



The Fiction of the Ninja: How Literature Became History in 20th Century Pop Culture

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Abstract

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Beginning in the 1960s and extending to the present day, ninja writers in both English and Japanese have made a series of claims that there really were clans of highly-trained, specialized assassins and covert warriors in medieval Japan, whose exploits were only now beginning to come to light after centuries in the shadows.

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Unfortunately, however, a disturbingly high proportion of what has been presented to English-speaking audiences as real-life historical ninja operations appears to have been derived from works of historical fiction. Focusing on one iconic alleged ninja operation, an attempt by the hero Ishikawa Goemon to poison the warlord Oda Nobunaga, this presentation explores how an assassination that almost certainly never happened went on to captivate the imaginations of audiences Western and Japanese for more than fifty years; and, in the process, asks some critical questions about the epistemic foundations of the ninja phenomenon.