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Adoption and Samurai Mobility in Tokugawa Japan

RAY A. MOORE

THE common use of adoption in Japanese society has occasioned comment from several generations of Western observers. To some it has appeared an unusual custom which deserved mention but not study. To others, it has seemed important for a variety of reasons—a means of preserving the family line, of finding a home for junior sons, of maintaining the religious functions of the family, of moving talent into positions of political responsibility. It is surprising how often the practice is mentioned in the literature on Tokugawa Japan and how often it is seen as a channel of upward social mobility in a society which rested on hereditary status.¹ Reviewing sources of samurai mobility in his perceptive article on traditional Japanese society, Professor John W. Hall has written that “A less apparent source of mobility was the unusual system of adoption practiced during the Tokugawa period. . . . Laws of inheritance were so contrived . . . that samurai families in particular could make adoptions almost at will. This fresh blood kept the families of the ruling class from petering out or becoming debilitated and frequently put men of high capacity into government office.”² Silberman’s study of elite mobility in the nineteenth century points to restrictions on social mobility imposed by birth but concludes that “adoption is, perhaps, one exception to this rule. A son of a lower samurai family might be adopted into a family of considerably higher status.”³ Yet, despite common agreement on its importance, students of the Tokugawa period have neither probed the phenomenon of adoption in depth nor explored its relationship to social mobility in the samurai class. With the growing interest of Western students in the samurai as a key group in initiating modernization in Japan and, particularly studies by Ronald Dore, Thomas Smith, John Hall, and others which focus on Tokugawa attempts to reconcile the requirements of an hereditary status system with the need for efficiency and ability in government, the role of adoption in social mobility takes on a new importance. As thoughtful men searched for ways of reducing tensions between the pull of hereditary claims and the push of an achievement ethic, what role did adoption play? To what extent did there exist what Marion Levy once called “civil service by adoption”?⁴

What follows is a summary of an initial empirical exploration of the relationship between adoption and social mobility in the Tokugawa samurai class. How common was adoption among the samurai? What functions did it perform in samurai society?

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¹ To mention only a few recent references, Ronald P. Dore, *Education in Tokugawa Japan* (Berkeley, 1965), p. 188; Marion J. Levy, “Contrasting Factors in the Modernization of China and Japan,” *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, II (Oct. 1953), 185–86; Horie Yasuzō, “Modern Entrepreneurship in Meiji Japan,” *The State and*

Economic Enterprise in Japan, ed. William W. Lockwood (Princeton, 1965), p. 200.

² “The Nature of Traditional Society: Japan,” ed. Robert E. Ward and Dankwart A. Rustow, *Political Modernization in Japan and Turkey* (Princeton, 1964), p. 30.

³ Bernard Silberman, *Ministers of Modernization: Elite Mobility in the Meiji Restoration* (Tucson, 1964), p. 34.

⁴ Levy, “Contrasting Factors . . .,” p. 185.

What were the socioeconomic backgrounds of adopted sons and adopting families? What effect did adoption have on the status of the parties concerned? To what extent did it influence a man's subsequent career in han service? These and other questions will be explored briefly through information extracted from samurai family records.

The data used here come from several sources: genealogies, family histories, public service records compiled and kept up to date by han officials, and lists of retainers, their incomes and family backgrounds, also prepared by han officials. The materials come from the archives of four han—Hikone, Kaga, Owari, and Sendai—which represent the major historical and political types of Tokugawa daimyo,⁵ and four major geographical regions in Japan. Most of the information on adoption used in the following analysis was gathered by simple random sample of extant records of largely middle and upper ranks of samurai class (*shi*) for the purpose of studying samurai mobility in these han. The Owari records of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries included many members of the lower ranks of *shi* and some who until 1862 were classified as *sotsu*. It must be emphasized therefore that this is for the most part a sample of extant *shi* family records rather than a sample of the total samurai population.

As used here, "samurai population" includes only heads of retainer families, not dependent family members, whose rank and income qualified them for the right of audience (*omemie*) with the daimyo. The samurai population of these four han ranged from 574 families in Hikone to about 3,000 in Sendai. However, extant family or service records, which form the statistical universe of this study, ranged from 560 in Hikone to 1,112 in Sendai. Although a 10 percent random sample of these records was drawn, many of the family records thus selected proved on examination to lack the information on official careers, or family backgrounds or other types of information desired and could not be used.⁶ Since the same procedure was used in selecting family records for study in the late seventeenth, late eighteenth, and mid-nineteenth centuries and since the number of samurai families varied with time, the sample size is somewhat different for each han and each period (TABLE 1). An independent check on some adoption practices revealed by the sample has been obtained by studying information on 165 cases of *shi* adoptions in early nineteenth-century Kaga.

The first question that must be asked is, how often was adoption used by samurai families? Ignoring han differences for the movement, TABLE 1 indicates that the use of adoption rose steadily throughout the Tokugawa period. In the seventeenth century a fourth of all families in this sample adopted sons. Hikone and Sendai samurai families, particularly, leaned heavily on the practice in the late seventeenth century, with roughly one-third of them adopting heirs. Adoption was even more frequent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The percentage

⁵ *Fudai-kinsei, shimpan-kinsei, tozama-shokuhō* and *tozama-sengo-ku*. This typology is discussed by Itō Tasaburō, *Nihon hōkenseido shi* [A History of Japanese Feudalism] (Tokyo, 1951), p. 256; and John W. Hall, "Foundations of the Modern Japanese Daimyo," *Journal of Asian Studies*, XX/3 (May 1961), 317-29.

⁶ To summarize these figures, the samurai popu-

lation was 574 in Hikone, 1,500 in Kaga, 1,500 in Owari, and 3,000 in Sendai; records are extant for 560 in Hikone, 965 in Kaga, 769 in Owari (average of three collections), and 1,112 in Sendai. Of these, about 10% were selected at random for each of the three periods. The numbers found useful are listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1—FREQUENCY OF ADOPTION

Han	17th Century		18th Century		19th Century	
	Total	Adoptions	Total	Adoptions	Total	Adoptions
Hikone	44	15(34.1)	54	19(35.2)	49	19(38.8)
Kaga	55	14(25.5)	58	28(48.3)	51	17(33.3)
Owari	53	7(13.2)	47	6(12.8)	70	37(53.0)
Sendai	55	18(32.7)	32	17(53.1)	64	19(30.0)
Total	207	54(26.1)	191	70(36.6)	234	92(39.3)

rose from 26.1 percent in the seventeenth to 36.6 percent in the eighteenth and to 39.3 percent in the nineteenth century. Kaga and Sendai data show a sharp rise in the number of cases of adoption in the eighteenth century, when approximately half of the sample adopted sons to succeed to the headship of their houses. Adoption declined in both han somewhat during the nineteenth century, though it still accounted for about one-third of all successions.

Owari's adoption rate, on the other hand, was low in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but very high in the nineteenth. It is not clear why it was so different from the others. One possible explanation is that the Owari sample contains lower ranks of samurai than the other samples and that the lower rate of adoption in Owari during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries represents a higher rate of fertility in these lower ranks. This seems plausible in the eighteenth century, when 72.3 percent of the Owari retainers had incomes of less than 100 koku. However, a closer examination of adoption rates and incomes in Owari during the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries casts considerable doubt on the hypothesis. The seventeenth century samples were distributed among different ranks of samurai in roughly the same proportion in all han. If differential fertility had been a factor, the rates of adoption would also be roughly the same. Yet there is a significant variation from 13.1 percent in Owari to 32.7 percent in Sendai. In Owari, again, adoption rates in the seventeenth century, when almost 98 percent of the sample had incomes in excess of 100 koku, was about the same as the eighteenth century, when 72 percent had less than 100 koku. Furthermore, when adoptions ran to 53 percent of the Owari sample in the nineteenth century, 52.9 percent of the retainers had stipends of less than 100 koku. Thus the Owari data do not appear to support the hypothesis that lower-ranking samurai were more prolific than their social superiors. On the contrary, it seems reasonable to suppose that the latter stood a better chance of producing male heirs since their greater resources enabled them to maintain concubines and make other arrangements which, presumably, added to their offspring. Another possible explanation for Owari's deviation from the norm might be that, despite the importance of the event, records of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries failed to list many cases of adoption.⁷

Regardless of individual variations, clearly the central point of the data in TABLE 1 is the very common occurrence of adoption in the samurai class. From one-fourth to more than a third had recourse to adoption during the Tokugawa period. With-

⁷ Owari records of the 17th and 18th centuries were thin genealogies, whereas those of the 19th century were very substantial service records of each family head. See footnotes 13 and 30.

out it, the death rate of samurai families would have exceeded 40 percent each century and few of the original families would have survived until the end of the period.⁸ Does this high rate of adoption mean that the samurai class was not reproducing itself despite the general increase of population during the period? That the Tokugawa ruling class had a lower fertility rate than the commoner classes? These are complex questions beyond the scope of this paper. We might note in passing, however, that the hypothesis of nonreproduction of the class would be consistent with the above data on adoption only in the event that these samurai families were finding heirs outside their own class, among merchants, peasants, and other nonsamurai sources. Since, as we shall see below, they were in fact adopting surplus second, third, and fourth sons of other samurai families, the problem would seem to be less one of differential fertility between the rulers and the ruled than between different ranks or families within the samurai class.

Why was adoption so common in the samurai class? What was its function? One obvious answer to the first question is that the need for sons was great and adoption was a way to secure a mature and healthy heir to succeed to the headship of the house, assume the obligations of that position, and receive the income that usually went with it. This was indeed the purpose of adoption from the adopting family's point of view and helps to explain the frequency of adoption among the Tokugawa samurai. But the biological continuity of a family is only part of the answer. There are other important reasons for the practice. First of all, from the standpoint of the adopted son and his family of birth, adoption provided the means whereby a younger son who had little chance of succeeding his own father, which was the prerogative of an older brother, could nevertheless achieve independent status in his society by entering the service of his han as the head of a samurai family. Assuming that he had a certain amount of personal ability, adoption as the head of a family was often the first step toward applying it to win a higher social position for himself. The very act of adoption involved in some cases upward social mobility for the adopted son. This happened when his status of birth was lower than that of the adopting family.⁹

Secondly, from the han's point of view, adoption not only preserved the class of retainers on which the daimyo's power was built but also provided one means of channeling fresh blood and talent into the system without violating the principle of hereditary status in the samurai class. Under favorable circumstances, then, adoption might lead to social mobility for the adopted son, to a new lease on life and possibly higher status for the adopting family and to improvement in the quality of han leadership. A third function that adoption may have served was an outlet for the energies of younger sons, which probably reduced the possibility of dangerous pressures building up and threatening the closed character of the class.

⁸ This refers to the number of families that were eliminated from the samurai class for whatever reason, though the most common reason mentioned in the records is failure to have an heir. Records of ex-retainers and extinct families compiled by Hikone, Kaga, and Owari make it possible to calculate that, during the 18th century, these han lost between 20% and 31% of their *shi*, or about 7-10% each generation. Without adoption to

provide heirs for a quarter of the *shi*, the family death rate would have exceeded 40% in the 18th century. Records of extinct families are in "zekkaroku" (Kaga), "chōshin kōhairoku" (Owari), and "jichū yuishochō" (Hikone).

⁹ The lesser family's adoption of a son from the higher family would also result in social mobility—downward. But the chief concern now is adoption as a channel of upward movement.

Adoption in the samurai class, therefore, not only served the interests of the adopted son but, historically more important, the interests of the samurai class by perpetuating elite families and reducing internal pressures for change. To the extent that the samurai class was essential to the daimyo's rule, adoption also supported the political system, though it may have helped to keep administrative control in the hands of too few families for the long-term benefit of daimyo power. This tendency could have been offset if adoption served as a major channel for the flow of talent into government.

But did adoption really serve as a meaningful channel of upward social mobility? It is often asserted in the literature on Japan that it did. When male issue failed in the samurai class, we are told, high ranking families (indeed, all families) were most anxious to adopt bright young men from lower status families, if necessary, to preserve their lineages, stipend, and status in the class.¹⁰ Furthermore, according to some accounts of the Tokugawa period, merchants and other non-elite groups purchased samurai status or used other devious means to get their own sons adopted into declining samurai families.¹¹

Before examining this issue in light of our data, we must first say what "social mobility" means. It is commonly defined as movement from one social stratum to another, either up or down, though the interest here is primarily in upward movement. It may also be usefully considered a change in status or position as defined by income, for example, without involving movement across class or strata lines. It is in this latter sense that social mobility will be used in this paper. However defined, social mobility in Tokugawa Japan involves many other important questions—how the society was stratified, what factors determined a samurai family's status or position in the stratification system, and how movement by a family was detected and measured. Since this is a study of adoption as a channel of mobility rather than of the amount of social mobility in the samurai class, these questions cannot be taken up here. Suffice it to say that family income is the chief measure of status and change in status used here. When a family's income dropped from 200 koku, say, to 100 koku, it was counted as a case of downward mobility; and, conversely, when income rose from 50 to 100 koku or 100 to 200 koku, they were considered cases of upward mobility. Using this definition, adoption acted as a channel of mobility when the income of the adopting family was different from the income of the adopted son's family of birth. If a family with 100 koku of income adopted as its head a boy from a family with only 50 koku, it would be a case of upward mobility through adoption, even though the two families were in roughly the same social stratum of the samurai class. Thus a comparison of family incomes of adopted sons before and after adoption is the first step in determining whether and to what extent social mobility resulted from adoption.

To rephrase the question posed above, did adoption serve as a channel of upward mobility by which able young men from poor families might improve their status and perhaps make their mark in society? Although answering the question is complicated by incomplete information on adopted sons' status of birth, the figures

¹⁰ A recent example is Horie Yasuzō, "Modern Entrepreneurship in Meiji Japan," p. 200, who believes that social mobility in the late Tokugawa pe-

riod is seen in "the practice of adopting into a family sons born to a different social status."

¹¹ Kuroita Katsumi, *Kokushi no kenkyū* [Studies in Japanese History], III (Tokyo, 1936), 219.

in TABLE 2 show quite clearly that in the seventeenth century at least, adoption did not serve this purpose. Of the twenty cases in which the adopted son's original status is known, only one came from a family whose income was less than the family which adopted him.¹² On the other hand, four of the twenty came from families of higher status.¹³ Families usually adopted sons from other families of the same social stratum.¹⁴ When they found it necessary to adopt from another stratum, they normally chose a son from a family of slightly higher status than their own. This supports the view that, generally, when adoption involved social mobility for the adopted son, it was downward mobility. However, such cases of downward adoption accounted for only about one-fourth of all adoptions in the seventeenth-century sample. The vast majority of adopted sons moved horizontally to families in the same stratum rather than up or down. This is hardly surprising. Laws and regulations of most han and the shogunate specifically encouraged samurai who had to adopt a successor to select a grandson, a younger brother, or other close male relative; and when this was impossible, to seek a distant relative of the same social standing.

Evidence from eighteenth-century records tends to support these general findings about adoption as a channel of mobility. Again the records are too often silent on the status of the adopted son's family of birth. But what they do reveal indicates that in practice adoptions occurred usually between families of the same status. This was, of course, encouraged by han laws as in the seventeenth century, by the stratification system of Tokugawa society which limited vertical movement, and by customary practices of the family system. The order of preference in adoption, han laws and the family system helped to assure not only that the adopting family and adopted son would be of roughly the same rank, but also that, whenever possible, they would be close relatives. When the two parties to an adoption agreement were

TABLE 2—ADOPTION AND MOBILITY IN THE 17TH CENTURY

Han	Adopted son's original status				Total
	Higher	Lower	Same	Unknown	
Hikone			3	12	15
Kaga	1		5	7	14
Owari	1	1	1	5	7
Sendai	2		6	10	18
Total	4	1	15	34	54

¹² Kanda Sembei of Kaga. "Shoshi keifu" [Genealogies of Kaga Samurai] (hereafter cited as SK), VII, 105.

¹³ Kanda Jūrōzaemon, born into a 300-koku family, was adopted by a family with 250 koku. SK, VII, 106. In Owari, Matsudaira Yasunaga, a junior son of the first daimyo, Yoshinao, was adopted by a family with 2,500 koku. The adopting family was, however, related to the daimyo, had had daimyo status (40,000 koku) in the 16th century and held the position of Keeper of the Castle at the time of the adoption. A biographical sketch is in "Shirin sokai" [Origins of Owari Retainers] (hereafter cited as SS; the supplement,

"Shirin sokai zokuhen", is cited as SSZ below), CXXX. The two in Sendai were Shikura Hisatsune and Akutsu Sashige. The latter, born to a *shi* family, was adopted by an official merchant (*goyō shōnin*) of the han whose stipend was only 5 *ryō* and rations for 8. Yet this merchant family was descended from a *shi* of 300-koku status. "Date seishin kafu" [Family Records of Date's Hereditary Retainers] (hereafter DSK), V (20), 13-16; and IV (12), 1-4.

¹⁴ *Shi* who adopted or married outside their status (*mibun*) group needed han permission. Nakata Kaoru, *Hōseishi ronshū* [Essays on the History of Legislation], I (Tokyo, 1926), 473.

of different ranks, the son was more likely to be from a higher status than the family which adopted him, as the examples in TABLE 3 show.¹⁵ Three of the eight adopted sons listed in the table experienced some upward movement through adoption, though none of them crossed strata lines. But in two of the three cases, Tsuge Gidayū and Nobura Masanori, first sons of branch families were adopted by the main houses. Though nominally cases of upward mobility by adoption, they actually represent emergency measures to save the main house from extinction. It is important to note that these were not cases of unprovided for younger sons climbing to social success through adoption, but rather cases in which junior lines were sacrificed in the interest of keeping the main houses going. In such cases, the branch house was abolished by the han as it was merged with the main line, and of course lost its independent stipend and standing in the han.

Seen from this broader perspective, one might conclude that the fortunes of the Tsuge and Nomura houses suffered a reverse and downward mobility in the status system. In all other cases that can be documented, adopted sons were second, third, or fourth born in their natural families. Both types of adoption illustrate how the practice of adoption in the Tokugawa samurai class served, on the one hand, to maintain the closed character of the stratification system by saving elite family lineages from extinction and, on the other hand, to reduce potentially dangerous discontent from building up among junior sons whose very existence was rendered precarious by the practice of preserving the patrimony through unitary inheritance.

Records of the nineteenth century provide more information on the original status of adopted sons than do the earlier records. As TABLE 4 shows, there was only one case of adoption in the nineteenth-century sample which was clearly adoption upward. Seventeen of the 92 adopted sons in this sample were born to families of higher status than their adopting families, and twenty-one of them came from the same strata as their new families. However, we still know nothing about the socioeconomic backgrounds of more than half of these adopted sons. Did they come from the samurai class? From the same strata as the families who adopted them? Or did they come from the merchant, the peasant or other non-elite groups of society, as suggested by some authorities on the Tokugawa period? While there is no way of answering these questions for the large "unknown" category of adoptees in our sample, precise information on the socioeconomic origins of 165 adopted

TABLE 3—STATUS OF ADOPTING FAMILY AND SON (18TH CENTURY)

Adopted son	Adopting family	Family of birth
Hori Inosuke	150 (koku)	650 (koku)
Hombo Yukizane	1,800	1,000
Kanamori Naruaki	1,700	2,700
Tsuge Gidayū	200	150
Kanamori Shujirō	500	4,000
Murai Matabei	15,569	18,050
Nomura Masanori	1,700	1,200
Suwa Chikayasu	150	(4th son of higher-status family)

¹⁵ Sources are SK, III, 7, 15; VII, 54-55; X, 28; XII, 2, 24-25; and *Tōhan shikō* [Draft History of Sendai-han], VIII, 18-19.

TABLE 4—ORIGINAL STATUS OF ADOPTED SONS COMPARED WITH ADOPTING FAMILY (AF) IN 19TH CENTURY

Han	Same as AF	Higher than AF	Lower than AF	Unknown	Total
Hikone	7(36.8)			12(63.2)	13(100)
Kaga	1(5.8)	3(17.8)	1(5.8)	12(70.6)	17(100)
Owari	6(16.2)	7(18.9)		24(64.9)	37(100)
Sendai	7(36.8)	7(36.8)		5(26.4)	19(100)
Total	21(23.5)	17(18.1)	1(1.1)	53(57.3)	92(100)

sons of Kaga samurai families during the mid-nineteenth century can suggest general trends.¹⁶ Using both income and rank as measures of status, I have compared the status of the adopted sons' families of birth with that of their adopting families. The results, shown in TABLE 5, support the conclusions reached earlier on the basis of a four-han sample: (1) that all came from the samurai class; (2) that all adopted sons were born into *shi* families of the samurai class; and (3) that almost 80 percent of them were from families with the same or higher status than their adopting families. The first and second conclusions rule out adoption as a channel of upward movement between non-elite social groups and the *shi* or between *sotsu* and *shi* within the samurai class.

There remain, however, thirty-four adopted sons who entered families of higher status than their own. These are examples of upward movement through adoption. The crucial question concerning these few cases is how far up the ladder they moved. Without an absolute standard of judgment or measurement, it is difficult to give a precise answer. Nevertheless, by analyzing the differences of income and rank involved in these adoptions, we can hopefully establish a firmer basis for judgment. Two points must be stressed. First, though family incomes differed little in over half of the cases, fourteen of the adopted sons did manage to double their family incomes through adoption. Perhaps only the latter should be considered significant cases of social mobility, since a fairly large increase in family stipend was necessary to qualify for appointment to a higher range of offices in the bureaucracy or to move up in the list of ceremonial preference. For instance, adoption from a 200-koku to a 1,000-koku family could open up new opportunities in the bureaucracy as well as increase one's prestige in the status-conscious society of the times. The most spectacular of these fourteen cases involved the third son of a family with 300 koku who was adopted into a family with 2,050 koku.¹⁷ In another case, the second son of a 500-koku family entered a family with 1,300 koku.¹⁸

TABLE 5—ORIGINAL STATUS OF KAGA ADOPTED SONS

	Same as AF	Higher than AF	Lower than AF	Total
Income	62 (38.4)	64 (39.5)	36 (22.1)	162
Rank	80 (48.5)	51 (30.9)	34 (20.6)	165

¹⁶ All from *Kaga-han kumiwake samuraichō* [Kaga Samurai Roster Arranged by Units] (Kanazawa, 1937). Of the 419 cases of adoption in this roster, which is about 25% of the total, I was able to determine the original income of 162 and the rank of 165.

¹⁷ Nakamura Gorōzaemon, *ibid.* Also Katō Satoari, from a 250-koku family, was adopted into a family with 1,500 koku. SK, VII, 59.

¹⁸ The second son of Satō Hayato became the heir of the Emori family. *Kaga-han kumiwake samuraichō*.

Secondly, while thirty-four of these Kaga sons did experience upward social mobility (as defined by income), twenty-two of them moved only across lines of military units (i.e., disciplinary and personnel units), as from the *umamawari* (mounted guards) to *ōgoshō* (great pages) or from the *kumihazure* to the *umamawari*, all of which were *heishi* (regular *shi*) units¹⁹ and approximately equal in status. Their mobility involved only the slightest social gradations. The remaining ten, however, did cross a line between two strata within the *shi* division of the samurai class.²⁰ They all began as younger sons of families assigned to military units (*ifū*, *ite*, *kachi*, and *yoriki*) which were known collectively as *heishi nami*, or provisional *shi*. Although some of these units, especially *kachi* and *yoriki*, were not *shi* in some han, they were in Kaga, possessing the right of audience with the daimyo, punishment that was different from the *sotsu* and the privilege of wearing two swords and special dress during formal ceremonies.²¹ The ten men were adopted into families of units which made up the stratum known as *heishi*. These are all clear-cut cases of upward social mobility by adoption from lower to middle ranks of the *shi*. Thus while there were many other Kaga adoptees whose backgrounds remain unknown, the above data on 165 men provide a basis for concluding with some confidence that no *shi* family adopted from outside the samurai class and only rarely, if ever, from the *sotsu* ranks. In short, while some upward social mobility through adoption did occur in Kaga, the distance of movement in most cases was very limited.

When we turn to a consideration of adoption in the *sotsu* ranks, our path is beset with obstacles. *Sotsu* family and service records do not exist in most han archives. The few that are available rarely throw much light on the socioeconomic background of adopted sons. The following comments on adoption among the *sotsu* are therefore necessarily brief and based largely on the few cases in the Owari sample. The high rate of adoptions in the nineteenth-century Owari sample (TABLE 1), which included many *sotsu*, may create the impression that adoption was particularly common among the *sotsu*. If adoption served to infuse talent from lower ranks and classes into the established social and political order of the Tokugawa period, then the vital link between the two may have been forged by *sotsu* adoption. For several reasons, one is tempted to see in the Owari data concrete evidence of the relationship which historians have long suspected existed. Not only is the rate of adoption very high but the sample included some of the lowest ranks of the *sotsu*, with incomes as low as five koku.²² Moreover, Shimmi Kichiji's study of low-ranking *bushi* in Owari shows that many *sotsu* intermarried with and adopted successors from other non-elite groups.²³ But an examination of individual cases in the Owari sample belies the intriguing thought of a *sotsu* link between commoner and samurai. Most of the cases of adoption were made by middle-ranking samurai

¹⁹ In Kaga the *heishi* was made up of *omote* and *soba koshō*, six companies of *ōgoshō*, numerous *umamawari* groups, *jōban umamawari* and *kumihazure*.

²⁰ The patterns of interstrata marriage in Kaga were very similar. Yokoe Katsumi, "Hanshi shakai ni okeru mibun to kon'in," *Kazoku to sonraiku*, ed. Toda Teizō and Suzuki Eitarō, I (Tokyo, 1939), 248.

²¹ *Ishikawa-ken shi*, [History of Ishikawa Prefecture] III (Kanazawa, 1931), 4-7, 81, 90-91, 161-162. Also *Kanō kyōdo jūi* [Dictionary of Kaga and Noto Local History] (Kanazawa, 1956), pp. 409, 433.

²² More than half of the Owari sample had incomes of 100 koku or less.

²³ *Kakyū shizoku no kenkyū* [Studies of Lower Class Samurai] (Tokyo, 1953), pp. 117-33, 325-26.

families who clearly belonged to the *shi* division of the class. The nine of the thirty-seven adopting families with less than fifteen koku of income were the only ones at the level where intermarriage with outsiders and adoption from non-elite groups was possible.²⁴ Unfortunately, in all nine cases the original status of their adopted sons is unknown. While this leaves open the possibility that some of them may have come from nonsamurai sources, the normal pattern of adoption argues against it. Even if they were of commoner backgrounds, this would not necessarily support the hypothesis of commoner talent entering the samurai class by way of the *sotsu*, for no link by adoption or marriage has been established between the *sotsu* and *shi*. In fact, Shimmi's evidence on marriage and adoption might indicate that, in Owari at least, *sotsu* were more commoner than samurai.

The general principle of adoption and marriage within one's own stratum was supported by han laws and precedents which strongly encouraged samurai who had to resort to adoption to do so in the least disruptive way possible. No han was likely to allow a large influx of peasant or merchants' sons or daughters into the elite class. Nor was a samurai family likely to risk punishment and social disapproval by contracting such adoptions when other alternatives were open to it. Only under very special conditions, therefore, would a family adopt from outside the stratum to which it belonged. And although we must be alert to unusual circumstances and means which provided opportunity for upward movement, we must likewise keep in mind the most common practices which law and custom sanctioned. Tokugawa laws required adopting families to look for a successor first within the family—a grandson, a younger brother, a paternal nephew, uncle, or cousin.²⁵ If none were available or if the available ones were unhealthy or incompetent, the search for a successor would extend to more distant relatives, including certain in-laws, and might eventually reach beyond the lineage to unrelated persons of the same status. Often during the nineteenth century, a man's grandson or younger brother was chosen as a successor.

In Hikone, seven out of nineteen adopted sons were of this first degree of relation—six were younger brothers of the adopting father and one was a grandson. In such cases, of course, there was no distinction between the adopted sons' status of birth and the status of their adopting families, although this was possible where the grandson was concerned. Obviously, therefore, no social mobility in the conventional sense could take place. A case from Hikone records will illustrate how samurai families adopted close relatives during the nineteenth century. Kaneda Kageyū was the ninth generation of his lineage to serve Hikone.²⁶ Being the second son, he appeared to be headed for a life of obscurity when his older brother succeeded to the headship of the family in 1851 and became sole trustee of the family's stipend. The father, who himself had been adopted in the early nineteenth century,²⁷ served first as an instructor in elementary Confucian texts in the han school and later as captain of a company of castle guards (*jōchū ban gashira*). Though he was head of the Kaneda household for more than thirty years and held several posts in

²⁴ One had 12 koku and rations for 2; 5 had 9 koku and rations for 2; 2 had 5 koku and rations for 2; and 1 had 2 *ryō* of gold and rations for 2.

²⁵ *Nagoya-shi shi, seijihen* [Nagoya City History: Politics], II (Nagoya, 1915), 55-58.

²⁶ The family service record is in "Jichū yuishochō" [Retainers Service Records] (Hereafter cited as JY), XXX.

²⁷ And received only 150 koku of the family's 200-koku stipend.

the han civil and military administration, he received neither promotion nor increase in stipend during that time. The eldest son, Heidayū, also began his career, in 1853, as an instructor in the han school. Soon after his appointment to an administrative post in Takano in 1857, Heidayū's poor health forced him to resign the burdens of his office and give up his position as head of the family. Being without a mature son of his own to take his place, he sought han permission to adopt his younger brother, Kageyū, as heir and successor. The latter served for ten years before he too resigned in 1869 and turned over the household to his own adopted son.

Another case involved a retainer who adopted his own grandson as heir and successor. Naitō Tatsunoshin also served Hikone during the last decade of the Edo era.²⁸ His grandfather, Gorōzaemon, was the seventh generation of his family to serve, the Ii daimyo of Hikone, and had held the high office of *goyōnin* during much of his forty years of service, which ended in retirement the year Perry reached Japan. Gorōzaemon had a son, Jōnoshin, who for some unexplained reason, never succeeded to the headship of the family. He did, however, produce a son, Tatsunoshin, who succeeded his grandfather when the latter died in 1857. Tatsunoshin, like most adopted samurai grandsons during the Tokugawa period, was legally considered the adopted son of his paternal grandfather and was listed in han records as the eighth generation of his family to serve Hikone. Although very young at the time,²⁹ Tatsunoshin became head of his household in 1857 and inherited his grandfather's 1,000 koku. Following a decade of service in the daimyo's household, he was appointed to the office of *goyōnin*, the highest and last position his grandfather had held.

Both of these cases of adoption followed the letter of the law and practice that prevailed among Tokugawa samurai. Both adopted sons were close relatives of the adopting fathers, and neither lost any family income or status in the process of adoption. In fact, there is no evidence in any of the nineteenth-century data on succession that the adoption of a younger brother or grandson in any way endangered the social standing of a family.³⁰

We return now to the main question: did adoption serve as a significant channel of upward social mobility? The evidence considered above suggests that it did not at any time in the Tokugawa period. To be sure, there were isolated cases of interstrata adoption in which the adopted son gained in status; but such cases were rare. As usually defined and understood, adoption took place between families of the same status or, when status differences were involved, the adopted son usually moved down rather than up. However, there is another way of looking at the problem. The analysis thus far has assumed that an adopted son shared the status of his family of birth and that the status of the two families should be compared

²⁸ The Naitō family service record is in JY, XII.

²⁹ His first appointment was as *koshō* or page in the daimyo's household, a position usually held by boys between 10 and 12 years old.

³⁰ In Kaga, Katsuo Hanzaemon rose from 400 koku to 1,000 koku and the top military rank of *hitomochi kumi*, and adopted his grandson as heir and successor in 1829. Details in SK, VII, 103.

Examples among Owari men were Suzuki Wakajirō, Nakamura Isaburō and Nakayama Daisaburō. "Hanshi nayose" [Owari-han Samurai Family Records] (Hereafter cited as HN), *su jō*, 270-72; *na ge*, 96-99, 338-41. Nakajima Yoshikurō and Arao Kizō adopted grandsons. *Ibid.*, *na ge*, 264-269; and *a ge*, 78-87. In Sendai, DSK, XII, 14-15; XIV, 14-15; and VIII, 33-34.

when trying to determine whether his status rose or not when adopted.³¹ Yet a son who was eligible for adoption was most likely a junior son who had no chance of succeeding to the headship of his own family. Therefore, his status was in reality considerably lower than his father's or older brother's. With luck, he might one day receive a small part of the family income, or, even better, a new grant from the daimyo. But even new grants were normally only one-tenth to one-fourth as large as his family's income.³² At best, therefore, he would end up with a much reduced but independent status in the han. At worst, he would continue to live at home as a dependent, superfluous younger son. In such circumstances, adoption into a family in the same stratum as his own, which would give him status and responsibility as the head of a household equal to his father's, would be a major advance in status. In this unconventional sense, then, adoption might be considered a channel of upward mobility, even when it involved families of the same social stratum.

The patterns noted in the above data should cause no surprises. It made good economic sense to adopt out surplus sons to any samurai family that needed them, regardless of its income. This relieved the families of birth of the burden of supporting unproductive members of the family and at the same time assured the junior sons of stable positions in the class. Without a house to command, a junior son's status was low indeed. An adoption arrangement also made good economic and social sense for the adopting family. Without a successor to carry on the family tradition and discharge its responsibilities to the daimyo, all would be lost. With an heir and successor, the family's membership in the class was assured, the stipend preserved. True, family stipend might be reduced; but this was a risk worth taking since any reduction would be partly offset by social prestige derived from an heir and successor who came from a family of higher status. The family which adopted the daimyo's fourth son was obviously improving its prestige in society, if not its economic position. Family ties formed in this way could be of inestimable value should the family ever need a friend in high places. For several reasons, therefore, as Hirose Tansō noted in 1840,³³ a family in the adoption market would usually prefer a boy of average ability from a higher-ranking family to an extremely able one from a lower-status family.

Another question which must be raised here is, what effect did adoption have upon the status of the family that used it to preserve itself? Many families in Hikone and Owari suffered losses of income when they adopted heirs. More than half of the adopting families in Hikone suffered a reduction of income; the percentage in Owari was almost as high. On the other hand, Kaga and Sendai retainers were able to use adoption without adverse effects on their status.³⁴ In Hikone, especially, adoption was associated with downward mobility for the adopting family in almost 50 percent of the cases during the eighteenth century. Often, too, the loss of status

³¹ Thus assumption is usually made by sociologists. For example, Bernard Barber, *Social Stratification: A Comparative Analysis of Structure and Process* (New York, 1957), p. 74; Jerzy Berent, "Social Mobility and Marriage: A Study of Trends in England and Wales," *Social Mobility in Britain*, ed. David Glass (London, 1959), p. 322.

³² In Kaga the following examples were typical: 200 of 800 koku, 100 of 600 koku and 150 of 1,000 koku. SK, X, 8; III, 27; VII, 82 and VIII, 8.

³³ Ronald P. Dore, *Education in Tokugawa Japan*, pp. 198-99.

³⁴ This was generally true, though there were some notable exceptions. Kuzumaki Ukonzaemon of Kaga lost 800 of his adoptive father's 1,500 koku when he succeeded. SK, VII, 50. One suspects, however, that other factors, not clear from the record, were also involved; perhaps an improper adoption or an immature heir.

was quite clearly the result of adoption. In a fairly typical case,³⁵ the second generation of an eighteenth-century Hikone family ended his career with a total of 700 koku of income. Being without a natural male heir, he adopted his brother's son. When han officials received his formal request to approve the adoption and to recognize the boy as his successor, they promptly did so but not without reducing the family income from 700 to 600 koku. On the other hand, as TABLE 6 shows, Kaga and Sendai seldom reduced family income for this reason. The loss of status by two families in Kaga and three in Owari occurred during the careers of one of the two generations involved and not when adopted sons succeeded.³⁶ Obviously, then, adoption was only one of many factors associated with loss of income and status. Why did some families move down the income scale when their adopted heirs succeeded and not others? Why also did some families which did not adopt successors lose part of their income between generations? While these questions involve more general considerations of channels of downward mobility, it is necessary to raise them here in order to get proper perspective on adoption as a channel of mobility.

In the first place it is obvious that adoption was not responsible for all downward movement. Nor did adoption always result in the loss of part of the family income. Other factors were also partly responsible. An examination of specific cases of adoption in four han reveals several things. First, although Hikone did not punish its samurai families for resorting to adoption to assure continuation of the family line, since adoption was a legitimate means of doing that, it did tightly regulate the practice. By contrast, Sendai's lenient adoption laws permitted a four-year-old adopted grandson to succeed to half of his grandfather's income, and at least in one case, allowed a posthumous adoption which gave the adopting family 100 koku of an original 600-koku grant.³⁷ This was unheard of in Hikone and Owari. Hikone reduced incomes not only when violations of adoption regulations were involved, including applications improperly drawn,³⁸ but also when the adopting father failed to serve the han long and well.³⁹ In other words, some of the reductions of status in Hikone which appear to be related to adoption were actually due to the adopting father's short or inactive career. The two are, of course,

TABLE 6—ADOPTION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN THE 18TH CENTURY

Han	Change in AF's status			Adopted son's original status				Total
	Up	Down	Same	Same	Higher	Lower	Unknown	
Hikone	1	9	9	2			17	19(35.2)
Kaga	1	2	25	5	4	3	16	28(48.3)
Owari		3	2	2			3	5(10.6)
Sendai	3		14	4	1		12	17(53.1)
Total	5	14	51	13	5	3	48	69(36.1)

³⁵ Nishio Jibunosuke, JY, XXXIX.

³⁶ Matsuda Masatake (d. 1763), SSZ, XXI.

³⁷ In 1645 Iibuchi Shigenari succeeded at age 4 to 120 koku of his grandfather's 240 koku. Family history is in DSK, LII, 22-28. Shiga Jizō, also of Sendai, was allowed to inherit 100 koku of his father's 600 koku more than a year after the latter died. *Ibid.*, VI, 22-25.

³⁸ Yamagata Shinzeimon, in JY, XXXIX.

³⁹ For example, Matsui Zembeï of Hikone served only 3 years before relinquishing his position to an adopted son, but the son received only 200 koku of the 300-koku stipend. JY, XXXIX. Also Katō Mataemon, SK, VII, 60.

closely related, for some household heads adopted heirs because they were themselves sickly and in danger of dying before healthy and mature successors could assume responsibility. They might lose some of the family income because of inactive careers, but they stood to lose much more if they left behind an infant or minor son as heir. Thus while adoption was one factor in the loss of family income in Hikone, failure to serve a certain number of years was another, though one which is often obscured by its close relation to adoption.⁴⁰

It may be that what we detect in both Hikone and Owari adoption data is a subtle attempt by the han to reduce the independent power of retainers by restricting the use of various devices, adoption in this case, for perpetuating their lineages and positions in Tokugawa society. The han's close regulation of retainers' lives may have been part of the wider power struggle in which daimyo sought to reduce retainers to complete dependence,⁴¹ while retainers strove to strengthen their positions through office-holding and to perpetuate their lineages through adoption. Their complete success would have been fatal for the centralizing power which the daimyo represented. This explains the han's strict control over retainers when their actions impinged on the sensitive area of daimyo prerogatives and authority. It also explains han restrictions on adoptions and the principle that normally samurai should adopt only successors of age, in good health and capable of performing in the han bureaucracy.

A final aspect of the problem of adoption and social mobility which will be considered here is the mobility of samurai following adoption. Were adopted sons able to move ahead faster in their careers than natural sons? Though the question is complicated by many variables that influenced a samurai's career as well as by the shortage of precise information on careers, perhaps the information from samurai service records will cast some light on the issue.

There are several reasons for expecting differential performance between adopted and regular sons as they competed for advancement in han service. One is ability. Were adopted sons somewhat brighter on the whole than natural sons? Was a mechanism of selection operating in adoption cases which introduced talent into the system? Obviously, we have no way of determining the ability of any samurai in this sample, whether adopted or not; but since adopted sons were often chosen from among two or more possible candidates,⁴² it seems reasonable to expect the selection of able candidates in such cases. Furthermore, if our assumption that ability was prized and promoted in Tokugawa samurai society is reasonably correct, then the figures on social mobility might be expected to show more upward movement of adopted sons than of others. Yet, as we examine the figures in TABLE 7, it appears that adopted sons were under-represented among upwardly mobile retainers throughout the Tokugawa period. In the seventeenth century they made up 26.1 percent of the sample but accounted for 23.4 percent of upward mobility. In the eighteenth century, the figures were 36.6 percent of the sample but only 10.8 percent of the upwardly mobile; and in the nineteenth century, 39.3 percent of the

⁴⁰ A study of *shi* careers in these four han indicate that those who served fewer than 11 years often lost part of their family stipend when they turned over the headship of the house to heirs.

⁴¹ Tsuji Tatsuya, "Bakusei no shindankai," *Iwanami kōza nihon rekishi: kinsei* [Iwanami's

Japanese History: Tokugawa Period], III (Tokyo, 1963), 1-36.

⁴² There was no choice in many cases. The preferred line of succession was known and followed. On the other hand, a man could pass over an obviously sick or dull-witted candidate.

TABLE 7—UPWARD MOBILITY OF ADOPTED SONS

Period	Frequency of adoption	Upwardly mobile retainers	
		Total	Adopted sons
Early	54 (26.1)	64	15 (23.4)
Middle	70 (36.6)	46	5 (10.8)
Late	92 (39.9)	60	15 (25.0)

sample but only 25.0 percent of upwardly mobile retainers. Clearly, then, these data lend no support to the thesis that adoption in the Tokugawa samurai class served to reward ability, or at least to place talent in position where it could gain its own rewards. For if an occasional bright boy was adopted, and there is nothing in the data that denies this, his chances of moving up the status scale were more limited than his nonadopted counterpart.

A second reason for expecting different performance of adopted sons after succession is that they were of somewhat different social status than the adopting families. Did family origins influence a man's career after adoption? For example, did a man from a higher social stratum than his adopting family have a better chance for advancement than one from a lower stratum? In a highly stratified society where all notable military families proudly claimed descent from the Seiwa Genji branch of the Imperial family, we might expect to find the younger offspring of prominent families enjoying a decided advantage in gaining promotion after adoption into a lower status family. Although the evidence in this case is quite spotty, a prominent lineage apparently provided little or no advantage in post-adoption careers. Of the twenty-three adopted sons in the nineteenth-century sample, for example, whose status of birth are known, seventeen were born into higher status families than those which adopted them.⁴³ However, only two of them were promoted in rank and given higher incomes during their years of service following adoption.

In short, there is little evidence in these data of han discrimination in the treatment of adopted sons because of social origins. Perhaps this conclusion is not really surprising when we recall that what set them apart were not inflexible class lines, as between samurai and peasant, but status distinctions within the samurai class based on income and office. Therefore, the social distance between a samurai family of 250 koku and one with 1,500 koku was not very great.⁴⁴ Both were members of the ruling elite; both, moreover, belonged to the *shi* division of the samurai class. They shared common values; their sons underwent the same training and education in Confucian morality, proper behavior and social decorum. Younger sons of samurai families could easily bridge the narrow social gap between the middle and upper ranks of the class. When adoption occurred between these ranks, probably little opprobrium was attached to minor status distinctions among the *shi*.

Another point worth mentioning is that han officials, who very likely depended

⁴³ I have disregarded two other cases of upward mobility or stipend increase from 30 to 50 *hyō* because, as part of a general pay raise Owari granted many retainers of lower ranks in 1862, they had

nothing to do with social origins or merit of the recipients.

⁴⁴ Katō Satoari, in SK, VII, 59.

on adoption for family continuity, had little reason to discriminate against a practice fully sanctioned by custom and law. They might have encouraged adoption ties between families of roughly the same ranks and income, as in Hikone, and may have reduced the income of a family whose adopted household head came from a lower stratum. But by the nineteenth century it was perfectly obvious to even the most stubborn opponents of loose adoption practices that the continuity of samurai lineages depended on liberal interpretation of adoption and succession laws, and that lineage and class interests must take precedence over the purity of blood lines. This was a lesson which the Kyoto nobility had learned centuries before and a lesson which Tokugawa officials, too, had learned in the seventeenth century, following a brief effort to restore the criterion of blood relations to adoption request. It is conceivable, of course, that biological stability of the samurai class might have been assured by some other means, such as a more pervasive practice of polygamy, without tapping the commoner blood of the peasantry or merchant class. But given the unitary inheritance system, which created a large reserve of nonsucceeding elite sons to draw on, it is hardly surprising that Tokugawa officials sanctioned a system of adoption to preserve the elite class.

If the above analysis is substantially correct, we can sum up our remarks on adoption as a channel of social mobility by saying, first, that the topic is far from simple and that too much attention to the opportunity for the poor-but-bright youth to be adopted into a high-ranking family has obscured more than it has revealed. Second, the effects of adoption on the family and the individual were ambiguous. For the adopting family, it might lead to downward mobility, but this was preferable to extinction. For the individual, adoption appears to have been mainly a channel of downward movement, when mobility is measured from his original family status; but as a means of upward social mobility, when seen from the angle of a junior son's social standing. Third, adoption tended to occur between families of roughly equal social status. When their statuses were different, the adopted son usually moved down rather than up. Fourth, adopted sons were underrepresented among the upwardly mobile portion of our samples throughout the Tokugawa period. Though the evidence is mixed, this seems to reflect either a stipend reduction which the family suffered when an adopted son succeeded to the headship of the family (as in Owari and Hikone) or systematic discrimination against adopted sons in matters of stipend increase and promotion. Finally, there is no evidence of differential treatment of adopted sons because of social origins in the samurai class. Thus adoption, while enormously important for the biological continuity of the Tokugawa samurai class and for the preservation of its closed character, was relatively insignificant as a channel of upward social mobility as usually understood.