

SAKAMOTO RYŌMA IN KYOTO: GETTING IN PERSONAL TOUCH WITH THE PAST IN HEISEI JAPAN

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MARIUS JANSEN WAS ABOVE ALL A PEOPLE PERSON, and it was typically through a personal link that we first met, at the annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies in San Francisco in 1966, when he came up to introduce himself after a talk that I had given about the Taisho student movement. He was eager to point out that we had a common acquaintance in Miyazaki Ryūsuke, the son of *his* Miyazaki Tōten and the founder of *my* Shinjinkai.¹ With this I entered Marius' wide circle of friends and followers. Three years later, I became his junior colleague in modern Japanese history at Princeton, where I came to know much more of the man and his many qualities.

My own work as a historian, as with the work of so many of us, has continued to intersect with the legacy of Marius in many ways, and today I want to pursue briefly one such intersection from my own recent past. I now find myself living for a good part of each year in an old Japanese house in the Gion district of Kyoto, so the connection that came immediately to

1. Miyazaki Tōten was Sun Yat-sen's primary collaborator in Japan and appears in a central role in Marius Jansen, *The Japanese and Sun Yat-sen* (Harvard University Press, 1954). His son Ryūsuke was one of the founders of the Shinjinkai, a radical student group at Tokyo Imperial University that was the focus of Henry D. Smith II, *Japan's First Student Radicals* (Harvard University Press, 1972).

mind when devising a topic for this memorial conference was of course *Sakamoto Ryōma and the Meiji Restoration* (1961), Marius' second book and a model text for the theme of this panel on "Local and National," in its skillful interweaving of several worlds: the personal world of Ryōma himself, the regional world of Tosa, the still broader worlds of national and indeed global politics and, most relevant to me, the world of the city of Kyoto where so much of the action took place in the 1860s. Introducing Ryōma in the preface of his book, Marius took note of his "colorful career," observing that it had already "drawn to it the talents of so many Japanese authors and playwrights that romance has to some degree come to overshadow fact" (p. x). In the course of the book, he proved that the facts were every bit as exciting as the fiction, but in his concluding discussion of Ryōma in the penultimate chapter, Marius again addressed the issue of image versus reality, concluding that "The popular image of the courageous hero grew until it overshadowed the less spectacular deeds of the *rōnin* adventurer, but both are of compelling interest for the light they throw on the development of modern Japan" (p. 346). Marius himself did not in fact devote any space to the popular image of Ryōma in his book, nor indeed was there much reason to do so in the late 1950s when he was doing his research and writing, since these years represented a lull in the popularity of the Restoration heroes in general.

In the subsequent decades, however, especially from the mid-1980s, this has all changed with the emergence of a remarkable cult of Sakamoto Ryōma. Although scholarship on the historical Ryōma seems to have advanced only marginally since the publication of *Sakamoto Ryōma and the Meiji Restoration* in 1961 (and its widely-respected Japanese translation of 1965, which remains in print today), the mass popularity of Ryōma has undergone dramatic changes that I would like briefly to survey. As it happens, I am well placed to observe these changes in Kyoto, the epicenter of Ryōma fandom, since the Gion house lies on a direct line between the site of Ryōma's assassination and the place of his burial, about twelve minutes by foot from the one and ten minutes from the other. In exploring these two Kyoto markers of his death, and others relating to his life, I have come to understand that the popular image of Ryōma, as with other similar phenomena of Japanese popular historical consciousness in recent decades, involves a constant interaction between the national level, in the form of impersonal mass-media output, and the local level, in the form of place-specific monuments, time-specific commemorations, and person-to-person dealings. This relationship is one that structures our entire consciousness today, and a case study like this may help us think about it more closely.

RYŌMA VERSUS THE AKŌ GISHI

I had already encountered this issue in my continuing study of the Forty-Seven Rōnin of Akō, a much older and more widespread phenomenon, to be sure, but one that similarly reflects a symbiosis of national networks of communication and local sites of devotion. The local places of commemoration for both the Akō Rōnin and Ryōma share a remarkably similar pattern, of a peripheral home town (Akō and Kōchi) that promotes its local sons with booster-like pride, balanced by a central grave site (Sengakuji in Tokyo for the 47 Rōnin versus Gokoku Shrine in Kyoto for Ryōma) that serves as a focus of religious devotion for pilgrims from all over Japan. I should properly travel to Kōchi to offer a full report on the local-national structure of the Ryōma cult, but must here limit myself to my own current base in Kyoto.

Let me first, however, briefly pursue the comparison of the Akō Rōnin and Sakamoto Ryōma at the level of the national media, where we find broad similarities but also some striking specific contrasts. Before the war, both cults were fuelled by a combination of patriotic spirit encouraged nationally by the Japanese state, and by the popularity of the tales (as much fiction as fact) recited by *kōdan* and *naniwabushi* story tellers. Then from the Taishō period, both Ryōma and the “Gishi” (as the Akō Rōnin were always known before the war, and often still) were frequently featured in film, particularly in the great era of silent film from the 1910s into the early 1930s. Gishi films were of course far more numerous, an average of over four a year if you count everything that was Gishi-related,² but Ryōma was scarcely neglected, appearing in the title of fourteen separate movies from 1911 to 1939, an average of exactly one every two years, with a peak from the mid-1920s to early 1930s.³

After Japan’s defeat in 1945, both the Gishi and Ryōma went out of style for a while, but both in time were re-tooled for a newly peaceful and democratic era in ways that bear certain parallels. The Akō Rōnin—now known as “Rōshi” rather than Gishi because of Osaragi Jirō’s 1928–29 novel *Akō rōshi* that was first to adumbrate the theme—were now praised not for loyalty to their overlord, but for their presumed protest against the political corruption of the bakufu in the Genroku era. As for Ryōma, we have no better testimony

2. A chronology of Chūshingura-related films and TV shows may be found in Akō-shi Sōmubu Shishi Hensanshitsu, ed., *Chūshingura*, vol. 5 (Akō: Akō-shi, 1993).

3. These figures come from a search of the Japanese Movie Database (<http://www.jmdb.ne.jp/>).

than that of Marius Jansen himself, who turned both to Tosa as the birthplace of the freedom and people's rights movements of the early Meiji period, and to Sakamoto Ryōma for his idealism, ambition, and above all his individualism, "self-confidence" and ideal of "self-realization," qualities that Marius saw as rooted in Tokugawa social values (pp. 375–78). Just as the Akō Rōnin came to represent resistance to a tyrannical national regime, so Ryōma in his blending of merchant and rural samurai (*gōshi*) origins could stand at once for the bourgeois democratic spirit in opposition to bakufu tyranny and for bushi self-reliance. In this Marius was in many ways prescient, as we will see, of the ways in which the popular image of Ryōma evolved, and offers a general theory of Ryōma's current popularity.

Still, however, at the time that Marius' book appeared in 1961, Ryōma had passed into almost total obscurity in Japan. This all changed in June 1962, when Shiba Ryōtarō, who was then 40 years old—one year younger than Marius—began serializing his great historical novel *Ryōma ga yuku* (a difficult title to translate, perhaps "Ryōma On the Move"?) in the *Sankei Shimbun* (actually then known just as "*Sankei*"). It would continue for six full years, following which it was then published in five volumes, or eight in the current pocket-sized edition that is still a perennial best-seller.⁴ This was not only the work that catapulted Sakamoto Ryōma to national cult status, but also the novel that firmly established "Shiba-Ryō," as he became affectionately known, as Japan's single most popular writer, a position he has continued to hold even after his death in 1996.

Marius Jansen was a scholar and Shiba Ryōtarō a popular novelist, but the appeal that each found in the person of Sakamoto Ryōma echoed that of the other. As Kawata Teiichi has related, it was only in the spring of 1993 that Marius and Shiba were at last able to meet in person, but each had long expressed his admiration for the other. In a letter to Kawata of March 1992, Shiba described receiving from Ōoka Shōhei a copy of the original English version of *Sakamoto Ryōma and the Meiji Restoration* some time in the early 1960s when he was writing *Ryōma ga yuku*, and laboriously reading it with a dictionary, "brimming over with curiosity" (*afureru yo na kōkishin de motte*),

4. The publishing history of *Ryōma ga yuku* is in fact considerably more elaborate: following the original 1962–66 five-volume edition, it was included in vols. 3–5 of Shiba's collected works (*Shiba Ryōtarō zenshū*) in 1972, followed in 1975 by the first Bunshun Bunko edition in eight volumes, then a larger-format "collector's edition" (*aizōban*) in the winter of 1981–82, a re-issue of the original five-volume edition in 1988 in a new binding, and then a new Bunshun Bunko edition of 1998 that is still in print—a total of six separate editions. And most of these editions involved numerous reprintings.

sometimes spending over half an hour on a single page. Shiba concluded that it was “one of the great books about Japanese history (and the very best by a foreigner).” Marius for his part saw Shiba not just as a novelist but as a great “historian of civilization.”⁵

Both Marius and Shiba clearly shared a similar admiration for Ryōma’s defiant and courageous spirit, and for his humanity and breadth of vision. With Shiba, however, the emphasis was more explicitly on youthfulness, as captured in that wonderful word “*seishun*,” youth as a “green springtime,” implying boundless optimism and fresh energy. It was not just the youthfulness of Ryōma himself that Shiba had in mind, but of the Meiji Restoration itself as the “springtime” of modern Japan.⁶ This broader conception that was in fact much the same as that of Marius, envisioning a rebirth of a new Japan following long years of war and reconstruction; for both, the historical meaning of Sakamoto Ryōma was linked to Japan’s potential for popular democracy a century after Ryōma himself had lived. And it also seems to be why many turn to Ryōma today, when Japan appears to be under the rule of a latter-day bakufu that is over-bureaucratized, corrupt, and rudderless, in need of a “Heisei Restoration.”⁷

Meanwhile, a critical shift in the media of mass entertainment was taking place in the 1960s, from films to television, which from this point on would be the crucial carrier of popularity for both the Akō Rōnin and Sakamoto Ryōma. The last major Chūshingura film, for example, after years of regular all-star productions, was in 1962, and from that point, the annual NHK Taiga Drama, drawing the nation back into its history every Sunday evening over an entire year, became the key force in keeping the Chūshingura legend alive. (The tale of the 47 Rōnin still holds the record, of four separate

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5. This information is from a handout provided by Kawata Teiichi at the memorial conference in December 2001, including copies of letters written to him by both Marius Jansen and Shiba Ryōtarō. Professor Kawata was instrumental in arranging the meeting of the two in 1993.
 6. For a fine analysis of the ways in which Shiba’s conception of the Meiji Restoration in *Ryōma ga yuku* intersected with his own sense of Japan’s historical juncture in the early 1960s, see Narita Ryūichi’s recent *Shiba Ryōtarō no Bakumatsu-Meiji: Ryōma ga yuku to Saka no ue no kumo o yomu* (Asahi Shimbunsha, 2003).
 7. In fact, there was even a curious political party called the “Heisei Ryōma no Kai,” founded by Kyoto native Shimizu Mitsuo, which advocated an amorphous mix of nationalism and internationalism. Shimizu founded the party sometime in the 1990s when, as a member of the Upper House of the Diet, he broke away from the New Liberal Club. Shimizu managed a web site for the party (<http://www.heiseiryoma.org/>) from August 2000 until spring 2005, following his resignation from the Diet in 2004; the site is archived at <http://web.archive.org>.

appearances on the Taiga Drama, in 1964, '75, '82, and '99—one per decade.) Given its immense popularity, Shiba's *Ryōma ga yuku* became an obvious candidate for the NHK Sunday-evening series even before it was finished, and was chosen for the year 1968. Whereas the Akō vendetta thrived in movie theaters for a decade after the end of the Occupation in 1952, the postwar popularity of Ryōma has been driven almost entirely by television: out of fifteen titles from 1959 to 2000, only three were theater versions, all during the great Ryōma surge of the mid-1980s. The rest were all on television, many of them been based directly on *Ryōma ga yuku*, confirming the decisive power of Shiba Ryōtarō in determining the fortunes of Ryōma.⁸

The real turning of the Ryōma tide seems to have come in the mid-1980s, apparently because of a historical confluence—partly the steady accumulation of fans of Shiba's novel, partly a popular TV drama in 1982 (NTV's *Bakumatsu Seishun Graffiti Sakamoto Ryōma*), partly promotion related to the celebration of the 150th year of Ryōma's birth in 1985, and perhaps most important of all, the appearance of Ryōma in *manga* form, in the long-running *Ooi Ryōma!*, which was serialized in a Shōgakukan monthly *Young Sunday Comics* for a full decade from 1986, then published in book form in 21 volumes and recently reissued in a 14-volume series that seems to be selling well—all 4,500 pages of it. This in turn was, in a familiar pattern, made into an *anime* series, which showed for one year on NHK from 1992 to '93. Unlike the 47 Rōnin, whose story has never held any particular appeal for youth as such and has hence never succeeded in *manga* or *anime* form, Ryōma seemed to be ready-made for the youth market, in no small part because of Shiba Ryōtarō's emphasis on "*seishun*."

GOKOKU SHRINE ON RYŌMA'S MEMORIAL DAY

Although the national mass media doubtless set off the Ryōma boom of late Shōwa, it was rather in local sites and at the face-to-face level that his popularity was most fully realized, above all in Kyoto. Hero worship must be literally put "in place": it must have physical monuments, sites of worship, annual commemorations, and clubs for face-to-face association. Given deep-rooted Japanese practices of graveside worship, it is no surprise that the local magnet of national feeling would be a cemetery. This had very much been the case of the Akō Rōnin, whose graves at Sengakuji became a popular attraction

8. The relevant data may be found on the very useful "Datsu! Ryōma ga yuku" website at <<http://ryoma.web5.jp>>.

within hours of their burial the morning after their execution on 1704.2.4. The transformation of Ryōma's grave came only many years after his death, around the time of the sesquicentennial of his birth in 1985. A *Kyoto Shimbun* article of March 1986 took note of a sudden increase over the previous year in the number of youthful visitors to Ryōma's grave, some one hundred on weekdays and up to three hundred on weekend days, as well as a surge in personal letters addressed to him at the shrine.

So let me first take us on a quick tour of this grand shrine of Ryōma fans throughout Japan, his grave in the cemetery of Gokoku Shrine at the foot of Mount Ryōzen in the Higashiyama area of Kyoto, up a steep hill just south of Kōdaiji and north of Kiyomizu Temple. This is the official place of burial for the fallen Restoration heroes, created in 1869 as the first in the Shōkonsha movement of shrines to the modern war dead that led in time to Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. It is now complemented by a museum across the street, the Ryōzen Rekishikan, dedicated to the memory of the Restoration heroes. Together with the nearby Yasaka Kannon, a postwar memorial to the war dead, the Ryōzen site as a whole maintains the somber war memorial feel of its origins, but it has been given a new face by the young fans of Ryōma. And young they are: the crucial feature of the Ryōma boom, in line with Shiba-ryō's stress on "*seishun*," is youthfulness: remember that Ryōma died on his thirty-second birthday.⁹ I happened somewhat by chance upon the celebrations of Ryōma's birthday/deathday at Ryōzen Gokoku Shrine on November 15, 2001, when my wife noticed a listing in the *Kyōto shimbun* of a lecture series about Sakamoto Ryōma at the Ryōzen Rekishikan. I arrived late, in the middle of a learned discussion by Kimura Sachihiko, chief curator of the museum, about fencing schools in Bakumatsu Japan. He is a fan of the older type, a Kyoto native, a graduate of the conservative Kokugakuin University, and a martial arts buff. He is sympathetic to the young fans, many of whom were packed into the standing-room-only crowd, but he is clearly not one of them. I learned later, however, that he may have played a key role in nurturing the Ryōma boom, when in the late 1970s letters began to appear addressed to "Mr. Sakamoto Ryōma" in the care of Gokoku Shrine, surely from readers of Shiba's *Ryōma ga yuku*, who wanted to confide in Ryōma their hopes, worries, and resolutions for the future, and often to ask his personal advice. Kimura is said to have

9. This reckoning is by the old lunar calendar, and overlooks the fact that although he was attacked on his birthday of the fifteenth day of the eleventh month in 1867, he actually died the following day. Today, the solar date of November 15 is accepted as both his birthday and memorial day.

responded individually to many of these letters, which by 1986 had reached a pace of five hundred a year, about ten every week, telling the writers what Ryōma would have said in response. Like the worshippers at Ryōma's grave, the letter-writers were mostly in their teens and twenties, over two-thirds female.

Having heard enough of Kimura's lecture, I crossed the street to Gokoku Shrine, and was unprepared for the frenzy of activity taking place there, even though I had already realized that this was Ryōma's memorial day. Front and center as I entered the shrine precincts was a large tent of the Kyoto branch of the Kōchi Prefectural Club (*kenjinkai*), where an assortment of representatives eagerly pushed various Ryōma-related sites back in the home province. Most of them seemed to be very new, products of bubble-era prefectural boosterism, and include the Kōchi Prefectural Sakamoto Ryōma Memorial Museum, the Kōchi Municipal Jiyū Minken Museum, the Nakaoka Shintarō Memorial Museum, and a private wax museum with 130 life-size figures known as the Ryōma Rekishikan. Nearby at the shrine, *kenjinkai* volunteers were dishing out free bowls of *shamo-nabe*, a Tosa-style chicken stew that Ryōma and his comrade Shintarō are said to have favored.

At still another tent, the Kyoto Ryōma Club was recruiting members and selling an assortment of Ryōma memorabilia, particularly fans and lanterns (Fig. 1). Also featured was a brand-new book on Ryōma and Kyoto, and you can see the author Takeyama Minehisa on the left signing copies for two young women. This was one of two books that had appeared just in the past few months pushing the Ryōma-Kyoto connection, in his case with the Shinsengumi (another Bakumatsu phenomenon with its own recent cult following) thrown in for added sales. Takeyama is a colorful character, a professional wedding emcee and the enterprising type who both profits from and directs the patterns of Ryōma worship in Kyoto. He had also edited a flip-chart like collection of Ryōma's most inspiring words, which was on sale at the shrine office.

Wandering about the plaza in front of the shrine, I encountered Ishii Yukiko and her daughter Chikage (Fig. 2), a mother-daughter singer duo from Osaka, seen here posed by the memorial to Ryōma set up in front of the main hall of the shrine, and dressed in garb presumably suggestive of local Tosa. They were eagerly drumming up business to perform at upcoming end-of-the-year parties.¹⁰ But for me, it was rather the fans themselves who were the

10. If you are interested, check out their web site at <http://www.niji.or.jp/home/yukiko/>. Their repertoire includes some Ryōma and Tosa related songs.



Fig. 1. Kyoto Ryōma Club booth, Gokoku Shrine



Fig. 2. Osaka enka singers, fans of Ryōma

most affecting, and certainly the least mercenary. There was, for example, a girl who had traveled alone all the way from Niigata for the occasion. She told me that she particularly liked Ryōma because he was nice to women. (This turned out to be a central element in the heavily female appeal of Ryōma, who was very attached to two strong women, his sister Otome and his wife Ryō.)

MESSAGES FOR RYŌMA

By far the most revealing evidence of the Ryōma cult, however, came into view after I left the central shrine area and paid the required ¥300 to enter the sprawling cemetery that covers the slopes of Mt. Ryōzen above the shrine. I immediately noticed that the steep path leading up to the graves was lined with numerous square stone plaques inscribed with dedicatory messages to Sakamoto Ryōma. I later learned that the practice began in the autumn of 1988, when the shrine embarked on a project to re-cover the public areas of the shrine with marble paving stones, each about 330 cm (12") square and 3 cm (1.2") thick. To help cover the costs, visitors were given the opportunity to pay ¥2,000 to donate one of the stones to the shrine, but it was only in November of that year that a young woman expressed her wish to inscribe a message to Ryōma and offer it at his grave. The practice spread quickly, and within nine months, some three hundred such plaques had been offered—about one a day.¹¹ In the ensuing decade and more, the offerings have continued unabated, especially after the price was lowered to ¥1,000.

11. These details are from a newspaper article entitled “Ryōma ni omoitaku wakamono” that is kept in the office of Gokoku Shrine; it has no indication of the source or date, but judging from the content, it appeared in the summer of 1988.

The stone plaques—which are frequently changed to make room for the new ones, with the old ones used for the original purpose of repaving, the inscribed side turned to face the earth—offer intriguing and often affecting testimony to the passions and hopes that drive the cult of Sakamoto Ryōma. Here it is possible to offer just a few representative samples. Not surprisingly, given the youthful and predominantly female constituency of Ryōma fans, romance is a common theme, often expressing a frustration with the hopes today of finding “a man like Ryōma.” But many plaques are also offered by couples already in love, who find in Ryōma a common bond, as in Fig. 3: “We are great fans, in the extreme, passionate, the utmost. We have come all the way from Yamaguchi Prefecture to see Ryōma.” He [Issei] writes: “I want to be like Ryōma, and do everything I can to make my dreams come true.” To which she [Haya] adds: “Me too, I want to be like Ryōma, and have a big heart.” Another common theme, of expansiveness and of reaching beyond Japan to the world, calling both upon Ryōma’s study of the West and of his experience in forming the *Kaiantai* maritime shipping fleet, is seen in the offering by the couple in Fig. 4, addressed “To Ryōma-san” with the large bold kanji “UMI” (The Sea) written in the middle, followed by her vow that “I will become big and strong,” and her boyfriend adding (in a less assertive script), “Me too, the sea is for me.”



Fig. 3. Two lovers who love Ryōma



Fig. 4. Ryōma fans aim for “The Sea”

And then there are those who just find Ryōma rebelliously cool—doubtless a reflection of the way he comes across in his TV, *manga*, and *anime* incarnations that many of these young fans have surely seen. Fig. 5, for example, reads: “Mr. Sakamoto Ryōma, the way you lived was, like, real ‘Punk Rock’! We wanna live like that too. From the R&R Gang ‘Nite

Parade' and 'The Revolvers.' Too fast to live, too young to die. 'Punk rock is here to stay, it will never die! 'Vive le Rock!'" Not a few of the plaques are from young men alone, with no reference to the opposite sex, but typically in admiration of Ryōma's masculinity, as in Fig. 6, which boldly declares that, "I will become even more of a man than Ryōma." Others refer to Ryōma's contempt for fame, wealth, and the opinions of others, such as one from a young man who has apparently been forced into the care of an orthodontist: "If Sakamoto had seen braces, he would certainly not have hesitated to wear them." But overall, the common tone is of Ryōma as personal spiritual advisor, a sort of guardian angel to provide the courage to forge ahead no matter what the difficulties. As one young man wrote, "I plan to stick with it until I can see everything in the world. Please give me advice from time to time! I beg you! When I join you in the other world, please be my guide." And at the same time, one finds a common thread of assertive self-reliance in many of the messages to Ryōma. One writes, "I want to be like you in living on 'my own' [*Jibun*'o *motte ikiyō to omou*], and another identified as a member of a high school volleyball club declares, "Since it's my life, I'm free to choose on my own. I refuse to have any regrets!" In the end, I could not help feeling that Marius would have found himself nodding in agreement with many of the sentiments expressed on the plaques offered at Ryōma's grave, all of which see in him an example of courage, ambition, and self-reliance—precisely the qualities that attracted him to Ryōma from the start. On the memorial day in November 2001, I spent some time observing the fans at Ryōma's grave, where they waited quietly in a long orderly line to take their turn, making offerings of flowers, sake, recorded tapes, and various sentimental bric-a-brac. Most touching of

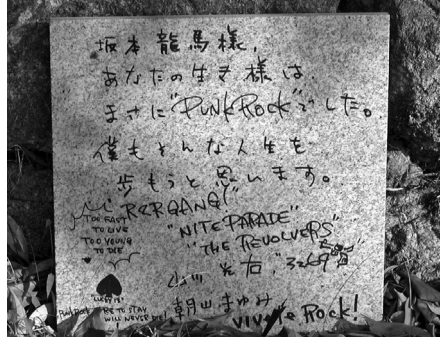


Fig. 5. Punk rocker fans of Ryōma

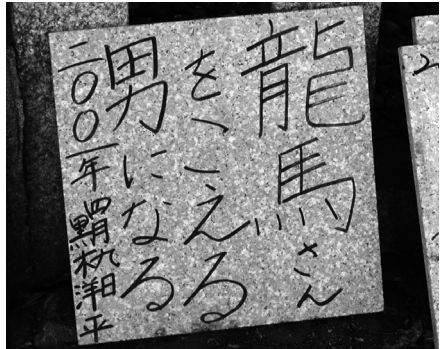


Fig. 6. To be a man like Ryōma

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all was the scene in Fig. 7, where a young woman photographed her pink teddy-bear mascot, which you can see if you look closely, placed at the feet of the small bronze statue of Ryōma adjacent to the grave, with Nakaoka kneeling beside him, as a group of children on an official school outing look on with mixed reverence and curiosity. For me, this single image, of the pink personal mascot smiling out from Ryōma's feet, best captured the spirit of intimate devotion that many of the fans seem to feel for the Bakumatsu hero.



Fig. 7. Fan snaps Ryōma with her mascot

LOCAL ORGANIZERS

In the end, of the many people I met at the shrine that day, the most revealing were those who managed to combine the devotional and the entrepreneurial, of whom I met two prime examples in front of the tent of the Kyoto Ryōma Club, shown in Fig. 8, photographed at sunset following the official graveside memorial services that day. On the right is Yamagishi Satoshi, founder and president of the Yokohama Ryōma Club, and to the left is the person who came to interest me the most, Akao Hiroaki. He is a genial type, about the age of Ryōma at the time of his death, and now routinely wears his hair in the flowing style associated with Ryōma in recent film depictions. Akao was born as the younger of two sons of the owner of Akao Shōbundō, a respected used-bookseller that is located squarely in the heart of downtown Kyoto, on the west side of Kawaramachi between Sanjō and Shijō, a staid presence in a pretty trendy neighborhood.

When I paid him a visit later at the bookstore, Akao-san told me the story of his own engagement with Ryōma. In 1993, the year before the celebration of the 1200th anniversary of the founding of Kyoto, he found himself the

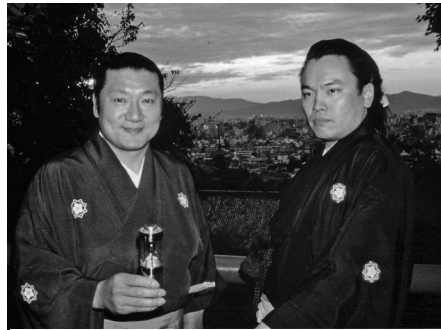


Fig. 8. Akao Hiroaki and Yamagishi Satoshi

head of the Youth Division of the powerful Kawaramachi Merchants Association, and was pressed to come up with a new idea to sell Kyoto, which as he put it, was a powerful “brand name.” His idea was Sakamoto Ryōma, whose deeds are commemorated in a cluster of historical sites in the Kawaramachi area. Along the Takasegawa canal on Kiyamachi, for example, just a block away, is the site of the Tosa domain mansion, seen in Fig. 9, on which was built the Rissei Elementary School (seen across the canal) that Akao himself attended. (A future dream of Akao is to convert the school, now closed for lack of students, into a museum in honor of Sakamoto Ryōma). And down the nearby alley is the Tosa Inari shrine, featuring a small (and unappealing) statue of Ryōma.



Fig. 9. Site of Tosa domain mansion

Not far north, just south of Sanjō and west of the Takasegawa, is Suya, the lineal descendant of one of the great lumber dealers that provided the name “Kiyamachi,” and now an elegant store for costly handcrafted wood objects. Ryōma is known to have stayed here at one point during his sojourns in Kyoto, as marked by a stone monument next to the store. Suya today makes the most of the connection, having established a second-floor art gallery “Ryōma,” and every year on November 15–16, the current owner, Nakagawa Atsuko, sets up a beautiful shrine to Ryōma on the street in front (Fig. 10), and welcomes visitors to a showing of Ryōma memorabilia in the gallery above.



Fig. 10. Ryōma memorial at Suya Gallery

And finally, the most important of the Ryōma sites in Kawaramachi, just a dozen shopfronts south of Akao’s family bookstore, is the stone marker at the location of the Ōmiya inn where he and Nakaoka were assassinated on a cold winter day in 1867 (Fig. 11). It stands in front of a travel agency that has irreverently surrounded it with racks of promotional material, but for those who pay attention, it is a familiar example of the way that Kyoto constantly

embeds its living past in the living present. At any rate, Akao Hiroaki founded the Kyoto Ryōma Club in 1994, and started holding an annual night-time lantern parade in Ryōma's memory on the 16th of November, the day after the conventional death-memorial events. I am happy to report that the eighth annual lantern parade in 2001 was a grand success, far outstripping all past efforts. To begin with, Akao managed to get a police patrol car to head the procession with lights flashing, a perquisite they had not merited in the past as they traipsed their route from Sanjō Bridge, past Suya and down Kawaramachi to Shijō, where they headed east into Maruyama Park to pay respects at the large bronze statues of Ryōma and Shintarō there, and then on to the graveside, and finally a raucous party at Imobō Restaurant.

This year, the lantern parade also had the crucial cooperation of Kimura-san, a stonemason hailing from the great quarries east of Takamatsu and the president of the Kagawa Prefectural Club in Kyoto, whose loyalty to Ryōma seems to derive from a pan-Shikoku patriotism. In Fig. 12, we see his truck,

which proudly followed the lead patrol car at the head of the parade, his organization now identified as the "Shikoku Club." It was decked out with a huge dragon head that plays on the "dragon" (*ryū*) in the name of both Ryōma and his wife O-Ryō, and carried a huge stone slab engraved in gilt with the slogan, "The Rebirth of Japan Will Begin in Kyoto." After this came the procession (Fig. 13), headed by Akao-san dressed as Ryōma, and accompanied by two very picturesque young women. To left is a movie actress who was on loan from the Tōei Movie Village in western Kyoto, an establishment with which the stonemason Kimura had certain ties. To the left, videotaping as she walks, in white hair and a costume that is presumably

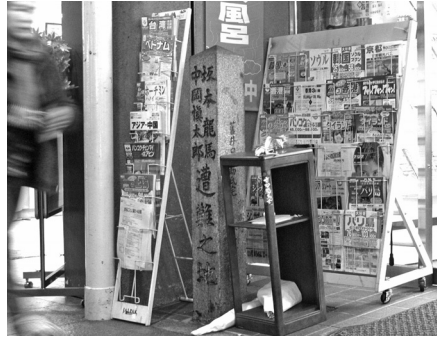


Fig. 11. Site of Ryōma's assassination



Fig. 12. Parade float of Shikoku patriots

intended to evoke the rebellious spirit of the Bakumatsu *shishi*, was Akubi Tomomi, a chanteuse from Tokyo who had been recently bitten by the Ryōma bug. After a visit earlier in the year to the Teradaya in Fushimi, site of the famous battle in which Ryōma and a friend fought off a horde of bakufu assailants, Akubi-san had dinner at a local sushiya in the nearby shopping street known as “Ryōma-dōri.” The local merchant’s association



Fig. 13. Lantern parade, Ryōma memorial day 2001

ended up commissioning her to write them a theme song, now the anthem of Ryōma fandom, entitled “Ryōma Kattobase,” Knock It Out of the Ball Park, Ryōma!

Arriving at Gokoku Shrine, the 70-odd marchers in the procession assembled for the requisite group picture. In studying the photo, I calculated that it was sixty per cent male, and that the average age appeared to be in the 30s or even 40s that is, less female and considerably older than the average fans who worship at Ryōma’s grave. One suspects that this reflects the greater sociability of the organizing types, in contrast to the individual dedication of the more worshipful. In accord with Akao-san’s aspirations, most of the people who joined the procession were not from Kyoto, but had come from all parts of Japan just to join the celebration, including nine men in matching blue jackets and white *hachimaki* head-bands. This was a delegation, I learned, of members of a Ryōma study group from the main office of Sony Corporation in Tokyo, set up by Mr. Minomiya, a member of the Sony board of directors and a serious Ryōma fan of the older school.

So these are the ways in Kyoto—and I’m sure a similar story could be told for Kōchi—in which a national fandom, forged by mass media culture of historical fiction, film, TV, *manga*, and *anime*, has been brought down to earth, situated in nearby local places, and tied intimately to personal face-to-face communities of like-minded fans and believers. To some historians, this may seem a distraction from further probing the historical “truth” of what Sakamoto Ryōma actually did. But for me, it is a lesson in how history really works in our day and age, cycling as ever between the abstract and distant national level, and the intimacy of the immediate

locale. As Marius himself reminded us, the living power of the popular image may even overshadow the actual deeds of Ryōma, but can shed equal light on the continuing evolution of modern Japan. Thank you, Marius, for this and so many other lessons that, like the spirit of Ryōma, are in no danger of disappearing any time soon.