Sakuteiki: Visions of the Japanese Garden

Jiro Takei & Marc P. Keane
Visions of the Japanese Garden
Sakuteiki
Visions of the Japanese Garden
A Modern Translation of Japan's Gardening Classic

Jirō Takei & Marc P. Keane

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The Sakuteiki was written in the eleventh century and is thus rather difficult for us to read now, especially for young students of landscape architecture. Some twenty years ago, I decided to undertake a translation to modern Japanese to help those students with their studies, and some years after that, seeing the increase in interest from international students, I also decided to produce an English-language edition. I was fortunate at that point to meet Marc Peter Keane, and we immediately began work, spending in all more than two years working on the translation and annotations. I would like to express my sincere thanks to Marc for his encouragement throughout that time, without which I would have never been able to finish this work. I would also like to mention my gratitude to the Tuttle Publishing Company for taking on this work.

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—Jirō Takei

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—Marc Peter Keane
Visions of the Japanese Garden
Sakuteiki

Visions of the Garden
石をたてん事
Ishi wo tate n koto
The Art of Setting Stones
With these words opens the oldest garden-making treatise in Japan—most likely the oldest in the world—best known by the name Sakuteiki, or Records of Garden Making. Immediately upon reading this first line, we realize that the Sakuteiki will present us with a radically new view of gardening. The expression *ishi wo taten koto* was used by the author of the Sakuteiki to define not only the placement of stones within the garden, but also the act of garden making itself. Although today there are many other words in Japanese to mean “gardening,” such as *zōen* or *niwa zukuri*, both of which literally mean “build gardens,” there was no such expression at the time the Sakuteiki was written. How fascinating to see that the simple act of standing a stone upright was so spiritually and aesthetically powerful (as with the dolmens of Stonehenge or Carnac), and so clearly central to the process of making a garden, that the act of setting stones became an appellation for gardening itself.

The importance placed on stones in Japan stems from several sources. The first is the ancient use of stones as prayer sites, especially those found naturally in the landscape, often stones that have a rounded form or a naturally upright appearance. It was believed that through the medium of the stone, gods could be induced to descend from their heavenly abodes to visit earth and bestow their blessings for good health and ample harvests on village communities. These sacred stones, called *iwakura*, are still actively incorporated in religious life even today. In later eras, the spiritual qualities inherent in sacred stones carried over into the use of stones in gardens. New meanings were added as well, meanings that were derived from cultural imports such as Buddhism and geomancy, the latter being an ancient Chinese method of geophysical divination. The author of the Sakuteiki clearly states that stones were a requisite part of gardening, going as far as saying, for instance, in chapter eight, “...stones are imperative when making a garden.”

In addition to the fact that the very word for gardening reveals the importance of stones, we also find another expression in the Sakuteiki of equal interest in this regard. In several places in the text, the author advises the reader to “follow the request of the stone,” *ishi no kowan ni shitagahite*. In current design language we might interpret this to mean “pay attention to the individual characteristics of the stones” or even “follow the character of the stone when making design decisions.” However, the word *request* reveals an important difference between the way we perceive gardens today and the way the writer of the Sakuteiki and his contemporaries did; for them, stones were animate, and the desires of stones warranted consideration. These two expressions regarding stones—the first showing that setting stones is the most central act of gardening and the second that stones were perceived as animate objects—both reveal that at the time the Sakuteiki was written, gardens were perceived quite differently than they are today. This is what makes the Sakuteiki so appealing: it offers us a view into another society, at a time distant from our own, when people had distinctly different ways of understanding their world.

It is believed that the Sakuteiki was written in the mid to late eleventh century, during the Heian period (794-1184), an important era in Japanese history since it marks a period of introspection when cultural attributes such as poetry, clothing styles, and so on, which had been imported from China and Korea over the previous centuries, were reexamined and transmuted into a clearly Japanese context. This is true of the gardens as well. The Sakuteiki offers the reader a vision of gardening from a society nearly 1000 years old. It also provides us with a rich source of information about the gardens of the...
time, insights that are pertinent not only to those who study historical records of gardening, but to anyone who is interested in simply perceiving what a garden is.

The Author and the Text

The oldest surviving version of the Sakuteiki was hand-written in flowing brushscript on two long scrolls. However, unlike the later Illustrations of Gardening [Senzu Narabi ni Yagyōzu], the Sakuteiki contains no illustrative material. At some point after the Heian period, a set of these scrolls came into the possession of the Maeda family, wealthy provincial lords in what is today Ishikawa Prefecture, in central Japan. From the Maeda family, copies of the scrolls spread to other hands, and one such copy was acquired by the Tanimura family of Kanazawa City. Later, between the years 1779 and 1819 (the late Edo period by Japanese reckoning), the Tanimura scrolls were used in the production of the Gunsho Ruijū, a collection of historical literary works that contains more than 1800 scrolls. One notable aspect of that collection is that it was published using block print rather than script, and at that time some of the alphabetic kana script used in the earlier scrolls was interpreted and printed as kanji, Chinese calligraphic script. It is not known how the Sakuteiki was referred to in the Heian period; there is no title on the Tanimura scrolls. During the Kamakura period, the text was referred to as the Secret Selection on Gardens [Senzai Hisshō], and at some point in the Edo period it became known as the Sakuteiki, the name used in the Gunsho Ruijū.

The author of the Sakuteiki was long believed to be Fujiwara Yoshitsune, primarily because his sobriquet, Gokyōgokudono, is found at the end of the Gunsho Ruijū text. Further research, however, has led to the now accepted theory that the author was in fact Tachibana no Toshitsuna (1028-1094). During the Heian period, the Tachibana family was listed as one of the Four Great Families, shisei, of Japan along with the Fujiwara, the Genji, and the Heike families, and for this reason alone Toshitsuna would have had ample opportunity to have spent time in and around gardens. Moreover, Toshitsuna was the son of Fujiwara no Yorimichi (992-1074), who ruled Japan as imperial regent for nearly half a century. Besides being a powerful administrator, Yorimichi was also known as a builder of grand palaces and is perhaps best known for the country retreat he built for himself in Uji, south of Kyōto, which he turned into a temple in 1052. Miraculously, the central hall of that temple, Byōdōin, still exists to this day. Yorimichi also built an estate within the Heian capital called Kayanoin, not far from the imperial palace itself. It was four times the normal size of a high-ranking nobleman’s estate. Ponds were placed on all four sides of the main hall, and a racetrack and horse-viewing grounds were also constructed on the property. Many of the festivities that took place at Kayanoin, as well as images of the gardens there, are recorded in paintings, perhaps the best known of which is Koma Kuraburō Gyōkō Emaki, a lengthy scroll that depicts events at Kayanoin in 1024. Paintings such as this give us
a good idea of what an aristocratic estate looked like in the Heian period, and those images match quite well with the descriptions in the Sakuteiki. In fact, the author of the Sakuteiki mentions visiting Kayanoin during the construction of its gardens—another clue indicating Toshitsuna as author. That visit most likely took place in AD 1040 when Yorimiche was forty-nine and Toshitsuna was thirteen years old.

With the building of the palace, Kayanoin, there was no one proficient in gardening, just people who thought they might be of some help. In the end, displeased with the results, Lord Uji took the task of designing the garden upon himself. I often visited the site at that time and was able to observe and study.

In his later years, Toshitsuna was appointed Fushimi Shuri no Daibu, head of a bureaucratic office in charge of construction and repairs of some imperial estates, which he held for twenty-four years. He is reputed to have taken part in making the gardens of many aristocratic families and was the owner of a magnificent garden as well. Although his main residence was Nishinotōintei in the Heian capital, he also possessed an estate in Fushimi, south of the city. Shokuyotsugi\textsuperscript{10} relates the following encounter between Toshitsuna and Emperor Shirakawa (1053-1129; r. 1072-86). The emperor requested that Toshitsuna name the best gardens of their time, to which he replied, “Finest of all would be Ishidadono. Second is Kayanoin.” “Of course,” interjected the emperor, “the third must be Tobadono,” suggesting his own estate, which lay by the confluence of the Kamo and Katsura rivers south of the city. Toshitsuna, however, responded by naming his own estate in Fushimi, revealing not only that he was confident enough of his position in aristocratic society to contradict the emperor.

As the result of this long experience, and many “secret teachings,” \textit{kuden}, regarding gardening that he would have had access to, Toshitsuna is a very likely candidate as author of the Sakuteiki. It is not the focus of this work, however, to prove or disprove the authorship of the Sakuteiki. In fact, as noted in the footnotes of the translation, there may well have been several authors, or additions made to an earlier text by later owners of the scrolls. Most likely, if Toshitsuna did somehow note down his various experiences and the secret teachings that he had been party to, his writings were probably compiled into the form we now know as the Sakuteiki at a later date. Since the original name of the text and the authorship are unknown, the value to us in understanding the Sakuteiki lies not in pinpointing historical details but in understanding what the text reveals about the perception of gardening in the Heian period. Through that understanding, readers today can glean ideas that inform their own understanding of gardens—as visitors or as designers.

**The Structure of the Heian Capital\textsuperscript{11}**

When the Heian capital, now known as Kyōto, was built in 794, it was the fifth large-scale capital to be built within just one hundred years, following Fujiwara, Heijō, Naniwa, and Nagaoka.\textsuperscript{12} The process of rebuilding capitals in new locations ended with the construction of the Heian metropolis. The city was to remain as the imperial seat from its inception until 1868 when the imperial court was relocated to Edo (present-day Tōkyō).

The site for the Heian capital was reputedly “discovered” by a party of nobles during a hunting expedition; a relatively flat, open valley that sloped gently from northeast to southwest. Along with several major rivers there were many small brooks and springs, which proved both bane and boon. 
the southwest area of the city, for example, groundwater proved to be in excess, with the result that those soggy areas never fully developed. In the northern parts of the city, however, especially the northeast, the abundance of water proved to be instrumental in the design of gardens that featured clear springs, meandering brooks, waterfalls, and ponds. The valley was surrounded on the east, north, and west by low mountains, yet opened broadly to the south. Besides the ready supply of water and a physically protected situation, the environs of the site of the new capital were also found to have favorable geomantic conditions, the most basic requirement of which was the believed existence of Four Guardian Gods, shijin, in the surrounding landscape. It is recorded in Shoku Nihonki that in the year AD 793, Emperor Kammu sent an expedition to survey the area then called Yamashiro no Kuni, and the report of the survey team includes the phrase shijin sōō, or “the four guardian gods are in balance.” The four gods are the Blue Dragon, Scarlet Bird, White Tiger, and Black Tortoise. The Blue Dragon was divined to the east of the proposed site for the capital in the form of the Kamo River; the Black Tortoise was divined as a small hill known as Funaokayama that lay to the north; and the Scarlet Bird was divined as a large pond, Oguraike, in the south. Only the White Tiger was not clearly evident in the landscape and consequently was embellished by taking spring-waters from Konoshima Jinja, a shrine just to the west of where the city would lie, and drawing them out in a long canal parallel with the western edge of the city. Even as the geomantic requirement of Four Guardian Gods was applied to the city as a whole, such symbology also became prerequisite for the design of the gardens within the city, and Heian-period gardens can be perceived as symbolic representations, on a reduced scale, of the larger world of the city and its environs.

The design of the Heian capital was based on that of Changan (present-day Xian), the capital of Tang-dynasty China, though it was built at a reduced scale. The whole city was laid out as a large rectangle, slightly longer north to south than east to west, covering some 2400 hectares (6000 acres) in all. This large rectangle was divided by a grid of avenues that formed large blocks that in turn were subdivided so that a map of the whole appears like complex graph paper in which each square is subdivided again and again with smaller squares. The basic module of this system was a unit 120 meters square called a chō, the standard allotment for aristocrats of third rank or higher. Within these rectangular plots the aristocrats built their residences, in what is now known as the shinden style.

**Structure of Shinden Residences**

Although the layout of aristocratic residences had many variations, they all adhered to certain basic rules. To begin with, situated roughly in the center of the property was the Main Hall, shinden, which acted as both forum for political and social events, and private residence for the lord of the household. Annex Halls, tai no ya, were arranged to the east, west, and north of the Main Hall to provide living quarters for family and servants as well as places for storage, cooking, and the like. These auxiliary buildings were connected by roofed corridors, suiwatadō (referred to as Breezeways in this book) that provided sheltered access amongst them. The rectangular spaces enclosed between the various halls and the corridors that connected them were often used to create simple gardens that featured one species of plant. These spaces were called tsubo and were named after the plant they contained, so we find the Wisteria Court (fuji tsubo), Paulownia Court (kiri tsubo), and so on. Although tsubo gardens are well known from other literary sources, it is interesting to note that these smaller gardens are not mentioned in the Sakuteiki.

In the classic architectural form of shinden residences, directly to the east and west of the Main
Hall were situated two Annex Halls from which long corridors, *chūmonrō*, led south to pavilions built in the garden. The roof of the corridors was raised halfway between the Annex Halls and the garden pavilions to create a gateway. In some cases those gates had doors, while in others only the raised roof itself emphasized the sense of threshold and passage. The garden pavilions were typically given names like Fishing Pavilion, *tsuridono*, and Wellspring Pavilion, *izumidono*. Just to the south of the Main Hall, and framed on the east and west by the long corridors, was a large flat area spread with sand that was used for gatherings of all kinds, from sporting events to formal dance performances. This area referred to in the Sakuteiki as the Southern Court, *nantei*. To the south of the Southern Court, and wrapping back around the pavilions and corridors that projected into the courtyard from the annexes, was the garden proper, usually containing a pond with islands, some hillocks, and various plantings. This entire area, including both the Southern Court and garden, is the main focus of the Sakuteiki.
Shinden residences displayed an interesting combination of simplicity and ornament. Owing to limited resources, the volume of lavish materials—gold, silver, ivory, gemstones, and so on—which were available to the larger imperial societies of China or Rome, were unavailable to the Japanese court. Whatever their aesthetic preferences were, this alone would have prevented them from grandiose displays of decorative materials. It seems, however, that the simplicity of their residences may have been to some degree a matter of taste. The Heian-period aristocrats had a predilection for colors of the most refined and complex sort, the combining of which, such as in the twelve-layered costume some princesses wore, was judged as a sign of one’s social refinement. Much of this use of rich color, whether it was brilliant gold foil or subtle plant dyes, was applied in microscale, for instance, to clothing, fashion accessories, scrolls, or screens. What is interesting is how different they chose to color their larger living environments, both house and garden. Paintings of shinden residences show that at times the railings of the verandas, kōran, and the curved bridge leading to the middle island, sori hashi, were painted vermilion. The floors of some of the interior spaces and the screens, misu, used to separate rooms are at times depicted as being an azure green, like lapis lazuli. In a few rare cases, carpets with elaborate designs woven into them are shown in some rooms. But even in the cases where all of the decorative materials just mentioned are employed, as in the palace depicted in the Koma Kurabe Gyōkō Emaki, the actual structure of the residence itself—the wooden...
structure, the roof of delicate cedar shakes, the floorboards on the verandas and in the rooms, the stairways, and corridors—are all untreated in any way. Whereas halls of state were painted with vivid combinations of green, yellow, and vermilion and roofed with green-glazed tiles, for their own residences, the nobles, from the emperor on down, all chose to build of untreated wood. This taste is revealed in the Sakuteiki as well, in the constant reminders toward naturalism in design.

The basic layout of the Main Hall of the shinden residence was like a set of boxes within boxes (see figure 3, p. 16). In the core was the moya, which contained two spaces: a walled room for sleeping, which had only one entry, and a second space that was opened to its surroundings to be used as a day-room. The moya was in turn surrounded by peripheral rooms collectively called hisashi. The hisashi were separated from the outdoors by sturdy hanging wooden-lattice panels, shitomi, lighter hanging reed screens, misu, and movable standing fabric screens, kichō. Surrounding the hisashi was a slim veranda, sunoko, located under the broad eaves of the roof but otherwise completely exposed to the elements. The sunoko is mentioned in the Sakuteiki as a reference point by which heights in the garden could be set, for instance the water level of the pond, and it also appears in many paintings as a favored place from which to admire the garden.

The design of shinden residences as described above is idealized. In reality there were many variants, and by the mid-Heian period most residences did not maintain a perfectly symmetrical plan. One reason for this was the recurrence of fires that destroyed the residences. Forced to rebuild time and time again, the nobles decided, for reasons perhaps financial rather than aesthetic, to do without certain elaborations in the ideal plan. There are, however, three points that can be said to be universal. First, the plan was centered on a central Main Hall with outlying halls connected by roofed corridors, even if those were not symmetrically placed. Second, the design was based on rectilinear forms: the surrounding earthen wall that enveloped the whole property; the north-south, east-west alignment of all the buildings; even the design of each simple, box-like architectural unit. In contrast to the architecture, the gardens were entirely organic in their design. This brings up the third and perhaps most important point: shinden architecture was garden-oriented. In fact, the buildings of the Heian period served in many ways as stages offering advantageous views of the garden.
The Southern Court and Garden

The Southern Court immediately south of the Main Hall was flat, open, and spread with sand or fine gravel to make it usable for large gatherings. The ornamental garden was built to the south of this court, as well as to the southeast and southwest of the property. In rare cases, when the property was inordinately large, there are records of gardens in all four directions from the Main Hall. The Sakuteiki dictates that the Southern Court should be eighteen to twenty-seven meters in depth from the Main Hall to the pond. We can judge from this and other sources that for a property of one chō, the Southern Courts ranged from one thousand to more than two thousand square meters in size, or roughly a quarter to a half of an acre, while the ornamental garden may have been about three thousand to five thousand square meters, or roughly an acre to an acre and a quarter in size.\(^{21}\) We can see in contemporary paintings, and find recorded in chronicles of the time, a great diversity of events taking place in this open area. *Nenjū Gyōji Emaki*, a scroll from the twelfth century depicting annual festivities in aristocratic households, for example, shows formal processions, dances, archery, cockfights, cherry viewing, and even at times men carrying torches, implying nighttime festivities as well.

\(^{21}\) We refer here to the size of the property in terms of the Japanese unit *chō*. One *chō* is approximately 100,000 square meters or 2.5 acres.
Another use of the garden revealed in contemporary paintings is boating. There were three types of boats, the best known of which are those that had their prows carved in the shape of the heads of dragons or waterfowl. These boats were used to convey musicians and their instruments around the pond, creating a glorious spectacle for people of higher rank, who sat in the Southern Court or on the veranda of the Main Hall observing the festivities. These boats were not used, however, for touring the garden. For that purpose there were two others types: one was an open boat with a narrow prow and the other was covered with a curved, Chinese-style roof and had a boxlike stern.22

There were as many styles and forms of garden as there were garden owners, but just as there were certain standard components to the architecture of the time so too were there standard components to the gardens which should be introduced briefly at this point. From images passed on to us in contemporary literature, including the Sakuteiki, as well as from paintings and archeological digs, we realize that the gardens often contained stones, diverse plantings, well-springs, ponds, islands, streams, bridges, and waterfalls.

As mentioned above, stones were the most fundamental element of garden design and served a number of purposes: structure, such as footings for building or ramparts to stabilize island banks; aesthetics, as when they were placed in flowing water to create certain visual effects; allegorical motifs, in which case the stones were seen as being representative of famous natural scenes or Buddhist deities; and for the effects they were believed to have on the geomantic balance of the entire property (a subject we shall go into in depth in the following chapter on geomancy). The garden stones we find depicted in paintings of Heian-period gardens are often complexly shaped. The Sakuteiki refers to these as “stones with corners” (kado aru ishi, ishi kado art), implying that angular or complexly shaped stones were considered to be attractive. Evidence from archeological digs on Heian-period gardens confirms that rough-textured stones were used, but the specific undulating form often depicted in paintings is rarely found and may have been a painterly convention of the time. The mountains that border the eastern side of Kyōto, called Higashiyama, are to a large extent composed of a type of granite that is formed primarily of three minerals: white feldspar, gray quartz, and black mica. When this granite is exposed on the surface and weathers, it quickly decomposes, forming the white sand that can be found in the rivers flowing out of that mountain. Assumedly, that is the same white sand that was used for surfacing the Southern Courts or for building promontories, sūsa shirahama, and sandbars, shirasu, in the ponds and streams of the gardens. To the north of Kyōto, however, is a range of mountains called Kitayama, which yields a different kind of stone now called Kitayama-ishi that is composed of chert.23 Unlike the granite or basalt boulders found in Japan, which form generally rounded shapes as they tumble along in rivers, chert is created in sedimentary layers of different hardness that degrade into more complex shapes as they erode.
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