

Adoption and the Maintenance of the Early Modern Elite

Japan in the East Asian Context

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More than anywhere else in the early modern world, adoption in late imperial China, Chosŏn Korea, and Tokugawa Japan was a way of life. Legally codified and socially sanctioned, the practice of adopting to acquire an heir was not simply a strategy to optimize family success; given the demographic realities pertaining at the time, it was absolutely necessary for perpetuating the family system itself, in political, economic, and spiritual terms.

The reliance on adoption stemmed from a problem common across early modern East Asia: in contrast to the demographic pattern typical in preindustrial societies, in which rates of fertility and mortality tended to be high and population growth substantial, the Chinese, Korean, and Japanese populations overall between the sixteenth and late nineteenth centuries experienced relatively low fertility, moderate mortality, and low to moderate population growth.¹ At the same time, due to shared Confucian ideals, families felt compelled to practice male primogeniture in matters of succession and inheritance. These two essentially incompatible factors—strict succession rules on the one hand, and a limited pool of potential heirs on the other—made an alternative solution necessary if the family system were to survive. Adoption was that solution.

However, adoption took quite different forms across East Asia, in great part because kinship, marriage, and succession practices—indeed the structure of family systems themselves—developed along distinct trajectories in each place over time. This chapter begins by briefly summarizing recent research in the historical demography of late imperial China and Chosŏn Korea with regard to adoption, and then uses those findings as the broader context in which to discuss the results

of my own and other scholars' research on adoption and succession in Tokugawa Japan. While the bulk of the research discussed here pertains to the elite classes—the Chinese imperial bureaucracy, the Chosŏn aristocracy, and the early modern Japanese shogunal and daimyo houses—I also include additional information on adoption practices among rural commoners in early modern Japan, information made possible by the maintenance and preservation of local demographic records dating from the early seventeenth through the late nineteenth centuries, and decades of historical research drawing on those records. Ultimately, I argue that even in the East Asian context, in which adoption of heirs was common and accepted, early modern Japanese warrior and commoner families stand out in terms of the frequency and flexibility with which they implemented adoption. To a greater degree than their contemporaries in China and Korea, early modern Japanese families adopted adults and children, men and women, kin and nonkin in an exceptionally free and unregulated manner. Although the form, practice, and ideology of adoption in Japan shifted significantly after the late nineteenth century, the importance of adoption—in particular the adoption of adults and, within that category, of sons-in-law—in maintaining the Japanese family system in ways that, notably, benefited both men (directly) and women (indirectly) has few parallels in world history.²

HOW COMMON WAS ADOPTION AMONG THE RULING ELITE IN EARLY MODERN EAST ASIA?

We may begin by comparing rates of adoption within the early modern East Asian elite, specifically, the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) imperial lines, the Qing nobility, the Korean royal house (Yi or Chosŏn dynasty, 1392–1910), the upper ranks of the Korean aristocracy in the Chosŏn period, the Tokugawa shogunal house (1603–1868), and a sampling of early modern Japanese warrior houses. There are several reasons for beginning an assessment of adoption with the ruling classes. First, across the region the importance of lineage as a determinant of power compelled political regimes to compile detailed genealogical records for the elite. While not without their biases and inaccuracies, these records contain an extraordinary amount of information about births, deaths, marriage, and succession in elite families—and by extension the ruling regimes themselves—that is invaluable for examining how they sustained and perpetuated themselves over time. Only in Japan does a comparable volume of demographic information for commoners survive. Second, across the region the educated upper classes bore responsibility for embodying Confucian values and practices, and as a result one would think that the dictates of male primogeniture—specifically, succession by the eldest biological son of the principal wife—would be most strictly observed among the elite. Third, Confucian prescriptions regarding adopted heirs—namely, that adoption should be resorted to only in the absence of biological male heirs,

and that adoptees should be chosen from among the ranks of close male agnatic kin—would presumably be followed more closely by elite families. The latter two reasons suggest that adoption among elites would reflect a relatively greater degree of attention to orthodoxy and exercise of restraint, making it a “limit case” exemplifying the lowest level of tolerance for heir adoption.

If we make this assumption—that adoption among the elite would for ideological reasons be limited and restrained—it is not surprising to see that there were no adoptions for succession in the Ming or Qing imperial lines, and only one case of adoption out of twenty-five cases of succession in the Chosŏn, or Yi, royal lineage (see table 2.1). By contrast, four out of the fourteen men who succeeded to the office of shogun in the Tokugawa period were adopted by their predecessors (28 percent of all shogunal successions). And, further, if we look to adoption within the broader elite classes, the frequency of adoption for heirship increased substantially overall across the region, with Japanese elites again adopting heirs at significantly higher rates than their East Asian neighbors: 6.5 percent of surveyed succession cases among the Qing nobility involved adopted heirs, whereas the figure is 19 percent among the Chosŏn high aristocracy, and between 17 percent (in the seventeenth century) and 27 percent (in the eighteenth century) among early modern Japanese warrior houses of all ranks.³ In all three countries, elite families adopted most frequently because they lacked sons, and the most ideologically appropriate solution was to adopt a single male kinsman to serve as heir.⁴ Further, when adopting for heirship, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese families generally preferred to adopt an older child or adult in part to avoid the perils of infant and early childhood mortality, but also to discern whether or not the adoptee would make a suitable heir and house head. Across the region, rates of adoption by elite families increased steadily from the late seventeenth through the early nineteenth centuries.

But in each country there were also extenuating circumstances that influenced the decision to adopt and that shaped the particular and distinct forms that adoption took. These differences require some explanation. In Korea in the early Chosŏn period (c. fifteenth to sixteenth centuries) elite families engaged in a variety of adoption and inheritance practices, including adopting daughters, adopting couples, adopting the husbands of biological or adopted daughters as heirs, and allowing heirship to pass to younger sons.⁵ By the seventeenth century, however, Confucian ideals had taken firm hold among the Korean aristocracy, and convention dictated inheritance only by eldest sons; evidence of assumption of heirship by younger sons all but disappears from the genealogical records, and the subsequent ritual and demographic pressures compelled more frequent adoption of sons to serve as heirs.⁶ A similar trend toward more frequent adoption can be seen among the Qing nobility in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, but in this case the pressures were less ideological than demographic; as Wang Feng and James Lee show, there was a direct correlation between the decrease in the number

TABLE 2.1. Succession by adoption within the early modern East Asian ruling elite

	Chinese imperial line (Ming) ¹	Chinese imperial line (Qing) ²	Qing nobility (1640–1900) ³	Korean royal house (Yi) ⁴	Korean aristocracy (Yi) ⁵	Tokugawa shogunal house ⁶	Japanese warrior houses, 17th cent. ⁷	Japanese warrior houses, 18th cent.
Adopted heirs, as percentage of all (or all sampled) succession cases	0	0	6.5	4	19	28	17	27
Adopted sons- in-law allowed?	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Adopted sons-in-law, as percentage of all (or all sampled) adopted heirs	N/a	N/a	N/a	N/a	N/a	0	41	30

¹ Percentages derived by the author from information on Ming imperial succession in Rawski 2015, 148, table 4.1.

² Percentages derived by the author from information on Qing imperial succession in Mote 1999, 822; and Rawski 1998

³ See Wang and Lee 1998, 411–27.

⁴ Percentages derived by the author from information on Joseon royal succession in Rawski 2015, 167, table 4.5.

⁵ See Kim and Park 2010, 443–52.

⁶ Percentages derived by the author from information on Tokugawa shogunal succession in Rawski 2010, 161, table 4.4, and in *Kokushi daijiten*, vol. 10, pp. 287–89.

⁷ Percentages derived by the author from data collected by Tsubouchi Reiko on 10,665 cases of succession in the Hagi Mōri, Saga Nabeshima, Morioka Nanbu, Akita Satake, Aizu, and Kaga Maeda domains in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; see Tsubouchi 1992, 63–74; Tsubouchi 2000; and Tsubouchi 2001, 29–59, 81–94, 98–113, 121–32, 137–49.

of sons born to elite families and the increase in the number of adoptions for heirship in those same families.⁷

Small family size and the absence of biological heirs also compelled Japanese warrior families to adopt heirs; but we must also consider other factors in accounting for their significantly higher rates of adoption. One contributing factor was the relative importance of blood ties as a determinant of membership in a given house or family. As compared to the Qing nobility and the Chosŏn aristocracy, the need to maintain close blood ties between generations—that is, between house or lineage heads and their successors—was comparatively weak in early modern Japan.⁸ Unlike the Tokugawa, the Qing was an ethnic-minority conquest dynasty that sought throughout its reign to actively promote Manchu ethnicity and identity within its ruling elite by strategically intermarrying with Han and Mongol elites, and by compelling officeholders to demonstrate proficiency in Manchu language as well as in martial arts, administration, and scholarship.⁹ Direct blood ties, especially to the founding dynasts, Nurgaci and Hongtaiji, remained the main conduit of ethnicity and the main determinant of kinship.¹⁰ From the seventeenth century onward, the Chosŏn aristocracy, for its part, pursued the adoption of male agnatic kin in the absence of biological male heirs in order to maintain blood ties through the patriline over time. It did so in order to observe Confucian principles, but also to counteract the power traditionally held (during the Koryŏ [918–1392] and early Chosŏn periods) by the ruler's affinal kin, whose interests, when asserted, had caused numerous violent succession struggles in the royal house.¹¹ Limiting heirs to agnatic kin thus constrained the number of potential heirs and was intended to contain conflict as well, although this strategy did not prove entirely successful.¹²

The Tokugawa warrior elite, by contrast, lacked the ethnic difference of the Manchu dynasts and the recent history of severe competition between agnates and affines in matters of succession that troubled the Chosŏn dynasty. The Japanese warrior elite thus had greater latitude to determine kinship in ways that served particular family and lineage needs, and its members were relatively freer to choose heirs from a wider range of possible successors: affines, agnates, and distantly related and unrelated individuals were all possible adoptees. Even cross-generational adoption (adopting one's younger brother as one's son, for example), which directly violated Confucian ritual principles of succession, was allowed and frequently practiced in Tokugawa Japan.¹³ Still, at the highest levels of the warrior class, adoption practices conformed at least nominally to Confucian norms: within the shogunal house, the four adoptees who assumed the title of shogun were all agnatic kin, drawn from the ranks of the collateral houses of the Tokugawa.

But among daimyo and warrior houses outside the Tokugawa shogunal line, adoption practices varied more widely. Table 2.1 aggregates and broadly summarizes Tsubouchi Reiko's research on succession during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in more than ten thousand warrior houses in six large domains scattered throughout Japan: Nanbu in the far northeast, Akita and Aizu in

inland eastern Honshu, Kaga on the Japan Sea coast, Hagi on the southwestern tip of Honshu, and Nabeshima in northern Kyushu. In all these domains in the seventeenth century, in a significant majority of succession cases heirship went to the oldest son. In the eighteenth century, however, the frequency of oldest-son succession decreased, in some cases quite dramatically, and the frequency of adoption for heirship rose at a correspondingly significant rate. The decrease in oldest-son succession and the increase in succession by adoptees was greatest in Nabeshima domain, where oldest-son succession decreased from 71 to 47 percent from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, and adoptee succession rose from 12 to 22 percent during the same time period. Similar, if slightly smaller, ratios of decline and increase could be seen in Hagi, Aizu, and Akita domains.¹⁴ Overall, in every one of the six domains surveyed, the general trend over time was for family headship to go less often to oldest sons and more often to adoptees, both single adoptees and adopted sons-in-law. Furthermore, among single adoptees, in three of the six domains it is possible to discern whether adopted heirs were kin (*dōsei yōshi*) or nonkin (*isei yōshi*), and in all three cases nonkin significantly outnumbered kin adoptees.¹⁵

What explains these trends? The primary cause was the absence of biological male offspring. This was due to in part to higher mortality, exacerbated in certain areas, such as the northeast, by economic hardship in the eighteenth century. But warrior families also lacked heirs because they strategically sent their sons out for adoption to other houses. For younger sons, who would not expect to inherit house headship in their natal families, adoption into another family in order to become its heir was not only preferable but desirable. One example is the Sakakibara of Takada domain in Echigo Province, a wealthy high-ranking daimyo house of 150,000 *koku*. In the early Tokugawa period, the Sakakibara were financially able to establish younger sons in branch houses, and there are no recorded adoptions of males out of the family until the late eighteenth century. But from the 1770s on, as domain finances deteriorated, nearly all noninheriting sons were adopted out to other houses; the ninth-generation heir Masanaga (1735–1808) adopted out six of his sons. The trend continued with his heir Masaatsu (1755–1819), who adopted out two sons, and also with the subsequent eleventh-generation heir Masanori (1776–1861), who adopted out four sons in spite of the fact that domain finances had revived somewhat by his time.¹⁶ The majority of these sons went to lower-ranking daimyo or direct shogunal retainer (*hatamoto*) families, but since they were adopted as heirs, their future prospects for independence, if not for advancement, were brighter than they would have been had they stayed at home.¹⁷ However, this strategy sometimes backfired, for a family that had adopted out its “surplus” sons itself found that it had no heir if the remaining male offspring died young or became incapacitated, making adoption of an heir necessary.

Such cases bring us to a second reason that might account for the relative frequency of heir adoptions among the early modern Japanese warrior elite: the

widespread practice of adopting a daughter's husband as heir. Such adopted sons-in-law, most commonly referred to as *muko yōshi* or *iri muko*, constituted an average of 40 percent of all adoptions for succession and an average of 10 percent of all succession cases in the six warrior houses surveyed by Tsubouchi from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Adopted sons-in-law were and remain a distinctly Japanese phenomenon. Elite families in late imperial China rarely adopted sons-in-law, and never for heirship; while son-in-law adoption was tolerated in early Chosŏn Korea, within the aristocracy the practice all but ceased by the seventeenth century.¹⁸ For early modern Chinese and Korean elites, nominal patrilineality was not enough: to adopt a son-in-law was to achieve lineage continuity through daughters rather than sons, and this was fundamentally unacceptable. But the early modern Japanese warrior elite, as discussed above, were much less bound by principles of patrilineality and blood ties. As a result adopted sons-in-law, many of whom were distant kin or nonkin, played a crucial role in shoring up an otherwise fragile stem-family system. Wakita Osamu argues that house heads in the Fukōzu Matsudaira, a Tokugawa collateral house, adopted sons-in-law so frequently that they effectively continued their line of descent through their daughters as much as they did through their sons (biological or adopted).¹⁹ Among fourteen other Matsudaira lineages in the same period, a third of household successions went to adoptees, and a third of those adoptees were sons-in-law, the majority of whom were nonkin.²⁰ Because the Matsudaira were high-ranking collaterals, they could be expected to be somewhat more conservative in their approach to adoption, and they could also be expected to want to keep descent within the kin group; however, their adoption practices suggest that neither was the case.

Indeed, for such warrior families, adopting a daughter's husband as heir could be an optimal succession strategy. In terms of kinship ties, the adoptee's offspring would still be direct descendants of the house head, albeit through the matriline rather than the patriline. For warrior houses of lower status, the economic benefits of adoption were also compelling. Adopting sons-in-law counteracted the threat of resource dispersion, for the possibility that family assets would be scattered more broadly, and potentially subject to the control of "outsiders," was held in check by matrilineal continuity through daughters.

Even more critically, due to the practice of providing dowries for adopted sons-in-law when they married into their wives' families, adoption could be economically beneficial to a receiving family.²¹ For while the Tokugawa period was an era of significant economic growth and change, that growth, as we know, was largely confined to the commoner class. By the eighteenth century, access to rank and office had become hereditary, and social mobility among samurai declined. Perpetuation of the family became practically more difficult, and additional financial resources had to be sought outside the regular channels of stipend or borrowing. Warrior families therefore had to find ways to maximize limited opportunities for achievement for both male and female offspring. Adoption of sons-in-law

not only enabled the family to achieve stability because it could secure an heir, but also ensured that the adopting family's daughter would at least maintain the status of her own family, for she never left it. Finally, adopted sons-in-law often came from families of higher rank than those into which they married and were adopted. The receiving family could then benefit from the status and wealth of their heir's natal family.

Furthermore, adoption of sons-in-law, who were often adolescents or adults at the time of adoption, proved beneficial because, to put it bluntly, adoption of an heir could be more expedient than birthing and raising one. Adoption of a son-in-law was more efficient with regard to succession because the adoptee was brought into the family in late childhood or early adulthood, when his physical survival was more likely, his potential as house head could be more accurately gauged, and the not inconsiderable costs of his early upbringing and education had already been covered by his natal family. The sending family, for its part, benefited as well. While they had to render the dowry, which was a financial burden for them, by adopting out a noninheriting son, the family was able (again, putting it bluntly) to shed a dependent who would otherwise contribute relatively little to the family's fortunes and, indeed, could possibly become a drain on them. Curiously, adoption could also make intrafamily relationships more harmonious. As Tsubouchi shows, in Hagi domain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, even if there were one or more sons in the household at the time of succession, an adopted son-in-law might be preferable as heir: of warrior houses with only one son, about half chose to send the biological son out for adoption to another house and to adopt a son-in-law as heir in his stead.²² This was perhaps because, especially in houses of higher rank, if sons were not born to the principal wife, or were born of a successor wife and were substantially younger than siblings, they were more likely to cause conflict over succession, and this might compel a house head to adopt out his biological sons and designate a son-in-law as heir to ensure smoother transition of heirship.²³

The economic as well as social benefits of adopting a son-in-law are well documented in the literature. Clearly, poorer samurai families benefited considerably from the dowries that adopted sons and sons-in-law could bring, but even wealthy and powerful houses adopted strategically, with an eye to the extra income an adoptee could bring.²⁴ Tahara Noboru has shown, through analysis of lineage records as well as "inside" sources documenting negotiations over adoption, that by the late eighteenth century, even the powerful and wealthy daimyo that controlled entire provinces (the so-called *kunimochi daimyo*) began to look outside their kin group to adopt sons and sons-in-law as heirs who had proved themselves capable, or whose families of origin were politically well connected.²⁵ These cases show how adopted sons-in-law could be a practical solution to the perpetual problem of maintaining or increasing status and wealth through a distinctly early modern version of an old pattern in which elite families gained power through

marriage politics.²⁶ Using adoption strategically in this way was a tactic used most extensively by early modern Japanese warrior families. In part it grew out of a long tradition—informal and extralegal though it had become by the early modern period—of reckoning kinship bilaterally (that is, on the maternal as well as paternal sides) in Japanese elite families. But it was also a response to the growing economic pressures on the warrior elite in the mid- to late Tokugawa period. Barred from commerce and agriculture and therefore unable to benefit from the economic growth that fueled commoner prosperity, the samurai's only assets were his name, his office, and his stipend. And since transmission of those assets had become almost entirely hereditary by the eighteenth century, an elite family's fortunes depended entirely on how well it managed and preserved the integrity of its lineage. With the stakes so high, it is no wonder that even high-status families dispensed with niceties and made sure their heirs and, through them, their families' futures were bought and paid for.

THE EFFECTS OF HEIR ADOPTION

While assessing the social and economic context of heir adoption might well give us some insight into the reasons families chose that option, we also need to attend to the effects that the practice had on families themselves. The long-term consequences of adoption on individual families and on the family structure were many, but I address here what I believe are two of the more significant effects. One was that frequent adoption of heirs significantly lessened the pressure on women to bear sons. With the biological imperative made less pressing due to the safety net provided by heir adoption, husbands and families could look beyond reproductive function to value wives and daughters for other qualities; they could also spare time and resources, when available, to foster their other skills and talents. No less than Kaibara Ekiken, in the section of his popular work *Teachings on Nurturing Life* (*Yōjōkun*, 1713), devoted to “methods for educating girls,” emphasizes this very point in his seldom-read commentary on female infertility, which was one of the oft-cited “seven reasons” a man could divorce his wife. He writes that even if she cannot bear children, “if the wife has a gentle heart, if her actions are good, if she is not envious, does not deviate from the proper path of womanhood, and satisfies her husband and father-in-law, a man might consider adopting a child from one of his siblings or other relatives and continuing the family line [in this manner], without divorcing his wife. Or, if a mistress or concubine has a child, even if the [legitimate] wife doesn't produce an heir, she need not be divorced.”²⁷ In other words, for Ekiken, a woman's innate virtues and talents and her compatibility as a spouse were of greater value than her fertility. A family heir could be acquired by other means, through adoption or by a concubine. Indeed, beyond Ekiken's opinions, fecundity itself was not much valued in prescriptive writings for women. While instructional manuals often lay out for their readers clear guidelines for ensuring the concep-

tion and birth of physically and morally healthy offspring, they do not uncritically advocate the position that more children is better.²⁸

Such values also might also serve to explain why samurai house heads would choose to adopt heirs instead of taking in concubines to produce more offspring and increase the pool of potential biological heirs. Like Chinese and Korean elite males of high status, samurai men regularly kept concubines. In fact, concubines were key to the perpetuation of ruling regimes across the region, for despite professed adherence to the principal of succession by eldest sons of principal wives, substantial numbers of heirs to the Ming and Qing imperial throne, the Yi royal house, and the Tokugawa shogunate were the offspring of secondary consorts; in two of the four cases, the Qing emperors and the Tokugawa shoguns, the majority of heirs were born to secondary consorts.²⁹ In early modern Japan, sons born of concubines of samurai house heads could succeed their fathers on the same terms and with the same privileges as sons born to the principal wife. But for many lower-ranking Tokugawa samurai looking to perpetuate their lineages, maintaining concubines was not easy, for acquiring and supporting them and their children were costly, a privilege only wealthier families could afford. For those lower on the status hierarchy, adoption may have been a more accessible option than concubinage for procuring an heir.

Another reason adoption may have been preferable to taking concubines had to do with intrafamilial personal relationships: concubines and mistresses often caused disharmony within families, no matter what their status. The prescriptive literature for women is full of admonitions to wives not to succumb to jealousy or envy of their husband's concubines. A good wife, the texts repeat, should tolerate her husband's other women and should welcome his children by them into her family and raise them as her own. One suspects, however, that for many women, such equanimity was difficult to achieve in practice, and if an heir could be acquired by other means that endangered family harmony less, that would have been preferable. Furthermore, especially in families of high rank, principal wives often were themselves daughters of houses of wealth and status, and affinal ties could be important for advancing and maintaining a family's status. Designating a son of a concubine as heir—even if the heir were accepted and raised by the principal wife—might endanger politically and economically important relationships with a wife's kin. All of the above factors combined helped make it possible for an elite society predicated on patrilineal descent and deeply influenced by a pro-natalist philosophy to perpetuate a family system that accommodated women who bore few or no sons.

ADOPTION AMONG COMMONER FAMILIES

If we pursue this logic further, it stands to reason that adoption would be even more prevalent within the commoner class, whose members had fewer resources

to support large families and keep concubines, and in which the pressure to maintain blood ties within a lineage across time was perhaps felt less intensely, even though family continuity remained extremely important.³⁰ Japanese historical demographers have turned their attention to adoption and family survival strategies among rural commoners in the Tokugawa period. Kurosu Satomi analyzed changes over time in two villages in northeastern Honshu, Shimomoriya and Nihonmatsu, for which population data are relatively complete for most of the Tokugawa period. Along with Ochiai Emiko, Kurosu also examined a detailed population register compiled in 1870 by the Meiji government for villages in South Tama, located just west of Tokyo, and Hayami Akira studied village population registers in Nishijō, in the Nobi Plain in central western Honshu.³¹ In these four communities, the scholars were able to discern overall rates of adoption for heirship and, in two cases, rates of adoption of sons-in-law as heirs. Their findings are summarized in table 2.2.³² It is immediately apparent that while elites (defined here as the Tokugawa shogunal house and the warrior houses discussed above) adopted heirs at slightly higher rates, commoners in these four rural areas chose to adopt sons-in-law considerably more often than their samurai contemporaries. For commoner families, the economic benefits of son-in-law adoption (dowry), as well as its relatively greater efficiency and security as a succession strategy (no worry about finding a bride for an adopted son; keeping a daughter at home), made it the succession strategy of choice for a considerable majority of the commoner families surveyed.³³

One notable aspect of son-in-law adoption worth emphasizing further was that the practice allowed families to keep a daughter who otherwise would have married and moved to her husband's residence, in the natal home. The prevalence of adoption of sons-in-law arguably increased the importance of female offspring, for daughters became more valuable to families because they could attract in-marrying husbands who, like their samurai contemporaries, tended to be non-inheriting younger sons who would benefit from becoming heirs to their wives' families. The results of this increased valuation of daughters can be seen in part in demographic records. Whereas the biological imperatives of consanguineal family systems such as China's contributed to the well-documented prevalence of female infanticide and skewed sex ratios, the Tokugawa archives show no evidence of consistent and widespread measures taken to suppress the number of female offspring in favor of males.³⁴ To be sure, infanticide was common, especially among farm families, but it tended not to be consistently sex-selective in favor of males. Rather, when possible, parents seem to have preferred to vary the sexes of their children to achieve a balance of female and male offspring, showing a marked preference for sons only when the ideal number of children had been reached.³⁵ For their part, instructional manuals for women devote considerable attention to childbearing and child-rearing, but they do not show pervasive gender bias in favor of males. In other words, even though the threat of lineage extinction due

TABLE 2.2. Adoption and succession in four rural communities, 1720–1870

	Shimomoriya, NE Japan, 1757–1829 ¹	South Tama peasant household registers, 1870 ²	Nihonmatsu, NE Japan, 1720–1870 ³	Nishijō, Nobi Plain, 1773–1869 ⁴	Average for sampled commoners	Average for sampled elites
Adopted heirs, as per- centage of all sampled succession cases	29	20	24	12	21	27
Adopted sons-in-law, as percentage of all adopted heirs	70	53	N/a	N/a	66	30

¹ Data from Kurosu 1998.

² Data from Kurosu and Ochiai 1995.

³ Data from Kurosu 1998.

⁴ Data from Hayami 1992.

to the absence of male heirs loomed large, Japanese families appear not to have maneuvered to have sons at the cost of daughters. It can be argued that the prevalence of adoption for succession in general, and of adopted sons-in-law in particular, was one of the main reasons Japanese women avoided the fate that befell their Chinese contemporaries.

Furthermore, adopting a son-in-law enabled a family to continue to benefit from a daughter's labor and natural authority within the family, and allowed her to remain in familiar surroundings rather than suffering the fate of most women in conventional marriages, who found themselves in their husbands' homes under the watchful eye of his relatives and, if his parents were still living, under the thumb of his mother-in-law, the outgoing (at least in theory) household manager. Like in-married wives, adopted sons-in-law were not in an enviable position. The demands placed upon them were pressing, and their responsibilities were many, for the fate of the lineage depended on their fulfilling the role for which they were brought into their wives' families. At the same time, they lacked the day-to-day support that might have been provided by their natal families. Wakita Osamu has shown that divorce in adopted son-in-law alliances among the warrior class was relatively frequent, and that women sometimes took successive married-in heirs-husbands serially. He contends that the divorce of adoptive heirs and remarriage of daughters to subsequent adopted sons suggests that families used not only marriage but remarriage(s) of their daughters as a strategy for securing the most suitable heir, even if it meant trying out and rejecting one or more sons-in-law in the process.³⁶ Ōtō Osamu, by contrast, shows that in peasant communities, divorcing an adopted son-in-law was a complicated process because of the cooperative and interdependent nature of rural farm life and village structure; a family's decision to send away an adopted son-in-law had repercussions for the village at large, and families therefore had to obtain the consent of village officials in order to finalize a divorce.³⁷ Still, the aphorism "An only daughter can choose among eight potential husbands" suggests that despite the challenges and the possibilities for failure, men seeking adoption as sons-in-law were not few.³⁸

Finally, the practice of adopting sons-in-law may well have contributed to the relatively high degree of "conjugal power" possessed by Japanese commoner women. G. William Skinner, in his study of peasant communities in the Nobi Plain during the Tokugawa period, found that power relations in marriage and in the family were much less skewed in favor of men and husbands than in patrilineal joint families in late imperial China. In Japanese peasant families, Skinner observed, women and men had essentially complementary roles in the family in terms of their labor and their spheres of authority. Skinner calls the early modern Japanese family system one in which patriarchy was notably "attenuated."³⁹ I have argued elsewhere that this attenuation—but by no means erasure or negation—of patriarchy also characterized gender relations in the warrior class, although it took different forms of expression.⁴⁰

In sum, adoption, especially of sons-in-law, allowed early modern Japanese families to achieve what should have been impossible: a pattern of descent that was both patrilineal and often consanguineal, but that did not require a couple to bear a son. Flexible and frequent adoption made it possible to bypass the constraints of biology and continue the *ie* indefinitely. It also enabled the full utilization of the energies of every member of a household, especially its women. Son-in-law adoption in particular encouraged a greater degree of gender role complementarity than was commonly seen in Chinese or Korean elite families in the early modern period, because it freed women from the biological imperative to birth a son and also from the social pressures that role entailed. Overall, the history of adoption reveals, perhaps better than any other social or legal practice, the durable nature, the critical importance, and the extraordinary flexibility of the *ie* in Japan. Focusing on adoption also reveals how the *ie* differs significantly in structure and function from the family systems prevalent in other parts of East Asia, most notably in its responsiveness to change, circumstance, and even, occasionally, individual desires and aspirations.

NOTES

1. The findings of scholars of historical demography indicate that population dynamics in China, Korea, and Japan in the early modern period were roughly similar in general trajectory, yet strikingly asynchronous: each country saw initial periods of sustained, moderate to high levels of population growth, followed by a period of stasis; but in China the stasis period lasted from the eleventh through the sixteenth century, in Korea from the late eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth century, and in Japan from the early eighteenth through the late nineteenth century. This static phase was followed by dramatic population growth in the mid- to late nineteenth century (in the case of China, growth was significant but steady in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and exploded in the early twentieth century; in Japan and Korea, growth began to accelerate in the late nineteenth century). More significant are findings regarding fertility: early modern China, Japan, and Korea were characterized by relatively low fertility as compared to European countries; see comparative statistics in Wang, Lee, and Campbell 1995, p. 385; see also Lee and Wang 2001. On Japan's demographic profile, see Hayami 2009 and 2015; see also Drixler 2013.

2. While the differences in the nature and frequency of adoption practices in early modern Japan as compared to the rest of East Asia is noticeable, the contrast between Japan and western Europe in the early modern period is striking. Adoption for heirship was widely practiced in the Roman Empire and in classical Greece, much in the way it was and continues to be practiced in East Asia; but with the advent of Christianity such practices disappeared, to the extent that the demographic historian Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux describes the history of adoption in Europe as "a history of non-adoption." See Fauve-Chamoux 1996, 1–14; see also Fauve-Chamoux 1998. Recent studies have modified this picture, if selectively, and rarely with regard to elites. Eighteenth-century Finnish farm families, for example,

seem to have adopted sons-in-law in the absence of biological male heirs, and adoption of children, even by single women, appears to have occurred quite often among the middling commoner classes in urban France during the sixteenth century, occasionally for the purpose of continuing the family into the next generation. On the Finns, see Moring 2009, 173–202; on forms of adoption in sixteenth-century urban France, see Gager 1996. While elite families did begin to engineer strategies for economic and social success in early modern England, adoption does not appear to have been among those strategies; see, for example, Stone 1979. One example I have found of adoption among European elites is some evidence of strategic adoption of heirs and godparenting of politically powerful younger male kin by a few kings of sixth-century Gaul; see Jussen 2000. For a summary discussion in English of Japan's distinctive adoption culture, see MacFarlane 2003, 360–66.

3. The figure of 17 percent (seventeenth century) to 27 percent (eighteenth century) for adopted heirs in early modern warrior houses is likely on the low side. Takeuchi Toshimi surveyed daimyo genealogies in the early-nineteenth-century *Kansei chōshū shokafu* compiled by the Tokugawa shogunate and found that in the early seventeenth century (Kan'ei through Keian eras, 1614–51), approximately 8.2 percent of all men born into daimyo houses were adopted; this figure rose dramatically to 31.3 percent by the late eighteenth century (Kanpō 11 to Kansei 6, 1741–94) and continued to rise into the nineteenth century. Taniguchi Nobuo found that approximately 30 percent of heirs were adopted in the eighteenth-century Okayama domain, and Hattori Hiroshi found approximately 50 percent of heirs were adopted in the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Kanazawa domain. The data are summarized in Kamata 1988, 62–63. As Anne Walthall observes in her article in this volume, these figures lead Kamata to state that “around 40 percent of all cases of succession [in warrior houses] were the result of adoption” (Kamata 1988, 62–63). However, because Kamata does not give comprehensive evidence to substantiate this rough estimate, I have chosen here to draw on Tsubouchi Reiko's more extensive data (see Tsubouchi 1992, 2000, and 2001). One should note further that these figures refer only to officially documented adoptions for heirship; they do not take into consideration the various forms of informal adoption, including the types of temporary adoption described by Anne Walthall in this volume, nor do they include adoption of daughters, siblings, or others who were not heirs.

4. On the absence of sons and agnatic kin adoption in the Qing nobility, see Wang and Lee 1998, 418; on the absence of sons and agnatic kin adoption in the Chosŏn aristocracy, see Kim and Park 2010, 447; data show that in the vast majority of both the Chinese and the Korean adoption cases, the adopting family did not have biological sons.

5. See Kim and Park 2010, 444. While the Chosŏn dynasty began in the late fourteenth century, scholarly consensus holds that not until the sixteenth century were Neo-Confucian norms widely assimilated into Korean society, and not until the seventeenth century did social structures change to the degree that they had a significant and widespread impact on individuals and families. See Ko, Haboush, and Piggott 1994, 11.

6. Kim and Park 2010, 448; Peterson 1996, 164.

7. Whether the decline in sons born is due to decreased fertility or increased mortality is not clear; see Wang and Lee 1998, 448–49.

8. As David Spafford's article in this volume shows, for samurai, active and loyal service to the lord was valued more than kinship in forming a strong and unified house.

9. Rawski 1998, 60–61.

10. Rawski 1998, 60–61.

11. As Mark Peterson argues, “the Korean society we often refer to as traditional, or Confucian, developed in the relatively recent past. . . . Women in the early Yi [Chosŏn] dynasty could succeed to their own family lines, provide successors to their husbands’ lines through either sons or daughters, and even have successors in their own right. With the complete Confucianization of society, a woman in the late Yi dynasty retained only the right of providing a successor to her husband’s line, and that right was forfeited if she did not bear a son.” Peterson 1983, 42–43. On succession struggles in the Chosŏn royal house, see Rawski 2015, 166–84; see also Haboush 1996.

12. In both the late imperial Chinese and Chosŏn Korean cases, one should be careful to avoid suggesting that adoption of nonkin never occurred in any circumstances; as in Japan, unofficial and off-record adoptions almost certainly took place, but there is no reliable way to quantify them.

13. Peterson 1996, 195; see also McMullen 1975.

14. In Kaga Maeda domain the decline in oldest-son succession over time was negligible (57 percent to 53 percent), but the increase in succession by adoptees was more substantial (19 percent to 29 percent); see Tsubouchi 2001, 121–35.

15. The ratios of nonkin adoptees to kin adoptees was 2:1 in Kaga Maeda domain, 5:1 in Akita Satake domain, and 6:1 in Morioka Nanbu domain; see data in Tsubouchi 2001, 29–59, 81–94, 98–113, 121–32, 137–49. This finding reinforces the point made in David Spafford’s article in this volume that kinship was not the only, or even the most important, type of relationship binding members of warrior houses.

16. Matsuo 2002, 242–46.

17. Ray Moore argued that within the samurai class, adoption did not positively influence the social or political mobility of the adoptee; Moore 1970. By contrast, among the Chosŏn nobility, adopted sons were more likely to succeed to higher office or gain status than were biological sons; Kim and Park 2010, 450.

18. Nonkin and son-in-law adoptees may well have been adopted informally, however.

19. Even high-ranking families such as the Matsudaira seem to have used adoption not as a last-ditch tactic but as one strategy employed among many to secure the most appropriate male heir and thus better safeguard the family’s future. See Wakita 1982, 28.

20. Ōguchi 2001, 5–25. Nonkin adoptees seem to have been preferable in cases of son-in-law adoption, even though in premodern Japan there was remarkably little stigma against close-kin marriage.

21. The term for the dowries brought by adopted sons-in-law was *jisankin*, the same word used for the dowry a bride took to her husband’s house in a typical virilocal marriage.

22. Tsubouchi 2000, 124, table 15.

23. Tsubouchi 2000, 124. On intrafamilial conflict over succession, see also Luke Roberts’s chapter in this volume.

24. For poorer samurai families, an adopted son-in-law’s dowry could be the key to economic survival. See the case of Itō Kaname (d. 1864), his wife, Maki, and their adopted and biological children in Mega 2011, 48–51. Wealthier warrior families also engaged in

strategic adoption; see the case of vigorous bargaining over an adopted son-in-law and his dowry pursued by Aoki Kazuyoshi, a daimyo in Settsū Province, and by a branch of the Date family in the early eighteenth century, in Ōmori 2002. See also Yonemoto 2016, 164–92.

25. Tahara 1998, 135.

26. I refer here to the situation among the court nobility in the Heian period (794–1185), in which powerful male courtiers sought to marry their daughters into the imperial line. Because elite marriages were often matrilineal, if and when their daughters or sisters married well, fathers, brothers, and other male affinal kin could wield significant power in court politics at the highest level. See Nickerson 1993; McCullough 1967.

27. Kaibara 1961, 270–71.

28. For example, Namura Jōhaku opens his discussion of pregnancy and childbirth in the *Onna chōhōki* (a text originally aimed at the lower ranks of the samurai class) by pointing out that whereas in ancient China a couple was advised to delay childbearing until both had achieved physical maturity themselves, in Japan men and women have typically married young and commenced childbearing immediately, with deleterious effects; Namura 1993.

29. The figures for succession by consorts' offspring are as follows: 62 percent of Ming emperors succeeded their biological fathers, and of these, 40 percent were sons of consorts, not of principal wives; among Qing emperors, the respective figures are 80 percent and 60 percent; among Yi dynasty sovereigns, 44 percent and 30 percent; among Tokugawa shoguns, 57 percent and 79 percent.

30. Fabian Drixler's article in this volume explores in some detail the prevalence of adoption among commoners in various regions of Japan, most notably northeastern Honshu.

31. See Kurosu 1998; Kurosu and Ochiai 1995; Hayami 1992.

32. Fabian Drixler's article in this volume posits increasing rates of adoption among commoner families in northeastern Japan between the mid-seventeenth and early nineteenth century. His data from population registers for the northeastern provinces show that by the early nineteenth century "nearly 27 percent of married men whose father or father-in-law served as household head were not the head's biological son," but he notes that this estimate is likely on the low side.

33. The recent work of Toishi Nanami adds an important new perspective on adoption in early modern villages. Toishi argues that adoption was much less an individual familial decision than a corporate village-level decision, and that adoption was a key strategy for village leaders to maintain the number of households—and with it the community's economic and political viability—in an era marked in many regions by declining or static population. See Toishi 2017.

34. On infanticide in China, see Mungello 2008.

35. See, e.g., Drixler 2013, esp. ch. 6.

36. Wakita 1982, 26.

37. Ōtō 1995.

38. Yamakawa 1992, 103.

39. Skinner 1993.

40. Yonemoto 2016, 13–14.

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