

# Study of Bushido in Chūshingura from the Perspective of Contrast between China and Japan

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## Abstract

**Bushido spirit is an important national spirit of Japan and the spiritual support of Japanese samurai. In the case of the Chūshingura, the samurais' behavior followed the requirements of the Bushido spirit. This article analyzes this incident with Chinese thinking, comparing similar events in Chinese history with the Chūshingura event to explore the differences of thinking between Chinese and Japanese and figure out the actual influence of Bushido spirit on the Japanese samurai in Chūshingura.**

## Keywords

**Bushido; Chūshingura; China-Japan Comparison.**

## 1. Introduction

Chūshingura is widely known in Japan. It tells the story of Asano Naganori and his retainers. Asano Naganori was ordered to perform seppuku due to raising a conflict with Yoshinaka Kira while treating the Imperial envoy at Shogun mansion. Forty-seven of Asano Naganori's retainers insisted on revenge for him. After it, they complied with the order of seppuku from the shogun. After the death of the righteous, their loyalty was trumpeted. According to a survey, 80 films related to the story of Chūshingura were broadcast from 1928 to 2010. The related literary work "Tale of the Forty-seven Ronin" is also regarded as a Japanese epic. Through the analysis to some of the plots in this story, we can see the influence of Bushido spirit on Japanese samurai and the differences of ways of thinking and doing things between Chinese and Japanese.

## 2. Why Did Asano Naganori Stab Yoshinaka Kira?

In China, there is a saying that a scholar can be killed but can not be humiliated. However, when the humiliation happened, the people involved, not only the scholars but even the military officers, mostly did not fight, even if they were furious deep in heart. The story of Mi Heng and Cao Cao is a case in point. In the late Eastern Han Dynasty, Cao Cao recruited all the famous men in Xu County. Mi arrived but was not appreciated. The others advised him not to go directly to Cao Cao, but to turn to Cao Cao's subordinates. He looked down upon Cao Cao's subordinates and insulted all of them. And then under the introduction of Kong Rong, Cao Cao eventually gave him a position, but let him be the drummer who cheered the soldiers up. Unexpectedly, Mi Heng took off his clothes, beat drums and scolded Cao Cao at a subsequent banquet. It made Cao Cao become murderous, but his reputation made it not easy for Cao Cao to kill him, so Cao Cao sent him to Liu Biao. As expected, Mi Heng was still arrogant, which made Li Biao feel annoyed, and he was executed sooner. This is a typical way for Chinese courts to solve problems. Even though Cao Cao was powerful and murderous, he still weighed the pros and cons after being insulted, and finally chose the way that best suited his own interests.

On the contrary, in the Chūshingura incident, Asano suffered humiliation and cut Kira in the general house directly. The superficial causes include suffering humiliation and feeling angry, while the underlying reason is related to Bushido. As it is said in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* that the Japanese believe that a decent person, whether it is a kindness or an insult, must

have a strong feeling and seriously "return". Asano's act of stabbing people is undoubtedly the maintenance of reputation and the "return" of insult. Another very important part of the Bushido spirit is the reputation consciousness. The sense of honor contains the dignity of personality, which requires the samurais to distinguish right from wrong and maintain the character of patience and perseverance. In the meantime, It also requires samurais willing to give up everything for fame. In his book *Bushido*, Nitobe Inazō wrote: "A person's reputation is the part of a person that cannot be destroyed, and the rest is just a beast." Such strong and extreme utterance proves that honor and reputation are given high status in Bushido culture. In *Chūshingura*, Asano was humiliated after been calculated by Kira. Under this circumstance, it should be clear that the sense of Reputation requires samurais to be perseverant and patient, but not to submit to humiliation. The sense of honor also teaches samurai to maintain dignity, and the katana is the best tool for Japanese samurai to maintain dignity. Therefore, when Asano was insulted, the strong sense of fame and honor made him unable to endure humiliation, and the anger caused by the insult encouraged the hurtful behavior.

### 3. Why Was the Asano Naganori Given the Order of Seppuku.

Actually, in Japan, here was a clear rule about how to deal with the case in this kind. It pointed out that equal sanctions shall be imposed on both parties in private struggles accompanied by armed violence, without any reason. But in history, the incident ended in Asano Naganori's seppuku, while Kira was not sanctioned in the same way, which was clearly unfair. Many later generations believe that there are two specific reasons for the emergence of the punishment. First, Asano's behavior in the general's house was impolite. The general was anger so that he finally made the order. Secondly, the verdict was a dictatorial act by General Tokugawa Tsunayoshi. Tsunayoshi was known as the "Quan Gongfang", who let dogs live a good life, but ignored human suffering. During his reign, the world in Japan was in disrepute. Corruption was rampant. Although the incident was still controversial within the shogunate at the time, the incident was not investigated in detail, and was unfairly judged, as his trusted follower, Yasuaki Yanagisawa, was a relative of Yoshinori.

Such a verdict was clearly against the spirit of Bushido. In the book called *Bushido*, a chapter related to justice cited the case of Akaho. It pointed out that the actions of the righteous are in the pursuit of justice. It was the maintenance of the spirit of Bushido. The inequities in this case also reflected if the rule of man was higher than the rule of law or the governance power of one person or one institution was too large, it was very likely to lead to unfair incidents. That was also reflected in ancient China. In ancient times, there were many unfair cases caused by the excessive power of monarchs. In order to consolidate the rule, there was "burning books and burying scholars" and "great literary prison". Such mass mutilation comes from a major flaw in human governance.

### 4. The Reason Why Asano Naganori Accepted the Order of Seppuku.

Sin and Shame states that the obedience of the lower classes to the Lord was not unconditional. If the interests of lower classes were harmed, they would protest against the Lord, which prevented the abuse of power to a certain extent. According to that, when the general gave an unreasonable ruling, Asano Naganori as a subordinate could have chosen to resist. Moreover, Asano Naganori, as the master of Akaho, has certain resistance ability, but according to historical records, Asano Naganori accepted the order without any resistance. With this premise, the reason why he accepted the order of seppuku is even more worth exploring. In China, although people who lose their honor in front of the monarch will be severely punished, the cruel punishments such as slicing would be imposed on the prisoners by others or the prisoners would be ordered to kill themselves by hanging or taking poison, which only causes

short-term pain, and most of them were not ordered to commit suicide in such a cruel way as seppuku, a way of self-mutilation, since it was difficult to carry out a punishment that was too painful. Moreover, this kind of punishment is inhumane in the eyes of ordinary people. But in Japan, the brutal practice of seppuku was extremely common. Even in some cases, seppuku was not because of punishment, out of loyalty or responsibility. This action required great spiritual strength, and the source of this strength was Bushido. In Bushido, seppuku was a typical act, which was considered to be an honorable pursuit of righteousness. When other people take seppuku as "cruel self-mutilation", the Japanese believe that the spirit and soul are in the abdomen, and the cutting of the abdomen is to surrender the soul with a smile. It shows that in the Japanese concept, the practice of seppuku is not only not evil, but also very sacred. The Japanese not only use it to atone for sins, apologize, and escape shame, but also to redeem friendship and prove sincerity. Thus, in this story, Asano, as a samurai, does not resist ending his life by the seemingly cruel act of seppuku as an apology for his guilt, as well as to show his loyalty to the general and respect for etiquette.

## 5. The Reason for the Collective Seppuku after Akaho's Revenge

As mentioned above: in Japan, which followed the Bushido, the revenge of the forty-seven ministers was out of the maintenance of fairness and justice, and also out of loyalty to Asano Naganori. However, after the revenge, these people chose to accept the trial of the shogunate, and finally complied with the ruling and committed suicide. It may seem implausible, but the "samurai faith" offers a plausible explanation for these actions. The act of accepting the trial, obeying the ruling, and performing the collective seppuku is in accordance with the kindness and loyalty in the spirit of Bushido. The chapter on kindness in *Chrysanthemum and Sword* shows that kindness can be related to emperors, kinship, Lords and teachers. Kindness is a debt that must be paid. The samurai should be loyal to the master, emperor and country to pay for the kindness. Therefore, in the story, although the samurai's revenge behavior realized the loyalty to the master, it did not realize the loyalty to the emperor, and this behavior disturbed the social order and did not realize the loyalty to the country. In order to preserve this loyalty and repay this kindness, they finally chose to die. This act fulfilled the Bushido spirit's emphasis on dying without remembrance, scruples and hesitation. As Nitobe Inaz said, "For samurai, the most important thing is to take responsibility and fulfill responsibility, and death is only a means to achieve it." These samurai bore the responsibility to the master, to the emperor, and to the country. They finally fulfilled all these responsibilities with revenge and hara-kiri. So in the hearts of people who follow Bushido, they are glorious warriors, they deserve to be remembered, their ideas deserve to be passed on. Throughout this event, the samurai's actions and choices are closely related to the spirit of Bushido. It shows the importance of the Bushido spirit to Japan. It is also the reason why in the subsequent handling of the incident, although the Japanese authorities issued the order of seppuku, they still wanted to spread their spirit and showed respect to it.

When it comes to gratitude and loyalty, the Chinese tend to take a less extreme approach. When the act of revenge is out of justice, if in the end loyalty cannot be balanced, if loyalty to the master and loyalty to the king cannot be balanced, if the only way to do both is to give up life, then in this case, the Chinese may try to figure out a way to preserve life. In the Chinese concept, life is precious, because the realization of everything is based on survival. And this point was reflected in the *Water Margin*, one of the four great novels of Chinese literature. In *Water Margin*, under the circumstance of corruption of the imperial court, Wu Song, Song Jiang and Lin Chong fled one after another after committing crimes for various reasons. Among them, Song Jiang is undoubtedly the best example to compare with these warriors. Among the heroes, Song Jiang was the most loyal to the imperial court because he ever had an official position, so he always

tended to surrender in the battle with the imperial court. However, even such a person with a heart for the court would choose to flee for life after committing the crime. It shows the difference in thinking patterns between China and Japan. The Bushido and Emperor beliefs in Japan govern the behavior of the Japanese. Obedience to Bushido and loyalty to the emperor led to the practice of seppuku in the Japanese story. However, in China there is no such strong belief in the emperor. In ancient China, a new dynasty came into being mostly in line with the trend of historical development. But in the end, every dynasty tended to arouse popular anger. While Liang Qichao emphasized that every man has the responsibility for the rise and fall of the world, he distinguished the subjugation of the dynasty itself and the subjugation caused by the invasion of the great powers. In Liang Qichao's time, when the "fall of the world" happened, the real national consciousness of the Chinese people were aroused. In contrast, the Japanese worship the emperor and take him as their spiritual leader, while the Chinese care more about the country itself.

## 6. Conclusion

This study compares the Chūshingura event with some similar events in ancient China to deepen the understanding of Bushido spirit by contrast and the understanding of the differences in thinking between China and Japan. There is no culture of seppuku in China, while the act of seppuku had a special meaning for the samurai. Therefore, in the process of analyzing the plot of the incident, the focus was on analyzing the behavior of seppuku Asano Naganori and his followers made. The analysis of the Bushido spiritual and cultural connotation of the event is also based on the analysis of the samurai's behavior of seppuku. It is found that there are great differences in the cognition and pursuit of loyalty, forbearance, justice, honor, gratitude and revenge between China and Japan. The Japanese samurai's almost paranoid pursuit of these aspects is rooted in the great influence of the Bushido spirit.

In a social group, the behaviors of multiple individuals will gradually evolve into collective norms of behavior, and the collective norms of behavior will be gradually developed into social standards and moral norms. And these standards and norms will react upon the social group, and then restrict the behavior of the individuals in the group. The act of seppuku was originally an individual act in Japan, but as it was adopted many times in Japan, it gradually gained meaning and became closely associated with samurai, becoming a constraint on samurai and an important part of Bushido.

The act of seppuku contains the Bushido spirit, which reflects the Japanese people's respect for power, the maintenance of reputation and social order. In other words, it reflects the Japanese people's strong sense of collectivism. The cognition is conducive to social stability, but it is not conducive to the development of individuals. The sense of mortality behind the culture of seppuku also contributes to Japan's high suicide rate. Therefore, in the process of learning Bushido culture, we should look at its influence from two different aspects. It should be noted that under the influence of Bushido spirit, Japan formed a strong social statute, which constrained the behavior of Japanese people and was conducive to social stability. It is also important to understand that parts of the culture of the Bushido spirit are extremely twisted ideas that can lead to individual suicide and a lack of respect for the lives of others. This is also an important reason for the large-scale war after the distorted Bushido spirit affected Japanese soldiers in the course of World War II. The extremism and ambivalence present in the spirit of Bushido stem in part from Japan's unique geography. Frequent natural disasters in Japan, such as typhoons and earthquakes, make the Japanese people have a strong sense of anxiety and also produce extremist thoughts. As Ruth Benedict ever said "The Japanese are extremely aggressive and very gentle by nature; Belligerent and fond of beauty; Disdainful and respectful; The stubborn stem is weak and changeable; Tame but unwilling to be manipulated; Loyal but prone

to mutiny; Brave and cowardly; Conservative but very welcoming to new ways of life." This point is deeply reflected in the Bushido spirit and in the event of Chūshingura. Therefore, when understanding and learning the spirit of Bushido, we should enhance the ability to distinguish, take its essence and discard its dross.

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