some integration efforts haven't gone smoothly. The Pearl S. Buck Foundation ran into objections with its free classes, with some families opposed to having new wives to make friends outside the home or learn about their legal rights.

In marriages that end in divorce, the courts favor the Taiwanese spouse, says Su Phyo, chairperson of TransAsia Sisters Association, a national legal-aid organization run by and for female immigrants. In child custody, she says, factors that might favor the mother are given less weight than the perceived risk that a foreign-born wife will take the child overseas.

Thai-born Zhou Wanjun divorced her Taiwanese husband in 2002, claiming he was a compulsive gambler. But he was awarded sole custody of their daughter, now a 15-year-old high-school student. Her mother sees her only on weekends. Ms. Zhou, who has lived in Taipei for 16 years and become a Taiwanese citizen, complains that foreign wives are assumed to be mail-order brides, to be bought and sold.

"People in Taiwan look down on us," says Ms. Zhou, who operates a market stall selling Thai-style papaya salad in a Taipei night market.

Among other things, TransAsia Sisters, established in the tobacco-growing southern town of Meinong in 1995 and now with several branches, helps foreign wives apply for driving licenses and other documents and balance work and family duties.

Every month, the original Meinong branch holds a social event where foreign wives gather to cook, gossip and plan events. "Even now, many families say to wives, You can go out of the home to work but don't get involved in those activities," says Sok Kollyan, a Cambodian-born volunteer who has lived in Taiwan for 11 years.

Ms. Sok and her Taiwanese husband have two daughters in the local elementary school. Both kids speak Cambodian, and Ms. Sok hopes to teach them to read the language, too.

While Ms. Sok says some teachers give the mixed-nationality kids less attention in class, she adds that school administrators are more sensitive now to claims of discrimination, a shift she attributes to the association's political clout. "The schools know that we are talking to the government," she laughs.

On a recent overcast morning, students at a nearby elementary school stood on the running track, ready for a weekend sports day. Parents joined some of the games, which included a rice-sack race, a tug-of-war and a tire-rolling relay race.

Off to the side, association volunteers laid out a table of handicrafts from Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam and Cambodia, and a row of mannequins displayed traditional dresses from the four countries. Another table groaned with Southeast Asian food: fried noodles, spicy sambal and sweet, candy-pink desserts.

The group's idea for showcasing their cultures had been approved by the school principal. In small, tentative clumps, children wandered over to inspect the Thai golden offering bowl, pick up the Indonesian rattle and poke at a Vietnamese doll dressed in a traditional ao dai. Some stopped to giggle at the costumes, then ran back to the sporting events.

Ms. Sok stood behind the stand, ladling out food and keeping up a constant chatter with children and parents alike. Soon, a line had formed for the noodles, and more parents were peering curiously at the table of handicrafts, symbols of foreign cultures now present in their community.

"We want to reach out to the parents who still think that our culture is different or strange," says Ms. Sok. "We want to educate them. That starts with food."

Back at his drafty tea shop in Shihding, Hsu Shu-tien brews a fragrant pot of green tea to keep out the cold. A decade ago, already pushing 40, he had almost given up on finding a wife to help take care of his aging parents and give him a son to inherit the family's tea business. His efforts had yielded only a string of failed relationships with Taiwanese women.

But then at the Vietnam wedding of a school classmate he met Duong Nghinh Bao, who spoke some Chinese -- she was working as an interpreter at the event. Within two months they were married. Shihding, a town of 8,000 residents is just a 30-minute drive from Taipei's outer suburbs, but has little of the capital's cosmopolitan sheen. It does have lots of foreign wives, mostly Vietnamese who occasionally shuck off their husbands and get together to belt out karaoke.

Ms. Duong, 20 years younger than her husband, is now the mother of two: 9-year-old Huai-en and Wen-zhen, the smiling first-grader, who is 7. Ms. Duong studies Chinese five evenings a week at the same school her children attend, part of the government program to integrate foreign wives.

As the two children dutifully study their schoolbooks, Ms. Duong explains that she spoke with them in Vietnamese when they were toddlers, but stopped because she thought it might hold them back. Nor do they know much about Vietnam, which they've visited only a few times. Huai-en recalls that his Vietnamese grandmother gave him lemons and that they drank coconut juice by the beach.

Prompted, Huai-en starts counting to 10 in Vietnamese; he also remembers the words for "food" and "air conditioning." His mother's smile widens.

Looking on, Mr. Hsu says, "I'm very busy running my business. I hope my wife can learn Chinese culture and teach it to our children...right now, they should focus on Taiwan. They can learn about Vietnam later."

—Simon Montlake is a writer based in Bangkok.

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