Strong Family Ties and Divorce in Japan

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Extended abstract

Introduction

Japan's crude divorce rate has rapidly increased since the 1970s and reached above 2.0‰ in the early 2000s, at a similar level with most industrialized countries other than the U.S. As shown in Figure 1, the graphs of the CDR and the number of divorces since the 1970s have had two peaks: The first peak (1.5‰) in 1983 and the second peak (2.3‰) in 2002. The number of divorces by marital duration indicates that the first peak came after the rapid increase in divorces of couples remaining married for ten or more years, whereas, at the second peak, divorces increased across all duration categories.

The fact that the first peak occurred in the recession in the early 1980s, and the second peak came during the long economic slump caused by the collapse of the bubble economy suggests a negative association between macro-economic growth and the risk of divorce. In fact, an event history analysis using marital history data and socio-economic measures from a nationally representative life-course survey revealed that the expansion of disparities between social classes accompanying the decline in Japan's macro-economic performance is a major cause of the rising divorce rate (Kato 2005b). Economic growth has a moderating effect to ease the force of social classes that causes differentials in the risk of divorce. This is the similar mechanism behind the later and less marriages in Japan (Kato 2001, 2004, 2011).

However, not only socio-economic factors but also family backgrounds including intergenerational co-residence and the presence of infant children may have some effects on the risk of divorce, particularly in a 'strong family' country such as Japan. In the past decade, much has been written and discussed about the associations between strong family ties and very low fertility (Dalla Zuanna & Micheli 2004). On the contrary, very little attention has been paid to the relationships between strong family ties and divorce.

This paper investigates the effects of intergenerational family ties on the risk of divorce in Japan, using event history techniques. The results would provide valuable insights into the links between strong family and demographic behavior.

Data and methods

Data from the National Family Research of Japan Special Survey 2001 (NFRJ-S01) is used to estimate a series of discrete-time logistic regression models for divorce. NFRJ-S01 is a nationwide

Japanese family life course survey with cluster random sampling performed in December 2001 (Kato 2003). The survey was implemented in January and February 2002. Respondents were women born in 1920-69, who were asked retrospectively life event histories such as marriage and divorce, childbearing and rearing, living with/nearby parents(-in-law), home ownership, employment, migration, and elderly care, with detailed information on family backgrounds and socio-economic characteristics. The sample size was 5,000 and the total number of questionnaires completed was 3,475, for a response rate of 69.5%. For the purpose of this study, never married women were excluded, resulting in an analytic sample of 3,350.

As measures of intergenerational family ties, living arrangement with parents(-in-law) and the age of the youngest child are utilized. The former is a time-varying variable with five categories: *living with husband's parents, living with wife's parents, living near husband's parents, living near wife's parents,* and *living far from any parents*. ('Living near' refers to proximate residence within a walkable distance.) Because couples could have lived separately one year before divorce, this covariate measures their living arrangements at year t-2. The latter is also a time-varying variable with five categories indicating the presence of young children or the child-rearing stage: *no children, zero to six, seven to twelve,* and *thirteen or older*.

Control variables measuring other family backgrounds and socio-economic characteristics are included in the event history models: *marital duration* (year t), *wife's age at marriage, husband's educational attainment, wife's educational attainment, husband's employment status at marriage, wife's employment status at year t-1, wife's father's employment status when she was aged 15, GDP growth rate at year t-1* (a seven-year moving average is used).

As shown in Figure 1, the risk of divorce seems to be the highest within five years of marriage, suggesting that the effects of covariates could change over time. In this study, therefore, three duration-specific models are estimated in addition to the baseline model covering the whole period: one for divorce within five years of marriage, another for 5-9 years, and the other for 10 years or more.

Results

Table 1 presents the results of discrete-time logistic regression models for divorce. Interestingly, the covariates measuring strong family ties are negatively associated with the risk of divorce. Couples living with husband's parents are 66% less likely to divorce, on average, than those living far from any parents. The effect of patrilocal co-residence is strong and consistent over the life course. Proximate residence with parents or in-laws also lowers the risk of divorce in the early years of marriage. Couples in the child-rearing stage are less likely to divorce than those before the stage. A young child can work as "a link between husband and wife," as stated by a Japanese proverb.

As for control variables, husband's employment status and macro-economic growth are strongly associated with the risk of divorce. Couples whose husbands are regular employees in

small/medium-sized companies or self-employed (non-agri.) are three times more likely to divorce than those whose husbands are regular employees in large companies in the later years of marriage. On the contrary, the risk of divorce is two to three times higher for wives who are regular employee, relative to full-time homemakers in the same period. And the risk of divorce is getting higher with economic deterioration, consistent with existing research (Kato 2005). Husband's educational attainment is negatively associated with divorce, while wife's education has no significant effect.

Discussion

This paper has examined the relationships between strong family ties and divorce using retrospective life history data from a nationally representative survey in Japan. The results of discrete-time logistic regression models for divorce suggest that intergenerational family ties substantially reduce the risk of divorce. In other words, strong family ties imply not only intergenerational family solidarity but also marital stability.

However, intergenerational co-residence at marriage has declined among recent birth cohorts. The proportion of couples co-residing with husband's parent(s) at the time of marriage decreased from about 30% for those born in the 1950s to 20% for those born in the 1960s (Kato, 2005a, 2013). Although those in the latter cohorts started living with husband's parent(s) soon after marriage and about 30% co-resided 12 years after marriage, relatively weakening intergenerational ties in the early years of marriage is presumably another cause of increase in divorce shown in Figure 1.

The fact that patrilocal coresidence can stabilize marriage denotes that living far from any parents or 'weak family' may have a higher risk of marital dissolution, given the long-term decline in macro-economic performance. Thus, further investigation is needed for the interactions between strong/weak family ties and socio-economic variables.

References

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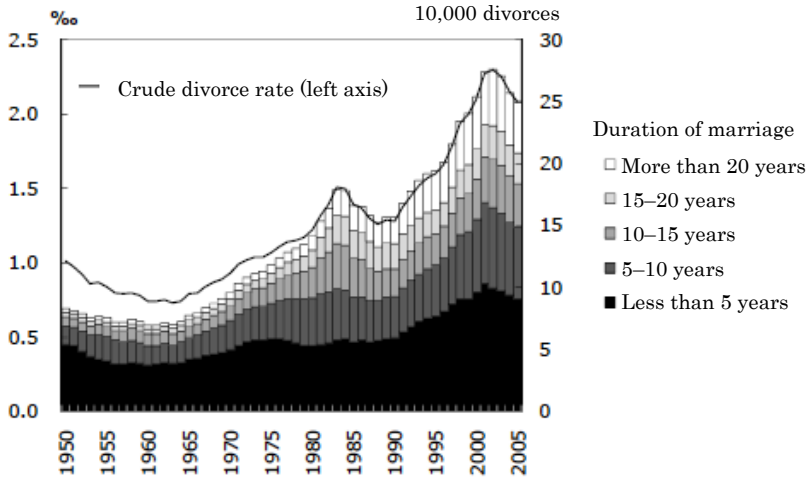

Figure 1. Trends in crude divorce rate and number of divorces: 1950–2005

Source: Vital Statistics Japan

Table 1. Odds ratios from discrete-time logistic regression models for divorce

		Years since marriage		
	Whole period	0-4 years	5-9 years	10 years or more
Intergenerational co-residence and proximity				
Living far from any parents (ref.)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Living with husband's parents	0.34 ****	0.41 **	0.37 *	0.24 ***
Living with wife's parents	1.23	1.14	1.56	0.92
Living near husband's parents	0.61 †	0.20 *	0.60	0.99
Living near wife's parents	0.64	0.13 *	1.18	0.64
Age of the youngest child				
No children (ref.)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
0-6 years old	0.57 **	0.30 ****	0.34 **	0.80
7-12 years old	0.37 ***	-	0.27 *	1.03
13 or older	0.48 †	-	-	1.33
Wife's age at marriage				
20 or younger	2.10 ***	2.60 *	1.96	2.29 *
21–23 years old	1.42 *	1.77 †	1.66	1.17
24–26 years old (ref.)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
27–29 years old	0.85	0.62	0.61	1.35
30 or older	0.52 †	0.56	0.67	0.16 †
Husband's education				
University or higher (ref.)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
High school/Vocational school /Jr. college	1.58 *	1.94	1.05	2.02 †
Junior high school or less	1.84 *	3.54 **	0.94	2.02
Wife's education				
University or higher (ref.)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
High school/Vocational school /Jr. college	1.56	0.81	4.35	1.83
Junior high school or less	1.04	0.39	4.73	1.23
Husband's employment status				
Regular employee in a large company (ref.)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Regular employee in a small/medium-sized company or self-employed (non-agri.)	2.23 ****	1.26	3.00 **	2.95 **
Self-employed in agriculture	2.77 ****	1.39	4.66 ***	3.56 **
Part-time/contract/not working	5.03 ****	2.57 †	9.49 ****	4.91 **
Wife's employment status				
Not working (ref.)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Regular employee	1.74 **	1.15	3.23 ****	2.01 *
Self-employed/family worker	1.25	1.24	1.06	1.35
Part-time/contract	1.35	1.09	2.06 †	1.09
Wife's father's employment status				
Non-managerial regular employee (ref.)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Managerial or higher-ranked	1.17	0.97	0.93	1.71
Self-employed in non-agriculture	1.18	1.74	0.94	0.97
Self-employed in agriculture	0.71	0.62	0.76	0.81
Part-time/contract/unknown	1.18	1.87 †	0.56	1.38
GDP growth rate	0.87 ****	0.93 *	0.84 ***	0.76 ****

****p ＜0.0001, ***p ＜0.001, **p ＜0.01, * p ＜0.05, †p ＜0.10