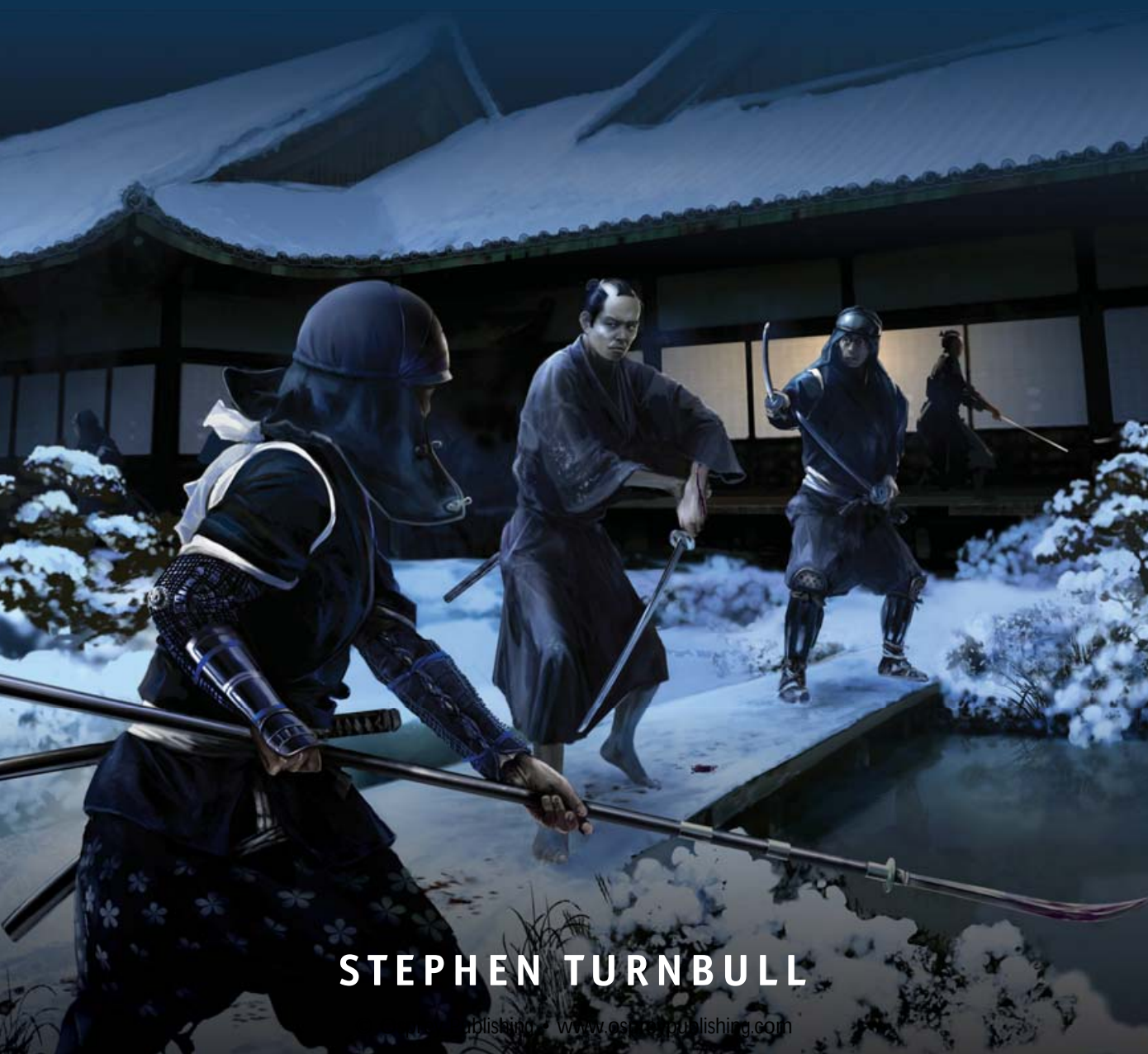
RAID

THE REVENGE OF THE 47 RONIN

Edo 1703



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INTRODUCTION

The revenge raid by the Forty-Seven Ronin of Ako was an incident that turned samurai culture on its head. As any popular account will relate, a young lord called Asano Naganori was taunted mercilessly by the greedy and cunning Kira Yoshinaka. Goaded to the limit, Asano struck Kira with a sword. As a result of the attack Asano was condemned to death, thus making the 47 samurai retainers who remained faithful into impoverished *ronin* or 'men of the waves', a word implying that they had been cast adrift on the ocean. Motivated solely by the principles of samurai honour and loyalty to their late master, the Forty-Seven Ronin, as history now knows them collectively, hatched a plot in complete secrecy and then, on a snowy night in January 1703, launched a raid to take the life of the cowardly Kira Yoshinaka. The Shogun, the ruler of Japan, utterly failed to recognize that the samurai code of *bushido* (the way of the warrior) and the self-denying tenets of Zen Buddhism had compelled them to seek revenge, and instead condemned them all to death. Within days they all committed suicide, earning thereby the respect and admiration of their contemporaries.

That is the popular version of the Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin, immortalized ever since through numerous plays, prints, novels and films. The unfortunate thing about the above account, however, is that hardly a word of it is true. The date was 1703 not 1702. Their victim's name was Yoshihisa not Yoshinaka. He was no coward. Greed and treachery were not involved and he played almost no part in bringing about Asano's death. Not all of Asano's 270 former retainers joined the plot or even sympathized with it. Religion played almost no part in their deliberations. The secrecy involved in their convoluted plot compounded the utter illegality and underhand nature of their act, to which the Shogun responded correctly by invoking the law of the land. The reaction by their contemporaries involved condemnation in addition to admiration, with both the Forty-Seven Ronin and their late lord being dismissed as cowards and a disgrace to the name of samurai. Finally, instead of 47 loyal samurai there were (according to some authorities) actually only 46, or maybe even 48. In fairness to the popular

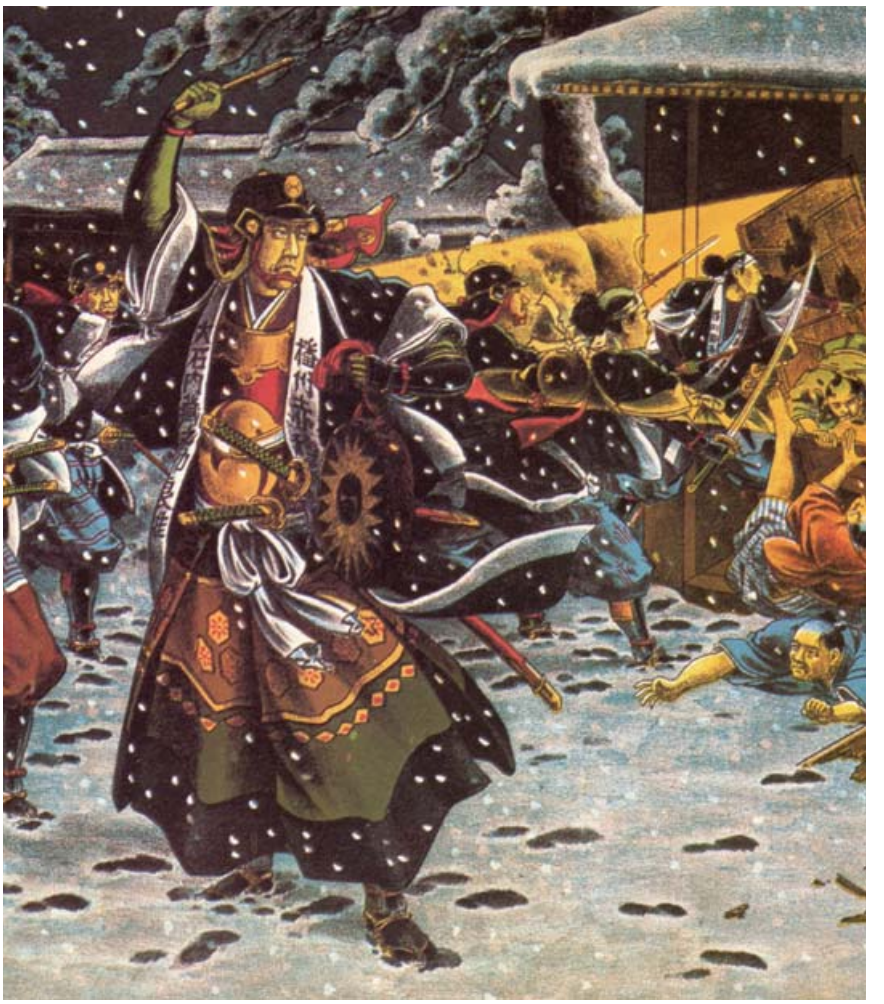
account, however, I can assure the baffled reader that on the night the raid was launched it was indeed snowing.

Up to the point when I undertook an extensive study tour of the places associated with the Forty-Seven Ronin, I shared fully and largely uncritically in the concepts and images provided by the popular version of the story, and in this I was not alone. One of the compilers of the *Cambridge History of Japan*, for example, in one of three references to the incident, calls the Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin a 'vendetta against a single wicked bureaucrat'. This negative judgement of Kira Yoshihisa's character, together with the main details of the story, were set out succinctly in the first account of the raid to be published in the English language. It was contained within a book of 1822 entitled *Illustrations of Japan, consisting of Private Memoirs and Anecdotes of the reigning dynasty of the Djogouns, or Sovereigns of Japan* by Isaac Titsingh, where we read that the injustice of Lord Asano's death sentence 'exasperated the servants of the prince, so much the more since it was Kozuke [i.e. Kira], who, by his repeated insults, had caused the death of their master.' Half a century later, a similar but much better-known and more influential account of the vendetta was to be contained within a book published in 1871 entitled *Tales of Old Japan*, written by A. B. Mitford (Lord Redesdale), one of the pioneers of Anglo-Japanese relations.

This statue of Oishi Kuranosuke, the *karo* (chief retainer) of the Ako branch of the Asano *han* (domain), greets visitors outside the station of Banshu-Ako in Hyogo prefecture. Oishi was the leader of the Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin.

We now know that Titsingh and Mitford, in common with most of their successors, were looking at the incident through a very large distorting lens. This lens was provided by a play from the Japanese *kabuki* theatre that was based on the raid and is usually referred to by the abbreviated title *Chushingura* (The Treasure House of the Loyal Retainers). It was first produced in Edo (modern Tokyo) in 1748 and has never left the repertoire since; in fact the National Theatre in Tokyo was due to stage a performance of it shortly after my departure from Japan in the summer of 2010. This version of the story, involving changes of names, dates and locations, is universally recognized for what it really is: a classic drama based on an unashamedly fictionalized account of an actual historical event; yet somehow the overall impression of the nature and circumstances of the raid provided by *Chushingura* has completely eclipsed the sober historical reality. To use an analogy from English history: it is as if our total knowledge of Richard III and our commemoration of him was based solely and completely upon the fictionalized version contained within Shakespeare's play. So, for example, the popular physical appearance of the Forty-Seven Ronin derives almost entirely from 19th-century woodblock prints that are based not on authentic

Most of what is popularly known about the Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin derives not from history but from the theatre. In this romantic painting from early in the 20th century, we see Oishi Kuranosuke banging a drum as a signal to start the raid. This is essentially a scene from *Chushingura*, although the setting in snow-covered Edo is undoubtedly authentic.



A series of superb wooden carvings in the Oishi Shrine in Banshu-Ako add a more naturalistic image to the theatricality of the woodblock print depictions of the Forty-Seven Ronin. Here one of the ronin, called Katsuta Shinzaemon Taketaka, contemplates his sword.

descriptions of the raiders nor on surviving pieces of their clothing, but on the theatrical costumes used in *Chushingura*.

Behind all these visual images lies one common message – the raid represented a noble act of samurai heroism to right a wrong that was tragically misinterpreted by the authorities. It is the purpose of this book to examine the revenge of the Forty-Seven Ronin for what it undoubtedly was: a small-scale, carefully planned and ruthlessly executed military operation designed to achieve a particular objective. This is an approach that will take into account the political and social environment of the time and the complex nature of the three centuries' worth of reaction to it. By these means, I hope, we may be able to get nearer to understanding what really happened on that fateful snowy night when the world of the samurai was so dramatically turned upside down.

CHRONOLOGY

1603		Establishment of the Tokugawa Shogunate
1641		Birth of Kira Yoshihisa
1659		Birth of Oishi Kuranosuke Yoshio, *karo* (senior retainer) of Ako
1667		Birth of Asano Naganori, *daimyo* (feudal lord) of Ako
1670		Birth of Asano Daigaku Nagahiro, his brother and heir
1681		Accession of the fifth Shogun, Tokugawa Tsunayoshi
1684		Assassination of Hotta Masayoshi
1701		
1m 1d	8 February	New Year's Day of Genroku 14
3m 11d	14 April	Arrival of imperial envoys in Edo
3m 12d	15 April	Imperial envoys present New Year's greetings
3m 13d	16 April	Imperial envoys attend a No play
3m 14d	17 April	Asano Naganori attacks Kira Yoshihisa. Asano is arrested and commits suicide
3m 15d	18 April	Order given for confiscation of the Asano domain
3m 21d	24 April	Memorial service for Asano Naganori at Sengakuji
4m 5d	12 May	The 'Radical' faction leave Edo for Ako
4m 14d	21 May	A debate begins between Oishi Kuranosuke and Horibe Yahei
4m 19d	26 May	Ako Castle is surrendered to the Shogunate
1702		
1m 1d	28 January	New Year's Day of Genroku 15
3m 14d	10 April	Suicide of Kayano Shigezane, the 'Forty-Eighth Ronin'
7m 18d	11 August	Asano Nagahiro is placed with main branch of the family
11m 5d	23 December	Oishi Kuranosuke arrives in Edo
1703		
12m 14d	30 January	The Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin takes place
12m 23d	8 February	The Shogun's Council debates the incident
1m 1d	16 February	New Year's Day of Genroku 16
2m 4d	20 March	Suicide of 46 of the Forty-Seven Ronin
1709		
1m 10d	19 February	Death of Tokugawa Tsunayoshi
2m 16d	26 March	Funeral of Tsunayoshi is marred by an assassination
1710		Pardon issued to Asano Nagahiro
1747		Death of Terasaka Kichiemon, last survivor of the Forty-Seven Ronin
1748		First performance of *Chushingura*

ORIGINS

The Glory that was Genroku

The Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin took place during the *nengo* (year period) of Genroku (1688–1704), an era when Japan enjoyed a time of growing prosperity almost unequalled until the economic boom of the 1960s. A lively cosmopolitan culture had developed, centred on the Shogun's capital city of Edo, where the arts flourished under the patronage and encouragement of the city's wealthy merchants. It was a world enjoyed equally by Japan's ruling class: the aristocratic samurai, who spent much of their time and money in Edo. While on duty there, a samurai's display of redundant military might concealed the state of genteel poverty into which many of them had sunk, along with their once exclusive martial traditions. Commoners now wore swords in open defiance of the law, while theatres put on plays whose plots mocked the once noble tradition of the samurai.

In 1701, when Genroku culture was at its height, a bizarre incident occurred inside Edo Castle whereby one noble samurai lord drew a weapon and attacked another noble samurai lord. This became known as the 'Ako Incident', and was to cause the reaction that we now call the Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin, to which the population of Edo, eager for any scandal, responded with greedy interest. To the surprise of very few people, within days of the raid a hurriedly written and thinly disguised version of it could be watched on the stage. The resulting drama showed samurai behaving in a manner that was both ambiguous and anachronistic. It was a portrayal of the morals and actions of a bygone age in which the ruling classes still believed, so it is no wonder that the citizens enjoyed it. Historical fact could hardly survive in such an atmosphere; it was almost as if the whole epic of the Forty-Seven Ronin had been specially commissioned for the theatre.

The Triumph of the Tokugawa

The Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin and the popular reaction to it was not the way the authorities would have chosen to begin a year of such historical significance. According to the contemporary lunar calendar, the Raid of the

Forty-Seven Ronin took place only a few days before the dawn of a new year that would mark the centenary of a highly auspicious event. In 1703 the Tokugawa Shogunate would be 100 years old.

The word 'shogun' in modern Western terminology means 'commander-in-chief'. Its use may be traced back to ancient Japan, when the Emperor commissioned brave warriors to march into wild and untamed areas of Japan to quell rebellions against the throne or to spread the benevolent influence of the dominant Yamato lineage among the remnants of the aboriginal inhabitants of the islands. In those days, the position of Shogun was always a temporary commission that ended when the general returned to the capital, his duty done.

Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616) was the founder of the Tokugawa Shogunate. Tokugawa Tsunayoshi, during whose reign the Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin occurred, was the fifth Tokugawa Shogun. By this time the image of the Shoguns had changed considerably from the martial appearance of Ieyasu, shown here in a hanging scroll from Okazaki as the fighting general he truly was.

During the 12th century, however, a major convulsion occurred in Japanese society. The overuse of independent warrior chiefs to act on the Emperor's behalf meant that several of the families who had received these commissions began to realize that they possessed a military strength in the form of their samurai (a word that originally meant nothing more than servants), who could be used, at the very least, as a bargaining counter to obtain imperial favour. Following several small-scale encounters, two of these clans – the Taira and the Minamoto – went to war against each other between 1180 and 1185 in the fateful conflict known to history as the Gempei War. When the war was over, the victorious Minamoto began a series of measures that would ensure that every aspect of the governance of Japan would pass under their control. The most important initiative came in 1192 when Minamoto Yoritomo received from the new Emperor the commission of Shogun. Yet no longer was this to be a temporary title to be surrendered when a campaign had finished. The post of Shogun was now understood to be a permanent appointment whereby the Minamoto clan, the greatest among the samurai class, would rule Japan on the Emperor's behalf. It was an institution that (with several vicissitudes) was destined to last for 800 years until the commission was formally handed back to the Meiji Emperor in 1868 as Japan prepared to enter the modern world.

The position of Shogun was always meant to stay within the Minamoto family, and allowing for some subtle and creative genealogical manipulation, so it did. Yoritomo's direct lineage, however, would only enjoy the Shogunate for two more generations until they were usurped by Yoritomo's widow's family, the Hojo. Their successive rulers, obedient to the Shogun tradition, called themselves a Regency. With the triumph of the Ashikaga family, who were of Minamoto descent, the Shogunate was re-established in 1336 and lasted until 1568.

Four decades of rule then ensued under the great unifiers Oda Nobunaga (1534–82) and Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–98). To a hegemon of Hideyoshi's

power and standing almost anything was possible, even to having himself adopted into a family of Minamoto descent and proclaimed as Shogun, but it was a step he never took. When Hideyoshi died in 1598 leaving an infant heir, it appeared that Japan would once again descend into the armed chaos from which he had rescued it. Matters came to a head at the decisive battle of Sekigahara in 1600, where the victor was Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616), a great general and, as far as anyone was concerned, a descendant of the Minamoto. In 1603 Tokugawa Ieyasu was installed as Shogun by Emperor Go-Yozei. Tokugawa Tsunayoshi (1646–1709), the man who was to preside over the Genroku era's many cultural highs and, thanks to the Forty-Seven Ronin, its most notorious cultural low, was the fifth member of the Tokugawa family to hold that illustrious title.

The Delicate Balance

The supreme position that the Tokugawa family were to hold for two and a half centuries after 1603 had been won on the battlefield. Yet Tokugawa Ieyasu knew that much more than the threat of military force was needed if he was to keep Japan from sliding back into a warring state that would threaten not only the peace and prosperity of the nation but also the very survival of his own family. The means by which he did this were far-reaching and complex, and had a decisive bearing on the chain of events that were to lead to that snowy night in 1703.

Two vast and inter-related initiatives came together to make up the overall pattern of Tokugawa government. Both involved the principle of balance, and both existed within an unquestioned hierarchical framework based on Confucian ideals that saw the Shogun at the apex of a harmonious pyramid of authority and duty. The first initiative was known as the *bakuhan* system, whereby a point of equilibrium was found between the central government of the Shogun, the *bakufu*, and the decentralized *daimyo* domains or *han*.

The word *bakufu* (which is conventionally translated as the 'Shogunate') has the meaning of 'government from behind the curtain', the curtain in

The samurai in the service of a *daimyo* (lord) during the Tokugawa Period would spent much time travelling between their castle towns and the Shogun's capital of Edo (modern Tokyo), where their lord normally resided. Indeed most *daimyo* saw more of Edo than their own territories, and it was in Edo that the conflict occurred between Kira and Asano, who were, theoretically, located a long way away from each other.

question being the field curtains (*maku*) that concealed from prying eyes the headquarters position occupied by a general on the medieval field of battle. The *han* were the geographical areas – sometimes whole provinces but more often parts of provinces or scattered patchworks of rice fields and villages – that made up the land holdings of the *daimyo*. *Daimyo*, which has the literal and quite appropriate meaning of 'big name', referred to the feudal lords who had spent the past century fighting each other in various bewildering alliances. To the Tokugawa there were three sorts of *daimyo*: the *kamon* (the Shogun's kinsmen), the *fudai* (the Tokugawa family's hereditary retainers) and the *tozama* (the 'outer lords' who had either been on the losing side at Sekigahara or who had hedged their bets). By 1603 they had all been forced to become the loyal followers of the new and all-conquering Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu.

The central government of the Shogun and the local government of the *daimyo* therefore existed in a state of blissful Confucian harmony, but to ensure that this blessed situation continued Ieyasu set in motion a redistribution of domains on a grand scale. In just a few years almost all the *daimyo* of Japan were moved about as if they were so many potted plants, so that ancestral lands and family temples going back centuries were abandoned for distant territories where the nature of the soil, the climate and even the accent of the local inhabitants was totally different. Such a relocation of territory was of itself nothing new. It could come about as a reward for good service, but it could also be used as a punishment. What Tokugawa Ieyasu did was to use relocation for strategic and political purposes, so that the loyal *fudai* received territories from where they could police the activities of the *tozama*, whose links with ancestral support were now thoroughly severed. So, for example, the *tozama daimyo* Satake Yoshinobu (1570–1633) was made to give up his ancestral lands in Hitachi province that were valued at 800,000 *koku* (one *koku* was the theoretical amount of rice needed to sustain one man for one year) in favour of the distant fief of Kubota (in modern Akita province) which was worth only 250,000 *koku*. The rice fields of Hitachi were transferred to the *kamon* Tokugawa Yorifusa (1603–61), one of Ieyasu's many sons. Satake Yoshinobu, however, was not the greatest loser in the exchange. That unhappy lot fell to Onodera Yoshimichi, whom Yoshinobu supplanted and whose persistent defiance against the Tokugawa continued for a year after Sekigahara. Such impudence put Onodera beyond the pale of even the *tozama*, so he ended his days landless and in exile.

As the years of the Tokugawa Shogunate wore on, the distinction between *fudai* and *tozama* became blurred because every *daimyo*, regardless of his family's history, was now the Shogun's man. Yet land transfers continued, and even accelerated, largely because the provisions of the *Buke Shohatto* (the written rules for the conduct of the *daimyo* drawn up by the Tokugawa) allowed the Shogun to use relocation as a punishment for additional offences, such as making unauthorized repairs to one's castle, for making unauthorized marriage contracts or for a host of other minor misdemeanours, including failing to produce a natural heir. This latter requirement, which caused several problems, was eventually dropped in favour of allowing death-bed

adoptions. Few *daimyo* remained untouched by land transfer, and it has been calculated that under the first five Tokugawa Shoguns, not counting the immediate aftermath of Sekigahara, more than 13 million *koku*'s worth of land was transferred, with hundreds of *daimyo* being eliminated, created, enriched or impoverished. It was a process that was eventually to take in the two families of Asano and Kira, whose quarrel was the spark for the Revenge of the Forty-Seven Ronin.

Even though the typical *daimyo* was to become firmly associated and identified with a particular domain, he was destined to see very little of it. This was due to the provisions of the *Sankin Kotai* or 'Alternate Attendance System', the other means of social and political control devised by the Tokugawa Shoguns. It was made compulsory by the third Shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu (1603–51) and was essentially an extension of the long-hallowed practice of taking hostages for good behaviour. Under the provisions of the Alternate Attendance System, the wives, children and certain senior officials of the *daimyo* were required to live permanently under the Shogun's protection in Edo. Most *daimyo* alternated their residence between Edo and their castle towns within successive years, or in some cases alternate half-years.

The *daimyo* were also required to maintain in battle readiness an army that was ready to serve the Shogun. Complex schedules were drawn up whereby the precise composition of these armies was written down according to the *daimyo*'s assessed wealth. Although usually approached from the point of view of a statement of the minimum contribution a *daimyo* had to make to the Shogun's overall forces, these schedules may also be understood as the maximum number of troops a *daimyo* was allowed to command. Any suspicion of an increase above these figures would lead to accusations of treachery. These troops, of course, had to exist; they could not just be figures on a sheet of paper, and the proof of that was shown through the requirements of the Alternate Attendance System when the *daimyo* marched from his domain with a magnificently equipped army to pay his respects to the Shogun. These journeys were exceedingly expensive undertakings that nearly bankrupted several *daimyo* as the years went by.

The requirement that a *daimyo*'s family should live permanently in Edo was in fact quietly abandoned in 1665, but by this time it had become almost a *fait accompli*. To a *daimyo* Edo was where his family lived. It was the centre of commerce and entertainment, and the best place in Japan for what we today call 'networking'. To reside in Edo was now a matter of choice, not compulsion, as illustrated by the remarkable statistic that by 1690 five out of every six *daimyo* then living had been born there. Some even had to be cajoled by their retainers to make the briefest of visits to the lands of which they were nominally the local lords. Yet even if a *daimyo* saw little of his domain, the opposite was true for the majority of his subjects. His samurai may have grumbled about the long journeys to and from Edo, but at least it enabled them to see a little of the world outside. The farmers who tended the *daimyo*'s rice fields would probably never go beyond the domain's strictly policed borders during their entire lives. They would have known of the existence of the Shogun and the Emperor only as abstract ideas, their entire

world being restricted to that of their absent lord's territory.

In terms of local rule, the *daimyo* were left surprisingly free to manage their own affairs. They were not even taxed directly, the Shogunate believing, not unreasonably, that the contribution they had to make under the Alternate Attendance System was enough, although there were sporadic and very expensive additional levies made of them for public works, such as the repair of the Shogun's castles. From about 1650 onwards there was also a noticeable slackening in the severity of punishments meted out by the Shogun for *daimyo* misdemeanours. The mildest reproof now appeared to be considered sufficient for offences that would have cost a *daimyo*'s father his lands or his grandfather his head.

The *daimyo*'s mansions in Edo were large but tightly packed together, and their outside appearance was that of a forbidding barracks. All that a passer-by would see was the walls of the *nagaya*, the accommodation blocks for the lowest ranking retainers. None have survived in Tokyo, but this specimen preserved in Kochi gives a good indication of the likely appearance of the Kira mansion where the Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin took place in 1703.

Instead of taxing the *daimyo*, the Shogunate subsisted financially on the tax revenue taken from its own extensive land holdings, with both income and expenditure being sustained and administered by a vast administrative hierarchy. By the time of the Shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi, an enormous bureaucracy had evolved within the central government in Edo. Under the first three Shoguns much use had been made of the service of favourite close associates who had earned the friendship and trust of their Shogun over many years, but with the accession of the fourth Shogun Ietsuna at the age of ten, the role of such men became somewhat threatening, to the extent that when his successor Tsunayoshi took office he began by sacking Sakai Tadakiyo, the chief minister whom he had inherited.

Nevertheless, neither Shogun nor *daimyo* could ever govern alone, and one key official in this regard was the Master of Shogunal Ceremony, who oversaw the Shogun's diary, court protocol, the organization of audiences and the like. This was the post held by Kira Yoshihisa at the time of the Ako Incident. In the environment of the Shogun's court, where Confucian ideals of hierarchy, precedent and ritual met notions of divination and good or bad omens, correct protocol and ritual were absolutely essential. Every detail was written down and illustrated by charts and drawings, including who should wear which ceremonial dress when receiving whom at which location for what event. Even the design of cakes was listed according to the appropriate ceremony at which they would be consumed. Gift-giving, still a vital element of social intercourse in modern Japan, involved an enormous amount of ritual exceeded only by the ritual required in saying thank-you. Everyone knew how to behave, or should know if he had been correctly taught, and it was to be a deviation from this most fundamental of all rules that led to the Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin.

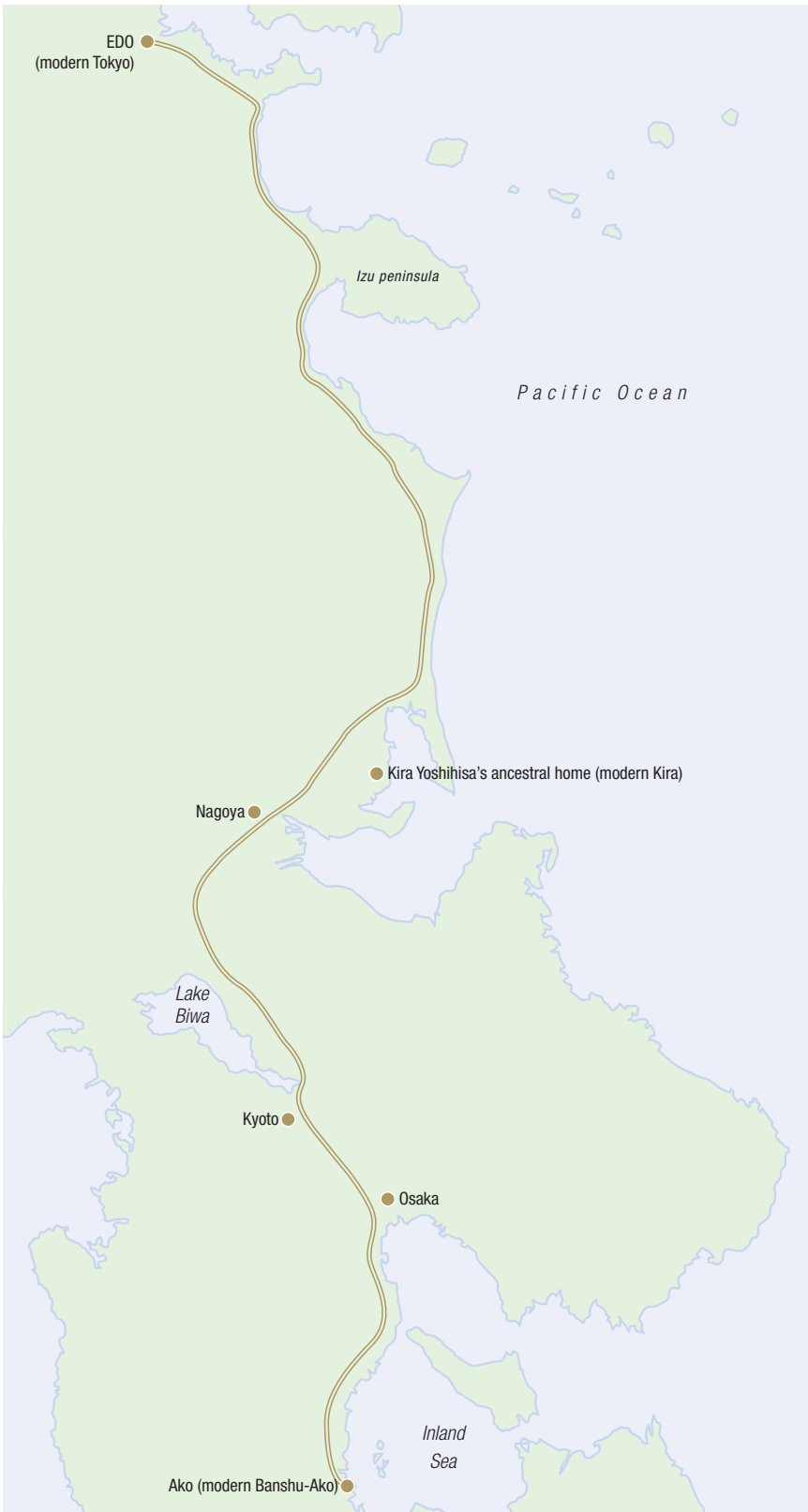
The Dog Shogun

The Shogun of the Genroku era, Tokugawa Tsunayoshi, was born in 1646 as the fourth son of the third Tokugawa Shogun, Iemitsu. That a fourth son would ever succeed to the Shogunate would have been very unlikely except for a remarkable series of coincidences. His oldest brother Ietsuna did become Shogun at the age of ten, but died when he was 41, leaving no heirs. Iemitsu's third son Kamematsu had died in infancy, while his second son Tsunashige had been adopted at birth. This strange-sounding course of action for the Shogun's family, where heirs were so important, came about because of genuine fears based on deeply entrenched notions of bad luck. The baby was due to be born in his father's 40th year, so that in his 42nd year the Shogun would have a two-year-old son, numbers that added up to 44. As the word for 'four' sounds the same as the word for 'death' this was considered so inauspicious that the child had to be removed from the family.

Consequently, when the sickly Ietsuna died in 1680 it was his brother, the fourth son Tsunayoshi, who became the fifth Tokugawa Shogun. Tsunayoshi soon showed himself to be a reforming ruler who reversed the growing tendency of leniency towards recalcitrant *daimyo*. In particular, Tsunayoshi wielded the weapon of domain confiscation as if it were a samurai sword. Yet Tsunayoshi was very much in tune with the times, appreciating as he did that Japan was saddled with a top-heavy military class that no longer had any enemies to fight. Under Tsunayoshi, the samurai began a slow process of transformation from sword-wielding warriors to brush-wielding bureaucrats. Not only did this find them employment, it also helped to emphasize how a samurai's focus of loyalty had shifted from an individual's own lord to every lord's own master, the Shogun. This is not to say that Tsunayoshi downplayed the martial side of the samurai life; far from it, because he encouraged military awareness and training in an apparent age of peace, so that the Shogun's standing army was always ready.

Asano Naganori was the young *daimyo* of Ako who attacked Kira Yoshihisa within the Corridor of Pines inside Edo Castle. He claimed to have a grievance against Kira, but was ordered to commit suicide before the nature of that grievance was revealed. This picture of him is from a hanging scroll in the Kagakuji, which was the Asano family temple in Banshu-Ako.

Such martial exhortations illustrated his complex psychology, because the strict Tokugawa Tsunayoshi has also gone down in history with the nickname of the 'Dog Shogun', a man noted for his compassion towards animals in general and dogs in particular. Although much mocked by later generations and even denounced as an instrument for the oppression of his human subjects, Tsunayoshi was undoubtedly motivated by the finest ideals. Sick animals were not to be abandoned, cruelty to animals was punishable by imprisonment and the killing of dogs would bring about either execution or exile. These measures, however, were put into force with a severity that called into question Tsunayoshi's humanity towards humans. In 1686 a retainer of the *daimyo* of Akita, was put to death and his children exiled for having killed a swallow. This negative image must, however, be countered by the fact



The relationship between the Asano domain of Ako and the capital city of Edo.

that Tsunayoshi also enacted several laws concerning the welfare of the most vulnerable people in society, so that no one would be left to die by the roadside. In a world of violence, he was undoubtedly a very compassionate man.

Asano Naganori

The strict yet compassionate Tokugawa Tsunayoshi was one of three men whose beliefs, positions and actions are crucial to understanding the Revenge of the Forty-Seven Ronin. The others are the pair who, through their untimely deaths, provided the two sides of the coin around which the revenge raid was conducted.

Asano Naganori and Kira Yoshihisa occupied very different social positions in the Shogun's court, although both owed much to the deeds of their recent ancestors. The Asano had served Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the man who finally succeeded in unifying Japan in the year 1591, and among Hideyoshi's most loyal followers few were more highly regarded than his brother-in-law Asano Nagamasa (1546–1613). When Hideyoshi died Nagamasa, who enjoyed good relations with both the pro- and anti-Toyotomi factions yet favoured neither, retired from public life. In 1600, however, he was persuaded to join Ieyasu's son Hidetada on campaign, and was suitably rewarded. His elder son Yukinaga (1576–1613) fought beside his father and was moved after Sekigahara from Kofu (200,000 *koku*) to Wakayama (370,000 *koku*). His son Nagaakira (1586–1632) fought for the Tokugawa at Osaka, and ended his days with the fief of Hiroshima (426,000 *koku*). The great Nagamasa, however, had another son Nagashige, who followed a more modest although no less loyal path of service to the Tokugawa, and after two moves of fief this branch of the family ended up in the castle town of Ako in Harima province (now the town of Banshu-Ako in Hyogo prefecture) with a respectable income of 53,500 *koku*.

Asano Naganori (1667–1701), the great-grandson of Asano Nagamasa and the man whose quick temper was to bring about the Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin, succeeded his father as *daimyo* of Ako in 1675 at the tender age of eight. We know very little about him prior to the famous incident of 1701, except for a tantalizing description in a report commissioned by the Shogun into the lives and behaviour of the *daimyo*. Entitled *Dokai koshuki*, the document is surprisingly frank about the most intimate details concerning Tsunayoshi's loyal followers. As it was written before the Ako Incident, there was no intention of singling out Asano Naganori for criticism, and he is described quite dispassionately as being intelligent and strict but much given to pleasure in preference to the sober business of government. Lord Asano, the report also notes, displayed neither literary nor military skills (a Tokugawa obsession that would certainly count against him) and had a considerable sexual appetite. The main means of promotion among his retainers appeared to be their success in obtaining women for him. He was surrounded by flatterers and toadies.

These flatterers and toadies included, of course, the future Forty-Seven Ronin. In view of what was to follow, it is very telling to read in *Dokai koshuki* a severe criticism of the retainers who had failed both to control

their young lord and to educate him in the morals and accomplishments required from a *daimyo*. To nurture an heir by the retainers he would one day inherit was a duty expected of them, exemplified for all time by the story (probably apocryphal, but no less moral for that) concerning the young Oda Nobunaga. Nobunaga, the first of Japan's unifiers, enjoyed a wild youth, a fact well supported by history. The credit for turning him away from his unpromising start is given to one of his retainers, who wrote a letter to the young lord criticizing his behaviour and then committed suicide in protest. This dramatic gesture, we are told, saved Nobunaga from himself. In the Asano case, young Naganori had been left fatherless at the age of eight, but instead of schooling the young lord in the practical and theoretical ways of the samurai, his retainers had neglected their duties for their own selfish goal of holding on to power within the domain. It was a devastating criticism to make of any *daimyo*'s close followers, particularly as these were the same men who within a very few years were to go down in history as the most loyal samurai that Japan had ever produced.

All theatrical versions of the Forty-Seven Ronin story cast Kira Yoshihisa as a selfish, haughty and grasping pantomime villain, who receives his just deserts from the noble young lord Asano. This image is perfectly captured by Kuniyoshi in this woodblock print. Ko Moronao (the stage name for Kira in the play) is shown as sinister and loathsome.

Kira Yoshihisa

On one side of the coin, therefore, we have a young *daimyo* aged 34, the descendant of great warriors but now found to be dissolute and pleasure seeking, content to leave his domain in the hands of others who had failed so spectacularly in his formative years that he was now deficient in the essential arts of war and peace. On the other side of the coin we have his rival Kira Yoshihisa, Master of Shogunal Ceremony, who could not have been more different.

In all the fictionalized accounts of the Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin, Kira Kozuke-no-suke Yoshihisa (1641–1701) is the undoubted villain, an attribution that is essential if this tale of murder is to be transformed into an uplifting account of samurai virtue. Kira Yoshihisa was not a *daimyo*. In monetary terms alone his income of 4,200 *koku* was well below the 10,000 *koku* threshold for *daimyo* status. He fell instead within the category of *hatamoto*, itself an honourable title that derived from its literal meaning of 'under the standard', because that was where those most loyal of samurai would fight as the Shogun's last line of defence. By 1701, of course, the military meaning of *hatamoto* had disappeared beneath the Tokugawa bureaucracy, but more importantly for understanding his status, Kira Yoshihisa did not own a domain. His income was provided instead in the form of a stipend, which was his salary for performing his duties faithfully and well within the Shogun's court. As Kira did not have the expense of maintaining distant territories in addition to his residence in Edo, his comparatively modest stipend would therefore have provided a disposable income comparable to many *daimyo*.

Kira Yoshihisa belonged to a small and exclusive group of families called the *koke* ('high families'), who had been given the responsibility early in the Tokugawa hegemony for overseeing ceremonial matters. Most of the *koke* had begun as *daimyo* who had been dispossessed after Sekigahara. Their conduct had not been such as to merit punishment, but neither did it deserve reward. Instead they survived, dependent upon a modest pension, out of which state of poverty the benevolent Shogun rescued them by putting them in charge of ceremonial duties. The Kira, however, did not fit into this category. In their case we may regard the status of *koke* not as a punishment but as a reward given to a family of doughty warriors of respectable background but of modest means, because in terms of ancestors Kira Yoshihisa's pedigree was honourable. They may not have been *daimyo* like the Asano, but their recent history as *hatamoto* was a noble one that even included a valuable Tokugawa connection. The Kira could in fact trace their descent back to Minamoto Yoshiie, the great samurai hero of the 11th century, which made their forebears distant cousins of the first Shogun Minamoto Yoritomo.

As a walk around the Kira graveyard in their family temple of Kezoji (in modern Kira Town, Aichi prefecture) will reveal, here was a family of good old-fashioned fighting samurai from the lower reaches of the Tokugawa hierarchy. The gravestone of Kira Yoshisada, who died in 1622, reveals that he was Tokugawa Ieyasu's first cousin, although the extensive lineage of both families does not imply the closeness of the two men that one might otherwise assume. Kira Yoshisada fought at Sekigahara within the Tokugawa ranks and was promoted to the rank of *hatamoto*. His son Yoshimitsu fought beside his father at Sekigahara, and it was he in whom the Kira were raised to the status of *koke*. This happened under the second Shogun, Hidetada. Yoshimitsu died in 1643. His son Yoshifuyu married the daughter of the *fudai daimyo* Sakai Tadayoshi, who gave birth to Kira Yoshihisa. The Kira may not have enjoyed great wealth, but their rise through the ranks as a result of marriage and battlefield service at a time when this was still possible had given them a proud heritage and a unique status that many a *daimyo* might envy.

The real Kira Yoshihisa bore no resemblance to the caricature dreamt up by dramatists to justify the Forty-Seven Ronin raid. This lacquered wooden statue in the Kezoji (the Kira family temple), in the town of Kira near Okazaki, shows a calm and sensitive official, the descendant of noble warriors who had served successive Shoguns for centuries.

Even before inheriting from his father the hereditary position of Master of Shogunal Ceremony, the young Yoshihisa had shown that he would be a worthy successor by acting as the representative of the fourth Shogun Ietsuna to go and congratulate Emperor Reigen on his accession to the throne. Yoshihisa was then only 22, and the following year he was to be further honoured when his one-year-old son was installed as the heir of his childless brother-in-law Uesugi

Tsunakatsu. In 1678 this son was permitted to be married to the sister of the son-in-law of no less a person than the Shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi. It was an honour indeed.

By 1701 the 60-year-old Kira Yoshihisa had served successive Shoguns as a loyal and utterly reliable master of court ceremonial for about 40 years. It was a role that required minute attention to detail and the ability to organize with clockwork precision. A man in that position, one can safely assume, did not suffer fools gladly. When faced, therefore, with having to instruct in etiquette a young *daimyo* to whom court ceremonial was much less interesting than court ladies, and a man who appeared ignorant of the most basic learning and yet enjoyed an income 11 times greater than his stuffy old teacher, Yoshihisa's self-control was to be tested to the limit.

17 APRIL 1701

Asano Naganori attacks Kira Yoshihisa. Asano is arrested and commits suicide

The Incident in the Corridor of Pines

In the fictionalized version of the Forty-Seven Ronin story, the characters and personalities of Asano Naganori and Kira Yoshihisa bear no resemblance to the brief details set out above. Here the difference in income between Asano and Kira is used to justify a caricature of the latter as a greedy and scheming petty official, ever eager to screw money out of the wealthy young *daimyo*. That any additional financial rewards likely to come Kira's way in the course of his dealings with Asano would arise from the ceremonial giving of gifts is a fact used to compound his alleged felony. The long-established Japanese tradition of gift-giving is conveniently forgotten. Graft, bribery and corruption instead become the order of the day, until the noble young lord's patience snaps and the miserly figure of Kira Yoshihisa gets what is coming to him. What came to him was a sword stroke delivered against his back in the Corridor of the Pines within the inner reaches of Edo Castle.

The one-man assault on Kira, which was even less anticipated by its victim than the 47-man raid launched against him almost two years later, happened during the preparations for a very important ceremony. Fortunately for posterity, we have a reliable eye-witness account in the form of a report by Kajiwara Yosobei Yoriteru, who held the position of supervisory official for the women's quarters in Edo Castle. Kajiwara was on duty that day as the intermediary in a ceremonial exchange of gifts. In accordance with custom, the Shogun had sent an envoy to convey his New Year's greetings to the Emperor and the retired Emperor in Kyoto. Also in accordance with custom, imperial representatives had then travelled to Edo to return the compliment, so that officials from the court of Emperor Higashiyama (who reigned from 1687 to 1709, the Genroku era) and ex-Emperor Reigen (who reigned from 1683 to 1687) arrived in Edo on the 11th day of the 3rd lunar month (14 April 1701). The following day they presented their New Year greetings, enjoyed a performance from the No theatre on the 13th, and were now prepared, on the 14th day (17 April), to perform a final ritual of farewell when the Shogun would offer his thanks to the Emperor. Gifts, always a vital element in any ceremony, would be presented to the imperial guests by the Shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi, by his wife and by his mother. In overall charge of the entire visit was the

Shogun's punctilious, no-nonsense master of ceremonies Kira Yoshihisa, who had given two particular *daimyo* the honour of acting as hosts for the imperial party. Date Muneharu was designated to look after the party of the ex-Emperor, while responsibility for the Emperor's envoys had fallen to the *daimyo* of Ako: Asano Naganori, whom Kira Yoshihisa had trained.

Kajiwara Yosobei Yoriteru relates that Asano was on his way to the room where he was normally stationed to make ready for the event, when he received a message from Kira that the offering of gifts had been brought forward to an earlier time. As timing was so important in matters of this nature, Kajiwara sought out Kira in the Corridor of Pines (a series of rooms linked by a side corridor in the Japanese fashion, so-called because the wall-paintings depicted pine trees) to confirm that this was indeed the case, but Kira was absent from his normal location. While he waited for Kira to appear, Kajiwara summoned Asano Naganori to his presence and informed him that he, Kajiwara, was acting that day as messenger for the Shogun's wife, and would appreciate Asano's assistance. Asano made a positive acknowledgement and returned to his own station. At that very moment, Kajiwara spotted Kira coming towards him from the direction of a room known as the White Chamber. Kajiwara walked forward to engage him in conversation, and as they stood talking about the plans for the ceremony Asano Naganori suddenly appeared behind Kira and struck him with the blade of his *wakizashi*, the shorter of the two swords carried by samurai and the only one allowed to be worn within the palace. He shouted, 'Have you forgotten my recent grievance?' Kira whirled round in surprise, at which Asano struck at him once again and he fell to the floor. Kajiwara immediately leapt upon Asano and restrained him until others could arrive and escort him away. As Asano was taken along the corridor he kept repeating that he had a grievance against Kira and that even though he knew it was neither the time nor the place, he had no choice but to strike out at him.

The next six hours must have passed very quickly for Asano Naganori. Kajiwara has nothing further to say about the matter after the point at which

The wounding of Kira by Asano is depicted in this painting on wood at the Oishi Shrine in Banshu-Ako. Both individuals were to be criticised for their role in the incident: Kira for offering no resistance and Asano for attacking him from behind and failing to kill him.

The suicide of Asano Naganori took place within a few hours of his attack on Kira. To his followers it looked like rough justice, and they were further outraged when Kira was not punished equally. This is a painting on wood at the Oishi Shrine, Banshu-Ako.

he handed Asano over to Okada Denpachiro, the *metsuke* (inspector) who was on duty that day. The ceremony of farewell continued without hindrance, and presumably without the imperial representatives getting to know of the outrageous incident that had occurred almost in their presence. Asano was in turn placed into the custody of the *daimyo* Tamura Takeaki, who confined him within his nearby mansion.

While under arrest, Asano related a verbal message, which was written down and later delivered to his retainers in Edo and Ako. He apologized that it had been impossible for him to let them know in advance about what was to happen that day. No mention was made of the nature of the grievance about which Asano had protested, and which had driven him to his impasse. Assumptions such as the one I related above, whereby Kira was exasperated by the younger man and made derogatory comments about him or otherwise belittled him beyond endurance until Asano hit back, are simply that: assumptions, fed by speculation on the one hand and the theatre on the other. An alternative theory states that Asano had failed to present Kira with a gift of sufficient worth in return for being trained in court etiquette, at which Kira mocked and scorned him for his lack of breeding. The truth will probably never be known. Yet the position that the Forty-Seven Ronin were to take was that even if the nature of the grievance remained unknown, the fact that Asano had been driven to such desperate measures proved that it must have been very a serious matter.

The reason why we will never know the truth behind Asano's motivation lies in the fact that he never had a chance to defend himself in a court of law, or even to make a statement to the authorities who had rushed to condemn him. The Tamura house records reveal the incredible speed of these events. Asano attacked Kira some time before midday; the order placing him in the custody of Tamura was issued at 1.00pm; the order for his execution was delivered at 4.00pm and he committed *seppuku* (ritual suicide) at 6.00pm. The first act of the drama was over.

INITIAL STRATEGY

Challenge to the Ronin

The news of the crime and punishment of Asano Naganori was hurriedly conveyed to his astonished followers in residence in Edo and in Ako Castle. We now know, of course, that their eventual reaction was to mount the Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin, but that was in fact the final conclusion they reached after much heart-searching and much deliberation. Before then, they contemplated the consequences of the dreadful breach of etiquette their former young charge had committed and, in their eyes, the fateful over-reaction to it by the Shogun.

Their shocked discussions over what had happened were echoed throughout noble society. Emperor Higashiyama, when he got to hear of the incident, was apparently unsurprised and even satisfied to have it confirmed that these samurai fellows were at heart unspeakably vulgar. The Shogun's reaction in condemning Asano to death so rapidly was also approved of by the Emperor because of the disrespect the assault implied against the imperial house. Similar thoughts, that Asano Naganori had somehow 'let the side down', are implied by the reaction of the Shogun in condemning him to death. Tsunayoshi was clearly embarrassed by the insult to the imperial court and appalled by the defilement of a sacred ritual space by the shedding of blood. The latter aspect of the incident was a very serious matter because it related to an attitude embedded very deeply in the Japanese psyche. Shinto beliefs involved extremely strict notions of purity and pollution, with blood being one of the worse agents of contamination. Asano Naganori had compounded his felony by shedding blood within the imperial presence, an environment where ritual purity was of the utmost concern.

For the stunned Asano retainers, the question of ritual defilement was far from their minds. Their immediate concern was with the survival of the Asano house. Tsunayoshi had already shown himself ready to punish *daimyo* by land transfer, and indeed the Shogun who had so speedily rushed to condemn Asano Naganori to death was to move with equally indecent haste to confiscate the Ako domain. The death of one's *daimyo* was tragic enough.

The news is brought to Oishi Kuranosuke in Ako by Hayami Tozaemon and Kayano Shigezane, as shown in a life-sized diorama in the Oishi Shrine, Banshu-Ako. The news of Asano's crime and speedy death both stunned and alarmed his followers, particularly as they were also required to surrender the castle of Ako to the Shogun's officials, thus making them all ronin (men of the waves).

The confiscation of the *han*, and the consequences that would have for his family and his surviving retainers, were quite another, and beg the question as to whether Asano Naganori realized just what a risk he was taking by using violence within the Shogun's palace. He certainly should have done, because his own uncle Naito Tadakatsu had lost his life and his fief on account of a remarkably similar assault scarcely 20 years earlier. In that incident, Tadakatsu had killed a fellow *daimyo* called Nagai Hisanaga within the precincts of the Zojoji temple in Edo during the funeral of the fourth Shogun Ietsuna. Just like Asano, Naito Tadakatsu was heard to exclaim that he was acting in revenge. Tokugawa Tsunayoshi, only days into his succession as Shogun, proclaimed the sentence, and for good measure also confiscated the victim's fief on the grounds that he had not named an heir. In matters of discipline, the new Shogun Tsunayoshi had quickly shown that he was a man to be reckoned with.

If that incident had not been enough to convince Asano Naganori of the folly of shedding blood in the presence of the Shogun, then surely another occurrence in 1684 should have persuaded him. In that year Inaba Masayasu (1640–84), a member of the Junior Council, assassinated Hotta Masatoshi (1631–84). The murderer's domain was confiscated, while that of the victim was steadily reduced in size, plunging the Hotta into poverty. Even brawls and quarrels among lowly *hatamoto* could be severely punished by compulsory suicide. In 1627 Naramura Mogokuro of the Tokugawa Foot Guards attacked two of his comrades inside Edo Castle. All three suffered, because the assailant was sentenced to death by *seppuku* while one of his victims died of his wounds and the other was exiled. Similar incidents were to occur in 1628 and 1670. Asano Naganori should have had considerable grounds for hesitation.

One common factor in all these earlier incidents was that the victim was treated almost as harshly as the assailant in terms of losing his domain, if not his own life, so why was Kira not punished? The argument that was to rage about this particular aspect of the incident centred on whether the attack by Asano on Kira was subject to the customary principle (which was not a legal requirement) that both parties in a quarrel involving physical violence should be punished equally, regardless of fault. As Kira had no domain to be confiscated, that form of punishment was of course ruled out. Yet the fact that he appeared to have escaped scot-free was an additional source of resentment as the Forty-Seven Ronin moved inexorably to their final and fateful decision. As a counter to this argument, it was to be pointed out that Kira had in fact acted within the spirit of the equality principle by

not retaliating, so one could as easily ask, 'Why should he have been punished?' Even if a 60-year-old court official could hardly have been expected to draw his sword and fight a young and vigorous assailant, Kira Yoshihisa was undoubtedly the victim of an assault to which he responded with restraint. In fact, Kira was to be praised for his orderly conduct, which probably riled the Ako retainers still further. Supporters of Asano also argued that by not retaliating Kira showed himself to be no true samurai and therefore deserved punishment, a viewpoint that could be paralleled by arguing that Asano was not a true samurai because he failed to kill Kira, let alone that he attacked his man from behind! This criticism of Asano was to be voiced in a satirical verse composed about the incident which suggested that if Asano had known anything about weapon usage he would have stabbed Kira rather than slashed at him.

In the Shadow of Soko

When the retainers of the late lord met to consider their fate, their deliberations were conducted beneath the benign shadow of the one of the greatest thinkers to have emerged during the first century of the Tokugawa regime: the Confucian scholar Yamaga Soko (1622–85). Somewhat ironically in view of the men his teaching was to influence, Yamaga Soko is known as one of the 'three great ronin' of the Edo Period (the others were Kumazawa Banzan and Yui Shosetsu). In this case the term 'ronin' is used less to describe a samurai who has no master than one who displayed an independence of thought and action beyond that expected from someone occupying a permanent official position. In terms of intellectual inquiry, Yamaga Soko was akin to the wandering swordsmen of an earlier age.

The great Confucian philosopher and strategist Yamaga Soko served the Asano family for many years, and his attitude towards samurai behaviour and values undoubtedly influenced Oishi Kuranosuke and his fellow ronin as they moved towards their final decision to take revenge upon Kira. From a painted scroll in Hirado, Nagasaki prefecture.

Soko's physical wanderings had made him very familiar with the Ako domain, where the then *daimyo* Asano Naganao (1610–72) had employed him as his *kinshi* (guest teacher) between 1652 and 1660. His military skills enabled Soko to help in the design of Ako Castle, but he probably spent most of his time serving Naganao when the latter was in Edo because of the Alternate Attendance System. After leaving the service of the Asano, Soko stayed in Edo as a freelance and free-thinking 'scholar ronin', where he developed a 'back to basics' view of Confucianism. Soko believed that Confucius' original teachings, uncontaminated by ancient Chinese commentaries or the Neo-Confucianism of the Song Dynasty (a philosophy to which the Tokugawa Shoguns were inclined), justified Japan's position as the land of the gods at the centre of the universe. The publication of a book expounding these views seriously offended Hoshina Masayuki (1611–72), a senior *bakufu* official, so Soko was

banished from Edo. Soko therefore returned to Ako in 1666 as an exile, but went back to Edo in 1675 after receiving a pardon, although his influence as an academic force never quite recovered.

It was Yamaga Soko's enthusiasm for both the philosophical arts and the martial arts that made him into a figure that attracted both respect and suspicion. It also left a lasting legacy of which the Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin was a small but important part, because the values that Soko found within works like the *Analects* of Confucius, such as filial piety, truth, loyalty, trust and honour, laid the foundations for a notion of a samurai creed for Japan, an unwritten code that was to become known as *bushido*, the 'way of the warrior'.

With considerable hindsight, the principles of *bushido* were to provide the rationale for the Ako revenge. Yet the warriors Soko now saw around him during his lifetime were not *hatamoto* fighting under the banner of their lord, but under-employed civil servants who stood in grave danger of a slide from virtue. The central question for Yamaga Soko was this: what was the role of the military class in an age of peace? His conclusion was that the samurai had to act as exemplars to the rest of society, particularly by setting an example of devotion to duty. A samurai should therefore be frugal in his ways and unostentatious in his dress. To this must be coupled martial discipline and military skills so that, in Soko's words, 'within his heart the samurai keeps to the way of peace, but without he keeps his weapons ready for use.'

Oishi Kuranosuke, the leader of the Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin, is shown here in a hanging scroll at the Sengakuji. He is dressed in a simple costume that is probably authentic. His helmet is a fire-helmet, the standard issue for senior retainers.

The juxtaposition of Yamaga Soko as the Asano teacher with the men who were to lead the Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin leads easily towards the simplistic conclusion that in taking revenge they were following the teachings of this great master of *bushido*. Even though the bulk of evidence for this comes from later writers who, in making such a link, were seeking to discredit both Soko and the Forty-Seven Ronin, some influence must have been present, and among those who had listened to Soko's admonitions was Oishi Kuranosuke Yoshio (more properly Yoshitaka, although that name is rarely used). He was the *karo* (senior retainer) of the Asano *daimyo* of Ako. He may not have drawn from Soko's teachings the implication that he had a responsibility for educating the fatherless young heir Naganori, whose own failure to follow Soko's teachings was to be picked up at a *bakufu* level, but once Naganori was dead certain other points once passed on by the great teacher began to make sense. The notion of duty, for example, pointed inevitably towards the course of action that the Forty-Seven Ronin would shortly follow. Yet this was still some way into the future, because the immediate aim of Oishi and his colleagues was to safeguard the future of the Ako domain, or what was left of it.

At the age of 76, Horibe (in plays and prints Oribe) Yahei Akizane was the oldest of the Forty-Seven Ronin, and is depicted in warlike mode in this print by Kuniyoshi. He has removed his helmet, but his age shows in his face and his hunched shoulders.

18 APRIL 1701

Order given for confiscation of the Asano domain

The transformation of the Asano retainers into the Asano ronin had begun within 24 hours of Asano's death, when the *bakufu* ordered two officials to take possession of the domain and castle of Ako Castle. On the same day, Asano Nagahiro, Naganori's younger brother and named heir, a *hatamoto* of 3,000 *koku*, was placed under house arrest in Edo. It is not generally appreciated that this process left behind not just 47 but a total of 270 displaced retainers. Because of the requirements of the Alternate

Attendance System, they were split up between Edo and Ako, and as soon as the *bakufu* decision was revealed Hayami Tozaemon and Kayano Sanpei were sent as express messengers to the castle town to inform the Ako domain that its fate had been decided.

It is at this point that we begin to read of named individuals who were to join their leader, Oishi Kuranosuke, in the eventual drama. Shortly afterwards, other prominent members among the Edo ronin made the journey to Ako. They were delayed only by the requirements to perform a seventh-day memorial service for Asano at the Sengakuji, his temple of repose. Kataoka Gengoemon, Asano's former chamberlain, and two others cut off their pigtails as a sign that they had renounced the world because of their remorse at failing to prevent their lord's death. Kataoka had in fact been the last of Asano's retainers to see him alive before his act of *seppuku*. On the 5th day of the 4th month (12 May), Horibe Yahei (the oldest among Asano's former retainers), Okuda Magodayu and Takada Gunbei also hurried to Ako, taking ten days rather than the usual 17. These three were to constitute the core of the 'radical faction' among the ronin who would argue most strongly for an act of revenge against Kira, although Takada was later to abandon the cause and is therefore not counted as one of the Forty-Seven Ronin. Also missing from the list of the conspirators are Yasui Hikoemon and Fujii Matazaemon, who were based in Edo and were so concerned that violence might break out that they forbade any more retainers from leaving Edo for Ako.

Horibe (Oribe) Yahei Akizane, the oldest of the Forty-Seven Ronin, was the first to urge revenge on Kira, and almost launched a suicidal raid within days of Asano's death. Instead he went to Ako to join Oishi, where the aggrieved ronin planned their next moves to have the domain restored. It was only when that strategy failed that the final raid was planned. He is shown here in a modern wooden statue in the Oishi Shrine, Banshu-Ako.

A fierce debate then took place, with the 'hawks' under Horibe arguing for a revenge attack on Kira and the 'doves' under Oishi hoping for a peaceful settlement. With this in mind, Oishi sent two emissaries to Edo to deliver a petition to the two *bakufu* officials who had been ordered to accept the surrender of Ako Castle. In the message, he describes himself and his colleagues as *bukotsu*, meaning unsophisticated country people compared to the 'smart set' in Edo. To these simple-minded folk, the fact that Kira remained unpunished had driven them to consider barricading themselves inside the castle. If satisfactory measures were taken in that regard, with Kira recognized equally as the cause of the problem, then surely the matter could be settled peacefully.

This tactic of barricading themselves inside Ako Castle in defiance of the Shogun had been Oishi's first plan. The idea arose in part from a rumour they heard that Kira had moved into the mansion of his wife's family the Uesugi, which would have made it difficult to kill him in revenge. Illegal occupation of Ako Castle was a risky manoeuvre that might provoke a

severe military reaction, and was at best likely only to win a few concessions or to buy some time pending a final judgement. A more dramatic gesture, that all Forty-Seven should kill themselves in protest within the precincts of the Kagakuji, the Asano's family temple in Ako, was quickly rejected, because this would count as *junshi* (suicide to follow one's master in death). *Junshi*, banned several times during samurai history, had been shown to have a devastating effect on the fortunes of a late lord's heir, and the latest law forbidding it dated only from 1635.

As months went by, the possibility that the domain could be restored to the incarcerated Asano Nagahiro was the straw to which the ronin clung after both suicide and siege had been ruled out. Yet as all the previous examples of domain confiscation following an act of violence had shown, the best that could have been hoped for would have been for Nagahiro to be released and live out the rest of his days in Edo with a few retainers. This appeared to be confirmed a year later when Nagahiro was removed from house arrest and placed instead into the custody of the main branch of the Asano family in Hiroshima. The prospect of the restoration of the Asano of Ako looked almost impossible, and must have been a factor in the Forty-Seven Ronin's deliberations, because when all else failed the only other course open to them was to take the honourable road of samurai revenge.

The Vengeful Imperative

The duty of vengeance that the Forty-Seven Ronin now felt was incumbent upon them had a long and honourable pedigree in Japanese history. Quick revenge upon the medieval battlefield or more considered moves, such as the long-planned revenge of the Soga brothers – a classic incident dating from the 12th century – had made the deed respectable in samurai eyes and hallowed by tradition. Almost the entire Gempei War could be seen as an act of revenge by the Minamoto (the ancestors, of course, of the Shogun Tsunayoshi) against the slaying by the Taira of one of their patriarchal figures. Such were the precedents, but Japan had moved on somewhat from those days, as the Forty-Seven Ronin fully appreciated.

The restored wall and tower of the castle of Ako, the castle town of the *han* (domain) controlled by Asano Naganori, whose attack on Kira Yoshihisa precipitated the conspiracy of the Forty-Seven Ronin.

In our modern age a cursory reading of popular Japanese history, where samurai swords spend more time unsheathed than lying in their scabbards, disguises the fact that by 1701 the act of revenge was surrounded by a plethora of laws and regulations. A systematic definition of *katakiuchi* (vendetta) and a series of rules about how one might be carried out, had emerged during the past century. In summary,

26 MAY 1701

Ako Castle is surrendered to the Shogunate

a man (or a woman, as several subsequent vendettas were to illustrate) was indeed allowed by law to avenge the killing of a relative (usually a father, but examples exist of brothers and uncles) by seeking out and killing the perpetrator. Yet this could only be done within a very strict legal framework, the most important of which was the requirement that the intention to carry out a *katakiuchi* should be registered with the authorities in advance, who would then grant permission for the vendetta to be carried out. One of the earliest conclusions drawn by the Forty-Seven Ronin was that secrecy was essential if they were to succeed against Kira, because he was expecting retaliation and had the backing of the Uesugi. The Forty-Seven also anticipated (undoubtedly correctly) that permission for their vendetta would never be granted.

One other stipulation under the law posed an even more serious problem, because the ronin wished to avenge the death of their lord, not a relative, and the death of one's master was specifically excluded from the legal provisions. The Forty-Seven Ronin were also aware of this and tried to justify their actions by appealing to ancient tradition rather than modern legalities. So their subsequent conduct meant that they had set themselves outside the law on two counts, and there was a third. It is now customary to regard the Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin as the classic act of revenge – the supreme vendetta – of Old Japan, yet this perspective reveals another complication for them, because to respond to the Ako Incident by killing Kira stretched the definition of a vendetta to its breaking point. *Katakiuchi*, on whatever grounds, had the literal reading of 'cutting down an enemy' and meant that someone, either the victim or his close representative, would take revenge on the killer. But in the Corridor of Pines, Kira had not been the assailant. Asano was. He may have claimed to be the victim of a grievance, but while no one knew for certain what that grievance was, everyone knew which of them had been the victim of the assault. The death of Asano had also come about so rapidly that Kira could have played no part in the decision to order his execution, which in any case was carried out according to the law and in conformity with every recent precedent. So if a vendetta should be carried out against anyone, then surely the target of the Forty-Seven Ronin should have been the Shogun himself? As this was both unthinkable and impossible, the Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin becomes less a vendetta and more an attempt by Asano's surviving retainers to follow where he had led in his response to the unknown grievance. Put quite simply, their lord had failed to kill Kira. They would finish the job in his memory.

All the above factors were taken into consideration as the months wore on and an outrageous plan began to develop. Having chosen to ignore all the negative elements, and believing that 'they may as well be hanged for stealing a sheep as for stealing a goat', the secret plotting of the Forty-Seven Ronin began. Act Two had ended, and Act Three was about to begin.

THE PLAN

The Final Decision

The man who ultimately decided which course to take was Oishi Kuranosuke Yoshio. Born in 1659, Oishi was distantly related to the Asano family through marriage. His position as *karo* gave him enormous responsibility, including, as was normal for every *han* under the Alternate Attendance System, being in total charge of the administration of the domain when the *daimyo* was in Edo. It therefore fell to Oishi to take the lead in all the negotiations, demands and eventually the plots that would follow over the ensuing months.

It is not generally known, however, that others among the Forty-Seven Ronin had already come very close to carrying out a raid on Kira's mansion themselves in the immediate aftermath of Asano's death. These men made up the group of Edo 'hawks' led by Horibe Yahei, but the plan was quickly abandoned when it was realized that the Kira household was on the alert for just such a retaliation and would have the armed support of the Uesugi. Not wishing to 'die a dog's death' as Horibe put it, they decided instead to go to Ako and occupy the castle. It dawned on them that this would damage the already delicate position of the heir Asano Nagahiro, so the plan was abandoned, and the castle was handed over to the *bakufu* on the 19th day of the 4th month (26 May 1701).

With the loss of the Ako domain, the hawks and the doves were now united, and it is at this point that their outlook changes from achieving restitution and justice to something much more serious. As far as they were concerned, the matter had now moved on to the higher plain of samurai honour. Having failed to persuade the authorities to punish Kira along with Asano, the ronin had been reluctantly forced to accept that their lord had been found guilty of unilateral misconduct in a private quarrel, not of taking part in a dispute where both sides necessarily deserved punishment. It was a painful slur. Asano Naganori had been labelled an assailant, and a cowardly one at that. He had therefore forfeited his samurai honour, and there was only one way by which his surviving retainers could hope to regain it in his

memory. As Horibe put it to Oishi, 'as long as Lord Kira is alive, how can we show our faces anywhere?'

The Great Deception

One of the best-known features of the Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin is the great secrecy under which it was planned. Although it was to become one of the most romantic aspects of the story, this secrecy compounded their crime of not notifying the authorities in advance. Clandestine plotting, for whatever reason, made their decision-making into a conspiracy, a practice that was also banned under Tokugawa law. The Forty-Seven Ronin would later argue that as they were an existing group of former retainers, their deliberations could not possibly fall under the definition of a conspiracy. The authorities did not accept this plea, and in fact it would be for the two crimes of conspiracy and disturbing the peace, rather than the actual death of Kira, that the Forty-Seven Ronin were eventually to be charged and condemned to death.

Thus began the period of plotting and covert contact by the now dispersed ronin. All the legends and plays tell us that they attempted to put Kira off his guard by living lives that suggested to the outside world that they had abandoned any ideas of revenge or of ever becoming respectable samurai again. Oishi Yoshio in particular is depicted as descending into drunkenness and debauchery. Kira Yoshihisa had feared that there might be a plot against him once he heard of the confiscation of the domain, so he had sent men to watch Oishi. His spies did their job well, but found only a man apparently addicted to drink and given to pleasure. There were tales of his being found lying conspicuously in the gutter, all his samurai honour gone, while others among the Forty-Seven Ronin divorced their wives and abandoned their children.

Meanwhile a genuine conspiracy took place. Seven or eight locations in Edo provided 'safe houses' within the capital where plotting could continue under Kira's nose, although the details of what actually occurred in the time between the surrender of Ako Castle and the coming together of the raiders on the fateful night derive largely from fictionalized accounts. But whatever the Forty-Seven Ronin did, it achieved its primary objective of making the raid into the surprise attack that they had planned for.

Troop Numbers

Stories of drunkenness and debauchery to put Kira off the scent have their place in popular myth, but one factor that must have genuinely reassured him was that the vast majority of Asano's former retainers had accepted the situation and were now living peaceful lives in different capacities. As noted above, when Asano Naganori died he left behind 270 retainers, from whose ranks the self-selected group known to history as the Forty-Seven Ronin was to emerge. It says something about the secrecy and solidarity among the Forty-Seven Ronin that no word of the plot was leaked to Kira or the Shogunate by any of the remaining unsympathetic ex-Asano retainers, who might have guessed what was happening. What is more remarkable is that the number and nature of the eventual raiders was a dynamic entity almost

Terasaka Kichiemon Nobuyuki was the *ashigaru* ronin, whose non-samurai status led to his being omitted from some lists of the avengers. This wooden statue of him in the Kagakuji, Banshu-Ako, however, ignores this point of view and shows him instead as a fully fledged warrior along with his 46 comrades.

to the end, so that the number 47 was the final result, not the totality from the beginning. Certain names dropped out of the conspiracy at an early stage and in fact eight men left the league between Oishi's arrival in Edo and the raid taking place only 40 days later.

So how many Ronin were there? That question is far from being a joke, because in fact an argument has raged for centuries over whether there were 46 or 47 ronin. It is a debate that was once conducted by Confucian scholars and is still disputed within modern academic circles. The problem arises over the inclusion within their ranks of someone whose status, in the hierarchy-obsessed world of Edo Japan, was far from clear. Terasaka Kichiemon Nobuyuki (1665–1747) was the lowest-ranking participant and, as his date of death reveals, he survived both the raid and the mass act of suicide ordered afterwards. This fact alone sets him apart from the others and will be dealt with later, but more importantly Terasaka was an *ashigaru*, a word that means a foot soldier. By 1701 the status of an *ashigaru* was effectively that of the lowest rank of the samurai class, but there were many who still did not regard *ashigaru* as proper samurai. Also, the position of Terasaka within the immediate hierarchy of the Forty-Seven Ronin was unique, because he was the only one who was in service to another within the group. Whereas the other 46 were direct vassals of Asano Naganori, Terasaka was the follower of his fellow 'loyal retainer' Yoshida Chuzaemon, in a position equivalent to being a hereditary retainer of a hereditary retainer.

Oishi Kuranosuke and the others clearly valued Terasaka's contribution highly enough to include him within this tight-knit and dedicated band, among whom secrecy and utter loyalty to the cause were paramount. There, one would think, the matter should end, and the debate might have continued at the pedantic level of whether an *ashigaru* was a true samurai had it not been for the following fact. Even though Terasaka's name was included among the list of raiders on the written declaration of intent they left in a box at the Kira mansion, he was not around when the raid was over and was therefore not among those who were sentenced to death. So where was he? The positive theory states that he was sent on a secret mission to take the news of the raid to Asano's widow and brother; the negative theory holds that he ran away in fear. Both imply that his non-samurai status was a factor, because even the positive interpretation involves his being chosen for the mission because, as a non-samurai, 'he didn't really count'.

Terasaka's absence from the bloody denouement of the raid explains why certain contemporary commentators on the Forty-Seven Ronin write about

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Suicide of Kayano Shigezane, the '48th Ronin'

46 ronin. Indeed it was only 46 men who committed suicide afterwards, although the exclusion of Terasaka is certainly not a view held within the centres of commemoration and ronin tourism that exist today. In the Kagakuji in Banshu-Ako, for example, the face on Terasaka Kichiemon's statue is as fiercely determined as any of his colleagues, and he is dressed identically to them. In popular culture at least the expression 'The Forty-Seven Ronin' is almost universal, a trend that was set in stone when the first plays about the incident began to be written and it was realized that 47 was something of a 'magical number' because it was the number of phonetic characters in the Japanese *hiragana* syllabary. In other words, there was one ronin for every letter of the alphabet, which was somehow fitting. In Donald Keene's translation of the puppet version of *Chushingura* we read, 'They wear black cloaks and breeches of mail, and breastplates over their loyal hearts. Truly these men form a copybook of loyalty', the last sentence referring to this mystical number written in a *kanadehon*, a book of phonetic characters.

However, this discussion must not conclude without a brief mention of a possible 48th ronin, and a count of the fine wooden statues in the Kagakuji in Banshu-Ako reveals that there are in fact 48 effigies. Yet instead of being depicted in the rough-and-ready suits of armour of the others, the statue of the 48th, depicting Kayano Sanpei Shigezane, is wearing court robes and is only half the size of the others. He is included first of all because he was one of the two men who took the earliest news of Asano's death to Ako. Yet long before the raid took place, Kayano, who was already one of the conspirators, was under pressure to accept adoption into another family. Being unable to choose between two conflicting claims on his samurai duty, he committed suicide on the anniversary of Asano's death a full 11 months before the raid was carried out.

As far as the Kagakuji is concerned, Kayano's suicide entitled him to be included in their number, and this is reflected in popular drama. In the puppet theatre version of *Chushingura*, Oishi Kuranosuke brings out a wallet of cloth, a personal memento of Kayano, which he uses to allow the late

The '48th Ronin' was Kayano Sanpei Shigezane, who committed suicide before the raid took place. He is nonetheless included in the line of statues at the Kagakuji, Banshu-Ako, even though his depiction, at small scale and in court robes, is intended to show that he was dead. On his right is Kakizaki (Senzaki) Yogoro Noriyasu.

Kayano to become the second person in their group to burn incense in memory of Asano. This was also the attitude taken by the great print artist Kuniyoshi, because the dead Kayano is to be found in his fine series of *Chushingura* prints, wielding a spear as one of the Forty-Seven Ronin. His face and hands, however, are printed without any colour, indicating that he was there as a ghostly presence. As Kuniyoshi did not want to depict 48 ronin instead of the conventional 47, it is the unfortunate *ashigaru* Terasaka who is excluded from the print series.

Opposing the Forty-Seven Ronin during the raid were the almost forgotten yet no less loyal retainers of Kira Yoshihisa. Kira's status as a *koke hatamoto* would have entitled him to a certain military retinue, all of whom would have been present with him in his mansion because he did not have a distant domain to maintain. His stipend of 4,200 *koku* fell in between the two benchmarks of 4,000 *koku* (79 men) and 5,000 *koku* (103 men) set down in the 1649 schedule (the last ever to be issued) for supplying troops to the Shogun. The figures for the lower income bracket of 4,000 *koku* break down as three mounted samurai, nine foot samurai, ten *ashigaru* spearmen, two *ashigaru* archers and five *ashigaru* matchlock musketeers, together with 57 non-samurai weapon-bearers and attendants, all of whom would be armed. For a 5,000 *koku hatamoto*, the figures would be six mounted samurai, nine foot samurai, ten *ashigaru* spearmen, three *ashigaru* archers, five *ashigaru* matchlock and 71 non-samurai individuals. These numbers tally well with the figures contained in an official report into the raid compiled later under the auspices of the *daimyo* of Kuwana, which stated that out of Kira's total household of 180 persons, 17 were killed while 28 were wounded or escaped. Fourteen out of the 17 dead were of samurai status. These figures, and the names behind them, will be discussed further when the raid itself is described, but it must have been appreciated by the Forty-Seven Ronin that they would be outnumbered by two to one, disregarding any possible outside intervention.

The Costume and Armour of the Forty-Seven Ronin

Our overriding impression of the appearance of the Forty-Seven Ronin during their raid depends very much on the image presented by woodblock prints, which are in turn based upon theatrical costumes, through which the warriors are portrayed as lightly armed. This portrayal derives from one of the enduring stories about the time of secrecy spent by the Forty-Seven Ronin, which concerns their covert acquisition and construction of armour and equipment, resulting in a familiar and persuasive visual image of the raiders as lightly clad ninja-like clandestine warriors. Instead of heavy armour they wear mail jackets and simple helmets. There is no use made of artillery or any hand-held firearms, only the swords and spears of the noble samurai.

The question of their weaponry will be discussed in the account of the raid which follows, but the popular image of their costume and armour is not far from the truth, as is confirmed by examining the preserved items of clothing and armour in the shrines and temples associated with them. A. B. Mitford made an early investigation of this, and after presenting his classic

retelling of the Forty-Seven Ronin story in *Tales of Old Japan* he relates a visit he made to the Sengakuji, where a priest used 'a silver key' to admit him to the storehouse in which old wooden chests held mementoes of the raiders and their simple equipment:

> Such a curious medley of old rags and scraps of metal and wood! Home-made chain armour, composed of wads of leather secured together by pieces of iron, bear witness to the secrecy with which the Ronins [*sic*] made ready for their fight. To have bought armour would have attracted attention, so they made it with their own hands. Old moth-eaten surcoats, bits of helmets … tattered trousers of what once was rich silk brocade, now all unravelled and befringed; scraps of leather, part of an old gauntlet, crests and badges…

The Sengakuji museum is one of the three places in Japan where extant fragments of this supposedly home-made armour are preserved and displayed. But was it home-made? Until the ronin were dispersed following the surrender of Ako Castle, there would have been no shortage of armour for use during the Alternate Attendance System, and there would have been armour available for the ronin who had entered the service of other families. But any further subterfuge would require them to obtain armour in secret or

Realistically painted in their light ninja-like armour and simple helmets, the Forty-Seven Ronin prepare to attack the Kira mansion. This is a detail from a painting in the museum in Banshu-Ako. The basis of the Forty-Seven Ronin's defensive costume would appear to have been a light body protection made from mail armour over a cloth backing.

Isogai (Isoai) Juro(za)emon Masahisa, one of the Forty-Seven Ronin, is shown in this print by Kuniyoshi wielding a *naginata* (glaive).

even to manufacture it, both processes being made easier by the fact that the armour was not intended as a complete defence but as a light form of protection that would not hinder their swift movements in any way.

The basis of the Forty-Seven Ronin's defensive costume would appear to have been a light body protection made from mail over a cloth backing. Japanese mail, found frequently on the sleeves of elaborate suits of armour, is much less dense than European mail and consists of an almost two-dimensional array of tiny intersecting lacquered iron rings, although some surviving specimens of Forty-Seven Ronin armour do indeed look home-made, as they include coins fastened together. The cloth below would be of double thickness with an inner padded lining, sewn with a seam. Long-sleeved jackets made in this way protected the torso. A *nodowa* (throat guard) may have been included. Tight fitting patterned *ko-bakama* trousers, similar to those worn for riding, were worn on the legs, and mail inserts or thigh guards may well have been worn underneath. The calves were protected by *suneate* or shin guards, which were simple cloth gaiters fitted with long splints of iron. Socks and straw sandals were worn on the feet.

The Forty-Seven Ronin's arms were protected by wearing a pair of *kote*, the usual form of sleeve armour, which was a cloth bag with mail on the outer surface reinforced with lacquered iron plates at the elbows, forearms and hands. Over these and the padded jacket was worn a loose *haori*, a short-sleeved cloth outer jacket not unlike a judo suit. The jacket was pulled in at the waist with a stout belt, into which were thrust the scabbards of the two swords that indicated their status as samurai. The sleeves of the *haori* would be tied back to allow freedom of movement when the wearer went into action by using a *tasuki*, a crossed-over cloth band.

On their heads, the ronin attackers appear to have worn a variety of simple helmet bowls almost identical to ordinary samurai armour, but with the omission of the *shikoro* or neckguard. In its place was a heavy cloth and mail hood that fastened beneath the chin or below the eyes with buttons that could also be used to tie it back. It was reinforced with a leather hem. This

modification, however, does not necessarily suggest that their headwear was home-made, because a helmet made like this with a hood was standard issue for wearing when fighting a fire. In fact, the entire ensemble of jackets and hoods made from mail on a cloth backing, all of which makes the Forty-Seven Ronin costume look like the 'ninja armour' so beloved by Japanese museums, is very similar to protective clothing that would be standard issue for any samurai who may have had to attend one of the periodic conflagrations that occurred in Edo. No suspicion would be attached to its possession, only to the obvious one of wearing of it when there was no fire. Oishi Kuranosuke is usually depicted wearing an elaborate multi-plate fire helmet.

In *Chushingura* and in the usual prints, the only modification made to this sombre and practical costume is to make it look more elaborate and colourful. The short *haori* jacket therefore becomes a wider or longer garment with a characteristically bold design of a series of white triangles along the edge and the individual ronin's name along the turnbacks. The *ko-bakama* are sometimes replaced by the wider *hakama* that look like a divided skirt, and the ronin are shown more bravely as bare-headed warriors with only the samurai's white *hachimaki* (headband) around their foreheads. Each of the Forty-Seven Ronin in the prints has a clearly defined weapon, sometimes his main fighting sword (*katana*), but in other cases a bow, spear or other edged weapon, as will be discussed below.

Finally, we may note that the costume worn by most of the defenders of the Kira mansion consisted of little more than the light kimono robes, tied in by a sash, in which they slept, augmented perhaps by a jacket pulled on hurriedly when the surprise attack began. It is reasonable to suppose that some were on guard duty and awake, but they would have had no time to don armour. We may also not unreasonably assume that because of the raid situation, the strict Japanese custom regarding footwear was turned on its head; the Forty-Seven Ronin wore sandals indoors, while the unfortunate Kira men went barefoot in the snow. Totally unprotected, they faced the swords and spears of the Forty-Seven Ronin out in the snow-covered courtyard.

The retainers of Kira defend the mansion against the Forty-Seven Ronin, from a hanging scroll in the Oishi Shrine. The defenders are shown accurately in their night attire, having been surprised by the raid.

The Plan of Attack

In the two months prior to the raid, the Forty-Seven Ronin moved to Edo, journeying there separately and at different times so as not to arouse suspicion, and taking up secret residence in 'safe houses'. Otaka Gengo, one of the conspirators, wrote a farewell letter to his mother, stating that the deed he was about to perform was in accordance with everything he had been taught about the samurai life, because 'since ancient times, in both China and our land alike, it has been contrary to the way of the warrior to leave one's enemy at peace'. Five days before the raid, Yokogawa Kanpei wrote another farewell letter in which he recognized that 'tears are the lot of a warrior'. None of the Forty-Seven Ronin was under any illusion about the probable fate that awaited him.

Even allowing for theatrical exaggeration, the wealth of authentic detail that survives about the Forty-Seven Ronin enables us to reconstruct the final plans for the raid with a reasonable degree of confidence. Legend tells us that the detailed and secret preparations included one of the Forty-Seven Ronin marrying the daughter of the builder of Kira's *yashiki* (mansion) so that they could obtain a copy of the plans. Every entrance and exit was therefore known, as was the probable location of the guards and even of Kira's daily movements, because Otaka Gengo had become a pupil of Kira's own master of the tea ceremony.

However it was obtained, this was all vital information, because the first important factor influencing Oishi's operation was the layout and immediate environment of Kira's residence. He had lived in two different locations before and, fortunately for the Forty-Seven Ronin, the third and final site for the Kira mansion allowed more of an element of surprise than its previous environments would have done. It lay across the Sumida River from Edo Castle and was bounded only one block away on its southern side by a smaller river called the Katagawa. The location meant that any relief from the south or the west would have to cross two bridges, which could be guarded.

The Kira mansion was one of the many *daimyo* residences that provided the dominant architectural feature of contemporary Edo, and they encircled the Shogun's castle as a massive irregular external defence line. Yet even though the mansions of the *daimyo* may have occupied a great deal of surface area, little space was wasted between them, so lords would find themselves to be very close neighbours, perhaps separated by only a narrow lane or even just a garden wall. This was Edo, after all, where all the Shogun's loyal *daimyo* and *hatamoto* had to have a permanent residence, so the Kira mansion lay within a typically tight grid pattern delineated only by natural features such as water courses. On the northern side of the Kira *yashiki* were the mansions of the Tsuchiya and the Honda, which were divided from the Kira mansion by only a wall. To the east and north-east respectively, across narrow streets, lay the mansions of the Makino and the Torii, while in the equivalent space on the west lay two temples: the Daitoku-In and the Eko-In. The latter survives today and is the temple favoured by sumo wrestlers, whose training bases are nearby. The small memorial garden called Matsusaka Park lies in a

Otaka Gengo Tadatake in action with a spear in a print series by Kuniyoshi. Otaka Gengo is famous for having written a farewell letter to his mother prior to the raid. In the Kira courtyard he fought against Kobayashi Heihachiro, one of Kira's leading swordsmen.

position one quarter of the way along the former northern wall of the Kira mansion, where it abutted the Tsuchiya *yashiki*.

In common with every other *daimyo* mansion in Edo, the Kira mansion presented from the outside the aspect of a forbidding barracks, with long, high and very plain outside walls presenting an almost unbroken frontage. These castle-like walls were indeed the outer surface of the *nagaya* (barracks), the military quarters of a Kira's *ashigaru* that provided the outer line of defence for the palatial living quarters that lay within. A *nagaya* was built upon low stone foundations and was separated by a narrow ditch from the street outside. Only barred windows and the occasional gate broke the monotony of the line.

The overall area of ground occupied by any mansion complex was determined by the owner's rank, so that even though Kira Yoshihisa received only a *hatamoto*'s stipend, his role as Master of Shogunal Ceremonies entitled him to a fine residence. Orientated almost exactly in accordance with the points of the compass, the east–west axis of the outer wall was 132m long, with the north–south line at 61m, so that the Kira mansion occupied a large rectangle that covered a total surface area of about 0.8 hectares. There were two sturdy but unprepossessing gates located respectively in the middle of the eastern and the western walls. Within these bounds lay a wide gravelled courtyard around a complex interlocking area of living quarters, official buildings and inner walled gardens. The palatial living quarters occupied a long contiguous position in the centre of the courtyard.

The Final Dispositions

The second factor influencing Oishi's plans was the need for speed, so that the raid could be accomplished before any of Kira's kinsmen arrived with reinforcements and the Forty-Seven Ronin became trapped inside the mansion. Surprise was also essential if they were to overcome the odds within the mansion itself. With the knowledge of the layout and numbers in mind, Oishi Kuranosuke chose his points of attack, dividing his team into two equally sized groups who would enter by the eastern (rear) and western (front) gates. The 47th ronin, the *ashigaru* Terasaka, was also assigned to the back gate. At each station some ronin were to secure the gates, others the immediate area of the courtyard, while two selected groups were given the task of entering the domestic buildings of the mansion from the two sides.

Kurahashi Densuke Takeyuki is seen here carrying a ladder, the first means of entry to the Kira mansion. From a wooden statue in the Kagakuji, Banshu-Ako.

The traditional version of the final organization and weaponry of the Forty-Seven Ronin is summarized in the accompanying table. To the name of each historical person I have appended the stage name (usually only the surname is changed) so that a cross-reference may be made with their depiction in prints or in the theatre. There is a considerable element of poetic licence in the assignment of weaponry, as may be noted when comparing the weapons borne by individual ronin on statues and in different print series, but the proportion of different types of arms is probably about right.

In Kuniyoshi's *Chushingura* print series, each man is given a biography that is a mixture of fact and fiction. On the fact side we may note how family relationships mattered in terms of successive generations serving the Asano, so that the three men named Hazama were a father (Kihei) and

Maseki (Mase) Yudayu Masaaki, was one of the commanders of the Forty-Seven Ronin whom Oishi stationed at the front gate of Kira's mansion. He is shown here as an expert swordsman in a *Chushingura* print series by Yoshitora.

two sons. Maseki Yudayu Masaaki was the father of Maseki Magokuro, while Horibe Yahei Akizane (at 76 the oldest of the Forty-Seven Ronin) was the father-in-law of Horibe Yasubei Taketsune, who had changed his name on marriage.

Three men at each station held positions of command. At the front gate Oishi Kuranosuke was in overall charge assisted by Hara Soemon Mototoki and Maseki Yudayu. Five ronin took up guard positions at the front entrance, while six others secured the courtyard and a further nine prepared to burst in to the living quarters. At the rear gate authority was exercised by Oishi's second-in-command Yoshida Chuzaemon Kanesuke, assisted by Onodera Junai Hidekazu and Hazama Kihei Mitsunobu. Eleven ronin under Oishi Chikara Yoshikane, Kuranosuke's 15-year-old son and the youngest of the Forty-Seven

Unit during raid	Name	Variation of name in plays and prints	Weapons traditionally used (Note: 1 *shaku* = 1 foot; 1 *sun* = 1 inch)
Front gate command	Oishi Kuranosuke Yoshio (Yoshitaka)	Oboshi Yuranosuke	*Saihai* (war fan) and drum *Jumonji yari* (cross-bladed spear)
	Hara Soemon Mototoki	Hara Goemon	*Dora* (gong) *Jumonji yari*
	Maseki Yudayu Masaaki	Mase	*Kagiyari* (hooked spear)
Guard at front gate	Horibe Yahei Akizane	Oribe	*Suyari* (straight-bladed spear; 8 *shaku 2 sun*)
	Yokogawa Kampei Munetoshi	Yukukawa	*Katana* (long sword)
	Muramatsu Kibei Hidenao	Uramatsu	*Kagiyari*
	Kaigaya Zaemon Tomonobu	Kaida	*Teyari* (hand-spear; 6 *shaku*)
	Okano Kinemon Kanehide	Okano	*Jumonji yari*
Attack unit inside mansion (front gate)	Kataoka Gengoemon Takafusa	Kataoka	*Jumonji yari*
	Tominomori Suke'emon Masayori	Tominomori	*Jumonji yari* (with short poem appended)
	Takebayashi Tadashichi Takashige	Takemori	*Omi yari* (long-handled spear)
	Okuda Magodayu Shigemori	Tokuda	*Nagamaki* (long-bladed, long-handled polearm)
	Yada Goroemon Suketake	Yata	*Katana*
	Katsuta Shinzaemon Taketaka	Katsuta	*Suyari*
	Yoshida Sawaemon Kanesada	Yoshida	*Katana*
	Okajima Yasoemon Tsuneki	Okashima	*Hashigo* (ladder)
	Onodera Koemon Hidetomi	Onodera	*Hashigo*, *katana*
Guard outside mansion but within courtyard (front gate)	Hayami Tozaemon Mitsutaka	Hayami	*Yumi* (longbow)
	Kanzaki Yogoro Noriyasu	Senzaki	*Hankyu* (small bow; with short poem appended)
	Yato Uemonshichi Norikane	Yato	*Kagiyari*
	Otaka Gengo Tadakatsu	Otaka	*Hashigo, nagamaki*
	Chikamatsu Kanroku Yukishige	Shikamatsu	*Gando chochin* (lantern)
	Hazama Jujiro Mitsuoki	Yazama	*Hashigo, jumonji yari*
Rear gate command	Yoshida Chuzaemon Kanesuke	Yoshida	*Saihai, kagiyari*
	Onodera Junai Hidekazu	Onodera	*Kagiyari*
	Hazama Kihei Mitsunobu	Yazama	*Jumonji yari* (with short poem appended)
Attack unit inside mansion (rear gate)	Isogai Jurozaemon Masahisa	Isoai	*Suyari*
	Horibe Yasuhei Taketsune	Oribe	*Odachi* (extra long sword; 3 *shaku* blade)
	Kurahashi Densuke Takeyuki	Kurahashi	*Katana*
	Sugino Jubeiji Tsugifusa	Sumino Tsugufusa	*Kakeya* (mallet)
	Akabane Genzo Shigekata	Sakagaki	*Katana*
	Sugaya Hannoju Masatoshi	Sugenoya	*Katana*
	Oishi Sezaemon Nobukiyo	Oboshi	*Ono* (axe)
	Muramatsu Sandayu Takanao	Uramatsu	*Suyari*
	Mimura Jirozaemon Kanetsune	Miura	*Kakeya*

Ronin, would secure the rear courtyard and the gates, while nine more entered the mansion to meet up with their comrades going in from the front.

The list of personal weapons included in the table was to provoke controversy from future critics of the operation. Each ronin wore two swords – the long *katana* and the shorter *wakizashi* – that were the mark of their class, but only seven appear to have relied upon the *katana* alone as their principal weapon. Horibe Yasubei, for example, was a noted swordsman of the Shinkage School who had already been involved in one vendetta in Edo.

Unit during raid	Name	Variation of name in plays and prints	Weapons traditionally used (Note: 1 shaku = 1 foot; 1 sun = 1 inch)
Guard outside mansion but within courtyard (rear gate)	Oishi Chikara Yoshikane	Oboshi	*Jumonji yari*
	Ushioda Matanoju Takanori	Ushioda	*Kagiyari*
	Nakamura Kansuke Masatoki	Nakamura	*Jumonji yari*
	Okuda Sadaemon Yukitaka	Yokuda	*Nagamaki*
	Maseki Magokuro Masatoki	Mase	*Jumonji yari*
	Semba Saburohei Mitsutada	Chiba	*Hankyu*
	Kayano Wasuke Tsunenari	Hayano Tsunenari	*Hankyu* (ya ni meiari – inscribed arrowhead)
	Hazama Shinroku Mitzukaze	Yazama	*Hankyu*
	Kimura Okaemon Sadayuki	Kiura	*Kagiyari*
	Fuwa Kazuemon Masatane	Fuwa	*Kagiyari*
	Maebara Isuke Munefusa	Aihara	*Ono*
Other	Terasaka Kichiemon Nobuyuki	Teraoka	Sent away on mission
	Kayano Sanpei Shigezane	Hayano Kampei Tsuneyo	Committed suicide prior to raid

Other edged weapons that may have been deployed included long and short spears, cross-bladed spears, hooked spears, *naginata* (glaives) and *nagamaki* (a polearm similar to a *naginata*, but with a long blade and an equally long handle), although the opinion over who used precisely which weapon seems to depend on the whim of the print-maker or playwright, as the illustrations selected for this book clearly demonstrate. Nevertheless, the fact that the majority were armed with less 'samurai-like' weapons such as spears was later to provoke criticism on the grounds that this proved that their skills as swordsmen were deficient. Such a strange conclusion was drawn by 'armchair samurai' of the Edo Period who had forgotten that the primary weapon of choice throughout the time of civil war had been either a spear or a bow, with the famous samurai sword relegated to a secondary position.

The specific criticism about the inclusion of missile weapons – in the form of bows – introduced a further dimension. Oishi arranged archers as sharpshooters to pick off any of Kira's retainers who might try to flee from the scene and warn neighbours who might help them, and to some commentators this was evidence of cowardice on the part of the Forty-Seven Ronin. Hayami Tozaemon Mitsutaka, a noted archer, was one of these sharpshooters. As for other implements, two ronin carried heavy wooden mallets for breaking down gates or doors if necessary, which was also the likely function intended for the ronin who wielded a large axe. Two ronin carried ladders and one had a dark lantern, a simple device consisting of a metal cylinder with a brightly polished inner surface in which was fitted a

Yoshida Sawaemon Kanesada was the son of the second-in-command Yoshida Chuzaemon Kanesuke, and is shown here armed with an axe, probably intended for breaking down doors. From a wooden statue in the Kagakuji, Banshu-Ako.

Takebayashi Tadashichi Takashige, who was among the group selected to enter Kira's mansion from the front gate, is shown here wielding a mallet against a sword in this print series by Yoshitora.

candle on a pivot. This would be used for identifying Kira when he was found. The two commanders Oishi and Yoshida held the traditional *saihai*, the tasselled baton of command carried by a general in battle. Oishi is also always represented with a drum that was the signal to move in to the attack. The signal to indicate that Kira had been found was the blowing of a bamboo whistle, so one may presume that a whistle was issued to each of the raiders.

Oishi Kuranosuke planned the final moves with military precision. It was made clear to all that the objective of the raid was not to cause slaughter and mayhem within the Kira household, but to take the head of Kira Yoshihisa. It was fully anticipated that Kira would try to hide or even disguise himself, so whoever managed to locate him was to blow his whistle as a signal so that identification could be made. Kira Yoshihisa would then be beheaded and his head taken as a trophy to be laid in front of the tomb

Otaka Gengo Tadatake, one of the Forty-Seven Ronin, is depicted here with a dark lantern, a simple device involving a candle on a swivel inside a polished cylinder. From a wooden statue in the Kagakuji, Banshu-Ako.

of Asano Naganori at the Sengakuji. Their duty done, the Forty-Seven Ronin would then report their deed to the authorities and accept whatever punishment might come their way.

The final list of instructions for the raid stated that if the Shogun's troops intervened while the raid was in progress the Ronin should refuse to exit the mansion until their objective had been attained and Kira was dead. They would then surrender themselves to the authorities. If, having completed the raid unmolested, a neighbouring *daimyo* should intervene, they were to provide no resistance but reveal their purpose and seek sanctuary in the adjacent Eko-In temple, where they would await the arrival of the authorities. If there was no intervention they were to rendezvous at the Eko-In when the task was completed, and if refused admittance they would instead assemble at the end of the Ryogoku Bridge before setting off for the Sengakuji. The final item on the list reminded the Forty-Seven Ronin that they should expect to die and not heed the consequences. One other item remained unwritten. If they should fail to find Kira or, having found him, fail to take his head, then they would perform an act of mass suicide.

This is the actual dark lantern used during the raid. It is preserved in the Oishi Shrine, Banshu-Ako.

THE RAID

The Night Attack

For reasons that are both legal and technical, the Revenge of the Forty-Seven Ronin may not be the classic example of an act of revenge, but its status as the greatest raid in Japanese history is unchallengeable. Having made themselves acquainted with the precise layout of Kira's mansion and laid the plans set out above, the Forty-Seven Ronin left their temporary residences in Edo and moved to their appointed stations at the front and back gates. In the eloquent words of Mitford, 'when the whole world was hushed, and peaceful men were stretched in sleep upon their mats', they waited in the subdued quietness of the winter snow for the moment to advance.

It is almost impossible to disentangle fact from fiction within what happened during the next few hours, but their immediate intention was crystal clear and was written down in a manifesto that they carried with them into battle. This testimony cited the ancient principle that a man cannot live under the same heaven as the killer of his lord or father, thus putting the demands of samurai tradition before the letter of the Tokugawa law. They were there to avenge Asano Naganori. As Oishi puts it in his speech to his fellow conspirators in the *kabuki* version of *Chushingura*, 'Our hatred of our lord's sworn enemy is piled up like this white snow. This evening we attack to avenge our lord. We will need enough force to move a mountain. The pure snow will both wipe away our disgrace and muffle our voices.'

30 JANUARY 1703

The Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin takes place

The raid began in almost total silence. It would appear that an entry at the front gate was made first by means of ladders, and four men climbed over into the immediate area of the courtyard to discover the entire household sound asleep. Hara Soemon Mototoki was one of the four, and injured himself by falling, one of the few casualties sustained by the Forty-Seven Ronin during the entire raid. The guard of the gatehouse was also asleep, so the ronin woke him and demanded the keys for the gate. The terrified man explained that the keys were kept within the inner mansion, so one of the heavy mallets carried by the raiders was used to smash the large wooden locking bolt, and the gate was forced open. A similar entry was

The gatekeeper of the Kira mansion is pinned to the ground as the raid begins. In the rear, lit by moonlight, some of the Forty-Seven Ronin scale the walls. The gatekeeper was one of the innocent non-samurai victims of the raid.

made at the rear. At this point, Terasaka may have been sent off on his mission to inform the Asano family about what was happening.

When the gates were secured, Oishi sent men (including the injured Hara) to the nearby mansions to assure their inhabitants that the noise they were hearing was not due to burglars, but was the sound of a noble act of revenge taking place. They were carrying out a vendetta directed against one person only, so his neighbours need not fear and certainly should not attempt to intervene. To guard against the latter, Oishi stationed chosen members of his band armed with bows and arrows at rooftop level at four positions round the courtyard. As we have seen, however, their primary role was to cut down anyone from Kira's household who attempted to escape and raise the alarm.

OVERLEAF:
The attack begins
Oishi Kuranosuke, the leader of the Forty-Seven Ronin, is in command at the front gate. Four of his men have climbed into the courtyard, but as no keys are available another of the raiders smashes the lock with a heavy mallet.

Tiny Matsusaka Park in Tokyo marks the site of the northern wall of the *yashiki* (mansion) of Kira Yoshihisa, attacked by the Forty-Seven Ronin. It is one of the few places in Japan that commemorates the heroism of Kira's defenders instead of his attackers.

The other precaution taken, which is not featured in any play, was that after entering the courtyard the Forty-Seven Ronin hammered iron clamps into the door and door frame of the long *nagaya* barracks, where Kira's numerous *ashigaru* and weapon bearers would be sleeping. With these men locked inside and unable to escape, the Forty-Seven Ronin would only have to contend with the samurai retainers inside the living quarters. When the clamps were in place, Oishi beat his drum to order an advance from the courtyard into the mansion itself.

With the designated guard positions covered, the four sub-groups who were to secure the courtyard and the inner quarters rushed through the gates into the dark area of the mansion. The first man in the front gate party to enter the living quarters was Yokogawa Kampei Munetoshi, and when the first Kira defender came out he was cut down. This man was the first victim of the raid, one of 17 almost unknown heroes to be killed, whose bravery in defending Kira Yoshihisa deserves better recognition. No woodblock prints specifically commemorate these men and, in marked contrast to the numerous memorials to the Forty-Seven Ronin, there appears to be only one physical memorial to the defenders. This stands in tiny Matsusaka Park in Tokyo, built on the site of the northern wall of Kira Yoshihisa's mansion to commemorate his loyal retainers, who were to put up a strong and costly resistance against the raid that they had always expected but which their observations had ruled out.

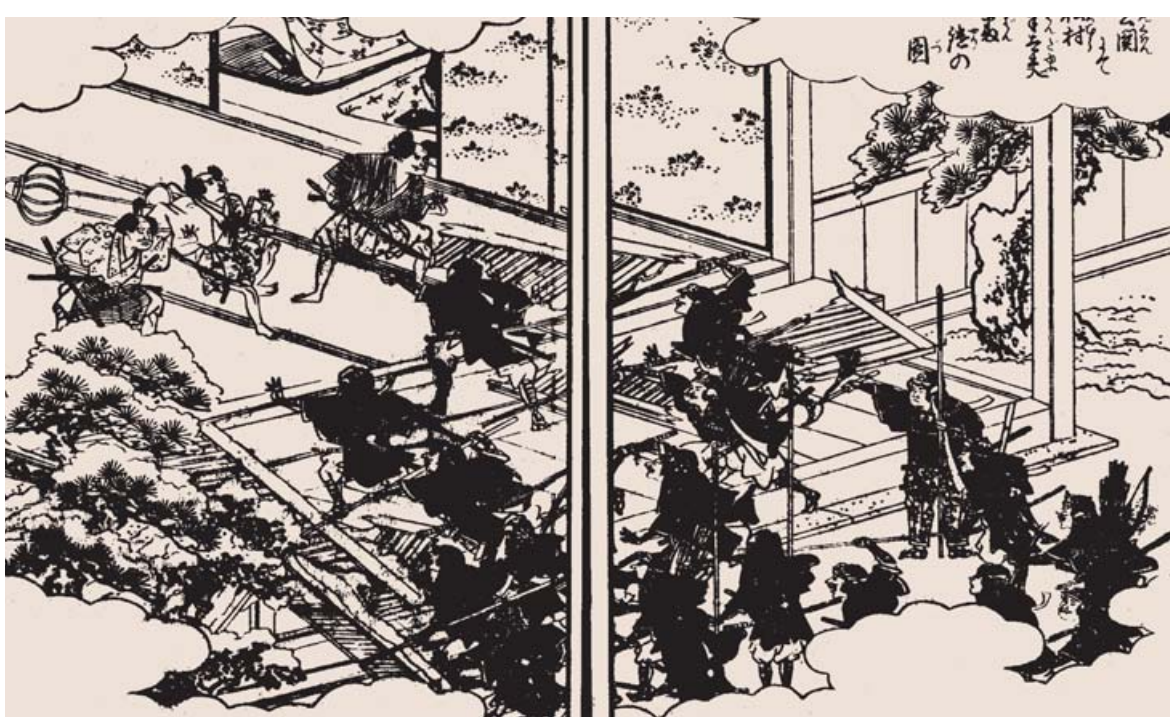
Woken by Oishi's drum or the noise of splintering timber, these men, whose names are listed individually on the memorial, rushed to their posts, seizing weapons as they went, and met the Forty-Seven Ronin coming in. In view of where he was later to be found, Kira Yoshihisa immediately sought a hiding place, so that the initiative in resisting the attack had to be taken by his son Yoshichika, who was to sustain a severe wound. Three of Kira's senior retainers, Kobayashi Heihachiro Hisamichi, Shimizu Ichigaku Yoshihisa and Torii Riemon Masatsugi, fought bravely and were killed, while Kira's *karo* Saito Kunai Tadanaga survived, as did Sayada Magobei Shigetsugi and Yamayoshi Shinhachiro Morihito. Among the total of 14 dead samurai we may also note the names of Niimi Yashichiro, Sudo Yoemon and Sayada Genpachiro. In addition to those from the samurai class, three others died.

Two, named as Suzuki Shochiku and Makino Shunsai, were *chabozu*, a word that literally means 'tea priest', indicating a youth who was a close personal servant. Both took hold of weapons to defend themselves. The other non-samurai to be killed was the unfortunate gatekeeper. Twenty-three of Kira's followers were wounded, including the above-named Yamayoshi Shinhachiro.

By now the two groups of raiding ronin who had entered the house from the back and the front had reunited inside it, where all was chaos. Realizing that they were unlikely to be able to defend the mansion, the surviving retainers of Kira tried to get a message out to their Uesugi allies, but all but four were cut down by arrows from Oishi's marksmen. Among these four was the senior retainer Yamayoshi Shinhachiro, who managed to leave the mansion and reach the Uesugi house.

Even if the stone in Matsusaka Park is the only physical memorial to them, the Kira retainers are nicely commemorated in Act 11 of the *kabuki* version of *Chushingura*, where a series of cameo roles shows them fighting every bit as bravely as the Forty-Seven Ronin. Much of this act consists of a series of dance-like combats choreographed according to the traditions of the *kabuki* theatre, where the antagonists periodically assume a *mie*, the 'freeze-frame' technique whereby the actor rolls his head and finishes with a fixed stare as the action stops for a brief moment. The dramatic expression on the faces of the samurai in the *Chushingura* series is derived from the *mie*.

The first of Kira's samurai to appear in the play has the stage name of Waku Handayu. He takes on three ronin at once and is followed on to the stage by one of the *chabozu*, who throws an ash bucket at his assailant. The

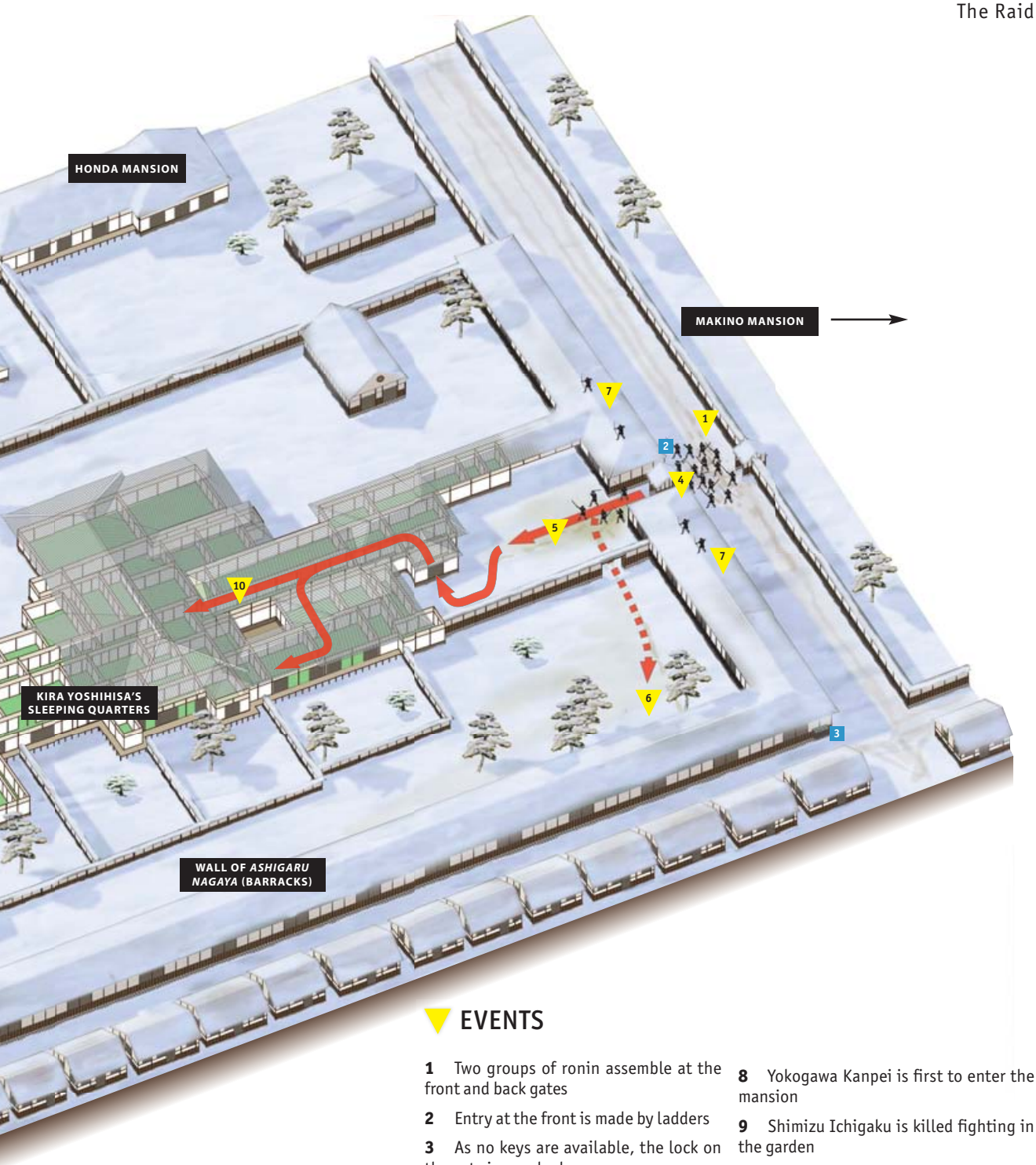


The Forty-Seven Ronin break into the mansion in a spread from *Ehon Chushingura* by Hayami Shungyosai.

THE ASSAULT ON KIRA'S MANSION

30 JANUARY 1703

This bird's eye view is a hypothetical reconstruction of the progress of the raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin, constructed by combining the historical accounts of the events with the likely layout of the Kira mansion within the known dimensions of the site. To the west lie the temples of Eko-In and Daitoku-In, while the mansions of Kira's neighbours surround the area on the other three sides. The Kira mansion itself is enclosed by the *nagaya* (barracks) of the *ashigaru* within the ranks of Kira's retainers.



EVENTS

1 Two groups of ronin assemble at the front and back gates

2 Entry at the front is made by ladders

3 As no keys are available, the lock on the gate is smashed

4 The back gate is also smashed in

5 The two guard groups secure the courtyard

6 The doors of the barracks are secured with iron clamps

7 Archers climb up on to the roof

8 Yokogawa Kanpei is first to enter the mansion

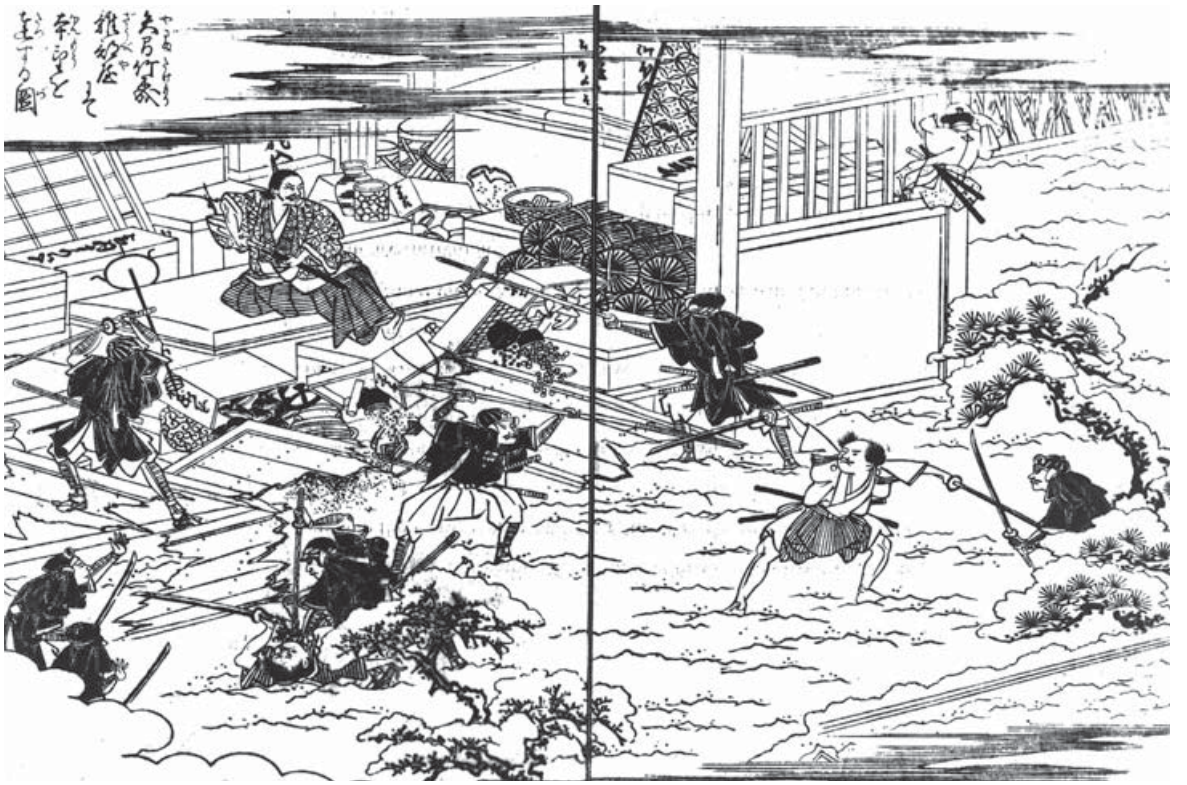
9 Shimizu Ichigaku is killed fighting in the garden

10 Individual combats take place within the living quarters

11 A search is made of Kira's private apartments, but he is nowhere to be found

12 Kira is discovered hiding in the charcoal store

13 Kira is beheaded



The fight in the garden is shown here in a spread from *Ehon Chushingura* by Hayami Shungyosai. Prominent in the defence of the Kira mansion is Kobayashi Heihachiro, although the actual combat was fought by Shimizu Ichigaku.

youth is then cut down, at which his killer expresses grief. In every case the contrast between the well-prepared Forty-Seven Ronin and the Kira retainers, all of whom are wearing their night attire, is a noticeable feature. The scene then changes to the snow-covered garden, where the fight between Kobayashi Heihachiro (which was actually fought by Shimizu Ichigaku) and a series of ronin provides one of the most spectacular combat scenes in all *kabuki* drama. First two ronin, Nakamura Kansuke and Onodera Koemon, arrive to take him on. After a short fight the two ronin go off to look for Kira, leaving their comrade Takebayashi Tadashichi to deal with Kobayashi. Their fight is fast and furious, with drifted snow flying in all directions as the sword combat gives way to a spectacular unarmed *ju-jitsu* bout. Their swords are then reclaimed and Takebayashi ends up falling from the bridge into the garden pond. More ronin led by Horibe Yasubei then appear and the brave Kobayashi is cut down. He finally commits suicide by seizing a ronin's spear and plunging the blade into his side, to fall dead across the small garden bridge. The inclusion of this scene is a fitting memorial to Kira's own loyal defenders. Seventeen of them were killed during the raid, with no serious casualties being sustained by the Forty-Seven Ronin. It is a statistic usually forgotten in accounts of the raid – the attackers killed 18 men, not just one.

The subsequent scene in the play probably represents the reality of the ensuing situation, because the remaining 46 ronin had now secured the house and courtyard. Kira Yoshihisa had not appeared and was nowhere to be found, and no proper search could be mounted as long as the sword combat

Okajima (Okashima) Yasoemon Tsuneki is hit by an ash bucket as he takes on one of Kira's *chabozu* (personal attendants) inside the mansion, in a picture from a *Chushingura* print series by Yoshitora.

continued. Meanwhile, female members of the household and servants were running screaming among the carnage. Three of Kira's closest retainers were standing outside his private quarters, their presence alone suggesting that he may be concealed therein. But had Kira escaped? Could it even be that the raiders' intelligence had been faulty and that he was not actually present? A search of his private quarters reassuringly revealed that the bed clothes were still warm. The popular story tells us that an escape route had been hastily cut through the rear wall, which sounds unlikely, but somehow the ronin were led to a little storehouse for charcoal located in the courtyard. Hazama Jujiro Mitsuoki examined the place, at which point two armed samurai leapt out. Assistance soon arrived, allowing Hazama the opportunity to enter the

OVERLEAF:
The fight in the garden
This plate shows a moment of heroism by one of Kira Yoshihisa's retainers, Kobayashi Heihachiro (although actually fought by Shimizu Ichigaku), one of the most spectacular combat scenes in all *kabuki* drama. Takebayashi Tadashichi takes on Kobayashi. Their fight is fast and furious with drifted snow flying in all directions, and Takebayashi ends up falling from the bridge into the garden pond.

Kira is found hiding inside a charcoal storage shed and is dragged out to await identification. This is a scene from *Chushingura*.

storehouse, where he found an old man. The whistle was blown, and soon Oishi Kuranosuke appeared to examine their quarry. The dark lantern was used to shine light on to his face and his identity was revealed.

In the *kabuki* play, Oishi Kuranosuke then goes down on his knees and explains to Kira who they are and why they are there. Kira is then invited to perform *seppuku*, but being (of course!) such a coward he hesitates so that Oishi is forced to kill him, using, as is only appropriate, the very weapon with which Asano Naganori had been forced to kill himself. The narrator in the puppet play tells us:

> Yuranosuke strikes the first blow, and the forty and more men raise shouts of joy and celebrate, as a blind sea tortoise might rejoice to find a floating log, or as they themselves might rejoice on seeing the flower of the *udonge*, that blooms once in three thousand years.

All we can say for certain is that Kira Yoshihisa was indeed found and decapitated. His head, which may first have been washed (there is a well at the memorial site identified as that in which the head was supposedly washed), was wrapped in Kira's own robe and tied to a spear. It was 3.00am. The first part of their objective had been achieved.

The March to Sengakuji

As the Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin was an action carried out to regain samurai honour on behalf of their dead lord, merely to have killed Kira was not enough. So, pausing only to extinguish all fires in the ghastly scene that the mansion had now become, the Forty-Seven Ronin set off through the dark streets of Edo to walk to the Asano family temple of Sengakuji, a distance of approximately 10km. There they would place the trophy in front of the tomb of their late master.

It may have been at the end of this march that the *ashigaru* Terasaka Kichiemon was sent off on his enigmatic mission, but two more ronin certainly did not go to Sengakuji with the others. They were Yoshida Chuzaemon and Tominomori Suke'emon, who were sent to report the matter to the *bakufu*'s *o-metsuke* (chief inspector) Sengoku Hisanao. Meanwhile, the famous 'March to Sengakuji' began. The route the 44 comrades chose for their epic walk displayed the fear they had that the Uesugi or any other *daimyo* sympathetic to Kira Yoshihisa might attack them on the way and retrieve the head. The Uesugi mansion was located just across the bridge leading to the Sakurada Gate at the south-western corner of Edo Castle, (a place destined to be the site of another assassination in the snow, when Ii Naosuke was cut down there by imperial loyalists in 1860). The distance had been too great for them to intervene during the actual raid, but the Uesugi may well have caught the ronin on the way to Sengakuji. It is probably for this reason that the ronin did not attempt to linger at the Eko-In (which indeed refused them admission in case they performed an act of mass suicide there), but instead gathered briefly at the Ryogoku Bridge and then set off straight for the Sengakuji. To guard against intervention, they made as much of their journey as possible along the eastern

Yokogawa (Yukukawa) Kampei Munetoshi fighting during the raid. His whistle is dislodged as he knocks a lantern to one side with his sword blade. The whistle was to be the signal that Kira had been found. From a modern reprint of a print by Kuniyoshi, in which the accompanying text has been erased.

The head of Kira Yoshihisa, wrapped in a ronin's jacket, is carried over the Eitai Bridge on the way to Sengakuji, in this section of a triptych (three-plate print) depicting the aftermath of the raid.

bank of the Sumida River, placing it between them and Edo Castle as a defence for almost one-third of the march. Avoiding the Shin Ohashi (lit. 'the new great bridge'), they finally crossed the Sumida by the Eitai Bridge, the lowest crossing point, and hugged the sea coast past the Zojoji before ascending the slope of a hill to the Sengakuji. There the head was washed (the well is again identified) and placed reverently in front of Asano's tomb. The 44 ronin knelt and offered incense. Their objective had been achieved, as they stated in the written account (as translated by Mitford) which they left as a moving address to Asano:

The march from Kira's mansion to the temple of Sengakuji.

The head of Kira is presented in front of the tomb of Asano Naganori, from a painting on wood at the Oishi Shrine, Banshu-Ako.

> … we, who have eaten of your food, could not without blushing repeat the verse, 'Thou shalt not live under the same heaven nor tread the same earth with the enemy of your father or lord,' nor could we have dared to leave hell and present ourselves before you in paradise, unless we had carried out the vengeance which you began.

In other words, his retainers saw their act as a continuation of the process of revenge that Asano had started by wounding Kira. That was the essential point for them in the loyalty they still owed to their dead lord. His work had to be finished. There had to be completion. There had to be closure.

> The old and decrepit, the sick and ailing, have come forth gladly to lay down their lives. Men might laugh at us, or as grasshoppers trusting in the strength of their arms, and thus shame our honoured lord; but we could not halt in our deed of vengeance.

Kira's head did not stay long at the Sengakuji because, in recognition of the deep-seated religious belief that a dead person's body should be intact,

The washing of the head of Kira Yoshihisa at the Sengakuji. The well where the washing took place is preserved and lies next to the ronin graveyard.

the priests gave it back to his family for cremation along with the rest of his corpse. The trophy was received by Sayada Magobei and Saito Kunai, who left a written receipt.

Yokogawa (Yukukawa) Kampei Munetoshi sits quietly in a contemplative mood. He is traditionally regarded as the first of the Forty-Seven Ronin to break into the actual living quarters within the Kira mansion. This is a wooden statue in the Oishi Shrine, Banshu-Ako.

Judgment and Punishment

The next act of the drama commenced with the official notification to the *bakufu* that the Forty-Seven Ronin had carried out a vendetta in a manner that had put them outside the law on several counts. They were then arrested and placed into the custody of other *daimyo*. An eye-witness described being struck by the solemnity of the occasion as 1,400 samurai, each carrying lanterns with the light reflected from the fallen snow, prepared to escort away their given charges inside closed palanquins. Seventeen of the ronin, including Oishi Kuranosuke, were taken into the Hosokawa mansion that lay very near to the Sengakuji. The strange discrepancy that there were 46 ronin rather than the 47 that appeared on the original list was explained to the officials by the others as follows. Terasaka Kichiemon had gone with them as far as the gate of the Kira mansion, but had then disappeared and no one knew what had happened to him. This statement, probably designed to allow Terasaka time to complete his mission of informing the Asano family that the raid had gone ahead, was to lead to the accusations that he had fled.

The remaining 46 ronin waited patiently in their places of confinement for what was to be decided, but as all the precedents suggested that they would not escape the death penalty, why had they not performed a further act of samurai honour by disembowelling themselves at the Sengakuji after presenting Kira's head? Could they have been expecting a pardon? Did they even have in mind some bizarre deal whereby their deaths would be accepted by the *bakufu* as a price for restoring the Asano house, which had been Oishi's first objective before revenge was considered? Such questions were to kindle a debate that has lasted to this day.

News of the outrage reached the Shogun's ears very quickly. Yet in contrast to the rapid reaction to Asano's attack on Kira and his speedy death, the official response to Kira's murder was excruciatingly slow, as the Shogun began a lengthy process of consultation. This may have given the Forty-Seven Ronin some hope that a pardon would be forthcoming, and indeed Tsunayoshi's councillors were split on the issue. Some sought to condemn the ronin, while others rushed to praise their noble deed, and the imminent approach of the New Year festivities further delayed any decision being made. Instead the supreme court of the Shogun produced a fudge in the form of an official response that was balanced precariously on the fence between law and duty. Its 14 members began by unanimously criticizing Kira's son Kira Yoshichika and his surviving retainers for not making greater efforts to save their lord. This condemnation was to be related in Isaac Titsingh's 1822 account as 'Kozuke's son, who had been withheld by cowardice from hastening to the assistance of his father although he was then in the palace, was deprived of his post and banished with all his kindred to the island of

8 FEBRUARY 1703

The Shogun's Council debates the incident

20 MARCH 1703

Suicide of 46 of the Forty-Seven Ronin

Awaji.' Yoshichika was indeed deprived of his position, but banished to Shinano province, and Sayada Magobei and Yamayoshi Shinhachiro accompanied him into exile. Kira Yoshihisa's relatives from the Uesugi family were also condemned for not intervening.

As 17 of the Kira men had died in the raid and the Uesugi were located too far away from the Kira mansion to intervene, these extraordinary statements were little more than pathetic attempts to provide balance to any criticism of the Forty-Seven Ronin, who were both condemned for their secret attack and praised for their loyalty. Such was the council's immediate conclusion, and the only firm recommendation they made was that any final judgement should be postponed until after the New Year festivities.

Opinion was also sought from Confucian scholars, who were well-versed in the demands of loyalty and its practical application in the ordered world of the Tokugawa. Their dilemma lay in determining the proper direction in which this loyalty lay. In the Japan of the time of civil war, loyalty had been vested in the samurai's lord, for whom the samurai would fight and die and, if necessary, carry out revenge. Yet even though these values still held true, the focus of loyalty had shifted, not so much in its direction but in the ultimate object of its devotion. Loyalty now passed through the individual

Hazama (Yazama) Shinroku Mitsukaze drops down on one knee in the classic guard position of the swordsman. From a modern reprint of a print by Kuniyoshi, in which the accompanying text has been erased.

daimyo and rested with the lord of all lords, the Shogun, whose laws and wise decrees ensured the harmony to which every loyal samurai aspired. By 1703, clearly, this new model had not yet overtaken the old, even at the highest levels of government, so Tsunayoshi had some moral grounds, if not legal ones, on which he could issue a pardon. It was a course of action he decided not to take.

1710

Pardon issued to Asano Nagahiro

Kaigaya (Kaida) Zaemon Tomonobu shields himself from flying arrows by using a cloth-covered *koto* (the Japanese zither).

Maebara (Aihara) Isuke Munefusa charges forward, swinging his sword and overturns a low screen, behind which women have been hiding smoking pipes. From a modern reprint of a print by Kuniyoshi, in which the accompanying text has been erased.

The sentence pronounced upon the Forty-Seven Ronin was that because of their conspiracy and the consequent breach of the Shogun's peace, they were condemned to death, but that in return for their display of loyalty they were to be permitted to commit the honourable act of *seppuku*. This was no great concession, because if he had denied them this privilege enjoyed by the samurai class and executed them as common criminals, the Shogun would have implied that they were not worthy of their samurai status, which would have been condemnation indeed. What lay behind the judgement and sentence was the need to uphold the law.

The sentence was enacted on the day it was issued, Genroku 16 2m 4d (20 March 1703) and the now-46 ronin cut themselves open within the courtyards of the four *daimyo* mansions in which they were currently confined. Their cremated remains were later interred in the graveyard of the Sengakuji next to the imposing grave of their master Asano Naganori, where they lie to this day.

The Immediate Aftermath

Six years after the raid, the Shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi died. His passing prompted a new mood of sympathy towards the Asano family and their loyal Forty-Seven Ronin, and in 1710 the younger brother Asano Nagahiro was pardoned. He was only made a *hatamoto* with a stipend of 500 *koku*, but the adult heirs of the Forty-Seven Ronin were also pardoned and allowed to return from exile. As if to commemorate the new feeling of approval towards the Forty-Seven Ronin, a bizarre event took place during the funeral of Tokugawa Tsunayoshi at the Zojoji temple. In an extraordinary echo of the Ako Incident, a *daimyo* assigned to help with protocol killed a master of ceremonies. He was immediately sentenced to death by *seppuku*. More remarkable was the contrast between the historical and the fictional Terasaka Kichiemon, the *ashigaru* 47th ronin, who died in 1747 at the ripe old age of 83. He had continued to serve a series of masters in faithful obscurity, in contrast to his alter ego on the *kabuki* stage, who was to be portrayed either as a coward or a secret agent, depending on the script. With his death the curtain came down on the final act of the historical drama. The following year saw the first production of *Chushingura*. The popular drama had just begun.

1747

Death of Terasaka Kichiemon, last survivor of the Forty-Seven Ronin

ANALYSIS

Reactions to the Ronin

The first way by which the revenge of the loyal retainers became known to the public at large would have been by word of mouth. The sight of the victorious and blood-stained avengers marching to the Sengakuji temple to present Kira's head must have provided an unusual spectacle at the very least, so it is not surprising that knowledge of the vendetta spread very rapidly.

Scholars soon added their own interpretation of the events, and considerations of space within this book prevent any more than a basic discussion of the main points, which can be easily followed up using the Further Reading. These comments were far from being universally positive, because accusations of cowardice were levelled against the Forty-Seven Ronin right from the start. Why had they not challenged Kira to a fair fight, or even attempted to cut him down out in the open? Had they chosen the latter course they would almost certainly have been killed themselves immediately afterwards with no chance of a pardon, but that was seen by many as being the noble course. Instead they carried out an underhand and cowardly raid in which 17 other innocent men needlessly lost their lives. They were therefore nothing but a gang of murderers.

The author of *Hagakure* (Hidden Behind Leaves) the classic of *bushido*, also criticized the Forty-Seven Ronin for their delay in acting. A true samurai, he argued, would not have entered into a long conspiracy, but would have attacked Kira immediately in the first flush of righteous anger. The passage in *Hagakure* attacks the Forty-Seven Ronin with these words:

> After their night attack, the ronin of Lord Asano made the mistake in failing to commit *seppuku* at Sengakuji. Furthermore, after having let their lord die, they delayed in striking down his enemy… These Kamigata types [i.e. from central Japan as distinct from sophisticated Edo] are clever and good at doing things that earn them praise … but they are unable to act directly without stopping to think.

Another depiction of Maseki (Mase) Yudayu Masaaki, this time as one of the archers stationed to pick off anyone fleeing the scene. Oishi's use of sharpshooters was to provoke later criticism of the Forty-Seven Ronin as cowardly fighters. This is a print by Kuniyoshi.

The Confucian scholar Ogyu Sorai took the opposite view, but even he saw a limit to their actions. He first contrasted their duty or righteousness and the rule of law:

> By righteousness we mean the path of keeping oneself free from any taint, and by law we mean the measuring rod for the entire country. A man controls his heart with decorum and his actions with righteousness. For the forty-six samurai to have avenged their master on this occasion shows that they are aware of shame, as becomes men who are samurai and since they have followed the path of keeping themselves free from taint, their deed is righteous.

He then brought in the factor of the rule of law:

> However, this deed is appropriate only to their particular group: it amounts therefore to a special exception to the rules. The persons connected with the vendetta considered Kira to be their enemy because Asano Naganori was punished for his disorderly behaviour in the palace, and they deliberately planned an act of violence without official permission. This is not to be tolerated under the law. If the forty-six samurai are pronounced guilty and condemned to commit *seppuku*, in keeping with the traditions of the samurai, the claim of the Uesugi family will be satisfied, and the loyalty of the men will not have been disparaged. This must therefore be considered as a general principle. If general principles are impaired by special exceptions, there will no longer be any respect for the law in this country.

Later generations, of course, came to idolize the Forty-Seven Ronin, and one commentator wrote, 'from scholars, ministers and gentlemen down to cart pullers and grooms, there is no one who does not slap his thighs in admiration'. Although they were officially criminals, they could still be worshipped as loyal and dutiful samurai who sacrificed their lives for a transcendent cause.

Such sentiments, of course, had to be expressed to a background of respect for the rule of law, and for two and a half centuries the Tokugawa family who had condemned them embodied the law. But once the Tokugawa were out of the way after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the Forty-Seven Ronin could be safely honoured at a higher level, and in their own little way they contributed something to the Meiji polity. One of the first acts of the new Meiji Emperor was to send a message to the Sengakuji:

> Yoshio, you and the others resolutely grasped the righteous duty binding a lord and his vassal in exacting revenge and then greeting death according to the law. Even a hundred generations later, people are still inspired by your deeds. I wish to express my deep appreciation and praise to you.

By this endorsement, the Meiji government further repudiated the legal and religious judgement of the hated Tokugawa whom they had replaced. Yamaga Soko's teachings, which had provided some inspiration for the Forty-Seven Ronin, had also been promulgated by Yoshida Shoin, one of the great martyrs of the restoration movement. But apart from settling this score, the Meiji government would go no further in honouring the Forty-Seven Ronin, because the wounding of Kira had occurred during the visit of an imperial envoy, so to some extent the Ako Incident could be seen as insulting to the Emperor. In fact, the founding fathers of modern Japan went further in their indirect criticism of the Forty-Seven Ronin, because in their new world revenge killing was an anachronism that had to be abolished. The imperial decree from the Meiji Emperor to forbid revenge was issued in February 1873, and read as follows:

> According to ancient habits, it was an obligation on a son or younger brother to revenge a father or elder brother, nevertheless, personal interest must not lead one to transgress

> the law and despise the public powers by revenging himself. Whoever so acts cannot be pardoned, the more especially because in that case it is impossible to know who is in the right and who is in the wrong. Therefore, from this day, no one shall have the right to avenge or pass judgement for himself. If unfortunately someone has done wrong towards a member of your family, take your complaint and explanations to the authorities, but do not follow the ancient custom, or you will be punished according to the law.

There were many more decrees to come out of the new Meiji government, such as the abolition of the wearing of pigtails, and restricting the carrying of swords solely to the armed forces, but none would so eloquently reverse the duties and obligations of a previous age than the abolition of a samurai's sacred duty of revenge.

The Forty-Seven Ronin in Art and Literature

Learned comment and scholarly debate about the Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin may have been slow in appearing, but the same cannot be said about the popular reaction, and it is quite amazing how quickly a fictionalized version of the story was attempted by the popular theatre. Stories of revenge killings were already a favoured subject, and within only 12 days of the suicide of Oishi and his companions the Nakamura Theatre in Edo was putting on a play entitled *Akebono Soga no Youchi* (The Dawn Attack by the Soga). No manuscript of the play survives, but although ostensibly concerned with the ancient story of the revenge of the Soga brothers, the speed with which the authorities closed it down after a run of only three days strongly suggests that it presented an account of the Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin. To re-enact contemporary events as though they were historical stories was one way of getting round censorship designed explicitly to protect the Tokugawa Shogunate's reputation and political control, but in this case it failed.

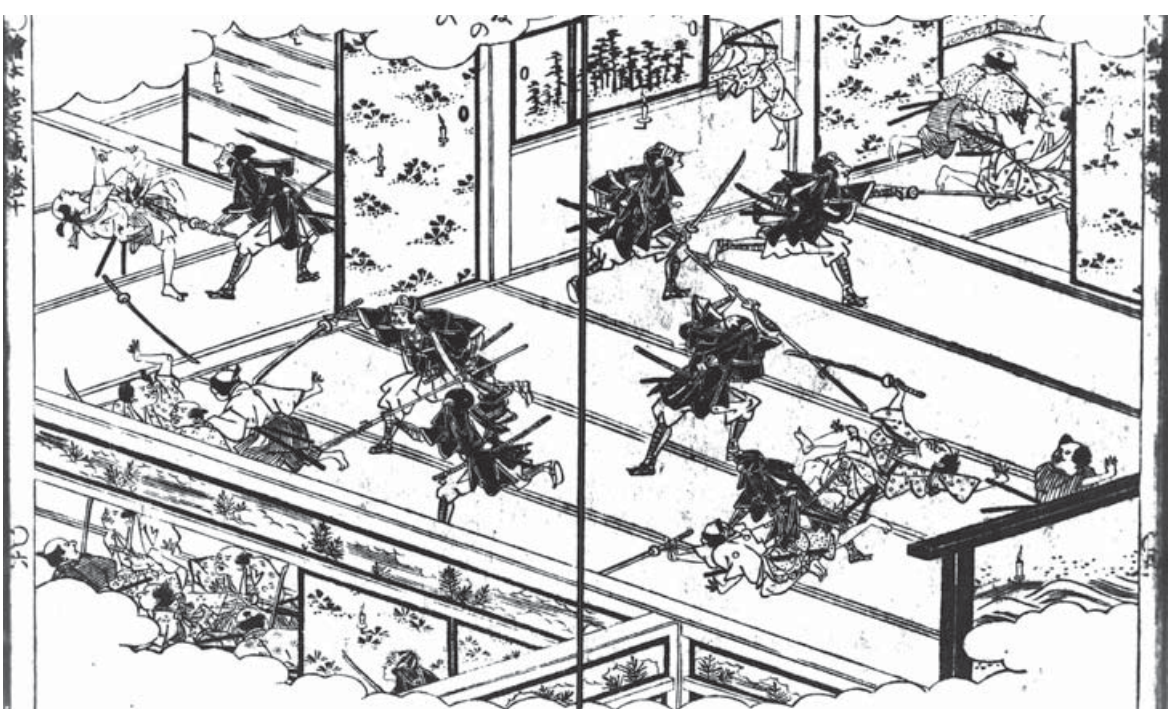
Oishi Chikara was the 15-year-old son of Oishi Kuranosuke. This is a wooden statue of him in the Sengakuji, Tokyo. Like his father, Chikara acquired a new identity when fictionalized versions of the story began to emerge.

Several other unsuccessful attempts to stage the drama in Edo under different guises may have been made at this time, but in 1710 the celebrated dramatist Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1725) succeeded in putting the story on the stage in a way that avoided censorship and set a lasting trend. The Shogun Tsunayoshi had died in 1709, and 1710 saw the reinstatement of Asano Nagahiro, so the time was ripe for a celebration of the Forty-Seven Ronin in a more open manner. Chikamatsu's method, however, was still very cautious. Earlier in 1710 he had written a play for the puppet theatre entitled *Kenko Hoshi*

Monomiguruma (The Sightseeing Carriage of the Priest Kenko). In the play, the hero Kenko (an historical figure) tries to save a court lady from the unwanted attentions of Ko Moronao, a samurai general of the Nambokucho Wars, by persuading him to try to seduce instead the wife of the samurai Enya Hangan. When she rejects Moronao's advances, her husband is denounced as a traitor and made to commit suicide. At this point, the two-act play ends somewhat abruptly. Not long afterwards, however, Chikamatsu added a third act, making the drama into the usual length for such a play, but in a stand-alone form that could be performed separately, as it invariably was from that time on. It was called *Goban Taiheiki*, a strange title that meant that *Taiheiki*, the great chronicle of the 14th-century civil wars, was being re-enacted on a playing board for the game of go.

The plot of *Goban Taiheiki* is unashamedly based upon the Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin. Ko Moronao and Enya Hangan are the main characters, but it is clear that they are Kira Yoshihisa and Asano Naganori. In the opening lines, we are told that a former retainer of Enya has now become a ronin and is known by the name of Oboshi Yuranosuke. That he is really Oishi Kuranosuke would have been immediately appreciated by the audience. His son Chikara becomes Rikiya. The other ronin are given names very similar to the real ones, which were to be retained for subsequent versions of the story. The plot of *Goban Taiheiki* ends with a scene of Moronao being surprised in his mansion by a raid and being beheaded. His head is then offered up at the grave of Enya Hangan.

The success of Chikamatsu in evading the censors, and the continuing interest in the story, prompted several dramatists to produce their own



The fight inside the house from *Ehon Chushingura* by Hayami Shungyosai. Images such as this, which are based on the play *Chushingura* rather than historical accounts, make up the dominant impression of the visual aspect of the raid. However, the confusion shown here as the raiders battle inside the living quarters must be very close to reality.

1748

First performance of *Chushingura*

versions in the years to come. It is a process that continues to this day as movies and television provide continual fresh outlets. By the year 1900, more than 50 full-length dramas of varying quality had been produced, and 40 films have appeared since 1910. The latest Hollywood version of the story, *The Forty-Seven Ronin* (2012) starring Keanu Reeves, is an epic drama that skilfully blends elements from the Japanese spirit world with a greatly modified version of the tale, and is therefore simply following a long and honourable tradition of exaggeration.

The classic example of this hallowed trend is the *kabuki* play *Kanadehon Chushingura* of 1748. The title is usually shortened to *Chushingura* (the treasure house of loyal retainers); *kanadehon* means 'the copy book written in the kana syllabary'. It was written by the three-man team of Takeda Izumo (1691–1756), Miyoshi Shoraku (1696–?) and Namiki Sosuke (1695–1751) and opened on 8m 14d (6 September) 1748 at the Takemoto Puppet Theatre in Osaka. In 1749 there were four versions in repertory: one in Kyoto and three in Edo. *Chushingura* soon became the favourite of the Japanese theatre, a popularity that has endured. Its 11 acts and 18 scenes tell the story of the raid and the death of Ko no Moronao, the arch-villain in the *kabuki* repertoire. Its battles, sub-plots and drama were brought to life by generations of star *kabuki* actors, whom people flocked to see. These luminaries soon began a tradition of introducing personal variations and tricks into the text, yet always based on the sound premise that Oishi Kuranosuke was the personification of the ideal samurai, who had maintained his duty of loyalty and service in spite of the temptations and decadence of the age. *Chushingura* contained no criticism of the Tokugawa regime, nor was it in any way subversive. Instead it glorified a samurai ideal otherwise seen as being in decline, stressing virtues of loyalty and honour. The authors nevertheless hedged their bets by beginning the plays with words of praise for the Tokugawa Shogunate, an inclusion that would be found objectionable in the Meiji Period.

The popularity of *Chushingura* continued into the 20th century, a time when the traditional martial virtues were being revisited to provide a justification for Japanese aggression overseas. The view of Oishi as a man inspired by righteousness and admirable ideas found particular expression in a version of the play written in the 1930s by Mayama Seika. His *Genroku Chushingura* was written at a time when Japan was actively engaged in war against China, so these samurai ideals found ready expression as a justifiable motivation for such actions. If the people of the Genroku era looked to the loyal retainers for proof that the ideals of *bushido* still existed, then so much more did the audiences of Japan in the 1930s. The continuing popularity of the classic story indicates that there is still a similar thirst in the 21st century, if for somewhat different reasons.

Sites and Memorials

The Forty-Seven Ronin are so popular in Japan that memorials associated with them can crop up in the most unexpected places. For example, the Nichirinji temple in Yamaga (Kumamoto prefecture) houses a shrine to the Forty-Seven

The Oishi Shrine in Banshu-Ako is the most lavish site in all Japan for the commemoration of the Forty-Seven Ronin. The approach to the shrine gateway is lined by stone statues of the heroes, while artefacts such as the actual whistle that was blown when Kira was discovered are on show in two display halls. The shrine also owns a series of beautiful and very lifelike modern wooden carvings that provide an interesting contrast to the more theatrical statues in the Sengakuji.

Ronin because one of them was associated with the town. Apart from these examples, the Forty-Seven Ronin are commemorated in two locations: Tokyo and Banshu-Ako, the modern name for the castle town of the Asano *daimyo*. Both places host annual festivals that include parades of the Forty-Seven Ronin, and both ignore the reality of the lunar calendar by stubbornly celebrating the event on 14 December rather than at the end of January.

The sites associated with the incident in Tokyo may be conveniently visited by following the course of the 'March to Sengakuji' through the modern city, a journey of about 10km. The starting point is Matsusaka Park, the site of the northern wall of Kira's mansion. The nearest station is Ryogoku on the Sobu Line, which is very close to the splendid Edo-Tokyo Museum. The park, a small garden enclosed by reproduction white plaster walls, contains a shrine, memorials and information boards. Most noticeable is a memorial to the Seventeen Loyal Retainers of Kira Yoshihisa, whose names are all listed. From here one heads west past the Eko-In to reach the Sumida River and walks along the eastern bank, which has been attractively landscaped with a pedestrians-only walkway and foliage. A short diversion is required to cross the Mannen Bridge over the Katagawa, where a statue of the poet Matsuo Basho gazes in the general direction of Mount Fuji. Just before crossing the Eitai Bridge over the Sumida River, there is a memorial to the fact that it was there the Forty-Seven Ronin, carrying Kira's head, rested on their way to Sengakuji. From the Eitai Bridge one has a dramatic view of modern skyscrapers, then it is mainly quite low-rise buildings as the route continues over the Kamejima Bridge. Beside this bridge is a monument to Horibe Yasubei. One then walks in the general direction of Hatchobori station and on along what was the old sea coast of the city of Edo, near to the famous Tsukiji Fish Market. The next landmark is the Zojoji temple, overlooked by the Tokyo Tower. The walk then continues through a commercial district until one is conscious of high ground over to the right. There, by Sengakuji station, stands the Sengakuji temple.

The Sengakuji is the centre for Forty-Seven Ronin interest in Tokyo, and a visit is very rewarding. The temple itself is undistinguished, but the graves of Asano Naganori and the Forty-Seven Ronin, always busy with worshippers burning incense, are a sight in themselves. In addition, there is a fine statue of Oishi Kuranosuke and two museums. The main museum includes a short DVD presentation (an English commentary may be requested) which tells the story very well. Inside the museum are scrolls and mementos of the Forty-Seven. In another building across the courtyard are displayed some lively and stylized wooden images of them.

Banshu-Ako, located between Kobe and Okayama, is an unremarkable Japanese town except for its association with the Forty-Seven Ronin, a link it celebrates enthusiastically. All the sites are well presented and lie within easy walking distance of each other. Oishi Kuranosuke's statue stands outside the station, from where it is a short walk to the well where the messengers from Edo refreshed themselves as they brought the sad news to Ako Castle of Asano's death. The nearby Kagakuji is the family temple of the Asano in Ako, and here may be found another set of graves of the Forty-Seven Ronin; these graves attract far less attention than those at the Sengakuji. In an adjoining building are some strikingly painted wooden statues of the ronin, while in another small museum are scrolls, prints and other mementoes of the deed. The focus on the Forty-Seven Ronin in Ako is, however, the elaborate and wealthy Oishi Shrine, built in 1912 next to the restored outer wall of Ako Castle. The approach to the shrine gateway is lined by stone statues of the heroes, while artefacts such as the actual whistle that was blown when Kira was discovered are on show in two display halls. The shrine also owns a series

The monument to Kira's own loyal retainers in Matsusaka Park, Tokyo.

The souvenir shop at the Sengakuji in Tokyo, the temple of the Forty-Seven Ronin that has become a shrine to *bushido*. Here are books, dolls, bells and small versions of the drum traditionally used by Oishi Kuranosuke to start the raid.

of beautiful and very lifelike modern wooden carvings that provide an interesting contrast to the more theatrical statues in the Sengakuji. Needless to say, the tourist's every need is catered for, and I finished my visit to Ako by lunching on a bowl of Ronin Ramen (soup noodles) and purchased a present for my granddaughter in the form of a towel depicting each of the Forty-Seven Ronin in the guise of the children's character 'Hello Kitty'.

In complete contrast to Tokyo and Banshu-Ako, stands the rarely visited Rinzai Zen temple of Kezoji in the town of Kira in Aichi prefecture. Here, in the family temple of the Kira family not far from the city of Okazaki, every well-known aspect of the story is challenged. The memorials in the graveyard tell the story of the family's fine history, while in the grounds is a small chapel containing three effigies of Kira Yoshihisa at the ages of 10, 30 and 60, every bit the noble lord. Behind the main hall of the temple is an exquisite Japanese garden, where I sat peacefully with a cup of tea while a priest calmly explained to me how everything I had ever read about the Forty-Seven Ronin was complete nonsense.

CONCLUSION

The Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin holds a unique place in Japanese history. It is usually quoted as the classic example of a Japanese vendetta. In fact it was nothing of the kind, its illegality and questionable motivation making it an anomaly among the scores of other revenge killings that took place during the Edo Period. In military terms, the Forty-Seven Ronin achieved their objective: to take the head of Kira Yoshihisa and place it before the tomb of Asano Naganori. Revenge was indeed taken, but not revenge for Asano's death, rather for the mysterious grudge that he had borne at Kira's hands and had failed to pay back. Asano's two clumsy sword strokes within the Corridor of Pines were followed by a multitude of cuts to settle the matter once and for all.

The story's enduring influence, however, lies in this anomaly, that by breaking all the rules the Forty-Seven Ronin challenged every law and assumption about the samurai class that the Tokugawa Shoguns had devised. As the pupils of Yamaga Soko, they gave their own interpretation to his admonition that the samurai should act as exemplars to the rest of society. Turning their backs on the progressive views of the Shogun, who promulgated a different version of the example that a samurai should set, they embraced the violence of a previous age that had not quite gone away. Through their act they held up a mirror to samurai culture at a time when it was going through a painful transition, and others transformed it into a theatrical performance.

From the vantage point of the 21st century, it is easy to say that the raid was totally unjustified, and that the only aspect of the matter that was even less justifiable was the adulation they later received. Yet even allowing for hindsight, it is still extraordinary that within 12 days of their suicide a theatrical performance was being staged that set the tone for three centuries' worth of glorification of an act of mass murder of an innocent elderly man and his band of loyal retainers. So on on the one hand we have popular adulation, on the other official condemnation by a government that wanted to move forward. The Raid of the Forty-Seven Ronin had clearly touched a raw nerve in Japanese culture, a nerve that by 1703 had grown incredibly sensitive.

The graves of the Forty-Seven Ronin are still carefully maintained at the temple of Sengakuji in Tokyo. They attract a constant stream of visitors, who burn incense in front of each tombstone.

It all could have been so very different, and one can easily envisage a situation whereby the incident might have been interpreted in the light of an alternative yet equally valid view of samurai duty and heroism. This would have been the image set out in Ivan Morris's celebrated book *The Nobility of Failure*. Here Morris gives a number of examples from Japanese history where the hero fails in his goals and dies a tragic yet noble death. Kira's death was a personal tragedy, but could a 62-year-old master of etiquette ever have been represented as a tragic failed hero? When attacked first by Asano, Kira Yoshihisa displayed restraint, and was dragged out of hiding only when all but a few of his men were killed. There were no heroics here, and certainly no *kabuki* play ever emerged to glorify Kira. So instead of enjoying a play where the tragic Kira was the hero (perhaps entitled *The Edo Massacre and the Seventeen Loyal Retainers of Lord Kira*), the population who lived in the gaudy world of Genroku craved a more direct heroism of a bygone age. If Kira Yoshihisa represented anything at all to them, it was the ordered, compassionate, legalistic and very boring world of the Shogun Tsunayoshi, not the exciting world of the sword-wielding samurai. To embrace this world the public had to ignore deceit, deception and a callous massacre, and, by creating a demand for the enduring myth of the Forty-Seven Ronin, ignore it they did.

FURTHER READING

The number of works in Japanese concerning the Forty-Seven Ronin, *Chushingura* and the relationship between them runs into many hundreds, ranging from scholarly books and articles to lively manga comics. The one I have found most useful for the historical narrative is *Genroku Ako jiken* (The Ako Incident in Genroku), which is Vol. 57 in the well-known Rekishi Gunzo Series published in 1999 by Gakken. It is currently out of print, but as many of the series are being reprinted it may well reappear on bookshelves. It is exceptionally detailed and very well illustrated, while being even-handed in its treatment of Kira Yoshihisa. This even-handedness is best found in English in a chapter in Beatrice M. Bodart-Bailey's excellent biography of Tokugawa Tsunayoshi, entitled *The Dog Shogun: The Personality and Politics of Tokugawa Tsunayoshi* (University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2006). Mitford's *Tales of Old Japan*, the classic retelling of the story, is available as a paperback reprint (Tuttle, Vermont, 1966 and subsequent republications).

A good compendium summarizing the scholarly debate that raged following the raid may be found in William Theodore de Bary et al. (eds.), *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, 2nd edition, Vol. 2 (Columbia University Press, New York, 2005), while around the time of the 300th anniversary of the raid, the journal *Monumenta Nipponica* published a series of articles in English that reflected upon the incident. They all appear in Vol. 58 and consist of the following works: Henry D. Smith II, 'The Capacity of *Chushingura*: Three hundred years of *Chushingura*' (pp.1–42); Bito Masahide and Henry D. Smith II, 'The Ako Incident, 1701–03' (pp.149–70); James McMullen, 'Confucian Perspectives on the Ako Revenge: Law and Moral Agency' (pp.293–315); Federico Marcon and Henry D. Smith II, 'A Chushingura palimpsest: Young Motoori Norinaga hears the story of the Ako Ronin from a Buddhist priest' (pp.439–65); and Motoori Norinaga and Federico Marcon, 'The Story of the Loyal Samurai of Ako' (pp.467–93).

For two other very useful articles see John Allen Tucker, 'Rethinking the Ako Ronin Debate: The Religious Significance of Chushin Gishi', *Japanese*

Journal of Religious Studies 26 (1999) pp.1–37 and Henry D. Smith II, 'The trouble with Terasaka: The Forty-Seventh Ronin and the *Chushingura* Imagination', *Japan Review* 16 (2004) pp.3–65. For the theory and practice behind the vendetta in Japan, see J. Dautremer, 'The vendetta or legal revenge in Japan', *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* 13 (1885) pp.82–89; and the more recent article by D. E. Mills, '*Kataki-uchi*: the practice of blood-revenge in Pre-Modern Japan', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 10 no. 4 (1976) pp.525–42.

For a short discussion of the slight religious aspects of the Forty-Seven Ronin see my own book *The Samurai and the Sacred* (Osprey Publishing, Oxford, 2006). The puppet-play version of *Chushingura* has been translated into English by Donald Keene as *Chushingura: The Treasury of Loyal Retainers* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1971). The entire *kabuki* play is available from NHK as a set of four DVDs with optional English subtitles and commentary. The viewer will note that the dialogue is much less extensive than in the puppet play. Each DVD may be purchased separately; Vol. 4 contains Acts 9 and 11, the latter being the raid itself, which consists of series of wonderfully choreographed fight scenes that are a joy to watch. Finally, Kuniyoshi's two series of woodblock prints of *Chushingura* are beautifully reproduced with a detailed and learned commentary in David A. Weinburg, *Kuniyoshi: The Faithful Samurai* (Hotei Publishing, Amsterdam, 2005). Modern reproductions of the prints with the commentary removed are obtainable in Japan at very reasonable prices, and they make good souvenirs.

Maseki Magokuro is hit by a pile of falling books as he fights within the mansion in a *Chushingura* print series by Yoshitora.

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Figures in **bold** refer to illustrations

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AUTHOR'S DEDICATION

In memory of Nan, my maternal grandmother Lizzie Wilson (née Pugh, 1887–1973), whose gift enabled me to make my first trip to Japan in 1970.

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