The Forty-Seven Rōnin

The Vendetta in History

JOHN A. TUCKER

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The forty-seven rōnin vendetta is one of the most famous incidents in Japanese history, but it is also one of the most misunderstood. John A. Tucker seeks to provide a credible account of the vendetta and its afterlife in history. He suggests that, when considered historically and holistically, the vendetta appears as a site of contested cultural ground, with conflicts, disagreements, and debates characterizing its three-century history far more than cultural unanimity about its values, virtues, and icons. Tucker narrates the incident as the historical event that it was, within the context of Tokugawa social, political, cultural, and spiritual history, before exploring the vendetta as conflicted cultural ground, generating a steady flow of essays, novels, plays, and ideologically driven expressions intrinsic to the course of Japanese history. This engaging, accessible study provides insights into ways in which events and debates from early modern history have continued to inform developments in modern Japan.

John A. Tucker is a professor of history at East Carolina University in Greenville. He has published extensively on Japanese and Chinese history, and his publications include *Critical Readings in Japanese Confucianism*, 4 vols. (2012), and the *Dao Companion to Japanese Confucian Philosophy*, coedited with Chun-chieh Huang (2014).

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PREFACE

This study began with my dissertation, completed through Columbia University's Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures (1990). There, I traced the influence of a late Song Confucian text by Chen Beixi, *The Meanings of Human Nature and Principle*, on seventeenth-century Japanese texts by Yamaga Sokō, Itō Jinsai, Ogyū Sorai, and others. In researching the dissertation, I noticed that many secondary sources claimed that Yamaga taught the forty-seven rōnin, and so influenced their vendetta. My knowledge of the rōnin incident largely derived from an early reading of Maruyama Masao's *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan*, wherein Maruyama discussed Ogyū's essay on the vendetta, the *Giritsusho*, as one of the decisive pieces shaping the shogunate's verdict for the rōnin. Itō Jinsai, according to other sources, taught Ōishi Yoshio, the leader of the rōnin vendetta, at his school in Kyoto.

Looking for primary sources documenting these claims, I soon realized that there were virtually none, especially none related to the most commonly repeated claim, that Yamaga had taught Ōishi Yoshio and the samurai retainers of Akō domain whence the vendetta arose. This claim I eventually traced back to the vendetta debates, especially essays by Satō Naokata and Dazai Shundai, criticizing the rōnin and blaming their vendetta on the ideas of Yamaga. Eventually, I traced the metamorphosis of those denunciatory allegations into points of pride for later thinkers such as Yoshida Shōin, and then his followers as they embraced the vendetta as a model for anti-shogunal activism. Simply put, then, my interest in the vendetta developed out of my interest in

Tokugawa Confucianism, and over time, Yamaga Sokō in particular. The disagreements, critical allegations, and polemics voiced in the Confucian debates came to shape my perception of the vendetta generally, from its origins through all subsequent outgrowths, leading to my overall assessment of it as a hotly contested cultural site wherein conflict and dissonance rather than consensus and unity ruled.

Articles and paper presentations in conjunction with my translation studies of texts by Yamaga, Itō, and Ogyū regularly discussed the alleged rōnin connections. Ultimately my conclusions were of the debunking variety, arguing that the conventional wisdom was essentially groundless. More careful readings of Beixi's text led me to realize that the pivotal notion in the debates, "loyal and righteous samurai" (*chūshin gishi*), had appeared in Beixi's text wherein it was explained in relation to individuals who had died, in many cases by their own hands, in their defense of some cause, meriting for them legitimate worship in temples established for them. Knowing that Beixi's text was one of the most well known, widely read among seventeenth-century Confucians, I came to view the vendetta debates as about more than contested questions of loyalty and righteousness, honor and duty. They were admittedly about that, but more significantly they were about whether the rōnin might be legitimately worshipped. This spiritual dimension of the debates soon colored my readings of the vendetta and its aftermath, leading me to develop a somewhat comprehensive framework through which the vendetta in theory and practice might be viewed.

It was only after formulating these ideas that I finally got around to reading Donald Keene's translation of *Kanadehon Chūshingura*, and then the Japanese text itself. As a result, my vision of that work was very much influenced by my study of Confucianism and the Confucian debates over the vendetta. Also, while a graduate student at Columbia studying classical Japanese with Professor Keene, I read my first Nō play, *Shunkan*, long before looking at *Chūshingura*. Interest in Nō led me to the Kanze kaikan in Kyoto for performances, and a vision of Japanese drama as not infrequently spiritual. Seeing torchlit Nō performances at the Heian Shrine in Kyoto and later in Nara at the Kasuga Shrine did nothing to dissuade me from that view.

The route to this project, then, was circuitous, via intellectual rather than military history. Along the way, I accumulated more debts in scholarship than can be meaningfully acknowledged here. However, a few must be recognized. At Cambridge University Press, Lucy

Rhymer's encouragement and patience will always be appreciated. Funding for research directly related to this project came from two sources, Duke University's East Asian Library grant program and Harvard University's Yenching Library grant program. Both helped keep me motivated, with a sense of indebtedness, to bring this project to completion. I hope that readers will find it useful.

INTRODUCTION: VENDETTA OVERVIEW

The forty-seven rōnin vendetta is one of the most famous incidents in Japanese history, but it is also one of the most misunderstood. This book seeks to provide, via critical analyses of relevant documents, a credible account of the vendetta and its afterlife in history. It suggests that when considered historically and holistically, the vendetta appears as a site of contested cultural ground, with conflicts, disagreements, and debates characterizing its three-century history far more than cultural unanimity about its values, virtues, and icons.

The Incident

In the spring of 1701, shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi was hosting annual ceremonies at his castle in Edo (modern Tokyo), the center of his samurai regime. At that point, the Tokugawa enjoyed exceptional authority and prestige, having governed the realm on behalf of the imperial line for nearly a century. The ceremonies featured Tsunayoshi welcoming emissaries bearing New Year's greetings from the emperor, Higashiyama, and retired emperor, Reigen, who resided in the imperial capital, Heian (modern Kyoto). Just before the start of the final day, one of the lower-level samurai hosts, Asano Naganori, lord of Akō domain, suddenly drew his sword and attacked, but did not kill, the shogun's master of ceremonies, Kira Yoshinaka.

Asano was promptly restrained and interrogated by shogunal officials. That afternoon, Tsunayoshi decreed that Asano commit

seppuku, or ritual suicide, forthwith. Subsequently, the shogun abolished the condemned lord's branch of the Asano line and confiscated Akō domain, which Asano lords had ruled since 1645. Word of Asano's attack and seppuku soon reached Akō, where his former vassals – now rōnin, or masterless men – reacted to the shocking news. Most of the three hundred rōnin soon scattered, resigned to their fate as warriors adrift, tainted by the seemingly disgraceful behavior of their late lord. However, another group, in the end numbering forty-seven and led by Ōishi Yoshio, banded together in a secret league to plot revenge.

In the twelfth month of the following lunar year,[1] after subterfuge and conspiracy, the forty-seven met in Edo, invaded Kira's mansion, tracked him down, and beheaded him. The rōnin then marched across the city, making their way to the Sengakuji, Asano Naganori's family temple in Edo. Following his seppuku, Asano had been buried at the Sengakuji. There the rōnin band presented Kira's head before Asano's grave, reverently conveying that his task was complete. Minus the lowest-ranking member of the group, Terasaka Kichiemon, now mysteriously departed, the rōnin remained at the Sengakuji, awaiting their fate. Earlier, two from their ranks had been sent to inform the shogunate of their vendetta. Rather than an immediate, final verdict, shogunal officials had the rōnin divided into four groups and imprisoned. Nearly two months later, following extended deliberations, Tsunayoshi sentenced the rōnin en masse to death by seppuku. With their demise on the last day of winter 1703, the forty-seven rōnin vendetta, also known to history as the Akō vendetta or Akō incident, came to a gruesome end.

History's drama soon reincarnated in various forms. First a succession of Confucian scholars debated its ethics and implicitly spiritually related issues. Then theatres staged puppet and kabuki performances, accompanied by copious woodblock prints. Temples and shrines established multiple graves and memorial sites. The vendetta quickly found its way into foreign narratives and cultural commentaries. Over time, the vendetta elicited an unprecedented flood of apocrypha, cultural look-alikes, statements, and counterstatements that, rather than replaying the incident with historical fidelity, conveyed more controversy and dissonance than cultural consensus and

[1] All months referred to numerically are lunar months. The year, when specified, refers to the Western calendar.

homogeneity. From the start, the vendetta had been born out of conflict: first with Asano's attack on Kira, and later, in Akō domain, with more than two hundred and fifty rōnin turning away from the minority group dedicated to taking direct action. During the following three centuries, the vendetta generated an ever-expanding litany of responses and aftershocks, often volatile and sometimes violent in expression. These belied the harmony and consensual unity implied by its status, touted in the mid-twentieth century, as Japan's national epic.

The vendetta has been called "arguably the most famous event in Japanese history."[2] There are good reasons for its renown: as history, it brimmed with court ritual and rivalries, shogunal pomp and circumstance, samurai intrigue, swordplay, passion, and tragic displays of loyalty, righteousness, and reverence. Yet for precisely those reasons, the historical events of 1701–1703 came to be submerged by three centuries of legend, drama, ideology, religion, philosophy, art, mass media, and popular culture. The multifaceted by-products of its history have entertained generations, making evident its capacity for individual, social, national, and international resonance. In addition to militarism, nationalism, and imperialism, the vendetta has been recast repeatedly to serve the rhetorical ends of civilization, popular rights, Christianity, capitalism, Marxism, pacifism, and contemporary cartoon culture as well.

As one of the first incidents of Japanese history introduced to the outside world, the vendetta became a staple in Western descriptions of the profoundly different culture, ones that warped along the way much of Japan's past, its ethics, values, and patterns of behavior. Compounding matters, some Japanese interpreters hawked the vendetta, claiming to explain thereby their supposedly unique national essence. With enduring appeal, even historical charisma, the vendetta became a cultural obsession, fascinating and disgusting, enchanting and deluding, inspiring and repulsing those trying to come to terms with it. Yet its accrued fame and infamy left few with any historically grounded understanding of what transpired in the first place. This study, by striving to document a credible narrative of the historical events of 1701–1703, seeks to return the integrity of primary sources to the forefront of understandings of the incident.

[2] Beatrice Bodart-Bailey, *The Dog Shogun: The Personality and Politics of Tokugawa Tsunayoshi* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), p. 160.

Out of the culturally rich Genroku period (1688–1704), the vendetta became the immediate sensation, leaving everything else – including masterful poetry, literature, and art – pale by comparison. Novelist Ihara Saikaku, poet Matsuo Bashō, philosopher Ogyū Sorai, and playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon attained considerable renown. Yet none compares with the leader of the forty-seven rōnin, Ōishi Yoshio, in terms of perennial, national, and international celebrity. Hardly had the rōnin completed their seppuku in 1703 than the incident began to elicit strong responses from erudite Confucians variously constructing vendetta narratives and appraising its ethics. One indication of the incident's sensational nature was the shogunate's ban on dramatic representations of it. Bypassing such efforts and beautifying its horrific dimensions, cultural doubles such as the puppet and kabuki play *Kanadehon Chūshingura* (*Storehouse of Loyal Retainers*, 1748) emerged, looking like history, albeit with aliases and altered spatiotemporal identities, massaged for mass appeal.

Spiritually, the rōnin vendetta occasioned three centuries of worship, remembrance, and veneration in Shinto shrines, Buddhist temples, and memorial sites all over Japan. These dimensions of the vendetta were integrally related to the popularity of its dramatic doubles, as theatre and religiosity inevitably overlapped, much as they had in earlier history with works of Nō drama calming the agitated spirits of those who had fallen tragically to fate. At another level, the spiritual standing of the rōnin had been central to the Confucian debates wherein an individual's ultimate devotion to loyalty and righteousness established his worthiness for sacrificial worship. In debating whether the rōnin were "loyal and righteous samurai" (*chūshin gishi*), Confucians were implicitly debating whether the rōnin merited legitimate temple-based reverence. Tracing and interpreting the vendetta's multiple, contested lives in spiritual culture is another objective of this study.

The vendetta is also one of the most infamous events in Japanese history. Legally, the rōnin and earlier their late master, Asano Naganori, were declared guilty of outrageous acts and sentenced to death by seppuku. Several Confucian scholars soon declared the rōnin lacking in any sense of righteousness and duty, and so denounced them for misguided expressions of homicidal loyalty on behalf of a lord whose ethical compass was, according to some contemporary accounts, equally warped. Vulgar parodies of the incident portrayed the rōnin as monsters or rapists, or with phallic imagery, bawdily caricaturing their

vendetta and thus distancing it from any form of respectable nobility and honor. Even though the rōnin were later elevated by the imperial state and its military as exemplars of self-sacrificing loyalty, some government propagandists also criticized the incident for displaying nothing more than a "minor righteous duty" compared to the grand variety worthy of the imperial throne.

In postwar Japan, the U.S. Occupation censored cultural expressions reminiscent of the vendetta, including those in textbooks, public discourse, literature, theatre, and film. In contemporary culture, some interpreters have cast the rōnin as cutthroat assassins who saw their mission exclusively in cold-hearted, strategic terms. Twenty-first-century popular culture, often embracing more positive, life-affirming expressions of heroism, has shunned the vendetta, compromising its standing as the iconic expression of Japanese culture. Internationally, hints of a shift away from rōnin culture came in 2013 when the Hollywood production *47 Ronin*, directed by and starring Keanu Reeves, ended up a monumental box office flop. Earlier, international events such as the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack made the vendetta's modus operandi profoundly problematic and difficult to own, much less revere and celebrate. Deconstructionists and postmodern commentators, in questioning absolute values and ethical icons, have spurned the vendetta as a feudal relic.

Considered comprehensively, the vendetta, in fame and infamy, is best recognized as one of the most contested events in early modern and modern Japanese history. In addressing the historical vendetta and then the debates, controversies, and interpretive tensions it spawned, this study advances an innovative paradigm for understanding the incident, one highlighting its historical capacity as an intellectual lightning rod, attracting if not catalyzing critical polarities and divergences in thought and action over the past three centuries. Along the way, it explores the vendetta's vicissitudes, showing that its standing as an almost universally known historical event, one with multifaceted modern and contemporary expressions, is deeply rooted in the Japanese historical experience and its efforts to invent and reinvent national exemplars.

The vendetta's historical waxing and waning as an iconic cultural expression is also analyzed. This book suggests that modern and contemporary technologies of cultural presentation have given the incident unprecedented levels of broadcast, yet in rendering it as mass entertainment, have emasculated its historical vitality and relevance.

Television, radio, cinema, and the Internet have repeatedly plumbed the vendetta, leaving it little more than a domesticated expression of history that middle-class Japan safely dominates and controls with the click of a remote. The rise in popular culture of myriad super-warriors, male and female, has questioned the dominant masculinity enshrined in the vendetta. As a result, *manga* and *anime* have tended to bypass traditional macho narratives in favor of the elastic possibilities of the historical imagination to recreate the past with newly invented, gender-diverse, and life-affirming cultural heroes and icons. Yet despite marked atrophy, the vendetta remains a versatile and resilient archetype, one that apparently has not and perhaps will not go quietly into the night.

Methodology, Sources, and Interpretation

Studies of the forty-seven rōnin incident sometimes drop the name "Chūshingura" in their titles, with an addendum explaining that they are not actually about the dramatic masterpiece *Kanadehon Chūshingura*, but instead are about the historical incident and its many cultural forms, including the play, that followed it. This approach, while sometimes merely headlining the vendetta's famous dramatic expression, blurs lines between documentable facts and their facsimiles in fiction. Without discounting *Chūshingura*, which made the historical vendetta far more significant than it ever would have been otherwise, this study mentions "Chūshingura" exclusively in reference to the play, or works that otherwise take it as their title. Herein, the historical events of 1701–1703, variously known as "the forty-seven rōnin vendetta," "the Akō incident," or "the Akō vendetta," are typically referred to as "the vendetta."

In grouping everything from Asano's attack on Kira, through the vendetta itself, and then beyond to the rōnin seppuku, together as an incident, this study continues an approach pioneered by Muro Kyūsō in his *Records of the Righteous Men of Akō Domain* (*Akō gijin roku*). The latter is a quasi-historical work that, along with its frequent credulity and pro-rōnin bias, presented the first major study of the events, from Asano's attack through the rōnin seppuku.[3] Muro's study, which preceded *Chūshingura* by four decades, was hardly compromised, in

[3] Muro Kyūsō, *Akō gijin roku*, in Ishii Shirō, ed., *Kinsei buke shisō*, Nihon shisō taikei, vol. 27 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1974), pp. 271–370.

interpretation or narrative, by the latter work. If anything, *Chūshingura* owes much to Muro regarding important aspects of the incident. For example, Muro early on described Kira as a greedy, vile individual who, when not bribed by Asano, humiliated him, prompting Asano's sword attack.

While extant documents do not substantiate Kira's greed beyond doubt, that interpretation came to be widely repeated as plain truth. Ironically, its broadcast was not due to Muro's text, but to the popularity of *Chūshingura* wherein Muro's interpretation of Kira as a rapacious bully reappeared, there to be seen and believed by theatregoers ever since. The result was a legend sprung from an early quasi-historical work that, in some of its undocumented interpretations, lent scholarly weight to dramatic efforts to make sense of what might have been a senseless, irrational attack that had nothing to do with greed, bribes, or money.

Muro was one of the most unabashed admirers of the rōnin, declaring them, in the title of his work, "righteous men" (*gijin*). This appellation goes well beyond objectivity and so will not be used here, except when quoting or summarizing sources that do use it. Nor will the forty-seven be called samurai. Following Asano's seppuku in the spring of 1701, the men who launched the vendetta were rōnin, or masterless men. Without meaning to disparage the forty-seven, this study differs with Muro by referring to them as such. On another count, while studies of pre-Meiji history often refer to major figures from Tokugawa times by their given names or their studio names (*gō*) instead of their family names, this study, rather than follow that Tokugawa practice and then switch in modern narratives to last names, typically refers to all historical persons by their last names. Thus, Asano Naganori is called Asano, and Kira Yoshinaka is called Kira. However, in discussing Asano family history or the Tokugawa line of shoguns, the given names are used to distinguish one family member from the next.

Another recounting of the vendetta appeared in the *Veritable Records of the Tokugawa House* (*Tokugawa jikki*), an early nineteenth-century work detailing events from the reign of Ieyasu, the founder of the shogunate, through the twelfth shogun, Ieyoshi. Although it offers no comprehensive account of the vendetta, the *Veritable Records* records pertinent events as it traces Tokugawa rule year by year. In 1701, it notes Asano Naganori's appointment as one of the hosts welcoming imperial emissaries bearing New Year's greetings to Tsunayoshi. It also documents Kira Yoshinaka's decades of service to

the shogunate as its master of ceremonies, including his ritual work at the imperial palace, the Ise Shrine, and the Nikkō Tōshōgū where Ieyasu was enshrined. Rumors about Kira's greed are mentioned, but they are recorded as just that, rumors.[4] Overall, entries mentioning Kira suggest that he was a man who helped define Tokugawa rule not in terms of battlefield power, but rather in terms of court rituals and high ceremony. The *Veritable Records* was, it must be remembered, an officially sponsored Tokugawa source rather than an unbiased, objective history. Thus, whatever the truth might have been, it would not likely have portrayed Kira as an evil minister who merited the brutal vigilante justice meted out by a band of vengeful rōnin.

Rather than Muro's *The Righteous Men of Akō Domain* or the shogunate's *Veritable Records*, this study relies largely on primary sources recognized by an array of historians as credible and reliable. Most of these sources have been reproduced in two modern compilations, *Documents on the Righteous Men of Akō Domain* (1910) and *Historical Sources on the Righteous Akō Samurai* (1931). While the titles to these two compendiums suggest bias in favor of the rōnin, many of the documents included are widely recognized as authentic, objective, and reliable. Three key sources inform this study's efforts to reconstruct, historically, what happened between 1701 and 1703: *Kajikawa's Diary* (*Kajikawa nikki*), an eyewitness description of Asano's attack on Kira; *Hakumyō's Memoir* (*Hakumyō waroku*), a Buddhist monk's memoir of his encounter with the rōnin at the Sengakuji; and *Accounts of Things Seen and Heard in Edo and Akō* (*Kōseki kenmonki*), a patchwork anthology documenting developments throughout the incident. Even these sources are not beyond reproach, making the project of impeccable historical reconstruction of the vendetta admittedly risky. Nevertheless, at the very least this study lays bare the sources and the events, as possible, hopefully without credulity or intentional fabrication. Other sources such as *Okado Denpachirō's Memoir*, attributed to an Edo Castle inspector, Okado Denpachirō, although widely viewed as a forgery, are also considered for the sake of laying bare apocryphal layers that later passed, in some accounts, into the quasi-historical record.[5]

[4] *Tokugawa jikki*, Kokushi taikei, vol. 43 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1999), pp. 427–433, 492–494.

[5] Nabeta Shōzan, ed., *Akō gijin sansho*, 3 vols. (Tokyo: Kokusho kankōkai, 1910). Chūō gishi kai, ed. *Akō gishi shiryō*, 3 vols. (Tokyo: Yūzankaku, 1931). Takeda Izumo and Shuzui Kenji, *Kanadehon Chūshingura* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1937).

In discussing the Confucian debates, this study follows the annotated modern editions of relevant essays and treatises found in *Early Modern Samurai Thought*, an anthology of sources published as part of the *Compendium of Japanese Thought* (Nihon shisō taikei) by the reputable Iwanami shoten. Discussions of *Chūshingura* are based on the Iwanami bunko text, published in 1937, and available online through the University of Virginia Japanese Text Initiative. Later Tokugawa, Meiji, and twentieth-century developments are analyzed, when possible, through modern, first editions. While notes are kept to a minimum, they are provided as necessary for a documented historical account.

An important secondary source is Shigeno Yasutsugu's *A True Account of the Righteous Akō Samurai* (*Akō gishi jitsuwa*, 1889), the first modern historical study of the vendetta.[6] Shigeno was a professor at Tokyo Imperial University and cofounder of the *Journal of History* and the Japanese Historical Society. A student of Ludwig Riess, who in turn had studied under Leopold von Ranke, Shigeno is known for applying the "scientific" methods of German historiography to traditional Japanese history. Famous for "eliminating" sources he deemed apocryphal, Shigeno, in his *True Account*, sought to distinguish the historical vendetta from *Chūshingura*, legendary fictions, and popular lore. As a first step, Shigeno compiled a list of sources with some classified as credible, others as partially credible, and still others as absurd fabrications. Many of his judgments remain widely accepted among vendetta scholars.

Yet even Shigeno had limitations. As the title to his work reveals, he praised the rōnin by referring to them as righteous samurai. The frontispiece of Shigeno's study is a reproduction of the rescript that the young Meiji emperor had delivered before the grave of the rōnin leader, Ōishi Yoshio, as he, the emperor, approached his new capital, Edo, soon renamed Tokyo. In prefacing his study with the rescript, Shigeno reminded his readers that the emperor – sacred and inviolable under the Meiji constitution, promulgated in 1889 (the year Shigeno's study was published) – had conveyed admiration for the rōnin vendetta. Thus, the father of objective historical research in modern Japan, though critical of dubious sources in other contexts, remained a man of his times regarding the rōnin vendetta. Postwar scholars affirm some

[6] Shigeno Yasutsugu, *Akō gishi jitsuwa* (Tokyo: Taiseikan, 1889).

ideals of scientific history, but also acknowledge that pure objectivity is unattainable because interpretive biases, often unrecognized, inevitably come into play. Rather than objective truth, the most realistic goal is an interpretive paradigm that garners credible consensus and lays foundations for future research. Such is the ambition of this book.

While following Shigeno and others in distinguishing *Chūshingura* the play from its historical antecedent, this study recognizes that highly respected historians of the incident such as Henry D. Smith II, without whose major contributions this study would have been impossible, speak of "Chūshingura" in reference to the historical event, the play, and other related cultural productions.[7] Many respected Japanese works, such as the multivolume compendium published by the Akō Municipal Office of Historical Studies, *Chūshingura* (1989–1997), provide ample precedent. Studies labeled "Chūshingura" admittedly garner attention because the dramatic production is better known than the historical event.[8]

Yet Smith also refers to the vendetta using other rubrics, and readily acknowledges that many historians favor "the Akō incident" due to its relative neutrality. Bitō Masahide's essay, translated by Smith as "The Akō Incident of 1701–1703,"[9] endorses this approach. Others such as Tahara Tsuguo, in his study of the Confucian debates, *Discussions of the Forty-Six Samurai of Akō Domain* (1978), have alluded to the titles of the Confucian essays in naming their own works. Miyazawa Seiichi, whose research on the vendetta has been more comprehensive than that

[7] Henry D. Smith II, "The Capacity of Chūshingura," *Monumenta Nipponica*, 58/1 (Spring 2003), pp. 1–42; " The Trouble with Terasaka: The Forty-Seventh Rōnin and the Chūshingura Imagination," *Japan Review*, vol. 16 (2004), pp. 3–65; "The Media and Politics of Japanese Popular History: The Case of the Akō Gishi," in James C. Baxter, ed., *Historical Consciousness, Historiography, and Modern Japanese Values* (Kyoto: International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 2006), pp. 75–97; "*Chūshingura* in the 1980s," in Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., *Revenge Drama in European Renaissance and Japanese Theatre* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2008), pp. 187–215; Federico Marcon and Henry D. Smith II, "A Chūshingura Palimpsest: Young Motoori Norinaga Hears the Story of the Akō Rōnin from a Buddhist Priest," *Monumenta Nipponica*, 58/4 (Winter 2003), pp. 439–465; Hyōdō Hiromi and Henry D. Smith II, "Singing Tales of the Gishi: *Naniwabushi* and the Forty-seven Rōnin in Late Meiji Japan," *Monumenta Nipponica*, 61/4 (Winter 2006), pp. 459–508.

[8] Akō shi sōmubu shishi hensanshitsu, *Chūshingura*. 7 vols. (Akō: Akō shi, 1987–).

[9] Smith, "*Chūshingura* in the 1980s," pp. 190, 209. Bitō Masahide, "The Akō Incident: 1701–1703," Henry D. Smith II, translator, *Monumenta Nipponica*, 58/2 (Summer 2003), pp. 149–170.

of any active Japanese scholar, and especially invaluable to this study in its coverage of modern developments, straddled the issue with his monograph, *The Masterless Samurai of Akō: Spinning Yarns of Chūshingura*, revealing his primary interest in the historical vendetta, but recognizing its cultural legacy in *Chūshingura* and other artistic, literary, spiritual, and philosophical spin-offs. Miyazawa's extensive studies provide, incidentally, much of the content in the coverage of the vendetta herein, especially in Meiji and post-Meiji modern times. Nevertheless, this study follows Tahara in using a title reminiscent of those in the Confucian debates, highlighting the climactic deeds of the forty-seven rōnin in relation to the entire incident. As noted previously, this study differs from earlier works in not referring to the vendetta as the work of "righteous samurai." Instead, it calls the agents of the vendetta what they were: rōnin, or masterless men.

Still, there is the question of number. Were there forty-six or forty-seven rōnin? Early Confucian essays addressing the vendetta sometimes refer to forty-six rather than forty-seven because in the end, forty-six men, following Kira's murder, were required to commit seppuku. However, one additional rōnin, Terasaka Kichiemon, was listed in the "Declaration of Asano Takumi-no-kami's Retainers" (*Asano Takumi-no-kami kerai kōjō*), an authentic document naming members of the vendetta group. By the latter count, there were forty-seven.[10] Mysteriously, Terasaka vanished after the rōnin arrived at the Sengakuji.[11] Some claimed that Terasaka was sent away to inform Asano's widow, Yōzeiin, and his younger brother, Asano Daigaku, about the vendetta's success.

Others concluded that Terasaka was dismissed by the samurai band because of his low standing as a foot soldier. The thinking was that a foot soldier did not merit the honor of seppuku. Still others speculate that Terasaka was simply a coward and ran rather than face

[10] Thomas J. Harper and Henry D. Smith II, "110 Manifesto," *Sengakuji Akō gishi kinenkan shūzōhin mokuroku/Memorial Hall of Akō Loyal Retainers, Sengakuji Temple Catalogue of the Collection* (Tokyo: Sengakuji, 2002), pp. 114–115. Shigeno, *Akō gishi jitsuwa*, pp. 118–122; Bitō, "The Akō Incident," p. 8; Miyazawa, *Akō rōshi*, pp. 175–176; *Akō gishi jiten*, pp. 85–86; Akō-shi, *Chūshingura*, vol. 1, pp. 174–180. Takumi-no-kami was Asano Naganori's court title. Kira Yoshinaka's title was Kozuke-no-suke.

[11] For a full discussion, see Henry D. Smith II, "The Trouble with Terasaka," pp. 3–65. Smith notes that there are several versions of Terasaka's account, but does not dismiss their authenticity.

punishment: certain death by public execution or, with samurai honor, by seppuku. Whatever the case, by the time the rōnin were divided for detention, there were only forty-six. Perhaps overwhelmed with the nearly four dozen men who had just completed a murderous vendetta, the shogunate did not launch a search for the one who disappeared. As things turned out, Terasaka passed away in 1747, nearly forty-five years after the vendetta. Early on, then, there were good reasons for referring to forty-six rather than forty-seven rōnin.

Nevertheless, the vendetta eventually came to be known as the work of forty-seven. Accepting the list of names on the "Declaration," this study refers to the vendetta as that of the forty-seven rōnin. In doing so, however, it acknowledges that the general tendency to accept forty-seven rather than forty-six is not due to early documents, but instead to *Kanadehon Chūshingura*. Donald Keene explains that the word *Kanadehon* alluded to "'a copybook of kana,' a penmanship book for writing the first forty-seven symbols making up the Japanese syllabary. The title calls attention to the coincidence between the number of *kana* and the number of heroes who took part in the vendetta (if we include one man who was only an honorary participant). There are references to this coincidence in the last act."[12]

The "honorary participant" Keene mentions is not, however, Terasaka. Keene's reference is to Kayano Sanpei, a former retainer of Asano Naganori who found himself torn between obligations to his family and his deceased lord. Rather than take sides, Kayano committed suicide on the fourteenth day of the first month, 1702. Because he had earlier pledged himself to the vendetta, an honorary gravestone was later placed alongside the original forty-six for those interred at the Sengakuji, just below that of their master, Asano Naganori. Yet another gravestone was added after Terasaka's death, bringing the total number to forty-eight. Sticking with the number of men listed in the "Declaration" as participants, this study refers to the vendetta as that of the forty-seven rōnin. Most frequently, however, for simplicity's sake, it is called "the vendetta."

Overall, this study analyzes the Akō vendetta as an ongoing, debate-ridden historical event, one giving rise to multifaceted, often provocative, and certainly disputed philosophical, ideological, artistic,

[12] Donald Keene, trans., *Chūshingura* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1971), p. ix.

and literary expressions in early modern, modern, and contemporary history. Examining the vendetta's conflicted metamorphoses in cultural history facilitates levels of analysis and understanding that transcend grisly narratives of decapitation and seppuku. Instead, the study highlights seminal issues integral to the debates over warrior honor and duty, especially as they relate to the problem of civil disobedience in service to affirmed ideals of rightness and justice.

Also addressed are spiritual nuances pertinent to the question of whether those who violate laws in serving their ideals should be deemed capital felons, or deities worthy of temple-based sacrificial reverence. Moreover, this study shows how three centuries of vendetta debates have crystalized a crucial nucleus, the vendetta, around which much of early modern, modern, and contemporary Japanese history might be configured. Discussions of this nucleus make evident, in turn, how early modern events and discourse about them remained alive and central to Meiji and twentieth-century struggles over Japan's samurai past and its relevance to future developments of history and culture.

Chapter Overviews

While the vendetta is widely known at one level or another, it is often grasped with little attention to the historical circumstances that spawned it. The first two chapters of this study offer a historically contextualized presentation of the vendetta, situating it vis-à-vis the time, place, and circumstances that the lord of Akō domain somehow became oblivious to. After all, what made the attack so outrageous, as the shogunal verdict stated, was Asano's utter disregard for the time and place, meaning the climactic day of the high ceremonial occasion so important to Tsunayoshi. This study highlights that ritual context and the politics of ceremonial power for understanding relations between the shogun and the emperor, the shogunal master of ceremonies and the distant daimyō, as well as the fate of the latter. Perceptions of the vendetta in later history were undeniably shaped by the fact that it sprang from a murderous attack proximate imperial emissaries hosted by the shogun, and cohosted by the ill-fated would-be assassin, Asano Naganori, lord of Akō domain.

The central theme of Chapters 3 and 4 relates to the contested, conflicted cultural complex from which the rōnin vendetta emerged.

Clearly either Asano Naganori had lost his senses or he found himself in a humiliating, grudge-based conflict with a shogunal official and sought to resolve it with his sword. Perhaps both were factors. More significant, however, was the reaction in Akō among Asano's former retainers. Although the vendetta is typically cast as a foregone conclusion of the rōnin, their writings reveal considerable disagreement, even vehement debate over what should be done. In negotiating this discord to a successful conclusion, the rōnin leader, Ōishi Yoshio, proved to be a shrewd and skillful manager of men, even if – as seems apparent – he did not always know in advance just what the right course might be.

Letters, memoirs, and other documents establish that the rōnin were hardly a homogenous group of single-mindedly loyal and honorable rōnin. Of the more than three hundred, only forty-seven, i.e., just over 15 percent, participated in the vendetta. The majority ended up walking away from the tragic loss of their lord. Even within the core group devoted to doing something, tensions and differences were real, and continued to simmer, to one degree or another, until the vendetta was done, and even thereafter.

One of the most well-documented, but often overlooked reverberations of the vendetta took the form of Confucian ethical discussions and debates over the rōnin and their deeds. Chapters 5 and 6 reveal that in those debates, the contested nature of the incident is again evident. Even in the writings of individual thinkers such as Hayashi Hōkō, a divided mind appears, recognizing on one hand the rōnin as intolerable violators of shogunal law, and yet on the other also acknowledging them as admirable exemplars of loyal and righteous devotion. Other thinkers praised the rōnin without hesitation, as did Muro Kyūsō, declaring unequivocally that they were "righteous samurai." Still others such as Satō Naokata denounced them as dishonorable men who were utterly misguided in their lawless, homicidal fury. In addition to highlighting the parameters of the debates, Chapters 5 and 6 suggest that they were not merely about whether the rōnin should be praised as loyal and righteous samurai, but whether they might merit, due to such recognition, legitimate sacrificial worship at shrines and temples dedicated to their memory. The fate of Yamaga Sokō's Confucian teachings in Edo, a philosophical casualty of the debates, is also explored within this context.

Prompt shogunal decrees meant to silence the Akō incident were, in the end, ineffective. Vendetta-related cultural expressions, the

subject of Chapters 7 and 8, surfaced prodigiously throughout the eighteenth century, typically in token disguise with thin aliases and alternative historical settings, but clearly addressing, at one level or another, the rōnin vendetta. Regardless of censorship, more literary, dramatic, and artistic reverberations came forth than from any other single event in early modern history. Of these, the most popular, *Kanadehon Chūshingura*, emerged, ironically, from puppet theatre and kabuki culture often patronized by urban merchants, artisans, and townspeople of early modern Japan. Decades before *Chūshingura*, multiple attempts at drafting suitable dramas were made, and in the decades after, still other attempts sought to rival the popularity of *Chūshingura*. Many were parodies, spoofing through thematic deconstruction *Chūshingura* and the vendetta at multiple levels.

Yet parody and satire hardly compromised the appeal of *Chūshingura*. Soon the play was translated into Chinese, and in often confused, summary form became a staple in Western accounts of Japanese history and culture. High-level woodblock artists tapped the virtually insatiable market for vendetta-related memorabilia, most featuring kabuki actors rather than the presumably less handsome rōnin of history. The late Tokugawa explosion of vendetta-related culture culminated in potent teachings prompting vendetta-inspired political activism. The latter, emerging from newly risen expressions of Yamaga Sokō's Confucian learning in the hinterlands, in turn contributed to the collapse of the Tokugawa and ushered in a new age, the Meiji, in which the historical deeds and their dramatic double, *Chūshingura*, became prominent – but not uncontested – icons of art, drama, philosophy, literature, ideology, and religion.

Chapters 9 and 10 examine the vendetta in modern Japanese history by first highlighting the importance of the Meiji emperor's rescript for pioneering a new, imperially sanctioned regard for Ōishi and the rōnin. Though sometimes noted, this rescript has not previously been assigned much significance. Yet arguably through it, the rōnin were no longer bound by their historical loyalty to their old-regime lord, Asano Naganori, but instead came to be posthumously enlisted by the young emperor as he and those managing his regime brought the rōnin into ideological service to the new imperial order. Thereafter, the vendetta reached new heights. Virtually every movement, from right-wing nationalism to the multifaceted forces of militarism, as well as left-

wing ideologies including Marxism, sought to appropriate the iconic rōnin for the sake of advancing their modern agendas. The forces of Taishō (1912–1926) liberalism and democracy equally embraced the vendetta by casting the rōnin as model protesters against corrupt and abusive regimes. Some of the most unfortunate modern reverberations, however, occurred during World War II as young officers time and again launched military pushes meant to realize their ideas regarding direct imperial-military rule.

In postwar Japan, Chapter 11 suggests, the vendetta moved from its wartime past and Occupation-imposed censorship to phenomenal popularity as mass entertainment on the silver screen and TV. By the 1970s, the vendetta had become a domesticated staple of postwar popular culture, entering homes across the land by the millions. By the early twenty-first century, vendetta entertainment had so saturated society that its tercentennial was anticlimactic, leaving observers wondering whether its spirit had finally been laid to rest, perhaps due to an overdose of mass media broadcasts. New perspectives from Japanese animation, especially the life-affirming super girl roles popularized in *Sailor Moon* and *Princess Mononoke*, made the suicide-driven honor ethic of the macho rōnin seem dated. New intellectual currents such as deconstructionism and postmodernism contributed to the relative decline if not demise of the vendetta, at least as traditionally conceptualized. Nevertheless, the cultural resilience of the vendetta over three centuries reflects its formidable capacity for navigating change and meeting if not overcoming the challenges of the future. If debate, discussion, and dialectic are the means to a better grasp of things, the vendetta's contested experience in cultural history has prepared it well to march forward with its new century and beyond.

1 TIME AND PLACE

The forty-seven rōnin vendetta is often traced to a sword attack by a samurai lord on a shogunal official. Little attention, however, has been devoted to the circumstances surrounding the attack. This chapter seeks to address those circumstances in an effort to better contextualize the crucial events that set the whole incident in motion. Overall, it suggests that the attack was not, in and of itself, so outrageously egregious. Rather, it was the samurai lord's complete disregard for the extraordinary circumstances of time and place that made his deed intolerable and subject to immediate judgment and punishment. This chapter identifies the historical players – the shogun, the master of ceremonies, and the samurai lord – central to the unfolding of the tragic events. Rather than provide a facile rehash casting the fight as one between heroes and villains, this chapter tries to lay bare the political, ceremonial, and personal complexities pertinent to all involved, hoping to illuminate the intrinsic historical ambiguities of the incident.

An Insane Attack?

The chain of events climaxing in the vendetta of 1703 began with a shocking act of violence committed just before the start of a high ceremonial occasion in the shogun's castle on the morning of the fourteenth day of the third month, 1701. According to the Western calendar, the date was April 21, 1701. For no apparent reason, one of the hosts, the young daimyō lord of Akō domain, Asano Naganori

(1667–1701), suddenly drew his sword and attacked the shogun's master of court ceremonies, the elderly Kira Yoshinaka (1641–1703). Kira was not killed, only seriously wounded. Yet intent to murder was manifest to all. Also, blood was spilled in the grand corridor bordering the ceremonial chambers. The attack was not, however, unprecedented. In 1684, four years after the reigning shogun, Tsunayoshi, assumed power, one of his grand councilors, Hotta Masatoshi, had been mortally wounded by a junior councilor, Inaba Masayasu, while in attendance at the shogun's castle. Inaba was cut down on the spot by senior councilors. Thereafter, Tsunayoshi distanced himself from his grand and senior councilors, and instead relied on his chamberlain and personal favorite, Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu, to mediate relations with the shogunal bureaucracy.

Hotta's murder helped shape what happened in 1701. When the shogun's verdict came down, it was largely the product of none other than Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu, a man who had risen to power following Hotta's assassination, and was not about to be lenient with another, attempted during an occasion wherein he and the shogun were present. The verdict was quick and severe. Yet rather than appeal to law, the shogunate condemned Asano to death for having forgotten the time and the place, and due to some private grudge, for having "behaved outrageously (*futodoki*)." Instead of highlighting its legal and institutional authority, the shogunate handed down a more subjective, but lethal judgment on Asano's ceremonial behavior. Implied was that while samurai might do such things with their swords, doing them while helping to host a ceremony in Edo Castle including representatives of the emperor and retired emperor was outrageous and intolerable.

With blood spilled in the castle, the site – and the ceremony – had been offensively polluted. In finding Asano guilty of outrageous behavior, Yanagisawa was, perhaps, referring to various breaches – of etiquette, law, and ritual purity – in one fell swoop. None questioned that Asano was in mortal trouble. Some instantly concluded that Asano must have been deranged (*ranshin*) when he committed the violence. Otherwise, its profound untimeliness was inexplicable. In the end, *ranshin*, or madness, might well be the most plausible explanation for Asano's sudden burst of murderous violence. Before examining these issues in detail, however, more needs to be said about the time, place, and people involved in the events of that fateful spring morning in 1701.