

Kikuchi Gozan: Saifukuji Temple

Saifukuji Temple on the western side of the former castle town of Waifu was one of the Kikuchi Gozan (Five Temples): Zen temples that during the medieval period enjoyed the protection of the Kikuchi clan in exchange for performing various administrative, supervisory, and religious duties. Under the Gozan system, one temple guarded each of the four key points on the compass, with a central temple completing the quintet. Saifukuji was tasked with overseeing the west.

The Kikuchi Gozan were designated by Kikuchi Takemitsu (1319–1373), a reformer and successful strategist under whom the clan reached the height of its power. When he selected the Gozan, Takemitsu took after 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 Zen 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 also motivated Kikuchi Takemitsu's introduction of the Gozan system.

The small cemetery behind the temple's main hall contains several tombstones and memorials thought to date back to the medieval period. Among these is a monument dedicated to Akahoshi Aritaka (d. 1333), a Kikuchi clan member who fought against the forces of Kublai Khan when the Mongol emperor attempted to invade Japan in 1274 and 1281.