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Jien's Periodization of the History of Japan: Philosophical Underpinnings

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the philosophical underpinnings of the periodization of Japanese history proposed by Tendai monk Jien (1155-1225) in the early XIII century within the framework of Japanese Buddhism. The research is based on the historiosophical writing "Gukanshō" (circa 1221). Jien in "Gukanshō" linked the idea of historical causation to Buddhist cosmology and offered a periodization of his country's history in terms of Japanese Buddhism.

It is well known among Japanologists that Jien divided Japanese history into seven periods according to invisible and visible Principles-*dōri*. After textual analyses of "Gukanshō" we have concluded that invisible Principles are rules determined by the cosmic world order and visible Principles are rules determined by worldly power and order.

Textual analysis allows to distinguish three other periodization schemes depending on various criteria: 1) three traditionally designated epochs (ancient times, recent ancient times, present days); 2) three periods corresponding to three ages of the deterioration of the Buddhist Doctrine (The True Law, The Semblance Law, The Latter Day of the Law); 3) four periods due to a form of rulership (an emperor, an emperor and a regent, an ex-emperor, an emperor with a *shogun* and a regent).

We show that four classifications do not conflict with one another. They are closely interrelated and organize historical data to legitimize the supreme power of the imperial house, the Fujiwara regency and military rule. The traditional periodization is a simple scheme reflecting empirical observation. Three other schemes are based on the theoretical framework and shaped by Buddhist cosmological worldview and theory of three ages of Buddhism. These three classifications create causative context for historical events. They reveal up-and-down course of Japanese history working towards degeneracy. Four forms of rulership are ways of adjusting to different stages of the deteriorating half of a kalpa. The traditional tripartite periodization is included in this philosophical system by being grounded on the doctrine of three ages of Buddhism.