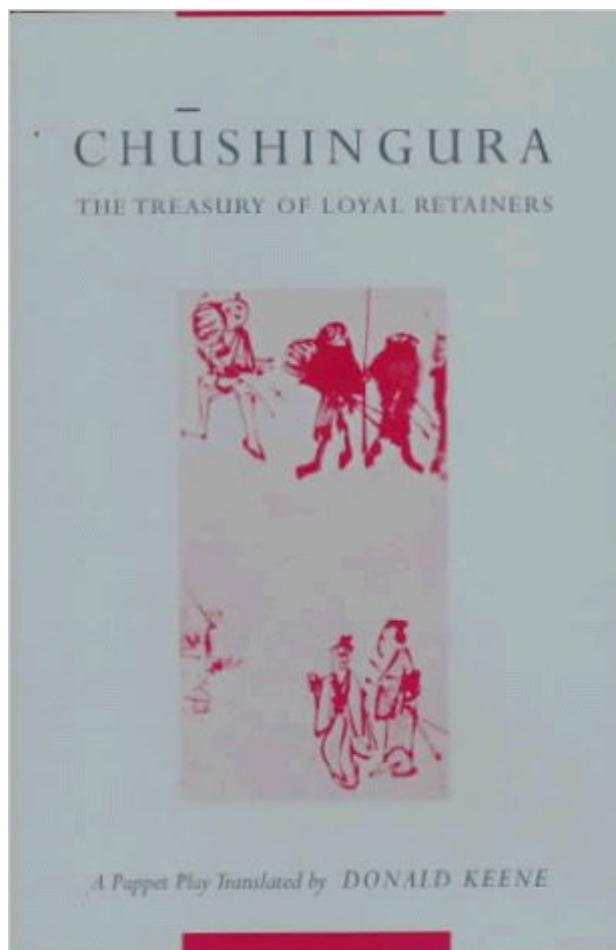


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Chushingura (The Treasury Of Loyal Retainers): A Puppet Play



Synopsis

Chushingura (The Treasury of Loyal Retainers), also known as the story of the Forty-Six (or Forty-Seven) Ronin, is the most famous and perennially popular of all Japanese dramas. Written around 1748 as a puppet play, it is now better known in Kabuki performances. In the twentieth century, cinema and television versions have been equally successful. Donald Keene here presents a complete translation of the original text, with notes and an introduction that increase the reader's comprehension and enjoyment of the play. The introduction also elucidates the idea of loyalty. This traditional virtue, as exemplified in Chushingura, has never completely lost its hold on audiences, in spite of twentieth-century changes in Japanese society and moral ideas. Moreover, as Professor Keene points out, the excitement, color and violence expressed in the play may be considered the counterpoint to the austere restraint and understatement which are more commonly thought to be "traditionally" Japanese.

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Customer Reviews

It is surprising that there is only one readily available (or at least affordable) translation of Chushingura, one of Japan's most famous puppet/kabuki plays, at . We are fortunate then that Donald Keene's translation is that particular one, for it is a vivid, elegant work, serving as both an entertaining read and historical document. After Tokugawa became Shogun in 1601, Japan entered a long period of regimented peace. The Samurai warrior-class were forced to adapt therein, trading

their swords for the pen, and many of the classic traditions fell into stagnation. The old ways were taught, but seldom practiced: to excel in Tokugawa's bureaucracy, skill with the tongue was more important than skill with the sword...at least in the long run. But occasionally the Samurai spirit rebelled. In 1703, forty-six former retainers of the late lord Naganori burst into the grounds of lord Yoshinaka, the man indirectly responsible for the death of their master; they killed Yoshinaka and then marched to a nearby Buddhist temple to offer the severed head to their master's grave. Even though they knew it would mean death by ritual seppuku (disembowelment), the ronin fulfilled their pledge to their master regardless, thus gaining 'face' through the performance of duty. Chushingura, a fictionalized account of this famous vendetta, emphasizes these aspects of honor and loyalty: the forty-six ronin are determined to see their course through to its end, regardless of cost. And the cost is, in places, quite high. Some have their wives sold to prostitution so that they can finance their revenge operation. Others deny their wedding promises, knowing death rests upon their shoulders.

"Chushingura" is Japan's "Romeo and Juliet". Not literally, of course, as the stories are very different, but in the way that it is a story that every Japanese person knows. Based on an actual incident, the story has been glorified and told and re-told for every generation, and still reverberates in hearts today. It is also, traditionally, a very hard story for Westerners to come to grips with, because the morals on display are not what we would consider to be admirable. Loyalty is something we can admire, of course, but this is unearned loyalty. The 47 Ronin do not avenge their lord because he was a good man, because he is worthy of their loyalty. They avenge him because he is their Master, and because he was born to be their master. The samurai also did not earn their position, they were born samurai, as an inherited class. Their job, rank and income was all decided the moment they drew their first breath, along with whom they would owe their loyalty to. The very word "samurai" translates as "servant", and without someone to serve they have no purpose. They uphold an inherently unfair system, as shown by their unwillingness to include a merchant in their vendetta, not because his courage is less but because his birth-determined class is lower than theirs. Donald Keene has performed a minor miracle with his translation of "Chushingura: The Treasury of Loyal Retainers". First off, his introduction deals with the inherent difficulties in the work. Even in Japan, since the inception of the work there has been debate on who are the heroes and who are the villains. A hotheaded lord sacrifices his life, family, home and the lives of the hundreds who depend on him simply because he could not swallow an insult.

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