

THREE HUNDRED YEARS OF CHŪSHINGURA

# Confucian Perspectives on the Akō Revenge

## Law and Moral Agency

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**T**HE revenge perpetrated late in 1702 by his retainers for the death of Asano Naganori 浅野長矩 (1667–1701), daimyo of Akō, was an illegal act.<sup>1</sup> In Confucian terms, however, it was arguably a moral one. Its scale, drama, and proximity to the center of government and the poignancy of its outcome riveted the attention of contemporaries. Japanese Confucians of the Tokugawa period, the men most ready to offer moral comment on their times, subjected it to detailed and sustained discussion. Indeed, it has been suggested that the opinion of one, Ogyū Sorai 荻生徂徠 (1666–1728), influenced the decision of the bakufu authorities to sentence the perpetrators to the honorable punishment of seppuku.<sup>2</sup> The incident, beginning with the act of violence by Asano Naganori against Kira Yoshinaka 吉良義央 (1641–1702) in the third month of 1701 and ending with the ordered seppuku of Asano's retainers in the second month of 1703, continued to be the subject of argument among Japanese intellectuals

THE AUTHOR is university lecturer in Japanese, Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford. This exploratory essay draws heavily on the published work of a number of scholars who have dealt with aspects of the Akō revenge. As shown in the references, I am particularly indebted to the writings of Bitō Masahide 尾藤正英, Ishii Shirō 石井紫郎, Tahara Tsuguo 田原嗣郎, Eiko Ikegami, Michael Dalby, and Douglas Mills. I am also grateful to Henry D. Smith II and to the members of the Norwich Chūshingura workshop for their views. I have learned much over the years from Thomas Harper's wide and rigorous knowledge of the Akō revenge and its background and have benefited from his generous willingness to share that knowledge. I have benefited also from the knowledge of Wim Boot (University of Leiden) and my brother, David McMullen (University of Cambridge). However, the particular view taken here is my own. The writings of Confucian scholars on the Akō revenge are cited where possible from Ishii Shirō's annotated selection in NST 27.

This is the third of a series of articles on the Akō incident and its retellings. For background on the incident itself, see the previous articles in the series, carried in MN 58:1 and 58:2.

<sup>1</sup> Bakufu law required that vendettas be registered for written approval. See *Goyuijō gohōzō iri hyakkajō*, p. 351. No such registration, of course, took place in the case of the Akō revenge.

<sup>2</sup> *Sorai giritsusho*, p. 150; see Ishii 1974, p. 531. See also Maruyama 1974, p. 74; Hiraishi 1984, p. 52. For a discussion of the authenticity of this document, see Tahara 1978, pp. 65–69.

through the mid- and late Tokugawa period. The revenge itself has retained the lively interest of historians right up to the present. No less, the response of thinkers living at the time of the incident, the main topic of this article, has attracted the attention of intellectual historians. Analysis has exposed fault lines both within Japanese society itself and within Confucianism, the tradition through which most Tokugawa thinkers approached the incident.

### Questions

In political terms, the recent work of scholars such as Tahara Tsuguo 田原嗣郎 and Eiko Ikegami has shown that the incident reflected tension between the authority of a centralized regime and regional baronial autonomy. The debate that it inspired can be analyzed in the same way. In sociological terms, the impersonal legal authority of a centralized regime conflicted with the more personal loyalty implicit in delegated feudal power. For the participants in the incident, honor, as Ikegami argues, was a motivating force, as was the case with such feuds in early medieval Europe.<sup>3</sup> Most Confucian commentators, however, probably felt themselves to command a moral sensibility different from and more refined than that of the warrior perpetrators of the revenge.<sup>4</sup> For them, the revenge and its sequel were not primarily a question of honor. They tended to look, rather, to the underlying imperatives that they believed should govern conduct in their society. The Akō incident embodied a contradiction between the demands of morality and of law. It represented a conflict, built into Confucianism from its beginnings, between “ritual” (*rei* 礼) or “righteousness” (*gi* 義), on the one hand, and, on the other, “law” (*hō* 法) or “punishment” (*kei* 刑).<sup>5</sup> Or, in more familiar language, it posed the question, well known also in the West, of whether an action could be at once a moral duty and a crime.

To some extent, the issues resembled and overlapped with those raised by the related casuistical problem of conflict between loyalty and filial piety. This problem was archetypically expressed in the predicament of the son whose parent had been taken hostage by his lord’s enemy.<sup>6</sup> The son in this situation confronted the dilemma of having to choose either to rescue his parent at the cost of defending his lord’s interest (filial piety), or to sacrifice his parent for the sake of his lord (loyalty). Insofar as the obligation to avenge a lord or parent might conflict with familial or political duty, revenge was a subset of the larger problem. Two leading participants in the Akō revenge, Horibe Yasubei 堀部安兵衛 (1670–

<sup>3</sup> For an introduction to the culture of feuding and revenge in early medieval Europe, see Fletcher 2002, esp. pp. 115–19.

<sup>4</sup> For examples of this consciousness, see *Akō gijin roku* (Muro Kyūsō), p. 365, describing Ōishi Yoshio 大石良雄 and Ōtaka Gengo 大高源五, leaders of the revenge, as “warriors and without [Confucian] learning.” Dazai Shundai 太宰春台 referred to “the singular way” of Eastern samurai (*Akō shijūroku shi ron*, p. 410); Satō Naokata 佐藤直方 distinguished between the opinions of “common samurai” and “Confucians” (*Ichī bushi shijūroku shi ron*, p. 388).

<sup>5</sup> This dichotomy had been integral to the tradition since Confucius himself. See *Analects* II, 3 (i); Legge 1960a, p. 146.

<sup>6</sup> For an English language exploration, see McMullen 1987.

1703), writing to Ōishi Yoshio 大石良雄 (1659–1703), and Ōtaka Gengo 大高源五 (1672–1703), explaining his imminent death to his mother, commented on their predicament in precisely these terms.<sup>7</sup> In that both the imperative to revenge and the casuistical problem of conflict between loyalty to lord and filial piety to parent tested basic familial and political relationships, Tokugawa thinking about the Akō revenge reveals assumptions about the source and scope of moral, political, and legal authority in Japanese society. Most interesting and most important, it also discloses attitudes to moral responsibility and agency. In the background lay the further question how moral thought that was the product of one society was to be interpreted in a different cultural, social, and institutional context. To what extent were Chinese Confucian notions of moral responsibility and of the self applicable in a warrior society? Did the Japanese Confucian response to the problem of revenge remain true to Chinese Confucian assumptions, or did it accommodate local preferences? How did Confucians, subscribers to a humanist tradition, react to the large death toll incurred by the incident?

The larger problem of conflict between loyalty and filial piety elicited a varied response from Japanese intellectuals. A dominant trend, however, in contrast to the usual Chinese preference, accorded priority to loyalty or subsumed filial piety into the former value. For Japanese, in short, political values tended to assume priority over familial ones. This suggests that in the case of revenge also, Chinese assumptions might be subject to subtle adjustments. Controversy over revenge in the Chinese tradition itself further complicated the Japanese response to the actions of the Akō retainers. This controversy reflected historical change in China from the “feudal” Chou order to the centralized imperial state of the Han and later dynasties. As though to license debate, moreover, Emperor Hsientung 憲宗 (r. 805–820) of the T’ang was recorded in 811 as delegating discussion of the problems of revenge and the associated “dichotomy between ritual and law” (*li fa erh shih* 礼法二事) to his scholar-officials.<sup>8</sup> Two influential essays, by Liu Tsung-yuan 柳宗元 (773–819) and Han Yü 韓愈 (768–824), both celebrated literary stylists, resulted. Revenge thus became a topic on which a cultivated intellectual might appropriately express a view. In a Japanese intellectual community often emulous of China, this T’ang precedent seems to have unlocked expression of opinion. The resulting proliferation of essays on revenge, as well as the charge of the events themselves, lends interest to the debate over the Akō revenge.

<sup>7</sup> Horibe Yasubei to Ōishi Yoshio, [1701].8.8 (*Horibe Taketsune hikki*, p. 205); and Ōtaka Gengo to his mother, a Buddhist nun, [1702].9.5 (kanbun translation in *Akō gijin roku* [Muro Kyūsō], pp. 363–65). Both men, in preferring loyalty to filial piety, made choices that reflected the ethos of their warrior estate. Ōtaka asserted that he could have used his filial duty to look after his aged mother as a reason to refrain from participation in the revenge; he would not have been blamed for doing so, but he had chosen otherwise (*Akō gijin roku*, p. 325). Muro Kyūsō commented that Ōtaka Gengo was “a warrior and without [Confucian] learning.” Nonetheless, the “narrow and coarse” nature of his action was lifted beyond reproach by its moral purity (*Akō gijin roku*, p. 365).

<sup>8</sup> See *Fu-ch’ou chuang* (Han Yü), p. 128.

Much of this extensive literature from the mid- or late Tokugawa period remains unpublished and unexplored, at least outside Japan. The opinions of major thinkers close to the events, however, are well known and accessible. This essay examines the views of two men in particular, Satō Naokata 佐藤直方 (1650–1719) and Asami Keisai 浅見綱斎 (1652–1711), who both wrote within a few years of the Akō incident. Both were followers of the same Confucian teacher, Yamazaki Ansai 山崎闇齋 (1618–1682), and members of his Kimon 崎門 school. They passed diametrically opposing judgments, however, on the perpetrators of the revenge. For Naokata, they were miscreants; for Keisai, heroes. Yet, significantly, the temper of their arguments had much in common. In terms of the Confucian tradition that both espoused, their views were extreme, if not unorthodox.

### *Chinese Perspectives on Revenge*

For Japanese Confucians, Chinese experience set the broad terms for the discussion. Particularly important was the sanction of vengeance for the killing of parents, relatives, or lords to be found in canonical texts such as *Li chi* 礼記,<sup>9</sup> *Chou li* 周礼,<sup>10</sup> and the *Kung-yang* 公羊 commentary to the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.<sup>11</sup> Vengeance of this sort could be regarded as a moral imperative, attesting to the value placed on familial relationships and those of social or political obligation in Chou dynasty “feudal” society. As the Chinese polity became more centralized, however, unregulated resort to reciprocal violence posed obvious problems to political power; it came to be assumed that violence must be the monopoly, or at least under the control, of the state.<sup>12</sup> The Confucian moral tradition, moreover, was humanistic and tended to reject violence. Already in the canonical period, Mencius (Meng Tzu 孟子; 371–289 B.C.E.) had warned of the bloody chain of revenge precipitated by killing a man.<sup>13</sup> The *Chou li* recorded “conciliators” (*tiao-jen* 調人) whose office was to intervene between the avenger and his intended victim.<sup>14</sup> The *Kung-yang* commentary, moreover, restricted the circumstances under which lords or rulers might be legitimate objects of vengeance. It described as “permissible” the famous action of Wu Tzu-hsü 伍子胥 (sixth-fifth century B.C.E.) in exacting vengeance on King P’ing of Ch’u 楚平王 for the unjust killing of his father; but it specifically denied the legitimacy of revenge against a lord who had executed a person for justifiable reasons.<sup>15</sup>

Yet the problem of reconciling a feudal morality with the reliance on law and punishment of a more centralized state continued to trouble both rulers and

<sup>9</sup> “Ch’ü li” 曲礼 2 (10); Legge 1967, vol. 1, p. 92; also “T’an kung” 檀弓 1 (ii), 24; Legge 1967, vol. 1, p. 140. Neither of these passages mention vengeance on behalf of “lord” or “ruler.”

<sup>10</sup> “Ti kuan” 地官, “Tiao-jen” 調人; Biot 1851, vol. 1, pp. 303–306.

<sup>11</sup> Ting Kung 定公, year 4, 11th month; *Kung-yang*, p. 5,075.

<sup>12</sup> This was pointed out by Ogyū Sorai in his *Seidan* 政談. See Lidin 1999, p. 288.

<sup>13</sup> Mencius VIIB, 7; Legge 1960b, p. 481.

<sup>14</sup> See above, note 10.

<sup>15</sup> *Kung-yang*, p. 5,075; Lewis 1990, pp. 84–85; for a general account of the Wu Tzu-hsü narrative, see Johnson 1981.

moralists in China, much as it was to in Tokugawa Japan. Under the empire, revenge seems most frequently to have been rooted in familial, rather than social, ties, and to have involved a son or daughter avenging the murder of an ascendant. One possible response open to rulers, of course, was outright prohibition. This occurred, apparently, under the Han and during the Six Dynasties.<sup>16</sup> During the T'ang and Sung periods, the eras, after the canonical period, best known to Japanese, evidently no law was issued, but the problem became the subject of public discussion. One solution advocated has been termed "symbolic compromise": both to punish and reward avengers.<sup>17</sup> This had been proposed by Ch'en Tzu-ang 陳子昂 (661–702) who lived during the regime of the T'ang Empress Wu 武后 (r. 690–705), in the case of Hsü Yuan-ch'ing 徐元慶. Hsü had taken vengeance against a local official who had killed his father, and had then surrendered to the authorities. Ch'en proposed that Hsü should be executed, but that his house should be awarded a banner for his filial piety. In this way, both the inviolability of the law and the moral status of revenge on behalf of a parent would be accommodated. This solution was acclaimed at the time and appears to have become standard practice, at least for a while. It also influenced Japanese Confucian responses to the Akō revenge.

Ch'en Tzu-ang's solution of "symbolic compromise" was, however, explicitly criticized some hundred years after his time by Liu Tsung-yuan. Liu found it contradictory and confusing. He advocated a broader approach: the moral probity of all parties to a revenge, including those implicated in their official capacity, should be thoroughly investigated before judgments were handed down. The order of society was preserved by two institutions: "ritual" (*li* 禮), which was essentially a positive sanction, and "criminal law" or punishment (*hsing* 刑), which was a negative one. Judgments should therefore opt clearly either for moral recognition or for criminal punishment; they should not compromise.<sup>18</sup> Liu's contemporary Han Yü also advocated a flexible approach. He stressed the heterogeneity of acts of revenge and the need for careful official consideration of each case, with the emperor exercising final judgment.<sup>19</sup> And in the Sung, Chu Hsi 朱熹 (1130–1200), who endorsed revenge against the killers of both parents and rulers,<sup>20</sup> did not scruple to impugn the morality of the decision of Emperor Hsüan-tsung 玄宗 (r. 712–756) of the T'ang to execute two young perpetrators

<sup>16</sup> Ch'ü 1965, pp. 80–81.

<sup>17</sup> Dalby 1981, p. 279.

<sup>18</sup> See *Po fu-ch'ou i* (Liu Tsung-yuan), pp. 23–29.

<sup>19</sup> See *Fu-ch'ou chuang* (Han Yü), pp. 128–33. For the T'ang emperor's responsibility to review all capital criminal cases, see Johnson and Twitchett 1993, p. 134.

<sup>20</sup> For Chu Hsi's endorsement of revenge against killers of parents, see "Ta Li Ching tzu shu," p. 36b. Here, in the context of a discussion of the graded intensity of kinship relationships, Chu alludes to the "T'an kung" book of *Li chi* (see above, note 9), which mentions only revenge on behalf of "father and mother." Elsewhere, in the context of state revenge in response to the Chin aggression against China, Chu modified this quotation by interpolating the word *chün* 君 (lord) before "father" and omitting "mother." See "Wu-wu tang-i hsü." This passage is quoted in Morohashi 1929, p. 864; see also McMullen 1987, p. 62.

of a revenge against an official whom they believed to have caused their father's death unjustly.<sup>21</sup> In these views, there is a willingness to distinguish men, including an emperor, as moral actors from the hierarchical positions that they occupy. Their conduct is examined according to values that transcended, rather than were particular to, their status. Such approaches suggest a degree of tolerance and pluralism. They recognize individuals as independent moral agents, and they may be described as universalist.<sup>22</sup>

With the exception of Wu Tzu-hsü, the examples of revenge that feature prominently in the Chinese literature tended to be local in importance and not to shock the center of political power as did the Akō revenge in Japan. Still, they suggested a range of approaches on which Japanese Confucians might draw in responding to the events of 1700–1703. The most favored Japanese response perpetuated the “symbolic compromise” of Ch'en Tzu-ang, albeit with varying emphases. This solution can be seen, for instance, in *Fukushūron* 復讐論 (before 1705) of Hayashi Hōkō 林鳳岡 (1644–1732)<sup>23</sup> and in other texts such as *Akō gijin roku* 赤穂義人録 (1703), a long account of the incident sympathetic to the avengers written by Muro Kyūsō 室鳩巢 (1658–1734).<sup>24</sup> It may also have influenced the view of Ogyū Sorai in his memorial of advice to the bakufu following the surrender of the forty-six. Sorai approved their “righteousness,” but also recognized the need to preserve “the law of the realm” (*tenka no hō* 天下の法).<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> The case was a complicated one. In 731, a local official, Chang Shen-su 張審素, was accused of bribery. Yang Wang 楊汪, sent to investigate, was intimidated by a subordinate of Chang into exculpating Chang. Subsequently Yang's intimidator was killed, and Yang changed his stance to support the accusations against Chang. Chang was then executed. Chang's two young sons were banished, but escaped, and in 735 they killed Yang, only to be arrested in due course themselves. Their case attracted public sympathy on the grounds of their filial piety. Chang Chiu-ling 張九齡 (673–740) wished to spare their lives, but P'ei Yao-ch'ing 裴耀卿 (681–743) and Li Lin-fu 李林甫 (d. 752) argued for their execution, on the grounds that to pardon them would subvert national law. Emperor Hsüan-tsung supported the case for execution, and the sons were beaten to death. Chu Hsi's position was that Chang had been unjustly executed since his guilt had not been established. In the account of this episode in his history of China, Chu Hsi recorded the sons' execution with the formula “because they took vengeance against their father's enemy, they were murdered (*sha* 殺) by beating on imperial order.” This wording in effect criticized the emperor for misjudgment. See *Tzu-chih t'ung-chien*, K'ai-yüan 開元 19 (731), tenth month, and 23 (735), second month; vol. 57, chüan 213, pp. 16a–b, and chüan 214, pp. 4a–b; and *Tzu-chih t'ung-chien kang-mu*, K'ai-yüan 23, third month; chüan 43, pp. 108a–109b; quoted, with helpful explication, by Bitō 1961, p. 123.

<sup>22</sup> Yet another view was that of Wang An-shih 王安石 (1021–1086), who held that revenge should be spiritualized and find no expression in action. It should be sublimated into “a passive, inward-turning, psychologically constrained notion of inaction.” See Dalby 1981, pp. 289–91. Further research is required to see if this view attracted any following in Japan.

<sup>23</sup> *Fukushūron* (Hayashi Hōkō), pp. 372–75; partial English translation in Maruyama 1974, p. 73. This essay alludes to “T'ang and Sung discussions” of revenge. There would seem little doubt that Hōkō was familiar with Ch'en Tzu-ang's symbolic compromise solution through Liu Tsung-yuan's description of it in his well-known essay.

<sup>24</sup> In his admiration for the revenge Kyūsō came close to the position of Asami Keisai described below. While praising the avengers as “righteous,” in the preface to his *Akō gijin roku*, he also, however, denied any intention to fault the official response to their action (*Akō gijin roku*, p. 271).

<sup>25</sup> *Sorai giritsusho*, p. 150; cf. Maruyama 1974, p. 74; Hiraishi 1984, p. 52. In the context of

This was, moreover, essentially the solution adopted by the bakufu itself in sentencing the forty-six to death but permitting them the honor of committing suicide. This stance implicitly recognized that in Japan, too, the historical conflict between feudal morality and central power was unresolvable. An act of revenge could indeed be both illegal and moral, but its moral purpose could be fulfilled only at the cost of the life of its perpetrator.

A variant approach, however, was to absolutize either “ritual” or law. The corollary was to diminish or nullify the remaining imperative, either by marginalizing it or by subsuming it into the absolutized alternative. This solution resembled Liu Tsung-yuan’s in its avoidance of compromise, but differed in denying the equal validity of ritual and law. Nor could it readily accommodate any dispersal of guilt or shading of blame. The views of Satō Naokata and Asami Keisai illustrate this absolutist approach particularly clearly. They were among the first major thinkers to comment on the incident. This relative closeness to the events, together with the widespread strength of feeling on the issue, may help explain the shared intensity of their reaction. As with the “symbolic compromise” solution, neither questioned the inevitability of the execution of the forty-six. The two men approached the incident, however, from diametrically opposing directions.

### *Satō Naokata: The Privileging of Law over Ritual*

Satō Naokata was in some ways among the most high-minded and idealistic of Tokugawa Confucian thinkers. He was a believer in reason and in dynastic revolution, a euhemerist, a universalist, and a rejector of the Japanese exceptionalism that clouded the thinking of some fellow Kimon scholars. These attractive

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Sorai’s mature thought, it may be pointed out, “righteousness” was a man-made, relative value rather than the transcendent imperative that it was for Chu Hsi Neo-Confucians. Sorai seems to relegate the value in this instance to the private sphere of action.

In addition to his *Giritsusho*, Sorai wrote an essay known under the title *Shijūshichi shi no koto o ronzu* 論四十七事. This essay criticized “the forty-seven” for wrongly assuming that Kira Yoshinaka was their lord’s enemy and the appropriate object of their revenge. The crime was Asano’s, and the avengers had misguidedly “perpetuated his evil purpose.” See *Shijūshichi shi no koto o ronzu* (Ogyū Sorai), p. 400. The circumstances of the incident paralleled those of the five hundred followers of T’ien Heng 田橫. A minister of the state of Ch’i 齊, T’ien had killed the messengers of the King of Han 漢王, the later Emperor Han Kao-tsu 漢高祖 (r. 202–195 B.C.E.). When Kao-tsu became emperor of all China, he summoned T’ien Heng, who, fearing punishment, had taken refuge with his followers on an island in the sea. But T’ien, evidently still fearing punishment, committed suicide; his five hundred followers followed suit. For the story, see *Shih chi*, pp. 2,646–649. These suicides had traditionally been regarded as especially moving, and had been cited with approval by Hayashi Hōkō in his essay on the Akō revenge (*Fukushūron* [Hayashi Hōkō], p. 373). But Sorai’s view seems to have been that the five hundred had been mistaken in focusing their self-sacrificial loyalty on T’ien Heng. Tahara also suggests that Sorai felt that the “forty-seven” should, like the Kazusa peasant Ichibei 市兵衛, whom he extolled for loyally striving to protect the interests of his wrongly punished village elder, have been actively concerned with the protection of the future of the Asano house (Tahara 1978, pp. 156–62). Interestingly, this essay was dropped from the printed edition of Sorai’s works published in 1740 and was transmitted only in a manuscript supplementary volume; see the headnote to *Shijūshichi shi no koto o ronzu* (Ogyū Sorai), p. 400.

traits might encourage the expectation that he would take a broad view of the revenge. Universalism there is in Naokata's opinion, but it is not of a very Confucian kind. In fact, he radically privileged law over "ritual." So strong was his preference for law that Bitō Masahide 尾藤正英, who has written incisively on this thinker, associates his view with that of the Legalists in China.<sup>26</sup> Yet, quite aside from his devotion to Chu Hsi, Naokata was not a Legalist, for he identified a moral as well as legal dimension in the authority of the shogun.

Naokata's views on the Akō revenge are found in a series of short essays, responses to questions, and other informal pieces written over more than a decade. Of these, the first, *Satō Naokata shijūrokunin no hikki* 佐藤直方四十六人筆記 of 1705 or earlier, most directly expresses his opinion. He began declaring of the shogun's sentence of seppuku on the forty-six that its "righteousness" (*giri* 義理) was "clear." The corollary was that the forty-six could not be right. "If the orders of official judgment accord with principle, how can [the forty-six] not be unrighteous?" The celebration of the men as loyal vassals by Hayashi Hōkō and others incensed him. This was not, as some scholars argued, a genuine case of Confucian revenge. The forty-six had mistakenly identified Kira Yoshinaka as their enemy. In fact, their own daimyo, Asano Naganori, was a criminal who had broken the law by assaulting Kira, unsuccessfully, in the shogunal palace. "[Asano] lacked courage and talent and was extremely laughable. It was properly in accordance with the principle of things that he should be subject to execution and have his lands taken." Kira's undignified behavior might also have earned him mockery, but he was clearly not Asano's enemy. "The forty-six, without chagrin for their lord's great crime, turned their backs on the shogun's orders, donned weaponry and adopted passwords and codes, and attacked using the methods of the battlefield. This was a further great crime on their part." Had they repented of their deluded action and committed suicide at Sengakuji 泉岳寺, they might have earned some pity. Instead, their surrender and request to await the sentence of the shogun was a devious ruse to escape death and gain employment in other domains. "This is not the action of those resolved to die." The reason for the widespread sympathy with the forty-six was that Kira's greed and survival after the initial incident had distorted perceptions of the events.<sup>27</sup>

Over a decade later, in notes written in 1718 in reply to questions on the revenge from fellow Kimon disciple Miyake Shōsai 三宅尚齋 (1662–1741), Naokata's opinion had not changed. The forty-six had shown immoral lack of respect for the government. "Even if, through lack of understanding, they were convinced [that Kira was their] enemy, to treat the judgment of the government that way makes them major offenders in the extreme. In reason and truth, theirs is a very great immorality (*mō* 妄). Ultimately, it is the same thing as having assaulted the government." Naokata discounted the retainers' alleged high-minded motivation, affirming that actions should be judged by their consequences,

<sup>26</sup> Bitō 1961, p. 115.

<sup>27</sup> *Satō Naokata shijūrokunin no hikki*, pp. 378–80.



in this case the criminal contravention of authority and the murder of a man held innocent by the judgment of the shogun.<sup>28</sup> In another, undated piece, he reported with approval a samurai's opinion that though the actions of the forty-six were widely admired by chōnin, viewed as a revenge, they were unexceptional for warriors in Japan.<sup>29</sup> And in a separate essay, he affirmed that, in legal terms, the attack on Kira should not be regarded as a case of a quarrel (*kenka* 喧嘩). Had it been, according to the practice of *kenka ryōseibai* 喧嘩兩成敗, whereby both parties to a quarrel were punished, both men should have been executed. But Kira had been simply the victim of an assault.<sup>30</sup>

In one way, Naokata's view is consonant with a theme in Chinese Confucian thinking on revenge, for the *Kung-yang* commentary had held that there could be no revenge on behalf of a criminal rightly executed, as Naokata claimed was the case with Asano. But the tone of Naokata's argument differs from normal Confucian discourse. Politically, perhaps influenced by residence in Edo, he saw the problem exclusively from an absolutist ruler's point of view. His formal, legalistic attitude, discounting of the widely perceived high motivation of the forty-six, and emphasis on the ex cathedra authority of the shogun seem unusual, if not actually incongruous, in a follower of Chu Hsi. Over the matter of vengeance against a lord, Naokata went further than Chu himself. He ruled out revenge against a man's lord under any circumstances. "If [a vassal] suffers the killing of his father by his lord, however unreasonably, there is no revenge to be exacted by the vassal."<sup>31</sup> He also dissented from Chu's cautious approval of Wu Tzu-hsü's revenge against King P'ing.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Shigekata monmoku* (Satō Naokata), pp. 380–84. In stating that actions should be judged by their consequences, Naokata cited Chu Hsi's *Chin ssu lu* 近思錄. For the relevant passage, see Chan 1967, p. 285.

<sup>29</sup> *Shijūroku shi hi gishi ron* (Satō Naokata), pp. 386–87.

<sup>30</sup> *Asano Kira hi kenka ron* (Satō Naokata), pp. 384–85. For the practice of *kenka ryōseibai*, see Ikegami 1995, pp. 141–46; 197–203. Concerning the relevance of this practice to the Akō incident, see also the article by Bitō Masahide in the previous issue, Bitō 2003, pp. 154–55.

<sup>31</sup> *Aru hito Asano no shin Kira o utsu o ronzu: Naokata shuhi*, p. 82. Naokata quoted Chu Hsi in support of a son simply not serving the state if the father had been executed without just cause (cf. *Chu tzu yü-lei*, vol. 8, p. 3,241; examples from the Chin 晉 dynasty). For Naokata, this seems to have been an argument against the Akō revenge. He probably thought of the shogun as the "lord" of the forty-six. Bitō writes that Naokata "had the centralized bureaucratic society of China in his mind" and "did not consider deeply . . . whether or not bakufu law and judgments were actually lord's orders for the vassals of the Asano house" (Bitō 1961, p. 114).

Naokata's main source for Chu's views on of revenge was the latter's "Ta Li Ching tzu shu." Here, as noted above, Chu alludes to the "T'an kung" book of *Li chi*, which mentions only "father and mother" as the subject of revenge. Naokata quoted this letter repeatedly in his comments on the Akō revenge and seems to have disregarded Chu's expansion in other contexts of *Li chi*'s scope of revenge to include vengeance on behalf of one's "ruler" or "lord" (see above, notes 9 and 20).

<sup>32</sup> Chu Hsi had approved Wu's revenge on the grounds that his father had been unjustly executed, and because he had fled from Ch'u and no longer had any mourning obligation to King P'ing (as indicated in *Li chi*, "T'an kung" II (ii), 1; Legge 1967, vol. 1, p. 173; the text here asks rhetorically, "How [in view of the way modern rulers dismiss their officers] should there be the observance of that rule about still wearing mourning [for previous rulers]?). Chu's was hardly,

Chu Hsi certainly believed in law and punishments; he is said to have considered the punishments of his own day too lenient.<sup>33</sup> But, as an orthodox Confucian, he more characteristically viewed society and social order in terms of individual moral regeneration and action, rather than law. It is difficult to see a practical commitment to these beliefs in Naokata's thought. Bitō, in fact, finds a void in Naokata's thinking between the law or state authority on the one hand and the role of the individual on the other. This void is filled by what Naokata calls *menoko zan'yō* 目ノ子算用 (calculation based on objective evidence). Bitō identifies *menoko zan'yō* not as Chu Hsi-type moral "knowledge" acquired by the "exhaustive pursuit of principle," but as a pragmatic and amoral rationality. In other words, men should simply behave pragmatically under the law. Naokata's high-minded Confucian ideals thus had little or no purchase on late-seventeenth-century Japanese reality; they were chimerical, divorced from everyday life. Complementing this, Bitō also finds a tendency in Naokata's thought to a kind of socially withdrawn Zen-like spirituality.<sup>34</sup> Against this background, Naokata accepted the hierarchical dispositions of Tokugawa society, rather than the individual's own moral cognition, as the determinants of moral practice. He did not, for all practical purposes, recognize the individual as an independent moral agent.

### *Asami Keisai: The Imperative of Absolute Loyalty*

Asami Keisai's views were quite different. He was, it must first be mentioned, a proponent of absolute loyalty of vassals to their lords or subjects to their rulers. Such loyalty, he held, was inviolable even if it required the vassal to sacrifice his life.<sup>35</sup> Keisai's major discussion of the Akō revenge, *Keisai-sensei shijūroku shi ron* 網齋先生四十六士論, is thought to have been written in 1706 or later, and passages in it explicitly rebut Satō Naokata's *Shijūrokunin no hikki*. In contrast

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however, a ringing endorsement. "He should not be called a 'rebellious minister or villainous son'" (see *Chu tzu yü-lei*, vol. 8, p. 3,211). Chu was clearly worried about legitimating revenge against rulers in the changed context of a unified imperial state. Elsewhere, in an even more cautious opinion on Wu, Chu asserted that the case did not legitimate revenge against a man's lord or ruler (*Chu tzu yü-lei*, vol. 8, p. 3,199).

Naokata argued that "although Tzu-hsü did not serve King P'ing, since his father did so, he was [still] King P'ing's vassal." This was thus a vassal killing his own lord, something of which Chu Hsi would not approve. Chu's positive view of Wu (seen in the first passage from *Chu tzu yü-lei* cited above) was "extremely doubtful," a "temporary theory; it cannot be his settled view." Naokata felt that he had the support of Chu Hsi's contemporary and fellow Neo-Confucian Chang Nan-hsien 張南軒 (1133–1181) in condemning Wu (see *Asano Kira hi kenka ron*, p. 382; Bitō 1961, p. 118). Naokata did not note, however, that the circumstances of this case do not parallel those of the Akō revenge. It seems likely that his real purpose in questioning Chu Hsi's tentative approval of Wu Tzu-hsü was to tarnish one of the most famous examples of revenge against a ruler in the Chinese tradition, and thus rhetorically to undermine the legitimacy of revenge against feudal superiors in general.

<sup>33</sup> Schirokauer 1962, p. 187.

<sup>34</sup> Bitō 1961, pp. 130–31.

<sup>35</sup> For Keisai's view of loyalty, see McMullen 1987, pp. 83–87.

to Naokata's state-centered view, Keisai adopts the perspective of the forty-six themselves. His intention is to vindicate their loyalty, and to absolve them from "unrighteousness to the realm" and the other "various spurious charges" that "exist as a consequence." Keisai states his position unambiguously at the outset. "Ultimately, the essential loyalty of the company of forty-six is beyond dispute." Since Kira in effect had caused Asano's death, Asano's vassals would default on the "great righteousness" to their lord if they did not consummate his purpose to kill Kira. The fact that Kira had been exculpated by authority was merely "the background situation" (*daitai no koto* 大体ノコト); it did not affect the vassals' obligation to kill him. "There is no great righteousness (*taigi* 大義; sc. major moral imperative) not to attack [Kira] out of deference to the shogun on the grounds that the shogun had pardoned him."<sup>36</sup>

This affirmation of the righteousness of the forty-six implicitly required Keisai to fault the shogun's handling of the case. In legal terms, Keisai concluded, Asano's assault of Kira had been an instance of *kenka ryōseibai* among fellow samurai (*dōshi* 同士). He had shown lack of caution in the shogun's court, but he had not had the slightest hostility against the shogun. Had he killed Kira, he would have committed suicide, or, if frustrated in that, "would have concurred with his own execution." If Asano were to be executed for creating a disturbance at the site of a court ceremony, Kira, who had precipitated the disturbance through willfulness, should also be punished.<sup>37</sup> But despite indicating that the shogun's disposition of the case had been unbalanced, Keisai did not present this criticism as in any way justifying protest against it. Keisai held that the forty-six were rear vassals of the shogun; it was a rear vassal's duty to obey his lord's lord, whether that lord was right or wrong.<sup>38</sup> To clarify this point, Keisai introduced a well-known historical precedent from the twelfth century. The Soga 曾我 brothers' revenge against Kudō Suketsune 工藤祐経 (?-1193), though he had been pardoned by Minamoto no Yoritomo 源頼朝 (1147-1199), in itself had been in no way disloyal.<sup>39</sup> What had been "a great unrighteousness and disloyalty" was their subsequent expression of resentment against Yoritomo. By contrast, the leader of the forty-six, Ōishi Yoshio, had not shown any opposition to the shogunate. Further, the forty-six had submitted to the bakufu after the attack on Kira. This showed that their behavior "was in accord with their lord's consistent loyalty to the shogun." The shogun had implicitly recognized this loyalty through generous treatment of the forty-six, by refraining from punishing their families, and by granting them tombs. But "even had it not been so and had the bones of

<sup>36</sup> *Keisai-sensei shijūroku shi ron*, pp. 390-91.

<sup>37</sup> *Keisai-sensei shijūroku shi ron*, p. 391. Kira, in Keisai's view, had been guilty of disloyalty to his lord through dereliction of his duty as the government officer in charge of ceremonial and through provoking Asano. In spite of this, he had not received the punishment of execution that he deserved.

<sup>38</sup> Compare Keisai's acclaim for the exemplary King Wen 文 for remaining steadfastly loyal to his unrighteous lord, King Chou 紂. See *Kōyūsō shisetsu*, esp. pp. 230-32.

<sup>39</sup> For details, see Mills 1976, pp. 530-31, 536.

their children and grandchildren been ground to dust, their attitude of loyalty would never be impugned.”<sup>40</sup>

Several features stand out in Keisai’s arguments: a passionate sympathy for the forty-six; a tendency to view the incident in terms of loyalty rather than as an act of revenge; the belief that the absolute imperative of loyalty transcended right or wrong and life or death; and the belief that the forty-six had consistently demonstrated that loyalty, to their lord first, but also, by their act of surrender, to their lord’s lord, the shogun. For Keisai, the failings of Asano himself did not release his retainers from their “greater righteousness” of loyalty to him. Nor did the implied injustice of Asano’s punishment release them from loyalty to the shogun. Absolute loyalty required obedience to superiors, whatever their moral circumstances. Such obedience was due both to immediate superiors and, upholding the latter’s duty as well, by extension to their superiors. If these obligations conflicted, the subject was condemned to pay the price. Such unconditional acceptance of hierarchical authority is un-Confucian. It disregards the high Confucian ideal that loyalty has a conditional and self-reflexive aspect, requiring the exercise of a degree of independent moral judgment, even by those in positions of subordination. Like Naokata, therefore, Keisai did not recognize individuals as moral agents who could act to any extent independently of their particularistic social circumstances.

### *Two Kinds of Absolutism*

Naokata and Keisai thus unraveled the symbolic compromise of Ch’ en Tzu-ang into its component elements. In terms of the tension between law and ritual or morality that informs their discussion, they made divergent choices and opposing judgments. Each preferred to focus on the Akō revenge as either crime or duty, but not as both. Viewing the incident from the vantage chiefly of the bakufu and the law, as it were from the apex of the political pyramid down, Naokata saw it negatively. His perspective could be described as Edo-centered. For him, “public law” was an absolute; the shogun’s orders acquired moral legitimacy by virtue of emanating from the shogun as lord. The problem of the conduct of Asano and the forty-six was primarily an objective, formal one of transgressing

<sup>40</sup> Summarizing *Keisai-sensei shijūroku shi ron*, pp. 391–92. The remainder of Keisai’s essay (pp. 392–97) rebutted accusations, mainly Naokata’s, against Asano and the forty-six. Keisai rejected the “despicable argument” that the motive of the revenge was financial; he also countered assertions that the failure of the forty-six to commit suicide at Sengakuji after the crime was “unrighteous”; that they had identified and attacked the wrong person as their lord’s enemy; that Asano deserved punishment because his inept swordsmanship had constituted dereliction of his duty; that the attack on Kira was unjustified since he had been pardoned by the shogun; that Asano’s misconduct absolved his retainers from the duty of revenge (only treason could do that); that the scale of the attack had been criminally disproportionate (Chu Hsi’s *Tzu-chih t’ung-chien kang-mu* and *Taiheiki* 太平記 provided examples); that resentment at having become rōnin had inspired the forty-six; that Keisai’s own ignorance of the Kantō invalidated his comments on the vendetta.

law; they had not acted from motives of loyalty but at best out of confusion. Naokata did not question the morality of the sentence on Asano; nor did he entertain any suggestion of protest.

For Keisai, the incident was more complex. The unconditional loyalty of a vassal to his lord was the primary existential obligation of men. Deriving solely from the social status of vassalhood, loyalty transcended other moral values. In this case, it required perpetuating the lord's "purpose" after his death. As loyal vassals, Asano's samurai were duty-bound both to discharge that purpose and to avenge him. This duty had to be pursued even at the cost of self-sacrifice. The forty-six had paid that sacrifice, and Keisai viewed their actions positively. But he also had to address the issue of the shogun's authority, which was widely perceived to have been flouted by the incident. His response was to subsume it under a greater loyalty. Should pursuit of loyalty to their own lord transgress the purposes of the shogun, that loyalty, in its turn, required absolute, unquestioning submission to the shogun's response.

For Naokata, in short, moral authority worked downwards, through law or political authority, from the shogun to subjects; for Keisai, it worked upwards, through the loyalty owed by vassals to lords and to the shogun. Naokata moralized political authority or law; Keisai invested morality with the inexorable force of law. Naokata, it might be said, was a legal absolutist; Keisai, a moral absolutist. Yet neither wholly suppressed the alternative category. Naokata accepted in principle the morality of the "normal pattern" (*jōshiki* 常式) of revenge, and he quoted Chu Hsi to that effect.<sup>41</sup> The "normal pattern," however, did not entail revenge directed at a superior. Naokata's absolutist political views made him deny the legitimacy of revenge of this latter type, that is revenge against a man's lord and, if his logic is to be extended, against any political authority.<sup>42</sup> Keisai, on the other hand, recognized a legal dimension to the incident when he argued that the dispute between Asano and Kira should have come under the rubric of *kenka ryōseibai* and have resulted in the punishment of both parties.

The disagreement between the two men thus exposes a familiar fault line in mid-Tokugawa society. In historical terms, Keisai, the more conservative, opted for feudal morality. His ideal political structure seems to have been a decentralized feudalism, bonded by loyalty. Naokata, by contrast, could be said to have endorsed a more modern form of centralized absolutism. Some irony may be noted in the fact that Keisai, not himself a samurai and living at a distance from the military capital, should choose a military style loyalty. A contemporary, in fact, accused him of a Kyoto chōnin's infatuation with warrior values and with ignorance of conditions in the Kantō.<sup>43</sup> Naokata, living close to the source of military power, by contrast, appears to have paid little attention to traditional

<sup>41</sup> *Shigekata monmoku* (Satō Naokata), p. 380.

<sup>42</sup> See above, note 31.

<sup>43</sup> *Ichi bushi shijūroku shi ron* (Satō Naokata), p. 388.

warrior loyalty or to warrior values. He seems to have held it a reproach against the Asano daimyo house that some of its members were students of the “military science” (*gunpō* 軍法) of Yamaga Sokō 山鹿素行 (1622–1685).<sup>44</sup>

The views of Naokata and Keisai thus illumine an aspect of moral thinking in their time. Despite the differences in their approach, both remain monochrome and two-dimensional. A shared single-mindedness informs their bleak complementarity. Like most, if not all, commentators on the revenge, they did not entertain the possibility that various motives may have animated the forty-six. At first sight polarized, Naokata’s and Keisai’s views converge in their acceptance of the principle that absolute moral authority is immanent in the hierarchical structure of the Tokugawa status quo. As examples of moral thought, both are formalist; both deny the subjects involved the exercise of independent judgment. Neither Naokata nor Keisai seems to distinguish positively between objective hierarchy and the occupants of hierarchical positions as moral agents. Moral obligation, for them, remains a direct projection of social hierarchy. Their overriding concern is to condemn transgression against norms immanent in that hierarchy.

In this absolutist tradition of thought, there is little room for “excuse conditions” or mitigating factors,<sup>45</sup> for universal values, for dispersal of blame, or for more than limited moral reasoning.<sup>46</sup> Neither Naokata nor Keisai felt able respond to the call of Liu Tsung-yuan for judgment of the perpetrators of revenge to incorporate evaluation of the probity of the actions of all parties involved. Nor did they avail themselves of the approach of Chu Hsi, the much-venerated founder of their school of Neo-Confucianism, who could unambiguously allocate blame for the wrongful resolution of a revenge to imperial moral misjudgment.<sup>47</sup> Such moral universalism would have been repugnant to Keisai, the promoter of an absolute and particularistic loyalty. Though possibly acceptable as an ideal for Naokata, it would have been impractical. Insofar as both had access to alternative and more complex models of response to the problem of revenge, their approaches may alike be described as reductive.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Accepting the *Akō gijin sansho* 赤穂義人纂書 text variant of *Satō Naokata shijūrokunin no hikki* recorded in NST 27, p. 379 (see headnote). Yamaga Sokō was known preeminently for his “military thought,” and it seems admissible to interpret Naokata as here referring to his thought generally rather than merely its technical military aspect. For Sokō on loyalty, see McMullen 1987, esp. pp. 79–83; further research is required on Sokō’s attitude to revenge. Cf. below, note 55.

<sup>45</sup> An “excuse” in this context is “a condition pertaining to an agent that precludes his or her blameworthiness for wrongful action.” See Smith 1992, p. 344.

<sup>46</sup> This may be one source of the appeal to honor in discussions of the revenge, for honor requires no moral reasoning.

<sup>47</sup> In the case of Hsüan-tsung authorizing the execution by beating to death of the Chang boys; see above, note 21.

<sup>48</sup> For the term “reductive” to be valid, there must be a conscious choice of a simple over a complex solution. Naokata’s learning and pedagogy are said to have been narrow (Abe 1980, p. 579), but he had read Hayashi Hōkō’s *Fukushūron*, with its reference to “T’ang and Sung discussions” of revenge (see *Satō Naokata shijūrokunin no hikki*, p. 378). Even had he not read the original Chinese essays, he was thus certainly aware of other possible approaches to revenge. Keisai, similarly, must have been familiar with Chu Hsi’s judgment of Hsüan-tsung’s “murder” of the Chang boys, for he is said to have read *Tzu-chih t’ung-chien kang-mu* forty-two times (*Bokusui itteki*, p. 8).

The absolutism of both positions is extreme and problematic in terms of the high Confucian tradition. It is tempting to suggest that, in that respect, Naokata and Keisai were not very good Confucians. In different ways, their views fall short of the ideal of Confucian moral universalism or the concomitant recognition of the individual as, within certain limits, an independent moral agent. A number of circumstances may help explain their attitudes: the relative closeness in time to the events of their writing; the momentous and intractable nature of the events themselves; and a tendency in both thinkers to a certain dogmatic shrillness and intensity that seems, in part at least, an inheritance of their Kimon school.<sup>49</sup> But their views also suggest adaptations of Confucian teaching on revenge to the special conditions of a military, deeply authoritarian order. It was one thing, of course, for Chu Hsi to criticize Hsüan-tsung's moral judgment from the safe historical distance of a different dynasty; quite another for a Tokugawa scholar to impugn the reigning shogun, particularly if he was Tsunayoshi 綱吉 (r. 1680–1709). Viewed historically, Naokata and Keisai both articulated the ethos of Tokugawa military rule and contributed to its legitimation. Such adaptation reflected a broader trend that can be seen also in the widely adopted resolution of the problem of conflict between loyalty and filial piety in favor of loyalty. Those under direct military command, after all, can have no concern with the morality or otherwise of their superiors or of the orders of the latter. Absolute obedience and loyalty are their duty, whether that duty is viewed objectively, as by Naokata, or subjectively, as by Keisai.

*Dazai Shundai: A Potential Challenge to the Status Quo*

The reductive views of Naokata and Keisai should not be taken, however, to suggest that the debate over the Akō revenge in the Tokugawa period did not produce any position more hospitable to moral independence or potentially subversive to the status quo. Suggestion of such a position appeared in what Tahara Tsuguo calls the “second round” of the controversy,<sup>50</sup> in the form of *Akō shijūroku shi ron* 赤穂四十六士論, by Dazai Shundai 太宰春台 (1680–1747). Shundai wrote this essay in the early 1730s, a quarter of a century after Naokata and Keisai had first expressed their views. He informs his readers that he had witnessed the incident when in his early twenties, and had at first shared the public admiration of the Akō retainers. But he had later changed his view to one that he found confirmed by Ogyū Sorai, with whom he studied.<sup>51</sup> At first sight, as Bitō remarks, Shundai appears to adopt much the same position as Naokata.<sup>52</sup> Like Naokata,

<sup>49</sup> Naokata, at first sight paradoxically, was known for a relaxed style of pedagogy (see Bitō 1961, p. 116). It is possible, however, to see that very informality as the obverse of his inflexible belief in absolute submission to external political authority or law. It is as though the disengagement from active moral participation in the world that Bitō finds in his stance enabled him to withdraw into a realm of relative intellectual detachment and freedom.

<sup>50</sup> Tahara 1978, p. 162.

<sup>51</sup> *Akō shijūroku shi ron* (Dazai Shundai), pp. 409–10.

<sup>52</sup> Bitō 1961, p. 111.

Shundai blamed the forty-six for not committing suicide immediately after the completion of their revenge, and he, too, suggested that they may have had venal motives in not doing so. But Shundai also looked at the situation from the perspective of a thinker deeply influenced by the ideas of Ogyū Sorai. Through his challenge of Chu Hsi thought, Sorai had historicized political hierarchies and institutions. As relative human creations, rather than part of an immutable order of nature, they could, and should, he believed, be changed if necessary. Concomitantly, Sorai also took an instrumental or utilitarian view of morality. Moral norms were not absolute imperatives, built into the order of things, but social necessities. They represented “techniques” devised by the sages as means for ensuring social and political stability. Because they contributed overall to the general welfare, it was important to uphold the moral norms of the time, but they did not carry an immutable value.

Shundai’s appraisal of the Akō revenge seems to have been informed by similar assumptions. On the one hand, he criticized as faulty the logic behind the actions of the forty-six. Like Sorai, Shundai believed that, as Kira was not responsible for Asano’s death, he could not be the proper object of revenge by Asano’s vassals. Beyond that, however, Shundai’s reasoning led in a different direction. He pointed out that, though shogunal law decreed the death penalty for murder in the shogun’s castle, Asano had not in fact killed Kira. The shogun’s punishment of Asano had been excessive. In effect, the shogun had misapplied the regime’s own law, inaugurated by Ieyasu himself. Under these circumstances, the retainers, in Shundai’s analysis, owed a prior commitment, or “righteousness,” to their lord rather than to the shogun. “The minister of a feudal lord recognizes only the existence of his lord. Why should he recognize the existence of the shogun?”<sup>53</sup> The resentment of Ōishi Yoshio and the others, therefore, should properly have been directed at the shogun rather than Kira. In not making clear that it was the shogun whose misjudgment had caused their lord’s death, they had, in fact, been ignorant of “righteousness.” Shundai thus boldly took the step that neither Naokata nor Keisai was prepared to take.<sup>54</sup> He separated the ruler’s role as moral agent from the office that he occupied and passed a moral judgment on his conduct.

True to the utilitarian temper of Sorai’s thought, Shundai also attributed an instrumental social value to the warrior ethos that called upon samurai to commit themselves wholeheartedly to their lord and thus to be prepared to avenge his death at the cost of their own lives. Although this ethos, “seen from the point of view of a benevolent person” (i.e., a Confucian perspective), might seem to require “a pointless death,” it was endorsed by the regime and served “to encourage the samurai spirit (*shiki* 士氣).” It thus “should not be cast aside.” One possibility, therefore, would have been for the forty-six “on the spot, their minds in

<sup>53</sup> *Akō shijūroku shi ron* (Dazai Shundai), p. 410.

<sup>54</sup> The contrast with Keisai is particularly striking, for Keisai had, while implicitly faulting the shogun, advocated absolute submission to his will. See above, pp. 303–304, 305.



turmoil, to go berserk” and to die at the scene of their lord’s adversity. But on these grounds, too, Shundai faulted the behavior of the Akō retainers. Their cautious plotting and delay had risked the possibility that Kira would die in the interim. They had sought an opportune moment to kill him and to win fame for themselves.<sup>55</sup> From the perspective of upholding the samurai ethos, their attitude was wrong. It would have been better for the Akō retainers to have resisted the bakufu messengers who came to take possession of Akō castle after Asano’s death and to have ended by committing suicide and torching the castle. Having failed to do that, they should have formed a platoon and marched openly to attack Kira in Edo.<sup>56</sup>

Shundai’s view of the affair is complex, idiosyncratic and not without apparent inconsistency. It rests on his legal and moral judgment that the true object of the retainers’ resentment over their lord’s death should have been the shogun. At the same time, it affirms direct resistance or protest based on the indigenous and historical Japanese samurai spirit. But it also alludes to high Confucian ideals of benevolence and respect for life that, on the surface at least, as Shundai himself recognizes, are difficult to reconcile with the warrior ethos. More research into the thought of this still understudied thinker is required to resolve these paradoxes.<sup>57</sup> It may be useful to recall that Shundai believed the Tokugawa regime to be in a state of decline, beyond the capability of government intervention to save.<sup>58</sup> His historical reasoning may have inclined him to expect a breakdown of authority, violent disintegration of the existing order, and the foundation of a new regime. Perhaps the forty-six might have had a role in this process in Shundai’s mind.

But for the purpose of this essay, it is Shundai’s advocacy of an act of resistance and protest that is salient and important. His imaginary platoon of wronged samurai marching to Edo in a gesture of defiance starts almost three-dimensionally from the page. Here there appears at last to be a recognition that morality need not always be identified with existing hierarchies. True, the freedom is only partial, for Shundai retains the belief that the status of the forty-six as retainers obligated them to the Asano daimyo house and to revenge. Moreover, it is unclear whether his imagined solution is primarily inspired by a sense of moral injustice against the regime, a belief that the regime was on the point of disintegration, or a utilitarian espousal of the samurai ethos of loyalty to one’s immediate lord. Perhaps all three played a part in his thinking. Nonetheless, he clearly imputes to the forty-six a potential will to protest the injustice of the shogun and criticizes

<sup>55</sup> Shundai attributed the retainers’ strategy in this regard to their having followed the military principles of Yamaga Sokō. He claimed that this was also the view of Sorai, whom, Shundai said, had condemned the revenge on Kira as having “simply adopted the military method (*heihō* 兵法) of Mr. Yamaga.” *Akō shijūroku shi ron* (Dazai Shundai), p. 410.

<sup>56</sup> *Akō shijūroku shi ron* (Dazai Shundai), p. 411. The apparent irrationality of attacking Kira (rather than the bakufu) is discussed by Tahara 1978, pp. 151–52.

<sup>57</sup> For an introduction to Shundai’s thought, see Najita 1972.

<sup>58</sup> *Keizairoku*, p. 36; cf. Najita 1972, pp. 835–37.

them for failing to undertake a gesture of resistance. For him, the Akō samurai appear to be moral agents capable, at least in his imagination, of transcending the status relationships of the larger society in which they lived; morality was not necessarily wholly immanent in the status quo. His views on the Akō revenge, however, were angrily condemned by later bakufu Confucian scholars as seditious, and it was found prudent to omit them from his collected works.<sup>59</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The three opinions surveyed above were part of a sustained debate among Tokugawa intellectuals. More research would be required to assess how far each argument prevailed within this larger debate. In wider society, however, there seems to have been little contest. As Shundai complained, “from scholars, ministers, and gentlemen down to cart-pullers and grooms, there is no one who does not slap his thighs in admiration” for the forty-six.<sup>60</sup> Both elements unraveled from the “symbolic compromise” by Naokata and Keisai nevertheless retained their purchase. In the settled order of mid-Tokugawa, the demands of absolute law and absolute moral duty rarely came into serious conflict; rather they complemented and reinforced one another. No other incident seems to have occurred during the period to test as searchingly the response of the bakufu or the community of intellectuals. For practical purposes, the duty to revenge was accommodated by the system of registering intended revenges. Revenge, moreover, continued to be overwhelmingly familial in scope; it posed no large-scale threat to public order. The fault line in late feudal society exposed by the Akō revenge stayed latent, at least until the upheaval of bakumatsu and the Restoration. Naokata’s absolute law and political authority remained the basis of the regime. At the same time, as Keisai would have wished, self-sacrificial loyalty became head of the hierarchy of virtues imposed on society. His intense admiration and sympathy for the revengers may have affronted Naokata, but it was widely shared. The “forty-six samurai” (*shijūroku shi* 四十六士) of Ogyū Sorai’s first memorandum transmogrified through the “righteous men of Akō” (*Akō gijin* 赤穂義人) to “The Treasury of Loyal Vassals” (*Chūshingura* 忠臣蔵). Perhaps in emulation, recorded acts of revenge seem to have increased during the mid- and late Tokugawa period.<sup>61</sup> As this series of essays for *Monumenta Nipponica* will amply demonstrate, *Chūshingura* has continued to be celebrated in many different ways. To this day, Sengakuji remains a prosperous place of pilgrimage.

No voice of criticism from among the community of Tokugawa Confucian scholars thus succeeded in tarnishing significantly the luster of the Akō revenge in the eyes of their contemporaries. Views critical of the forty-six were likely, in any case, to have been a small minority.<sup>62</sup> Of those sketched here, Satō

<sup>59</sup> Bitō 1961, p. 110.

<sup>60</sup> *Akō shijūroku shi ron* (Dazai Shundai), p. 409.

<sup>61</sup> For a chart listing revenges, see Nishiyama 1983, pp. 349–52.

<sup>62</sup> For Dazai Shundai’s sense of isolation as a critic of the forty-six, see his *Akō shijūroku shi ron*, p. 409.

Naokata's criminalization of the revengers' action was probably too skeptical, stark, and unmitigated in its absolutism to exert much popular appeal. His opinions seem to have circulated only in manuscript copies. Dazai Shundai's more challenging views were deemed subversive and were suppressed. Still less were voices heard to criticize the morality of revenge itself or of the honor associated with it.<sup>63</sup> No more complex or subtle model of moral conduct or moral subjectivity with respect to revenge appears to have been successfully advocated. In that sense, Tokugawa Confucians must be conceded to have failed to learn from their Chinese mentors. They did not succeed in moving from a particularistic to a more universalist view of morality; men were not accorded moral agency independent of their social position. For all but at most a few, the morality of vengeance remained immanent in social status. The unquestioning loyalty, reductive morality, and brittle sense of honor that sanctioned such pointless sacrifice as that of the forty-six retained their grasp over society at large. An atavistic, violent, and futile incident became enshrined in the culture of the nation.

<sup>63</sup> True, as noted above, Dazai Shundai described the "indigenous" self-sacrificial warrior response to the death of a lord as an "empty death" from a Confucian point of view, but, since it fostered "samurai spirit" and was part of a code of conduct recognized by the bakufu, he did not advocate abandoning it (*Akō shijuroku shi ron*, p. 410; cf. Tahara 1978, p. 149). For many, if not most, Confucians, Chu Hsi's approval of the principle of revenge would, of course, have made questioning the principle unthinkable.

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