

Marriage Trends in Eastern Culture: A Fact Sheet

Background and Importance

The following Fact Sheet highlights statistics on marriage, divorce and non-marital childbearing in Japan, China, and the Republic of Korea (a.k.a., South Korea) -- a collection of countries representing some of the breadth of Asia. There are six major Asian groups and they include Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Filipino, Asian Indian, and Cambodian/Hmong/Laotian. There are over 30 different countries and a variety of languages lending to the diversity of the Asian population. There is very little data on marriage and divorce in Eastern countries, however more data is to come given the economic and other recent advancements of Asian countries.

Data in this Fact Sheet tracking Asia's longitudinal marriage and divorce rates are taken predominantly from the *Demographic Yearbook* from the Statistics Division of the United Nations (data were not always available for the countries selected for all years.) Most of the vital statistics data published in this *Yearbook* come from national civil registration systems. The completeness and the accuracy of the data from these systems vary from one country or area to another. Reported below are *crude marriage and divorce rates*, which are the rates at which individuals marry, or divorce, per thousand people in the population. The rates are reported across countries of interest. Although this rate does not indicate the probability that a marriage will end in divorce, or the portion of people who will eventually marry by a certain age, it is the most reliable means for comparing data across countries.



The information presented here is intended to provide relationship education practitioners and policymakers in the United States with an understanding of the variations in, and magnitude of family formation patterns that are occurring in Eastern nations as a point of comparison and potential insight into underlying driving forces.

Headlines/Trends

Overall, while China experienced increased rates of both marriages and divorces, Japan and Korea had an overall decrease in marriage rates and an increase in divorce rates since the 1970s, which mirrors longitudinal patterns found in the United States and Northern, Western, and Southern Europe (also see <http://www.healthy marriageinfo.org/docs/MarriageTrendsInWesternCulture.pdf>).¹

Definitions

Cohabiting couples, as defined in scholarly literature, are unmarried romantic partners sharing a household. Some cohabit with the intent to marry while others cohabit as an alternative to marriage.

There are also those who cohabit out of convenience. “Cohabitants” could be engaged couples, common-law husbands and wives, or singles living together in a romantic relationship.

Crude marriage and divorce rates describe the number of marriages or divorces per 1,000 individuals in the population. The crude rate is mainly used to provide a sense of how common marriage and divorce is over time. Limitations of the crude rate is that it includes children and currently married individuals—populations that are not “at risk” of marriage. In addition, the rates only represent a single point in time. Crude marriage and divorce rates provide rough descriptions of trends in marriage and divorce over time, and allow comparisons between the U.S. and other countries.

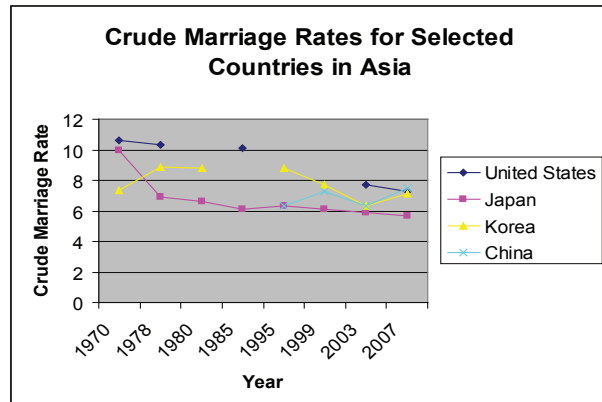
Data

Marriage rates

As the table below shows, Japan’s crude marriage rate decreased significantly from 10.0 in 1970 to 6.6 in 1980, then decreased slightly further in 1985, and has remained quite stable since. Korea experienced a moderate decline in its crude marriage rate from 8.9 in 1978 to the most recent estimate of 6.2 in 2009.² China appears to be the exception. The crude marriage rate increased from 6.3 in 1995 to 7.5 in 2007 (crude marriage rates prior to 1995 are not available). As of 2007, China’s crude marriage rate was comparable to that of the United States (see table below).

In Japan and Korea, expanding economic opportunity and access to higher education has led to both a delayed age at first marriage (for instance, the mean age for first marriage for Japanese women was 23 in 1950 and was 28 in 2009³) and increases in non-marriage among women. Some scholars also note that the decline in parents’ involvement in arranging marriages for their children has affected the marriage rate in these countries.⁴

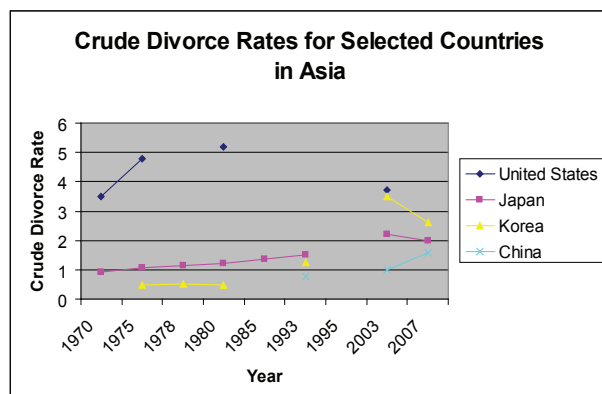
Table 1 Crude Marriage Rates for Selected Countries in Asia⁵



Divorce rates

By contrast, Japan, and Korea have experienced significant increases in their crude divorce rates since the 1970s. Japan’s crude divorce rate more than doubled between 1975 and 2003 (from .93 to 2.2) and has since declined somewhat, to 2.0 in 2007. Korea’s crude divorce rate increased more than seven-fold between 1975 and 2003, and has since declined to a rate of 2.6 in 2007. Korea leads other Asian countries and a number of European nations in having a relatively high divorce rate, tying the United Kingdom’s divorce rate in 2007.⁶ While starting at a lower rate, China’s crude divorce rate doubled from 1993 to 2007, to 1.6.

Table 1 Crude Divorce Rates for Selected Countries in Asia⁷



Several theories have been offered for the dramatic increase in divorce rates among these three countries. Women have increasingly become a part of the labor force, have greater economic opportunities, and/or are obtaining a higher education. As a result, women have become less financially dependent on men and are reportedly less tolerant of extramarital affairs.⁸ According to an article by the All-China Women's Federation,⁹ one reason why the divorce rate in Korea is so high is that more women than men are initiating divorce or separation procedures: 66.7% of divorces were initiated by women in 2003 compared to 30.6% of divorces initiated by men. Korean couples have commonly cited family/in-law problems and extramarital affairs for their divorce initiations.

An important influence in divorce patterns in Japan and China in particular are changes in laws governing divorce. In 2003 China made it simpler and easier to obtain a divorce.¹⁰ Previously, a couple interested in divorcing needed the approval or recommendations of their local community organizations or their employer. Today, a couple in China can obtain a divorce in one day with their own written agreements, identification, and residence cards.¹¹ In order to curb Korea's high divorce rate, the Seoul Family Court implemented measures to delay divorce proceedings. Couples must now undergo a "thinking period" and a counseling session before applying for a divorce.¹²

Finally, according to social researchers, the negative social stigma of divorce in Asian countries has waned in recent years.¹³

Cohabitation rates

The cohabitation rates in Japan, China and Korea, for various reasons, are unavailable. These rates, which are being tracked in Europe and the U.S., are unavailable in this report.

Non-marital Childbirths

Across Asia, Europe, and the United States, women's increased economic opportunity may have led to delayed age at first marriage (to pursue employment or higher education) and more control over marital choices, which in turn has affected rates of marriage, divorce, and non-marital births. There is a dearth of available statistics on births occurring outside of marriage in Asian countries; researchers were unable to find any reliable data for China. This Fact Sheet presents the limited data available.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the rate of non-marital childbearing in Japan was very low and relatively stable from 1970 to 1998, hovering around 1% of the total number of births.¹⁴ By 2006, Japan's non-marital child birth rate had steadily increased to 2.11%.¹⁵ Still, Japan and Korea have one of the lowest rates of non-marital births among developed nations (Korea's rate was 1.5% in 2007).¹⁶ In comparison, the U.S. non-marital birth rate in 1970 was 10.7%,¹⁷ and by 2007 had grown to 38.5%.¹⁸

One reason for the relatively low rate of Asian non-marital births, as compared to rates of North America and parts of Europe, may be an enduring social stigma. Many Asian countries still heavily stress childbearing within marriage; children born out of wedlock can be subject to social prejudice.¹⁹

Conclusion

Asian countries like Japan and Korea are mirroring the longitudinal trends of declines in marital rates and increases in divorce rates of the United States and Europe. In contrast, China has witnessed increases in marriages and divorces over the years. Still, by comparison, the United States has a significantly higher divorce rate than all Asian countries described in this Fact Sheet.²⁰ Korea seems to be most simi-

lar to the United States in both crude marriage and divorce rates.

Similar to the United States and Europe, one main reason for the decline in crude marriage rates in Japan and Korea is the later age of first marriage for both men and women. Researchers also attribute the increase in divorces to the economic and social changes Asian women have experienced in the last decades. A global economy has expanded educational and economic opportunities, increased women's economic and social independence, and changed generational expectations for relationship satisfaction and family formation.

Data Sources

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