

Teacher's Notes for
Moonshadow: Eye of the Beast
By Simon Higgins

Historical & Cultural Context

Following the battle of Sekigahara (1600) the warlord (daimyo) Ieyasu of the Tokugawa clan, seized control of Japan, effectively, though not instantly, ending a long period of violent chaos and civil war known to the Japanese as Sengoku Jidai ('the era of warring States').

Ieyasu's rule ushered in over 200 years of relative peace during which his descendants, functioning as a military dynasty, presided over a country in which art and culture flourished and many pre-existing art forms reached the zenith of their development. This 'new Japan' was the seed-bed for a creative explosion throughout society that affected theatre, poetry, music, painting, ceramics, flower arranging, paper sculpture and more, and saw many traditional warrior arts begin evolving into sports or exhibition forms, as samurai found themselves mutating into bureaucrats and public servants, many of whom had never seen actual combat.

As Shogun (supreme military ruler) of Japan, Ieyasu and his bloodline not only maintained a lasting national peace, but eventually expelled foreigners and their influences, practically sealing off the country for around 260 years. In many ways, this particular legacy of the Tokugawa Shogunate has served most to protect and preserve numerous aspects of Japanese society as they existed in medieval times. The visitor to modern Japan who is fascinated by the country's resilient social and creative echoes from the middle ages, largely has the Tokugawas to thank for the phenomena.

The first decades of Ieyasu's rule, when many disgruntled warlords still schemed and plotted to engineer a reversal of Sekigahara and overthrow the Tokugawas, must have been an exciting time of high espionage.

The premise of *Moonshadow: Eye of the Beast* is that during that era, the fragile peace of the new Tokugawa Japan was preserved – through deeds left mostly outside the pages of history – by the Shogun's loyal Secret Service. To develop the humanity as well as the intrigue of that imagined body, I operated on the following key elements. First, that an organisation of what was effectively warrior monks and nuns, drawn from a variety of 'shadow clans' (spy houses) and other disciplines, served each Shogun with their special talents. Second, that this unusual group of shinobi (spies, also sometimes called ninja) selected suitable orphans for training as top-level operatives.

Although the chronology of this idea may not strictly fit historical fact, and of course, the actual capabilities of the shinobi characters are imbued with fantasy elements, each particle of this romanticized Japanese world has a strong basis in fact. Not only did samurai and ninja exist in this era, but there were many secret plots –and a few open

rebellions over the years- that challenged the Tokugawa's rule or posed a threat to the life of the then-Shogun. In history, the Tokugawa Shoguns operated both secret police and contract spies and assassins when it suited them; my premise is that, at least for a while, such a group were actually 'the good guys.'

So it could be said that the world of *Moonshadow* is romanticized or fantasy-enhanced history, rather than traditional epic fantasy in the *Lord of the Rings* or *Chronicles of Narnia* mode. The city of Edo, the Tokaido (Japan's great highway), the town of Fushimi and Momoyama Castle, as well as virtually all the shinobi-ninja secret weapons and practices shown, are fragments of recorded history. The furube sutra, a kind of shinobi's daily and pre-mission prayer or meditation, actually comes from medieval times and was used by real Iga ninja. The details concerning Iaido, the art of sword-drawing and duelling, are faithfully and accurately rendered, based on my own lengthy and ongoing training in the 470 year old art (now a non-contact competitive art form in which, ironically, Australia now dominates the world titles held annually near Kyoto).

Though a specialized kind of warrior, the orphan boy once called Nanashi and renamed Moonshadow after his signature sword technique, is effectively a spy who fights for peace. Because of the transmitted life experience and philosophy of compassion imparted by his duelling teacher, Mantis, young Moon is both obliged and motivated to avoid the taking of life. Given his role as a warrior-spy and, in his first outing, as a thief of crucial scientific information from a well-guarded and alerted castle, he has a tough balancing act to maintain. Despite his remarkable training and skills, and his natural talents, Moon is inexperienced in many aspects of 'real life' and in some areas, simply inept or naïve. This mix reflects, in a much more dramatic setting, the passage most children on the verge of young adulthood face. In this sense, medieval Japanese or not, Moon has something in common with every modern day student.

Ideas from the text for Class Discussion

1. Early in the book, Brother Eagle tells Moonshadow about his time as a prisoner of the Iga clan, and how, when they were attacked, his (unexpected) instinct was to protect his captors from *their* enemies, the Fuma clan. See the end of Chapter One.

What does it mean to 'follow your own instincts?'

Have you ever followed an unexpected urge or instinct that made everything turn out for the best? Give an example.

2. In *Moonshadow: Eye of the Beast*, both samurai and shinobi have their own 'code of honour' and a series of 'obligations' by which they live and act.

Do you have a 'code' by which you live or act? Does it sometimes force you to make difficult choices? Give two examples.

3. Old Japan was clearly a dangerous, often violent world, yet there were also many noticeable social rules demanding orderly conduct, hard work, diligent study and politeness which were followed, and are still practiced in Japan and elsewhere in Asia.

Give an example from the text of one of the above ‘social rules’ in action.

What do you think the main differences are between our society and Asian societies? What can we learn from countries like Japan? What can they learn from us?

4. As the cover of *Moonshadow* suggests, stories of this kind are popular material for Japanese cartoon adventures usually referred to in the west as *Manga*.

When you consider Manga TV shows and movies for young people about samurai and ninja, do you think they reflect much of real Japanese history?

Which parts are in any way realistic, and which strike you as pure fantasy or for entertainment only?

AND

5. Consider Moonshadow’s skills as shown in the text. How much of what he does is feasible, and how much would have been simply impossible? Referring to the book’s glossary after answering may help you assess the accuracy of your answer.

6. Moon clearly considers the Grey Light Order to be not only his trainers, but also his (somewhat unusual) family. What is it they do, or have done, that makes him see them this way? What does this tell us about how wide and sweeping the real definition of ‘family’ should be?

Exercises to Try

1. Animal Empathy. The Eye of the Beast refers to Moon’s special ability to see through the eyes of, or even to control, an animal, bird or fish. He has learned this, over a number of years, from Brother Eagle, and in the book we learn that this is an ancient Iga ‘Old Country’ shadow-science, an almost lost art, as Detective Katsu tells Silver Wolf at the end of Chapter Twenty.

Imagine *you* can use the Eye of the Beast, with your pet, a friend’s pet, or an animal you meet in a zoo, wildlife reserve or a national park while bushwalking. Write a short story showing what you would see through the animal’s eyes, or what you would make it do and why. Don’t forget its other senses apart from sight. By way of example, consider an adventure situation in which your powers –and animal friend – help you pull off a rescue.

2. Play ‘Valid or Invalid’. Divide a page into two wide columns, the left-hand column titled ‘Valid’ (fair enough, I agree with it) the right-hand column ‘Invalid’ (not reasonable, I *disagree* with it).

Now consider the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of the following characters and, after writing their names, divide up their views between those you think are fair enough and those which you think are not. Place each in the appropriate column and briefly explain why you *do* or *don't* validate the character's position.

Warlord Silver Wolf, plotting secret rebellion.

Young Mantis, a wandering duellist.

Old Mantis, a swordsmanship teacher advocating mercy and compassion.

Snowhawk, a Fuma-trained spy considering 'defection' to the Grey Light Order.

3. Inhabiting a Character. Choose your favourite (or most disliked) character from *Moonshadow: Eye of the Beast* and write a short excerpt regarding their life either before their role in the story, or long afterwards.

Example: Jiro the Gangster's early years. How did he become a gangster? How did he learn the shinobi art of shuriken throwing?

OR

Long after tangling with Moonshadow, what became of Jiro? Did he remain a (limping) gangster, serving bad lords for money? Did he change his ways and say, enter a monastery? Did he finally do something noble and brave, for which he was socially elevated and made *samurai*?

4. Research and Reply. Read in your library or via the internet about Ieyasu Tokugawa, the first of the Tokugawa Shoguns, who brought in the Edo or Tokugawa era (of peace) in Japan. Research also a little about those who defied or challenged him in the years immediately following the battle of Sekigahara in 1600. Then:

Pretend you are the Shogun and write a short speech on why you believe Japan must set aside the life of the warrior and become a more peaceful and artistic land.

OR

Take the role of Warlord Silver Wolf, and, using what you have learned from your historical research, write a speech to be delivered to your samurai army arguing why the Shogun must be challenged and how you intend to go about it. Assume your plot involving the foreign secret weapon has already been spoiled by Moonshadow.

On-line resources

For more about the Author & his travels in Japan

<http://www.simonhiggins.net>

For more about the Art of Iaido

<http://www.seishinkan-iaido.org/>