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Becoming Kannon

Daidō Chōan, Guzeikyō, and Buddhist Reform in Meiji Japan

This article explores the important yet overlooked role that Kannon has played in the modern history of Buddhist reform. Previous scholarship has focused on the formation of the sectarian histories of the Jōdo Shin, Nichiren, and Zen Buddhist schools and emphasized the role of the buddha Amida. As a historical corrective, I examine the work of former Sōtō Zen priest Daidō Chōan and his founding of a new religious movement centered on Kannon called Guzeikyō in the late nineteenth century. Following a doctrinal dispute with Shin Buddhists and his excommunication from the Sōtō school, Chōan embarked on a project to revolutionize Japanese Buddhism under the banner of “reform.” Chōan’s ideological commitments resonated with many of the concerns of his contemporaries, including adapting to the rapidly shifting religious milieu of Meiji Japan, reinventing orientations toward the laity to undermine sacerdotalism, preempting ideological fragmentation by incorporating Western philosophy, and reenvisioning the terms of Buddhists’ social commitments. Chōan’s vision for Buddhist reform centered on the transformative power and trans-sectarian appeal of Kannon calls for greater scholarly engagement with the history of marginalized Buddhist modernities and reform movements.

KEYWORDS: Kannon—Guzeikyō—social evolution—lay Buddhism—Buddhist reform—sectarian formation

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DESPITE its widespread popularity and transnational appeal, Kannon, a bodhisattva primarily associated with compassion, has attracted relatively little attention in existing scholarship on Japanese Buddhism. Attention has often been paid to Amida, the primary buddha of Jōdo schools, which often relegate Kannon to a subordinated status as a mere attendant (*kyōji* 脇侍) of Amida. HAYAMI Tasuku (1982) suggests that the general tendency to neglect the figure of Kannon reflects not so much the deity's insignificance as the abiding sectarianism that characterizes much of contemporary Japanese scholarship on Buddhism. That is, the conspicuous absence of research on Kannon stems from the bodhisattva's lack of a fixed sectarian affiliation, and, because sectarian scholarship dominates Japanese Buddhist studies, Kannon has "fallen between the cracks" (HAYAMI 1982, 327). The elision of Kannon from the scholarly purview is a symptom not only of the modern configuration of Japanese Buddhism but also of the prevailing influence of a deeply entrenched sectarian politics on the organization of its disciplinary study within Japanese scholarship.

Another possible explanation for the marginal attention paid to the figure of Kannon in Japan arises from the division of labor between Buddhist studies and "folk Buddhism" within academia.¹ Even today, Kannon has gained broader popularity in the Japanese religious landscape relative to its status at the turn of the nineteenth century. This trend is closely associated with grassroots devotional practices like pilgrimage, "this-worldly" interests (*genze riyaku* 現世利益), the popularization of Buddhist art, and the contentious ritual of atonement for aborted fetuses known as *mizuko kuyō* 水子供養 (HARDACRE 1997), all of which center on the figure of Kannon. In contrast to the extensive body of scholarship on Kannon within both the fields of folk Buddhism and art history, Buddhist studies has traditionally fixated on texts over questions of practice, further exacerbating the problem of Kannon's disciplinary positionality.

ŌMI Toshihiro's (2014; 2018) recent work has highlighted the problem of historiography centered on Jōdo Shin (hereafter Shin) Buddhism, especially in the field of modern Japanese Buddhism. With the foundational figure Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1262) at its core, Shin Buddhism offers a soteriological framework focused

1. Ōmi Toshihiro also observes a reluctance among scholars of Buddhist studies (*Bukkyō kenkyū* 仏教研究) to refer to the work of folk Buddhist studies (*Bukkyō minzokugaku* 仏教民俗学). He suggests this lacuna comes from the general assumption that folk Buddhist studies lacks an investment in deepening "thought" (*shisō* 思想), which is a core feature of Buddhist studies in Japan (ŌMI 2007, 119).

exclusively on the relatively accessible practice of *nenbutsu* 念仏 oriented toward rebirth in Amida's Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. Shin Buddhism is also organized around a lay tradition that putatively rejects traditional monastic life and social stratification through the notion espoused by Shinran that its individual practitioners are "neither monk nor layman" (*hisō hizoku* 非僧非俗). According to ŌMI (2018, 368), Shin Buddhist intellectuals played a pivotal role in the modernization of Japanese Buddhism from the late nineteenth century onward, with the result that the modern concept of "Buddhism" was formulated in close correspondence to the model provided by the Shin Buddhist intellectual tradition. This same theoretical framework has been characterized elsewhere by Jeff SCHROEDER (2022, 214) as "Shin modernism," its "core features" consisting of "a this-worldly focus, non-reliance on the established interpretive tradition, pursuit of transformative experiences, and an ideal of egalitarianism (accompanied by underlying sexism)." Contrary to these Shin-centric discourses, the story of Kannon within the Meiji Buddhist reformist movement remains largely unwritten and is often dismissed as one of the very practices left behind by modernization.

To address the general scholarly tendency toward the elision of Kannon within sectarian histories, this article examines Guzeikyō 救世教 (School of Salvation), a new religious movement centered on Kannon, which has been marginalized in scholarship due to the dominating influence of Shin modernism that culminated in the specific standards of normativity in the Meiji period. I trace how the founder of this movement, a laicized former Sōtō monk by the name of Daidō Chōan 大道長安 (1843–1908), constructed a "hybridized Buddhist modernism": a mix between "traditional" Buddhism and discourses of modernity to challenge existing understandings of modern Buddhism (McMAHAN 2008, 18–22). Under institutionally and intellectually unstable conditions in the Sōtō school resulting from the rapidly changing religious policy of the nascent Meiji government, Chōan, a parochial leader in the Niigata region, offered a radical reformist position and came into conflict with the headquarters of the Sōtō school. As a result, he was eventually excommunicated as a putative heretic, which ultimately led to the establishment of Guzeikyō in 1886.

Chōan and his Guzeikyō projected a malleable image of Kannon in response to the multifold challenges the Buddhist world faced at this time of rapid change. These persistent difficulties included sectarian fragmentation, an increasing awareness of the need for Buddhist reform (*Bukkyō kairyō* 仏教改良), ideological competition with Western thought, and reformulation of the already disintegrating distinction between monks and the laity. In response to the challenges posed by both Christianity and Shin Buddhists, Chōan restructured the existing cosmological hierarchies of Japanese Buddhist tradition and elevated Kannon to a central and transcendent status, above and beyond Amida, Jesus Christ, and even Shakamuni, the central figure of the Sōtō tradition.

This article begins with a brief outline of Chōan's life and existing scholarship before proceeding to investigate the concrete contexts in which Guzeikyō emerged as independent from the Sōtō school in the 1880s. As a parochial leader in Niigata, Chōan was proactive in promulgating his ideas directly to lay followers, which led in rapid succession to three formative events: a conflict with local Shin Buddhists, his subsequent "persecution" at their hands, and Chōan's founding of the Guzeikyō. Next, I examine how Chōan championed Kannon-centrism in response to the growing demand for Buddhist reform and the epistemological challenges latent in his conception of "social evolution." Finally, I focus on Chōan's model for lay Buddhism, which centered on a newly formulated model of the redemptive practitioner that he termed *ninsha* 仁者 (bearer of humane virtue). I discuss how the core of Chōan's argument was that everyone should strive to emulate Kannon, transcending the monk/laity binary and entrenched social hierarchies in order to ensure the survival of Buddhism in an age of social Darwinism and the popular refrain of "civilization and enlightenment."

The Kannon-centric Buddhist reform movement, despite a highly localized genesis, challenged the status quo of the religious milieu of modern Japan. Chōan's activism also constituted a watershed moment for the seemingly fixed sectarian discourse of Meiji Buddhism, accommodating an expansive array of modernizing agendas, ranging from the search for a novel form of Buddhism centered on the laity and a new conceptualization of its social relevance, to comprehensive institutional reform and ideological competition with Western thought. Serious consideration of the role that Kannon played in Buddhist reform efforts, such as those of Chōan and Guzeikyō, is necessary to complicate our understanding of Buddhist modernity and address the teleological, sectarian histories of Japanese scholarship on Buddhism.

Daidō Chōan and Meiji Buddhism

Daidō Chōan was born in 1843 in Echigo 越後 (present-day Niigata Prefecture). At the age of six, Chōan was ordained as a Sōtō Zen monk under his master Senmyō 泉明 (d.u.), an abbot of Chōkōji 長興寺 in Nagaoka 長岡, Niigata. Senmyō was a central figure in the Sōtō Buddhist community in the region as Chōkōji was the base of operations for the provincial administration of the Sōtō school during the Tokugawa period. Chōan belonged to a highly influential lineage within the Sōtō context in that he could trace his ancestry back to esteemed monks such as Keizan Jōkin 瑩山紹瑾 (1268–1325), Gesshū Sōko 月舟宗胡 (1618–1696), and Manzan Dōhaku 卍山道白 (1636–1715) (DAIDŌ 1955, 197–198). According to several biographies, Chōan's fervent devotion to Kannon took shape under the influence of his senior instructor Hakutei Taiju 柏庭大樹 (d. 1873), who later became his adoptive father. Taiju also fervently embraced asceticism in practices

directed to Kannon (DNZ, 1–86; DAIDŌ 1955, 185–282; DAIDŌ 1983, 25–41). As a part of his new year religious observances in 1853, Taiju reportedly devoted himself to painting thirty-three images of Kannon, providing the necessary illumination by burning oil in the palm of his own hand.² It is said that Taiju’s dramatic performance had an enormous impact on the young Chōan, inaugurating the beginnings of what would eventually become a lifelong devotion to Kannon.

The severe suppression of Buddhism following the Meiji Restoration deepened Chōan’s sense of crisis.³ Triggered by the efforts of the new Meiji government to forcibly separate Buddhism and Shinto, this anti-Buddhist movement—often characterized by scholars as a starting point of modern Japanese Buddhism (for example, FUKUSHIMA 1964, 44)—had a devastating impact on the entire Japanese Buddhist world. As with other leading Buddhists of the day, Chōan considered the Meiji religious reform a serious challenge to the long-term sustainability of the status quo. Responding to this political and religious cataclysm, Chōan wrote up several recommendations, calling for a return to orthodox practices in the form of a revival of the precepts and a reprisal of the original doctrine of Shakamuni prior to its later sectarian fragmentation. In 1872, at the age of thirty, Chōan reportedly went through an experience he would characterize as his “great enlightenment” (*taigo* 大悟), avowedly “inventing” over the course of a single mealtime the central ideas that would later develop into Guzeikyō (DNZ, 679–680).⁴

In 1875, Chōan succeeded Senmyō as the abbot of Chōkōji, becoming the parochial leader of Sōtō Buddhism in Niigata. Chōan then began to devote himself fully to sectarian proselytization, expanding his activity throughout the Shinetsu 信越 region, roughly encompassing the present-day prefectures of Niigata and Nagano. According to his *Benkyōroku*, in which he recorded his proselytizing activities from September 1875 to December 1882, Chōan preached more than three thousand times and fulfilled the role of preceptor in a total of twenty-nine precept-conferring ceremonies (DNZ, 1461). The scale of his efforts is staggering; the number of disciples who received the precepts from Chōan reportedly reached more than ten thousand people (DAIDŌ 1955, 247–251).

In parallel with his commitment to Sōtō propagation, Chōan also undertook philanthropic activities centered on his faith in Kannon (DAIDŌ 1955, 256–257),

2. The meaning of his ascetic performance is unclear. When Chōan asked him about it years later, Taiju said he wanted to make Chōan a “good friend” (*zenchishiki* 善知識) and to spiritually guide the people (DNZ, 13).

3. For more on the Buddhist response to anti-Buddhist discourse and movement, see KETELAAR (1990) and KLAUTAU (2008).

4. Although the details of this mystical experience are unclear, Chōan compared his enlightenment with the invention of steam engines by James Watt (1736–1819) in a later public lecture (DNZ, 680).

undoubtedly influenced by the then popular Christian notion of social welfare (YAMASHITA 1991). In 1883, Chōan founded an orphanage in Nagaoka called Guzeiin 救世院 with the support of his local patrons. In Chōan's view, Guzeiin was an embodiment of the great compassion of Kannon in its commitment to save all sentient beings, and it became the hub for Guzeikyō in its later years. As a further act of dedication to his missionary and philanthropic activities, Chōan transferred the abbot position at Chōkōji to his disciple, Zenzui 禅瑞 (d.u.), and moved his base of operations to Guzeiin around the same period.

Nonetheless, Chōan came into conflict with local Shin Buddhists in the Shin'etsu region, which marked a major turning point for his later establishment of Guzeikyō. Niigata was one of the regions where Shin Buddhism exerted a strong influence and has often been referred to as “the kingdom of Shin Buddhism” (MATSUI 1993, 143). The inception of Chōan's conflict with Shin Buddhists is said to have originated in a quarrel between Shin and Sōtō followers. In June 1884, several lay followers of Sōtō asked Chōan to clarify the doctrinal distinction between Sōtō and Shin. In response to their request, Chōan composed *Sōtōshū Shinshū kubetsu hachi kajō* 曹洞宗真宗区别八ヶ条 one month later, which sparked a religious confrontation between the Sōtō and Shin schools in Shin'etsu due to his provocative assertions of the doctrinal superiority of Sōtō over Shin Buddhism (DNZ, 1468).

The conflict between Sōtō and Shin Buddhism culminated in violence against Chōan himself. In June 1885, the year before his establishment of Guzeikyō, Chōan stayed at Zuitenji 瑞天寺 in Niigata as a guest preacher. At that time, an armed crowd of hundreds of Shin priests and followers stormed the temple, seeking the retraction of Chōan's thesis, which culminated in his forcible submission at their hands. In Guzeikyō's historiography, this momentous event was labeled “the dharma persecution in Kumogaike” (DNZ, 39–40).

In 1886, Chōan suddenly shifted his energies toward a focus on the establishment of Guzeikyō. In March, he published *Guzei shinjitsu gi* 救世真实義, later counted as the most significant text in the Guzeikyō canon, before founding the Association for World Salvation (Guzeikai 救世会), the predecessor to the Guzeikyō, in June. On 11 June, he finally submitted his request for laicization to the headquarters of Sōtō to “accomplish Buddhist reform,” which caused a significant disturbance in the Sōtō hierarchy (DNZ, 1519). Indeed, Chōan's abrupt laicization and his founding of an independent tradition were a massive shock to the headquarters given his long career of forty years as a Sōtō monk and his role as a leader in the Shin'etsu region. Miyoshi Ikudō 三好育道 (d.u.), the vice director of the Niigata District Office of Sōtō, relayed Chōan's request for laicization to their headquarters, appending his own opinion accusing Chōan of being a separatist. Notably, Miyoshi saw this event as a radical departure from prior

convention, pointing to the fact that Chōan's actions constituted an occurrence largely unprecedented in sectarian history (DNZ, 1520).

In response to Chōan's request to be laicized, the headquarters appointed Ōuchi Seiran 大内青巒 (1845–1918), a former Sōtō monk, to lead an investigation into the incident. Ōuchi was a prominent Buddhist intellectual actively involved in the reconstruction of the Sōtō organization at that time. Nonetheless, Chōan refused a summons, noting that Ōuchi was a member of the laity and thus unqualified to conduct an investigation, which would have constituted a great dishonor to Chōan, a monk who had received the full set of precepts (DAIDŌ 1955, 271). This refusal decisively ended Chōan's relationship with the Sōtō school. In September 1896, Azegami Baisen 畔上棟仙 (1825–1901), the chief abbot of the Sōtō school, officially proclaimed Chōan's excommunication (DNZ, 1521–1522). After this incident, the Sōtō school published a statement on the circumstances of his excommunication in the *Meikyō shinshi* 明教新誌, a nationwide Buddhist newspaper, as well as bulletin boards across Nagano. The statement emphasized that Chōan, an excommunicated monk, was wandering around in Shin'etsu advocating a heretical doctrine that deviated from Sōtō orthodoxy and seeking to delude the public under the banner of "Buddhist reform" (DNZ, 1518–1523).

Official accounts notwithstanding, the circumstances surrounding Chōan's sudden "rebellion" and subsequent excommunication are dubious at best. As SAKURAI Shūyū (1981, 37) notes, cases of "heresy" are relatively rare throughout the history of the Japanese practice of Sōtō Zen Buddhism. DAIDŌ Eisen (1955, 268–272), Chōan's dharma relative (*hōrui* 法類) and posthumous defender, speculated that the factional struggle over the parochial initiatives in Niigata constituted a major factor in Chōan's separationist activities, but many of the surrounding details still remain unclear.⁵

In any case, despite initial hardships, Guzeikyō expanded rapidly, supported by local patrons especially in the Shin'etsu region. Guzeikyō reached its zenith in the late Meiji period, establishing a nationwide network of dozens of branches from Hokkaido to Kyoto and accumulating around one hundred thousand followers. In 1891, Guzeikyō performed a ceremony marking the fifth anniversary of its establishment in Nagaoka and bestowed the honorific title of "founding bearer of humane virtue" (*kairitsu ninsha* 開立仁者) on an influential set of twenty patrons, all of whom were local to the Shin'etsu region. In later years, Chōan expanded it to thirty-three, in imitation of the thirty-three manifested forms of Kannon. The diversity among the backgrounds of the chosen

5. Daidō Eisen also initiated the movement to restore the honor of Chōan within the Sōtō school in 1939. He submitted a special request for the withdrawal of Chōan's excommunication to the headquarters of Sōtō, and it was officially accepted the following year.

candidates is particularly noteworthy, comprising not only nuns and monks but also male and female lay patrons.⁶

In 1893, Guzeikyō moved its headquarters from Nagaoka to Tokyo, a change that was paralleled by a shift in Chōan's organizational efforts to Tokyo and Shin'etsu as its two central spheres of influence. Additionally, starting in the late Meiji period, Chōan began referring to his practice as "New Buddhist Guzeikyō" in order to underscore its novelty.⁷ Chōan died of illness in Tokyo in 1908. Although Guzeikyō endured through the Taisho and early Showa periods, its operations subsequent to Chōan's death appear to have borne little fruit. According to some historical accounts, Guzeikyō began to decline after the early death of his successor, Yoshida Shūfu 吉田修夫 (1879–1919), a scholar of esoteric Buddhism. Today, it can generally be concluded that the religion has all but disappeared (*Kannon shinkōshi*, 186–187).

Reconnecting with the Laity

The circumstances behind Chōan's excommunication and the independence of Guzeikyō remain somewhat obscure. Nonetheless, the foundation of Guzeikyō took shape through Chōan's doctrinal conflict with local Shin Buddhists and his growing dissatisfaction with the Sōtō institution. During his doctrinal struggles with Shin Buddhists, the most serious challenge Chōan faced was tailoring conventional Buddhist teachings centered on monasticism to a larger lay audience to overcome the binary between Sōtō and Shin Buddhism. According to Chōan, Pure Land Buddhism held to a dualistic classification scheme differentiating between the paths of Pure Land (*jōdomon* 浄土門) and the sages (*shōdōmon* 聖道門), easy (*igyō* 易行) and difficult (*nangyō* 難行) practice, and other-power (*tariki* 他力) and self-power (*jiriki* 自力), with these two classes corresponding to the differing foci of the Shin and Sōtō schools respectively. In keeping with this distinction, Jōdo Buddhism has advocated for the superiority of the former class, especially as a way of addressing the diminished capabilities of the common people in the final age of the dharma (*mappō* 末法).⁸ Specifically, Shinran, profoundly influenced by his master Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212), devoted himself exclusively to the practice of *nenbutsu* and the great compassion of Amida in response to the unique soteriological challenges posed by the final age of the

6. Guzeikyō produced many notable figures of its era. For instance, Suzuki Tenzan 鈴木天山 (1863–1941) was among the thirty-three *ninsha*. Suzuki took the position of the chief abbot of Eiheiji 永平寺, one of the two main headquarters in the Japanese Sōtō school (DAIDŌ 1955, 290).

7. For a discussion on the Meiji discourse of New Buddhism, see ŌTANI (2012, 42–70).

8. The doctrinal difference between Shin Buddhism and Guzeikyō was also a principal point of contention in the debate between Sakaino Kōyō 境野黄洋 (1871–1933), a leading Shin Buddhist intellectual, and Umehara Kunzan 梅原薫山 (d.u.), a leading Guzeikyō follower and *ninsha* within the group (IKEDA 1995, 337–338).

dharma, thereby renouncing reliance on self-power and difficult practice. Indeed, it was in fact his confrontation with Shin Buddhism that finally forced Chōan to respond to the inadequacies of this binary framework.

The pioneering scholar of religious studies in Japan, Anesaki Masaharu 姉崎正治 (1873–1949), had a positive opinion of Guzeikyō, recognizing it as an exceptional case of success within the burgeoning tide of Buddhist reform during the Meiji period. In his 1908 account, Anesaki writes:

Guzeikyō originally emerged from the attempt to make the sectarian doctrine of Sōtō as close as possible to that of the Shin school and to advance it one step further by formulating the path of wondrous power (*myōriki mon* 妙力門) to transcend [the divide between] self-power and other-power, designating the Chapter of the Universal Gate of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva as its representative scripture and advocating that the sentient beings should be saved by the power of Kannon's wondrous wisdom (*myōchiriki* 妙智力). (*Shūkyō*, 203–204)

Although Anesaki's assessment was partially incongruent with Guzeikyō's self-conceptualization, his appraisal of Guzeikyō as a mere variant of Shin Buddhism suggests that Chōan's debates with Shin Buddhists provided the critical impetus for his Kannon-centric thought. Indeed, the idea of transcending the dualism of the two gates of Pure Land and sages—that is, seeking rebirth in Amida's Pure Land or following the sagely path to buddhahood—constituted a central theme in Chōan's Guzeikyō, emphasizing the power of Kannon as the ultimate mediator in conflict.

While Chōan's conflict with the Shin Buddhists was regional, it also reflected a broader challenge that the Sōtō school faced at that time. The abolishment of the Great Teaching Institute (Taikyōin 大教院) and Ministry of Religious Education (Kyōbushō 教部省) in 1875 and 1877 respectively marked the failure of the government's attempts to establish Shinto as a national creed and the dawn of a new era of Buddhist proselytization. Despite the demise of the “official” mobilization of Buddhist sects, the Meiji government continued to involve traditional Buddhist schools in the mission of moral persuasion (*kyōka* 教化), separating them from their primary role as family registrars during the Tokugawa period. The increasing imperative for lay proselytization was further driven by the erosion of economic support traditionally derived from temple landholdings, known as *shuinchi* 朱印地 and *kokuinchi* 黒印地 during the Tokugawa regime. In this sense, the Sōtō school faced considerable challenges in its efforts to connect with the laity.⁹

9. Regarding the drastic change in the social and economic conditions faced by the Meiji Buddhist world and the new role of *kyōka*, see HAYASHI (2009). For a general overview of the role of moral suasion in modern Japan, see GARON (1997).

Yoshikawa Yūgo 芳川雄悟 (d. 1938), a Sōtō monk, published *Dōjō fukyō no shō enkaku* in 1902, when Chōan was still alive. This work vividly describes the trajectory of the Sōtō school's continuous search for an appropriate method of propagation, offering a firsthand account of its course during the Meiji period. Yoshikawa introduces a historical periodization, demarcating the shift in historical trajectory as one from the “era of the contamination of politics and religion” (*seikyō konkō jidai* 政教混淆時代), corresponding to the period from April 1868 to May 1875, to the “era of preaching as one intends” (*zuii sekkyō jidai* 随意説教時代), corresponding to the period from May 1875 to July 1884 (*Dōjō fukyō*, 4–5). According to Yoshikawa, Sōtō Buddhism traditionally took the form of monastic practice, relying mainly upon monasteries designated as *sōrin* 叢林, the tradition of *kōans*, and old cases for Zen precedents (*kosoku* 古則) (*Dōjō fukyō*, 5–6). Hence, Sōtō Buddhist practice was, historically speaking, conspicuously lacking in cohesive methods for proselytizing to the laity. In this respect, the period Yoshikawa refers to as the “era of preaching as one intends” represented a period of disorientation regarding the appropriate doctrinal teachings for the laity in the Sōtō school; this period overlapped directly with Chōan's proselytization efforts.¹⁰

During this tumultuous decade, Chōan's ideological struggles took place within the broader discussion of how to reformulate the education of lay followers in the Sōtō school. Chōan summarizes the situation surrounding Sōtō Buddhism as follows:

We have taken on the appearance of beggars for [the tenets of] peaceful mind (*anjin* 安心) for some time, standing in front of the doorway of the Shin school begging for the leftover rice porridge of the other-power in the morning, and bowing and begging for the *tsukemono* of *daimoku* 題目 in front of the gate of the Nichiren school in the evening. (DNZ, 1484–1485)

In 1884, Chōan published a small pamphlet titled *Sōtōshū shinshū kubetsu no sanso* at the request of local Sōtō lay followers. The purported origin of this dispute was a provocation by a Shin preacher, who had claimed that “the Zen school cannot rescue [the laity],” which led to turmoil among Sōtō followers (DNZ, 1468–1469). Although the reliability of this claim from the Sōtō side is debatable, the point of consternation was not merely the proper mode of mutual distinction between the two schools but rather the question of how to articulate the soteriological doctrine of Sōtō for the laity and how it might produce its own equivalent to the *Amida nenbutsu* in Shin Buddhism.

10. On the doctrinal turmoil and the sectarian efforts to determine its orthodoxy in Meiji Sōtō Buddhism, see LOBREGGIO (2009).

In a curious turn of events, the intensified inter-sectarian competition led to Chōan's advocacy of chanting the formula *Namu Shakamuni butsu* 南無釈迦牟尼仏 to demonstrate the soteriological superiority of Sōtō over Shin Buddhism. To that end, Chōan made his argument in eight points: petition (*gan* 願), practice (*gyō* 行), compassion (*jihī* 慈悲), founders (*soshi* 祖師), peaceful minds (*anjin*), essence of the doctrine (*shūtai* 宗体), followers (*shinto* 信徒), and women (*nyonin* 女人). In so doing, he crystalized the soteriological system of Sōtō into a doctrine centered on Shakamuni and the position of the sectarian founder Dōgen in a role parallel to that of Amida and Shinran in Shin Buddhism. For instance, Chōan proclaimed the predominance of Shakamuni over Amida in terms of his foundational “petition,” drawing on both the *Candragarbhā Sūtra* and the *Karuṇā-puṇḍarīka Sūtra* (DNZ, 1464). The *Karuṇā-puṇḍarīka Sūtra* includes a story of Shakamuni in his previous life in which he made five hundred vows (*gohyaku seigan* 五百誓願), portraying him as the preeminent salvific Buddha and a central figure superior to Amida. In this sense, Chōan emphasized the superiority of Shakamuni vis-à-vis Amida specifically in terms of his “petition,” another direct challenge to the authority of Shin thought.¹¹

Much as in the case of Chōan's views of the *nenbutsu*, this conflict also contributed to his burgeoning awareness of sectarian and doctrinal fragmentation within Japanese Buddhism (LOBREGLIO 2005). Because for Chōan all sectarian and doctrinal idiosyncrasies constituted a departure from the fundamental authority of Shakamuni as their source, it was necessary to overcome sectarian partisanship in order to recover the original purity of Shakamuni's thought. Accordingly, he makes a case for Shakamuni as the collective father of the Buddhist community, implying that his disciples are nothing other than his sons, and that both “Shakamuni [as father] and the disciples [as sons] are identical in essence” (*fushi ittai* 父子一体). Built upon this unified view, Chōan proposes disregarding the sectarian differences between the path of the Pure Land/sages and various sectarian traditions, all in the name of a return to the original teaching of Shakamuni himself (DNZ, 1480–1481).

It should be noted that Chōan was not alone in employing *nenbutsu*; indeed, it is common practice to chant *nenbutsu* even among practitioners in the Sōtō school today. For example, Yoshioka Shingyō 吉岡信行 (d. 1886), a Sōtō monk and preacher based in the Tohoku region, also proposed worshiping both Shakamuni and Amida, advocating the importance of other-power. Yoshikawa would later retrospectively depict this “undesirable” trend in cynical terms, labeling

11. Concerning patterns of historical belief in Shakamuni in premodern Japan and the pivotal role of *Karuṇā-puṇḍarīka Sūtra*, see THOMPSON (2017) and NISHIMURA (2018, 285–307). On the transformative image of Shakamuni throughout the history of Japanese Buddhism, see AUERBACK (2016).

it as a new *nenbutsu* faction (*shin nenbutsu ha* 新念仏派) characteristic of Meiji Sōtō Buddhism (*Dōjō fukyō*, 6).

After some time, the internal turmoil surrounding sectarian teachings for the laity culminated in the formulation of the *Sōtōshū shūsei* 曹洞宗宗制, issued in May 1885 by the central Sōtō sectarian authorities (KAWAGUCHI 2002, 638–651). In its preface, sectarian leaders such as Takiya Takushū 滝谷琢宗 (1836–1897) laid out the *Sōtōshū shūkyō taii* 曹洞宗宗教大意, which asserted that:

The religion of the Sōtō school explicates pure self-power, namely the attainment of buddhahood with one's own body (*sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成仏) for both monks who have renounced the world and [people of] superior capacity, in addition to the exclusive practice of the other-power of rebirth in Amida's Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss [by chanting *nenbutsu*] for a single moment (*senju tariki ichinen ōjō* 専修他力一念往生) for lay men and women and [people of] inferior capacity. (*Dōjō fukyō*, 12–13)

Although the Sōtō headquarters would redact this sectarian policy shortly thereafter, Yoshikawa was moved to condemn the regulations as a fabrication, regarding them as a deviation from the true orthodoxy of the Sōtō tradition. Furthermore, he speculated that Chōan's act of rebellion and his radical choice to be laicized originated in his disillusionment with the misguided teachings of the Sōtō school (*Dōjō fukyō*, 15). However, the degree to which this tentative adoption of other-power affected Chōan's subsequent action must remain to a certain extent unclear due to the paucity of historical evidence. The sectarian vacillation over the question of instruction for the laity finally concluded through the compilation of a brief and dense text titled *Shushōgi* 修証義, primarily edited by Ōuchi Seiran and officially promulgated in 1890 to establish the centrality of *shūi anjin* 宗意安心 (peace of mind) in the Sōtō school (LOBREGLIO 2009, 89–94). Nonetheless, Steven HEINE (2003, 170) reminds us that the tenets of *Shushōgi* have remained a matter of sectarian controversy, primarily due to its total omission of “the need for meditation” and its “strong emphasis on repentance as a means of eradicating evil karma.” More importantly, the Buddhist schools that remained committed to monasticism still constantly sought new methods to proselytize to the laity, and so the question of the monastic relationship to the laity remained an issue long after the end of the Meiji period.

As briefly outlined earlier, the rapidly shifting circumstances surrounding the Sōtō school in the 1880s spurred Chōan and his contemporaries to reevaluate and restructure the terms of their religious connection with the laity. In the course of making these changes, Shin Buddhism forged an ideological rivalry with Sōtō Buddhism that informed Chōan's vexations surrounding the formulation of lay teachings. Throughout his conflict with local Shin Buddhists, Chōan's accounts mainly underscored the dominant role of Shakamuni and *nenbutsu*

without any noted reference to Kannon. Nonetheless, this experience critically shaped Chōan's awareness of the urgent need for both a novel instructional method for the laity and the remediation of sectarian and doctrinal fragmentation, placing in stark relief the imperative for radical Buddhist reform to adapt to a changing social setting. It was in this historical context that Chōan's inclination toward Kannon-centrism began to take a central role.

Transcending Binaries in the Time of Social Evolution

This section introduces the basic tenets of Guzeikyō, with a particular focus on Chōan's work, *Guzeikyō*. Published in 1891, the text laid out the theological foundation for the Guzeikyō new religious movement's doctrine. Among its five sections, the chapters "Teachings on the Truth of World Salvation" (*Guzei shin-jitsugi* 救世真實義) and "The Teaching of Skillful Means for World Salvation" (*Guzei hōbengi* 救世方便義), both originally written in 1886, constitute Chōan's magnum opus and the central texts of Guzeikyō.

In general, the most consistently recurring themes within *Guzeikyō* are the establishment of teachings focused on the laity and the transcendence of sectarian and doctrinal fragmentation through the power of Kannon. The central doctrine of Guzeikyō is enshrined within two main principles: "remembrance of the holy [Kannon] and our liberation" (*nenshō gedatsu* 念聖解脫) and "the wonderful power (*myōriki* 妙力) of Kannon." More specifically, "remembrance of the holy [Kannon] and our liberation" refers to the exclusive devotional practice of chanting the name of Kannon, that is, the act of reciting *Namu Guzekanzeon bosatsu* 南無救世觀世音菩薩. In effect, the "Chapter on the Universal Gate" in the *Lotus Sūtra* (also known as the "Kannon Sūtra") reiterates the sacred phrase, "Recall the power of Kannon" (*nenpi Kannon riki* 念彼觀音力), a particular instantiation of the traditional practice of invoking the name of Kannon in Japanese Buddhism. Chōan also argued that *gedatsu* was to be understood as synonymous with the Western notion of the "greatest liberty" (*saidai jiyū* 最大自由), associating it with the model of freedom under liberal philosophy (DNZ, 87). In particular, the chapter extols the virtues of Kannon as the progenitor of liberation from the hardships of restriction and imprisonment (*kasa nan* 枷鎖難), a parable that Chōan reconceptualized as demonstrating Kannon's transcendental power to endow people with a sort of twofold freedom. On the one hand, this freedom could be understood in the traditional Buddhist sense; on the other hand, it also implied the sense of "enlightenment" gestured at by the Western notion of freedom. Chōan's second critical term, *myōriki*, is also an abbreviated form of *myōchiriki* 妙智力, the "wonderful power of [Kannon's] wisdom" to "relieve the suffering of the world," as articulated in the *Lotus Sūtra*. It was through this notion of the wonderful power of Kannon, and a certain dialectic

logic, that Chōan was finally able to facilitate the conflation of the dual categories of the paths of both the Pure Land and sages. In his vision, Kannon served the crucial role of transcendental mediator, eliminating the schism between both paths and transcending the dualistic distinction that, he believed, was particularly entrenched in the Pure Land Buddhist tradition. In addition to reconciling doctrinal and sectarian discrepancies, Chōan also reconceptualized Kannon as a unifier of various buddhas and bodhisattvas; according to Chōan, Kannon was to represent the divine manifestation of all buddhas and bodhisattvas. This hermeneutical framework paved the way for transcending the binary opposition of Amida and Shakamuni that he had previously addressed during his years as a Sōtō monk.

Throughout Chōan's reinterpretative process, Kannon's transformative and trans-sectarian characteristics, oriented toward saving sentient beings, came to occupy pride of place. To demonstrate the universalistic manifestation of Kannon, Chōan sutured together the various traditions related to Kannon discoverable within each individual school. In particular, Dōgen's belief in Kannon became the vital connecting thread in the resultant tapestry. For example, in the rough silhouette of "Kannon" visible in the *Shōbōgenzō*, Dōgen recognized a vision of Kannon as "the father and mother of all buddhas." Following this passage, Dōgen admonished that one should not consider Kannon an "inferior buddha" without realizing the "truth," while also praising Kannon as the "Tathāgata who clearly understood the true dharma" (Shōbōmyō Nyorai 正法明如来) in a past life (*Shōbōgenzō*, 169). Thus, Dōgen's rendition of Kannon as "the father and mother of all buddhas" became the primary inspiration for Chōan's transformative efforts to elevate Kannon to a position that transcended the apparent duality in Japanese Buddhism between Amida and Shakamuni, although Sōtō scholars previously had not paid much attention to this passage (DNZ, 111). Chōan also formulated a multiplicity of Kannon, drawing upon various traditions such as Kannon's manifestation into Prince Shōtoku 聖德 (574–622) and Hōnen. In following this logic, Chōan even went so far as to say that Jesus Christ and the God of Christianity are also manifestations of Kannon, identifying the Christian God with the Maheśvara, one of the thirty-three forms of Kannon and a creator deity presumed to preside over the three realms (DNZ, 111).

Chōan's intellectual efforts also included the elevation of the "Chapter on the Universal Gate" to a central status in his tradition. For instance, Chōan paid particular attention to Kūkai's 空海 (774–835) esoteric interpretation of the *Lotus Sūtra*. In the *Hokekyō mitsugō*, Kūkai comments that the "one vehicle of the *Lotus Sūtra* is the mantra of Kannon," which contributed to the legitimacy of the supremacy of the "Chapter on the Universal Gate" (*Hokekyō mitsugō*, 392–393). This re-estimation of the *Kannon Sūtra* is noteworthy given the peculiar hermeneutical framework of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Some sectarian traditions of Japanese

Buddhism, such as Tendai and Nichiren, emphasize the supremacy of the *Lotus Sūtra* as the ultimate teaching of Shakamuni within the traditional classification system of Buddhist teachings. Following this exegesis, Chōan positioned the *Kannon Sūtra* as the unique embodiment of the true principle of the *Lotus Sūtra* and hence called it “the king of the scriptures” (*kyō’ō* 經王), a term that had historically been reserved for the *Lotus Sūtra* (DNZ, 102). In following this line of analogical reasoning, Chōan ultimately concluded that all scriptures were best understood as consisting merely in different approaches by which to interpret the “Chapter on the Universal Gate.”

Proceeding in the manner outlined above, Chōan reconfigured the conventional pantheon of buddhas and bodhisattvas by redistributing the locus of authoritative discourse on Kannon within the Buddhist canon. Evidently, Chōan’s exegesis of Kannon was closely associated with his experience of excommunication and laicization. In Chōan’s interpretation, Kannon must be understood as being none other than the manifestation of the supreme tathāgata of Shōbōmyō, a past life of Kannon that is referenced in Dōgen’s *Shōbōgenzō*. Hence, it is precisely Kannon’s act of self-subordination, despite its originally elevated status, by which the bodhisattva demonstrates its supreme compassion as an attendant of buddhas. Chōan explains that Kannon’s abdication from tathāgata was voluntary and aimed at saving sentient beings as a merciful act. Chōan highlighted the profound implication of this self-sacrificing act, comparing it in social hierarchical terms to a downgrade from the rank of master (*danna* 檀那) to that of servant (*decchi* 丁稚). In accordance with this act of self-renunciation, Chōan projected the emotional ordeal of his own experience of “persecution” and laicization onto the figure of Kannon. In highly emotional terms, Chōan noted that it was Kannon’s great compassion that drove him to found Guzeikyō, “turning all the schools against him,” “making the group of my fourteen or fifteen thousand disciples who received the precepts cry,” and accepting the denigratory label of “heretic” (DNZ, 702–703). Chōan sought to reinterpret Kannon’s subordinated position as the attendant of other buddhas as proof of its great compassion, an interpretation that also resonated with his experience of laicization and excommunication from Sōtō. In other words, in the same respect that Kannon descends in the form of a bodhisattva as the embodiment of compassion to save sentient beings in the secular world, Chōan disrobed and sacrificed his own sacerdotal authority to act as a representative of Kannon and embody its compassion. Chōan offered context for his own trials and legitimization for his movement by invoking Kannon’s transitional position and identifying his sacrifices with those undertaken by Kannon.

The Rise of Buddhist Reform and Chōan's Guzeikyō

Another underlying rationale for the establishment of Guzeikyō was to adapt religious practices to the ongoing climate of Buddhist reform. In this respect, Chōan's "Teaching on Skillful Means for World Salvation" is particularly noteworthy in that the term "skillful means" is intended to represent the concrete measures of Guzeikyō as a response to larger shifts in the contemporary social climate of Chōan's day (DNZ, 105). Over the course of this process of reform, Kannon's malleability was a pivotal factor in adjusting to the new environment of modernity, which, for Chōan, was epitomized by the imperatives of "social evolution."

Japanese Buddhist society in the late 1880s witnessed an increasing concern for the concept of "reform," broadly impelled by an acute awareness of the need to overcome their putative backwardness and introduce Western knowledge as a response to the permeation of Christianity in Japan (WU 2022). Along similar lines, the pretext for Chōan's petition to be laicized was explicitly that he desired to accomplish Buddhist reform. Although Chōan developed Guzeikyō mainly in the Shin'etsu region during its earliest stages, he regularly visited Tokyo to socialize and exchange ideas with the leading Buddhist reformists of the day, such as the Buddhist philosopher Inoue Enryō 井上円了 (1858–1919), Nichirenist thinker Tanaka Chigaku 田中智学 (1861–1939), Shin Buddhist reformer Kitabatake Dōryū 北島道龍 (1820–1907), and Tendai priest Mizutani Ninkai 水谷仁海 (1836–1896). Among them, Chōan regarded Mizutani and Kitabatake as his allies in the larger effort toward Buddhist reform.

Inoue Enryō, often credited as an originator of Buddhist philosophy in Japan, also significantly influenced Chōan's ideas on Buddhist reform.¹² Inoue advocated for the priority of activities and moralities oriented toward this-worldly benefits, downplaying the supramundane attitude conventionally attributed to Buddhism. Taking a relatively trans-sectarian viewpoint, Inoue envisioned a nationwide project of Buddhist mobilization, emphasizing the Buddhist commitment to moral suasion and philanthropic activities as necessary steps in the process of nation-building.

The dialectical logic of Kannon's transcendence beyond the binary of the two paths of the Pure Land and sages also gained considerable legitimacy through one of Inoue's most influential works, *Bukkyō katsuron joron*, in 1887. In this work, Inoue reductively defined Christianity in terms of its putative simplicity as a merely "emotional" religion. In contrast, he asserted the superiority of Buddhism because it synthesized both the intellectual and emotional aspects found in each among the respective pages of the Pure Land and sages (*Bukkyō*

12. Regarding Inoue Enryō's reformist efforts in Buddhism, see JOSEPHSON (2006) and SCHULZER (2019).

katsuron joron, 68–69). Expanding upon Inoue’s formulation, Chōan regarded the existing model of Buddhism as deficient due to its dualistic fragmentation between the Pure Land and sages, which for him precipitated the need for further integration. Accordingly, Chōan insisted upon the superiority of Guzeikyō, noting that it integrated the binaristic terms of the Pure Land and sages, thereby constituting a complete and flawless religion (*kanzen muketsu* 完全無欠) qualified to preside over the whole of civilization (DNZ, 682–683).

Another impetus for Chōan’s reformist agenda came from his conviction in the imperative to appropriate the modern concept of social evolution. In particular, Chōan sought to respond to how late nineteenth-century Japanese society was overtaken by the burgeoning influence of Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), an English philosopher and well-known advocate of social Darwinism. Spencer’s translated works penetrated various intellectual circles, including those of the Buddhist reformists (GODART 2016). Chōan, very much a product of this trend, became an ardent follower of Spencer. According to his memoir, Chōan recited Spencer’s aphorisms day and night while he was still a Sōtō monk, despite the fact that he had never received a modern education (DNZ, 1454). He often repeated the phrase “the principle of social evolution” (*shakai shinka no ri* 社会進化の理), employing the logic of said “social evolution” to map the sociohistorical significance of Guzeikyō on the global historical stage. Furthermore, Chōan legitimized the emergence of Guzeikyō from the perspective of social evolution.

You merciful persons should ponder the evolution of the Buddhist world. Like the mirror’s reflection, it is clear that while it had been represented by the world of the path of holiness and self-power at the beginning, it has gradually transformed into the world of the Pure Land and that of the other-power. Now, with its continued progress and culmination in its present apothotic form, it presents the World of Subtle Bliss (*myōraku sekai* 妙楽世界), where the paths of the Pure Land and sages become one, and the self-power and other-power are no longer two (*shōjō ichinyō jitafuni* 聖淨一如自他不二). (DNZ, 104)

In this way, Chōan depicted the development of the “Buddhist world” from the Pure Land and sages, and then to its later unification by Guzeikyō in a relatively linear way. While recognizing the historical belief in Kannon in Japan, Chōan attempted to draw the boundary between his Guzeikyō and the earlier cases in alignment with the progressive development envisioned by the discourse of social evolution.

Clinton GODART (2017, 84–85) notes that the modern conception of social evolution was entangled in complex ways with the Buddhist view of time as circular or retrogressive in *mappō* theory. During the Meiji Restoration, Chōan longed for the restoration of the utopian origins of Shakamuni, calling for a return to an untainted version of his original practices and doctrine. In his

view, the fragmentation of Buddhism as contaminated by sectarianism was a symptom of the evils brought about by the ages of “semblance and decay of the dharma” (*zōmatsu no hei* 像末の弊) (DNZ, 1185–1186). Nonetheless, Chōan’s relatively uncritical capitulation to the logic of “social evolution” can be understood as part of the larger shift toward a progressive view of history.¹³

Another external imperative deriving from Chōan’s encounter with Western ideas was represented in his ideological confrontation with Christianity. Chōan issued a rather vehement response to anti-Buddhist attacks made by Christian intellectuals. According to Chōan, the followers of Christianity, which he referred to as the “foreign religion” (*gekyō* 外教), habitually denigrated the custom of worshiping images of the buddhas, using this custom as justification for the relegation of Buddhism to the inferior status of “idolatry” (*gūzōkyō* 偶像教) and hence that of a “savage religion” (*yaban no shūkyō* 野蛮の宗教) (DNZ, 681). In response to challenges from Christianity, Chōan partially acknowledged the alleged backwardness of the iconographic practice in Buddhism, leading to the allusions to the putative ignorance of Buddhist followers. Chōan argued that the images of buddhas are initially none other than expressions of the “truth,” but that they are also often inadvertently subjected to the thoughtless practice of idolatry. Chōan made a strong case that Guzeikyō, unlike its predecessors, did not continue to revere wooden statues and images of the Buddha, and instead embraced only the epithet of Kannon (*myōgō* 名号), an immaterial image (*mukeni no keizō* 無形の形像) and therefore one continuous with the truth itself (DNZ, 681–682). Simultaneously, he also prohibited the “prayer for cessation of calamity and incantation” (*kaji jujutsu* 加持呪術) as part of the greater project of showcasing the rational and scientific relevance of Buddhism at a time when it was frequently criticized as “superstition” (DNZ, 107). This idea might be surprising, given the widespread popularity of Kannon ingrained in the iconographic tradition.¹⁴ Concurrently, his rejection of image worship underscores his dedicated efforts to reconcile the Kannon tradition with contemporary Eurocentric discourses on religion.

*Becoming Kannon: The Malleable
Transformation of Buddhists in the Crisis of Social Evolution*

Chōan was also critical of monasticism in Buddhism. The cornerstone of his reform was the idea that traditional Buddhism centered on monks—in which clerical violation of the precepts was rampant—had become obsolete and ineffi-

13. For a discussion on the Japanese Buddhist response to evolutionary theory and its interaction with the concept of the final dharma age, see BURENINA (2020).

14. NISHINO Kōichi (2009, 70) speculates that this hardline stance of Guzeikyō against the image worship of Kannon might have led to the decline of Guzeikyō after Chōan’s death.

cient in the wake of social evolution and needed to be radically reformulated in order to survive. Chōan's primary suggestion for addressing this crisis was the proposition that everyone should become a Kannon in their own right, transcending the binary of the monk/laity, and even the social strata, in order to realize the promise of world salvation. As mentioned above, social evolution theory was a critical harbinger in the emergence of Guzeikyō, but it also produced a sense of crisis within Chōan's appraisal of the longevity and directionality of modern Buddhism. For Chōan, this new tide of social evolution, epitomized by the "survival of the fittest," carried the risk of eliminating Japanese Buddhism if it failed to adapt sufficiently to its rapidly shifting environment.

According to Chōan, the spiritual timing and ability of contemporary people (*jiki* 時機) underwent a drastic change under the influence of Western civilization and social evolution. The implication was that Buddhism was in danger of being eliminated. For instance, Chōan enumerates several characteristics of "timing": all things (*hyappan* 百般) compete with each other; people easily disregard old things; the world becomes an ideological battlefield par excellence based on the principle of "survival of the fittest"; and finally, as one result of this ideological competition, Christian missionaries begin their encroachment into Japan. Concerning the people's capacities and proclivities (*ki* 機), he notes that they esteem independence and disdain indignity while detesting old ways and customs (*kyūshū* 旧習). For Chōan, the popular propensity was to seek liberation (*jiyū* 自由), reject restraint (*sokubaku* 束縛), and, most notably, "abhor Buddhist monks" (DNZ, 105–106).

Compelled by his sense of crisis, Chōan sought a survival strategy for Buddhism. In particular, the increasing sentiment against Buddhist monks was integral to Chōan's historical consciousness of the status of Buddhism. Around the time of the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the young Chōan had mainly focused on the revival of the Buddhist precepts, calling for a return to the principles of monasticism. He saw their revival as a remedy for the devastating persecution of Buddhism. Chōan argued that the monastic decadence found in "clerical marriage and meat consumption" (*nikujiki saitai* 肉食妻帯) had led to the moral degeneration of Buddhist monks and their disparagement and discrediting of Buddhism among "kings, princes, and the ministers" (*ōkō daijin* 王公大臣) (DNZ, 1177–1178). Chōan's relatively hardline stance had common ground with that of other monks who upheld the precepts, such as Shaku Unshō 釈雲照 (1827–1909) and Fukuda Gyōkai 福田行誠 (1809–1888).¹⁵

Among the tenets of Guzeikyō, Chōan's critical stance against the declining monastic discipline was broadly visible. According to Chōan, the primary task of

15. For more on the religious movement to revive the Buddhist precepts during the Meiji period, see JAFFE (2001) and KAMEYAMA (2022).

the monks on the path of sages is to gain the trust and belief of the laity through their ascetic practices and moral behavior, namely through their willful self-subjection to the Buddhist precepts. Nonetheless, he argued that the Buddhist monks had ultimately failed to observe the Buddhist precepts, radically widening the rupture with the laity. Despite his concern over the disciplinary degeneration among the monks, Chōan no longer sought the revitalization of Buddhist monasticism as a panacea to the worsening relations between monks and laity. Indeed, Chōan's ultimate solution was instead to abandon his prior preoccupation with strict adherence to monastic codes. As a corollary to this recognition, Chōan proclaimed that conventional Buddhist practices were no longer useful, including adherence to a singular clerical formula of robe and bowl (*ihatsu no ikkei* 衣鉢の一形), clerical engagement in funeral and ceremony, and devotional practices such as reading sutras and chanting *nenbutsu* (DNZ: 105–106).

Eventually, Chōan proclaimed that it was now the time to transition from the “teaching and uplifting based on a singular form [of monastic deportment]” (*ikkei keyaku* 一形化益) to the “teaching and uplifting based on the universal gate” (*fumon keyaku* 普門化益). The “universal gate” here means the encompassing of all things, appropriated from the “Chapter of the Universal Gate of the *Lotus Sūtra*.” Under the weight of the sociohistorical paradigm of social evolution, Chōan believed that all Buddhists were duty-bound to take it upon themselves to save the world and spread Buddhist teachings, following the law of Kannon's universal manifestation (*fumon jigen* 普門示現) (DNZ, 105–106).

In this line, Chōan posited a new form of salvific practitioner called *ninsha*, literally “bearer of humane virtue,” which is also an honorific title that had first been applied to Kannon within the *Kannon Sūtra*. Chōan defined *ninsha* as any representative of Kannon and Buddhist practitioner devoted to saving the world, whether layman or monk, and encompassing all walks of life. Chōan also envisioned *ninsha* from a relatively egalitarian perspective:

In general, all of the activists of world salvation (*guzeishoku* 救世職) are called *ninsha*. In particular, because they took the form of the Teaching and Uplifting of the Universal Gate, we discriminate between neither monks and laity nor men and women, and we do not impose prohibitions on clerical marriage and meat consumption. They wear the Buddhist robes of the field of merit (*fukuden no kesa* 福田の袈裟) in their hearts, and Western and Japanese clothes in appearance, and they must serve as exemplars to others through model behavior, initiating all sentient beings and upholding the progress of civilization. (DNZ, 106–107)

More importantly, the malleable transformation of Kannon, epitomized by the thirty-three manifested forms, provided a generative model for the role of *ninsha* in responding to drastic social changes, disregarding the conventional

Buddhism oriented toward monks. Just as Kannon manifests in contingent form in response to calls for help from sentient beings, Chōan believed that Buddhists should transform their form according to necessity in the process of their social engagement.

Chōan also underscored the agency of women in his movement. In his conceptualization, Kannon's transformation into a woman (*bunyoshin* 婦女身) represents the active role of women in Buddhism, opposing misogynistic traditions of Buddhism such as the five obstacles (*goshō* 五障) for women and the doctrine of the "transformation into men" (*henjō nanshi* 變成男子) expounded in the "Devadatta" chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* and in the *Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra*.¹⁶ In fact, Chōan organized the Women's Association for World Salvation, strategically mobilizing women's power to expand Guzeikyō. Furthermore, some of his leading thirty-two *ninsha* included nuns and female lay patrons. Yet Chōan was also a strong advocate of the ideal of "good wife, wise mother" (*ryōsai kenbo* 良妻賢母), based on normative gender roles in Meiji society, and critical of the notion of "equal rights for men and women" (*danjo dōken* 男女同權).¹⁷ In his later years, Chōan sought to address deeply entrenched gender problems within Buddhism, regarding Kannon as a potential mediator between the misogynistic tradition of Buddhism and the "radical" ideas of *danjo dōken* (DNZ, 511–538).

Through the concept of *ninsha*, Chōan envisioned Kannon as an ideal paragon, blurring the boundaries of the traditional binary of monks and laity. Chōan further outlined the *ninsha*'s role through his expectation of close engagement in moral discipline based on the practice of six virtues (*rokutokugyō* 六德行) and the four debts of gratitude (*shion* 四恩). The practice of six virtues refers to the six perfections in the Mahāyāna tradition, originally the pure practice for the bodhisattva; the four debts of gratitude refers to the repayment of bonds of obligation incurred through debts of gratitude toward parents, sentient beings, rulers, and the three treasures. For instance, concerning the act of charity, one of the six virtues, Chōan requested his followers to engage in charitable activities such as the construction of a hospital, private school, or penitentiary (DNZ, 113–114). Chōan also encouraged the observance of the precepts, the second of the six perfections, as a mode of uplifting general social morality (DNZ, 115–116).

While his project was relatively progressive, Chōan also infused his mandate with a nationalist mission to stabilize the status quo of the Japanese empire through the constitution of *ninsha* as model imperial subjects. In particular, the encouragement of the four debts of gratitude became a popular discourse among

16. On gender issues surrounding Japanese Buddhist tradition, see AMBROS (2015). As for the Shin Buddhist response to *henjō nanshi* from the Meiji to early Showa periods, see also STARLING (2013).

17. Regarding the gender discourse related to *ryōsai kenbo*, see KOYAMA (2013).

Buddhists in the Meiji period. IKEDA Eishun (1976, 18–31) and other scholars have problematized the four debts of gratitude, which emphasize the king's debt and the allegiance to the Japanese emperor. Chōan also emphasized the mythical unbroken lineage of the Japanese emperor and encouraged the performance of one's duties as an imperial subject.

Furthermore, Chōan's blueprint for social stabilization also reflected his pragmatic stance on the prevailing direction of world affairs. According to Chōan, the world was tending toward greater and greater harshness, and, because conditions favored the survival of the fittest, the strong had taken to ruthlessly exploiting the weak. His pessimism notwithstanding, Chōan maintained that unequal settings invoked the disaffection and anguish of "the weak" and invited their potential retaliation against the strong, eventually destabilizing the social order. Chōan cited as an example the assassination of Emperor Alexander II (1818–1881) of Russia by Narodnik activists in 1881 and the rise of socialism as an ominous harbinger of this threat (DNZ, 130). In Chōan's view, the commitment of *ninsha* to moral conduct and philanthropic work served as the remedy to mitigate the worst effects of the modern social order, the benefits of which he hoped would eventually lead to the realization of a Buddhist utopia (DNZ, 123).

Conclusion

Daidō Chōan reimagined the conventional belief in Kannon to accommodate to the rapidly shifting epistemological, political, and historical circumstances of the Buddhist world in Meiji Japan. Furthermore, Chōan's movement, Guzeikyō, illuminates how this Kannon-centrism ushered in a new trend of Buddhist reform in the Meiji period and effected a resourceful challenge to the status quo of Japanese Buddhism by mobilizing the transformative power of Kannon. In this process, Chōan also aimed to downplay the import of monasticism and mollify the sectarian fragmentation in Japanese Buddhism, leading to broader advocacy for a form of Buddhism oriented toward the laity based on Kannon itself. The trans-sectarian nature of belief in Kannon, as well as Kannon's capacity for malleable transformation as a means of saving sentient beings, lay at the center of Chōan's Buddhist reform.

In the process of bringing about these changes, Chōan's appropriation of the discourse of social evolution functioned as a catalyst for the further transformation of Buddhism. It partly superseded the traditional and retrospectively utopianizing view of the age of Shakamuni, and was concomitant with pessimism related to *mappō*, which he had embraced during the period of early Meiji reforms. In Chōan's estimation, conventional Buddhism was failing to adjust to the new environment and would become obsolete in the near future. In the age of social evolution and the discourse of enlightenment and civilization, Chōan

believed that Buddhists needed to engage in religious propagation and social activities regardless of their social status, just as Kannon manifested in a diversity of forms in order to save sentient beings. For Chōan, it was only a new salvific practitioner called *ninsha* that could carry out the appropriate primary mission of moral cultivation and charitable activities, concurrently contributing to Japanese civilization and the strengthening of the nation as the representative of Kannon.

Interestingly, Chōan's attempts to elevate Kannon from its historically subordinate status to one of relative superiority, thereby producing a rivalry with Amida and Shin Buddhism, bears a striking parallel to the scholarly neglect of Kannon within the postwar scholarship on Japanese Buddhism. As discussed at the outset of this article, the marginalization of Kannon was mainly caused by the sectarian-oriented interests of Japanese Buddhology, contrasting with the scholarly attention to Amida mainly advocated by Shin Buddhism. Furthermore, ŌMI (2018, 368) highlighted the connection between Shin Buddhism-centric historiography in the study of modern Japanese Buddhism and the pivotal role played by Shin Buddhist intellectuals in the modernization of Japanese Buddhism. A thoroughgoing reexamination of Chōan's case suggests an alternative version of the history of Buddhist reform, one centered on Kannon in the early developmental stage of the modernization of Japanese Buddhism in Meiji Japan. Chōan's ideological contestation with Shin Buddhism and the subsequent consignment to oblivion of his life's work emphasize the amnesic dimensions of historiographies of Japanese Buddhism that took shape in the late nineteenth century and continue to impact the scope and assumptions of contemporary scholarship.

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ABBREVIATION

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