

main argument, however, it might be appropriate to present some background information on Chinese adoption in general.

## AGNATES AND OUTSIDERS: ADOPTION IN A CHINESE LINEAGE

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How does a member of a powerful Chinese lineage choose an heir if he is unable to produce his own? According to orthodox rules, he must first exhaust all possibilities of finding a suitable heir within his lineage before he selects an outsider. Yet a significant number of adopters in the lineage village under consideration ignored the rules and decided to purchase a male infant from complete strangers rather than to adopt an agnate. In doing so, the adopting fathers had to submit to a humiliating initiation ceremony and pay for an extremely expensive banquet. In contrast, agnatic adoption is relatively inexpensive and painless. The following article examines a number of adoption cases and concludes that segmentary rivalries within the lineage are the root cause of this unusual pattern of outsider selection. Supporting evidence is presented from the written genealogy of the lineage involved, as well as from first-hand field data.

### I

Prior to the Communist Revolution in 1949, segmentary patrilineages played a dominant role in the power circles of southeastern China. Lineages owned much of the agricultural land in this region and controlled some of the more lucrative aspects of market town commerce. Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that these kinship organisations became primary targets during the land reform campaigns of the early 1950's and the class struggles that followed. The weight of evidence now suggests that the lineage has been eliminated as a significant focus of social activity within the People's Republic. However, functioning lineages can still be found in the rural areas of Hong Kong, a British Crown Colony on the southern coast of China. This article is based on seventeen months of field research (1969-70) in one of Hong Kong's most traditional lineage communities.

Viewed from the outside, the Chinese lineage resembles a homogeneous unit with few important structural variations. On closer inspection, the same organisation might appear to be suffering from internal conflict which threatens its very corporate nature. Although neither view is entirely correct, the larger lineages are invariably divided into rival segments that compete for local power and wealth. A good deal is known about the Chinese lineage (see e.g., Ahern 1973; Baker 1968; Freedman 1958; 1966; Pasternak 1972; Potter 1968), but it is not always clear under what circumstances a member will allow segmentary rivalries to interfere with his allegiance to the lineage as a whole. This problem is examined in the following discussion of adoption in one lineage. I intend to demonstrate how the selection of male heirs by those who are unable to produce their own reveals a basic conflict between the need for agnatic solidarity and the realities of segmentary opposition. Every adopter has to make a choice from a limited set of alternatives, some of which benefit the individual and others the lineage. Before proceeding with the

### II

#### *Adoption in Chinese society*

'Three things are unfilial, and the worst is to have no sons.' This popular aphorism is attributed to the sage Mencius who lived during the fourth century B.C. It summarises one of the most widely held values in traditional Chinese society, namely the absolute necessity of producing male heirs (see De Groot 1908: 107). In the traditional view, it is the duty of every son to provide his own father (and father's father, etc.) with grandsons to carry on the patriline and to worship the ancestral spirits. A person who dies without heirs is doomed to everlasting misery because no one survives to make the appropriate offerings of food and other goods that nourish the spirits in the afterlife. Unless some provision is made for these unfortunates, they become 'hungry ghosts' that prey upon the offerings of others (Hsu 1948: 76; Jordan 1972: 34).

Spiritual considerations of this nature are certainly important but there are also a number of material factors which motivate sonless individuals to seek an heir. According to customary practice, the property of a man who dies intestate automatically passes to his nearest agnatic kinsmen. Most people insist on designating their own successor (who may or may not be a close agnate) in the belief that this gives them more control over the eventual disposition of their property. Furthermore, as outlined later in this article, many Chinese adopt a son specifically to provide companionship and financial support in old age.

The decision to adopt is usually postponed until all possibilities of producing one's own heir have been exhausted. For instance, if the first wife is suspected of infertility the husband might take a second or even a third wife. If our subject has proven his own capabilities by producing daughters, he may be encouraged to try his luck with concubines. There are limits to these experiments, however, because the additional women ordinarily require support throughout the rest of their lives. Economically it is often more practical to arrange an uxori-local marriage between one's own daughter and a poverty-stricken man who is willing to change his surname, or allow some of his sons to take their grandfather's surname (see M. Wolf 1972: 192-199). In this way an heirless individual who is at least fortunate enough to have daughters can 'produce' his own grandsons. Despite its convenience, the uxori-local arrangement is commonly regarded as the most dangerous method of securing an heir. The son-in-law may threaten to take his children and leave the family at any time, especially if he feels entitled to a larger share of the inheritance. A father who chooses this option can easily find himself at the mercy of an unscrupulous outsider.

It is not surprising, therefore, that most Chinese prefer to adopt their own heirs directly from another family. Ideally, an adopter is expected to choose from among his closest collateral agnates in the descending generation (see discussion below). Adoption between agnates in China is known as *kuo chi*, which literally means 'to cross and continue' (Nelson 1969: 118). The terminology reflects the view that the adopted son crosses over into a new position in the patriline to continue a segment or line that would otherwise die out (see also A. Wolf 1974: 141-2).

During the Imperial era (pre-1911), agnatic adoption was encouraged by the state laws regarding family succession and inheritance. Children of other surnames were not to be adopted as sole heirs until all agnatic possibilities were exhausted. However, in most parts of China these legal restrictions were never enforced with great vigour by the government; and, as a consequence, non-agnatic forms of adoption were also common (Freedman 1958: 28 n2). In fact, many adopters found it advantageous to buy an infant son from a total stranger rather than to adopt an agnate. For reasons that I hope to make clear, this is particularly true for people who were members of powerful lineages.

### III

#### *The setting: a single-lineage village*

The data for this study were gathered in San Tin, one of the largest 'single-lineage villages' in Hong Kong's New Territories. In 1970, San Tin had a population of approximately 4,000, all members of the Cantonese-speaking *pen-ti* ('native') ethnic group which dominates this part of China. Except for a handful of shopkeepers, every male in the village bears the surname *Man* (Mandarin *Wen*) and traces direct lines of descent from a common founding ancestor who settled in the Hong Kong region during the early fourteenth century. The Man lineage grew by a process of segmentary expansion until it controlled a large section of land near the mouth of the Sham Chun River. This river now forms the border between British Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China.

San Tin has been under colonial rule since 1899 when the British government took possession of the New Territories. The occupied land (which was obtained on a 99-year lease) currently serves as an agricultural hinterland for the cities of Kowloon and Victoria. Although the New Territories have undergone considerable change in recent decades, five original lineages still manage to dominate the region (see Baker 1966). One of these is the Man lineage at San Tin.

Now in their 27th generation, the San Tin Mans are divided into seven major segments and dozens of minor segments. Each 'segment' is defined as a land-owning corporation comprising the male descendants of a specific ancestor who was wealthy enough to leave an estate. Alternatively a group of agnates might buy land and set it aside as an estate to honour their father or grandfather, who then becomes the apical ancestor of an incipient segment. The profits from these estates pay for the annual worship of the founding ancestors and subsidise the social activities of the segments involved. If a surplus exists, the money is usually divided among the surviving members. Estate dividends in some lineages are large enough to constitute an independent income for the members of certain segments (see e.g., Potter 1968: 110-12).

The Man lineage has shown remarkable resilience over the centuries. It still retains many of its traditional functions, including the management of commonly-owned property, maintenance of five ancestral halls and support of the village school. The lineage continues to be the primary reference group for most people in San Tin no matter how much experience they have had in the outside world.

The conflict between the need for lineage-wide solidarity and the realities of segmentary opposition is a part of everyday life in San Tin. Historically, three

dominant segments were fierce rivals for control of the village. The oral tradition of the lineage abounds with stories of cross-segment fights for control of the village market and other sources of income. According to a local maxim, 'the rich segments (*fang*) exploit the poor, and the powerful exploit the weak.' Even though these segmentary distinctions have become less important in recent years under the influence of massive emigration and other changes,<sup>1</sup> the Mans are still conscious of the hierarchy of segments within the lineage.

At the same time, however, all the Mans are acutely aware that their dominant status in the surrounding countryside depends upon the power and prestige of the lineage as a whole. Intra-lineage rivalries are not very apparent when the Mans deal with the outside world. Before the British occupation, the lineage controlled a large section of the northern New Territories region. This gave the Mans economic and social advantages that ordinary peasants did not enjoy. For instance, whenever a San Tin resident needed to contact a government bureaucrat or a town merchant he could rely upon his lineage leaders to act as intermediaries. The Mans also maintained their own militia for protection against bandits and rival lineages. Even today the Mans feel superior to the people living in small, neighbouring multi-lineage villages and they expect to be treated with deference when they visit the nearby market towns. The lineage is thus an integral part of every member's personal identity.

In exchange for the benefits of lineage membership, individuals are expected to observe a set of rules which are designed to protect the interests of the group. Some of these rules can be traced to the Confucian classics but most are quite parochial and tend to elevate the lineage to a position of importance over everything else in the society. Written rules are generally recorded in the genealogies kept by powerful Chinese lineages (see Liu 1959), while unwritten rules are part of the oral tradition in lineage communities. Any transgression of these accepted modes of behaviour can be interpreted by the membership as a threat to the prestige of the entire group. The rules governing adoption among the Mans are a reflection of the concern for maintaining the lineage as a powerful and privileged elite. And, as I shall demonstrate, the same rules also help protect the corporate wealth of the various segments within the lineage.

### IV

#### *Principles of adoption*

Adoption rules in San Tin (most of which are unwritten) encourage a sonless individual to select an heir from the most immediate agnatic group whenever possible. Brothers are expected to share their sons with less fortunate siblings. If there are no extra heirs among brothers, the adopting father is encouraged to look within the next highest agnatic group, which consists of the descendants of his grandfather. When these possibilities are exhausted, adoption is encouraged within ever higher agnatic groups until all options are eliminated and the searcher reaches the kinship boundaries of his immediate localised lineage (i.e., the lineage in his own community).

The rules of preferred selection do not stop even here because adoption is then encouraged within the non-localised 'higher-order-lineage'. Members of this

kinship unit share a common founding ancestor but live in separate communities often dispersed over a wide area (Freedman 1966: 21–3). Beyond these wider lineage ties, the hardpressed searcher is urged to select an heir from a family with the Man surname (i.e., members of the same *clan* which may not be based on actual lines of descent). The selection process has reached the boundaries of recognised agnatic kinship at this point and the adopting father must then procure a son from an outside family.

The rationale behind these rules is not hard to find. As noted earlier, lineage segments are property-owning corporations and it is natural that segment members should seek to restrict access to these sources of wealth by encouraging adoption within the pre-existing group. Each time an adopting father brings in an heir from another segment (or another lineage), one more beneficiary is added to the estate of the apical ancestor (cf. Fei 1939: 70; Liu 1959: 73 sqq.).

## V

*Within the lineage: adoption of agnates*

The ‘crossing’ of sons between brothers is the most common form of adoption in San Tin. Lineage rules stress that the oldest brother in any set of siblings has rights over the sons of his younger brothers because, as the first-born, he is primarily responsible for maintaining the patriline.<sup>2</sup> For instance, when there are two brothers, the older can claim the only son of his younger brother and raise the boy as his own.<sup>3</sup> If the younger brother has several sons, the heirless older brother is permitted to choose the one he most desires. Younger brothers also have certain rights to the excess sons of their male siblings, but only after the oldest brother is reasonably certain that he will have an heir capable of reproduction.

The position of the adopted son is somewhat ambiguous, especially if he is the sole surviving heir of both brothers. When this happens, the son inherits from two lines and is expected to ‘light the lamps of both houses,’ meaning that he is responsible for the ancestral rites commemorating his biological and his adoptive father.

Beyond the minimal agnatic unit of brothers (i.e., descendants-of-same-father), the rights of a sonless searcher to claim an heir are not clearly defined and depend upon his personal wealth and status. Ideally, of course, the members of his most immediate agnatic group should help, but no one wants to relinquish a younger son to someone who offers a bleak future for the boy. Wealthier searchers, however, have little difficulty finding a suitable agnatic heir, if they choose to do so.

There is a practical reason for selecting a son from a close agnate in San Tin because adoption becomes increasingly more difficult and more expensive the further one ‘ascends’ the patriline in search of an heir. Adoption beyond the level of brothers has to be legitimised by an expensive, nine-course banquet for lineage members who belong to the same minimal agnatic unit as the adopting father and the biological father. This unit is easily computed by tracing the lines of descent for both men up through the lineage until a common ancestor is reached. Every male elder (*fu lao*, age 61 and over) and leader (estate trustee, village guardsman, etc.) who descends from this ancestor must be invited to the banquet. During the

festivities, the elders are asked to place their signatures on a red cloth banner certifying that they recognise the adoption as legitimate.<sup>4</sup> The adopting father has to pay a fee for the signatures in some cases.

The certification is an attempt to preclude conflicting claims on the adopted son later in life, and all who sign the banner are expected to accept the boy as an authentic heir of his new father. These certification banquets theoretically become larger and larger until they reach the maximal segments of the localised lineage, one of which now incorporates nearly a thousand living members. Adoption beyond this point requires a banquet and a certification ceremony for all the elders and important leaders in San Tin.

## VI

*Beyond the lineage: adoption of outsiders*

When a member is unable, or unwilling, to find a prospective heir within the lineage, he must go beyond the village and buy a son from a poor outsider. The founding ancestors placed severe restrictions on this type of extra-lineage adoption because they felt it threatened the ‘purity’ of the patriline.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, members who have been fortunate enough to produce their own sons ordinarily resist all efforts to break down the closed nature of the descent group. They prefer to keep the economic and social benefits of lineage membership circulating among their own heirs. According to the rules in San Tin, any adopting father who attempts to bring an outsider into the lineage must submit to an initiation ceremony during which he is humiliated by his peers. (Although this is technically the son’s initiation, his father undergoes it for him.) If the father proceeds with an outsider adoption without submitting to the ceremony, the ultimate sanction is enforced by the elders and the offender is formally expelled from the lineage.

The initiation takes place during an elaborate banquet which the father must give for all the elders and leaders in the lineage, plus all males who descend from his own grandfather. In recent generations this can easily include up to 400 people. Unlike wedding banquets, the guests do not bring gifts of money to compensate the host for his hospitality. The whole tone of the banquet is different because the adopting father must compensate his fellow lineage members for accepting an outsider into their midst. The guests try their best to humiliate the host by shouting insults about his inability to produce his own heirs. During the banquet any guest may seek out the host and borrow money on the spot. This is done with full knowledge that the lender will never ask for repayment, for it would only be an embarrassing reminder of the initiation. At the culmination of the feast the adopting father asks every elder present to sign a cloth banner certifying his recognition and acceptance of the new lineage member. The host must buy each signature for about £3, although some elders may demand more (in 1970, there were 164 elders in the Man lineage). As they leave the hall, the guests berate the host for defiling the lineage and complain about the miserable food.

If the elders agree to accept the new member by signing the certification banner, the adoption is sealed and the boy’s name is recorded in the genealogy. He is given full inheritance rights, as well as an annual share of sacrificial pork which symbolises membership in the lineage. All his ties to his original family are cut and he becomes

dependent on the lineage. His position, however, remains somewhat ambiguous because the other members never forget his origin (cf. Smith 1900: 252). In later life the adopted outsider may be called 'mixed breed' or 'bought son' behind his back, but never to his face. His father has paid the price of entry so the son has a legal and moral right to be accepted as a full member of the lineage. Many of these adopted outsiders try to overcompensate for their ambiguous position by becoming the staunchest upholders of lineage traditions.

VII

*Genealogical data: ideal upheld*

One might ordinarily expect that these adoption restrictions would encourage the Mans to choose sons within their immediate agnatic group whenever possible. Furthermore, one would assume that cases of adoption from outside the lineage would be extremely rare because the restrictions are so severe and the cost so high. Yet, when the available sources of adoption data for the Man lineage are examined, an unusual pattern emerges which supports the first assumption but not the second.

Written genealogical records are one of the few sources of quantifiable data on adoption in the New Territories. Like most other powerful lineages in China, the Mans have a genealogy (*tsu p'u*) that lists as nearly as possible all males who descend from the founding ancestor. Besides the names and lines of descent, the Man genealogy also records a limited amount of personal data for selected individuals including surnames of wives, scholarly achievements, unusual traits, success in business, and other details of particular interest to the chroniclers (cf. Hu 1948: 43 sqq.). The version of the Man genealogy used here<sup>6</sup> also lists 89 cases of agnatic adoption showing the lines of exchange for cases within the localised lineage at San Tin and the village of origin for cases in which the sons originated outside the localised lineage. Before proceeding with the analysis of these cases, a number of qualifications are in order.

It is well known that Chinese genealogies contain inaccuracies because later generations often attempt to enhance their own prestige by embellishing the record of their ancestors (see e.g., Eberhard 1962: 46 sqq.; Freedman 1966: 26-31). Furthermore, research by Meskill has shown that adoption data recorded in Chinese genealogies reflect only those cases conforming to lineage ideals while extra-lineage adoption is disguised (1970: 150). These qualifications certainly apply to the Man genealogy discussed here. There are no examples recorded of a member procuring an heir from a family with a different surname although I have evidence of several such cases from interview sources. One would expect, therefore, that the adoption cases included in the genealogy would conform to the ideal system previously outlined.

The Man genealogy covers twenty-four generations and includes entries on approximately 2,000 male descendants of the founding ancestor. The chroniclers chose to record only eighty-nine cases of adoption, eighty of which occurred within the localised lineage, while only nine involve sons born outside the village. These cases are best analysed from the perspective of the adopting father who occupies the position of ego in the following discussion. It is convenient to categorise the cases according to agnatic levels arranged hierarchically within the

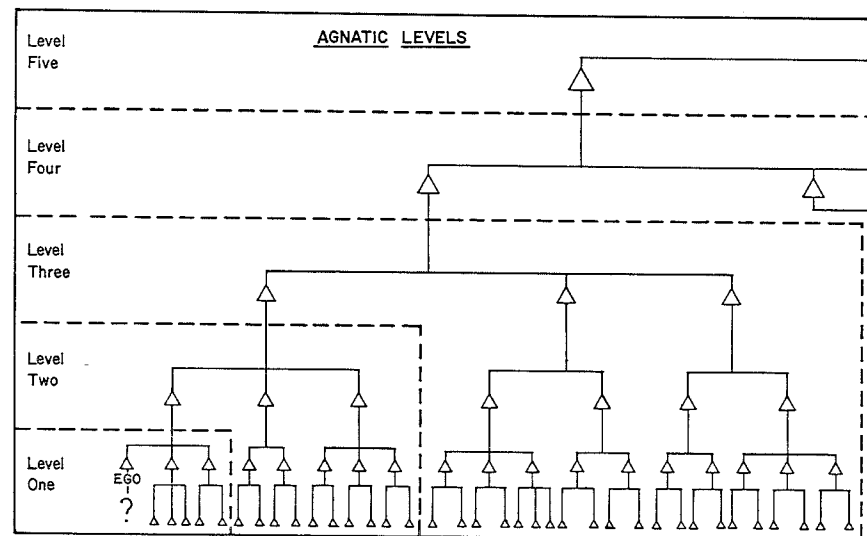


FIGURE 1

lineage (see fig. 1). Each level corresponds to a specific group of kinsmen and is identified by the phrase 'descendants-of-same-(agnate)'. According to this classificatory system, descendants-of-same-father (i.e., brothers) constitute agnatic level one; descendants-of-same-grandfather, level two; and on up to level five, descendants-of-same-greatgreatgreatgrandfather.

As expected, adoption entries in the Man genealogy conform closely to the lineage rules that encourage adoption within the closest possible agnatic level (see table 1). For example, adoption between brothers at agnatic level one constitutes 55 per cent. (N=49) of the cases recorded. The second agnatic level, descendants-of-same-grandfather, account for 27 per cent., the third level 6 per cent., and the

TABLE 1. Adoption entries in the Man genealogy.

A. Adoption cases within localised lineage.			
Agnatic Level	Kin group ('Descendants-of...')	Number of cases	%
One	Same father	49	55
Two	Same grandfather	24	27
Three	Same greatgrandfather	5	6
Four	Same greatgreatgrandfather	2	2
No cases recorded beyond agnatic level four in localised lineage.			
Sub-Total		80	90
B. Adoption cases outside localised lineage.			
Level			
Man higher-order-lineage (same founding ancestor)		8	9
Man clan (same surname)		1	1
Sub-total		9	10
Total adoption entries		89	100

fourth level 2 per cent. The Man genealogy examined in this study does not list any cases of localised lineage adoption beyond agnatic level four. However, nine cases of adoption outside the localised lineage are recorded. Eight of these are at the higher-order-lineage level (same founding ancestor) and only one case is noted at the clan level (same surname).

Undoubtedly there were numerous cases of adoption that the chroniclers chose not to record during the twenty-four generations covered. The genealogy lists 237 lineage members who died without an heir to carry on their line (approximately 11 per cent. of the total entries), which means that sonless males were quite common in lineage history. Unfortunately it is not possible to determine from the genealogy how old these members were when they died. Similarly, the entries do not distinguish between cases of adoption while the adoptive father is still alive and post-mortem adoption in which the son, who may be an adult, is crossed over to continue a branch of the patriline (Nelson 1969: 119). It is clear that these genealogical data should be used with caution because they reflect the ideal system of adoption. However, they do demonstrate that the lineage rules have had an influence on actual behaviour in a large number of cases.

### VIII

#### *Adoption rules and practical considerations*

In reviewing the genealogical evidence a question arises that can only be answered by assuming that the rules of adoption are sometimes in conflict with the practical considerations of procuring a reliable heir. Why do the chroniclers stop recording adoption cases at the fourth agnatic level, and yet find it appropriate to include nine cases of adoption beyond the boundaries of the localised lineage? The explanation may be simply that the men who kept the genealogy considered these nine cases worthy of recording. The adopting fathers had followed the rules at least to the extent of selecting heirs who were members of the same higher-order-lineage or the same clan. It is understandable that the chroniclers chose not to record any cases of outsider adoption, but it is not so clear why they did not make note of adoption beyond agnatic level four in the localised lineage at San Tin. Cases at level five and beyond would be even closer to the ideal than the higher-order-lineage entries. It is reasonable to conclude that there may not have been any cases of adoption beyond agnatic level four in the local lineage, or if such cases did exist, they were extremely rare. (I did not discover any instances of agnatic adoption beyond this level in my interviews with residents of San Tin.)

It is my contention that the pattern of adoption revealed in the genealogy is not a reflection of the chroniclers' biases but is, in fact, a consequence of the segmentary structure of the Man lineage itself. There must be a good reason why the Mans chose not to adopt too 'deeply' into their own localised lineage. Furthermore, as outlined below, there is considerable evidence that the Mans have not been entirely successful in limiting outsider adoption even though the restrictions are still enforced. With these qualifications in mind, it would appear that the adoption rules have predictive value only up to agnatic level four in the lineage. Beyond this level a number of practical considerations begin to interfere with the fulfilment of the ideal model.

Besides the genealogy, the other sources of information on adoption in the Man lineage are my own observations and interviews in San Tin. After several months, I began to learn that there were more cases of outsider adoption in the village than anyone was willing to admit. Some of these adopted outsiders have become respected elders entrusted with responsible positions of authority in the lineage. Others have not been able to overcome their ambiguous status and live on the social periphery of the lineage. Except when they are angry or intoxicated, few of the villagers will ever discuss individual cases of outsiders who were brought into the lineage. Although it is difficult to be certain, these probably account for no more than one per cent. of the males in the lineage.<sup>7</sup> However, given the severe restrictions against non-agnatic adoption, this is more than I had originally anticipated.

The usual story offered by the villagers to explain outsider adoption is that the father was unable to find a son in the lineage and therefore had to buy an heir from strangers. Anyone who was interested could probably have found a suitable heir in a lineage settlement the size of San Tin. The father must have made a conscious decision to skip over the lineage and adopt an outsider in the majority of the cases known in San Tin. From the adopting father's point of view, these decisions are eminently reasonable.

The adoption rules in the Man lineage are quite explicit regarding the obligations and duties of the father, but they are somewhat vague about the position of the son. As in the case of two brothers 'sharing' a single heir, the duties of the son are never clearly defined. In cases beyond this first agnatic level, the son is expected to serve his adoptive father without any consideration of his original position in the lineage. However, these obligations are not subject to enforcement by the lineage unless the son's neglect of his adoptive father becomes so blatant that it reflects badly on the lineage as a whole. The adopting father can never be certain of his son's loyalty if the biological father, or the biological father's immediate family, lives in the same community. Herein lies the cause of the unusual patterning of adoption in San Tin.

In cases of adoption within agnatic levels one and two (descendants-of-same-grandfather) which constitute 82 per cent. of the genealogical entries for San Tin, the adopting father presumably is secure in his control over the son. At this level the adoption is usually contracted only after consulting with everyone concerned. The parties involved may own property together and could even share a common budget if the grandfather is still alive. This does not imply that levels one and two are free of tensions (they certainly are *not*) but it is unlikely that a biological father could ever raise claims on the adopted son of a close agnate without risking severe sanctions. Adoption within the first two agnatic levels, therefore, is easily regulated by the members involved.

A similar pattern of social control may operate at levels three through five. The fifth agnatic level in our discussion corresponds in part to the *wu fu*, a recognised kinship category in Chinese society. Literally, the term *wu fu* means 'the five mourning grades' which relate to a set of clearly prescribed mourning obligations for deceased agnates within four ascending and four descending generations of ego (see Freedman 1958: 41-5). Mourning, however, is only one aspect of the *wu fu* relationship. Freedman has demonstrated that the *wu fu* forms the agnatic core of

the Chinese kinship system. For instance, domestic ancestor worship (as distinct from worship in lineage halls) is normally confined to the ascending four generations (Freedman 1970: 166). Interpersonal relations within the *wu fu* are often intimate and the members are expected to co-operate in many ways. It is understandable that an adopting father might feel reasonably secure in choosing an heir from his own *wu fu* kinsmen.

As one moves beyond the fifth agnatic level in the lineage, however, the kinship ties become less immediate and the possibilities of ambiguity in the adoption relationship increase accordingly. The certification ceremony is an attempt to preclude any later claims, but there is always a chance that the biological father may reassert himself later in life. This is especially true if the adopted son happens to become a successful leader or a rich merchant.

If the adoption has been contracted between fathers who are members of opposing lineage segments, later claims on successful sons are difficult to prevent. Intra-lineage rivalries were very common in San Tin during traditional times and there is little reason to doubt that the segment of an adopted son's biological father would miss the opportunity to press a claim if it were to their advantage.

The only way to avoid these conflicts is to choose an heir from a family that has no chance of causing problems when the son has matured. An outsider son is completely cut off from his past once he enters the lineage as a certified member. The Mans insist on actually purchasing the infant because, in so doing, they remove some of the ambiguity in the relationship between families. If he is challenged, the adoptive father can often produce a signed contract which proves he has already compensated the boy's biological family. As a further protection against later claims, the adoption might be arranged through trusted intermediaries<sup>8</sup> who keep the identities of both parties secret. When this method of procurement is unsuitable the searcher will make every effort to buy a son from a family living as far away as possible from San Tin. The real origin of these outsider sons is one of the most closely guarded secrets in the community; adopting fathers never discuss the subject, and they are never asked. Lineage members can only assume that the son came from the lowest strata of society in the Hong Kong region.

No matter how humiliating it might be for the adopting father, this arrangement is more secure than finding a son whose family is known in the community. The adopting father has more at stake than his own pride since he is responsible for producing heirs who will carry on the worship of his immediate ancestors. Furthermore, his personal comfort and security in old age depend almost entirely on the support of his son. Although some lineages offer welfare benefits to destitute members, there are few provisions in Chinese peasant society for taking care of the aged other than those made by the immediate family. This is one reason why a filial son is often more highly valued than a rich or successful one.

An outsider son may be a cause for embarrassment on occasion, but his loyalty to his adoptive father is never in question. His continued membership in the lineage is entirely dependent on the father's decision to keep him in the family. If the heir proves unfilial or undesirable for any reason, his father can terminate the relationship by simply stating in public that he is looking for a new son. The outsider has no right of appeal and is expelled from the lineage without even the dignity of a formal expulsion (*ch'u t'zu*, 'out of lineage') ceremony. Thus, the father has absolute

and complete control over an outsider son. If he had chosen an heir who was already a member of the lineage, the father would not have this advantage and might find himself abandoned by his adopted son.

At this point I would like to return briefly to the problem of agnatic adoption beyond the localised lineage (i.e., at the higher-order-lineage and clan level). The fact that the genealogy records only nine cases of adoption at this level in twenty-four generations indicates that it was not a very popular option. However, even in these few cases the main argument of this article holds true. The villagers could not recall any actual examples in recent generations, but they reasoned that the adopting fathers would always have the upper hand because the other branches of the Man higher-order-lineage are much smaller and far less powerful than San Tin.<sup>9</sup> It is doubtful that the biological family of an adopted son would feel strong enough to press demands on a member of the dominant lineage branch.

## IX

### Conclusions

In this article I have demonstrated that the rules of agnatic adoption are often in conflict with the realities of life in a Chinese lineage. The evidence suggests that an adopting father conforms to the rules whenever possible, but only if he is reasonably certain that he will have firm control over the heir. Adoption among the Mans might be viewed as a game of chance with exceptionally high stakes. The father can never be certain that he has chosen a filial son or that his authority over the heir will go unchallenged later in life. However, by selecting carefully he can minimise the possibilities of future claims.

It is clear from genealogical data that adoption within agnatic level two, descendants-of-same-grandfather, is perceived as a relatively secure choice. Adoption further up the agnatic hierarchy is less secure because it becomes enmeshed in the continuous and fluctuating round of segmentary rivalries that characterise powerful Chinese lineages. These rivalries make intra-lineage adoption a high risk for the adopting father who is unable to find an heir among his more immediate agnates. Under the circumstances, the odds of a secure adoption favour skipping over the lineage and seeking an heir among poor outsiders.

### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Fifteen years ago San Tin's agricultural economy collapsed and the village became an emigrant community which is now completely dependent on remittances from restaurant workers in Europe (see Watson 1975). The land around San Tin fell into disuse and, as a consequence, many of the lineage segments lost their independent sources of income. The Mans are beginning to underplay the significance of segmentary divisions. This is a relatively recent development, however, and it does not change the main argument of this article. Except for a few cases, all of the adoptions under discussion were contracted well before the economic decline of San Tin's ancestral estates.

<sup>2</sup> Any male offspring can carry on a man's patriline, but the Mans feel that it is particularly important for the first-born son to have heirs whenever possible. The domestic ancestral tablets are kept in the house of the oldest brother and he sometimes inherits an extra share of the family property.

<sup>3</sup> This form of adoption is 'real' in the sense that the older brother usually takes the son into his own household and acts as his legal guardian. Men who are forced to give up their only sons in this way inevitably feel a deep resentment toward their brothers. In one case I knew particularly well, the older brother took possession of the child as an infant and guarded him jealously throughout his life. The original father was never permitted to be alone with his son, even after forty years (see also Eberhard 1962: 159-60).

<sup>4</sup> Baker (1968: 49) and Potter (personal communication) also report the practice of certification for cases of adoption in the nearby single-lineage villages of Sheung Shui and Ping Shan.

<sup>5</sup> The restrictions against outsider adoption in some lineages are more severe than those described for the Mans. In a study of the written regulations of sixty lineages, Liu found that fifty-one had negative attitudes toward outsider adoption (1959: 75). In some cases the penalty for choosing an outsider son was public flogging in the ancestral hall and denial of all lineage privileges (Liu 1959: 74).

<sup>6</sup> There are several versions of the Man genealogy because each major segment keeps its own records. All the versions, however, are copies of the official genealogy kept by the lineage master. They differ only in the records of the most recent generations which have not yet been consolidated into the official version. The one used here is a hand-written edition I managed to photograph in San Tin.

<sup>7</sup> This figure is a rough estimate based on the seven known and seven suspected cases of outsider adoption I discovered in San Tin. Assuming a membership of approximately 1,700 males in the current generation, 0.8 per cent. is a reasonable estimate.

<sup>8</sup> According to several informants, the retail rice merchants in the nearby market towns of Sham Chun and Yuen Long were intermediaries for many adoption arrangements. These merchants have extensive networks in the surrounding region which allow them to set up 'blind' adoptions between families that do not wish to meet. The practice of buying sons appears to be quite common in south China (see e.g., Freedman 1966: 7).

<sup>9</sup> There are several other branches of the Man higher-order-lineage in San Tin's immediate vicinity. These include two smaller single-lineage villages, part of a tri-lineage village (three surnames, one of which is Man), and several fragmentary groups scattered throughout the New Territories. All the branches trace descent to San Tin's founding ancestor and they all send representatives to the annual worship at his grave. In the past, members of the Man higher-order-lineage relied on San Tin's militia for protection against hostile neighbours.

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