

# Mark Twain and Modern Japan: Southern Honor and Samurai Revenge *Adauchi*

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It is a well-known fact that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century numerous American Southerners faced each other in mortal combat to defend one another's honor in a duel; many of them died purely for honor's sake. Yet most historians find no academic value in Southern honor-bound duelists or Southern honor culture. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, a distinguished historian, admits in his book *The Shaping of Southern Culture*:

In a truly analytical way, the concept of [Southern] honor has entered the historians' vocabulary only recently. When gathering material for a study of the subject in the late 1970s, I discovered that the subject catalog at Case Western Reserve University's Freiburger Library contained almost no entries for historical approaches to the ethic. Only those related to the Shakespearean and German literary past appeared. If mentioned at all, historians, with the exception of Clement Eaton, Dickson Bruce, and a few others, treated the ethic of honor in the South as no more than a mischievous hypocrisy. It was not examined as a complicated impulse, one that involved the interaction of the claimant and the public arena in which badges of gentility or sheer virility were conferred or withheld. The rituals and rhetoric of honor have

likewise failed to reach the American historian's consciousness.  
(296)

Following scholarly neglect in historical study, the general feeling has seemed to dismiss Southern honor culture as a hypocritical and loathsome custom of the past. People of the present day tend to cast a scornful look upon 19<sup>th</sup> century combatants who clung to an outdated convention of honor in either of fictional and real stories.

In Japan, on the other hand, writers and historians have always had a keen interest in samurai avengers in affairs of honor during the feudal ages. Modern Japanese naturally disapprove of revenge through murder, while cherishing the honorable samurai culture of revenge in novels, dramas, and movies. This conflicted attitude of modern Japanese may be curious for modern Americans, but was helpful giving new insight into antebellum Missourians and Mark Twain.

Twain, as you well know, conveys stirring dramas of those Southern duelists and avengers. Twain, by treating those time-honored duelists in his works, might aim a satire at the Southern gentleman's strong affinity for duels, chivalries, and decayed system of "worthless long-vanished society," if we accepted at face value his fierce denouncement on them in *Life on the Mississippi* (275). The satire is not only motive for Twain to treat Southern duelists and Southern honor culture of his age as a prominent literary theme.

In an attempt to bring a new light to Mark Twain criticism, I will show literary similarities in Mark Twain's tragedies of honor-bound avengers by comparing the avengers to their Japanese counterparts, and discuss the literary significance of long-neglected Southern honor culture in his works.

I

First, let me take a brief look at the honor culture in the American Old South. Modern historians differ subtly over how to define the concept of Southern honor, on account of the diversity and ambiguity of what people considered honorable behavior. Nevertheless, Wyatt-Brown and other leading modern historians, Dick Steward and Edward L. Ayers, agree in asserting that Southern honor culture was a vital impulse which shaped antebellum Southerners' identity, institutions and culture.

According to Ayers's relatively easy generalization in *Vengeance and Justice*, that the ethics of honor was a moral judgment or "indicator" of white male conduct, which was accepted in every part and by every class of the Old South. Abiding by the honor code, male Southerners were compelled to meet their antagonists in a duel when disgraced or attacked. By fighting a duel staged under elaborate ritual, upper-class men could win respectability and gentility. Privileged plantation owners, through courage, could legitimize their high social standing and self-professed noble lineage. Even men of lower status fought in obscure taverns and backstreets in order to retain or gain the respect of a few drinking friends.

Wyatt-Brown documents in *Honor and Violence in the Old South* that code duello was popular in Missouri of the 1830s and 1840s. As Andrew Jackson, actually did in Tennessee, Missourian men of upper class and profession could cement their leadership and aristocratic status by fighting a duel. Far from being popular only among the elite, the practice of duel was spread to men of every class and bred gun-fights, street murders, revenge killings and family feuds under the guise of honorable combat. In the value system of this honor-bound

society, vengeance was the only recourse for a disgraced man to remedy his shame and maintain his reputation. Vengeance was the only accepted method with which to vent his anger, whereas the law afforded no remedy that could give true satisfaction like revenge could. Before the Civil War many Missourians believed that honor or holy vengeance stood above the law. Twain vividly tells in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* how Judge Driscoll defends his family honor by fighting a duel with Luigi, an Italian, who kicked his nephew Tom Driscoll. Judge and other leading citizens despise Tom for his resorting to law in settling his brawl with Luigi; they believed it a sacred duty for Southern gentlemen to save their family honor of high standing and noble lineage by dueling.

On the other hand, as Dick Steward suggests, the 1822 anti-dueling statute of Missouri, though hardly enforceable, caused slow but inexorable change in public opinion toward men of honor. In the 1830s judges, police officers and grand juries began to enforce anti-dueling laws more vigorously. Furthermore, in 1835 the state legislature passed a new law that made dueling a felony regardless of whether anyone was killed or hurt. Mark Twain's father, John Marshall Clemens, became a judge in 1842 at Hannibal, Missouri. Although Marshall Clemens devoted himself to enforcing anti-dueling laws, he ultimately failed in the murder case of William Owsley (which Twain himself witnessed as a boy) in 1845. William Owsley, in defending his honor, shot Samuel Smarr, who had insulted and threatened him. Owsley was tried for murder but exonerated because there remained the long-established custom of placing holy vengeance above the law. Public opinion became agitated.<sup>1</sup> Because of his father Twain well understood throughout his childhood that antebellum Missourians had

two kinds of contradictory public morals—legal justice and honor ethics.

This regional peculiarity had a great influence on Twain and his conflicted treatment of honor-bound avengers. Injun Joe breaks away from a courtroom, where his revenge killing of Dr. Robinson is revealed by Tom Sawyer. In *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Judge Driscoll appears both as a practical law enforcer and a time-honored duelist. Roxana, a female slave, seeks vengeance on her own son Tom when disgraced, but is never tried in the court. Instead her son Tom is sentenced to life imprisonment in the murder trial. “A Double-Barrelled Detective Story” has two story lines: one is about the attempted holy revenge of a young, noble descendant of a cavalier. The other line is about the murderous revenge of a young miner who is later arrested and proved guilty by the legal authorities. In Twain’s works reflecting antebellum Missouri, honor-bound avengers live under the court’s authority, but escape its enforcement in some ways. Thus Twain showed that the value systems of honor ethics and legal justice of his day coexisted in an uncomfortable balance.

## II

We can understand Twain more clearly by looking at Japanese writers who also experienced drastic conflict half a century after the American Civil War. *Adauchi* was the samurai rite of revenge of Japan’s feudal past, in which the male relatives of a murdered person sought vengeance on the killer. The idea of *adauchi* or holy vengeance came from Confucian moral teachings. Though different in origin, the Japanese tradition of revenge also had many traits in common with its American counterpart. *Adauchi* or ritualized revenge killing was

institutionalized as part of the samurai moral code. Just like in Southern honor culture, Japanese found vengeance the only recourse for a disgraced man to remedy his name and maintain family honor. The Tokugawa regime and manor lords approved and even encouraged *adauchi* revenge killing, as long as certain rules were observed to prevent prolonged blood feuds. Mako Taniguchi suggests in *Bushido* that during Japan's feudal age, when judicature power was not fully recognized, private revenge under certain rules was useful in maintaining social peace and order, just as it did in European feudal ages (121-22).

Under the circumstances, no Japanese doubted that *adauchi* revenge was morally correct until April 2, 1874. Six years before, the Tokugawa feudal regime was taken over and modernized into the Meiji government. This new government, for the first time in Japanese history, introduced constitutional law, modeled after American and European precedents. The Meiji government had pressing need to modernize Japan into a constitutional state, in order to trade fairly with its American and European counterparts. On April 2, 1874 the government of Japan, without any public notice or consensus, issued a law forbidding *adauchi*, prescribing a penalty of murder for honorable revenge killing, following European laws. Even government elites and legal professionals had difficulty accepting the newly enacted law and newly introduced concepts of legal justice, which contradicted conventional Japanese morality.<sup>2</sup>

Overnight Japan was placed into a similar situation as the Missouri of the 1840s. Until the day before the anti-dueling law came into force, the samurai honorable custom of *adauchi* had been popularized among the common people. Mako Taniguchi states that it is

historical fact that anyone, women, children, and even beggars included, could and did partake in *adauchi* duels. Writers featured *adauchi* in newspapers with admiration and dramatized it in Kabuki plays (Mako Taniguchi 102-04). *Adauchi* dramas and stories became one of most popular literary genre, and this tradition was carried on to the Meiji era and even present day. The booming *adauchi* literature in the Meiji era suggests that the Meiji government and judicial authorities severely enforced laws against *adauchi* revenges, but stayed mute about the ardent public favor which *adauchi* literature enjoyed. In a short time, Japanese learned that revenge killing was an evil crime under the law, although they still enjoyed *adauchi* plays and advocated samurai honor culture in private. Japanese absorbed two kinds of value systems—traditional honor ethics and modernized legal justice, more drastically than antebellum Missourians and Twain did.

Three decades after the anti-dueling law was passed in Japan, literary men showed a most painful response to the age of contradictory value systems. Those men of letters were among the selected elite that most vigorously studied and absorbed American and European literature, laws, Christianity and the concept of individualism. They were impressed with foreign civilization and by international standards and now understood the honor culture of *adauchi* to be a barbaric custom of the feudal past. On the other hand, most literary men were originally from samurai clans and were drilled by their parents in the conventional samurai morality of honor. If they disapproved of *adauchi* or samurai honor culture, they lost their own identity as noblemen. Prominent writers began to reevaluate the *adauchi* stories as symbolic subjects of painful dilemmas between traditional honor ethics and modernized legal justice.

A novelist, Ogai Mori, also suffered the double binds of samurai honor ethics and modernized public justice, well displayed in his short story of *adauchi* avengers, “Gajiingahara no Katakiuchi” in 1914. Mori was a doctor educated in Germany, where he was strongly affected by individualism. Furthermore Mori frowned on propaganda *adauchi* novels which were written after the Russo-Japanese War to trumpet a holy samurai spirit and patriotism. Still, Mori hesitated to disapprove *adauchi* and samurai honor culture in the story, owing to his noble samurai background. He narrates his story in a plain tone: one day, a young man of a samurai clan received the news that his father was killed by an acquaintance of distant relative, but the murderer quickly disappeared. The young samurai, accompanied by a stout and faithful uncle, traveled almost one year to trace the murderer, but in vain. During the distressing journey, the young samurai disappears, leaving his uncle a message that he has given up everything — samurai obligation, samurai honor, and his samurai identity. However, the elderly uncle persists upholding his samurai obligation and honor: after tortuous wanderings he at last finds his enemy and brutally slaughters the pitiful creature without mercy. The uncle returns home self-contented where he is warmly welcomed by his family and moderately rewarded by the local lord. By thus showing two kinds of men — one lost but freed from outdated honor ethics, the other clinging to them, the author asks his contemporary readers which path to choose. It was definitely hard for 19<sup>th</sup> century Japanese to select.

Mark Twain also exhibited a conflicted attitude to Southern honor culture. He blamed Walter Scott and his historical romance of cavalier for fanning Southern patriotism and the Civil War. Twain was

disgusted with violent nature of honor culture and bloody duels. Despite all this, Twain shows compassionate attachment to Southern honor culture and its merits. Twain had a strong identity as the son of a Southern gentleman. Twain expresses his abhorrence for gun-shooting, though he once challenged a duel to a rival journalist in 1870.

Twain's conflicted attitude toward Southern culture is well displayed in the Grangerford-Shepherdson feud episode in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Huck was sheltered by the Grangerfords; characteristic of an honorable Southern family, they are noble in a self-controlled manner and show warm hospitality in accepting the orphaned boy Huck. Huck feels comfortable with this noble Southern family and becomes friends with Buck Grangerford, a boy of about the same age. The two boys ultimately choose different paths. Huck leaves the Grangerfords, refusing to fight the feud for honor's sake, while Buck stays for the family honor and dies in a gunfight. Twain, like the Japanese writer Mori, shows that Southerners had two paths to take—cling to outdated honor ethics or discard them. Twain makes Huck choose to run away, though he shows deep concern over Buck, the victim of honor culture. Twain and leading Japanese writers did not simply denounce old-fashioned honor culture but presented honor-bound avengers with dilemmatic double moral standards of human tragedy.

### III

The Civil War and Northern influence forced on Twain further painful dilemma over changing morals. Practical Northern values already sneaked into the minds of Missourians before the Civil War. Northern states had already established modernized public morals, in

which laws took precedence over personal honor and vengeance. But Steward says:

Jacksonian individualism, the expanding market economy, protestant evangelicalism and ethnic diversity all pulled Missouri into an orbit economically directed toward the North. These forces of maturation likewise counteracted the appeal of the code duello. Culturally however, southern influence remained powerful. The traditions of the Missouri duel reflected the push and pull of these competing forces and underwent a number of social modifications. (133)

Twain was apparently nurtured in this regional peculiarity of “the push and pull of these competing forces” of North and South.

When Twain came back to his home town roughly 20 years after the Civil War, he reconsider the postbellum South from the viewpoint of Northerners, and criticized character of Southerners, which “checks this wave of progress, and even turns it back . . . with decayed and degraded systems of government; with the sillinesses and emptinesses, sham grandeurs, sham gauds, and sham chivalries of a brainless and worthless long-vanished society (*Life on the Mississippi* 175). Twain admitted that Southern honor culture to which he once felt attached was wholly denied as harmful and outdated in the new era of the nation led by modernized Northern states after the Civil War. I venture to say that Southern morals were subjected to be denied under the control of Union Army and successive Northern influence, Twain did witness that morality, however devoted and revered, were doomed to change through ages and wars.

The tragedies brought about by changing morals were the main theme of Ryunosuke Akutagawa's short story, "Aruhino Oisikuranosuke," published a year after Mori published the *adachi* story stated above. For his fictional story, Akutagawa adapted Kuranosuke, one of the most well-known *adachi* heroes in Japanese revenge history. The heroic avenger Kuranosuke spends a peaceful and content day in a cozy room. A few days before, Kuranosuke fulfilled holy revenge against a high-ranked enemy of great power after many long years of hardship. Kuranosuke proudly sees himself as an incarnation of samurai honor ethics, but begins to feel ashamed of himself when he knows that the town people are now consumed with *adachi* fever and engaging in reckless street fights of honor. Supposedly a model of morals, they are imitating him. Kuranosuke feels an icy chill pass down his spine, thinking his morals are simply vanity. The superficial public accepts the avenger as the absolute embodiment of morality, but will soon change their opinion, when other wind blows.

It is inferred in the story that a few days later Kuranosuke and his followers will be ordained by the shogun to commit honorable hara-kiri (suicide by self-disembowelment) for violating the *adachi* rules. Hara-kiri suicide means that Kuranosuke will die nobly, but still a criminal. For Japanese readers of modernized civilization, Kuranosuke is a vengeful, atrocious murderer under modern law, while still admired as an honorable samurai hero in the public sentiment. The author, suffering from the conflicting moral senses of his age, deplores the samurai tragedy of sacrificing everything for unstable moralities. Ryunosuke, a forerunner of modern Japanese literature, might anticipate more painful confusion over unstable moralities that ensued.

Shin Hasegawa, a Japanese modern writer, insisted on treating *adauchi* as his literary theme, even though in 1945 the US Forces of occupation banned *adauchi* plays on the public stage for inciting Japanese to deadly revenge of the war. Kenjyo Tunabuchi comments that Hasegawa did not approve the practice of the *adauchi* or revenge killing in the age of legal justice, but only hoped that his *adauchi* stories would give self-respect to Japanese under American occupation: Japanese were made to reject their traditional honor ethics and culture (*Nihon Adauchi Iso* 369). Hasegawa's numerous stories on *adauchi* are still favored by Japanese.

Twain adopted Roxana as a tragic heroin of unstable morals. The slave Roxana, in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, seeks vengeance on her son when disgraced, and fights a white man when her beloved little girl is brutally hurt. To defend her self-proclaimed noble lineage, Roxana intends to behave nobly, observing Southern white honor codes of vengeance. However, from the very beginning, Twain continues to question through the narrator's voice whether Roxana is morally right. Roxana is nothing but a nasty criminal under the legal laws, but "Was she bad? Was she worse than the general run of her race? They had an unfair show in the battle of life, and they held it no sin to give military advantage of the enemy" (11), says the narrator. The narrator even refers to diversified morals on races, slavery, and modernized legal system. Even though questioned of her righteousness in the context of the Missourian conflicting value systems on laws, honors, and races, Roxana is attached to what she considers honorable behavior, and thus invites tragedy.

Mark Twain's writing has a lot in common with Japanese *adauchi* literature, but was distinctively different in one thing. Japanese

writers, although from a new perspective, retold the original *adauchi* literature, modeling after the accepted norm. On the other hand, Twain created his own version of vengeance tragedies, with racial and gender matters blended in. Twain deliberately endowed the slave Roxana, female Laura Hawkings and Native American Injun Joe with honor culture, although that honor had been reserved for white adult males in Southern history and literature. All of these avengers were driven to tragic death or a miserable end, simply because they were faithful to the old-fashioned honor ethics. In the age of conflicting ethical standards, Roxana and the other avengers, Laura and Injun Joe, make wrong or unsuitable choices for honor.

Mark Twain's tragedies of unstable morals has great appeal to Japanese readers, who have long appreciated and acclaimed their own *adauchi* literature. This literature has many similarities with Mark Twain's writings, owing to a similar historical background. Considering the great importance which Japanese attach to *adauchi* literature and the honor culture of the past, I believe that we have more to study in Twain's avenging stories of Southern honor culture, especially as it has been long neglected in the reviews and criticisms of Mark Twain.

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Notes

- 1 Twain documented the murder case of William Owsley in *Mark Twain's Hannibal Huck & Tom*.
- 2 For the general history of the Meiji era, I consult Ruth Benedict, Kazuhiro Takii, Mikito Ugiie, Chicho Hozumi.