



Divorce In Asia

Asian Family Matters

Changing Family in Asia Cluster

Research Brief Series No. 19 September 2014

This brief is intended to provide an overview of research produced by the Changing Family in Asia Cluster at the Asia Research Institute.



“Divorce Trends in Asia” (2011) *Asian Journal of Social Science*, Volume 39 (6). Guest Editors: Premchand Dommaraju and Gavin Jones.

Premchand Dommaraju is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Sociology at Nanyang Technological University, and a Research Associate in the Changing Family in Asia cluster at Asia Research Institute. His current work focuses on changes in marriage system in South Asia, Southeast Asia and Central Asia.

Background

Asia is characterised by a wide diversity of patterns in both marital formation and marital dissolution. Across the continent, there are changing attitudes towards marriage, age of marriage, gender ideology and the role of women. These shifts drive divorce trends. In the past, divorce rates have varied, ranging from very low rates in South Asian countries to very high rates in the Malay-Muslim populations of Southeast Asia. However, in recent decades, divorce rates have spiked, almost universally across all of East Asia. Most parts of East Asia have reached or surpassed the average of the most developed countries. This represents a major social change for East Asian societies where divorce has not been common in the past. To understand the transforming marriage systems, it is necessary to understand first the traditional marriage and kinship systems, then the pressures that social and economic developments exert upon them.

Key Findings

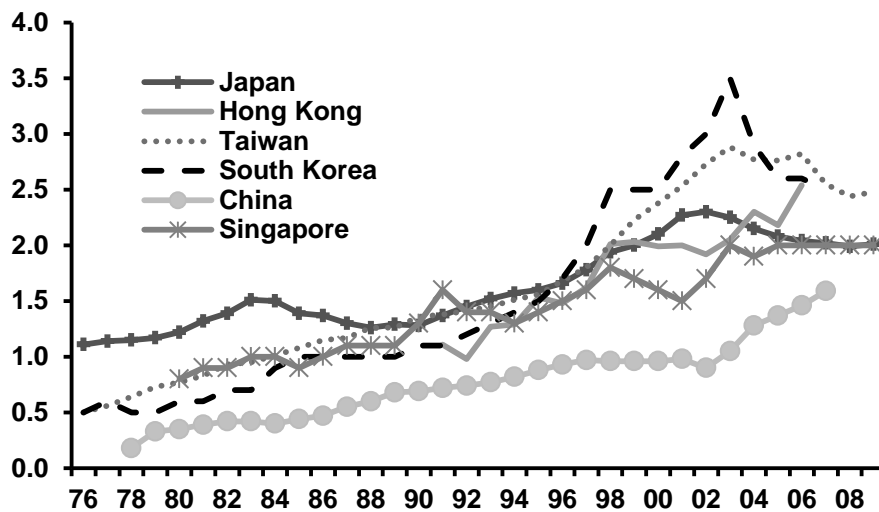
This study reveals three major patterns of divorce in Asia: those in South Asia, East Asia and Islamic Southeast Asia.

South Asian pattern: In South Asia, divorce rates continue to be very low and stable. In much of South Asia (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka), 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, as is the hindrance in most cases, of earning an independent income. Unless arranged marriage and living with or near husband’s parents’ cease to be the norms governing marriage, it is unrealistic to expect much increase in divorce rates in the region. Research on divorce in South Asia is, however, hampered by lack of data.

East Asian pattern: As shown in the figure below, divorce rates have been increasing in all countries in the region since the early 1980s, if not earlier. Though there have been temporary

declines, the general pattern suggests an increase in divorce rates, reaching a peak in many countries in early 2000 and declining or plateauing afterwards. South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong now have the highest divorce rates in the region. Comparative analyses of survey data from Taiwan, Korea and Japan show that many women do not consider it as necessary to stay in a marriage for the sake of children. This shows a significant departure from traditional attitudes toward marriage.

Crude divorce rates, East Asia and Singapore, 1976–2009



Islamic Southeast Asia pattern: Among the Islamic population of Southeast Asia (in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, southern Thailand and southern Philippines), divorce rates were traditionally high, declining dramatically in the mid-20th century as the region modernised. However, in recent times, this trend has reversed; divorce rates are once again on the rise, driven by factors similar to those operating in East Asia and, interestingly, the West.

Discussion

Increases in divorce rates are understandable, given that family life is changing rapidly in Asia. Changes include larger cities (in terms of both population and land area), a greater proportion of women working outside the confines of the home and not reliant on their husbands' income, longer working hours, exposure to a wider range of colleagues in the workplace, and shifting norms about the primacy of family over individual interests. Any or all these drastic changes could lead to higher divorce rates. The increase in divorce rates begs the question: does marital instability reflect the deinstitutionalisation of marriage in Asia?

For more information, visit: <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/journals/15685314/39/6>

Research Cluster Activities

Presentations

Thang Leng Leng, “*Changing Perceptions towards Caring for Aging Parents at Home: A Comparison between Japanese and Singapore Female University Students*”. Presented in the 24th Japanese Family Sociology Conference, Tokyo, Japan, 5-7 September 2014.

Quah Sharon, “*Family and Divorce in Australia and Singapore*”. Guest Lecture at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia, 12 September 2014.

Publications

Dommaraju, P. (2014). Family, elder care and caregivers in India. Presented at the XVIII ISA World Congress of Sociology, July 13-19, Yokohama, Japan.

Dommaraju, P. and Victor A. (2014). Marriage, divorce and remarriage in Kyrgyzstan”. Presented at the XVIII ISA World Congress of Sociology, July 13-19, Yokohama, Japan.

Jones G. and W. Jean Yeung. (2014). Marriage in Asia, A special issue in Journal of Family Issues, 35(12), first published on June 5, 2014.
doi:10.1177/0192513X14538029.

Quah, S.E.L. (2014). Negotiating post-divorce familial relationships: A case of Singaporean divorce biographies. ARI Working Paper Series no. 226. Singapore: National University of Singapore, Asia Research Institute.

Teerawichitchainan, B. and Korinek, K. (2014). Military service, exposure to trauma and health in older adulthood: An analysis of northern Vietnamese survivors of the Vietnam War. *American Journal of Public Health*, 104(8):1478-1487.

Teerawichitchainan, B. (2014). Gender and health status among older adults in Vietnam. In T. Devasahayam. (Ed.), *Gender and ageing: Southeast Asian perspectives*, pp. 122-149. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Publishing.