

Kikuchi Gozan: Tofukuji Temple

Tofukuji Temple looks out over the Tsuiji Ide irrigation canal and toward the Kikuchi River in the distance from a hillside perch just east of central Kikuchi. Its location holds special significance: during the medieval period, Tofukuji was the eastern temple in the Kikuchi Gozan (Five Temples), a group of Zen temples that enjoyed the protection of the Kikuchi clan in exchange for performing various administrative, supervisory, and religious duties. In the Gozan system, each temple was associated with a cardinal direction: north, south, east and west, with a central temple completing the group.

The Kikuchi Gozan were designated by Kikuchi Takemitsu (1319–1373), an influential reformer and skilled warrior under whom the clan reached the height of its power. When he selected these five temples for official status, Takemitsu was drawing on a tradition that began in China during the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) and was brought to Japan by the Kamakura shogunate (1185–1333). The purpose of the Kamakura Gozan system was both to promote Zen, the school of Buddhism favored by the Kamakura shoguns, and to incorporate its temples into the government bureaucracy, thereby strengthening the shogunate's control over the country and its people. The twin objectives of religious virtue and administrative benefits were also the motivations for Kikuchi Takemitsu's introduction of the Gozan system.

Tofukuji was one of the Kikuchi clan's ancestral temples, and its cemetery contains the tombs of several clan members. The temple's principal object of worship is a statue of the Thousand-Armed Kannon, which is accompanied by statues of the fierce guardian deities Fudo Myo-o and Bishamonten. The three statues have been designated Important Cultural Properties of Kumamoto Prefecture.