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Citation

Jin, Hai. "Tracking an Esoteric Buddhist Synthesis from India to China to Japan and Then China Back Again". Research Reflections Series. Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2026. © License: CC BY NC.

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Tracking an Esoteric Buddhist Synthesis from India to China to Japan and Then China Back Again

Hai Jin

Edited by Aaron Michael Ullrey.

Published in March 2026

The following Research Reflection is part of an ongoing series spotlighting the academic study of religions.

Recognized as the founder of Shingi Shingon Buddhism in Japan and occupying a critical and unique position in East Asian Buddhist history, Master Shinken (1307–1392 CE) was an erudite cleric-academic during the Nanboku-chō period (1336-1392). Shingon is Japanese Esoteric Buddhism (*Vajrayana*). The name Shingon means “True Word” and is a translation of the Sanskrit word *mantra*. Exoteric Buddhism refers to the public, doctrinal teachings and philosophical discourses, while Esoteric Buddhism refers to the private, secret, ritualized methods intended to trigger direct realization of the ultimate tantric gnosis. Shingi Shingon is the “New Meaning” (*shingi*) school of Japanese Esoteric Buddhism, and it refines an Indian-origin Chinese Esoteric Buddhist school known as Tang Mi, in which rational philosophy (the exoteric) is the bedrock for ritual realization (the esoteric). Shinken’s work is not merely a Japanese development. It is a critical preservation of Tang Mi’s tantric Buddhist principles, which flowed from medieval India to eighth-century China, to ninth-century Japan, and then back to China in the twentieth century.

Drawing extensively and explicitly on Shingi Shingon and Shinken’s interpretation of Tang Mi, the modern master Chi Song (1894–1972) founded the Shanghai-based Hu-Mi movement aimed to inspire a socially-engaged, esoteric Buddhist revival, a “New Chinese Esoteric Buddhism” that channels the highest realizations through tantric methods physically enacted and displayed publicly. For both masters, if they could prove the process of tantra using Buddhist logic and philosophy, they could protect the experience of tantra from outside interference. These figures utilized formal exoteric logic and dialectical structures from Buddhist philosophy as a sort of “intellectual armor” to defend the validity of physically enacted, esoteric tantric ritual performance. Their efforts to legitimize tantra ultimately transmitted Tang Mi across cultures and eras.

Shinken’s intellectual vitality is predicated on his systematic mastery of Buddhist logic and debate. He viewed Tang Mi not as an esoteric ritualism but a comprehensive knowledge system in which exoteric philosophy formed the rational bedrock for esoteric realizations. Shinken rejected prior notions that the essence of Buddhist Dharma (*dharmakaya*) is silent, absolute, and unspeakable, and he advanced a position that the “Realization stage,” also called the “Fruit Stage,” a state of ultimate liberation, is ineffable. However, the “Cause-Stage,” those practices and teachings leading to realization, can be expressed in speech. Final realization may surpass words, but the means to attain

it must be articulated, including through ritual, which is a form of Buddhist sacred speech. Though his teachings were about the intellectual accessibility of esoteric teachings, Shinken was a rigorous proponent of physically enacted, though private, rituals and of resisting the medieval trend toward purely mental internalization or visualization of tantric rituals.

In the twentieth century, Chi Song reconstructed Shinken's system that brought about profound realizations, leading him to found a new Chinese Esoteric Buddhism called Hu-Mi, drawn from Tang Mi through Shingon. Chi Song locates Shinken in his Buddhist lineage. Shinken used exoteric Buddhist logic to preserve esoteric Tang Mi in a skeptical medieval scholastic landscape, and Chi Song adopted the same dialectical structures to justify esoteric Tang Mi rituals in the skeptical "scientific" environment of modern China.

Chi Song adopted Shingon's ontological view that physical ritual is sacred speech that can confer Buddhism's highest realizations. Tantric rituals, he insisted, must be physically performed—not visualized in meditation. In modern China, where ritual is considered backward and tantra to be superstition and magic, Chi Song reframed the physical gestures of *mudras*, rhythmic chanting of *mantras*, and visualization of *mandalas* as a precise ritual system to interface with the very essence of Buddhist realization. He stripped away the occult stigma that made Tantra vulnerable to modern charges of superstition.

Chi Song's Hu-Mi school of Esoteric Buddhism moved tantric ritual practices from private monastic cells into the social sphere, publicly performing large-scale fire rites and initiations (*abhisheka*). He presents these tantric rites as rigorous practices that transform the monastic community—the Buddhist *bhikṣu-saṅgha* of monks and nuns—into a group of cultural and intellectual guardians, educators who use formal logic to ground the mystical experiences of Tang Mi in the modern world. No matter how complicated, bewildering, or powerful, if the tantric rituals of Tang Mi are a rigorous technology for mental and social transformation, then Chi Song argued that these practices need not be hidden but should be demonstrated as a defensible cultural force.

Shinken and Chi Song legitimized, protected, and made esoteric tantric lore more accessible by grounding it in philosophy-based interpretations of Buddhist doctrine. The esoteric and exoteric move back and forth, each aspect reinforcing the other, creating a true synthesis. From Indian origins, to China, to Japan, and back to China again across six centuries, this rich strategy of esoteric-exoteric synthesis is a blueprint for surviving transcultural shifts spanning geographies across eras.

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Bio: Hai Jin (Visiting Scholar, CSWR, 2024-26) is an Entrusted Researcher at Koyasan University, Wakayama, Japan and held a full-time visiting scholar appointment at the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies within the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University (2021-2023). Jin conducts his academic research on “The Revival of Tang Dynasty Esoteric Buddhism in China.”

Jin has been appointed to guest professorships in several universities in China and has held senior shipping finance and management positions in several internationally recognized companies worldwide. He graduated from The People’s University of China (RENMIN University of China) with a BA in Economics. Dr. Jin has also studied at Shanghai Fudan University, Columbia Law School, New York University Stern School of Business, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Manchester Business School, and the Norwegian School of Management. Jin obtained his first PhD in Law in 2014, furthered his second PhD completion in Buddhism in 2023. He has written his own and translated more than 10 professional books.