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

by Dr. Rob Tuck
Associate Professor of Modern Japanese Literature
School of International Letters & Culture

Abstract

Ninjas – black-clad, shuriken-throwing assassins of medieval Japan – are probably among the most recognizable pop culture icons of the 20th century. As cheesy and cartoonish as the ninja may now seem, when the modern ninja emerged in the 1960s, it was explicitly framed as a genuine historical phenomenon. 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.