

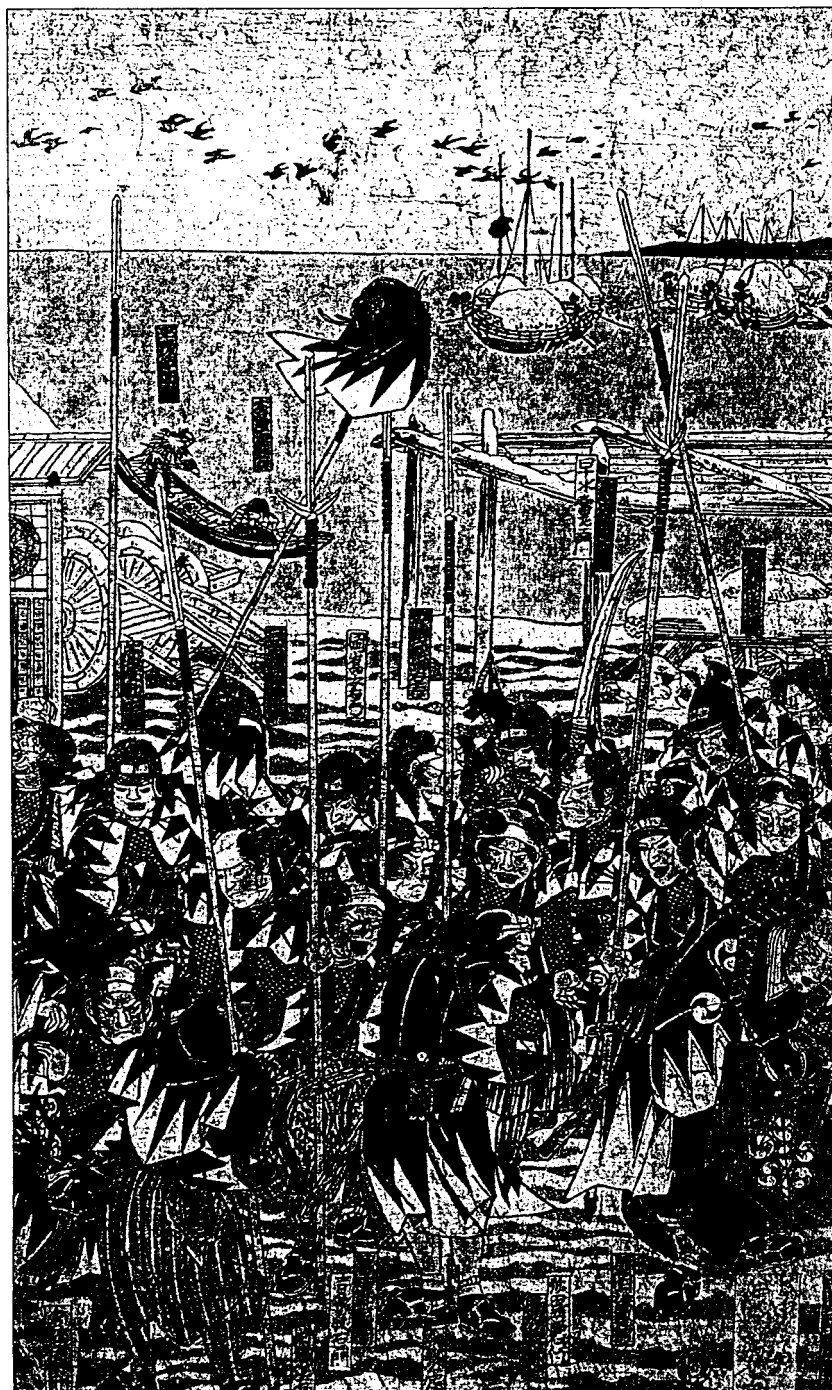
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The 47 Ronin

One of the most important thinkers in defining the role of the samurai in Tokugawa Japan was Yamaga Soko (1622-85). Yamaga wrote a series of works, which explored and defined 'The Warrior's Creed' (Bukyo) and 'The Way of the Samurai' (Shido, or Bushido). His ideas profoundly influenced Oishi Kuranosuke, a retainer of Asano Naganori (1667-1701), the daimyo of Ako, in Harima province.

Lord Asano was one of a number of daimyo ordered by Shogun Tokugawa Tsuneyoshi to entertain envoys from the emperor when they visited the shogun's court

Below: The 47 Ronin gather for their dawn raid on the mansion of Kira to avenge their late master.



at Edo. It was important that, as a representative of the shogun, Lord Asano should not offend against the complicated imperial etiquette, so Kira Yoshinaka, an acknowledged expert on etiquette, was appointed to teach Asano the correct way to receive the imperial envoys.

Kira made it obvious that he expected Asano to bestow lavish gifts in return for his instruction, whereas Asano was of the opinion that it was Kira's duty to teach him. This led to bad feeling between them, and when Kira insulted Asano in public, Asano drew his wakizashi (short sword) and cut Kira on the forehead. To draw a weapon in the shogun's palace was a serious offence and the act of wounding a shogunal official made it even worse. There was only one punishment fit for a daimyo; Asano was ordered to commit seppuku, and his fief was confiscated.

Oishi's vendetta

After Asano's death, his wife shaved her head and became a nun and his retainers lost their positions and became ronin. Oishi Kuranosuke called the ronin together and asked them to join him in killing Kira in order to revenge their lord; 46 answered his call and they began to make preparations for Kira's death.

Kira, realising that he was at risk, surrounded himself with armed guards, so Oishi decided to wait and strike when success was certain. To convince Kira that he was safe, the 47 ronin separated and disguised themselves; some became craftsmen or merchants, while Oishi left his family and associated with prostitutes and the low life of Edo, often appearing drunk in the street and brawling with passers by. On one occasion, a samurai from Satsuma saw Oishi insensible in the street and spat on him, saying he was not fit to be a samurai.

The plan worked and gradually Kira relaxed his vigilance and dismissed his guards. On December 14, 1702, the ronin gathered together and collected arms and armour they had previously hidden away. Dividing into two groups, they attacked Kira's mansion from the front and rear and, although Kira's guards put up a strong resistance, the ronin eventually caught him. In deference to his rank, Oishi invited Kira to commit seppuku, but he refused to speak, so Oishi cut off his head with the same dagger that Asano had used to commit seppuku. The head was put in a bucket and taken to Asano's tomb in Sengakuji temple, where it was laid as an offering in front of Asano's grave.

The ronin then gave themselves up to the authorities. While there was a great deal of sympathy for their actions, the Tokugawa Bakufu would not allow their loyalty to their

lord to disrupt the laws forbidding vendettas and the ronin were ordered to commit seppuku. Their bodies were buried in Sengakuji next to their lord, whom they had served faithfully to the death. They were joined by the body of the Satsuma samurai, who committed seppuku in front of Oishi's grave to atone for the insults he had given.

The incident provoked tremendous interest and comment, reminding the Japanese that the samurai spirit still existed among some of the warrior class. The Kabuki writer Chikamatsu wrote a play based on the event, which was an instant success. The famous 'Chushin-gura' ('A Treasury of Loyal Hearts') is still a popular favourite among theatre audiences.

In Sengakuji the graves and their associated cherry trees are still venerated as symbols of loyalty and the true samurai spirit. Even today, Japanese visit all the graves in turn, burning incense and praying for the souls of the 47 ronin of Ako.



Left: The graves of the 47 Ronin at the Sengakuji temple, in Tokyo.