The World of the “Mikkyō” Book of the Tenpōrinshō

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Since the transmission of Esoteric Buddhism (mikkyō) to Japan by Saichō and Kūkai, the faith spread chiefly through the aristocratic class not only in the form of doctrine but as a teaching enabling the fulfillment of prayers through the performance of esoteric rites (shuho). These esoteric rites were conducted on a grand scale when, for example, they were sponsored by the court to secure the peace of the nation, but they were also conducted for individuals who hoped for the realization of their prayers.

There has been much scholarship, chiefly by historians, devoted to the significance of esoteric rites in medieval society, but, as the majority has relied on journals and temple documents, there has been little work on the concrete reality of the rites themselves. Given these circumstances, in this article I examine the concrete relationship between esoteric rites and society from the viewpoint of the texts of hyōbyaku (pronouncements) by analyzing the unique character of the “Mikkyō” book of the Tenpōrinshō.

The Tenpōrinshō is a classified compilation of hyōbyaku texts composed by the famed Buddhist preacher Chōken of the Agui lineage, and the “Mikkyō” book is composed of hyōbyaku texts that were read out on the occasion dharma assemblies (hōe) of an Esoteric Buddhist character. Thirty-six items are included in the book, but the book lacks a single unifying principle both in terms of the nature of the assemblies and the contents of the prayers included, and thus the contents are extremely varied.

Nevertheless, it is possible to point out a number of characteristics. One is that hyōbyaku texts for assemblies associated with Jien, the preeminent Tendai cleric of the day, are numerous. I first classed these hyōbyaku texts together and examined the relationship between the esoteric rites and society while paying particular attention on the content of the prayers.

Furthermore, it can be pointed out that another characteristic is the inclusion of hyōbyaku related to Minamoto no Yoritomo. In this context I focused on the hyōbyaku text of the dedication of the five-storied pagoda at Tsurugaoka Hachimangū, which is often addressed in terms of Yoritomo’s religious policy, and confirmed the relationship between the Yoritomo’s policy and the dharma assembly.

On the basis of the above, I have elucidated the structure of the “Mikkyō” book as based on the various phases of esoteric assemblies under the social conditions prevailing from the Insei through
the early-Kamakura period. In other words, esoteric assemblies played the social function of fulfilling prayers on various levels. In this manner, I have demonstrated that the Tenpōrinshō is a valuable source in considering the relationship between dharma assemblies and society during the medieval period.

Key words: Tenpōrinshō, Chōken, Jien, Minamoto no Yoritomo, dharma assemblies