

Sarutobi Sasuke:

From Magical Trickster to Ninja Warrior

by

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ABSTRACT

The hero Sarutobi Sasuke (literally, “monkey-jump Sasuke”) is one of the most popular Japanese literary characters of the twentieth century. The *Tachikawa Bunko* book series released in the 1910’s told the story of the samurai Sasuke, who used magic and trickery to defeat his foes. The character garnered so much interest that many other writers wrote their own books, manga, and stories about Sasuke, and filmmakers went on to adapt his story to the big screen throughout the twentieth century. Sarutobi Sasuke’s influence is so wide in Japan that he still maintains some level of relevance in Japan today. From the postwar period onward, however, modern academic and non-academic writers and media figures in both the West and Japan have advanced two controversial claims: first, that Sarutobi Sasuke was either real, or based on a real person, and second, that Sarutobi Sasuke has always been a “ninja.”

By investigating the *Tachikawa Bunko* series that popularized the character of Sarutobi Sasuke, this thesis surveys the evidence available on both of these claims. Firstly, this thesis explores the fact that though there are a wide range of sources available that show Sarutobi Sasuke is a completely fictional character, many authors still write about the character as though he were a historical figure. Secondly, the thesis examines the sources that have characterized Sarutobi Sasuke as a “ninja” by historicizing the idea of “ninja,” which is a term that was never actually used in the original *Tachikawa Bunko* series to describe Sasuke. Evidence suggests that Sarutobi Sasuke was only ever understood to be a “ninja” after the ninja boom of the 1960’s, and that many of these claims characterizing Sarutobi Sasuke as a ninja have come from the anachronistic misinterpretation of the Japanese words *ninjutsu* and *ninjutsu-tsukai*. This thesis thus tells

the story of the origins of an often overlooked, yet important fictional character of the twentieth century, while also highlighting a strain of Orientalism, as described by Said, in English-language ninja writing. These issues have led popular writers to ignore Japanese literary creativity and treat all Japanese texts as literal history.

DEDICATION

For Grandpa Jerry, Abuelo José Joaquín “Pepe,” Nana Debbie, and
Abuelita María de los Ángeles “Angelines”

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Historical fiction in Japan has long been a source and an outlet for imagined communities, ranging in scale from national identity to local town pride. Real figures such as Toyotomi Hideyoshi 豊臣秀吉 (1537-1598) and Kusunoki Masashige 楠木正成 (1294-1336) have had their stories told over and over again since the times they lived in, and new tales have been invented for them after all of the stories had been told. These stories and their settings have been loci of imagination and creativity. However, it was not only historical figures who were used as the bases of these stories, but also new fictional characters who could be retroactively fitted back into Japanese history, such as the famous trickster samurai known as Sarutobi Sasuke 猿飛佐助 (literally “Monkey-Jump Sasuke” in Japanese), who starred in many historical fiction tales of heroism. Historical fiction draws historical settings, people, and matter into the same space as fictitious settings, people, and matter. The author can use these elements to shape a story at will, using as much or as little historical record as they like to tell their story. Ultimately it is the reader’s knowledge of historical record that determines the true boundary between reality and fiction.

In this liminal space between history and literary fiction, there is room for misunderstanding, misreading, and mistreating historical fiction in both the West and Japan. Though historical fiction contains historical elements, the stories are ultimately fictional, and thus should be treated as such. The approaches to the character of Sarutobi Sasuke in both the realm of academic discourse and non-scholarly history books serves as a case study in terms of emphasizing the importance of reexamining the current discourse

and methodology of the study of historical fiction. As it stands, most popular Western authors that have examined the character of Sarutobi Sasuke have done so through the lens of Edward Said's Orientalism.¹ By treating Japanese fictional characters as though they were real people, or by assuming that they must be based on real people, authors are ignoring the possible influence of individual artistic and creative license of Japanese artists in favor of the blanket assumption of objective historical facts.

The main goal of this thesis is to highlight the Orientalist methodologies of literary studies. Professor Edward Said's critical concept of Orientalism serves to describe the various problematic ways that the West depicts the East. Though Said mostly wrote about the Far East, his concepts apply to the way in which Western authors have either directly or indirectly influenced the West's view of Japanese historical fiction as simply historical, and not fictional. Said describes his third definition of Orientalism:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient- dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing view of it, describing it, by teaching, settling it, ruling over it: in short, [the third definition of Orientalism describes] Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.²

In order to show that the West has dealt with Japan in such a manner, I am making two main arguments: the first being that popular ninja writings in both English and Japanese have blurred the boundaries of fact and fiction when it comes to the background of the popular character Sarutobi Sasuke. There is sufficient evidence that Sarutobi Sasuke is a completely fictional character who has appeared in various historical fiction stories since at least the eighteenth century, yet popular authors are selectively ignoring this evidence.

¹ Said, Edward W.. *Orientalism*. United States: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1979.

² Said, *Orientalism*, P 3

The second part of this argument is that many of the misunderstandings about Sarutobi Sasuke come from a larger mishandling of Japanese historical fiction sources, and that these mishaps have been further aggravated by the appellation of the title of “ninja” to Sarutobi Sasuke. The existing academic work on the subject of ninja, or the lack thereof, has left several gaps in understanding the literary background of Sarutobi Sasuke.

By exploring the historical background that the character Sarutobi Sasuke is placed in, alongside the historical background of the ninja, I will identify the inconsistencies in logic and in record that have falsely painted a picture of Sarutobi Sasuke as a real figure. These inconsistencies tend to take the shape of three theories: the “literal truth” theory, the “model” theory, and the “deeper truth” theory. These theories all connect to the theoretical frameworks for understanding the historical fiction novel as described by Susan Strehle.

As articulated by Georg Lukács, The Marxist view believes that historical fiction interprets a selected history for the present; it therefore focuses on the selection and interpretation of historical content. Historical fiction, Lukács believes, aims to represent political conditions of and for the masses and the nation in periods of social change. The fiction’s ethical aim, overt or implied, is to awaken readers to injustice and oppression and to improve the lives of the subaltern class.³

The Marxist idea of historical fiction, then, is chiefly concerned with the ethical concerns of injustice, and to use a historical setting to represent the injustices the subaltern classes face. On the other hand, the postmodernist view of historical fiction that Linda Hutcheon points out,

Understands historical fiction as a sophisticated form of self-reflexive metafiction, using historical material as a springboard for art while undermining any simple sense of the ‘real’. Metafictional readings therefore focus on the development of reflexive form as means of representation; less directly interested in questions of

³ Strehle, Susan. *Contemporary Historical Fiction, Exceptionalism and Community: After the Wreck*. Germany: Springer International Publishing, 2020. P 27

which history is chosen or how the fiction interprets it... metafictional interpretations awaken readers to the uncertainties of knowledge and the limits of the observers' authority.⁴

The postmodernist view, this particular literary academic argues, seems to celebrate the lack of clarity in the difference between fiction and reality. This interpretation argues that reading historical fiction should make it clear that knowledge is uncertain. While Linda Hutcheon's argument opens the avenue for many interesting areas of study, it does the historian a disservice. For the purposes of this thesis, it is important to separate literature and history.

These theories about historical fiction serve as the foundational building blocks of my own three theories that I will apply to the different academic and nonacademic sources' claims about Sarutobi Sasuke, especially regarding his historical existence. The "literal truth" theory describes the entirely uncritical approach of authors who interpret fiction as though it were literally history. Authors that have treated completely fictional stories about Sarutobi Sasuke as though they are historical tales are following the "literal truth" theory. The "model" theory describes the belief that there is a specific historical person that Sasuke was "modeled" after. The "literal truth" and "model theories describe the Orientalizing manner in which the West has reinterpreted Japanese literary traditions as historical records. The "deeper truth" theory describes the idea that many Japanese sources acknowledge that Sarutobi Sasuke is not literally real, but instead argue that his characterization serves as a way of understanding how the historical ninja operated.

⁴ Strehle, *Contemporary Historical Fiction*, P 27

The “literal truth” and “model” theories explain the problem of fictional characters in historical fiction being described as historical people. The model Theory typically applies to Western authors who tend to use it in two specific ways: the first way is that the author uses the general assumption of the average reader that historical fiction has some real historical elements to it. The second part of this is that the author advances claims that are not supported by actual historical research, playing on the reader’s lack of specific historical knowledge. The author creates a connection between a fictional character, and a presumably historical person using only tenuous evidence. It is a form of Western domination and restructuring of Japanese literary traditions as historical records. The “literal truth” and “model” theories are inherently Orientalist because these theories indicate a Western mode of studying the East. These two theories depend on the assumption that there *must* be a real-world referent for a historical novel; therefore, Western audiences, who are less likely to be familiar with the literary or historical context of the story, are more likely to take a literalist approach to historical fiction.

The “literal truth” and “model” theory are characterized by an underlying belief that is influenced by latent-Orientalist approaches to studying Eastern cultures—that literary traditions must have some sort of tangible, historical explanation. It goes beyond a colonizing view of Japan’s literary traditions; it ignores the possibility that Eastern authors are capable of expressing novel human elements by means of a fictitious character in a historical context, especially for the purpose of entertainment. The Western writers on the topic of the ninja that I will highlight in this thesis have systematically treated most Japanese-language texts as historical documents. These authors appear to presume that any character, fictional or otherwise, written in these Japanese texts literally

existed. It is a problematic approach to Japanese text that assumes that Japanese authors lack an imagination, or that they only bother to write things down as they literally happened. The “literal truth” and “model” theories embody the denial of the vibrant creative spirit of East Asian cultures through history. The treatment of these texts in this manner results in a method of refusing to acknowledge the existence of the literary imagination of Japanese authors.

The deeper truth Theory, by contrast, acknowledges Sarutobi Sasuke’s fictional status, but contends that he reflects a set of deeper historical truths about Warring States and early Edo Japan. This is the approach to Sarutobi Sasuke that has largely been followed in Japan, particularly with authors writing on the ninja tradition. The deeper truth theory explains that though Sarutobi Sasuke is a fictional character that did not exist, individuals *like* Sarutobi Sasuke did indeed exist, and so Sasuke represents a deeper truth about history. These authors all point out that Sarutobi Sasuke is fictional, but the supernatural abilities he has access to in the stories serve as a “deeper truth” about Japanese history, where there were historical people that had amazing physical abilities that could reproduce the effect of Sarutobi Sasuke’s magic.

By examining these Orientalist methodologies through which the fictional character of Sarutobi Sasuke has been used to further false historical claims, I will make clear why we must adjust our approach to the study of historical fiction.

Since a vast majority of this discussion involves the discussion of Sarutobi Sasuke as “ninja,” I would like to clarify the terminology of the word “ninja” itself. Simply put, ninja can be understood as cultural icons of Japan. Though the image of what ninjas are is widely understood and accepted, the historical context of the ninja is not well understood

by most people in the West and in Japan. They are usually depicted as clad in black, wielding a sword and throwing stars, and are capable of impressive feats of dexterity, strength, and agility. This visual icon, however, does not always correspond with the impact of the concept of “ninja.” They have been depicted by various media as either historical agents or literary characters, and in either of these instances ninja do not always conform to the idea of the “clad in black,” and so forth. To make this image more clear, I will briefly go over the etymology of the term “ninja.”

The kanji, or sinographs used in Japanese to write the word ninja are “忍者”. The character *nin* 忍 itself has several meanings and pronunciations. On its own, the on’yomi⁵ *nin* 忍 can serve as a noun that means something like “endurance”, often being combined with another character for the noun or verb *nintai* 忍耐 meaning endurance, perseverance, or patience. The kun’yomi reading of the graph in the word *shinobi* 忍び frequently appears in both medieval texts and is still used in the modern day. The word *shinobi* is a noun meaning “stealth”, though it is often used as part of the verb *shinobikomu* 忍び込む, or, “to sneak in.” The “ja” (it’s actually “sha,” but the fricative consonant becomes voiced here) of “ninja,” can also be read as *mono* 者 which means “person.” In the modern day, the popular use of the words “ninja” and “shinobi” are used

⁵ On’yomi 音読み is the reading of a graph that is derived from the Chinese reading of the graph in Japanese. This is in contrast to Kun’yomi, which is the Japanese reading of a graph that is derived from the Japonic language in the Japanese archipelago.

interchangeably. For example, the popular manga *Naruto* (1999-2014) and anime series of the same name (2002-2007) and its successor shows all use the word “ninja” and “shinobi” to denote the same referent.

My argument does not seek to place “ninja” as firmly in the realm of history nor in the realm of literature. To define a one-size-fits-all definition for a literary ninja is nearly impossible, and to define a “historically accurate” ninja is a completely impossible task. My simple observation of the word “ninja” is that Western audiences seem to understand the “ninja” as historical figures. That is not to say that Western audiences entirely accept the concept of ninja as historical figures wholesale, but rather that the word “ninja” is connoted as historical, alongside words such as “samurai.” What I am arguing, however, is that though the character of Sarutobi Sasuke is often identified as a ninja, he only came to be identified as a ninja during the Post-War period of Japan. Up until the idea of “ninja” became popularized in post war fictional novels and films, the term was rather obscure, and certainly not associated with Sarutobi Sasuke.

In other words, any claim that connects Sarutobi Sasuke to the ninja before the 1960’s is based on incorrect and incomplete research. Various works, scholarly and non-scholarly, make various claims that Sarutobi Sasuke was either a real-life ninja, or that the fictional character Sasuke is based on the idea of ninja. In either case, the fictional character of Sarutobi Sasuke is being used as an example to try and make historical claims about the supposed “historical ninja,” but the use of a completely fictional character to make historical claims is very problematic. These claims are false and, as I will show, based in a form of Orientalism that restructures Japanese historical fiction as historical record.

CHAPTER 2

WHO IS SARUTOBI SASUKE?

Sarutobi Sasuke's impact on the literary and entertainment cultures of Japan cannot be overstated. He has been the star of a long series of wildly popular historical fiction serials from the late Meiji (1868-1912) to the Taishō era (1912-1926) called the *Tachikawa Bunko* 立川文庫 (Tachikawa Library). He has been the subject of several films and T.V. shows throughout the post-war period, playing the main role in no fewer than seven films and six television series. In 1959, Sarutobi Sasuke was the main character of an animated feature film called *Shōnen Sarutobi Sasuke* 少年猿飛佐助. The film had an American release under the name of *Magic Boy* and gained a modest level of popularity. Sasuke has even played a prominent role in a *jidaigeki* 時代劇 (Period Piece) film as recently as 2016 called *Sanada Jūyūshi* 真田十勇士 (Sanada Ten Braves). Sasuke is either the titular character or the main character in around eleven manga series, and eight novels. Sarutobi Sasuke also plays a significant role in the backstory of the well known ninja-focused anime *Naruto Shippuden* (2007-2017).

Few characters can claim as strong a legacy and prominence in Japanese popular culture as Sarutobi Sasuke. The name "Sarutobi Sasuke" was used in fictional stories for characters who played minor, insignificant roles since at least the late 1700's⁶, however, Sasuke was not a full fledged and consistent main character until 1914. His popular

⁶ Takahashi, Kei'ichi."Edo no Sarutobi Sasuke." Ehime daigaku chi'iki sōsei kenkyū nenpō, Vol 5, 2010. P 2

debut is found in the original run of books from the Osaka-based publishing company Tachikawa Bunmeidō, that published the *Tachikawa Bunko*. Sarutobi Sasuke’s story is told in the *kōdan* 講談 style of storytelling, a traditional Japanese performance art marked by its vaudeville-esque presentation style. The style was originally developed in the Edo era (1603-1868), and usually consisted of a male performer in front of a short lectern using a fan and wooden clappers reading out a story.⁷ At first, the value of *kōdan* seems to have been in explaining war chronicles and old books in an easily comprehensible manner, and it developed through the Edo and Meiji period as an entertaining and comedic performance.⁸ The *Tachikawa Bunko* series is written in a way that evokes this *kōdan* style, but in written form.

The Tachikawa Bunmeidō had been publishing historical fiction stories, but truly found their stride when they started the series centered on Sarutobi Sasuke in 1912, which was the fortieth edition of the Tachikawa series.⁹ Eventually, in the climax to the character’s development, Sarutobi Sasuke was killed off in the process of heroically serving his master. However, likely due to the readers’ demand for the character, and how well stories about Sasuke sold, the character’s fate was made more ambiguous to bring him back in the final *Tachikawa Bunko Sanada Sanyūshi* title.¹⁰ Another *kōdan* storyteller named Matsubayashi Hakuchi 松林伯知 (1856-1932) later wrote his own version of Sarutobi Sasuke, whose stories were serialized in the *Asahi Shinbun* 朝日新聞,

⁷ “Kōdan,” in Encyclopedia Nipponica, 2023, JapanKnowledge.

⁸ “Kōdan,” in Nihon Kokugo Daijiten, 2023, JapanKnowledge.

⁹ “Sarutobi Sasuke,” in Encyclopedia Nipponica, 2023, JapanKnowledge.

¹⁰ Croft, Adam Thorin. *Urban Culture in Pre-War Japan*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2019. P 183

one of Japan's biggest newspapers. This version also kills off Sasuke, shortly before resurrecting him from the dead.¹¹ One author who has covered the history of the *Tachikawa Bunko* notes that one merchant "would easily sell 100 copies [of the *Tachikawa Bunko*] in one evening, clearing a profit of 8 yen- this at a time when the average person's daily living expenses amounted to 15 sen ([100 Sen= 1 Yen.])"¹²

Versions of the character Sarutobi Sasuke seem to have existed since at least the late eighteenth century; however, the *Tachikawa Bunko* is the first series to completely encapsulate the character's life and create a complete fictional canon for Sasuke. At this point, there are several versions of Sarutobi Sasuke, belonging to several different canons, much like the American comic book superhero. Sasuke's stories can be examined as an extension of the old tradition of *kōdan*, and *jidaigeki*, or historical period drama into the Taishō era. There is no one definitive story, but *Tachikawa Bunko*'s serials give us a prototype both for Sasuke's fictional life, and for his exploits within fictional history.

Since the most iconic and well-remembered stories about Sarutobi Sasuke come from the *Tachikawa Bunko* series, I will elaborate on the background of the books. They are a series of historical fiction books written in the *kōdan* style, primarily for young adults. The readership was made up of young apprentices, who could afford the cheap books and read them between long shifts at work.¹³ They mainly focus on the protagonist, Sarutobi Sasuke, and his misadventures as a magic-wielding samurai. Since *kōdan* are primarily an oral form of storytelling, they are told by skilled orators known as *kōdanshi*

¹¹ Croft, *Urban Culture in Pre-War Japan*, P 52

¹² Langton, Scott C. "A Literature for the People: A Study of Jidai Shosetsu in Taishō and Early Shōwa Japan." Doctoral Dissertation, Ohio State University, 2000. P 105

¹³ Torrance, Richard - "Literacy and Literature in Osaka, 1890-1940." *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, Winter, 2005, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Winter, 2005), P 54

講談師. The credited author of the *Tachikawa Bunko* Sarutobi Sasuke stories was one such *kōdanshi* by the name of Tamada Gyokushūsai II 二代目玉田玉秀齋 (1856-1921). Sasuke's stories were originally published in this written form of *kōdan*, which was a popular genre in and of itself known as *kakikōdan* 描き講談, or “Written-kōdan.” These were produced by stenographers, who would write down the story as the *kōdanshi*, Tamada in this case, dictated the narrative.¹⁴ Though Tamada Gyokushūkai is the credited author of the Tachikawa books, only some of them actually reflected his own original stories.¹⁵ Behind the scenes, a team of three writers using the pen name of “Snowflake Mountain Hermit” or Sekka Sanjin 雪花山人 started writing their own material based on Tamada's outline of narrative plot points, and simply sent the writings to Tamada for review.¹⁶

But the exceptional aspect of Sarutobi Sasuke's characterization that makes his character so widely popular and prominent in Japanese culture are his magical *ninjutsu* 忍術 abilities. In the *Tachikawa Bunko* series and other popular films and stories, he is often characterized as a playful trickster, and a *ninjutsu-tsukai* 忍術使い, or a ninjutsu-user. *Ninjutsu*, in this context, means something like “sorcery” or “magic”. These abilities give Sarutobi Sasuke superhuman agility and strength. In the 60's, the word *ninjutsu* would later take on a different meaning, resembling something like a martial art, or

¹⁴ Langton "A Literature for the People," P 93

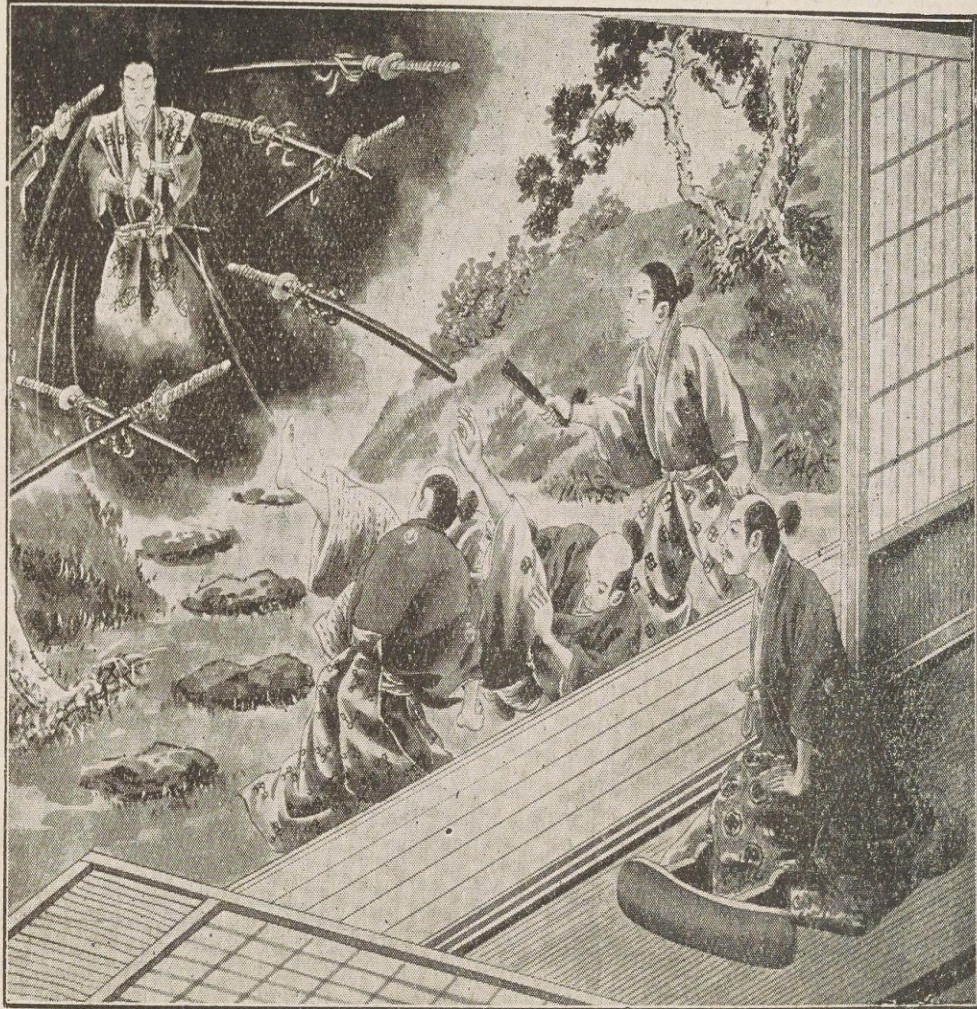
¹⁵ Langton "A Literature for the People," P 93

¹⁶ Croft, *Urban Culture in Pre-War Japan*, P 8

scientific arts. See Figure 1 for an image of Sasuke using *ninjutsu* as a magical ability, in this case lifting swords by muttering an incantation and making a hand symbol called 九

字切り *Kuji Kiri*.

猿飛佐助の忍術を以て多勢の刀を取上る



アヤアヤ我々腰に差して居る刀が忽ち空中に飛上るがとは不思議だ

Figure 1 "Sarutobi Sasuke, using ninjutsu, takes up swords in great numbers."

In the *Tachikawa Bunko*, Sarutobi Sasuke's amazing abilities are made clear from the very beginning.

Every day, Sasuke would scramble up the huge trees in the mountains of Torii pass, flying from tree to tree, and appeared to play tag with the monkeys or whatever animals when he got the chance. That was not actually the case, but believe it or not, he was so agile that he could jump twenty feet up or down without even taking a second thought. He could run around on precarious cliffs down which a deer could not go, as though he were going about on level ground. The people of the village were all amazed at his impressive abilities, saying things like, 'Washizuka's boy, young master Sasuke can do what no other man can.'¹⁷

The writing is stylized in a way that makes it seem like it is being performed by a *kōdanshi*. The narrator of the story, who is written to speak like a *kōdanshi* focuses on the importance of military nobility. The locations in this story are real, and it is set in the real historical context of the Sengoku Era, or Warring States era (1467-1615).

To speak of [Sarutobi Sasuke's] lineage and background, at the foothills of Torii Pass in Shinano province, there was a local wealthy samurai called Washizuka Sadayu (Sasuke's father). Originally he was the retainer of Mori Nagayoshi, castle lord of Shinano Prefecture's Kawanakajima, and Governor of Musashi Province, but Lord Nagayoshi had died at the battle of Komakiyama, and since then, Washizuka Sadayu was a man with a personality of such unparalleled devotion and loyalty that his heart would not allow him to serve a second lord, and instead lived a peaceful life at the foot of Torii pass as a masterless Rōnin.¹⁸

The significance of such an introduction is to speak of Sasuke's lineage as a samurai, giving him a certain level of prestige, and giving this story that *kōdan* flavor. One day, Sarutobi Sasuke is using his grand powers to practice fighting against a tree. An old man

¹⁷ Tamada, Gyokushūkai. *Sanada Sanyūshi Sarutobi Sasuke*. Osaka: Tachikawa Bunmeidō, 1917 P 2

¹⁸ Tamada, *Sanada Sanyūshi Sarutobi Sasuke*, P 1

named Tozawa Hakuunsai 戸沢白雲齋 appears and mocks his lack of dueling skills, after which he offers to teach him the arts of sword fighting, and magical *ninjutsu*.

The Old Man: ...This thing called the art of war is tempering your courage, anticipating change, and avoiding getting hit by someone, that is vital. Do you understand? This is how I prepare for battle, checking my body for potential weak spots.¹⁹

Eventually, Sarutobi Sasuke is introduced to Sanada Yukimura 真田幸村 (1567-1615), a real historical figure who was a prominent general during the waning years of the Sengoku Era. Sanada Yukimura plays a rather significant role in the *Tachikawa Bunko* Sarutobi Sasuke stories, either being mentioned or appearing in most chapters. Sanada's surname is even in the title of the collected version of Sarutobi Sasuke: *Sanada Sanyūshi Sarutobi Sasuke*. The Warring States era was a time of all-out war and great political turmoil. This period of turmoil came to an end through the three great unifiers, who were made up of Oda Nobunaga 織田信長 (1534-1582), and his successors Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu 徳川家康 (1542-1616). The three unifiers are often identified with particular characteristics: Nobunaga as a bloodthirsty killer, Hideyoshi as cold, brutal, and efficient, and Ieyasu as a patient opportunist. In fact, there is a famous saying about the unifiers that goes,

“If the song bird won't sing, Nobunaga kills it.
If the song bird won't sing, Hideyoshi makes it.
If the song bird won't sing, Ieyasu waits.”²⁰

¹⁹ Tamada, *Sanada Sanyūshi Sarutobi Sasuke*, P 4

²⁰ Furukawa, Susan Westhafer. *The Afterlife of Toyotomi Hideyoshi: Historical Fiction and Popular Culture in Japan*. United States: Harvard University Asia Center, 2022. P 23

Nobunaga overthrew the shogun and laid the foundation for unifying the main islands of Japan. This period of upheaval and war serves as the setting for *Tachikawa Bunko* stories. Eventually, in 1582, Nobunaga was murdered by his own vassal Akechi Mitsuhide 明智光秀 (1528-1582).

After Nobunaga's betrayal and subsequent death, his ally Toyotomi Hideyoshi took his place as effective ruler of Japan until his death in 1598. Since Hideyoshi based himself primarily in the Osaka area, Hideyoshi's rule and exploits have long been a source of pride for the Japanese people of the Kansai²¹ region, even after Tokugawa Ieyasu's rise to power in Hideyoshi's place. Sanada Yukimura was a close ally of Hideyoshi, continuing to support his heir, Hideyori 豊臣秀頼 (1593-1615), after Hideyoshi died from an illness. Some of the prominent allies of the Toyotomi clan conspired against Hideyori after Hideyoshi's death, with Tokugawa Ieyasu ending up victorious, and securing the position of shogun. Those loyal to Hideyoshi continued to fight to support Hideyori. One such supporter, Ishida Mitsunari 石田三成 (1559-1600) was a vital general for the young Toyotomi heir. Tokugawa Ieyasu smashed Mitsunari's forces at the famed Battle of Sekigahara (1600), and then crushed Hideyori's army at the Siege of Osaka (1615), completely ending the Toyotomi faction. Tokugawa Ieyasu represents the eventual supremacy of Edo, or modern-day Tokyo, after centuries of Osaka and Kyoto serving as the Japanese archipelago's cultural centers. Sanada Yukimura's

²¹ The Kansai region of Japan is located in the south west of Japan's central island, Honshū. It is home to such cities as Osaka, Kyoto, and Kobe.

loyalty to the popular Hideyoshi through continuing to support his heir Hideyori, and his resistance to Tokugawa and thus Edo, paints him as a somewhat underdog figure and a source of pride and inspiration in Japan's Kansai region.

In the *Tachikawa Bunko* stories, Sarutobi Sasuke eventually becomes a retainer for Sanada Yukimura. He is one of the *Sanada Sanyūshi*, or “Sanada's Three Braves”. This connection ties him to the popularity of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who already enjoyed the highest level of respect among the three great unifiers of Japan.²² Hideyoshi was a lowborn soldier who worked his way up through the ranks before being at one point the most powerful man on the Japanese archipelago. His low-born and supposed self-made man status contributes to his popularity, these being points of pride on top of the fact that he was heavily associated with Osaka and Kyoto, contributing the famous Osaka Castle to the city.

Once Sasuke gains his station as a samurai, he meets Sanada Yukimura and joins his retinue of vassals known as his “braves.”²³ After Sasuke, three more notable fighters join Sanada's forces: Kirigakure Saizō 霧隠才蔵, Yuri Kamanosuke 由利鎌之助, and finally Anayama Kosuke 穴山小助. The book that collects most of the Sarutobi Sasuke stories, *Sanada Sanyūshi Sarutobi Sasuke*, is titled “Three Braves” because of the *Tachikawa Bunko*'s focus on Sarutobi Sasuke's personal entourage of himself along with

²² Furukawa, *The Afterlife of Toyotomi Hideyoshi*, P 23

²³ The “Ten Braves” have also gone by the “Three” (such as in the titles of the *Tachikawa Bunko* series) or “Six” or “Seven Braves,” with Sasuke being the seventh member. The first six members in the *Tachikawa* series were Miyoshi Seikai 三好清海, Miyoshi Isa 三好伊三, Unno Rokurō 海野六郎, Kakei Juzō 笥十蔵, Nezu Jinpachi 根津甚八, and Mochizuki Rokurō 望月六郎. In modern representations of the Ten Braves, the members are all called “ninja,” such as in the 2016 film *Sanada Jūyūshi*. These Ten Braves are also referred to as a group of ninja in many books about ninja, as we will see below. This contrasts with the *Tachikawa Bunko* series, in which the word “ninja” is never used.

Kirigakure Saizō and Yuri Kamanosuke.²⁴ Tachikawa even published a stand-alone series for Yuri Kamanosuke and Kirigakure Saizō, both titled under the “*Sanada Sanyūshi*” name. Long before Sasuke meets his two companions, though, he goes through a long process of proving his worth to the other members of the Braves, who all vie for their liege Sanada Yukimura’s attention.

Sarutobi Sasuke meets Yukimura when he travels to his home at Torii pass, in Kawanakajima. He proves his worth to the lord by beating several of his braves in duels by using trickery by means of his magical ninjutsu, suddenly disappearing and moving impossibly fast. Sanada Yukimura recruits Sasuke and grows to trust and rely on him as a vassal.

Until the age of nineteen Sasuke remained in constant service to the Lord Yukimura, accompanying him always. With the other heroes, he sharpened his ninjutsu and military skills. Over time, the noble Yukimura came to rely on Sasuke like a brother. One day Lord Yukimura set Sasuke several tasks; first, to catch a dove on the roof; second, to climb up into a pine tree, which he accomplished with a single bound. Sasuke could do things that others were not capable of. His master was pleased. He had made do with the other six heroes, but not so with Sasuke.²⁵

His attention from Yukimura earns Sasuke the envy of the other Braves, who make plans to beat Sasuke and humiliate him. While the others creep into Sasuke’s room while they think he is sleeping, Sasuke traps the Brave Miyoshi Seikai 三好清海 in his futon, then uses his magic to take on Miyoshi’s appearance. The others come into the room, and begin beating on the futon, believing it to be Sasuke. When the others then go to present a beaten and bloody Sasuke to Sanada Yukimura, they realize they have beaten

²⁴ Croft, *Urban Culture in Pre-War Japan*, P 98

²⁵ Croft, *Urban Culture in Pre-War Japan*, P 181

one of their comrades, and have just humiliated themselves in front of their master.²⁶

After some time passes, the other braves begin to respect Sasuke, and he cements his position as one of Yukimura's most important vassals.

Sasuke goes on many different adventures, traveling to real places, and interacting with real historical figures. He infiltrates castles and uses his magic to get himself and his friends out of sticky situations, and sometimes to create a bit of chaos. He kills people, falls in love with a woman, and spies on enemies, learning lessons about life along the way. A significant turning point in the story occurs when Toyotomi Hideyoshi dies, and the braves begin to contend with Tokugawa Ieyasu's forces. Eventually, however, the 1917 printed *Tachikawa Bunko* edition that collects Sasuke's stories ends with a rather unceremonious wrap up. In this version, Sasuke survives the summer battle of Osaka, faking his death, and escaping to a southern province with Yukimura.²⁷

²⁶ Croft, *Urban Culture in Pre-War Japan*, P 185

²⁷ Tamada, *Sanada Sanyūshi Sarutobi Sasuke*, P 644

CHAPTER 3

SARUTOBI SASUKE: FACT OR FICTION?

Though the collected edition of the *Tachikawa Bunko* series *Sanada Sanyūshi Sarutobi Sasuke* makes it clear that Sasuke survives the battle of Osaka, scholar Adam Thorin Croft, who has analyzed the *Tachikawa Bunko* stories, points out that Sasuke does die at the siege of Osaka in the fortieth edition of the *Tachikawa Bunko*.²⁸ Sarutobi Sasuke's entire story in the *Tachikawa Bunko* is told as a tale of historical fiction, and was not intended to be interpreted as a historically accurate text. However, despite the *Tachikawa Bunko* being the story that popularized Sarutobi Sasuke making him a fully formed character, *Tachikawa Bunko* itself was not necessarily the point of origin for the name Sarutobi Sasuke. Since the name Sarutobi Sasuke can be shown as being recorded as early as 1781,²⁹ some might say this is evidence that Sarutobi Sasuke is not a purely fictional invention and that he is based in historical reality, but this is simply not the case.

Examining Japanese-language sources, the degree of uncertainty as to Sarutobi Sasuke's historical status is quite surprising, considering there is no evidence that he is historical. Turning to the entry for Sarutobi Sasuke in the *Encyclopedia Nipponica*, the language is unambiguous. "*Tachikawa Bunko's Sarutobi Sasuke* is an original fictional character, and one of the members of the Sanada Ten Braves."³⁰ However, according to the *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten's* entry for Sarutobi Sasuke, "[Sarutobi Sasuke] is a ninjutsu user from the Warring States era (1467-1615). His name is written down in an Iga-ryū

²⁸ Croft, *Urban Culture in Pre-War Japan*, P 182

²⁹ Takahashi, "Edo no Sarutobi Sasuke," P 2

³⁰ "Sarutobi Sasuke," in *Encyclopedia Nipponica*, 2023, JapanKnowledge.

document, however, the reality of his existence is unclear.”³¹ Sarutobi Sasuke is an incredibly popular fictional character, yet a variety of sources claim that he may be a real person. To find out why this issue seems to be unclear in some cases, we will look at the authors that are claiming that there is a historical Sarutobi Sasuke and elucidate the fallibility of their claims.

One scholar, Richard Torrance, mentions Sarutobi Sasuke in minor detail as part of his article, “Literacy and Literature in Osaka, 1890-1940.” He summarizes Sarutobi Sasuke’s backstory from the *Tachikawa Bunko* series, referring to Sasuke as a prominent “ninja” throughout his article.³² Given Sasuke’s alliance with Sanada Yukimura and literary connections to the Osaka region, it makes sense that in a discussion of Osaka’s literature, Sasuke’s name would crop up. Torrance focuses on the audience of Sasuke’s stories, analyzing what made them so popular among certain groups.³³

Another academic work that takes a glance at Sasuke is a doctoral dissertation from 2000 by Scott C. Langton titled *A Literature for the People: A Study of Jidai Shōsetsu in Taishō and Early Shōwa Japan*. Langton traces the history of the *Tachikawa Bunko*, including examining the various authors of the stories, and the wide audience that the stories appealed to. Langton also speaks to Sasuke’s prominence in the *Tachikawa Bunko* serials, noting that Sasuke was “the first ninja to appear in the *Tachikawa Bunko* series...”³⁴

³¹ “Sarutobi Sasuke,” in *Encyclopedia Nipponica*, 2023, JapanKnowledge.

³² Torrance, “Literacy and Literature in Osaka,” pp 54-56

³³ Torrance, “Literacy and Literature in Osaka,” pp 56-57

³⁴ Langton, “A Literature for the People” P 103

Both of these authors are very clear on Sarutobi Sasuke's status as an ahistorical, fictional character. Langton, whose dissertation is primarily concerned with the practice of historical fiction in 20th century Japan, notes that, "Although Sarutobi Sasuke was a completely fictional character, his adventures were peopled with historical figures."³⁵ That is to say, Sasuke himself is fictional, but his stories took place in real historical contexts. This does not, of course, make Sarutobi Sasuke a historical figure. Richard Torrance says, "Sarutobi Sasuke seems to have been entirely the invention of Otetsu,"³⁶ referring to Yamada Otetsu 山田阿鉄 (1875-1942), the son-in-law of the *kōdanshi* Tamada Kyokujūsai II. Torrance and Langton's work comprises a significant portion of the relatively small amount of Western academic work that has covered Sarutobi Sasuke, and both leave no room for ambiguity as to Sasuke's historical existence; they firmly contextualize him as fictional.

Indeed, Otetsu makes no claims about basing the character of Sarutobi Sasuke on a real person. In fact, in an interview with 1960's scholar and ninja researcher Adachi Ken'ichi, it is made abundantly clear that Otetsu invented the character. "Otetsu came up with it. Otetsu said, 'Up until this *kōdan* book, one work was turned inside out, patched together, you could say it was all cut from recycled cloth. It is the type of thing that feels comfortable. This thing now, Sarutobi Sasuke, was at any rate, a cut from brand new cloth'"³⁷ What Otetsu says seems to be in line with how *kōdan* works. Stories are taken from here and there to create new ones, but the notable thing that Otetsu claims is that he

³⁵ Langton, "A Literature for the People" P 104

³⁶ Torrance, "Literacy and Literature in Osaka," P 54

³⁷ Azuma, Shūzō *Osaka Bungaku Chizu*. Osaka: Henshū Kōbō. 1993, P 187

created the character of Sarutobi Sasuke. Specifically, he is saying that Sarutobi Sasuke was a new character that he came up with, which was outside the norm of the *kōdan* that were being published in his time.

In his 2019 academic book *Urban Culture in Pre-War Japan*, Adam Thorin Croft deeply analyzes the *Tachikawa Bunko* stories. His work focuses on tracing the history and social impact of the *Tachikawa Bunko*, including reading the books as a means of understanding state ideology, hypermasculine sentiments, and Osaka as a distinct site of cultural production.³⁸ Another point that Croft brings to light is the transcultural origins of Sasuke, as an extension of Chinese literary traditions that have been reimagined in other very popular works of fiction such as *Nansō Satomi Hakkenden* or, *Tale of Eight Dogs* 南総里見八犬伝 (1842). Croft points out that Sarutobi Sasuke is arguably an adaptation of the famous Chinese character of Sun Wukong 孫悟空, the monkey deity from the traditional Chinese novel *Journey to the West*. Croft compares the characters, noting the qualities that they share:

Thanks to the spread of Buddhism, the exuberant exploits of the mischievous immortal [Sun Wukong] are common throughout Asia (Ohnuki-Tierney 1990, Meir 1992, Isobe 2011, pp. 212–229). In Japan he is known as Songokū. Like his transcultural counterpart, Sasuke possesses keen senses and great physical strength; he can also control the elements of fire and water using magic. There is one significant difference between the two characters: Songokū is an immortal, whereas Sasuke is not.³⁹

Langton even supports this connection between Sarutobi Sasuke and Sun Wukong in *Journey to the West*, calling attention to the fact that, “*The Journey to the West* was

³⁸ Croft, *Urban Culture in Pre-War Japan*, pp 109-112, 93, and 70-72

³⁹ Croft, *Urban Culture in Pre-War Japan*, P 5

popular with Japanese readers during the late Edo period and was still widely read in the Taishō era. It was reportedly one of Yamada Otetsu's favorite novels."⁴⁰ Essentially Croft is arguing that both the content, and writing style found in the *Tachikawa Bunko* is based on the Japanese Edo era Neo-Confucian moral framework of reading for edification (*kanzen chōaku* 勧善懲悪), and that the character of Sarutobi Sasuke serves as a representation of the national ethos of Japan during the Taishō era. Though Croft concedes that Sarutobi Sasuke's character is possibly a reinterpretation of the character of Sun Wukong, he also brings up the question of historical ambiguity.

The chief protagonist of the *Tachikawa bunko* is a fictional warrior named Sarutobi 'monkey-jump' Sasuke 猿飛佐助, vassal to the Toyotomi general Sanada Nobushige (1567–1615), more commonly referred to these days by his alias Yukimura. Historical evidence shows that there were established narratives within the *kōdan* community that mention Sasuke in connection with the Sanada clan from the 1880s onwards. For instance, a version of Sasuke appears briefly as a middle-aged warrior in *Sanada sandaiki* (Three generations of the Sanada: A Chronicle) published in 1888 (Ryūji 2004, pp. 300–301). This revelation has produced a great deal of controversy as to whether there was a real prototype for Sasuke or not.⁴¹

Croft uses an article by Takahashi Kei'ichi 高橋圭一 at Ehime University as evidence for a potential historical prototype for Sarutobi Sasuke, but this indicates that Croft has completely misinterpreted what Takahashi is saying. Takahashi, in his article "Edo no Sarutobi Sasuke" ("Sarutobi Sasuke of the Edo Period") discusses the character of Sarutobi Sasuke, and his various appearances in fictional tales before the *Tachikawa Bunko*. In particular, Takahashi mentions an old map discovered by historian Okamoto Ryōichi 岡本良一 (1939-1988), who discovered this map in a pile of uncatalogued

⁴⁰ Langton "A Literature for the People," P 103

⁴¹ Croft, *Urban Culture in Pre-War Japan*, pp. 1-2

records in Osaka Castle. Okamoto found that the old battle map showed formations of the legendary siege of Osaka. On the bottom of the map, he found the names Sarutobi Sasuke and Kirigakure Saizō listed among a list of Sanada Yukimasu's⁴² (1601-1615) forces.⁴³

This discovery is significant because, at first glance, such a document would appear to constitute evidence that Sarutobi Sasuke and Kirigakure Saizō were real people who served the Yukimura/Toyotomi faction. Under this assumption, Croft, accordingly, raises the question, “Was it possible that two of Japan’s most celebrated fictional characters were real?”⁴⁴ Croft is somewhat dismissive about Otetsu’s claim that he himself had created the character; Croft asserts, “It is notable that after the series went into decline, Otetsu retired from writing to return to his first vocation in dentistry. If he had been the creative force behind the [Sasuke] series, I am certain he would have continued.”⁴⁵

But Takahashi is not making the point that this is evidence that Sarutobi Sasuke is based on a real person. Certainly, the map that lists Sarutobi Sasuke and his cohort Kirigakure Saizō is somewhat compelling evidence for historic origin. Otetsu could have heard of the character in passing, and co-opted the historical figure unconsciously, believing he invented the character. But if we look, Takahashi Kei'ichi's research shows that there is more to be said about the matter. It is clear, at least, that the character of Sarutobi Sasuke existed in some written form during the Edo era. But, his existence was still fictional, and not historical, and Takahashi is unambiguous about this point,

⁴² 真田幸昌 Yukimura's son; he is known as 大助 Daisuke in *kōdan*

⁴³ Takahashi, “Edo no Sarutobi Sasuke,” P 1

⁴⁴ Croft, *Urban Culture in Pre-War Japan*, P 3

⁴⁵ Croft, *Urban Culture in Pre-War Japan*, P 8

“Sarutobi Sasuke was born from the *Jitsuroku* (historical fiction) of the Edo period. The text that Okamoto mentions, *The Record of Three Generations of the Sanada*, is one such work of historical fiction.”⁴⁶ Takahashi mentions several different texts that mention Sarutobi Sasuke, which are all either historical fiction or *kōdan* tales. Takahashi digs through these, and tracks Sarutobi Sasuke’s evolution as a character throughout each work.

Sasuke also appeared in at the very beginning of another *Jitsuroku* known as *Enshoku Taiheirakuki* 厭蝕太平楽記 (1781), which may be his earliest appearance, however in a minor role.⁴⁷ Sasuke has a slightly more expanded role in a Kansai area war narrative known as *Namba Senki* 難波戦記, a fictional *kōdan*. “The Taishō era *kōdanshi* Kyokudō Nanryō II’s *kōdan* of *The Namba Senki* was the source book of the modern Kamigata *kōdan*, also called *Namba Senki*. However, if you were to read and compare the *Enshoku Taiheirakuki* with the *Namba Senki*, it is clear that the *Namba Senki* came from *Enshoku Taiheirakuki*.”⁴⁸ Nanryō II’s work came later than the *Tachikawa Bunko* series, however the works of another Osaka based short *kōdan* writer by the name of Kanda Hakuryū 神田伯龍 (1902-1949) wrote two books that predated Nanryō II’s work: 1889-1900’s *Namba Senki Winter War* and *Namba Senki Summer War*, which also of course use the *Enshoku Taiheirakuki* as a source.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Takahashi, “Edo no Sarutobi Sasuke,” P 2

⁴⁷ Takahashi, “Edo no Sarutobi Sasuke” P 3

⁴⁸ Takahashi, “Edo no Sarutobi Sasuke,” P 5

⁴⁹ Takahashi, “Edo no Sarutobi Sasuke,” P 5

What Takahashi is proposing, then, is that based on all of the increasingly purely fictional appearances of Sarutobi Sasuke, the names Sasuke and Kirigakure Saizō had to have been added later. “In fact, Sarutobi Sasuke appears in *Taiheirakuki*. Judging from this old map’s index, one may imagine if it was created based on *Taiheirakuki*.”⁵⁰ The addition of the names to the map is perhaps an homage to the literary characters, rather than listing real people. This claim completely contradicts Otetsu’s claims about inventing the character, and clearly demonstrates that Sarutobi Sasuke had already been a part, though minor at first, of *kōdan* storytelling. While Otetsu’s claims about having completely invented the character of Sarutobi Sasuke from nothing do not seem to be true, this does not mean Sarutobi Sasuke was a real person. Rather, it demonstrates that Sarutobi Sasuke existed in literary tradition for longer than was initially widely thought. Based on what Takahashi is saying, the evidence would appear to indicate that Sarutobi Sasuke is and always was a completely fictional character, having appeared in several fictional accounts throughout the Edo period.

Croft’s misunderstanding of the evidence provided by Takahashi is an example of the “model” theory in practice. Croft starts with the Orientalist assumption that Sarutobi Sasuke must be based on a real person, a “model,” then uses tangential evidence to support his claim. However, as it turns out, the evidence that Croft used points in a completely different direction. Croft’s argument about Sasuke potentially existing would have some weight if the stories that he was in were not historical fiction. This assumption

⁵⁰ Takahashi, Kei’ichi. “Ninja to gouketsu - Sarutobi, Kirigakure, Ban Dan’emon” in *Bungaku*, pp 39-49 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 11/12, 2006) P 42

is essentially Orientalist, where Croft is recontextualizing evidence of a tradition of fictional literature as historical record.

Croft's mishandling of historical fiction is only one example of many. Authors such as Hatsumi Masaaki 初見 良昭, Fujita Seiko 藤田西湖 (1899-1966), Murayama Tomoyoshi 村山知義 (1901-1977), and Okuse Heishichirō 奥瀬平七郎 (1911-1997) have written extensively about the modern practice of *ninjutsu*, and the ninja, with Hatsumi and Fujita both claiming to have trained as a ninja. Murayama Tomoyoshi was a prominent Japanese communist, and the author behind a series of very influential fictional ninja novels called *Shinobi no Mono*⁵¹ (1962-1971). Essentially, in many cases these authors believe that there is some sort of esoteric origin to the idea of *ninjutsu* that survives to the present day and can be practiced as a form of physical conditioning. This physical conditioning, such authors claim, can produce seemingly miraculous results that might appear to an onlooker to be literal magic. This usually involves taking fictional examples of *ninjutsu-as-magic* and trying to recreate them from a scientific, empirical standpoint. These authors have used Sarutobi Sasuke to bolster their claims about *ninjutsu* as physical training without seriously attempting to prove his historical existence.

Murayama's ninja novels use the idea of the ninja to highlight the class inequities of the common man, and the feudal lords of the Warring States era. Murayama points out that the "Sanada Ten Braves" characters like Sarutobi Sasuke, Kirigakure Saizō, the

⁵¹ *Shinobi no mono* is, usually, another word for "ninja." The issue of the difference between the two words is rather complex, and is addressed in "Sarutobi Sasuke: Ninja and Ninjutsu-tsukai"

monk Miyoshi Seikai, Yuri Kamanosuke, and Anayama Kosuke were all fictional characters,

However, it is certain that there were countless nameless ninja, worked hard by their commanders, that perished. Those people died, and their names were lost with no way to be recovered. In the night, if you listen carefully, you can hear the begrudged cries filling the night, of the humans who were shouldered with the utmost limit of suffering, and those countless people who were extinguished without a trace.⁵²

Murayama is arguing that his work, the book series of *Shinobi no Mono*, is indeed fiction, but that it demonstrates a deeper historical truth about a class of people who did exist, but whose names and histories are irretrievable. In other words, his stories about the ninja contain fictional characters, but they are stand-ins for a group of people who existed but were lost to history. This is representative of the “deeper truth” theory, where Murayama uses fictional stories as historical evidence that there were actual ninja during the Warring States period. His point is that though these Sanada Ten Brave characters are all fictional, they stand in for a group of people that actually existed. This is a mistake because historical fiction *cannot* be used as historical evidence. Murayama is using these fictional ninja characters to make claims about the past, when really his work serves to awaken his readers to injustice as Georg Lukács’s Marxist view of the historical novel is described.

The English-language academic sources that analyze the *Tachikawa Bunko* and Sarutobi Sasuke more often take this Marxist approach to understanding the series and the character. In other words, these academics accurately suggest that the *Tachikawa Bunko* be studied as literature that represents contemporary struggles. Langton and

⁵² Murayama, Tomoyoshi. “Honpen no Dokusha ni” in *Shinobi no Mono 1: Jōmaki* (Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten) 1961. P 543

Torrance put no effort into trying to prove that Sarutobi Sasuke was real, instead they point out that Sarutobi Sasuke is fictional, and focus on what the character represents during the periods in which the character was being written into these various stories. Langton quotes the author Niwa Fumio 丹羽文雄 (1904-2005), "Generally, for people of our generation, Tachikawa bunko was the first literature we had which actually seemed like literature..."⁵³ Langton also adds, quoting the well-known author Kōda Rohan's 幸田成行 (1867-1947) assessment of the *Tachikawa Bunko* stories, concludes that "Although the stories were 'complete nonsense,' children around the country loved reading about Sarutobi Sasuke and Kirigakure Saizo making themselves invisible, flying over walls and turning into animals by reciting special incantations."⁵⁴ Langton's argument overall revolves around pointing out the burgeoning literacy of the Meiji and Taishō eras, and the implication that, "Looking for content that would simultaneously entertain new readers and reinforce the ethics that would make them productive subjects of the Emperor, publishers turned to the vaudeville halls, particularly to the *kōdan* which were rich in morality and in entertainment value."⁵⁵ The *kōdan* tales of the *Tachikawa Bunko* were meant to teach values framed in history, rather than to teach history, or make historical claims.

Richard Torrance agrees with Langton's sentiment. His argument focuses on the circumstances of the lives of those that made up the primary audience of the *Tachikawa Bunko*.

⁵³ Langton, "A Literature for the People" P 105

⁵⁴ Langton, "A Literature for the People" P 107

⁵⁵ Langton, "A Literature for the People" P 108

The life and circumstances of Sarutobi are made to conform, in many respects, with those of apprentices, who were the target readers. Sarutobi is about the age of the average apprentice. Like an apprentice, he undergoes prolonged sleeplessness and physical discomfort to attain a goal. He is judged worthy solely on the basis of his competence and abilities rather than by his lineage. Lord Sanada's domain functions much like an Osaka business, with a number of retainers instead of live-in apprentices.⁵⁶

Torrance argues that because Sarutobi Sasuke aligns himself with the Toyotomi faction, and thus the “Osaka” based faction, as opposed to the Edo/Tokyo faction of Tokugawa, the Osaka readers could relate to the underdog struggle of Sasuke. Torrance also points to Sasuke’s anti-hero status, arguing that, “The enthusiasm with which such ‘antihero heroes’ were received throughout the country indicates that Osaka's readership was once again in the forefront of forging a popular literature that incorporated the most immediate fantasies and anxieties spawned by increased valorization and regimentation of a modern economic order”⁵⁷ In other words, Sarutobi Sasuke is not a popular character because he is real, or even plausibly real. Sasuke does not represent how an actual Warring States era samurai would act, but rather his character responds to the concerns of the readership. Sasuke represents the escapism and struggle that appealed to a wide audience in Meiji and Taishō Japan.

Croft’s interpretation of Sarutobi Sasuke is mildly similar to Langton and Torrance’s. Though Croft has also insinuated that Sasuke may be based on a historical figure, it is clear that he understands that Sarutobi Sasuke is written as a character that embodied the issues that faced the contemporary Taishō readership.

Ichikawa and others have interpreted Sasuke as a ‘friend to the weak or those in need’ and as a ‘figure of justice’ – the implication being that Sasuke was a man of

⁵⁶ Torrance, “Literacy and Literature in Osaka,” P 55

⁵⁷ Torrance, “Literacy and Literature in Osaka,” P 57

the people. If we examine Sasuke's actions, this is problematic. But when viewed through a regional lens, the popular view of Sasuke as a representation of the 'common person' struggling to make their way in the world has merit. This is where an appreciation of 'orality' in society becomes critical.⁵⁸

Torrance's point about Sasuke being an anti-hero does not necessarily apply to a representation of the "man of the people" as Croft suggests. In fact, the title of "anti-hero" does not accurately describe Sarutobi Sasuke, at least in terms of how the character was intended to be portrayed. There is evidence that Sasuke was intended to break a trend of evil *Ninjutsutsukai*, or ninjutsu users.

For evidence of Sasuke's moral status representing contemporary issues rather than historical ones, we can turn back to Adachi Ken'ichi's interview with Otetsu. He told Adachi, "In the plot [of the Sarutobi Sasuke stories], ninjutsu is not used for evil purposes, as in previous works featuring Ishikawa Goemon 石川五右衛門, Niki Danjō 仁木弾正, and Jiraiya 自来也. The ninjutsu is used only by good guys, and if they use it for evil, the technique is immediately disrupted."⁵⁹ Since this appears to be a reflection of a scheme to impose morals on the readers by the authors, it is clearly a literary writing and not historical writing. In the story, Sasuke can only use his magic for good, otherwise it does not work. The tale is not bound to a historical record, but to a type of lesson that the author is trying to teach its audience. According to Otetsu, the authors were writing a "family oriented" book and focused on stories of heroism instead.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Croft, *Urban Culture in Pre-War Japan*, P 112

⁵⁹ Azuma, *Osaka Bungaku Chizu*, P 187

⁶⁰ Azuma, *Osaka Bungaku Chizu*, P 187

Considering that authors like Takahashi, Torrance, and Langton make it rather clear that Sarutobi Sasuke is an explicitly fictional character, it is strange that other authors are making claims about a historical version of Sarutobi Sasuke. There appears to be a link between these historical claims, and Western writers' books on the topic of the ninja.

One of the first such books to mention Sarutobi Sasuke is Andrew Adams's *Ninja: The Invisible Assassins* (1970). Adams's book is potentially one of the most influential English-language books on the topic of the ninja. It has been in print since its initial publication in 1970, and has been printed as recently as 2008, marking its 36th edition.⁶¹ *Invisible Assassins* is cited in nearly every work about the ninja; below, more authors on the subject of the ninja, Alt and Yoda,⁶² Levy,⁶³ and Turnbull⁶⁴ have cited the book.

Adams' account of Sarutobi Sasuke tells the tale of how Sarutobi Sasuke dies, a story that, as we will see, circulated widely among the English-language authors on the ninja. Adams's version of events is as follows:

One of the most remarkable stories of the courage and cleverness of two famous ninja leaders, Sasuke Sarutobi and Hanzo Hattori, is recounted by ninja scholar Okuse. The former ninja was in the employ of Hideyori Toyotomi, Hideyoshi's son, while the latter was allied with Gen. Ieyasu Tokugawa. Following the death of Hideyoshi in 1598, the two clans became deadly enemies in the bitter struggle for power. The Toyotomi forces sent Sasuke from their Osaka Castle headquarters to the district controlled by the Tokugawa army- present-day Aichi Prefecture and Nagoya Castle- to find out if Tokugawa planned to attack them soon. Tokugawa's ninja bodyguard regularly searched the attics and under the corridors, but Sasuke slipped through the garden. The important meeting of Tokugawa and

⁶¹ <https://www.worldcat.org/formats-editions/3737923>

⁶² Yoda, Hiroko., Alt, Matt. *Ninja Attack! True Tales of Assassins, Samurai, and Outlaws*. Japan: Tuttle Publishing, 2012. P 201

⁶³ Levy, Joel. *Ninja: The Shadow Warrior*. United States: Sterling, 2008. P 202

⁶⁴ Turnbull, Stephen. *Ninja: Unmasking the Myth*. United Kingdom: Pen & Sword Books, 2017. P 217

his aides was held in the general's private rooms, where plans were disclosed to go ahead and assault Toyotomi's castle in Osaka. After overhearing the plans, Sasuke started to leave. He climbed the wall safely, but when he jumped down the other side his left foot got caught in a steel trap. Unable to extricate himself and fearful that the guards was soon find him, the courageous ninja cut off his left leg. He applied a tourniquet to stop the flow of blood, then tried to make good his escape. After dragging himself as far as possible and almost fainting from loss of blood, Sasuke Sarutobi finally committed hara-kiri.⁶⁵

Andrew Adams also goes on to lay out the story of Hattori Hanzō impersonating Sarutobi Sasuke to trick the Toyotomi faction into thinking that Sasuke still lives, and passes them false intelligence, part of which contributes to Toyotomi and Sanada's defeat at Osaka. Notably, this story does not appear at all in the *Tachikawa Bunko* run. Adams is rather coy about the story's origins too, having no source for the story besides that it came from someone named Okuse.⁶⁶ Adams does not give any indication as to whether the story is historical or fictional, and presents it as though it is simply a true story. In the first chapter of his book, Adams uses deliberately ambiguous language to hint that the stories in his book may contain exaggerated elements, but that they are ultimately true. This argument strongly recalls the "literal truth" claim that historical fiction stories are actual history. Following that logic, the "literal truth" theory would suggest that magical "ninja" were in fact real men with physical skills:

In all the annals of Japan's long history, no single breed of men ever wreaked more havoc or spawned more terror than the fabulous clans of ninja... Supernatural tales claim the ninja was able to fly, walk on water, live underwater like a fish, become invisible at will, sink into the ground, flow through stone walls, disappear in a puff of smoke and even transform himself into a snake, frog, bird or insect. Improbable as these stories may seem, there is a logical explanation for each one, a spark of truth behind the billowing screen of smoke.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Adams, Andrew. *Ninja, the Invisible Assassins*. Spain: Ohara Publications, 1970. P 165

⁶⁶ This is likely Okuse Heishirō, a prominent name among the "ninja" community.

⁶⁷ Adams, *Ninja, the Invisible Assassins*, pp 23-24

Adams's underlying point is fundamentally Orientalist. He suggests that fictional stories can be read as historical stories, which allows him to adopt the position that he is writing about history without raising the need to verify any of his information. This method allows Adams, and other authors, to enter in any fictional writing about ninja as evidence for a historical ninja. It is not until the 1960's that Sarutobi Sasuke was taken as anything but fictional, as fictional stories about Sasuke had a sort of resurgence with Shirato Sanpei's 白土三平 (1932-2021) *shōnen* 少年⁶⁸ manga series entitled *Sasuke* (1961-1966.)

The Sasuke-Hanzō episode is told once again by Donn Draeger, a famous martial artist and author, in his book *Ninjutsu: Facts, Legends, and Techniques* (1971). This tale is found in a section of the book titled "The 'Monkey' Ninja". In recounting Sasuke's feats, Draeger also hedges the information in his book by taking the position, "Some of the stories [about the ninja] are true. But a good many of them have become distorted by exaggeration, while still others are purely the result of persons with overly active and imaginative minds who have become possessed by the lure of ninjutsu."⁶⁹ Draeger also adds that the ninja perpetuated fictional stories about themselves in order to make them more terrifying, without providing any evidence on the subject.⁷⁰ By implying that the fictional stories are directly connected to the supposedly "real stories," Draeger, like Adams, is using fictional stories to make historical claims. Draeger also mentions Sarutobi Sasuke's ability to leap from tree to tree, which as we have seen comes from the

⁶⁸ *Shōnen* is Japanese for "young man." *Shōnen* serves as the name of a genre of manga and anime that is supposed to appeal to a wide demographic of young boys and young men.

⁶⁹ Draeger, Donn F.. "Chapter 6" of *Ninjutsu: Facts, Legends, and Techniques*. Japan: Tuttle Publishing, 2011. P 103

⁷⁰ Draeger, *Ninjutsu: Facts, Legends, and Techniques*, P 103

fictional *Tachikawa Bunko* books, though Draeger does not mention the *Tachikawa Bunko* books at all.

Draeger uses more ambiguous language, referring to Sasuke as a “legendary ninja.”⁷¹ Using the word “legendary” is a rather tactical choice on the part of this author. “Legendary” can be used to describe something “remarkable,” but it can also be used to note that something is “from legend,” or in other words “not necessarily true.” Either use of the word is applicable in this instance, therefore Draeger is continuing to blur the boundary between fact and fiction. In telling the story of Sasuke’s death, he adds on the portion where Sasuke tries to make his initial escape, “... leaping onto a high wall surrounding the shogun’s residence by using a small springboard device which he had concealed alongside of the garden prior to final entry in the shogun’s private quarters.”⁷² Adams makes no mention of the part about a springboard, and since Draeger does not use any sort of citation, it is uncertain whether not he had copied Adams’s version of events. Draeger may have added his own ideas to the story, or went to a source closer to a perhaps original version of this story, and included more details. The most likely case is that Draeger used Adams’s book as a source, considering how close these books came out, Adams’s in 1970 and Draeger’s in 1971.

The ninja entertainment culture is similar to the *kōdan* tradition of storytelling as Otetsu pointed out earlier, where different fabrics are recycled to spin new ones. Ninja tales rely on ambiguous characters who can plausibly fulfill the role of ninja, and then authors add them to the canons of ninja lore. All these characters, stories, and ideas are

⁷¹ Draeger, *Ninjutsu: Facts, Legends, and Techniques*, P 103

⁷² Draeger, *Ninjutsu: Facts, Legends, and Techniques*, P 103

woven together, relying on the fuzzy boundary between fact and fiction to maintain the appearance of being based in historical fact. The English-language authors who came in later to examine these stories seemed to have not realized that there was a distinction between fact and fiction in the ninja stories. An example of this is found in the book *Ninja: The Shadow Warrior* (2008) by Joel Levy. Levy tells the same Sasuke episode about his death at Tokugawa Ieyasu's mansion that Adams and Draeger previously quoted.⁷³ But he also mentions Sasuke's master Hakuunsai Tozawa from the *Tachikawa Bunko* series, who is a completely fictional character.⁷⁴

Though Levy provides a bibliography at the end of the book, he does not utilize in-text citations or footnotes to explain where each piece of information is coming from. He cites the Andrew Adams book *Invisible Assassins* mentioned above, for example, but does not clarify which pieces of information are coming from it. It is unclear where he is pulling from for the reference to Sarutobi Sasuke's master. Levy, like Draeger, also uses the word "legendary" to avoid taking a clear stance on whether or not Sasuke is a fictional character,

The characters featured here often straddle the boundary between historical fact and folkloric fiction. Most or all of them may have been historical personages (who probably lived during the Sengoku period- the heyday of the ninja) but layers of legend, myth, mysticism have accreted around their exploits.⁷⁵

The wording of these introductory paragraphs preceding ninja stories is an effective method for the author to avoid the question of historical evidence in the telling of ninja lore. It provides no certain level of clarity as to which part of Sarutobi Sasuke's

⁷³ Levy, *Ninja: The Shadow Warrior*, pp 160-161

⁷⁴ Levy, *Ninja: The Shadow Warrior*, pp 168-169

⁷⁵ Levy, *Ninja: The Shadow Warrior*, pp 152-154

story is real, and which part is fictional. Considering we know that Sasuke's master, Hakuunsai Tozawa, comes from a fictional story, there is very little actual ambiguity. The main solution to clearing up uncertainty between history and myth is by keeping track of where each story is coming from. Had Levy directly cited where Sasuke's teacher came from, we could create a clear line between the *Tachikawa Bunko* and Levy's book. Since Levy seems to have come across the character of Hakuunsai Tozawa, he was likely aware of the *Tachikawa Bunko*, but still took no stance on the historicity of Sasuke and his sword master. Arguably, some of the statements couched in mystery about Sarutobi Sasuke's historicity seem to be manufactured. But regarding the other claim, the story of Sasuke and Hanzō is treated as though it is based in some sort of historical reality, but the fact is that there is a way to clearly trace the tale to its fictional roots.

Finally, a 2019 book called *Ninjas: Japan's Stealthy Agents* by Matt Chandler and illustrated by Silvio DB tells the same story about Sarutobi Sasuke infiltrating Tokugawa Ieyasu's mansion, and then being foiled by Hanzo's bear trap. They also add the detail that Sarutobi Sasuke is historically a person called Kōzuki Sasuke. "Over time, tales of Sasuke's adventures evolved into stories about a ninja named Sarutobi Sasuke. Sarutobi Sasuke is a popular character in many fictional stories. However, his abilities and achievements are based on Kōzuki Sasuke and other ninjas of his time"⁷⁶

Since Chandler did not cite the source for this claim about Kōzuki Sasuke, it is impossible to be sure where that character comes from. It is worth noting, however, that on the Wikipedia entry for "Sarutobi Sasuke" Kōzuki Sasuke's name is included among a

⁷⁶ Chandler, Matt. *Ninjas: Japan's Stealthy Secret Agents*. United States: Capstone, 2019. P 10

list of potential prototypical models for the character of Sarutobi Sasuke. There is, however, no evidence to support this. This is an example of the “model theory,” since the claim is that though there is a fictional Sarutobi Sasuke character, he is based on a real human being who served as, in some way, a model for the character. This implies that someone like Kōzuki Sasuke was similar to Sarutobi Sasuke in some way and may have been some sort of ninja. However, there is no evidence that this person was a ninja, let alone a magic user, and there is no link between the two, other than in name.

This connection between Kōzuki Sasuke and Sarutobi Sasuke is another Orientalizing approach to Japanese fiction. As the “model” theory suggests, Chandler approaches this story as though it is historical, since the author assumes that Sarutobi Sasuke *must* be based on a real person. Chandler is “settling” the character of Sarutobi Sasuke as a real person. This assumption can only be made by ignoring the possibility that Sarutobi Sasuke is the result of literary creativity of East Asian storytellers.

Of these English-language sources, one pair of authors did manage to source Sarutobi Sasuke to the *Tachikawa Bunko* series. Hiroko Yoda and Matt Alt write in *Ninja Attack! True Tales of Assassins, Samurai, and Outlaws* (2012) that Sasuke and his rival Kirigakure Saizō first appeared in the *Tachikawa Bunko* books, also mentioning that Sasuke “shattered the stereotype” of the evil, or anti-hero ninja. Prudently, they also speak to Sasuke’s trans-cultural literary origins in the Chinese mythical character of Sun Wukong, from *Journey to the West*. The authors point out Sasuke’s prominence as a name that “remains the stereotypical name for a ninja in Japan today.”⁷⁷ Compared to

⁷⁷ Yoda, *Ninja Attack!*, P 175

these other English-Language non-academic writers, Yoda and Alt are more cautious about their claims, pointing out that virtually all of these stories are fictional. However, they do make a point to say “Some say,” refusing to take a position, “Sasuke is loosely based on a pair of real-life Iga ninja brothers named Shimotsuge Kizaru and Kozaru, whose nicknames translate into ‘Tree-Monkey’ and ‘Little Monkey,’ respectively.”⁷⁸

There is a trend among these English language authors of making a vague claim about a historical referent for Sarutobi Sasuke, but in none of these cases have authors even attempted to provide convincing evidence to the claim.

Although none of the authors who relayed the Sarutobi Sasuke-Hanzo story to their audiences provided a source for it, this particular story can in fact be traced to a Japanese-language source. The Hanzo-Sasuke story is told in the 1964 book *Shōnen no tame no Ninja/Ninpō gahō* by Hatsumi Akiyoshi 初見昭義 (who now goes by Hatsumi Masaaki). In this “*shōnen no tame*,” or, book “for children,” Hatsumi’s story of Sasuke plays out considerably similarly to Adams’s version of events. In Hatsumi’s version of Sasuke’s escape, “Sasuke quickly climbed up the wall from the garden. However, as he jumped off to the exterior of the mansion, there was a loud *Ka-chink!* Sasuke felt an abrupt, intense pain in his left leg. A metal bear trap had bitten into his left ankle.”⁷⁹

Whether or not Hatsumi created this story is uncertain. Shirato Sanpei’s shōnen manga series *Sasuke* may be the origin of this story. In any case, Hatsumi is very clear that the story is completely fictional. As opposed to the English-Language authors, he clearly states that the character of Sarutobi Sasuke and this story was a fictional depiction

⁷⁸ Yoda, *Ninja Attack!*, pp 175-176

⁷⁹ Hatsumi, Masaaki. *Shōnen no Tame no Ninja/Ninpō Gahō*, Tokyo, Japan: Akita Shoten, 1964. P 128

of ninja.⁸⁰ Hatsumi's book, which the English-Language authors of Adams, Levy, Draeger, and Chandler were likely referencing, was in fact a book of fictional stories to entertain children, and moreover was explicit on the fact that Sarutobi Sasuke was a fictional character.

The above examples show how poorly understood the character of Sarutobi Sasuke appears to be in popular English-language material, since it is not at all clear that any of the authors above understood that Sarutobi Sasuke was a fictional character. As a further example of how Sarutobi Sasuke's status as a "ninja" is often misunderstood, we can turn to the work of author Fred Pattern. He contributed an article in the book *The Animated Movie Guide*, writing about the semi-famous animated film featuring Sarutobi Sasuke, which is known in the United States as *Magic Boy*. Pattern notes the translated title of the film, saying, "*Magic Boy (Shonen Sarutobi Sasuke, literally 'Sasuke the Ninja Boy')*..."⁸¹ but this translation of the film's original title in the Japanese release is incorrect. *Shonen Sarutobi Sasuke* does not contain the word ninja at all. All it means is "Sarutobi Sasuke the youth" or "young man." He also notes that "MGM's publicity falsely said that the movie's Japanese title was 'The Adventures of the Little Samurai,' preferring to identify Sasuke with the public image of Japan's samurai (heroic knights) rather than with ninja (sinister spies and assassins.)"⁸² There is no citation for this, and there appears to be no evidence to support the claim that MGM would have preferred to call Sasuke a samurai instead of a ninja.

⁸⁰ Hatsumi, Masaaki. *Shōnen no Tame no Ninja/Ninpō Gahō*, P 27

⁸¹ Pattern, Fred. "Magic Boy" in *The Animated Movie Guide*, ed. Jerry Beck. United States: Chicago Review Press, Incorporated, 2005. P 158

⁸² Pattern, "Magic Boy," P 158

Pattern makes three assertions about the ninja that are not necessarily based in historical fact, but rather on the misunderstandings that have been spread by the systematically inaccurate ninja books. First, he suggests that there is a clear separation between samurai and ninja. Second, he assumes that ninja were clearly viewed as dishonorable. Third, he assumes that Sarutobi Sasuke was already considered a ninja when the film was made, though he was not. For one thing, the Japanese title referring to Sasuke's title of Samurai is more accurate than ninja. In the *Tachikawa Bunko* series, Sasuke is never referred to as a ninja, but he is very explicitly a samurai as mentioned earlier in "Who is Sarutobi Sasuke?" In fact, the words "ninja" and "shinobi" never appear in the book. One author who has written extensively about the ninja, Stephen Turnbull⁸³ has also checked this, and confirmed that he is only ever referred to as a samurai, or a "Great name in ninjutsu."⁸⁴

⁸³ Turnbull's work on the ninja in the past has not been quite rigorous by his own admission, but he has reexamined many of his mistakes in his most recent 2017 book *Ninja: Unmasking the Myth*. Though he is a degree-holding scholar, most of his work is published through non-scholarly publishing houses.

⁸⁴ Turnbull, Stephen. *Ninja: Unmasking the Myth*. United Kingdom: Pen & Sword Books, 2017. P 120

CHAPTER 4

SARUTOBI SASUKE: NINJA AND NINJUTSU-TSUKAI

Perhaps the biggest contributors to the mistaken notion that Sarutobi Sasuke was a historical figure are the rather large body of English-language ninja books which seemed to have gained certain heights of popularity in the late sixties to early seventies. This boom of ninja works gave life to dozens of books dedicated to describing the history of ninja through the eighties, and still even into the past decade. Among the ninja figures appearing in these books, who are more often than not characterized as either real historical beings, or having prototypes that serve as the basis for the fictional version of the character, is Sarutobi Sasuke. By examining both English-language and Japanese-language non-academic ninja books, we can put together a picture of how the historical identity of Sarutobi Sasuke has been built in the West. But first, in order to properly understand the scope of the assertion that Sarutobi Sasuke is a ninja, we must first properly historicize the idea of the ninja.

At Mie University, located in the city of Iga, Japan, there is a department of researchers dedicated to studying ninja. The most obvious stake that Mie University has in this discussion is that the city of Iga is heavily associated with the ninja. These researchers, primarily professors Yamada Yūji 山田雄二 and Yoshimaru Katsuya 吉丸雄哉, have given various lectures and written many different articles about the ninja, and have even written one of the most comprehensive books about the history of the ninja, *Ninja no Tanjō* 忍者の誕生 ('The Birth of the Ninja, 2017). In this book, and other works Yoshimaru has worked on, he has suggested that the terms “ninja” and “shinobi”

be used to describe two different things: “In this article, I will use the term ‘shinobi’ to refer to the ninja of historical fact and ‘ninja’ to refer to the ninja of fiction.⁸⁵” Yoshimaru is making a clear distinction between the real, historical ninja by calling them “shinobi” and the literary, fictional version of ninja “ninja.” Yoshimaru argues that this difference is explained by the fact that examples of real, historical “shinobi” are overwritten by fictional stories about the “ninja.”

This false image of the “ninja” has been formed in the following manner: The characteristics underneath the truths that are passed down, and the stories of the “shinobi no mono” that attract peoples’ interest are recorded. Once those stories are introduced, they become models for other similarly structured stories to be produced. As a result, the publicly held fixed image from the stories is formed, and the “shinobi” is changed to “ninja.”⁸⁶

At first glance this idea makes sense, trying to separate the facts and the fiction when it comes to the ninja, and perhaps since one of the goals of this thesis is to clearly mark Sarutobi Sasuke as a fictional character, Yoshimaru’s sorting serves as a way to understand Sarutobi Sasuke as a “fictional ninja.” However, this is still an incorrect designation for the character. There are two main reasons why Sarutobi Sasuke should not be understood as a classical “ninja” figure. The first reason is that the term “shinobi” is not as firmly rooted in historical fact as Yoshimaru suggests, and furthermore, Yoshimaru’s idea of the “fictional ninja” is not a figure that is well established until the 60’s.

To properly historicize the word “shinobi” as Yoshimaru uses it, we should take a look at the history of the word. “Shinobi” has evidently been used since at least the 17th

⁸⁵ Katsuya Yoshimaru and Yūji Yamada, *Ninja no tanjō*. Japan: Bensei Shuppan, 2017. P 167

⁸⁶ Yoshimaru Katsuya, “Kinsei ni okeru ninja no seiritsu to keifu.” *Kyoto Gobun* 19: 2012 P 108

century; The *Nippo Jisho*, a dictionary of Japanese words from 1603 written by Portuguese Jesuit missionaries has an entry for the noun *shinobi* (romanized as *xinobi* in the original text). This text was translated into Japanese in 1980 from 17th century Portuguese, and in this version the original definition is translated by Tadao Doi as “In the circumstance of war, spies who search into affairs, or one who secretly hides in castles, or climbs into military camps”⁸⁷ While this gives us a definition of “shinobi” it is far from the full picture that the word paints in the modern day. Polina Serebriakova and Danny Orbach, in their article, *Irregular Warfare in Late Medieval Japan: Towards a Historical Understanding of the “Ninja”*, suggest that the term “shinobi” usually, “appears as an adverb, denoting an activity, and not as a noun referring to a person or a particular type of conflict.”⁸⁸ The authors suggest that the term “shinobi” can refer to the irregular warfare tactics of the Iga and Kōga⁸⁹ soldiers.⁹⁰ But the key point of this is that Serebriakova and Orbach are saying that “shinobi” is not necessarily a profession as much as it is a specific action that one might make.

Serebriakovba and Orbach also point out that “... the term *shinobi-mono* was rare, and irregular warriors were usually not described either as a cohesive social or professional group, or as a well-defined warrior type, in contrast to later Japanese depictions or comparable discussions of ‘partisans,’ ‘guerilla fighters...’”⁹¹ The authors

⁸⁷ Tadao Doi, *Nippo Jisho- Vocabulario Da Lingoa De Iapam*. Tokyo, Japan: Iwanami Shoten, 1960. P.771

⁸⁸ Serebriakova, Polina, and Danny Orbach.. “Irregular Warfare in Late Medieval Japan: Towards a Historical Understanding of the ‘Ninja.’” *Journal of Military History* 84, no. 4 (2020): 997–1020 and P 1000

⁸⁹ Iga and Kōga are two regions often associated with ninja. Iga is a city in Japan that is part of modern day Mie Prefecture, where a substantially popular Ninja Museum is run.

⁹⁰ Serebriakova and Orbach, “Irregular Warfare in Late Medieval Japan,” P 1007

⁹¹ Serebriakova and Orbach, “Irregular Warfare in Late Medieval Japan,” P 1000

also specifically point out the retrospective nature of the ninja myth, arguing that the people that are calling historical figures “ninja” are applying this title without historical basis, and that instead these historical figures were often “fulfilling routine military, civilian, or religious tasks most of the time...”⁹² But since the modern version of the word “shinobi” is interchangeable with the word “ninja”, the definitions of those words carry more baggage, and far more nuance. The definition of “shinobi” has unsurprisingly changed since 1603. In today’s world, spying is one activity that is associated with shinobi or ninja. One of Japan’s premier dictionaries, *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten*, described a ninja as “A person who surreptitiously sneaks and enters into places, investigating enemies’s positions and so forth.”⁹³ The same dictionary’s entry for “Shinobi no Mono” is almost exactly the same, further clarifying that shinobi no mono are “...Kanchō. Mawashimono,”⁹⁴ both of which mean “spy.” Considering how unusual the term “shinobi” was, and the fact that it did not constitute a profession or specialization, Yoshimaru’s suggestion that “true shinobi stories” were replaced by fictional ones would appear to be somewhat dubious.

In *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*, David Hackett-Fischer outlined what he called the “converse fallacy of difference,” a logical fallacy which, “renders a special judgment upon a group for a quality which is not special to it.”⁹⁵ The argument that “shinobi” are a special class with specific stories that were the basis for a wide body of literature is working with the assumption that shinobi are a special,

⁹² Serebriakova and Orbach, “Irregular Warfare in Late Medieval Japan,” P 1000

⁹³ “Ninja,” in *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten*, 2023, JapanKnowledge.

⁹⁴ “Shinobi no Mono,” in *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten*, 2023, JapanKnowledge

⁹⁵ Fischer, David Hackett. *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*. United Kingdom: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971. P 223

ubiquitous, and storied group. The separation of “shinobi” and “ninja” is characteristic of the “model theory,” where historical “shinobi” serve as the model for “ninja” fiction. Furthermore, Yoshimaru’s idea of separating the historical “shinobi” from the fictional “ninja” contributes to the rampant mislabeling of Sarutobi Sasuke. Firstly, it provides a context that allows for confusing Sarutobi Sasuke as existing based on a model of a historical “shinobi” when this is emphatically not the case. Secondly, as we will see from the vast body of ninja books from the 60’s onward, the idea of the “ninja” is almost universally considered to be, on some level, a historical construct, especially among Western audiences. Thirdly, terming Sasuke a “ninja” contributes to the notion that the idea of “ninja” fiction has had some level of continuity since the time of the shinobi, which is not the case. The modern usage of the word “ninja,” even when clearly defined as a fictional construct, still carries the baggage of post-1960s conceptions of what the ninja are, which has not been historically consistent.

The fact of the matter is that the *Tachikawa Bunko* series that popularized Sarutobi Sasuke does not seem to portray the character as a “ninja” in any substantial way. However, as we have noted so far, Serebriakova and Orbach, Pattern, and several of the non-academic writers have referred to ninja or *shinobi no mono* as “spies.” This aspect of “ninja” is one thing that aligns with Sasuke’s characterization in the Tachikawa series. In the fifteenth chapter of *Sanada Yukimura Sanyūshi Ninjutsu Meijin Sarutobi Sasuke*, Sasuke does indeed spy on the inhabitants of a castle and sneak in with the intention of gaining intelligence.⁹⁶ The portrayal of ninja in popular culture often agrees

⁹⁶ Croft, *Urban Culture in Pre-War Japan* pp 206-207

with this definition of ninja. In an installment of the *James Bond* film franchise, *You Only Live Twice* (1967),⁹⁷ James Bond meets with the members of Japan's version of a CIA, and the members of this organization are all ninja.

Despite an abundance of evidence that Sarutobi Sasuke was not initially a ninja, authors are still writing about the *Tachikawa Bunko* while contextualizing them as “ninja” stories. The current home to the biggest collection of the *Tachikawa Bunko* books in the West is at the University of Pennsylvania. An article on the university's website titled “Early Taishō Japanese Juvenile Pocket Fiction: *Tachikawa Bunko* and its Imitators” has several paragraphs dedicated to Sarutobi, and he is clearly identified several times by the blog's author Michael P. Williams as a ninja several times, stating that “[Sarutobi Sasuke's] popularity heralded the rise of a ‘ninja boom’ that lasted until the latter 1920's.”⁹⁸ In fact, the entire academic world that has addressed Sarutobi Sasuke has mischaracterized him as a ninja in the context of the *Tachikawa Bunko* series.

Richard Torrance, one of the academic authors mentioned earlier, discussed Sarutobi Sasuke's importance as a part of Osaka literature. He refers to Sarutobi Sasuke as a prominent “ninja”. He references the *Tachikawa Bunko*, saying that “Haku'unsai [is] the foremost master of the ninja arts.”⁹⁹ Essentially, he is pointing out that Sasuke's teacher was a master of ninja arts, and thus taught Sasuke ninja arts. Torrance's idea of Sasuke as a ninja is essential to how he understands the importance of the character. He

⁹⁷ Gilbert, Lewis, dir. *You Only Live Twice*. London, U.K.: Eon Productions, 1967, Film.

⁹⁸ Williams, Michael P. “Early Taishō Japanese Juvenile Pocket Fiction: *Tachikawa Bunko* and its Imitators” Unique at Penn. Pennsylvania State University. April 23, 2013. <https://uniqueatpenn.wordpress.com/2013/04/23/early-taisho-japanese-juvenile-pocket-fiction-tachikawa-bunko-and-its-imitators/>

⁹⁹ Torrance, “Literacy and Literature in Osaka,” P 55

also gives Sasuke credit for “precipitating a ‘ninja boom.’”¹⁰⁰ Williams made this same claim, but in both cases this fact is false, considering that Sasuke could not have yet been considered a ninja.

Scott C. Langton’s dissertation covered the history and culture of the *Tachikawa Bunko* in great detail. Langton speaks to Sasuke’s prominence in the *Tachikawa Bunko* serials, also noting that Sasuke was “The first ninja to appear in the *Tachikawa Bunko* series...”¹⁰¹ Langton describes Sarutobi Sasuke and his use of ninjutsu, and further contextualizes the character as a ninja. He also alludes to a “‘ninja boom’ which swept Japan from 1913 to about 1920.”¹⁰² Though Langton and Torrance consider what they call “ninja stories” as part of the developing literary traditions of a subaltern group in Osaka, Croft avoids the idea of ninja stories altogether.

Croft mostly avoids this designation of ninja for Sarutobi Sasuke in the main body of his work. However, Croft still refers to Sasuke as a ninja in his summarized translation of the Tachikawa Bunmeidō’s *Sanada Sanyūshi Sarutobi Sasuke*. Croft, Langton, and Torrance’s problem is rooted in a deeper problem of mistranslation that has led to the idea that Sasuke is a ninja. Croft translates the title of a Tachikawa Bunmeidō story of Sarutobi Sasuke called *Sanada Yukimura Sanyūshi Ninjutsu Meijin Sarutobi Sasuke* as “Three Renowned Ninja Heroes of Sanada Yukimura”.¹⁰³ But the title does not say the word “ninja heroes”; rather, it says “ninjutsu heroes,” referring to Sarutobi Sasuke magical powers. Since *ninjutsu* has been conflated with the ninja, Croft has assumed that

¹⁰⁰ Torrance, “Literacy and Literature in Osaka,” P 56

¹⁰¹ Langton, “A Literature for the People,” P 103

¹⁰² Langton, “A Literature for the People,” P 104

¹⁰³ Croft, *Urban Culture in Pre-War Japan*, P 112

Sasuke's use of *ninjutsu* makes him a ninja. But at this point there is no evidence that suggests *ninjutsu* has anything to do with ninja. As I have pointed out, Sarutobi Sasuke was never referred to as a ninja, so Croft's assumption that he is a ninja comes from an anachronistic understanding of the word *ninjutsu* and is plying Sarutobi Sasuke with the unnecessary baggage of being a "ninja." This mistranslation comes from a lack of a cohesive awareness of "ninja" figures in academic circles, and represents one of the many possible pitfalls of assuming that the "ninja" figures are historical, monolithic figures. Instead of calling characters that use *ninjutsu* in pre-war texts ninja, they should instead be called as they are called in the original stories: *ninjutsu-tsukai*.

While in the *Tachikawa Bunko* Sarutobi Sasuke is never called a ninja, he is referred to many times as a *ninjutsu-tsukai*, or "ninjutsu user." *Ninjutsu* is literally the "art of subtlety," but in the *Tachikawa Bunko* books and other texts during the Taishō period it really meant something more akin to "sorcery." For an example of this, Sarutobi Sasuke uses this sort of magic several times throughout the *Tachikawa Bunko*. Croft summarizes, "Whilst evading spear thrusts from below, Sasuke defends himself with blasts of fire and ice."¹⁰⁴ When Sasuke meets Ishikawa Goemon in the twenty-third chapter, he sees Ishikawa making deft hand movements and muttering incantations, to which Croft translates Sasuke as saying, "From whom did you learn your ninjutsu?"¹⁰⁵ In another one off series written by the collective behind the *Tachikawa Bunko*, the Sekka Sanjin, one of Sarutobi Sasuke's allies asks Sasuke to use his ninjutsu to get them out of a

¹⁰⁴ Croft, *Urban Culture in Pre-War Japan*, P 209

¹⁰⁵ Croft, *Urban Culture in Pre-War Japan*, P 226

bad situation, and Croft translates Sasuke's response, "I've gone unnoticed for three years. If I start flying around in the sky shouting, I'll shock people."¹⁰⁶

This representation contrasts with many modern depictions of what ninjutsu is. It seems that at some point in the sixties, ninjutsu switched from being this magical art to something more subtle. Specifically, it seems to have become the "art of the ninja." Looking at the graphs for "ninjutsu", 忍術, we see one of the same kanji used in "ninja" and "shinobi" which is "忍". It is followed by "jutsu" 術, which refers to an art, technique, or skill. Since the "nin" is the same graph used in ninja, it can appear to mean "art of the ninja". In the modern day, these ninja arts have come to represent physical techniques, particularly martial arts. Alt and Yoda, in their *Ninja Attack!* book, define ninjutsu as "The term for the martial art of espionage," while conceding that it is a hard word to truly define.¹⁰⁷ The *Encyclopedia Nipponica* defines ninjutsu as "One of the Japanese martial arts, a technique used for special military and political affairs, which involves secretly entering enemy territory and enemy ranks, to gain intel on enemy affairs and secrets. Sometimes, these groups would go out for direct actions like assassinations, surprise attacks, disrupting the rear, and so forth, dealing massive blows to enemy forces."¹⁰⁸

In the *Tachikawa Bunko* serials, ninjutsu, however, was always a manner of magic. This is further evidenced by the fact that this appeared to be common knowledge

¹⁰⁶ Croft, *Urban Culture in Pre-War Japan*, P 167

¹⁰⁷ Chandler, *Ninjas: Japan's Stealthy Secret Agents*, P 9

¹⁰⁸ "Ninjutsu," in *Encyclopedia Nipponica*, 2023, JapanKnowledge.

for those familiar with the idea of ninjutsu. In in shōnen oriented book on ninja stories, Masaaki outlines the common perception of ninjutsu versus his idea of ninjutsu,

“When your father and mothers were children, they thought that ninjutsu was when someone would make hand signs, and then chant an incantation, and then do things like becoming a giant toad, or disappearing in a cloud of smoke. However, this thing called ninjutsu is not that sort of thing. Ninjutsu (also called Shinobi no jutsu) is a technique that utilizes every sort of science, the human mind, physics, astronomy, geology, psychology, in order to understand the state of one’s opponent, to stir up enemy positions, or to strike out and defeat one’s opponents.”¹⁰⁹

In other words, this new association with the word “ninjutsu” referring to a physical, scientific approach, appears to have occurred far after the publication of the *Tachikawa Bunko* series. As the more popular depictions of ninja took shape, the idea of ninjutsu changed, and there seems to have been a mix up where characters that used ninjutsu were were all retroactively claimed to be ninja, applying new labels onto them that were not there when the characters were first written. The *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* notes that “*ninjutsu-tsukai*” is a synonym for ninja.¹¹⁰ This is the common misconception that has brought Sarutobi Sasuke under the umbrella of the ninja label.

The development of the idea of ninjutsu as a scientific discipline seems to have started in very obscure places. Journalist and author Itō Gingetsu 伊藤銀月 (1871-1944) wrote a book called *Ninjutsu no Gokui* (1917) or “The Secrets of Ninjutsu,” which explores the idea of using the magic of ninjutsu by uncovering the scientific methodology behind it. Itō came to believe that the ninjutsu of *kōdan* stories obscured the reality of ninjutsu, rather than awakened people to the truth of it.¹¹¹ He also claimed to have trained

¹⁰⁹ Hatsumi, Masaaki. *Shōnen no Tame no Ninja/Ninpō Gahō*, P 10

¹¹⁰ “Ninja,” in *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten*, 2023, JapanKnowledge.

¹¹¹ Itō, Gingetsu. *Ninjutsu no Gokui*. Tokyo, Japan: Bukōsekaisha, 1917. P 2

with monks to run vertically up walls.¹¹² Another author who claimed to be a true “ninjutsu-tsukai” by the name of Fujita Seiko wrote an article for *Liberal* magazine in 1952, in which he claims that “Ninjutsu is often mistakenly classified as black magic. For example, when we think of things that give our opponents the creeps, like a snake or frog, this could also be referred to as ‘magic.’ But the point is to use these mental tricks to our advantage.”¹¹³ He also explains that ninjutsu-tsukai could create breathing apparatuses, and use a special tool to unlock any door. He also goes on to climb trees using the *tanuki gakure* technique (fox-hiding technique), as well the “hiding in the leaves” and “hiding in the grass” techniques.¹¹⁴

Though these claims do not seem to have a basis in reality, they do borrow from the *kōdan* stories and *Tachikawa Bunko* to support claims that these stories represent a “deeper truth” about Japanese history. Fujita points out that “Sarutobi Sasuke was created from the imagination,”¹¹⁵ and suggests that Sasuke, and the character of his master Hakuunsai serve as stand ins for the actual people who founded the Iga and Kōga ninjutsu schools.¹¹⁶ Yamada Yūji, a researcher at Mie University in Japan, hypothesizes that the idea of sorcery in these stories was connected to the shinobi idea later after the popular ninjutsu stories, and that these ideas are connected to Chinese literary ideas of sorcery.¹¹⁷

¹¹² Itō, *Ninjutsu no Gokui*, P 38

¹¹³ Fujita, Seiko. “Watashi wa Ninjutsutsukai.” *Riberaru*, 1952. P 72

¹¹⁴ Fujita, “Watashi wa Ninjutsutsukai,” P 74

¹¹⁵ Fujita, “Watashi wa Ninjutsutsukai,” P 75

¹¹⁶ Fujita, “Watashi wa Ninjutsutsukai,” P 75

¹¹⁷ Yamada, Yūji. *Ninja no Rekishi*. Japan: Kadokawa, 2016. P 237

Thus, the study of the character of Sarutobi Sasuke has been flanked by three major issues: first, that Sarutobi Sasuke is being treated as though he could be a historical figure by Western authors, representing a serious mistreatment of Japanese historical fiction. These efforts are akin to treating Japanese authors as though they have no literary authority, and must base all of their writings in historical fact, instead of literary creativity. Sarutobi Sasuke must be “modeled” after some prototypical historical figure who could plausibly be the “real” Sasuke. The second issue is that Sarutobi Sasuke is taken for granted as a ninja by all academic sources, Western and Japanese. His status as a ninja has been unquestioned and unexplored to date, and there are some serious gaps in this appellation, especially with the work regarding the *Tachikawa Bunko*. The third issue is that Sarutobi Sasuke has been used to explain a “deeper truth” about ninja culture, since his status as a ninja has gone unquestioned. This has been an area for non-academic Japanese-language sources to use the character to explain the real idea of being a ninja. This leaves room for a person like Hatsumi Masaaki to use Sarutobi Sasuke to advance his own teachings about the “true” ninja, and “real, scientific” ninjutsu.

Though the Japanese language sources about Sarutobi Sasuke treat him as a fictional character, the English-language ninja books treat Sasuke’s historicity as though it is an unresolved issue. These authors are taking Japanese historical fiction (*jidaigeki*, *jitsuroku*, *kōdankaki*) and treating these stories as history, instead of as fiction. It is possible that by keeping the historical origins of a character like Sarutobi Sasuke ambiguous, it makes the ninja myths more plausible and interesting, and keeps the idea of ninja afloat as a historical topic. Another possibility is that the English-language writers are taking a rather undiscerning approach to working with Japanese texts, and are

misunderstanding, or mischaracterizing these historical fiction books and stories as just historical.

This is made possible by the appellation that Sarutobi Sasuke is a ninja. Mischaracterizing Sarutobi Sasuke as a ninja, rather than a *ninjutsu-tsukai*, is the source of many different layers of ahistorical work, and false conclusions as we saw in the case of a supposed “ninja boom.” As was discussed previously, the “converse fallacy of difference” applies to the idea of the ninja, but also to the character of Sarutobi Sasuke. Though the character shares some traits with popular depictions of ninja, he is first and foremost a *ninjutsu-tsukai* and a samurai.

Though authors have failed to make it clear, Sarutobi Sasuke is indisputably a fictional character. Since the realm of historical fiction exists in a space of great range and freedom, it can be challenging to differentiate between historical facts, apocryphal ideas of history, and complete fiction. Any given text, with consideration to its popularity and reach within an audience, can become so ingrained in the culture that fiction can become the symbol of reality for a readership. Fact and fiction are married, and this problem is doubled across language, where understandings of genre can differ wildly, and expectations can completely change how works are translated and thus understood across a language barrier. This problem persists in Japanese historical fiction, where English discourse has been muddled by the Orientalist assumption that Japanese fiction authors are writing about history. Japanese historical fiction is set in history, and the fiction when surrounded by historical context can cause English readers and translators to misunderstand the genre. English writers should approach Japanese texts with a better

understanding of the significations between historical basis, verisimilitude, and pure creative storytelling.

I submit that as academics, we should focus on establishing these lines between historical fiction and history by treating the subjects of Sarutobi Sasuke and the ninja as figures of historical fiction. It is important to recognize the problematic and harmful Orientalist approaches that Western authors have made towards Japanese literature by reinterpreting it as history. By authorizing view of Japanese texts, Western writers are unwittingly participating in literary erasure. It is imperative that Sarutobi Sasuke and the ninja as a whole be approached with a greater appreciation for the literary background of the characters. Not only out of a regard for the available evidence on the matter, but for the justice of portraying the creativity of the Japanese literary culture in its deserved space of fantastic imagination.

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