

The VINTAGE NINJA Movie & TV Guide

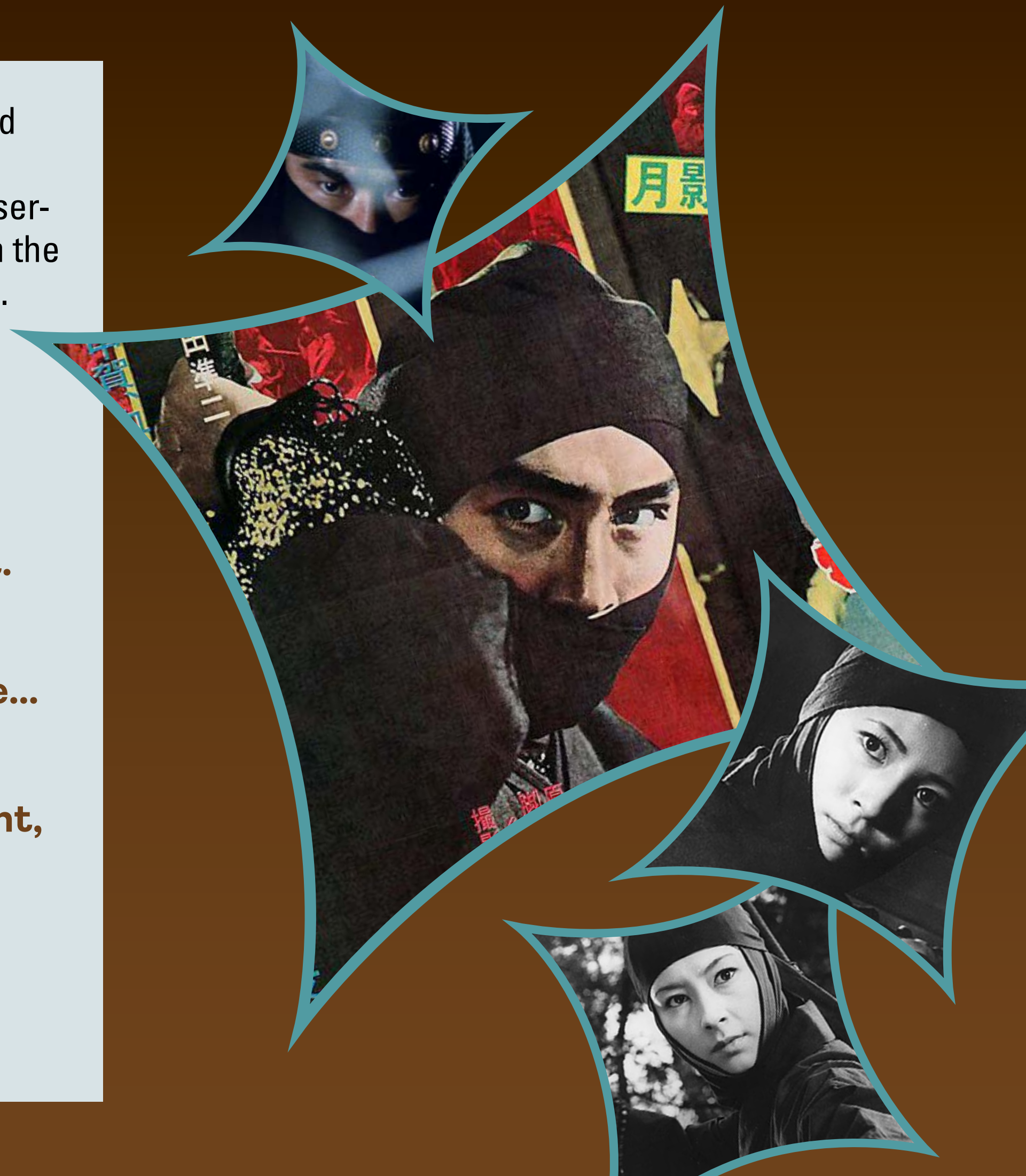
VOL. 1: JAPAN, LIVE ACTION — 1920s–1980s

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You want to see the movies Sho Kosugi grew up watching, the ones that inspired animation designers and video game artists of the 80s and 90s, the ones the James Bond people ripped off in the 60s, but where to start? Or, you've amassed a collection of these gems already but know there's more out there. Here's a user-friendly reference for both pursuits, with quick-and-easy recommendations for Japanese ninja titles from the silent era to the late 80s — their general flavor and tone, varying trends and tropes, and a lot of surprises.

CONVENTIONS OF THIS GUIDE:

- **TITLES** — for better or worse I've used the most commonly used translations out there. These are often the most accessible references to these films so, even if the title's been butchered, there's still a practical advantage when searching them out.
- **VN** as an entity has to be cautious when it comes to supporting/endorsing certain not-so-authorized film collecting activities out there, so sorry, there's no links here...
- **YES THERE'S MORE TO COME!** This will be updated often and I have a huge stack of discs and files awaiting input. Plus future volumes on Anime, Japan 1990—present, Hong Kong/Chinese films, ninja-like hooded heroes, and more.
- Yes, we welcome corrections and additions. Email me through the website.
- See the Appendixes at the end for more info!



CASTLE OF OWLS

1963

(aka Samurai Spies, orig. *Ninja hicho fukuro no shiro*)

YOUR HUMBLE AUTHOR'S ALL-TIME FAVORITE NINJA MOVIE

Iga province is annihilated by the Shogun, with the few surviving ninja scattered across feudal Japan. Square-jawed **Ryutaro Otomo** plays Juzo, who for ten years does nothing but train for the day of Iga's revenge. Gohei, his oldest friend, goes undercover as a member of higher society and gets very accustomed to the good life. Ambitious to attain samurai status, he turns on his own kind and becomes ninja hunter. What follows is akin to the *Sam the Sheepdog/Ralph the Wolf* cartoons with nostalgic conversations between old pals interspersed with tense fights against reluctant but driven rivals. And a crafty kunoichi adds all sorts of complications for both sides...

The oft-visited shinobi-cinema themes of the ninja life being inescapable, shinobi never being good enough for the samurai class, and the pawns learning the hard way to never trust any other piece on the board are done superbly here. Lush color adds depth to night scenes like shuriken fights in the woods and sword duels in the rain. *Owls* is just superb...

- The 1999 digital-heavy remake *Owl's Castle* largely set off the 2000s nin-stalgia boom, but alas has not aged well
- A gorgeous color film shot with B&W contrast when needed
- [VN has done multiple features on this film](#)



DEMON SPIES

1974

(Oniwaban)

GRIM AND GRITTY MASKED MALEVOLENCE FROM THE WRITER OF *LONE WOLF & CUB*

Proven newsstand and box-office gold, it would seem any 70's mangaproperty from legendary scribe **Kazuo Koike** would make for a home-run film adaptation. Much like the morose to the point of humor *Shadow Hunters* films from his same pen, this aggressively dark and severe tale lacks what made *Lone Wolf & Cub* so endearing — the human relationship (father and son) in the middle of the bloodbath.

Taking place post-warring states period, a time when legend has it ninja were re-purposed as secret police and undercover peacemakers, a squad of youngsters is trained in vicious martial arts and other Spartan-like forms of human cruelty. Graduation means killing your teachers, and your reward is a suicide mission.

The myriad oniwaban and onmitsu movie and TV shows all grew out of the 60s ninja boom, just as those historical forces adapted out of feudal era shinobi. This movie is typical ninja-fare in plot, but with that 1970s gore, rapey-ness and cynicism in droves.

- Uncomfortably exploitive as far as cheap sleaze
- Great masks with crazy flowing hair





FEMALE NINJA MAGIC

1964

(aka Female Ninja, orig. *Kunoichi Ninpo*)



SURREAL NINJA EROTICISM FROM THE MIND OF FUTARO YAMADA, THE WRITER OF *NINJA WARS*

While the ghosts of the recently-defeated Sanada Yukimura and Sarutobi Sasuke observe and narrate, five female ninja magicians, particularly skilled in seductive spell-casting, try to corrupt the path of feudal ascension by bedding their clan's conqueror and infiltrating his lineage with the resulting offspring. A squad of snarky anti-kunoichi men are assigned to stop them, and whole ton of passive-aggressive misogyny ensues.

This head-scratching debut from director **Sadao Nakajima**, better known for yakuza fare, promises more eroticism than it delivers, is higher on abstract arthouse craft than would seem necessary, and is in all honesty... *dull...*, just not knowing what genre it wants to be. The set-bound production is nifty though, and a cast that's a who's-who of oft-nekkid genre regulars might make this curiosity worth your time. As a studio, Toei wasn't the flesh-peddler that Nikkatsu would become soon after, but this movie is the probably the start of the kunoichi-sploitation sub-genre that would range into Pinky Violence, Groper Train and other smut channels in subsequent decades.

- Remade as the “Lady Ninja” soft-porn series in the early 90s
- Rarely-filmed ninja magic like intra-womb baby transference and gender swapping abound



FEMALE NINJA: In Bed With the Enemy

1976

(aka Lady Ninja: Suicide Door, orig. *Kunoichi Ninpo: Kannon Biraki*)



TEN YEARS LATER, TOEI FINALLY GOT IT RIGHT AND MADE NAUGHTY NINJA-GIRLS VIOLENT AND FUN

A trio of short-sword-wielding ninja girls, as skilled in the bedroom as they are in the dojo, are tasked with retrieving stolen gold. Male rivals, ninja hunters and slain shinobi love interests hinder their every move, but once the full might of their nudity is unleashed in a cloudy nether-realm right out of the 50s wizard era, deadly soap bubbles and psychedelic snow prevail.

This movie takes the nature of films like *Demon Spies* and *Shadow Hunters* a step further into outright exploitation, but also retains the grim and gritty violence of the era. There's plenty of sexual martial arts and seductive hypnosis, topless combat and up-skirt photography. The ladies aren't exactly Shintaro Katsu or Tomisaburo Wakayama with the swordplay, but neither of those two looked as good executing a flying leg-scissor to the face.

- As much serious action and blood as there is softcore smut and tongue-in cheek perv
- “Kannon Biraki” is a meat-flaying technique in the kitchen, and a sternum-cracking karate kill, but it’s a whole different sort of finishing move for a female ninja...





THE GOLDEN NINJA

1966

(*Boken Daikatsugeki Ougon no Touzoku*
rough trans: “Great Adventure Film: The Gold Thieves”)



NO... NOT “THE GOLDEN NINJA WARRIOR”

A tragically misleading title from a gray-market vendor maybe looking to hide the buddy-comedy nature of this film, *The Golden Ninja* is actually about two children who, after the battle of Sekigahara, witness defeated Toyotomi samurai hide the clan’s great treasure. Twenty years later, the pair — played by the A-list duo of **Hiroki Matsukata** and “Shintaro the Samurai” himself **Koichi Ose** — are convicted thieves who upon release from jail are followed by myriad greedy parties still seeking the gold. These include a crafty kunoichi pretending to be blind, some pissed-off warrior monks, a squad of shinobi (in all of *one* scene), and pretty much no one else is who they seem either...

Stylish, with a jazzy Bond/Flint-like score and a memorable dream sequence, the star power alone — particularly in comedy roles we’re not used to seeing them in — is *maybe* enough to make this worthwhile, if you don’t mind olde-timey wacky comedies...

- Of interest to you Australian fans of *The Samurai*
- Like a jidai-geki version of a Martin/Lewis film from the 60s with some Matt Helm swagger

HENSHIN NINJA ARASHI

1972-73

(two-season TV series with concurrent manga)

BIRD-ARMORED NINJA BATTLES A CLAN OF MONSTERS IN FEUDAL JAPAN

After a decade of grim and gritty espionage in cinemas, the biggest ninja properties of the 1970s, inspired by *Masked Ninja Akakage*, would embrace garish, colorful costumes and outré creatures for wildly popular kids television. Genuinely creepy as a manga, the TV version of this property was more tame and jaunty.

Avenging his slain father, ninja Hayate and sidekicks battle the Blood Wheel clan and a cadre of monsters inspired by a worldwide array of sources — mummies, wolfmen, vampires, Greek mythology, you name it... I myself could never figure out if the transformed hero was actually a human/bird hybrid or just a dude in magical costuming that's part kendo gear, part sports mascot. Either way, this series is fun as hell and loaded with insane character designs.

- Created by Shotaro Ishinomori of *Kamen Rider* fame
- One of the most beloved tokusatsu of all time, especially in terms of merchandise
- Another ninja role for Maki 'Tonbei the Mist' Fuyukichi

JIRAIYA THE BRAVE

(*Goketsu Jiraiya*)

1921



ONE OF THE ONLY SURVIVORS OF JAPAN'S SHINOBI-LITTERED SILENT ERA

The tale of heroic swordsman/black-magician Jiraiya battling the evil corrupter of the sorcerers' art Orochimaru dates back to proto-pulp literature of the early 1800s and has been adapted into every popular media form since — kids books, kabuki theater, film and TV at least once a decade, anime, manga and video games. This miraculously intact 1921 silent version ran the gauntlet of fires, earthquakes, bombings in WWII and the general attrition of time and neglect... and thank heavens.

You won't see black hoods or climbing claws or star-shuriken here, but this set of magic skills — transformations into monsters, manipulation of the weather, teleportation and invisibility etc. defined fictional ninjutsu for entire eras before the 60s cemented them as martial spies in black. It's amazing we can enjoy both.

- If you like *Torawakamaru*, *Magic Serpent* and *The Red Shadow*, this is their ancient ancestor
- [Insight into the ninja-filled but tragically lost silent era of Japanese cinema can be found here](#)
- [You can watch this rare treasure on YouTube!](#)

KABAMARU THE NINJA BOY

1983

(Iga no Kabamaru)



A LIVE-ACTION ADAPTATION OF A COMEDY MANGA AND ANIME, WITH STUNTS GALORE

After his abusive grandfather/sensei dies, mountain-bumpkin ninja Kabamaru hits modern day Tokyo with tons of shadow skills but zero knowledge of society or culture, and a serious love of yakisoba. Enrolling in a high-school run by an old flame of his grandad's, he goes through the usual fish-out-of-water rituals to finally endear himself to his fellow students via his shinobi skills.

This property was a hit manga and anime at the same time as this film, and I'm guessing it's the least effective of the versions. But there's an insane array of Japan Action Club stunts (and endangered stuntmen) like running up waterfalls and diving off high towers onto air bags as intramural sport. Too wacky for its own good, loaded with subtle linguistic jokes we who don't speak the language will never get, there's still a lot of weirdness and physical dynamite to make this more than watchable.

- Most of the *Ninja Wars* cast is re-purposed here, including Hiroyuki Sanada and Sonny Chiba
- If you liked the 2004 *Ninja Hattori-Kun* live-action movie this version is a spiritual ancestor



KAGEMARU OF IGA

(Iga no Kagemaru)

1963

A PANEL-TO-SCREEN ADAPTATION FROM THE CREATOR OF *TETSUJIN* AND *GIANT ROBOT*

The 80s ninja boom went to hell when it became all about the kids, but in Japan a young audience was the bedrock of the genre from the onset. **Mitsuteru Yokoyama's** mega-hit manga, running from 1961-66, mixed previous tropes of the plucky boy hero and blurred lines between martial arts and outright magic/superpowers with the burgeoning aesthetic shift to the black suit commando/spy era. The movie adaptation is enthusiastically loyal to the source illustrations in costuming and character portrayals, and achieves a tone that's for kids but then suddenly violent and editorially complex in ways you often see in the best manga.

From the same core story as *Shinobi no Mono*, Tokugawa Ieyasu needs the help of a here benign Momochi Sandayu to gain the throne, and his rivals send an outré band of Koga thugs to trash the heroes of Iga. **Hiroki Matsukata**, right in the middle of several other adult-audience ninja projects, bounces around superbly as the young hero, and the rogues gallery of villains are just great.

- Similar in execution to *Watari the Ninja Boy*
- Mixes manga, anime and live action superbly



KAIKETSU LION MARU/ FUUN LION MARU

1972-73

(aka Ultralion, Lion Man, “Magic of the Ninja”)



THE SECOND BIG TOKUSATSU/NINJA SHOW OF THE 1970S, PERHAPS THE MOST ICONIC

Three shinobi-skilled orphans wander feudal Japan looking for wrongs to right, constantly assailed by skull-masked ninja minions and a sponge-suited monster-of-the-week. Luckily the trio’s leader has a magic sword that transforms him into a horrible sports team cheerleader mascot— er... I mean... anthropomorphized swashbuckling warrior-cat. Yeah, that. Formulaic hijinks ensue.

Running for only two years but forever entrenched in generations of hearts, Lion Maru is one of the most iconic of the transforming heroes of the day, and he probably had the best theme song of any of them. For the non-Furries, acrobatic and short-skirted sword-girl Saori and the awesome Dokuro skull-ninja are worth the price of admission alone. In fact, I love this whole show... except for the title character. Godfrey Ho could have stolen this for IFD/Filmmark and dubbed it “Ninja Chronicles of Narnia.”

- **There was a short-lived but well-designed reboot in 2006 that took itself way too seriously**
- **Again, the villains and monsters carry the show**



LONE WOLF & CUB

1972-80

(6-film series / 3-season TV series, orig. *Kozure Okami*
aka Shogun Assassin, Lightning Swords of Death)

**Y'KNOW WHERE'S A BAAAAAD PLACE TO BE A NINJA?
A *LONE WOLF & CUB* MOVIE.
YOU ARE JUST NOT GETTING OUT OF THAT SHIT ALIVE...**

This mega-property needs no introduction here, but instead I wanted to give credit where credit is due for how this chambara series introduced a lot of the world to the *Japanese studio version of ninja* long before any outright Japanese ninja films made it to foreign shores.

At the same time as Cannon's original ninja trilogy, *Ninja* magazine and the Asian World mail order catalogs were forging a rather modern Americanized version of ninja, the availability of the composited (and *superbly* synth-scored) *Shogun Assassin* and *Lightning Swords of Death* showed us a proper period-set look and feel for the idiom. The TV series aired on Spanish-language cable all throughout the 80s as well, and just these three examples of the original context of the black hooded set were enough to inspire further discovery.

In bitter irony, as the boom waned, the manga finally made it into translation, alongside *Kamui: A Ninja Story* and the 90s would finally see grails like *Shinobi no Mono* hit VHS outside of Japan. So those of us who stuck with it were finally rewarded but it was too late to save our beloved boom. But without the shinobi-slaughter-fest of Ito Ogami's blood-soaked 'Baby Cart' adventures serving as initial notions of the Japanese original product, we may never have gotten there.



1966

MAGIC SERPENT

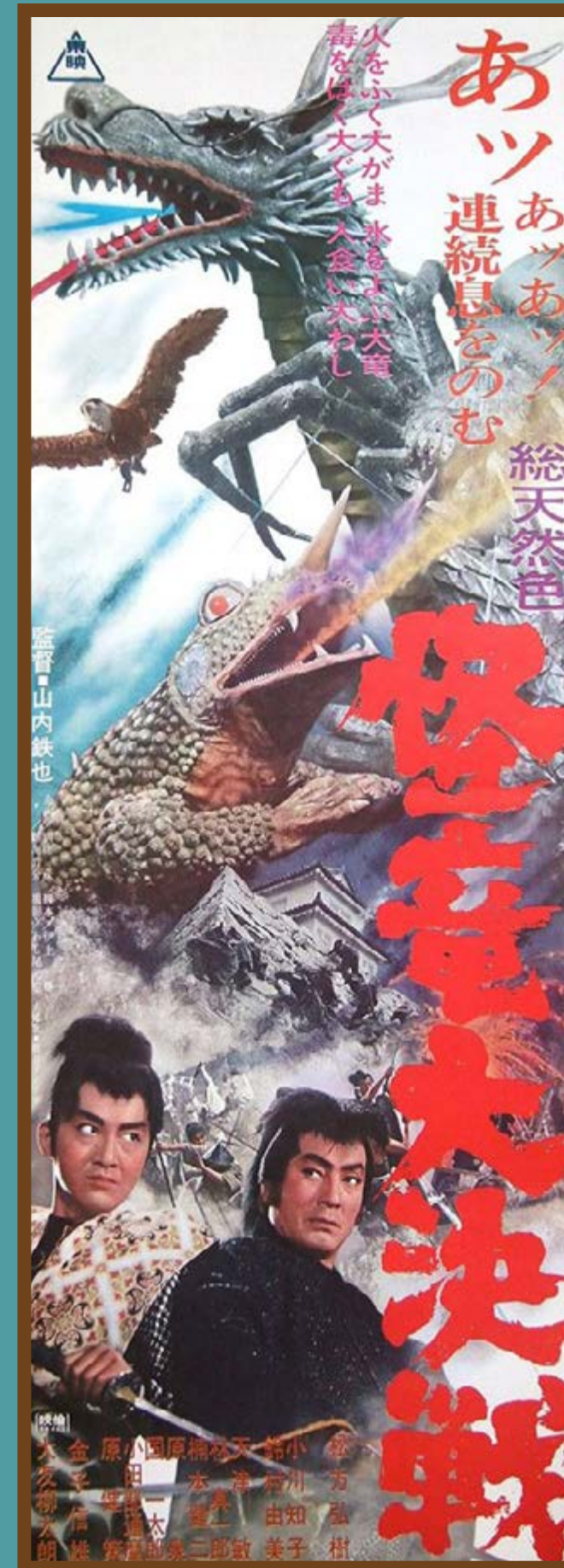
(aka Dragon Showdown, orig. *Kairyu Daikessen*)

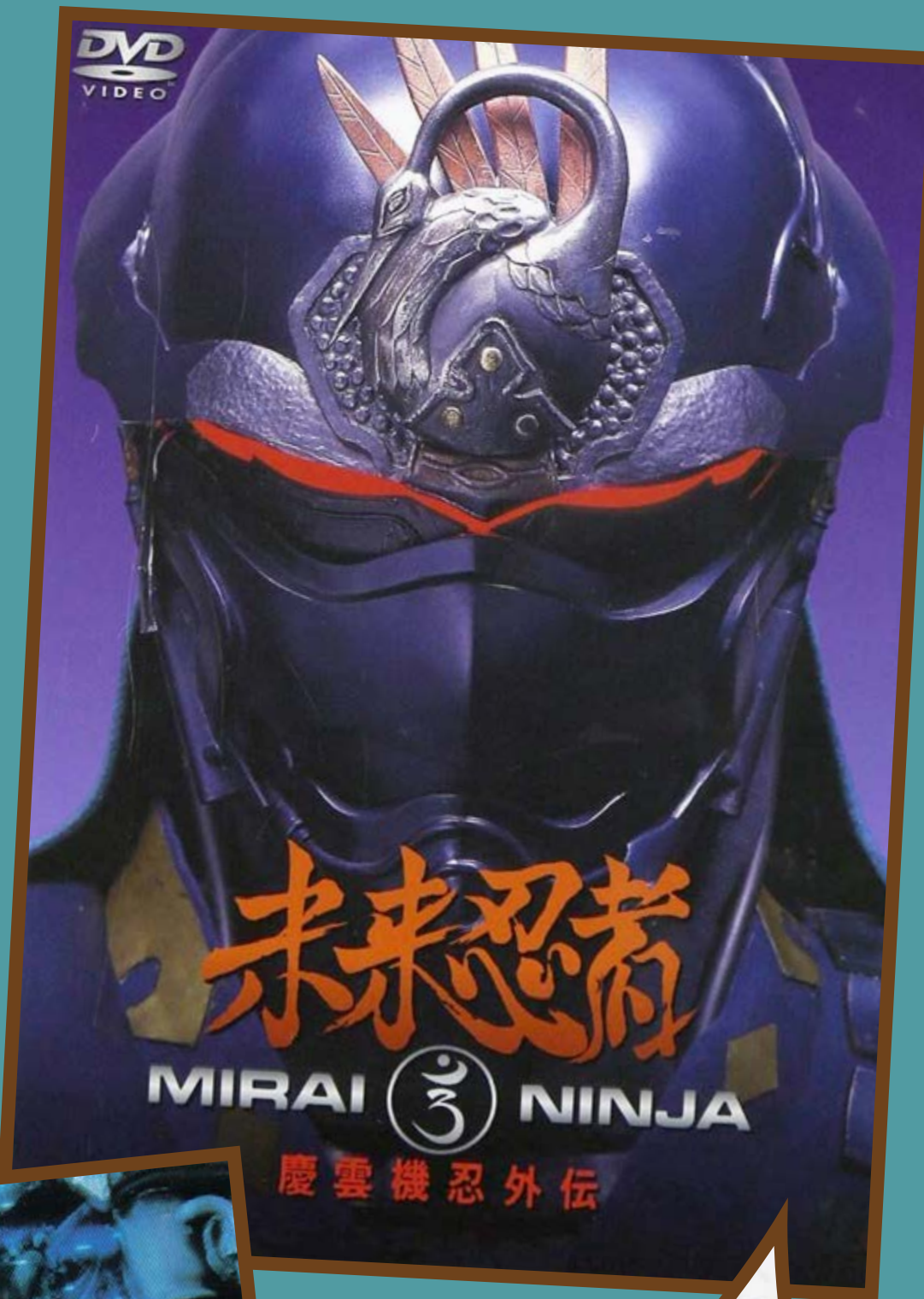
THE KAIJU MOVIE THAT BROUGHT NINJA TO AMERICAN TV A DECADE BEFORE THE CRAZE.

If you were a kid in the 70s glued to UHF TV every time a Godzilla or Gamera flick came on, chances are you were exposed to the ninja-filled *Magic Serpent*. A kaiju-centric re-imagining of ninjedom's oldest rivalry — Jiraiya vs. Orochimaru, adapted to film since the silent era — the traditional ninjutsu black magic and monster transformation skills alongside the clan warfare and Japanese folklore themes went right over the heads of most of us, especially as dubbed by Sandy Frank. But who cared, with giant fire-breathing toads and aquatic dragons crushing castles, huge eagles and spiders AND boomerang-throwing ninja!

Sadly, this is largely a forgotten film, in both kaiju and ninja circles, the only release being as an extra on a late-90s Gamera DVD. The Japanese original has fared better in fan-sub communities.

- Ancient myth and folklore meets 60s rubber suit FX
- Shockingly violent early ninja fight sees our hero Hiroki Matsukata temporarily decapitated!
- [Read the full VN write-up here](#)





MIRAI NINJA

1988

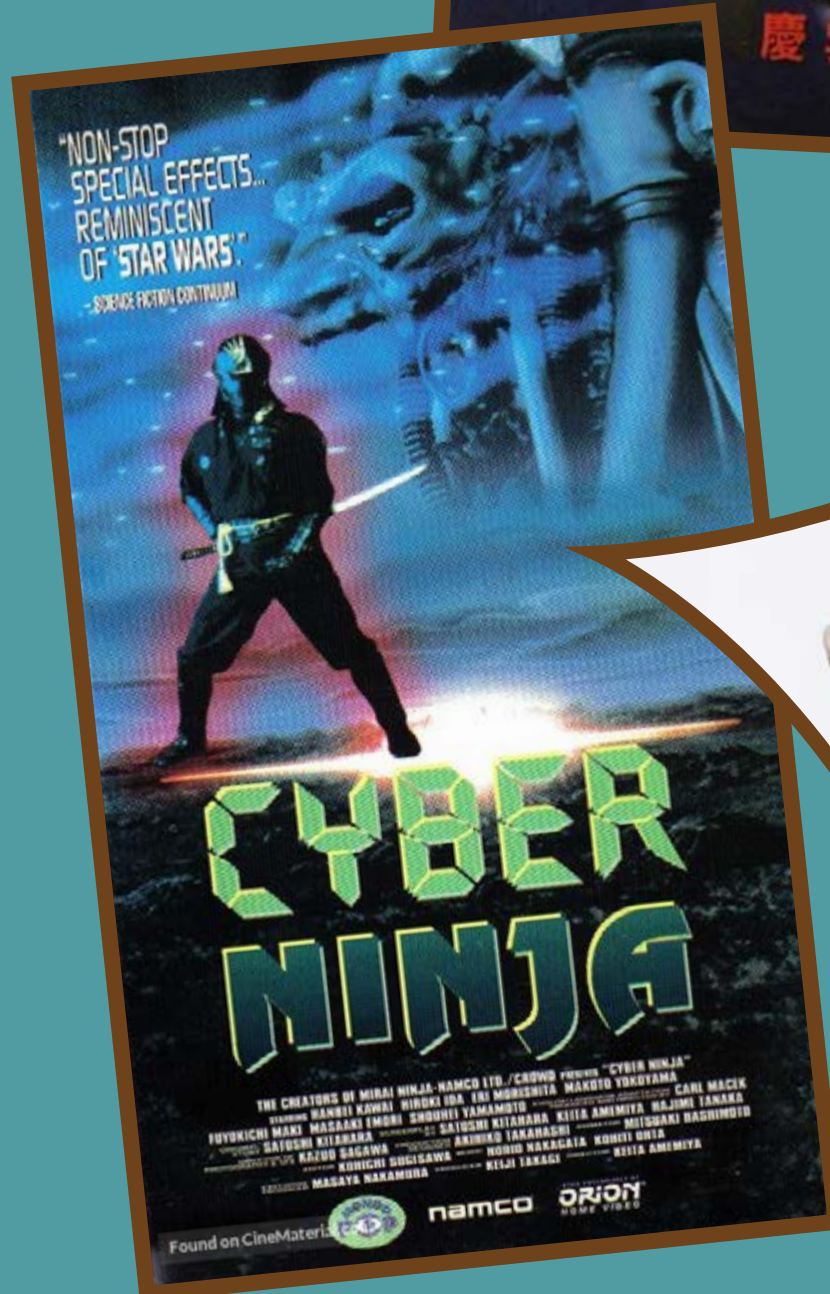
(aka Cyber Ninja, Warlord, Robo Ninja,
orig. *Mirai Ninja: Keigumo Kinin Gaiden*)

FUTURISTIC YET NOSTALGIC NINJA-NESS FROM THE MIND BEHIND *ZIERAM*

Keita Amemiya was ahead of his time in a lot of ways, fully comfortable integrating the silos of cinema, anime, tokusatsu television and video game development all at once. And with all things Keita, *character design* is the spiritual core of the project.

When feudal Japan is invaded by cyborg ninja, a warrior sets out to avenge his fallen brother, only to learn said sibling has become a heroic cyborg himself, desperately trying to get his human body back. Large scale samurai battles, squads of bizarre robo-shinobi and even castles that transform into battle-bots — the sorts of things considered by most to be unattainable in live-action, forcing properties into the animated or kids TV realms — were tackled with a confident matter-of-course-ness here, and the results are a very future-thinking film that sometimes looks like an old episode of *Akakage* or *Jiraiya*, other times like a ninja movie designed by H.R. Giger. And did I mention the amazing *character design*?

- This would be Maki 'Tonbei the Mist' Fuyukichi's final role in a ninja film



MISSION IRON CASTLE

1970

(aka *Shinobi no Mono 9*, *Shinobi no Shu*)

THE ATTEMPT TO REBOOT *SHINOBI NO MONO* ACTUALLY BOOKENDED THE 60'S ERA

If I had to put one single movie in a time capsule to represent the dark and often fatalistic 60's era of shinobi-cinema, this just might be it. Ironically, this is also a long-obscure, reportedly not well received, and ill-advised attempt by Daiei to reboot the *Shinobi no Mono* series a year after franchise star Raizo Ichikawa's premature death, coming just a year before the downfall of the studio itself. But man, did the swinging ninja 60's go out with a bang!

Hiroki Matsukata leads of team of shadow elites, with varying motivations, to rescue a kidnapped noblewoman from a heavily fortified and very much ninja-proofed castle. Commando skills, and core values of clan duty and the ninja life, are tested equally by this house of traps in a phenomenal punctuation of the era.

- One of the single finest examples of 60s ninja-eiga, positively perfect in its sheer ninja-ness
- Be warned, one of the most downer endings ever
- Wall-to-wall black hoods and shadow technique, but also dabbles in mystical mind control, too





MOONSHADOW NINJA SCROLL: TWENTY-ONE EYES

1963

(*Tsukikage Ninpo-Cho: Nijuichi no Me*)



A DEAD-SERIOUS SPY DRAMA MORE IN THE TONE OF *TINKER, TAILOR, SOLDIER, SPY* THAN JAMES BOND

Because of how the 1980s ninja boom unfolded, we associate ninja movies with *martial arts* films, but a more accurate picture of the 1960s Japanese output would be spy thrillers and class-struggle dramas peppered with *military arts* and arcane black magic for flavor. Some of them are actioners, like a Bond movie, but others leave the action behind for games of human chess, and this particular game is played in the dark...

As a cover for larger-scale political moves, evil ninja terrorize the city, until a shadow-skilled samurai recruits a team of more benign shinobi to burn them out. Light on costuming tropes and heavier on info-gathering and subterfuge — *y'know, real spying* — this is probably what the whole ninja thing actually looked like back in the day. Tiny blowguns, iron-knuckles, incendiary distractions — the most discreet of 'dirty weapons' abound — until the black suits come out for a brutal climactic showdown.

- **Hair-raising napalm fight on river gondolas is one of the most unique in the entire genre**
- **All-star cast includes Hiroki Matsukata, his pop Jushiro Konoe and Satomi Kotaro**



NINJA BUGEICHO

1967

(aka Tales of the Ninja, Band of Ninja, Manual of Ninja Martial Arts)

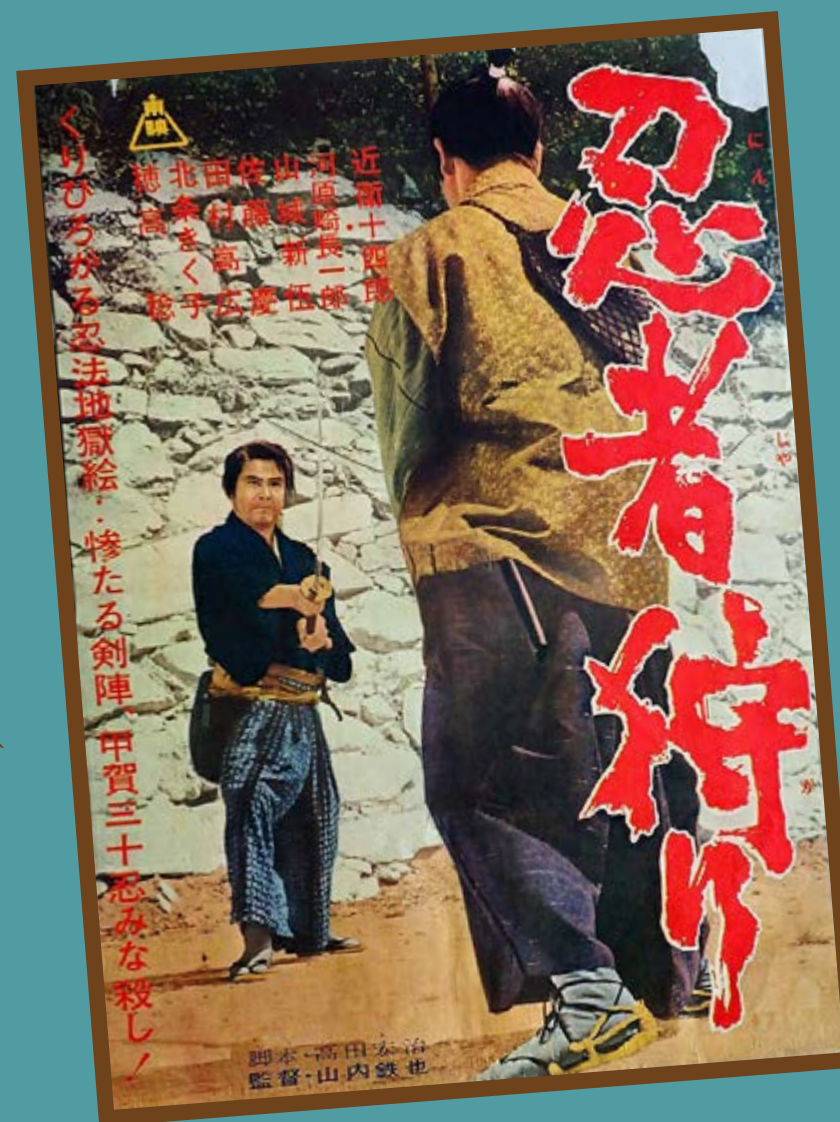
SOMETIMES AN OBSCURE FILM IS OBSCURE FOR A REASON...

Nagisa Oshima, the controversial director responsible for *In the Realm of the Senses* and *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence* among other eye-raisers, broke ground with what would later be known as “motion comics” with this film, constructed entirely by camera motions over illustrated panel art from **Shirato Sanpei's** manga epic of the same name. The effectiveness of the results is debatable. Even the studio didn't know what to do with this experimental oddity, as evidenced by the movie poster at left.

While your mileage with such may vary (I have a hard time getting through it myself) *Ninja Bugeicho* presents one of if not the most historically significant ninja manga ever, condensed into a watchable form, and is worth exploring for that alone. I guess...

There are two versions of this work that screen (seldomly) around the world — a shortened cut with spoken English narration (likely derived from arthouse prints that toured back in the day) and a full-length print in the original language with subtitles.

- While the film is challenging, the source art is genius
- [As of this writing the entire film is up on YouTube](#)



THE NINJA HUNT

1964

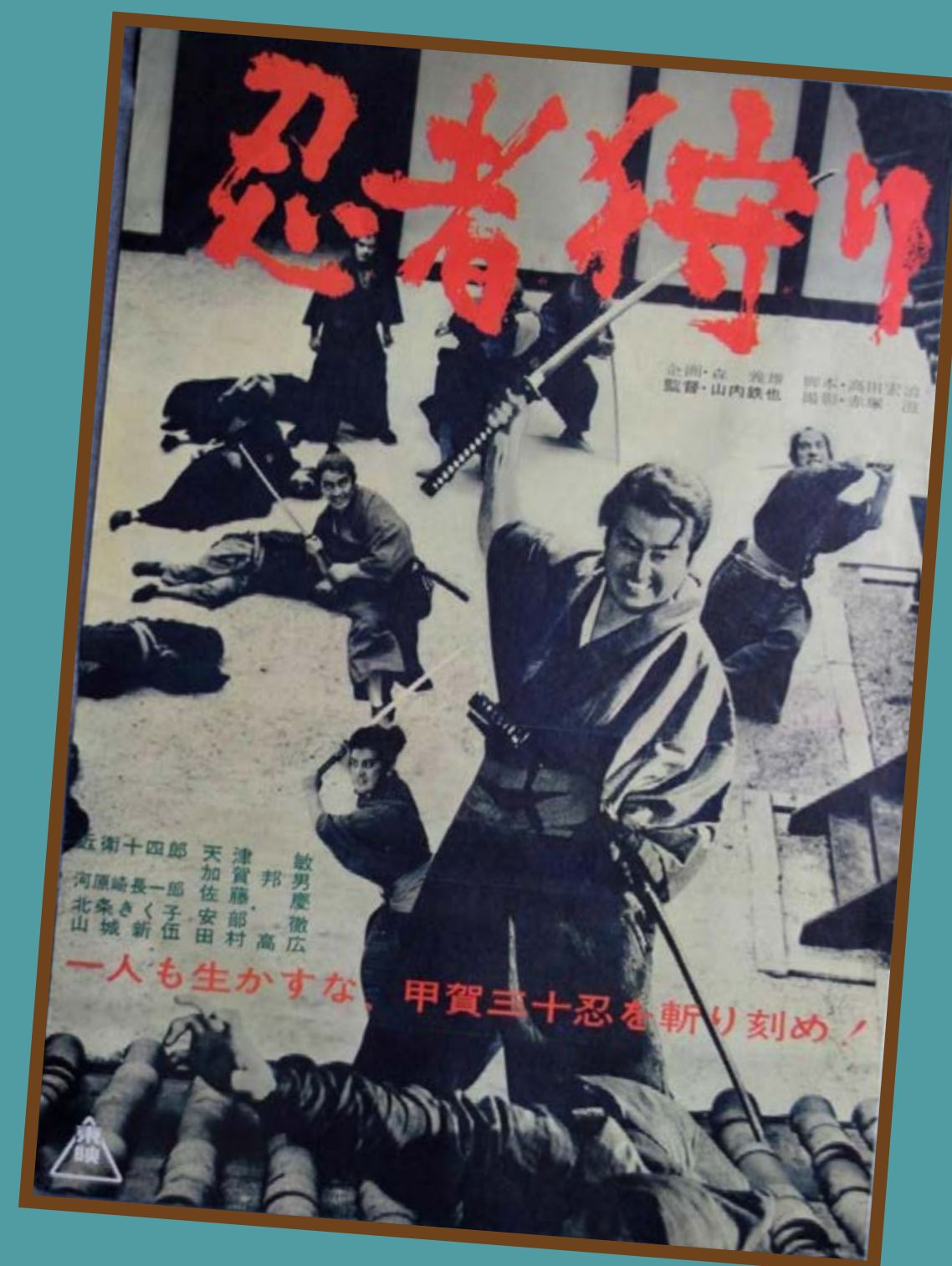
(*Ninja Gari*)

ANTI-NINJA RONIN VS. KOGA COMMANDOS IN A BRUTAL WAR OF ATTRITION

The Gamo clan is in deep caca with the Tokugawa for their fealty to the Toyotomi, and elite Koga ninja are sent in for the killing blow. In a daring counter-measure, the Gamo hire four ronin — each the survivor of a clan destroyed by ninja — as experts in what needs to be done to survive. Their defensive tactics may be just as inhumane as the evil ninja descending on them.

Jushiro Konoe takes time off from playing Jubei in the *Yagyu Bugeicho* series to lead the ronin squad against the ace ninja Kurando in what is perhaps the most severe and brutal of the already dark and gritty 60s shinobi-cinema. The final showdown in the bowels of the mansion is absolutely grisly, Konoe enduring cringe-worthy punishment in a desperate attempt to complete his task. It's also one of the best-shot sequences of the entire genre under expert direction from **Tetsuya Yamauchi**.

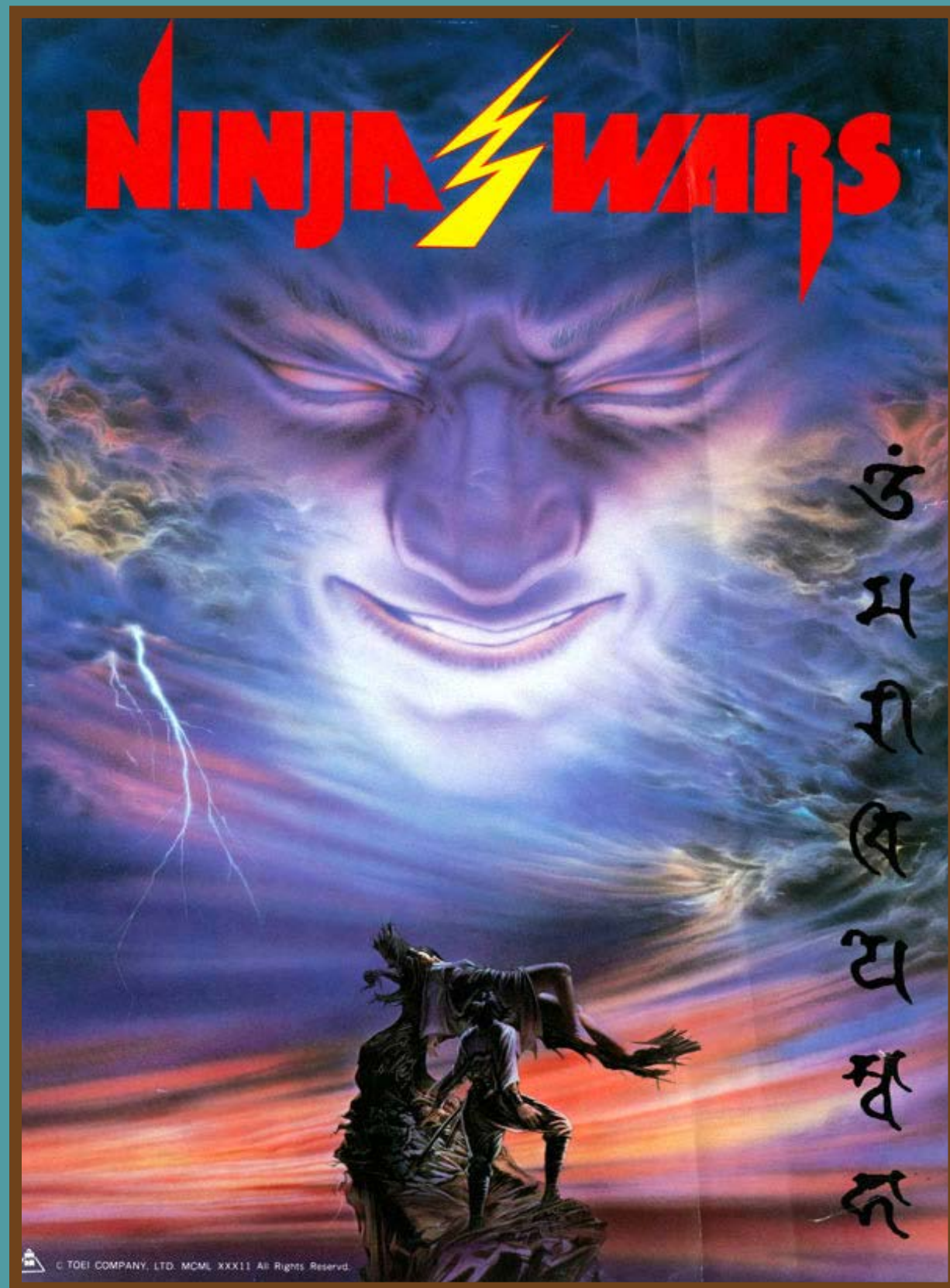
- **Kurando's needle-spitting to the eyes gag must have inspired Sho Kosugi in *Revenge of the Ninja***
- **Also seek out the excellent 1982 TV remake by the same director with Konoe's son Hiroki Matsukata**



1982

NINJA WARS

(aka Death of a Ninja, orig. *Iga Ninpocho*)



THAT WEIRD-ASS STAPLE OF 80S CABLE WITH THE DECAPITATED NEKKID GALS AND THE ACID-GLUE NINJA BARF...

Long before *Ringu*, *The Last Samurai* or the most recent *Mortal Kombat* film, **Hiroyuki 'Henry' Sanada** became a fave of ours with cable/video store staples like *Legend of the Eight Samurai*, *Shogun's Ninja* and this surreal epic, hastily retitled to nibble off *Star Wars*, as the hero has mastered... *laser-karate*?

The convoluted tale sees an evil sorcerer manipulate a warlord with magic teapots, aphrodisiacs and decapitated women with heads reattached to each others' bodies. Then there's five devil monks each with a specialty super-power more bizarre than the next and **Sonny Chiba** pimped-out in black finery right off the set of *Kage no Gundan*. Historical events (the burning of the Todai-Ji Buddha in 1567) flow into trips to stormy other-realms and even Japanese Hell where pop-star heroines get burned at the cross *and yeah I've seen this dozens of times over the past 30 years and I still have no clue what's going on...*

- Light on black hoods, heavy on WTF, beautiful to watch
- Gets awfully rapey and is not kind to its female cast...
- [Check out a vintage press book here](#)

1968

NINJA'S MARK: The Secret of the Fylfot

(*Shinobi no Manji*)



SHOGUN IEMITSU CAN'T GET IT UP!

One of the three ninja clans serving as internal security within Edo Castle is sabotaging the lord's every attempt to sire an heir, and it's up to a roguish loose-cannon anti-shinobi freelancer to get to the bottom of it all. Armed with a sword that vibrates whenever a ninja power is used, he's knee-deep in Iga, Koga and Negoro ninja — both male and female — and assailed by outré shadow skills like body swapping, poison blood rays, and transforming courtesans into half-fish-women. And when he meets his match in the form of whip-wielding kunoichi femme-fatale, a deadly romance blooms.

'Pinky Violence' legend **Noribumi Suzuki** delicately balances tongue-in-cheek eroticism and sublime (if not silly) ninja mysticism with more grounded fight choreography and some grisly kills. Gorgeous set-bound cinematography and a haunting orchestral score surround a cast of quirky, engaging characters and a plot based on a novel by prolific ninja scribe **Futaro Yamada** (*Makai Tensho, Ninja Wars*).

- 'Fylfot' and 'manji' are variations of swastickas used globally for centuries from Buddhists to Aztecs, but sadly morons (and eBay) confuse with a Nazi symbol

NINJA'S WEAPON

1956

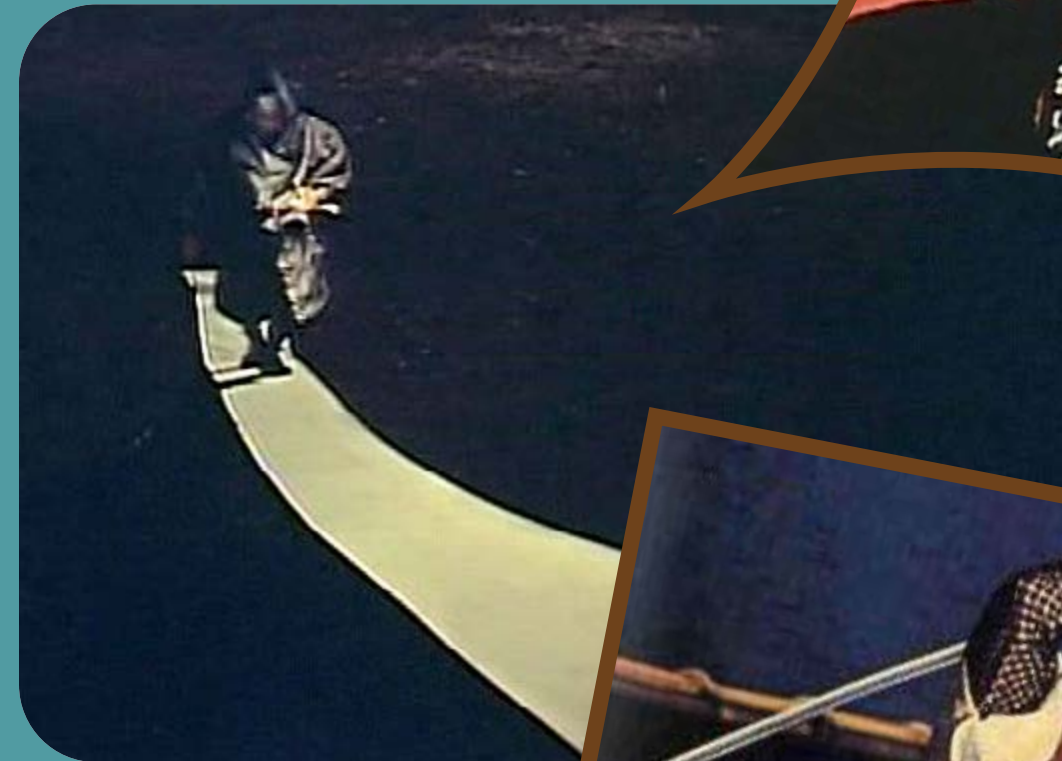
(aka Palace of Snakes, orig. *Yoja no Maden*)

A TEXTBOOK EXAMPLE OF THE PRE-60S NINJUTSU SORCERER-SAMURAI FILM

Just as a betrayed lord and his family are about to be executed by an evil clan rival, toads vanguard the arrival of an old ninjutsu wizard. Summoning a storm, he manages to whisk off their son to safety, and for the next ten years trains him in the magical ninja arts for the eventual day of revenge. On the hero's road to vengeance there's clan intrigue, a samurai woman with some tricks up her sleeve, a rival mercenary sorcerer, and a final duel in a nether-realm with a fire-breathing snake — y'know... *the classics*. There's also good hard-hitting swordplay throughout.

Plenty of mystical arts on display here — using an unfurled scroll as a bridge, literal invisibility, transforming into a smoke cloud, spider-web-fu — the sorts of things presented as pure magic but in later decades explained by practical commando techniques and subterfuge. The costuming is particularly strong here, with lushly metallic sheens in gorgeous mixed hues, very kabuki theater-like.

- **Flame-spewing giant snake alert!**
- **No black suits but plenty of black magic**



ONMITSU DOSHIN: THE EDO SECRET POLICE / OEDO SOSAMO

(aka 'Edo Dragnet' / 'Edo Untouchables')

1972-1990



18 YEARS OF FEUDAL ERA POLICE WORK WITH A DISTINCT NINJA FLARE

Airing on weekly TV from 1972-1990, this juggernaut of a show featured a team of specialized fighters secretly working for a government official, orchestrating justice from the shadows. With a changing line-up not unlike the TV version of *Mission: Impossible*, there was always an outright shinobi-skilled member, the original of which was *Female Convict Scorpion* herself **Meiko Kaji**!

Celebrating the 400th episode in 1979, a stand-alone film was aired with a heavy-caliber cast including **Toshiro Mifune** and **Hiroki Matsukata**. It's a damn fine adventure centered on the mystery of a massacred village and an heir to the Shogun who doesn't want the mantle. Another '79 special starred **Etsuko Shihomi**. This show and rival *Edo o Kiru* just ran forever — the quality of cast, drama and movie-quality action driving that success.

- 1971-2 seasons launched Meiko Kaji into franchises like *Lady Snowblood* and *Wandering Giza Butterfly*
- See also the equally long-running ninja-adjacent series *Edo o Kiru*

THE RED SHADOW

1961

(*Akai Kageboshi*)

TREASURE HUNTS, JUBEI, HANZO, TATTED-UP SPY MOMS, AND NINJA COUTURE GALORE!

The notorious sword bandit known as The Red Shadow has some problems — he doesn't know who his father is, his bitter ninja-mom is obsessed with finding a lost treasure, and Jubei Yagyu and Hattori Hanzo want him dead. And he just fell in love...

Superb jidai-geki hijinks ensue, with Shadow dodging expert long-swords and crafty shuriken alike, all while modeling a superb array of colorful ninja suits that are absolutely to die for!

While retaining the glam fashion sense of the swashbuckling ninjutsu wizard era, this is a grounded ninja drama with credible skills on hand. It's also a great example of ace samurai fencers being nothing a ninja wants to go sword-to-sword against ever.

- There's a nifty budo tournament at the center of all the intrigue, akin to another highly recommended Japanese tourney film *Festival of Swordsmen*
- Potentially the deadliest love triangle ever!
- Not to be confused with the tokusatsu TV series...
- [VN's multi-part analysis of the film is here](#)





THE RED SHADOW

1967-68

(orig. *Kamen no Ninja Akakage*, aka Red Ninja, plus composited English dubbed films: *The Magic Sword of Watari*, *Watari and the Fantasticks*, *Watari the Conqueror*, *Watari and the Seven Monsters*, *Ninja Scope* and myriad others...)



NINJA-VS-KAIJU MAYHEM FROM THE MIND BEHIND *TETSUJIN-28* AND *GIANT ROBO*

Mitsuteru Yokoyama's ground-breaking and multi-adapted ninja property was every Japanese kid's genre-hybrid dream come true — ninja heroes with magical powers equal to their martial arts skills fighting the giant sponge-suited monster-of-the-week. This show set the precedent for where the ninja genre found its most success in the post black & white gritty 60s — Saturday morning kid's television — inspiring shows like *Kaiketsu Lion Maru* and *Henshin Ninja Arashi*.

The Red Shadow is more superhero than shinobi, honestly, but his ninja roots are strong. His kiddie sidekick Blue Shadow is an annoying pain in the ass, but his other ninja pal White Shadow is played by Tonbei the Mist himself, **Maki Fuyukichi**, so all you Australian 'Shintaro' fans take note. The villainous wizards and evil monster ladies they face week-to-week are amazing, as are the kaiju designs.

The property was relaunched as a more serious anime in 1987, and a light-hearted live action film in 2001 during a wave of digital-effects heavy ninja remakes/reboots.

- **Not to be confused with *Akai Kageboshi* or *Watari the Ninja Boy***
- [VN's two-part look at the monster designs begins here](#)



RENEGADE NINJAS

(aka Shogun Assassins, orig. *Sanada Yukimura no Bouryaku*)

1979

A SHINOBI-FIED 'SANADA BRAVES' REMAKE

At the height of the 80s ninja boom, when the best of Japan's ninja media was never exported, we got weird stuff like this instead — a retelling of the already challenging 'Sanada Braves' epic made all the more incoherent by bad dubbing and editing-for-television. A vanquished warlord swears revenge from exile and gathers a team of unlikely rogues to undergo ninja training in the quest for the Shogun's head. This tale has been adapted countless times, with magic and monsters, lasers and spaceships, animal transformations and any other genre's tropes instead of ninjutsu.

Hiroki Matsukata elevates the cast, but myriad oddball things like Sarutobi Sasuke portrayed as both a trickster magician and an *actual gorilla* on the battlefield turn this, especially the dubbed version, into a genuine psychotronic experience.

- A staple of 1980s video rental and UHF TV, largely forgotten since...
- Equal amounts martial-exploitation and big battle castle siege, with great red samurai armor to boot
- Unforgettable dubbing, between a stiff narrator and lines like "You are indeed the master of the pickles!"

THE SAMURAI

(ten-season television series, orig. *Onmitsu Kenshi*)

1964-66+



JAPAN'S FIRST MAJOR NINJA EXPORT WAS BIGGER THAN THE BEATLES!

A craze is really a craze when it hits movies and TV at the same time, and in Japan the exploits of the Shinobi no Mono were paralleled at home with ***Onmitsu Kenshi***. A standard jidai-geki lone-swordsman adventure at first, from the second season onward regular ninja characters and inter-clan hooded combat became the norm. The heroic Shogunate operative Shintaro was given a 'Tonto' of sorts in Iga ninja Tonbei the Mist, enthusiastically played by career screen ninja **Maki Fuyukichi**.

When Australian TV dubbed the series into awkward English, the show became a sensation there, and live promo tours with star **Koichi Ose** had bigger airport crowds than The Beatles. Aussie kids were decades ahead of us when it came to playing ninja in the backyard as a result, and the show retains adoring followers to this day.

Ten seasons had two official releases overseas, seasons 3-10 are particularly ninja-rific with Tonbei demonstrating various ninja tools and techniques a regular feature. As the seasons go, the enemy ninja threats get a little silly, with things dragon-shaped submarines introduced, but there is consistent solid ninja action throughout.

- **Two standalone films in Japanese have circulated fan circles for years but with no official release**
- [VN's "Tonbei the Mist Primer" is here](#)
- [Read more at this Australian fan site](#)



SAMURAI SPY

(*Ibun Sarutobi Sasuke*)

1965

THE ARTHOUSE NINJA MOVIE THAT RATED A DVD RELEASE FROM CRITERION

Masahiro Shinoda's unsettling take on one of ninja-dom's most adapted characters — Sarutobi Sasuke — is a clinic in high-brow artistic filmmaking, to the point you almost wonder does the genre really deserve this sort of poetic arthouse treatment?

Sasuke is no leaping monkey or young precocious mountain wizard-in-training here. Rather, he's a high-paranoid spy on the run, followed in the fog, stalked in the shadows. With a serial killer on the loose, two political forces about to go to war, and a white-pilgrim-clad ace ninja on his heels (**Tetsuro Tanba**), Sasuke skirts the fence of loyalty, duty and self, while the shadows, and shuriken, creep in...

- Great music adds to a weird mood, mixing Japanese traditional with woozy jazz elements
- [There is no more visually striking ninja movie](#)
- Considered on the low-end of Shinoda's catalog by samurai cinema fans, but at the top, if not transcendent, of the ninja genre by folks like us



SARUTOBI SASUKE

1958

Senjogadake no Himatsuri

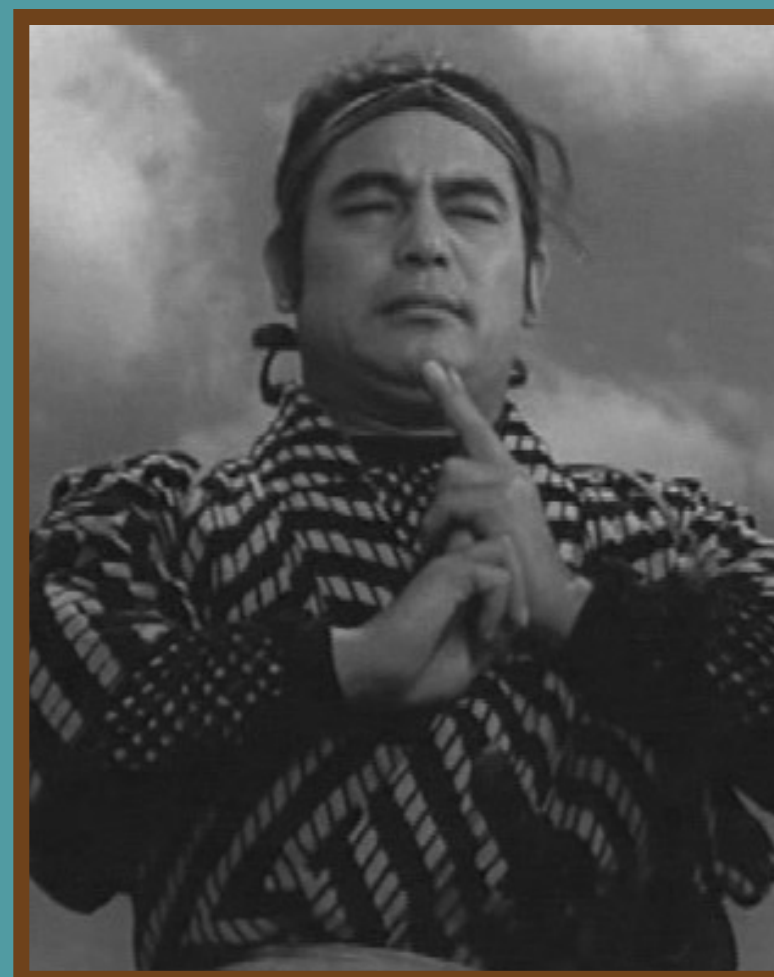
(rough trans: “Sarutobi Sasuke: Fire Festival on Mt. Senjogadake”)

THE BRIDGE FILM BETWEEN SHINOBI WIZARDS AND NINJA COMMANDOS

Years before *Shinobi no Mono* would become the *Dr. No* of the 60s Japanese ninja boom, this Daiei production was like a catfish, able to breathe in two environs — the traditional image of the ninjutsu magic practitioner that dated back centuries, and the black-hooded martial artist spy that would dominate the next decade and be carried over to the worldwide craze in the 1980s.

Here, Sasuke is a mature adult with a grounded skill set, in a love triangle with his village sweetheart and an evil but conflicted kunoichi, while being hounded on castle rooftops by rival ninja. The black-hooded stuff eventually gives way to a magical duel in the clouds, albeit more subdued than previous cinematic versions, but nonetheless this is the movie that mixes both and passes a baton.

- **Both ahead of and behind its times at once**
- **Great female ninja, and shuriken fights in the woods, more famous later in *Castle of Owls***
- [Read the full VN write-up here](#)





SASUKE AND HIS COMEDIANS

(*Sanada Fuunroku*)

1963

SANADA, SASUKE AND HANZO AGAIN, BUT UNLIKE ANY OTHER INTERPRETATION EVER

Endowed with outré powers like invisibility, hypnosis and super-leaping from the radiation of a meteor, a young Sarutobi Sasuke unites with a group of battlefield-scavenging orphans and a dandy European guitar minstrel to fight on the side of a down-and-out Sanda Yukimura against the new Shogunate.

Whimsical to a point where it might be for kids, but also complex, subversive, sardonic and grave (with a downer-as-hell ending), this movie is so quirky and gorgeous you won't care about the wounds you've given yourself scratching your head in bewilderment. Brilliantly set-bound, imaginative in camera trickery and non-traditional in costuming, with ninja battles staged like musical dance numbers right out of *Beach Blanket Bingo*, there's never a predictable moment here.

- In the same ballpark as *Warari the Ninja Boy* but a lot more brutal in content
- Same core tale as *Renegade Ninjas* from Tai Kato, the director of *Warrior of the Wind*



THE SCROLL'S SECRET

1958

(Ninjutsu Suikoden Inazuma Kotengu)



ONE OF THE LAST PURE EXAMPLES OF THE NINJUTSU MAGICIAN FILM BEFORE THE GENRE CHANGED IN THE 1960s

In the early 1500s, a demon-masked wizard haunts the dreams of the shogun and he calls for a legendary magic scroll for protection. Charged with getting it to Kyoto is plucky ninjutsu magician/swashbuckler Umenosuke, who needs every special-effects-laden trick he can muster to fend off a kabuki-like rival wizard, a hunch-backed goblin of a villain and his monster-masked ninja, plus a couple of rather magically endowed kunoichi.

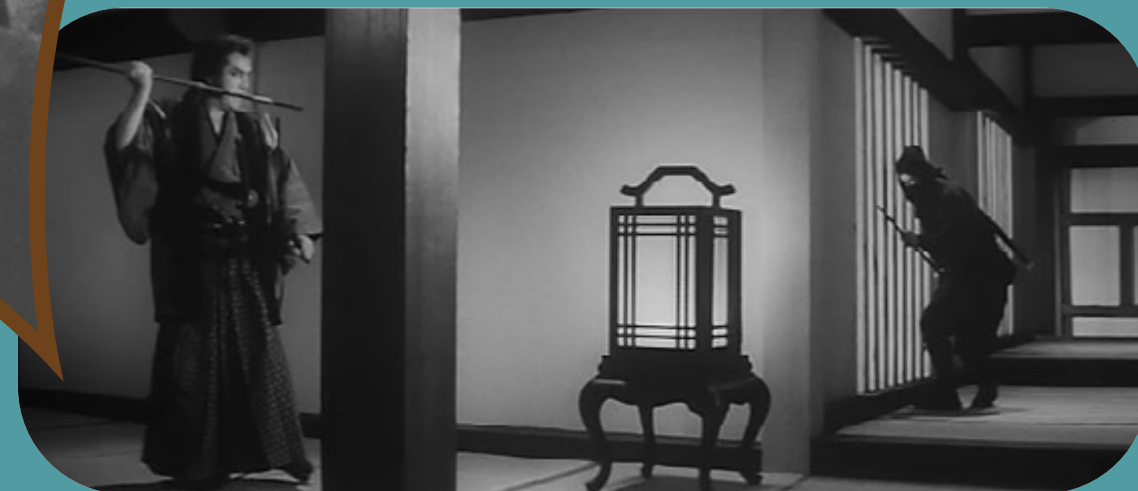
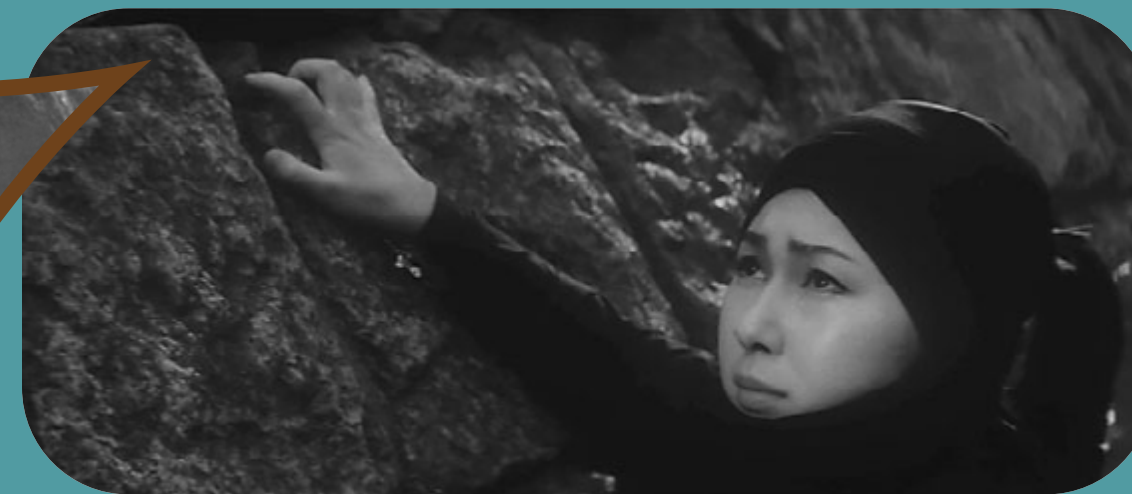
Wizards and giant snakes battling in cloud-realms (aka minimally set-dressed sound-stages drowned in fog, saving the studios a fortune) were typical of this genre, but this film goes next level with eerie nether-landscapes and armies of samurai wiped out by lightning and flames. Prolific 50s chambara star **Chiyonosuke Azuma** really sells the upright magical hero thing. His slapstick sidekicks knock a few points off, but masks, costumes and stage/cinema effects galore more than compensate.

- **Arguably the best of this genre, if you see only one...**

1963 / 1965

SEVENTEEN NINJA / SEVENTEEN NINJA 2: THE GREAT BATTLE

(*Jushichinin no Ninja / Jushichinin no Ninja: Daikessen*)



PEAK 60'S BLACK & WHITE NINJA GOLD!

An all-star cast of **Satomi Kotaro**, **Ryutaro Otomo** and **Jushiro Konoe** play human chess with a roster of ninja, one side trying to maneuver a single spy into the right position to secure a secret scroll (no matter what the cost in lives), the other side a mercenary anti-ninja squad losing the respect of their snooty samurai masters. And yeah, the ninja life sucks and escaping it alive would be nice...

That theme, and the commonly explored notions of 'domestic love will never happen for a shadow' and 'no matter how hard you work for the samurai you'll never be one of them' continue in the sequel. **Hiroki Matsukata** takes over as lead, as rival ninja forces battle over an arsenal of muskets that will tip Japan's political scales.

- First-rate drama and first-rate ninja action in both
- Don't take your eyes off the ladies...
- Can be watched independently, in any order
- First film was remade by Sonny Chiba for TV in 1990
- [VN's write-up of both films is here](#)



SHADOW HUNTERS / ECHO OF DESTINY: SHADOW HUNTERS II

1972

(*Kage Gari / Kage Gari: Hoero Taiho*)



ANTI-NINJA '3 MUSKETEERS' FROM THE MINDS BEHIND *GOLGO 13* AND *STARBLAZERS*

Manga genius **Takao Saito** was one for quiet and dour anti-heroes obsessed with their deadly trades, and his foray into period-set swordplay was no different. Two film adaptations, directed by **Toshio Masuda** of *Space Battleship Yamato* fame, faithfully adapted the books but with a more grim tone. These three ninja-obsessed crusaders are just no fun at parties, their depressing dialog almost comical at times.

There's gore and ninja cannon fodder aplenty over the course of two films, wherein the shinobi hunters hate life, slaughter entire clans of ninja and then hate life again because they're too busy exterminating ninja to have successful love lives. And repeat...

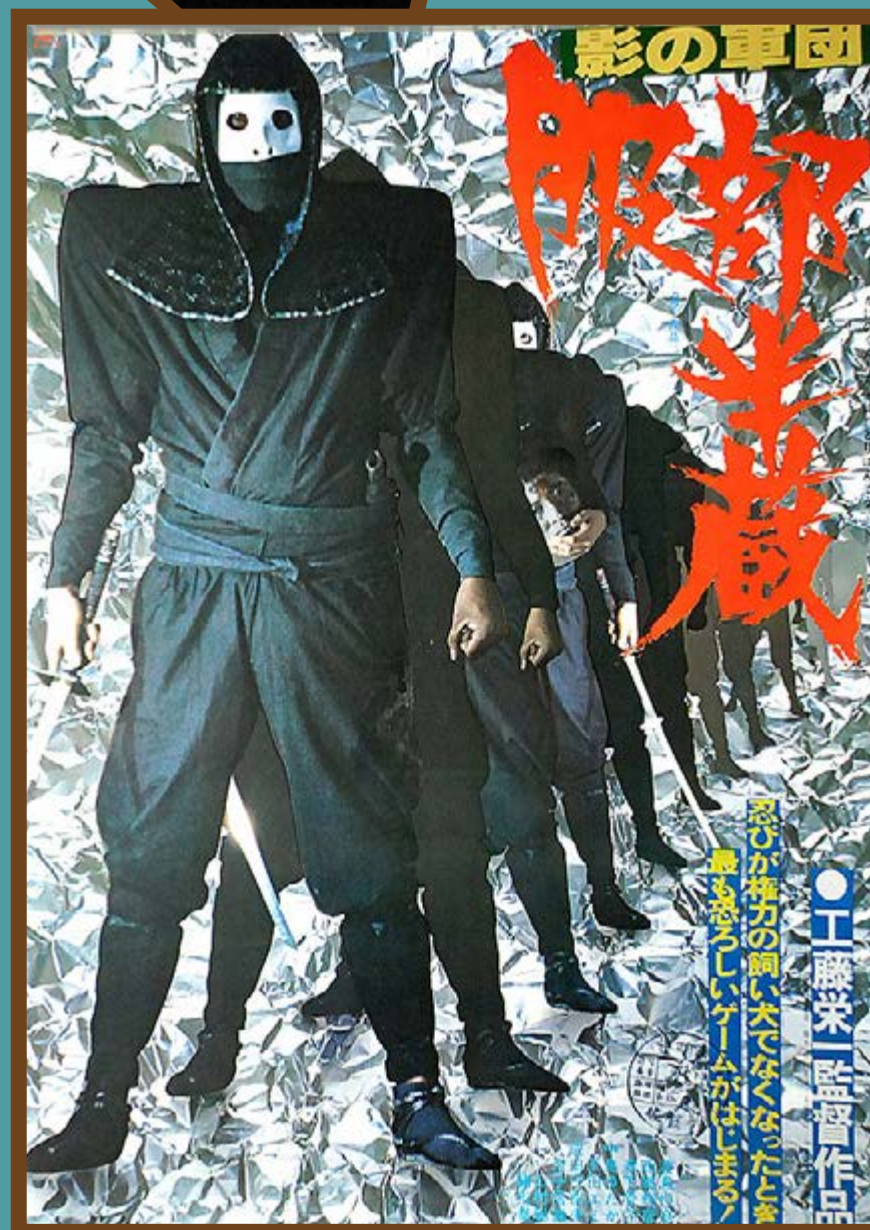
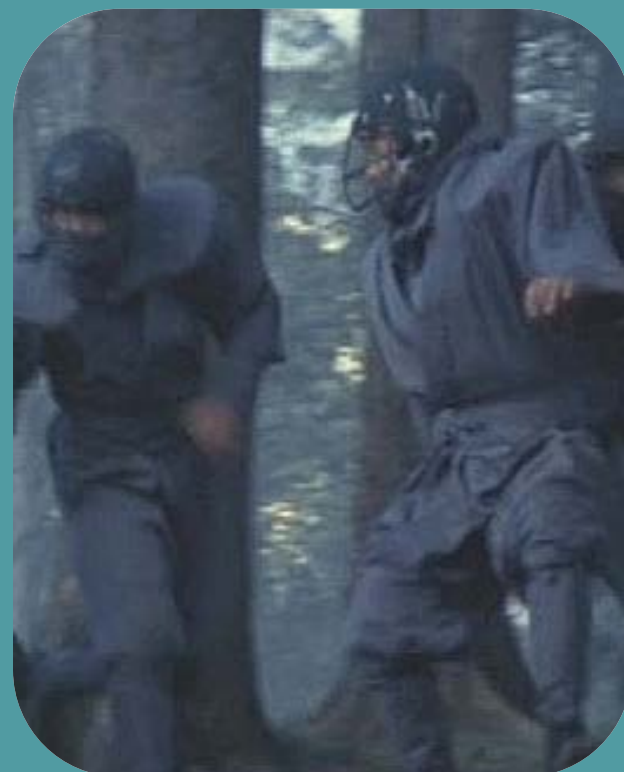
- If you like the *Lone Wolf & Cub* films or *Demon Spies*, these are the same flavor
- The property spans at least two manga runs and a less-severe made-for-TV remake
- [We looked at the manga and films here](#)



SHADOW WARRIORS

1979/80

(aka Hattori Hanzo: Samurai Shadow, orig. *Kage no Gundan: Hattori Hanzo*)



THE GRIM, DOUR AND SURREAL NINJA FLICK WITH A FOOTBALL GAME IN THE MIDDLE

This stunning, but stupefying, nigh-arthouse work from director **Eiichi Kudo** (*Castle of Owls*, *13 Assassins*) was part of an effort to relaunch period actioners for the 80s. It was so damn weird the property jumped to TV where Sonny Chiba turned it into an iconic but formulaic franchise ala *Magnum P.I.* It's the tale of a drunk and disillusioned Hattori Hanzo getting roped into a mission he doesn't want, and is perhaps the most severe of the 'can't escape the ninja life' themed movies out there (and that's a crowded field).

And... amidst some absolutely superb visuals and a jaw-dropping castle destruction... *there's a ninja football game*. Not kidding. Too hard to explain here, best you see it for yourself. Sadly, the scene is the dominant legacy of this otherwise overlooked film.

- Arguably the weirdest ninja movie ever, certainly has the most head-scratching scene in the entire genre
- Oh, and there's a fire-breathing tar-man ninja, too...
- Great costuming, particularly the chain mail hoods
- [Read our extensive article here](#)

SHADOW WARRIORS

1980-85

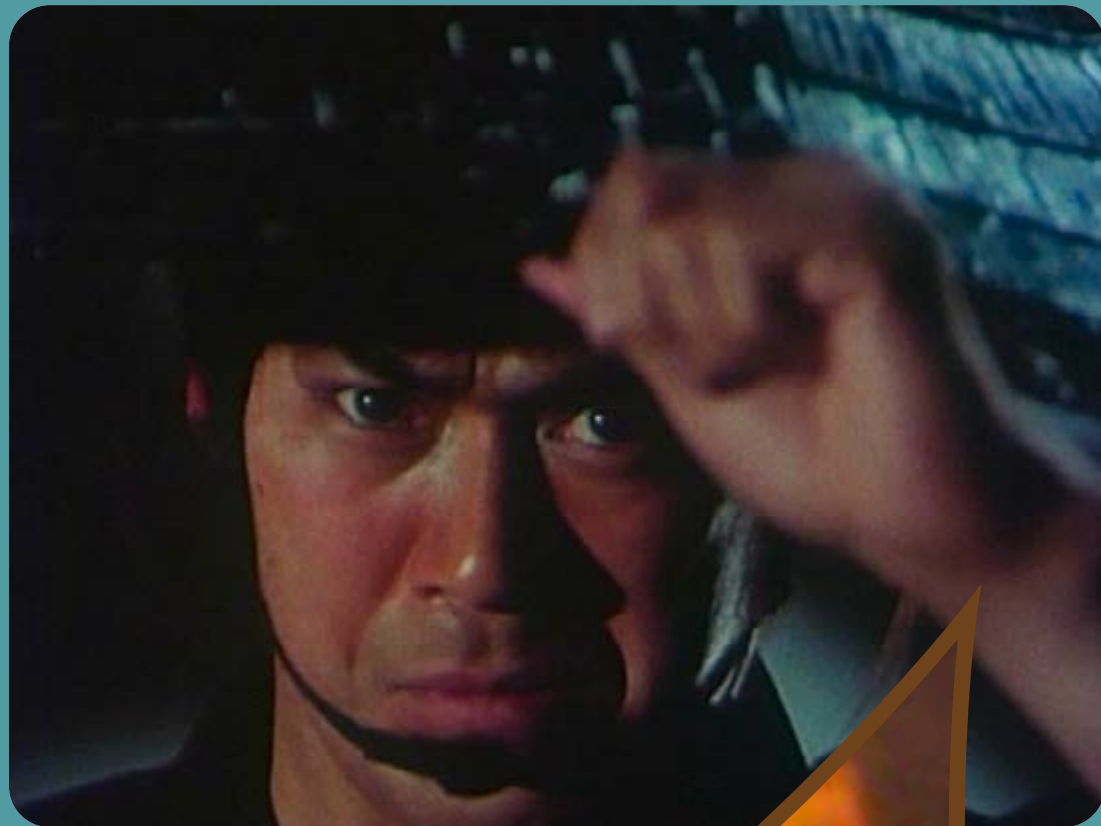
(Five-Season TV series, orig. *Kage no Gundan*)

119 EPISODES OF SONNY CHIBA LOOKING PISSED OFF IN A CHAIN MAIL HOOD

In a more publicly palatable course correction from the surreal movie that launched it (think the difference between Altman's *M*A*S*H* and the TV version), *Kage no Gundan*'s formula was classic TV in any country — ensemble cast goofs around until their mission arrives, enter guest star(s) of the week to catalyze intrigue, big fight scene at the end, roll credits and preview next week. Perfectly surfing the worldwide ninja wave, Chiba's flashy-ninja stunt-heavy show became an institution.

Basically playing a different generation's Hattori Hanzo in each season, Chiba is surrounded by a squad of specialized ninja (**Japan Action Club** regulars like **Sue Shihomi** of *Lady Streetfighter* fame) in increasingly colorful get-ups as the show went on. The final kill was always his though, be it with signature katana rested across his shoulders or distinct 'kabuto' armor-cracker.

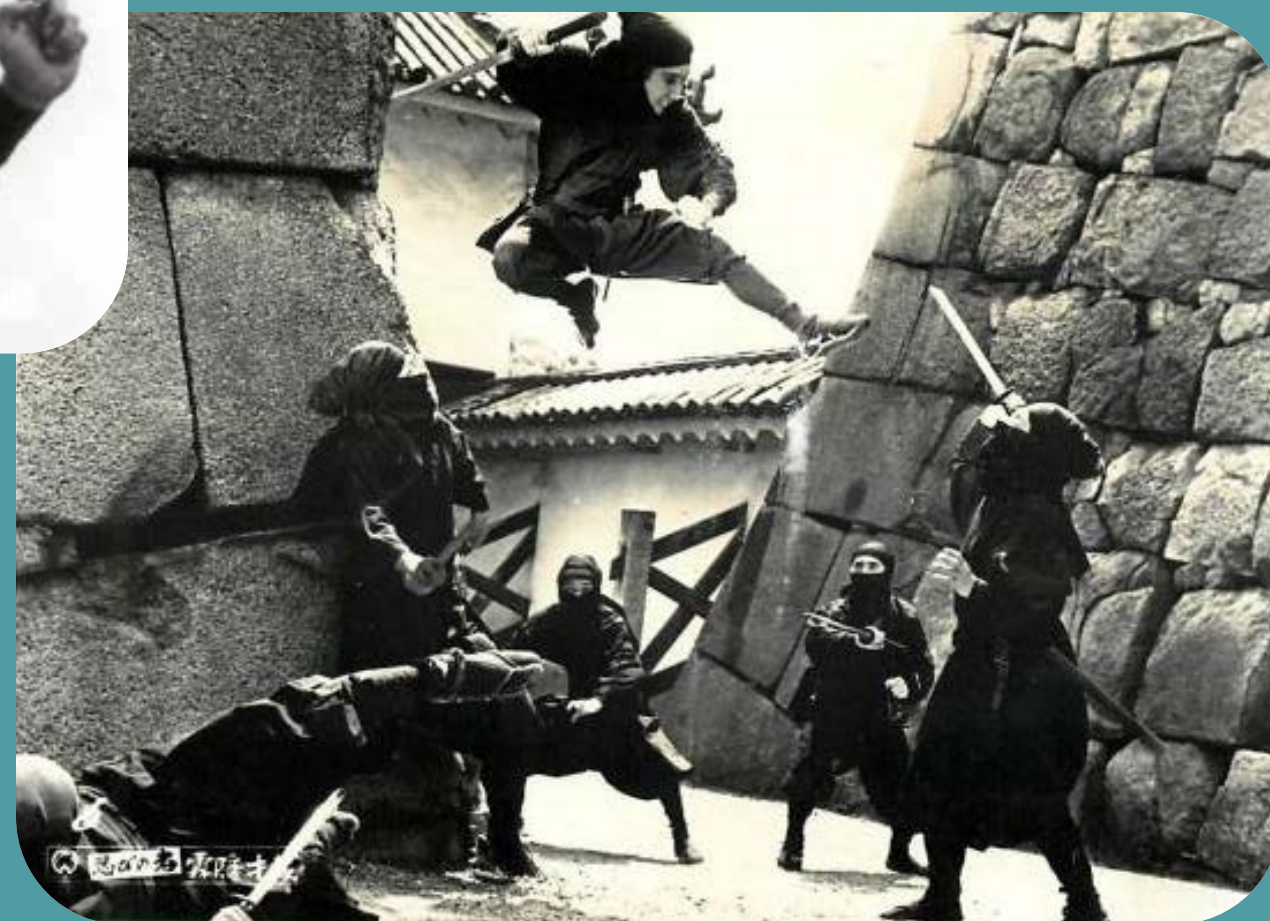
- This is super watchable, like a shinobi *Magnum P.I.* or *Knight Rider* in structure, and fights galore
- Season 1 got an official release, others were fan-subbed, including an early 2000s nostalgic reboot



SHINOBI NO MONO (series)

(aka Ninja #1, A Band of Assassins, + 8 sequels)

1962-1970



WIDELY CONSIDERED GROUND-ZERO FOR THE 1960s JAPANESE NINJA BOOM

Yes, there were some black & white movies before *Shinobi no Mono* that dealt with realistic ninja. There were also British spy movies before *Dr. No* introduced James Bond. Doing what *Enter the Ninja* did for us, this was the first big mainstream hit and really turned the key in the lock of the genre, setting up the rest of the decade's ninja formula — gritty, noir-ish execution, as much 'legit' ninjutsu infiltration techniques, gadget tools and exotic weaponry as possible, and the ninja life being a merciless existence our heroes desperately wanted to escape.

The first of a nine-movie series that continually rebooted itself with different lead characters, all portrayed by the "Japanese James Dean" **Raizo Ichikawa**, the first film sees historical/lore figures Ishikawa Goemon battling master of disguise Sandayu Momochi.

- **The *Dr. No* or *A Fistful of Dollars* of the genre**
- **Masaaki Hatsumi was on-set as an advisor**
- **Shamelessly ripped-off by *You Only Live Twice***
- **[Read the VN feature here, with bonus podcast!](#)**

See series breakdown on following pages...



SHINOBI NO MONO series breakdown

1-3: THE 'GOEMON' FILMS (1962-63)

Shinobi no Mono (aka Ninja #1, A Band of Assassins)

Shinobi no Mono 2: Vengeance (Zoku Shinobi no Mono)

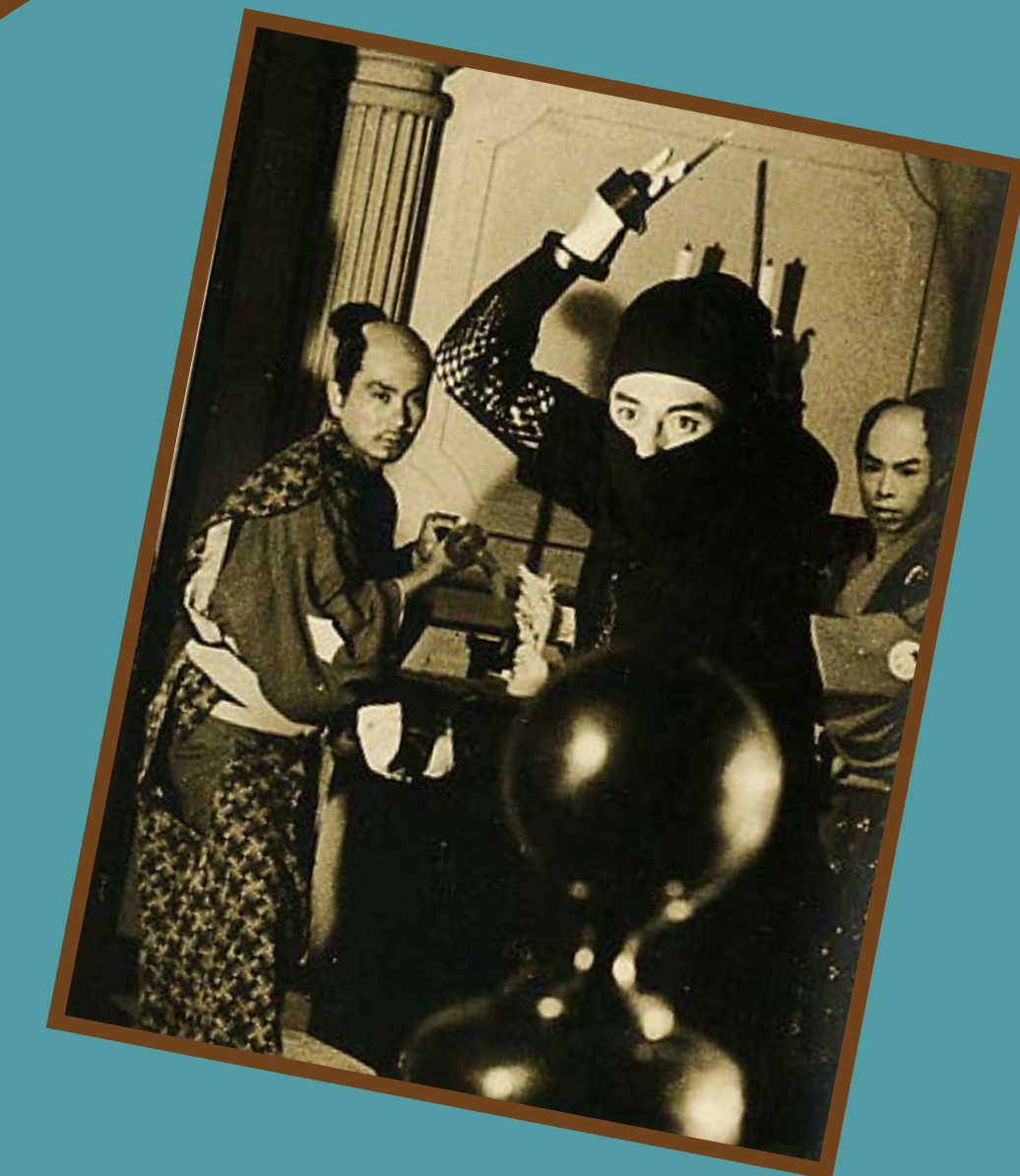
Shinobi no Mono 3: Resurrection (Shin Shinobi no Mono)

Foolishly hopeful of leaving the Spartan ninja life, skilled but reluctant ninja Ishikawa Goemon falls prey to the manipulations of master-of-disguise Momochi Sandayu, a woman who wants him, another woman he actually loves and a murderous Oda Nobunaga all at once.

Somehow negotiating a happy-ish ending, Goemon wasn't safe as Daiei was THE franchise studio, and the success of the first movie lead to an immediate sequel where things did not go as well. His short-lived domestic life is brutally shattered by Nobunaga's samurai and under pressure from Hattori Hanzo, he is caught in the swirl of the historical conflict between Hideyoshi and Tokugawa, and must return to the assassin life. After some superb castle infiltration cinema, he is captured and boiled in oil. But this is Daiei, and the third film sees him rescued from execution by Hanzo and becoming a major shadow-catalyst of the Tokugawa ascension to the Shogunate.

While the first film is a total package of emulsion in ninja-dom with tons of dramatic surprises, the second is a depressing study in the suffering of a hero, and the third while excellent in its politics and intrigue strays from the pure ninja fetish of the first film. Still, this trilogy is top-notch shinobi-cinema.

This initial trilogy had technical advisors like **Masaaki Hatsumi** of what we know today as the Bujinkan on set and providing guidance on arsenals and such. It shows in some, to be honest, odd-looking fights with techniques and movements not seen anywhere else.



SHINOBI NO MONO series breakdown

4-7: THE 'SAIZO THE MIST' FILMS (1964-66)

Kirigakure Saizo / Zoku Kirigakure Saizo

Iga Yashiki / Shin Kirigakure Saizo

While continuing the same historical arc, Raizo Ichikawa returns as an entirely different ninja — Saizo the Mist, a decidedly less reluctant hero. These four films see the ninja action lean more on spectacle, possibly due to Bujinkan advisors not being on-set this time, so the action from here on out tends to be more *studio* and less *dojo*.

The politics and history get very complicated and to be honest are a burden for the Westerner, but hey, it's more of Raizo in a black ninja suit so no complaints.

8: THE REBOOT (1966) *Shinsho Shinobi no Mono*

Predating the rest of the series in historical timeline, Raizo returns as Kojiro, a wanderer orphaned as a child when a chain-and-sickle expert kills his father during a gunpowder robbery. On the path of vengeance, he seeks out ninja training from a shinobi agent of Takeda Shingen, and tries desperately not to fall in love with his daughter. Almost jaunty at times, the tone here is lighter and somehow things wrap up in a happy ending.

Raizo Ichikawa was facing continual health problems at this point, and exited this franchise to continue work on the legendary *Sleepy Eyes of Death* series, before dying too young of cancer in 1969 at age 37.

In 1970, a floundering Daiei attempted an ill-advised reboot of the series with *Mission Iron Castle*, which despite being a superb representation of the genre, literally and metaphorically punctuated the end of the 60s b&w boom.





SHOGUN'S NINJA

1980

(*Ninja Bugeicho Momochi Sandayu*)

SONNY CHIBA, HENRY SANADA, SUE SHIHOMI AND A WHOLE TON OF STUNT WIRES

This cosmopolitan mix of ninja lore and high-kicking Chinese martial arts is another redefining of the oft-portrayed Momochi Sandayu, or more accurately his son. Barely escaping the Toyotomi's ninja-led destruction of the clan, Prince Takamaru is raised in exile in China where he picks up all sorts of Bruce Lee-like skills, not the least of which is his shredded build. Returning to Japan, he reunites with childhood friends and clan allies, while a ruthless Chiba hunts him for the secret treasure map hidden in his inherited twin daggers.

Ninja of multiple clans (and costumes) clash, acrobatics akin to Peking Opera abound, and insane Japan Action Club stuntwork somehow doesn't kill Sanada in his first starring role. Benefiting from the mega-success of the American TV mini-series *Shogun*, the fact the film's villain is named "Shogen" allowed for an easily exploitive title for a deliriously exploitive film.

- Score diverges into jazzy-disco-soft-porn territory
- Probably the movie that inspired martial arts suppliers to stock camouflage ninja suits



SHOGUN'S SAMURAI

1978

(aka The Yagyu Clan Conspiracy, orig. *Yagyu Ichizoku no Inbo*)



FIGHT BUDDHA IF YOU HAVE TO... YOU MUST SEE KINJI FUKASAKU AND SONNY CHIBA JOIN FORCES TO REVIVE OLD-SCHOOL JIDAI-GEKI

A Shogun is assassinated, an unfit heir (**Hiroki Matsukata**) is manipulated by a power-obsessed elder, and the Yagyu clan are knee deep in this mess. Jubei Yagyu (**Sonny Chiba**) returns to the family after a long sojourn and wants none of this nonsense, recruiting his sword-master siblings (including **Etsuko Shihomi**) and some young ninja from an exiled clan (including **Hiroyuki Sanda**) to set things right. Things get real bloody, with a shock ending and insane performance by **Kinnosuke Yorozyua** (best known to us as TV's Lone Wolf and Cub) that is legendary in Japanese cinema circles. Oh, and **Tetsuro Tanba** and **Toshiro Mifune** check-in, too.

This is a big, complicated period drama with a ton of money and star power behind it, and it's littered with ninja. It's higher-end than the typical Chiba/JAC exploitive stuff, and there's meaty roles for all our genre faves and great swordplay throughout.

- Same tale ran concurrent as a 39-episode TV series
- You cannot go wrong with Chiba as Jubei!

THE THIRD NINJA

1964

(*Daisan no Ninja*)

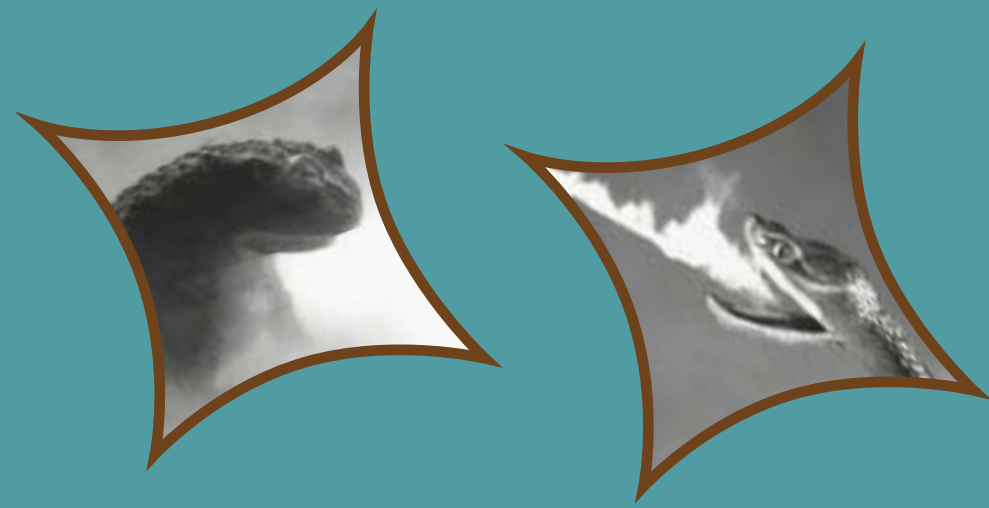


THREE HUNTERS, ONE PREY, MANY BLADES...

Two competing ninja, one an obedient servant, the other an upstart looking for a job, are given the task of hunting down Takeda Shingen's deadliest assassin. The winner becomes #1 Resident Spy, the loser gets the literal axe. Along the way, the reluctant duo encounter a third ninja with a grudge against their target, and the game is on. Commando-style invasions of booby-trapped houses and ninja-on-ninja weapon fights ensue, with a couple of surprise reveals making for a truly dramatic (and blood soaked) end.

This flick doesn't miss a trick of the genre: cat burglar skills, shuriken fights, close-quarter short-sword duels, disguises, traps, unrequited love, the need to escape the life... it's ALL here. Grim, gritty, gory – it's a tough tale and there are some truly wretched characters on both sides of the morally ambiguous goings-on.

- **'Legit' like an old Hatsumi manual come to life**
- **Forgive some of the awkward wire work...**
- **Ranks with any *Shinobi no Mono* film in the vein of serious ninja action with film noir execution**
- **[Full review and more visuals here](#)**



TORAWAKAMARU, The Koga Ninja

1957

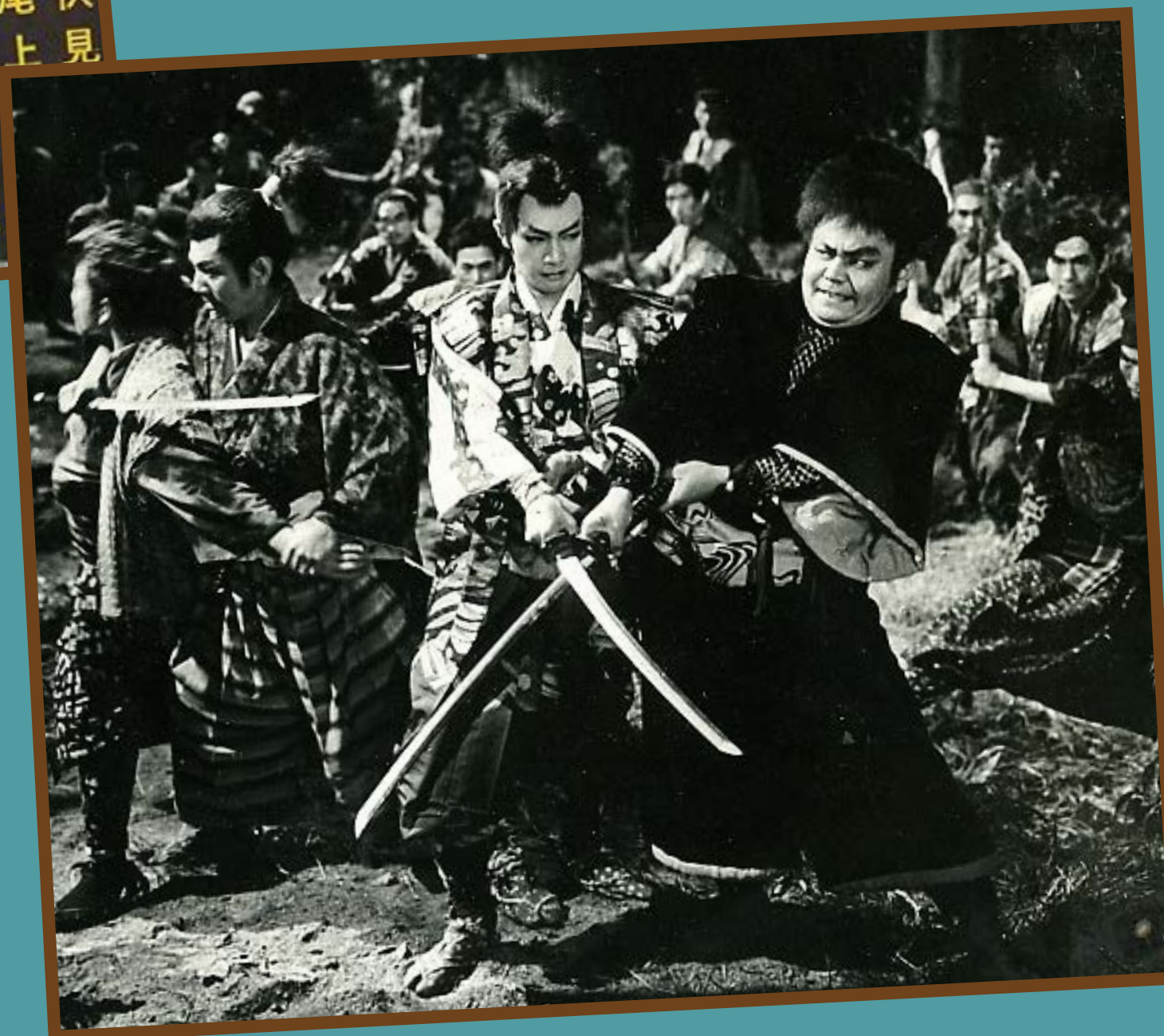
(*Ninjutsu Gozen-Jiai*)

A TEXTBOOK EXAMPLE OF THE PRE-1960'S NINJUTSU WIZARD ADVENTURE

There are hundreds of manga, books, movies and TV shows from every era of Japan's media evolution that can be accurately described as 'ninja movies', yet an untrained eye (seeing nary a black suit or hood, nor throwing star hurled) would not recognize them. The tradition of the jaunty precocious young sorcerer, trained in the mountains by a long-bearded ancient one, fighting a similar older disciple who corrupted the same training and turned to black magic, is as old as dirt and leapt from lore to pulp to stage to screen to video game and beyond, effortlessly.

Plucky hero Torawakamaru faces the (in this film) evil Ishikawa Goemon with a variety of magic tricks, rooftop and cloud-layer dueling and transformations into toads and snakes. Great for Japanese kids of the era, baffling for those looking for Sho Kosugi's roots, and curious history for the jidai-geki enthusiast.

- **Look, it's barely an hour long, give it a try!**
- [VN's write up from way back is here](#)

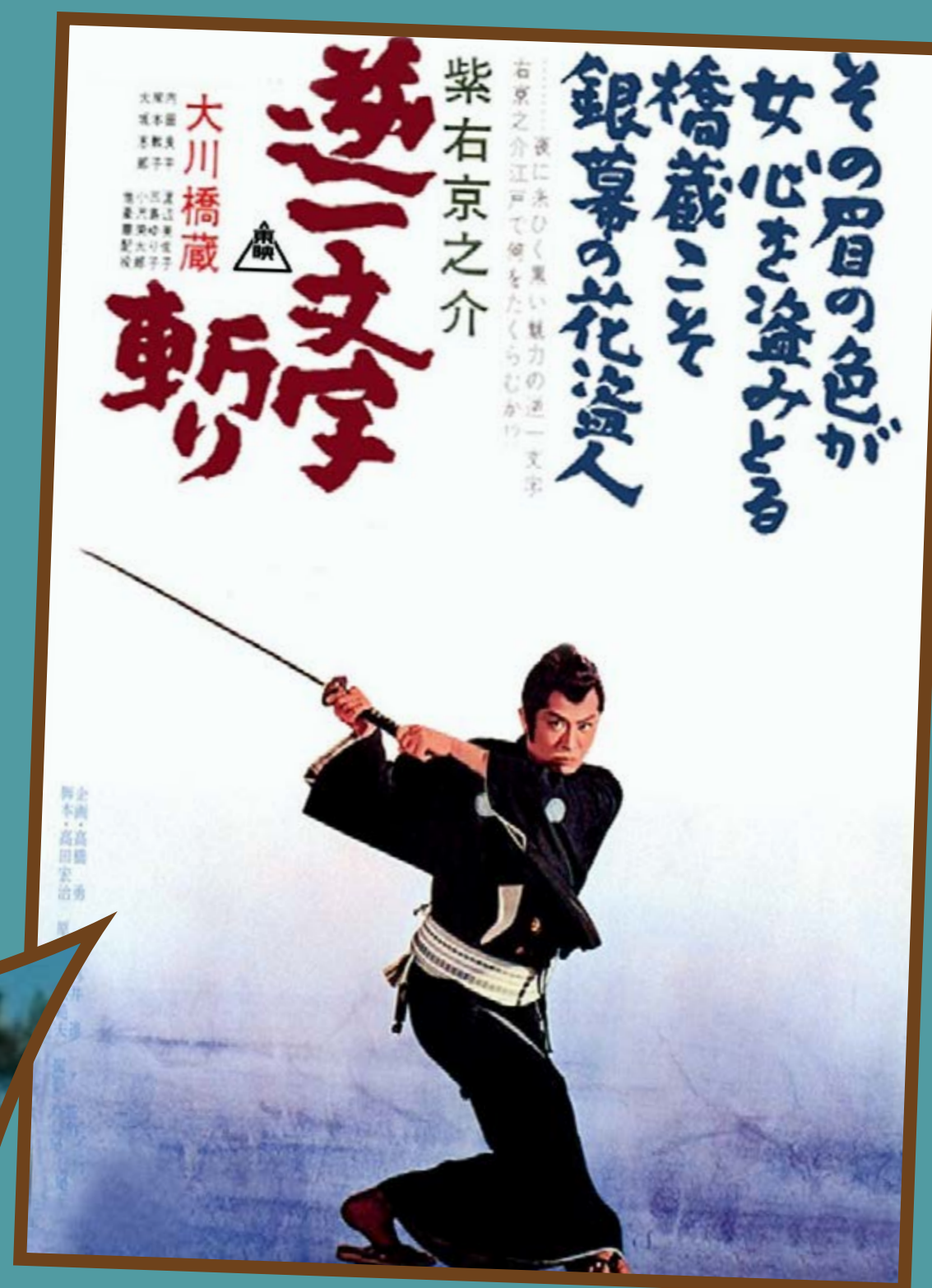




UKYONOSUKE ON PATROL / UKYONOSUKE'S REVERSE ICHIMONJI CUT

1963 / 64

(aka On Patrol, orig. *Ukyonosuke Junsatsu-Ki* / *Murasaki Ukyonosuke Gyaku Ichimonji Gin*)



PROVING ONCE AGAIN IT'S A REAL BAD IDEA FOR NINJA TO GET INTO SWORDFIGHTS WITH SAMURAI

When an upright but low-ranking samurai is promoted to clan inspector, his two rival inspectors, both well established and openly corrupt, frame him to get him out of the way. Forced into hara-kiri after a one-eyed ninja seals his fate, his best friend and fencing instructor escapes with his young son to a distant clan of warriors to plan for the eventual day of revenge. Once fully grown and possessed of uncanny sword skills, Ukyonosuke prepares for the the long trail of vengeance, only to learn the ninja who framed his father are of the very clan that has adopted him.

This and its sequel are interesting departures for the period in that ninja are integral to the story but are not the heroes of it. The results are unbalanced Oreos of chambara sword-hero stuff and complex clan drama with ninja as the creamy center, but alas, too much cookie, not enough cream...

- Starring Hashizo Okawa of *Akai Kageboshi* fame
- From the director of *Seventeen Ninja*
- Some of the most gorgeous outdoor locations you'll ever see in a ninja movie





WARRING CLANS

1963

(*Sengoku Yaro*)

SHINOBI AND SWORDPLAY MIXED WITH SARDONIC HUMOR ALA *KIRU!* OR *THREE OUTLAW SAMURAI*

A caravan of weapons guarded by a Bashaku gang is beset from without by ninja and within by some shady subterfuge. Three ronin — a *The Good, the Bad & the Ugly*-like trio of **Yuzo Kayama**, **Ichiro Nakatani** and a show-stealing **Makoto Sato** — sign-on to help protect the loot, each boasting they're going to climb the ranks and become the next ruler of Japan, but they're actually just bums... *or are they?*

A plucky sword-lass played by **Yuriko Hoshi** (of numerous Godzilla films) as the gang leader is having none of their bullshit, nor is pirate queen **Kumi Mizuno** (of *Matango* and Ms. Namikawa fame) in a clash of kaiju cuties. A whole pile of eccentric warriors, squads of ninja lurking in the tall grass and in every mountain crevice, a great jazzy score, fast snappy editing and some just phenomenal cinematography combine to make this highly recommended.

- You will fall absolutely in love with this all-star cast in the first few minutes of the film
- From *Sword of Doom* director Kihachi Okamoto
- [VN's loving write-up and a bunch of colored stills is here](#)

WARRIOR OF THE WIND

1964

(aka Ninja Vagabond, orig. *Kaze no Bushi*)

POSSIBLY THE MOST BEAUTIFUL NINJA FILM EVER SHOT

We over-simplify the 60's as the decade of gritty, noir-ish black-and-white ninja movies, but the color entries into the field are often standouts (*Akai Kageboshi*, *Castle of Owls*), and this may be the cream of the crop. Director **Tai Kato**, most known for yakuza films, experiments with the tropes of shinobi cinema mostly to remarkable success. There are scant night or dark scenes, in fact an orange sun-lit dusk fight among a maze of rocks on a beach is the film's highlight, and is unforgettable.

Hashizo Okawa shines as one of the most *human* protagonists to ever dawn the hood. It's hard to describe his journey from complacent layabout to reluctant hero and beyond without giving away too many spoilers, but he's yet another ninja caught between a princess and a shifty kunoichi, and we all know how affairs of the heart go in the ninja genre...

- Other ninja films are chiaroscuro sketchbooks, this one is a lush painting
- Great ninja action, but more importantly a great character arc for the man who grows into our hero
- [Full review here](#)



WATARI THE NINJA BOY

1966

(*Dai Ninjutsu Eiga Watari*)



A BOY AND HIS BATTLE AXE

Young woodland ninja Watari and his shinobi-gandpa played by **Maki** (Tonbei the Mist) **Fuyukichi** battle blue- and red-skinned shinobi, robot-ronin, pervy toad-men, meaty demon ladies and garishly wardrobed wizards lifted right off the pages of **Shirato Sanpei's** mega-hit manga. The film is even faithful to the hairstyles, which means all our heroes have only one eye visible.

One of the best examples out there of Japan's willingness to attempt exacting replications of abstract and experimental manga to live-action film, no matter how bizarre or "un-film-able." Lost in the feast of these visual acrobatics is an overly complicated and very mature plot you fortunately don't need to follow to enjoy.

Animated cat and butterfly magic, artificial painted skies in elaborate interior sets, and lots of wire work create a magical artificial world ideal for any kids movie, but then there's also an enormous body count, tons of child endangerment and enough violence for an R rating elsewhere. *God, I love Japanese cinema...*

- Phenomenal jazzy theme song is a total banger
- Child star Yoshinobu Kaneko was also in *Masked Ninja Akakage*, hence myriad "Watari"-ized alternate titles for that property world-wide



WORLD NINJA WAR JIRAIYA

1988-89

(aka Ninja Olympiad. orig. *Sekai Ninja Sen Jiraiya*)



MASAAKI HATSUMI, NINJA FROM AROUND THE GLOBE, A DEMON AND HIS CROWS...

When an ancient ninja secret scroll, protected by one family all the way into modern day Tokyo, is under threat from the villainous Sorcerers Clan, a young student passes his father's final test and inherits the super-powered Jiraiya armor. Over the next 50 episodes of this "Metal Heroes Series" entry, the masked menace Dokusai and his ninja minions relentlessly attack the family, while the conflict attracts a dizzying array of ninja from all around the world (hence the 'Ninja Olympics' notion). Some are allies — British knight-ninja Baron Owl, pistol-packin' African-American ninja Rocket Man, a giant mohawked Turkish ninja, a cyborg ninja, a holy ninja from the Vatican, a frontier ninja descended from Billy the Kid, and many many more. Others are up to no good, and side with Dokusai and his legions of Karasutengu crow soldiers. With all sorts of 80s fashion and vehicle fetish, plus a crap-ton of explosions, this is a wild ride for sure...

Starring as the father and doubling as on-set martial arts advisor was Togakure-Ryu founder **Masaaki Hatsumi**, who decades before had done the same for the *Shinobi no Mono* films and *You Only Live Twice*.

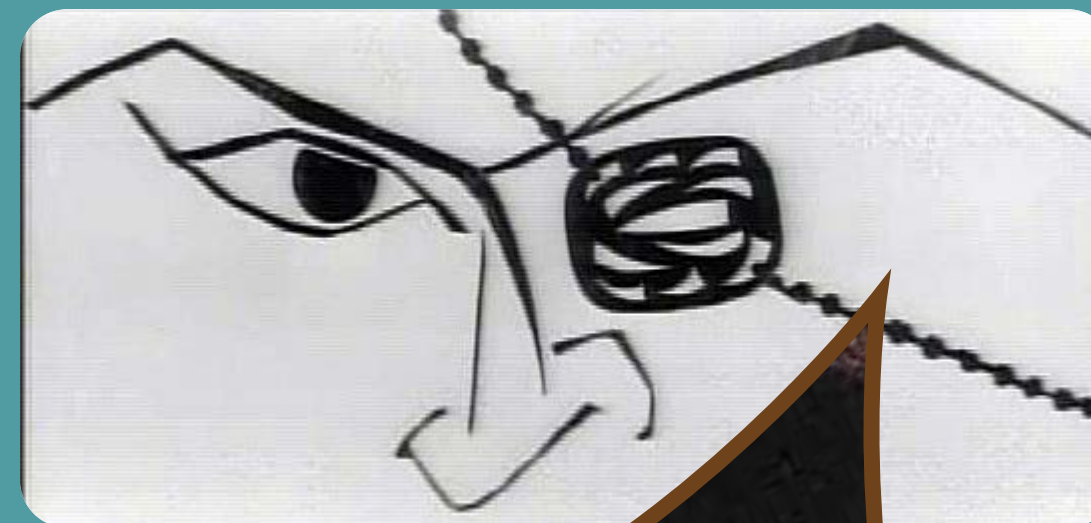
- If this looks familiar, you may have had the localized toy line re-titled "Tacky Stretch-oid Warriors"
- [Take a look at a vintage photo book of the series here](#)



YAGYU CHRONICLES (series)

1961-1964

(Nine film series, each entry beginning with *Yagyu Bugeicho*)



A SMORGASBORD OF SWORD-SCHOOLS, SECRET SCROLLS AND SLAUGHTERED SHINOBI

Jubei Yagyu was a real historical figure, master of his clan's sword style which is still famous today, and servant to the third Shogunate. Until he was fired for reasons unknown and disappeared for a decade-plus. This gap in his bio has been over-filled by speculation and legend, and boy do ninja fictioneers just love this blank canvas to work with! Toei Studios and jidai-geki legend **Jushiro Konoe** produced a jaw-dropping nine films in four years featuring Jubei and a whole ton of ninja, catching the craze-wave like an expert surfer.

The films run the gamut of clan intrigue to outright battlefield warfare with ninja armies. Konoe is a force of nature throughout.

- *Yagyu Chronicles 8: The One-Eyed Ninja* is a series highlight, with a neat animated credit intro and 64 ninja in a battle akin to D-Day
- Konoe's sword-guard (tsuba) eyepatch, held in place by chain, is the coolest of any cinematic portrayal





YAGYU SECRET SCROLLS I & II

1957/58

(*Yagyu Bugeicho* / *Yagyu Begeicho: Soryu Hiken*)

YEP, THAT'S TOSHIRO MIFUNE AS A NINJA!

True story: after Miyamoto Musashi and Kojiro Sasaki dueled on the beach at Ganryu Island, they were reincarnated as ninja brothers chasing around secret scrolls. Well... more accurately, the legendary director **Hiroshi Inagaki**, after completing his famed *Samurai Trilogy* re-hired the same cast and crew to adapt **Kosuke Gomi's** often-filmed novel. The result was two movies with, to be honest, Toshiro Mifune looking rather out of place in ninja gear...

The same core story as Jushiro Konoe's *Yagyu Chronicles* series, this version leans more on the brothers' relationship and the scrolls, blood being thicker than paper.

- **Ninja costuming with multiple hues for different missions and reversible commando/civilian clothes (why don't we see this more???)**
- **Another bridge film, nods to the jaunty/trickery era and the pending shadow-spy boom**
- **It's Inagaki... first-rate swordfighting abounds**
- **[VN's write-up on both films is here](#)**



The VINTAGE NINJA Movie & TV Guide

APPENDIX 1: The Silents



From 1912 to 1939, in the midst of what must have been a remarkably creative and ambitious period of filmmaking, an already crowded Japanese film industry generated no fewer than **55 films that could be defined as ‘ninja movies’** – 55! Below is a partial list culled from **Kigami Jigoku Kobayashi’s** book ***Carnal Curses, Disfigured Dreams*** by year, which illustrates the first ninja booms — as these were concurrent with popular kids media and martial arts writings similar to ninja crazes in the 60s and 80s. You’ll notice a lot of familiar names and titles below, too...

1912: Jiraiya Goketsu Tan-Banashi	Ninjutsu Botan No Choji (Tenkatsu) Ninjutsu Juyushi (Tenkatsu) Ninjutsu Sanin Taro (Tenkatsu) Tengu Sodo (Nikkatsu)	1920: Genkotsu to Ninjutsu no Manyu (Nikkatsu) Iwami Jutaro to Kirigakure Saizo (Kokkatsu) Kirigakure to Sarutobi (Nikkatsu) Ninjutsu Koboshi (Kokkatsu) Sarutobi Sasuke Ninjutsu Daisakusen (Kokkatsu)	Kirigakure Saizo Ninjutsu Sanyushi (Shochiku) Sarutobi Sasuke (Shochiku)	1936: Yojutsu Sharanui Kumo
1914: Jiraiya (Nikkatsu) Jiraiya (Tenkatsu) Jiraiya O Teru (Nikkatsu)	1918: Jiraiya Goketsu Banashi (Nikkatsu) Sarutobi Sasuke (Nikkatsu)	1921: Goketsu Jiraiya (Nikkatsu) Goto Matabei Ninjutsu-Yaburi (Kokkatsu) Joso Ninjutsu (Kokkatsu) Ninjutsu Goro (Nikkatsu) Sanada Daisuke to Sarutobi Sasuke	1923: Ninjutsu Gokko (Shochiku)	1937: Ninjutusu Togakushi Hakkenshi Ninjutsu Yaoya Tanuki
1915: Sarutobi Sasuke (Tenkatsu)	1919: Amago Juyushi (Tenkatsu) Kaijutsu Ryuomaro (Tenkatsu) Ninjutsu Shitenno (Kokkatsu) Okubo Hikozaemon to Ninjutsu Yakko (Tenkatsu)	1922: Jiraiya (Shochiku) Kirigakure Saizo (Nikkatsu)	1924: Sarutobi no Ninjutsu (Shochiku) Gijin Sarutobi	1938 Kai Genma Kaiketsu Tora Muteki San-Kenshi Tetsu no Tsume Ninjutsu Daishingun Ninjutsu Hyakuju Gassen
1916: Jiraiya Goketsu-Den	Onna Sarutobi (Tenkatsu) Sarutobi Sasuke (Nikkatsu)		1926: Ninjutsu Ichiya Daimyo (Nikkatsu) Sarutobi Sasuke to Seikai Nyudo	1939: Ninjutsu Saiyuki (Journey to the West)
1917: Kintoki Kinta (Nikkatsu) Nidaime Jiraiya (Nikkatsu)			1934: Ninjutsu Hinotama Kozo – Edo no Maki (Nikkatsu)	

- Between a catastrophic earthquake in 1923, the fire-bombing of cities in WWII, and a post-war period of censorship that lead to the destruction of movies with any sort of fight scenes, every film mentioned above was **LOST**, save for fragments of two of the *Jiraiya* films. [VN’s full article on this topic can be found here.](#)

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APPENDIX 2: Wanted!

One has highs and lows, fluctuations in supply and demand, when seeking rare and obscure TV and film. There are years where a confluence of translators, cable broadcasts in Japan and savvy gray-marketeers lead to an explosion of never-before-seen titles becoming common. Then there are times where none of those keys turn in their respective locks and you have years of drought.

And in all that up and down, there are grails the entire community just can't seem to collectively make happen. There's an entire *Shinobi no Mono* TV series none of us have ever seen a frame of to this day...

So here's a few choice titles that have eluded me for one reason or another.



‘Lady Saizo the Mist’ TV:
need info and subs



This ‘Black Hood’
or ‘Black Scorpion’
film from Toei...



This buddy-ninja TV show
with two kunoichi cuties.



Whatever years of
Mito Komon that
featured Kaoru Yumi
as Kagero Ogin, or her
1995 spin-off series.

