

# A Guide to Reading *Chūshingura*

The Play by Izumo, Shōraku, and Senryū  
(as translated by Donald Keene)

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## Introduction

The story of the Forty-seven Samurai has been referred to as the national epic of Japan. It refers to actual historical incidents of 1701-1703. Due to a perceived slight, Lord Asano attempted to kill Lord Kira. Because the attack took place in a castle hosting an emissary of the shōgun, Lord Asano was sentenced to commit *seppuku* (ritual suicide), and his estate was confiscated. This rendered his retainers *rōnin* (masterless samurai). Forty-seven (or forty-six by some counts) of these samurai secretly planned for two years before avenging their late master by killing Lord Kira. The government sentenced them to commit *seppuku*, which they did; however, in death they became heroes to the samurai ideals of loyalty and honor. Almost immediately, fictionalized accounts of the Forty-seven Samurai arose. Since then, the story has been told from a variety of perspectives in every medium (including *kabuki*, novels, films, *manga* [comic books] and *anime* [cartoons]), but the first major fictionalized account (and still one of the most popular) is the *bunraku* (puppet play) version, *Chūshingura* 忠臣蔵 (*The Treasury of Loyal Retainers*) (1748) co-authored by Izumo, Shōraku, and Senryū. The play and the incident of the Forty-seven Samurai both belong to the Tokugawa Era. During this long period of peace and prosperity, the samurai class seemed increasingly irrelevant, particularly in the face of the rising merchant class. As a result, the incident of the Forty-seven Samurai seemed moving because of the almost quixotic nobility the samurai showed. The Tokugawa was also a period of strict government control over society, and the actions of the samurai were a threat to social order. Consequently, versions of *Chūshingura* were dramatically set in earlier periods of Japanese history, with the names of the historical figures changed.

The story has inspired Japanese audiences (and can equally move Western ones) for a variety of reasons, but one of the primary themes is the tension between *giri* (義理) and *ninjō* (人情). *Giri* is one's "socially defined obligations," while *ninjō* is literally "human feeling." In Act 3, the actions of Kampei illustrate these concepts. Kampei should be close to his lord when they are visiting the castle, in case he is needed (*giri*). However, he gives into the temptation to leave the castle for a quick assignation with his wife, Okaru (*ninjō*). As a result, Kampei is not present when his lord needs him, and he loses his honor as a samurai. It would be too simple to say that *giri* should always be followed instead of *ninjō*. What is important to recognize is how characters are defined by their attempts to mediate the two values, sometimes with tragic results. Arguably, these concepts have relevance in modern life as well: a businessperson's obligation to work long hours of overtime (*giri*) can conflict with their desire to spend more time at home with their spouse and children (*ninjō*).

Another issue to consider is how you personally react to the values of the play. I think that if you are open-minded, you will find many parts of it moving and even inspiring.

However, you may also find it disturbing from a variety of perspectives (such as the treatment of women). What should our response be to cultural values that seem so different from our own? Even if you think ethics is relative, you cannot evade having to decide what *you* think about the characters and values of the play.

### Characters by Acts

Act 1: We Meet and Learn the Characters of Lord Moranao and Lord Enya Hangan

- ❖ Tadayoshi (Lord Ashikaga Tadayoshi): the shōgun's younger brother, whose visit is the occasion for the reception where the incident involving Enya Hangan and Moranao occurs
- ❖ Moranao (Lord Kō no Moranao): a greedy, lustful, dishonorable samurai
- ❖ Wakasanosuke (Lord Wakasanosuke Yasuchika): an honorable samurai
- ❖ Enya Hangan (Lord Enya Hangan Takasada): an honorable but short-tempered samurai
  - Kaoyo (Lady Kaoyo): wife of Lord Enya; object of Lord Moranao's lust

Act 2: Lord Wakanosuke Reveals His Plans to Honzō

- ❖ Wakasanosuke (Lord Wakasanosuke Yasuchika): an honorable samurai
  - Honzō (Kakogawa Honzō Yukikuni): chief retainer of Lord Wakasanosuke
    - Tonase: Honzō's wife
    - Konami: Honzō's daughter; fiancée of Rikiya
- ❖ Rikiya (Ōboshi Rikiya): son of Yuranosuke (see Act 4); retainer of Lord Enya; fiancé of Honzō's daughter Konami

Act 3: Lord Enya Hangan attacks Lord Moranao

- ❖ Moranao (Lord Kō no Moranao): a greedy, lustful, dishonorable samurai
  - Bannai (Sagisaka Bannai): chief retainer of Lord Moranao
- ❖ Wakasanosuke (Lord Wakasanosuke Yasuchika): an honorable samurai
  - Honzō (Kakogawa Honzō Yukikuni): chief retainer of Lord Wakasanosuke
- ❖ Enya Hangan (Lord Enya Hangan Takasada): an honorable but short-tempered samurai
  - Kampei (Hayano Kampei): a retainer of Lord Enya; he is the husband of Okaru, a maidservant to Lord Enya's wife, Lady Kaoyo
  - Okaru: a female servant of Lord Enya's wife, Lady Kaoyo; she is the wife of Kampei, a retainer of Lord Enya

Act 4: Envoys Deliver the Death Sentence to Lord Enya Hangan

- ❖ Enya Hangan (Lord Enya Hangan Takasada): an honorable but short-tempered samurai
  - Kaoyo (Lady Kaoyo): wife of Lord Enya Hangan; object of Lord Moranao's lust
  - Gōemon (Hara Gōemon): Chief of the Samurai for Lord Enya Hangan
  - Yuranosuke (Ōboshi Yuranosuke): Chief Retainer of Lord Enya
    - Rikiya (Ōboshi Rikiya): son of Yuranosuke; retainer of Lord Enya; fiancé of Honzō's daughter Konami (see Act 2)
    - Kodayū (Ono Kodayū): a cynical samurai retainer of Lord Enya Hangan

- Sadakurō: a greedy, dishonorable samurai; son of Kudayū
  - Yagorō: an honorable samurai retainer of Lord Enya Hangan
- ❖ Yakushiji (Yakushiji Jinzaemon): one of the shogun's envoys; a friend of Lord Moranao
- ❖ Ishidō (Ishidō Umanojō): one of the shogun's envoys

#### Act 5: Chance Meetings on the Road Lead to Death

- ❖ Kampei (Hayano Kampei): formerly a retainer of Lord Enya; he is the husband of Okaru
  - Okaru: formerly maidservant to Lord Enya's wife, Lady Kaoyo; she is the wife of Kampei
- ❖ Yagorō: one of the Forty-seven; formerly a retainer of Lord Enya Hangan
- ❖ Sadakurō: formerly a retainer of Lord Enya Hangan, he is now a *rōnin* who has become a bandit; son of Kudayū (see Act 4)

#### Act 6: Kampei Discovers What Happened to His Wife and Father-in-Law

- ❖ Mother: Okaru's mother; Kampei's mother-in-law
  - Okaru: formerly a maidservant to Lord Enya Hangan's wife, Lady Kaoyo; wife of Kampei
  - Kampei: (Hayano Kampei): formerly a retainer of Lord Enya; he is the husband of Okaru
- ❖ Ichimonjiya: owner/manager of the brothel at Gion
- ❖ Gōemon (Hara Gōemon): a leader of the Forty-seven; formerly Chief of the Samurai for Lord Enya Hangan
  - Yagorō (Senzaki Yagorō): one of the Forty-seven; formerly a samurai retainer of Lord Enya Hangan

#### Act 7: Visitors to the Brothel Attempt to Discover Yuranosuke's True Character

- ❖ Bannai (Sagisaka Bannai): chief retainer of Lord Moranao
  - Kudayū (Ono Kudayū): formerly a retainer of Lord Enya Hangan; now in the service of Lord Moranao
- ❖ Yuranosuke (Ōboshi Yuranosuke): a leader of the Forty-seven; formerly Chief Retainer of Lord Enya
  - Rikiya (Ōboshi Rikiya): one of the Forty-seven; son of Yuranosuke; formerly a retainer of Lord Enya; fiancé of Honzō's daughter Konami
- ❖ Yagorō (Senzaki Yagorō): one of the Forty-seven; formerly a retainer of Lord Enya Hangan
- ❖ Jūtarō (Yazama Jūtarō): one of the Forty-seven; formerly a retainer of Lord Enya Hangan
- ❖ Kitahachi (Takemori Kitahachi): one of the Forty-seven; formerly a retainer of Lord Enya Hangan
- ❖ Heiemon (Teraoka Heiemon): formerly a low-ranking retainer of Lord Enya Hangan; brother of Okaru; he seeks to join the Forty-seven
  - Okaru: sister of Heiemon; now a prostitute in the brothel; formerly a maidservant to Lord Enya Hangan's wife, Lady Kaoyo; wife of Kampei

Act 8: Honzō's Wife and Daughter Travel to Meet Yuranosuke's Family

- ❖ Tonase: Honzō's wife
  - Konami: Honzō's daughter; fiancée of Rikiya

Act 9: Tonase Asks Oishi to Go through with the Wedding between Their Children

- ❖ Yuranosuke (Ōboshi Yuranosuke): a leader of the Forty-seven; formerly Chief Retainer of Lord Enya
  - Rikiya (Ōboshi Rikiya): one of the Forty-seven; son of Yuranosuke; formerly a retainer of Lord Enya; fiancé of Honzō's daughter Konami
  - Oishi: wife of Yuranosuke
- ❖ Honzō (Kakogawa Honzō Yukikuni): chief retainer of Lord Wakasanosuke
  - Tonase: Honzō's wife
  - Konami: Honzō's daughter; fiancée of Rikiya

Act 10: A Merchant Assists the Forty-seven

- ❖ Gihei (Gihei of the Amakawaya): a wealthy merchant
  - Igo: a simple-minded servant of Gihei
  - Yoshimatus: Gihei's son
  - Osono: Gihei's wife
- ❖ Gōemon (Hara Gōemon): a leader of the Forty-seven; formerly Chief of the Samurai for Lord Enya Hangan
  - Rikiya (Ōboshi Rikiya): one of the Forty-seven; son of Yuranosuke; formerly a retainer of Lord Enya; fiancé of Honzō's daughter Konami
- ❖ Ryōchiku (Ōta Ryōchiku): Gihei's greedy father-in-law; Osono's father; he was formerly in the service of Ono Kudayū (see Act 7)
- ❖ Yuranosuke (Ōboshi Yuranosuke): a leader of the Forty-seven; formerly Chief Retainer of Lord Enya

Act 11: The Attack

- ❖ Yuranosuke (Ōboshi Yuranosuke): a leader of the Forty-seven; formerly Chief Retainer of Lord Enya
  - Jūtarō (Yazama Jūtarō): one of the Forty-seven; formerly a retainer of Lord Enya Hangan
  - Kampei: (Hayano Kampei): honorary member of the Forty-seven; formerly a retainer of Lord Enya; he is the husband of Okaru (he died in Act 6)
  - Heiemon (Teraoka Heiemon): one of the Forty-seven; formerly a low-ranking retainer of Lord Enya Hangan (see Act 7)
  - Rikiya (Ōboshi Rikiya): one of the Forty-seven; son of Yuranosuke; formerly a retainer of Lord Enya; fiancé of Honzō's daughter Konami
- ❖ Moranao (Lord Kō no Moranao): a greedy, lustful, dishonorable samurai
  - Bannai (Sagisaka Bannai): chief retainer of Lord Moranao
  - Yakushiji (Yakushiji Jirō): retainer of Lord Moranao
- ❖ Wakasanosuke (Lord Wakasanosuke Yasuchika): an honorable samurai (see Acts 1-3)