

Kikuchi Gozan: Hoppukuji Temple

Hoppukuji Temple stands to the north of central Kikuchi, across the Hazama River from the former castle town of Waifu. The first temple on this site is thought to have been established in the ninth century, but the name Hoppukuji (“Northern Temple of Fortune”) dates to the time of Kikuchi Takemitsu (1319–1373), the fifteenth head of the Kikuchi clan.

Takemitsu is remembered as a reformer who ushered in the Kikuchi clan’s greatest period of prosperity. One of his key initiatives was designating the Kikuchi Gozan, five Zen temples that enjoyed the protection of the clan in exchange for performing various administrative, supervisory, and religious duties. One temple oversaw each of the four key points of the compass, with a central temple completing the quintet. Hoppukuji, as its name indicates, was made the guardian of the north.

The Gozan system originated in China during the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) and was brought to Japan by the Kamakura shogunate (1185–1333). In Japan, its purpose 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 adoption of the system.

Present-day Hoppukuji consists of a single hall, next to which stands a stone monument raised in 1335 to honor a fallen warrior of the Kikuchi clan. The memorial is a *gorinto*, a five-part structure in which each differently shaped part symbolizes one of the five elements that are believed to constitute the universe. The shapes and their corresponding elements are a cube for earth, a sphere for water, a pyramid for fire, a hemisphere for air, and a jewel for void.