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Divorce Trends in Asia

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Abstract

This paper presents and discusses recent trends in divorce for countries in Asia, highlighting both wide variations in divorce patterns and recent changes in divorce trends for countries in the region. Three broad regional patterns are evident: an East Asian pattern characterised by increasing divorce rates, though there are signs of stabilisation in some countries in the last few years; an Islamic Southeast Asian pattern characterised by declining divorce rates until recently; and a South Asian pattern with relatively stable and low divorce rates. The paper also discusses divorce in international marriages in some East Asian countries and Singapore.

Keywords: Marriage; Divorce; Southeast Asia; East Asia; South Asia; Marital dissolution.

Introduction

Asia is characterised by a wide diversity of patterns in both marital formation and marital dissolution. Though there has been some research on recent changes in marriage patterns, marital dissolution in the Asian context has not received much critical attention. Changes in divorce rates have been linked to ideational changes, increasing education and changing labour force participation of women, changing nature of spouse selection, changes in age at marriage, extent of social support for divorced women, changes in religious and civil laws regulating divorce and changes in life expectancy. To a varying extent, many of these changes have been occurring in most of Asia and their influence on marital dissolution needs to be examined.

This paper deals with divorce trends in East, Southeast and South Asia. It does not cover Central Asia or West Asia. For an overview of divorce patterns and trends in West Asia, see Courbage (2010).

In East Asian countries, divorce rates have been rising steadily since 1980. In Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong, the increase has been particularly marked in the period since 1990. A dramatic rise in divorce rates occurred in South Korea between 1995 and 2000—the period in which the Asian financial crisis occurred. Substantial increases in divorce rates in East Asian countries signify a significant change in circumstances and attitudes to divorce because, in the past, divorce carried a considerable stigma and the pressure to remain in a disharmonious marriage ‘for the sake of the children’ and also for the sake of appearances and family honour, was very strong. It would appear that factors, such as increasing economic independence of woman, and the pressures of the big city environments in which an increasing proportion of East Asian live, are influencing divorce trends. More controversial is the issue of whether East Asian societies are becoming more individualistic and less governed by Confucianist norms.

In the less wealthy countries of Asia, divorce rates have varied tremendously in the past, from very low rates in South Asian countries to very high rates in the Malay-Muslim populations of Southeast Asia (in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and southern Thailand and southern Philippines). It is only when the traditional marriage and kinship systems in these countries are understood, along with the pressures under which they are placed by social and economic developments, that trends in divorce can be understood. The reason why massive declines in divorce rates in Malay-Muslim populations were correlated with rising education and economic development was that divorce had been an escape route from unsatisfactory parent-arranged marriages at very young ages, and when this system of marriage arrangement broke down and love marriages took over, this escape route was no longer needed (Jones, 1997). In very recent years, the falling trend in divorce rates in Malay-Muslim populations of Southeast Asia appears to have been reversed, very likely because the factors just mentioned have more than played themselves out and divorce among these populations is now being driven by factors similar to those operating elsewhere in East Asia, and in the West, for that matter.

The degree of social, economic and moral support available for divorced women plays a vital role in determining divorce rates. As noted by Das Gupta (2010:128), north-west India, China and South Korea have rigidly patrilineal kinship systems, in which daughters were

effectively lost to their parents when they married. While changes have taken place, it can be said that in most of India today, and more broadly in South Asia, divorce is not a feasible way out of a disharmonious marriage because a divorced woman does not normally have the option of returning to her natal family or in most cases of earning an independent income. Unless arranged marriage and patrilocal residence cease to be the norms governing marriage, it is unrealistic to expect much increase in divorce rates in the region.

Equally important in influencing divorce rates are the civil and religious laws pertaining to marriage and divorce. These laws have been changing and such changes have been controversial in some Asian countries (see, for example, Maznah, 2010).

Divorce trends

There is no single pattern that fits the diversity of divorce trends in Asia. Divorce rates for countries in the region, as presented in Table 1, reveal three major patterns: East Asian, Islamic Southeast Asian and South Asian. The East Asian pattern is characterised by a recent upswing in divorce rates, rapid in some countries but gradual in other parts, over the last 30 years, reaching Western levels in some countries. The Islamic Southeast Asian pattern is typified by a decline in divorce rates beginning in the mid-20th century and stabilising in the latter part of the century, with signs of this trend reversing in recent years. The South Asian pattern is characterised by mostly stable and very low divorce rates. These patterns are discussed in detail in following sections but, before that, issues surrounding the measurement of divorce need to be briefly examined.

In this paper, we use Crude Divorce Rate (CDR) to capture the trends in divorce, mainly because data required for calculating CDR are readily available for many countries in the region. CDR is calculated as number of divorces in a given year divided by the mid-year population in that year. There are several limitations of using CDRs.

As with other crude demographic measures (crude death rate, crude birth rate, etc.), CDR is susceptible to changes in the composition of the population. In the case of CDR, changes in age structure and marital structure of the population are especially important. The denominator of CDR is simply the mid-year population, which includes those not at risk of divorce (like the unmarried and children). When the composition of the population changes, say the population becomes younger or proportion of population married changes, changes in CDR might not reflect

changes in divorce accurately. In such cases, changes in CDR may be due to the changes in the composition, rather than changes in divorce patterns *per se*. Besides the compositional effect, CDR, a period measure of divorce, will also be influenced by timing of divorce. These limitations mean that CDR must be interpreted with some caution. General Divorce Rate (GDR: ratio of number of divorces in a given year to population age 15 and over in the same year) is a slightly refined measure over CDR and can be calculated for some countries in the region. But GDR does not greatly modify the findings based on CDR.

Intuitively, one would expect a good measure of divorce to answer the question: What proportion of marriages end in divorce and within what period of time? This question can be answered if detailed marital histories are available. Such detailed data are not available for many countries in Asia but later in the paper we present an example of such a measure from Malaysia.

Besides the technical limitations on how divorce rates are calculated, there are broader issues in measuring divorce. By definition, divorce is limited to official unions (be they religious or civil) that can be officially dissolved. This leaves out dissolution of unions that are not officially registered, which are not uncommon in Asia. In Thailand, for instance, many couples delay registration of marriage until there is a need for it, though they live in a union that is socially accepted as a marriage but not formally registered (Knodel *et al.*, 1987). Dissolution of such unions is left out of divorce statistics. Similarly, only those granted divorce by civil/religious courts are recorded in the registration system. This excludes those who have separated permanently but have not been legally divorced. The cumbersome legal procedures in some countries may deter people from applying for divorce though they may have separated. A broader notion of divorce should include dissolution (including separations that are not legally recognised) of unions (including non-marital unions).

East Asia pattern

Divorce rates for East Asian countries are presented in Figure 1. It is clear from the figure that divorce rates have been increasing in all countries in the region from the early 1980s if not earlier. Though there have been temporary declines, the general pattern suggests an increase in divorce rates between the early 1980s and mid-2000, reaching a peak in many countries in early 2000 and declining or stabilising after that. Only in China and Hong Kong are there no signs of decline or stabilisation of divorce rates yet. Though they exhibit a similar pattern, each country

has its unique dynamic shaped by social, economic, ideational and legal changes over the last half-century. These are discussed individually in the following sections.

China

China has the lowest divorce rates in the region. Except for a brief period in the early 1950s when divorce rates increased following the promulgation of a new marriage law and land reform law, divorce rates were extremely low until the mid-1980s. This was mainly because of ‘legal procedures being geared towards reconciliation rather than dissolution of marriage’, and reconciliation meant mediation by the work unit or residents’ committee and family members (Platte, 1988:428 *et passim*). Beginning in the mid-1980s, following the changes to divorce laws in 1981, there has been a steady increase in divorce rates, which began to rise steeply after 2003 when changes to the marriage registration regulations were introduced. These changes relaxed the grounds for divorce and led to a surge in divorces with CDR increasing from 1.1 to 1.6 between 2003 and 2007.

Changes in regulations might have made it easier to obtain a divorce. However, the changes in divorce rates must be placed in the broader context. The legal changes might have enabled easy divorce, but other factors, such as changing mores, greater independence among the younger generation, higher expectations of marriage than in the past, leading to disillusionment when marriages strike trouble, women’s greater independence, and increasing temptations for married people to stray in a broader information-filled world have been mentioned as key factors driving the divorce trends in China (*People’s Daily*, 2005). A sharp increase in divorce in the age group around 35 years is said to reflect high initial expectations on marriage, disillusionment with marriage after eight years or so, and increasing life and career pressures for this age group (*People’s Daily*, 2005).

This pattern of divorce in China should be examined in the context of nearly universal and relatively early, but increasing, marriage age, and decline in arranged marriages. Both increases in marriage age and decline in arranged marriages have a potential to lower divorce rates. This can be clearly seen when divorce rates are examined at the provincial (regional) level. Provinces in which arranged marriages declined also witnessed a decline in divorce rates (Zeng *et al.*, 2002; Zeng and Deqing, 2000). However, at the national level, changes in the legal, educational and economic condition of women, ideational change, ease of remarriage and

erosion of stigma attached to divorce have lead to changes in divorce rates. As described by Wang (2001:183):

While the major reasons for divorce were lack of love and political reasons in the 1960s and 1970s, the reasons for divorce in the 1980s and 1990s include division of family chores between husband and wife, love affairs, unsatisfied sexual life, different career goals, working in two different cities, etc.

Equally important in driving the divorce trends is the acceptability of remarriages. Wang and Zhou (2010) document a nearly four-fold increase in remarriage rate between 1985 and 2007 and, strikingly, at the provincial level the patterns of divorce and remarriage match closely. They also indicate a secular trend, possibly reflecting ideational change, coupled with modernisation (increasing education level and economic growth) as contributing to changes in divorce rate. In Zhang's (2007) interviews with divorced women, some of the commonly cited reasons for divorce include higher expectation of marriage, dissatisfaction with quality of life with ex-husbands and adultery.

Japan

Japan had the highest divorce rate among the East Asian countries in the 1970s and up to the mid-1980s. Divorce rates peaked in the early 1980s before declining gradually in the mid- and late 1980s. Divorce rates increased rapidly in the 1990s before peaking in early 2000s, followed by a decline and stabilisation. By 2009, crude divorce rates stood at about 2.0, the lowest in East Asia with the exception of China.

This low level of divorce rates compared to other countries in the region that have similar industrial and economic structure could be because in Japan "dependency between the spouses is greater, alternatives to marriage are fewer, and the legacy of the traditional gender division of labor continues to influence the actions and attitudes of men and women" (Ono, 2006:233). Another factor that has kept the divorce rates comparatively low is the rise in non-marriage, mentioned by Tsuya *et al.* (2004) as the price for marital stability. With increases in educational attainment and paid employment among women, alternatives to being married are increasingly viable and many women seem to have chosen this path instead of marriage.

Divorce is, however, not a rare event in Japan. Raymo *et al.* (2004) estimate that one-third of marriages will end in divorce within 20 years of marriage. Among Western industrialised countries, only USA has a higher proportion of marriages that end in a divorce. And, as in other industrialised countries, women with lower levels of education are more likely to be divorced than highly educated women. While most divorces in the past were by mutual agreement, there is a growing trend of divorces that involve a legal process in the family court (Sasaki and Wilson, 1997). In such cases, financial problems, incompatibility and adultery were given as main the reason for divorce (*ibid.*). Also, the steady shift from a functionally-based marriage system controlled by elders to a love-based marriage system that emphasizes companionship could have contributed to increased marital instability.

Labour market changes might also have contributed to greater marital instability, especially since the restructuring of the labour markets in the 1990s. This restructuring eroded the practice of lifetime employment of men and resulted in more housewives taking employment, rather than being fully dependent on the husbands as in the past. This increased labour force participation of married women might have contributed to increases in divorce (Ono, 2006). Further, as Bumpass *et al.* (2009:223) argue:

Tensions inherent in marriage, which were once tolerated, may become less tolerable in the new climate of rising values and individualism. Moreover, the increasing employment of wives and mothers suggests that tensions between spouses may well be increasing, especially from wives' perspectives.

South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong

For South Korea and Taiwan, divorce rates have been moving upward since the mid-1970s and peaked in 2003. While Taiwan's divorce rate was higher than South Korea's until 1995, divorce rates in South Korea shot up dramatically surpassing Taiwan, before declining again to levels seen in Taiwan. Hong Kong also saw a steady increase in divorce rates in the 1990s, similar to South Korea and Taiwan, but divorce rates stabilised by 1999. Only after 2002 did the divorce rates began to increase again. By 2006, divorce rates in all three countries were beginning to converge.

The East Asian Tigers which started their economic growth later than Japan seem to have experienced more pronounced marital instability than Japan. The increase in divorce rates in these three countries suggests a change in family attitudes. As Quah's (2008) interviews with divorced women in South Korea and Hong Kong reveal, the traditional reasons why divorce was avoided in these societies were 'for sake of children' or to maintain family's 'good name'. The respondents often mentioned these as the reason why they prolonged a marriage that 'was hopeless'. This may perhaps explain the later age of divorce in many East Asian countries compared to the West. The attitudes towards divorce were already changing by the mid-1990s. Bumpass and Choe's (2004) survey of attitudes towards divorce shows that while about one-half of the respondents agreed with the statement that parents should not divorce for the sake of the children, there was a clear cohort trend with younger cohorts (age 25–29) less likely to agree with this statement than older cohorts. This does provide evidence for changing attitudes towards divorce. Nevertheless, the number of children a couple have still continues to be an important factor in predicting divorce in both South Korea (Lee, 2006) and Hong Kong (Fan and Lui, 2004).

South Korea's dramatic rise in divorce rates has not surprisingly led to increased attention by researchers. While various risk factors seem to have played a part in the rise in Korean divorce rates, and there appears to be support for the hypothesis that married women's economic independence from their husbands increases the probability of divorce conditional on other family circumstances (Lee and Bumpass, 2008), such risk factors only partially explain the rise in divorce rates over time, and the rapid rise over the 1998–2002 period remains unexplained. Lee (2006:127) argues that "societal-level transformations in normative regimes regarding divorce, which may have accelerated after the economic recession of the late 1990s" might have played an important role. These normative changes could include erosion of any stigma attached to divorce and increasing acceptance of divorce as a way out of unhappy marriages. Women in the region now are less tolerant towards marital infidelity and seek divorce in such situations (Fan and Lui, 2004). In fact, in a survey of nearly 200 respondents who had knowledge about divorced women nearly three-fourths felt that the divorced women were happier after divorce (Chou, 2008).

In Taiwan, as in other East Asian countries with the exception of China, increase in divorce rate has occurred in the context of decreased prevalence of marriage. This pattern of

declining preference for marriage is also evident for remarriages. In the case of Taiwan, there is recent evidence based on single-year age-specific exposure rates. Between 1980 and 2005, while the chance of getting divorced increased from 7 percent to 25 percent, the chance of getting remarried for women declined from 53 percent to 34 percent (Yang and Tsai, 2009). This decline in remarriages as divorce has increased is an indicator of growing acceptance of, and perhaps preference for, singlehood.

Southeast Asia

Southeast Asian divorce patterns broadly fit into two groups: traditionally high levels of divorce among the Islamic populations of the region, which declined dramatically in the mid-20th century and relatively moderate to low and stable divorce rates among other groups in the region. This classification should not be seen solely in religious terms. More important than religion is the “pan-Southeast Asian pattern of female autonomy which meant that divorce did not markedly reduce a woman’s livelihood, status, or network of kin support” (Reid, 1998:632).

Islamic Southeast Asia

A thorough analysis of divorce in Islamic Southeast Asia is presented in Jones (1994: Chapter 5) covering the period from the 1950s to the late 1980s. A few key points are summarised here. Divorce rates were high among the Malay Muslim populations, but there were geographic differences. Early and parent-arranged marriages were common and such marriages were prone to divorce, mainly because compatibility of spouses was valued and arranged marriages had a high degree of incompatibility built-in. In many cases divorce occurred before consummation or co-residence. Divorce rates were higher among the poorer and less educated. With a shift towards self-selected marriage and later marriage, and, in some countries, a tightening of legal restrictions on divorce, divorce became less common and this trend appears to have continued until the 1990s.

Though divorce rates have declined, divorce is not uncommon compared with rates for other populations in the region. For example, divorce rates in Malaysia are higher for Malays than for Chinese and Indians (Tey, 2011). However, in contrast with the past, divorce now occurs for different reasons. As early marriages have declined, the influence of marriage age as a predictor for divorce has also weakened, being replaced by education as an important predictor

of greater marital stability (Heaton *et al.*, 2001). Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan (2003) argue that as divorces for traditional reasons decline, there may be a rise of ‘modern divorce’ (i.e., divorce driven by the same factors as in the West).

Among the Muslim populations of Malaysia and Indonesia, the decline in divorce rates seen in the mid-to-late 20th century appears to have reversed in recent years. For Malays in Peninsular Malaysia, CDR increased from 1.09 in 2001 to 1.5 in 2006, and in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city, CDR nearly doubled from 1.3 to 2.2 during the same time period (Tey, 2011). Another way of looking at divorce rates is to examine the proportion of marriages ending in a divorce. The percentage of first marriages ending in a divorce by marriage cohort is presented in Table 2. The results confirm the general pattern of declining divorce rates up to the early to mid-1990s and signs of increase in divorce from the mid- to late-1990s onwards. While about seven percent of marriages were dissolved by divorce within the first five years of marriage among women who married before the 1980s, this declined to about two percent for women who married between 1990 and 1994, before increasing to 3.6 percent for women who married between 1995 and 1999.

Divorce patterns in Indonesia are quite similar to those for Malays in Malaysia. Heaton *et al.* (2001) document the decline in divorce rates in Indonesia in the middle of the 20th century. Heaton and Cammack’s paper in this issue shows a reversal of this pattern beginning in the late 1990s. They discuss the role of media and shifting emphasis on personal fulfilment as two of the factors for the recent increase in divorce rates.

Thailand and Philippines

Divorce rates among the non-Muslim populations in Thailand and Philippines have been historically low compared to Muslim divorce rates in these countries. CDRs for Thailand are presented in Figure 2. The trend shows a steady increase in divorce rates reaching 1.4 by 2005. This trend should be interpreted with caution as there are different types of marriage in Thailand and not all of them necessarily are registered, and, similarly, not all separations are registered (Knodel *et al.*, 1987). Given these uncertainties, it is difficult to assess the trend in divorce in Thailand. For the period between 1950 and 1970, Teerawichitchainan (2004) estimates that about one in ten marriages among the Thai Buddhists ended in divorce within the first five years of marriage, and this pattern held steady throughout the period. However, for the Muslims, divorce

rates plunged from one in three marriages in the 1950s to the level seen among Thai Buddhists by the 1960s.

In the Philippines, divorce is not legal for non-Muslim Filipinos, except if the husband or wife is an alien and satisfies certain conditions (Gloria, 2007). However, the law allows for three forms of separation: legal separation, annulment of marriage and declaration of nullity of marriage, each with different legal pre-requisites and legal consequences (*ibid.*). These legal conditions make it difficult to get a legally recognised dissolution. As in Thailand, live-in relationships that are not registered are common in the Philippines. In 2002, about 13 percent of females aged 20–24 were in a live-in/common-law relationship compared to 37 percent who were married in the same age group (Xenos and Kabamalan, 2007). The prevalence of non-marital unions means that the concept ‘union dissolution’ rather than ‘marital dissolution’ would be better suited in the case of Philippines.

Singapore

Singapore, though geographically situated in Southeast Asia, shares many commonalities with the industrialised East Asian countries, including divorce patterns, as seen in Figure 1. As in Taiwan and South Korea, divorce rates in Singapore increased between 1980 and 1998; however, in contrast with these countries, divorce rates dipped for over three years in the late 1990s and this was followed by recuperation and stabilisation of divorce rates by early 2000. Over the last seven years, divorce rates have been remarkably stable.

The overall picture presented using divorce rates for the country as a whole masks substantial differences in divorce patterns in Singapore between the Muslim (mainly Malays) and non-Muslim (mainly Chinese) communities. In Singapore, Muslim divorces are granted by the Shariah Court in accordance with Islamic law and non-Muslim divorces are granted by the Family Court in accordance with the Women’s Charter. Muslim and non-Muslim divorces granted between 1961 and 2009 are presented in Figure 3a and 3b. The number of non-Muslim divorces granted has been increasing steadily (though there have been two short slumps) from the early 1970s to the present. In contrast, Muslim divorces remained fairly stable in the 1960s and 1970s before increasing gradually over the last three decades. An interesting picture is presented in the next chart (Figure 3b) showing number of divorces per 1,000 marriages in the same year. Muslim divorce rates were and continue to be higher than non-Muslim rates. The

difference is narrower now than in the 1960s both because Muslim divorce rates fell dramatically in the 1960s and because non-Muslim divorce rates have been increasing since the mid-1970s.

Since 1980, ‘irretrievable breakdown of marriage’ became the sole ground for divorce under the Women’s Charter and this can be proved by satisfying one or more of five conditions (Chan, 2008; Jeng and McKenry, 2001). These conditions are adultery, unreasonable behaviour, desertion for at least two years, living apart for three years and the other spouse consents to the divorce or living apart for at least four years (*ibid.*). In 2009, unreasonable behaviour and living apart were the two main reasons stated for non-Muslim divorces (48 and 45 percent respectively) (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010). This pattern has remained unchanged over the last ten years. The popularity of some of the reasons might be because of ease of proving them in court and other legal considerations. Chan (2008) mentions that the popularity of unreasonable behaviour could be because it allows for quicker termination of marriage and it is not difficult to satisfy the court on the fact of unreasonable behaviour.

For Muslims the stated reasons for divorce are much more detailed. In 2009, infidelity was the main reason (21%), followed by personality difference and verbal abuse. A notable change in the last decade is the increase in infidelity as the stated reason for divorce from 7 percent in 1999 to 21 percent in 2009. Interestingly, infidelity was the main reason regardless of whether husband or wife instituted divorce proceedings.

As seen in other countries in the region, early marriages are highly unstable in Singapore. Age Specific Divorce Rates (ASDR) presented in Figure 4 show that divorce rates among those married at younger ages are higher and this has intensified in recent times. Marriages at young ages are more unstable now than they were in the past. Out of 1,000 married females age 20–24 about 8 were divorced in 1980 and in the same age group about 24 were divorced in 2009.¹ Over the last three decades, divorce rates for all age groups have increased except for those aged 50 and over.

¹ In interpreting this rise, it is important to note that married women at ages 20–24 (some of whom would have married in their late teens) are less numerous now than in the past, and the probably greater frequency of ‘shotgun marriages’ among those marrying at these ages in more recent times is likely to be related to the rise in divorce rates for such marriages. However, this factor is unlikely to be more than a partial explanation for the rise in divorce rates for 20–24 year olds.

As in the case of age, risk of divorce varies by duration of marriage and number of dependent children. In Singapore, the risk of divorce by duration of marriage is different for Muslims and non-Muslims as seen in Figure 5a and 5b. Muslim divorces occur early in marriage, while non-Muslim divorces typically occur later in marriage. For instance, among Muslim divorces in 2009 about 32 percent occurred after less than five years. In the same year, this was true for only 14 percent of non-Muslim divorces. In fact, for non-Muslims, divorce within the first five years of marriage is extremely low. Muslims who divorce are more likely than non-Muslims to have dependent children, not surprisingly given the higher fertility rate for Muslims. In the majority of divorces granted for non-Muslims, the couple had no children, while this was true in slightly over one-third of Muslim divorces granted in 2009. The pattern has remained fairly stable for Muslims over the last 25 years (see Table 3).

South Asia

Divorce in South Asia is relatively rare and divorce rates are low. The number of ever-married women currently divorced or separated (though not legally) ranged from 3.2 percent in Bangladesh in 2007, 1.8 percent in India in 2005–2006, 1.7 percent in Nepal in 2006 and 1.5 percent in Pakistan in 2006–2007 to 1.2 percent in Sri Lanka in 2001 (Demographic Health Surveys, various countries and 2001 Sri Lanka census). The percentage of currently divorced is not a good measure of incidence or prevalence of divorce, as it is affected by the rate of re-marriages. However, comparable data for calculating divorce rates for countries in the region are not available. The rarity of divorce is no doubt a key reason why little information is available about divorce rates in the region. Since divorce is a rare event, data systems have not been oriented to systematic presentation of data on the subject.

While data for divorce at the national level are not readily available for countries in South Asia, data at the provincial or sub-national level are available for some countries. For Bangladesh, data from the Demographic Surveillance System (DSS) in the region of Matlab has information on marriage and divorce. Bhuiya *et al.* (2005) using this data show that for Muslim marriages that occurred between 1980 and 1987, nearly 13 percent ended in divorce by the end of the ninth year. An earlier study by Alam *et al.* (2000) for the same region tracked marriages that occurred between 1975 and 1979 for 13–17 years and found that nearly one-third of them ended in divorce. While the two studies are not directly comparable because the duration of

marriage is different, the magnitude of the difference is so large that it cannot be merely attributed to duration of marriage, suggesting a real decline in divorce rates. In fact, analysis by Alam *et al.* (2000) for earlier periods shows that divorces per thousand married males declined between 1975–1979 and 1989–1992.

In conservative parts of Bangladesh, divorce was high. In Teknaf, a conservative Muslim region bordering Myanmar, there were nearly 30 divorces for 100 marriages in the early 1980s (*ibid.*). A high rate of polygynous marriages (17 per 100 marriages) and marriages at very young ages, similar to the earlier situation in Islamic Southeast Asia, seem to have contributed to greater marital instability in this region.

Recent data from a slum neighbourhood in Dhaka suggest that about 15 percent of marriages there end in a divorce (Jesmin and Salway, 2000). At least in this urban slum setting, where marriages are more likely to be self-arranged rather than by parents or family, the weakening of family ties and social control, coupled with increased opportunities for re-partnering and economic independence of woman may contribute to higher rates of divorce (*ibid.*).

Comparable data for India are lacking. There is, however, some data on divorce cases filed in family courts in cities, which shows an increase in divorce cases filed over the last two decades. In the family court in Mumbai (Bombay) the number of divorce cases filed increased from about 1,800 in 1991 to about 2,800 by 2001 (Singh and Sinha, 2005) and to about 4,100 by 2007 (*New York Times*, 2008). While these figures should not be equated with divorce rates (as not all filings for divorce are successful) and should be interpreted with caution (as they may reflect the growth in number of marriages in tandem with population growth), they, nevertheless, suggest an increased willingness to file for divorce, at least in the context of Mumbai. An amendment to the marriage law introduced in 2010 makes ‘irretrievable breakdown of marriage’ a ground for divorce. This, some commentators believe, would make it easier to get a divorce (*The Hindu*, 2010). The data from the family court are for non-Muslim marriages. Family law for the Muslims in India is based on the Sharia, and marriages and divorces for Muslims are registered separately. For the Muslims it is relatively easy to get a divorce under the Sharia. Again, lack of data prevents any meaningful analysis of Muslim divorces and also prevents an examination of whether divorce rates for the Muslims are different from those of non-Muslims in India.

The Sri Lankan marriage pattern is unique in some respects from the rest of South Asia. In the last-half century, marriage age has increased drastically and is the highest in the region. There has been a shift from parent-arranged marriages to self-selected marriages (Caldwell, 2005). Historically, divorce has been low in Sri Lanka, but there has been an upward trend in divorce and legal separations (Siddhisena, 2003). Overall, the incidence of divorce continues to be low, as in the rest of South Asia.

International marriages and divorce

International marriages, particularly contracted by men, are gaining prominence in countries such as Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and Singapore. Such marriages constituted about 14 percent of marriages in South Korea, 32 percent in Taiwan, and 5 percent in Japan (Jones and Shen, 2008). In Singapore's case, about four in ten marriages in 2008 involved a Singapore citizen and a non-Singapore citizen, an increase of 7 percent from the 1998 level (Government of Singapore, 2009).

Such marriages are thought to be particularly susceptible to tensions, so studies of divorce from such marriages are increasingly being conducted. In South Korea, divorce in international marriages increased along with increases in divorces in domestic marriages, from about 320 divorces among Korean husband with foreign wives in 2000 to about 2,444 divorces in 2005 (Kim, 2007). These are absolute number of divorces and not rates. In about 45 percent of marriages of Korean men to foreign women, Korean men were remarrying (Lee *et al.*, 2006). This perhaps contributes to the higher risk of divorce in such marriages. The propensity of divorce varied depending on the nationality and sex of the spouse, whether the international partner entered Korea for marriage, and whether the marriage was mediated by a broker or not (Kim, 2007). Some international marriages were highly unstable: for instance, marriages between Korean men and Mongolian, Vietnamese or Uzbekistani women, on average, lasted less than one year (*ibid.*). On the other hand marriage between Korean men and Southeast Asian women tended to be more stable (Lee *et al.*, 2006).²

The role of the state in regulating visa and citizenship issues related to international marriages cannot be ignored in studying the stability of such marriages. For example, where the

² However, in Japan it is reported that divorces between Japanese men and Filipina women are especially frequent (Sachi, 2010:6).

residence status of the foreign bride is dependent on her remaining married to the (Korean, Taiwanese, etc.) husband, such wives may be more inclined to remain in abusive relationships than to seek divorce.

Discussion

Rises in divorce rates are understandable in the rapidly changing context of family life in Asian countries. Larger cities, a greater proportion of women working outside the confines of the home, and not necessarily relying on a husband's income, long working hours, exposure to a wider range of colleagues in the workplace, and changing norms about the primacy of family over individual interests, all would seem to make for higher divorce rates. The increasing primacy of the dual-earner family poses serious challenges to how the family functions. "The traditional family where the husband works and the wife stays home to take care of the family full-time have not yet been successfully replaced by a new family structure which adapts well to the absence of a full-time domestic manager" (Straughan, 2009:103). Gender ideology still consigns women to most domestic tasks, even when they are in full-time paid work (Tsuya *et al.*, 2004; Straughan, 2009:66–73). A Singapore study shows that women who embrace liberal gender expectations are less likely to stay happily in their marital union unless their spouses too adopt liberal gender expectations (Straughan, 2009:65). However, in recent years, divorce rates have declined or held steady in most of East Asia and Singapore, except in China and Hong Kong. The reasons for this are not clear and need further investigation.

Western countries with high rates of divorce also tend to have low rates of marriage, high levels of cohabitation and out-of-wedlock births (Coleman, 2004). In some respects, the experience of advanced countries in Asia mirrors the Western experience. In much of East Asia and in the major urban regions of Southeast Asia where divorce rates have increased marriage rates have come down. However, cohabitation and out-of-wedlock births in Asia have not reached Western levels. Cohabitation, though increasing in Japan and probably elsewhere in Asia, is not a common feature of societies in the region. Cohabitation implies couples staying together in the same household. If the definition of cohabitation is expanded to include couples who are in a relationship but are living apart, as is common in parts of East Asia, rates of cohabitation will go up, but this still will be lower than the rates seen in the West (Jones, 2007).

In contrast to Western countries, non-marital births have not increased significantly in Asia, even in those Asian countries that have seen a substantial drop in marriage rates. One reason for this is the considerable stigma still attached to having children outside of marriage. While the attitudes towards non-marital births might be changing in some countries, there are considerable structural obstacles. In Japan, for instance, it is “exceedingly difficult to simultaneously be an unmarried mother and a worker within the structure of the Japanese labor market.” (Bumpass *et al.*, 2009: 226). This situation is not unique to Japan and can be seen in many of the industrialised countries in the region.

Does this trend of high rates of non-marriage and greater marital instability reflect the deinstitutionalisation of marriage in Asia? Cherlin (2004) has argued in the context of the United States that marriage has been deinstitutionalised and the norms and social structures governing marriage have weakened. In many parts of Asia, non-marriage has become socially acceptable, but marriage has not lost its value or importance (JooEan, 2010). With the exception of South Asia, in the rest of Asia companionate and self-arranged marriages have become the norm. But in contrast to the West, the institution of marriage does appear to have retained its significance in Asia. Even in countries with high rates of singlehood, the majority of men and women express a desire to get married. Nemoto (2008) notes that the reason for non-marriage in Asia is not because marriage has lost its value, but rather the fact that marriage has become unattractive due to prevailing conditions of gender inequality and structural constraints.

From a demographic perspective, the recent trends in marriage and divorce in some advanced countries of Asia look similar to those of Western countries. Lesthaeghe (2010) argues that the trends in both contexts are being driven by similar set of factors. These factors include normative changes, increased emphasis on individual autonomy and self-realisation, and spread of new ideas through mass media. It is undeniable that all of these factors have played a role to a certain extent in driving the marriage and divorce trends in Asia. However, there are important differences between the two settings that must be acknowledged. Even in advanced countries of Asia, unlike in the West, patriarchy continues to hold sway. As Therborn (2004:108) has observed in East Asia patriarchy “has been seriously eroded, without evaporating”. Patriarchy plays a far more significant role when it comes to marriage and divorce in Asia than it does in the West. In most of South Asia where patriarchy has not been eroded, the institution of marriage continues to be strong and divorce rates low.

The diversity of marriage and divorce patterns in Asia preclude any easy generalisation. There are distinct regional patterns which have been shaped by particular historical and cultural contexts. In this paper, we have presented regional patterns and touched upon some of the reasons for the distinct regional patterns. In many of the developing countries in Asia, an increasing proportion of women are finishing college and participating in the labour force. This is likely to put tremendous pressure on the institution of marriage. How these forces will shape marriage and divorce patterns in countries that currently have nearly universal marriage and relatively low rates of divorce remains to be seen.

Divorce has its downsides. Some of these are poverty among female single-parent households (partly because of the tendency of men to renege on alimony payments, where these are required) and negative effects on children. The former problem is sometimes alleviated by parents taking the divorced woman (and her children, if she has children) back into their household. This was true traditionally in Islamic Southeast Asia. Raymo *et al.* (2004) note that about a quarter of divorced women aged 35–39 in Japan were living with their parents.

With respect to negative effects on children, while these are undoubtedly serious in many cases, there is considerable scholarly disagreement about how serious they are. The nature of effects will differ according to age of children, and the nature of the marriage that was broken. In cases where the marriage was truly dysfunctional—filled with bitterness and, perhaps, violence and abuse—termination of the marriage will not necessarily affect children more adversely than its continuation. There have been very few studies comparing children in single-parent families and children in ‘intact’ (two-parent) families in Asia. A recent study by Park (2008) finds that in Korea, children in single-parent families have lower educational aspirations and higher levels of disengagement than children from two-parent families. A more complicated picture is presented by Xu *et al.*’s (2007) study of children in single parent families in China. In comparison to intact families, children in single parent families express lower wellbeing, but this is mediated by academic achievement.

In conclusion, we must recognise that divorce is not a proxy indicator for dissatisfaction in marriage. To paraphrase one point noted in the study by Goode (1993:319–320) on world divorce patterns, we have no reason to believe that when divorce rates are high, or rising, more people are unhappy in their family life. Nor need we believe that people in low-divorce rate

systems do not divorce because they are content in marriage. Analysis of divorce patterns needs to be conducted, as far as possible, in an environment free of normative judgments.

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Table 1. Crude divorce rates, Asian and OECD countries, 1970–2008

| Country | Around 1970 | | Around 1985 | | Around 1995 | | 2000 or later | | | | | |
|---------------------|-------------|-----|-------------|-----|-------------|-----|---------------|-----|-----------|-----|-----------|-----|
| | Year | CDR | Year | CDR | Year | CDR | 2000–2003 | | 2004–2005 | | 2006–2008 | |
| | | | | | | | Year | CDR | Year | CDR | Year | CDR |
| China | 1978 | 0.3 | 1985 | 0.4 | 1995 | 0.9 | 2003 | 1.0 | 2005 | 1.4 | 2007 | 1.6 |
| China-Hong Kong SAR | .. | .. | 1985 | 0.8 | 1995 | 1.5 | .. | .. | 2005 | 2.2 | 2006 | 2.5 |
| Indonesia | 1976 | 0.8 | 1985 | 1.0 | 1995 | 0.6 | 2001 | 0.7 | .. | .. | 2002 | 0.7 |
| Iran | 1970 | 0.6 | 1985 | 0.8 | 1995 | 0.6 | 2003 | 1.1 | 2005 | 1.2 | 2007 | 1.4 |
| Japan | 1970 | 0.9 | 1985 | 1.4 | 1995 | 1.6 | 2003 | 2.2 | 2005 | 2.0 | 2007 | 2.1 |
| Kazakhstan | 1970 | 1.6 | 1985 | 2.6 | 1995 | 2.5 | 2003 | 2.1 | 2005 | 2.1 | 2007 | 2.3 |
| Saudi Arabia | .. | .. | .. | .. | 1996 | 0.8 | .. | .. | 2004 | 1.1 | 2005 | 1.1 |
| Singapore | 1979 | 0.6 | 1985 | 0.7 | 1995 | 1.2 | 2003 | 1.5 | 2005 | 1.5 | 2007 | 1.5 |
| South Korea | 1975 | 0.5 | 1985 | 0.9 | 1995 | 1.5 | 2003 | 3.5 | 2005 | 2.7 | 2007 | 2.6 |
| Sri Lanka | 1972 | 0.1 | 1985 | 0.1 | .. | .. | .. | .. | .. | .. | .. | .. |
| Taiwan | | | | | 1995 | 2.1 | 2000 | 3.0 | 2005 | 3.4 | 2008 | 2.9 |
| Thailand | 1978 | 0.5 | 1985 | 0.6 | 1995 | 0.9 | .. | .. | 2004 | 1.4 | 2005 | 1.4 |
| Viet Nam | .. | .. | .. | .. | .. | .. | 2003 | 0.2 | 2005 | 0.2 | 2007 | 0.2 |
| OECD | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Australia | 1970 | 1.0 | 1985 | 2.5 | 1995 | 2.8 | 2003 | 2.7 | 2005 | 2.6 | 2007 | 2.3 |
| France | 1970 | 0.8 | 1985 | 2.0 | 1995 | 2.1 | 2003 | 2.1 | 2005 | 2.5 | 2006 | 2.2 |

| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|------|-----|------|-----|------|-----|------|-----|------|-----|------|-----|
| Germany | 1970 | 1.3 | 1985 | 2.3 | 1995 | 2.1 | 2003 | 2.6 | 2005 | 2.4 | 2007 | 2.3 |
| United Kingdom | 1970 | 1.1 | 1985 | 3.1 | 1995 | 2.9 | 2003 | 2.8 | 2005 | 2.6 | 2007 | 2.3 |
| United States of America | 1970 | 3.5 | 1985 | 5.0 | 1995 | 4.4 | .. | .. | 2005 | 3.6 | 2006 | 3.7 |
| Russian Federation | 1970 | 3.0 | 1985 | 4.0 | 1995 | 4.5 | 2003 | 5.5 | 2005 | 4.2 | 2007 | 4.8 |

Sources: United Nations, 2009a; United Nations, 2009b; Taiwan data from Social Indicators, various years.

Table 2. Cumulative percentage of first marriage ending in a divorce among Malay women in Peninsular Malaysia, by marriage cohort and duration of marriage

| Marriage cohort | Year 1 | Year 3 | Year 5 | Year 7 | Year 10 | Beyond year 10 |
|-----------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|----------------|
| Before 1980 | 3.4 | 7.9 | 9.9 | 10.8 | 12.7 | 15.9 |
| 1980–1984 | 1 | 2.4 | 3.3 | 4.6 | 4.8 | 7.2 |
| 1985–1989 | 1.1 | 1.8 | 2.4 | 3 | 4 | 4.8 |
| 1990–1994 | 1.1 | 2.3 | 2.5 | 3.1 | 4.5 | 5.1 |
| 1995–1999 | 1.3 | 2.8 | 4.4 | - | - | - |
| 2000–2004 | 2 | 3.5 | - | - | - | - |

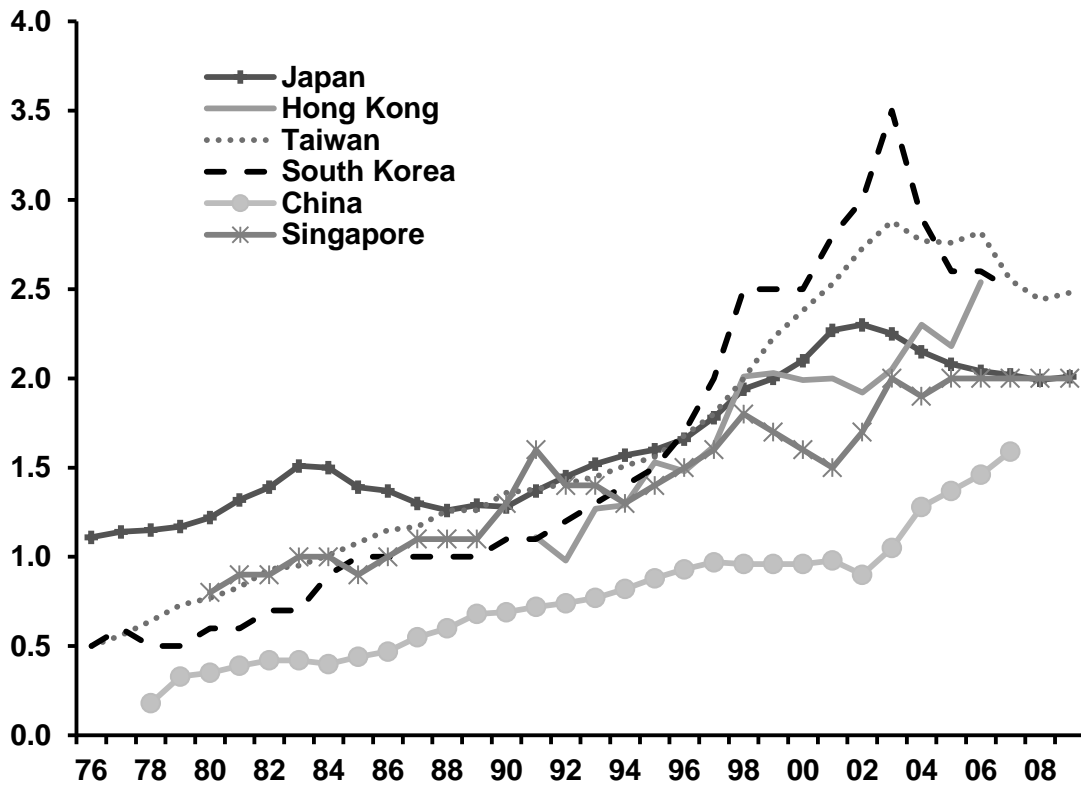
Source: Adapted from Tey (2011: Table 10.10).

Table 3. Divorces and number of dependent children, Singapore, 1985–2009, percent

| | Non-Muslim | | | | | Muslim | | | | |
|------|------------|----|----|---|----|--------|----|----|----|----|
| | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4+ | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4+ |
| 1985 | 36 | 33 | 23 | 7 | 1 | 33 | 30 | 19 | 10 | 8 |
| 1990 | 41 | 33 | 21 | 5 | 1 | 32 | 28 | 22 | 13 | 5 |
| 2000 | 63 | 20 | 13 | 4 | 1 | 32 | 25 | 22 | 14 | 7 |
| 2009 | 51 | 27 | 17 | 4 | 0 | 36 | 28 | 21 | 10 | 4 |

Source: Singapore Department of Statistics, Statistics on Marriages & Divorces, various years.

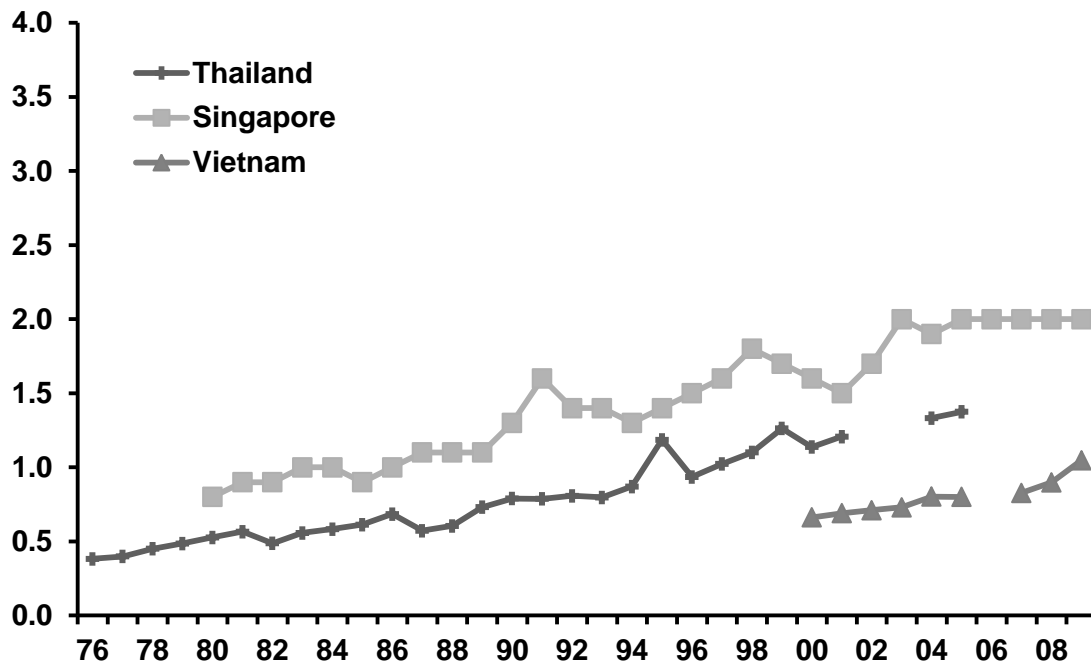
Figure 1. Crude divorce rates, East Asia and Singapore, 1976–2009



Sources:

Japan, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2010); Hong Kong, Census and Statistics Department (2007); Taiwan, Department of Household Registration Affairs, M.O.I (2009); South Korea, Statistics Korea (2010); China (2008); Singapore Department of Statistics (various years).

Figure 2. Crude divorce rates, Southeast Asia, 1976–2009



Sources:

Thailand, 1976–2001 calculated based on number of divorces reported in Thailand Health Profile, 1999–2000, Ministry of Public Health and population estimates from United Nation's World Population Prospects 2008. For 2004 and 2005, same as Table 1.

Singapore Department of Statistics (various years)

Vietnam: Number of divorces as reported by Thi (2010), based on Statistical data of National Supreme People's Courts. Mid-year population estimated from United Nations, Demographic Yearbook, various years.

Figure 3a. Muslim and non-Muslim divorces, Singapore, 1961–2009

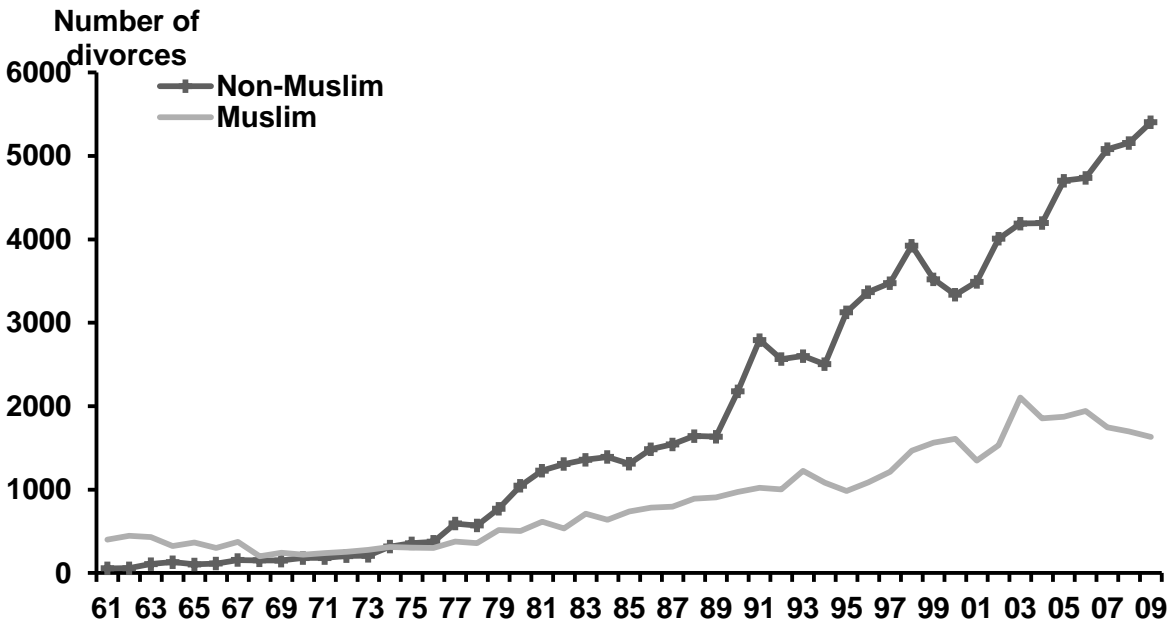
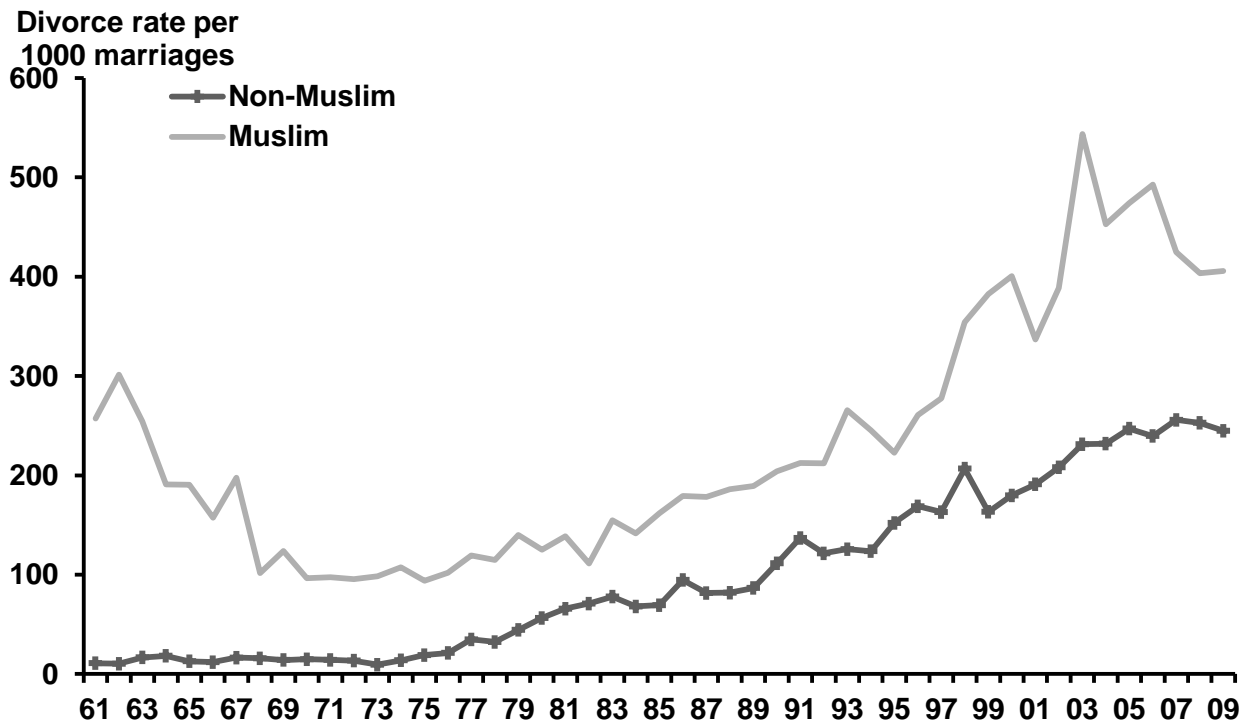
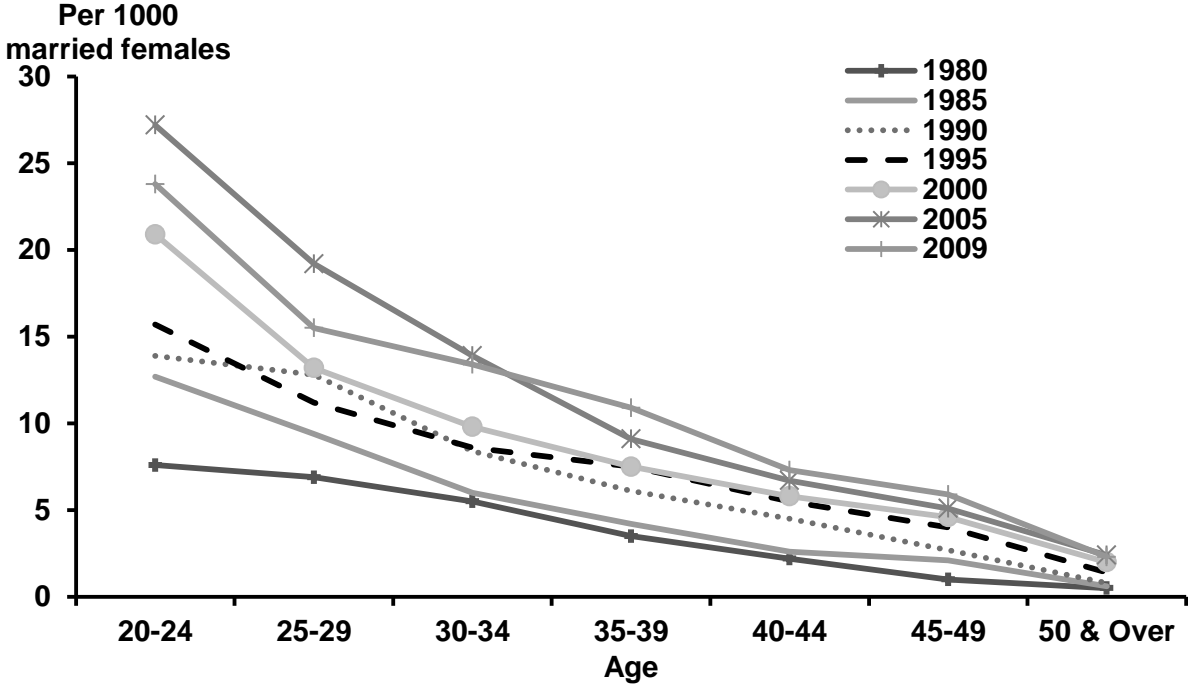


Figure 3b. Muslim and non-Muslim divorce rate, Singapore, 1961–2009



Sources: 1961–2004 data from Saw Swee Hock (2007: Chapter 7); 2004–2009: Singapore Department of Statistics, Statistics on Marriages & Divorces, various years.

Figure 4. Age-specific divorce rates for women, Singapore, 1980–2009



Source: Singapore Department of Statistics, Statistics on Marriages & Divorces 2009.

Figure 5a. Percent distribution of divorces by duration of marriage for non-Muslims, Singapore, 1980–2009

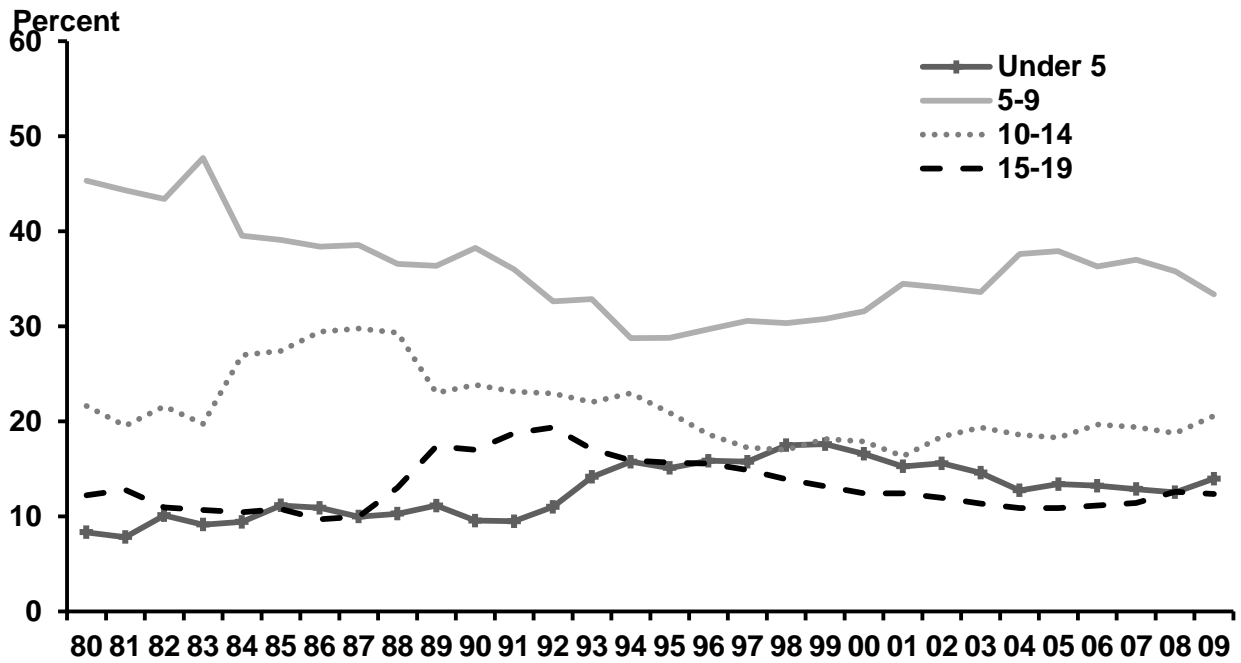
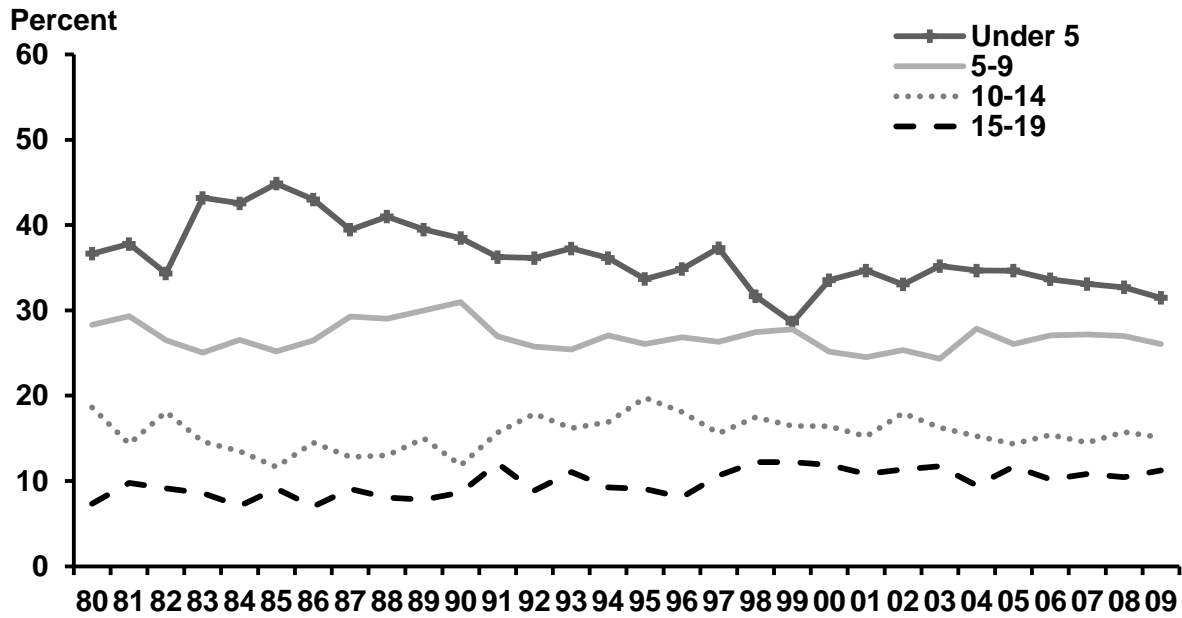


Figure 5b. Percent distribution of divorces by duration of marriage for Muslims, Singapore, 1980–2009



Source: Singapore Department of Statistics, Statistics on Marriages & Divorces, various years.