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## The End of History? Sunday Night on NHK B.M. Bodart-Bailey

Faculty of Comparative Culture, Otsuma Women's University, Tokyo; formerly, Faculty of Economics, Kobe University

When I was asked to write a short piece about the reaction of people within my environment here at Kobe University to the year-long *rekishi taiga drama* 歴史大河ドラマ, as NHK's Sunday night history extravaganza is known, I met with unexpected difficulties. Very few of the people I come into contact with have actually seen it.

This took me by surprise. After all, it is Japan National Television's (NHK) largest and most expensive production, running a full year every Sunday night at peak viewing time. The title and theme were well publicized in advance, and so were the actors selected for the various roles. The location for shooting frequently turns into a highly popular tourist site. When the subject was Nobunaga some years back, the 500,000<sup>th</sup> tourist to visit the set made the evening news. But the massive stone walls that Nobunaga erected to support the splendor of Azuchi Castle at Lake Biwa were virtually deserted when I visited them around that time. And no doubt this will remain so, unless those who want to erect a replica of the

much-decorated castle on what is left of the site have their way.

This year's theme is the perennial favorite, the Forty-seven *rōnin* 浪人, or *Akō gishi* 赤穂義士, a story known to every child in Japan and often retold under the title of *Chūshingura* 忠臣蔵 in countless versions from dating from soon after the incident to the present time. (Even the all-female Takarazuka revue had a go at it some years back.)

Akō castle on the Inland Sea near Himeji, the home of the loyal retainers who sacrificed their lives to revenge their lord, was destroyed after the Meiji Restoration. Although the site owed part of its layout to the samurai-philosopher Yamaga Sokō 山鹿素行, and despite its significance as the place where the *rōnin* absorbed Sokō's teachings from which their loyal conduct grew, it was not thought worth preserving. What was left of the fortifications of this *hira jō* 平城, or castle built on flat ground, became the site for a new public school.

The leader of the *rōnin*, Ōishi Kuranosuke 大石内蔵助, and his followers, however, were not forgotten. In Meiji 30 (1897 - but some pamphlets have 1912) a shrine to Kuranosuke and his men was built within the outer walls of the castle, near the small wooden house and garden that purportedly was Kuranosuke's home. New, larger - than - life-size stone figures of the *rōnin* - somehow reminiscent of the stone figures lining the road to imperial Chinese tombs - mark the approach from the parking lot to the sanctuary. The scene is made even more incongruous by stalls selling trinkets and second-hand goods, ranging from clothing to kitchenware, within the temple compound.

Erecting the shrine entailed further destruction of the original castle site, but eventually reconstruction of the main gates and other parts of the castle began, a process that continues today. Thus, by carefully limiting the angle of the camera, one of the main gates could be used in the NHK production to shoot the arrival of the young daimyo Asano Naganori 浅野長矩, as he first arrived from Edo after he inherited the fief.

The director also decided to shoot Naganori's approach to the domain on location. There is, however, the problem that Banshū Akō 播州赤

穂, as the town is generally referred to, has a good amount of industry, and the smoke from the tall chimneys is visible from a distance. But early Akō was well known for the baking of salt, and the process has been reconstructed in an open-air museum some distance away along the shore. Thus there was a good reason for the smoke in the distance as Naganori was heading for his castle, and, to make the point, the director has him carefully inspecting the smoking salt-burning huts, even before entering his castle after the long 640 km journey from Edo.

Not surprisingly the town of Banshū Akō is doing its best to draw maximum profit from the TV series. There were stalls within the outer castle grounds selling everything from the locally produced salt, fast food, pottery and the inevitable T-shirts, and postage stamps with the image of the modern-day NHK Ōishi Kuranosuke. The greatest attraction, however, was a large, multi-domed tent, erected with the assistance of NHK, whose contents one was able to explore at the cost of 700 Yen. It featured, among other things, a partial reconstruction of Edo Castle's famous *matsu no rōka* 松の廊下, the gold-screened corridor where Asano Naganori drew his sword and wounded Kira Yoshinaka 吉良義央, an action which earned him the death sentence, and in turn motivated his loyal retainers to kill Kira. From time to time the painted golden *fusuma* would draw apart to reveal on a film screen the dramatic action that took place at this location. A fair amount of space was also allotted to the final killing of Kira in what the pamphlet terms the *kuraimakkusu kōnaa* クライマックスコーナー. Again, the *shōji* of Kira's snow-covered villa opens to reveal the bloody action on a large film screen. As the exhibit comes complete with its own home page I need say no more. (See URL:

<http://www2.memenet.or.jp/~akogishi/genroku/0-101.html>,

With all this publicity, why then is it so hard to find people who watch the NHK Sunday history drama? It is obviously the fault of my environment. As one of my colleagues put it succinctly: "Educated people (*interi* インテリ) don't watch that sort of thing." But someone else conceded: "Last year's drama on Tokugawa Yoshi-

nobu, the last shogun, was on an interesting topic, because relatively little is known about his person and his plans for reform of the country. But then they had the story told by a middle-aged woman, and it ended up with the silly story of that woman and her husband.” Others chimed in: “Yes, whenever that came on, I switched it off.” There was agreement that in an effort to get high ratings, NHK had sacrificed the original quality of its history productions. Clearly the popularity of the actors (“much too young” someone commented) was of greatest importance not historical authenticity, and it was also felt necessary that something “exciting” happened in every weekly episode. Secure in the company of his all-male colleagues (except for myself), one added with obvious disdain: “It’s all just made for women ...” But even the wives of my colleagues don’t seem to watch the series (according to their husbands), mainly, it appears, since a much more interesting program on new exhibitions is being screened on Educational TV at the same time.

Not being an expert on the fifteenth shogun, Yoshinobu, and not having watched every episode, I would not like to comment on the historical authenticity of the performance. However, I did notice that Perry on his arrival in Japan in 1853 was reading the 1906 edition of Engelbert Kaempfer’s *History of Japan*. Well, I guess they should at least be given marks for trying ...

If criticisms about the inclusion of fictional material and an undue amount of “popularization” are voiced about last year’s production on Tokugawa Yoshinobu, they are all the more pertinent to this year’s series on the 47 *rōnin*. The difference between the two begins with the credits. In the Yoshinobu production these were shown against a backdrop of early photos of Japan, or realistically produced scenes of the period. In the case of the *rōnin* series there are instead cartoon images of strutting peacocks, and flowers with blooms unfolding and the miniaturized figures of the *rōnin* dancing on their petals. (Yes, I am sorry, this is not a misprint.)

The story of the loyal samurai contains good material for a dramatic performance of several hours, but hardly enough for the fifty-plus episodes of the year-long NHK drama. Hence the NHK series begins with Tsunayoshi’s succession as the fifth Tokugawa shogun, over two decades

before the final killing of Kira and the death of the *rōnin*. The popular image of the debauched “Dog Shogun”, moreover, provides plenty of dramatic material.

On the orders of his father, Tsunayoshi was educated not as a samurai but as a scholar, and was the first, and perhaps the only Tokugawa shogun who had some genuine interest in scholarly pursuits. Yet in the NHK series Tsunayoshi is portrayed as a raving madman, whose contorted features show an uncanny resemblance to that of the ferocious guardian kings at the entrance of temples. Whether angry or in deep sorrow over the death of his only son, Tsunayoshi’s behavior is violent, with his closed fan serving as his weapon physically attacking those who are in his presence. Also the other characters are badly overdrawn, with the “goodies” and “badies” readily identifiable. There is here no effort at historical authenticity: the purpose is obviously simply to entertain.

A producer shooting a prewar TV series once explained to me: it really does not matter what people wore at the time. What we need to use is clothing and props that immediately identify this as prewar scene in the viewer’s mind. Similarly the NHK series seems to be guided by what is popularly known about the period, as well as the viewer’s predilection for romance and violence, rather than any historical research.

With so little feedback on the topic from my colleagues, I tried my students. But, alas, this was even less successful. They did not even know that such a series was being shown. “Young people don’t watch NHK,” someone explained to me. I also made the startling discovery that out of some twenty students only one had heard of Kurosawa, and none of the film “Rashōmon”.

I must admit that, being under pressure of time, I gave up at that point. There are obviously people watching the program (someone mentioned that it is very popular in Hawaii), but certainly few with a primary interest in history rather than popular entertainment.

I would like to end this with another observation on the popularity of Japanese history – or rather the lack of it – in today’s Japan.

When I was first asked to teach Japanese history to Japanese students I was looking forward to being able to pitch my lectures at a fairly high

level. After all, students had studied the subject for years at school, and the Japanese History section of most university entrance exams looks pretty daunting. I was surprised, however, to find that basic knowledge – such as the implications of the bakufu's *sakoku* policy – were lacking. While all students study Japanese history in primary and middle school, it becomes an elective subject during the last three years at high school. University entrance exams generally permit a choice between World History and Japanese History, and with many believing that “*kokusaika*” 国際化 holds the key to Japan's future, students often opt for the former. The result is that they might know the date of the French Revolution, but not that of the Meiji Restoration. But even those who do study Japanese History in their three years of high school often lack fundamental knowledge about the broader issues. The problem here is that at high school history is studied purely for the purpose of passing university entrance exams. Since these exams are marked by computer, questions must be of the “multiple choice” type, a format which favors examining knowledge of facts and figures, but makes it difficult to test the understanding of broader issues. For those with enough dedication, NHK educational television has some excellent programs that could fill the gap, but, like x-rated movies, these are usually shown after 11 p.m., and I am yet to meet someone who shares my enthusiasm for them. Maybe it requires the shock of seeing foreigners being more enthusiastic about Japanese history than the Japanese themselves, – as I believe was once the case with wood block prints – until the subject becomes popular again as a serious discipline of study, rather than the basis for soap opera plots of the NHK Forty-seven *rōnin* variety.

### Book Reviews 書評

Edo Tōkyō Hakubutsukan 江戸東京博物館 [The Edo-Tokyo Museum]. *Sankin kōtai: kyodai toshi Edo no naritachi* 参勤交代: 巨大都市江戸のなりたち [The System of Alternate Attendance: Origin of the Edo Megalopolis]. Tokyo: Edo Tōkyō Ha-

kubutsukan, 1997.

Perhaps the most arresting visual image in Constantine Vaporis's detailed study of the early modern Japanese network of travel and transport is Felix Beato's photograph of the Tōkaidō near Kanagawa from the 1860s.<sup>1</sup> This picture captures a wide, tree-lined, dirt road that could be mistaken for the path leading to a shrine or temple anywhere in Japan today, if not for the presence of nearly a dozen travelers and vendors in various postures of rest or mobility, and a lone samurai staring directly into the camera. The photograph is particularly powerful because of the juxtaposition of temporalities it represents: a scene from Japan's pre-modern age is captured using a technology that is intimately associated with the mechanical reproduction of modernity. Another of Beato's photographs is used to open the Edo-Tokyo Museum's catalog on the system of alternate attendance, again bringing the modern Western lens to bear on the fading landscape of Tokugawa authority. This image, "Panorama of Yeddo from Otayama [sic.]," (愛宕山) catches a 135-degree view of the tiled Edo rooftops, dotted by trees, fire watchtowers, and storehouses, but above all dominated by the long walls of the *daimyō yashiki* 大名屋敷. The photograph captures with mechanical accuracy a scene that no longer exists, emphasized by the diagram below the image that explicates Edo buildings in the picture as well as the location of contemporary landmarks: we learn that the Tamura family's upper *yashiki* for example, was located near the location of the current JR Shimbashi Station. Anyone who has visited Shimbashi station, however, knows the landscape in the

<sup>1</sup> Constantine Nomikos Vaporis, *Breaking Barriers: Travel and the State in Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1994): 41.