

Guide to Inagaki's Film Version of *Chushingura* ("The Treasury of Loyal Retainers" or "The 47 Samurai")

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This story is loosely based on an actual historical event. There are many versions of the story, including a puppet play and cartoon versions. This is one of the best movie versions. The story has been called "the national epic of Japan."

This movie is complicated. There are many characters and subplots. The most important characters (and the actors who portray them) are Lord Asano (Yuzo Kayama), Lord Kira (Chusha Ichikawa), Chamberlain Oishi (Koshiro Matsumoto), and Tawaraboshi (Toshiro Mifune). (Mifune is the only actor who is well known outside Japan, having starred in numerous samurai films.) Asano is a paradigmatic noble samurai lord. Kira is a samurai in name only: he is venal and cowardly. Oishi is Asano's chief retainer, and he must lead the other retainers after Asano is forced to commit *seppuku* (also called *hara-kira*, ritual suicide). Tawaraboshi is a *ronin* (masterless samurai) who aids the conspiracy out of admiration for their ideals.

The story in general and this particular version of it raise countless issues. However, one key theme is the conflict between *giri* and *ninjo*. *Giri* is one's obligation, typically specified by one's social role (e.g., as a lord or as a retainer). *Ninjo* is one's human feelings. Consider how the tension between these two demands plays itself out in the actions of Asano, Oishi, and other characters.

The numbers below refer to the section divisions on the DVD version of the film. The titles in quotation marks are those given in the DVD version. Following that are brief descriptions of the content of each section. Letters indicate different scenes within each part.

1. "Main Title sequence"

"Part 1: Blossoms"

2. The imperial envoys pass through an inn. The innkeeper and his wife discuss the visit, and dismissively comment on a piece of calligraphy given to him by one of the envoys.

3. "Edo": Lord Kira gives a present (a Western-style globe) to Lord Yanagisawa. They discuss the fact that Kira will be Grand Master of Ceremonies at the visit of the Imperial Envoys, while Lord Asano will be "Head of the Reception." Kira will be responsible for advising Asano on the niceties of protocol. Kira complains that the gifts given by Asano are too small. Yanagisawa advises Kira to use his position to punish Asano.

4. "The Values of Life": (a) Lady Yanagisawa sleeps with the Shogun (with Lord Yanagisawa's

encouragement). (b) Lord Kira praises Lord Yanagisawa to his wife and brags that his values are "lust and greed."

5. "Lord Asano": We first see Lord Asano at his estate, where his advisors warn him that he must give a larger "gift" to Lord Kira. Asano responds that it would be unethical to do so. Asano and his wife express their sadness that they will be parted for the duration of the ceremony for the envoys.

6. "A Visit from Lord Kira": Kira inspects the place where the reception is to take place, and drops broad hints that Asano should give him a larger "gift." When Asano does not offer one, Kira announces that all the mats must be replaced (overnight, since the reception is the next day). Asano protests that Kira had said previously that the current mats were acceptable, but Kira denies it.

7. "A Matter of Honor": (a) Asano's retainers swear that they will round up every matmaker in the area and get the new mats made in time. (b) When one matmaker refuses, one of Asano's retainers gets him to agree by threatening to commit *seppuku* right in front of him. (c) Horibe (another retainer) finds a matmaker in a bar and tries to get him to come with him. However, the matmaker had just agreed to a drinking match with the sparmaster Tawaraboshi, and Tawaraboshi insists that he stay to finish the match. In exchange for letting the matmaker go, Horibe agrees to stay and take part in a drinking match with Tawaraboshi. (d) By dawn, all the mats are replaced.

8. "Receiving the Envoys": (a) Kira refuses to tell Asano whether he should greet the envoys at the top or the bottom of the stairs. (b) Lord Wakisaka advises Lord Asano about how to handle Kira: play it cool. It will look bad for Kira if Asano fails in his duties, so Kira will tell him what to do in the end. (c) Sure enough, Kira tells Asano at the last minute what to do.

9. "Asano's Breaking Point": (a) Kira refuses to show Asano some instructions that had been sent with the envoys. Wakisaka, who had read the instructions, advises Asano that it doesn't make any difference, because they were just routine instructions about fire safety and such. (b) Still, Asano follows Kira and asks to see them. Kira insults Asano. When Asano looks enraged, Kira reminds him that his clan will be destroyed if he violates the rules by drawing his sword in a place where the imperial envoys are visiting. Kira then slaps Asano. Asano pulls his sword, but only inflicts two minor flesh wounds on Kira before he is restrained by others.

10. "Formal Questioning": Asano is formally questioned about the incident. One of the interrogators makes clear that he will be absolved if he claims that he was "mentally disturbed" at the time of the incident. Asano twice refuses to admit this. One interrogator asks him to explain his actions, but the other interrogator cuts him off, saying that it makes no difference what his motives were.

11. "Following Orders": (a) Asano's brother complains to his sister-in-law, Lady Asano, about what Asano has done to them through his actions. Lady Asano asks whether Lord Asano might be allowed to live. (b) Lord Asano calmly commits *seppuku*. His last words are, "My people will wonder when they hear of this day."

12. "Kira's Pain": We suddenly cut to a shot of Lord Kira waking up from a nightmare and moaning in pain. We learn that Kira's son has married into the powerful and wealthy Uesugi clan. Kira begs his son and those around him to protect him, saying, "If I'm called a coward, I'm proud to be one."

13. "March 15, 1701: Couriers on the Run": Couriers are carried from Edo to Lord Asano's castle to bring the news. The group of the retainer Sampei accidentally kills an old woman. Without stopping, Sampei shouts out his name, explains that they are on an emergency mission, and asks them to forgive him.
14. "The Asano Clan Castle in Ako": (a) Lord Asano's retainers, led by Chamberlain Oishi, discuss whether to surrender the castle (as ordered by the Shogun, who has directed that the Asano clan be dissolved) or fight to the death. (b) The Treasurer obtains permission from Oishi to collect the taxes and loans owed them, supposedly so that they can pay the local people what they owe them for the paper currency they have issued.
15. "The Army of Lord Wakisaka": (a) Lord Wakisaka (see 8-9, above) arrives in Ako to take the castle, by force if necessary. (b) We glimpse the Treasurer fleeing in a boat (with all the money he had collected).
16. "Blood Pledge": (a) Chamberlain Oishi suggests to the other retainers that, rather than fight, they ask the Shogun to restore the clan under the leadership of Asano's brother. (b) Oishi remarks, regarding the Treasurer, "From now on I'll doubt everyone." (c) The remaining retainers affix their thumbprints in blood to an oath, pledging loyalty to Oishi.
17. "Surrendering the Castle": Wakisaka, taking control of the castle, tells Oishi that Asano "broke the Shogun's rules but upheld the samurai code." He then interrogates Oishi about his motives, suggesting that Oishi plans to kill Kira. But Oishi states his plan to ask Shogun to reinstate the clan under Asano's brother's leadership.
18. "Hyobu the Protector": (a) Hyobu, a retainer of the Uesugi clan, has been assigned to direct security for Kira. Kira insults samurai in front of Hyobu, calling them "stupid," and saying that he became a Grand Master of Ceremonies to avoid having to put his life at risk for honor. (b) Towarabashi demonstrates his abilities with a spear (by tossing bales of dirt) to the Uesugi clan, and asks about becoming their retainer.
19. "Oishi's Home in Yamashina": A friend of Oishi's visits his house on the anniversary of Asano's death and is surprised to find that he is away at a teahouse (essentially a brothel, in this case), rather than commemorating this sad day.
20. "Refuge in a Brothel": (a) Sampei (see 13, above) and his fiancée, Okura, talk of their love for one another. (b) Oishi engages in drunken revelry at the teahouse. Another samurai seeks him out, wanting to find out what his true intentions are. We learn that Oishi had been given some money by Lady Asano. The other samurai leaves in disgust when it appears that Oishi is wasting the money on *sake* and prostitutes, and has no interest in avenging his late lord. (c) Passers-by throw dirt at Oishi's house and mock him.
21. "Sampei's Honor": (a) The son of the woman whom Sampei accidentally killed (see 13, above), tries to kill him. Since the son is not a samurai, Sampei easily disarms him, but does not kill him. (b) Sampei goes to Oishi and asks to be relieved of his oath (see 16, above), so that he can commit *seppuku* to atone for killing the old lady. Oishi agrees, and Sampei presses him to tell him his true intentions before he dies. Oishi says, "Up until this moment I have wavered," but now he will

definitely lead the other retainers to take revenge on Kira. (c) The son of the woman who was killed shows up at Sampei's house, this time with several people to help him kill Sampei. Before they can enter the house, Sampei slits his own throat.

22. "Oishi Gets the News": This is one of the best scenes in the movie! While at the teahouse, Oishi is told that Sampei had killed himself. He must feign indifference so that no one will suspect that he is still a man of honor and passion. He tells the other people at the teahouse that he wants to have a mock wake for his dead sparrow. He sings and dances while trying to hide his tears.

23. "Time for Revenge; Off to Tajima": (a) We learn that Asano's brother has been banished, so there is no longer any hope of restoring the clan. Most of the conspirators will now move to Edo. (b) We see Okura (see 20, above) tending Sampei's grave. (c) Oishi says goodbye to his mistress at the teahouse. (d) Oishi's wife and younger children leave him to go and live with her parents. Oishi and his son debate whether Oishi should have told his wife explicitly what his true feelings and intentions were.

Part II: Snow

24. Several laborers are killed when a stone they are carrying to a noble's garden falls on them.

25. "An Edo Carpenter": (a) A carpenter discusses how he has agreed to supervise modifications to the mansion of Lord Kira, including adding a secret passageway and hiding places. While this is happening, a rice delivery man who is actually the retainer Okano shows up and listens. He then asks the carpenter's sister out on a date. (b) We cut suddenly to Lord Kira molesting a younger woman. (c) It turns out that the woman is a spy for Asano's retainers.

26. "Okano Proposes": (a) On a walk by the river, Okano tells the carpenter's sister that he is the son of a samurai, but gave it up because it was too demanding. He proposes to her. (b) Meanwhile, the carpenter is talking to two other men who both want to propose to his sister. The sister returns and, to the brother's delight, announces that she and the rice delivery man are in love and want to get married. (c) Okano expresses to his comrades his sadness at having to deceive the girl. (d) We see another retainer who has fallen in love with a prostitute.

27. "Kira's Public Appearance": Kira is carried through town in a sedan chair. Some of the retainers try to kill him, but they are stopped by other retainers before they are discovered.

28. "After the Plans": (a) Okano's fiancée tells her brother, the carpenter, that she wants to borrow the plans to Lord Kira's mansion. The carpenter guesses that she wants to use them to impress the rice delivery man's parents, who don't want their son to marry beneath him. He tells her that she can't have them, but then he leaves the key to the drawer holding the plans on the floor in front of her. (b) Asano's men hear a rumor that Tawaraboshi has joined Uesugi's men (see 18, above). He is so skilled a fighter that he must be killed before they launch their attack. Horibe is assigned the task, even though he was Tawaraboshi's drinking buddy (see 7, above).

29. "Duel with Tawaraboshi": Horibe attacks Tawaraboshi, but his heart is not in it, and they break off

the fight. Tawaraboshi explains that he has not really joined Uesugi's men. He hints that he wants to join Horibe and the rest of Asano's men, and asks to be told, indirectly, when the time comes for the attack.

30. "Imperial Envoy: Mitsutada Obana": (a) In order to sneak into Edo (?), Oishi disguises himself as an imperial envoy, and passes through the same inn that the actual envoys had passed through earlier in the movie (see 2, above). The innkeeper realizes that something is amiss when the inventory the envoy is required to submit turns out to be blank. Noticing the Asano family crest on one of their cases, the innkeeper decides to help them and keep their secret. (b) A local official demands to see the envoys. The innkeeper refuses, explaining that the envoys have too high a status to see him, since they are on an official mission on behalf of the prince. As evidence, he produces the calligraphy given to him by the earlier envoys, which he says was written for the envoys by the prince himself. The bluff works. (c) The innkeeper gives Oishi the calligraphy in case he needs it to bluff his way past a later guardpost.

31. "Studying the Plans": (a) We see some European guests visiting the city (Dutchmen, who were the only foreigners allowed in Japan for a long period of time in the Tokugawa Shogunate). Oishi's son wonders what they would think about the plans of Asano's retainers. Oishi finds it interesting that younger people like his son care what foreigners think. (b) Kira's neighbors complain about his rudeness in not keeping a more quiet household.

32. "Farewell to Lady Asano": (a) Oishi visits Lady Asano for what will be the last time. He eyes suspiciously one of Lady Asano's attendants (presumably because he does not recognize her). He tells her that he and the others plan to give up being samurai and take up farming. Lady Asano expresses her disgust with them, and denies Oishi the right to pay his respects at the shrine of Lord Asano. (b) On the way out, another of Lady Asano's attendants, who is also the sister of one of the retainers, asks Oishi to tell her brother that she disowns him for giving up. Oishi gives her what he says are "keepsakes of Lord Asano" that he has no right to keep, now that he is a mere farmer. He asks her to hold on to them until tomorrow, when Lady Asano is in a better frame of mind.

33. "Time to Get Ready": (a) Okano's fiancée shows up at the rice shop, asking when Okano will return. She is told that he is gone for good, and she leaves heartbroken. (b) Oishi's son worries to his father that he has only managed to say things that are "ordinary" in his farewell letter to his mother, but Oishi tells his son that he does not have to say more. (c) The retainer who is in love with the prostitute (see 26, above) tells her what he and his comrades are about to do, saying that he did not want to die having lied to her. She thanks him deeply for his honesty, and asks him to stay for one drink. (d) Horibe finds Tawaraboshi in a bar, and hints that tonight is the night.

34. "The Samurai Gather": (a) The samurai start to gather at the rice shop, and concern develops that some of the original group seem to be missing. Will those who have not shown up inform on those who have gathered to carry out the plan? (b) One member of the group is in bed, almost too sick to walk. The woman attending him cannot understand why he is so upset about an illness that will go away in a week or so. (He later dies while dragging himself through the snow to try and join them.)

35. "Dropouts": While the other samurai anxiously wait for the others to show up, someone throws a note through the door. It is from some of the others, who say that they will not come, but promise not

to inform on them. The samurai discuss whether it is more painful to refuse or to come with them. The last samurai show up.

36. "The Loyal 47": The samurai are assembled. (The subtitles say that there are 47 samurai, but in Japanese they say that there are 46 at the rice shop. I'm not sure why this is so.)

37. "The Truth about Kuranosuke": (a) We suddenly see a cloaked figure trying to kill the attendant of Lady Asano to whom Oishi gave the "keepsakes." It turns out to be the attendant of whom Oishi was suspicious. (See 32, above.) She is captured. (b) They open the package from Oishi, and it turns out that it is a ledger and a letter explaining how they had used the money Lady Asano had given them (see 20, above) in order to prepare for "tonight." Lady Asano realizes that they plan to avenge Lord Asano.

38. "The March on Kira's Mansion": (a) Great fight scenes as Asano's men attack Kira's mansion. (b) Tawaraboshi goes to a nearby bridge and single-handedly blocks reinforcements and police from arriving.

39. "The Elusive Lord Kira": (a) Asano's men have killed all of Kira's men, but they cannot find Lord Kira himself. They are just about to give up when someone blows a whistle, signalling that they have him. (b) Having found someone who looks like Kira, they positively identify him by the scars left by Lord Asano's sword, and then invite him to commit *seppuku*, but he refuses and whimpers like the coward he is.

40. "Retribution": (a) Having cut off Lord Kira's head, Asano's men march through town. Tawaraboshi is with them. (b) A townsman, rushing to see them, trips and screams when he sees a dead couple in a doorway. It is the retainer and the prostitute (see 33, above). (c) Okano comes to see his ex-fiancee. The carpenter, realizing what has happened, asks Okano if he ever really liked his sister. Okano says that he loves her. He then asks the sister for forgiveness for what he has done, before rejoining the rest of Asano's men.

41. "Their Final Fate": The 47 samurai are forced to commit *seppuku* as punishment for their crime (but their fame and adulation are immediate and long-lasting).