

Chushingura (The Forty-Seven Ronin) in History and Film, A Guide for Secondary Level History Teachers

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With the victory of Tokugawa Ieyasu at the battle of Sekigahara in 1600 a new period in Japanese history; the Tokugawa or Edo Period (1603-1686), began. It was an incredible change as the country shifted from several hundred years of warfare to a time of peace. It was, however, a time of peace which held the warrior class as its highest members. The samurai were controlled by the daimyo or local lords who controlled the provinces but were, in return, subordinate to the bakufu or central government. While this organization of control would last for two hundred and fifty years without many major problems there were occasions when events called the tenets of the system into question. One such event was Chushingura or the story of the Forty-seven Ronin.

In 1701 the daimyo of the province of Ako, Asano Naganori attacked Kira Yoshinaka inside the Shogun's castle in Edo. Kira was only slightly wounded on his forehead and back, but due to the violation of drawing his sword in the Shogun's castle, Asano was forced to commit seppuku on the same day. Asano's domain was confiscated resulting in his vassals becoming masterless samurai or ronin. Two years later forty-seven of the retainers of Asano attacked the mansion of Kira in Edo and killed him. They took his head to the Asano's grave at Sengakuji and then reported their crime to the bakufu government. After a period of confinement the men were forced to commit seppuku. This event became a topic in contemporary academics debates, but more importantly captured popular imagination.

Beyond just a period of peace, the Tokugawa period saw a flowering of Japanese culture including popular theatre such kabuki and bunraku (puppet theatre). Almost immediately the story of the Forty-seven Ronin was extremely popular in Edo Period theatre. "But precisely because of the widespread fame of the incident, it was constantly reinterpreted and reimagined by later generations, so that the truth of the historical incident paradoxically became ever more inaccessible as time passed." (Masahide, p.149) These reinterpretations give us a glimpse into different perspectives on the incident. The popularity of the story has continued into modern media. Each year NHK, Japan's national television channel, shows, usually a historically based, fifty-two one hour episode drama series known as the taiga drama. The first taiga drama to start in January was called Ako Ronin and based on the story of the Forty-seven Ronin; it had a fifty-three percent share of the viewing audience which is a record unbroken to this day. (Schilling, p.245) The popularity of this story has also resulted in over two hundred movie versions of the story. Two versions in particular, *The 47 Ronin* (1942), directed by Kenji Mizoguchi and *Chushingura* (1962), directed by Hiroshi Inagaki have different approaches to the subject.

By looking at the historical basis of the story and comparing this with two different film versions a secondary level history teacher has a lens through which to study the Tokugawa period in a high school history classroom. Students could use one of the many play versions of the story to act out key scenes and compare this with one or both of the film versions. The two film versions discussed here could be viewed to compare the handling of different

elements of the story. Some key elements to compare could include the historical authenticity, the idea of loyalty, and the role of women in both film versions.

This study falls under the current Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Frameworks as provided by the Massachusetts Department of Education.

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK

World History Standards

History of China, Japan, and Korea to 1800

- WHI.25 Summarize the major economic, political, and religious developments in Japanese history 1800
 1. the development of feudalism
 2. the rise of the shogun and the role of the samurai

- WHI.28 Describe the influence and consequences of isolation

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

With his victory at the battle of Sekigahara in 1600, Tokugawa Ieyasu became the most powerful person in the country, but it was the emperor who bestowed upon him the title of shogun. The Emperor was in a position above the shogun, however, he held no real power at this time still official formalities were upheld. Each year the shogun would send emissaries to the imperial residence in Kyoto and in return the emperor would send representatives to the shogun's capital of Edo. In 1701 representatives of the Emperor Higashiyama (1687-1709) and the retired Emperor Reigan (1683-1687) came to Edo to present New Year wishes to the shogun. As part of the system of control of the daimyo by the bakufu, daimyo would serve in various capacities in the capital. Asano Naganori, daimyo of the province of Aki, was appointed to serve as a host for the Emperor and another daimyo, Date Muneharu, did the same for the retired emperor. Both of these individuals worked with the shogunal official in charge of ceremonies, Kira Yoshinaka. During the ceremonies, Asano attacked Kira, who was about seventy years old, with his sword inside the shogun's castle in Edo. Kira was struck in the face and as he turned to run away he was struck again in the back. He lived but this was the initial incident which would culminate with forty-seven of Asano's followers entering Kira's house and killing him two years later.

One of the largest controversies surrounding the incident involves the cause of Asano's attack on Kira. One account of the attack on Kira by an official in Edo castle, Kajiwara Yosobei, is the only statement by a witness to the attack which survives today. According to his statement, Kajiwara had gone to speak with Kira concerning an exchange of presents with the emissaries but he was not present so he spoke with Asano. After speaking with Asano he noticed Kira return so he went to speak with him and while doing so Kira was attacked coming from behind Kajiwara. Kajiwara reported that Asano stated during the attack "Do you remember my grudge from these past days?" (*kono aida no ikon oboetara ka*) (Masahide, p.150). Asano was then held back by Kajiwara and others while Kira was helped away. Bakufu officials were notified and Asano was confined.

Another report on the incident was left by a different shogunal official, Okado Denpachiro, who was an inspector on duty at the time of the attack. His report provides a little more insight into the reason for the attack than Kajiwara's statement. Okado states that when he questioned Asano concerning the attack, Asano stated that he had forgotten where he was and attacked Kira because of a grudge. He does not, however, explain more about the grudge in his report.

Another account of the attack is found in Ako Gijinroku (1703) by Muro Kyusu. He was not an eyewitness to the attack. In Ako Gijinroku, Kajiwara is speaking with Asano concerning the exchange of presents when Kira approaches and makes a statement concerning Asano's lack of knowledge and refers to him as a country bumpkin. Reacting to the statement Asano attacks Kira. This account, however, was written two years after the incident.

The bakufu ordered Asano to be held by the daimyo Tamura Takeaki while the investigation continued. The records of that daimyo state that the attack had occurred before noon, Asano was placed into custody at 1 P.M., the order for Asano to commit seppuku came at 4 P.M., and Asano committed seppuku just after 6 P.M. (Masahide, p.151) The official bakufu statement declared that Asano was guilty of two crimes; disrupting the ceremonies and drawing his sword in the shogun's castle. Not only was Asano forced to commit seppuku but his domain was confiscated, his younger brother Daigaku was placed in the custody of another daimyo, and his house was abolished. With his domain confiscated all his retainers were now ronin or masterless samurai.

The Ako domain had approximately two hundred and seventy samurai at the time of the incident who were now unemployed. The immediate response of Asano's retainers was mixed. Some wanted to attack and kill Kira while others urged restraint. Messengers were sent from Edo to Asano's home province of Ako where the response was again mixed. Some of the retainers in Ako suggested holding the castle against the shogun's forces and dying as they defended it but before that decision was made a petition was sent to the bakufu. The petition was based on the idea of *kenka ryoseibai* which stated that all sides in a disagreement were to be punished equally. Kira had not been punished while Asano received a swift decision being forced to commit seppuku on the same day of the incident. The petition was not made without precedence.

Prior incidents provided a basis for sending a petition to the government of the current shogun Tsunayoshi. In 1627 Naramura Magokuro attacked two others inside Edo castle and he was forced to commit seppuku. One of the people he attacked died but the other Kizukuri Saburozaemon fled without offering resistance. Due to his action or his inaction Kizukuri was banished. Asano's retainers argued that Kira should at least be sentenced to banishment, but the response to the petition urged the retainers go along with decision of the bakufu. "The lenient treatment of Kira can be seen as a manifestation of the political posture of Tsunayoshi, which placed primary emphasis on maintaining order." (Masashide, p. 155) One reason to give up the idea of defending the castle concerned the protection of the Asano clan. Some retainers hoped that Asano's younger brother, Daigaku, would be allowed to take over the Asano clan and allow it to continue. If the castle was held against bakufu orders Asano's closest relative, Daigaku, could be punished. Another option considered by the retainers was junshi or suicide after the death of a lord. Junshi, however, had been outlawed by the bakufu so following that course could have resulted in punishment for daigaku as well. Daigaku was eventually released from custody but he was handed over to relatives in Hiroshima eliminating any chance that the Asano house would be restored along with the jobs and honor of its retainers. Without hope of having the Asano house restored the decision was made to seek revenge against Kira.

In considering the response of the bakufu it is important to consider the influence of the shogun and the timing of the incident, Tsunayoshi. He was a student of Confucianism and strongly believed in regulations. Aware of the court attitudes towards the warrior government he paid particular attention to ceremonies. The feelings of the shogun to improve the ceremonies in the eyes of the imperial court, the high position of inspector of ceremonies that Kira held may have been in conflict with daimyos who only spent some of the time in the

capital. The bakufu was at a high point of its power. It was solidifying its relationship with the daimyo and encouraging the variety of court rituals which led to an increased concern for the matter of etiquette. Just seven years after the Asano attack on Kira another daimyo, Maeda Toshimasa, in a position similar to Asano's attacked and killed the inspector of ceremonies, however, this attack took place outside of Edo castle.

After a period of planning and hiding their true intentions, forty-seven of Asano's retainers led by Oishi Kuranosuke attacked Kira's mansion in Edo. None of the men from Ako were killed while they killed several of Kira's men and wounded many others. Forty-seven men entered the mansion but, as soon as Kira was killed one man left to bring word back to the province of Ako so while most accounts describe forty-seven men as partaking in the revenge against Kira some refer to the forty-six ronin. Regardless of the title, after they took the head of Kira it was placed at the grave of Asano at Sengakuji.

The bakufu's response to the attack on Kira's mansion was not as swift as the response to Asano's attack on Kira. One document, described as being of questionable authenticity, described the bakufu's reaction to the attack on Kira's mansion. Kira's adopted son was forced to commit seppuku and all the men who survived the attack and without helping with the defense of the mansion were executed by decapitation. Decapitation was seen as a harsher punishment than being allowed to commit seppuku. Kira's house was abolished with the understanding that his adopted son did not act as a samurai since he should have gone out after the forty-six ronin.

The immediate response by the bakufu against Oishi and the other retainers was to place them into custody. Eventually they were ordered to commit seppuku. Seppuku was a punishment which was considered honorable and only applied to samurai. The fact that ronin were allowed to commit seppuku as samurai instead of being decapitated as they broke bakufu law showed a compassion for their actions. They were, however, going to die which showed the bakufu's ultimate objective of maintaining order by following the law.

The action of the forty-seven ronin created a heated debate among scholars of the time. "The revenge itself has maintained the lively interest of historian's right up to the present." (McMullen, p.294) The forty-seven ronin created a controversy by following one of the highest samurai virtues of loyalty to their lord by while doing this they broke bakufu law. Sato Naokata wrote in 1705 that the bakufu made the correct decision by having the retainers commit seppuku as they had broken the law. "In an another, undated piece, he reported with approval a samurai's opinion that though the actions of the forty-six were widely admired by chonin, viewed as revenge, they were unexceptional for warriors in japan." (McMullen, p.301) In response to Naokata's writings another Confucian scholar, Asami Keisai stated that the forty-six had acted in the only moral way they could. Kira was the direct cause of their lord's death so revenge was the only solution. Keisai ideal does place some blame on the bakufu's judgment against Asano and believes that the final judgment of the bakufu against the forty-six ronin shows an understanding of the action of the forty-seven ronin. They were forced to commit seppuku, but none of their families were punished. Another scholar, Dazai Shundai, regarded the action of the ronin as misplaced. He felt it was not Kira who caused Asano's death but the wrongful judgment of the bakufu. These ideas, critical of the bakufu, were suppressed. "As Shundai complained,' from scholars, ministers, and gentlemen down to cart-pullers and grooms, there was no one who does not slap his thighs in admiration for the forty-six." (McMullen, p.310)

Debates continue to this day concerning the various aspects of the incident even on the point of why Asano attacked Kira. Did Kira cause problems for Asano because he failed to give an adequate bribe to Kira leading to the attack? Did Kira make an inappropriate advance to Asano's wife? Many of these questions continue even with varying degrees of evidence to support them. The greatest debate, however, still resolves around the question of loyalty and honor in the incident.

LOYALTY AND HONOR

Loyalty and honor are two key elements in the story of the forty-seven ronin. Were there actions a result of loyalty to their deceased lord, were they an attempt to redeem their personal honor, or to something else. To better understand these factors it is important look at the history of conflict resolution in samurai society. Conflict resolution has evolved over time, but be divided into three distinct periods of development. The first was medieval period when the principle of jiriki kyusai or self-redress of grievances was the predominate method of solving grievances. The second period was the late medieval or warring states period when the idea of kenka ryoseibai or equal punishment of all parties in a quarrel regardless of the reason behind the involvement. The final stage, Tokugawa period, saw pacification force a radical change to the way samurai settled arguments. The ultimate determination of disputes was found within the law.

The introduction of kenka ryoseibai during the warring states period created a decline in the samurai's self determination and a rise in the power of warlords or daimyo. Instead of personally taking care of disputes samurai were now more dependent on the influence of outside opinion. Samurai needed to appeal to another power for the resolution of disputes. The bakufu did utilize the idea of kenka ryoseibai, however, "even though kenka ryoseibai had acquired the status of a kind of customary law by that time, it was not formally inscribed in the shogunate's official code." (Ikegami, p.203) There was no official legal way to handle samurai disputes. During the warring states period kenka ryoseibai was important from a military perspective. It limited disputes within military formations, but under the Tokugawa bakufu it was seen as a way to prevent problems under the Tokugawa model of organization.

The forty-seven ronin, even after deciding to attack Kira, were not united in a plan of action. During their two years of planning two contending factions developed. The conservative faction led by Oishi Yoshio who was more concerned with the honor of the Asano house than personal loyalty to their daimyo who was forced to commit seppuku. If the Asano house was able to be restored honor would also be restored. This was his primary concern. The radical group felt a personal loyalty to their daimyo, Asano. They wanted to take action against Kira and attack him without delay. One member of this group stated "if the deceased lord had been thinking of the importance of the house descended from his ancestors, he would not have allowed himself to be carried away by anger." (Ikegami, p.228) This course of action would cause the radical group to go against the law of the bakufu, however, they stated that their primary obligation was not to the shogun. Their most important goal was the restoration of their personal honor as samurai. Oishi believed the radical group's sense of loyalty was misplaced. Their loyalty should be to the house of Asano and protecting the honor of the house should be the samurai's objective. Odaka Gengo stated

"we had been patient until now...because we were hoping that, if Daigaku were allowed to succeed to the lordship, and Kira were to receive some sort of punishment, Daigaku would have a better appearance in the seken. If so, the ie of Asano would stand even though our lord had been [killed] in this way...[But since this hope appears to be in vain] ... if we only watch to see how things turn out, that would be the way a coward would act, and not the attitude that a real samurai should take... We will

stand up for the way of the samurai and take revenge on the enemy of our master..."
(Ikegami,p.230)

When Daigaku was placed in the custody of relative sin Hiroshima the differences between the two groups closed. An attack on Kira would satisfy the honor of the house and the samurai, but this discussion brings to the front two concepts of loyalty. These two concepts include loyalty to a person in the form of the daimyo of a samurai and the second is loyalty to the house to which the samurai belong. In Japanese these two ideals are expressed with the terms *hitomae* and *seken*. *Hitomae* is the sense of honor felt by samurai while *seken* is the sense of within a community. While the radical group spoke about its loyalty to their dead daimyo Asano they were concerned with their sense of honor within the *seken*. It is interesting to note that the radical group was composed mainly of Ako samurai who were assigned to represent the domain in Edo. Edo was filled with many samurai is a crowded environment. The perception of the *seken* was a strong force. Oishi criticized this and stated that "if you would let go of your private worry, and look at the essence of the matter, criticism of the *seken* would not bother you." (Ikegami, p.231) Oishi was concerned with the *seken* but felt the best course of action was to restore the honor of the Asano house within the *seken*.

Methods of conflict resolution, views of loyalty and placement of honor have all been interpreted in various ways and provide an opportunity for the story itself to be interpreted in numerous ways. This has allowed the story of the forty-seven ronin to continue in popular culture.

CHUSHINGURA IN POPULAR CULTURE

"Within a month, Nakamura, a kabuki theatre in Edo, preformed a play entitled Akebono sogano youchi, which apparently derived it's theme from this vendetta." (Ikegami, p.225) The shogunate banned further performances after just three shows. The story continued to be told but playwrights changed the names of the character in the stories to limit government interference. The popularity of the story along with its ambiguities such as the cause of the 'grudge' between Kira and Asano has spawned many versions of the story.

One version in particular brings family into a more central role of the story. "In Kanadehon Chushingura, the most famous of the seventy or so kabuki and puppet plays on the subject written between 1706 and 1891" (Barrett, p.26) Right from the beginning of the family enters the story showing Kira's desire for Asano's wife as the center of the disagreement between the two individuals. Concern for families is also increased as Oishi and the other retainers are very concerned about the impact of their decision on their families. "This difference doubtless reflects the different lifestyles of the audience. In the kabuki-viewing merchant family the wife had the active role in the family business." (Barrett, p.27) More than just the emphasis on family some dramatic story lines are introduced. Oishi is a witness to the death of Asano and receives the sword used in his seppuku. At the end of the play Oishi uses this same sword to kill Kira.

Another famous version Mayama's Genroku Chushingura by Mayama Seika was made into a two part film in 1941 and 1942 by the director Kenji Mizuguchi who made the film at the request of the Japanese wartime government. Mizuguchi had made films critical of feudalism but this film highlighted absolute loyalty. "Since Mizuguchi takes for granted in his audience so many plot, character, allusion, and allegory, he is free to concentrate his energies on the problem of defamiliarizing the Chushingura epic." (Davis, p.132) The scenes of Kira causing problems for Asano are not shown and the movie begins with the attack on Kira. Very little is made of the reasons for the attack shifting blame away form the evilness of Kira as shown in

other versions to placing blame on the system of control as set up by the bakufu. How can a samurai, a man of loyalty and honor exist within such a system? “The villain of the affair is not Kira, who simply played the coward, but the system of government that can commend actions of the coward while summarily punishing with death the partner to the quarrel who drew and used his wakizashi in the last defense of samurai honor.” (Powell, p.737)

In Genroku Chushingura, the placement of loyalty is also shifted. Oishi is loyal not to Asano the man but loyal to his position. “Oishi’s loyalty is not personal but institutionalized, for it is simply directed toward anyone in a superior position, and Mizuguchi illustrates this cinematically” (Barrett, p.29) by having Oishi frequently shown from an overhead camera.

Mizuguchi places the viewer within the movie by using various methods. He uses very authentic materials, props, and sets the movie to such an extent that the budget of the film was ten times more than other contemporary films. More important is the methods Mizuguchi uses to explore these sets.

“Genroku Chushingura is a masterpiece because it transcends drama, or rather brings drama into a perceptual realm that seems to have little to do with its overt subject matter. Although Genroku Chushingura is a deadly serious historical tract, Mizuguchi plays games with our perceptual apprehension of space and objects at a local level. He asks that we focus our attention on things that are not directly relevant to the story, which attenuates the narrative but concentrates the style.” (Davis, p.148)

Mizuguchi uses multiple long shots in his films as well. “The close relationship between Mizuguchi’s style and the old performing arts is apparent, and only in this limited sense can his works be called premodern.” (Sato, T. p.181) By utilizing these techniques Mizuguchi moves the emphasis away from elements of the story such as the evil Kira and places the viewer within the system he is calling into question.

In contrast to Mizuguchi’s handling of the story, the director Hiroshi Inagaki in his movie version Chushingura (1962) shows Asano as embodying the ideals of virtue and youth. Much more time in the movie is used to show the level of Kira’s harassment of Asano. The cause of this harassment is clearly shown as Kira’s greed leaving the action of Asano, his attack on Kira, as the result of his integrity honor. “It is the universal contrast between pure youth and corrupt adulthood.” (Barrett, p.30) While the story discusses the possibility of restoring the Asano house in a limited way the emphasis is clearly placed on the personal loyalty to the daimyo Asano.

WOMEN

While the story of the forty-seven ronin places honor and loyalty in the revenge of their departed daimyo against Kira as the central elements of the story, the role of women is treated differently in the two film versions providing an interesting insight into the Tokugawa period. Inagaki does show the involvement with women by the forty-seven compassionately but they are truly secondary to the act of revenge. Mizuguchi, however, gives woman a very important place in his version.

In Hiroshi Inagaki’s film version of Chushingura women have a secondary role. Oishi Kuranosuke leaves his wife and children and visits Yoshiwara in order to conceal his true intentions from the government. He drinks and pretends to enjoy the company of women since Kira’s allies who expect an act of revenge. Oishi divorces his wife sending her home without explanation or an affectionate farewell. Unlike some versions of the story where Oishi’s wife responds to her husband’s cruelty, Inagaki shows Oishi’s wife as the samurai wife must

understand. Any emotional involvements of the 47 must be let go for the sake of samurai duty. "In Inagaki's flamboyant spectacle, flawed by visual excess, after the killing of Kira the forty-seven march triumphantly through the town, tired, wearing their dirty, bloodstained clothes, but supremely dignified." (Mellen p.32) The brotherhood of the group replaces any attachment they held.

In Kenji Mizuguchi's version of Chushingura, is not until the end that the relationship between men and women comes to the center of the story. Including parts left out by Inagaki, Mizuguchi deals with the days before the ronin commit seppuku. One day a woman appears who had been engaged to one of the forty-seven. Her father had spent all his money in preparations for their marriage. He now feels betrayed by the ronin's decision to join the expedition. "The camera dollies one hundred and eighty degrees around the woman for the entire duration of her explanation to Oishi of her predicament, adding an emotional intensity lacking in the film before now." (Mellen, p.33) The woman wants to know what he really feels. Inagaki's women, suffer through the decisions of their loved ones but Mizuguchi, showing the feudal period from an anti-feudal point of view, provides the woman in this scene with a strong sense of self. The audience is made to feel sympathetic toward her desire not to suffer in doubt for the rest of her life. "The camera keeps moving, signaling that the most sincere of human feelings are now being revealed without hypocrisy." (Mellen, p.34) Oishi requests that she not see her lover as he might weaken in his last moment and be unable to complete his seppuku. She is finally allowed to see him and he states that he does not love her but this is not the truth as he shows that he has retained a token of their relationship. He leaves asking her to tell her father that he is still his son-in-law. "It could be argued that Mizuguchi's perennial preoccupation with women is the means by which he subtly sabotages the nationalism apparently promoted by the picture." (Davis, p,132)

In the final scenes of the movie after the ronin leave for their seppuku, the woman herself commits seppuku. This is the only seppuku Mizuguchi allows to be seen in the movie. Even the forty-seven ronin's seppuku is not shown only their names are read. It is only a woman in Mizuguchi's version who seeks out answers to the questions she has even if this goes against what is expected of her. She chooses the prerogative of the samurai, seppuku, even when she has other options. She alone represents the ultimate ideals of honor and loyalty.

CONCLUSION

For the secondary history teacher, Chushingura or the Story of the Forty-seven Ronin provides multiple opportunities to explore the Tokugawa Period. The story can be used as the center of a lesson on the samurai, popular culture, the ideals of loyalty and honor, or the representation of history in film and satisfies a history requirement as stated in the Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Frameworks as provided by the Massachusetts Department of Education. Films are a great tool to help with this opportunity.

When films are brought into the classroom students are exposed to new worlds and the films The 47 Ronin (1942) directed by Kenji Mizuguchi and Chushingura (1962) directed by Hiroshi Inagaki both provide a rich telling of a story which continues to be told and retold in popular Japanese culture more than the story of Ebenezer Scrooge in A Christmas Carol is retold in American culture. The issues raised from different perspectives in each film allow the teacher to set up activities such as viewing comparative segments and analyzing the various perspectives. More than just differences looking at films on the same subject would allow the students to find commonality as well. Readings could also be introduced to supplement the visual materials. Either way, using these two films along with the historical background

provided will allow teachers to look at important questions from the Tokugawa Period and enjoy some two great films.

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