

Rupkatha Journal

On Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities

ISSN 0975-2935

www.rupkatha.com

Volume VII, Number 3, 2015

General Issue

Indexing and abstracting

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SNIP, IPP and SJR Factors

Nr.	Source ID	Title	SNIP 2012	IPP 2012	SJR 2012	SNIP 2013	IPP 2013	SJR 2013	SNIP 2014	IPP 2014	SJR 2014
1	21100201709	Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities	0.313	0.034	0.1	0.271	0.038	0.116	0.061	0.007	0.101

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Reversing Patriarchy: A literary Examination of Adopted Husbands (Mukoyoshi) in Japan

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Abstract

Being a patrilineal society, some of the gender codes operating within the Japanese culture possess a set of self-perpetuating scheme that facilitates its hold on patriarchy. One of such schemes is the age-old tradition of adopting a full-grown man (omukosan) into a household with only female offspring as a husband to the eldest daughter in the household. He is expected to contribute towards sustaining the family lineage and consequently prevent the extinction of such a family's name. The adopted husband then assumes the role of the headship of the house and enjoys all the privileges of a legal son. However, this sexist formulation works paradoxically both to elevate the adopted son to the status of leadership and perniciously portray him as a weakling who is perpetually obligated to his adopted family and thus occasionally treated with disdain. This paper deploys Futabatei Shimei's novel *An Adopted Husband (Sono Omokage)* to ascertain the implications of this practice to the discourse of sexual inequality in Japan. It also probes the extent to which this patriarchal custom delivers the woman/bride a soft landing to valorize her status in the society and also circumvent the reach male hegemony.

Keywords: patrilineal, Futabatei Shimei, *Sono Omokage*, omukosan, Japan

BACKGROUND

As long as you have even a measure of rice, do not become an adopted husband.

Japanese proverb.

One of the core values that defined the Japanese outlook on life as well as culturally sketched their gender stance is the *ie seido*. The *ie* is literarily defined as a house, a home, a household, a family or a mere building. The *ie*, however, had implications beyond the "households" or "family". Other things like preserving the honor of its name, paying allegiance to dead ancestors, upholding each *ie*'s unique mores and preventing the *ie* from being wiped out are factored into the concept of *ie*. For the Japanese, the *ie* was highly revered, and the task of continuing the *ie* was viewed as an onerous one, a vital task that must not fail. The most essential function of the *ie* in a nut shell was continuity.

The *ie* consisted essentially of all the immediate members of a particular house or main house as well as younger sons who have branched out to form a new one or the branch house, branch of a branch house, long dead and forgotten ancestors, recently dead folks and offspring yet

to be born¹.

The affairs of the *ie* are managed by the head, and he is legally accountable for all members of the family. He by virtue of his position enjoys certain privileges like being allowed to take the first bath, being served first at meals, being waited upon, etc.²

The head of the household wields so much power that he takes unilateral decisions most times. Moreover, his opinions on any matter are strictly adhered to. An expression of a contradiction or otherwise is viewed as a threat to the group harmony and well-being of the *ie*. The system thus produced much “frustration” in other members of the household as the head of the household with his limitless power was capable of various abuses on those beneath him.³

As earlier noted, the prime motivation of the *ie seido* is continuity. It is also important that the continuity be based strictly on bloodlines. Thus, for the *ie* to be effectively perpetuated+ over the ages, a woman (usually selected by the head of the household) is married for the eldest son into the household to bear children that are considered as the next generation. As she is an outsider, the status of the incoming wife in an *ie* is usually very low, usually the lowest on the hierarchy. The living arrangement is such that, the eldest son (who is the head of the household in waiting) and his wife live together with his old parents.

The incoming wife is expected to learn the custom of her new *ie* and to subordinate her individual interests to those of the *ie*, putting every other person before herself. Hendrey opines that, an unsuitable wife could be returned to her home for “lack of general fitness, as well as possible barrenness. Such a resort could even be taken if an outsider fell ill in the middle life, and became unable to carry on with his or her expected duties. Again, the *ie* is seen to take precedence over its individual members”⁴.

In the absence of sons, the usual option was to adopt as head a man (sometimes a close relative and at other times, a total stranger) who also became the husband of a daughter, such a head is called a Yoshi⁵. This becomes necessary especially when a family possess a well-established business empire or a recognized name and has no male successor but has an unwed daughter of a suitable age. A man is chosen by her parents especially for his skills, health and good character to be her husband. He assumes the name of his wife’s family, her ancestors as well as the family tradition. Since he left his natal family to enter another, from the point of view of his adoptive family “he was an in-marrying member, in a newcomer’s position that in some ways resembled that of most young wives”⁶. The culture of *Mukoyoshi* or adopted husband as a form of marriage, therefore, places the customary understanding of marriage completely on its head.

The procedure for the marriage or wedding ceremony also defiles normalcy. According to Peter Temm, the engagements are “carried out as if the young man was the bride and the wife-to-be were the groom.... In a typical, rural *mukoyoshi* marriage, the adopted son may bring with him to

¹ See Hendrey 1985, Befu 1972, Nakane 1967 and Hall and Beardsley 1965 for a full exposition of the practice of *ie seido* in feudal Japan.

² Japanese families usually share the same bath water. The routine involves, first taking a shower outside the bath and then stepping into the already heated bath water. The most respected member of the family takes the lead and when he is through, leaves the bath water for the next most respected member to use until the last member of the family has had a bath.

³ . For more of the prerogatives of the household head in feudal Japan see Hendrey 2005 and Befu 1971.

⁴ Hendrey 1987:28

⁵ See Hendrey 1981, 1985, Condon 2005 and Temm 1967

⁶ See Harald Fuess *Divorce in Japan: Family, Gender, and the State 1600-2000*.

his new household a dowry of clothes, chests, and even bedding. He is brought to his new home by the bride, and usually the marriage ceremony takes place there”⁷.

Since a *mukoyoshi* is the replica of normal marriages but in reverse, the *mukoyoshi* experiences the same fate as the wife in a typical *ie*. He is expected to learn the custom of his adopted family and abide by them while subordinating his own desires and wishes to that of his new family. For paying a high price of losing his family name, the adopted husband looks forward to a reward. Ruth Benedict opines that “often it is a deal out of which both sides hope to gain. These are called ‘political marriages’. The girl’s family may be poor but of good family and the boy may bring ready cash and in return move up in the class hierarchy. Or the girl’s family may be wealthy and able to educate the husband who in return for this benefit signs away his own family”. In feudal Japan, great Samurai lineages are preserved mostly by the use of husband adoption, it also provided a noble chance of upward mobility within the Samurai class⁸. Due to his status as an adopted son cum husband, a *mukoyoshi* is expected to be absolutely devoted to his new household. So great was the level of devotion in feudal Japan that he “had to prove himself in his new household by taking his adopted (sic) father’s side in a battle, even if it meant killing his own father. In modern Japan the ‘political marriages’ involving adopted husbands invoke this strong sanction of *giri*⁹ to tie the young man to his father-in-law’s business or family fortunes with the heaviest bonds the Japanese can provide”

As the adopted husband is in a similarly inferior position as a young wife, divorce or annulment of the arrangement is easy. Thus, the adopted husband could be sent away if he failed to live up to his parents-in-law’s satisfaction. This explains why the adopted husband is kept under probation for a reasonable time before his name is entered in the family register or *koseki*, which is the final proof of family membership in Japan. He is thus expected to work hard to prove his worth or have his name expunged and sent packing from that household¹⁰.

The practice of adopting husbands or uxorilocal/matrilocal residence is as old as marriage itself. This unique marriage arrangement is also practiced in other parts of Asia and the Asian Pacific with motives that are similar to that of the Japanese. The practice is common among the Mosos in southwestern China and the Sirayas of Taiwan. In India, it is found among the Kerala of south India and the Hindi name for such a husband is *Gharjamai*, a rather pejorative term which literary translates as househusband. In the Polynesian island, however, such marriages appear to have no shame or social stigma attached to it for the in-marrying husband, nor is he positioned in a subservient place. Such marriages may therefore “often have attractions for the individual male, especially a junior son/brother with no particular prospects of succession in his own line, who can at least better his economic situation if not his status prospects”¹¹

As often times well fashioned and thought out as most sexist cultures are, they are not without their imperfections. These imperfections if and when wholly apprehended retain some far-reaching advantage for the subordinate gender. The defects come as fault lines or apertures, which

⁷ Temm 1967:9

⁸ For more on Adoption and Samurai Mobility, see Ray A. Moore “Adoption and Samurai Mobility” *Journal of Asian Studies*. Vol 29 No 3 pp. 617-632 (May 1970).

⁹ *Giri* is the Japanese word for obligation or moral responsibility. Adopted husbands are often held accountable for fulfilling their part of the marriage deal by moral obligations. For more on *giri* as it operates in a *Mukoyoshi* marriage and the Japanese society at large, see Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company 1954

¹⁰ See Fuess 2004; Hendry 1983; Temm 1967 and Benedict 1954

¹¹ Sherry Ortner 2006:74

serve as avenues for space reconfiguration in the prevailing asymmetrical sex cartography. Thus the argument of this paper is succinctly captured in Ortner's words:

Whatever the hegemonic order of gender relations may be- whether "egalitarian," or "male dominant or something else-it never exhausts what is going on. There are always sites, and sometimes large sites, of alternative practices and perspectives available, and these may become the basis of resistance and transformation¹².

The following section shall concentrate on identifying the gaps that act as a groundwork for resistance and indeed oppositions in patriarchal Japanese society as gained from Shimei Futabatei's novel, *An Adopted Husband*.

AN ADOPTED HUSBAND (Sono Omokage)

Hasegawa Tatsunosuke, who goes by the pen name of Shimei Futabatei, is acclaimed as the father of modern Japanese literature. Futabatei was the first Japanese writer to write "a real novel depicting living models out of practical lives"¹³. Born to an aristocratic samurai family on April 4, 1864; Futabatei studied literature at the Russian language department at the Tokyo Foreign Language School but quitted his studies midway in protest over administrative restructuring. He took up literary criticism and translated the works of famous Russian novelists including Dostoevsky, Ivan Turgenev and other Russian realists into Japanese language.

Futabatei's first novel *Ukikumo* was known for its use of the realist style and "gave a new turn to the general taste for reading as it earnestly studies life itself and depicts the inner struggles of man". The indecisive and pathetic hero he created became a prototype for Japanese writers all through most of the twentieth century. He later published *An Adopted Husband (Sono Omokage)* and *Heibon* both of which were successfully received and measured as masterpieces. Futabatei then gave up his literary career for journalistic pursuit as Asahi Newspaper reporter from Russia. He died in 1909 while returning from Russia to Japan of Tuberculosis.

SYNOPSIS

An Adopted Husband tells the story of the Ono family. Mr. Reizo Ono has the calamity of not being blessed with a son and so to prevent his family name from being wiped out, his daughter, Tokiko cannot be given away in marriage but instead, a husband must be adopted for her. The adopted husband of the title is Tetsuya Ono. Tetsuya, who was a studious and ambitious student when his father passed away, is left struggling for funds to finance his studies, the Ono's family saw Tetsuya as a wise choice, thinking that a prosperous future lay ahead of him so they offered to cover his school expenses and he in turn, he gets adopted into their household, take their name and marry their daughter.

The story begins many years after the adoption and the major characters Tetsuya-the

¹² Ortner 1996:18

¹³ In the olden days of the Shogunate, Japanese novels were mostly fantastic novels with impossible characters and are often set in unreal worlds. Futabatei Shimei's *Ukikumo* and later *Sono Omokage (An Adopted Husband)* are indeed the first works of Japanese literature depicting real people with real problems in a real world. His method "was to study his characters intimately, in every phase of their beings; then drawback to get a proper perspective" (Introduction to *An Adopted Husband* pg.11)

adopted husband and Tokiko his overbearing wife, Hamura the rising business man, Sayoko, Reizo Ono's illegitimate daughter and Tetsuya's mother-in-law are soon introduced.

At the beginning of the novel Ono's family patriarch, Reizo, had just died thus straining the family's finances and leaving the burden of supporting the family to Tetsuya. Tetsuya is overwhelmed by his wife's extravagance, disrespect and endless request including asking her husband to employ a second maid (she is a housewife) and giving Sayoko, her half-sister out as a governess to the morally depraved Mr. Shibuya out of sheer jealousy.

Bonded by an unfavorable marriage arrangement and deep obligation, Tetsuya decides that the only way out of the quagmire is to leave Takiko for her half-sister Sayoko; however, he must pay back all the money expended on his education first. Sayoko, on the other hand, is troubled by the guilt of stealing her elder sister's husband and consequently opts out of the proposed elopement plan. Tetsuya having no way out, notwithstanding takes up a position overseas and takes the path to self-destruction; the end of the novel sees Tetsuya as a damaged alcoholic with mental challenges.

The notion of adopting a husband in itself is a highly patriarchal formulation. It is based on the assumption that women in the absence of men are incapable of managing a home and; therefore, a man has to be brought in to take up the role of headship. Interestingly, the practice of adopting husbands becomes a useful tool for reversing patriarchy or at least attaining gender equality if maximally exploited.

In Japan like most patriarchal societies, men control the mechanisms of acknowledgement. As the status of an adopted husband is very similar to that of an in-marrying new wife, his validation in the society is no less. Also since patriarchy holds sway, a man that finds himself in a situation that restricts his ability to wield sexual power is likely to be lampooned first, by fellow men.

Thus, Hamura in the first chapter of the novel describes Tetsuya Ono as being "a very queer man" who belongs to a "good-for-nothing class" (21). Hamura while assuming this stance, mocks Tetsuya's authority as the head of the Ono's household by holding crucial discussions with Tetsuya's wife Tokiko and his mother-in-law and subsequently taking decisions that concern Tetsuya's family without Tetsuya's approbation. Furthermore, his presence is completely unacknowledged in his own home and together with Tetsuya's wife; Hamura makes mockery of Tetsuya's demand for an explanation for their action. The following conversation records the duo's reaction;

Hamura looked up at the ceiling and laughed aloud.
When he stopped, he said, "I shall die of laughter.
Poor man! Something must be wrong with him."
"Yes, indeed," agreed Tokiko....

Assailed so severely, Tetsuya could not say a word; he could only look glum. Feeling more foolish than a man who had mistaken his own shadow for a thief and had drawn his own sword against him, he could not find a single word to excuse his stupidity (55-6).

It is worthy to note that even in his house; Tetsuya is a victim of discriminations. He is the last person in the household to receive courtesies while being the sole source of income for the household. His wife claims to be "much too busy" to attend to him or to his needs but in reality, she "considered it foolish to serve such a husband respectfully". Tokiko and her mother has absolutely no regards for him and makes no effort to hide it. He is, in fact, but a ceremonial head of the family

as Tokiko and her mother soon became the de facto authority/head of the house. The author confirms this:

Though nominally master of his house, he could not manage his household affairs as he wished. Burning, as it were, with chagrin, he could only lament his fate: that he had been adopted into the Ono family to be the daughter's husband....unknowingly he had permitted his domestic authority to weaken, and now his wife and her mother did just as the pleased. This deplorable state of things, confirmed by time, could not be changed. (24-5)

The two women came and went as they pleased and deferred to no one, least of all, Tetsuya.

In normal marriages, a young wife would be at her best behavior and seek mostly to make her husband happy. She would be responsible for cooking, cleaning and washing while sometimes contributing to the family's source of income. However, Tokiko, unlike most Japanese women is the last to wake up; long after her husband is gone for work and begins her day by calling for fire for tobacco from the comfort of her bed. She subsequently has servants wait on her all day. She afterwards ends her day by pleasure seeking to the theatre every evening and returning very late at night most times more elaborately dressed than is suitable for the theatre.

Moreover, Tokiko's taste combined with that of her mother is unaffordable for a classroom teacher like Tetsuya but they two would not be bothered with such reality and so urge him to work harder and earn more. The author declares;

He found that his salary that at first sustained his family, gradually failed to meet their expenses. This obliged him to teach in a second school. The additional salary made them more comfortable but for a time; he soon learned that his income was still insufficient. He managed to teach in a third school; in the end the result was the same. Only for a short space did this extra money suffice. Within three months, they felt as poor as ever. Thus, domestic expenses drove him on each month; ...when he considered that he was so driven because of the waste caused by the luxurious habits into which his house had fallen, he felt that he had been adopted for the sole purpose of gratifying the vanity of mother and daughter.

They duo of mother and persistently push Tetsuya like a beast of burden that is only useful to them as a means of sustenance. Tetsuya in turn continues to exert himself, sacrificing self, ambition and luxury while painfully but silently enduring his lot. Tetsuya's total existence appears to be to ensure the comfort of the two. His original family who saw to his education until he became adopted as a high school student could not be attended to no matter how much they petition him. This is due to the fact that his immediate family possess an insatiable taste for overindulgence. Pushed to his elastic limit, Tetsuya feebly laments:

Are you not whipping me to exert myself to the utmost that you may squeeze as much money as you can out of me, and all this because you wish to wear fine clothes or buy costly rings; in short, to satisfy a base vanity? Where is the sympathy between husband and wife?...If you have any wifely sympathy, you ought to try, if not to console me, at least to avoid giving me unnecessary pain; whereas you want to add to my pain and seek to make yourself alone comfortable. Isn't it cruel?

At this point, the structural forces in the Japanese society that operates to exclude women from the society and prevent their full participation in work outside the home is fully deployed to the advantage of the housewife Tokiko and her equally housewife mother. As women are expected to be professionally unambitious and fit only as housewives with little or no connection to the social

world. Consequently, lamenting and enduring his fate is all Tetsuya can do as altering the system is out of his reach and procuring a divorce in his position as an adopted husband, is a far-fetched option.

In feudal Japan (at the time *An Adopted Husband* was written), divorce was not an option for women. Harald Fuess reports that's "a woman could not legally divorce her husband under any circumstances" but a man can easily divorce his wife for any reason from talkativeness to barrenness. If a woman, however, wishes to divorce her husband, her only option is to successfully run to a special Buddhist temple known as *kakekomidera* "a temple to flee to" without being seized halfway, a mission that was almost impossible considering the fact that no man would allow himself to be thus scorned¹⁴.

By the same token, procuring a divorce as an adopted husband is a herculean task. A task more challenging to undertake, sometimes than absconding uncaptured to the Buddhist temple. The complications in a *mukoyoshi* seeking divorce is "the need to sever his ties as an adopted son in addition to the bonds of marriage. When conflicts arose as to whether senior members of the house, adoptive fathers or even adoptive mothers, had the right to dissolve the ties of a *mukoyoshi* as a son and husband, the magistrates usually took the side of the of senior household members"¹⁵. The status of a *mukoyoshi* in feudal Japan was so low and lightly regarded that he never wins a law suit against his in-laws and can be divorced even by a woman. Fuess affirms

"When an adoptive mother wanted to divorce her daughter's *mukoyoshi*, belief in male supremacy clashed with the belief that wishes of senior members of the house should take precedence over those junior members. In several extant *mukoyoshi* cases, magistrates supported social hierarchy and seniority in the household against a husband's prerogative. The house even if represented by a woman, was able to divorce *mukoyoshi* husbands".

There seems to be a conspiracy against adopted husbands by both genders in the society. The male gender probably because the idea of *mukoyoshi* tends to downgrade the awe inspiring image of men in feudal Japan as well as acts as a shortcut to success or fame (depending on the household) and for the female gender as it is their only chance at equality or validation or recognition.

In the case of Tetsuya Ono, to divorce Tokiko, he

...would have to give her immediately at least half the expense of his schooling from the middle of his high school course to his graduation from the university... Tetsuya in his present position, however, he might cudgel his brains, could not conceive the means of raising that amount.

Tetsuya, therefore, must remain boxed in such an inimical alliance. More unfortunate for him is the fact that there are no *kakekomideras* (temple to flee to) for men who would not be granted divorce by their wives. All he could do is mutter words of regret and probe his fate while questioning "what sin he had committed in the preceding world to have to suffer so much in this"? The author said "his sorrow knew no bounds. He left the house each morning looking morose, and returned each evening still looking sullen".

The novel ends on a sad note. Tetsuya, submerged as he is, in a miserable, sad and slavish marriage and bonded heavily by obligation finds himself hopeless. Tetsuya is to quietly endure or pay a divorce fee which neither takes into account the 8 years he already spent as the sole financier

¹⁴ For more on divorce and women in feudal Japan, see Fuess 2004; Hendry 1996; Tanaka 1995; Condon 1985.

¹⁵ Fuess 2004:36

of the family. He finds solace in the bottle and ends up a wanderer in faraway China. Tokiko and her mother, having no source of income and wallowing in poverty, relocate to the village.

It is true that the Japanese are the most “marrying” people in the civilized world and that marriage for them is as unavoidable as death.¹⁶ This assertion may be culturally accepted as true and especially so for the female folks than it is for the male gender. The relevant question therefore is, why would a man elect to put himself in such a precarious and subversive position? Why would a man choose to become a *mukoyoshi* knowing that the articulation of authority in a feudal order lies in the clearly established gender roles which bear on their status? The answer again lies in the Japanese family system or *ie seido*. Since 2nd and 3rd sons are in no place to inherit an *ie*, the adopted husband (which in most cases they become) in the rural setting stands to inherit a household, land status and other benefits that comes with heading a household and therein lies the gain.

The defeat of Japan in the 2nd world war ushered in several unprecedented alterations in the Japanese law and culture. One of such seeming changes is the amended 1947 constitution issued at the time of the allied occupation. The amendments practically demolished the firm and idiosyncratic Japanese family system or the *ie seido* as it was then considered by the American forces as being incompatible with modern life. The family system was seen as an “evil, feudalistic growth obstructing modernization”¹⁷. The system was thus abolished and theoretically, all the practices that accompany it became illegal.

The practice of adopting husbands or *mukoyoshi* being an ancient tradition which is parts and parcel of the Japanese family system (*ie*), however, survived. The practice survived the rapid and sometimes radical cultural transformations and alterations in worldviews that swept through and is till sweeping Japan since the last 4 decades. Even with the current sharp decline in the birthrate, the practice still persists.

It is said that Japan has the world's second highest adoption rate of more than 81,000 a year. Vikas Mehrotra, & co. contends that “adoptions to secure heirs have steadily escalated from 73% of all Japanese adoptions in the mid-20th century to over 98% of all adoptions in 2004”. Adding that “Over 90% of the 81,000 people adopted in Japan in 2011 were adult males in their 20s and 30s”¹⁸. Adopted marriages like normal marriages can be sometimes very successful and at other times, ill-fated. Additionally, the ill treatment of adopted husbands in feudal Japan even though widespread, is not the norm. Some adopted husbands grow to be well respected and regarded within their adopted families.

Modernity combined with the ubiquitousness of adopted husbands has affected social opinions and becoming a *mukoyoshi* is no longer seen as disparaging but has instead become a profitable venture. Most family businesses in Japan have survived from generation to generation due only to this practice. Even today, the bulk of Japanese companies that are considered successful including Toyota, Suzuki, Canon, and Sony are family businesses that have grown and survived all these years with the help of adopted husbands. Suzuki for instance, is famously known to have been led consecutively by adopted sons. “The current chairman and CEO Osamu Suzuki is the

¹⁶ Until recently, marriage for the Japanese is as important as the very air we breathe. This view is clearly espoused in Dorothy Robins-Mowry's *The Hidden Sun: Women of Modern (1983) Japan* and Jane Condon's *Half a Step Behind* 1985

¹⁷ Nakane, 1973:28

¹⁸ Vikas Mehrotra, Randall Morck, Jungwook Shim & Y Wiwattanakantang, 2009.

fourth adopted son in a row to run the company”¹⁹. Becoming an adopted husband in contemporary Japan is like a mutually beneficial deal, a far cry from what obtains in the past.

Patriarchy need not necessarily be supplanted by matriarchy or female hegemony. Similarly, male hegemony need not be recompensed by a female counter-hegemony, rather constructive dialogue and structural changes can be put in place to unfetter women from their limitations and the authority of male supremacy. Nevertheless, as these changes are painfully slow and long in coming, the cultural logic that makes for space reconfiguration and circumvents patriarchal orders, though insignificant in the sea of the hydra of systemic sexist practices, must be accentuated and maximally exploited.

All references to the text *An Adopted Husband (Sono Omokage)* by Shimei, Futabatei was taken from the 2009 edition translated by Mitsui Buhachiro and Gregg M. Sinclair. New York: BiblioLife

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¹⁹ Mariko Oi, “Adult adoptions: Keeping Japan's family firms alive” <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-19505088>