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# THE CHINESE ORIGIN OF THE NINJA

## JUST WHERE DID THE NINJA COME FROM?

The *ninja* are without doubt the most misunderstood and misrepresented figure in military history, their story is filled to the brim with falsehoods; loose theory and a full dash of “facts” which are taken for granted. In this article, the history of the *ninja* and the possibility of the connection to China will be explored, with the aim of putting some historical facts in place to form a better picture of the connection between the two and by the end of this short paper you will have come to understand what a *ninja* is and maybe, just where he comes from.

Before diving into the history of the *ninja* it must first be established just what a *ninja* (or *shinobi*) is, strange as this may seem, most people upon the planet truly misunderstand the reality of these men of Japan and the three most fundamental misconceptions in the study or understanding of the *ninja* today are:

1. *Ninjutsu* is a specialised *hand to hand* combat system passed on in secret between the *ninja* and was kept secret from the *samurai*.
2. The *ninja* were a “counter-culture”, born in the mountains to peasant families who were fighting against the oppression of the *samurai* overlords and thus developed *ninjutsu* and that *ninjutsu* was too underhanded for the *samurai* to use.
3. That it is an accepted fact that the *ninja* were founded by Chinese immigrants in the sixth and seventh century, who were fleeing oppression in China.

There three above factors that always “crop up” when researching the *ninja*. Firstly, there is not a

single record of a *ninja* martial art in existence nor it being used to provide special *hand to hand combat* or weapons skills in direct combat, the *shinobi* are always referenced as being used to “creep in” or get information by clandestine methods and history shows that “*ninja* martial arts” were an invention of the mid twentieth century and are still opposed by Japanese researchers today as false. Secondly, historically the *ninja* are always recorded as *samurai*, or in some minor cases, as foot soldiers, who work for *samurai*. In point of fact, the idea of the poor *ninja* farmer myth, where they live in the *ninja* homeland of *Iga* and *Koka*, is incorrect. The problem is that the families of *Iga* and *Koka* at the time of the *ninja* were in fact independent *samurai* families who were powerful enough to stay independent until the 1580’s and who owned farms (as did many *samurai*). They were not a rag-tag group of dirty serfs, living in isolation, they were actually a culturally sophisticated and independent series of clans, who formed a collection of land owning *samurai* families, powerful enough for an early *shogun* of Japan to need to ask permission to cross their lands. Thirdly, the idea of the *ninja* as a *Chinese* immigrant may not be wholly incorrect and this article as will discuss that subject in length. With these above myths firmly highlighted and thrown out of the readers mind, the next stage is to actually understand what the arts of the *ninja* were, before we can ask, where did they come from?

“The *ninja* are without doubt the most misunderstood and misrepresented figure in military history”

What is *Ninjutsu*?

The arts of the *ninja* (*ninjutsu*) are quite specific in the historical records and the *ninja* have a definite role to play in war. However there is no English word to describe their job in total and they are born from a mixture of western military roles combined into one man:

Scouting:

A *ninja*'s job is to creep deep into enemy territory, past enemy check points and scouts, venturing deep into the mountains and valleys. It is here that the *ninja* will search for days on end, recording; rivers, mountains, rice paddies, measuring with care the depth of moats and watercourses. Here it is also the *ninja*'s task to use mathematical principles to measure the heights of castle turrets, so that the correct distances for launching (Chinese based) fire attacks can be calculated. In addition, the *ninja* must wait and hide, attempting to secure; enemy passwords, "listening-scout" positions, watch fire defences and the status of the enemy army. The *ninja*'s scouting duties may take him to the walls of the enemy castle where he must possess every skill he can muster to achieve these goals.

The Spy:

During a scouting mission, or even months or years before a war has begun, the *ninja* changes his identity from that of a *samurai* or foot soldier and takes on a disguise as he travels to the enemy territory. His task here is to record as much about the enemy as possible from the inside of the opponents castle or fortifications to the smallest details of the population. Also, the preferences of the commander, the weaknesses of his retinue and all the information he can gain. This information will be used later on to lay plots and send fake secret letters, which will help cause friction between the enemy, as there is no way that their enemy could know such secrets, which unbeknown to them, was provided by the *ninja* agent months before the attack every came.

The Explosives Expert:

A much underplayed role of the *ninja* was their dramatic and in depth understanding of explosives and gunnery, which clearly originated in China, even if somewhat altered over time. Explosives were a high percentage of a *ninja*'s understandings and teachings. The medieval *ninja*, *Fujibayashi*

writes that a *shinobi* (*ninja*) needs to know the basic "fifty Three" fire recipes, however in his manual he then goes on to list over two hundred and fifty! These include all forms of; fire signals, including; smoke, flares and rockets. Further tools include; tear gas, poisonous gas, hand grenades, multiple shot muskets, landmines and even exploding and collapsible bridges. All in all, the *ninja* was a fire expert and would be called upon to use his skills to burn down castles, destroy supplies or even burn armies that stray into dry grass land (a tactic taken from the Chinese).

An example of a fire tool from the 1676 manual, the *Bansenshukai* is as follows:

*The Illuminating Arrow*

- Saltpetre - 20 Momme
- Sulphur - 5 Momme
- Ash - 5 Momme
- Camphor - 3 Bu
- Mouse droppings - 3 Bu

"Make a powder of the above, put the mixture into a cylinder and scrape the outer surface of the bamboo and wrap it with paper and glue. Attach it onto an arrow which is one Shaku five Sun long and which has no arrowhead. When you need to see inside [of a fortress], shoot it through the arrow or gun port so you can see within."

The Infiltration Agent:

*Enter the ninja*; it is from this aspect that we get the classic image of the *shinobi*. His task, as well as the others was to find his way into enemy castles and houses at night and under the cover of darkness, waiting for the moon to set as he scaled the walls. Once inside, the *ninja* or group of *ninja* would set up in position and wait for a signal, at which point they would burn the castle or house to the ground from the inside while their allies on the outside would attack in unison or they would infiltrate and remain unseen, hiding in the shadows of the house, listening to enemy plans as they were constructed.

These above points are the true roles of the *ninja*, of which only the latter has ever really been portrayed by modern media or modern *ninja* enthusiasts, but it was such a small role in comparison to the months of preparation before, during and after a war and has left us with a distorted image of the *shinobi* masters.

#### The Chinese Origin of the *Ninja*

The origin of the *ninja* is considered a “Dark Age” in Japanese history as no historical documentation of its creation, is contemporary to the first records of *ninja* activity. This means that all ideas aimed at the *ninja* origins, are open to theory and are not supported in any way by documentation that was written when the *ninja* first appeared. However, there is one theory will *never* “fit the bill”; and that is the idea of a *ninja* counter-culture of peasants that were based in *Iga* and *Koka* and that developed special skills to defend against *samurai* oppression. That being said, no one knows where in Japan the *ninja* first were created, but they became most well known in the provinces of *Iga* and *Koka*, but this was not until at least two hundred years after their first appearance in Japanese history which was in the thirteen hundreds.

The fourteenth century *Taiheiki* War Chronicle is the very first appearance of the *ninja* and states:

*“One night, as it was windy and raining, Moronao took advantage of the weather and sent out an Itsu mono no shinobi 逸物ノ忍 (excellent ninja) to infiltrate Hatchiman mountain and to set fire to the buildings.”*

This, alongside another quote from the same document is the gateway where the *ninja* first entered the Japanese historical record. This means that any attempt to show a sixth century migration and establishment of the *ninja* from China requires the theorist to bridge a gap of around six hundred years, a mighty chasm in the world of history.

So, if the *ninja* have no contemporary origin record in Japan and there is no evidence which states that they directly came from mainland Asia, then, the first step is to look to what the *ninja* believed about the origins of their skills.

The *Natori-ryu* *ninja* manual of 1681 states:

*“Shinobi have existed in Japan since ancient times”*

However, the author *Natori*, a *samurai* of the *Kishu-Tokugawa* clan does use *Sun Tzu*’s five types of spy as a basis for the *ninja* and continuously shows Chinese influence in his manual (now published in English as *True Path of the Ninja*).

The *Ninpiden* *ninja* manual of 1560 states:

*“The shinobi 竊盜 were founded in the period of the Emperor Gao (256/7BC -195BC) of the Han dynasty of ancient China. At that time the art of war and the shinobi were both initiated and at that time the shinobi were called Kan 間. In the Zuo Zhuan 左伝 Chinese classic they were called Cho 長 and after that Ryosaku 両作.*

*It is known that a man called Yi Yin 伊用, who was a retainer of King Chen Tang of Shang of China, sneaked into the palace of King Zhou who reigned over the Shang Dynasty from 1075BC – 1046 BC and defeated him. Also Jiang Ziya, who was Prime Minister to King Wen of the Zhou state, wrote 71 chapters on the shinobi ways (the Six Secret Teachings) and ruined Dodo, a retainer of King Jie of Xia 桀王.*

*Sun Tzu, a retainer of He-lü of Wu invented five types of shinobi called Gokan, which appear in his chapter called Sonyokan 尊養寒. It is said that some retainers of the Emperor of Gaozu of the Han Dynasty, such as Zhang Liang (?-189BC) and Han Xin (?-196BC), and also, Sun Tzu used the arts of the shinobi, as they are referred to in the book on the dialogues with Emperor Taizong.”*

The *Bansenshukai* *ninja* manual of 1676 also discusses the connection with ancient China and Chinese warfare as the origin of the skills of the *ninja* in a form of questions & answers page:

*Question: Is this art called ninjutsu in China as well?*  
*Answer: shinobi is a name that was invented in our country. In the state of Wu it was called Kan 間, and in the Spring and Autumn Period, Cho 諜, and in and after the Warring States Period [in China], Saisaku 細作, Yutei 遊偵, and so on.*

All these names refer to *ninjutsu*. Alongside this, in the *Six Secret Teachings*, it is referred to as *Yushi* 遊士 “playing warrior” and in the *Yin Jing* 陰經 manual written by *Risen* it is known as *Koujin* 行人.

As seen in these, it has been called in many different ways according to the period, or the lord's intention. It is quite similar in our country [of Japan], as we call it *shinobi* (*ninja*), *Yato*, *Suppa*, *Nokizaaru*, *Mitsumono*, *Kyoudan*, etc.

It is plainly obvious that the *ninja* themselves fully believed in a Chinese origin theory, but a few factors must be understood. The time period between the dates above is almost one thousand years, and when put into a historical context, we see medieval people discussing Iron Age movements, without out any proof or recordings and who are working purely from oral traditions. However, it is reassuring to see that nearly all of the *ninja* origin theories presented in the Middle Ages point to a Chinese ancestry. However, one thing that they all lack is any reference to *how* the skills came to Japan. The options are; that the skills did come over with immigrants in some form, probably over the many years of migration, bringing the skills of the *ninja* with them bit by bit and settling down on Japanese soil and invariably becoming Japanese themselves. Or alternatively, Chinese texts, which are constantly referenced, being imported to Japan where the “native” Japanese of the time studied them and constructed *ninjutsu* from their pages.

The final step in attempting to identify an origin for the *ninja* comes with a comparison of skills between the two countries. To start with, it is fundamental to understand that *samurai* warfare is heavily based on Chinese ideas and that by sheer default, so then must the *ninja* be a part of Chinese warfare. But to aid support to this a comparison of skills between the Chinese; “Kan” (spies), “Incendiary Agents” and “Thieves” to the Japanese *shinobi* shows a vast collection of similarities, which include: Water crossing devices, infiltration skills, fire technology, explosives manufacture, spying skills and scouting tactics. While too complex to discuss in full within the scope of this article, there is little doubt that the *ninja* of Japan shared a considerable amount of skills with their *Chinese* counterpart and that the *ninja* themselves went on to change and develop ideas (which were at times inferior to the Chinese versions) and that without a doubt Chinese warfare

skills were being used in the mountains and plains of Japan.

In summery: The recorded history of the *ninja* starts in the late fourteenth century, where they appear in the historical record as full blown *Shinobi*, but before that they are unrecorded. The *ninja* themselves believe that their skills are descended from the ancient ways of China, yet they do not state if it was through immigration or if it was through the importing of war manuals. And when *ninjutsu* is compared to the skills of China, a vast amount of similarities can be found that are shared between the two forms of agents. Therefore, in conclusion, at present it appears that at some unrecorded point, Chinese military thought “invaded” the shores of Japan, most likely in small parts and with a gradual dissemination, where either Chinese immigrants mixed with locals developed and taught the skills of *ninjutsu*, or where the “native” Japanese took hold of the military manuals and utilised the skills, giving birth to the *shinobi* somewhere between the seventh and twelfth century. Either way, the story of the *ninja*'s origins highlights two major points, first that China had the first “*ninja*-like” agents in the world according to the historical record and that the *ninja* before the thirtieth century are fully in the shadows and it is only by theory we can form any image of them at all, but the research continues.

About Antony Cummins

Antony has a Bachelors' degree in History and a Masters' degree in Archaeology, both of which were awarded from the *Victoria University of Manchester*, England. Antony is also the founding member of the *Historical Ninjutsu Research Team*, who have translated and published five of the major *ninja* works in two publications and has worked for Television and authors as historical advisors.

“*True Path of the Ninja*” & “*True Ninja Traditions*”, are both available in all good bookshops and online. For free downloads and information on the *ninja*, please visit [www.natori.co.uk](http://www.natori.co.uk).