

REVENGE DRAMA IN EUROPEAN
RENAISSANCE AND JAPANESE THEATRE

FROM HAMLET TO MADAME BUTTERFLY

Edited by Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr.



REVENGE DRAMA IN EUROPEAN RENAISSANCE AND JAPANESE THEATRE
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CHAPTER 8

CHŪSHINGURA IN THE 1980S

RETHINKING THE STORY OF THE
FORTY-SEVEN RŌNIN

HENRY D. SMITH II

INTRODUCTION

MY CURIOSITY ABOUT *CHŪSHINGURA* WAS FIRST PIQUED IN DECEMBER 1981 by a remark of Tsurumi Shunsuke at a conference in London to the effect that “if you study *Chūshingura* long enough, you will understand everything about the Japanese.” My respect for Tsurumi as a pioneer scholar of modern Japanese popular culture helped convince me that perhaps I should some day learn more about what I had always felt to be a distasteful chapter in Japanese cultural history. For myself, whose acquaintance with Japan began in 1962 (the year of the last full-scale feature film production of *Chūshingura* and the end of an era in the mass popularity of the legend), “*Chūshingura*” was a thing of the past, indelibly linked with feudal values and prewar militarism. Of course, I loved the original *yoruri* version of *Kanadehon Chūshingura* as I knew it through Donald Keene’s translation, which I had used to teach in undergraduate courses, but that seemed to be something apart from the larger and vaguer “*Chūshingura*” that I associated with prewar Japan.

The chance to rethink the story of the forty-seven *rōnin* came in autumn 1989, when I had the prospect of teaching a graduate seminar at Columbia University that I knew would include students in both history and literature, both modern and premodern: Chūshingura seemed a good way to bring these various interests into common focus. This report stems from that seminar, and I am indebted in countless ways to the six graduate students who helped me work through some of the issues treated in this chapter—as well as many other issues that I will not have space to mention.¹

As part of my preparations for the seminar, I stopped by Kinokuniya Bookstore in Shinjuku during a trip to Japan in the summer of 1989, looking for recent writings about Chūshingura. I discovered not just one or two books, as I had expected, but over a dozen volumes on Chūshingura, all of them recent. Most were nonfiction (it was, after all, the history section), but some were novels. And of course Kinokuniya Bookstore did not have all the books written on Chūshingura: in the 1980s alone, I would now estimate, about forty new books on Chūshingura appeared, both fiction and nonfiction. (See the appendix to this chapter for a list of thirty books).

Some of the books of course purported to be “real” history revealing the “truth” of the original Akō Incident, but a number were historical fiction, while still others analyzed the meaning of Chūshingura in Japanese culture as a whole. Somehow I had not expected much vitality from Chūshingura in the 1980s. As it turns out, the legend seemed to be as durable and versatile as ever, and it remains quite simply the most widely known and frequently presented story in Japan. It seemed a good time to try to place the entire phenomenon of Chūshingura in broader historical perspective. A good place to start is with the question posed by the title of the single most provocative book of the 1980's, Maruya Saiichi's *Chūshingura to wa nanika* (*What is Chūshingura?* [1984]).

WHAT IS CHŪSHINGURA?

I have more simple-minded intentions than Maruya (to whose ideas I shall return) in posing this preliminary question. It is simply a problem of definition: to what do we refer today when we use the term “Chūshingura”? Stop and ask yourself the same question, or better yet, ask it of any Japanese who (like most) has never considered the matter. The inevitable hesitation will bring home the dimensions of the problem: what in fact do we mean by “Chūshingura”?

The actual word, of course, comes from the *yoruri Kanadehon Chūshingura* of 1748, and purists continue to use it in this restricted way.² In actual usage, however, the term has been constantly expanding over the years. In the later Edo period it came to be used in the titles of variant *kabuki* versions of the story and increasingly so in Meiji. In late Meiji, as we shall see, there occurred a radical conflation of the previous genealogy of the Akō Incident, by which not only the different lineages of stage and storytelling but also the historical incident itself were all gathered within “Chūshingura” as an umbrella term.

Ultimately, the only sensible definition of “Chūshingura” is as an all-encompassing term for the entire body of cultural production that ultimately stems from the Akō Incident of 1701–1703. All parts of this body have in common an intention either to tell the story or to attempt to explain its telling—which becomes simply one more form of retelling. In this sense I am merely adding to the vast thing that is “Chūshingura” in producing this report. Dealing with Chūshingura is somewhat like dealing with the Tar-Baby of Brer Rabbit fame: when you try to stand apart and assault it, you willy-nilly become part of it. This is precisely why Chūshingura is so tantalizing and ultimately so frustrating for the historian.

Let me nevertheless make my own effort to stand apart and to see “Chūshingura” as something that does in fact have a history—a history in which the very notion of “history” performs a central function. In so doing, I have ended up strongly opposed to precisely what lured me to the topic in the first place: Tsurumi's proposal that Chūshingura has come to encompass all of the cultural proclivities of the Japanese people. This type of argument is essentially a type of Japanese exceptionalism, whether claiming that Chūshingura must be understood as part of the basic Japanese preference for failed heroes (*hangan biiki*), or in terms of the Japanese tendency to act in groups, or as a reflection of the hierarchal organization of Japanese society, and so on. Of course it is all this in varying degrees, but such an approach begs the question of Chūshingura's durability, since various other legends that are in these obvious ways “Japanese” have come and gone.

I propose, then, that the “popularity” and durability of Chūshingura deserve historical rather than cultural explanations, and that all those who interpret it as a peculiarly Japanese phenomenon are misleading us. The power of Chūshingura can ultimately be explained, I would argue, only by the particular nature of the original historical incident of 1701–1703, and by the particular historical circumstances through which its retelling

has evolved in the almost two centuries since. Rather than universally Japanese, I would argue, Chūshingura is particularly historical.

THE AKŌ INCIDENT

The problem begins with giving a name to the incident that began it all. In Edo times, no one would have called it an "incident," but people would have referred to the "forty-six samurai" (or "forty-seven samurai") or the "Akō gishi (or gijin)." In Meiji times it became more common to call it the "Genroku Incident." Among historians today, however, consensus seems to favor "Akō Incident," avoiding the problems of whether Terasaka Kichiemon really should be counted as one of the group, whether the Akō retainers were in fact "righteous," and whether all Genroku need to be subsumed by the affair.³

The power of survival of the Akō Incident in later imagination lies less in the drama implicit in this outline sketch than in the complexity and ambiguity of motivation involved both in the initial palace incident and in the night attack. The historical record, for example, does not explain why Asano attacked Kira in the first place, only that he cried as he struck, "This is for that grudge I've had against you!" (*Kono aida no ikon oboetaruka*). This obscurity of motive and the rather limited and contradictory information that we have about the personalities of the two men involved have made it possible to engage in a wide range of speculation, particularly among amateur historians. To be sure, the traditional type of explanation—that is, Kira had offended Asano by haughty behavior of some sort—remains the most plausible. Still there is no hard evidence for it and the fact that the rōnin in their voluminous correspondence almost never touched on the reason for Asano's grudge suggests that even they did not really know the reason for Asano's attack.

The even greater ambiguity lies in the motivation and action of the rōnin. They justified the attack as a vendetta (*katakiuchi*) on behalf of their lord, but in no way did the case fit either the legal or the customary definition of *katakiuchi*. Kira, after all, was not their master's murderer: On the contrary, Asano had tried to murder Kira. There was also no justification for avenging the death of one's lord, only that of a family member: The rōnin even had to call on a Confucian scholar to come up with a textual basis for their action. Legalities aside, what was the underlying spirit of their act? Was it indeed personal loyalty to their lord, as the mainstream of the Chūshingura tradition would have it? Or was it a protest against the bakufu's lenient treatment of Kira for his involvement in the

incident? Or was it a simple matter of personal honor to carry out their master's unfinished task? Or, as one school of interpretation would have it, were they impoverished samurai desperate for a new job and trying to prove their credentials?

Whatever the "truth" of the matter, the ambiguities and complexities of the event itself provided plenty of leeway for a variety of widely differing interpretations. This would prove essential to the modern survival of Chūshingura.

THE POPULAR RESPONSE: KANADEHON CHŪSHINGURA

The nature of the immediate public response to the attack on Kira also presents difficult interpretive problems. Consider what our own basic texts tell us: that "the public was thrilled,"⁴ and "there was a spontaneous outpouring of admiration for this brave and selfless act."⁵ Within Edo, of course, the news must have traveled swiftly and public interest was surely high, but was there mass public sympathy for the act? One member of the seminar attempted to look at the contemporary documentation of the incident and found it to be a mass of contradictory and ambiguous evidence.⁶ It is difficult to say whether the "public" was either thrilled or shocked: Given the divisions that would soon emerge among samurai leaders on this issue, it seems at least reasonable to question the assumption that the public response was uniformly positive.

Interesting new evidence on this score has recently been offered by Kōsaka Jirō in his best-selling book on the diary of a Nagoya samurai in the Genroku era. The diarist, Asahi Bunzaemon, was alert to every bit of gossip that passed his way, and he reported such incidents as love suicides in long and consuming detail. The vendetta of the Akō rōnin, however, was reported in one utterly noncommittal line, and their seppuku was not even mentioned. Kōsaka suggests that if the incident had been such a big stir in Edo, Bunzaemon would clearly have heard much more about it through his many sources and would have reported it in greater detail.⁷

The conventional evidence of public interest that has been cited in the past is a *kabuki* performance in Edo just twelve days after the seppuku of the rōnin, which was ostensibly about the Soga brothers but possibly related to the Akō Incident. The evidence for this and another account of early theatrical reenactments in Edo, however, is highly problematic and now discredited by many scholars.⁸ It was rather in Kyoto and Osaka that one finds the more sustained response. Of course, the stricter censorship in Edo is doubtless the key factor, but it remains a fact that the

Chūshingura legend was created in Kamigata, where it was easier to fantasize about the historical event.

Particularly revealing is the earliest known piece of fiction based on the incident: an ukiyozōshi of 1705 entitled *Keisei budōzakura* by the prolific Osaka writer Nishizawa Ippū.⁹ The entire incident is transposed to the pleasure quarters, with Asano (“Asamanosuke”) as a chonin playboy skilled in the martial arts and Kira (“Kichikō”) as the pompous son of a nouveau riche merchant. The two conflicted over a rivalry for the affections of the courtesan Kurahashi, and it is actually Kichikō who attacks Asamanosuke, reversing the historical order of aggression. Both are wounded, but Asamanosuke dies. The revenge is plotted by Densuke, a follower of Asamanosuke, who is in league with Kurahashi and a band of other courtesans whom Asamanosuke had favored when alive. Densuke and fourteen courtesans attack Kichikō when he lets down his guard and visits the pleasure quarters, and then all commit suicide before Asama’s grave. Nowhere to be found in all of this is any trace of interest in samurai valor or loyalty: the real point of the story, argued Aoki Sentei, lies in the contrast of the “*sui*” sophistication of Asama and the stingy, boorish style of Kichikō. We are already at a long parodic remove from the event.

The subsequent road to *Kanadehon Chūshingura* of 1748 has been carefully traced by scholars of Edo theatre.¹⁰ The pivotal year, it is now agreed, was 1710, the year after Tsunayoshi’s death, when there appeared a cluster of plays that drew on the Akō Incident in elaborate and thinly disguised detail. Other plays followed over the succeeding decades. Had it not been for the masterful work of synthesis performed by the team that wrote *Kanadehon Chūshingura*, however, one wonders whether the Akō vendetta would have survived as any more than one of many lesser themes in the *yoruri* and *kabuki* traditions. Not only did *Kanadehon Chūshingura* provide the word “Chūshingura,” but its tremendous popularity assured that the theme would be imitated on a far more extended and imaginative scale than ever before.

Fujino Yoshio has compiled a list of seventy such dramatic variants of the legend from 1748 until mid-Meiji.¹¹ Certain interesting trends appear from this data. First, the overwhelming number of new productions until the mid-1810s were created in Kamigata: twenty-four in Osaka and four in Kyoto, versus only six in Edo. In this same period, the number of *yoruri* (fifteen) remained about the same as *kabuki* (nineteen). After this, however, the pattern is reversed, with thirty new works in Edo-Tokyo in the period 1818–92, and only six in Osaka; of these, only one was *yoruri*.

As a growing tradition, in other words, one sees a clear shift from Osaka, where Chūshingura originated, to Edo-Tokyo.

It seems possible that this shift from west to east was paralleled by a change of emphasis within the tradition as a whole, from the erotic to the political. The theme of loyalty with which *Kanadehon Chūshingura* opens and closes, one might argue, is merely a veneer to make the authorities happy and serves to divert attention from the real concerns of the Kamigata audiences, that is, the erotic and romantic themes that run throughout the play. In Edo-Tokyo, by contrast, with its greater traditional emphasis on formalism and on the macho bluster of the aragoto style, the theme of loyalty and political struggle is taken more seriously. It is revealing, for example, that in Kamigata performances, Kō no Moronao is depicted as lascivious above all, while Tokyo actors emphasize rather his haughtiness toward subordinates.¹² Given the richness and complexity of the original *yoruri* text, it is in fact possible to get quite different emphases from the play.

Even in Edo, however, Chūshingura was not always taken seriously, as demonstrated by the rich parodic tradition that emerged in the later eighteenth century. The earliest of these appears to be Hoseidō Kisanji’s *kibyōshi* parody of 1779, *Anadehon tsūjingura* (roughly translated, *A Treasury of Those In the Know, A Guide to the Pitfalls of Life*).¹³ In the preface, Kisanji writes that the loyalty of Ōboshi and the others was grand, but the real cause of the whole affair was En’ya Hangan’s utter lack of sophistication (*tsū*) in failing to realize that his bribe was too small. Thus having subverted the basic moral order of Chūshingura, Kisanji proceeds to his own version in which everyone is utterly preoccupied with worldliness and with whether others are being too stingy or not. This was followed by numerous other *kibyōshi* parodies as well as such similar subversions of the legend as Shikitei Sanba’s *Chūshingura HENCHIKIRON* (1812), a “perverse argument” that diametrically opposes the received wisdom on Chūshingura, and Tsuruya Nanboku’s *kabuki Tōkaidō Yotsuya kaidan* (1825) began as a tale of one of the “disloyal retainers” who did not participate in the vendetta.

THE POPULAR RESPONSE: THE KŌDAN RETELLINGS

The late Edo period meanwhile saw the development of a new and rather different lineage of Chūshingura in the genre of oral story-telling known as *kōshaku* (later *kōdan*) that flourished on well into the Meiji period. Although these variants derived in many ways from the stage traditions,

they differed in claiming to be real stories of real people, so-called *jitsur-oku* (true records) and hence used the actual names of the historical participants in the Akō Incident rather than the pseudonyms of *Kanadehon Chūshingura*. As analyzed by Satō Tadao, the *kōdan* versions tended to emphasize the impetuous, heroic male aspects of the legend, minimizing the romantic and domestic complications that were an important part of *yoruri* and *kabuki*. Thus the *kōdan* versions almost completely omit the story of the romance between Kanpei and Okaru that became so popular in the *kabuki* tradition. Satō sees in this a contrast in the social class of the audiences, with *kabuki* appealing to upper-class merchants firmly embedded in the feudal social order and *kōdan* to lower-class artisans who live by their individual skills.¹⁴

Another feature of the *kōdan* version was the elaboration of the heroic exploits of individual members of the band of forty-seven, thus developing the genre of *gishi meimeiden* (separate biographies of the loyal retainers). This feature reminds us how important it was that such a large number of individuals were involved in the historical Akō Incident—far more than had been involved in almost any of the other great vendettas in Japanese history. Some have interpreted this as a mark of group-oriented behavior, but it is revealing that in the *kōdan* tradition it allowed rather for the proliferation of individualistic heroes, each with his own story.¹⁵ In a sense, this division replicates the basic tension in the history of samurai values between self-centered honor and self-negating loyalty.

In the Meiji period the *kōdan* versions—known by such titles as *Akō shijūshichi-shi* (*The 47 Samurai of Akō*) or *Gishiden* (*Biographies of the Loyal Retainers*)—were carried over into the genre of *rōkyoku* (*naniwabushi*), which began in Osaka in the late Edo period and in which oral narration was provided with the musical accompaniment of a *samisen*. The great popularity of the *rōkyoku* version of the Akō *gishi* in the late Meiji period, emerging directly from the *kōdan* tradition, provided the matrix for the modern emergence of Chūshingura as a cornerstone of emperor-system patriotism.

THE REVIVAL OF HISTORY AND THE MEIJI SYNTHESIS

For the first half of the Meiji period, Chūshingura survived with no major change in the two great Edo-period lineages of *kabuki* stage productions and *kōdan* story-telling. To be sure, the new regime seems to have appreciated the political uses of the forty-seven rōnin as early as 1868, when the Meiji emperor, on arriving in his new capital of Tokyo, sent

an emissary to Sengakuji to place offerings before the graves of the Akō rōnin together with a proclamation addressed to Ōishi praising him for upholding the principle of the master-follower bond. Yet this did not lead to any particular official manipulation of the legend to foster imperial loyalty: Chūshingura remained in the possession of the people.

The modern transformation of Chūshingura into what amounted to a piece of propaganda on behalf of martial values and selfless sacrifice to the state came, revealingly, only after the way had been paved by the first modern historical studies of the Akō incident.¹⁶ This process began in 1889 with the appearance of *Akō gishi jitsuwa* (*The True Story of the Akō Gishi*), an account by Shigeno Yasutsugu (1827–1910), a pioneer of the modern critical method in history. Shigeno insisted on the need to separate out the many counterfeits among the surviving documents of the incident in an effort to tell the “true story.” The form of the book (which was related orally to a newspaper reporter) was an act-by-act analysis of *Kanadehon Chūshingura* indicating what was “true” and what not. This marks the beginning of a new element in the Chūshingura phenomenon, that is, the perception that the historical event constituted a different kind of story to be told with different tools and methods. The way to a greater historicity might have been paved by the *kōdan* tradition and its stronger sense of the actual event—particularly in the use of the historical names of the participants—but the line between history and fiction remained one that was never openly contested.

The pivotal work in the modernization of Chūshingura was Fukumoto Nichinan's *Genroku kaikyo roku* (*Record of the Valiant Vendetta of Genroku*), published in late 1909. The use of the word “Genroku” signals Nichinan's consciousness of the historical event, and his work continued the spirit established by Shigeno of trying to recover the original story. Still, Nichinan was a journalist, not a historian, and still retained many elements of traditional *kōdan*-style embellishment. Less than a year after the publication of *Genroku kaikyo roku*, however, the historiography of the Akō Incident entered a new era with the publication of the documentary collection *Akō gijin sansho* (3 vols.), which was first assembled by Nabeta Shōzan, a samurai antiquarian from Taira (Fukushima prefecture) in the late Edo period. Impressed by the need to establish his story on a firmer documentary basis, Nichinan rewrote his earlier version and published it in 1914 as *Genroku kaikyo shinsō roku* (*Record of the Truth of the Valiant Vendetta of Genroku*). Although a less readable work, the effort to reach the “truth” of the event marks an entirely new attitude toward the Chūshingura legacy.

Nichinan's two works, especially the first, were wildly popular in the patriotic climate of Japan following the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–1905, and lay the foundations for the understanding of the story as one of martial valor and devotion to superiors. Although more conscious of the “truth” of the historical incident, Nichinan in no way compromised the essential emphasis on loyalty and valor. In this way a more modern consciousness of the history of the Akō Incident was fused with the latent historicity of the *kōdan* tradition to yield a new rendering of the Chūshingura tradition, one particularly well suited to the times. The importance of historicity is revealed in comparing the fate of Chūshingura with that of the legend of the vendetta of the Soga brothers, which was a far longer and deeper tradition in many ways than Chūshingura that did not survive as a major theme in popular culture after the end of Meiji. The great liability of the Soga brothers is that they were almost impossible to recover for history, dating from a much earlier period and with virtually no documentary support.

The late Meiji period also marks the beginning of the entirely new Chūshingura genre of film, which by the time it had run its course in the mid-1960s had brought the story of the forty-seven rōnin to many more Japanese than ever in the past and with a new level of power and immediacy. The film historian Misono Kyōhei has counted a total of sixty Chūshingura films in late Meiji and Taisho (1907–26), an average of three per year.¹⁷ The number would rapidly multiply in the years that followed. In general, the film tradition followed the pattern set by the *kōdan-rōkyoku* tradition of treating the Akō incident as a historical event rather than using the Taiheiki “world” (*sekai*) of the stage tradition.

The mounting nationalism of the 1930s tended to leave the mainstream of Chūshingura locked into the mode that took shape in the 1910s, although some literary efforts subversive of that mainstream were already beginning to emerge among a small minority of intellectual writers, as we shall shortly see. The mainstream itself took a turn in a more intellectual direction with the epic “new *kabuki*” version of Mayama Seika, *Genroku Chūshingura*, which began in 1934 as a piece for Sadanji II, and continuing through nine more acts until 1941 (by which time Sadanji had died). Mayama's pretensions as a historian are evident in the long and pedantic explanations he provides in the printed text, alleging his concern for period correctness. Yet his work is every bit as much a product of the ideology of its own time, notably in his depiction of the anxiety of Ōishi over whether Asano's act might be interpreted as insulting to the emperor;

this introduction of imperial loyalism into the minds of the forty-seven rōnin seems to be Mayama's innovation with no historical justification.¹⁸

The war interrupted the modern film mainstream of Chūshingura but did not radically alter its course. Both stage and film versions of the story were prohibited under the early years of the Allied Occupation of Japan for intimate associations with feudal values and wartime patriotism. From 1949, however, the ban on Chūshingura was lifted and productions of both *kabuki* and film proceeded apace. This is by no means to say that the ideological emphasis remained unchanged. Gregory Barrett has suggested that the major shift was to play down the emphasis on abject loyalty to one's superior and stress Ōishi Kuranosuke's personal affection for his lord.¹⁹ In a sense, the abstraction of loyalty that had allowed its modern transference from daimyo to emperor now reverted to a more direct and personal sort of loyalty. But the theme of loyalty itself remained central.

The postwar survival of Chūshingura, however, was not simply a product of this kind of redirection. As Satō Tadao notes, Chūshingura was the only one of the “Three Great Vendettas” of the Edo period that did in fact survive the war: nothing more was to be seen of the Soga Brothers or Araki Bunzaemon, which are names virtually unknown to the majority of Japanese today.²⁰ The advantage of Chūshingura lay once again in the ambiguities and complexities offered by the historical incident itself. From before the war Chūshingura had already entered a second phase of modernization, one that endowed it with distinctively anti-authoritarian overtones.

THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF CHŪSHINGURA

In its very essence, the Akō Incident was politically multivalent. Although carried out in the name of loyalty to their feudal lord, the vendetta of the forty-seven rōnin was explicitly in defiance of the *bakufu*, as recognized by their death sentence. Given the essentially contradictory demands of loyalty under the *bakuhān* system, their action could be interpreted in two wholly different ways: as confirming loyalty in the abstract, or as negating loyalty not directed to the shogunate. Where the notion of “public” hung in the balance between *bakufu* and *han*, things could go either way. And so in the twentieth century, when “public” was again defined in ambiguous ways—either as personal loyalty to the emperor or as abstract loyalty to the state—the Akō Incident was perfectly placed to satisfy both. And even after the democratizing reforms of the Occupation period, the Akō story could still be reoriented to adapt to new times by conceiving

of the actions of the rōnin as directed against the autocratic actions of the bakufu.

This new "democratic" phase in the history of Chūshingura actually had its beginnings before the war among the liberal and modernist intellectuals of the Taisho and early Showa era. The earliest sign was perhaps Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's short story "Aru hi no Ōishi Kuranosuke" ("Ōishi Kuranosuke on a Certain Day"), published in *Chūō kōron* in October 1917, a sketch of the leader of the forty-seven rōnin during his stay in the Hosokawa domain mansion awaited the judgment of the bakufu following the vendetta.²¹ It was modern in two senses. First, Akutagawa turned to the primary sources of the historical incident, in particular the account of Horikawa Den'emon who was in charge of guarding the group at the Hosokawa mansion in which Ōishi had been placed. Second, Akutagawa was interested in the human psychology of Ōishi as an individual with both strengths and weaknesses rather than the stereotypical hero that had appeared in all earlier renditions. This interest in probing the more complex and human side of the participants in the Akō affair set into motion a strand of Chūshingura rendition that remains strong to this day.

The modern turn also took a radical twist in the early Showa period with the first appearance of interpretations that openly challenged the black-and-white idealism of the older Chūshingura tradition. The first interpretation seems to have been a March 1928 essay by Hani Gorō seeking to reevaluate Ōishi, but I have not yet located a copy.²² Another "materialist" interpretation of the motives of the forty-seven rōnin was put forth first in May 1931, in a *Chūō kōron* article by the liberal Hasegawa Nyozeikan entitled "The Akō Gishi in Light of Historical Materialism," in which the motives of the rōnin in seeking revenge were attributed not to their loyalty but to their poverty and need for a new job. A similar line of thought was pursued by the Marxist historian Tamura Eitarō in a series of books and articles on the Akō event extending from *Chūshingura monogatari* in 1934 on to *Akō rōshi* in 1964. Doggedly pressing his argument that the rōnin were simply in search of a new master and never expected to sacrifice their lives, Tamura set a tone of iconoclasm that opened a new chapter of revisionist thinking in the history of the Akō Incident. To be sure, there had been distinguished earlier critics of the rōnin's actions, such as Satō Naokata two years after the event and Fukuzawa Yukichi in the Meiji period, but these had been in largely legal grounds. Tamura was the first to impute economic motives.

The most important work for the postwar revival of Chūshingura, however, was the first long modern historical novel on the theme of the

Akō Incident, Osaragi Jirō's *Akō rōshi* of 1928 (serialized the previous year in the Mainichi newspapers). The use of "rōshi" rather than "gishi" hints at the diversion of emphasis away from the theme of loyalty, and in the direction of a conception of the attack on Kira as a protest against the corrupt and venal government of the bakufu under Tsunayoshi. This element was in fact already part of prewar orthodoxy. The biography of Ōishi that appeared in the old elementary school textbooks, for example, opened on precisely this theme, stressing the "looseness" of Genroku politics and the decadence of Tsunayoshi and his animal-protection laws.²³ The rōnin could thus easily be resurrected after the war as paragons not of loyalty, but of justice and honesty in politics.

Osaragi's text played a key role in the 1960s transition from film to television as the basic medium for the mass propagation of Chūshingura. The year 1962 saw the last great feature-film production, Inagaki Hiroshi's *Chūshingura*, bringing to a close a half-century era. The new era began in 1964, when NHK (Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai, Japan Broadcasting Corporation, the government-run television network) chose the Chūshingura theme for the second of its year-long "grand fleuve drama" (*taiga dorama*), of which a one-hour installment was shown every Sunday evening. Entitled *Akō rōshi*, it was based in Osaragi's 1927 novel. The power of television, authorized by the government network, brought the images of the forty-seven rōnin directly into the homes of millions of Japanese over a sustained period of time, reviving the legend just at the point that it was faltering. The production was accompanied by a new outpouring of books about the Akō Incident. It is surely not without significance that 1964 was also the year of the Tokyo Olympics: the triumphal return to the international scene of a democratized Japan was accompanied by a revival of the nation's greatest legend, now itself democratized.

In the years following, NHK has continued to play the central role in the survival of Chūshingura in mass culture by selecting it twice more for the *taiga dorama* series, in 1975 and 1982. In both cases it was occasion for the publication of new books about Chūshingura, the reissue of old ones, and renewed speculation by intellectuals about the perpetual appeal of the theme to the Japanese people. That things were changing, however, was revealed in the approaches of the two series, neither of which approached the Akō Incident head-on. The 1975 drama was *Genroku Taiheiki*, a title that revealingly suggests a return to the indirection of *Kanadehon Chūshingura*, which used the world of the *Taiheiki* as a setting. The series offered a panorama of Genroku society and politics that included the Akō Incident but focused as much on Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu,

who was chamberlain under Tsunayoshi and on the politics of shogunal succession.

The 1982, NHK series was given the abstruse title *Tōge no gunzō*, translatable as something like “group portrait at the divide,” implying that the Genroku period was a kind of historical watershed. The Akō Incident here appeared less as the main theme than as the backdrop to the depiction of the lives of a group of ordinary citizens of Edo. According to the analysis of Gregory Barrett, “sentimentality was used to fashion a contemporary message of patriotism through the treatment *everyone* receives,” as reflected in the lenient treatment of Kira, of the Akō retainers who were *not* loyal, and even of the notorious shogun Tsunayoshi himself. Thus, Barrett argues, “NHK’s *Chūshingura* bears a remarkable resemblance to the Japanese family drama in which no one is to blame for arguments resulting from misunderstandings that are ironed out in the final reconciliation scene.”²⁴ By this process of watering down and deflection of emphasis away from the theme of either loyalty or protest, the *Chūshingura* legend has been further adapted to postwar needs.

REENTER HISTORY

The kind of “lenient treatment” of old villains that Barrett detects in the 1982 NHK series, however, reflects more than just a pious wish to show Japan as one big happy family. Rather it emerges from an ongoing process of critically reexamining the legend and challenging some of its central verities by turning back to the historical event. In a sense, this is in the spirit of discovering the “real” Akō Incident pioneered earlier in the century by Fukumoto Nichinan and carried forth in a more explicit mode of debunking by Tamura Eitarō in his argument of the 1930s that the Akō vendetta was no more than a campaign to win new employment.

What has changed since the war is a widening of the field of debunking activity and the emergence of a virtual industry of amateur history-writing aimed at revealing the “truth” of the Akō Incident in ways that often amount to the most fantastic speculation. The best example, perhaps, is the problem of the cause of the incident that began it all: the attack by Asano in the Pine Corridor of Edo Castle. The way was first cleared by the demonstration of respectable historians—notably Matsushima Eiichi in his judicious 1964 *Chūshingura: Sono seiritsu to tenkai* in the Iwanami Shinsho series—that the surviving documentation gave very few clues as to the real reasons for Asano’s grudge against Kira.²⁵ This means that it

is anybody’s guess and, as a result, a great many theories have been put forward.

Take, for example, the episode on the Pine Corridor incident that appeared in NHK’s “Invitation to History” (*Rekishi e no shōtai*) series in which academic historians, amateur historians, and writers of historical fiction are all happily mixed together to debate a particular issue. One major topic of discussion in this particular program was the “salt-farm theory,” deriving from the fact that both Akō and Kira Yoshinaka’s own domain of Kira-chō, located 40 km southeast of Nagoya on Atsumi Bay, just happened to be producers of salt. It was the novelist Ozaki Shirō—a native of Kira-chō—who first proposed in 1949 that the incident had its origins in a salt rivalry between Asano, whose Akō salt was of superior quality, and Kira, who had easier access to the Edo market. Of the several versions of the salt-farm theory, the most common envisions Kira sending spies to Akō to steal the secrets of superior salt technology, thereby provoking Asano and eventually the Matsu-no-rōka attack. Never mind that there is not a shred of evidence for the theory: the NHK show made a virtue of this by featuring a lengthy discussion by a leading expert of Edo salt production who conclusively demonstrated that the industrial spy theory was in fact implausible, since the geological and labor conditions in Kira-chō would have made Akō’s techniques useless anyway.

Also offered on the same show was a novel theory centering on the abnormal psychology of Asano, proposed by Anzai Norio, a specialist in the “psychology of history” from Ōtemon Gakuin University in Osaka and the author of such works as *A Psychological Walking Tour of Kyoto* and *The Psychology of the Tea Ceremony*. Professor Anzai diagnoses Asano as a clear case of an obsessive-compulsive personality type (*nenchaku kishitsu*), characterized by exaggerated attachment to form and ceremony, extreme preoccupation with cleanliness, and a revulsion against money—naturally extending to the offering of bribes. What actually happened in the Pine Corridor, however, was a kind of epileptic fit to which this type of personality is susceptible and allegedly ran in the Asano family. The immediate provocation of the attack, Anzai speculates, was a sudden burst of light that struck Asano’s eye, triggering what is known as a “illuminant seizure” (*kōgensei hossa*).²⁶ Anzai admits that the sun was high and the sky cloudy at the time of the attack but proposes that the contrasting pattern of light and dark on the floor would have been sufficient.

Without going into the five other theories discussed on the NHK show, this should be enough to suggest the amount of ingenuity that has been devoted to explaining the twists and turns of the Akō Incident. These

have been put forth in a steady outpouring of books claiming to tell, once again, the “truth” of the Akō Incident. In effect, the incident has become much like a mystery story to be figured out by clever detectives; any concern with the deeper moral and political implications of the event recedes into the background. In these ways, the historicity of the Akō Incident has served to keep the Chūshingura legend alive even when those political implications no longer seem compelling. Symptomatic of this trend is Izawa Motohiko’s *Chūshingura Genroku jūgonen no hangyaku* described on the cover as a “historical detective story.”²⁷ It involves a young contemporary playwright who is asked to write a play about Chūshingura and becomes entangled in the mysteries of the historical event itself. In this way, Chūshingura is made palatable to a new generation as history.

In the entire body of debunking and revisionism about the Akō Incident, the two themes that stand out are the reevaluation of Kira Yoshinaka and of the “disloyal” retainers who failed to participate in the attack. Each of these themes has a considerable history. In particular, the rescue of Kira from his villainous fate, emphasizing his role as a model lord in his own domain, has been pressed since the 1930s and has become especially active in the postwar period. The town of Kira-chō itself has predictably made much of this theme, and the temple with Kira’s local grave has become a popular tourist site, attracting some ten thousand visitors a year.²⁸ Various recent books have been devoted entirely to telling the Kira story, such as Fumidate Teruko’s nonfiction *Kira Kōzukenosuke no Chūshingura* or Morimura Seiichi’s two-volume historical novel, *Kira Chūshingura*, both published in 1988.

The writer of the 1980s who has made the most imaginative use of what might be called “anti-Chūshingura” themes was Inoue Hisashi, a virtuoso parodist who looks back to Edo popular fiction (*gesaku*) for inspiration. This began with his *Fuchūshingura*, serialized irregularly in *Subaru* from May 1980 to December 1984, and published as a single volume in 1985. It is, the title tells us, a “Treasury of Disloyal Retainers,” that is, a series of nineteen portraits of those retainers of Asano who did *not* participate in the vendetta. Inoue’s takes as point of departure the argument that the forty-seven rōnin accounted for fewer than one in six of the 308 former retainers of Asano, and that it would clearly be a mistake to see this minority as in any way typical.²⁹ For a real “model” of Japanese behavior, one needs rather to turn to the “disloyal” retainers. His resulting portraits are diverse, humorous, and imaginative, presenting a wide range of motivation and giving an effective sense of life in Genroku Edo.

Inoue followed the disloyal retainers with a new characterization of Kira in the play *Inu no adauchi* (*Dog’s Revenge*), written for a performance at the Komatsuza in Tokyo in September 1988.³⁰ The play recreates the final two hours of Kira’s life in real time, from the point at which he goes to hide in a charcoal shed when the Akō band attacks. Hiding in the shed with him are a dog that had been a personal gift from Tsunayoshi, various personal retainers and maids, and a thief who just happens to have snuck into the mansion on the night of the attack. In the final scene, Kira wakes up to the fact that he has been little more than a victim of Tsunayoshi’s regime and grasps Ōishi’s true intent as rebellion against the shogun. Kira realizes that although he himself will be despised as a villain for the rest of time, he will play a key role in the survival of the valiant story of Ōishi and his band. Sensing that he and Ōishi thus share a common glorious destiny, Kira leaves the charcoal shed in triumph to meet his fate declaring that “Now Kōsuke-no-suke goes forth to live!”

MARUYA SAIICHI’S “WHAT IS CHŪSHINGURA?”

Even more than Inoue Hisashi, the writer who did the most to revive Chūshingura in the 1980s was Maruya Saiichi, whose *Chūshingura to wa nanika* (*What is Chūshingura?*) became a bestseller after its appearance in 1984 and has continued to inspire new writings in and about the legend. It is difficult in brief compass to do justice to the complexity of Maruya’s various arguments or to the sheer interest of the book, with its wealth of fascinating and arcane detail about the Akō Incident and Edo culture in general. Some of his major emphases, however, can be quickly outlined.

Maruya, it must be remembered, is a novelist and literary critic, and these callings do much to fashion his conception of Chūshingura. His basic approach is seen most clearly in his explicit use of “Chūshingura” to refer to both to the historical event and to *Kanadehon Chūshingura*, distinguishing the two as “jiken to shite no Chūshingura” and “shibai to shite no Chūshingura.” This in turn reflects his central theme: that the historical Akō vendetta was literally a “dramatic” incident (*gekiteki na jiken*), in the sense that the forty-seven rōnin were reenacting the vendetta of the Soga Brothers as it had been understood through Edo *kabuki* performances. In short, Maruya proposes, the historical Akō Incident was essentially a literary event—a new and daring conflation of the role of history and literature in the Chūshingura legend as a whole.

The various specific arguments advanced by Maruya tend to be drawn from folklore and anthropology, thus tying in with a generally popular

intellectual trend in Japan of the 1980s. He argues that the vendettas of the Soga Brothers and the forty-seven rōnin were both attempts to appease the vengeful spirits (*onryō*) of their dead masters (or father in the Soga case), drawing on Japanese folklore research on *onryō*. Maruya's arguments here bear a strong resemblance to the those of Umehara Takeshi in *Kakusareta jūjūjika* (1972) in which it is argued that the rebuilding of Hōryūji after the fire of 672 was intended in many complicated ways as an effort to ward off the avenging spirit of Shōtoku Taishi, which was angry at the termination of his line. Indeed, Maruya's entire approach shares much with that of Umehara: both are contemptuous of established academic theories, both are drawn to riddles and mysteries, both are prone to seek explanations in hidden spiritual forces, and both are compelling writers.

Not content with seeing the force of *onryō* in the vendetta of the Akō rōnin, Maruya asserted a hidden element of hostility to the bakufu in the act, tracing it back to an alleged anti-Yoritomo motif in the revenge of the Soga brothers. In this way, Maruya continued an older tradition of seeing the Akō vendetta as essentially directed against the bakufu, but he now gave it an even more sinister and seditious sense. In Maruya's most controversial allegation, he carried this theme of a disguised rebellion over to *Kanadehon Chūshingura*, which he interprets as a kind of "carnival" in the European manner, a springtime festival involving the ritual killing of the king of winter—in this case, Moronao, by implication, the shogun Tsunayoshi as well.

The first reviews of Maruya's book were uniformly enthusiastic, but in March 1985, a lengthy and highly critical review by Suwa Haruo, a historian of Edo theatre, appeared in the journal *Shingeki*. Suwa systematically argued against most of Maruya's arguments about the meaning of the Soga drama and its impact on the Akō affair. Maruya answered Suwa in a scathing counterattack in *Gunzō* in May 1985, leading to a counter-reply by Suwa and then a counter-counter-reply by Maruya. Meanwhile, Maruya was attacked on another front by the anthropologist Yamaguchi Masao, who accused him of both misunderstanding and misapplying Western anthropological theory in his notion of Chūshingura as "carnival."³¹

Without going into the many complexities of all the arguments involved, let me simply say that on strictly historical grounds, I tend to side with Suwa Haruo, who claims that Maruya's theories simply cannot be proven. Maruya himself recognized this in one of his responses to Suwa, claiming that since he was dealing with deep, hidden motivations, one could not expect to find any direct evidence. Time and again, Maruya

claims to have a special sense of the superstitious and magical (*jujutsuteki*, one of his frequently used words) beliefs of the common people of Edo, enabling him to see through to the true motivations of the Akō rōnin, which have been misrepresented over the centuries by Confucian scholars. Here, as in his reliance on the findings of folklorists, Maruya clearly sees himself practicing a kind of *minshūshi* (people's history).

In the end, Maruya has succeeded in using history to further the cause of Chūshingura as literature. Yamaguchi Masao, at the end of his hostile review of Maruya's book, quotes approvingly the remark of a science-fiction writer who wondered why Maruya, "with that much knowledge, didn't just go ahead and write a novel."³² And in the end, that is probably the best way to read *Chūshingura to wa nanika*—as a novel. Or more accurately, we must realize that we have reached a point in the history of Chūshingura that any systematic effort to separate history from fiction is doomed to frustration.

WHAT THE HELL IS CHŪSHINGURA?

Chūshingura has shown remarkable resilience throughout its history of almost two centuries and seems alive and well today. Indeed, mass media even declared a "Chūshingura boom" in 1986, beginning with New Year's Eve when a Nihon Television production of Chūshingura achieved an audience share of 17 percent when competing against NHK's venerable song contest, "Kōhaku uta-gassen." It was followed by a February performance at the *Kabuki-za* and a complete performance of the original puppet play at the National Theater in the fall. In addition, Chūshingura went international with the European tour of "The Kabuki," a French adaptation of the Chūshingura theme performed by the Tokyo Ballet.³³ In the same year, Inoue Hisashi's *Fuchūshingura* appeared and the first volume of Morimura Seiichi's new epic historical novel of Chūshingura was published in October.³⁴

But is it possible that we are reaching the end of Chūshingura as a living tradition? The possibility is raised by a consideration of the age of the authors responsible for the spate of books published in the 1980s, which are listed in the appendix for this chapter. Out of fourteen for whom birth years could be ascertained, five were born in the 1920s, eight in the years 1931–34, and one (Izawa Motohiko, the author of the "historical detective" story mentioned earlier) in 1954.³⁵ The concentration among older writers, particularly those born in the early 1930s, is striking. In other words, Chūshingura is being kept alive by a generation that

could still read the account of Ōishi Yoshio in the prewar elementary school textbooks and who reached maturity during the great postwar era of Chūshingura film popularity from 1949 to 1962.

Does this mean that Chūshingura will in fact begin to disappear as this older generation and its readers disappear? One small piece of evidence to the contrary is one of the most curious books of the 1980s, a 1988 work by the implausible author “Akita to Ikumi to Tamiko-chan” with the equally implausible title “*Heb, Chūshinguraa, nanda sore?*” to *iu kata ni pittari no Chūshingura desu*. This slangy title, which appeared in zany typography on a shocking pink cover, is difficult to translate in a way that captures the sense of the contemporary Tokyo slang, but the authors themselves provide a good stab at it in an English table of contents provided as an appendix (itself a revealing mark of contemporary youth culture): *What the Hell is Chūshingura?*

As the title suggests, the book is clearly intended for a generation that did not grow up with Chūshingura but somehow feels responsible for knowing about it. The main text, although written in the characteristic jargon of teenagers and illustrated with cheery cartoons, actually provides a serious and responsible account of all the details of the historical Akō Incident. In a mark of contemporary egalitarianism, all honorifics are dropped and Lord Asano becomes “Asano-kun,” while Kira is referred to as “Kira no jisama” (something like “Grandpa Kira”). It is hard to know exactly what to make of a book like this, but at the very least it proves that there is clearly an audience for Chūshingura in the younger generation, if only to overcome its embarrassment at not really knowing anything about it.

EPILOGUE: AFTER THE 300TH ANNIVERSARY

After completing this writing in early 1990, I forgot about Chūshingura for several years but eventually decided that I should myself take advantage of the upcoming 2001–2003 tercentenary of the Akō Incident in some way. I organized a workshop in England in August 1999, and a conference in New York in March 2003, and taught both graduate and undergraduate seminars about Chūshingura in spring 2002.³⁶ I profited greatly from the stimulation of colleagues and students and learned much more about the history of this immensely complicated chapter in Japanese history—although I know that I have barely scratched the surface. My basic approach and concerns have not really changed, however, and

with the exception of the small emendations indicated in the notes, I find myself in basic agreement with what I wrote in 1990.³⁷

Here I would simply like to provide an update on what has happened to the Chūshingura phenomenon in Japan in the intervening thirteen years between 1990 and the tercentenary begun in 2001 and running through 2003. I noted in 1990 that the younger generation of Japanese seemed to have precious little interest in Chūshingura and that most Chūshingura-related books of the 1980s were written by the prewar generation. I must now qualify at least the second assertion: the continued outpouring of Chūshingura books in the 1990s revealed the emergence of a generation of postwar-born Japanese with a consuming interest in the history of the Akō incident. Not only were an increasing percentage of the new books written by a younger generation but there also, predictably, appeared respectable Web sites about the historical Akō incident, proof that a new generation was taking advantage of a new technology.³⁸

On the whole, however, publishing trends from the early to mid 1990s suggest a stable continuation of the Chūshingura boom of the late '80s, and the year 1994 even saw the appearance of feature films on Chūshingura for the first time since 1978.³⁹ What I did not anticipate was that NHK would select Chūshingura once again—for the fourth time—as the theme of its Sunday evening program “Taiga Drama” in the year 1999, entitled *Genroku ryōran (A Hundred Flowers of Genroku)*. The publishing industry responded with a vengeance, churning out in a single year from autumn 1998 almost exactly the same number of titles about Chūshingura that had been produced in the entire decade of the 1980s.⁴⁰ I was in Japan in the latter half of 1999 and did not sense that the Japanese nation was any more obsessed with Chūshingura than ever before; it was rather once more a mark of the astonishing power of NHK to determine what interests the Japanese people (and when), and to stimulate the book market accordingly. My conclusion remains the same: The single most powerful influence in sustaining the capacity of Chūshingura since the 1960s is television in general and NHK in particular.

Genroku ryōran in 1999 seems to have exhausted popular interest in Chūshingura, and the anniversary celebrations of 2001–2003 were muted and modest. Local institutions with a vested interest in Gishi-related tourism, notably Sengakuji temple in Tokyo and Ōishi Shrine in Akō, mounted massive fund-raising campaigns to build new structures to celebrate the tercentenary, but public interest on the whole was muted. It was certainly not the “mind-boggling” celebration that I had predicted. It is particularly revealing that events related to the 300th anniversary of

the night attack, in late 2003, were almost entirely performances of the classical theatrical versions of *Kanadehon Chūshingura* on the *kabuki* and *bunraku* stages.

These events now lead me to predict that whatever happens to Chūshingura in the future, it will be television and not printed books that will be the decisive factor. Apart from the periodic year-long NHK dramas, Chūshingura regularly appears in various guises in many other TV programs, and these turn out to be heavily concentrated in the month of December. The pattern began from the start in 1953, which was the first year of public television broadcasting when both NHK and Tokyo TV showed special Chūshingura dramas on December 14 and 15. The heavy concentration of Chūshingura themes in December has continued until this day as clearly revealed in a detailed chronology of Chūshingura-related television programs that appears in a series of materials edited by Akō City. This shows that in the four decades from 1953 to 1992, over one thousand programs related to Chūshingura have been shown of which 52 percent were in the month of December, for an average of 14.2 Chūshingura shows every December—versus an average of 1.2 shows during the other months.⁴¹ It seems clear that it has been primarily the medium of television that has ingrained Chūshingura into the year-end seasonal consciousness of the Japanese nation. As the historian Miyazawa Seiichi has noted, Chūshingura has become an “annual celebration” (*nenjū gyōji*), as though reliving the story of the revenge of the Akō Gishi at the end of the calendar year might provide a cleansing and cathartic effect that is appropriate to the season.⁴²

It seems best, therefore, to think now of Chūshingura in twenty-first-century Japan as more of a national “habit” than a national “legend,” that is, a reassuring seasonal event that demands as little thought about its deeper meanings as Christmas does for the majority of the U.S. population. Still, the weight of Chūshingura and its undeniable capacity to encompass many of the values that have been forged by the Japanese people over three centuries will remain a topic of abiding interest to scholars of Japan and of the ways in which national cultures invest themselves in special stories from their past.

NOTES

1. The students and their topics were: Michael Ainge (short stories about Ōishi Kuranosuke by Akutagawa Ryūnosuke and Nogami Yaeko), Andy Cane (Utamaro parody prints on Chūshingura), John Carpenter (early *uki-e* Chūshingura prints), Iori Joko (*kibyōshi* parodies of Chūshingura), Sue Kawashima (the case

- for Kira Kōzuke-no-suke), Jordan Sand (reporting the Akō incident in Edo), and Keiko Takahashi (Hiroshige's Chūshingura prints).
2. In actual fact, the term “Chūshingura” seems to have been used prior to *Kanadehon*, in an illustrated *kurohon* chapbook of 1746. Few, however, are aware of this.
3. The regular use of “Akō jiken” seems to date from the 1960s. The one-volume *Nihonshi jiten* of 1954, edited by the Kokushi kenkyūshitsu of Kyoto University, describes the incident under “Akō gishi,” while the first volume of the Iwanami *Kokushi daijiten* (Yoshikawa Kōbunkan 1979, ff) uses “Akō jiken.” For a detailed study of Terasaka Kichiemon, who disappeared after the attack on Kira, see Henry D. Smith II, “The Trouble with Terasaka: The Forty-Seventh Rōnin and the Chūshingura Imagination,” *Nichibunken Japan Review* 14, no. 1 (2004).
4. John Fairbank, Edwin Reischauer, and Albert Craig, *East Asia: Tradition and Transformation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 411.
5. Paul Varley, *Japanese Culture*, 3rd ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1984), 184.
6. Jordan Sand, “Chūshingura as a Media Event: Reporting and Documenting of the Akō Incident,” seminar paper, Columbia University, unpublished 1989.
7. Kōsaka Jirō, *Genroku o-tatami bugyō no nikki* (Tokyo: Chūkō shinsho, 1984), 180–83. I now believe that Kōsaka was wrong, since he failed to notice that Asahi Bunzaemon's single line on the night attack was followed by a note that said, “for details, see *Jintenroku*,” which is a manuscript collection that appears to have a variety of materials related to the Akō incident. I might have underestimated the degree to which information about the night attack spread quickly throughout Japan, although I remain doubtful that the response was uniformly positive.
8. Donald H. Shivley, “Tokugawa Plays on Forbidden Topics,” in *Chūshingura: Studies in Kabuki and the Puppet Theater*, ed. James Brandon (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1982), 35. In Japanese, the most recent discussion of the problem is Watanabe Tamotsu, *Chūshingura: Moo hitotsu no rekishi kankaku* (Tokyo: Hakusuisha, 1981).
9. I rely here on the description of Aoki Sentei, “Keiseika serareta gishi shōsetsu,” *Aoi* 2–4 (June–August 1910): 13–17, 10–12, 14–18.
10. Shivley, “Tokugawa Plays” gives a detailed summary in English. The seminal work in this area was Yuda Yoshio, “*Kanadehon Chūshingura seiritsushi*,” *Kokubungaku: Kaishaku to kanshō*, December 1967, reprinted in Yuda Yoshio, *Jōruri shi ronkō* (Tokyo: Chūōkōronsha, 1975), 359–70.
11. Fujino Yoshio, *Kanadehon Chūshingura: Kaishaku to kenkyū* (Tokyo: Ofūsha, 1974), vol I: 80–144.
12. Nakayama Mikio, *Chūshingura monogatari* (Tokyo: Gagugei shorin, 1988), 17.
13. This and three other *kibyōshi* parodies were the topic of the seminar paper by Iori Joko, “Chūshingura Parodies in *Kibyōshi*,” seminar paper, Columbia University, 1989. *Anadehon Chūshingura* appears in an annotated edition in Koike Masatane, et al., eds., *Edo no gesaku ehon*, zokkan 1 (Shakai shisōsha, 1984). Note, *A kibyōshi* dating one year earlier than *Kanadehon Chūshingura* appears in a list

- of forty-three *Chūshingura*-related *kibyōshi* in Sawada Michiko, "Chūshinguramonō' no kibyōshi," *Aoyama gobun* 9 (March 1979): 65–66.
14. Satō Tadao, *Chūshingura: Iji no keifu* (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbunsha, 1976), 88.
 15. It might be argued that the two words "Kanadehon" and "Chūshingura" imply two different vectors in the interpretation of the Akō vendetta, with the former emphasizing the individuality and sense of honor of each the forty-seven separate retainers and the latter implying their unity as a band loyal to a single lord. In the variants of *Kanadehon Chūshingura* listed by Fujino Yoshio (*Kanadehon Chūshingura: Kaishaku to kenkyū* [Tokyo: Ofūsha, 1974]) words referring to the kana number (particularly *iroha* and *shijūshichi*) are about twice as common in the kabuki tradition as words relating to loyalty (*chūshin*, *gishin*, *chūgi*, etc.) up until Meiji, which is when terms of loyalty becomes dominant.
 16. I am indebted in the following account to Matsushima Eiichi, *Chūshingura: Sono seiritsu to tenkai* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1964), 213 ff.
 17. As cited by Satō, *Chūshingura*, 96, from a privately published work, *Eiga Chūshingura*.
 18. Mayama's work is discussed in detail in Donald Keene, "Variations on a Theme: *Chūshingura*," in Brandon, *Chūshingura*, 13–21. Satō, *Chūshingura*, quotes Mayama's daughter as claiming that her father really wanted to depict the Akō rōnin as opponents of tyrannical shogunal rule but was prevented by the militarism of the times (108). Mayama's *Genroku Chūshingura* served as the basis for Mizoguchi Kenji's two-part film of the same name, 1941–42.
 19. Barrett, Gregory. *Archetypes in Japanese Film: The Sociopolitical and Religious Significance of the Principal Heroes and Heroines* (New York: Associated University Presses, 1989), 30.
 20. Satō, *Chūshingura*, 111.
 21. Akutagawa's story was translated and analyzed by Michael Ainge, "Nogami Yacko and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke: Two More Voices Join the Chūshingura Legend," seminar paper, Columbia University, 1989.
 22. The work is mentioned in Matsushima, *Chūshingura*, 223, as having appeared under the penname Ōkawa Hyōnosuke, entitled "Ōishi Yoshio no baai." I have since located the article, which was published in the March 1929 issue of *Shinkō kagaku no bata no moto ni*, and included in *Hani Gorō rekishiron chosakushū*, vol. 3 (Aoki Shoten, 1967), 120–25. Hani saw the Akō incident as the result of a crisis in the feudal class of the Genroku period that led Tsunayoshi to increase pressure on the daimyo through forced confiscations and by using pawns like Kira to exact bribes. He saw the rōnin avengers as reacting out not from concern for their real interests, which would have led to a revolutionary alliance with the unpropertied classes, but from ideological distractions with high ideals. Hani doubtless considered the Akō affair to have lessons for Japan of the late 1920s, when the state was increasingly oppressive and many intellectuals were unemployed.
 23. Satō, *Chūshingura*, 102–3.
 24. Barrett, *Archetypes in Japanese Film*, 30.

25. Matsushima, *Chūshingura*, 10 The observation that no real evidence survives because the nature of Asano's grudge was made long before Matsushima, in the first serious modern history of the Akō incident by Shigeno Yasutsugu, *Akō gishi jitsuwu* (*The True Story of the Ako Vendetta*) (Tokyo: Taiseikan, 1889).
26. I now know that the proper medical term for this affliction is photosensitive epilepsy (PSE) thanks to the widely reported "Pokemon panic" of December 1997, in which hundreds of young Japanese children were thought to have suffered from just such an attack while watching an episode of the animated cartoon "Pokemon" that had bright flashing lights.
27. Izawa Motohiko, *Chūshingura Genroku jūgonen no hangyaku* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1988).
28. Kira was studied by Sue Kawashima, "Kira Yoshihisa, A Tragic Hero: A Neglected Perspective," seminar paper, Columbia University, 1989. The real grave of Kira is at the temple of Manshōin in Nakano-ku, Tokyo; the one in Kira-chō is a secondary grave.
29. Inoue made these points in a *taidan* with Morimura Seiichi, *Shūkan Asahi*, May 21, 1982.
30. I rely here on the description of the play in Nawata Kazuo, "Chūshingura' sakuhi arekore: kinsaku to ippin," *Taishū bungaku kenkyū* 87 (January 1989): 8–9.
31. Yamaguchi Masao, "Chūshingura to ōken no ronri" *Kokubungaku: Kaishaku to kanshō* 31, no. 15 (1986): 38–41.
32. Yamaguchi Masao, "Chūshingura to ōken no ronri," *Kokubungaku: Kaishaku to kanshō* 31, no. 15 (1986): 38.
33. See Saeki Junko's chapter in this book for an in-depth analysis of this piece.
34. These details come from *Asahi kiiwaado*, 28.
35. To update the expanded list of titles in the appendix for this chapter yielded twenty more authors with known birth dates, spreading the spectrum more into the postwar generation. But even with this new total of thirty-four Chūshingura writers, almost four-fifths (twenty-seven) received all or most of their primary education before 1945. In particular, virtually all who wrote books on the history of the Akō incident were from the prewar generation, while writers of historical fiction tended to be younger.
36. The 1999 workshop was held at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England, under the generous sponsorship of the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures (SISJAC), and the 2003 conference at Columbia University was supported by the Weatherhead Program Development Fund of the East Asian Institute, Columbia University. These efforts have resulted in a series entitled "Three Hundred Years of Chūshingura" that began in the journal *Monumenta Nipponica* with issue 58:1 (Spring 2003) and continued into 2004.
37. For my more recent thinking on the Akō incident and the Chūshingura phenomenon, see Henry D. Smith II, "The Capacity of *Chūshingura*," *Monumenta Nipponica* 58.1 (2003): 1–42 and Smith, "The Trouble with Terasaka."
38. The great majority of Web sites about Chūshingura are (like Web sites about anything) are amateurish and of not interest, but two in particular stand out

- as serious efforts (albeit by amateurs) to engage in online history. Particularly impressive is the site of Tanaka Mitsurō (born ca. 1960), called “Long Ivy” (Rongaibi / Nagatsuta) after the area of Yokohama where he lives. Also of use and interest is the “Akō Gishi Shiryōkan” site of Satō Makoto (<http://www.age.ne.jp/x/satomako/TOP.htm>), who is a bit younger than Tanaka.
39. The tradition of theatrical feature films of Chūshingura essentially ended in 1962, when television took over as the major visual medium. Exceptions were *Akō-jō danzetsu* (Tōei, dir. Fukasaku Kinji, 1978) and the two films that appeared simultaneously in October 1994: *Shijūshichi-nin no shikyaku* (Tōei, dir. Ichikawa Kon) and *Chūshingura gaiden: Yotsuya kaidan* (Shōchiku, dir. Fukasaku Kinji).
 40. This is based on a search of the National Diet Library Online Public Access Catalog using the subject heading of “Ako gishi” plus the title keyword “Chūshingura,” which yields 144 titles for the year September 1998 through August 1999 versus 143 for the decade 1980–89. (These totals include reprints and overlaps between the two searches.)
 41. Akō-shi Sōmubu Shishi Hensanshitsu, ed., *Chūshingura*, vol. 5 (1993), 809–88.
 42. Miyazawa Seiichi, *Kindai Nihon to 'Chūshingura' gensō* (Tokyo: Aoki Shoten, 2001), 8.

APPENDIX

CHŪSHINGURA-RELATED BOOKS OF THE 1980S

When originally prepared in 1990, this list contained thirty titles. Since then, new bibliographies and electronic resources have enabled this more complete list of fifty-six titles, which is still selective, excluding about two dozen books considered too marginal or narrow. Reprints or anthologies of older works have also been omitted. The books below are classified into six types: D (drama, excluding TV scripts), F (fiction), G (general), H (history), K (*kabuki*-related, including *ukiyo-e*), and L (literature other than *yoruri* and *kabuki*, mostly Edo senryu and novels). For many more Chūshingura-related short stories, plays, and TV scenarios that were published singly in journals or anthologies, see the bibliography of novels and plays in Akō-shi Sōmubu Shishi Hensanshitsu, ed., *Chūshingura*, vol. 6 (1997), in which pp. 399–408 cover the 1980s. For a chronology of about 240 Chūshingura-related television programs (excluding repeats) shown in the 1980s, see Akō-shi Sōmubu Shishi Hensanshitsu, ed., *Chūshingura*, vol. 5 (1993), 854–76.

- March 1980 NHK, ed. *Chūshingura*. *Rekishi e no shōtai*, vol. 5. NHK. (Reissued with revisions as vol. 15 in November 1988.) [H]
- August 1980. Saitō Hanzō. *Akō gishi Ōtaka Gengo den*. Kōdansha. [H]
- December 1980 Fujita Motohiko. *Chūshingura omoshiro jiten: Akō rōshi, shiwasu no uchiri!* Nagaoka Shoten. [G]
- December 1980. Kumashiro Teruo. *Fukushū: Moo hitotsu no Akō rōshi den*. Tōkyō Shinbun Shuppanyoku. [H, F]
- June 1981. Noda Hideki. *Akō rōshi: Konchū ni narenakatta fāburu no sūgakuteki kinōhō*. Jiritsu Shobō. [D]
- November 1981. Arai Hideo. *Jisetsu Genroku Chūshingura*. Nihon Bunkasha. [H]
- November 1981. Kataoka Nizaemon. *Sugawara to Chūshingura*. Kōyō Shobō. [K]

- November 1981. Sakaiya Taichi. *Tōge no gunzō*, vol. 1. Nihon Hōsō Shuppan Kyōkai. The text for the 1982 NHK Taiga Drama; vol. 2 appeared in February 1982 and vol. 3 in June 1982. [F]
- November 1981. Watanabe Tamotsu. *Chūshingura: Moo hitotsu no rekishi kankaku*. Hakusuisha. [K]
- November 1981. Ozaki Hideki, comp. *Chūshingura meimeiden: Monogatari to shiseki o tazunete*. Seibidō. [H, L]
- December 1981. Horikawa Toyohiro. *Kira Kōzuke-no-suke zuidan*. Meigen Shobō. [H]
- December 1981. Kumashiro Teruo. *Chūshingura igaishi*. Tōkyō Shinbun Shuppankyoku. [H, F]
- December 1981. Kuwata Tadachika. *Akō rōshi shidan*. Shiode Shuppan. [H]
- December 1981. Sate Tetsuji. *Onna-tachi no Chūshingura*. Shun'yōdō Shoten. [F]
- December 1981. Shioda Michio. *Genroku Bushidō: Chūshingura to ningenzō*. Green Arrow Shuppansha. [G]
- December 1981. Tamiya Yukio. *Jitsuroku Yonezawa Chūshingura: Akō rōshi to Uesugike*. Yonezawa: Fubō Shuppan. [H]
- January 1982. Suwa Haruo. *Chūshingura no sekai: Nihonjin no shinjō no genryū*. Yamato Shobō. [G]
- February 1982. Satake Shingo. *Chūshingura no onna-tachi*. Kōfūsha Shuppan. [F]
- June 1982. Iio Kuwashi. *Igaishi Chūshingura*. Shin Jinbutsu Ōrai Sha. [H]
- August 1982. Muramatsu Shunkichi. *Akō jiken no kyozō to nazo: Ura kara kaite sugao no Chūshingura*. Nihon Bungeisha. [H]
- November 1982. Kayahara Teruo. *Kōshō Akō jiken: Bobi tanbō I*. Osaka: Tōhō Shuppan. [H]
- November 1982. Tsuka Kōhei. *Tsuka-ban Chūshingura*. Kadokawa Shoten. [F]
- April 1983. Morimura Seiichi. *Shinsetsu Chūshingura*. Shinchōsha, 1933. [F]
- October 1983. Hashida Sugako. *Onna-tachi no Chūshingura*. Yamatoyama Shuppansha. [F]
- November 1983. Tsurumi Shunsuke and Yasuda Takeshi. *Chūshingura to Yotsuya kaidan: Nihonjin no communication*. Asahi Shinbunsha. [K]
- December 1983. Yoshida Chiaki. *Shashin Chūshingura*. Hoikusha. [K]
- January 1984. Hyōgo Prefectural Museum. *Akō jiken to "Chūshingura."* Exhib. cat. [G]
- March 1984. Suwa Haruo, ed. *Akō jiken ni kansuru bungei to shisō*. Gakushūin University. [L]
- April 1984. Hiraoka Yūei. *Ōishi Yoshio*. Gakushū Kenkyūsha (Manga). [H]
- October 1984. Maruya Saichi. *Chūshingura to wa nanika*. Kōdansha. [H, L]
- June 1985. Iio Kuwashi. *Za Chūshingura*. Shin Jinbutsu Ōrai Sha. [H]
- November 1985. Nakajima Shizuo. *Asano Takumi no kami ninjō no himitsu*. Medical Publicity. [H]
- December 1985. Inoue Hisashi. *Fuchūshingura*. Shūeisha. [F]
- December 1985. Komuro Kinnosuke. *Chūshingura no jikenbo*. Tokyo Shoseki. [H]
- July 1986. Nanbara Mikio. *Onna Chūshingura*. Kadokawa Shoten. [F]
- September 1986. Shimura Takeshi. *Chūshingura no jinseikun*. Mikasa Shobō. [G]

- October 1986. Morimura Seiichi. *Chūshingura*. 2 vols. Asahi Shinbunsha. [F]
- December 1986. Fujita Hiroshi. *Issatsu marugoto Chūshingura no hon*. Longsellers. [G]
- December 1986. Minagawa Hiroko. *Chūshingura satsujin jiken*. Tokuma Shoten. [F]
- December 1986. Sawada Fujiko. *Chūshingura hiren ki*. Kōdansha. [F]
- November 1987. Imao Tetsuya. *Kira no kubi: Chūshingura to imajineeshon*. Heibonsha. [L]
- March 1988. Morita Naruo. *Chūshingura no e*. Kōdansha. [F]
- April 1988. Iio Kuwashi. *Chūshingura no shinsō*. Shin Jinbutsu Ōrai Sha. [H]
- October 1988. Inoue Hisashi. *Inu no adauchi*. Bungei Shunjū Sha. [D]
- October 1988. Yoshii Shōjin. *Ōno karō nazo no chikuten: Chūshingura gaiden jidai shōsetsu*. Privately published. [F]
- November 1988. Akita to Ikumi to Tamiko-chan. "Heh, Chūshinguraa, nanda sore?" *to iu kata ni pittari no Chūshingura desu*. Gogatsu Shobō. [G]
- November 1988. Kobayashi Nobuhiko. *Ura-omote Chūshingura*. Shinchōsha. [F]
- November 1988. Morimura Seiichi. *Kira Chūshingura*. 2 vols. Kadokawa Shoten. [F]
- December 1988. Fumidate Teruko. *Kira Kōzukenosuke no Chūshingura*. PHP Kenkyūjo. [H]
- December 1988. Izawa Motohiko. *Chūshingura Genroku jūgonen no hangyaku*. Shinchōsha. [F]
- December 1988. Nakau Ei. *Chūshingura ukiyo-e*. Ribun Shuppan. [K]
- December 1988. Nakayama Mikio. *Chūshingura monogatari*. Gakugei shorin. [K]
- January 1989. Kōdo Suisei. *Chūshingura nante nakatta*. Banseisha. [H]
- March 1989. Sōda Kōichi. *Onna-tachi no Chūshingura*. Shufu to Seikatsu Sha. [F]
- March 1989. Yagi Seiichi. *Chūshingura*, vol. 1. Akō City. [H]
- December 1989. Akamatsu Masaaki. *Ko-senryū de tsuzuru Akō gishi den*. Taihei Shooku. [L]
- Note:* This paper was originally prepared for presentation at the Modern Japan Seminar, Columbia University on April 13, 1990, and an earlier version was subsequently posted on the Internet. A revised and expanded version appears here with revisions for style and errors of fact and issues on which my thinking has changed substantially in the intervening years. In addition, the final section "Epilogue: After the 300th Anniversary" has been written specifically for this volume to place the original paper in broader perspective.