

Abstract

Modernization and Divorce in Thailand: 1940s to 1970s

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The much-heralded claims about rising divorce rates in Thailand over the recent years are neither based on reliable data sources nor supported by systematic empirical evidence. In this study, the author attempts to provide an accurate reading of level and determinants of divorce in Thailand during the 1940s and 1970s using the 1975 Survey of Fertility in Thailand. The author challenges the conventional wisdom that modernization invariably leads to an increase in divorce. It is found that overall divorce was fairly common and did not increase as Thai society became more modernized. There were significant ethnic variations in divorce patterns. Divorce was very high and declined over time among Thai Muslims but was very low among Thai Chinese. “Traditional” social statuses (e.g., having no schooling, marrying at an early age) are associated with higher propensity to divorce. These findings suggest that a cross-cultural theory of family change should recognize the much more varied patterns in divorce.