

Divorce in Asia Revisited: Changing Dynamics in Contemporary Marriages

Introduction

Asia has experienced significant transformations in various aspects of marriage, from decisions about whether to marry, the types of unions formed, the timing of marriages, the selection of marital partners, and the stability of marriages (Himawan et al., 2018; Yeung et al., 2018). While a substantial body of literature has examined many of these changes, there has been relatively little focus on the demographic dimensions of marital stability. Existing research on divorce tends to concentrate on individual countries, with few comparative studies. The studies are often based on aggregate measures such as crude divorce rates, which are difficult to compare across countries and time periods (Dommaraju & Jones, 2011).

Marriage patterns in Asia are diverse. In South Asia, gender norms are generally more patriarchal than in other regions, with marriage remaining almost universal and typically occurring at a relatively early age (Allendorf & Pandian, 2016). In East Asia, there has been a shift away from universal marriage, marked by rising rates of non-marriage, delayed marriage, and alternative union forms (Lai & Song, 2022). This change has been accompanied by greater women's autonomy, higher levels of education, and increased women's workforce participation (Shu & Chen, 2023). Southeast Asia is distinct for its more egalitarian gender norms, where women have a greater say in marriage decisions. The family system in Southeast Asia is often bilateral, with flexible kin arrangements, with women maintaining stronger connections to their natal families even after marriage (Jones, 2021; Kuang et al., 2019).

This study is situated within the context of evolving marriage, education, and ideological changes in Asia, which significantly impact marital stability. For instance, the trend toward later marriage is often viewed as a stabilising force. This is seen, for instance, in the decline in divorce rates observed in Southeast Asia during the latter half of the 20th century, which coincided with an increase in the age at which women marry (Jones, 2021). Marriages based on mutual compatibility, or companionate marriages, might also tend to be more stable (Chen et al., 2021). Additionally, in contexts where marriage is no longer universal and those who marry are more selective, divorce rates may be lower because individuals who marry are more committed to maintaining stable marriages (Raley & Sweeney, 2020).

This study makes two key contributions. First, it provides a comprehensive comparative analysis of divorce using an innovative approach based on survey data from 15 Asian countries. Much of the existing literature in Asia relies on conventional measures of divorce, such as crude and refined rates, which are affected by changes in the sex, age, and marital composition of the population and are difficult to compare across countries or time periods. Also, for many countries, official statistics on divorce are incomplete and sparse, and the measures are not intuitive to interpret. We estimate the percentage of marriages ending in divorce by the fifth, tenth, and fifteenth years of marriage, taking into account factors such as age, sex, and marital duration within each country for two periods: the 2020s and the mid-1990s. This approach offers a clearer and more nuanced interpretation of divorce patterns, enhancing our demographic understanding of divorce in Asia.

Second, the study goes beyond national-level estimates to examine educational differentials in both historically low and high divorce societies. The effect of educational changes on divorce is not uniform across countries or even with regions in a country (Chen et al., 2021). There has

been little comparative work on how educational changes have impacted divorce in Asian countries. The analyses presented in this study will add to our understanding of the complex relationship between educational changes and divorce in Asia.

Data and Methods

The analysis is based on data from the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) conducted in 12 South and Southeast Asian countries. For East Asia, data is from the Chinese General Social Survey (CHN), the Japanese General Social Survey (JPN), and the Taiwan Social Change Survey (TWN).

We use data from two time periods: the most recent data from 2015 onwards and data from approximately a quarter-century earlier, from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s. The DHS and MICS data are nationally representative, collected through a multi-stage cluster sampling design, and include a women's questionnaire administered to women aged 15 to 49. This covers questions on marriage, education, fertility, health, and work. The countries include Afghanistan (AFG), Bangladesh (BGD), Cambodia (KHM), India (IND), Indonesia (IDN), Lao (LAO), Myanmar (MMR), Nepal (NPL), Pakistan (PAK), Philippines (PHL), Thailand (THA), and Vietnam (VNM).

While the DHS and MICS surveys collect information on current marital status, whether the woman was married more than once, and the date of her first marriage, they do not collect information on when the first marriage ended or how it ended. Therefore, we know whether the first marriage ended by the time of the survey, but there is a lack of information on when or how it ended (divorce or widowhood).

This creates two challenges. First, the absence of information on the timing of when the marriage ended means that we cannot use traditional survival models such as Kaplan-Meier (KM) or Cox regression to estimate divorce. To address this, we use an interval-censored approach, which does not require the exact timing of the divorce. In this approach, the interval begins with the start date of the first marriage and ends when the women were last observed in the survey. The event of interest is whether the woman was divorced by the survey date, classified as Case 1 interval-censored data. This procedure was recently implemented in STATA 17.

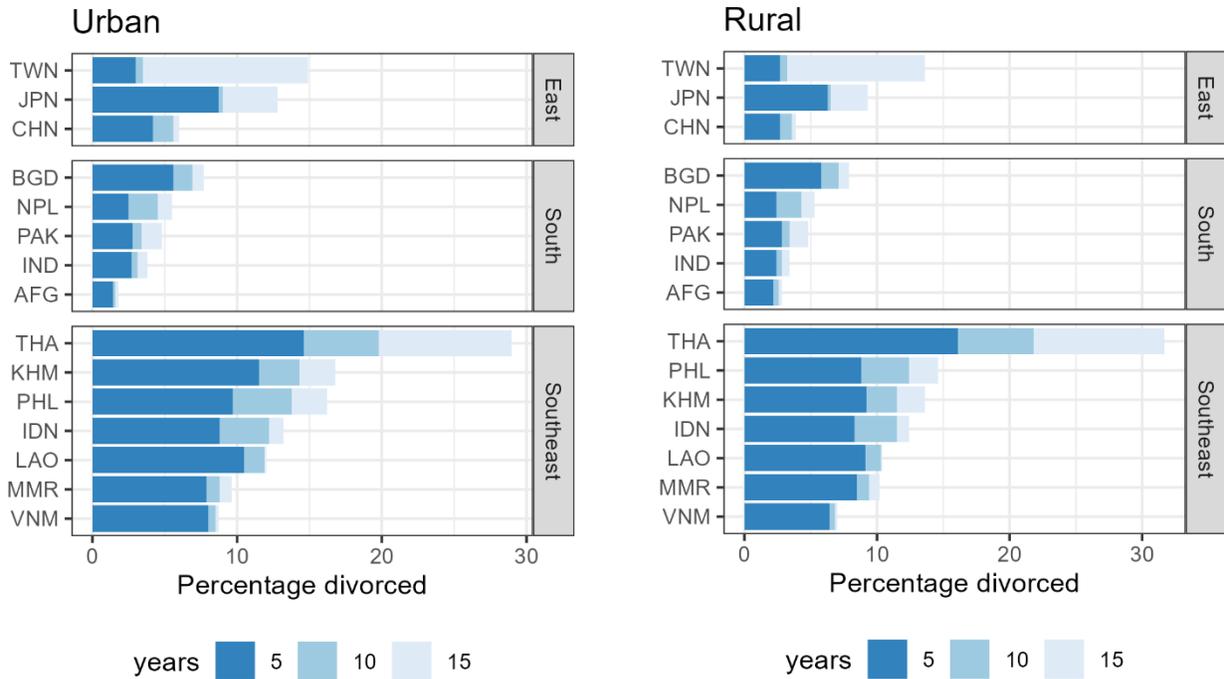
Second, for women who remarried, there is no information on whether their first marriage ended due to divorce or widowhood. This would be problematic if widowhood rates were high and widows had higher remarriage rates. To address this, we limit the analysis to women who married within 15 years of the survey date. As marriages in the countries studied tend to occur at younger ages, widowhood rates are expected to be low, with even lower remarriage rates among widows. We assume that all women who remarried within 15 years of their first marriage did so after a divorce.

To verify the robustness of the interval-censored estimates, we compared them with traditional survival models using data from the longitudinal Indonesian Family Life Survey (IFLS), which includes information on how and when the first marriage ended. The estimates from both approaches differed by no more than 1%.

Findings (Preliminary)

We begin by presenting the results on the proportion of first marriages that end in divorce by the 5th, 10th, and 15th years of marriage for women, based on interval-censored analyses of the data.

Figure 1: Percentage of marriages ending in divorce after 5, 10, and 15 years in urban and rural areas (2015–2022), based on interval-censored regression



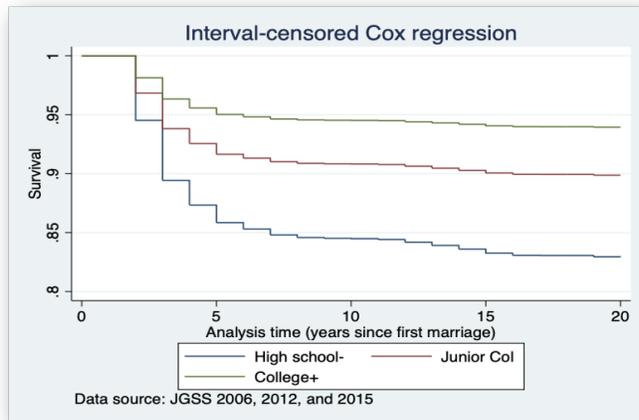
As shown in Figure 1, there is significant variation in divorce rates, ranging from less than 5% in much of South Asia to over 25% in Thailand by the 15th year of marriage. Within Southeast Asia, divorce rates are comparatively lower in Myanmar and Vietnam but higher in Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines. East Asia shows an interesting pattern, with divorce rates remaining relatively low in China compared to Japan and Taiwan. It is worth noting that while non-marriage rates may be increasing in China, divorce rates remain relatively low compared to other parts of the region. Furthermore, rural-urban differences in divorce rates are seen, with most countries showing higher divorce rates in urban areas than in rural areas.

The figures also reveal that the timing of divorce varies across countries. In Taiwan, much of the marital dissolution occurs after ten years of marriage, whereas in countries like Vietnam, most divorces happen within the first five years of marriage. In many countries, the early years of marriage tend to be more unstable, leading to higher dissolution rates during this period. These findings regarding the duration of marriage and divorce are rich, and further analysis will explore these patterns in greater detail. To investigate how divorce rates have changed over time, we are currently analysing data from the mid-1990s round of surveys.

Preliminary analyses of educational differentials in divorce rates for Japan are presented in Figure 2. In Japan, the results indicate a clear educational differential, with higher divorce

rates among women with lower levels of education. Similar analyses will be conducted for other countries.

Figure 2: Proportion of marriages ending in divorce by educational level, Japan



The results will be contextualised in relation to the changing social and normative environments of each country, highlighting both commonalities and divergences in divorce patterns across regions.

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