Divorce in Contemporary Vietnam: Prevalance, Patterns and Effects

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Recent study on divorce show that, while divorce has long been culturally discouraged and limited, divorce has been rapidly rising after the Renovation policy [Doi Moi] in late 1980s. However, very few empirical studies, which are based on statistical analyses of individual data on the association between socio-demographic factors and divorce in Vietnam, have been implemented. Using the results of the existed data, which include the annual statistics on divorces at the Vietnam Supreme Court; and especially, the whole divorce cases granted at two district courts in ten years 2000-2009 in the Red River Delta (i.e. 499 divorced couples in a rural district and 1534 divorced couples in an urban district); and applying theoretical approaches on divorce, this study attempts to examine how the divorce prevalence, patterns and the reported reasons of divorce varied with structural factors, such as gender, cultural and demographic (i.e. rural/urban residence, living arrangement before divorce), life course (i.e. presence of children, birth cohort, age at marriage, duration of marriage, age at divorce) and socioeconomic status (i.e. economic condition) variables in the effects of social backgrounds. In addition, case studies of divorced men and women were conducted to collect to provide the possible explanations, and to investigate the socio-cultural factors to divorce.

There are twelve important findings in the dissertation. First, divorce in Vietnam is increasing in both number and rate and the upturn is much stronger in urban areas than in rural areas. The crude divorce rate and general divorce rate are rising considerably and reach to 1.12 and 1.49 respectively in 2010, share the similar trend with other Southeast countries but remain low in compared to the developed countries. Second, there are disparate trend in divorced/separated probability. Divorced/separated probability is higher among the more modernized settings such as urban residence, Southeast residence, Kinh group, better-off people, and working women. For instance, living in an urban area, kinship ties and financial independence arising from employment outside home give women the ability and confidence to be on their own, increased opportunities for meeting new partners and divorce is a credible option if they are in unsatisfactory marriages. However, education is negatively associated with divorce, because more educated women are more likely to have a romantic marriage and are less likely to be
exposed to other high risk factors of bad marriage such as very early and arranged
marriages. Third, divorce procedure is still complicated toward reconciliation and
collectivism in traditional settings. In the rural areas, divorce procedure is more
complicated and is a collective decision with the direct interventions of alternative
subject powers such as family, kinship, and mass organization. In the urban setting,
higher modernization and individualism may lead to easier divorce decision and
less complicated divorce procedure. Forth, there are evidences that divorces happen
mostly at the young age, among the young people, especially among the more
traditional setting such as rural area. For instance, women divorce at younger age
than men, and rural individuals divorce at younger age than the urban counterparts.
It is also interesting that there is a strong increase among divorced people who have
no child at the time of divorce, and strongly increased among rural divorcees. They
may divorce at the younger age when they do not have children yet. Fifth, gender
equality and the more independence of women status in marriage and family show
the dominant trend of women initiating divorce regardless of birth cohorts, age at
marriage, age at divorce, number of children, sex composition of children, wealth
ranking, and living arrangement. Sixth, children values remain strong since women
with more children are less likely to initiate divorce than women without or having
fewer children. While among couple with more children, men are more likely to
initiate divorce. Seventh, divorce is the highest in the first five years of marriage
and majority of marriages end in divorce in the first 10 years. Eighth, patterns of
long or short duration of marriage vary by the socioeconomic status, the life course
perspectives and the cultural and demographics backgrounds. The couples with
longer marriage duration are those enjoyed more individualism and modernization
such as living in the urban areas and separately from parents, getting married at the
older age, and being better off. On the other hand, couples with shorter marriage
duration are living in the rural areas, with parents, poor, getting married at the
younger age, having no child, which predict a tendency toward a higher
individualism since there is a conflict of higher social pressure of traditional values
of marriage and family and an open viewpoints rooted from modernization, which
make people are ready to dissolve their marriage. From the gender perspective,
male divorcees report longer duration of marriage than female divorcees. Ninth,
there are gender and structural differentials in divorce reasons. Men are more likely
to divorce due to adultery and economic hardship. Women suffering domestic
violence, adultery, economic hardship and life style difference are more likely to
divorce, which support for the hypothesis. Individuals with high socioeconomic
status report infidelity and life style conflict as their divorce reasons while the low
socioeconomic status report economic hardship, missing/in prison, domestic
violence, and life style dispute are the reasons. Individuals who married at a young
age were more likely to report difficulties in “settling down,” such as economic
hardship, domestic violence, addicted and missing and who married at old age are
more likely to divorce due to infidelity, life style dispute, and no child. Tenth, there is a competing force of both modern and traditional influences on divorce reasons and a transition toward higher individualism in divorce. Couples who broke their marriage with modern/individualistic reason, such as life style conflict, are more likely are modern people such as urban residence, high socioeconomic status, and older age at marriage. The profound evidence of influences of the “traditional” reason for divorce is the number of divorces due to domestic violence, economic hardship, and childless, which are often high in the rural areas. Eleventh, children granted to live with their mothers after divorce is the dominant trend of the divorced couples in Vietnam, regardless of their rural/urban differential, living standard, child number, divorced year, the age at divorce, birth cohort, and living arrangement before divorce. And finally, there are evidences of the gender inequality in house and property arrangement after divorce. Urban women are given more favourable conditions after divorce since most of them at least receive half of the house value. Mothers can be more protected of the house ownership if taking care of all children. If mothers share the child custody or do not take care of child after divorce, their house ownership right is significant lower than those of the husband.

Modernization accompanied by the infiltration of egalitarianism, important role of the state in formulation of the marriage patterns through the introduction of the legal documents and other socioeconomic development policies, the improvement of women's socio-economic status, and the expansion of individualism explains, to some extent, the prevalence and pattern of divorce in Vietnam.

The socio-economic miracle that followed the country's opening to the outside world and Renovation after 1986 has dramatically changed social mores and getting divorced no longer carries the social stigma it once did. Vietnam's transformation to a market economy and modernization also began to reshape lifestyles and values, including those on marriage and divorce. Modernization process unites individual traditional viewpoints and perceptions of marriage and family and has brought greater autonomy to the Vietnamese. With material comforts vastly improved, people are no longer satisfied with marriages that merely fulfilled the need to carry on the family line and requiring obeying and scarifying from women. Divorce is becoming a reflection of autonomous and rational decision to pursue individual happiness. Gender equality and women status in Vietnam is promoting significantly over the years. The economic independence and legal setting prioritized women have meant power to be emotionally more independent, making women brave enough to walk out of an unsatisfactory marriage. Individualism and collectivism is a cultural dimension which relates to divorce prevalence and pattern. Vietnam is in the stage of catching up with the Western standards of individualism. Individualism, which used to be weak in traditional society, is one of the most influential factors in
rising rates of divorce.

The disparate coexistence of various levels of tradition and modern values in the context that new institutions have not perfected while old institutions remain existent is the general model of divorce in contemporary transitional Vietnam. This mean there is a contradictory trend existing in contemporary Vietnam, where many traditional ideas are infringed by modern values, but not be eliminated completely and where the new modern values are forming and expanding under the process of modernization and socialism.