

The Untold History of the Fuji School: The Origins of the Temple Issue (5)

This series is based on The Dark History of the Fuji School: Revealing the Origin of the Nikken Sect (Ankoku no Fuji Shumonshi: Nikken Shu no Engen o Kiru) by Hajime Kawai, a vice senior advisor of the Soka Gakkai Study Department. The previous installment chronicled the efforts of the ninth high priest, Nichiu, to combat corruption within the priesthood.

Chapter 5: Doctrine of high priest's infallibility emerges during tenure of "child high priest"

1) Sakyō Nikkyō's new doctrine to protect a 13-year-old's position as high priest

NICHIU'S tenure as the ninth high priest spanned some forty-eight years until he retired and transferred the office to Nichijō, the tenth high priest in 1467. Nichiu moved to Sugiyama in Kai Province and had a temple built there. In 1470, Nichijō transferred the office to Nittei, the eleventh high priest. However, both Nichijō and Nittei died in 1472, and Nichiu came out of retirement to assume the office of high priest once again.

According to *The Chronology of the Fuji School*, Nichiu transferred the lineage to 13-year-old Nitchin, the twelfth high priest in 1482, but the exact date is unknown (vol. 1, p. 87). Since Nitchin took the office at such a young age, he was known as the "child high priest." In 1526, Nitchin appointed 8-year-old Nichiin as his successor. The following year Nitchin died and Nichiin became the thirteenth high priest at 9.

In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Japan, feudal lords often inherited their family estates when they were very young, and family stewards were entrusted with their education and care until they were old enough to assume the administrative responsibilities as the heads of families. Following this secular custom, the priesthood at Taiseki-ji began appointing the children of powerful feudal lords as successors to the office of high priest. The appointment of children as high priests indicates both the shortage of capable candidates and the influence of family lineage.

Many priests and members of the head temple's parish expressed deep concern about the ability of these children, especially in their understanding of Buddhist doctrine. When Nitchin became high priest at 13, his patron priest, Sakyō Nikkyō, propounded a new doctrine to silence this criticism—the infallibility of the high priest. Sakyō Nikkyō writes: "To have an audience with the high priest, who is a reincarnation of the Sage [Nichiren], is to meet and form a relationship with the living Sage [Nichiren]" (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 2, p. 309); "When those who embrace the [Lotus] Sutra have an audience with the current high priest, they meet with the original Buddha" (*ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 329); and "Each successive high priest who received the transmission of the heritage of the Law is the Gohonzon as Sage Nichiren" (*ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 29).

Sakyo Nikkyo defined Nichiren Daishonin as the “original Buddha,” a view that elevated him beyond the reach of ordinary mortals. He then equated the Daishonin with the current high priest by linking the two through the erroneous notion of the transmission of the heritage of the Law. Simply put, Sakyo Nikkyo invoked the Daishonin’s name to deify the high priest, but he cites no doctrinal basis from the Daishonin’s writings. In the history of the Fuji School, the concept of the high priest’s infallibility was put forth only when his ability and authority were in question and needed doctrinal support.

According to records kept by Nichiji, the sixth high priest, Nikko Shonin is said to have stated that if he grows old and senile and starts invoking the name of Amida Buddha, he must be abandoned (*The Record of Taiseki-ji*). Nikko Shonin also states: “Do not follow even the high priest if he goes against the Buddha’s Law and propounds his own views” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1618). It was with full awareness of the possibility of an aberrant high priest that Nikko Shonin made these statements. He clearly did not espouse the doctrine of the high priest’s infallibility. Furthermore, the documented history of the Fuji school with a host of misguided high priests refutes such an idea.

(2) Transfer documents lost in feud between two offshoots of the Fuji School

SOME of the most important transfer documents that the Daishonin wrote to Nikko Shonin were lost in the late sixteenth century due to a feud between two offshoot branches of the Fuji School: the Kitayama Hon’mon-ji school and the Nishiyama Hon’mon-ji school. Nichidai was appointed by Nikko Shonin as the chief priest of the Omosu seminary (later Kitayama Hon’mon-ji). But he was later rejected by the priests at the seminary and forced to leave his post. Nichidai eventually moved to Nishiyama and had a temple built, thus founding the Nishiyama Hon’mon-ji school, which continued to assert its orthodoxy over Kitayama Hon’mon-ji through its connection to the lineage of Nikko Shonin. The two branches of the Fuji School, which evolved out of Nikko Shonin’s Omosu seminary, carried on an intense rivalry. The Nishiyama school, for example, filed a suit against the Kitayama school to reclaim the right of the seminary and the Daishonin’s statue that was kept there.

After Nichidai left, Nichimyo became the chief priest of the Omosu seminary, which gradually distanced itself from Taiseki-ji and renamed itself Hon’mon-ji—“temple of the true teaching.” This was the name that was said to be assumed by the temple upholding the Daishonin’s teachings at the time of kosen-rufu. In response, Nishiyama also renamed itself Hon’mon-ji.

On March 17, 1581, some priests from Nishiyama escorted by soldiers of Masuyama Gon’uemon, a retainer of Takeda Katsuyori, the governor of Kai Province, went to Kitayama and took its “treasure box.” This box was said to contain many Gohonzon inscribed by the Daishonin, some originals of the Daishonin’s writings such as “On the Three Great Secret Laws” as well as some transfer documents, including the two transfer documents in which Nichiren Daishonin entrusted Nikko Shonin as his successor. Other works believed to

have been in the treasure box include: "On the Birth of the Original Buddha"; "Seven Articles on the Object of Worship"; "One-hundred and Six Comparisons"; and "On the Buddhism of the True Cause."

According to one record, Nisshun, the chief priest of Nishiyama Hon'mon-ji, lodged a suit with Takeda Katsuyori and obtained permission to search Kitayama. Escorted by approximately one hundred soldiers, Nisshun went to Kitayama and demanded to inspect the contents of its treasure box, claiming that some important treasures had recently been lost from Kuon-ji, a temple at Mount Minobu. When Nichiden, the chief priest of Kitayama, reluctantly brought out the box, Nisshun took it back to the estate of the Takeda clan in Kai Province, claiming that the contents would need further investigation (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 9, p. 22).

Nichiden immediately went to Kofu, the seat of the provincial government in Kai Province, and demanded that the Takeda clan return Kitayama's property. His appeal, however, fell on deaf ears. In protest Nichiden went on a hunger strike and died in February 1582. The following month, however, the forces of the neighboring lord, Oda Nobunaga, defeated Takeda Katsuyori's army. During the confusion surrounding the defeat of the Takeda clan, much of the contents of Kitayama's treasure box were lost.

Later Honda Sakuzaemon, a retainer of Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of the Tokugawa shogunate government, recovered some of the lost items and donated them to Nishiyama. Nisshutsu, the chief priest of Kitayama, however, lodged a complaint with Tokugawa Ieyasu to reclaim its lost property. Acknowledging the merit of Nisshutsu's complaint, Tokugawa Ieyasu ordered the return of the remaining sixty-four items to Kitayama.

Due to this incident, many important documents and Gohonzon inscribed by the Daishonin were lost. The rivalry between the Kitayama Hon'mon-ji school and the Nishiyama Hon'mon-ji school escalated to where it resulted in the tragic loss of important archives and artifacts of the Daishonin's Buddhism. Later some scholars denied the Daishonin's transfer of his lineage to Nikko Shonin, claiming that the two transfer documents and "On the Three Great Secret Laws" were forged now that the originals were lost. However, copies that had been made before the loss of the originals were extant, and the background of the incident, which resulted in the loss of the originals, was documented. So their claim to deny Nikko Shonin's legitimacy could not be substantiated.

(To be continued)