

Buddhist Middle Ages in China? Bibliography

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Abstract: Buddhism was an important vector for ideas about time and history in pre-modern East Asia. In medieval China (fourth to tenth centuries CE), Buddhists situated themselves historically with reference to Indian Buddhist history (real or imagined). Later, in Japan, Buddhist scholars looked back on the transmission of their religion from India to Japan, via China. Religious ideas about the supposed decline or revival of Buddhist teaching shaped historical theories. The notion of a Buddhist Middle Ages in China is not a new idea, and it remains a very influential concept even for people who do not study religion. But most of the research on this periodization of history has concentrated on the idea of a “middle ages” in the work of writers who lived after the tenth century. What is emerging is a new focus on people within that period itself—what did medieval Chinese Buddhists think was going on with regard to the history of their own tradition?

Medieval Chinese Buddhist historiography is a very well-developed tradition. We have hundreds of sources documenting the lives of thousands of individuals across the span of a thousand years or so. Learned Buddhist authors had an acute sense of the importance of history and a strong interest in the past (and future) of their religion and the territories in which it held sway. My basic thesis is that encounters of Chinese Buddhists in the fourth to tenth centuries with Indian history and geography through the medium of Buddhist texts caused some re-conceptualization of how to periodize history.

Historians of China have only used the borrowed terms “Middle Ages” or “Medieval” to describe a particular period for a hundred years or so. But there were other and earlier ways of periodizing history that did not just default to using dynastic cycles to mark periods of time. When we want to consider a Buddhist Middle Ages in China, we should look first to medieval Chinese historiographers and how they constructed their own historical situation using material from another time and place—the (imagined) history of India through the medium of Buddhist texts and Buddhist ideas.

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