

From Shinobi(忍び) to Ninja(忍者): Observations Focusing on the Tatsukawa Bunko Edition of Sarutobi Sasuke

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“Shinobi” refers to individuals who engaged in peacetime espionage and wartime reconnaissance and sabotage in Japan between the 14th and first half of the 17th century. Well-known among the shinobi were Iga-mono and Koka-mono, which mean shinobi who were natives of Iga and Koka, respectively, the two provinces where many of the shinobi hailed from. During the relatively peaceful Edo period, shinobi maintained their existence as employees of daimyo, but their activities were seldom noticed by the general public.

At the same time, possibly because their mystery-shrouded existence captured the people’s imagination, “ninja” (in this presentation, shinobi as portrayed in works of fiction will be referred to as “ninja”) equipped with superhuman ninjutsu started to appear frequently in novels and drama.

The majority of ninja novels and plays dealt with 1) The use of ninjutsu to procure something important, or 2) The use of ninjutsu to take over the right of succession, or for subversion. Less common were stories of ninja performing the activities of the shinobi (intelligence gathering, reconnaissance, sabotage) in a military context, as was the case in history.

Among the well-known ninja is Sarutobi Sasuke. Recent studies have identified the earliest known mention of Sarutobi Sasuke in Enshokutaiheirakki, a novel written in the second half of the 18th century. Sarutobi Sasuke made frequent appearances in subsequent war novels and kodan (storytellings) dealing with the Siege of Osaka.

The name of Sarutobi Sasuke was made famous by the Tatsukawa Bunko series, published in Osaka during the Taisho period (1910s). Sarutobi Sasuke, published in 1913 as issue 40 of the Tatsukawa Bunko, completely altered the popular perception of the ninja.

Sarutobi Sasuke was recruited by and studied ninjutsu under Tozawa Hakuunsai, a Koka school ninjutsu master. Sasuke went on to become a vassal of Sanada Yukimura, whom he served using ninjutsu. As opposed to the majority of previous fictional works, which described ninja as shady individuals employing dubious ninjutsu, the Tatsukawa Bunko portrayed Sarutobi Sasuke as a loyal person, who worked hard for his master, Sanada Yukimura. The Tatsukawa Bunko was also the first to portray Sarutobi Sasuke, or any ninja, as a righteous, heroic figure, who punishes bandits and

other villains and saves those in distress. Following the precedent set by the Tatsukawa Bunko, ninja in later novels, plays and movies came to be portrayed as the good heroes.

The Tatsukawa Bunko’s Sarutobi Sasuke is said to have been strongly influenced by the character Sun Wukong from the Chinese novel Journey to the West. Perhaps more significantly, Sasuke is portrayed as a samurai who is also capable of ninjutsu, a scenario possibly chosen in conformity to the other works in the Tatsukawa Bunko series, which dealt with samurai protagonists. The Tatsukawa Bunko, with its stories of family loyalty and camaraderie of allies, had a wide readership among teenage decchi (live-in apprentices and shop boys) employed by traders and craftsmen. Although publication of the Tatsukawa Bunko ceased in 1924, Sarutobi Sasuke has subsequently appeared in numerous novels, manga, movies and games, and to this day remains one of the best-known ninja.



Lecture and performance in London, Alicante, Valencia, Barcelona, Madrid and Rome, November 2014

Presented by Mie University and the Japan Foundation

The Truth about Ninja

A comparison of the historical 忍び(Shinobi) and 忍者(Ninja) as a cultural phenomenon

Ninja culture research at Mie University Faculty of Humanities, Law and Economics

Mie University conducts ninja research in partnership with the municipal government, the local chamber of commerce and industry, and the tourist board of Iga City, home of the ninja.

1. Study of the ninja (or shinobi, to be more accurate) as a historical presence, based on ninjutsu literature never before made public.
2. Study of the ninja as portrayed in Japanese literature and drama. Study of the ninja in animation and movies around the world.
3. Scientific analysis of the physical qualities and ability of the shinobi/ninja, in partnership with natural science researchers and departments. Interdisciplinary study of ninja knowhow described in ninjutsu literature.

To learn more about Ninja

●Ninja Bungei Kenkyu Dokuhon, published by Kasama Shoin, 2013

This is the first piece of academic literature in Japan on the historical shinobi, and the ninja created by Japanese literature.

http://kasamashoin.jp/2014/04/post_2888.html

http://kasamashoin.jp/shoten/ninja_set.pdf

●Iga Renkei Field Ninja Culture Conference : University-Community Partnership Program in Iga

The conference is in the process of creating a database of literature, animation and movies pertaining to the ninja. It also holds monthly lectures on ninja in Iga City, and creates reprints of ninjutsu literature. The conference also has plans to publish its research outcomes in English (in digital form).

<http://www.human.mie-u.ac.jp/kenkyu/ken-prj/iga/>



About Iga City

Situated roughly the same distance from Kyoto, Osaka, and Nagoya, as well as Ise Shrine, Iga City, the birthplace of the ninja, was one of the most strategically important locations in the country during the Sengoku period (Warring States period, 16c). The Ninja Museum of Iga-ryu in Iga City collects and exhibits materials related to the ninja, and puts on ninja shows.

<http://www.iganinja.jp/> (in Japanese and English)

<http://www.ninja-museum.com/> (in Japanese and English.)

For more on Iga City, please visit the following websites.

<http://tourismmiejapan.com/municipality/iga.html> (in English)

<http://tourismmiejapan.com/spanish/recommend/ninja.html> (in Spanish)

<http://tourismmiejapan.com/italian/recommend/ninja.html> (in Italian)

<http://igakanko.net/> (in Japanese)

<http://www.igaueno.net/> (in Japanese)



The Body and Mind of the Ninja

Jinichi KAWAKAMI



The existence of “Ninja” are widely known, even outside Japan. It is a recognized form of Japanese culture, but it is also the victim of misconceptions. Accurate historical clarification based on historical sources and investigation into the true art and spirituality of the ninja are neglected, preventing accurate understanding.

Ninjutsu is a classic military tactic comprising espionage, reconnaissance, disruption and plotting, among others, which originated as a means of self-preservation and self-defense (“sogo seizon gijutsu,” lit. “comprehensive survival techniques”). It is also a practical method for avoiding battle and instead building “wa,” a peaceful, stable, equilibrium of coexistence. Ninja are by no means dark warriors of dubious integrity, as is often imagined.

A viable ninja needs to be equipped with the intelligence to spy on and plot against the enemy, and the physical strength and agility to act appropriately under all kinds of situations. Essential above all are the perseverance to endure adversity, and seishin (lit. correct mindset), which enables a ninja to maintain integrity unswayed by self-interest. Ninja are not born equipped with these qualities or learn them merely through books, but develop them through rigorous physical and mental training, which begins from an early age.

Would-be ninja develop the mindset of a ninja in the course of training to attain a state of shinshin-funi (lit. unity of body and mind). The training is carried out in accordance with traditional methods, for the purpose of mastering theoretical and practical knowhow. Only through rigorous training that stretches the limit of one’s ability is it possible to develop the mindset of the ninja, which comprises perseverance, seishin, and the spirit of wa. The prescribed training method, referred to as “苦行” or “九業” (both pronounced kugyo, the former meaning “penance” and the latter “nine tasks”), when followed consistently and diligently, is believed to bestow on the would-be ninja superhuman abilities. Considered to be of even greater importance than the physical ability to employ “superhuman” skills, however, is the underlying mindset.

The Chinese character “忍” for shinobi or the nin of ninja, is made up of “刃” (blade) and “心” (heart), denoting an unshakable heart, but also brutality. The term “shinobi” also has the meanings “clandestine” and “endurance.” “Nin”, when written “仁”, means benevolence. The essence of the ninja, attainable only through rigorous training, resides in the attitude of gratitude and coexistence encapsulated in the word “nin/shinobu.”

Coordination of body and mind is essential for a ninja. Daily physical and mental training, military preparedness, avoidance of battle through information gathering, and harmonious coexistence are the true aims of the ninja. A genuine ninja is an individual with mental and physical soundness, who endures adversity while maintaining integrity, and seeks altruistic harmony with nature and people.

A History of Shinobi (忍び)

Yuji YAMADA

Ninja were historically referred to as “shinobi.” The earliest known written mention of shinobi dates from the Nanbokuchō period (1336 – 1392). Regional variants of the term include rappa, suppa, and kusa. Sengoku (the end of 15c the end of 16c) daimyo, or regional lords, are known to have employed their own shinobi, who engaged in intelligence wars as well as combat, often in the vanguard. One of the important tasks assigned to shinobi was breaking into enemy castles ahead of others by crossing moats and scaling walls, and to carry out sabotage, arson, or assassination.

Partly because of their proximity to Kyoto, and the natural defensive advantage provided by surrounding mountains, the regions of Iga and Koka were kept relatively free of the strong influence of feudal lords. This encouraged autonomy, and inhabitants eventually organized themselves into armed groups called ikki. These Iga-shū and Koka-shū, as these communities were known, at times took part in battles as mercenaries hired by neighboring provinces.

The autonomy of Iga and Koka suffered a crushing blow at the hands of Oda Nobunaga’s forces. Following the Honnoji Incident on the 2nd day of the 6th month of Tenshō 10 (1582), however, Iga-mono and Koka-mono (shinobi from Iga and Koka, respectively) aided Tokugawa Ieyasu’s undercover flight from Sakai (Osaka) to his home base in Okazaki (Aichi) via Shiroko (Suzuka, Mie), successfully escorting him through the mountainous terrains of Iga and Koka. Iga-mono and Koka-mono also served Ieyasu by fighting in the forefront of many subsequent battles. In recognition of these services, Ieyasu awarded Iga-mono and Koka-mono residential land near Edo Castle after the bakufu was established in Edo, and employed them as guards of Edo Castle. Some of the Iga-mono and Koka-mono entered the employment of daimyo, while others remained in Iga or Koka to become farmers.

The last battle involving shinobi was the Shimabara Rebellion in Kan’ei 14 (1637). Once peace prevailed, and there were no more battles to fight, the main responsibilities of shinobi shifted to gathering information on rival domains, and guarding the sankin kotai processions. It was also around this time that many ninjutsu-sho, or treatises on shinobi knowhow and mindset, started to appear, possibly reflecting the fact that shinobi came to be perceived as a profession in its own right, as opposed to a genre of military tactics.

Bansenshukai, which draws on the ancient Chinese military treatise The Art of War by Sun Tzu, as well as many other pieces of military literature and ninjutsu-sho, was compiled in Enpō 4 (1676), prompted by an urgency to preserve for posterity the skills transmitted through generations of shinobi.

The very last task ever assigned to shinobi is said to be the investigation of Matthew C. Perry’s “black ships” when they arrived off the port of Uraga in Kaei 6 (1853), late Edo period. Shinobi as a profession ceased to exist thereafter.

