The “Forty-Seven Rōnin” Incident as History and Myth

21H.154, Session 13
New Samurai?
Samurai Evolution

- Away from land to cities
- From warriors to salaried bureaucrats
- Rise of warrior ideology: later called *bushidō* (‘Way of the Warrior’); Yamaga Sokō (1622-1685)
- Place within the Tokugawa social order (‘SPAM’)
  - Separating samurai from the rest
Hierarchy and Status

- S (samurai)
- P (peasants)
- A (artisans)
- M (merchants)
Hierarchy and Status
Akō Incident as History

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Historical Characters

- Asano Naganori, Lord of Akō (1667-1701)
- Kira Yoshinaka, bakufū master of ceremonies (1641-1703)
- Ōishi Kuranosuke Yoshio, Asano chief retainer (1659-1703)
- 5th shōgun Tsunayoshi, “Dog Shōgun” (1680-1708)
Akō Incident

- A.k.a., “Akō Vendetta,” “47 Rōnin Incident”
- April 22, 1701: Asano Takumi-no-kami Naganori vs. Kira Kōzuke-no-suke Yoshinaka
- January 31, 1703: 47 former Asano retainers led by Ōishi Kura-no-suke Yoshio attack Kira’s Edo residence
A Quintessential Samurai Story

• Legend vs. history
• Well known in the West: Ruth Benedict, *Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946)
• Countless retelling in Japan
  • First performance two weeks after the vendetta
  • Kabuki, film, tv, comics
Akō Incident as History
History vs. Legend

• 1701: surprise attack from behind
• Attack at noon, execution after 6pm
• Asano motive unclear; not so heroic?
• Maybe Kira was a better ruler
History vs. Legend

- No record of revenge request
- Immediate goal: seek Akō restoration
- Hierarchy within the 47
  - Ōishi Kuranosuke’s $$$$ attachment to the house (o-ie) of Asano
  - #47 Terasaka Kichiemon, foot soldier
- 1703: only 47 out of 500+ retainers
- No records of between 1701 and 1703
Guilty?