

NINJA

Stephen Turnbull

NINJA

THE **UNOFFICIAL**
SECRET MANUAL

WITH 122 ILLUSTRATIONS

 Thames & Hudson

**In loving memory of James Field,
artist and friend.**

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Ninja: The (Unofficial) Secret Manual
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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Ninja: the (Unofficial) Secret Manual, or to give it its Japanese title *Shinobi Hihokan* (literally 'The Ninja's Secret Treasure House') was the last, and many would say the finest, of a number of works that appeared during the first two centuries of Japan's peaceful Tokugawa Period (1603–1868) that purported to convey in writing the secrets of ninjutsu: the mysterious arts and techniques of the undercover warriors called ninja. The book's authorship is attributed to an anonymous Grand Master of the Iga-Ryu (the 'Iga School' or 'Iga Tradition') of ninjutsu. The Iga School took its name from his home province of Iga (modern Mie Prefecture) from where (according to the Grand Master at least) all ninja excellence ultimately derived, hence the local bias that permeates the entire work.

Whoever he was, the anonymous author's life encompassed the reign of the eleventh Tokugawa Shogun Ienari, who ruled Japan between 1787 and 1837. This was a time when the country's isolation from the outside world was being tested by incursions into Japanese waters by ships from Russia and the United States, and the paranoia and suspicion that soon became a normal part of Japanese life may well account for the commissioning of *Shinobi Hihokan* by the shogun in 1789. It was intended to be the definitive top-secret textbook for training ninja in the defence of the realm, and its comprehensive nature in this regard is unparalleled.

In addition to its understandable pro-Iga exaggerations, *Shinobi Hihokan* also contains a few unfortunate errors, which I have noted in my translation, although only experts in the field are likely to spot them. They are almost entirely due to the process of rapid rewriting that *Shinobi Hihokan* underwent following the tragic loss of the first version of the book, which took the form of an exquisite painted scroll. This regrettable situation came about because the Grand Master had

insisted that every detail of *Shinobi Hihokan*'s design should be of the highest quality to suit so great a recipient as the shogun himself. The finest Chinese ink was chosen for the calligraphy. Every section was to be ornamented with gold leaf, and the outer binding of the scroll was to be of silk thread dyed with the rarest indigo otherwise used exclusively (and on pain of death otherwise) for dyeing the shogun's socks. All these materials were obtained at very great expense, and the one mistake the Grand Master made concerned the paper on which the great work was to be written, which was all due to an international misunderstanding.

At that time Japan's only link with Europe lay via the Dutch trading post on Dejima, an artificial island in Nagasaki Bay. As part of his routine investigative duties the Grand Master had sent ninja to Nagasaki to spy on the Dutch merchants. Among the wealth of information that his agents had brought back from the Dutch was an anecdote that it was customary in Europe for the most important government documents to be written on goatskin. Not realizing that the word was merely a euphemism for high quality paper, the Grand Master arranged for the import of a herd of goats from South East Asia so that their skins might be used for *Shinobi Hihokan*. When it became clear that ordinary mulberry-leaf paper would have to suffice, the Grand Master, who was a devout Buddhist opposed to the killing of animals, decided to keep the goats as pets. Unfortunately, goats have an insatiable appetite for mulberry paper. Three days before the scroll was due to be collected for presentation to the shogun, one of the goats found its way into the office where the great work was being bound and ate the entire thing: gold leaf, silk thread and all.

The Grand Master was so mortified that he fell into a deep gloom from which none could raise him. Fearing that the whole domain might be confiscated as a punishment, his followers rallied and quickly reconstructed *Shinobi Hihokan* as best they could from the Grand Master's rough notes, from copies of earlier ninjutsu manuals (which were

speedily acquired) and their own vivid imaginations. The results were quite remarkable. The work was rewritten with ten days; the shogun was delighted; the domain remained intact and the ninja of Edo Castle acquired their secret scroll, errors and all.

Shinobi Hihokan stayed as a handwritten manuscript until 1853, when the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry of the US Navy threw the government into turmoil. An illustrated woodblock-printed edition of *Shinobi Hihokan* was hurriedly prepared to assist in the defence of the nation, but when Perry returned in 1854 and demanded trading concessions it was soon realized that the old skills of ninjutsu would be of no avail against contemporary Western firepower. The publication of *Shinobi Hihokan* was therefore halted and the work remained virtually unknown. The original 1789 scroll was sadly destroyed in a fire in 1891 and only one complete set of the woodblock-printed edition now survives. It is owned by Nara Prefectural Library and has provided the basis for this translation. In spite of its inaccuracies *Shinobi Hihokan* can safely be regarded as the definitive work on ninja and ninjutsu, just as the Grand Master had always intended.



Two ninja are hiding in the shadows ready to carry out a spying mission on a rebel daimyo lord. They are dressed in black with their faces covered to disguise their identity. This is the *innin* style of ninjutsu in which no one knows you are there.

FOREWORD

*by His Most Illustrious Highness
Tokugawa Ienari, Shogun of Japan*

I, Tokugawa Ienari, the Eleventh to hold the exalted position of Shogun of Japan, commend to you this work from the august brush of our beloved servant the Grand Master of the Iga School of Ninjutsu, whom I have entrusted with the vital task of training the ninja of the future in the defence of the realm.

Know that today harmony prevails in Japan, the Land of the Gods, owing to the enlightened and benevolent rule that has prevailed since the auspicious reign of my illustrious ancestor Tokugawa Ieyasu, Avatar of the Great Sun Goddess of the East.

In spite of this we must never become complacent. Only last year there came a portent from Heaven in the form of the Great Fire of Kyoto that destroyed the Imperial Palace. It was a reminder from the gods that we should always be vigilant.

The human enemies who lurk both at home and beyond the seas have the potential to do more harm than any fire or earthquake. The most vital weapons in our defence are the ninja of Iga who guard Our Most Excellent Person within the stout walls of Edo Castle with both their unsurpassed martial skills and their prowess in undercover operations and intelligence gathering.

This exquisite scroll has been written for those who will carry the torch of that great learning by putting into practice the Iga ninja's long tradition of noble service to the House of Tokugawa.

You have been chosen to join their ranks, so take note that the secrets contained within this unique and precious work must not be shared among the common people who dwell outside Edo's mighty walls. This secret scroll is for you alone, and should any of its contents be divulged by a traitor, it would be better for that wretched man if he had never been born.

May all the gods and Buddhas take heed!
May they blast all transgressors!

徳川家斉

**Tokugawa Minamoto no Ienari,
Barbarian-Quelling Shogun of Japan**

Written this First Day of the Fifth Month of the First Year of Kansei, the Year of the Cock within the Element of Earth, being the Ninth Year of the Reign of His Divine Majesty the Imperial Son of Heaven Emperor Morohito the one hundred and nineteenth Emperor of Japan, two thousand four hundred and forty-nine years after the accession of Jimmu, the first Emperor of the Land of the Rising Sun.

I WHAT IS A NINJA?

WHAT A NINJA IS AND WHY THIS BOOK IS ALL YOU NEED TO BECOME ONE

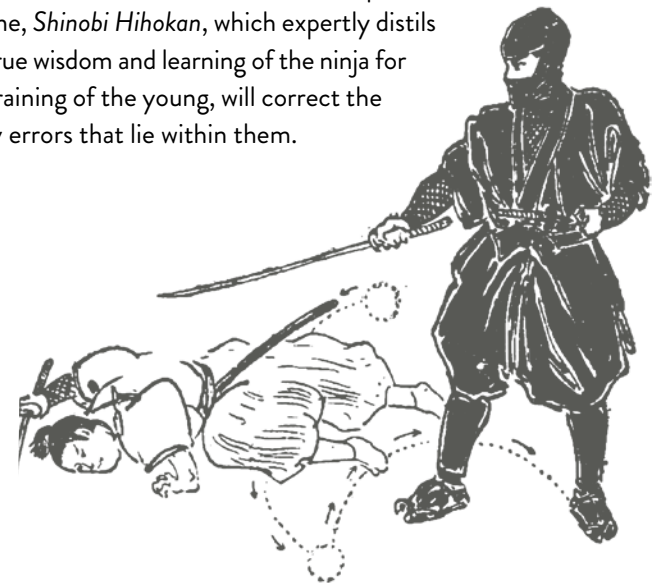
A ninja is a person of mystery, superior in the martial arts (*bujutsu*) but also uniquely proficient in the secret arts (*ninjutsu*). That combination makes them the world's supreme warriors, who carry out intelligence gathering, infiltration and other deeds that wreak havoc among the enemy. The ninja dress all in black with their faces covered, and beneath their garments are concealed many strange and wonderful secret weapons. The individual ninja is a master of disguise, a prince of deception, skilled in observation, adept at explosives, eloquent in curses, expert with medicines and a brilliant manipulator of clever devices known only to the chosen few. He or she has been initiated into the craft by the ninja masters of the Iga School, whose lore and learning can only be passed on to their finest and most trusted disciples.¹

*** Translator's Note:** 1. The Iga School was not the only ninja tradition in existence but, as will be made clear in the pages that follow, the Grand Master despised all the others.

The ninja have a very glamorous image like this one of the supreme secret warrior defeating an enemy. Some people may be attracted because of the excitement, but there is more to being a ninja than dressing up in black and fighting people.

Do you have the potential to become one of these superlative warriors? Pause for a moment before you reply, while reflecting on the following words:

To undiscerning and contemptible people the word 'ninja' conveys only a world of excitement and self-glorification. Many, too, are attracted to the secret art of ninjutsu because they are entranced by the glamour of it, but few are chosen to practise it correctly. To do that you must first prove yourself worthy of the name ninja, an onerous task for which the careful study of this scroll will stand you in very good stead. It will teach you precisely what is required to become a ninja and how to achieve that status as no work has ever done before. Yes, in the past there have been ninja manuals such as *Mansenshukai*, *Shoninki* and *Shinobi Hiden*, to name but three. Those crude and primitive works have their uses, I will admit, but this present volume, *Shinobi Hihokan*, which expertly distils the true wisdom and learning of the ninja for the training of the young, will correct the many errors that lie within them.



Do not be disappointed when you read ‘Further information is to be transmitted only by word of mouth.’ This refers to your personal training within Edo Castle in which you will learn from a ninja master such as myself the skills that are too secret to be put in writing. Sadly, not everyone who reads these words will be a trustworthy ninja, so the most sensitive information will only be relayed to you once you have proved your worth.

You will also note that I have chosen to write all dates in the style employed by the Southern Barbarians. The present year, for example – the First Year of Kansei, the Year of the Cock – is simply written as ‘1789’. Why should we do something so unspeakably vulgar? The reason is that at this point in Japan’s history these barbarians from Europe and Russia pose the greatest threat to His Most Illustrious Highness’s enlightened rule. It is therefore vital that ninja learn as much as possible about their disgusting habits, preparing for the day when they may be called upon to infiltrate their filthy outposts in the Philippines, Macau or the Spice Islands.

Know your enemy! That is the first rule of any ninja.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

So, are you the right person to become a ninja? The first clue to your suitability lies in your understanding of the term ‘ninja’. The word, of course, is written using the two Chinese characters *nin* and *ja* (or *sha*). Because of the richness of our Japanese language this character combination for ‘nin-ja’ can also be read as ‘shinobi no mono’, which is why you will often hear of ninja being called *shinobi*. Personally, I prefer the word ‘ninja’. It’s easier to say and it also acknowledges our great Chinese heritage, which I will tell you more about later.

The second character, *ja*, simply indicates a practitioner of something (as in the word ‘*gei-sha*’, which means a female entertainer)

刃 + 心 = 忍

The ninja ideograph, showing how it is constructed from the characters for ‘blade’ placed over ‘heart’. It is a warning to us all that a ninja puts his life on the line.

but within the first character, *nin*, lie a maze of meanings. Just look at how it is constructed! Can you see how it is made up of two separate characters, meaning ‘blade’ and ‘heart’, lying one above the other?

That is significant. Consider the image it presents: a sharp unsheathed sword lying dangerously close to what gives you life and what you most value! It is indeed a challenge to anyone’s understanding.

Put together, these two ideographs make up the compound character that we read as *nin*, but did you also know that *nin* can have two meanings? You are aware, of course, that *nin* usually stands for secrecy because a ‘nin-ja’ is a ‘practitioner of secrecy’, but *nin* also indicates qualities like endurance, patience and fortitude. These are all assets that a ninja needs, so we must also regard a ‘nin-ja’ as a person with endurance: able to withstand hardship, pain, discomfort and adversity.

In a similar way, of course, because the character *jutsu* means techniques or skills, ‘nin-jutsu’ can mean the techniques of endurance as well as those of secrecy, so all aspiring ninja must learn how to put up with great suffering as well as how to climb into someone’s castle. They must know how to exist on very little food. They must be able to sleep in a freezing rainstorm. They must be able to stare death in the face.

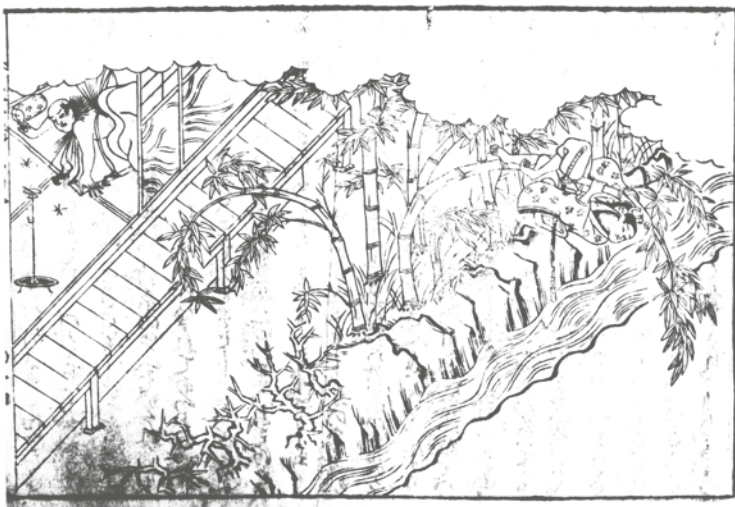
Do you have those qualities? Can you live with a sword blade hanging over your heart?

If your answer is yes, then you can be a ninja.

SORRY, WE DON'T DO ASSASSINATION!

Now that I have defined what a ninja is, let me say more about what a ninja does. I noted above that the ninja's role includes spying and infiltration. In other words, we gather intelligence from the enemy, and at the same time we confuse him. We have developed many techniques that allow us to sneak into defended places undetected and to escape afterwards to report back the vital information we have gained. These activities encompass the wide range of skills and knowledge, called ninjutsu, that have earned the ninja both fear and admiration over many centuries.

However, there are people who think that ninja are nothing more than hired assassins. 'Ninja, you say? Oh, don't they go around killing people?' Well, there may be occasions when a regrettable loss of life results from a ninja's activities, but if a ninja has done his or her job properly then the number of casualties on a battlefield will



Stories from the past about assassins have fed into the idea we have of ninja. Here the young hero Kumawaka avenges his dead master. He was as clever as any ninja, as shown by the way he escaped using the springiness of bamboo – but you know, of course, that ninja are not hired killers.

be much reduced because the enemy has already been grievously weakened. What we do not do is set out to murder people. Unfortunately there have been a number of incidents in Japanese history when prominent generals and statesmen have been assassinated, and as those stories usually tell of the assassin climbing into someone's house at night (and dressed in black!)

vulgar and unlearned people think that these crimes were committed by ninja. Please note that such deeds are usually acts of personal revenge performed by someone known to the victim, not by a member of our glorious brotherhood.