# How Ninja Conquered the World

## THE VINTAGE NINJA

## TIMELINE OF SHINOBI POP CULTURE'S WORLDWIDE EXPLOSION

**Version 1.2 ©Keith J. Rainville, 2019**

How did insular Japan's homegrown hooded heroes go from local legend to the most marketable character archetype in the world by the mid-1980s? ***VN*** connects the dots below, but before diving in, please keep a few things in mind:

- **This timeline is a 'warts and all' look at a massive pop-culture phenomenon — meaning there are good movies and bad, legit masters and total frauds, excellence and exploitation. It ALL has to be recognized to get a complete picture of why the craze caught fire and how it engineered its own glass ceiling. Nothing is being ranked, no one is being endorsed, no one is being attacked.**
- **This is NOT TO SCALE, the space between months and years isn't literal, it's a more anecdotal portrait of an evolving phenomenon.**
- **It's USA-centric, as that's where VN originates and where I lived the craze myself. And what happened here informed the similar spats all over Europe, Latin America etc. Also, this isn't a history of the Japanese booms that predated ours, that's someone else's epic to outline.**
- **Much of what you see spotlighted here has been covered in more depth on VintageNinja.net over the past decade, so check it out...**
- **IF I MISSED SOMETHING, TELL ME! I'll be updating the timeline from time to time, so if you have a gap to fill or correction to offer drop me a line!**

## Pinholes of the 1960s

In Japan, from the 1600s to the 1960s, a series of booms and crazes brought the ninja from shadowy history to popular media. Now fueled by mega hit movies, kids books and tourist museums, the 60s renaissance and redefinition of ninja is too big to contain to Japan, and in the age of international mass-media, tidbits escape to the rest of the world.

### MAY 1961

### *ARGOSY* MAGAZINE

Martial arts article **"The Art of Invisibility"** is likely the first Western feature on ninjutsu, introducing **Masaaki Hatsumi** and **Togakure Ryu**.

### JUNE 1961

### *MAGIC BOY*

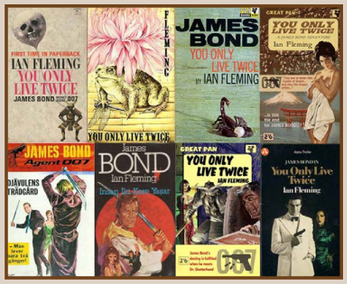
While possessing no outward signs to a Westerner that there's anything ninja about it, the first anime imported to the US, MGM's release of ***Magic Boy***, is indeed a tale of **Sarutobi Sasuke**.

### 1962

### *ZEN COMBAT*

**Jay Gluck**'s survey book of world martial arts contains a chapter dedicated to ninjutsu and the contemporary Japanese ninja craze he found dubious and even despicable.

### 1964




### THE BOND BOOK

**Ian Fleming**'s ninja-infused James Bond novel ***You Only Live Twice*** published worldwide in multiple languages. While Japanese themes appear on the covers, the world has no literacy of the ninja look, nor does it have marketable value as of yet.

### DEC 28, 1964

### *THE SAMURAI*

Dubbed episodes of the 1962 Japanese jidai-geki TV series ***Onmitsu Kenshin*** debut on Australian TV, becoming an overnight sensation, and enduring for 10 seasons. The ninja-heavy adventure show is never shown in any other English-language market nor dusted-off for the 80s boom.

### 1965/66

### STRIPS... COMIC STRIPS

***You Only Live Twice*** newspaper strip adaptations by **John McLusky** are the first illustrated ninja for Western mass-media.

**JUNE 1967**

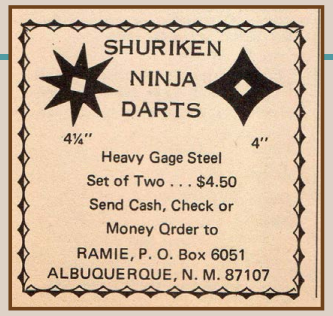
## "I...LOVE YOU"

The big budget, massively-scaled film adaptation of ***You Only Live Twice*** is released, with **Masaaki Hatsumi** and **Donn Draeger** amongst the consultants, and **Tetsuro Tanba** as ninja spy master Tiger Tanaka.

**DEC 1967**

## FIRST MAIL ORDER STARS

A lone ad for mail order "Shuriken Ninja Darts" runs in Black Belt from a vendor in Albuquerque, NM, never to be heard from again. Ads for "Kung Fu Throwing Stars" would become common 10 years later.



**OCT 1, 1969**

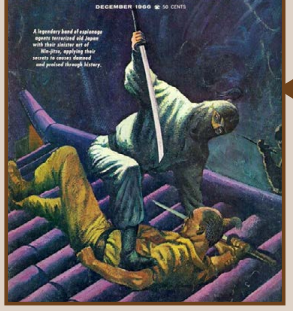
## SPOCK'S DAD WAS A NINJA?

In some cringe-worthy yellow-face, *Star Trek*'s **Mark Lenard** becomes American TV's first ninja in the ***Hawaii Five-0*** episode **"To Hell With Babe Ruth."** **Anthony Lawrence**'s script pioneers tropes like the local karate expert consulted by the cops in pursuit.

**DEC 1966**

## FIRST *BLACK BELT*

Issue of Black Belt is first ninja cover for an American magazine, begins a series of pioneering articles by **Andrew Adams** on ninja past and present.



**JUNE 1967**

## *JUDO MASTER*

After mentions of the Houdini-esque magical arts of ninjutsu in the pages of the May 1966 and April 1967 issues of the Charlton martial arts superhero comic ***Judo Master***, a two page illustrated article introduces young readers to ninja in a back-up story by **Frank McLaughlin**.

**1967**

## RONALD DUNCAN

The career martial artist does exhibitions and seminars on esoteric Japanese weaponry in New York City, said to go back to 1964, including the 1967 **"Orient vs. America"** event. During the 80s craze, this period was retroactively redefined as Duncan outright teaching *ninjutsu*, thus he is considered by some to be the "The First American Ninja."

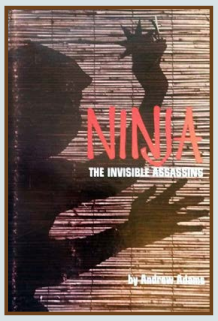
**1968**

## *THE MAGIC SERPENT*

Gamera-mogul **Sandy Frank** dubs a cut-down version of Toei's 1966 ninja-kaiju hybrid ***Kairyu Dai-Kessen*** for American TV. It becomes a staple of UHF creature features throughout the 70s.

# Media Flirtations of the 1970s

Three significant things happen in the 1970s to lay the groundwork for the 80's explosion — American martial artists come back from Japan and start teaching ninjutsu in the US, ninja assassins become plot devices on American primetime TV, and kids are exposed to ninja villains in mainstream comic books. The word (literally) is slowly getting out there...




## *INVISIBLE ASSASSINS*

First copyright of **Andrew Adams**' ***Ninja: The Invisible Assassins*** book, collecting various magazine articles from *Black Belt* in the 1960s, with first paperback edition following in 1973. It becomes an immediate staple of any ninja-curious's library and the format was set for a slew of tomes to follow.

**1970**

**FEB 1973**

## FIRST MERCH IN *BLACK BELT*

**Martial Arts Supplies Company** out of New York and Los Angeles stocks stores and runs mail order ads in issues of ***Black Belt*** magazine for "available for the first time in the United States" ninja weaponry and merchandise. The ad, featuring a straight sword, a letter opener and Donn Draeger's book, uses a publicity photo from *Shinobi no Mono*.

**1970***

## HATSUMI'S BUJINKAN

Having inherited the Togakure Ryu, Masaaki Hatsumi founds the **Bujinkan** association, which becomes the premiere exporter of modern ninja training worldwide.

***NOTE:** Conflicting dates of **1972** (the year **Toshitsugu Takamatsu** dies) and **1974** have also been published in official sources.

**1971**

## *ART OF INVISIBILITY*

First copyright of **Donn Draeger**'s book ***Ninjutsu: The Art of Invisibility, Japan's Feudal Age Espionage Methods*** (the first Phoenix/Lotus edition with familiar 'black cat' cover would be published 1977).

**OCT 4, 1973**

## *KUNG FU*

***Kung Fu*** episode **"The Assassin"** airs on ABC, with **David Carradine**'s Caine battling **Robert Ito** as an expatriate shinobi-skilled blacksmith in the American West.

## MONTH OF THE NINJA

**SEP 1974**

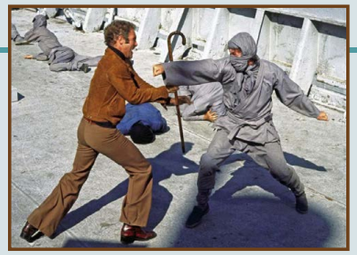
Both Marvel and DC feature ninja villains on the comic book spinner rack: the mystically trained killer "The Ninja" debuts, fighting Iron Fist in ***Marvel Premiere* #17** by **Doug Moench** and **Larry Hama** (who would later create Storm Shadow for *GI Joe*), AND... DC's ***The Shadow* #6** tale "Night of the Ninja" by **Denny O'Neil** and **Mike Kaluta** introduces the first 'red ninja' in American comics.

**FALL 1975**

## STEPHEN K. HAYES IN ATLANTA

**Stephen K. Hayes** returns from his first ninjutsu training sessions in Japan under Shoto Tanemura and Masaaki Hatsumi and opens "**The House of T'Ang: Fighting Arts of the Far East**" in Atlanta, GA. First teachings of Togakure Ryu in North America.

**DEC 19, 1975**



## *THE KILLER ELITE*

**Sam Peckinpah**'s ***The Killer Elite*** opens in US theaters, with **Mako** and **Tak Kubota** doing their best to salvage a lot of unnecessarily derogatory ninja content.

**SEP 22, 1976**

## *BARETTA*

Weekly prime-time crime series **Baretta** episode **"The Ninja"** airs on ABC, featuring **John Fujioka** and **James Hong**.

## "DEATH IS THE BLACK NINJA"

**SEP 1977**

Villain of the month "Black Ninja" appears in **Master of Kung Fu #56** by **Doug Moench** and **Jim Craig**. He is portrayed as European monk-like and wields a medieval mace and chain.

**1979**

## ROBERT BUSEY

The "King of Combat" brings Togakure Ryu back to US, emphasizing practical self-defense over esoteric traditions.

**APR 1974**

## *DEADLY HANDS* SETS THE STAGE

Marvel's black-and-white magazine format martial arts anthology series ***Deadly Hands of Kung Fu*** starts a three year run that sees multiple uses of ninja as villains, plus related editorial features. Writer **Doug Moench** and *Judo Master* creator **Frank McLaughlin** are among the creative teams, who will go on to become regular contributors to Marvel's martial arts-related properties. Issues #3 (8/74), #18 (11/75), #23 (4/76) of particular interest.

**1975**

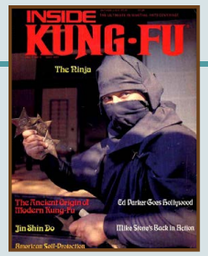
## FRANK DUX

Cited year of foundation of **"Dux-Ryu Ninjutsu"** in Hollywood, CA — however this is also the same year he allegedly entered the US Marine Corps for a series of foreign covert missions AND claims to have entered the Kumite tournament made famous in the film *Bloodsport*.

**JAN 1976**

## THE HANDS OF SHANG CHI

"Night of the Ninjas" storyline in issue #36 of Marvel Comics' ***Master of Kung Fu*** by **Doug Moench** and **Keith Pollard**.




**JULY 1977**

## *INSIDE KUNG-FU*

Ninja are finally the cover feature for the first time on the second of the 'big two' martial arts mags.

**DEC 2, 1977**

## *QUINCY*

Long-running **Jack Klugman** medical/detective drama series ***Quincy, M.E.*** episode **"Touch of Death"** airs on NBC, featuring regular **Robert Ito**'s cousin, a movie stuntman, being killed on-set by a Dim Mak blow after running afoul of gangsters. **Mako**, **Keye Luke** and **Harold "Odd Job" Sakata** also appear.

**APR 1979**

## *OFFICIAL KARATE*

***Official Karate*** addresses the competition and does its first ninja cover feature.

# The CRAZE, the BOOM, the 80s

If you liken the karate and kung-fu booms of the 60s and 70s to Elvis and The Beatles, then in the 1980s ninja are the Sex Pistols — the aggressively self-identifying decade wants its *own* martial movement. As suit jacket sleeves are rolled-up and fingers cut off leather gloves from coast-to-coast, Mike Stone talks-up Cannon while Chuck Norris is in the editing room, and Eric Van Lustbader's manuscript is readied for press. Martial artists crowd seminars, and mail order companies sense the next big thing.

Note the entries are listed year-by-year now with the increases in density and variety illustrating how fast it all bursts... and how quickly it slows.

## 1980

### MIKE STONE

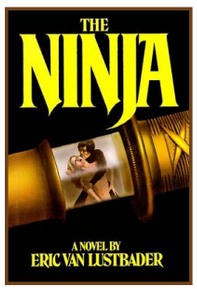
**Early 1980**

Career martial artist **Mike Stone** pitches Cannon Films producers Golan-Globus on a ninja project titled "**Dance of Death**."

### THE BESTSELLER

**APR 1980**

**Eric Van Lustbader**'s novel ***The Ninja*** debuts, spending five months on *The New York Times* Bestseller List. Optioned for film by 20th Century Fox but quagmires in 'development hell' under the likes of **Irvin Kershner** and **John Carpenter**, and is shelved some years later. *This failure is the great "what if?" of the 80s ninja craze...*




**JUNE 1980**

### FIRST HAYES COVER

Having long been in the interiors, for the first time **Stephen K. Hayes** is featured on cover of ***Black Belt*** magazine.

*Not the last...*

**AUG 14, 1980**

### *THE OCTAGON*

***The Octagon*** starring ***Chuck Norris***, ***Tadashi Yamashita*** and **Richard Norton** as the iconic Kyo the Enforcer, released in US theaters. The movie poster features all ninja, no Norris.

**SEP 15-19, 1980**

### ASSASSIN IN *SHOGUN*

Emmy and Golden Globe-winning ***Shogun*** mini-series begins five-night primetime run on NBC, with an average Nielsen Rating around 32, thus bringing its ninja scenes into 25-30 million American homes (estimated 51% of America's primetime TV viewership). Concurrent to the broadcast was a release of a new mass-market paperback edition of the **James Clavell** book with over 2 million copies in print. This stands as the most consumed traditional ninja event in American media history...

**NOV 11, 1980**

### *SHOGUN ASSASSIN*

***Shogun Assassin*** released in US theaters (later banned in British ones), introducing the English-speaking world to shinobi exterminators **Lone Wolf & Cub**.

**1980**

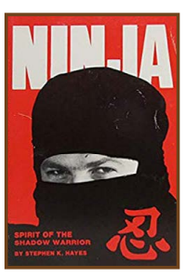
### MARTIAL CHARLATANISM

Radford W. Davis aka Chris Hunter aka **Ashida Kim** — self-aggrandized inheritor of Count Dante's "Black Dragon Fighting Society," copyrights and/or publishes ***The Book of the Ninja*** and/or ***Secrets of the Ninja*** (advertised dates and official records conflict). An empire of nonsensical books, videos and for-sale bogus degree certificates begins.

**NOV 1980**

### MY WIFE IS A NINJA?

The 1978 classic Shaw Brothers romantic action/comedy ***Heroes of the East*** is released in the US, with **Gordon Liu** defending Chinese kung fu against a ninja-led squad of Japanese and his own kunoichi wife. Marketing features no ninja imagery, despite a re-title as "***Challenge of the Ninja***."




### FIRST HAYES BOOK

**1980**

Ohara Publications releases **Stephen K. Hayes**' ***Ninja: Spirit of the Shadow Warrior***, setting both the physical format and editorial tone for a decade of books to follow.

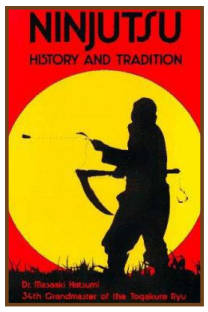
## 1981

While nowhere near a household word yet, ninja are all the buzz in the entertainment industries, and 1981 would see early adopters benefit immensely from that awareness.

**JAN / SEP 1981**

## ELEKTRA & THE HAND

Trend-setting first appearance of sai-wielding, scantily clad ninja assassin **Elektra** in Marvel Comics' ***Daredevil* #168** and the Marvel Universe's clan of disposable ninja **The Hand** in ***Daredevil* #174** by **Frank Miller**.




**EARLY 1981**

## HATSUMI IN ENGLISH

First printing of ***Ninjutsu: History and Tradition*** by **Masaaki Hatsumi** (via Hayes) in the US.

## *NINJA MASTER*

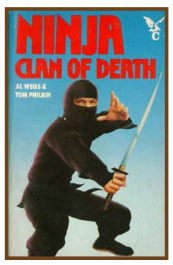
Debut of **Wade Barker**'s 'Brett Wallace' in Warner Books' ***Ninja Master #1: Vengeance is His***, beginning 8 novel run mostly written by kung fu cinema expert **Ric Meyers** under the Barker pseudonym.

**NOV 1981**

**LATE 1981**

## THE SCENT OF SHADOWS

**Parfums du Coer** releases cheesy knock-off perfume "Ninja" with Geisha-themed ad campaign and bottles.




## CLAN OF DEATH

**Al Weiss** and **Tom Philbin**'s sensationalized myth and murder-driven ***Ninja: Clan of Death*** is released. It's tone and look would later be adopted for the same publisher's *Ninja* Magazine.

**1981**

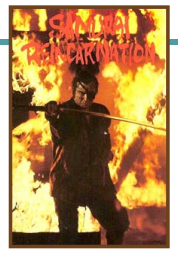
**EARLY 1981**

## KAH-BOOO-KAY

Japanese professional wrestler **Akihisa Mera** re-gimmicks himself as **The Great Kabuki** and begins an iconic run as an exotic in-ring ninja master complete with armored hood and Okinawan arsenal.

**MAR 9, 1981**

***SOAP*** Ninja appear in kung fu-themed episode of mega-hit network TV sitcom ***Soap***.



**1981**

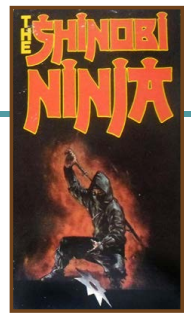
## CHIBA'S JUBEI

**Kinji Fukasaku**'s supernatural epic ***Makai Tensho*** is cut by over half an hour and released in the West as ***Samurai Reincarnation***, introducing the world to **Sonny Chiba**'s Jubei Yagyu, and possibly inspiring *Ninja III: The Domination* years later...

**OCT 2, 1981**

## *ENTER THE NINJA*

Having mutated considerably since its "Dance of Death" days (**Franco Nero** replacing **Mike Stone** as lead for instance), Cannon's ***Enter the Ninja*** is released in US theaters, introducing the world to **Sho Kosugi**, and widely considered the spark point of the mainstream American ninja boom. Press photos promoting the film include Kosugi's dual-sword jump kick, an image that would become *the* most prolific icon of the 80s craze.




**LATE 1981**

## BRONSON THE NINJA

**Tadashi Yamashita** finally overcomes his unfair "Bronson Lee" moniker in redundantly titled rushed-to-market grindhouse schlock ***The Shinobi Ninja***.

# 1982

Having ignited in the past 18 months, the craze is now fully ablaze. Ninja-themed articles and covers of martial arts magazines are increasingly numerous, more and more interior pages of mail order catalogs are dedicated to ninja products. *Enter the Ninja* took Hollywood a bit by surprise, so while that and *The Octagon* hit cable, American studios race to develop various properties, while Asian distributors take notice and pounce on the bandwagon like jackals.

**EARLY 1982**

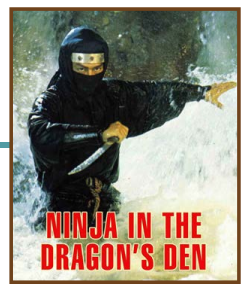
## ENTER THE HO

Hong Kong's insanely prolific exploitation film guru **Godfrey Ho** and **IFD/Filmark** release cookie-cutter kung fu movies under bait-and-switch titles like ***Secret Ninja*** and ***The Leopard Fist Ninja***, setting a precedent for grindhouse and VHS frauds like *Phoenix the Ninja, Jade Dagger Ninja* and many more.

**APR 1982**

## THE MULTI-COLOR MASTERPIECE

**The Venoms** go ninja as Shaw Bros. multi-chromatic spectacle ***Five Element Ninjas*** is released in Hong Kong and exported worldwide. Commonly retitled ***Chinese Super Ninjas*** in English-speaking markets, it is immediately knocked-off by Taiwan's ***Ninja in the Deadly Trap*** amongst others.




**APR 1982**

## DRAGON'S DEN

Japan Action Club idol **'Henry' Sanada** is teamed with rising Hong Kong star **Conan Lee** in the stunt-driven Chinese/Japanese co-pro ***Ninja in the Dragon's Den***.

**MAY 1982**

## FIRST ACTION FIGURE

Mego Corp.'s **Eagle Force** line of metal military miniatures beats Hasbro's rebooted GI Joe to toy shelves, introducing villain character **Savitar** – the first ninja figure designed/released by an American toy company. It is based on traditional Japanese designs with a stingray-style hood.

MID-LATE 1982

## JAPANESE LAZER NINJA

*Star Wars* special effects-influenced Kadokawa productions like ***Ninja Wars*** and ***Legend of the Eight Samurai*** join stunt-driven epics like ***Shogun's Ninja*** and ***Renegade Ninjas*** in the dismayingly shallow waters of English-dubbed Japanese craze-era exports. They become VHS and cable staples, but too few follow...

JULY 1982

## KOSUGI MAIL ORDER

Incorporation and first ads in martial arts mags for **Sho Kosugi Ninja Enterprises Inc.**, selling the "SK Ninja-To" and the now iconic jump kick and sword-claw retail posters.

# 1983

1983 is the first of the three-year sweet spot of the boom — it really feels like a *movement* at this point, concurrent with Japanese graphics being all over posters, album covers and clothing in mall stores like Chess King. Whereas from 80–82 you had to seek out ninja stuff, from 83–85 you can't avoid it if you try.

JAN 27, 1983

## MAGNUM

Ninja-themed **"The Arrow That Is Not Aimed"** episode of ***Magnum P.I.*** airs, guest starring **Mako**.

FEB 3, 1983

## BELIEVE IT OR NOT...

**Mako**'s evil ninja clan steals a ray gun in the **"30 Seconds Over Little Tokyo"** episode of ***The Greatest American Hero***.

1983

## ENTER THE TAI AND THE REI

Director **Robert Tai** enters the fray with ***Shaolin vs Ninja***, then finds his star **Alexander Lo Rei** — beginning the 80s most prolific ninja partnership. The nine-hour TV epic ***Ninja: The Final Duel***, ***Ninja Death I-III***, ***The Super Ninja***, ***Ninja in the USA***, ***Mafia vs Ninja*** and more follow within three years depending on the nation of release.

SEP 16, 1983

## *REVENGE OF THE NINJA*

**Sam Firstenberg**'s ***Revenge of the Ninja*** released by Golan-Globus/Cannon in US theaters, with **Sho Kosugi** making history as a Japanese actor in the sole leading role of an American film. **Robert Walsh**'s iconic synth score would be re-used and copied in several subsequent films, defining the era. Set in the US, shot in the US, with an immigrant ninja hero at its center just trying to live the American dream, *Revenge of the Ninja* is the first pure-bred son of the 80s American ninja craze.

1983

## ENTER THE NAM

Taiwanese director **Lee Tso Nam** cranks out a pair of deliriously exploitive masterpieces, ***Deadly Life of a Ninja*** with **Yasu Kurata** and ***Challenge of the Lady Ninja*** with **Elsa Yeung**.

JULY 7, 1983

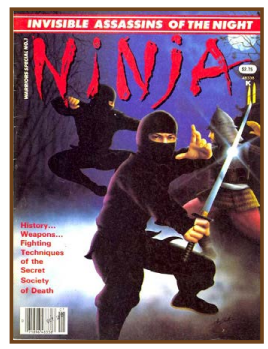
## ENTER THE BECK AND THE LYNCH

The lost-for-decades, utterly enlightened, pilot TV movie ***The Last Ninja*** airs on ABC, with **Michael Beck**, **Richard Lynch** and **Mako**. Somehow it is not picked up for series and not released on any home video format until 2017.

FALL 1983

## *THE* MAGAZINE

First issue of ***Ninja*** **Magazine** released by Condor. It is an immediate sell out and subsequent issues are a smash hit. The painted covers of the first few years endure as icons of the era.



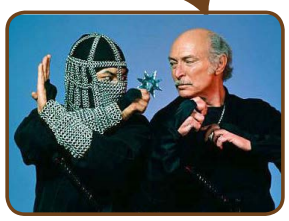
DEC 1983

## WHISPER

First issue of ***Whisper*** from Capital Comics, featuring a spandex aerobics-wear-clad female ninja created by **Steven Grant** and **Rich Larson**.

# 1984

1984 sees several milestone releases, but is also the year a few bricks start to loosen in the wall, and as ninja popularity skyrockets it also starts to butt its head against its own glass ceiling. Some quality control issues become apparent, but there is no stopping ninja become more and more mainstream.



## *THE MASTER*

The craze becomes official as ninja hit network TV with ***The Master***, starring **Lee Van Cleef**, **Sho Kosugi** and a hamster in a van. Alas, the show is canceled three months later.

JAN 20 1984

1984

## *NINJA THUNDERBOLT*

**Richard Harrison** makes his ninja debut for **Joseph Lai/Godfrey Ho** in ***Ninja Thunderbolt***, made by cutting together an older crime film and newly shot ninja scenes featuring mail order weapons and garish costuming. The formula works and 50-some-odd films follow through 1992.

1984

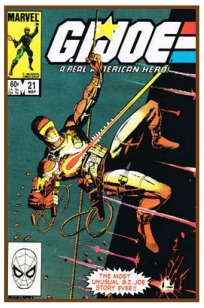
## THE KAWASAKI NINJA

In an early example of corporations adopting the term for its 'cool factor,' Kawasaki nicknames its innovative new **GPZ900R** sport motorcycle **"Ninja"** and redefines the modern street bike.

EARLY 1984

## ASIAN WORLD GOES FULL NINJA

**Asian World of Martial Arts**, having long sold ninja equipment amidst Kung Fu and Karate gear, now dedicates catalog covers and magazine advertising exclusively to ninja products.




MAR 1984

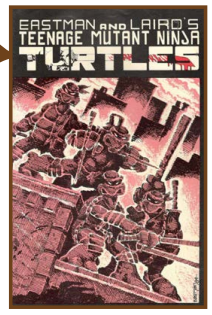
## STORM SHADOW

**"Silent Interlude"** is the first appearance of **Storm Shadow** in Marvel's ***G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero*** **#21**, by **Larry Hama**. The first action figure follows shortly after and is an instant sell out, and the entire Joe property henceforth leans on ninja heavily.

MAY 1984

## TURTLE'S TINY DEBUT

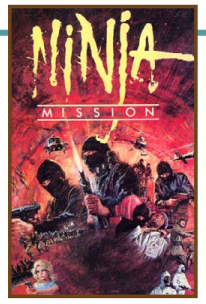
First issue of Mirage's ***Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*** black-and-white comic by **Eastman** and **Laird** debuts at a New Hampshire comic con to demure success. Nothing about it is for kids and no one sees the wolf in sheep's clothing that has just infiltrated the pack...

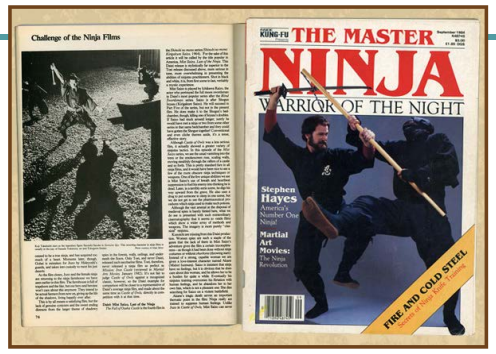



SEP 1984

## ENTER THE SWEDES

Hastily *ninja-fied* Swedish commando-vs-terrorist action film ***The Ninja Mission*** released in US theaters. Painted artwork on subsequent home video releases belies the quality of the film with great success.




SUMMER 1984

## BEST MAG OF THE ERA!

*Inside Kung-Fu*'s **"Master Ninja: Warrior of the Night"** summer special hits newsstands, with **Jessica Amanda Salmonson**'s writings on 1960s Japanese ninja films absolutely *tormenting* your author/curator at the time and directly influencing the founding of *VintageNinja* decades later.

LATE 1984

## REMCO TOY LINES

Remco toy company releases both **"Ninja Strike Force"** in 3.75" GI Joe style and **"Secret of the Ninja"** in He-Man scale just in time for Christmas. Deluxe sets include VHS tapes with dubbed episodes of ***Lion Maru***, ***Red Shadow*** and ***Kamui***.

SEP 14 1984

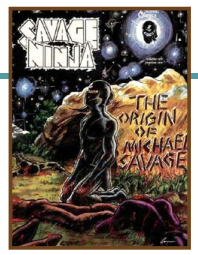
## *DOMINATION*

The ninja-sploitation/*Exorcist*/*Flashdance* hybrid masterpiece ***Ninja III: The Domination*** is released in U.S. theaters, with audiences little-knowing it would be **Sho Kosugi**'s final film with Cannon (although not **Lucinda Dickey**'s).

1984

## NINJA IN THE B&W BOOM

Indie comic ***Savage Ninja: The Origin of Michael Savage*** released, an early example of several ninja properties created during the mid-1980s "Black & White Boom."




# 1985

1985 sees Kosugi move-on from Cannon, Cannon move-on from Kosugi, and shinobi invade the world of tabletop gaming. This is arguably the peak year of the entire boom, with magazine covers and features too numerous to list, and previous films becoming staples of cable TV and home video rental. *Ninja has become a household word.*

JAN 1985

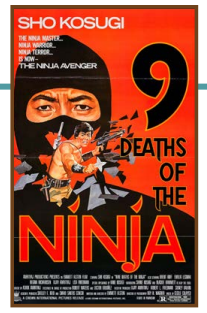
## DOLAN'S GOES FULL NINJA

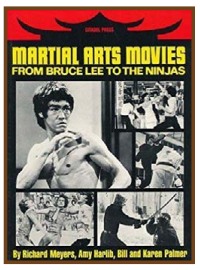
**Dolan's Sports** catalog covers become exclusively ninja merchandise and equipment.

APR 26, 1985

## SPIKE SHINOBI???

**Sho Kosugi**'s first non-Cannon film, the semi-comedic ***9 Deaths of the Ninja,*** released in US theaters.




1985

## IT'S OFFICIAL!

Prolific champion of martial arts **Richard 'Ric' Meyer**'s essential ***Martial Arts Movies: From Bruce Lee to the Ninjas*** is first film book to recognize the ninja boom.

1985

## *SHURIKEN*

Manga-influenced female ninja indie comic ***Shuriken*** by **Reggie Beyers** begins an 8-issue run.

MAR 1985

## SEGA NINJA

**"Sega Ninja"** (originally *Ninja Princess* in Japan) video game released in arcades, with home system release a year later as simply "The Ninja."

MAY 3, 1985

## *GYMKATA*

The sort-of-ninja-releated-if-you-squint **Kurt Thomas** vehicle ***Gymkata*** is released in US theaters with a decidedly ninja-centric movie poster. **Tadashi Yamashita** steals the show.

1985

## AD&D GOES FULL NINJA

## WAY OF THE TIGER

**Mark Smith** and **Jaime Thomson**'s ***Way of the Tiger*** adventure gaming book and video game series launches with ***Avenger***.

1985

## INSPECTOR GADGET

Mega-hit cartoon series ***Inspector Gadget*** gets in on the act in **"The Capeman Cometh,"** with a shinobi design right out of 60s anime.

OCT 28, 1985

NOV 1985

## PRAY FOR DEATH

**Sho Kosugi** returns to serious ninja fare, and seriously ornate helmets, in the brutal ***Pray for Death***, with **James Booth** and **Donna Kei Benz**, released in US theaters by Trans World Entertainment.

## THE MASTER... *CLASS*

**Sho Kosugi**'s one-hour instructional VHS ***Master Class*** features a hybrid of street and screen martial arts. It is not outwardly ninja-themed.

1985

1985

## MASTER... NINJA?

TWE pairs episodes of long-canceled *The Master* into seven new VHS volumes entitled ***The Master Ninja***. Confused renters either mistake them for new unseen films or episodes of the old show that never aired. Many are disappointed once home...

**Gary Gygax**'s ***Oriental Adventures*** book introduces ninja as a new character class in **Advanced Dungeons & Dragons**. The book is TSR's bestseller of the year.

AUG 30, 1985

## AMERICAN NINJA

Cannon begins its post-Kosugi era with ***American Ninja***, a film once pitched as a Chuck Norris vehicle, now in the hands of new franchise star **Michael Dudikoff** with **Tadashi Yamashita**, **Judie Aronson** and **Steve James**.

1985

## THE GOLDEN NINJA WARRIOR

The now famous, *then not*, ***Ninja Terminator*** is released by Lai/Ho, featuring **Richard Harrison** on a Garfield phone, inspiring endless memes decades later...

1985

## SABOTEUR

**Clive Townsend**'s 8-Bit ***Saboteur*** video game is released for Commodore home computers, featuring an utterly 80s Uzi-wielding ninja and promising "Martial Arts at its most playable."

LATE 1985

## THE ONLY *OFFICIAL* TOYS

**Fleetwood**, manufacturer of those cheap rack toys you find in grocery stores and pharmacies, releases a re-purposed generic ninja figure and a series of toy weapons emblazoned with Cannon's ***American Ninja*** poster art. This stands, to this very day, as the only example of officially licensed toys from a craze-era film.

# 1986

1986 is a bit of a weird year for the craze. Sure, ninja are everywhere, but little do we know Kosugi is in the process of moving on from the genre, and with no major theatrical releases this year, the boom eyes the greener pastures of home video. Things get cheaper, derivative and more exploitive, even if at the same time landmark video games loom.

## ELIMINATORS

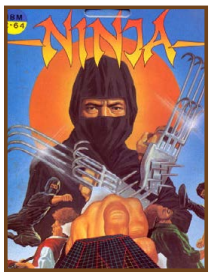
JAN 31, 1986

Four years after *Dragon's Den*, **Conan Lee** dons stylized ninja gear himself for the multi-genre-bender ***Eliminators***. Ninja as components of a team rather than central stars of their own stories would become more common in coming years.

MAR 14, 1986

## HASSELHOFF VS. NINJA

"Knight of the Rising Sun" episode of ***Knight Rider*** airs, with **Tadashi Yamashita** in his Black Star Ninja gear.




## MASTERTRONIC

**"Ninja"** aka **"Ninja Mission"** home video game released by Mastertronic, Inc.

1986

1986

## HIRO YAMATO

Hong Kong-based toy company Lanard releases GI Joe knock-off line **"The Corps"** with clearly Sho Kosugi-inspired ninja character **Hiro Yamato**.

1986



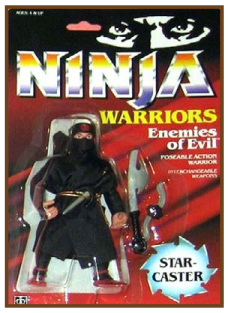

## NINJA THEATER

Trans World Entertainment releases twenty or so repackaged kung-fu and IFD "ninja" flicks in a VHS line called **"Ninja Theater Hosted by Sho Kosugi."** The 'donuts' — newly shot weapons demos — are essentially lipstick on a pig as video store shelves increasingly become a minefield of lies...

APR 1986

## RAMBO CARTOONS

***Rambo: The Force of Freedom*** animated series debuts, concurrent to the toy line, with White Dragon and Black Dragon ninja characters both voiced by **Robert Ito**.




1986

## HASBRO'S *OTHER* NINJA

Cashing in on the ninja figure mania they themselves created with Storm Shadow, Hasbro releases the **"Ninja Warriors"** toy line, actually establishing the scale/style of TMNT figures a year before their debut.

## YET ANOTHER NINJA GIRL

Modern kunoichi-based comic ***Ninja*** by **C.J. Henderson** and **Peter Palmer** debuts from Eternity Comics, continuing for 14 more issue over 2 years.

OCT 1986

## SOMA'S "MASTER NINJA"

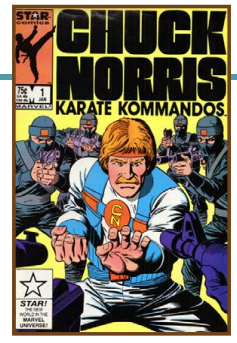
International toy company **SOMA** releases a half dozen inch-tall rubber figurines of ninja in response to the Smurfs boom. Knock-offs of these are still being produced to this very day, sold in capsule vending machines.

1986

1986

## ENTER THE HURRICANE

TV ads for Honda's answer to the Kawasaki Ninja, the **"Hurricane"** feature **Sho Kosugi** in his last traditional ninja portrayal of the era.




SEP 1986

## ILLUSTRATED CHUCK

Just in time for after-school audiences, the ninja-infused **Chuck Norris** cartoon series ***Karate Kommandos*** debuts with concurrent comic book and toy line, surprisingly featuring some vintage Japanese costume inspiration.

1986

## MITES?

In an answer to the mini-figure sensation "M.U.S.C.L.E.," Panosh release the shinobi-fied version **"N.I.N.J.A. Mites"** (Nasty Indestructible Ninjas Jumping About).

## 1987

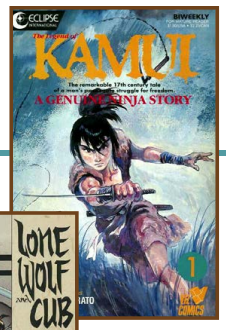
1987 was the year I graduated high school, and a full five years since I had fallen in love with ninja in the first place. That's pretty much the life cycle of any craze, and after some movie and TV let-downs, I can't have been alone in mentally moving on. Trips to the video store yield little more than *Master* episodes disguised as new films, and Godfrey Ho drek in false-prophet packaging. Serious ninja stuff starts to look tone-deaf and outdated as *parody* (the end-time of any genre) creeps in like kudzu. The best years are behind us, with significant nails being driven into the coffin...

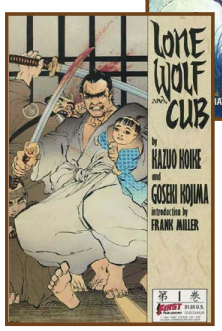
FEB 1987

## RAGE OF HONOR

**Sho Kosugi** vehicle ***Rage of Honor*** released in US theaters briefly, but with much longer legs on home video. Despite some disposable shinobi in the film, the marketing campaign does not feature any ninja.

1987




## MANGA MILESTONES

Late for the ninja boom, but history-making for the comic industry, Eclipse and First release English-adapted manga ***Lone Wolf and Cub*** and ***Kamui: A Genuine Ninja Story*** to US markets. While **Frank Miller** covers ensure *LW&C* is a hit, *Kamui*'s lack of hooded ninja probably keeps it from connecting with a larger casual audience.

## COKE... DIET COKE

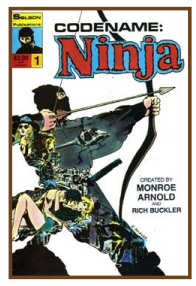
Then Remington Steele, future James Bond **Pierce Brosnan** plays cat and mouse with slapstick ninja in a pair of **Diet Coke** TV ads.

1987

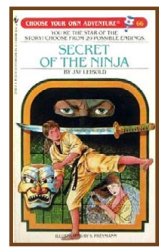
1987

## TRYING TO KEEP IN REAL...

**Monroe Arnold** and **Rich Buckler**'s ***Codename: Ninja*** comic debuts, oriented to authentic martial arts, modern espionage and serious ninja portrayal.




APR 1987



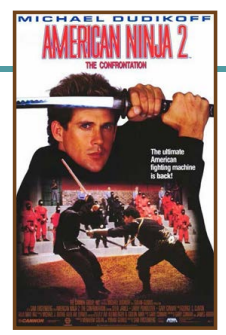

## CYOA NINJA

The 66th entry of the prolific **Choose Your Own Adventure** book series, **Jay Leibold**'s ***Secret of the Ninja***, is an instant bestseller for the line and ninja themes would be revisited in the series several more times in following years.

1987

## NINJOR

A floundering **He-Man/Masters of the Universe** property introduces villain character **"Ninjor"** with a **Bruce Timm** penciled mini-comic adventure titled "Enter the Ninjor."




MAY 1987

## AMERICAN NINJA 2

***American Ninja 2: The Confrontation***, lacking the budget of its predecessor, squeaks out into US theaters, with **Michael Dudikoff** facing **Mike Stone** in a script by co-star **Gary Conway** of *Land of the Giants* and *I Was A Teenage Frankenstein* fame.

NOV 1987

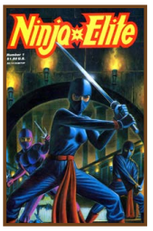
## MORE PIXEL NINJA

Video game **"Shinobi"** released in US arcades, introducing Joe Musashi, while Activision releases **"The Last Ninja"** for Commodore 64 home PC.

1987

## AND ANOTHER COMIC KUNOICHI

Female ninja-driven indie comic ***Ninja Elite*** by **Scott Behnke** debuts, begins 8-issue run. The kunoichi idiom is cresting cliché-dom in comics...




## THE WORD WEAKENED...

Comic series appropriating or cashing-in on the term 'ninja' and outright parodies of the idiom start to crowd comic store shelves — ***Zen Intergalactic Ninja***, ***Ninja High School***, ***The Fat Ninja*** and ***Ninja Funnies*** amongst others.

1987

NOV 11, 1987

## NINJA BALKI

Ninja-wear is played for laughs in the **"Karate Kids"** episode of the inexplicably popular primtetime comedy ***Perfect Strangers***.

1987

## TASTES GREAT VS. LESS FILLING!

**Miller Lite** launches an ad campaign featuring **Joe Piscopo** in a Bruce Lee parody fighting a who's-who of Hollywood martial legends, including **Tadashi Yamashita**, once again in his Black Star Ninja gear.

DEC 1987

## TURTLES...

The television premiere of the ***Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*** animated series, concurrent to Playmates tooling up the initial toy line for release six months later, forever redefines the term 'ninja' to any future generation.

# 1988 / 89

While comics try to keep it real, even Cannon relegates ninja movies to home video only. The parody trend continues, but worse, the term "ninja" is increasingly co-opted where it doesn't belong and its very meaning transfers to *just being really good at something*. Even core ninja stuff stops *looking* like ninja stuff. The black hoods are becoming dated and the kickboxers are doing push-ups around the corner...

APR 1988

## *NINJA WARRIORS*

Debut of ***Tales of the Ninja Warriors*** magazine format comics anthology, aimed at the martial arts community, begins a 16-issue run.

MAY 1988

## *BLACK EAGLE*

The film ***Black Eagle*** sees a decidedly non-shinobi **Sho Kosugi** star opposite **Jean-Claude Van Damme**, and it is difficult to deny this is a passing-of-the-baton moment from one decade's martial arts icon to another's...

MAY 1988

## *SILENT ASSASSINS*

An army of ninja jobbers is no match for Flash Gordon and Pazuzu as **Sam Jones** and **Linda Blair** slaughter the ***Silent Assassins***. Ninja as utterly anonymous cannon fodder are increasingly common across all media...

OCT 1988

## GAIDEN

The prolific video game property **"Ninja Gaiden"** first released in US arcades.

1988

## PC PARODIES

PC video games using ninja for irony emerge, such as ***Ninja Scooter Simulator***, ***BMX Ninja***, and **Ninja Hamster**.

## FINALLY SOME ANIME...

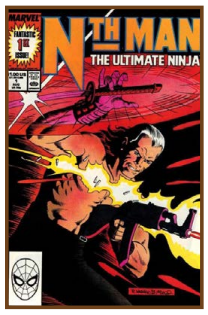
Celebrity Home Entertainment releases ***The Dagger of Kamui*** on their Just for Kids VHS label in a dubbed version retitled ***Revenge of the Ninja Warrior***.

1988

FEB 1989

## *AMERICAN NINJA 3*

***American Ninja 3: Blood Hunt*** gets a limited theatrical release in US with concurrent VHS release elsewhere. **Steve James** billed as co-lead with **David Bradley** replacing Michael Dudikoff.




**AUG 1989**

## NTH MAN

**Larry Hama**'s post-apocalyptic *GI Joe* follow-up ***Nth Man: The Ultimate Ninja*** starts a 16 issue run, with a lead character featuring no outward resemblance to the classic ninja image.

**OCT 1989**

## SHADOWMASTERS

Having debuted earlier in the year in Marvel's *Punisher War Journal*, **Carl Potts**' modern ninja squad ***The Shadowmasters*** get their own limited series.

# POST-MORTEM

As we enter the decade of kickboxers and grunge, thoroughly 80s films like the original Cannon trilogy become un-cool. Martial arts mags turn to other things and the proto-days of MMA begin. The Turtles prove to be worthy ninja assassins, having killed any serious adult notion of shinobi in popular media, and it would take an unlikely video game savior to redefine the character-type in new garish colors with superpowers as otherworldly as old toad magic. In 1995, two would-be significant film releases fail to resuscitate the movement that had been a vegetable on life support for more than five years...

**MAR 1991**

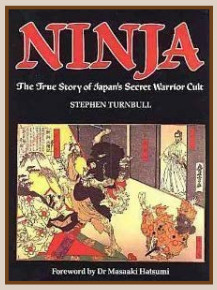
## *THE ANNIHILATION...*

**Michael Dudikoff** returns to join **David Bradley** in ***American Ninja 4: The Annihilation***, with limited theatrical release in the US *one full year* after European and Asian market releases.

**1991**

## GREAT BUT LATE

The 80s ninja craze finally gets its first English history textbook in the form of **Dr. Stephen Turnbull**'s ***Ninja: The True Story of Japan's Secret Warrior Cult***. Had this come out in '81 instead of '91 maybe we'd all have been taken more seriously...




## *THE RAVEN*

*A-Team* creator **Frank Lupo**'s ***The Raven*** premieres on CBS, essentially *The Master* with the ninja elements more demure, and **Lee Majors** as the celebrity draw. A second season sees the ninja elements even more hidden.

**JUNE 24, 1992**

**JAN 1992**

## *MASTER NINJA THEME SONG!*

Episodes of *The Master*, having inexplicably fallen into public domain in "Master Ninja" format, are the butt of robot jokes on Comedy Central's **Mystery Science Theater 3000**. These shows endure as, by far, the largest and most loving audience the show ever received.

**AUG 1992**

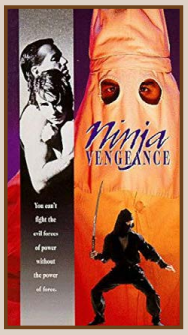
## *3 NINJAS*

The family comedy film ***3 Ninjas*** released to moderate success, with multiple sequels and myriad "Kid" gimmicked knock-offs following.

**1992**

## NINJA FORCE

In attempt to boost flagging sales, and about five years too late, **GI Joe** ninja-fies several team members and introduces other new ones in their "**Ninja Force**" toy and comic line.




**JULY 1993**

## *NINJA VENGEANCE*

***Ninja Vengeance***, an indie-produced martial arts film made in 1988 featuring **Stephen K. Hayes** in training sequences, finally released on VHS (it remains in obscurity until resurfacing in the late 2000s on Netflix).

**OCT 1992**

## GET OVER HERE!

The mega-hit video game **"Mortal Kombat"** is released in US arcades, redefining ninja for a new decade, with multiple properties and merchandisers influenced by the colorful armored "ninja" characters. Live action films and TV would follow in the next few years.

**NOV 5, 1993**

## *ROBOCOP 3*

The once-mighty, now past-its-freshness-date ***RoboCop*** franchise features a cyber ninja heavy in what is one more excuse for the public to roll its collective eyes at an already disappointing film.

**FEB 24, 1995**

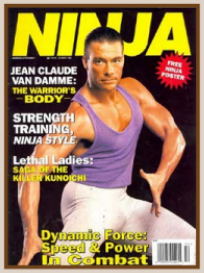
## *THE HUNTED*

A full decade late and largely unnoticed or ignored by the movie-going public, ***The Hunted*** is released in US theaters, starring *Highlander*'s **Christopher Lambert** and *Last Emperor*'s **John Lone** and **Joan Chen**, guest starring Japanese action star **Yoshio Harada** and *Shogun*'s **Yoko Shimada**, with **Tak Kubota** in a small role. It is the last serious ninja film released in US theaters until modern times.

**DEC 18, 1993**

## RIP JACKSON

Action star **Steve James**, best known to us as Jackson in the *American Ninja* series, passes away of cancer at the age of 41.




## SUMMER 1995

### THE LAST *NINJA*

Having *long* outlasted the craze that begat it, Condor's ***Ninja* Magazine** publishes its final issue. The cover features Jean Claude Van Damme.

## NOV 1995

### *AMERICAN NINJA 5*

Having been shelved for over two years, ***American Ninja 5*** is finally released in the US on home video in an ill-fated attempt to reboot the franchise for kids.

*Consider the plug pulled...*

The next decade would not be a good one for our beloved 80s-style ninja. The last black-clad ninja to make it to theaters were slaughtered by Chris Farley. Then, despite a massive wave of vintage genre cinema seeing new life like never before, the 80s films were *not* a major cog in the DVD revolution. Even Stephen K. Hayes would leave ninjutsu behind, founding his own art in 1997. While the classic black hood and signature weapons were never forgotten (*WMAC Masters*, anyone?), the mega properties that adopted the term — TMNT, Mortal Kombat, even Power Rangers — spawned multiple generations of fans raised without associations of the archetypal ninja image.

BUT!!! The mid-to-late-2000s... well, we might need a term for this period at some point. *The Nin-stalgia Craze?*

There was a Re-Renaissance of sorts. While a younger crowd let *Naruto* redefine ninja wear as ski parkas, for us old farts, 80s nostalgia led to boom-era film and TV *finally* getting quality home releases. Internet newsgroups, fan-subbing and DVD-R trading were godsends, making it possible for us to get ahold of vintage Japanese media for the first time. A couple of new movies hit theaters even. Fresh eyes re-translated the old secret scrolls leading to a new wave of history and martial arts books and videos. There were even junky swords in Chinatown smokeshops again! *And this site came about, for whatever that's been worth...*

As we approach 2020, Sho Kosugi is finally doing conventions, *Ninja III: The Domination* has emerged as a cult favorite to a whole new young audience devouring 80s retro, and Japanese tourism is leaning heavily on traditional ninja allure. The term has been co-opted by kitchen gadgets, and come to describe obstacle course athletes or theme park stage show acrobats, but at this point appropriation of the term 'ninja' is a tradition onto itself. But the core iconography established in Japan in the 1960s and adopted by the rest of us in the 80s remains, and as long as a hooded weapons master can be used on merchandise without any sort of licensing fee, ninja aint going anywhere!

*And neither is this site...*

I hope you got something out of this timeline. Check back for updates, and if you can add anything, holler!

***Keith J. Rainville — VintageNinja.net***

**Special thanks goes out to these sites that are also well worth your time:**

Paghat the Ratgirl's Weird Wild Realm • Vintage Nunchaku on Facebook • MA-Mags.com

**And forever... one million Thank-You-Retsu's to my shadowy soul brother Tim March!**

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