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HUGVÍSINDASVIÐ

**The 47 Loyal Retainers:
The Heroification of Illegality**

Ritgerð til BA prófs í Japönsku Máli og Menningu

Áróra Ósk Halldórsdóttir

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Háskóli Íslands
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Áróra Ósk Halldórsdóttir

Kt.: 030692-2339

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Abstract:

An incident that occurred in the early 1700's in Japan quickly became an immensely popular tale amongst the public. The feudal lord Asano Naganori attacked another, Kira Yoshinaka, within the shogun's palace where drawing weapons was forbidden. Asano failed to kill Kira and received the punishment of death by *seppuku* so his retainers took it upon themselves to avenge their master and launched an attack on Kira's household and slew him, for which they also received the punishment of an honourable death by *seppuku*.

These retainers are venerated as great heroes who exemplify samurai loyalty and honour despite the fact that their actions went against the law and the shogun's orders. This event is known as the Ako Incident, or *chuushingura*, and is still discussed today and new fictional adaptations made despite over 300 years having passed since the event took place. The matter of the ronin's punishment was hotly debated due to the Japanese feudal period belief that a samurai's loyalty to his lord was everything and so many argued that the ronin had performed something others did not believe existed: the moral crime.

This thesis discusses the popularisation and heroification of the 47 ronin's illegal actions by examining the historical facts and the ronin's standing as samurai warriors in feudal Japan and whether they could have gone about their vendetta in a legal manner. It also looks at the many fictional adaptations made of the incident, the public's reception of said adaptations and what it means when the public so glorifies the actions of criminals. Lastly it looks at the opinions of the scholars of the time and their arguments for and against the ronin's actions and subsequent punishment, as well as the punishment's part in the appeal of the ronin's story.

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- Introduction

Kanadehon Chuushingura or *The Treasury of Loyal Retainers*, is an epic puppet play written in 1748 based on the historical event known as the Ako Incident which transpired in Japan during the early 18th century and inspired several plays, films, artwork, tv series, and many more adaptations which are commonly known in the west as the *47 Ronin*. This tale is celebrated all over Japan and there are few Japanese who have not heard of the brave group of samurai warriors who avenged their master's unjust death by slaying his enemy and accepted their sentence of death by *seppuku*, or ritual suicide, afterwards. They are lauded for their loyalty, keeping to their master's wishes even though he had already passed and despite knowing their act would most likely lead to their own deaths. The legend of the *Ako ronin*, or masterless samurai, is thus celebrated despite the illegality of the ronin's actions; attacking the household of a government official with the sole intention of slaying him despite his pardon after the events that their master was sentenced to death for.

Due to the hundreds of fictional adaptations of the so called Ako Incident and the long time that has passed since it occurred some points of the original, historical facts remain shrouded in mystery. Yet there is an abundance of accounts of what may have happened. Both the public, in the form of theatre, novels and other fictional adaptations, as well as scholars have discussed the events back and forth for the over 300 years since it occurred. Here I will be exploring both the history and literature of *chuushingura*, as both the fictional and historical story of the Ako Incident is commonly referred to, and how the two have influenced each other as well as

considering the glorification of the 47. Why exactly are these men, technically criminals, held up as heroes to be praised for their unlawful actions? Was their vendetta somehow justified or does the public simply like a good revenge/hero story? There are almost no versions of the story where the ronin are considered in a non-heroic manner so there must be something within the story that caused the admiration of the people of Japan, from the day the revenge took place until the present day.

- The Ako Incident: The History

The story of the Ako Incident was changed a lot throughout the years, the fictional being influenced by history but later the supposed historical accounts, known as *jitsuroku*, were in turn influenced by the fictional.

The literary arts create composite characters [that is, characters who combine two separate historical models], and thus give birth to new legends. Then subsequent plays and novels try to create variety, and a wide diversity of new episodes are born.

Meanwhile, *jitsuroku*, while ostensibly presenting the historical truth, are constantly revised and expanded by incorporating the fabrications created in the literary world. It was in this way that the legends of the Ako ronin were born. (Smith, p. 20)

While what remains of the history has indeed been heavily influenced by the fictional I will in this chapter attempt to look at the historical facts, or as close to them as possible, relying mainly on an article by the Japanese historian and university professor Bito Masahide from a special edition of *Monumenta Nipponica* published on the 300 year anniversary of the Ako Incident where he traces the historical facts. It certainly shows what a great influence the Incident had on Japan that 300 years later it is still being celebrated and discussed by scholars and the public alike.

The Ako Incident began on the 21st of April in 1701 when the *daimyo*, or feudal lord, of Ako, Asano Naganori, attacked and injured a court official by the name of Kira Yoshinaka while

within the *shogun*'s, Japan's military leader's, palace and was consecutively condemned to death by *seppuku*, or ritual suicide.

The exact reason for Asano's attack remains one of the biggest mysteries of the case. While many speculations have been made as to the cause the only known fact comes from a first-hand, eyewitness account written by a man overseeing the women's quarters at Edo castle at the time, Kajikawa Yosobei. According to Kajikawa's diary he was talking to Kira when:

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?"). 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. (Masahide, p. 150)

Asano's words speaking of a grudge over something that had happened in the past few days are the only thing known about his reasons.

One of the most popular theories of the time that became integrated into several versions of the story was that Asano had failed to provide Kira with the proper bribe and so Kira had given him some misinformation and humiliated him (Norinaga, p. 468). For some reason the true cause is never mentioned in the documents dating from this period, nor do the retainers speak of it. There is even speculation that the retainers themselves did not know the real reason for Asano's attack on Kira, that it did not matter to them as much as the fact that their lord's honour had been, in their opinion, slighted and "so for his retainers, in turn, to ignore their lord's dishonor was a

matter of personal dishonor for themselves as vassals” (Masahide, p. 160). For it was not the attack itself that the retainers wished to avenge, it was the punishment.

Asano was ordered to commit *seppuku*, a sentence he most likely knew he would receive when he struck at Kira, which was in no way unusual for the offence of drawing one’s weapon within the *shogun*’s palace. In fact, in the rare cases there are records of where this had happened before the attacker normally received the punishment of death by *seppuku*. However, in previous incidents the other party was either killed in the attack or banished for their part in it (Masahide, pp. 154-5).

There existed at the time something known as *kenka ryouseibai*; “the principle that both parties to a fight were to be punished equally.” This was not an official law of the shogunate but rather an accepted convention (Masahide, p. 154) which was here harshly broken because Kira received no punishment at all. Arguments have been made that this was due to the fact that he never drew his sword or fought back in any way, not making it a real *kenka*, which is the Japanese word for fight. However cowardice was also something that slighted a samurai’s honour and could have been grounds for banishment or even execution. An example of such punishments from this very incident was that after the ronin’s following attack on Kira’s home those of Kira’s retainers who had not participated in the fighting were sentenced to a commoner’s execution, a dishonourable death, mainly due to having “behaved in a cowardly manner unbefitting of a samurai” (Masahide, p. 165).

Following Asano's death his retainers quietly planned for over a year, according to historical sources trying first for the restoration of the Asano house before concluding that they must take revenge for their lord by killing Kira. The retainers did not all agree on the best course of action, the group is generally considered to have been split between those following Horibe Yasubei, a radical member of the retainers, and those following Oishi Kuranosuke Yoshitaka, the chief councilor of the Ako domain. Eventually, however, the group came to the conclusion that they must avenge their lord. Several retainers chose not to take part in the vendetta at all but on the 30th of January 1703 forty-seven of Asano's former retainers attacked Kira's home in the night, succeeding in killing him and a large portion of his household.

Afterwards they laid Kira's head on their lord's grave at Sengakuji temple before giving themselves up willingly to the authorities. After some months of debating, the government decided the ronin should receive the same sentence as their master, an honourable death by *seppuku*. Admittedly only forty-six of them received this punishment, a retainer named Terasaka Kichiemon was not included and records differ whether he fled during the attack itself or was dismissed at Sengakuji (Smith, p. 2; Norinaga, p. 485). The group is still however usually referred to as the 47.

Donald Keene, renowned Japanese literature scholar, translator and historian, wrote:

The boldness of the vendetta caught the imagination of people of every class. At a time when the samurai ideals of loyalty and resolute action seemed to have been forgotten, thanks to the peace of almost a hundred years, this sudden dramatic gesture came as a heartening reminder of what being a samurai had once meant. (p. 2)

As Keene points out, the ronin were immediately heroified by the public, held up as exemplifying the ideals of warrior honour. Truly they provided a revival of those ideals in this last age of the samurai class' existence.

- The Ideal Samurai: A Dying Breed

When the Ako ronin took it upon themselves to avenge their master, despite being samurai warriors and having trained in fighting these were not men of war. In fact, there had not really been any wars for them to fight for nearly a hundred years. Prior to the Tokugawa period, which lasted from 1603 to 1868, there was a time known as the *sengoku jidai*, or the warring states period. During this period, which lasted over a hundred years, or from roughly 1467 to 1603, there was constant fighting, the bulk of it internal. The formation of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1603 ended this period, unified Japan and replaced the fighting with a time of peace under the *bakufu* government, a military feudal government led by the *shogun*, essentially a military dictator. The *shoguns* during Tokugawa period were all from the Tokugawa family, hence the name.

The whole samurai class was in decline during the Tokugawa period as there was little need for warriors during peace times. The samurai gradually changed from warriors to bureaucrats and once the Meiji period began in 1868 the class itself was soon abolished completely by the new government. While the Ako Incident took place near the beginning of this decline in the early 1700's there is no doubt that one of the reasons the ronin's story received such a strong reaction

from the public was that it reminded people of the great heroes samurai once were and made the public fondly remember a time when such bold acts would have been commonplace.

In stories from the *sengoku* period there is a certain ideal of how a true warrior should behave. Not many warriors actually filled these ideals in reality but the intentions behind actions and details rarely matter when turning history into a good story. It is certainly easier to romanticize war when one has never taken part in it and it says a lot about the public's appreciation for the *chuushingura* story that it was immediately told along with and in the same literary language as the warrior epics of old. A lot of war stories, perhaps the majority of them even, are about doing things that in times of peace would be considered a crime, things that were not at all glamorous when they happened but are easy to talk about afterwards in that way. The Japanese also have a lot of pride for their brave warriors and so this resurrection of their ideals touched a sense of national pride within people. It certainly made for a much better story to tell of the brave warriors who devoted themselves so fully to their master that they accepted death in defence of his honour rather than the men who brutally murdered the victim of their lord's attack despite the ruling of the authorities.

While some of the ideals were likely also held as just that, ideals, during the *sengoku* period there was probably less time to worry about how honourable you were in the midst of battle while fighting for your life. The best known ideals which are today known as *bushido*, or the way of the warrior, were actually developed during the Tokugawa period, a time of peace, rather than during the earlier times of war. The main part of the way of the warrior is usually considered to be loyalty and honour, but in one of the main writings on the subject, *Hagakure*,

“the way of the warrior is found in death” (p. 1) because a loyal samurai should be prepared to die at any moment for his lord and his honour. In this way the 47 truly stand as the paragons of the way of the warrior, giving their lives for the honour of their lord, not least because their lives ended with *seppuku*. As the historian Turnbull wrote;

In the world of the warrior, seppuku was a deed of bravery that was admirable in a samurai who knew he was defeated, disgraced, or mortally wounded. It meant that he could end his days with his transgressions wiped away and with his reputation not merely intact but actually enhanced. (p. 73)

So the fact that the Ako ronin ended their life with this most honourable death rather than had they for example been exculpated and released as they themselves hoped or, worse, been sentenced to a commoner’s execution, their sentence actually helped promote the popularity and the idealisation of the event. While their sentence was extremely controversial, had they not been granted death by *seppuku* perhaps their story would not even be remembered today.

- Early Adaptations: *Goban Taiheiki & Kanadehon Chuushingura*

The important factors in preserving this tale were not only the public’s appreciation for the ronin’s act but also the way the story inspired artists, urging them to create woodblock prints and plays based on the events that immediately came to be known as the Ako Incident.

The most influential of these was the *bunraku* puppet play *Goban Taiheiki* by the famous playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon that was first performed between 1709 and 1710 (Smith, p. 16), a mere 6 years after the retainer's vendetta, although some sources say it was written as early as 1706 (Keene, p. 4). The reason this is so special for the time is that during the Tokugawa period, "a regime that prohibited the printing of any news, word of mouth served as the most important medium of information about current events" (Smith, p. 21). There was in fact a ban on all artwork and performance arts showing current political events and censorship could be harsh. Any form of satire or criticism of the government was strictly forbidden and there were cases of artists and scholars being jailed or even exiled for their work.

Despite this, plays had for a long time functioned as a sort of tabloid in Japan. There were an abundance of different performance arts and the public's way of following recent events was to go see a performance about them. For things that did not relate so closely to the government there were often plays being performed within the week which helped keep the public informed of current events (Bach). Because of the censorship however plays about political events took different forms and a longer time to appear, generally changing the names of people involved as well as the time period. The harshness of the specific ban on the Ako Incident was actually relented once the *shogun* Tokugawa Tsunayoshi died in 1709 and a verdict was put through to pardon the Asano family. Before then, any sources written were private manuscripts or illegal novels published in the Kamigata area, far from the capital, but after Tsunayoshi's death plays began to be made, although they mainly remained in Kamigata rather than in the capital, Edo. Names and time periods continued to be changed because the censorship was not so much lifted as it was softened (Marcon, p. 447; Smith, p. 20).

Chikamatsu's play was performed almost immediately after the Asano family pardon and in many ways shaped the future of all adaptations of the tale to come. Chikamatsu is one of the most famous *bunraku* playwrights, a master of his craft. Many of his plays are still shown today. *Bunraku* theatre is still popular in modern Japan and is nothing like children's puppet theatre in the west but rather a high artform with elaborate puppets requiring three puppeteers to control just one. Chikamatsu got his play, *Goban Taiheiki*, through without any censorship troubles both due to the recent softening of the specific Ako Incident ban as well as by using the previously mentioned way of changing the time period, some details of the incident and the names of all the characters, which was still necessary to get anything through the censorship. It probably also helped that Chikamatsu had, just a short time prior to releasing *Goban Taiheiki*, written a play called *Kenko Hoshi Monomiguruma*. This play was only two acts instead of the usual three that *bunraku* included and so presumably felt incomplete. *Goban Taiheiki* then came out as only one act, probably separate because of the change in direction but nonetheless finishing the set despite not being performed together.

Kenko Hoshi is about a man named Kenko who tries to help a court lady get rid of the unwanted attentions of the general Moronao by persuading Moronao to give his attentions to the wife of Enya Hangan instead. Being spurned there as well Moronao forced Enya to commit *seppuku*. (Keene, p. 4).

Goban Taiheiki is written as if though it happened during the *taiheiki*, originally a historical epic set in the 1300's but later the setting for many fictional stories, and goes into details about how

the general named Moronao, now a codename for Kira, covets Enya's, the play's name for Asano, wife. Following the previous play's story, this is the woman Kenko convinced Moronao to turn his unwanted attentions to so Kenko's friend the court lady would be left alone. Enya's wife rejects Moronao's advances and so, angry at being spurned, he deliberately shames Enya at every turn and eventually Enya strikes out at Moronao and is ordered to commit *seppuku* for his crime. This being very similar to the beginning of the Ako Incident but not exactly the same Chikamatsu then simply added that Enya's retainers, seeking revenge for their lord, went after Moronao and killed him. The main part of the story was the retainers plotting their revenge and finally achieving it.

Because of the immense popularity of *Goban Taiheiki* the most famous play of all, *Kanadehon Chuushingura*, was based on it. This can be seen in how *Kanadehon Chuushingura* retains the names and time period used in *Goban Taiheiki* and most adaptations from then on keep these in. So well known is the play version with these names that from discussions with Japanese fellow university students I found that there are some Japanese who would be more likely to know Enya and Moronao's names than Asano and Kira's and the majority believe the Ako Incident took place, if not in the 1300's, at least that it was much earlier than 1703.

The *bunraku* play *Kanadehon Chuushingura*, or *The Treasury of Loyal Retainers* was written in 1748 by Takeda Izumo, Miyoshi Shoraku and Namiki Senryu. The play uses *Goban Taiheiki* as a basis and so retains the same names, settings and plot line of Moronao as Kira, Enya as Asano as well as the same names for the retainers. It does however get to give more depth to the story because of its length, albeit still being somewhat limited due to there only being so many types

of dolls in *bunraku*. It was almost immediately adapted for a *kabuki* play with the same name, giving the audience a choice between seeing the performance with dolls in *bunraku* or actors in *kabuki*. The plotting of the revenge also provided the bulk of the story in *Kanadehon*; the play follows the many retainers and how they must gather their courage and money for the revenge, leave their loved ones and in one case even betray Enya's memory to convince Moronao's men they have no intention of revenge so his defences will be lowered. It gets very dramatic and emotional at times: a beloved wife selling herself to a whorehouse to show support and provide money, a merchant who helps the ronin ship weapons divorcing his wife in order to keep their secret and even the preemptive death of one of the retainers, all culminating in an action packed battle at Moronao's mansion.

Nearly every adaptation of note after 1748 is based on *Kanadehon Chuushingura* and the commonly used term for the Ako Incident as portrayed in literature and media is *chuushingura*, or loyal retainers, which speaks volumes of its influence and popularity. It was certainly adored by the public, and is still today being performed nearly in its entirety despite taking ten to eleven hours to perform (Keene, p. 11).

It was common in Japanese literature, especially older plays and poetry, to write in a very complex manner, using Chinese literary language and referencing other works from many time periods. In order to understand a single poem one often had to be fairly well educated, or at the very least know several other stories that would be referenced or quoted. But for *Kanadehon Chuushingura* a Japanese writer, Jippensha Ikku, wrote that;

This play is written throughout in a style that avoids lengthy speeches and keeps the expression as terse as possible. The style consequently differs greatly from that of Chikamatsu Monzaemon. It generally avoids poetic language or quotations from Japanese and Chinese texts, and states only what is essential. That is why one never tires of seeing it. (Keene, p. 13)

Simplicity of language meant it was much easier to enjoy the performance for anyone regardless of education and this no doubt promoted the play's popularity and was why it took over *Goban Taiheiki* as the number one performance piece on the Ako Incident, quickly being adapted from *bunraku* to other types of plays and performances as well.

- Heroified Despite Illegality: The Moral Crime

One of the most interesting things about the popularity of the *chuushingura* story is how it caught on despite the actions of the ronin being quite illegal. They are generally held up in the stories as paragons of virtue, the ideal samurai who sacrificed their lives for their master's honour. Yet, can they be considered heroes despite their criminal actions? This has been debated for more than 300 years, ever since the incident occurred and up until modern times.

In *Kanadehon Chuushingura* during the attack on Moronao's home the neighbors came to investigate and when Yuranosuke, the leader of the ronin, tells them who they are and why they are attacking the neighbors exclaim: "What superb courage! Every man who serves a master should behave as you are doing. Call if you have any need of us" and withdraw, letting the ronin

go about their business (Keene, p. 157). This shows the idealization of the stories, people lauding them for coming to murder their neighbour and his household, but in reality what they did was in direct conflict with the *shogun's* judgement of their lord and they themselves received the punishment of death for their crimes.

There were in fact ways of avenging others that were perfectly legal in feudal Japan. However, there were procedures that had to be followed, ones which the ronin did not and could not have followed if they wished to succeed. The main one of these was that any vendetta had to be publically stated. In modern times it would be similar to posting an advertisement in the newspapers, that 'I so and so proclaim a vendetta against so and so for the crimes of this and that', letting the public, the government and most importantly the opponent know beforehand who held a grudge against them and was planning to try and kill them.

This would have almost guaranteed failure for the ronin, Kira was a great lord with an entire retinue of samurai of his own to protect him. In fact, in *Kanadehon Chuushingura* and many other fictional adaptations of the events a large portion of the plot revolves around Oboshi Yuranosuke, the play's name for Oishi Kuranosuke who was the chief councilor of the Ako domain and one of the leaders of the 47, pretending to have become a disrespectful drunkard who cares more about spending time in whorehouses than revenge to lull Kira and his men into a false sense of security, enabling the ronin to finally attack when his defences have been lowered. While the ronin did not go that far in reality they did take nearly two years to plot their revenge, waiting until no strike was expected and even then attacking without an official vendetta proclamation in the dead of night, catching Kira, his guards and his household completely by

surprise. Had they attacked after a proclamation in broad daylight it is highly unlikely they would have succeeded in killing Kira, which was after all their main objective.

Another reason they could not have publicly proclaimed their vendetta was that this would have required registering their revenge plot with the *bakufu*; “something that was obviously impossible when the target was a high bakufu official, and when the death of their lord had been ordered by the bakufu itself” (Smith, p. 7). So they quite literally could not have gone about the vendetta in the legal manner if they wished to succeed.

It was difficult for the government to see the ronin’s revenge as not going against the *shogun’s* orders, as something other than a rebellious act bordering on treason, even though they could not have followed the legal procedures. By claiming Kira had been wrongfully not punished they were in fact saying that the *bakufu* had been wrong in their judgement and going against said judgement, a very dangerous opinion to state in feudal Japan. The ronin themselves knew this and actually did try to prevent their actions from being seen this way. “The Ako ronin 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” (Masahide, p. 165). The ronin themselves called the act a vendetta in their own correspondences and also discussed how their act should not be considered a conspiracy, against which there were strict laws. A conspiracy constituted five or more people plotting together illegally, however the ronin saw themselves as one group of retainers, a single unit that had been brought together legally and so they argued their plotting did not warrant being called a conspiracy. During the attack itself they repeated their claims of a ‘vendetta’ and so “were in

effect seeking to make it clear that their action was not a protest against the bakufu” (Masahide, pp. 164-5) in the faint hope of receiving a more lenient punishment.

Masahide explains that based on letters sent from the ronin their reasoning for why they weren't trying to go against the *shogun's* decision was that during the attack their lord, Asano, "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" (Masahide, p. 160) and so they could not let the matter lie. Honour, after all, mattered more than most things to a samurai in feudal Japan. Yet even more so than their personal honor was the honor of their lord. Horibe Yasubei, a leader amongst the ronin, wrote in one of his correspondences that: "It does not make sense to die fighting simply to clear our personal honor" in specific reference to how it would be foolish to rashly attack Kira's mansion while he was heavily guarded and there was little chance of success. To him, if they attacked and died without killing Kira it was the same as dying in vain (Masahide, p. 162).

While they did not escape death with their claims of personal rather than political intentions the ronin did receive what was considered an honourable death by *seppuku* rather than a commoner's execution, which to them probably meant a great deal. It also shows the conflicting opinions at the time that while Asano's sentence was given and carried out only a few hours after his attack on Kira the ronin were held as captives for over a month while the *bakufu* debated on their punishment (Smith, p. 2).

So the Ako ronin could have taken the legal route to revenge but had they done so they would almost definitely not have succeeded in their objective of killing Kira. Even the *bakufu* understood their situation to some extent as can be seen in the long time period it took for the eventual punishment to be decided on and the punishment itself being an honourable death rather than a dishonourable one.

Not only the *bakufu* and the public wondered at the correct way to view the ronin, the matter was hotly debated among Confucian scholars both at the time of the incident and for decades to come. One of them, Ogyu Sorai, is even claimed to have influenced the *bakufu*'s final decision with his writings, where he stated that while the ronin had performed righteously "this deed is appropriate only to their particular group; it amounts therefore to a special exception to the rules" but that there was no way to keep respect for the law while making exceptions for blatant crimes so the only way to keep their honour and also punish them rightfully was to have them commit *seppuku* (Keene, p. 3).

While the act was without a doubt illegal because no vendetta had been registered it brought confusion to the Confucians about "whether an action could be at once a moral duty and a crime" (McMullen, pp. 293-4). One Confucian scholar, Sato Naokata, said that: "[Asano] lacked courage and talent and was extremely laughable. It was properly in accordance with the principle of things that he should be subject to execution and have his lands taken" (McMullen, p. 300).

On the other hand, a councilor by the name of Sakai Tadakatsu had said about one of the previous incidents of attacks within Edo castle 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.

(Masahide, p. 155)

While Asano was not a low-ranking samurai it must be considered that a strike on his enemy at the *shogun*'s castle was certainly easier and more likely to succeed than a full scale attack on Kira's mansion, not to mention the fact that his attack is considered by most to have been an act of passion, a heat of the moment decision rather than a calculated plot. Naokata argued vehemently against not only Asano but also the ronin, claiming for example that they had turned their back on the *shogun* and if they had committed *seppuku* at Sengakuji they might deserve some pity but: "Instead, their surrender and request to await the sentence of the shogun was a devious ruse to escape death and gain employment in other domains. [...] This is not the action of those resolved to die" (McMullen, p. 300). His contemporary, Asami Keisai, claimed the exact opposite, stating that: "Ultimately, the essential loyalty of the company of forty-six is beyond dispute" because submitting to the *bakufu* "was in accord with their lord's consistent loyalty to the shogun" (McMullen, p. 303) and so by killing Kira they honored their loyalty to Asano but by submitting afterwards they honored their loyalty to the *shogun*. Keisai even went so far as to say that: "The fact that Kira had been exculpated by authority was merely "the background situation"; it did not affect the vassals' obligation to kill him" (McMullen, p. 304). It was even agreed on by a council of the *bakufu* that "the attack against Kira to fulfill the dying wishes of their lord was an act of "true loyalty"" despite the laws against "taking oaths and forming a conspiracy" (Masahide, p. 165).

The debate over which was the more important factor when choosing a befitting punishment is undoubtedly why it took such a long time for the *bakufu* to come to a satisfying conclusion on what to do with the 47. Asano's sentence was given and carried out a mere six or seven hours after he attacked Kira but the ronin were held in captivity for a month and a half before their punishment could be decided upon (Masahide, p. 151; Smith, p. 2). This period gave not only the *bakufu* but also all of Japan the time to form opinions on the ronin and to voice them. Some are even believed to have influenced the final decision such as the previously mentioned scholar Ogyu Sorai.

Sorai believed that political institutions: "As relative human creations, rather than part of an immutable order of nature, they could, and should [...] be changed if necessary" (McMullen, p. 308). He also felt that moral norms, while important to follow for society to function, were not absolutes. These views led Sorai to his writings which, as mentioned earlier, are said to have influenced the *bakufu's* final decision in its statements that the 47 had to be punished for going against the law but had also acted honourably and so should be allowed to commit *seppuku*.

Although rare there were some who took up arguments even back in the Tokugawa period against the *shogun's* judgement. An example of this was Dazai Shundai, a scholar who had studied with Ogyu Sorai and was heavily influenced by him. Shundai took Sorai's beliefs a step further by claiming in writings from the 1730's that not only were the ronin misguided in believing Kira to be their enemy, it was in fact the *shogun* they should have resented. He stated that the *shogun's* punishment had been excessive and actually a misuse of the law, a view not

voiced by many because of the dangers of criticizing the ruler of your country in the 1700's. Even Shundai did not voice this opinion until many years after Tokugawa Tsunayoshi, the *shogun* during the incident, had passed away.

Shundai further stated that: "The minister of a feudal lord recognizes only the existence of his lord. Why should he recognize the existence of the shogun?" (McMullen, p. 308) While this may sound as if though Shundai shared Keisai's views of the ronin it was in fact the opposite; Shundai claimed to have admired them at first like most did but to have changed his views as he grew older.

Not only did he criticise the ronin for plotting so long, stating that they had in truth been trying to gain fame for themselves by waiting for the right moment and really they should have died at Ako castle when the *bakufu* came to take it after Asano's death but, more importantly to him, the ronin failed to act righteously because they attacked Kira rather than the *shogun* himself. A stark contrast to even Keisai's arguments, for while Keisai claimed it had been their duty to go against the *shogun's* judgement he amended any offence to the government by stating it was also their duty to submit afterwards. "Shundai thus boldly took the step that neither Naokata nor Keisai was prepared to take. He separated the ruler's role as moral agent from the office that he occupied and passed a moral judgment on his conduct" (McMullen, p. 308).

Later confucian scholars frowned upon Shundai's views on moral judgement and the fallibility of the *shogun* and so often omitted it from collections of his works. Perhaps there were more instances of scholars going outside the norm and for that their work got censored like this by

other scholars. If the original text did not survive and their opinions were not mentioned in other writings we have no way of knowing. There may also have been those who had similar opinions but never wrote them down for fear of governmental interference. After all, Shundai's opinions were quite dangerous ones to voice, feudal governments in general frowned upon being seen as immoral or fallible in any way.

As we can see there were various different opinions amongst the Confucian scholars about the honourability and heroification of the ronin. Some, like Keisai, believed they had acted as honourably and righteously as possible. Others, like Naokata, believed they had been entirely in the wrong. Some took the middle ground, as Sorai did, and in rare cases like Shundai's there was even criticism of the *shogun* himself.

Despite all the criticism the event received from scholars, no one managed to diminish the immense popularity of the story and in general the public's view leaned heavily towards Keisai's arguments. After all:

it also seems likely that the sympathy that people of the time felt for the actions of the ronin, 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 "Chushingura" have continued to maintain until the present day. (Masahide, p. 169)

As explained previously the 47 were immediately heroified in popular culture, plays and performances of all kinds springing up as early as it was humanly possible to get them through

the government censorship. Even Shundai once wrote, albeit with disdain, that "from scholars, ministers, and gentlemen down to cart-pullers and grooms, there is no one who does not slap his thighs in admiration" for the 47. While the *bakufu* at first resisted all adaptations and still rejected all that mentioned the ronin and the incident with their real names for decades to come they must have feared the way the ronin's insolence and rejection of the *bakufu*'s sentence would have an effect on the public.

Because of the story's influence in Japan there have even been instances of the government attempting to use it as a message to inspire people to have loyalty to them, changing the details to inspire loyalty to the government rather than a struggle against their decisions. A film version from 1941, made and premiered during the Second World War, called *Genroku Chushingura* shows Asano specifically stating when questioned after his attack on Kira that he never meant any harm to the *shogun* and a *bakufu* official, although a low ranking one, argues for sparing his life. The retainers later receive a message that the emperor himself approved of Asano's actions and stated regret that he did not manage to kill Kira. This is a clear effort of lessening the crime and practically making the subsequent attack on Kira sanctified by the emperor, the one you were supposed to be willing to fight and die for during the ongoing Second World War. However, removing the illegality completely could not be done because that would also remove one of the main appeals of the story.

All of the Japanese tales of 'outlaws', in the sense of people who opposed and stayed outside the law, have always been incredibly popular, a sure sign that not everyone was happy with their strict government. Such tales are far more likely to be popular when the audience admires the

‘hero’ who opposes the government because it is a form of wish fulfillment, a catharsis for them, to see someone go against the law when they themselves cannot. (Bach)

Even so, nearly all such tales in Japan end with the outlaw’s death, capture or going off on a ‘journey’; this was something that could be done in a feudal system to avoid capture, simply going over to some other distant province for several years because often the guards would not follow you out of their jurisdiction. All these endings represent the fact that the outlaw has done wrong, he does not get a happy ending no matter how much the audience admires his actions. Besides, if outlaws were rewarded for their actions in such tales the government would most likely not have been pleased with the promotion of lawbreaking and they wouldn’t get through censorship or, in modern times when censorship is less of an issue, disapprove of the promotions and strays from the by now ‘traditional’ endings. The ideal of those endings in Japanese stories tends to be death because they consider death to be the ultimate act of heroism (Bach).

The ronin’s eventual sentence to *seppuku* has therefore most likely promoted their popularity far more than if they had been allowed to live. They performed the ultimate act of loyalty to their lord by dying for him, even when he himself was dead. Most likely Asano himself would have been mostly forgotten less than a hundred years later, as have the other incidents of attacks within Edo castle, had his retainers not taken it upon themselves to avenge him. “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” (Masahide, p. 156). In fictional adaptations of his story Asano is usually made into some sort of saint, a great samurai who simply could not hold his temper at being repeatedly

wronged by the villainous Kira, who is nearly always portrayed as a selfish, cruel brute who insulted Asano's honor at every turn. Most adaptations, whether performances, novels or early films, follow only slightly varied stories of the ronin and view all of them as heroes. Different adaptations perhaps follow different characters or focus on different parts but in them Kira is a villain and the retainers' vendetta is justified. It is easier to admire the ronin if their master was a good man, even if in reality it mattered not. An ideal retainer was loyal to his lord regardless of the lord's goodness, willing to die for the memory of his honour even if it turned the retainer himself into a criminal.

- Closing Words

History is most likely to live on in the minds of the people when it gets turned into an interesting story. An event which occurred hundreds of years ago where a Japanese lord was sentenced to death for attacking another and his retainers followed this up by killing the man their master attacked in the name of loyalty and justice. This historical incident certainly inspired many good and interesting stories, keeping it firmly in the nation's heart from the day it happened until present times.

At the beginning of the end of the samurai class this brave act reminded people who were used to living in a time of peace of the bold actions of warriors during war times. It revived the ideal warrior, brave and loyal to the point of death, and the story's popularity grew like wildfire. It might even be that the 47's actions and subsequent death helped inspire the famous words from the beginning of *Hagakure*, the best known book on the way of the warrior written only a few years after the Ako Incident, that "the way of the warrior is found in death" (p. 1).

The Ako Incident has been an influence upon Japanese culture for three centuries already and undoubtedly will continue as such for the foreseeable future. The first performance arts to take this event as their subject did so as soon as they could get their plays through the Tokugawa period's censorship. Chikamatsu's *Goban Taiheiki* overtook its contemporaries and a few decades later was followed by *Kanadehon Chushingura*, which to this day remains the best known, most iconic version of the story and has inspired most others that followed. Despite the

incident having taken place such a long time ago it continues to have new adaptations made and watched or read, resonating with new generations. At first the plays and performances showed the heroes who were the ideals of samurai loyalty as well as the rebels who went against the *shogun's* decision and vanquished their enemy regardless of the authorities' opposition. The adaptations then changed to reflect the times; later adaptations have shown them fighting not only for revenge but against the whole feudal system when democracy was on the rise. One of the most recent versions in this day of feminism and strong female characters is the 2016 television series *Chuushingura no Koi*, or The Loyal Retainer's Love, based on the 2012 novel *48-ninme no chuushin* which focuses on a fictional 48th 'member' of the league who is a woman. The story of the Ako Incident has been adapted both in the west and the east, made for all mediums, even being turned into a ballet and an opera.

The ronin's popularity was in no way lessened by the fact that their actions were illegal, perhaps even being enhanced by this. After all there was truly no way for them to go about their revenge that was legal and ensured success, something that was clearly important enough for them to risk death. While the ronin themselves tried to appeal for a lighter sentence by constantly referring to their actions as a vendetta this did not come to fruition and was even criticised by some Confucian scholars, such as Naokata, as being an underhanded way to trick the government into letting them off easy. Other scholars such as Keisai found this to be a part of their great loyalty, showing that they meant no harm to the *bakufu* and that giving themselves up willingly after killing Kira was in fact the best declaration of their loyalty both to their lord and the *shogun*.

While the event was controversial when it happened, sending both the government and scholars into heated discussions about the righteousness of the ronin's actions, no arguments of legality diminished their heroism in the eyes of the public. The men who sacrificed themselves for their lord and their honour were and continue to be worshipped in Japan as the epitome of samurai loyalty. Few non-scholars stop to ponder their actions as the crime they technically are, and even scholars are swayed by the majesty of the story. After all, a part of why they were brave was the illegality of their actions. It would not have been such a great display of loyalty had they been allowed to kill Kira and walk away scot-free. A huge reason for this story's success is precisely the ronin's final fate of an honourable death by *seppuku*. Their willingness to die as well as the government's choice to grant them an honourable death, a clear sign that even the *bakufu* could not deny the loyalty and morality shown despite the crime, helped light the fire that keeps burning to this day.

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