REVENGE DRAMA IN EUROPEAN RENAISSANCE AND JAPANESE THEATRE

FROM HAMLET TO MADAME BUTTERFLY

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INTRODUCTION

My curiosity about Chūshingura was first piqued in December 1981 by a remark of Tsurumi Shunsuke at a conference in London to the effect that "if you study Chūshingura long enough, you will understand everything about the Japanese." My respect for Tsurumi as a pioneer scholar of modern Japanese popular culture helped convince me that perhaps I should some day learn more about what I had always felt to be a distasteful chapter in Japanese cultural history. For myself, whose acquaintance with Japan began in 1962 (the year of the last full-scale feature film production of Chūshingura and the end of an era in the mass popularity of the legend), "Chūshingura" was a thing of the past, indelibly linked with feudal values and prewar militarism. Of course, I loved the original joruri version of Kanadehon Chūshingura as I knew it through Donald Keene's translation, which I had used to teach in undergraduate courses, but that seemed to be something apart from the larger and vaguer "Chūshingura" that I associated with prewar Japan.
The chance to rethink the story of the forty-seven rōnin came in autumn 1989, when I had the prospect of teaching a graduate seminar at Columbia University that I knew would include students in both history and literature, both modern and premodern: Chūshingura seemed a good way to bring these various interests into common focus. This report stems from that seminar, and I am indebted in countless ways to the six graduate students who helped me work through some of the issues treated in this chapter—as well as many other issues that I will not have space to mention.1

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

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

WHAT IS CHŪSHINGURA?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Popular Response: Kanadehon Chūshingura

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Popular Response: The Kōdan Retellings

The late Edo period meanwhile saw the development of a new and rather different lineage of Chūshingura in the genre of oral story-telling known as kōshaku (later kōdan) that flourished on well into the Meiji period. Although these variants derived in many ways from the stage traditions,
they differed in claiming to be real stories of real people, so-called juitsuroku (true records) and hence used the actual names of the historical participants in the Ako Incident rather than the pseudonyms of Kanadehon Chushingura. As analyzed by Satō Tadao, the kodan versions tended to emphasize the impetuous, heroic male aspects of the legend, minimizing the romantic and domestic complications that were an important part of joruri and kabuki. Thus the kodan versions almost completely omit the story of the romance between Kanpei and Okaru that became so popular in the kabuki tradition. Satō sees in this a contrast in the social class of the audiences, with kabuki appealing to upper-class merchants firmly embedded in the feudal social order and kodan to lower-class artisans who live by their individual skills.  

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

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

The Revival of History and the Meiji Synthesis

For the first half of the Meiji period, Chushingura survived with no major change in the two great Edo-period lineages of kabuki stage productions and kodan story-telling. To be sure, the new regime seems to have appreciated the political uses of the forty-seven rōnin as early as 1868, when the Meiji emperor, on arriving in his new capital of Tokyo, sent an emissary to Sengakuji to place offerings before the graves of the Akō rōnin together with a proclamation addressed to Ōishi praising him for upholding the principle of the master-follower bond. Yet this did not lead to any particular official manipulation of the legend to foster imperial loyalty: Chushingura remained in the possession of the people.

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

The pivotal work in the modernization of Chushingura was Fukumoto Nichinan’s Genroku kaiyō roku (Record of the Valiant Vendetta of Genroku), published in late 1909. The use of the word “Genroku” signals Nichinan’s consciousness of the historical event, and his work continued the spirit established by Shigeno of trying to recover the original story. Still, Nichinan was a journalist, not a historian, and still retained many elements of traditional kodan-style embellishment. Less than a year after the publication of Genroku kaiyō roku, however, the historiography of the Ako Incident entered a new era with the publication of the documentary collection Ako gijin sansho (3 vols.), which was first assembled by Nabeta Shōzan, a samurai antiquarian from Taira (Fukushima prefecture) in the late Edo period. Impressed by the need to establish his story on a firmer documentary basis, Nichinan rewrote his earlier version and published it in 1914 as Genroku kaiyō shinsō roku (Record of the Truth of the Valiant Vendetta of Genroku). Although a less readable work, the effort to reach the “truth” of the event marks an entirely new attitude toward the Chushingura legacy.
Nichinan's two works, especially the first, were wildly popular in the patriotic climate of Japan following the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–1905, and lay the foundations for the understanding of the story as one of martial valor and devotion to superiors. Although more conscious of the "truth" of the historical incident, Nichinan in no way compromised the essential emphasis on loyalty and valor. In this way a more modern consciousness of the history of the Akō Incident was fused with the latent historicity of the kōdan tradition to yield a new rendering of the Chūshingura tradition, one particularly well suited to the times. The importance of historicity is revealed in comparing the fate of Chūshingura with that of the legend of the vendetta of the Soga brothers, which was a far longer and deeper tradition in many ways than Chūshingura that did not survive as a major theme in popular culture after the end of Meiji. The great liability of the Soga brothers is that they were almost impossible to recover for history, dating from a much earlier period and with virtually no documentary support.

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

The mounting nationalism of the 1930s tended to leave the mainstream of Chūshingura locked into the mode that took shape in the 1910s, although some literary efforts subversive of that mainstream were already beginning to emerge among a small minority of intellectual writers, as we shall shortly see. The mainstream itself took a turn in a more intellectual direction with the epic "new kabuki" version of Mayama Seika, Genroku Chūshingura, which began in 1934 as a piece for Sadanji II, and continuing through nine more acts until 1941 (by which time Sadanji had died). Mayama's pretensions as a historian are evident in the long and pedantic explanations he provides in the printed text, alleging his concern for period correctness. Yet his work is every bit as much a product of the ideology of its own time, notably in his depiction of the anxiety of Ôishi over whether Asano's act might be interpreted as insulting to the emperor; this introduction of imperial loyalism into the minds of the forty-seven rōnin seems to be Mayama's innovation with no historical justification. The war interrupted the modern film mainstream of Chūshingura but did not radically alter its course. Both stage and film versions of the story were prohibited under the early years of the Allied Occupation of Japan for intimate associations with feudal values and wartime patriotism. From 1949, however, the ban on Chūshingura was lifted and productions of both kabuki and film proceeded apace. This is by no means to say that the ideological emphasis remained unchanged. Gregory Barrett has suggested that the major shift was to play down the emphasis on abject loyalty to one's superior and stress Ôishi Kuranosuke's personal affection for his lord. In a sense, the abstraction of loyalty that had allowed its modern transference from daimyo to emperor now reverted to a more direct and personal sort of loyalty. But the theme of loyalty itself remained central.

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

**The Democratization of Chūshingura**

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

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

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

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

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

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