Terminological Issues: Taimitsu and Tōmitsu
Taimitsu 台密, i.e., the esoteric Buddhism of the Tendai 天台 lineages, is one of the two major streams of esoteric Buddhism developed in Japan, the other being the better-known Shingon school. The term “Taimitsu” and its matching term “Tōmitsu” (東密, literally, “the esoteric Buddhism of the Tōji 東寺 lineages”) are documented only in the fourteenth-century Genkō shakusho, composed in 1322 by the Tōfukuji 東福寺 monk Kokan Shiren 虎関師鏡 (1278–1346).¹ In the premodern period, the term “Shingon,” 眞言 which today identifies the school that claims Kūkai 空海 as its founder, was used more generally to indicate esoteric Buddhism in its whole, often interchangeably with the term mikkyō 密教. Historical sources often refer to Taimitsu as “the shingon (or mikkyō) of the Tendai lineages.”

Neither term corresponds to homogeneous traditions. Kokan explained that these two major streams consisted of four divisions: the lineages of Ennin 圓仁 and Enchin 圓珍 in Taimitsu, and the Ono 小野 and Hirosawa 広沢 lineages in Tōmitsu. Indeed, at the culmination of the development of tantric Buddhism in Japan (eleventh to fourteenth centuries), Taimitsu identified two competing traditions, the so-called Sanmon 山門 (Mountain branch) and Jimon 寺門 (Temple branch), each of which claimed a different founder and set of distinctive rituals that legitimized their reciprocal existence.

Institutional Divisions: Sanmon and Jimon
The depiction of Taimitsu as the tantric practices of the school founded by Saichō 最澄 (767–822) headquartered at Enryakuji

¹ Kokushi henshūkai 1929–1966, 31: 409. Kokan discusses both streams of esoteric Buddhism under the entry “mikkyō.” Before Kokan, Annen used the term “shingon” in the same way.
延暦寺 on Mt. Hiei 比叡山, is ambiguous in historical terms, affected as it is by the focus on origins and reflecting the contemporary situation of a centralized Tendai school. The territory of Mt. Hiei itself was not historically a homogeneous entity. It was differentiated in areas of influence, which became known as the “three pagodas and sixteen valleys” by the late-Heian period (Kageyama 1978; Take 1993, 2008b). The area where the Konpon Chūdō 根本中堂 built by Saichō was located, called the Eastern Pagoda (Tōtō 東塔), was developed by Ennin (794–864). He also established buildings in the Yokawa 横川 area, which were to become the center of his own lineage (see Groner 2002, 305–309). A third area of Mt. Hiei, known as the Western Pagoda (Saitō 西塔), was developed by Enchin (814–891) during his term as head (zasu 座主) of the Tendai school. Enchin had also restored a temple on the shore of Lake Biwa, southeast of Mt. Hiei, called Miidera 三井寺 or Onjōji 阿野寺. This was a separate cloister (betsuin 別院) of Enryakuji under his administration.²

Long-term succession disputes over the appointment of the Tendai zasu led to a split between Ennin and Enchin’s lines; the schism became definitive in the tenth century after Ryōgen 良源 restored the Tendai community and established the supremacy of Ennin’s lineage on Mt. Hiei (McMullin 1984). When the schism exploded, Enchin’s disciples fled to Miidera. This was to become the institutional center of Enchin’s lineage, known as the Jimon. The Sanmon branch that represented Ennin’s lineage (or, according to some narratives, Saichō-Ennin’s lineage), kept its headquarters on Mt. Hiei. From this point onward, the two institutional centers developed independently.

In spite of the different size of the two institutions, historically the Onjōji lineage played a distinctive role within Japanese tantrism. Indeed, in medieval documents Japanese tantrism is usually described as constituted by the Tōji, Sanmon, and Jimon lines. Often indicated as “too close to Tōji lineages,” the Jimon line constructed a specific ritual system in competition with Sanmon and was crucial in the institutionalization of another important tradition of Japanese religious practice, Shugendō 修験道 (see Sekimori, “Shugendō and Its Relationship with the Japanese Esoteric Sects” and Ambros, “Tōzanha Shugendō

² Another area with historical repercussions for the definition of Taimitsu was the base of Mt. Hiei, in Sakamoto, where the Hiei shrine complex developed. As the abode of the tutelary kami of the mountain, this was the core of the esoteric interpretation of the kami developed by Taimitsu (Sannō Shintō 山王神道).