

Summary: Presentation, 9 Dec 2011 in Paris

Calendars and almanacs in Japan (689 to 1884): formats, contents, users

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This presentation gives an overview of calendrical documents that survived on the Japanese islands and its users from all historical periods. Two objective factors make such an investigation feasible for this region: Firstly, during all historical periods in Japan the calculation, compilation and distribution of the yearly calendar remained largely under the control of the state. There is therefore only a limited variety in types and forms. Secondly, a large number of calendrical documents survive. Beginning with the oldest fragment from 689, more than 1300 fragments and complete versions of calendars are extant for the period prior to 1600. This is an abundance compared to the situation in India, where hardly any calendar survives from the pre-modern period, or indeed in China, where, except for material from the Western peripheries of Turfan and especially Dunhuang, where some 40 datable fragments and complete calendars and almanacs have been discovered, there is also a paucity of material before the 15th century.

It will be shown that the first calendars in Japan were copies of Chinese versions and that the adoption of the continental calendrical system occurred during the 7th to 10th centuries in four phases. The oldest versions in Japanese writing appeared in the 13th century, first in handwritten form, a century later, woodblock-printing became the means to increase the number of annually produced editions. By the end of the 17th centuries calendars had reached all groups of the literate populace and in a complete re-organisation of the calendrical system in the 1680s all regional editions were melted into one single edition on this occasion. This printed national calendar continued to appear in almost unchanged form until 1873, when it was replaced, however, by the Gregorian calendar introduced in that year that brought about again a fundamental change in calendrical science. These changes eventually lead to the emergence of a dual time structure accomplished by 1900, which consists on the one hand of the Western way of structuring time in terms of days, months and the hours. On the other hand there were almanacs, that first appeared illegally on an annually basis and that reproduced not only the old luni-solar time structure but also continue to supply all those with chronomantic guidance, that still choose auspicious time periods and directions when planning general activities in daily live in modern Japan.