

Foreword

We are pleased to present the final report from the “International Expert Meeting on Paradise and Gardens in Eastern Asia” held in 2009.

The “Ancient Garden Research Project” was commenced in 2001 at the Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties. This research project was launched in response to a recent series of archaeological discoveries and aims to contribute to the historical knowledge of Japanese gardens.

In Japan, the designs of gardens created in the Heian period and the middle and early modern ages were imitated by a number of existing gardens in Kyôto, Nara and some other areas. The history of these gardens, established through research, has now grown to be one of the three major topics of historical research in Japan, together with the history of architecture and art. In the past, no gardens created before the Nara period had been discovered, and much remained unknown about the origin and development processes of Japanese gardens and their position in the context of the history of gardens in Asia.

A major breakthrough in the historical research of ancient gardens took place in 1967 when the Tô-in Garden was discovered during excavation at the site of Nara Palace (Heijô-kyû) site, which was followed by successive discoveries of ruins of gardens dating back to the Nara and Asuka periods in earlier years. These discoveries, coupled with recent achievements in the excavation research of ancient gardens in China and Korea, are giving rise to a new research theme – the history of gardens in Eastern Asia. It is against such a backdrop that the Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties launched the above research project.

In this project, we first focused on the Kofun (mounded tomb) period to explore the origins of Japanese gardens and then traced the development of gardens chronologically. The research topic we have chosen for this fiscal year is “Pure Land Gardens,” an element that occupies a very important position in the history of Japanese gardens.

During the Expert Meeting, very fruitful discussions took place among Chinese, Korean and Japanese researchers on such basic topics as: how “Pure Land Gardens” should be defined in the first place; whether gardens that fall under the Japanese definition of “Pure Land Gardens” ever existed in China and Korea; and how Japanese “Pure Land Gardens” should be positioned within the Eastern Asian context. Recently, renewed attention is being paid to the nature and significance of “Pure Land Gardens,” in relation to the attempt to apply for the addition of Hiraizumi to the World Heritage List. In this sense, we may say that this meeting was held in a very timely fashion.

Still, many issues have to be addressed: for example, we have yet to clarify the relationships between China, Korea and Japan in terms of the history of gardens, and define the meaning of “Pure Land Garden” in a more easy-to-understand manner. We will remain committed to research in this field and, in this connection, highly appreciate the continued encouragement, support and cooperation of all those involved.

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