

The Capacity of Chūshingura

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THREE centuries have now passed since the Akō 赤穂 vendetta of 1701–1703, a historical event that in the intervening years has evolved into Japan’s “national legend.” It has come to constitute, under the omnibus term of “Chūshingura” 忠臣蔵, a cultural phenomenon of a scale, complexity, and durability unusual in world history. With what, for example, can it be compared? Candidates might be King Arthur for England, Jeanne d’Arc for France, the Song of Ch’un-hyang 春香歌 for Korea, or the Alamo for the United States. Yet none of these or other national legends seem to have, in the suggestive term of the historian Miyazawa Seiichi 宮澤誠一, the “capacity” of Chūshingura, the ability of a single story to root itself in the national psyche in a way that encompasses so many issues for so many audiences in so many media.¹

For all the utter familiarity, indeed banality, of the Chūshingura story, we still really understand very little about why, and how, the narration of this particular sequence of acts of samurai vengeance in the Genroku 元禄 era has multiplied through such a range of forms in the centuries since the original incident. Japanese, including many intellectuals, tend to resort to the reductionist explanation that Chūshingura appeals in a special way to the values of the Japanese people. But how could it represent anything other than those values, since they are precisely what have fashioned it over the years? It is the argument of this survey of recent studies of Chūshingura, and of a series of more focused articles by a number of contributors that will follow it in this journal, that the best explanations for the “capacity” of Chūshingura are to be found in its history, a history that is long and complex. Here I propose simply to lay out the general terrain of

THE AUTHOR is professor of Japanese history at Columbia University. He wishes to acknowledge the support for research on Chūshingura provided by the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Culture (SISJAC), which sponsored the workshop “A Treasury of Loyal Retainers: The Cultural History of Japan’s National Legend” at the University of East Anglia in August 1999. Additional research was undertaken during an appointment in 2001 as visiting researcher at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken).

¹ Miyazawa 2001, p. 5. He uses the loan word *kyapashiti* キャパシティー.

the subject, making note of some of the most interesting recent scholarship on the Chūshingura phenomenon and suggesting where more exploration is in order.

A word of explanation of the term “Chūshingura”: It is now standard practice, even among academic specialists, to overlook the anachronism of using a word that first appeared only in 1748 in the title of the puppet play *Kanadehon chūshingura* 仮名手本忠臣蔵 to refer backwards in time to the historical Akō vendetta of 1701–1703 on which that play was based, as well as to expand it to include later retellings of the story in various media, whether novels, plays, oral storytelling, films, or “straight” histories of the incident, on until the present day. This nomenclature is a sure indication of the tremendous power of that particular play in sustaining the legend for so long. But the play and the phenomenon are far from identical, and to distinguish the two I will reserve the term *Kanadehon* for the jōruri of 1748 and its subsequent kabuki versions.

The Legality of the Vendetta

It all began as deadly reality, at one instant in time, on a spring morning in 1701 (Genroku 14.3.14; 21 April 1701), when the lord of Akō, Asano Naganori 浅野長矩, drew his sword in a corridor of Edo castle and attempted to kill the senior bakufu protocol official Kira Yoshinaka 吉良義央.² It was the last day of the visits to Edo castle of envoys from the imperial court in Kyoto, the reception of whom had been placed in the hands of Asano and another daimyo. Asano, who struck from behind and wounded Kira only slightly on the shoulder and forehead before he was restrained, was immediately taken into custody and ordered to death by seppuku later the same day for the high crime of drawing a sword within the shogun’s castle. His domain was confiscated and his retainers set adrift as rōnin. Kira, however, was praised for his restraint and escaped punishment, a situation that many of the Akō rōnin found unacceptable. Twenty-two months later, forty-seven of the former retainers of Asano, declaring that they were fulfilling their lord’s original intentions, attacked the Edo mansion of Kira, severed his head, and marched across the city to the temple of Sengakuji 泉岳寺, where they offered their trophy before the grave of their master. For a month and a half, the bakufu debated before finally issuing the honorable sentence of death by seppuku for the forty-six of the rōnin who had surrendered themselves at Sengakuji, for the crimes of conspiracy and disturbing the peace of Edo.³ The order was carried out the same day, on Genroku 16.2.4 (20 March 1703), and the rōnin were interred in graves adjacent to their lord, where to this day they continue to be

² Kira’s name is read by some as Yoshihisa.

³ One of the forty-seven attackers, Terasaka Kichiemon 寺坂吉右衛門, was probably dismissed from the league at Sengakuji, presumably for reasons related to his low rank. The official stand of the league leadership, however, as recorded in a letter of 1702.12.24 (Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, p. 409), was that he fled from cowardice before entering Kira’s mansion. The issue continues to be hotly debated; for the latest round, see Akō-shi 1997.

worshiped by throngs of incense-bearing visitors as the “Righteous Samurai of Akō” (*Akō gishi* 赤穂義士).⁴

Between the lines of this condensed account lie two very different narratives. Most compelling is the tale of a bloody revenge that began with attempted murder, proceeded through long months of intricate plotting, culminated in a dramatic night assassination, and was put to rest by a mass execution. In the curt judgment of James McMullen (with which I am in basic agreement), it was “an atavistic, violent, and futile event.”⁵ Less obvious but equally important is the saga of procedural wrangling over the legality and morality of the actions of the various protagonists. Although the crimes involved were fundamentally ones of passion, they were also highly unusual in categorical terms, and raised issues that went to the heart of the institutions and values of the Tokugawa system. In and of itself, the Akō vendetta was inconsequential to the political and institutional history of Japan, but as a mirror of political and institutional dilemmas in a period of transition for the samurai class from practicing warrior to urban bureaucrat, it has no rivals. In the end, it was this dual character of the historical incident, at once tabloid crime and legal conundrum, that provides the first and most basic explanation of the “capacity” of Chūshingura.

The legal issues have been endlessly debated for these three centuries, but in largely isolated contexts. Both the initial assault by Asano and the counterattack by his vassals, by the nature of their disruptive violence at the heart of shogunal authority, presented the bakufu with urgent judicial decisions. Virtually no direct documentation survives, however, of what must have been complex debates within bakufu councils, particularly over the disposition of the avengers.⁶ In essence, the most crucial decision of the entire affair remains a “black box,” which has both enabled and encouraged widespread guesswork about the issues involved. Public discussion of bakufu politics was strictly prohibited during the Tokugawa period, so that records remain only of the occasional debates that were conducted within the private circles of Confucian scholars, beginning immediately after the execution of the avengers and continuing throughout the Tokugawa period. These debates were circulated in private through manuscript copies and were beyond the reach (or at least the concern) of bakufu officials. Known now as the “Confucian scholar debate” (*jusha ron* 儒者論) or the “Righteous Samurai debates” (*Gishi ron* 義士論), they constitute a self-sufficient archive that has passed down intact to the present and has been widely reproduced and analyzed by modern historians.⁷

⁴ The term *gishi* is a generic noun, but it has come to be used almost exclusively to refer specifically to the Akō rōnin in a laudatory way. I will use “Gishi” as a proper noun in this essay to denote this latter usage. See note 97 for other terms.

⁵ McMullen 1999. An expanded and revised version of James McMullen’s paper will appear later in this series.

⁶ The sole document that directly documents the bakufu debates is “Hyōjōsho ichiza zōji-yorigaki” 評定所一座存寄書; see Nabeta 1910–1911, vol. 3, pp. 148–49.

⁷ Many of the texts of the Confucianist debates on the Akō Gishi were included in Nabeta

Little new light has been shed in recent years on the many intriguing considerations raised in the Confucian debates. The major legal issues of the vendetta itself were concisely laid out in a chapter by Bitō Masahide 尾藤正英 in his 1975 survey history of Genroku Japan, and a book of 1978 by Tahara Tsuguo 田原嗣郎 analyzed the debates themselves in fine detail.⁸ It might be useful here briefly to note the major points at stake and the current state of their resolution.

1. *What was the nature of the dispute between Asano and Kira?* As Shigeno Yasutsugu 重野安繹 first emphasized in his classic 1889 study of the Akō vendetta, the historical record has left no reliable evidence about the specifics of Asano's motivation for attacking Kira, revealing only that as he struck, Asano cried out, "Do you remember the occasion for my grudge?" (*Kono aida no ikon oboetaru ka* 此間の遺恨覚たるか).⁹ Rumors that spread from an early point through Edo and out along the highways of Japan reported that the hostility between the two men began with Asano's failure to provide Kira with adequate gifts (or "bribes," depending on one's view of the morality of such a system of compensation). In the absence of any definitive evidence, however, fantasizers over the centuries have been free to concoct any number of possible theories, from sexual advances to industrial espionage to contests of cultural expertise.¹⁰ (The Akō avengers themselves, in all their voluminous correspondence, almost never touched on the precise reasons for Asano's grudge, suggesting that they did not know or—more likely—that they did not care.¹¹)

The broader legal question about Asano's attack was whether it qualified as a proper "fight" (*kenka* 喧嘩) and hence was subject to the customary practice of *kenka ryōseibai* 喧嘩両成敗, the principle that both parties to a quarrel involving physical violence should be punished equally, no matter which was at fault. It is often asserted that the indignation of the Akō retainers over the nonpunish-

1910–1911 and again in Adachi 1910 (for which see also Miyazawa 2001, pp. 91–93). More recently, the key texts were included in Ishii 1974, where they accounted for almost two-thirds of part 2, "The Akō Incident" (Akō jiken 赤穂事件), which in turn accounted for almost two-thirds of the entirety of this volume of documents on the theme of "early modern samurai thought." In effect, "samurai thought" (*buke shisō* 武家思想) thus tends to mean "Confucian thinking about samurai" as much as "the thinking of samurai." A somewhat different selection of texts may be found in Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, pp. 673–726.

⁸ See Bitō 1975 and Tahara 1978. A list of the relevant texts may be found on pages 230–31 of the latter. A translation of Bitō Masahide's account of the incident will appear in the next issue as the second of this series of articles on Chūshingura.

⁹ As quoted by Kajikawa Yosobei 梶川与惣兵衛, the official who restrained Asano, in "Kajikawa-shi nikki" 梶川氏日記; Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, p. 6. See also Shigeno 1889, pp. 9–12.

¹⁰ For a useful catalogue of the theories, see Akō Gishi Jiten Kankōkai 1972, pp. 25–42. Some of the more fanciful recent theories are described in Smith 1990.

¹¹ The only reference by one of the rōnin to a specific motive that I have seen is in a document by Horibe Yahei 堀部弥兵衛 asserting that Asano's assault was the result of Kira's "verbal insult" (*akkō* 悪口); see Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, p. 252. The basic logic of the rōnin position was that if Asano was angry enough to be willing to destroy himself, his family, and his domain, then he must have had adequate reason. See Ōtaka Gengo's 大高源五 famous farewell letter to his mother, in which he notes that Asano's anger alone was proof enough for his retainers that he had just cause (Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, p. 307).

ment of Kira was rooted in their commitment to this principle. In fact, however, the avengers never appealed specifically to *kenka ryōseibai*: they simply said that it was unfair (*kataochi* 片落ち, “one-sided”) to let Kira off scot-free when he had obviously provoked Asano. In fact, as Tahara has noted, the implicit intent of *kenka ryōseibai*—to discourage acts of private violence among samurai—was vindicated in this case, since Kira did not respond to Asano’s attack.¹² The basic reality is that *kenka ryōseibai* itself flew in the face of instinctive warrior notions of justice and honor (in the sense of *iji* 意地—the stubborn commitment to preserving one’s own integrity and dignity, come what may).¹³ How could a warrior be punished for reacting honorably to a malicious or unprovoked insult? It was precisely this fundamental sense of fairness, and not the legalistic principle of *kenka ryōseibai*, that lay at the heart of the Akō revenge.¹⁴

2. *Should the Akō retainers have resisted the surrender of Akō castle to the bakufu?* Records do survive concerning the debates conducted in Akō following the arrival of the news of the daimyo’s attack and seppuku, and continuing until the final surrender of the castle one month later (1701.4.19), and they reveal that the options of *rōjō* 籠城, or holding the castle in defiance of the bakufu, and even of *junshi* 殉死, or following their lord in suicide, were broached. It remains unclear exactly how these options might have been carried out, and whether they were truly viable. Bitō observed that the threat of *rōjō* may have been no more than a tactic to win concessions from the bakufu, while Kasaya Kazuhiko 笠谷和比古 has argued more recently that *rōjō* was a normal procedural maneuver pending the arrival of a proper order of surrender from a legitimate authority.¹⁵ The option of *junshi*, which had been outlawed by the bakufu in 1663, seems even more implausible, since it would have brought harsh retribution both to the Asano family and to the families of those committing the act. In other words, no matter what the documents say, much remains uncertain about exactly what options the retainers considered and how seriously they considered them.

3. *Was the restoration of the Asano house a realistic possibility?* Elaborate documentation exists for the insistence of the chief elder of the Akō domain, Ōishi Kuranosuke Yoshio (Yoshikata) 大石内蔵助良雄,¹⁶ who was in charge of

¹² Tahara 1978, pp. 22–25 and passim. Tahara also notes the further legal question whether Asano’s attack constituted a proper *kenka*, which was customarily defined as involving physical violence by both parties. The samurai common sense that drove the Akō rōnin made no such legal distinctions: it was obvious to them that their master had a quarrel with Kira, for which they specifically used the word *kenka* in their manifesto (Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, p. 395).

¹³ For an extended analysis of *iji* with specific reference to Chūshingura, see Satō 1976.

¹⁴ See Ikegami 1995, pp. 141–45 and 201–203, for the emergence of *kenka ryōseibai* in the sixteenth century as a way to establish daimyo authority at the price of restricting the autonomy of the individual warrior. The principle was never codified as bakufu law, and was probably in decline in the Genroku period; see Tanaka 2002.

¹⁵ Bitō 1975, p. 309; Kasaya 1998, pp. 86–88.

¹⁶ Modern promoters of the Akō Gishi refer to Ōishi by his adult given name (*na* 名) of Yoshio 良雄 rather than his better-known informal name (*tsūshō* 通称) of Kuranosuke 内蔵助. The proper reading of Ōishi’s given name seems to have been Yoshikata, as indicated by the furigana on contemporaneous documents, but in the modern period, it has almost always been read Yoshio.

the surrender of the castle and became the leader of the league of revenge, that first priority be given to pressuring the bakufu for the restoration (*saikō* 再興) of the Asano house of Akō. This specifically meant the restoration of the status of Asano Daigaku Nagahiro 浅野大学長広, the younger brother and legal heir of the childless Naganori. A hatamoto retainer of the bakufu, Nagahiro had been placed under a form of house arrest (*heimon* 閉門) immediately following his older brother's seppuku and pending a decision on his own ultimate fate. Many imponderables remain about Ōishi's intentions. Did he seriously believe that the bakufu would restore the Asano line in the wake of a crime that so assaulted the dignity of the shogun's palace at a moment of high ceremony? Or was it merely a stratagem to some other end, as various later historians and historical novelists have speculated?¹⁷ And even if Nagahiro were restored, it would surely have been only as a lowly hatamoto with a small number of retainers, so what use would this have been? In the end, the decision of the bakufu over a year later, on 1702.7.18, to remand Nagahiro into the custody of the main line of the Asano family in Hiroshima made the question of restoration moot, and it was the decisive event in committing Ōishi to revenge against Kira. But the tangled question of house restoration, as with so many other procedural issues of the vendetta, cannot be answered on the basis of surviving documents, leaving one more rich area of potential debate within the vast capacity of Chūshingura.

4. *Was the revenge of retainers on behalf of their lord a proper vendetta?* As Eiko Ikegami has explained in careful detail, there had emerged during the seventeenth century a system of “registered” vendetta (*katakiuchi* 敵討) by which a person (at this stage, almost always a male samurai) could avenge the murder of a relative (typically a parent, but sometimes an elder brother or uncle), but only by adherence to a variety of legal stipulations, of which the most important was registration of the intended revenge with the authorities.¹⁸ The Akō vendetta, however, did not conform to the rules of *katakiuchi*, so it was a “revenge” only in a commonsensical sort of way. Most importantly, virtually no precedent existed for avenging the death of one's lord—a fact of which certain of the Akō rōnin were acutely aware, leading them to seek justification instead in Chinese Confucian texts.¹⁹ But even if revenge for a lord could be supported, the avengers

¹⁷ Bitō 1975, p. 309, suggests that Ōishi's real concern may have been less house restoration than the punishment of Kira by the bakufu, a demand that was included in a petition that Ōishi dispatched to the bakufu on 1701.3.29.

¹⁸ Ikegami 1995, pp. 247–52.

¹⁹ As James McMullen points out in an article on the Confucians' responses to the Akō vendetta that will appear later in this series, there did in fact exist a clear precedent in the writings of Zhu Xi for avenging the death of one's lord, although it remains unclear whether the Akō rōnin were aware of it. According to a later story, Horibe Yahei and his son Yasubei 安兵衛 asked Hosoi Kōtaku 細井広沢, a Confucian scholar and friend, if he could provide a classical source that might justify the term “revenge for a lord or father” (君父之讐); see the excerpt from “Nirō ryakuden” 二老略伝 in Nabeta 1910–1911, vol. 2, pp. 287–90. In the Japanese secondary literature, the Zhu Xi source is mentioned in Maruya 1984, pp. 73–74; and again by Yagi Akihiro 八木哲浩 in Akō-shi 1987, vol. 1, pp. 178–80, in which Yagi discounts the particulars of the Kōtaku story, but spec-

would still presumably have been subject to the requirement for prior registration of their intentions with the bakufu, something that was obviously impossible when the target was a high bakufu official, and when the death of their lord had been ordered by the bakufu itself.

5. *Did the avengers violate the prohibition of conspiracy?* At the other end of the spectrum from the question whether the Akō vendetta was a proper *kataki-uchi* was the issue whether it constituted a conspiracy (*totō* 徒党), something strictly banned under bakufu law. In the end, the bakufu deemed that it did, and conspiracy was the crime with which the Akō rōnin were explicitly charged in the sentence of seppuku on 1703.2.4.²⁰ This was an issue to which the rōnin were clearly sensitive in the course of their plotting, and at one point some took pains to argue that the concept of conspiracy could not apply to the members of a single retainer band.²¹ For all the debates among Confucianists and others about the “righteousness” of the cause of the avengers, the violation of the ban on conspiracy, in combination with their disturbance of the peace of the shogunal capital of Edo, was more than enough legal cause to sentence them to death.

6. *Should the rōnin have committed seppuku at Sengakuji rather than surrender to the bakufu?* This question was raised forcefully by the Confucian scholar Satō Naokata 佐藤直方, one of the earliest and harshest critics of the Akō rōnin. In a commentary of about 1705, just two years after the end of the incident, Naokata argued that if, having killed Kira in defiance of the bakufu out of undue preoccupation with their late lord’s anger, the rōnin had paused “to reflect on the crime of defying the orders of the bakufu and committed suicide at Sengakuji, although their actions would have been unprincipled, we would still have been able to sympathize with their feelings.”²² Instead, however, they reported their crime to chief inspector Sengoku Hisanao 仙石久尚 and professed total obedience to the bakufu. “Wasn’t this just a scheme,” Naokata asked, “to win the praise of people, avoid death, and gain employment?” Similarly, in his famous text *Hagakure* 葉隠 (composed ca. 1709–1716), Yamamoto Jōchō 山本常朝 asserted that the rōnin should have committed seppuku at Sengakuji immediately after the attack.²³ Naokata was surely going too far in suggesting that the Akō rōnin had hoped not only to be spared but to win new employment, although the

ulates that Kōtaku did indeed know of the Zhu Xi source and was instrumental in drafting the manifesto of the league. In addition, Miyazawa 1999, pp. 147–48, notes that the plotters had considered ways in which Asano Nagahiro, as the legal heir of Naganori, might lead the revenge in order to provide legitimation of a vendetta on behalf of an elder brother.

²⁰ Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, p. 622.

²¹ Four league members in the Kyoto-Osaka region argued, in a letter of 1702.2.21 to Horibe Yasubei and Okuda Magodayū 奥田孫太夫 in Edo, that “one retainer band” (*ichikachū* 一家中) should be considered as a single actor, and hence could not be guilty of conspiracy, which required five or more participants. See Ishii 1974, pp. 219 and 251. Fear of the charge of conspiracy was also later a motive for some of those who withdrew from the league after the final commitment to revenge at the “Maruyama 円山 conference” in Kyoto on 1702.7.28; see Matsushima 1964, p. 92.

²² Ishii 1974, p. 379. For an English translation of the entire document, see Sato 1995, p. 327.

²³ See the discussions in Bitō 1975, p. 321; and Ikegami 1995, p. 287.

possibility may well have occurred to some of them. For the rōnin themselves, the far more critical consideration in surrendering to the bakufu was rather the risk of total dishonor should the authorities decide to execute them as common criminals by simple decapitation (*zanshu* 斬首) rather than the honorable sentence of seppuku. Why did Ōishi take this risk? We will never know for sure.

Although each of these legal complexities may have had precedents, it was in the end the concatenation of such a diversity of issues that made the Akō vendetta so unusual: nothing like it had happened before and nothing like it would happen again.²⁴ These issues were perplexing to many of those involved at the time, and they remain perplexing to historians today, who must cope as well with the constraints of fragmentary evidence. The provocative brew of complexity and ambiguity has done much to sustain and expand the “capacity” of the Akō vendetta as a historical event worthy of continued investigation.

What Motivated the League Members?

At the moment of the attack on Kira, the members of the Akō league of revenge acted as one, and as a result of their spectacular success, they were treated as such—both in the minds of the general public and by the bakufu authorities. By presenting to the authorities a manifesto signed “Retainers (*kerai* 家来) of Asano Takumi no kami 内匠頭 Naganori,” and listing their names in order of rank, the forty-seven members of the league insisted that they were a unity, underlining their legal position that a retainer band could not be held guilty of conspiracy. In the debates by Confucian scholars over the legal and moral dilemmas presented by the incident, both critics and supporters similarly treated the avengers as a single entity, with no consideration of any possible difference of motivation or dedication among them. In popular legend as well, a simple moral narrative emerged from the start: rooted in the assumption that Kira was an evil villain (whether from greed or lechery, or both) and that Asano was a virtuous (if short-tempered) samurai who acted to defend his honor, it presumed that the avengers themselves were both righteous and unified in their will to take Kira’s life. This mythic structure continues to dominate the popular conception of Chūshingura.

At the same time, this trope of unity has constantly been challenged by the sheer numbers involved, forty-seven men. Within popular culture, as we will see, the impulse was to spin off separate narratives of each individual rōnin, known as *meimeiden* 銘銘伝, each of which could survive as an independent and self-contained story without disrupting the larger myth of essential unity, known as the “main story” (*honden* 本伝). Modern historians likewise have been reluc-

²⁴ Mention must be made of the parallels that are often drawn between the Akō incident and the Jōrurizaka 浄瑠璃坂 vendetta of 1672 in the domain of Utsunomiya 宇都宮, which involved an early morning attack by forty-two men on an Edo mansion; indeed, two books devoted to the Jōrurizaka incident draw attention to the parallel in their titles (Harada 1989 and Takeda 1999). As Miyazawa 1999, pp. 144–46, emphasizes, however, for all the interesting similarities of scale and method, Jōrurizaka was a conventional blood revenge by a son against his father’s enemy, and hence fundamentally different from the Akō vendetta.

tant to probe closely the many fault lines that divided league members, largely because so many of those who have written about the Akō incident have been partisans, for whom pursuit of indications of internal strife among the “Gishi” would seem to impugn the righteousness of their cause. It has been only in the past two or three decades that closer focus has been brought to bear on the complex divisions within the historical league, in the process shedding much light on the changing world of samurai values in the mid-Tokugawa period.

The publication and scrutiny of the primary documents of the Akō vendetta, most of which first became available in a modern edition in 1910, made evident the tensions within the league. The most apparent rift among the rōnin was the stark opposition between Ōishi Kuranosuke and Horibe Yasubei 堀部安兵衛, the leader of the Akō retainers in Edo, over the priority of Asano house restoration versus revenge against Kira. This often acrimonious debate began with a personal confrontation in Akō on 1701.4.14, when Horibe and two colleagues from Edo met with Ōishi, and was later continued through letters sent between Ōishi in Yamashina and Horibe in Edo over a period of about one year, until the sixth month of 1702. The correspondence was then compiled by Horibe into a single document that he handed over to his friend, the Confucian scholar Hosoi Kōtaku 細井広沢, for safekeeping.²⁵ It makes compelling reading and has become the scaffolding for most accounts of the motivation of the league members.

Prewar writers of the orthodox pro-Gishi type fully recognized the Ōishi-Horibe split, which was typically characterized as an opposition between the moderate “Kamigata” group under Ōishi and the Edo “radicals” (*kyūshinha* 急進派) under Horibe, but they viewed it as a tactical difference and not as a fundamental conflict of values. It was only in postwar academic scholarship that an effort has been made to see the tensions within the league as part of broader historical changes in samurai values. Tahara, for example, in his 1975 study of the Confucian debates, conceptualized the distinction between Ōishi and Horibe as one between loyalty to the Asano house and loyalty to the person of Asano Naganori, relating this in turn to the growing importance of the daimyo house (*ie* 家) within the bakuhan system. In a thoughtful review of Tahara’s book, Mizubayashi Takeshi 水林彪 recognized the importance of Tahara’s emphasis on the tension between the “large world” of the bakufu state, with its universalistic pretensions, and the “small world” of the daimyo domain rooted in the lord-retainer bond, but he proceeded to argue that another kind of opposition was equally important, between the older nonrational ethical norms of warrior society and the legalistic and formalized standards of the emerging Tokugawa bureaucratic state.²⁶

Eiko Ikegami built on the ideas of Mizubayashi in *The Taming of the Samurai* of 1995 to propose a transformation of the “honor culture” of the bushi in the

²⁵ Known as “Horibe Taketsune hikki” 堀部武庸筆記, the document is included in Nabeta 1910–1911, vol. 3, pp. 1–100; Ishii 1975, pp. 179–270; and Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, pp. 138–224.

²⁶ Mizubayashi 1978.

mid-Tokugawa period, by which the older instinctive values of the battlefield were “proceduralized” with rules and limitations, and loyalty was “moralized” along Confucian lines. Ikegami also emphasized a crucial dimension that had been absent or muted in the writings of Tahara and Mizubayashi, the question whether samurai honor was individualistic or social. She stressed the importance of *seken* 世間, which she defined as the “cultural community” of warrior society, in enforcing norms of behavior, while at the same time she pointed to the presence of a distinctly individualistic type of honor that presumably survived from an earlier era.²⁷ In terms of historical change, it seems most plausible that the balance was steadily shifting in favor of the power of *seken* over individualized honor, although Ikegami herself seems to have had a stake in insisting on the survival of an individualistic sense of honor into modern times.

Ikegami offered no clear opinion about the balance among the Akō avengers between these two impulses, the concern for appearances within the community of samurai opinion and an autonomous sense of individual honor, but we may imagine that the mix differed for each person involved. On the whole, my own feeling is that those who joined the league were (with some notable individual exceptions) keenly concerned with how their actions appeared to other samurai, as reflected in a recurring language of “name” (*na* 名, *meiyo* 名誉), “face” (*tsura* 面, *menboku* 面目), and “shame” (*haji* 恥) in their letters. Even those “radicals” like Horibe who urged quick action against Kira were at the same time highly calculating types, willing to attack only if assured of success. In apparent confirmation of Yamamoto Jōchō’s criticism in *Hagakure* of the Akō avengers as being calculating and “clever” (*chie kashikoki* 知恵かしこき) Kamigata types, Horibe related in his own chronicle that he and his group refrained from attacking Kira immediately in Edo because they knew their numbers were too few to insure success, and thus the attempt would result only in a “dog’s death” (*inu-jini* 犬死)—precisely the sort of useless death that Jōchō claimed any proper samurai should not be concerned about.²⁸

It was also Horibe who more than anyone else in the league seems to have been obsessed with the rumors (in his words, *hyōban* 評判, or “repute”) in the streets of samurai Edo about what was expected of the Akō retainers,²⁹ some-

²⁷ Ikegami 1995, pp. 90–94 and passim. In a chapter on the Akō vendetta (which constitutes the best analysis of the incident in the English-language literature), Ikegami used the term *hitomae* 人前 to refer to a concern for reputation vis-à-vis *seken*, versus *ichibun* 一分 for the more individualistic “feeling of pride inherent in his sense of dignity” (p. 230). A more appropriate term for the latter, however, would probably be *iji*, a word that better captures the sense of stubborn honor in disregard of what others may think. For the notion of *iji*, see above, p. 6 and note 13. For a view of the importance of *seken* in samurai attitudes of the Edo period, see the pioneering ideas of Tsuda Sōkichi 津田左右吉, who in 1918 argued that samurai were concerned above all with saving appearances in the face of public opinion (what he called *sekentei* 世間体, identical to Ikegami’s *seken*), and were thus constantly preoccupied with shame and face; see Tsuda 1918, pp. 382–422 (translated into English in Tsuda 1970, pp. 97–129).

²⁸ For Horibe, see Ishii 1975, p. 187. For *Hagakure*, see the references in note 23.

²⁹ This concern was most elaborately detailed in a letter of Horibe to Ōishi dated 1701.8.8, in which he outlined what Tahara has analyzed as four separate *hyōban* about the Akō situation that

thing that suggests that “radical” did not mean “individualistic” in an older autonomous mode. Doubts remain, however, whether or not the consensus of samurai *seken* in fact supported the project of revenge against Kira. In the mythic version, it has simply been assumed that the Akō avengers acted as any samurai in such a situation would have been expected to act. But in an important new article, Taniguchi Shinko 谷口真子 has questioned this assumption, noting that certain established bakufu retainers were horrified to hear of the plot.³⁰ There also remains the simple mathematics of the Akō retainer band as a whole, since ultimately only about 15 percent participated in the attack on Kira, leaving the great majority on the sidelines. Even so, such an authority on samurai history as Kasaya Kazuhiko has argued recently that it was “entirely appropriate in samurai society of that era that the Asano vassals should take revenge upon Kira.”³¹

The issue of public opinion brings us back to the work of Eiko Ikegami, who from her standpoint as a historical sociologist has argued that the *seken* that was of such increasing importance to samurai honor was the result of the urbanization of the samurai class in the seventeenth century, which created “imagined cultural communities” that imposed new pressures on individual samurai to pay close attention to their reputation in the streets. This argument applies particularly well to the case of Horibe Yasubei, who lived in Edo and had gained fame as a swordsman in a public brawl at Takadanobaba 高田馬場. The notion of a close correlation between league membership and Edo community has been strongly supported by Taniguchi, who has shown that fully half of the league members were in the city of Edo at the time of Asano’s attack on Kira, some permanently stationed there in the Akō domain offices and others having accompanied Asano on sankin kōtai. Although Taniguchi does not dwell on this statistic, we may well imagine that the immediate, physical experience of Edo at the time, with rumors of every sort swirling about, must have left an indelible memory and a strong sense of community among the Akō retainers who shared it.

Taniguchi’s article also focuses on a final issue that deserves closer attention in thinking through the complex dynamics of league membership, that of kin linkage. Many have noted in passing that many league members were related to one another by blood or adoption—just over half, in fact. Taniguchi, who identifies four distinct kin groups among them, quotes Onodera Jūnai 小野寺十内, the elder of one of these groups, as expressing his pride that so many family members should be in the league.³² Although she does not pursue the connection, these facts suggest that the Akō league of revenge may have been much more of

were then circulating in Edo; Tahara 1978, pp. 51–52. Tahara suggests that Horibe was somewhat paranoid about this matter, and that few ordinary samurai in Edo gave much thought to the matter, at least until after the attack on Kira.

³⁰ Taniguchi 2002, p. 45.

³¹ Kasaya 1998, p. 90. Tahara would seem to differ; using the concept of *amae* 甘え, he suggests that the Akō rōnin indulged themselves without any solid ground in the notion that they had the support of public (that is, samurai) opinion. Tahara 1978, pp. 42, 53.

³² See the charts in Taniguchi 2002, pp. 41 and 44.

a family matter than has previously been considered. It might even be argued that certain members of the league, who were distinguished by exceptionally close personal (possibly even sexual) ties to Asano Naganori, viewed their lord as much as a father or brother as a lord, and hence that the Akō vendetta was effectively much more of a kin-based *katakiuchi* than has previously been recognized.

At any rate, the common theme of such recent rethinking as that of Taniguchi confirms that the Akō rōnin constituted not a single homogeneous group, but rather a complexly divided and constantly changing alliance of many different factions and kin groups, showing that distinguishing solely the Ōishi “moderates” and the Edo “radicals” is simplistic and misleading. This encourages us to think of the league rather as a work in constant progress, the unity of which was often threatened—never more so than in the final month or two when the fear of further defections led to a state of paranoia that at once held the group together and threatened to destroy it at any minute. Eight men defected between Ōishi’s arrival in Edo on 1702.11.5 and the attack forty days later. The defectors were the target of vituperation by other league members in their writings, which vilify their former fellows with a variety of epithets for “coward,” such as *ōhikyō* 大卑怯, *ōokubyōmono* 大臆病者, and *koshinuke* 腰抜け (“spineless”).³³ The dramatic success of the night attack made all these differences moot, particularly to those on the outside who witnessed only the end result. But if we really hope to understand the Akō vendetta in all its complexity, it will be necessary to return to the realities of the league before its stunning victory, and not be blinded by its success.

The Akō Vendetta as a Literary Event

Perhaps the most innovative book about Chūshingura to appear within the last two decades was Maruya Saiichi’s 丸谷才一 *Chūshingura to wa nani ka* 忠臣蔵とは何か of 1984. In the seemingly simple title, “What is Chūshingura?” Maruya tacitly posed the truly complicated question how we can ever distinguish between the historical event of the Akō vendetta and the countless imaginative retellings of it over three centuries. His answer was intriguing: he proposed that the Akō incident was itself a literary event—or more specifically, a literally “dramatic event,” since he argued that the forty-seven rōnin were reenacting the vendetta of the twelfth-century Soga 曾我 brothers as it had come to be known through both oral and textual versions, but above all as a theme of the Edo kabuki stage in the Genroku period. It was in many ways a logical argument for a novelist and literary critic like Maruya who at the same time had a strong interest in history and folklore.³⁴

It is impossible here even to hint at the complexity of Maruya’s ingenious if often far-fetched arguments, or to convey the sheer interest of the book, with its wealth of fascinating and arcane detail about the Akō incident and Edo culture

³³ Taniguchi 2002, pp. 49–50.

³⁴ For more detail about Maruya’s approach, see Smith 1990.

in general. Suffice it to say that he set out to find hidden evidence that the driving force of the Akō vendetta was a need to appease the vengeful spirit (*onryō* 怨霊) of Asano Naganori, fueled further by a similarly hidden hostility towards the Tokugawa bakufu. In the end, Maruya's arguments were received coolly by scholars of Edo drama and literature, as seen in particular in an extended and often vituperative debate between Maruya and Suwa Haruo 諏訪春雄, a historian of theater from Gakushūin University.³⁵ As the anthropologist Yamaguchi Masao 山口昌男 mused at the end of a hostile review of Maruya's book, "with that much knowledge, why didn't he just go ahead and write a novel?"³⁶ I tend myself to sympathize with Suwa, who claims that Maruya's theories simply cannot be proved.

A more productive response to Maruya, however, and one that preserves his basic insight about the Akō vendetta as a literary event, emerges from the work of Miyazawa Seiichi, whose *Akō rōshi* 赤穂浪士 of 1999 is the single most interesting new book about the Akō vendetta by an academic historian in recent years. Miyazawa's fresh approach comes, somewhat ironically, from the fact that he did not embark on the study of Chūshingura out of any strong interest in the Akō incident. On the contrary, as one who did his graduate studies in early modern history at Waseda in the politicized environment of the 1960s, he shared the political "allergy" to the subject that is prevalent among postwar academic historians because of the close associations of the Akō Gishi with prewar militarism (a topic to which he would turn in a subsequent study, of which more below).³⁷ At any rate, Miyazawa agreed to write a survey history of the Akō vendetta for the publisher Sanseidō. Most of the book is indeed no more than a fairly conventional survey history, although one that is highly readable and filled with numerous insights about particular points. Miyazawa's real innovation stemmed rather from his growing preoccupation, as he scoured the documentary sources, with two particular themes. One was the echoes of *Taiheiki* 太平記, the fourteenth-century tale of the fall of the Kamakura bakufu and the wars of the Nanbokuchō period, that Miyazawa detected among various of the writings by those involved in the vendetta; the second was in the way in which the incident was transformed from history into legend, both in the early accounts known as *jitsuroku* 実録 and in subsequent literary renditions.

Miyazawa had been drawn to the issue of the influence of *Taiheiki* in Edo culture through the recent work of Wakao Masaki 若尾政希, a historian of political thought, and Hyōdō Hiromi 兵藤裕己, a scholar of oral literature—prime examples of the fruitful cross-fertilization that has been developing in recent decades between the fields of Japanese premodern history and literature.³⁸ So Miyazawa

³⁵ The Suwa-Maruya debates may be found in the journals *Shingeki* 新劇 32:3 (March 1985) and *Gunzō* 群像 40:5–7 (May to July 1985).

³⁶ Yamaguchi 1986.

³⁷ This background comes from personal discussions with Miyazawa in October 2001 and July 2002.

³⁸ See Wakao 1999 and Hyōdō 1999.

was on the lookout for evidence of *Taiheiki* influence in the Akō vendetta documents, and sure enough he found it—not a pervasive pattern, to be sure, but enough to confirm that it was there and probably significant. He noted a letter of 1701.4.10 from Onodera Jūnai, one of the league leaders, to his wife, Tan 丹, for example, a melodramatic epistle of the sort to which this highly literary samurai was prone, in which Jūnai referred to the current unexpected turn of events (as Akō castle was about to be surrendered) as matching the description of the evanescence of life in a jōruri version of *Taiheiki*: like “a flame in the wind, or a dewdrop on the tip of a leaf.”³⁹ Oral recitations of *Taiheiki* had spread among samurai in the seventeenth century, Miyazawa observes, before expanding in turn to chōnin audiences.

Miyazawa provides only one other direct *Taiheiki* reference from the correspondence of the rōnin,⁴⁰ but his most persuasive evidence relates to a document that for all its centrality seems to have been marginalized in discussions of the Akō vendetta. Entitled *Sekijō meiden* 赤城盟伝 (A biography of the league of Akō), it is an account of the league begun by one of the members, Kanzaki Yōgorō 神崎与五郎, as a memento for friends and relatives after his death. The account was reworked by Kanzaki’s colleague Maebara Isuke 前原伊助, while a third member of the league, Kimura Okaemon 木村岡右衛門, provided it with a preface. Written in kanbun, which enabled a lofty rhetoric and high moral tone that would have been difficult in pure Japanese, it seems to have been completed shortly before the attack on Kira. The account begins with a version of the original confrontation that is striking in its extreme rhetoric, found nowhere else in the surviving documents of the league. It asserts that Asano attacked out of hatred for Kira’s evil and perversity (*shinkan kōnei* 深姦厚佞), acting as a delegate of Heaven to punish him for his “accumulated evils” (*sekiaku* 積悪). Heaven registered its own response with unseasonal cold winds and hail eight days after Asano’s seppuku. Then comes the specific reference to *Taiheiki*, claiming the death of Asano to have been no less valorous than the death in battle of Nagoe Takaie 名越高家 or Nitta Yoshisada 新田義貞, who both died bravely without flinching for opposing sides in the Nanbokuchō era.⁴¹

Miyazawa also notes that the preface by Kimura, who was known as a student of the Ō Yōmei (Wang Yangming 王陽明) school, explicitly refers to the members of the league as *gishi*. This was probably the first use of the epithet that would in time become virtually synonymous with the Akō avengers, and shows that the extended Confucian debate over the “righteousness” of the vendetta was begun by none other than the rōnin themselves. In the same vein, *Sekijō meiden*, combining gut-level warrior emotion with its high-flown Chinese-style rhetoric, devotes much of the text to castigating those who had defected from the league.

³⁹ Miyazawa 1999, p. 67; for the original text, see Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, p. 271.

⁴⁰ The document in question is a letter of 1702.2.22 from Horibe Yasubei to Oyama Gengoemon 小山源五右衛門, in which Horibe alludes to the “era of *Taiheiki*” (*Taiheiki jibun* 太平記時分), a reference that is not wholly clear; Miyazawa 1999, pp. 102–103.

⁴¹ Miyazawa 1999, pp. 148–50.

Indeed, although entitled a “biography of the league,” it is in large part a chronicle of the defectors. Those involved in its composition quite simply were engaged in writing a moralistic history of their own revenge even before it was consummated. And in doing so, they turned naturally to the models that they knew best, the military tales with which they had been brought up, *Taiheiki* above all. It is worth noting that Maruya Saiichi was unable to provide a single direct reference to the revenge of the Soga brothers in all the documents of the Akō revenge—although he may not have really tried, since his entire argument was that the influence was deep and unconscious. Miyazawa, by providing these direct links, makes a much more compelling case that the Akō rōnin may well have imagined themselves, both consciously and unconsciously, to be reenacting the heroic acts depicted in classic literary tales.

The notion of the Akō vendetta as inspired by literary sources is given further support by Taniguchi Shinko, who notes two revealing passages from Akō rōnin letters. Ōtaka Gengo’s 大高源五 famous farewell letter to his mother of 1702.9.5, for example, argued that “since ancient times, in both China and our land alike, it has been contrary to the way of the warrior (*bushi no michi* 武士の道) to leave one’s enemy [that is, the object of one’s vengeance] at peace.” And Yokogawa Kanpei 横川勘平, in a letter written just seven days before the attack on Kira, wrote that “tears are the lot of a warrior, and when one takes up the sword, it must be with a resolve no less than that of Fankuai 樊噲 (Jp. Hankai) of China or Lord Hachirō 八郎 of Tsukushi.”⁴² These citations broaden the scope of influence from *Taiheiki* alone to the broader world of Japanese and Chinese military tales that circulated with increasing reach among the samurai class of the Genroku period as the result of the growing power of both print and oral recitation.

Japanese tales that might have provided models for the vendetta also included accounts of more recent feats of military valor, in particular Ihara Saikaku’s influential collections of warrior stories, *Budō denrai ki* 武道伝来記 (1687) and *Buke giri monogatari* 武家義理物語 (1688). Published just ten-odd years before the Akō vendetta, the former dealt exclusively with samurai vendettas, mostly of the early seventeenth century. We can imagine that many of the avengers were familiar with these tales, and that the prescriptions of samurai honor found in them structured their view of their own actions. In the oft-quoted lines introducing one of these tales, Saikaku himself argued that “The desirable attitude and mindset of the samurai nowadays are very different from those of old; in the old days, the most important thing for the samurai was courage and unconcern for one’s life.”⁴³ The stories that Saikaku told about instinctual and honor-bound samurai violence in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries suggest, on the

⁴² Taniguchi 2002, pp. 50–51. Fankuai was a military general and a loyal servant of the first Han emperor, while Lord Hachirō refers to the semilegendary medieval warrior Minamoto no Tametomo 源為朝 (1139–1170).

⁴³ Translation from Ikegami 1995, p. 239. For a complete English translation of *Buke giri monogatari*, see Saikaku 1981.

one hand, as Eiko Ikegami notes, that such older norms were still operative at the time of the Akō vendetta. But one might also argue, as Tsuda Sōkichi did in 1918, that such tales fostered a highly idealized “posture of deference and worship” towards samurai of the Sengoku period, obscuring the reality of “self-indulgent behavior and unscrupulous scheming” (*hōjū na kōi ya, habakaru tokoro naki kenbō jussū* 放縦な行為や、憚るところなき権謀術数) that went hand in hand with their ferocious sense of honor.⁴⁴

Finally, it should come as no surprise that later retellings of the Akō vendetta turned to precisely the same older tales and models that surely inspired the avengers themselves. The rector of the Confucian academy, Hayashi Nobuatsu 林信篤, wrote a lament in Chinese verse mentioning three celebrated cases of vengeance in Chinese history that might serve as standards by which to judge the Akō retainers’ virtue.⁴⁵ Far more important, however, was the incorporation of the story of the Akō Gishi into the world and language of *Taiheiki*. Chikamatsu’s puppet play *Goban Taiheiki* 碁盤太平記 of about 1710 was probably the first to use the “world” (*sekai* 世界) of *Taiheiki* as the setting for the Akō story,⁴⁶ and although there were alternative *sekai* found in other jōruri, it was the *Taiheiki* model that became dominant, overwhelming all others with *Kanadehon chūshingura* in 1748. Meanwhile, one of the most influential historical narratives of the Akō vendetta, *Sekijō gishinden* 赤城義臣伝 (by Katajima Shin’en 片島深淵, published 1719), was written in the embellished *engitai* 演義体 style of *Taiheiki*, thus placing it firmly within the orbit of older idealized warrior tales.

Between History and Legend

Another distinctive dimension of Miyazawa Seiichi’s history of the Akō incident was his interest in accounts, many of them appearing within just two or three years of the vendetta, that gave embroidered and sometimes fabricated versions of the story, marking the start of the complex processes by which history is turned into legend. Broadly, a distinction may be made between two categories of texts. Closest to “history” are manuscript texts that were typically compiled by samurai who were not directly involved in the incident, but had access to a variety of manuscripts that began to circulate widely in Edo. Many of these manuscripts were actual primary documents from the league itself—such as the manifesto of the league, or Horibe Yasubei’s account. To these were added details culled from other secondary manuscripts and from the many rumors that the vendetta generated. Although often highly unreliable, such accounts bore the presumption that they were conveying information about events that actually had happened, and they are known generically as *jitsuroku* 実録, or “true records.”

⁴⁴ Tsuda 1918, p. 398.

⁴⁵ The poem was appended to Hayashi’s commentary on the Akō revenge; Ishii 1974, p. 373.

⁴⁶ For the date of 1710, see Mueller 1986; Ishikawa Ryō 石川了 has argued for a date of the ninth month of 1709; see Ishikawa 1977.

Out of about a half-dozen such *jitsuroku*-style accounts that survive from the first years after the incident, Miyazawa made most extensive use of two. One is *Akō shōshūki* 赤穂鍾秀記, compiled in 1703 by a Kaga domain samurai named Sugimoto Yoshichika 杉本義鄰 who was living in Edo at the time of the Akō incident.⁴⁷ Much of what Sugimoto reported was hearsay, as he clearly indicated by frequently introducing new sections with such phrases as “according to a certain account” (*aru setsu ni* 或説に), but he provides a precious record of what an interested samurai could learn about the incident at the time. It is also of considerable importance as the primary source for Muro Kyūsō’s 室鳩巢 *Akō gijinroku* 赤穂義人録 (1702, rev. 1707), a highly influential history of the vendetta by a Confucian scholar. Kyūsō, who at the time was in Kanazawa, in the service of the Maeda 前田 lord of Kaga, obtained material from Edo from Sugimoto.⁴⁸ Rather different was the other *jitsuroku* account that Miyazawa most frequently cites, known as *Ekisui renbeiroku* 易水連袂録. The anonymous author seems to have been a hatamoto retainer of the bakufu, with possibly better access to reliable information than Sugimoto. Although his account includes some rumors and popular stories, it is also distinguished by the author’s own sharp and often critical opinions of the behavior of the Akō rōnin.⁴⁹

In a wholly different category from the *jitsuroku* were works by commercial writers for the stage (both jōruri and kabuki) and print, anticipating a largely chōnin audience. The majority of these were produced in the Kyoto-Osaka area, where there was less danger of reprisal from the bakufu for treating a forbidden subject. Such authors were interested in entertainment rather than historical truth, and they freely expanded upon and embellished the tale. In addition, the legal prescriptions against treating contemporaneous political events meant that the stories had to be transposed to older “worlds,” such as that of *Taiheiki*, and the names altered in at least a token way. Miyazawa singled out three such works, Chikamatsu’s *Goban Taiheiki* mentioned earlier,⁵⁰ another jōruri entitled *Taiheiki sazareishi* 太平記さざれ石, which was first performed in Kyoto in the seventh month of 1710,⁵¹ and an *ukiyo-zōshi* 浮世草子 novel by Ejima Kiseki 江島其磧, *Keisei denju-gamiko* けいせい伝受紙子, with a preface dated 1710.i8.⁵²

At about ten major turning points in his historical narrative—such as the initial

⁴⁷ The text of *Akō shōshūki* appears in Nabeta 1910–1911, vol. 2, pp. 417–86.

⁴⁸ Akō Gishi Jiten Kankōkai 1972, p. 448.

⁴⁹ This work was not in Nabeta Shōzan’s collection (Nabeta 1910–1911), and the first four books were published only as an appendix to Chūō Gishikai 1931, vol. 3, pp. 451–528. According to the commentary by the editor, Watanabe Yosuke 渡辺世祐 (ibid, p. 4), the identity of the author as a hatamoto is based on a reference in the memorandum of Haga Seidayū 波賀清太夫, the official in charge of the Akō rōnin in custody at the Matsuyama 松山 domain mansion. The title *Ekisui renbeiroku* is a reference to the poem “Parting at the Yishui River” (Ch. *Yishui ge* 易水歌, Jp. *Ekisui sōbetsu no uta* 易水送別歌), said to have been written by Jingke 荆軻 (Jp. Keika) before he set out on his unsuccessful attempt to assassinate the Chin emperor in 227 B.C.

⁵⁰ *Goban Taiheiki* is available in English translation in Mueller 1986.

⁵¹ *Taiheiki sazareishi* survives in the form of a plot summary; see *Kyakushoku yoroku*, pp. 235–41.

⁵² See Ejima 1710.

cause of Asano's attack, the surrender of Akō castle, Ōishi's dissipation in Kyoto, the attack on Kira—Miyazawa pauses to see what these alternative versions offer. Miyazawa has no real method, and his sources are partial, but the details are fascinating and often suggestive about the way history moved into oral legend and then onto stage and print. Take, for example, the issue to which he devotes his most extended foray into such sources, the story that Ōishi Kuranosuke led a dissolute life in the brothels of Kyoto as a way of deluding his enemy into thinking that he had no interest in revenge.⁵³ The reliable historical record offers little except an observation in *Kōseki kenmonki* 江赤見聞記, a source that lies somewhere between a primary source and a *jitsuroku*,⁵⁴ in which it is reported that Ōishi's senior relatives felt that he was engaging in "inappropriate behavior" (*fugyōseki* 不行跡) in Kyoto by indulging in "outing and sightseeing" (*yusan kenbutsu* 遊山見物) and spending money too freely.⁵⁵ The account goes on to mention a rumor (*fūsetsu* 風説) that Kira's spies in the Kyoto area had observed such behavior and reported back to their master that Ōishi seemed to have no interest in revenge.

In Sugimoto's *Akō shōshūki*, however, is it claimed that Ōishi was interested only in "partying day and night" (*chōbo yūen* 朝暮遊宴), unmindful of his obligations to his late lord and with no thoughts of affection for him, so that people mocked this "great rock" (*ō-ishi*) as being "as light as a paper tiger." His father-in-law was so incensed by his behavior and his evident lack of commitment to revenge that he ordered Ōishi to send his wife Riku back to her family home, and when Kira's spies saw such behavior, they concluded that he had no interest in revenge, so that Kira relaxed his guard. Although the presumption here is strong (if not explicit) that Ōishi visited the brothels, dissipation is not described as a conscious stratagem to deceive the enemy.⁵⁶ When, on the other hand, we turn to the account of Muro Kyūsō in *Akō gijinroku*, which as we have seen was likely derived from *Akō shōshūki*, we find no mention at all of Ōishi's dissipation—reflecting, Miyazawa proposes, Kyūsō's strict Confucian moralism. Kyūsō

⁵³ Miyazawa 1999, pp. 118–28.

⁵⁴ This text, which may be found in Nabeta 1910–1911, vol. 3, pp. 172–362, includes many authentic documents, and circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that it was compiled by Ochiai Yozaemon 落合与左衛門, who served as chamberlain to Asano Naganori's widow, Yōzeiin 瑤泉院, after her husband's death and who was intimate with many of the plotters. Note, however, that the final three of the seven volumes are considered spurious later additions, of little reliability except as a record of rumors in Edo.

⁵⁵ *Kōseki kenmonki*, book 4 (Nabeta 1910–1911, vol. 3, p. 263); and Miyazawa 1999, pp. 118–19. Miyazawa relates that he was provoked to explore this issue by a comment of Katayama Hakusen 片山伯仙 in the latter's edited collection of letters of the Akō rōnin, concerning a remark in Ōishi's letter of 1702.7.25 to his wife Riku りく, responding to the news of the birth of their son Daisaburō 大三郎 at Riku's family home in Toyooka 豊岡, Tajima province. Ōishi mentions that he and his son Chikara 主税 (who had remained with his father in Yamashina) had gone to see the "Yasaka Gion odori" やさかぎおんおどり, which clearly refers to the seasonal Obon dancing. Katayama's headnote (Katayama 1970, p. 185) speculates that this may well have been the extent of Ōishi's "extravagant play" (*gōyū* 豪遊).

⁵⁶ Nabeta 1910–1911, vol. 2, p. 429. I have added details not included by Miyazawa.

instead provides his own embellishment of details from *Akō shōshūki* to depict Ōishi as scheming over the course of a full year to mislead the spies sent by the Uesugi 上杉 house of Yonezawa 米沢 (from which Kira's wife came, and into which Kira's eldest son had been adopted as heir; the son was serving as daimyo at the time of the Akō incident). As portrayed by Kyūsō, Ōishi pretended to be mad, or terminally ill and concerned only with enjoying his last days, and he even built a house to give the impression that he was settling down and retiring.⁵⁷ Here the element of conscious scheming on Ōishi's part clearly emerges. It provides us with evidence of the ways in which Kyūsō altered details to depict Ōishi in a much more favorable light. But note that *Kōseki kenmonki* had already provided the basis for such a depiction in its mention of Kira spies in Kyoto.

Turning then to the various literary versions of around 1710 that were created to entertain a Kamigata chōnin audience, Miyazawa shows that rather than isolated rumors about Ōishi's behavior, we now find convoluted plots in a world of fantasy that revolve far more around family relations than revenge itself. In *Goban Taiheiki*, Ōishi is transformed into “Ōboshi Yuranosuke” 大星由良助—the name he would continue to carry in *Kanadehon chūshingura*—and is revealed to have an “addiction to women” and a “prowess at drinking parties” that seems designed to put off not only the enemy spies, but his own family as well, lest they become entangled in the revenge plot. In the end, however, his wife and mother (although the historical Ōishi's mother had died long before) end up committing suicide in front of him in order to remonstrate against his dissolute behavior and apparent lack of will to take revenge. This sacrifice of the female family members to the cause of revenge is a theme that was entirely absent in the *jitsuroku* accounts, to say nothing of reality, but it came to dominate the chōnin literary versions. So in the play *Taiheiki sazareishi*, Ōishi's wife—now “Otatsu” お辰, wife of “Ōgishi Kunai” 大岸宮内—commits suicide again, but in this case as a way of steeling her son Rikitarō 力太郎 (the historical Chikara 主税, “Rikiya” 力弥 in *Kanadehon*) to join the league with no lingering attachment to his mother. Finally, in Ejima Kiseki's novel *Keisei denju-gamiko*, the sacrificial women are not those of Ōishi's family, but rather are linked to other members of the league. Two of these, carried over from the plot of *Taiheiki sazareishi*, are wives who sold themselves into prostitution to raise funds for the cause, while another was the wife of a rōnin who had botched his own effort to raise funds when he was caught stealing melons, and who committed suicide (after killing their child) out of remorse at his ineptitude. From these diverse and richly imaginative early precedents in the critical years 1709–1710, it was not really that much distance to the grand synthesis of *Kanadehon chūshingura* almost three decades later.

For a more systematic account of the complex gray area between history and fiction in these evolving Chūshingura texts, we need to turn to the work of scholars of Edo literature. In a commentary on Kiseki's *Keisei denju-gamiko*,

⁵⁷ Miyazawa 1999, p. 121; the original passage is in Ishii 1974, p. 289.

Hasegawa Tsuyoshi 長谷川強, a leading scholar of *ukiyozōshi* of this period, has described the dynamics of the situation as follows:

The literary arts create composite characters [that is, characters who combine two separate historical models], and thus give birth to new legends. Then subsequent plays and novels try to create variety, and a wide diversity of new episodes are born. Meanwhile, *jitsuroku*, while ostensibly presenting the historical truth, are constantly revised and expanded by incorporating the fabrications created in the literary world. It was in this way that the legends of the Akō rōnin were born.⁵⁸

The process noted by Hasegawa also helps explain how a concatenation of particular political events in 1709–1710 worked to revive fading memories of the Akō vendetta six years earlier and to create a boom in Gishi-related books and plays. The pivotal event was the death of the shogun Tsunayoshi 綱吉 on 1709.1.10, followed five months later by the pardon of Asano Nagahiro and the effective restoration of the Asano house—although when Nagahiro was reappointed as a hatamoto shortly after, it was only with the modest stipend of 500 koku. The adult heirs of the Akō rōnin were also pardoned and returned from exile. These circumstances presumably created a much more lenient climate for the production of commercial works related to the Akō vendetta. A still more sensational event occurred on 1709.2.16, when during a memorial service for Tsunayoshi at the temple of Zōjōji 増上寺 in Edo, a daimyo who had been designated to help with the ceremony struck and killed a *kōke* protocol officer and was put to death by seppuku by the end of the day, an uncanny replication of Asano’s attack on Kira. The result was an outpouring of what literary historians now call *Akō-mono* 赤穂物, texts and plays dealing with the Akō revenge.

In many ways, the literary products of the 1710 “boom” took the story ever further from its historical reality. And yet, as literary historian Sugimoto Kazuhiro 杉本和寛 has shown in a recent article, the trend over the next several years in novels based all or in part on the Akō story—of which he mentions fully eight—was rather back in the direction of history, suggesting that the taste of the audience was not for fantastic and stage-like plots but for a greater sense of reality. The authors thus assiduously went back to the early *jitsuroku* accounts in search of fresh inspiration.⁵⁹ The results were rarely any closer to “real” history in the modern sense, but nevertheless reveal that within the wide gray zone between history and legend, there could be a two-way street.

Whereas literary historians like Hasegawa and Sugimoto have focused on genres and particular works of literature, others have taken instead a thematic approach, following a single character or motif through multiple texts. One example is a 1985 article by Kitagawa Tadahiko 北川忠彦 that traces the transformation of the historical forty-seventh rōnin, Terasaka Kichiemon 寺坂吉右衛

⁵⁸ Hasegawa 1989, p. 248.

⁵⁹ Sugimoto 2001, pp. 243–46.

門, from his actual fate, to the way in which his story was told in various *jitsuroku*, and on through his changing personae in novels and plays until the full-blown character of “Teraoka Heiemon” 寺岡平右衛門 emerged from *Goban Taiheiki* to *Kanadehon chūshingura*.⁶⁰ It is a fascinating account that shows how “composite personalities” evolve and the ways in which samurai ideals were adapted to commoner audiences. Then in 1987, theater historian Imao Tetsuya 今尾哲也 singled out the theme of the severed head of Kira Kōzuke no suke for close textual sleuthing, revealing the wide and fascinating array of rumors and tales that told much, as promised in the subtitle of his book, *Kira no kubi: Chūshingura to imajinēshon* 吉良の首: 忠臣蔵とイメージーション, about “Chūshingura and imagination.”⁶¹ His demonstration of the power of rumor encourages the historian to consider exactly how rumor functioned in early modern Edo, where under a regime that prohibited the printing of any news, word of mouth served as the most important medium of information about current events. In his exploration of the rich diversity of legend about Kira’s head, Imao shows in particular the way in which legend creates ritual moments centered on objects of great symbolic potency, such as a severed head or the dagger that killed both Asano and Kira (a key motif in *Kanadehon*).

The Century of Kanadehon Chūshingura

This is not the place to dwell on the making of *Kanadehon chūshingura* and the sensation that it created within the theatrical world of Osaka, Kyoto, and Edo in 1748–1749, or of the centrality it has assumed over the past two and a half centuries within the bunraku tradition, and through the constant refinement of the kabuki version, and the proliferation in the Edo period of variant spin-offs known as *kakikae* 書換. All of this has been chronicled in detail by theater historians, and a useful overview may be found in Matsushima Eiichi’s 松島榮一 survey history of the Chūshingura phenomenon.⁶² Fully as impressive as the entrenchment of *Kanadehon* as the most popular play in the kabuki repertoire was its permeation into virtually every other genre of Edo literature and performance. A good sample of this phenomenon, although only the tip of the iceberg, may be found in two of the volumes in the series of Chūshingura materials published by the city of Akō since 1987, and a forthcoming volume in the same series promises to provide a synthetic overview of both the theatrical and literary legacies of Chūshingura.⁶³ Among recent publications, I would single out only an instructive survey and explication of Chūshingura senryū (the majority of which deal

⁶⁰ Kitagawa 1985. See note 3 for more on Terasaka.

⁶¹ See Imao 1987, pp. 7–94.

⁶² Matsushima 1964, pp. 128–208.

⁶³ Akō-shi 1987, vol. 4, provides a representative sampling of texts of the performing arts: jōruri, kabuki, songs, rakugo, *naniwabushi* 浪花節, and *kōdan* 講談. Vol. 6 is dedicated to Edo comic verse and theater commentaries, and also includes a thorough catalogue of modern Chūshingura fiction with a sampling of representative texts. Vol. 2 will be the secondary survey of the performing and literary arts.

not with the historical incident but with the kabuki versions of *Kanadehon*) by Abe Tatsuji 阿部達二.⁶⁴ Senryū was the only genre for which brevity permitted the inclusion of the entire surviving corpus, and the city of Akō anthology included a total of 3,774 verses. It did not provide any annotation, however, and many of the verses are difficult to grasp for those without an intimate knowledge of kabuki. Abe, by taking over five hundred Chūshingura senryū and explicating them within the context of a chatty act-by-act description of *Kanadehon chūshingura*, has made this one genre far more accessible.

But what further historical changes characterize the later Edo history of Chūshingura apart from the infectious spread of *Kanadehon* to other literary genres? Looking around, we find that in fact there were alternative, and in many ways autonomous, lineages of narration that would be of particular importance in terms of modern developments. One of these was the continued evolution of *jitsuroku* of the Akō incident, a term that is used, as we have seen, to refer to the loose and disparate collections of documents and rumor that appeared in the years immediately after the seppuku of the rōnin in 1703. Over the decades, as suggested by the quotation from Hasegawa Tsuyoshi above, the *jitsuroku* of the Akō revenge developed into more embellished accounts with a coherent overall narrative structure and some literary pretensions, intended for popular reading and circulating in manuscript format through the lending libraries and peddlers (*kashihon'ya* 貸本屋) that flourished in late Tokugawa cities. However embellished, *jitsuroku* used the real names of the historical participants and were assumed to be “true stories.” To use the actual names was illegal for printed works, so that the manuscript *jitsuroku* imparted the thrill of reading illicit accounts of true adventures. This was in sharp contrast to the Akō vendetta as presented in the form of *Kanadehon chūshingura* on the kabuki stage, where it was transposed to the “world” of *Taiheiki* and not presumed to be historical truth no matter how realistic the emotions depicted.

In the early nineteenth century, however, as analyzed in a recent article by Yamamoto Takashi 山本卓, the sense of historical truth associated with *jitsuroku* manuscripts began to filter into commercially printed books, in the genre known as *ehon yomihon* 絵本読本, a type of long novel created by the Kamigata publishing industry (although they circulated in Edo as well), combining texts with illustrations every several pages.⁶⁵ Yamamoto analyzes the sources of *Ehon chūshingura* 絵本忠臣蔵, written by Hayami Shungyōsai 速水春暁齋 and published in ten volumes in Osaka in 1800. Despite the title, it did not follow *Kanadehon chūshingura* but rather the general outline of *jitsuroku* accounts, although maintaining the theatrical tradition of altered names.⁶⁶ Through assiduous digging and

⁶⁴ Abe 2002.

⁶⁵ Yamamoto 2002.

⁶⁶ See the chart in Yamamoto 2002, p. 28, for examples of the ways in which names were handled; for the rōnin, the general pattern was to use the *Kanadehon* stage names for the family names, but the real given names, a compromise that suggests a greater tolerance by the bakufu of referring in print to the names of the historical Akō rōnin.

comparison, Yamamoto was able to determine that most of the subplots in *Ehon chūshingura* were taken from a single manuscript *jitsuroku* entitled *Akō seigi naishidokoro* 赤穂正義内侍所 (of which the earliest surviving copy is dated 1770), but with some details derived from a variety of other sources, including Katajima Shin'en's *Sekijō gishinden*, and, revealingly, kabuki-related publications.

Yamamoto argues that the originality of *Ehon chūshingura* lay partly in the illustrations, which began a new lineage in the visualization of the Akō vendetta, but more importantly in the new historical consciousness that it represented. Where the manuscript version that served as its model had rambling and involved plot lines, reflecting the earlier *jitsuroku* tradition, the *yomihon* version was clearer and more coherent in narrative structure. As a genre, the story was now stabilized in print (in contrast to the *jitsuroku*, where each copyist felt free to add new embellishments), and made available as a legitimate reading pleasure, suitable for public contexts and with none of the underground ethos of manuscript novels. Whereas the *jitsuroku* versions of the Akō story were a kind of “proto-history” (*zen rekishi* 前<歴史>), *Ehon chūshingura*, Yamamoto suggests, was truly “historical literature,” and while it may not have been focused on historical “fact,” it was accepted by its readers as a sort of historical “truth.” In this respect, it represents a crucial new pattern in enhancing the “capacity” of Chūshingura, one that remains strong today in historical novels and in the films and television series derived from them.

At the same time, the last two to three decades of the Tokugawa period saw a fresh growth of serious interest in the historical Akō incident. This may have been encouraged by bakufu censors, who for reasons unknown became apparently willing to permit the publication of printed accounts that dealt with the Akō Gishi, using the real names of the protagonists. For almost the entire Tokugawa period, the regime had strictly prohibited all printed accounts of the Akō incident that used the real names and dealt with it historically—while freely permitting the circulation of such accounts in manuscript form, or the printing of novels derived from the Akō vendetta as long as the names were changed. The one crucial work that briefly circumvented this prohibition was Katajima Shin'en's *Sekijō gishinden*, published in Osaka in 1719. Although banned the following year, it seems to have continued to circulate widely, contributing greatly to spreading the fame of the Akō Gishi.⁶⁷ No record survives for the following century and more, however, of any printed works that used the real names of the Gishi, until suddenly, in the early 1850s, a number of books appeared that dealt openly (if not very accurately) with the Akō incident. The two key authors were Aoyama Nobumitsu 青山延光, a Confucian scholar of the Mito school,

⁶⁷ Akō Gishi Jiten Kankōkai 1972, p. 479. For the edict that banned the work, under the disguised title of *Taihei gishinden* 太平義臣伝, see Konta 1981, pp. 139–42. Fukumoto 1914, p. 912, relates that the book was produced by a group of publishers who knew that it would be banned, so they printed a large number of copies in advance and sold them in one lot in the major cities before the authorities could respond. The truth of this story is uncertain, but many copies of the work do in fact survive, although some may be later reprints.

whose *Akō shijūshichishi den* 赤穂四十七士伝, a collection of kanbun biographies of the Akō rōnin, was published in 1851 (but with a preface dated 1829), and Yamazaki Yoshinari 山崎美成, a prolific Edo scholar who collated all the information he could find on the Akō rōnin into *Akō gishi issekiwa* 赤穂義士一夕話, published in 1854 with numerous illustrations by the ukiyo-e artist Hashimoto Gyokuran 橋本玉蘭 (Sadahide 貞秀). Both authors were highly partial to the Gishi, particularly Aoyama, whose Mito school affiliations encouraged a linkage between the loyalty of the Akō rōnin and the imperial loyalty promoted by that school, helping explain in turn the popularity of the Akō Gishi among many bakumatsu imperial loyalists, and their subsequent absorption into the ideology of the modern emperor system.

Even more important in the long run were the efforts of another private devotee of the Gishi in these years, a samurai named Nabeta Shōzan 鍋田晶山 (1778–1858), who was stationed for many years in Edo as an official from the domain of Taira 平 in northern Japan, and who amassed a large personal collection of documents and other memorabilia related to the Akō incident.⁶⁸ It was to be over half a century before his collection was finally published in 1910–1911 as *Akō gijin sansho* 赤穂義人纂書 (3 vols.). Later supplemented by the *Akō gishi shiryō* 赤穂義士史料 (3 vols.) of 1931, this work became the foundational documentary collection for all modern studies of the Akō incident.⁶⁹

Together with these trends towards a new historicity of the Akō vendetta in printed works, still another critical development in the Chūshingura phenomenon was underway in the last century of the Tokugawa period, although it is one for which we have far less documentation, namely the spread of *kōdan* 講談 storytelling (known as *kōshaku* 講釈 for most of the Edo period). *Kōdan* had its roots in Buddhist preaching and in the telling of military epics, so that the Akō vendetta was a natural topic, and *kōdan* accounts of the incident spread widely from the mid-eighteenth century. An unusual record survives of an early oral recounting of the story of the Akō vendetta, as told in more than twenty sessions by a traveling Jōdo priest in the town of Matsusaka 松阪, Ise province, in 1744, and written down from memory by a fourteen-year-old boy named Ozu Koshirō 小津小四郎, who would later grow to fame as the great Kokugaku scholar Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長.⁷⁰ Apart from the evidence it offers of the precocious abilities of the young Norinaga, the text is of value as a unique record of an actual oral recitation, and one that predates the first performance of *Kanadehon chūshingura* by four years. As analyzed by Federico Marcon, the preacher's account shares much in common with existing *jitsuroku* versions, but also has details that

⁶⁸ Nabeta 1910–1911.

⁶⁹ Nabeta 1910–1911 and Chūō Gishikai 1931. See *Akō Gishi Jiten Kankōkai* 1972, pp. 503–507, for a history of the *Akō gijin sansho* and a list of its contents. Strictly speaking, only the first two volumes of *Akō gijin sansho* were from Nabeta's collection; the third was a "supplement" (*hoi* 補遺) of documents discovered later and edited by Nishimura Yutaka 西村豊.

⁷⁰ Motoori 1744. The text was first published in a modern edition only in 1975, and it has yet to be closely studied; it is cited briefly in Maruya 1984, pp. 11–12; and Kitagawa 1985, p. 27.

suggest a certain autonomy in the *kōdan* storytelling lineage of the Akō vendetta. Together with the related *naniwabushi* 浪花節, such *kōdan* versions would achieve their fullest flowering and largest audiences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁷¹

Kōdan worked to diversify and extend the range of Chūshingura by focusing in particular on the “individual stories” (*meimeiden*) of the separate league members as well as “outside stories” (*gaiden* 外伝) of others associated with the league in some way, including such newly fictitious characters as Murakami Kiken 村上喜剣, the man from Satsuma who berated Ōishi for his dissipation and later committed seppuku on his grave out of remorse, and Tawaraboshi Genba 俵星玄蕃, a swordsman who supported the cause in Edo.⁷² Such characters seem to have been created by *kōdan* storytellers, but since oral literature leaves so few traces, it is a history that remains largely invisible until the Meiji period, when the technique of shorthand enabled the transcription and publication of *kōdan* tales.⁷³ It would also be important to know more about the audiences for *kōdan*, and whether it is true, as Satō Tadao 佐藤忠男 has suggested, that whereas the urban merchant bourgeoisie took to kabuki renditions of the vendetta, with their emphasis on romance and family complications, *kōdan* narration appealed rather to the artisanal class, with minimal romance and plenty of tough, short-tempered samurai bluster.⁷⁴ One of the great challenges in the history of Chūshingura is to find evidence, in the general absence of surviving texts, that might shed light on the burst of *kōdan* creativity and its class support in the later Edo period.

Chūshingura under the Meiji State

Until recently, the modern history of Chūshingura had been wholly neglected by historians, except for a useful but brief overview in one chapter of Matsushima Eiichi’s landmark 1964 survey, *Chūshingura: Sono seiritsu to tenkai* 忠臣蔵: その成立と展開.⁷⁵ Things changed with the publication in autumn 2001 of Miyazawa Seiichi’s *Kindai Nihon to ‘Chūshingura’ gensō* 近代日本と「忠臣蔵」幻想.⁷⁶ Miyazawa relates having been surprised when he researched his earlier book on the

⁷¹ Marcon 2003.

⁷² Brief biographies of these two imaginary characters may be found in Akō Gishi Jiten Kankōkai 1972, pp. 405 and 433.

⁷³ One promising piece of evidence is the *ninjōbon* 人情本 collection of tales of the Gishi by Tamenaga Shunsui 為永春水 entitled *Iroha bunko* いろは文庫, of which the first four volumes were published from 1836 to 1841; see Tamenaga 1836–1841. (The series was continued for another fourteen volumes, until 1872, by Tamenaga Shunsui II.) Shunsui also performed as a *kōdan* storyteller, and *Iroha bunko* probably reflects oral *kōdan* versions. *Iroha bunko* was abridged and rearranged into a single coherent narrative for an early introduction of the tale of the forty-seven rōnin in literary form to the West; see Saito and Greey 1880, of which an account may be found in Miyazawa 2001, pp. 38–40.

⁷⁴ Satō 1976, pp. 82–94. Satō is probably speaking primarily of *kōdan* and kabuki in the modern period, and it is unclear how much of this can be projected back into the Edo era.

⁷⁵ Matsushima 1964. Mention should also be made of Satō 1976, which, however, was restricted largely to Chūshingura in modern film.

⁷⁶ Miyazawa 2001.

Akō incident by the absence of a history of Chūshingura in modern times, and he set about collecting the materials for one. Scouring used-book store catalogues, looking through journals, and carefully sifting through the roughly three thousand titles listed in a bibliography of the Akō Gishi compiled by Matsuoka Shūzō 松岡脩三 and published privately in Seoul in 1934,⁷⁷ Miyazawa accumulated a mountain of material from which he selected the most revealing items. He also consulted a wide variety of secondary sources, which are cited parenthetically in the text. The resulting book is organized as a roughly chronological series of over one hundred discrete entries, averaging about two pages each, on specific books, articles, political events, theatrical performances, novels, and films that deal in some way with the Akō Gishi (overwhelmingly the preferred term in the prewar period on which he focuses). While the book is highly informative, this approach results in a somewhat diffuse effect, although Miyazawa consistently brings to his analysis the cool and critical eye of an academic historian with no sentimental attachment to the Chūshingura legend, which, as his title makes clear, he considers a “fantasy” (*gensō* 幻想).

To the degree that Miyazawa’s book has a central theme, it is how Chūshingura became a “national legend” (*kokumin densetsu* 国民伝説), which for Miyazawa means the ways in which it was incorporated into the emperor-system ideology (*tennōsei ideorogi* 天皇制イデオロギー) of prewar Japan, so that the values represented by the story of the Akō Gishi came to reflect those of state ideology. The evidence of the various texts he offers is compelling, showing how the Akō Gishi were held up as models of the ideals of “Bushidō,” the modern system of belief that was first developed by Inoue Tetsujirō 井上哲次郎 and other ideologues and eventually made into an integral part of official ideology.⁷⁸ The “loyalty” of the Gishi, which was complex and often contradictory in historical reality, was channeled into the single mold of loyalty to the emperor and service to the imperial state, and their greatest personal virtue was deemed to be “self-sacrifice” (*kenshin* 献身, *jiko gisei* 自己犠牲). The founding text of this ideological lineage is the citation addressed to Ōishi Yoshio that the Meiji emperor dispatched to Sengakuji when he first entered his new capital of Tokyo in late 1868, praising the leader of the Akō rōnin for his righteousness in following his lord and carrying out revenge.

For all Miyazawa’s emphasis on the Akō Gishi as official ideology in prewar Japan, however, he also offers striking evidence for the simultaneous ambivalence with which the state viewed these avenging heroes. To begin with, their heroic deed was a *katakiuchi*, or vendetta, which was declared a crime by the Meiji government on 7 February 1873, as part of the campaign to unify legal rights in Japan along Western lines. The system of registered vendetta that had been instituted two centuries earlier was thus brought to an end, and with it the feudal anomaly of effectively allowing citizens to take justice into their own hands. Equally embarrassing was the fact that the Akō vendetta was carried out

⁷⁷ Matsuoka 1934.

⁷⁸ On this point, see also Tucker 2002.

on behalf of a local feudal lord in defiance of the central bakufu and its laws—scarcely a paragon of behavior for citizens of a modern nation-state. Official propaganda, of course, made every effort to obscure this contradiction, converting feudal loyalty into an abstract virtue that ultimately meant loyalty to the emperor alone.

Various critics of the Gishi, however (of whom the statist legal scholar Katō Hiroyuki 加藤弘之 was one of the most persistent) continued to harp on these contradictions.⁷⁹ Their greatest influence was in the area of textbooks, a topic to which Miyazawa dedicates several revealing sections. It is a complicated story, but basically the Akō incident was considered acceptable material for lessons in Japanese language and history—but never for ones in ethics (*shūshin* 修身). And even in history textbooks, the coverage of the incident declined in length and detail after the inauguration in 1886 of the system of official approval of textbooks, disappearing entirely in 1902 and reappearing as an entry on “Ōishi Yoshio” in 1921 largely because of insistent pressure from the newly founded Chūō Gishikai 中央義士会. Wartime revisions in 1941 and 1943 progressively diminished the length and detail of the section on Ōishi, until so little remained that almost nothing was left of the Akō incident itself.⁸⁰ In the 1930s, the ambivalent nature of Gishi loyalty also became a sore point with the military, which tended to view it as “lesser righteousness” (*shōgi* 小義) and a possible threat to the “great righteousness” (*taigi* 大義) of imperial loyalty.⁸¹ Miyazawa makes the provocative suggestion (although on the basis of limited evidence) that it was only in the final years of the war, after 1943, that the military once again warmed to the story of the Akō rōnin, on the grounds that their vendetta was an appropriate model for the desperate campaign of “great national revenge” (*koku-minteki ōadauchi* 国民の大仇討) on which Japan was now launched.⁸²

Perhaps because of these troublesome complications of the Akō revenge for official ideology, it was rather in the private (*minkan* 民間) sector that a coherent and durable ideology for the Akō Gishi took shape. The key mover in this process, and indeed probably the most influential figure in the modern history of Chūshingura, was the journalist Fukumoto Nichinan 福本日南 (1857–1921), who in the late Meiji and early Taishō period managed both to perpetuate the Tokugawa tradition of highly embellished literary accounts of the Gishi, and at the same time to complement that tradition with a modern historical approach based on the close study of primary documents. To understand how this

⁷⁹ Katō criticized the Akō rōnin for acting out of emotion rather than logic and for threatening the order of the state; see Miyazawa 2001, pp. 71–72, 96–97, 104–105.

⁸⁰ Miyazawa 2001, pp. 49, 72, 104–106, 132–34, 179–81, 219–20.

⁸¹ Miyazawa 2001, pp. 198 and 216–17. Miyazawa provides no documentation, but Kaionji Chōgorō 海音寺潮五郎 offers evidence of the military resistance to the Akō Gishi as a case of *shōgi* in the postwar preface to his historical novel *Akō gishi* (Kaionji 1969–1971, vol. 19, p. 100). This work was first published during the war as *Ōishi Yoshio* 大石良雄 (Chōbunkaku, 1944), and then revised and reissued after the war by Kōdansha in 1955; see Kaionji 1969–1971, vol. 19, p. 400.

⁸² Miyazawa 2001, pp. 221–22.

happened, it is necessary first to mention briefly the way in which the Akō revenge came to be viewed by Meiji academic historians. The first two decades of the Meiji period saw little serious interest in the history of the Akō vendetta, which seemed out of step both with the progressive spirit of enlightenment and with the legal prohibition of *katakiuchi* in 1873. The decisive turn to a modern history of the incident came in late 1889 with the publication of *Akō gishi jitsuwa* 赤穂義士実話 by Shigeno Yasutsugu (1827–1910).⁸³ Shigeno was a founding father of the modern profession of academic history in Japan, and at the time of his account of the Akō incident had just become the first president of the newly founded Historical Association (Shigakkai 史学会). It was just at this time in the late 1880s that he was preaching the need to expunge from the record of Japanese history all traces of myth and legend, for which he became known by his opponents as “Dr. Eraser” (*massatsu hakushi* 抹殺博士).⁸⁴

Shigeno set out to perform the operation of erasure on the legends that had accreted around the Akō incident, in particular *Kanadehon chūshingura*, which he subjected to an act-by-act deconstruction. Such an approach today would seem much like shooting fish in a barrel, since the play itself was never intended to be a historical account and is filled with willful inventions. In fact, however, Shigeno merely used *Kanadehon* as a foil for a serious and still provocative consideration of the history of the incident through primary documents. The significance of his work can be appreciated from the opening pages, where he first carefully provided a “list of books cited” (*in’yōsho mokuroku* 引用書目録), which he divided into such categories as “deemed reliable” (31 items), “useful for reference even though some may be mixtures of truth and fabrication” (32), “deemed to be fabrications or baseless speculation” (14), and items “of which I have heard the title but not yet seen” (19).⁸⁵ In the text, Shigeno quoted directly from those primary sources that he trusted and ruthlessly rejected much of what many Japanese had come to believe was the historical truth of the Akō incident. Ideologically, Shigeno was certainly an admirer of the Akō Gishi, but, as Miyazawa emphasizes, he saw their act not as one of revenge (now forbidden by Meiji law) but rather as one of loyalty to their lord and his family line.⁸⁶

But the far more lasting impact on the modern historiography of the Akō vendetta was to be made by Fukumoto Nichinan. Politically, Nichinan was substantially to the right of Shigeno, more in the lineage of the Gen’yōsha 玄洋社 in northern Kyushu and the Seikyōsha 政教社 in Tokyo than of the mainstream Satchō oligarchy. He first serialized a long account of the Akō Gishi in his own Kyushu newspaper, which was then published in 1909 as *Genroku kaikyōroku* 元禄快拳録. Written in ornate and flowing prose, it went on to become one of the most popular accounts of the Akō incident in modern times and remains avail-

⁸³ Shigeno 1889. Shigeno’s account was dictated to Nishimura Tenshū 西村天囚.

⁸⁴ Matsushima 1976, pp. 396, 409–410.

⁸⁵ Shigeno 1889 (1976 reprint edition), pp. 3–6.

⁸⁶ Miyazawa 2001, pp. 55–58.

able in paperback today.⁸⁷ Although Nichinan insisted in the introduction that he rejected the fanciful tales of the *jitsuroku* and *kōdan* tradition of “Gishi biographies” (*Gishi den* 義士伝), his account nevertheless included many details that Shigeno would have “erased.” Just five months after the publication of *Genroku kaikyōroku*, however, Nabeta Shōzan’s *Akō gijin sansho* began to appear, making the basic documents of the Akō incident available in one convenient three-volume work. Nichinan was deeply impressed and was quickly converted into a document-based historian. For over two years he worked to revise and rewrite his earlier work, producing in 1914 *Genroku kaikyō shinsōroku* 元禄快挙真相録.

Nichinan’s *Shinsōroku* is a frustrating work, difficult to evaluate. On the one hand, it seems to be the work of a modern historian, with a listing of sources consulted at the end of many paragraphs and shrewd comments on conflicts among them in the distinctive “comment” (*ben* 弁) sections. No one since Nichinan has devoted so much effort to collating all the sources that were available to him, so that his *Shinsōroku* remains an indispensable resource for any historian who seriously studies the Akō incident. At the same time, Nichinan’s positivism was skin-deep, in the end severely compromised both by his literary instincts and by his ideological commitment to the utter righteousness of the Gishi. He continued as in *Genroku kaikyōroku* to offer long sections of patent fiction in which he reconstructed verbatim conversations. He also remained largely uncritical of his sources. In his preface, Nichinan specifically attacked Shigeno for his all-or-nothing approach to sources, and in particular his rejection of the early *jitsuroku* that included a mixture of fact and fabrication. The factual material in such works was valid and useful, Nichinan argued. But never did he reveal exactly how he himself managed to separate the fact from the fiction, and his source citations are merely lists of a wide diversity of documents with no indication of which he used for what. But the *appearance* of scholarly method was crucial in persuading countless amateur and even professional researchers for decades after that this really was, as the title boasted, the “True Record of the Inspiring Deed of Genroku.”⁸⁸ No other single work has done more both to advance and to obstruct the serious and critical historical study of the Akō incident.

Taking advantage of the great “Gishi boom” of the late Meiji period, which saw the publication of over thirty Chūshingura-related books in addition to his own,⁸⁹ Fukumoto Nichinan proposed the creation of a national organization that would be dedicated to perpetuating the memory of the Akō Gishi and their leader, Ōishi Yoshio. The Chūō Gishikai was founded in 1916, and over the following years it established dozens of branches throughout Japan, dedicating itself to

⁸⁷ In 1982 *Genroku kaikyōroku* was included in the Iwanami Bunko series.

⁸⁸ Nichinan’s term *kaikyō* 快挙, according to Miyazawa 2001, pp. 89–90, was inspired by the use of the word to refer to Japan’s naval victory over Russia in the Battle of the Sea of Japan in May 1905. The use of “Genroku” also set the precedent for the widespread practice thereafter to refer to the Akō vendetta as the “Genroku incident.”

⁸⁹ See Utsumi 1933, pp. 544–49, for a list of the most important of these works.

celebrating the deeds of the Gishi through research and public lectures. The spirit of the Chūō Gishikai fostered a tone of scholarship on the Akō incident that survives today, with Nichinan's two *Genroku kaikyo* volumes as its foundational texts, of uncritical and unquestioning acceptance of the Gishi and their actions as righteous, and of a preoccupation with countering the continuing flood of "vulgar accounts" (*zokusetsu* 俗説)—specifically the Gishi tales of the *kōdan* and *naniwabushi* storytellers—with the "true" history. This sort of eulogistic history, known by its own practitioners as *Gishi kenkyū* 義士研究 ("Gishi studies"), was represented in the official academic establishment by Watanabe Yosuke 渡辺世祐 (1874–1957), a scholar on the staff of the Historiographical Institute (Shiryō Hensanjo 史料編纂所) of Tokyo Imperial University and a recognized authority on the political and military history of the Sengoku period. He was also a fervent pro-Gishi ideologue, as vividly revealed in his public speeches, many of which were printed in *Gishi seishin* 義士精神, the journal of the Chūō Gishikai. He continued these activities after the war in an only slightly less propagandistic spirit; a posthumous publication of a series of articles written in 1958–1962 shows him at his best, carefully telling the story through the documents.⁹⁰

The most exhaustive work of "Gishi studies" after Nichinan, however, was the *Shinsetsu Akō gishiroku* 真説赤穂義士録 of 1933 by Utsumi Teijirō 内海定治郎, a native of Akō who worked as a schoolteacher and devoted his entire life to the study of the Akō Gishi. Like Watanabe, he was a fervent ideologue, declaring in the introduction to his book that the self-denying, self-sacrificing behavior of the Gishi served as an ideal model for all Japanese citizens in a time of national crisis and as a way of warding off the evil effects of "materialistic civilization" from the West.⁹¹ He was also a good historian, however, and his history of the Akō incident remains, if one makes allowance for his ideological blinders, a standard work, albeit a work flawed by the lack of almost any documentation of sources. This problem also characterized an important reference work based on Utsumi's research, the *Akō gishi jiten* 赤穂義士事典 of 1972.⁹² The persistent failure of documentation is in fact characteristic of virtually everything that has ever been written about the history of the Akō incident. Tracing any suspicious anecdotes or details back to the original sources thus becomes extremely difficult, a circumstance that has worked over the decades as one of the greatest disincentives to serious scholarly study of the Akō incident. In a sort of Gresham's Law of academic value, bad scholarship has driven out the good.

⁹⁰ Watanabe 1971. Watanabe was also responsible for editing *Akō gishi shiryō*, a major collection of primary documents on the Akō incident; see Chūō Gishikai 1931.

⁹¹ See Utsumi 1942 for a more extended wartime explication of these themes.

⁹² *Akō Gishi Jiten Kankōkai* 1972. Although Utsumi's research materials provided the "building materials and blueprint" for the dictionary, the actual work of putting it all together was done by an editorial committee, so that, as explained in the introduction, pp. 1–10, Utsumi is not properly considered the "author" of the work. The dictionary is particularly valuable for its bibliography, which includes detailed explanatory notes for many works. The historical narrative of the Akō incident and the biographical sections, which are wholly undocumented, are less reliable.

Historical Literature and the Mass Media

Miyazawa's chronicle at the same time vividly documents a different trend that began in the Taishō period, precisely when Gishi ideology was at a peak, and which worked to counter that ideology and to reorient the conception of the Akō vendetta in ways that would be critical to sustaining its viability after the collapse of the prewar order. Emerging in the pages of modern historical fiction, from the late 1920s this new mode of Chūshingura quickly spilled over into film, and then, in the postwar period, into television. It has ultimately become the dominant mass form of all Chūshingura cultural production.

The acknowledged pioneer in this new and distinctively modern lineage of historical fiction was Akutagawa Ryūnosuke 芥川龍之介, whose short story "Aru hi no Ōishi Kuranosuke" 或日の大石内蔵助 appeared in the September 1917 issue of *Chūō kōron* 中央公論.⁹³ The "certain day" (*aru hi*) of the title occurs for Ōishi during the confinement of the leadership group in the Hosokawa 細川 domain mansion while awaiting the sentence of the bakufu. Akutagawa depicts Ōishi as vaguely conflicted in various ways, something that conventional heroic conceptions would have never allowed. Ōishi is upset to hear that the league members are considered such heroes in the streets of Edo that even chōnin have started copycat vendettas over petty affronts. He is similarly discomfited by the contemptuous remarks of his fellows about those who resigned from the league; far from despising the defectors, Ōishi feels a certain understanding for the choices they made. And he shows himself to be oddly embarrassed by talk about his dissolute behavior in the pleasure quarters, even if it had been done to throw off the enemy. In all these ways, Akutagawa set a new pattern for a more psychological understanding of the Akō avengers, turning the previous black-and-white depiction of the heroic Gishi versus the cowardly "unrighteous retainers" (*fugishi* 不義士) into shades of gray, and showing the rōnin to be highly sensitive to public opinion—and thus probably also taking us back much closer to historical reality.

Miyazawa shows how erosion of the dichotomous good-guy–bad-guy morality of Tokugawa tradition continued thereafter in literary depictions that sympathetically portrayed a variety of individuals from the Akō incident previously dismissed as cowards and villains. In two stories of 1929, Morita Sōhei 森田草平 offered a sympathetic portrait of some of Kira's retainers, followed by a similarly humanizing account of Mōri Koheita 毛利小平太, previously despised as the last of the eleventh-hour defectors from the league. Kira himself was resurrected in a Kikuchi Kan 菊池寛 story in 1931, the same year that saw Naoki Sanjūgo's 直木三十五 recuperation of Ōno Kurobei 大野九郎兵衛, the house elder of Akō who had parted ways with Ōishi over the surrender of Akō castle and who was condemned to perpetual villainy on stage as Ono Kudayū 斧九太夫.⁹⁴ This trend to the resurrection of the bad guys of the Akō incident continued in

⁹³ Akutagawa 1917.

⁹⁴ Miyazawa 2001, pp. 154–60.

the postwar period, reaching a culmination of sorts in the 1980s in Inoue Hisashi's 井上ひさし brilliant series *Fuchūshingura* 不忠臣蔵, "A Treasury of Disloyal Retainers."⁹⁵

The work of historical fiction that was truly decisive, however, in charting the future of Chūshingura for the remainder of the twentieth century was Osaragi Jirō's 大仏次郎 monumental *Akō rōshi* 赤穂浪士 of 1928–1929, which was serialized in the *Tōkyō nichinichi shinbun* 東京日々新聞 from May 1927 to November 1928, and published in three volumes by Kaizōsha in 1928–1929.⁹⁶ Essentially, Osaragi depicted the Akō rōnin (or *rōshi*, a term that he was one of the first to use) as protesters against the corruption and decadence of the bakufu.⁹⁷ Osaragi's view of the Akō rōnin as opponents of the bakufu was not in fact a particularly radical point of view; on the contrary, it was in conformity with established views of the Akō Gishi, who, particularly in the ideology of the Chūō Gishikai, were seen as old-time provincial samurai who had by their example halted the trend of the samurai class towards softness and decadence in the face of the spread of chōnin culture and reawakened them to the original spirit of Bushidō. This interpretation meshed nicely with a general view of the Genroku period as given to indulgent and profligate behavior under the corrupt leadership of the shogun Tsunayoshi, a depiction that had even become a key part of the 1921 history textbook entry on "Ōishi Yoshio," well before Osaragi began his novel. Osaragi did, however, inject a new note of active resistance to the bakufu on moral and political grounds that went beyond the specific complaints about the lenient treatment of Kira.

The conception of the Akō incident as a protest against a capricious and tyrannical regime was perfectly suited for the revival of Chūshingura in the newly democratized Japan of the postwar era, symbolized by the choice in 1963 of Osaragi's *Akō rōshi* as the basis for the second year of the NHK Sunday evening historical series known as the Taiga Dorama 大河ドラマ ("grand fleuve drama"). In the following four decades, versions of the Chūshingura story were selected three more times, as *Genroku Taiheiki* 元禄太平記 (1975), *Tōge no gunzō* 峠の群像 (1982), and *Genroku ryōran* 元禄繚乱 (1999). Since no other historical theme has been chosen more than once (although most cluster in certain historical eras, in particular Sengoku and Bakumatsu-Meiji), the four-time choice of Chūshingura testifies as much to the power of NHK in sustaining its popularity as to the

⁹⁵ Inoue 1985. These nineteen portraits of various *fugishi* were first serialized irregularly from May 1980 to December 1984 in the journal *Subaru* すばる.

⁹⁶ Osaragi 1928–1929. Miyazawa 2001 summarizes the novel on pp. 147–51.

⁹⁷ After 1945, Akō *rōshi* became the term of choice for Japanese (particularly academics) who wished to avoid the militaristic overtones that "Gishi" had acquired during the war years. Miyazawa, however, notes that *rōshi* was not commonly used in the Genroku era, and he himself has declared his own preference for *rōnin* 浪人, rejecting both *gishi* for emphasizing loyalty and *rōshi* for implying resistance. Miyazawa 2001, p. 18. It is ironic that while "Akō rōnin" is widely used in English, it sounds a bit odd in Japanese because of the overwhelming predominance of the more loaded *gishi* and *rōshi*. In popular articles about the Akō incident in Japan today, usage tends to be split fairly evenly between Akō *gishi* and Akō *rōshi*.

sure-fire popularity of the theme itself.⁹⁸ Whatever the balance of the two forces, it seems clear that national television has been a decisive element in perpetuating and even enhancing the capacity of Chūshingura in the late twentieth century. This was nowhere more in evidence than in the 1999 *Genroku ryōran*, for which the warmup of late 1998 may well have been the most intensive Chūshingura media blitz in Japanese history, given the sheer volume of old books reprinted and new books published, as well as magazine articles churned out. Not surprisingly, the TV series itself enjoyed good ratings, so much so that the popular appetite seems to have been thoroughly sated. As a result, the tercentenary of the Akō incident in 2001–2003 has passed almost unnoticed in mass culture and popular publishing. By the time of the three hundredth anniversary of the *uchiiri* 討入り (the established term for the night attack on Kira's mansion) in December 2002, Chūshingura had been crowded out from the shelves of bookstores by a wave of new publications about the swordsman Miyamoto Musashi 宮本武蔵, hero of the soon-to-commence NHK Taiga Drama for 2003.

Continuities of the Twentieth Century

The blending of historical novel and film into a dominant TV-based lineage of Chūshingura has not completely suppressed alternative traditions that had earlier played more important roles. The publication of books and articles on the “true” history of the Akō incident, for example, continues much in the mold of prewar “Gishi studies,” promising to cut through the accumulated layers of “fabrications” (*kyokō* 虚構) in order to reveal the “historical truth” (*shijitsu* 史実) of the original Akō rōnin. The vast majority of such writing, however, is produced by amateur fans of the Gishi, many of them of a prewar generation, and tends for the most part to rehash stock themes or embark on new theories that are in the end speculative and undocumented. The other side of the coin has been the general disinterest of academic historians, with some notable exceptions, such as the works by Matsushima Eiichi and Tahara Tsuguo mentioned earlier.⁹⁹

Another exception worth notice is a popular paperback of 1994 by Noguchi Takehiko 野口武彦, a prolific and wide-ranging scholar of Japanese literature and history, entitled *Chūshingura: Akō jiken, shijitsu no nikusei* 忠臣蔵: 赤穂事件・史実の肉声. As Noguchi candidly admits in his postface, the book was commissioned by a publisher with a quick deadline, so he simply read through the key primary sources as compiled in the three successive modern collections, writing his account, as the subtitle promises, through the “live voices of historical reality.”¹⁰⁰ Despite the main title of *Chūshingura*, the book deals exclusively with

⁹⁸ For an exhaustive chronology of television programs related to Chūshingura, see Akō-shi 1987, vol. 5, pp. 809–88, covering the years 1953–1992.

⁹⁹ Matsushima 1964 and Tahara 1978. The Matsushima volume was the first, and still the only, effort to encompass both the historical Akō incident and later retellings of the story in a single historical account.

¹⁰⁰ Noguchi 1994, pp. 234–37. The documentary collections are Nabeta 1910–1911; Chūō Gishikai 1931; and Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3.

the historical Akō incident of 1701–1703, of which it provides a highly interesting and readable account. Noguchi's literary sensibilities and empathy for the protagonists help bring his narrative more to life than those of most historical novelists. He also demonstrates that the primary sources continue to yield many riches and new insights for those willing to read them closely. One small example is the description of the unearthly scene in front of the Sengoku mansion at Atagoshita 愛宕下 around midnight the day after the attack on Kira's mansion, as the rōnin were split into groups to be escorted to the four domain mansions in whose custody they had been placed. Noguchi offers the account left by the head of the Matsuyama 松山 domain delegation, Haga Seidayū 波賀清太夫, who, emerging from the Sengoku mansion into the cold and rainy night, found the entire area illuminated by hundreds of lanterns, carried by both the 1,400 troops that had been assembled to escort the rōnin and by retainers from the adjacent daimyo mansions. The unaccustomed brightness of this stunning night illumination must have imparted a certain solemnity, Noguchi writes, to all the busy movement as the rōnin were carried off in palanquins to await their fate.¹⁰¹

One other important scholarly accomplishment of recent years in the history of Chūshingura remains to be mentioned, the compilation by the historical office of the city of Akō of an impressive series entitled *Chūshingura* intended to document and narrate both the Akō incident and its later retellings. The editorial committee consists of leading academic scholars, headed by the distinguished historian of Edo culture Nishiyama Matsunosuke 西山松之助, who is also a native of Akō. So far, five of a projected seven volumes have appeared, two of which have already been mentioned as anthologies of Chūshingura-related literary works (vols. 4 and 6), and one of which is a detailed listing of Chūshingura plays, films, and television programs (vol. 5).¹⁰² The remaining two volumes are a survey history of the incident (vol. 1) and a compilation of the primary documents used to write it (vol. 3), both prepared by Yagi Akihiro 八木哲浩 (1922–), a respected scholar of the economic and political history of Hyōgo prefecture in the early modern period. Yagi claims his standards to be high, but the results are less than user-friendly. The volume of documents is alleged to include only authentic accounts, either by participants in the Akō incident or direct observers, but Yagi gives no explanation of exactly how reliability was determined for the 233 selected items, none of which are provided with any commentary or annotation. Yagi's survey history volume, which appeared in 1989, is competent and even provides indexes of names and events, although, like Noguchi's book of 1994, it appears to have been written in some haste.

Still another lineage of Chūshingura that remains alive and well, having survived in its own largely autonomous world throughout the modern period, is that

¹⁰¹ Noguchi 1994, p. 186.

¹⁰² Akō-shi 1987. The two still unpublished volumes are vol. 2, a multiauthored secondary account of the Chūshingura arts as catalogued in the other volumes, and vol. 7, a catalogue of Chūshingura prints and paintings.

of *Kanadehon chūshingura* as it has continued to be performed on the bunraku and kabuki stage. *Kanadehon*, together with numerous variations and modern additions, has maintained its Edo status as the single most popular play in the kabuki repertoire, notwithstanding a notable hiatus when revenge plays on the kabuki stage were banned by the Allied Occupation, a controversial episode that has recently received renewed attention.¹⁰³ Since the revival of *Kanadehon chūshingura* in November 1947, it has continued to be performed regularly. It is telling that the most notable commemorative events at the time of the tercentenary of the night attack in late 2002 were almost all performances of kabuki (with two separate *tōshi kyōgen* 通し狂言 “complete-play” programs in Tokyo, at Kabuki-za in October and at the National Theater in November) and bunraku.

In still another world, but one that was similarly busy during the tercentenary celebrations, are those institutions surviving from before the war that continue to have a vested interest in the perpetuation of the memory of the Akō Gishi in the old style. Heading the list is the Chūō Gishikai, which remains active, especially under its current president, Nakajima Yasuo 中島康夫, an aggressive proselytizer of Gishi values and a prolific author of books in the “Gishi studies” lineage. Involved less by ideology than by location are the temple of Sengakuji in Tokyo, and the city of Akō, both of which rely heavily on the Gishi for their economic prosperity. These twin centers of Gishidom were the biggest sponsors of commemorative events on 14 December in both 2001 and 2002, and both undertook beforehand large fund-raising campaigns that enabled the construction of a new memorial hall at Sengakuji and the rebuilding of Ōishi shrine in Akō. I attended the Uchiiri celebrations on 14–15 December at Sengakuji in 2001 and Akō in 2002, and in the end I was far less impressed by these gleaming new facilities than by various of the special events that were performed, and above all by the audiences who watched them.

The event that most attracted my attention was the “Gishi dance” (*Gishi odori* 義士踊り), as performed by groups from three neighboring villages in the Ina 伊那 valley of Nagano prefecture, a relatively isolated rural backwater of central Japan. Each troupe featured forty-seven men of various ages dressed for revenge, each with heavily painted eyebrows, a white headband (except for Ōishi father and son, who wore helmets), a neckband inscribed with the name of one of the historical Gishi, a knee-length jacket in the familiar zigzag (*yamagata* 山形) pattern of kabuki costume, black-and-white striped pants, straw sandals, and, of course, two ersatz swords in the sash. They danced in unison to the easy-to-follow singsong chant of a narrator who told the story of the Akō revenge. The dancers pantomimed the action in defiant gestures that seemed more Western than Japanese. Or perhaps it simply looked more Meiji than anything else, since the *Gishi odori* troupes are said to have sprung up in villages throughout Japan in the wake of the great Gishi boom of late Meiji, and they continued to flourish

¹⁰³ Most of the controversy revolves around the role of Faubion Bowers in the revival of *Kanadehon chūshingura* in November 1947. See Inose 1987; Okamoto 2001; and Mayo 2001.

into the war years. They declined, predictably, after the war and now survive only in a few scattered locations.

It occurred to me that these stirring remnants of prewar rural Gishi sentiment are closely linked by class and culture with another major lineage of Chūshingura that flourished from Meiji through the war but that survives only in attenuated forms today, that of *kōdan* storytelling and its more plebeian modern offshoot, *naniwabushi*. As described in detail in Hyōdō Hiromi's recent book on the rise of *naniwabushi* as the "voice" of the modern Japanese people (*kokumin* 国民), it was in particular the phenomenal popularity from 1910 of the Gishi tales of Tōchūken Kumoemon 桃中軒雲右衛門 (1873–1916) that made *naniwabushi* so popular, and in turn it was the popularity of *naniwabushi* that spread the fame of the Gishi far more widely than ever in the past.¹⁰⁴ With its melodic passages of song to a samisen accompaniment, and its readily comprehensible language, *naniwabushi*, together with *kōdan* (which survived as a rather more upscale and bourgeois form of narration, using more stylized language), were far more important than kabuki, novels, and film together in nurturing the mass affection of the Japanese people for the Gishi. The advent of radio in the late 1920s, for which *naniwabushi* quickly became the most popular type of programming, further contributed to this process.¹⁰⁵ Kabuki and *kōdan*-derived *naniwabushi* also fed into the emerging film tradition in Japan, in which Chūshingura-related tales bulked larger than any other single theme. Today, it is rare to see either *kōdan* or *naniwabushi* performances of Gishi tales, but the best place to catch them would be precisely at such religious sites as Sengakuji in Tokyo, or the Ōishi shrines in Akō and Yamashina, particularly at the "Gishi festivals" (*Gishi sai* 義士祭) that are held every 14 December.

It was in looking around at the faces of the throngs of ordinary Japanese who came to offer incense at the graves of the Gishi at Sengakuji, or to watch the Gishi Parade in Akō, that I became aware for the first time of the class character of these manifestations of Chūshingura. These were largely working-class people, plain in dress and earnest in mien, with scarcely any trendy hairstyles or business suits in sight. Even those at Sengakuji who may have been Tokyo natives were clearly from the shitamachi areas and not the western suburbs. In age, few were very young and quite a lot were older, but there were plenty in their thirties and forties, all born after the war, and their interest in the Gishi hence not explainable by prewar indoctrination. It would rather seem to be the distant memory, passed down in families and local communities, of all the stirring individual tales told over and again, and eventually replicated in film and television—of Ōishi's parting with Asano's widow, Yōzeiin 瑤泉院, on the snowy night at the Asano Edo residence at Nanbuzaka 南部坂, of Ōtaka Gengo's encounter with the haikai poet Kikaku 其角 on Ryōgoku 両国 bridge, or of the

¹⁰⁴ Hyōdō 2000. An article by Hyōdō focusing on the relationship between the rise of *naniwabushi* and the Chūshingura boom of late Meiji will appear later in this series.

¹⁰⁵ Hyōdō 2000, p. 8.

last duel of Kira's valiant defender, the swordman Shimizu Ichigaku 清水一学. As explained by Satō Tadao, these classics of *kōdan* and *naniwabushi* were dominated by the themes of stubborn pride and decisive, violent action.¹⁰⁶

Few people tell these stories any more, and only the oldest generation remembers them, except to the extent that they have been blended in as subplots of homogenized film and television extravaganzas. Yet something survives of their spirit in the form of the religious devotion to the Gishi that is most conspicuous before the graves at Sengakuji. These offerings are not in the manner of prayers to Tenjin for better scores on the entrance exams, or to Jizō for forgiveness after taking the life of a fetus. They are more a respectful worship of the Gishi as avenging spirits, in death as in life, and as such more to be appeased than entreated. Perhaps Maruya Saiichi was right in feeling that this elemental tale of revenge must have been rooted from the start in fears of the dead. I am convinced at any rate that we must acknowledge this lingering folk feeling in order to complete the puzzle of the complex capacity of Chūshingura as it continues after three centuries to survive as Japan's national legend. I have my own doubts about its power of survival through the coming century, but its past alone is enough to command our respect and renewed interest.

¹⁰⁶ Satō 1976, pp. 82–94.

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