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### **International Marriages**

#### **---Impact on children and families in Taiwan**

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

Under the world wide trend of globalization, Taiwan could not stay out of it. Globalization enhances the commodity exchange and economic exchange, in the mean time; it also promotes the population migration and mobility. The movement of commodity comes first, and is followed by capital movement and labor movement. The movement has its direction; it usually goes from worse economic state to a better economic state. The flows of foreign labors and foreign brides from mainland China and South-East Asia to Taiwan are just two of the many regional movements. Foreign labors and foreign brides have brought new energy and culture to Taiwan and at the same time, generated many very complicated social phenomena. This article will focus on the international marriages issue rather than the foreign labor issue. The term of international marriages, international families, or foreign spouses families may be used interchangeable.

Ever since the Marshal Law had been lifted in 1987, the economic investments in South-East Asia countries have been increased drastically. Since 1986, the international marriages have increased accordingly. The lift of the Marshal Law which allows all kinds of communications between Taiwan and mainland China, make a lot of “old soldiers” go home to mainland China and marry their young brides from their home town in China. Later on, some Taiwanese men, who are having a hard time to find brides, prefer to marry Chinese girls.

On the other hand, the international brides, at first, are from Thailand and Philippine the most, Malaysia the second. After 1991, the international brides from Indonesia, Vietnam, and Cambodia increased with these countries’ opening up their foreign economic markets. In recent years, Vietnamese brides are most wanted, with commercial brokerage involvement; the number of Vietnamese brides is growing fast. Although, we oppose commercial marriage,

but marriage is a private domain, practically there is no 'law' is available to regulate.

International marriages mean men or women who married people from mainland China (includes Hong Kong and Macau), South-East Asia and other foreign countries. Among them, foreign brides from mainland China are the most, from South-East Asia countries are the second, and from other countries are the least. Most men who married foreign brides are from agricultural, industrial or metropolitan bordering area. Most of them are from lower stratum, comparatively economic disadvantaged, disabled or mentally ill people. Despite of being economic disadvantaged, sometimes, they are still much better off than that of foreign brides' original families. Some of these marriages have the purposes of bearing offspring and the cheap labors for their families (Tsai, 2001; Chia, 2000; Hsiao, 2000). Many foreign brides are far away from home countries and married to Taiwan at their young age, with limited Mandarin or Taiwanese language abilities for communication, while they are adjusting themselves to their new families, they have already had to nourish their children and taking care of their father-in-laws and mother-in-laws. In addition, some of them even have the responsibilities to assist with their family financial expenses.

According to Bureau of Children, Ministry of Interior, in recent years, one every 7 or 8 new born babies were born by foreign brides. In other words, these babies were born in international families, which most of them are comparatively economically disadvantaged. In this article, I will discuss about their problems and needs of these families, and some recommendations will also be proposed.

## **INTERNATIONAL FAMILIES AND THEIR CHILDREN**

According to Ministry of Interior (2006), the foreign spouses have cumulated to about 384,000 people. There are about 250,000 (65%) from mainland China, Hong Kong and Macau, about 134,000 (35%) are from South-East Asia and other countries since 1987. In about 20 years, the percentages have been ups and downs due to the imposing of tighter regulations. The numbers of international marriages were increasing annually since 1987 to the year of 2003, and went down after that to 16.77% in 2006(Table 1).

Year	Number of Married	Number of Foreign	Number of Mainland, HK &	Percentage of Foreign
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**Table 1. Annual Marital Registration Statistics**

unit : couple ; person ; %

	Couples	Spouses	Macau Spouses	Spouses(%)
1998	145,976	10,454	12,451	15.69
1999	173,209	14,674	17,589	18.63
2000	181,642	21,338	23,628	24.76
2001	170,515	19,405	26,797	27.10
2002	172,655	20,107	28,906	28.39
2003	171,483	19,643	34,991	31.86
2004	131,453	20,338	10,972	23.82
2005	141,140	13,808	14,619	20.14
2006	142,669	9,524	14,406	16.77
Compare to previous year (%)	1.08	-31.03	-1.46	Φ-3.37

Resource: Department of Household, Ministry of Interior.

note : Φpercentage of change.

There are 63% of the female foreign spouses with junior high school or less education, compared to that of the national brides is 16%. The foreign spouses were much younger when they got married to Taiwanese men. In 2004, there is about 30% of the South-East Asia foreign spouses who were under age of 19 and 38% were less than 24 years old. For foreign spouses from mainland China, there are about 32% of them are 24 years or older when they got married to Taiwan. There are about 23% of Taiwanese female are less than 24 years of age when they got married (Chiu & Lin, 2004). From the above

figures, we could find that foreign brides were comparatively young when they were married to Taiwan and they have less education.

In 1998, there are 5.12% of the new born babies were born by foreign spouses in Taiwan, by year of 2004; the percentage has been increased to 13.25% (Table 2). That means one out of every 7 or 8 births was given by foreign spouses. Although the increase of international marriages has been slow down for the couple of years, but it stays on its steady course. Up to now, we have more than 380,000 international marriage families in Taiwan. If we take the average number of person in every household which is 3.4 people in year of 2000, we could have about 126 thousand people live in multicultural families. The children in these 380,000 families will experience different language, different philosophy of parenting and education during their childhood. Compare to the rest of the children and families in Taiwan, they are experiencing their life differently. Their welfare and needs deserve our special attention.

Table 2. Number of newborn by nationality of mother

year	Nationality of mother		
	Taiwan	Mainland, HK, Macau	Foreign
1998		257,546	13,904
1999		266,505	17,156
2000		282,073	23,239
2001		232,608	27,746
2002		216,697	30,833
2003		196,722	30,348
2004	187,753 (86.8%)	11,206 (5.2%)	17,460 (8.1%)
2005	179,345 (87.1%)	10,022 (4.9%)	16,487 (8.0%)
2006	180,566 (88.3%)	10,423 (5.1%)	13,480 (6.6%)

Resource: Children' s Bureau, 96.05.07

## **PROBLEMS ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN AND INTERNATIONAL FAMILIES**

The trend of globalization enhances the population movement and international marriages. These immigrants, who need to adjust to the new country, used to have completely different language, food, weather, tradition, religion and value. Children and families of international marriages may need to face numbers of problems. For discussion purposes, I will divide them into children's and the families'.

### **PROBLEMS OF CHILDREN IN INTERNATIONAL FAMILIES**

There are at least five problems which children in international families need to deal with.

#### **1. Language/speech development in early childhood**

Children spend a lot of time with their mothers before schooling. Foreign spouses may learn mandarin or Taiwanese for a couple of months before they arrive. When the child was born, they don't know too well about the local language. They have language problems themselves, and they will have a hard time to teach their young children. The pronunciation is probably the most difficult part for the mothers, and for the children. Children learn incorrect pronunciation from their mothers creates confusion when they communicate with other children. In the long run, the poor language ability will affect their social skills and their social adjustment. There are 38.11% of the children from international marriages have poor learning and living adjustment problems in Taipei City (Taipei City Government, 2003). Poor adjustment mainly due to poor verbal communication and mother or caretaker very limited education and verbal communication ability (Wang, 2004).

#### **2. Developmental delay**

There are about 5% of screened children were developmental delay found in 2003, when they did the developmental screening for children are under the age of 6 in 13 towns and villages of Nantou County. It is about the same rate as that of Taiwan, but the language development delay and the cognitive development delay rates are much higher than that of Taiwan. The Child and Adolescent General Survey of Taiwan in 2005 reported that there are 2.1% of the children, who were requested and examined by doctors, were developmental delay.

According to the South-East Asia Foreign Spouses Families Survey, there are 17.1% of children who are developmental delay (Hsu, 2004). Hsu's report is much higher due to the children was taken to the hospital for evaluation, they had already been suspected with the problems. A lot of parents want to be sure about their children's developmental status, but they are very reluctant to take their children for examination.

3. Lack of preschool education due to poverty

According to Chia (2000) and Chiu (2003), most of the international marriage families are in the lower economic stratum of agricultural and labor classes. As soon as these foreign brides are married to their husband, they have to work at home doing the house chores, taking care of the elderly and rearing children. Some have to work out of home and make minimum wage to assist the family finance (Chia, 2000). These families have no money for their children's preschool education.

4. Parenting stress of foreign spouses

One of the important purposes to marry foreign spouses is to have offspring to carry down the family names. They got pregnant before they have been ready for it (Yang, 2003). Their husbands do help with caring for their children (Wang, 2001), the foreign spouses have to take care of their children alone and they are not very effective due to premature themselves and the language barrier. When the children start school, the educational expenses cause more financial burdens. In many occasions, parenting stress, lack of discipline skills and lack of support result in abusive behaviors.

5. Child witness of marital violence

Due to 'quick' marriage, the marital relationship is lack of confidence and unstable (Chiu, 2003). Once the international marriage is having crisis, it is more difficult to solve the problem (Cheng, 2000). Husbands pay the brokerage fee to get their brides and are afraid of being dumped; they limit their wives to have contacts out of their families. To some degree, they are controlling their wives. The marital relationships are very weak, although it has the protection of law.

The rates of family violence are thousand of 5, 6 and 4 for domestic women, South-East Asia spouses and mainland China spouses respectively (MOI, 2002). According to Lee & Lee (2002), the family violence rate of foreign spouses is thousand of 4.6, which is similar to the data of Ministry of Interior. But, South-East Asia spouses or mainland China spouses, who have language barrier, are not familiar with the law, and are afraid of being

deported, are less likely to report being abused. Therefore, these rates could be even further being underestimated than domestic women. According to the American Medical Association, one of every three American women is being abused, and immigrant women are much more likely to be abused than domestic women. The number of domestic violence is always being underestimated. Due to the above reasons, the 'black number' could be more than we expect and the problems are more difficult to deal with. Children are living under the violent family environment could have very much negative effect for their well-being in the process of development.

### **PROBLEMS OF INTERNATIONAL FAMILIES**

There are six problems which international families may face:

1. Don't understand each others' culture

Although South-East Asia countries are not very far away, but most of us don't know that much about there culture. Since the marriage usually does not go through the ordinary dating process, the groom and bride do not know each other and each other's families well before they get married. That could generate conflicts between husband and wife and the in-laws.

2. Treating foreign brides inappropriately

The foreign brides have been brought over to Taiwan for inappropriate purposes which includes cheap labor, for being wives and have offspring, caring for the elderly and helping with family chores, etc. With these inappropriate purposes from the beginning, the husband and the whole family do not take the foreign bride as an ordinary wife.

3. Intergenerational conflict

Due to the misunderstanding, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are easily having conflicts in our culture; a daughter-in-law from a different country can only worsen the misunderstanding.

4. Marital conflict

The marriage is not based on love to begin with. After they got married, language barrier, adjusting problems, different value system and family rules are all creating conflicts and generating marital stress.

5. Financial stress

The economic stress has always been a problem for foreign spouse's families, and it will not be lessened easily. If the foreign spouse is rushed into pregnancy and having babies, the new situation will create even deeper financial stress. Unfortunately, it happens all the time to foreign

spouse's families and the original families are usually having no abilities to help.

6. Too rush into childbearing with no assistance

Having children is one of the major purposes for having foreign spouses. A lot of times, they have children when they are not ready for them. New born babies bring joy and hope to the families, in the mean time, they require care, time and fund to bring them up. Sometimes, their arrival to foreign spouses families not only having to increase the family budget, but also preventing the foreign spouses from working which decrease the family income.

The problems we have discussed are just some of the problems which foreign spouses would have to deal with and solve these problems.

### **MOST URGENT WELFARE NEEDS FOR INTERNATIONAL CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

1. Providing child allowance to enhance the family financial security

Family financial difficulty is very common in international families. Foreign brides from South-East Asia countries usually come from very poor families. They are not only having no dowry, but are expected to work and make money to help with the families. Foreign spouses who have limited language, education and skills, are very difficult to find good job. When the babies arrive, the family financial status will be even worse. Then, what we call "new son of Taiwan" will have to live in a poor financial situation with no choice.

Child allowance has been used for a long time to assist poor families in the world. We should really consider that, especially the fertility rate is extreme low in Taiwan right now.

2. Equal opportunity for preschool education

Preschool education is very important for child development. Language development, for children, is the earlier the better. The international family environment is disadvantaged for young children's language and cognitive development. Preschool education becomes even more important to children in international families.

Public preschool facilities are not enough for all the children in Taiwan. The private facilities are quiet expensive for low income families. Currently, some of the local governments do request the public preschool

facilities reserving a number of vacancies for children from foreign spouse's families to provide affordable preschool education for children from international families.

3. Preventive medicine for foreign spouses and early intervention screening for their new born babies

According to Yang (2003), foreign spouses are less frequent to have prenatal care and more frequent to have premature babies, therefore, preventive medicine for foreign spouses is very important. Some of the Taiwanese men, who married foreign spouses, are in high risk for unhealthy offspring, both preventive medicine for foreign spouses during pregnancy and early intervention screening for new born babies are equally important for having healthy offspring.

4. Education for people who are planning to have foreign spouses

Although getting married is a private matter, but more knowledge about marrying a foreign spouses will not only help people to make the right decision, but also help them to accommodate for the situation they are going into.

5. Counseling for family or marital conflicts

Foreign spouse families, just like any other ordinary families, will have all kinds of family and marital problems and conflicts. Foreign spouses are far away from their home countries and are alone in Taiwan. They have very little social support and have no place to go if they have problems. Counselor with appropriate translator will be able to assist them.

About three years ago, the Executive Yuan in Taiwan has started in assisting the local governments with funding to set up a comprehensive social services center for foreign spouse families to provide different kinds of services needed. The effectiveness of these centers has not yet being examined.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **1. National immigration policy**

There are about 380,000 foreign spouses in Taiwan, although the rate of increase is going down in recent years, but pretty soon the number of foreign spouses will be over the aboriginal population. The fertility rate has been very low and the births given by foreign spouses are about one eighth of the new born every year. With the trend of globalization continues, the culture of Taiwan will be even more diversified. The government needs to make a national immigration policy to be able to forecast the population composition

and to provide the services needed.

**2. Comprehensive child welfare system**

The welfare system or services in Taiwan has always been residual type with no long term vision. With the extremely low fertility rate and the rapid aging population, it is the time to reevaluate our child welfare system. We need to assist the families to raise our children by providing child allowance and subsidy to meet minimum requirements for the needy children.

**3. Affordable preschool education for children in international families**

Preschool education has been very important for child development, especially when the major caretaker has limited local language ability. There are several ways can be approached, for example, to reserve a number of vacancy in public preschool facilities.

**4. Respect and understand the multicultural backgrounds**

People live in Taiwan had never been as diversify as what it has been for recent years. The number of foreign spouses is about the same as aboriginal population now. We don't have too much experience in understanding and accommodating each others' culture in the past. That's one thing we all have to learn in many years to come in order to live harmoniously with people form different origin.

**5. To straighten preventive medicine and early intervention**

The best way to prevent from regret is to prepare ahead of time before it's too late. Helping foreign spouses to have a healthy family starts with health precaution is a must.

International marriages happen every where in the world, and it becomes a common phenomena in Taiwan, and it generates a new kinds of social problems which we have never encountered in the past. Governments, policy makers, administrators, professionals from different fields and direct services providers are all have to work hand in hand to work as a team in order to assist the international families to adjust to our society.

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