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The *sōkan* system in Japanese Buddhism: A historical study

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Abstract
This work studies the development of the Sōkan system, a hierarchical administrative framework for Buddhist monk officials in medieval Japan, influenced significantly by China's Sengguan zhidu (僧官制度). The Sōkan system was crucial in integrating Buddhism into Japan's socio-political structure, creating a distinctive framework that connected religious and governmental roles. This study explores the functions of notable monk officials-namely Sōjō (僧正), Sōzu (僧都), and Risshi (律师)-analyzing their duties in supervising monastic governance, maintaining religious discipline, and acting as intermediaries between Buddhist organizations and governmental bodies. This research examines historical sources and religious writings to track the evolution of the Sōkan system across time, highlighting its adaptive nature and significant political impact in medieval Japan. The data demonstrate how the Sōkan system enabled governmental supervision of Buddhist organizations, promoted religious activities, and broadened the socio-political influence of Buddhism. This study offers significant insights into the administrative complexities of Buddhist government in medieval Japan and its enduring influence on the religious landscape of Japanese history.

Keywords: Sōkan system, Japanese Buddhism, monk officials

Introduction

In 594 CE, Emperor Suiko issued an edict that formally recognized Buddhism in Japan, signifying one of the earliest official endorsements of the religion in Japanese history (Reischauer and Fairbank 1960) [12]. A quick transformation took place as Buddhism became a part and parcel lifestyle of imperial court-supported society and also involved considerable expansion and development to state interests of the elite including alignment with the elite interests (Grapard 1992) [7]. Because of not having systematized doctrinal guidance and standard ordination practices, however, the rapid increase in the number of Buddhist clergy led occasionally to infractions of monastic discipline. In the 32nd year of Emperor Suiko's reign (624), a system of monastic officials was established to remedy these deficiencies and encumber monastic conduct through legal means (Kornicki 1998) [11]. With this, began the formalization of monastic administration in Japan, the bases for which would subsequently be developed and organized by the emperors that would follow.

More important, the advent of Buddhism from China around the 6th century CE marks notable transitions in cultural life in Japan. The association of Buddhist foreign spiritual orientation with Japanese traditions subsequently intermingled together and greatly added to the religious and cultural diversity of Japan while heralding new epochs of socio-cultural evolution (Dumoulin 2005) [4]. Though Chinese Buddhism exercised influence in Japan, it created a unique development in its cultural note in arriving at a mixture; therefore, the adaptation that Japanese Buddhism received could not be regarded as any simple imitation (Gernet 1995) [6]. This unique adaptation exemplified by the Sōkan system stands out as one of the most striking pieces of administrative organization in the history of Japanese Buddhism. Though influenced by China's Sengguan zhidu (僧官制度), the Sōkan system developed organically to meet Japan's needs in both the religious and political realms (Deal and Ruppert 2015) [3].

The term Sōkan (僧官) expresses a system comprising of the last stand of the student within a Buddhist clergy or Sōgō (僧綱) in Japan, which means two broad ranks being divided and further classified into ten ranks, followed by a series of titles referred to as 僧位 (Frédéric 2002) [5]. Monks normally are related to their ranks, which gives some kind of indication of their position in the hierarchy of Buddhism. The first or highest one is called sōjo, and it has three levels: Dai-sōjō (大僧正), Sōjō (僧正), and Gon-sōjo (権僧正). The second one, sōzu, has four levels: Dai-sōzu (大僧都), Gon-dai-sōzu (権大僧都), Shō-sōzu (小僧都), and Gon-shō-sōzu (権小僧都). The third one, risshi, comprises three levels: Dai-risshi (大律師), Chū-risshi (中律師), and Gon-risshi (権 律師). The ten levels, sōi, are extra titles that can be achieved by a monk. These are attached to the titles, Hōin (法印), Hōgen (法現), and Hōkyō (法橋), according to different ranks of sōjo, sōzu, and risshi, and they signify higher accomplishments of the monk in the Buddhist clergy (Frédéric 2002) [5].

The Sōkan system together represents a balance of continuity with certain Chinese frameworks and innovations adjusted to Japan's altering social context. With the scramble of Japanese society and its sociopolitical realities, there were also adaptations to the structure and jobs of the Sōkan system concerning certain features and demands of each historical epoch. The hierarchical system assigns ranks to the Buddhist monk officials by determining their functions for supervising religious activities, maintaining monastic discipline, and acting as mediators between Buddhist institutions and the imperial government (Kitagawa 1966) [10]. These officials served dual functions as spiritual leaders and political agents, integrating Buddhist monastic governance with the overarching interests of the state (Teeuwen and Rambelli 2003) [15]. The government integrated Buddhism into the political framework, thereby enhancing its societal status and exercising control over religious institutions to align them with state objectives.

The Sōkan system was thus effective in bringing together religious authority and political power, with Buddhist monk officials gaining positions of importance in both domains. The Sōkan system also created closeness between the ruling elite and the monastic order, corroborating the idea that Buddhism could act as a stabilizing force within the sociopolitical field of Japan. The Sōkan system in Japan thus arose in reaction to changes concerning state and religious institutions and how they were interacting with each other. This was impactful in monastic governance, discipline, and control of monastic life, leading to the administrative and religious development of Buddhism in Japan (Adolphson 2000) [2].

The Origins and the Establishment of the Sōkan System

The system for Buddhist monks and officials throughout Japan traces its inception to antiquity through the establishment of the Sōkan system, which is a structured hierarchy created to regulate and manage Buddhist monastic communities. The system can be traced back to Sengguan zhidu (僧官制度) in China, an evolved administrative organization established to manage Buddhist institutions across various Chinese dynasties (Gernet 1995; Dumoulin 2005) [4, 6]. The Sengguan zhidu comprised a structured hierarchy of monastic officials of different ranks, responsible for maintaining discipline among the monastic community, undertaking administrative tasks for the monasteries, and acting as intermediaries between the state and the Buddhist clergy. The unification of the rank and file allowed for state interference and control in religious institutions, aligning religious institutions with political and social objectives (Deal and Ruppert 2015) [3]. In China, it served to maintain order and rank among and within monastic hierarchies but was also used by the imperial government to control the increasing influence of Buddhism as a cultural and political power. The Sengguan zhidu established graded ranks, among which the most important stations were Sengzheng (僧正, Chief Monk) and Senglu (僧錄, Monastic Register), besides different work assigned to other ranks (Kornicki 1998) [11]. The officials, designated by the state, held a position that conflated religious authority with political power. The Sengguan zhidu facilitated state oversight of monastic activities, thereby moderating the expansion of Buddhism and mitigating any potential challenges to the emperor's authority (Teeuwen and Rambelli 2003) [15].

The system's introduction in Japan and its establishment therein coincided with the circulation of Chinese Buddhism across the 6th and 7th centuries (Adolphson 2000) [2]. The transfer of Chinese Buddhist administrative practices to Japan occurred within the broader context of cultural and political interactions between the two countries during the Asuka (538-710) and Nara (710-794) periods. During the Tang Dynasty (618-907), Japanese scholars who travelled to China acquired comprehensive insights into Chinese religious, political, and administrative systems (Grapard 1992) [7]. In this context, China's Sangha regime is regarded as a pertinent model that can be adapted to meet the specific requirements of Japan's expanding monastic community. The exchanges enabled the incorporation of Chinese Buddhist practices in Japan, notably Sengguan zhidu, which developed into Japan's unique Sōkan system (Kitagawa 1966) [10].

Monastic administration was a notable development for Buddhist governance in Japan during the Suiko Era (592-628). The administrative system included three chief offices in charge of the management of temples and monastic affairs. In the year 624A. D., Emperor Suiko appointed the Sōjō 僧正 as the top official responsible for monitoring the monks and their temples with Guanle 观勒 serving as the first appointed Sōjō (凤凰网佛教 2013). In the 33rd year of Emperor Suiko's reign (625), the monk Huiguan 慧灌 succeeded Guanle as 僧正, becoming the second individual to occupy this esteemed position. Supporting the Sōjō was the Sōzu 僧都, whose role was to assist in administrative and disciplinary matters. Additionally, the fatou 法头 · a role unique to Japan, was tasked with inspecting temple assets and ensuring their proper management. Subsequently, 大 化二年 (645), Huiguan's disciples2 were promoted to the rank fatou. This hierarchical structure laid the foundation for the centralized governance of Buddhist institutions in Japan. This is a unique Buddhist monk official in Japanese Buddhism, responsible for inspecting temples, checking monks and nuns, as well as the number of slaves and maids in temples (Deal and Ruppert 2015) [3].

The Taika Reforms (645) had major impacts on the administrative system of Buddhism in Japan, which included the introduction of new positions and a hierarchical

structure. During the first year of the Taika period, an edict urging Buddhism was promulgated, which supported the system of Ten Virtues (十德) 3 or Ten Masters (十师). 4 That same year, by imperial order, in each temple, positions for Temple Chief (寺主) and Temple Manager (寺司) were established in charge of all monastic affairs and for maintenance of discipline (Grapard 1992) [7]. During the reign of Emperor Tenchi (661-671), a formal hierarchy of monastic officials was established, with Sengzheng (僧正) as the highest monastic official, Sengdu (僧都) as a subordinate, and two assistant officials at lower ranks. In the twelfth year of Emperor Tenmu's reign (684), this system was restructured into three official ranks: Sengzheng (僧正), Sengdu (僧都), and Risshi (律师), collectively known as the Seng Gang (僧纲) (Dumoulin 2005) [4]. These reforms were on virtues and merit appointments that cultivated a structured and centralized control of monks and nuns. It also adopted a two-tier governance which differed the roles between state and individual temples and the respective clergy and laity. These are aimed at centralizing the administration of Buddhism and adapting it to the broader governance systems of the state.

2 Namely Hui Shi 慧师, Hui Lun 慧轮, and Zhi Zang 智藏,

3 During the early Tang Dynasty, an institution was established to examine monks and nuns. Among those evaluated were prominent figures such as Huiguan (慧灌), Fuliang (福亮), Huiyun (惠云), Changan (常安), Lingyun (灵云), Huizhi (惠至), Sengmin (僧旻), Daodeng (道登), Huilin (惠邻), and Huimiao 惠妙 (Huiyin惠隐).

4 The ten masters were responsible for coordinating and managing Buddhist affairs nationwide. Their duties included promoting Buddhism and providing education to monks and nuns across the country

In the first year of the Taihō era (701), Emperor Monmu established local monastic officials known as 国师, 5 who resided in major temples across each administrative region. These officials worked in coordination with national ministers to supervise local clergy, audit temple assets, and conduct Buddhist teachings. Additionally, temples implemented the 寺院三纲6 to manage monastic affairs and oversee study and discipline within each temple (Adolphson 2000) [2]. These temple officials operated under the supervision of central Buddhist officials Seng Gang (僧纲) and the state secretaries (Kokushi 国司) as well as local district authorities, reinforcing a system that balanced monastic and governmental oversight. The Seng Gang 僧纲, a central bureau for monastic affairs, operated under the Ministry of Ceremonies 治部省 and was headquartered at Yakushi-ji 薬師寺. The code formalized the management of official temples (官寺管理) with roles such as the 上座, 寺主 and 都维那 overseeing daily operations. To preserve the order of the monastic hierarchy, all the monks and nuns had to follow the governance of the 僧纲 strictly; there was absolutely no leniency for anything close to disrespect or insubordination (Kitagawa 1966; Teeuwen and Rambelli 2003) [10, 15]. The provincial rule was maintained by the regional monastic officials such as 地 方僧官, including 国师, who would oversee the local temples with support from the nation governors: the 国司. Over time, the title changed from an administrative to a more ceremonial one and was eventually called 讲师 following Chinese practices. This integration of Buddhist governance into the state system helped to reinforce central control and align Japan's Buddhist administrative framework with the Chinese model. With time, Buddhism has strongly been established and gradually acquired governmental support as a state religion in Japan, with the court also recognizing its potential as a tool for religion and politics. The state brought in a further formal structure to the Buddhist clergy as a measure of strengthening the control over religious institutions amid efforts aimed at consolidating power in the Japanese government, hence embedding within it the semblance of state governance (Deal and Ruppert 2015) [3]. The distribution of the aforementioned responsibilities among officials from the

5 The title 国师, meaning "National Preceptor", holds a similar fundamental significance in both China and Japan

6 三纲: Each rank in the hierarchy had specific responsibilities:

- 上座: The elder among the monks, held by an individual of exceptional moral integrity and virtue.
- 寺主: Responsible for overseeing the general affairs and management of the temple.
- **都维那:** In charge of managing the monks' daily activities and directing temple operations according to
- Established regulations, Religious, administrative, and disciplinary perspectives ensured not only the maintenance of internal order but also compliance with the ends of the state. The integration thus enabled the ruling elite of Japan to supervise monastic business, ensuring that it remained politically compliant and thus played its part in bringing about social stability.

Evolution of the Sōkan System from the Nara period (710-794) to Meiji (1868-1912)

It was during the Nara period (710-794) that Sōkan had come to be established as a prime administrative foundation for insistence on the incorporation of Buddhist institutions into the state apparatus. Among these were Sōjō (僧正), Sōzu (僧都), and Risshi (律师), which concerned internal doctrinal integrity, discipline, and administrative order (Kitagawa 1966) [10] for Buddhist communities. It gave the Japanese state a means by which it could manage through the increased influence of Buddhism-not to overshadow imperial authority (Kornicki 1998) [11]. This period saw the development of the system by the introduction of features borrowed from Chinese Buddhism that proved difficult. The newly established offices included Daisōjō (大僧正), which indicated the highest monastic authority, and Risshi (律师), restricted to upholding monastic discipline. Extravagantly, Biedang 别当, supervising temple staff, and Hō-ō 法王, an honorary title given to distinguished monks, opened their environment to the Sōkan enrichment experience. It also

enacted Buddhist welfare to regulate monastic appointments and integrate temple administration into state governance in the Taihō Code (701). The established hierarchy centralized authority over monastic operations, guaranteeing that temple activities conformed to state goals. The Sōkan system, by consolidating Buddhist administration under state patronage, reinforced imperial authority and institutionalized Buddhism as a fundamental element of Japan's political and social structure (Abe 1999, 76) [1].

Understanding how secular authority was channelled through Buddhist governance will reflect the creation of monastic titles along the set administrative paradigm. In creating these politically significant ties between the monastic titles and the aristocratic ranking system, the titles helped form a convergence that ensured Buddhist political hierarchies were integrated into the Buddhist political hierarchy. The 僧正 was equivalent to the Senior Fourth Rank (从四位); the 僧都, to the Junior Fifth Rank (正五位); and the 律师, to the Senior Fifth Rank (从五位). Because of this relationship, Buddhism could consolidate its role as a governing world's religious and political authority.

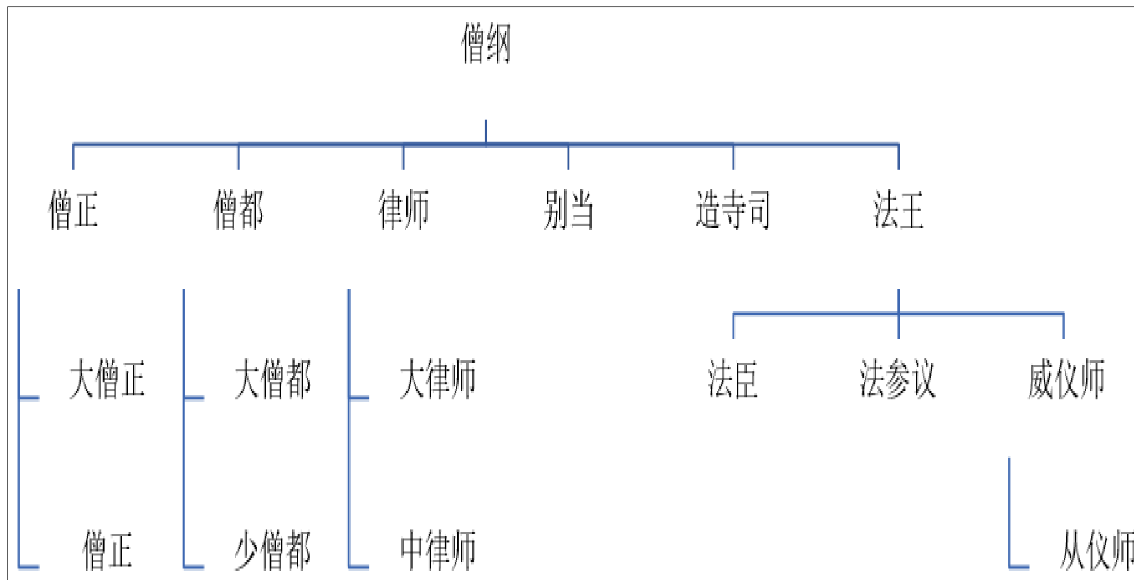

Fig 1: Sōkan System in Nara period (710-794) (凤凰网佛教 2013)

During the Heian period (794-1185), Japan's Sōkan system developed to meet the needs of the growing monastic community and the intricate religious-political environment. This period experienced the diversification and stratification of roles within the system, marked by the introduction of new ranks and auxiliary positions to oversee the increasing number of temples and clergy. The system's adaptability facilitated alignment with changing court priorities, thereby ensuring the integration of Buddhist administration with state governance (Adolphson 2000) [2]. The Heian period established a nine-grade hierarchical structure, introducing titles such as Hōin (法印), Hōgen (法眼), and Hōkyō (法桥) to denote levels of spiritual and administrative authority. 7 Intermediate ranks such as 权僧正 and 权僧都 were created to assist the higher levels of monastic leadership, thereby improving the system's ability to manage intricate temple networks.

The emergence of new positions under the Tendai and Shingon sects reflected the evolving complexity of monastic governance and the growing influence of these Buddhist schools. The Zasu 座主 became a central figure in overseeing major temples, with prominent examples being Mount Hiei's Enryaku-ji 延暦寺 for the Tendai sect and Mount Kōya's Kongōbu-ji 金剛峯寺 for the Shingon sect. Besides these, there were also the 長者 at Tō-ji 東寺, whose administrative duties included dealing with the overall workings of the temple, and the 行人, who was responsible for 7 法印 (Hoin). Highest rank. Lit. Eye of the law. 法眼 (Hogen). Second highest. Lit. Seal of the law. 法橋 (Hokkyo). Third highest. Lit. Bridge of the law. Auditing the finances, logistics, and defence of the temple. The same sort of activity was replicated through offices of 长吏 in places like Onjō-ji 園城寺 and Kanshū-ji 勧修寺 to ensure smooth and daily operation in the temple. These posts illustrate institutionalized temple administration in that they simultaneously require accounting, logistics, and defense-internalizing religious, economic, and political functions in monastic institutions.

The establishment of the Zasu 座主 position, a title reserved for the abbots of large temples, such as Enryaku-ji, marks an important configuration. The Zasu functioned as spiritual leaders while also exercising considerable administrative power, indicating the growing significance of temple governance in state matters. This stratified and specialized organization reflected the profound connection between Buddhism and the imperial court, with temples serving as pivotal sites for both religious activities and political strategies. The Sōkan system, by adjusting its structure to contemporary needs, strengthened its function as a vital instrument for overseeing the convergence of religion and politics (Fig.2). The innovations of the Heian period set a foundation for subsequent advancements in Buddhist administration, reinforcing its incorporation into Japan's socio-political structure.

Three, Nine-Level System

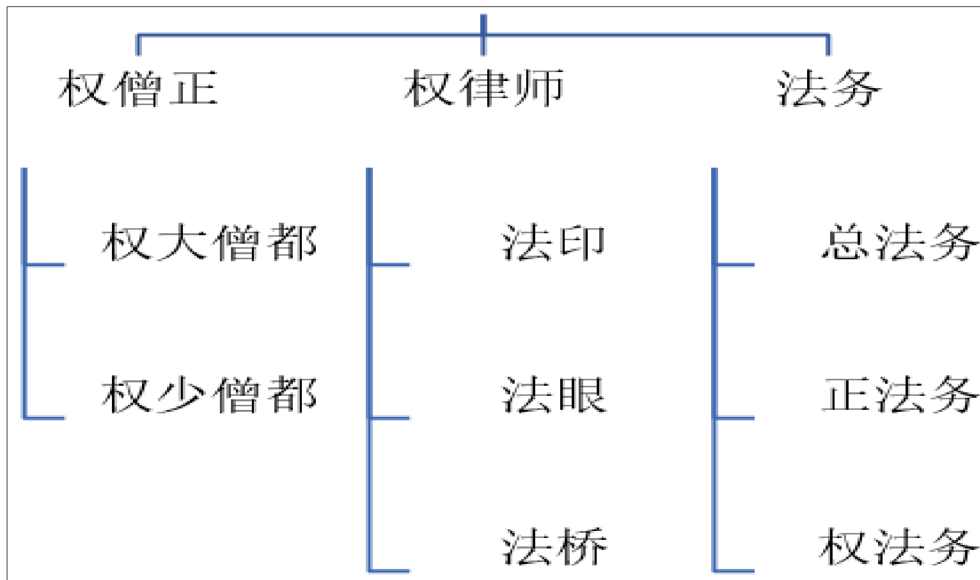

Fig 2: Sōkan System in Heian period (794-1185) (凤凰网佛教 2013)

The monastic system offers a framework of rituals and education with specialized positions aiding one's spiritual practice as well as one's scholarly achievement (Fig.3). For instance, the 讲师 and 读师 were key positions that aided in propagating Buddhist teachings, while the 复师 ensured strictness regarding recitation and interpretation regarding doctrinal matters. The role of the 内供 奉 concerned performing rituals and sanctifying temple space. The title of Acharya 阿阇黎 consisted of several subcategories, each having its functions. The Seven Mountain Acharya (七高山阿阇黎) was a top-level leader in the monastic scholastic community, while the Acharya of Dharma Transmission 传法阿阇黎 was a specialized acharya with the task of teaching core Buddhist teachings. Finally, the Individual Acharya -身阿阇黎 stressed the factor of personal mastery and mentorship over teaching and research. Moreover, within the higher learning system, the 学头 coordinated activities along his line of study while overseeing a student that is not in the academic circle but was working toward excellence through study in his own time. The 学侣 sphere existed to assist in the sharing of knowledge and research. All these positions embody the amalgamation of ritual expertise with academic rigour applied in sustaining monastic education and spirituality as a whole.

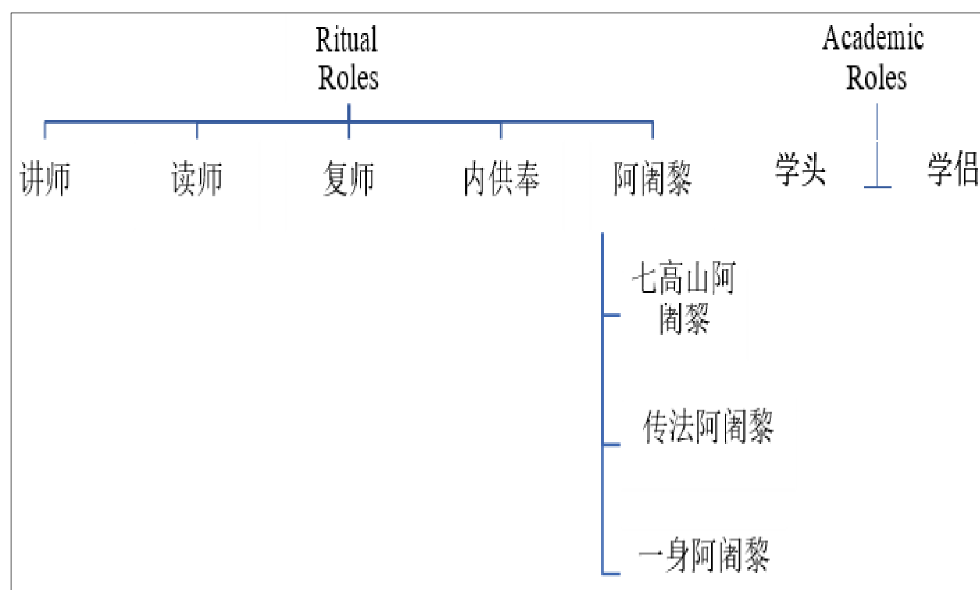

Fig 3: Ritual and Educational Framework within the monastic system (凤凰网佛教 2013)

During the Kamakura era (1185-1333), the Sōkan rose into a more complex structure; in response, it developed a scenario and some types of phenomena: that were beloved by the samurai class and which produced forms of military governance. Buddhist institutions formed alliances with ruling warriors, compelling innovations in administration to incorporate such linkages as well as those with the emerging sects: Zen and Pure Land Buddhism (Dumoulin 2005) [4];

Senglu Division (僧录司), just as it was coming into being, implicated centralizing oversight of major Zen temples; this was a telling indication of the rising significance of Zen Buddhism. New roles and systems were experienced in the field of monastic administration in medieval Japan for the addressing of various religious, social, and political demands. One of the major projects included the 大劝进, which would be responsible for the activity of overseeing the preparations and financial aspects of very major restoration projects of temples. The Zen 法律 was integrated into the 僧录司, which was entrusted with the management of the 五山十刹, as well as appointment of abbots, settlement of disputes, and oversight of temple operations. However, the office was not as popular as it had been when the central temples, like Myōshinji 妙心寺 and Daitokuji 大德寺, received their independence. The Jōdo Shinshū 净土真宗, appropriately regarded as the True Pure Land Sect, was much influenced by village-centered governance models that 坊主 would organize faith communities at the village level consisting of a mixture of religious leadership and local administration. Hongan-ji 本愿寺 accounts and operations were managed by the monastic ministers like 坊官 and ranks at 法眼 and 法桥. Besides, Zen temples structured their internal organization according to regulations such as Baizhang's Rules (百丈清规 and Zen Garden Rules (禅苑清规) imported from China. Just as there were roles such as 首座, 典座, 监寺, and 直岁, there were also practical guides such as Tenzo Kyōkun 典座教训 and Chiji-shingi 知事清规 that wrote these into practice. Altogether, these reforms reflected the growing entwinement of temples with localities and governance, an adaptation of Chinese Zen practices, and the creation of new roles for evolving societal and political needs (Fig. 4).

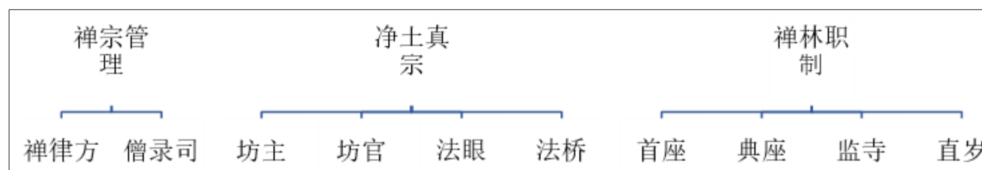

Fig 4: Sōkan System in Kamakura period (1185-1333) (凤凰网佛教 2013)

The Sōkan system witnessed much alteration during the Edo period (1603-1868) as the Tokugawa shogunate came with its rules to consolidate the said authority over religious institutions. The hierarchy was thus made stronger to make Buddhist temples very close to the shogunate, which would prevent any kind of objection to its authority. It was during this time that the system transformed itself into a regulatory framework that preserved the order of society along with the alignment of religious institutions with the interests of the state (Teeuwen and Rambelli 2003) [15]. Under the Tokugawa government, political activities by Buddhist clergy were curtailed so that they were supposed to concentrate on the religious and educational aspects of their lives. New roles, including 触头, acted as intermediaries between temples and the government, whereas Nenghua (能化) were designated as educational authorities responsible for supervising the training and doctrinal compliance of monks (Hur 2007, 159) [9]. The measures underscored Buddhism's function as a stabilizing element within the feudal structure, bolstering the shogunate's authority and preserving societal cohesion. Under the Tokugawa Shogunate, Buddhist administration became a vital component of the 公家、武家、佛家制度 (Imperial, Military, and Buddhist System), reflecting the shogunate's centralized governance. To maintain order, reforms prohibited arbitrary appointments and enforced strict rank advancement rules. The 僧录司, headquartered at Nanzen-ji 南禅寺 from 1615, was led by 崇传. He managed Zen temple affairs, drafted key temple laws (1608-1615), and engaged in military and diplomatic roles.

It was established in Edo and provincial areas, touch points were used to impose decrees from the shogunate and monitor temple activity. It regulates the behaviour of monks, manages temple operational affairs, and broadcasts official directives to sects. Examples are at places like Sōneiji 总宁寺 or Sengaku-ji 泉岳寺 in the Sōtō Sect, 轮番 in the Jōdo Shinshū, and 在番 in the Shingon Sect. Besides that, 能化 has played an important role in educating monks regarding sect doctrines and rules, where the duration of the training differs according to sect as that of the Jōdo Sect takes 24 years, above 20 years for the Shingon Sect, and over 30 years for Zen monks mastering 1,700 kōans. Over time, sects like Jōdo Shinshū replaced the traditional 能化 roles with positions such as 劝学 and 司教, although these again declined after 1824 during changes in administration. The authority of Jisha-bugyō 寺社奉行 has been extended to cover temples and shrines, monks, and lands; establishing an authority that decentrally governs Buddhist and Shinto institutions within the state governance structure, ensuring control and compliance with that of the shogunate.

Fig 5: Sōkan System in Edo period (1603-1868) (凤凰网佛教 2013)

In Japan, the Meiji Restoration (from 1868 to 1912) ushered in an alien form of religion and governance into the nation and thereby ended the long historical practice of having Buddhist institutions part of the state-organized system. The

Meiji government, to further the process of modernization, did away with the old Sōkan system, which was meant to separate religion from politics and establish Shinto as the state religion (Grapard, 1992) [7]. This policy blanketly excluded Buddhism from any form of intervention in politics and society, thus classifying Buddhist monks into professional clergy categories and recasting Buddhist function within the new national perception (Adolphson, 2000) [2]. New administrative positions, such as Guanchang (管长) and Kyōdō (教导), were established to align religious governance with the new policies of the contemporary state: those temples presented autonomy to supervise their activities under new religious councils. The decree announces a move toward democratized and decentralized frameworks (Hardacre 2017, 123) [8]. The Buddhist institutions now practically ceased any connection to state oversight and met the changing dimensions as required by a modernizing society. The Meiji period changed and redefined Buddhist governance and interaction with religious institutions as Japan evolved within its political and social fabric as the world changed.

Under the Meiji Government, the Buddhist administration was restructured to align religious institutions with nationalistic and imperial objectives. The establishment of the 教部省 (Kyōbusho-Ministry of Doctrine, 1872-1884) introduced a system of 教导职 (Kyōdō-shoku - Teaching Positions) with 14 ranks, such as 从大教正 (Junior Grand Instructor) and 训导 (Instructor), aimed at promoting loyalty to the Emperor and national ideals. In 1884, this system was replaced with the 管长制 (Kancho System), which centralized the sect administration under one 管长 (Kancho-Chief of Sect) using its sect-specific terms and appointment methods. For example, the term of the 座主 (Zasu) for 天台宗 (Tendai) was 7 years while 真宗十派 (Jōdo Shinshū) practiced hereditary leadership for Higashi Hongan ji 東本願寺 and Nishi Hongan-ji 西本願寺. The 宗议会 (Sōgi-kai-Sect-Parliament) became the body decision-making for sect affairs, ensuring representation and governance through a structured role such as 赞众 (Sanju) in 真宗大谷派 (Ōtani) and 会众 (Kaishu) in 本愿寺派 (Hongan-ji). The end of the 管长制 came post-World War Reform and was shifted to decentralized governments under 门主 (Monshu) or 法主 (Hōshu), which served as the religious head, while 季军 (Sōmu Sōchō) was in charge of administrative duties. New secular titles such as 部长 (Director) and 参务 (Councilor) in 天台宗 (Tendai) have"t helped functional differentiation in sect governance.

Also, newly formed religious movements started adopting modern organizational frameworks and built leadership positions like 会長 (President) and 理事長 (Director). Uncommon designations, like 法座長 (Hōza-chō), in movements like 灵友会 (Reiyūkai), helped perform such grassroots forums for studying the doctrines and exchanging faith. These changes reflected a transition towards mod-rendition of the traditional religious practices in the wake of social and political shifts.

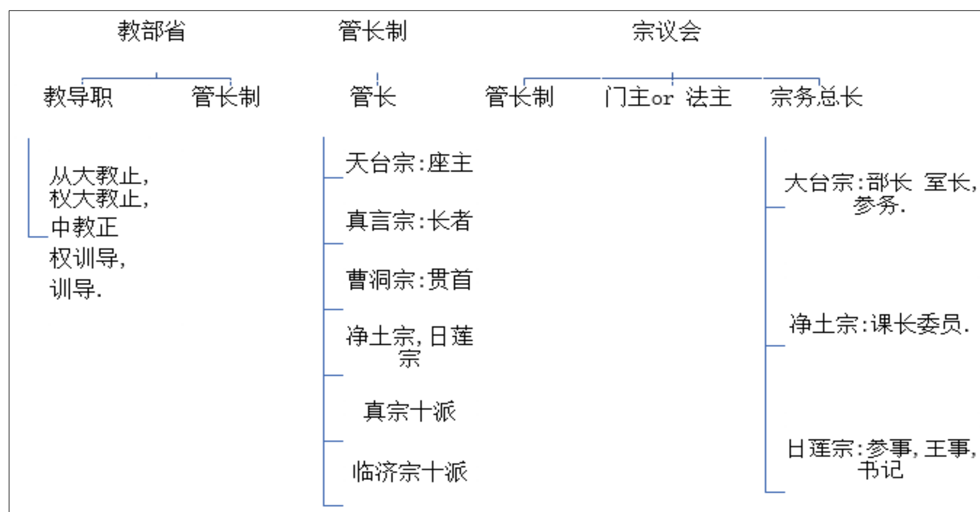

Fig 6: Sōkan System in Meiji Restoration (1868-1912) (凤凰网佛教 2013)

The Role of the Sōkan System in State and Monastic Management

Religious and administrative roles of monk officials

The Sōkan system was inclined to assign each monastic official a burden that reflected the double qualities of being a religious and administrative leader. Their terms of office included the following-carrying out the monastic discipline, compliance with ethical and moral injunctions, attached to monastic life as well as officiation of religious ceremonies and rites (Deal and Ruppert 2015) [3]. Thus these officials managed the finances of the temples, accounted for income, and allocated the required amount for construction and maintenance (Kitagawa 1966) [10]. They were also the middleman between the monastic community and the court, who gave the emperor and the imperial court advice on religious affairs, especially those touching upon state-sponsored rituals. Their dual role as managers of the state and tending to the faith gave them a special kind of power within that class (Grapard 1992) [7].

The Sōkan system thus initiated a somewhat complicated relationship between the Buddhist institutions with the Japanese state. The Buddhist temples enjoyed such income

and power accumulation with the help of royal patronage. The relationship does not end here: while the state provides funds and protection to these institutions, the monastic community is expected to provide religious legitimacy for royal authority via state-sponsored ceremonies (Teeuwen and Rambelli 2003) [15]. Monastic officials served as the linchpin to connect these two entities, with all their invaluable roles within the partnership. Their roles concerning temple discipline, resource management, and governance of religious activities created the opportunity for an individual to manipulate the position of Buddhism as a stabilizing force within society rather than a threat to imperial authority (Adolphson 2000) [2]. These officials, from inception, served as overseers for the resources of the temple including, for example, donations, land, and taxes usually levied for the temple's benefit. The resources include construction of temples, maintenance of buildings, and food and clothing for monks. Higher up were Sōjō (僧正) and Sōzu (僧都) who led the novices' training and education which secured a well-developed future Buddhist clergy about doctrine and administration (Grapard 1992) [7]. Therefore, all this had to be well managed so that the seamless functioning of temples themselves and also vis-à-vis the overriding socio-political goals of the state could be achieved (Kornicki 1998) [11].

The Sōkan make connections so smoothly such institutions are mandated by the imperial court. The Sōjō acts for advice on religious matters and involves many state ceremonies that are rich in Buddhist symbolism. The state can employ monastic officials to serve as intermediaries to ensure that the monastic community remains loyal to the imperial government. State-appointed monastic officials would therefore offer the emperor and the court direct oversight of such major temples and allow for the effective use of Buddhist rituals and institutions as instruments for legitimizing authority. The Sōkan system's hierarchical structure, characterized by a distinct division of roles and responsibilities, facilitated effective management of monastic affairs and preserved a strong connection between the state and Buddhist organizations. This organization ensured the proper functioning of temples and secured Buddhism's position within Japan's medieval socio-political order. The hierarchy of the system, characterized by specific religious and administrative responsibilities, solidified Buddhism's position as a state-endorsed religion, integrating it into Japan's political and social framework (Adolphson 2000) [2].

State Control and Religious Regulation

An additional role of this institution, indeed, is that even a religious role in reality, it served as an administrative tool used to dovetail Buddhist institutions under the influence of the Japanese state, which would enforce each Buddhist attention to the politics of state objectives. The integrated system would put all Buddhist monasteries into the framework of the state administrative structure. The court thus supervises religious activities, monastic discipline, and management of temples (Deal and Ruppert, 2015) [3].

To stifle independent religious forces that might contest imperial power, the state invented the Sōkan system which comprehensively viewed Buddhist affairs and initiated enlightenment between monastic officials and the court. Under this system, the government appointed officials who supervised and maintained direct lines or channels between monasteries and the court. Using the Sōkan system, the Japanese state had regulatory oversight over different aspects of Buddhist institutions. Initially, the state controlled the appointment of key officials, namely, Sōjō and Sōzu ensuring that all those in power in the Buddhist community were directly loyal to the state's policies (Kitagawa 1966) [10]. For another, monastic officials were appointed to monitor temple finances, land use, and religious activities to regulate the wider economic and spiritual influence of leading temples; the state thereby controlled the wealth accumulated and ensured that resources were used in ways that were not to the detriment of court interests (Kornicki 1998) [11]. In addition, the Sōkan system ensured that Buddhist rituals and ceremonial observances were performed in state-prescribed doctrine, thus permitting the state to monitor religious activities and prevent any teachings or practices that might be construed as politically subversive (Adolphson 2000) [2].

To some, an official like that of the Sōjō would consider it to be his task to care for religious affairs within his monastic community, making sure that monks were keeping the Buddhist precepts and that what was done in the temple was in line with what was taught as religious. However, on the other hand, this official was supposed to act as a mediator between the Buddhist community and the state, that is to say, forming an advisory body to the emperor on religious issues and ensuring state interests were respected within the monastic community. A high-ranking official in the structure of Sōkan and such as Sōjō and Sōzu would have been asked by and summoned from the post of the former for advice to the immediate y during times of crisis and transition on religious and political matters, given the statuses he held. These officials were viewed by the state as moral authorities well-versed in Buddhist doctrine, who would guide concerning Buddhist ceremonies usually incorporated by the state for legitimizing the imperial rule and securing spiritual protection for the nation (Grapard 1992) [7].

In addition to rendering guidance in religious matters, the officials of the monastery advised the emperor and other officials on ethical matters that were most often used as justification of the state's ethical governance by Buddhist reference. In this capacity, he contributed to the view of the emperor being an ethically just ruler who ruled according to Buddhist principles. Further with the Sōkan, a monastic would take part in the government of forming religious policy at the very highest level. His effect could carry into other matters, for instance, such as temple buildings, ordaining monks, or regulating religious activities throughout the empire, thus the state centralized control over Buddhist institutions and yet maintained the appearance of religious independence (Dumoulin 2005) [4].

These broad-based powers allowed a monastic to have much political power. They had important roles in both the two states as intermediaries between the two actors while also drawing the enormous net of relations between them. To receive such a reward for loyalty, monastic officials exercised within their temples considerable power in overseeing extensive temple lands and various religious activities (Grapard 1992) [7].

However, their political power continued to rely on maintaining the court's support, as the state held the authority to appoint or dismiss them at its discretion. The state may exert influence over religious affairs by regulating

the appointment of monastic officials and employing them as intermediaries, thus circumventing direct involvement in the daily functions of Buddhist monasteries. This system created a balanced distribution of power between the state and religious institutions. The political implications of the Sōkan system extended beyond religious considerations. Monastic officials frequently exerted considerable influence in court politics, especially during periods of political instability. Senior officials, such as the Sōjō, frequently advised on succession, governance, and state policy matters. The authority of Buddhist clergy, both symbolic and moral, made them important allies to political factions within the court, which often employed Buddhism to legitimize their claims to power (Adolphson 2000) [2].

The Impact of the Sōkan System

It is the Sōkan system that considerably affected the administration of Buddhist monasteries in medieval Japan and had far-reaching effects politically, socially, and religiously. Indeed, the establishment played an essential role in not only establishing the relationship between Buddhist monasteries and government but also influenced more than the direct administrative scope, marking a significant legacy on Japanese religious history and later religious frameworks (Kitagawa 1966; Grapard 1992) [7, 10]. It was fundamental in structuring the internal administration of Buddhist monasteries and the religious practices within these communities. The establishment of a formal hierarchical structure and regulation of monastic officials' activities imposed order and discipline within monastic institutions, ensuring compliance with state-sanctioned teachings and religious practices. Such a hierarchy enhanced the administration of the temple, enabling it to manage its resources and religious ceremonies as well as monastic life (Deal and Ruppert 2015) [3]. Indeed, a temple falling within the system's purview served as both a religious centre and an administrative unit according to the regulations fixed by state-appointed monastic officials (Kornicki 1998) [11].

The Sōkan system is closely concerned with and exercises the administration of several other matters connected with it, including how the way such monasteries practice religion. Inhibiting the establishment of any different or unorthodox practices that might potentially compromise the authority of the clergy and, consequently, the state was the standardization of Buddhist doctrines and rituals. Enforced Vinaya by Risshi officials, who were essential in upholding ethical and moral standards within the monastic community. Under hierarchy, controls, and mechanics, violations of monastic rules were met with disciplinary measures. An elite administrative class was then established within the monastic community to consolidate much of the power among a few officials acting both as spiritual leaders and political managers (Teeuwen and Rambelli 2003) [15].

Political and social implications hence resulted from this Sōkan system. The Japanese government's incorporation of Buddhism into the state apparatus used it as a means to control religious organizations with moral authority. This system created a model in which religion and the state were intertwined; it established the interdependencies built into them, allowing both entities to withstand and strengthen their power and legitimacy. Imperial power prohibits Buddhist monasteries from becoming independent power bases by appointing state-loyal monastic officials. To safeguard the temples, the Buddhist clergy received royal patronage, ensconcing them with financial assistance and lands. Concurrently, such benefits nurtured the temples' welfare, leading to the evolution of the material temples into wealthy and dominant institutions within Japanese society (Adolphson 2000; Dumoulin 2005) [4, 2].

The Sōkan system promoted this growth by creating an official administrative framework that connected these religious institutions to the state. Buddhist rituals served to legitimize the emperor's authority, while monastic officials often provided counsel to the court on matters of religious and moral importance. Such an arrangement allowed the state to keep religious harmony while making Buddhist institutions adhere to its political objectives. State-supported appointed officials would oversee the monastic community, thus ensuring that Buddhist teachings would stress loyalty, discipline, and social order principles that reinforced imperial authority (Grapard 1992) [7].

Table 1: Summary of the Sōkan system in Japanese Buddhism

Period	Structural Features	Functions	Changes and Innovations
Asuka (538-710)	Initial setup with Sōjō, Sōzu, and Hōtō	Supervision of monks and nuns, temple affairs, and legal discipline to curb misconduct.	Introduction of Sōkan, modeled after Chinese Buddhist administration, with innovations like Hōtō.
Nara (710-794)	Three-tier system: Sōjō, Sōzu, Risshi; expanded to five ranks: Daisōjō, Sōjō.	Centralized control of monastic discipline, appointment of senior monks, and temple management.	Addition of ranks like Daisōjō; creation of titles like Biedang and Hō-ō to handle temple affairs.
Heian (794-1185)	Development into a nine-rank system: Daisōjō, Sōjō, Hōin, etc.; roles like Zasu emerge.	Comprehensive temple management; roles expanded to oversee religious, administrative, and ceremonial duties.	Introduction of Zasu, Acharya, and academic leaders like Xuetou to handle growing monastic influence.
Kamakura (1185-1333)	New roles like Daikyōin (Great Teaching Institute) to support temple rebuilding and Senglu Division.	Managed temple restoration, appointed abbots, and oversaw temple governance.	Zen Buddhism's rise prompted structural changes; the Senglu Division was introduced to manage Zen sects.
Muromachi (1336-1573)	Expansion of Zen roles like Shokutō, Daisōzu, and Sōjō; integration of Song dynasty rules.	Supervised "Five Mountain" temples and Zen monastery administration; introduced village-level governance.	Rural self-governance supported by monks like Fangguan; clearer distinctions between sectarian roles.
Edo (1603-1868)	Reorganization of the Senglu Division, new roles like Nenghua, and creation of liaison offices (Shokutō).	Strengthened control over Buddhism, regulated monastic ranks, and centralized religious policies.	Implementation of Nenghua as educational leaders; liaison offices standardized governance.
Meiji (1868-1912)	Abolition of Sōkan ranks; introduction of Guanchang (superintendent) for sect-specific management.	Managed temples, religious education, and sect governance under centralized imperial policies.	Modernized system; secularization of monastic roles; emphasis on education and social functions.
Modern Era (Post-WWII)	Democratic structures like religious councils; roles like Chancellor, Chief Executive, etc.	Governance of sects, policy-making, and management of temples in line with modern societal norms.	Shift toward secular and democratic structures; sect leaders aligned with lay and administrative responsibilities.

Conclusion

Such Sōkan system which acts as a typical administrative system governing Buddhist livelihood in Japan significantly borrowed its external features from the Chinese Sengguan zhidu but then developed into a uniquely Japanese model for religious institution management. It created a hierarchy of monastic officials who were assigned to superintend religious activities, enforce monastic discipline, and manage temple affairs according to state goals. Such officials thus performed dual functions, as religious leaders and political agents, linking the monastic community with the imperial state. Just like in China, Japanese Sokan had the same purpose in that it sought to regulate Buddhist monasteries and oversee their activities so that they were along with the interests of the state. The Sōkan system was introduced as a component of the Japanese court's extensive initiative to centralize authority and incorporate religious institutions within the state framework. The initial implementation of this system involved the designation of monastic officials to oversee significant temples such as Tōdai-ji (東大寺) and Kōfuku-ji (興福寺). The officials were responsible for upholding discipline within the monastic community, supervising religious rituals, and administering temple assets and construction projects. The ranks in the Sōkan system corresponded to those of the Sengguan zhidu, with titles such as Sōjō (僧正), Sōzu (僧都), and Risshi (律师) indicating their roles in managing religious affairs to meet the particular requirements of Japanese Buddhist institutions and their interactions with the state.

The evolution of the Buddhist administrative system Sōkan in Japan illustrates significant changes in governance, societal demands, and religious priorities throughout history. The Sōkan system, originating in the Asuka period and persisting into modernity, evolved in response to political and cultural shifts while preserving its significance in Buddhist and state matters. Although it experienced many ups and downs at times, the governmental administration of religion as formalized through the Sōkan system was revived again in later historical periods of Japan, chiefly during the Tokugawa Shogunate (1600-1868). It was during this time that the Danka system came into existence, which opened the doors for state control over religious institutions in Japan, forcing Buddhist temples to register all Japanese citizens into their rolls. It was during this time that Buddhism acted to perpetuate the social control tradition by utilizing Buddhist institutions. Changes in political authority, the emergence of a new Buddhist sect, and the progressive autonomy of the major temples led to the dissolution of centralized management over religious institutions, thereby weakening the control of Sōkan itself. The evolution of the Sōkan system is essentially indicative of the link between religion and government in Japan. From centralized rule to contemporary democratic constructs, such a shift has followed a lifetime pattern with political, social, and cultural changes while still maintaining a foundation of the functions that religion holds. Indeed, this development signifies the flexibility and resilience of Buddhist institutions in the face of historical transformations.

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