Modernization and Divorce in Thailand: 1940s to 1970s

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Introduction

Over the past few years, examples of the breakdown of Thai family have been portrayed extensively by the media. Broken homes, problem kids, and wife abuse are popular themes for TV dramas in Thailand. Underlying these themes is the demise of marriage, which is often portrayed as a major source of contemporary social problems. A recent headline news in the *Bangkok Post* links "bleak future" of many Thai children to Thailand's rising divorce rates (Hutasingh, 2003). Changing lifestyles, especially those associated with modern and urban living, are thought to lead to an increase in divorce rates. Popular explanations for this phenomenon usually focus on the shifting roles of Thai women. Since many wives are now bringing home the "bread and butter", the competing interests between home and workplace are likely to lead to tension and strain in modern family – thus, resulting in the destabilization of traditional Thai marriage (Edwards et al., 1992).

The much-heralded claims on rising divorce and its subsequent social problems, however, are rarely supported by systematic empirical evidence. Several studies conveniently draw their conclusions from anecdotal evidence or from official records of marriage and divorce registration, which became available during the mid-1930s. These sources of data give an impression that divorce rates were low in traditional Thai society and the rates have been increasing, as Thailand became more industrialized and more Thai women gain economic autonomy through education and employment outside home. However, these studies do not critically evaluate the quality

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of their data sources and thus, fail to recognize that both marriage and divorce are seriously under-registered in Thailand. In these studies, some important theoretical questions have also been left unexplored including: is it a universal trend that divorce was rare in the past and has become more common recently? Is it possible that divorce trends in Thailand are more complex than a one-way street from low to high level? What is the relationship between social change in Thailand and divorce? What are the socioeconomic or cultural factors that might explain a rise or decline in divorce rates in Thailand?

In this study, it is attempted to document the level and determinants of divorce in Thailand, particularly during the period of modernization. The author questions existing Thai divorce estimates and the methodology used in previous to derive these estimates. The conventional wisdom that modernization invariably leads to a rise in divorce is challenged. This study is based on marital histories available in the 1975 Survey of Fertility in Thailand. The life table and proportional hazards models to document level and determinants of divorce in Thailand from the 1940s to 1970s are used. While the life table model takes care of data censoring issues and examines correlates of divorce descriptively, the proportional hazards model provides an assessment of variations in divorce in a multivariate framework (Teachman, 1982).

From the 1940s to 1970s, modernization began to spread across Thailand. This can be observed in how socioeconomic characteristics of Thai women change over these periods of time. There were increased proportions of women attaining at least primary education, participating in modern labor force prior to marriage, and marrying at later ages. However, The strong evidence to support that “traditional” social statuses (e.g., having no schooling, marrying early) are associated with lower odds of divorce is not found. From the 1940s to 1960s, divorce was not uncommon in Thailand, nor did the rates of divorce increase as Thai society became more modernized. For certain ethnic groups such as the Thai Muslims, divorce rates were actually high but declining during the periods considered in this study. In addition to socioeconomic changes, it is found that ethnicity – a proxy for cultural factors – could explain the variations in divorce in Thai society, in addition to changing socioeconomic characteristics. These

findings suggest that a cross-cultural theory of family change should recognize the much more varied patterns in marital disruption.

Divorce in the Thai context

Contrary to the conventional wisdom that divorce rates were low in the past and have been rising with modernization, historical and anthropological evidence suggests that divorce was not uncommon in traditional Thai society (for example, see Bumroongsook, 1995; Henderson, 1971; Philips, 1965). In the Thai context, marriage is usually considered a social contract that is made after the groom's parents formally approach the parents of the bride-to-be and ask for her hand. Despite such formality, marriage is not necessarily permanent. Divorce can take place without serious social disruption in communities (Keyes, 1995).

The relative ease of divorce in Thai society is partly owing to its religious tradition. *Theravada* Buddhism does not stigmatize divorce, even though social pressures might be there to maintain a marriage since family has an important economic function. If a married couple were to get divorced, the Buddhist belief would reason that the couple's ability to "perform good deeds" as husband and wife had ended (Bumroongsook, 1995). Other distinguished cultural characteristics that contribute to the tolerance of divorce in Thai society include high status of women and bilateral kinship system. In general, there is neither strong preference for sons (Wongboonsin and Prachuabmoh-Ruffolo, 1995) nor strong cultural prescriptions favoring residence with the groom's family after marriage (Chamratrithirong, Morgan and Rindfuss, 1988). In agrarian Thai society, women generally take on central roles in the planting and harvesting of rice and are also active as sellers and traders in the market (Kirsch, 1996; Van Esterik, 1996).

The level of divorce in pre-modern Thai society was rarely documented. Registration of marriage and divorce was not required until Thailand's first modern family law was issued in 1934. In addition, systematic censuses and surveys were

hardly available before the 1950s. Prior to these periods, very few statistics on marital history of Thai population were gathered (except for some Muslim communities in southern Thailand 1). A 1972 study by Prachuabmoh and colleagues crudely estimates the early prevalence of divorce by assessing the frequency of remarriages among Thai women born from 1900 to 1925. Remarriage was fairly common for Thais in the first half 20th century; as were divorce, separation, and widowhood. Rural women were more likely to remarry than their counterparts in urban areas, perhaps because in agricultural communities there might be greater economic pressure for remarriage after the desertion or death of a spouse.

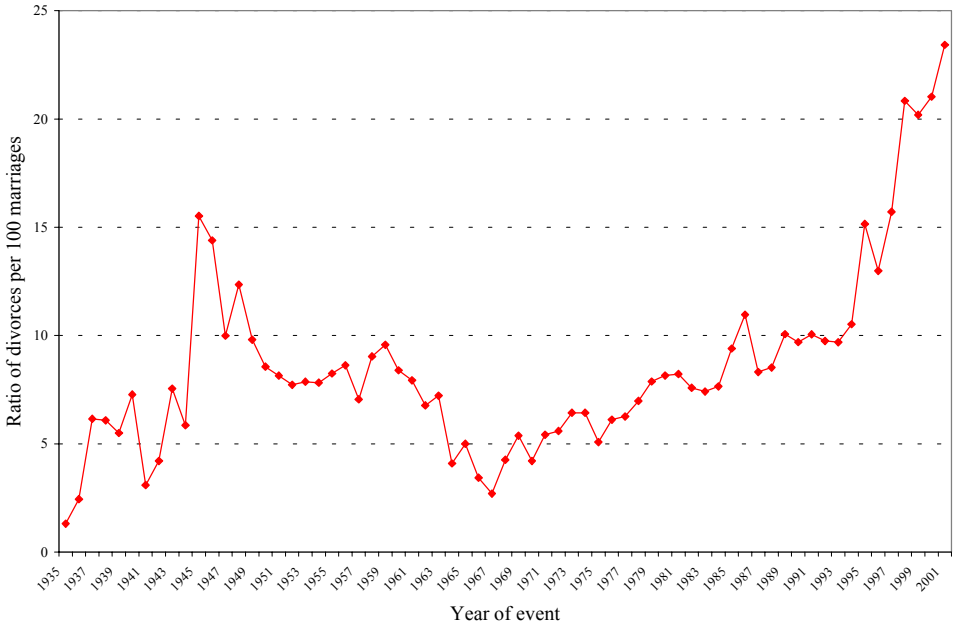
Official records on registered marriage and divorce were available after 1934. Many studies that attempt to assess the level of divorce in Thailand rely heavily on this source of data. The validity of marriage and divorce registration is questionable. There has been serious and persistent under-registration of marriage and divorce among Thai couples. A study by Chayovan (1989) based on the 1987 Thailand Demographic and Health Survey reports that only 53 percent of women had their marriage registered. The proportion of registered marriage was supposedly even smaller in earlier decades. A more recent study shows that there was no sign of significant improvement in marriage registration. Based on the 1996 Thailand Contraceptive Prevalence Survey, Warangrat (1997) reports that still only 58 percent of Thai women registered their marriage. Since several marriages are not registered, divorce – when happening – is not officially reported either. Marital disruption usually proceeds informally rather than with an official legal termination (Knodel, Chamratrithirong and Debavalya, 1987) – thus, resulting in an undercount of divorce inn official records.

Without questioning the data validity, previous studies based on the official records of marriage and divorce reported by the Thai government often find that divorce is rising in Thailand as the society becomes more modernized and industrialized (for example, see Komin, 1989; Wongsith, 1991). Figure 1 illustrates common flaws found in these studies. The overall divorce trends from 1935 to 2001 are presented. The ratio of divorce to marriage in each year is calculated by conveniently dividing the number of divorces by the number of marriages that occur in the same calendar year. Detailed

statistics from Thailand's Bureau of Registration Administration, which Figure 1 is based on, can be found in the appendix Table A1.

Figure 1

Ratio of divorces to marriages that registered to Thailand's Bureau of Registration Administration in the same calendar year from 1935 to 2001.



Source: Bureau of Registration Administration, Ministry of Interior, Thailand. Adapted from Thailand Health Profile (http://w3.whosea.org/eip/thf/PDF/Part%204-Social%20Situation&trend.pdf).

Figure 1 shows that divorce was rare during the 1930s and early 1940s. There was a brief upsurge in the mid-1940s (which some might argue that it was caused by the World War II). The ratio of divorce went down and stayed relatively stable at the rate of below 10 percent throughout the 1950s. The ratio began to increase slowly, yet continually, from 1965 onwards. During the 1990s, the level of divorce soared. In 2001, nearly one in every four Thai marriages ended up in divorce.

While relying on such data and method provides a quick and easy way to measure the incidence of divorce, it can give a misleading impression that divorce rates were low in the past and have been increased rapidly over the recent years. Not only that the number of marriage and divorce shown in the official statistics prone to a serious undercount but it is also methodologically inappropriate to calculate divorce rates based on the number of marriages and divorces registered in the same calendar year 2 . Divorce can – and usually – occur to a marriage that took place 5, 10, or 20 years earlier.

The methodological issue can even be more complicated by the fact that it is unknown whether divorces are more under-registered than marriages and whether the level of under-registration has changed over time. Even if the levels of marriage and divorce are wrong, it may still be possible to interpret the trend of divorce, assuming the constant levels of under-registration. However, changes in the completeness of reporting of marriages and divorces will affect this ratio of divorces to marriages.

There seems to be no consensus on how prevalent divorce was in the past and how the trend was like when modernization came into the picture. While historical and anthropological works suggest that divorce was not rare in pre-modern Thai society, especially in the agrarian settings, empirical studies based on vital statistics and survey data are quite insensitive to the qualitative findings and suggest that the trends in divorce in Thailand were otherwise. Recognizing typical flaws in earlier empirical studies, the present study is based on data and methods that provide an accurate reading of the level and determinants of divorce during Thailand's early decades of modernization. A better understanding of divorce trends and their correlates will contribute to the knowledge of the dynamics of Thai family and also to the cross-cultural theory of family change under the rubric of modernization.

Data and methods

To provide a correct reading of the incidence of divorce, detailed marital history data, with information on current marital status, timing of first marriage, dates of prior marriages and marital dissolutions, are required. Such detailed information is,

however, rarely collected. In a search for marital history data, it is found that World Fertility Surveys conducted in many developing countries, including Thailand, during the 1970s is one of the few data sources for empirical research on trends in divorce. There are a few studies of marital dissolution based on WFS data; however, these studies primarily focus on methods of measurement, rather than attempting to explain trends and patterns of divorce (for example, see Smith, 1981 and Smith, Carrasco and McDonald, 1984). Unfortunately, there were no recent demographic surveys in Thailand with comparable marital histories that would allow an assessment of divorce trends for more recent periods.

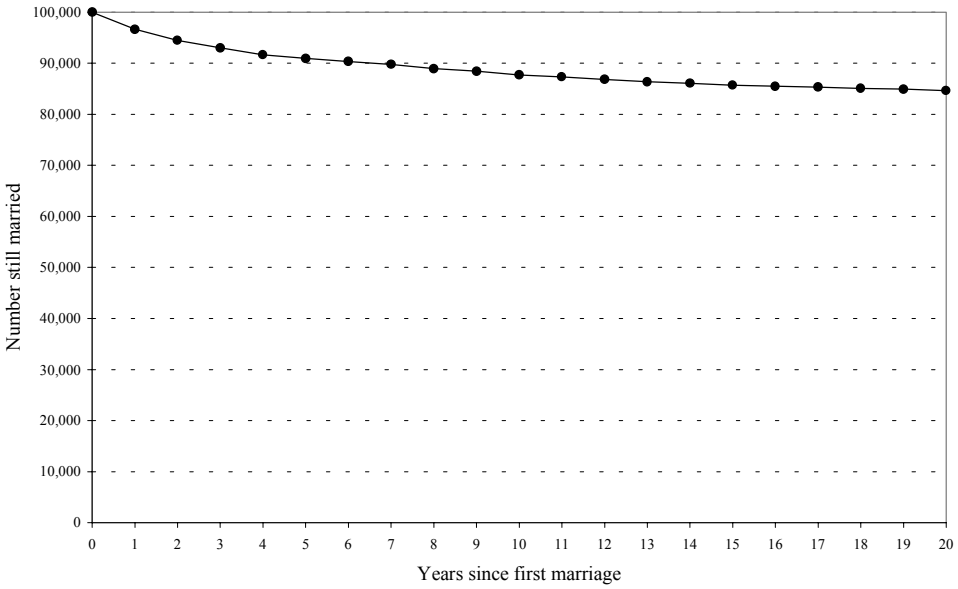
The analysis is based on WFS data from Thailand, which is known as Survey of Fertility in Thailand (SOFT) and was conducted in 1975. In SOFT, nationally representative samples of 3,820 ever-married women ages 15-49 were interviewed about their maternity and marriage histories, knowledge and use of contraception, fertility intentions and preferences, and socioeconomic background. Based on SOFT questions on marital histories, I can reconstruct histories of marital dissolution (by either death of spouse or divorce/separation) from the dates (month and year) of each respondent's first marriage and marital dissolution (Smith 1981: 10-11). In this study, reports of both divorce and separation are taken as measures of marital disruption. In Thai, "separation" has less unfavorable connotations than "divorce". It is plausible that many survey respondents find it easier to report marital disruption as separation rather than divorce, especially when there is no legal termination.

Despite clear advantages of SOFT, the survey's cross-sectional design poses few limitations to the study. The survey does not allow the author to fully capture the effects of time-varying independent variables. The operationalization of certain variables is limited to characteristics before first marriage; most changes that happen during the marriage are not measured. In addition, since the SOFT sample includes women age 15-49 in 1975, there is an issue of left censoring in age distribution of the estimated population, especially among earlier marriage cohorts. For instance, for the 1945 marriage cohort, the SOFT sample includes only women who were aged 20 or younger in that year. The upper age of the estimated population rises year by year for successive marriage cohorts. Note that the bias will be small because most Thai women in the SOFT sample married at young age, especially in the early years of observation.

The first step in the analysis is to construct life table estimates of cumulative experience of marital dissolution by duration of marriage. Because marriage can be dissolved by death as well as by divorce or separation, estimate multiple-decrement life tables using standard demographic methods (Preston, Heuveline and Guillot, 2001: Chapter 4). The populations of first marriages at risk of divorce for each year of marital duration are adjusted to include only marriages not disrupted by spousal death. Figure 2 shows the survival curve of 100,000 first marriages (l_x^s values), which are subject to marital-duration-specific probabilities of dissolution due to separation and divorce. The l_x^s values presented here do not reflect the impact of marital dissolution due to spousal death, although the duration-specific divorce/separation probabilities (q_x values) were computed on the basis of populations at risk adjusted for all sources of marital dissolution. The methods used to construct the life table are reported in the appendix Table A2.

Figure 2

Life table estimates of the survival of first marriages subject to the risk of divorce or seperation by duration of marriage



Source: 1975 Survey of Fertility in Thailand

Figure 2 shows that most separations or divorces occur early in marriage. The survival curve levels off after approximately the first five years of marriage. Because most divorces occur early in marriage, the descriptive analysis uses one point on the survival curve – the proportion of first marriages that end in separation or divorce within five years after marriage (l5/l0) – as an indicator of the level of divorce. The analysis excludes marriages that began less than five years before the date of interview and those that were dissolved by spousal death in the first five years of marriage. The life table analysis allows for the estimation of the risk of divorce (in the first five years of marriage) for several marriage cohorts from the 1940s to 1960s.

In the subsequent multivariate analysis, a proportional hazards model, which allows the inclusion all ever-married women regardless of marital duration. In this analysis, the effects of predictor variables on the risk of divorce, net of marital duration and other covariates are estimated (Castro Martin and Bumpass 1989; Teachman 1982, 1983). The logistic coefficients are expressed as the natural log of the odds ratio relative to an omitted category. To facilitate interpretation results, the exponentiated coefficients (exp[β]) that represent the odds ratio for a particular category relative to the odds ratio for the reference category are presented.

Modernization and social change in Thailand

Over the last half of the twentieth century Thailand transformed itself from an agrarian society to a newly industrialized country. There were significant social, political, and economic changes during the periods considered in this study (from the 1940s to early 1970s) that set the stage for subsequent era of rapid economic growth and development in the 1980s and 1990s.

The 1940s was a period of severe economic stagnation due to the World War II. Japanese military forces occupied much of Asia, including Thailand – the only Southeast Asian country not formally colonized by a Western power. The country underwent economic and political dislocation during this period. The 1950s witnessed

significant economic recovery. With substantial foreign aid, the Thai government made major investments in infrastructure, healthcare, education, and other domestic needs. The resumption of international trade and economic booms created by the Korean War in the 1950s and the Vietnam War in the 1960s increased earnings from exports and provided the economic base for increased investment and consumption in the country. These trends continued through the 1970s, as the healthy international economy accelerated the pace of social change.

The evidence of social change and development is apparent in Table 1, which reports the level of education, employment prior to marriage, and age at marriage among Thai women of the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s marriage cohorts. These variables shed some light on the conditions of the lives of Thai women during these periods.

Table 1: Trends in education, employment before marriage, and age at first marriage among Thai women by marriage cohort

	Marriage cohort (percentage)					Marriage cohort (number)				
	1940s*	1950s	1960s	1970s*	Total	1940s*	1950s	1960s	1970s*	Total
Total	100	100	100	100	100	476	1103	1351	890	3820
Level of education										
No formal education	34	24	14	7	18	162	268	184	58	672
Some primary	64	72	79	79	75	303	794	1065	703	2865
Beyond primary level	2	4	8	14	7	11	41	102	129	283
Employment before marriage										
Agriculture Unpaid	63	60	58	49	57	299	665	787	437	2188
Agriculture Paid	14	13	12	13	13	65	143	162	112	482
Non-agriculture Unpaid	4	4	4	4	4	20	49	54	36	159
Non-agriculture Paid	9	13	18	26	17	43	145	247	233	668
Did not work	10	9	7	8	8	49	101	101	72	323
Age at first marriage										
Under 15	13	6	5	3	6	60	66	63	28	217
15-19	68	56	53	50	55	324	619	720	443	2106
20-24	19	33	33	36	32	92	364	46	321	1223
25 and over	–	5	9	11	7	–	54	122	98	274

Source: 1975 Survey of Fertility in Thailand

Note: * The 1940s cohort includes women who first married from 1938 to 1949 and the 1970s cohort includes women who first married from 1970 to 1975

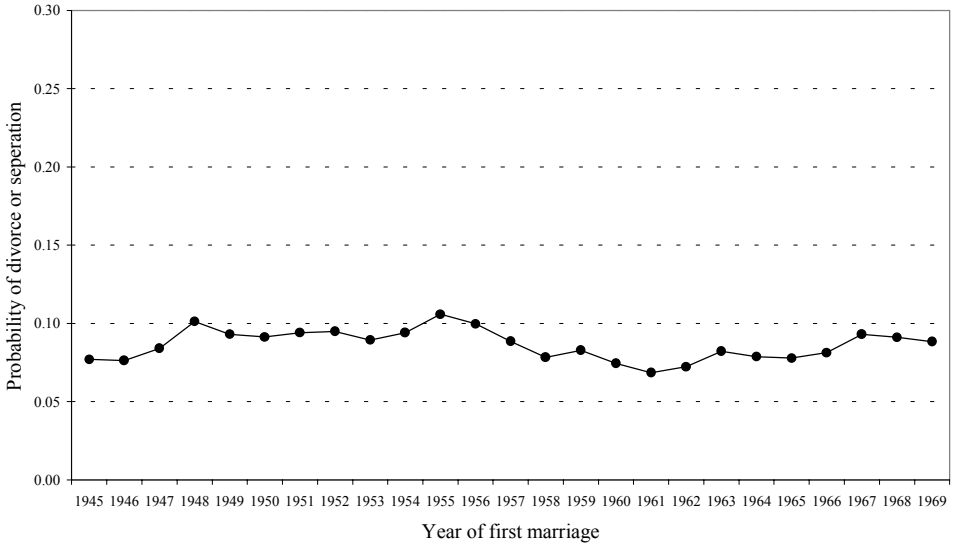
During the 1940s, the characteristics of newly married women reveal that Thai society at the time was very traditional. Both education and employment opportunities were limited for women. One in every three women had no formal schooling, while most of those who were educated got only primary education. Ninety percent of Thai women had premarital work experience but almost all were employed as unpaid workers in family agriculture. Over 80 percent of the Thai brides were below 20 at the time of their marriage. These estimates of age at marriage are affected by the truncated age distributions for the earliest marriage cohorts as noted earlier.

There were only a handful of women in Thailand who had modern characteristics in the 1940s. These women had education beyond primary level, earned a living in non-agricultural sector prior to marriage, and married in their 20s. The number of Thai women with modern characteristics increased in the 1950s – but only modestly. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, newly married women in Thailand were more likely to have some schooling and married at an older age. By the 1970s, only 7 percent of Thai brides had no formal schooling and the fraction of teenage brides was less than 60 percent. The proportion of Thai brides who had worked in paid non-agriculture sector increased from 9 to 26 percent between the 1940s and the 1970s.

Descriptive analysis of level and determinants of divorce: the 1940s-1960s

The process of modernization that swept across Thailand during the 1940s and 1970s reflect in changes in women's level of education, employment prior to marriage, and age at first marriage. These variables represent independent variables for subsequent analysis of divorce. Based on the life table measure of divorce (i.e., the probability of divorce/separation within the first five years of marriage), Figure 3 presents an overall trend in divorce (reported in a three-year moving average) by year of marriage from 1945 to 1969.

Figure 3
Trend in probability of divorce or separation during the first five years of marriage in Thailand: 1945-1969



Source: 1975 Survey of Fertility in Thailand.

For the entire span of years considered here, about one in every 10 marriages ended in divorce within the first five years of marriage. In other words, Thailand's divorce rates hovered around 10 percent without any distinct upward or downward trend 3 . The rate of one in 10 marriages ending in divorce might be considered relatively high for a traditional society. This evidence supports Goode (1993)'s concept of "stable high divorce rate system" which was found in a small number of traditional societies, where divorce was relatively high prior to modernization and industrialization. Given the observed changes towards modernization in the characteristics of Thai women from the 1940s to 1970s, it is surprising not to find that the divorce rates increased in Thailand – thus, rending no support for the conventional wisdom.

The next descriptive analysis, shown in Table 2, explores estimates of divorce for three marriage cohorts (the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s) by region, ethnic group, education, premarital work experience, and age at marriage. These are life table estimates of the probability $(1-(l_5/l_0))$ of a marriage ending in divorce or separation within the first five years of marriage.

Table 2: Life table estimates of the probability ($1-(l_5/l_0)$) of marital disruption during the first five years of marriage among Thai women by marriage cohort

	Marriage cohort (probability)				Marriage cohort (number)			
	1940s	1950s	1960s	Total	1940s	1950s	1960s	Total
Total	0.09	0.09	0.08	0.09	476	1103	1351	2930
Current region of residence								
North	0.08	0.13	0.09	0.10	118	288	299	705
Northeast	0.09	0.10	0.10	0.10	162	362	511	1035
South	0.21	0.15	0.09	0.14	66	112	137	315
Central	0.05	0.03	0.08	0.05	103	249	278	630
Bangkok	0.04	0.05	0.04	0.04	27	92	126	245
Ethnic group								
Thai Buddhist	0.08	0.09	0.08	0.08	431	1024	1249	2704
Thai Chinese	--	0.00	0.05	0.02	14	39	39	92
Thai Muslim	0.32	0.33	0.11	0.22	31	40	63	134
Level of education								
No formal education	0.14	0.13	0.11	0.13	162	268	184	614
Some primary	0.07	0.08	0.08	0.08	303	794	1065	2162
Beyond primary level	--	0.07	0.04	0.05	11	41	102	154
Employment before marriage								
Agriculture Unpaid	0.09	0.10	0.08	0.09	299	665	787	1751
Agriculture Paid	0.11	0.08	0.09	0.09	65	143	162	370
Non-agriculture Unpaid	--	0.08	0.06	0.08	20	49	54	123
Non-agriculture Paid	0.09	0.06	0.06	0.06	43	145	247	435
Did not work	0.08	0.12	0.15	0.12	49	101	101	251
Age at first marriage								
Under 15	0.23	0.18	0.14	0.19	60	66	63	189
15-19	0.09	0.11	0.11	0.10	324	619	720	1663
20-24	0.02	0.05	0.04	0.04	92	364	446	902
25 and over	--	0.06	0.06	0.06	0	54	122	176

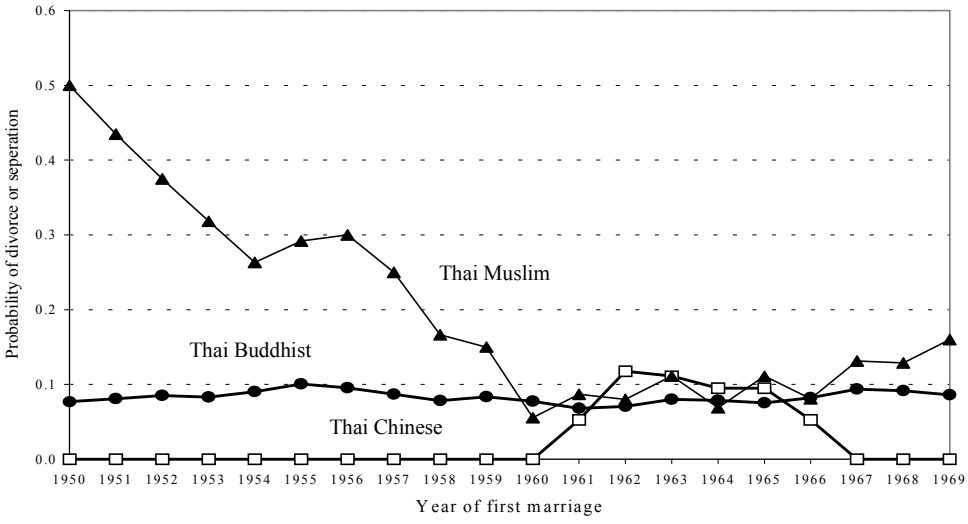
Source: 1975 Survey of Fertility in Thailand
Note: -- fewer than 25 observations

The overall trends reported in Table 2 are similar to those reported in Figure 3. Thai divorce rates were moderate and stable throughout the periods considered. Slightly less than one in 10 marriages was disrupted. In addition, Table 2 also reveals two important findings. First, there are significant ethnic variations in divorce patterns. Second, "traditional" socioeconomic characteristics of women in Thailand are associated with higher propensity to divorce, compared with "modern" characteristics.

Ethnic variations in divorce between Thai Muslims, Thai Chinese, and Thai Buddhists are perhaps one of the most striking findings. The Thai Muslims, who live predominantly in southern Thailand, had high divorce rates during the 1940s and 1950s. About one in every three Muslim marriages ended in divorce within the first five years. The rate declined to about 11 percent in the 1960s. This high-and-falling divorce pattern among the Thai Muslims is consistent with what other studies find during the same periods of time among other Muslim populations in Southeast Asia based on the WFS and other survey data (Guest, 1992; Heaton, Cammack and Young, 2001; Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan, 2003; Jones, 1994; 1997).

Opposite to the Thai Muslims, Thai Chinese had extremely low divorce rates. The Thai Buddhist population had an in-between divorce level of less than 10 percent for the whole periods represented here. This diverging ethnic patterns in divorce are highlighted in Figure 4, which features the estimated trends in divorce (a three-year moving average) by year of marriage from 1950 to 1969) for Thai women of different ethnic groups.

Figure 4
Trend in probability of divorce or separation during the first five years of marriage in Thailand by ethnic groups and year of first marriage: 1950-1969



Source: 1975 Survey of Fertility in Thailand

The decline in divorce rates among the Thai Muslim women during the 1950s was very dramatic. The rate dropped from nearly one in every three marriages to about one in every 10 marriages that ended with divorce during the first five years of marriage. This finding challenges the conventional wisdom that divorce trends are usually one-way street from low to high level and also questions the theoretical consensus on the relationship between social change and divorce. The 1960s observed the convergence between divorce levels among women from three major ethnic groups in Thailand. The divorce trends for Thai Muslim women even show a slight increase at the end of the 1960s. A small number of Thai Chinese in the SOFT sample might partly explain the observed fluctuation in divorce rates among this group in the 1960s. But this pattern may also suggest a sign of increased incidence of divorce among Thai Chinese during the decade, as they underwent changes in socioeconomic characteristics.

In addition to the strong association between ethnic groups and the likelihood to divorce, Table 2 also reveals an association between "traditional" social roles and divorce. This is most apparent for rural/urban location and educational attainment. Women from Bangkok and central Thailand (the two most urbanized regions) had the lowest level of divorce. Lower educational attainment is associated with higher likelihood of divorce. Divorce rates were highest among women with no formal schooling and dropped to low levels among those with some secondary schooling, who represented a very small fraction of Thai population during the 1940s and 1960s.

Women who had no premarital work experience had higher divorce rates than women who did, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. These differences may be partly due to measurement problem 4 or to the different proportions of women who worked prior to marriage. There is also a clear and consistent negative association between age at marriage and the propensity of divorce. Women who married under age 15 were the most likely to get divorced. Women who were aged 15-19 at the time of their marriage had higher likelihood of divorce than women who married in their 20s. These patterns suggest that women with modern characteristics and social roles (i.e., having higher education, working prior to marriage, and marrying at a later age) are less tolerant of divorce than are women with traditional statuses.

Multivariate analysis of divorce in Thailand: the 1940s-1970s

In the next analysis, proportional hazards models of divorceis presented. This multivariate analysis is aimed at teasing out the net effects of ethnicity (as a proxy of culture), socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. In other words, an attempt to address whether the bivariate associations observed in Table 2 are modified when additional covariates are introduced in the multivariate analysis. Also, another question addressed in this analysis is whether the trend toward lower divorce among Thai Muslims is an outcome of changes in population characteristics.

Results are shown in Table 3. The first model presents the trend in divorce based on only one independent variable of marriage cohort. Model 2 introduces measures of urban/rural location and cultural characteristic – region of residence and ethnicity. The last model includes measures of socioeconomic and demographic characteristics – education and employment prior to marriage and age at first marriage as covariates.

Table 3: Proportional hazards estimates of the odds (exp(β)) of marital disruption among women in Thailand by marriage and social and cultural characteristics

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	N
Marriage cohort				
1940s	1.000	1.000	1.000	476
1950s	1.015	1.068	1.199	1103
1950s	0.906	0.925	1.100	1351
1970s^	1.121	1.194	1.489 *	882
Current region of residence				
North	--	1.000	1.000	890
Northeast	--	0.901	1.065	1350
South	--	0.901	0.955	397
Central	--	0.727 *	0.807	855
Bangkok	--	0.641 *	0.818	320
Ethnic group				
Thai Buddhist	--	1.000	1.000	3526
Thai Chinese	--	0.323 *	0.258 **	121
Thai Muslim	--	2.626 ***	1.747 *	165

Table 3: (continued)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	N
Level of education				
No formal education	--	--	1.409 **	672
Some primary	--	--	1.000	2857
Beyond primary level	--	--	0.668	283
Employment before marriage				
Agriculture Unpaid	--	--	1.000	2182
Agriculture Paid	--	--	1.201	481
Non-agriculture Unpaid	--	--	1.503	159
Non-agriculture Paid	--	--	1.330	668
Did not work	--	--	1.589 **	322
Age at first marriage				
Under 15	--	--	1.440 *	217
15-19	--	--	1.000	2102
20-24	--	--	0.598 ***	1219
25 and over	--	--	0.726	274
-2 log likelihood	7315.072	7268.772	7215.417	--
Degrees of freedom	3	9	18	--
N	3812	3812	3812	3812

Source: 1975 Survey of Fertility in Thailand

Note: *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

^ *Eight cases (from the 1970s marriage cohort) are not included in the proportional hazards analysis because marriage took place at the same month as the SOFT interview.*

The coefficients are expressed as the ratio of the odds of divorce to non-divorce for each category relative to the comparable odds of the reference category for each independent variable. For example, the reference category of the 1940s marriage cohort in Model 1 has a standard odds ratio of 1.0 (the odds for the 1940s divided by itself) and the odds ratio for the 1950s cohort equals 1.015. This means women from the 1950s marriage cohort are slightly (1.5 percent) more likely to get divorced compared to the 1940s cohort. Note that none of the coefficients for marriage cohort in Models 1 and 2 are statistically significant – suggesting that differentials in propensity to divorce between marriage cohorts are not evident. However, in Model 3 when all variables are included, the odds ratio for the 1970s equals 1.489 and is statistically significant. This means women from the 1970s cohort are nearly 50 percent more likely to get divorced

than those of the 1940s cohort, given they have the same background characteristics (e.g., education, ethnicity, location, work experience, age at marriage).

The multivariate analysis also shows that the regional variation in divorce trends in Thailand observed in Table 2 is largely a function of ethnic composition and level of socioeconomic development. In Model 2, when controlling for ethnicity, the odds ratio for southern Thailand is not significant. This is also true for Bangkok and central Thailand in Model 3. When education and other socioeconomic characteristics were introduced, lower probabilities of divorce of Bangkok and central Thailand are no longer statistically significant.

Ethnicity has very strong effects in determining the likelihood of divorce. Thai Chinese have much lower odds and Thai Muslims much higher odds of divorce, compared to Thai Buddhist, who are the majority of the Thai population. In Model 3, the effects of Thai Chinese and Thai Muslim are only modestly influenced by the inclusion of education, premarital work experience, and age at marriage as covariates. This shows the persistence of the effects of ethnicity on likelihood of divorce. Note that the Chinese finding may be considered tentative because there are only a little over 100 Thai Chinese in the SOFT sample.

In this multivariate analysis, a strong net effects of education on the propensity to divorce is also observed. Women with no formal schooling have the highest likelihood of divorce. Meanwhile, those with secondary schooling have lower likelihood. However, the coefficient is not statistically significant. This might be because very few women in the sample went beyond primary education. Until recently, compulsory primary education in Thailand consisted of only four years of schooling.

The impact of age at marriage on the likelihood of divorce is also salient but not linear. It reflects a sharp shift between the teenage years and the 20s. There are few Thai women who got married before 15 but they have much higher odds of divorce than brides of other ages. Marrying above age 20 has a very strong and significant influence in lowering the odds of divorce relative to those marrying earlier. The coefficient for

Thai women who marry at age 25 or later is in the expected direction, but smaller in absolute size and not statistically significant.

The effects of premarital work experience on divorce are inconsistent and statistically insignificant. This makes it difficult to draw any conclusions. Women who did not work prior to marriage or those who worked for family business have higher odds of divorce than those in the reference category who worked for family agriculture. The higher likelihood of divorce experienced by these two groups of women cannot be explained by any of the covariates. About 90 percent of Thai women had premarital work experience. Perhaps the less than 10 percent of Thai women who did not are very selective on certain attributes that are correlated with divorce.

Discussion

The much-heralded claims in the media about alarmingly rising divorce rates among Thai couples do not do justice to a much more complex patterns of divorce in Thailand. The study provides an accurate reading of incidence and determinants of divorce based on detailed marital history from the 1975 Survey of Fertility in Thailand, life table analysis, and proportional hazards models.

Divorce was common in pre-modern Thai society, particularly among the Thai Buddhists and Thai Muslims. Divorce rates among the Thai Muslims were very high during the 1940s and 1950s – as high as or even higher than what we have recently observed in industrial societies. Approximately one in every three Muslim marriages ended with divorce within the first five years of marriage. The findings suggest that divorce is not necessarily rare in traditional societies and trends in divorce rates do not necessarily increase from low to high levels, as a society becomes more modernized. The traditional high divorce group like the Thai Muslims experienced a sharp decline in divorce rates during the 1960s.

While women's education and employment opportunities outside home may bring them more autonomy, it does not always mean that women would be more likely to get divorced. During the 1940s and 1970s, Thai women who lived in urban areas, had higher education, had premarital work experienced, and married at a later age had the least likelihood to divorce. Women who were most prone to divorce had "traditional" characteristics such as living in rural areas, having no education and no work experience, and marrying in their teens.

These findings lead us to question the Western social science which often assumes that Western trends in modernization and family change are universal. An evidence in support of Goode (1993)'s and Jones (1994)'s earlier statement that there is more than a single path to modernity and divorce trend is not necessarily one-way street from low to high levels is found. Cross-national theory of family change needs to recognize the varied patterns of marital disruption, especially the existence of traditional high divorce system.

What explains high divorce patterns in pre-modern Thailand? Which factors contribute to the tolerance of divorce in traditional Thai society – the Thai Muslim communities in particular? Jones (1994) observes that tolerance of divorce in Southeast Asia (including Thailand) was tied to existing marriage and family structures. Southeast Asian women enjoyed considerable social and economic independence. Marriage was usually early and universal. Arranged marriage existed in certain communities such as Islamic communities. Yet, there was a strong cultural emphasis on spousal compatibility. Bilateral kinship system provided young married couples – particularly brides – both moral and economic security. Such security remained even after a marriage was disrupted by death or divorce and created an institutional environment that wives did not need to tolerate incompatible marriages. How did the process of modernization change these marriage and family dynamics? In the 1960s, the pattern of traditional high divorce among the Thai Muslims began to deteriorate, as Muslim women received more education and married at a later age. It appears that modernization might create an impression that divorce is associated with socioeconomic backwardness or traditional social characteristics. During this transition, Thai women

with modern characteristics had less tolerance towards divorce (i.e., lower divorce rates).

Now that Thai society has by and large become urbanized and industrialized, what does the future hold for the trends of divorce in Thailand? During the 1960s, the convergence of divorce trends among three ethnic groups in Thailand was underway. The early 1970s witnessed a small increase in the incidence of divorce. Perhaps it is likely that there has been a continual rise in divorce rates in the following decades. However, with the lack of appropriate marital history data, we can neither be certain nor provide an accurate documentation of the incidence and determinants of divorce for the recent periods.

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Notes

1 In Islamic communities in Southeast Asia, religious leaders were in charge of keeping records of statistics of life course events –including marriage and divorce – which occurred in their communities. In some southern provinces of Thailand where the majority of population are Muslim, such records of marriage and divorce were kept by provincial Islamic Committee. However, the committee never processed the data so tabulation is not available for researchers to analyze (Jones 1994). Unlike religious leaders in Muslim communities, Buddhist monks in pre-modern Thailand, who were community spiritual leaders, rarely took on such role. Neither did civilian heads of Thai communities attempt to collect statistics of life course events. Note that although Buddhism was seamlessly intertwined with the life of Thai peasants, it was less involved with marriage and divorce than with other events such as birth and death.

2 Other typical flaws found in studies on divorce include computing proportions of current divorce from measures of current marital status that are available in censuses and demographic surveys. Measures of current marital status do not provide an accurate estimation of the incidence of divorce. The number of persons currently divorced is only a fraction of those who have experienced a divorce. Many people who are currently married may have a previous marriage that ended in death or divorce.

3 There may be an upward bias in the estimates of divorce for the earliest year of the time series and perhaps a small bias toward the later years as the SOFT sample becomes more representative of the full range of age at marriage in the early 1950s.

4 How premarital work experience is measured can be problematic because women interviewed in the SOFT were left to their own judgment how they defined their work experience. For example, some women considered that they "worked" when they just helped out on family farm, while others did not think of family farm work as "work experience" because they were unpaid labor.

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Appendix

Table A1: Statistics of marriage and divorce registered to Thailand's Bureau of Registration Administration in each calendar year from 1935 to 2001.

Year of event	Number of registered marriages	Number of registered divorces	Ratio of divorces per 100 marriages in the calendar year	Year of event	Number of registered marriages	Number of registered divorces	Ratio of divorces per 100 marriages in the calendar year
1935	3,051	40	1.3	**1969**	115,488	6,211	5.4
1936	16,382	401	2.4	**1970**	148,451	6,252	4.2
1937	16,253	1,000	6.2	**1971**	123,021	6,666	5.4
1938	21,189	1,289	6.1	**1972**	168,161	9,400	5.6
1939	30,624	1,684	5.5	**1973**	176,166	11,335	6.4
1940	20,907	1,521	7.3	**1974**	199,258	12,817	6.4
1941	69,080	2,139	3.1	**1975**	266,934	13,555	5.1
1942	69,839	2,938	4.2	**1976**	270,415	16,536	6.1
1943	47,634	3,596	7.5	**1977**	281,111	17,616	6.3
1944	61,493	3,600	5.9	**1978**	291,501	20,356	7.0
1945	22,054	3,422	15.5	**1979**	285,461	22,485	7.9
1946	23,308	3,354	14.4	**1980**	305,588	24,922	8.2
1947	21,535	2,152	10.0	**1981**	332,798	27,363	8.2
1948	22,430	2,770	12.3	**1982**	317,462	24,095	7.6
1949	24,647	2,417	9.8	**1983**	380,023	28,168	7.4
1950	28,558	2,446	8.6	**1984**	392,822	30,057	7.7
1951	28,430	2,317	8.1	**1985**	343,134	32,252	9.4
1952	31,906	2,465	7.7	**1986**	333,974	36,602	11.0
1953	33,008	2,597	7.9	**1987**	373,637	31,068	8.3
1954	38,226	2,989	7.8	**1988**	391,124	33,344	8.5
1955	36,817	3,036	8.2	**1989**	406,134	40,875	10.1
1956	35,393	3,052	8.6	**1990**	461,280	44,725	9.7
1957	44,833	3,163	7.1	**1991**	449,913	45,230	10.1
1958	36,342	3,284	9.0	**1992**	482,452	47,025	9.7
1959	36,583	3,502	9.6	**1993**	484,569	46,953	9.7
1960	46,015	3,862	8.4	**1994**	492,683	51,840	10.5
1961	48,907	3,881	7.9	**1995**	470,751	71,342	15.2
1962	59,216	4,011	6.8	**1996**	436,831	56,718	13.0
1963	51,468	3,717	7.2	**1997**	396,928	62,379	15.7
1964	115,125	4,713	4.1	**1998**	324,262	67,551	20.8
1965	101,936	5,098	5.0	**1999**	386,611	78,049	20.2
1966	150,321	5,167	3.4	**2000**	337,140	70,882	21.0
1967	129,868	3,513	2.7	**2001**	324,661	76,037	23.4
1968	129,995	5,543	4.3				

Source: Bureau of Registration Administration, Ministry of Interior Thailand.
Adapted from Thailand Health Profile (http://w3.whosea.org/eip/thf/PDF/Part%204-Social%20Situation&trend.pdf).

Table A2: Life table of marital dissolution due to spousal death and separation/divorce among Thai women

Yrs. since first married	Yrs marr at interview	Marr x+1 or more yrs	Sp dths from x to x+1	Cum sp dths from 0 to x-1		Sep/div from x to x+1	Cum sep/div from 0 to x-1	Cum sep/div from 0 to x-1 only for marr x or more yrs	Adjusted pop at risk	Prob of sp dth at x	Prob of sep/div at x	Survival Curves	
									(3) - [(6) + (9)]	(4)/(10)	(7)/(10)	$l_{x-1}^{D}({}_1q_{x-1}^{D})$	$l_{x-1}^{S}({}_1q_{x-1}^{S})$
x	Yrs. Marr.	N_x	${}_1d_x^{D}$	${}_{x-1}d_0^{D}$	${}_{x-1}d_0^{D}$	${}_1d_x^{S}$	${}_{x-1}d_0^{S}$	${}_{x-1}d_0^{S}$	l_x^{a}	${}_1q_x^{D}$	${}_1q_x^{S}$	l_x^{D}	l_x^{S}
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)
Ever Married		(3,820)											
0	66	3754	10	0	0	127	0	0	3754	0.003	0.034	100,000	100,000
1	170	3584	7	10	9	77	127	118	3457	0.002	0.022	99,734	96,617
2	158	3426	5	17	14	50	204	188	3224	0.002	0.016	99,532	94,465
3	163	3263	13	22	17	44	254	226	3020	0.004	0.015	99,377	93,000
4	174	3089	10	35	28	22	298	254	2807	0.004	0.008	98,950	91,645
5	159	2930	14	45	37	17	320	258	2635	0.005	0.006	98,597	90,927
6	154	2776	6	59	49	16	337	255	2472	0.002	0.006	98,073	90,340
7	124	2652	7	65	52	22	353	260	2340	0.003	0.009	97,835	89,755
8	164	2488	13	72	57	12	375	265	2166	0.006	0.006	97,542	88,911
9	140	2348	12	85	67	16	387	259	2022	0.006	0.008	96,957	88,419
10	160	2188	8	97	76	9	403	257	1855	0.004	0.005	96,382	87,719
11	138	2050	14	105	76	9	412	254	1720	0.008	0.005	95,966	87,294
12	118	1932	8	119	86	9	421	251	1595	0.005	0.006	95,185	86,837
13	117	1815	7	127	86	5	430	246	1483	0.005	0.003	94,707	86,347
14	112	1703	10	134	90	6	435	237	1376	0.007	0.004	94,260	86,056
15	124	1579	7	144	91	3	441	228	1260	0.006	0.002	93,575	85,681
16	113	1466	5	151	86	2	444	217	1163	0.004	0.002	93,055	85,477
17	112	1354	9	156	82	3	446	204	1068	0.008	0.003	92,655	85,330
18	155	1199	8	165	86	2	449	188	925	0.009	0.002	91,875	85,090

Table A2: (continued)

Yrs. since first married	Yrs marr at interview	Marr x+1 or more yrs	Sp dths from x to x+1	Cum sp dths from 0 to x-1		Sep/div from x to x+1	Cum sep/div from 0 to x-1	Cum sep/div from 0 to x-1 only for marr x or more yrs	Adjusted pop at risk	Prob of sp dth at x	Prob of sep/div at x	Survival Curves	
									(3) - [(6) + (9)]	(4)/(10)	(7)/(10)	$l_{x-1}^{D}({}_1q_{x-1}^{D})$	$l_{x-1}^{S}({}_1q_{x-1}^{S})$
x	Yrs. Marr.	N_x	${}_1d_x^{D}$	${}_{x-1}d_0^{D}$	${}_{x-1}d_0^{D}$	${}_1d_x^{S}$	${}_{x-1}d_0^{S}$	${}_{x-1}d_0^{S}$	l_x^{a}	${}_1q_x^{D}$	${}_1q_x^{S}$	l_x^{D}	l_x^{S}
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)
19	84	1115	11	173	83	3	451	175	857	0.013	0.004	91,080	84,906
20	101	1014	6	184	82	1	454	156	776	0.008	0.001	89,911	84,609

Source: 1975 Survey of Fertility in Thailand

Notes:

Column (1): x is the number of years from year of first marriage to year of interview

Column (2): is the number of respondents by marital duration (yrs since first married) in completed years

Column (3): N_x is the number of respondents with "x or more" years since marriage

Column (4): ${}_1d_x^{D}$ is the number of respondents with spousal deaths from x to x+1

Column (5): ${}_{x-1}d_0^{D}$ is the cumulative number of spousal deaths from x=0 to x-1

Column (6): ${}_{x-1}d_0^{D}$ is the cumulative number of spousal deaths from x=0 to x-1 only for marriages of x or more yrs duration

Column (7): ${}_1d_x^{S}$ is the number of respondents with separations/divorces from x to x+1

Column (8): ${}_{x-1}d_0^{D}$ is the cumulative number of separations/divorces from x=0 to x-1

Column (9): ${}_{x-1}d_0^{S}$ is the cumulative number of separations/divorces from x=0 to x-1 from x=0 to x-1 only for marriages of x or more yrs duration

Column (10): lx^{a} is the adjusted population at risk (marriages x years ago that have not been previously dissolved)

Column (11): ${}_1q_x^{D}$ is the probability of a spousal death at marital duration x

Column (12): ${}_1q_x^{S}$ is the probability of a separation/divorce at marital duration x

Column (13): l_x^{D} is the proportion ever married survivors (of 100,000 marriages) at each marital duration x after cumulative attrition from spousal deaths

Column (14): l_x^{S} is the proportion ever married survivors (of 100,000 marriages) at each marriage duration x after cumulative attrition from separations/divorces