

日本人の DNA

by Miriam Davis

While the missionary community in Japan last December was busy with the celebration of Jesus' birth, Japanese were reflecting on the 300th anniversary of a story that Ruth Benedict in 'The Chrysanthemum and the Sword' describes as 'the true national epic of Japan'. 'Chushingura' is probably more familiar to English readers by the name of 'The 47 Ronin'. Lord Asano of the Akoo clan is unable to bear repeated insult from Kira Kozukenosuke, an important official in the Tokugawa Shogunate, and strikes him on the forehead with his sword. Although the wound is slight, Asano is commanded to commit seppuku, his fief is confiscated and his retainers become masterless ronin. On December 14th 1702, however, 21 months after Asano's death, 46 (one dropped out at the last moment) of his ronin with Oishi Kuranosuke at their head, avenge their master by killing Kira and placing his head on Asano's grave at Sengakuji Temple. Eventually the 46 are also required to commit seppuku and are buried alongside their master where people still visit their graves today. More details of the story can be found in Benedict along with her own interpretation but I checked on the outline of the story under Oishi in JTB'S English 'Who's who of Japan – 100 Historical personages' (¥930), an excellent little book.

On December 26th NHK televised a documentary entitled 忠臣蔵 300年—日本人の最も愛した物語. This was fascinating for the insights it gave into the way present-day Japanese view this epic. It was also clear that through Kabuki, movies and TV dramas the interpretation has varied over the centuries. Here are a just a few of the comments from the studio audience, letters written to the program and panel guests.

'Chushingura' appeals because it teaches endurance to the last which then results in victory'. 「我慢して、耐えて、最後に勝つというところに魅力があります。」

'Why seppuku? Because the 'hara' or stomach is the centre of one's being'. 「なぜ腹を切るか。腹という物に忠心があるからです。」 N.B. The 'chushin' could be the 忠臣 of 'loyal retainer'.

'I like 'Chushingura because there is great

depth in the story. 「忠臣蔵は奥行きが深いから好きです。」 Some who had lost jobs felt the epic gave them strength to go on against the odds and believe in themselves.

'I think what is great is the ability of the 47 ronin to focus on one purpose and unite in its fulfillment.' 「四十七士は一つのことに向かってつき進む真剣さとか団結力といった点が本当にすてきだと思います。」

'One appeal of Chushingura lies in the fact that the 47 ronin were just ordinary people.' 'Chushingura' is the spirit of Japan' (日本の魂) and 'the DNA of the Japanese' (日本人のDNA(遺伝子)).

Among many comments on the leadership of Oishi was the following. 「蔵之助は日本史上最高のプロジェクトリーダーです。」 The writer, himself a project leader, finds himself referring to the example of Oishi in his daily work. 「蔵之助のことを参考にしながら日々の業務にあたっています。」

Some parallels (and differences - 四十七士は人殺しの集まりではない) were drawn with terrorism and September 11th and it was pointed out that Chushingura has in the past been interpreted wrongly by Japanese governments. But said one, the 47 ronin had freedom of choice to give their lives and this is very different from a government demanding people's commitment to death. One man spoke of being encouraged by Oishi who through 自己犠牲 (self-sacrifice) discovered 自己実現 (self-realization). A panelist concluded that what is inherently Japanese (日本的) about 'Chushingura' is that its main theme is 情 (じょう passion or emotion), in contrast to the 理 (り reason) of Europe.

All in all, this was a fascinating documentary. TV Tokyo's latest 10 hour long version of 'Chushingura' on January 2nd 2003 required somewhat more stamina. I was glad to be able to record it and watch it later in instalments! Finally, I wondered why the 47 ronin is read しじゅうしちし and not よんじゅうしちし and it seems it could simply be that the former sounds better or 語呂がいい.