

The Akō Incident, 1701–1703

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IT began in the spring of Genroku 14, when on the fourteenth day of the third month (21 April 1701), the daimyo of Akō 赤穂 in Harima province, Asano Takumi no kami Naganori 浅野内匠頭長矩, attacked the senior bakufu master of ceremony (*kōke* 高家) Kira Kōzuke no suke Yoshinaka 吉良上野介義央 in Edo castle with his short sword.¹ This led twenty-two months later to the day, in the twelfth month of 1702, to an attack by a large group of Asano's former retainers on Kira's mansion in Edo. These two violent incidents together constitute what has come to be known as the "Akō incident," which later became far more widely known when it was performed on the stage under the name *Chūshingura* 忠臣蔵, or "treasury of loyal retainers."² But precisely because of the widespread fame of the incident, it was constantly reinterpreted and reimagined by later generations, so that the truth of the historical incident paradoxically became ever more inaccessible as time passed.

The first problem confronted in considering the incident is the question of the actual cause of Asano's attack. On that particular day, a ceremony was to be conducted in which the shogun met with emissaries of the emperor and the retired emperor (*in* 院) from the imperial court in Kyoto. It was a customary practice that each year the shogun would send an envoy to carry his New Year's greeting to the Kyoto court, and that imperial representatives would respond in turn by traveling to Edo. This year, the emissaries for Emperor Higashiyama 東山 (r. 1687–1709) and Retired Emperor Reigen 霊元 (r. 1683–1687) arrived in Edo on the eleventh of the third month, presented their formal good wishes for the new year to the shogun in a ceremony on the twelfth, and were entertained with a noh performance on the thirteenth. In a final ceremony on the fourteenth, the shogun was scheduled to offer his thanks for the imperial greeting, an event known as

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¹ Some read Kira's given name as "Yoshihisa."

² The term "Chūshingura" appeared initially in the title of the puppet play *Kanadehon chūshingura* 仮名手本忠臣蔵, which was first performed in Osaka in 1748, and quickly spread to the kabuki stage in Osaka, Kyoto, and Edo. It has since become a term that is used to refer to both the historical Akō incident and to its many recreations on stage and in fiction.

the “ceremony of response to the emperor” (*chokutō no gi* 勅答の儀). Gifts were to be offered to the imperial envoys in thanks for their efforts by the shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi 徳川綱吉, by his consort, and by his mother, Keishōin 桂昌院. Asano Naganori was appointed to serve as host for the emperor’s envoy, and Date Muneharu 伊達宗春, the daimyo of the domain of Yoshida 吉田 (Iyo province), performed the same function for the representative of the retired emperor.

The only surviving account by an eyewitness to Asano’s attack on Kira is a report written by Kajikawa Yosobei 梶川与惣兵衛, who was then serving as a supervisory official (*rusuiban* 留守居番) in the women’s quarters of Edo castle.³ On that particular day, Kajikawa was acting as the intermediary for presenting gifts from the shogun’s consort, and when he proceeded to the room where he was normally stationed, he was told that there had been a message from Kira that the offering of the gifts had been rescheduled to an earlier time. He proceeded to the Pine Gallery (Matsu no ōrōka 松の大廊下, so named for the paintings of pine trees on the sliding doors that lined it) in search of Kira in order to confirm this news, but discovered that Kira was absent from the room used by the *kōke* officials. Kajikawa then had Asano called. “I am serving today as the messenger for the shogun’s consort,” he told Asano, and will be pleased to have your assistance.” Asano replied with words of assent and returned to his own station. At that point Kajikawa saw Kira returning from the direction of the White Chamber (Shiro shoin 白書院), so he went to meet him. As he stood talking to Kira about the scheduling of the ceremony, someone came up from behind and struck at Kira. “This is for what happened these past days!” he shouted (literally, “Do you remember my grudge from these past days?” *Kono aida no ikon oboetaru ka* 此間の遺恨覚えたるか). It turned out to be Asano Naganori. Kira whirled around in surprise and tried to escape, whereupon Asano struck him a second time, and he fell to the floor face down. At that moment, Kajikawa leaped at Asano and restrained him by the arms.

After this, a crowd including Kajikawa, the *kōke* officials, and others surrounded Asano and escorted him to the Willow Room (Yanagi no ma 柳の間). Throughout he repeated words to the effect that “I have had a grudge against

³ See “Kajikawa-shi hikki” 梶川氏筆記, in *Akō gijin sansho*, vol. 2, pp. 267–73; Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3 (as “Kajikawa-shi nikki” 梶川氏日記), pp. 5–9. Here and below, primary sources for the Akō incident are cited from three major modern collections: *Akō gijin sansho* 赤穂義人纂書, which was first assembled in the late Edo period by Nabeta Shōzan 鍋田晶山 (1778–1856) and published in two volumes in 1910, to which a third volume of documents not included in Nabeta’s collection was added in 1911; *Akō gishi shiryō* 赤穂義士史料, edited by the Chūō Gishikai 中央義士会 and published in 1931, which provided three volumes of documents not included in *Akō gijin sansho*; and volume 3 of a series compiled by the Historical Office of the city of Akō (Akō-shi Sōmubu Shishi Hensanshitsu 赤穂市総務部編さん室) under the general title of *Chūshingura* (Akō-shi 1987). This last work was edited by Yagi Akihiro 八木哲浩 and represents an effort to assemble in one volume the most important and authentic documents of the previous two collections, plus a number that had never been published before. In addition, selected documents related to the Akō incident were included in *Kinsei buke shisō* 近世武家思想, NST 27; citations to this collection are given as well because of its detailed annotations and wide availability.

Kira for some time, and although I much regret the time and the place, I had no choice but to strike at him.” He spoke in such a loud voice that others sought to calm him, and he finally quieted down. After a bit, Asano was handed over to the inspectors (*metsuke* 目付), and Kajikawa records that he had no knowledge of what happened after that.

For the inspectors’ side of the story, there survives a record said to have been written by Okado Denpachirō 多門伝八郎, who was on duty as an inspector that day. It differs, however, in various respects from Kajikawa’s account, and is suspect on many points, including an excessively sympathetic attitude towards Asano, so that it cannot be trusted as a contemporaneous account.⁴ And yet in Okado’s version as well, when questioned by the inspectors about the reason for his attack on Kira, Asano responded simply along the lines that “Bearing a grudge, I completely forgot where I was and struck out,” giving no particulars about what his “grudge” might have been.

Following the attack, the bakufu designated a substitute for Asano, changed the appointed place from the White Chamber to the Black Chamber (Kuro shoin 黒書院), and carried out the ceremony without any further trouble. As for Asano, the bakufu placed him in the custody of Tamura Ukyō-daibu Takeaki 田村右京大夫建顕, daimyo of Ichinoseki 一関 domain in the Tōhoku region, and sentenced him to death by seppuku the same day. According to the records of the Tamura house,⁵ the timing of the day’s events was as follows: the attack by Asano occurred sometime before noon, and the order from the bakufu elders placing Asano in Tamura custody was issued at 1 P.M. Shortly before 4 P.M., the chief inspectors and inspectors of the bakufu arrived and delivered the order to Tamura Takeaki that Asano be executed, and the ceremony of seppuku was carried out after 6 P.M. While in custody at the Tamura mansion, Asano told one of his guards that he would like to send a letter to his retainers. He was not permitted to write a letter, but he did give an oral message that was written down and later handed over to the Akō retainers; it stated that “I should have informed you about this matter in advance, but what happened today could not be helped, and it was impossible for me to let you know. You must wonder about the situation (*fushin ni zonzubeku sōrō* 不審二可存候).”⁶ These words, together with the mention of “my grudge” that was recorded by Kajikawa, constitute the totality of what we know about the reasons for Asano’s attack on Kira.

⁴ “Okado Denpachirō hikki” 多門伝八郎筆記, in *Akō gijin sansho*, vol. 1, pp. 266–78; Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, pp. 29–40; also in *Kinsei buke shisō*, pp. 164–78. The title appears in the latter two collections as “Okado Denpachirō oboegaki” 多門伝八郎覚書. Although there is no direct evidence, this report may well have been written after the revenge against Kira taken by Asano’s former retainers.

⁵ “Tamura Ukyō-daibu-dono e Asano Takumi no kami oazukari ikken” 田村右京太夫殿へ浅野内匠頭御預一件, in *Akō gijin sansho*, vol. 2, pp. 1–6; Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3 (as “Ichinoseki-han kachū kiroku” 一関藩家中記録, pp. 14–19).

⁶ “Tamura Ukyō-daibu-dono e Asano Takumi no kami oazukari ikken,” in *Akō gijin sansho*, vol. 2, p. 5; Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3 (“Ichinoseki-han kachū kiroku”), p. 19.

The Background of the Incident

We thus have no idea what the concrete cause of Asano's "grudge" toward Kira might have been. From the evidence of his reference to the reasons for the grudge as having occurred "these past days" (*kono aida*, according to Kajikawa) and as being something "I should have informed you of beforehand" (*kanete shirase-mōsubeku sōraedomo* 兼て為知可申候へ共, according to the oral message transmitted by the Tamura officials), we know that he had been harboring anger against Kira, and we are left to conjecture that his action was probably not the result of a sudden impulse.

It was not only Asano himself who said nothing specific about this matter; his retainers, who plotted to carry through on his anger at Kira and who left copious records and correspondence concerning their plans, never touched upon the reasons for Asano's original attack. It is unclear whether they knew the reason but did not mention it, or whether they simply did not know. From their standpoint, it would seem, the only thing that mattered was that their lord had undertaken his assault on the basis of a grudge towards Kira. The specific nature of the grudge appears to have been almost beyond their concern.

As for what might in fact have been the source of Asano's grudge, the standard explanation has become that the Asano house had failed to give an adequate bribe to Kira in return for his guidance in matters of etiquette. Asano was then allegedly put to shame concerning the ceremonial details of the reception of the imperial envoys, and this, it is held, gave rise to his anger. One of the earliest surviving accounts to explain the cause of the incident in these terms is *Akō gijinroku* 赤穂義人録 (1703, revised 1709), by Muro Kyūsō 室鳩巢, a Confucian scholar in the employ of Kaga domain.⁷ Kyūsō probably did not fabricate this story, but rather based it upon the hearsay accounts that were circulating in Edo at the time. Overall, however, *Akō gijinroku* is filled with inaccuracies, as in its description of the details of the attack itself, which differs greatly from that of Kajikawa's eyewitness testimony. According to Kyūsō, Kajikawa asked Asano to inform him when the ceremonies were over, whereupon Kira jumped in from the side and declared before the assembled group, "What does a country bumpkin know about etiquette?" Unable to contain his anger, writes Kyūsō, Asano suddenly drew his sword and struck Kira.⁸

Given such discrepancies, it is difficult to know how much we can trust Muro Kyūsō's theory of bribery as the source of the rancor between Asano and Kira. There may be some truth to the matter, but it seems clear that Kyūsō, as the adherent to a moral view that held bribery to be an evil, engaged in considerable exaggeration and imagination so as to set up a sharp contrast between Asano as the virtuous hero and Kira as the villain. In addition to the bribe theory, many other possible reasons have been put forth over the years as the true cause of Asano's

⁷ *Akō gijinroku* is one of the most famous accounts of the Akō incident. For both the original kanbun text and an annotated *yomikudashi* text, see *Kinsei buke shisō*, pp. 271–370.

⁸ *Akō gijinroku*, in *Kinsei buke shisō*, p. 275.

attack, but none have any firm foundation, and all remain purely in the realm of speculation.

At the same time, we must not forget that one of the general features of this era, reflecting both the authoritarian personality of the shogun, Tsunayoshi, and his liking for Confucianism, was a growing tendency to respect regulations and ceremonies. The bakufu made efforts to systematize its rituals along the lines of those of the imperial court in Kyoto. The historian Tsuji Zennosuke 辻善之助 has observed that when the court noble Nonomiya Sadamoto 野宮定基 traveled to Edo in 1696 as an imperial envoy on the occasion of seventeenth-year memorial services for the previous shogun, he recorded in his diary that “these barbarians know nothing of etiquette,” reflecting a sense on the part of Kyoto courtiers that bakufu protocol was lacking in refinement. Tsuji noted that for its own part, the bakufu itself had changed from its early years and had become anxious and timid in its efforts to avoid the contempt of the Kyoto court.⁹ Another practice that encouraged this trend was the taking of wives and concubines from the Kyoto nobility by the Tokugawa shogun, so that the consort of Ietsuna 家綱 was a daughter of Prince Fushimi 伏見宮, and Tsunayoshi’s consort came from the Takatsukasa 鷹司 family. In this way, the culture of the Kyoto court came to penetrate the women’s quarters of Edo castle.

In these circumstances, it may well be that *kōke* such as Kira Yoshinaka, who prided themselves on their knowledge of ritual etiquette, had become haughty and acted in ways offensive to the pride of daimyo like Asano Naganori, whatever the specific insult might have been. In fact something of this sort happened just seven years after the Akō incident, when in 1709 the daimyo Maeda Toshimasa 前田利昌 of the Daishōji 大聖寺 domain (a subdomain of Kaga), who had been appointed as host to the imperial envoy on the occasion of a funeral mass for Tsunayoshi, killed the *kōke* Oda Hidechika 織田秀親 at Kan’eiji 寛永寺 temple.

The Response of the Bakufu

Whereas the punishment of Asano was swift and severe, the bakufu not only declared Kira innocent but even offered words of sympathy, declaring that he “would not be charged (*okamai korenaku* 御構無之) and should tend to healing his wounds.”¹⁰ This was presumably because Kira had offered no resistance whatsoever to the attack. When the bakufu councilors (*rōjū* 老中) questioned Kajikawa Yosobei about the circumstances of the attack, they specifically asked whether Kira had touched his short sword (*wakizashi* 脇差) or made any attempt to draw it. Kajikawa answered that he himself had not seen Kira place his hand on the sword.¹¹ By contrast, the same bakufu order declared that Asano was deemed to have “acted in the most insolent manner when he struck with his sword beyond all bounds of reason and with no regard for the occasion or respect for

⁹ Tsuji 1969–1970, vol. 5, pp. 35–37.

¹⁰ *Tokugawa bakufu gonikki* 徳川幕府御日記, in Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, p. 42.

¹¹ “Kajikawa-shi hikki,” in *Akō gijin sansho*, vol. 2, p. 271; Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, p. 8. No bushi were allowed to wear their long swords within the shogunal palace.

the palace.”¹² Not making any issue at all of the reasons for the assault, the order emphasized instead that Asano’s crime lay in violent behavior that paid no heed to the time and place. It was the disruption of order within Edo castle on the occasion of a state ceremony that was the ground for the criminal charges. From this point of view, Kira was no more than a simple victim, and hence innocent.

A second major issue embedded in the Akō incident is whether this bakufu decision was partial and hence basically unfair. As we will see, many of the Akō retainers complained that the disposition was “one-sided” (*kataochi* 片落), and there appear to have been many others who harbored similarly critical feelings, the grounds being that the decision was in violation of *kenka ryōseibai* 喧嘩両成敗, the principle that both parties to a fight were to be punished equally. But, in fact, *kenka ryōseibai* was not a written law under the bakufu; it existed only as customary law or as an accepted convention. And even if the principle of *kenka ryōseibai* were to be applied, there remains the question whether this particular incident was actually a “fight” (*kenka* 喧嘩). Since Kira made no attempt to respond to Asano, it is possible to view the situation as a simple case of one-sided assault, and not a true *kenka*. The bakufu judgment seems to have been based on this way of thinking, and many historians as well now view the matter in the same way and consider the bakufu disposition to have been justified.

But while it may be true that it does not amount to a fight if one side flees, the basic assumption is that no proper warrior would ever flee, and it might be argued that this was an unspoken premise of the principle of *kenka ryōseibai* itself. Even if a fight were provoked for no good reason, the training of a samurai demanded that he stand his ground. It is instructive to compare the disposition of the Asano-Kira case to previous examples of sword attacks within Edo castle. The first such of which we know occurred in the eleventh month of 1627, when Naramura Magokurō 榎村孫九郎, a member of the shogun’s personal guard (*koshōgumi* 小姓組), attacked two of his comrades, Kizukuri Saburōzaemon 木造三郎左衛門 and Suzuki Kyūemon 鈴木久右衛門, in the Western Enceinte (Nishinomaru 西の丸). Suzuki was wounded and escaped, while Naramura was subdued by Soga Kitarō 曾我喜太郎, a member of the palace guard (*shoinban* 書院番), and Kitarō’s son Gonzaemon 権左衛門. Naramura was sentenced to seppuku, Suzuki died of his wounds, and Kizukuri was banished (*tsuihō* 追放).¹³ It is unclear whether Kizukuri tried to flee, but it was probably because he neither struck back at Naramura nor made any effort to restrain him that he was sentenced to the penalty of banishment.

The next such incident occurred less than a year later in the eighth month of 1628, when the inspector Toyoshima Nobumitsu 豊島信満 struck and killed the bakufu councilor Inoue Masanari 井上正就 in the Western Enceinte of Edo castle, for which he was executed by seppuku the following day. Then, in the tenth month of 1670, the palace secretary (*yūhitsu* 右筆) Mizuno Ihei 水野伊兵衛 had an argument with Ōhashi Chōzaemon 大橋長左衛門 and ended up striking Ōhashi

¹² *Tokugawa bakufu gonikki*, in Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, p. 42.

¹³ *Tokugawa jikki*, vol. 2, p. 417.

with a fan, whereupon their colleagues rushed to separate the two. Mizuno, however, managed to draw his short sword, for which he was sentenced to seppuku four days later. And then, in 1684, the vice-councilor (*wakadoshiyori* 若年寄) Inaba Masayasu 稲葉正休 struck and killed the chief councilor (*tairō* 大老) Hotta Masatoshi 堀田正俊.¹⁴

In these four previous incidents, we find that in every case except for that of Inaba, who was killed on the spot, the attackers were sentenced to death by seppuku. In this respect, the case of Asano was no different, but when we consider the victims in earlier instances, we find that those who were not killed in the attack ended up with a sentence of banishment. The exception was Ōhashi Chōzaemon in 1670, against whom no sanction was applied. This was presumably because he had been forcibly separated from his attacker by the others, and was thus deprived of any opportunity to respond.

At least in terms of the precedent of the 1627 incident, Kira Yoshinaka, by virtue of his cowardly behavior in fleeing without responding to Asano's attack, should presumably have received a comparable sentence of banishment. That he did not suggests how much bakufu policy had changed in the intervening seventy-odd years; the lenient treatment of Kira can be seen as a manifestation of the political posture of Tsunayoshi, which placed primary emphasis on maintaining order. Although from Tsunayoshi's point of view, it may have seemed appropriate to deal with Kira in this way, the bakufu's action appears not to have gone down well among ordinary samurai. It was this situation that lay behind the charge that the principle of *kenka ryōseibai* had been violated.

In addition, when we consider the number of previous sword attacks in Edo castle, all carried out in knowledge of the unhappy fate that awaited any attacker, it seems difficult to conclude that Asano's case was necessarily an unthinking outburst. At least with Inaba Masayasu's killing of Hotta Masatoshi in 1684, the attack seems to have been carefully planned. In the case of Toyoshima Nobumitsu's killing of Inoue Masanari in 1628, the dominant opinion among the bakufu councilors was that the entire Toyoshima lineage should be punished, but, according to *Tokugawa jikki* 徳川実紀, the councilor Sakai Tadakatsu 酒井忠勝 prevailed with his opinion that "a low-ranking samurai who wishes to satisfy a grudge against a daimyo cannot carry out an attack against his mansion or his retinue in the street, so that the only place available to him is Edo castle. A true warrior does not forsake his grudge, and if we are to condemn such attacks as high crimes, then the spirit of samurai honor is sure to disappear."¹⁵ As a result, the status of Nobumitsu's house as a bakufu vassal was terminated, but his relatives were not implicated.

Edo castle might indeed have been the ideal place for an attacker to catch his enemy off guard and take revenge. The problem in Asano's case is that he failed to accomplish his mission. His defenders have taken this as proof that he acted

¹⁴ *Tokugawa jikki*, vol. 2, pp. 440–41; vol. 5, p. 85; vol. 5, pp. 520–21.

¹⁵ *Tokugawa jikki*, vol. 2, p. 441.

out of temporary derangement, while his critics have seen it as a mark of his lack of martial proficiency. Today there is no way to confirm or deny the truth of either theory. Yet, whatever people may have thought of Kira Yoshinaka's cowardly behavior, it cannot be said that there was much praise for the actions of Asano either, given that he failed in his purpose while knowing full well that his act would result in his complete ruin. Evidence is sparse concerning the public judgment of Asano's behavior at the time, but it seems likely that the incident attracted little interest; even *Gotōdaiki* 御当代記, the private account of events during the reign of Tsunayoshi kept by the rōnin scholar Toda Mosui 戸田茂睡, records only the simple facts of the matter. We tend to think today that public sentiment was on Asano's side from the start, but this may only be a reflection of what came to be imagined after the success of the retainers' attack on Kira the following year. A satiric verse (*rakushu* 落首) suggests that some may have mocked Asano for botching the initial assault on his opponent:

初手は突き二度目はなどかきらざらん石見がえぐる穴を見ながら

Shote wa tsuki / nidome wa nadoka / kirazaran
Iwami ga eguru / ana o minagara

Why did he not stab first,
And then cut Kira down?
He must have known about
the hole Iwami dug.

In other words, Asano failed to learn from the example of Inaba Masayasu (whose court title was Iwami no kami 石見守), the successful assailant of Hotta Masatoshi in 1684, who had followed the basic rule of weapons training that when trying to kill with the short sword, one must stab rather than slash as Asano did.¹⁶ If Asano did indeed forget this rule, it would be no surprise were his behavior considered a disgrace.

The Sentiments of the Akō Retainers

The sentencing of Asano to seppuku meant as well the confiscation of his 53,000-koku domain of Akō. On the fifteenth of the third month, one day after the incident, the bakufu appointed inspectors Wakizaka Yasuteru 脇坂安照 and Kinoshita Kinsada 木下公定 as emissaries to take receipt of Akō castle. On the same day, Asano Naganori's younger brother Nagahiro 長広 (generally referred to at the time by the name Daigaku 大学), who served the bakufu as a hatamoto with a stipend of 3,000 koku, was sentenced to the form of domiciliary confinement known as *heimon* 閉門. As Naganori's close relative, Asano Daigaku was considered complicit in the crime of his older brother. The bakufu also ordered that the Akō domain mansions in Edo were to be vacated by the seventeenth, but in

¹⁶ Kaionji 1974, p. 46. The original source of this verse is uncertain. The word *kirazaran* (not . . . cut down) is a pun on "Kira." The reference to "Iwami" digging a hole plays on the fact that the province of Iwami was known for its silver mines.

the meantime the retainers resident in Edo dispatched express messengers to Akō with the news, the first of whom arrived in Akō on the nineteenth.

Further messengers were sent to Akō after this, and a group of three retainers headed by Asano's former chamberlain Kataoka Gengoemon 片岡源五右衛門 (300 koku) also set out for Akō after cutting their topknots following the seventh-day memorial services for Asano at the temple of Sengakuji 泉岳寺.¹⁷ Then, on the fifth of the fourth month, Horibe Yasubei 堀部安兵衛 (200 koku) and two others left Edo; taking only ten days to make a journey that usually required seventeen, they arrived in Akō on the fourteenth. This trio led by Horibe constituted the "radical faction," so to speak, the most extreme among the Akō retainers resident in Edo, who from the start urged revenge by attacking Kira's mansion.¹⁸ Immediately after the departure of Horibe's group, the two Akō domain councilors stationed in Edo, Fujii Matazaemon 藤井又左衛門 (800 koku) and Yasui Hikoemon 安井彦右衛門 (650 koku), issued orders that no more retainers were to leave Edo, probably from concern that subversive violence might break out in Akō.

For events in Akō at the time, we have the evidence of a memorandum left by Okajima Yasoemon 岡島八十右衛門 (20 koku 5 ninbuchi), who served at the time in the domain fiscal offices,¹⁹ and the diary of Horibe Yasubei, mentioned above as the Edo "radical" who arrived on the fourteenth of the fourth month.²⁰ Various debates unfolded in Akō under the leadership of the chief councilor of the domain, Ōishi Kuranosuke Yoshitaka 大石内蔵助良雄 (1,500 koku),²¹ and at the start, the dominant stance seems to have been in favor of holding the castle (*rōjō* 籠城) in Akō and refusing to surrender it to the bakufu. Alternatively, some proposed that if surrendering the castle could not be avoided, the retainers should follow their master in death by committing suicide (*junshi* 殉死) at Kagakuji 華岳寺, the Asano family temple in Aki.²² Underlying both proposals was a concern to take action that would serve to criticize the bakufu judgment as unfair and to demand a rectification of the injustice.

It was the same way of thinking that led Ōishi on the nineteenth of the third

¹⁷ They presumably cut their topknots as a gesture of renouncing the world in remorse for not having been able to prevent their lord's death.

¹⁸ The two other core members of this group were Okuda Magodayū 奥田孫太夫 and Takada Gunbei 高田郡兵衛; Takada later left the league of revenge.

¹⁹ "Okajima Yasoemon Tsuneki oboegaki" 岡島八十右衛門常樹覚書, in *Akō gishi shiryō*, vol. 1, pp. 51–68; Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, pp. 56–66. Stipends awarded as *fuchi* 扶持 signified a lesser status than stipends granted in terms of koku, but in some cases, as here, a retainer might receive a combination of the two. *Fuchi* were granted as "man-allotments," with "one man-allotment" (*ichininbuchi* 一人扶持) equivalent to an actual yearly income of 1.8 koku.

²⁰ "Horibe Taketsune hikki" 堀部武庸筆記, in *Akō gijin sansho*, vol. 3, pp. 1–100; Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, pp. 138–224. An annotated version appears in *Kinsei buke shisō*, pp. 179–270. Subsequent citations to this important document will be from Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, and *Kinsei buke shisō*.

²¹ The proper reading of Ōishi's given name, as indicated on contemporaneous documents, seems to have been "Yoshitaka," but in the modern period, it has almost always been read "Yoshio."

²² "Horibe Taketsune hikki," in Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, p. 139; *Kinsei buke shisō*, p. 181. The term for *junshi* in Horibe's text is *oibara* 追腹.

month to dispatch Tagawa Kuzaemon 多川九左衛門 (400 koku) and Tsukioka Jiemon 月岡次右衛門 (300 koku) to Edo to deliver a petition to the two bakufu inspectors who had been appointed as receivers of Akō castle. “We believed at first that it was because Lord Kira had been killed that our master Takumi was sentenced to seppuku,” the petition declared, “but we then learned that Kira had in fact survived. The samurai in our retainer band are all unsophisticated (*bukotsu* 無骨) types, whose thoughts are only for their master and who have no grasp of the finer points of law, and who therefore regret that they are unable to hand over the castle so long as their opponent remains alive and well. We are not asking that Lord Kira be punished, but we beseech you to take some measure that our retainer band will find satisfactory.”²³ It is not clear exactly what sort of measure the petitioners had in mind, whether some sort of punishment for Kira, or perhaps the restoration of the Asano house, but there is no doubt that the statement was an expression of dissatisfaction with the bakufu’s judgment.

The term *bukotsu* (uncouth, unsophisticated) used in this document appears as “country bumpkin” (*inakamono* 田舎者) in a different version that is included in Horibe Yasubei’s account.²⁴ The latter is a summary of the gist of the petition, so the former is probably the original text, but the meaning is the same in both cases: as unsophisticated country samurai, the Akō retainers could not accept the newfangled ways of thought underlying the bakufu’s decision. By the time that Tagawa and Tsukioka arrived in Edo, the two inspectors had already left for Akō, so the petition made its way to the bakufu councilors, and was handed over in turn to Toda Ujisada 戸田氏定, a younger cousin of Asano Naganori and the daimyo of Ōgaki 大垣 in Mino province. Toda thereupon sent a letter to Akō seeking to calm the angry former retainers of Asano. He urged them to abide by the spirit of Naganori, who, he declared, had always respected the bakufu, and to accept the shogunal judgment. Toda indicated that while he understood that the petition had been sent out of the retainers’ affection for their lord, it also was “a result of their ignorance of things here in the capital” (*gotōchi fuannai no yue* 御当地不案内の故).²⁵ In other words, he suggested, the retainers did not understand the new ways of thinking in Edo, and should reconsider their position. We can see a clear rift between the older provincial samurai spirit and the trend in bakufu politics towards giving priority to the preservation of order.

The Matter of Samurai Honor

The Akō retainers surely had strong sentimental attachment to Akō castle, which had been newly built by Asano Naganao 長直, the grandfather of Naganori. (In 1645, when Naganao had been transferred to Akō from his former domain of Kasama 笠間 in Hitachi province, there had been nothing on the site but an or-

²³ The text of the petition is included in “Okajima Yasoemon Tsuneki oboegaki,” in *Akō gishi shiryō*, vol. 1, pp. 66–67; *Akō-shi* 1987, vol. 3, pp. 53–54.

²⁴ “Horibe Taketsune hikki,” in *Akō-shi* 1987, vol. 3, p. 141; *Kinsei buke shisō*, p. 183.

²⁵ “Okajima Yasoemon Tsuneki oboegaki,” in *Akō gishi shiryō*, vol. 1, p. 64; *Akō-shi* 1987, vol. 3, p. 54.

dinary samurai mansion.) The argument for defending the castle against the bakufu, however, was not simply a matter of sentiment. It appears rather to have been a way of urging the bakufu to reconsider its decision, and also to have been based on the calculation that under the existing circumstances it would be difficult for the retainers to rectify the situation on their own. This way of thinking is clearly expressed in Horibe Yasubei's account, in which he relates that Ōishi and the others devised the plan of *rōjō* because of rumors in Edo that Kira was being taken under the protection of the Uesugi 上杉 house, which would make it difficult to kill him. Horibe also relates that his own group had at one point planned to attack Kira's mansion in Edo themselves, but on hearing reports that Kira would have the support of Uesugi troops, they abandoned what would have been a "futile death" (*inuji* 犬死, literally, "a dog's death") and decided instead to head for Akō to hold the castle.²⁶ (Kira was related to the Uesugi house, 150,000 koku, of Yonezawa 米沢, Dewa province, and his wife was from the Uesugi family. This had led to their son being adopted as heir to the daimyo of Yonezawa, and, at the time of the Akō incident, he occupied the post of daimyo under the name of Uesugi Tsunanori 綱憲.) But by the time that Horibe and the other two arrived in Akō, Ōishi had already decided to surrender the castle peacefully, having been persuaded by the letters of Toda Ujisada and others, and he refused to change his mind when confronted by Horibe.

The chief reason for abandoning the plan of *rōjō* in Akō castle was the conclusion that it would have caused difficulties for Asano Daigaku. Thereafter, Ōishi managed to persuade the other retainers, including the Horibe group, that they should forego ideas of *rōjō* or *junshi*, and concentrate their efforts on a movement to have the Asano house restored and Daigaku appointed its head as the heir to Naganori. As a result, Akō castle was surrendered without incident on the nineteenth of the fourth month. The option of *junshi* may appear to have been a more moderate course of action than defending the castle, but given the bakufu's strict prohibition of *junshi*,²⁷ this would have surely invited a new round of punishments of both Asano Daigaku and the main line of the Asano house in Hiroshima 広島.

Yet while it may have made sense to give up these measures, pursuit of restoration of the Asano house was by no means the safest and most reasonable option. If we look back to the previous incidents of sword attacks in Edo castle, we find that in those cases where the attacker was sentenced to seppuku, whether in the case of Toyoshima Nobumitsu in 1628 or of Inaba Masayasu in 1684, the status of their houses as Tokugawa vassals was terminated at the same time. It would therefore have been an unusual exception to permit continuation of the house in the case of Asano Naganori, and from the bakufu's point of view, it would have constituted an admission that its sentence of seppuku had been in error. So there was no reason to expect that the bakufu would approve such a request; in the

²⁶ "Horibe Taketsune hikki," in Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, p. 144; *Kinsei buke shisō*, p. 187.

²⁷ *Junshi* was prohibited by the bakufu in 1663.

end, Asano Daigaku was released from house arrest in the seventh month of the following year of 1702, but was immediately remanded into the custody of the main Asano house in Hiroshima, making the issue of house restoration moot.

It is often said that it was only with the extinction of any hope of reviving the Asano house that Ōishi finally resolved to take direct revenge on Kira, and that until that point, what he had in mind is hard to tell. In fact, however, there never was any realistic hope of actually restoring the Asano house. Whether or not Ōishi seriously believed in such a possibility, we cannot say. Rather, the key thing to recognize is that all the measures considered—*rōjō*, *junshi*, or restoration of the house—had in common the purpose of obliging the bakufu to reconsider its disposition of the issues arising from Asano's attack on Kira. When those potential courses of action had been exhausted, the sole remaining option was for the retainers to take Kira's life with their own hands.

What was it, in the end, that the Akō retainers were seeking in these continuing efforts? According to Horibe's account as well as other documents, they sought to defend their honor (*ichibun* 一分) as samurai. The term *ichibun* referred to their private honor, whether that as an individual samurai or that of the Akō retainer band as a whole. They felt that their *ichibun* as Asano retainers could not be maintained after the forced seppuku of their lord, Naganori, so long as the target of his attack, Kira Yoshinaka, was still alive.

For the retainers, it did not matter why Asano attacked Kira, or why he had failed in his mission; all that mattered was that their lord had challenged Kira to a fight as a samurai. Given this fact, unless he either succeeded in killing Kira or died together with his opponent, his honor would be sullied. So for his retainers, in turn, to ignore their lord's dishonor was a matter of personal dishonor for themselves as vassals. As Horibe Yasubei declared to Ōishi, "so long as Lord Kira is alive, how can we show our faces anywhere while letting our lord's enemy be?" Horibe thus asked Ōishi to find a solution that would preserve the "honor of the retainers" (*kachū no ichibun* 家中の一分).²⁸

Although the Akō rōnin used the phrase "our lord's enemy" (*shujin no kataki* 主人の敵), there is a serious question whether Kira was in fact the "enemy" of Asano. The normal understanding of a vendetta, or *katakiuchi* 敵討 (literally, "striking down the enemy"), was that either the victim or someone acting on his behalf would take revenge on the assailant. In the case of the initial attack in Edo castle, however, it was Asano who was the assailant, not Kira. If one were to probe into origins of the dispute, Asano might perhaps be considered a victim, but Asano himself did not claim any such defense. Nor was this an issue for Horibe and the others; all that mattered to them was that Kira remained alive. Rather than a vendetta, in their eyes it seems to have been the continuation of a battle that their lord had initiated, which once started had to be fought through to victory. To leave it otherwise would be a dishonor. It was this fundamental principle of the warrior that was epitomized in the term *ichibun*.

²⁸ "Horibe Taketsune hikki," in Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, p. 145; *Kinsei buke shisō*, p. 188.

A difference of opinion existed between Horibe and Ōishi, however, over the matter of how best to defend their honor. Whereas the Horibe group was anxious for a quick strike against Kira, Ōishi took a more deliberate attitude, arguing that even if the chances were miniscule, it would preserve their honor (*menboku* 面目) if the Asano house were to be restored.²⁹ In Ōishi's mind, house restoration and revenge on Kira were not mutually incompatible options; both were ways of pursuing the common goal of preserving the retainers' honor (*ichibun*, *menboku*) as samurai. If the bakufu did not permit the restoration of the Asano house, the only remaining way to vindicate their honor was to carry on their lord's wishes and kill Kira. While the retainers referred to Kira as their "lord's enemy," as a *katakiuchi* it was an exceptional case; it would be closer to the realities of the incident to see it as the continuance of a private quarrel (*shitō* 私闘) that had been begun by Asano Naganori.

According to Hiraide Kōjirō's 平出鏗二郎 classic study *Katakiuchi* (1909), the great majority of recorded vendettas are cases where the son or younger brother of a victim sought revenge on behalf of his father or older brother, and examples of revenge on behalf of one's feudal superior are rare exceptions. Indeed, other than the Akō incident, the only such case mentioned by Hiraide occurred in 1724. In this case, Takino 滝野, a lady-in-waiting in the women's quarters of the Edo mansion of the Matsudaira 松平 lord of Hamada 浜田 (Iwami province), had committed suicide after having been insulted by a senior female attendant named Sawano 沢野. Thereupon, a fourteen-year-old girl named Yamaji 山路, who had been in the service of Takino, avenged her mistress's death by killing Sawano. (This incident provided material for the 1782 *jōruri Kagamiyama kokyō no nishiki-e* 加賀見山旧錦絵, adapted for kabuki the following year.)³⁰ And even this is a far cry from the case of the Akō vendetta, in which a large number of samurai, acting as a group, took vengeance on behalf of their daimyo lord. The Akō incident has come to be considered the classic case of *katakiuchi*, so much so that the minute we hear the word *katakiuchi* we think of the Akō avengers. But we should try to set aside such fixed ideas and reconsider the many anomalous features of this incident.

Those who regard the Akō incident as a *katakiuchi* on behalf of the retainers' lord have typically explained it as rooted in emotional attachment; they have depicted the rōnin as sacrificing their lives in order to repay a debt of gratitude to their lord, with whom they had deep bonds of affection and obligation. It is doubtful, however, whether all the Akō retainers who participated in the attack on Kira were conscious of any particular indebtedness towards Asano Naganori. When in the eighth month of 1701 Horibe Yasubei and his two comrades in the Edo "radical" group, Takada Gunbei 高田郡兵衛 and Okuda Magodayū 奥田孫太夫, went to pay a visit to Asano's widow, who had become a nun under the name

²⁹ Ōishi Kuranosuke to Takada Gunbei, Horibe Yasubei, and Okuda Magodayū, 1701.10.5; quoted in "Horibe Taketsune hikki," in Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, p. 166; *Kinsei buke shisō*, p. 209.

³⁰ Hiraide 1909, part 2, pp. 62–72.

of Yōzeiin 瑤泉院, they noted that they themselves had only recently joined the Akō retainer band; hence they were nonhereditary “outsiders” (*tozamamono* 外様者) and mere “newcomers” (*sakkonmono* 昨今者). But, in a situation like this, they declared, there could be no distinctions according to length of service.³¹ Or as Ōtaka Gengo 大高源五 wrote in his farewell letter to his mother when he left for Edo in the ninth month of 1702, he was “just an ordinary person, who has received no special favors from my lord.”³²

Although we cannot deny that there may have been personal affection and feelings of obligation towards their lord, the more important motive for the Akō rōnin was rather what Horibe Yasubei referred to as “the *iji* 意地 of a samurai,” a term suggestive of a defiant and stubborn sense of personal honor, or what Ushioda Matanojō 潮田又之丞 called “bushi resentment” (*bushi no ikidōri* 武士のいきどをり). As Horibe put it, “although our lord’s fortune as a warrior (*bu no myōri* 武の名利) ran out, that does not mean that his numerous retainers’ fortune as warriors has also run out.”³³ It was through the successful completion of the private quarrel begun by Asano Naganori that Horibe and the others sought to defend their honor as samurai.

Changing Perspectives on Self-Redress

In that their aim was to carry through to completion an unfinished private quarrel, if a small number of Asano’s retainers were to attack Kira’s mansion rashly, heedless of the chances of success, it would be no more than a repetition of Asano’s own error and would only compound the dishonor. The radicals under Horibe Yasubei were well aware of this, as seen in Horibe’s explanation for their reluctance to attack Kira when he was well guarded by Uesugi troops. “In these circumstances,” he wrote, “it would be difficult to accomplish our mission [of killing Kira], and useless to die in vain. It does not make sense to die fighting simply to clear our personal honor.”³⁴ We see here, again, that the actions of the rōnin were supported by rational judgment rather than simple emotional impulse.

All of the methods contemplated by the rōnin—whether *rōjō*, *junshi*, Asano house restoration, or killing Kira—had in common the single purpose of restoring their blemished honor. In European feudal society, the individual pursuit of redress through violence to recover rights or honor that had been violated is said to have been widely recognized as a prerogative attaching to knights and all others of free status. In medieval Japanese samurai society as well, the pursuit of pri-

³¹ “Horibe Taketsune hikki,” Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, p. 162; *Kinsei buke shisō*, p. 206.

³² Letter from Ōtaka Gengo to his mother, 1702.9.5, in *Akō gijin sansho*, vol. 1, p. 372; *Akō gishi shiryō*, vol. 3, p. 156; Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, p. 306.

³³ Letter from Horibe Yasubei to Takayama Takumi 高山内匠, 1701.11.7, in *Akō gishi shiryō*, vol. 3, p. 119; Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, p. 288. Letter from Ushioda Matanojō to his mother, Shinshōin 真昌院, 1701.12.5, in *Akō gishi shiryō*, vol. 3, p. 210; Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, p. 356. Letter from Horibe Yasubei to Yoshikawa Mohei 吉川茂平, 1701.6.28, in *Akō gishi shiryō*, vol. 3, p. 89. This letter appears in abbreviated form, without the cited passage, in Akō-shi 1987, pp. 278–81.

³⁴ “Horibe Taketsune hikki,” in Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, p. 187; *Kinsei buke shisō*, p. 187.

vate quarrels and vengeance as a means of redress was also recognized as justifiable.³⁵

In the early modern period, restrictions were gradually imposed on this right of private redress out of official concern for public order. The “Laws Governing Military Households” (*Buke shohatto* 武家諸法度) as revised under Tsunayoshi in 1683 explicitly extended the prohibition of the pursuit of private quarrels to the samurai class as a whole.³⁶ Even under such a system of control, however, a consciousness of the right of self-redress similar to that of medieval Europe had not been completely eliminated from the world of the samurai. Despite the direction of bakufu policy, the medieval tradition remained alive in their hearts. As we have seen in the argument of Sakai Tadakatsu, to have prohibited self-redress entirely would have been tantamount to usurping the samurai’s very spirit, or *iji*, as a warrior. The conditional official sanction of some forms of *katakiuchi*, which was in fact a type of “private quarrel,” provided a loophole for satisfying the older spirit of self-redress while remaining within the bounds of the recognized social order.³⁷

In earlier periods, the party that exercised the right of private redress was the *ie* 家 (house), the basic unit of medieval samurai society. By the early modern period, however, the samurai house had been incorporated into the larger structure of the retainer band and had lost its autonomy. In this situation, the only potential agents for carrying out an act of self-redress were either individuals, who now no longer had the backing of an independent house, or the daimyo “house” (*kachū* 家中), the retainer band that constituted a new type of non-blood-linked *ie*. It might shed revealing light on these issues were one to study the ways in which tales and plays about the famous revenge of the Soga 曾我 brothers against their father’s murderer—a classic example of medieval private redress—changed along with the attitudes of their audiences in the transition from the medieval to the early modern period.

In the Edo period, only a limited number of family members, typically the children or younger siblings of the person to be avenged, were normally allowed to exercise the prerogative of *katakiuchi*. Even after permission was granted by the authorities concerned, tracking down an enemy whose whereabouts was unknown might well require a prolonged period of lonely wandering. The Akō vendetta was a quite different matter. Those seeking to participate in it constituted a group of forty-odd men, bound together by their sense of solidarity as members of the Akō retainer band. The retainer band (*kachū*) was by origin a unit organized for combat, and in this instance it was this combat unit that sought to act as the agent for the exercise of self-redress.

³⁵ See Ishii 1974, p. 86 ff. In English, see Ikegami 1995, pp. 86–87 and passim, on the right of self-redress (*jiriki kyūsai* 自力救済) in medieval Japan.

³⁶ See Bitō 1975, p. 281.

³⁷ See Ikegami 1995, pp. 247–52, for an account in English of the way in which *katakiuchi* was subjected to legal proceduralization in the Tokugawa period.

The Issue of Conspiracy

Insofar as the Akō retainers organized themselves as a fighting unit with the intent of engaging in an act of violence, the question quite naturally arose whether their action constituted a violation of the bakufu law banning conspiracy (*totō* 徒党). In late 1701, a bakufu hatamoto retainer named Uchida Saburōemon 内田三郎右衛門 asked Takada Gunbei, a member of the “radical” group led by Horibe Yasubei, to become Uchida’s adopted heir. When Takada’s brother declined the offer on Gunbei’s behalf, giving the planned revenge on Kira as a reason, Uchida declared, “That is an inexcusable idea, and would constitute a malicious attack on the judgment of the bakufu. It is the rule that it becomes a case of conspiracy when five or more people plot together.”³⁸ Uchida tried to change Takada’s mind by threatening to report him to the authorities if he did not abandon the plan for attacking Kira.

As a result, Gunbei shortly thereafter dropped out of the league, but when Ōtaka Gengo and three others in the area around Kyoto heard of Uchida’s criticism, they responded in a letter to Horibe that “If one runs about recruiting people here and there, then it may well constitute conspiracy, whether it is a matter of five or even just three members, but for a single retainer band (*ichikachū* 一家中) to act on behalf of its deceased lord, even should those involved come to several hundred, cannot rightly be called a conspiracy.”³⁹

In the view of Ōtaka and the others, “conspiracy” was something involving an illegally constituted group; thus, they argued, the concept should not apply to a retainer band, which was a legally sanctioned organization. Even Uchida Saburōemon did not try to restrain Takada on the grounds that any action as a group constituted a conspiracy, but rather that this group action entailed a defiance of the public authority of the bakufu. For Ōtaka and his fellows and for Uchida alike, the determining factor in a “conspiracy” was organized group action in opposition to publicly constituted authority. But although it might be argued that private vengeance pursued for purposes of self-redress did not necessarily involve such defiance, the situation in this case was complicated by the fact that Asano Naganori’s dishonorable death was the direct result of an official bakufu judgment.

Ōtaka Gengo, in the farewell letter to his mother of 1702.9 quoted above, wrote that although the avengers had absolutely no intention to undertake “anything like a conspiracy” (*totō-gamashiki koto* とたうがましきこと) or to express anger against the government of the realm (*tenka* 天下, that is, the bakufu), his mother should nevertheless be prepared for the worst in the event that the bakufu interpreted their actions in this way and sought to punish the parents, wives, and

³⁸ Letter of 1701.12.25 from Takada Gunbei, Horibe Yasubei, and Okuda Hyōzaemon 兵左衛門 [Magodayū] to Ōishi Kuranosuke, quoted in “Horibe Takatsune hikki,” in Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, p. 175; *Kinsei buke shisō*, p. 219.

³⁹ Letter of 1702.2.21 from Nakamura Kansuke 中村勘助, Ōtaka Gengo, Ushioda Matanojō, and Hara Sōemon 原惣右衛門 to Horibe Yasubei and Okuda Hyōzaemon, quoted in “Horibe Takatsune hikki,” in Akō-shi 1987, vol. 3, pp. 206–207; *Kinsei buke shisō*, p. 251.

children of the league members.⁴⁰ The Akō rōnin set out on their mission in full awareness of the great danger in undertaking an action that might appear subjectively to be a case of self-redress, but which objectively constituted a protest against state authority.

The Disposition of the Rōnin Attack

On the night of 1702.12.14, Ōishi and forty-five others succeeded in attacking the mansion of Kira in the Honjo 本所 district of Edo, taking the head of Kira Yoshinaka, and offering it before the grave of their lord, Asano Naganori, at the temple of Sengakuji.⁴¹ The manifesto that Ōishi and others carried with them during the attack declared that “in view of the principle that one cannot live under the same heaven as the enemy of one’s lord or parent, it is impossible to remain silent, so today we have made our way into the home of Kōzuke no suke, with the single-minded commitment to assume the anger of our late lord.”⁴² In short, they justified their action as purely a matter of *katakiuchi*. Since, as discussed above, the private redress of grievances was recognized in samurai society of the Tokugawa period only in the case of *katakiuchi*, in declaring that they had no intention other than that of vengeance according to the principles of *katakiuchi*, the Akō rōnin were in effect seeking to make it clear that their action was not a protest against the bakufu.

As for the official response to the assassination of Kira, there exists a document known as “The Opinion of the Supreme Judicial Council” (“Hyōjōsho ichiza zonjiyorisho” 評定所一座存寄書) that purports to be a summary of the opinions expressed at a meeting of the council on 1702.12.23.⁴³ The report first deals with the Kira side, proposing that Yoshichika 義周, the adopted heir of Yoshinaka, be sentenced to seppuku, that those retainers of Kira who did not participate in defending against the attack be executed as common criminals by decapitation, and that the Uesugi domain of Yonezawa be confiscated because the Uesugi had failed to attack Ōishi and the other Akō retainers at Sengakuji. The recommendation for such extremely harsh penalties against the Kira side doubtless reflected the opinion that Yoshichika had behaved in a cowardly manner unbefitting a samurai by not taking up arms against the Akō assassins.

As for the disposition of Ōishi and the others, the opinions of the council were divided. On the one hand, it was agreed that the attack against Kira to fulfill the dying wishes of their lord was an act of “true loyalty” (*shinjitsu no chūgi* 真実の

⁴⁰ Letter from Ōtaka Gengo to his mother, 1702.9.5, in *Akō gijin sansho*, vol. 1, p. 373; *Akō gishi shiryō*, vol. 3, p. 158; *Akō-shi* 1987, vol. 3, p. 308.

⁴¹ Although the participants in the vendetta are often referred to as the “forty-seven retainers,” one member of the group, Terasaka Kichiemon 寺坂吉右衛門, was evidently dismissed from the league immediately before or after the attack. The fourteenth day of the twelfth month of Genroku 15 (1702) actually fell in the first month of 1703 by the Gregorian calendar.

⁴² “Asano Takumi kerai kōjō” 浅野内匠家来口上, in *Akō-shi* 1987, vol. 3, pp. 395–96.

⁴³ For the text of this document, see *Akō gijin sansho*, vol. 3, pp. 148–49. Those sitting on the Hyōjōsho were the holders of the most important bakufu administrative posts below the rank of councilor.

忠義) that accorded well with the stipulation in the opening article of Tsunayoshi's 1683 revision of the *Buke shohatto* to encourage "the arts of peace and war, and loyalty and filial piety" (*bunbu chūkō o hagemashi* 文武忠孝を勵し). On the other hand, the report noted, the fact that a large number joined together to plan the attack might be seen as a violation of the sixth article of the same code, which prohibited "taking oaths and forming a conspiracy" (*totō o musubi seiyaku o nasu* 徒党を結び誓約を成す).⁴⁴ But, the report continued, if Ōishi and the rest had "intended to engage in a conspiracy," they surely would have shown an uncooperative attitude at the time of the surrender of Akō castle. They had not done so. And now, although they had joined together in large numbers to plan the attack, this was because they believed that otherwise it would be impossible to accomplish their goal. So their action was perhaps not really a case of "conspiracy." In other words, according to the report, opinion on the matter of whether such group action constituted a true "conspiracy" was divided, but on the whole the members of the council were disposed positively toward the actions of the Akō rōnin. The report concluded that the most appropriate response would be to keep Ōishi and the others in custody for the time being.

This report seems excessively sympathetic to the Akō rōnin. While criticisms may well have been made about the behavior of the Kira side, the inclusion of the demand that the Uesugi house be punished for failure to send troops to Sengakuji makes it difficult to accept this as the decision of the bakufu authorities. After all, if the Uesugi were to have been allowed to dispatch troops, warfare could easily have broken out in the streets of Edo. The document thus appears to be a forgery, but it still has a certain value as an indication of the kind of thinking that underlay public sentiment, which in the wake of the incident was highly favorable to Ōishi and his followers. If, as the Akō rōnin hoped, the attack were to be considered a *katakiuchi* on behalf of their lord, it is in fact conceivable that arguments of the sort outlined in the document would have stood.

Although it is unclear what sort of debates actually took place within the bakufu, the fact that a final decision was not reached until the second month of the following year suggests that it was an extremely perplexing matter to decide. The sentence of the rōnin to execution by seppuku on 1703.2.4 is said to have been based on an opinion written by Ogyū Sorai 荻生徂徠, a Confucian scholar in the service of Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu 柳沢吉保, bakufu councilor and Tsunayoshi's most trusted minister.⁴⁵ In his opinion, Sorai distinguished between "righteousness" (*gi* 義) as a matter of individual morality and the "law" (*hō* 法) that maintains the social order. Although, Sorai argued, taking revenge on behalf of one's lord could be considered "righteous" in the sense that it manifested an awareness of samurai honor, it was in the end a "private logic" (*watakushi no*

⁴⁴ For the 1683 version of the *Buke shohatto*, see *Kinsei buke shisō*, pp. 458–59.

⁴⁵ Sorai's opinion is in a document known as *Sorai giritsusho* 徂徠擬律書, which appears in *Akō gijin sansho*, vol. 3, p. 150. Although there is some question whether this document is actually the work of Sorai, its content is compatible with his overall line of thought.

ron 私の論). That is, it reflected only the vantage point of individual morality. From the standpoint of “law,” on the other hand, to engage in mass violence without authorization for the sake of one who had been punished by the bakufu was unacceptable, and thus Ōishi and the others should be punished by seppuku. In effect this argument granted that the rōnin should be treated with due “samurai ceremony” (*samurai no rei* 侍の礼) and allowed the right of seppuku in recognition of their righteous actions as individuals, but in concluding that they should receive a sentence of death, it gave priority to preserving the authority of the law. “If public criteria are impaired by private considerations,” Sorai concluded, “the law of the state cannot be maintained.” Sorai focused precisely on the sensitive point that, regardless of retainers’ intent, the pursuit of a private quarrel in the name of a *katakiuchi* undertaken out of loyalty to their lord implied criticism of the bakufu decision regarding Asano’s attack on Kira. The Akō rōnin may have become the object of popular adulation as “loyal retainers and righteous samurai” (*chūshin gishi* 忠臣義士), but it would seem that what moved people was not so much the demonstration of abstract moral values such as “loyalty” or “righteousness,” as the pursuit of personal redress through private violence in the name of loyalty. It was this action that stirred people as a manifestation of a type of samurai behavior that was rapidly disappearing.

Bushidō and the Matter of Death

A passage in *Hagakure* 葉隠, the famous treatise on the way of the warrior, criticizes the Akō revenge in these words: “After their night attack, the rōnin of Lord Asano made a mistake in failing to commit seppuku at Sengakuji. Furthermore, after having let their lord die, they delayed in striking down his enemy. If Lord Kira had died of illness in the meantime, it would have been to their everlasting regret. These Kamigata types are clever and good at doing things that earn them praise, . . . but they are unable to act directly without stopping to think.” In the eyes of the author, the revenge of the Soga brothers was also “excessively delayed,” taking far too long until the enemy was killed; the true way of the samurai, by contrast, was “not to think of winning or losing, but to act headlong in the spirit of a ‘death frenzy’ (*shinigurui* 死狂ひ).”⁴⁶ This is precisely the way of thinking that is encapsulated in the famous opening section of *Hagakure*: “I have discovered that the way of the warrior is simply to die.” If there is an enemy to be killed, the author argues, you must put aside all thoughts of how it will turn out and all concern for public opinion, and strike out at the opponent even if it means dying a futile death.⁴⁷ And if you happen to succeed, you should then demonstrate your courage by committing seppuku on the spot.

It seems to be the received opinion now to contrast this “death frenzy” style of bushidō with the rational approach of the “Kamigata types,” and to interpret

⁴⁶ *Hagakure*, vol. 1, p. 45. Kamigata indicates the central area of Japan, focused around the cities of Kyoto and Osaka.

⁴⁷ *Hagakure*, vol. 1, p. 23.

the former as the successor to the true spirit of the Sengoku warrior and the latter as a new form of bushidō that was established in the Edo period under Confucian influence. This interpretation was most clearly formulated by the philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō 和辻哲郎 in his 1941 wartime essay “The Morality of Self-Sacrifice and its Sources” (“Kenshin no dōtoku to sono dentō” 献身の道徳とその伝統), which held that the most laudable traditional value of the Japanese people was *kenshin* 献身, a spirit of unconditional submission.⁴⁸ In the process, the idiosyncratic arguments of the author of *Hagakure* came to be accepted as statements of objective fact.

By contrast, the historian Takayanagi Mitsutoshi 高柳光寿 argued that the sort of bushidō appearing in *Hagakure* was an abstract parlor game that had taken shape under the peaceful conditions of the Edo period and that was far from the bushidō of the beginning of the Tokugawa era, let alone that of the Sengoku period.⁴⁹ For the Sengoku warrior, living or dying was a fact of everyday life. For them, “it would have been fatuous in the extreme to claim that they had discovered that the way of the warrior was simply to die. That is how difficult life was for the Sengoku warrior.”⁵⁰ For the real-life Sengoku samurai, the crucial concern was rather to accomplish something by putting one’s life on the line. Takayanagi’s interpretation is surely more in accord with historical reality than that of Watsuji. *Hagakure* consists of the words of Yamamoto Tsunetomo 山本常朝, a retainer of the Saga domain in Hizen, as recorded in the early eighteenth century by Tashiro Tsuramoto 田代陣基. Yamamoto was born in 1659, lost his father at the age of eleven, and lived on through the Genroku era. It was precisely in these decades that Hoshina Masayuki 保科正之 and Tokugawa Tsunayoshi were fashioning a morality that made an absolute value out of “loyalty” (*chū* 忠) and sought from the samurai class an attitude of unconditional submission. Considered in this context, Saga domain was not isolated from the trends of the times; it was just such developments that gave birth to the anti-intellectual bushidō of *Hagakure* and its stress on dying without thinking (*shinigurui*).

Under a regime such as the Genroku bakufu, a bushi who sought to live in accord with his own rational judgment might well find himself in opposition to the regime. And in fact, the process by which the Akō retainers (including even the radicals like Horibe who saw no sense in dying a “futile death”) proceeded from a consideration of *rōjō* and *junshi*, on to a petition to restore the Asano house, and finally to the decision to attack Kira, shows them making rational judgments at each stage, as they steadily pursued the goal of defending their own honor as samurai as well as that of their lord. If indeed their intention was to accomplish the goal of restoring their honor through their own actions, not simply to put their lives on the line blindly, *Hagakure*’s criticism of their actions must be considered wide of the mark. After failing to persuade the bakufu to

⁴⁸ This essay was later included in a revised form in Watsuji 1952.

⁴⁹ Takayanagi 1942; Takayanagi 1960.

⁵⁰ Takayanagi 1960, p. 774.

right the injustice of its initial decision, the Akō retainers determined to do so themselves. They thereby ultimately set themselves in opposition to bakufu policy. Taking advantage of the basic contradiction between the overt bakufu promotion of “loyalty and filiality” and the inner reality of despotic rule, they moved step by step to accomplish their goal, skillfully avoiding any outright confrontation with the authorities. By adopting this strategy, they expressed political resistance through action in the only way open to them. In this sense, there is considerable validity to the criticism of such Edo Confucian scholars as Satō Naokata 佐藤直方 and Dazai Shundai 太宰春台 that the actions of the Akō rōnin could not be justified as a case of *katakiuchi* but rather constituted a form of rebellion against the bakufu. But it also seems likely that the sympathy that people of the time felt for the actions of the rōnin, whether they were aware of it or not, similarly incorporated an element of opposition to the bakufu. And this same element is surely not unrelated to the popularity that the dramatized forms of the incident known as “Chūshingura” have continued to maintain until the present day.

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