

Where mountains fly : the honji-suijaku mechanism in Japan

Autor(en): **Roth, Carina**

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WHERE MOUNTAINS FLY – THE *HONJI-SUIJAKU* MECHANISM IN JAPAN

Carina Roth, University of Geneva

The literal translation of *honji-suijaku* 本地垂迹 means “original forms (*hon-ji* 本地) of deities and their local traces (*sui-jaku* 垂迹)”.¹ This expression appears in Japan from the Xth c. AD onwards. It denotes a conceptual mechanism originating in Buddhist thought and pervasive until now: “originals” refer to Buddhist deities that temporarily take on the shape of Japanese indigenous divinities in order to help them, as well as the Japanese population, on the road to Buddhist salvation. Under this light, the Japanized Buddhist deities become “traces” of their Indian originals.

Honji-suijaku is the Japanese equivalent of a phenomenon that is likely to appear in all countries under Buddhist influence, since rather than crushing local traditions and customs to assert itself, Buddhism integrates them, molds itself into their shape, and works on from there. Especially in Japan, but also in India and China, this leads to a system of “Russian dolls”, starting off with the concept that indigenous deities, *kami* 神 in the case of Japan, are in reality so-called emanations of Buddhist deities. According to the teachings of Mâhayâna Buddhism², and more specifically of Esoteric Buddhism (*mikkyô* 密教), it is possible for anyone to reach Buddhahood, even in this life (*sokushinjôbutsu* 即身成仏, “becoming Buddha in one’s own body”). However, Buddhism also sees most people as not strong enough to work towards that goal by themselves, so that they need help to progress on the path of salvation: bodhisattvas are one example of adjuvants for spiritual awakening. If indigenous divinities are seen as the reflection, the “trace” of a Buddha, and assimilated that way into Buddhism, they can play a similar role. Such a process creates a dynamic system of often multiple correspondences: a local deity is taken as the emanation of a

1 Teeuwen Mark / Rambelli Fabio ed., *Buddhas and Kami in Japan, Honji Suijaku as a Combinatory Paradigm*, Routledge Curzon, London, 2003, p. 1.

2 Buddhism of the Great Vehicle (*daijô* 大乘), the form of Buddhism that spread mainly in Tibet, China, Korea and Japan and that considers all living beings to have inherent Buddha nature, so that none are forecluded salvation.

more powerful regional deity, itself the emanation of a bodhisattva, which in turn is the emanation of a Buddha, etc. until one reaches the final goal, i.e. fusion with or extinction within the Universal Buddha. Via these correspondences, the *honji-suijaku* mechanism has the double advantage of legitimizing indigenous divinities, and of anchoring Buddhism deeply in local soil. While it does create a hierarchy since “originals” are in general considered superior to their “traces”, *honji-suijaku* facilitates the “digestion” of divinities of all kinds and nationalities.

However, this process of amalgamation³ may take time. In Japan, several steps can be distinguished in the evolution of the concept before the term of *honji-suijaku* actually appears in the course of the Xth c. AD. When Buddhism was first introduced to Japan in the VIth c. AD, Buddhas and bodhisattvas were worshipped as “foreign *kami*” (*adashikuninokami* 他し国の神) alongside indigenous deities, and rather than being amalgamated, they lived in juxtaposition with each other. Then, around the VIIth c. appears the notion that *kami* are sentient beings in need of Buddhist salvation. Buddhism, as one part of the heavy cultural borrowal from China that was underway in Japan, became the protector of the Japanese nation and its deities under the motto of *chingo-kokka* 鎮護国家, “pacification and protection of the nation”. However, slowly but surely, *kami* rose in their status, and Buddhas and *kami* started being considered as interdependent. From being unilateral, the support becomes mutual: Buddhas help *kami* and vice-versa.⁴ Finally, towards the end of the XIIth c., the *honji-suijaku* theory as such appears explicitly: Buddhist divinities are defined as the original forms of Japanese *kami*. Hierarchy remains in place to a certain extent, since *kami* are emanations of Buddhas and not the contrary, but the former gradually work their way towards parity.⁵ Many, but not all, *kami* are con-

3 Rather than fusion into one identity as in assimilation, amalgamation evokes the superposition of several identities for greater efficacy. Teeuwen and Rambelli (cf. op.cit.) prefer this term to that of “assimilation”, which is generally used to describe the *honji-suijaku* mechanism (the previous standard was set by Alicia Matsunaga, in *The Buddhist Philosophy of Assimilation*, Sophia University, Tôkyô, 1969).

4 At a political level, this is reflected by the evolution of *chingo-kokka* 鎮護国家, “pacification and protection of the nation”, into *ôbô-buppô* 王法仏法, “(interdependance) of Imperial and Buddhist Law”.

5 In some cases, the total amalgamation of *kami* and Buddhas ends in the reversal of the paradigm, called reversed-*honji-suijaku* (*han-honji-suijaku* 反本地垂迹), in which *kami* are seen as being superior to Buddhas. However, this current remains minor.

sidered as being either bodhisattvas or *gongen* 権現, so-called temporary manifestations or avatars, i.e. emanations of, ultimately, the Universal Buddha.

Although it originates in the Buddhist way to integrate non-Buddhist deities into its pantheon, *honji-suijaku* can be understood as a “*modus vivendi*-processor” between various religious traditions. In order to provide a concrete example of how such a mechanism may function, I should like to introduce one particular Japanese religious tradition, and see how *honji-suijaku* is applied within its frame. *Shugendô* 修験道, or the “Way to Cultivate Wondrous Effects”, emphasizes ascetic practices in mountains. From a doctrinal point of view, it is an eclectic cocktail of various religious traditions evolving around a core of Esoteric Buddhism, Daoism, and indigenous beliefs centered on sacred mountains. This variety of influences makes *Shugendô* a perfect environment for the development of *honji-suijaku* as a means to harmonize the former’s loose network of deities and beliefs. The spiritual aim of *Shugendô* practitioners, as in all Buddhist currents, is to reach Buddhahood. It is however often combined with a more worldly goal, i.e. practice austerities in sacred mountains in order to acquire magical powers and trade those among the population as healers, martial art teachers, exorcizers, etc.

Being linked to specific mountains, *Shugendô* has by essence a very strong local anchorage, which leads to a fair amount of independence among its various branches. The cradle of its development, however, is the Kii Peninsula 紀伊半島, to the South of Kyôto 京都 (Fig. I), and more specifically the area around the mountain range of Mount Ômine 大峰山,⁶ which extends over some 130 km of rugged terrain between the town of Yoshino 吉野 and that of Kumano 熊野, both very ancient religious centres. The founder of *Shugendô* is said to be *En no Gyôja*, En the Ascetic 役の行者, a semi-legendary figure who lived at the beginning of the VIIth c. on the slopes of Mount Katsuragi 葛城山 in the North-West of the Kii Peninsula. He quickly became the prototype of the ideal ascetic, endowed with tremendous magical powers and resources. En no Gyôja is said to have revealed the identity of the main deity of *Shugendô*, called *Zaô Gongen* 蔵王権現. We have seen above that *gongen* is one of the appellations used to manifest the link between a *kami* and a Buddha. This in itself shows how strong the influence of *honji-suijaku* is present within the frame of *Shugendô*.

6 Miyake Hitoshi, one of the foremost authorities on *Shugendô*, calls Ômine “the Mecca of *Shugendô*” (Miyake Hitoshi 宮家準, *Shugendô shisô no kenkyû* 修験道思想の研究, Tôkyô, 1985, p. 426).

Versions of how Zaô Gongen, the tutelary deity of Mount Kinpu, appeared to En no Gyôja differ, but the common thread is that En no Gyôja secluded himself on Mount Kinpu 金峰山 to the very North of the Ômine range. There, he prayed that he be revealed a protective deity for himself, and by extension for *Shugendô* practitioners as well as for all living beings. In most tales, two or three Buddhas or bodhisattvas appear one after the other, but En no Gyôja judges all of them to be too gentle for the formidable task of saving the world in those dark ages, and he sends them back. When Zaô Gongen, finally casts himself out of a rock, surrounded by flames with fierce expression and dark blue complexion, En no Gyôja is satisfied at last. This is one instance of “standard *honji-suijaku*”, linking one Japanese deity with one or more Buddhist deities.⁷ However, this mechanism can be applied in many more ways, some of which I should like to examine through examples drawn from a *Shugendô* document of the XIIIth c., called *Shozan engi*⁸, “Mountain Stories of Origin”. In terms of its teachings, *Shugendô* very clearly emphasizes practice over theory on the one hand, and oral transmission on the other, so that written sources are scarce. The *Shozan engi*, is among the oldest such documents. It is a compilation of texts focusing on three mountain ranges in the Kii Peninsula. Its twenty chapters are extremely diverse in nature, including precise descriptions of rituals or of sacred landscapes, as well as legends of Buddhist, Daoist or other origin.

One of the key features of the *Shozan engi* is its description of the Ômine region as embodying the Womb World and the Diamond World mandalas, i.e. the two fundamental mandalas of Esoteric Buddhism (Fig. II and III).⁹ Mandalas are representations of the Buddhist cosmos. They symbolize the whole universe, and are mainly used as a basis for visualisation and meditation practices. The practitioner mentally enters the mandala, and either travels through it or focuses onto one of the many figures represented in it. Either way, the aim of

7 Sometimes Zaô Gongen is said to follow the apparition of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, sometimes to embody them all at once.

8 *Shozan engi*, in *Jisha engi*, Nihonshisô-taikei vol.20, Iwanami Shoten, Tôkyô, 1975, pp. 89–139. The translations of the excerpts below are my own. Originally, *engi* are temple or shrine censuses. From the mid VIIth onwards, they are adorned with miracle stories and legends, in order to attract government grants. One of the ways to enhance the importance and sacrality of a religious site is to attribute the discovery of its link with one or more particular deities to a charismatic figure. It often happens to be a *Shugendô* practitioner, as their ascetic practices in the mountains inspire both respect and fear, and lend them an aura of magic and mystery.

9 *Taizôkai-mandara* 胎藏界曼荼羅, and *Kongôkai-mandara* 金剛界曼荼羅.

these practices is identification with the object of meditation, leading the practitioner to fuse the world of humans and that of the Buddhas into one. The aim of the process is to gain spiritual insight or supernatural powers, if not both, in order to bring closer to one another the supermundane and the mundane levels. Most mandalas are paintings, though some are tridimensional, and they generally depict a multitude of Buddhas, bodhisattvas and other deities symbolizing the infinite aspects of the universe. Ultimately, however, these myriads of different beings are nothing but facets of the same Universal Buddha of Esoteric Buddhism. In that respect, mandalas can be seen as an ideal basis for the *honji-suijaku* principle, providing fertile ground for the emanation and embodiment system. They range from very abstract descriptions of ideal universes to geographically precise locations, linked to a particular mountain or religious site. This is where *Shugendô* comes into play: being as it is centered on practice much rather than on theory, *Shugendô* started creating full scale mandalas by projecting the virtual realm of Buddhahood onto actual valleys and peaks. Practitioners thus physically walk through mandalas they normally travel through only mentally. The virtual maps leading to Buddhahood provided by mandalas become very real.

The *Shozan engi* is one of the earliest examples of such “mandalization”¹⁰ of landscape. Its first chapter describes the practitioner’s journey through the Womb World and the Diamond World mandalas. More than a hundred mountain peaks are accounted for in a few lines each: every description starts off with the name of the mountain, which corresponds to one of the figures in the mandalas. It goes on with the name and the title of the person to whom the deity revealed itself, and mentions sutras or statues that have been buried or deposited on the peak. Lastly legends or particular relevant facts are listed:

Initial Gate of the Womb World:

First, to the left, the Peak of Nanba-ten¹¹.

This mountain bears the name of First Pârâmitâ¹². Kaisen Shônin¹³, from the country of Hôki, left recitation sutras as offerings in the Western District. His copy of the Flower

10 In Grapard Allan G., “Flying Mountains and Walkers of Emptiness: Toward a Definition of Sacred Space in Japanese Religions,” in *History of Religions*, vol. 21, n°3 (Winter 1982), pp. 195–221.

11 *Ten*: deva, an Indian deity. Nanba-ten and his companion Taimen-ten are often represented as ferocious guardians at the entrance of Buddhist temples.

12 The six pârâmitâ are bodhisattva practices: 1) almsgiving, 2) observation of the precepts, 3) perseverance, 4) assiduous practice, 5) meditation, 6) wisdom.

13 Kaisen Shônin: unidentified hermit.

Ornament Scripture is said to be there. To the right, at the same height, is the residence of Taimen-ten¹⁴. It is a place where deities gather. The Treaty of the Ten Stages (of bodhisattva practice) is enshrined there, as well as five sutras copied according to the rules. (*Shozan engi*, p. 91)

Although not all divinities appearing in the two mandalas are represented, those enumerated follow a precise route through Mount Ômine. In this case, *honji-suijaku* can be understood as direct geographic assimilation: no intercession by local *kami* is needed, since Buddhas, bodhisattvas and any other deities are the mountains themselves:

[...] Bearing in mind that every rock taller than one shaku¹⁵ is a seat for a Buddha, and that every tree higher than one jô¹⁶ is the radiance of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, whether we travel the sky or tread the earth, all of us, we are walking alongside the Buddhas (...) Those who have faith shall realize the marvellous fruit of Awakening here and now. (*Shozan engi*, p. 100)

Foreign religious entities are used in this way to enhance the sacrality of a given space. However, this importation needs to be legitimized, which is what the first lines of the *Shozan engi* aim at: they explain the origin of Mount Ômine as being an actual part of the Vulture Peak in India, where the historical Buddha Shakyamuni used to preach. Inmidst of a violent earthquake and accompanied by a multitude of sounds, the mountain flies over to Japan one night of 538 AD¹⁷, surrounded by flaming clouds. The whole country, both the population and the Court, are overwhelmed, and the *kami* look up to Amaterasu Ômikami, the ancestor deity of the Imperial family and highest divine authority in Japan, for advice. Amaterasu cheerfully answers that the landing of the mountain means Buddhist law has at last reached Japan. According to the *Shozan engi*, the very top of Japanese religious and political authorities therefore strongly encourages Buddhist faith.

Hence Mount Ômine has several layers of identity: it is its natural self as a Japanese sacred mountain, then it is a part of the Indian Vulture Peak, and finally, it embodies the Two World Mandalas. Ômine is not the only mountain to have such characteristics. Mount Kinpu¹⁸, on the northernmost side of the Ômine

14 Cf. note 11.

15 30.3 cm.

16 Approx. 3 m.

17 One of several dates cited as that of the introduction of Buddhism to Japan.

18 Mount Kinpu too was said to have come travelling from afar: "An old man told me that in ancient times, Mount Kinpu was seated on Chinese land. It was the residence of the

range, was venerated since ancient times as a “Water-Distributing Mountain” (*mikumari no yama* 水配りの山). Then, under Buddhist influence, Mount Kinpu came to be seen as the Inner Sanctuary of Tosotsu-ten 兜率天 residence of Miroku bosatsu 弥勒菩薩, the Buddha of the Future. If Mount Kinpu is the Inner Sanctuary, Mount Kasagi¹⁹, which also appears in the *Shozan engi*, is Miroku bosatsu’s Outer Sanctuary. The last mountain range cited in the *Shozan engi* is Katsuragi, and is said to embody the Lotus Sutra²⁰. 28 stations spread throughout the mountain correspond to the 28 chapters of the sutra, and the number of strides needed to complete the pilgrimage is the exact number of Chinese characters the sutra counts:

Under the feet of *En no Gyôja* who walks and never ceases to walk, are the 69'384 characters. (*Shozan engi*, p. 117)

Through the above examples drawn from the *Shozan engi*, I tried to show a very specific application of the *honji-suijaku* mechanism, which creates direct geographic correlations between Buddhist deities or sacred scriptures and Japanese mountains. However, the basic assumption remains the same as in a straightforward kami/Buddha association: it illustrates an essential link between indigenous and foreign identities or entities. I have presented the *honji-suijaku* phenomenon as being a fundamental articulation of Buddhist logic, be it in India, China or Japan. It is moreover one that transcends time. Even nowadays, despite the forceful separation between *kami* and Buddhas that occurred at the end of the XIXth c.²¹, the amalgamation or cumulation of various religious identities within one body is obvious in many Japanese temples or shrines. However, although the connection between *kami* and Buddhas existed much earlier, the need to develop a theory around *honji-suijaku* did not appear until well into the Xth c. At this point in time, a profound change in perception took place with regard to Buddhism in Japan. Until then, Buddhism had been considered essentially clerical, and only a fairly restricted part of the population felt concerned by its doctrines. But around the XIIth c., Japan was living a fearful

bodhisattva Kongô Zaô 金剛藏王菩薩. This mountain then flew away and came here floating on the surface of the sea. This is why this Mount Kinpu here is simultaneously that mountain there.” (*Shozan engi*, p. 102)

19 笠置山, situated to the South-East of Kyôto.

20 法華經, one of the most famous Buddhist scriptures, in Japan as elsewhere.

21 神仏分離, *shinbutsu-bunri*. According to the prescriptions of the Meiji 明治 government, Shintô 神道 became state religion, and Buddhism was to disappear.

period, in a turmoil of political, economical and climatic troubles. Added to this, the belief that the world had entered the final age of the Law (*mappô*)²², gave rise to strong millenaristic fears. Buddhism widened its grip on the population by taking on a less austere appearance, and claiming that salvation for all was at hand. Some Buddhist schools simplified their doctrines to the point that it was enough to speak out once the name of the Buddha Amida with authentic faith in order to be reborn in a Buddhist Pure Land. As a power enhancement system, through its logic of emanation leading on to ever more powerful deities, *honji-suijaku* functioned perfectly in that new environment.

As we have seen, *honji-suijaku* is as simple in its fundamental assumption that indigenous deities are emanations of Buddhas, as it is complicated in the patchwork of its derived applications. In a similar elusive way, it can be considered as a factor of continuity, since it illustrates a mechanism inherent to Buddhism that is pervasive until now. On the other hand, the development of *honji-suijaku* as a formalized doctrine takes place in the context of one specific period of time, around the Xth and XIth c., in which people felt a strong need to be assured there would be salvation from their worries. In that perspective, *honji-suijaku* may also be perceived as a marker of change. In the examples drawn from the *Shozan engi*, we have seen how mountains come flying through the air from India or China, and chose to settle down in certain regions of Japan. In a very concrete way, these mountains are seen as both the actual foreign sacred mountain and the Japanese one at the same time. In another instance, mandalas or sutras are projected onto Japanese mountains, so concretely as to allow pilgrims to walk them and identify the residences of Buddhas and bodhisattvas along the way in various peaks, caves and waterfalls. The Japanese *kami* said to dwell in such places are themselves echoes, avatars or manifestations of deities that have come from elsewhere. However, in all of the listed examples, the essence of the Japanese soil is never touched: the mountains *Shugendô* practitioners walk are also, and above all, theirs'.

22 末法, widespread apocalyptic belief according to which, after the death of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, Buddhism enters three phases of deterioration, of which *mappô* is the last and most severe.

Illustrations

KII PENINSULA

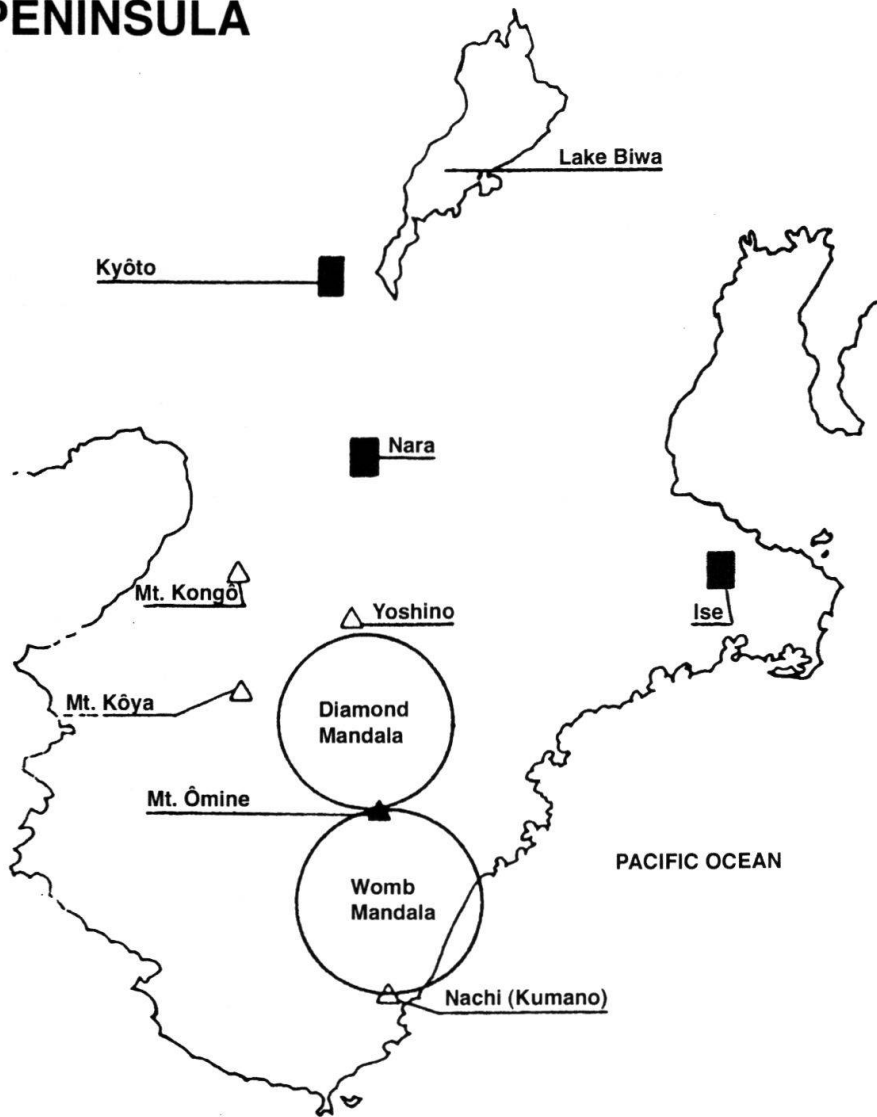


Fig. I: Map of Kii Peninsula (Japan), after Grapard Allan G. (1982), p. 215.

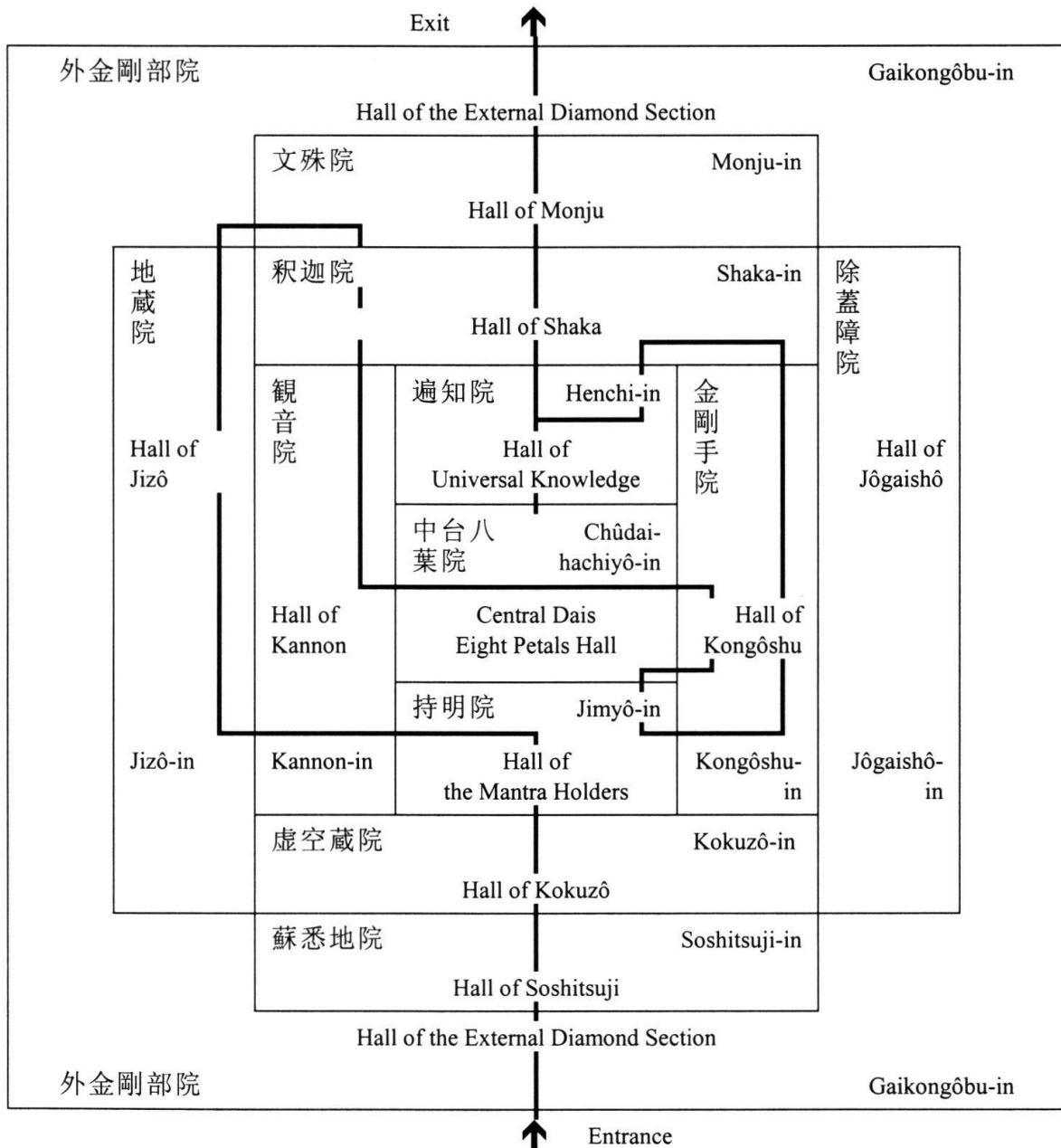


Fig. II: Journey through the Mandala of the Womb World 胎藏界曼荼羅, *Taizōkai-mandara*, according to the *Shozan engi*.

Shin-ne 四印会	Ichiin-ne 一印会	Rishu-e 理趣会
←		
Four Mudra Assembly	Single Mudra Assembly	Rishu Assembly
Kuyô-e 供養会	Jôjin-ne 成身会	Gôzanze-e 降三世会
←		
Offerings Assembly	Perfected Body Assembly	Gôzanze Assembly
Misai-e 微細会	Sanmaya-e 三昧耶会	Gôzanze-sanmaya-e 降三世三昧耶会
←		
Subtle Assembly	Sammaya Assembly	Gôzanze-Sammaya Assembly

Fig. III: Journey through the Mandala of the Diamond World 金剛界曼荼羅, *Kongôkai-mandara*, according to the *Shozan engi*.

