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From Daoist to Pure Land Paradises: Pond Gardens in Silla and Heian Palaces

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Abstract

This study has examined how Silla Korea and Heian Japan diverged from the pond-garden tradition of Tang China and developed their own localized forms in terms of landscape and religious studies. In Tang China, the Grand Fluid Pond occupied a prominent position within the highly symmetrical palace compound, yet it was excluded from the imperial sacrificial rituals. The pond primarily functioned as a space for courtly recreation, while Daoism survived largely as a symbolic vocabulary and formal embellishment. By contrast, the Wŏlji pond in Kyŏngju more actively incorporated celestial elements of garden Daoism and indigenous beliefs. They included the three immortal islands, the Twelve Peaks of Mount Wu, wild animals for hunting, and the worship of the Dragon King. More importantly, the pond was deliberately situated adjacent to a royal Buddhist temple, and, over time, a large number of Buddhist artifacts were placed in the pond area. Taken together, the Silla pond functioned not merely as an idealized landscape but also as an ideological space that reinforced the royal authority and glorified the dynasty through a syncretic religious landscape. Although the imagery of Amitābha's Western Paradise was only partially expressed in the Silla garden, it was fully realized in garden form under the patronage of the Fujiwara clan in eleventh-century Heian Japan. By this time, Pure Land Buddhism had permeated all levels of society, while widespread anxieties over the "Latter Days of the Law" encouraged devotion to Amitābha as the primary means of salvation. Against this religious background, the Fujiwara sponsored temple complexes with expansive pond gardens. Two of the most prominent examples, Hōjōji and Byōdōin, were deliberately designed to represent Amitābha's Western Paradise and to serve as ritual settings for Pure Land devotion. This religiosity therefore represented a fundamental departure from both the Daoist garden of Tang China and the syncretic gardens of Silla Korea.

Keywords: Daoist myth; pond gardens; Pure Land Buddhism; Silla; Heian; Wŏlji; Hōjōji; Byōdōin; Western Paradise; Amitābha Buddha

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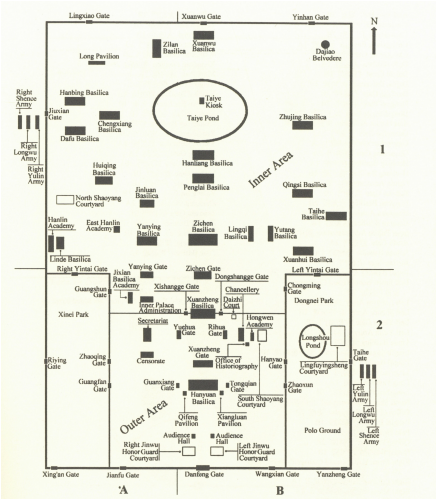
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1. Introduction[1]

Ancient Chinese people imagined that somewhere in the ocean existed the three mythical islands of immortality—Penglai 蓬萊, Fangzhang 方丈, and Yingzhou 瀛洲. This belief in a blissful Daoist land inspired Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE) of Han China to build a replica of those islands in a pond, called the Grand Fluid Pond (Taiyechi 太液池) in his Jianzhang palace. From then on, having three islands in one pond (*yichi sandao* 一池三島) became a defining feature of Chinese imperial garden design and was repeatedly adopted by subsequent dynasties, although the number and arrangement of islands varied over time (Zhou 2008, pp. 85–87). Although Emperor Wu was preoccupied with the Daoist

quest for immortality in his garden, the religious significance diminished in later imperial gardens. Over time, imperial pond gardens evolved into multifunctional spaces for courtly banquets, literary gatherings, and ceremonial activities. One prominent example is the Grand Fluid Pond of Tang China (618–907).

The imperial family of the Tang empire claimed descent from Laozi as an attempt to give religious legitimation to the authority of the emperors.[2] Daoism was soon established as the state religion in the seventh century, and it fully penetrated imperial court culture. Daming Palace (about 3.42 km^2) was first laid out in 634 as a summer retreat for Emperor Gaozu (r. 618–626), the founder of the dynasty, and it became the official palace in 663, when it was completed by Gaozong (r. 649–683). Daoist symbolism was deployed through building names, such as immortals (*xian* 仙), cinnabar (*dan* 丹), primordial (*yuan* 元), and the Purple Throne (*zichen* 紫宸). The palace compound was divided into two precincts: the southern precinct became the administrative nucleus of the empire, while the northern precinct was reserved for imperial residence (see Figure 1).



4.2. Schematic map of Daming Palace. After TLJCFK "Xijing Daming gong tu"

Figure 1. Daming Palace and Grand Fluid Pond (after Xiong 2000, Map 4.1).

At the heart of the northern precinct, the Grand Fluid Pond area mainly served the purposes of imperial leisure and social interactions. It is well-known that Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–756) had excursions with Consort Yang (719–756) along the pond, when lotus flowers were fully open (McMullen 2001, p. 234). Notably, the Buddhist motif of the lotus blossoms on the pond was not mentioned by contemporary writers. Instead, Confucian culture was absorbed into the pond area. On top of the island stood a Taiye Pavilion, and it served as a social and learning place for emperors and noble men. In 821, for example, it was used as a Confucian lecture hall to teach the *Shijing* 詩經 (*Book of Odes*) and *Shujing* 書經 (*Book of Documents*) (Shin 2011, pp. 1–8, 20–26). In other words, the Grand Fluid Pond lost Daoist religiosity, and it was secularized as a pleasure garden and didactic space for emperors and their entourages. Alongside the Chinese myth of the Three Blissful Islands, the Daoist tradition of pond gardens was transmitted to ancient Korea and Japan as part of palace architecture. What differed from China, however, was that they also reflected the Buddhist ideal world.

In Buddhist salvation, practitioners seek to cross the river or ocean of Birth and Death (*shengsihai* 生死海) by boat in order to reach the shore of Nirvana (*niepan'an* 涅槃岸), metaphorically known as "the other shore." This aquatic symbolism was further elaborated in Pure Land Buddhism. In this sinful world, described as the age of the Decline of

the Dharma, ordinary beings were believed to be incapable of pursuing the path of Gautama Buddha and attaining liberation through their own efforts. They instead relied on the saving power of Amitābha (K. Amit'a; J. Amida), aspiring to rebirth in his Western Paradise. This blissful realm, Sukhāvatī, was envisioned as a celestial landscape centered on ponds filled with lotus flowers existing beyond the western horizon at sunset, where the faithful would be reborn and seated upon lotus blossoms. Thus, water and lotus ponds became central visual metaphors for Pure Land belief and profoundly influenced the design of later Buddhist gardens.

This tradition of other-power Pure Land Buddhism took shape in China between the fourth and sixth centuries. It spread to the Korean peninsula in the seventh century, and it was subsequently transmitted to Japan during the Nara period (710–794). It flourished from the tenth century onward under the patronage of the Fujiwara clan in the Heian period (794–1185). Amitābha Buddha was widely known as the Buddha of Infinite Life (*Wuliangshou* 無量壽). In China, the term "Infinite Life" was often understood in association with the Daoist pursuit of longevity and immortality (*bulao busi* 不老不死). Moreover, Daoism and Pure Land Buddhism came to share a common vision of a watery paradise—whether conceived as the Islands of the Immortals amid the cosmic sea or as Amitābha's lotus-filled Pure Land. These parallel spatial imaginations proved highly compatible and mutually reinforcing when expressed in garden design. While this religious syncretism left clear traces in Silla gardens, Buddhist symbolism became increasingly dominant in the Fujiwara gardens of the Heian period.

Against this background, this paper adopts a comparative historical framework to examine how Silla Korea and Heian Japan developed distinctive pond-garden traditions. Although textual records concerning Wŏlji are relatively limited, scholarship on the subject has advanced to a new dimension since the archeological excavations conducted at Wŏlji between 1975 and 1976. In contrast, Heian-period gardens are well documented in historical and literary sources, yet few survive today. Archeological investigations have uncovered shorelines and material remains (Pearson 2023, pp. 228–31), but these discoveries have had a less transformative impact on scholarship than the excavations of the Silla pond. Accordingly, this study employs an interdisciplinary approach that integrates textual, archeological, art-historical, and religious evidence in order to reconstruct and compare the religious landscapes reflected in the Silla and Heian gardens.

2. Wŏlji in Kyŏngju: Syncretism of Daoism and Buddhism

Daoism was not formulated as a state religion in ancient Korea, yet it still contributed to the ideological framework through which kings legitimized their sovereignty and pursued their worldly aspirations. The layout of immortal islands in a pond in a palace in itself reinforces the royal authority, and in this sense, Daoist gardens should be understood as political spaces, not just a scenic place. Such "secularized" Daoist royal gardens appeared first in Puyŏ, the third and last capital of Paekche (18? BCE–660 CE). They benefitted from geographical proximity to the Southern dynasties (420–589), enabling them to adopt Chinese aristocratic culture directly. In 634, King Mu (r. 600–641) constructed a rectangular pond, where an islet resembled the Immortal Mount of Pangjang 方丈 (Ch: Fangzhang) (B. Kim 1145, Chapter 27). About forty years later, a royal pond garden was created during the Silla (57? BCE–935 CE) dynasty. Though Silla was the most undeveloped among the three kingdoms at the beginning, it rose to hold a great presence during the sixth century, and King Munmu (r. 661–681) unified the Korean peninsula in 668. Six years later, he supposedly constructed the pond in celebration of his monumental achievement (Liu and Zhang 945, 16, p. 477).

> In the second month [of 674], they dug out a pond and made artificial mountains in the palace complex. They planted flowers and grass, and raised outlandish birds and eccentric animals. 二月, 宮內穿池造山, 種花草養珍禽奇獸.

The historian Kim Pusik (1075–1151) does not provide a proper name for the pond garden. Conventionally, the pond was called Anapchi 雁鴨池, referring to wild geese (*an* 雁) and ducks (*ap* 鴨) flying over the pond. In 2015, it was officially renamed as Wŏlji 月池 (Moon Pond, Historic Site No. 18), given the fact that the pond is situated within Wŏljigung 月池宮 (Palace of the Moon Pond) and close to Wŏlsŏng 月城 (Moon Palace). King Munmu renovated the pond at least twice in 679 while expanding the palace compound and completing the Prince Palace (Liu and Zhang 945, 17a, p. 529).

The two pond gardens in Paekche and Silla had matching construction processes and landscape designs, as cited above. While the Paekche pond is clearly defined as the Daoist paradise, the Silla pond remains unspecified as to its landscape theme. This difference is somewhat surprising, because Kim Pusik usually recorded Silla sites in much more detail. The layout of the pond would have already been dilapidated so that Kim could not discern the shape of the islands. Consequently, his silence incurred scholarly discussion of the underlying theme of the Silla pond. Previously, the ideological background of Wŏlji has largely been interpreted in terms of Daoist immortality beliefs and dragon cults (Pak 2001, pp. 39–40, 122–24). Recently, its connection to Buddhism has also been repeatedly raised. I will examine their views in chronological order, and then propose that the pond reflected multiple systems of thought, including Daoist immortality traditions, dragon symbolism, and Buddhist beliefs. The ambivalent character of the pond is already observed in an augmented gazetteer (Yi et al. [1530] 1969, Chapter 21):

> Anapchi is located in the north of Ch'ŏnjusa. King Munmu dug out a pond in the palace grounds. Rocks were piled to create artificial mountains, which resemble the Twelve Peaks of the Shaman mountains. They planted flowers and raised rare and exotic birds. To the west of the pond lies the site of Imhaejŏn, where foundation stones and stair remains can still be seen scattered among the field ridges.
>
> 在天柱寺北. 文武王, 於宮內爲池, 積石爲山, 象巫山十二峯. 種花卉養珍禽. 其西有臨海殿基, 礎砌猶在田畝間.

The gazetteer first identifies the location of the pond as north of the royal Buddhist temple Ch'ŏnjusa 天柱寺 (Heavenly Column Temple), which was also referred to as Naejesŏkgung 內帝釋宮 or Naejesŏksa 內帝釋寺 (Royal Temple for Indra). The full term of *jesŏk* is *Sŏkajep'aindara* 釋迦提婆因陀羅, a transcription of Śakra Devānām Indra, the god of thunder in Vedic mythology. The temple was founded during the reign of King Chinp'yŏng (r. 579–632), several decades prior to the construction of the royal pond. Within 100 m south of Wŏlji lies the palace of Panwŏlsŏng, and the site of the royal temple has been identified somewhere in the intervening area. Moon (2024, pp. 362–65) further suggests that the southern building sites of Wŏlji mark the northern boundary of the temple precinct. Subsequently, we can tell that the pond was purposefully situated near the temple from the beginning.

Daoist elements are observed in two names in the passage: Imhaejŏn (Ocean-reaching Hall) and the Twelve Peaks of Shaman Mountains 巫山十二峰. The hall was designed for viewing the pond in the east, which symbolized the East Sea, where immortal islands were believed to exist. The Twelve Peaks of the Shaman Mountains consist of two groups of six peaks lying along the upper stream of the Yangtze River in present-day Chongqing. The Twelve Peaks are named based on a mix of Daoism and Shamanism; they include the Dragon Climbing Peak (Denglongfeng 登龍峰, 1130 m), Goddess Peak (Shennü feng 神女峰, 860 m), Pine Cliff Peak (Songluan feng 松巒峰, 820 m), Immortals Gathering Peak

(Jixian feng 集仙峰, 840 m), Flying Phoenix Peak (Feifeng feng 飛鳳峰, 740 m), Cranes Gathering Peak (Quhe feng 聚鶴峰, 820 m), and Pure Altar Peak (Jingtan feng 淨壇峰, 1020 m). They might be dismissed as local landscapes or folklore of the region, but they were gradually represented as "piled rocks" in Chinese gardens, which visualize the otherworldly Daoist landscape. An early example is "*Record of Plants and Trees of the Mountain Villa at Pingquan* (平泉山居草木記)," in which the author Li Deyu 李德裕 (787–850) introduced eight famous rockery sites, including Wuling 巫岭, i.e., Wu Mountains. The Chosŏn gazetteer was aware of this culture of miniature rocks and described the Silla pond as such. The passage shows that Buddhist and Daoist elements existed in the pond from the beginning, based on location, naming, and rockery.

The syncretic character of the Silla pond is more clearly reflected in a poem by Kang Wi 姜瑋 (1820–1884), a late Chosŏn antiquarian and reform-minded scholar. During his travels in Kyŏngju, he composed "*Miscellaneous Poems on the Road to the Eastern Capital*" 東京道中雜詩. Among the twenty-two poems, the ninth one, titled "Anapchi" 雁鴨池 (Kang [1885] 2003, p. 384c), reads as follows:

> 十二峯低玉殿荒 The Twelve Peaks lie low, and the jade hall stands desolate;
>
> 碧池依舊雁聲長 the emerald pond remains as before, filled with the lingering cries of wild geese.
>
> 莫尋天柱燒香處 Seek not the incense-burning site of Ch'ŏnjusa Temple;
>
> 野草痕深內佛堂 deep beneath the traces of wild grasses lies an inner Buddha hall.

The poet expresses a melancholic vision of the once-flourishing Silla capital now fallen into ruin. He also inadvertently preserves valuable evidence of the Daoist-cum-Buddhist atmosphere that once characterized the pond. The first couplet evokes a Daoist landscape: the jade hall seems to allude to Imhaejŏn Hall, and "jade" in the name reinforces a Daoist atmosphere alongside the twelve peaks. Ruined peaks and the abandoned hall are contrasted with the enduring emerald pond and cries of geese. The second couplet shifts toward a Buddhist setting, referring to Ch'ŏnjusa Temple and an Inner Buddha Hall. From this context, we may infer that the royal Buddha Hall was part of the temple within the pond complex.

Modern scholarship of Wŏlji was first written by Japanese colonial scholars. Hara (1932, pp. 12–22) was the first scholar to conduct investigations in situ, twice in 1922 and 1925, and completed his measured survey drawings. A professor in landscape architecture at Tōkyō Imperial University identified the three islands in the pond and interpreted the Twelve Peaks of Shaman Mountain as garden rocks. His works also included detailed reports of individual ornamental stones. It is significant that ornamental stones were densely concentrated on the southeastern side of the pond. Later, in 1932, Japanese archeologist Arimitsu Gōjo 有光廣禮 (1907–1979), generally known as Arimitsu Kyōichi 有光教一, suggested a visual affinity of Wŏlji and the Taiye pond in Daming Palace in his report (1934? (Araki and Lee 2023, p. 153)). His interpretation might reflect a typical tendency of Japanese colonial scholarship, which stressed a Chinese influence on Korea as a tool to validate Japanese imperial rule. A leading scholar of this academism, Kurota Katsumi 黒板勝美 (1874–1946), advised him to research in Kyŏngju (Lee 2015, pp. 27–28 in Korean; pp. 45–46 in Japanese). Although it remains uncertain how much he was influenced by colonial scholarship, at least his remarks on similarities between Wŏlji and the Tang pond are inaccurate, which will be explicated in the next section.[3]

Research on the Silla pond progressed in a new dimension as an excavation project was conducted for two years from 1975 as part of the Kyŏngju Comprehensive Development Plan. They measured the size of the pond, 200 m (east/west) and 180 m (north/south), and unearthed 26 building sites. More importantly, the layout of the three islands differs

completely from that of the one island of the Tang pond. It also deviated from the Han pond, though both ponds took the form of three islands. On the one hand, the Han pond had a central island flanked by two islands. On the other hand, the Silla pond had a small island (62 m^2) in the middle, with two other major islands that counterbalance each other on opposite sides. The largest island (1094 m^2) is located to the southeast, and the second largest (596 m^2) to the northwest. This plan is designed to enhance water circulation. The two major isles are anchored in front of the intake or drainage facility. The water flows are naturally divided into two small yet rapid streams, and they help eliminate the sediment around the inlet and outlet areas. In addition, the rectilinear lines of the building sites on the western and southern sides and undulating lines on the opposite sides bring about visual diversity. Such a unique shoreline is dissimilar to the overall round shape of the Tang pond (see Figure 2).

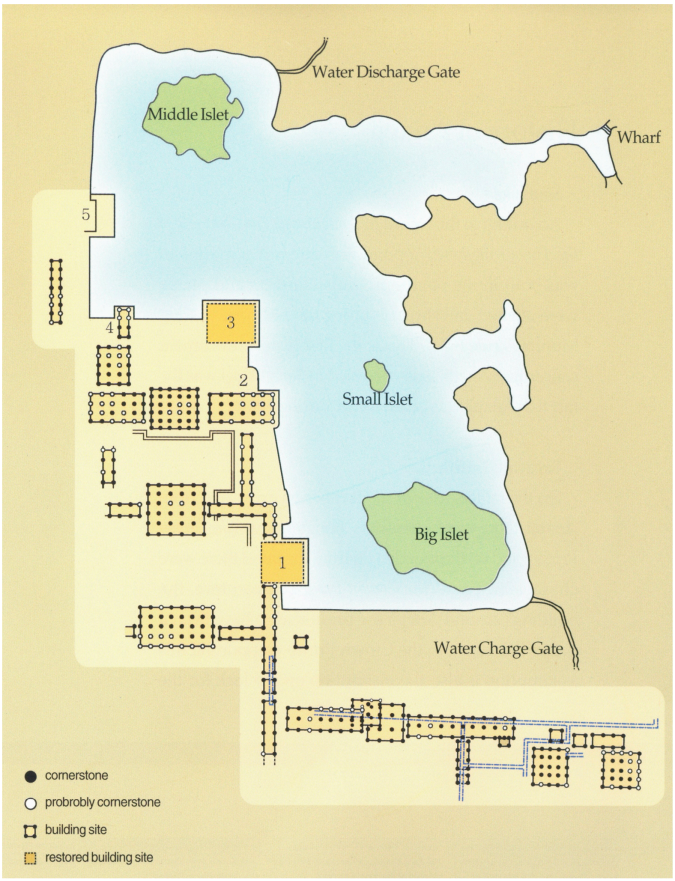


Figure 2. Wŏlji ground plan. After (Gyeongju National Museum 2002, p. 21).

The amalgamation of Daoist and Buddhist symbolism may be observed in the inlet and water collection system located in the southeastern section of the pond. Water was naturally purified through a complex process: it was first retained in stone reservoir basins, then guided through a winding channel, and finally released over a double-tiered waterfall. The cascading water stream evokes the unrestrained transformation and movement of water, a recurrent metaphor within Daoist thought. The stone basins resemble a dragon (Pak 2001, pp. 188–93). Additionally, one pair of gilt-bronze dragon heads (15.7 cm wide) was discovered in the area. Such dragon images in the pond are associated with King Munmu, who promoted Buddhism, which will be discussed later. These hydraulic features were shaped through Daoist and Buddhist symbolic vocabulary (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Wŏlji inlet. Source: Korean Heritage Service.

Archeological Discovery and Buddhist Artifacts

The excavation project's findings not only clarified the pond's physical structure but also yielded more than 33,000 artifacts. These include architectural materials, ceramic wares, *mokkan* (wooden tablets bearing inscriptions), and a wide range of household objects associated with royal life. Among them, three categories are particularly relevant to the present study: animal bones, vessels related to the Dragon King cult, and numerous Buddhist artifacts. Their locations in the pond are summarized in Table 1 and marked on the map as follows (see Figure 4 and Table 1).

Table 1. Chart of Excavated Objects Mentioned in this Article.

	Timeline	Item (Location)	Thoughts
1	Unknown	Bones and teeth of animals and fowl (Silt layer of the pond)	State Daoism
2	Late 7th century	One pair of Buddha ears (Building Site No. 2)	Buddhism
3	Late 7th to early 8th centuries	Two Buddha triad plaques, seven bodhisattva plaques (The large island area)	Pure Land Buddhism?
4	8th to early 10th centuries	One seated Buddha statue and four standing Buddha statues (Building Site No. 4)	Buddhism
5	8th to 16th centuries	Ceramics inscribed with the Dragon King (Building Site No. 1)	Buddhism-tinged local cult

First of all, I emphasize the significance of the substantial quantity of animal remains. A total of 228 mammalian bone fragments, 14 avian bone fragments, and 29 teeth were discovered in the southwest silt layer of the pond (Ko 1989, p. 127), although these animals were likely kept on the opposite side of the pond during its use. These finds provide im-

portant archeological evidence corroborating the passage in the *Samguk sagi* which speaks of "rare birds and exotic animals" (*chingŭm kisu* 珍禽奇獸). In particular, remains of dogs, horses, rams, and deer demonstrate that hunting activities took place around the pond. The textual record and its corresponding ample evidence show that the pond area functioned not only as a pleasure garden but also as a game preserve or hunting park, and this is a feature distinctive from cases in Tang China and Heian Japan.



Figure 4. Excavated objects mentioned in this article.

In ancient China, imperial parks were conceived as a microcosm of the boundless realm ruled by the Son of Heaven (Schafer 1968, p. 334). They maintained "exotic animals" both for hunting and for display as symbols of imperial authority. In Tang China, however, imperial hunting was conducted in the Forbidden Park, not in the Grand Fluid Pond, through it was connected to the western gate of the pond. Likewise, there is no evidence for hunting or the keeping of game animals in the Buddhist-oriented gardens of Heian Japan. Such features would have been incompatible with the Pure Land, where peace and harmony prevail. Indeed, the Sukhāvatī in the *Shorter Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra* (Fo shuo Amituo jing 佛說阿彌陀經, Kumārajīva 402) describes birds together with lotus flowers and the seven precious substances but makes no reference to terrestrial animals kept for hunting.

Second, many ceramics inscribed with the phrase *sinsim Yongwang* 辛審龍王 were discovered in the southwestern part of the pond. They are presumably a ritual utensil used for offerings to the Dragon King. Such a ceremony would be staged as a sacrificial rite (*kyosa* 郊祀) in the Dragon King Hall in *Samguk sagi* (B. Kim 1145, Chapter 39). The Dragon King is not attested in historical records, but it may refer to King Munmu; he not only built the pond but also left a famous testament (Ilyŏn 1281, Book 1, Chapter 2. Year 671): "After my death, I wish to become a great dragon protecting the state, upholding the Buddha's teachings and safeguarding our country." 朕身後願爲護國大龍, 崇奉佛法守護邦家. The exact meaning of "*sinsim* 辛審" remains unclear, but it appears to convey a sense of purification and petitioning to the Dragon King. The ritual continued for a long time, at least until the sixteenth century, based on excavated artifacts (see Figure 5).

In contrast to the Silla pond, religious rituals were not conducted in the Grand Fluid Pond area. The pond was situated in the northern part of Daming Palace, and the imperial procession of the Southern Suburban Sacrifice (Nanjiao 南郊) commenced at the Gate of

Government Announcement (Xuanzhengmen 宣政門) in the southern part of the palace. Likewise, dragon worship rituals for invoking rain were held at a different body of water, namely the Dragon Head Pond (Longshouchi 龍首池). To the south of the pond were the Altar for Five Dragons (Wulongtan 五龍壇) and the Dragon Hall (Longtang 龍堂). Thus, despite its Daoist name, the Grand Fluid Pond was not included in state-sponsored religious activities.



Figure 5. A vessel inscribed with "*sinsim Yongwang* 辛審龍王". Dimensions: 19.9 cm (diameter). Unified Silla (8th–9th century). Source: Gyeongju National Museum.

Lastly and most importantly, many excavated Buddhist statues play a key role in understanding the nature of the Silla pond. The gilt-bronze artworks of various types and production periods include Buddha statues, Buddha plaques, Nirmāna-Buddha (temporary manifestation of the Buddha), and mandorlas. The biggest statue is believed to approach life size, as suggested by a pair of gilt-bronze ears measuring 16 cm in height, discovered at Building Site No. 2 on the western side of the pond complex (see Figure 6). The Buddha in question evoked the existence of the royal Buddhist temple, mentioned by the poet Kang Wi.

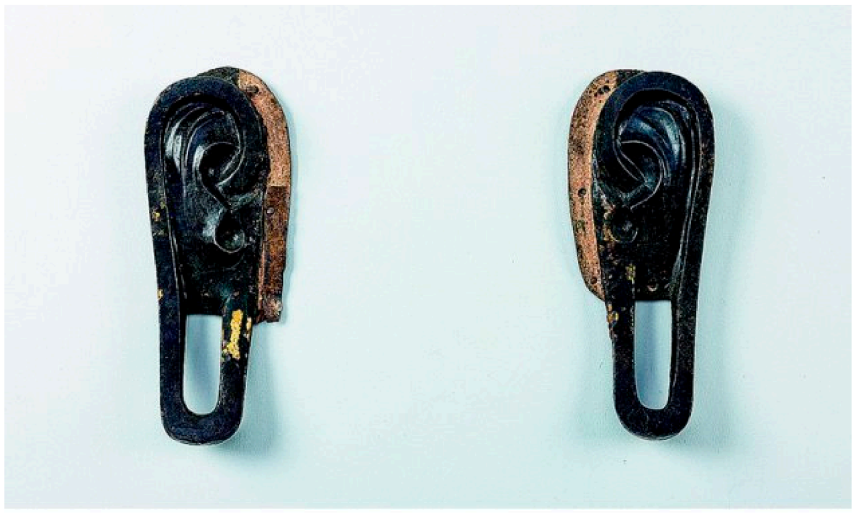


Figure 6. Gilt-bronze ears, H. 16.0 cm. Gyeongju National Museum.

Based on the size and style of the ears, the Buddha statue dates to the late seventh century (Yang 2023, p. 173). Though the identity of the Buddha remains unknown, it is still noteworthy that the estimated date of the statue corresponds to those of ten gilt-bronze Buddha plaques (Kŭmdong p'anbul 金銅板佛). Among them, the two most elaborate ones are Buddha triads, which are commonly proposed as Amitābha triads (see Figure 7). Before discussing their identity, we first need to examine the origin and development of Pure Land Buddhism in Korea.



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 7. (**a**,**b**) Two gilt-bronze seated Buddha triad plaques 金銅板三尊佛坐像, ca. 680, National Museum of Gyeongju, 20.3 × 27 cm.[4]

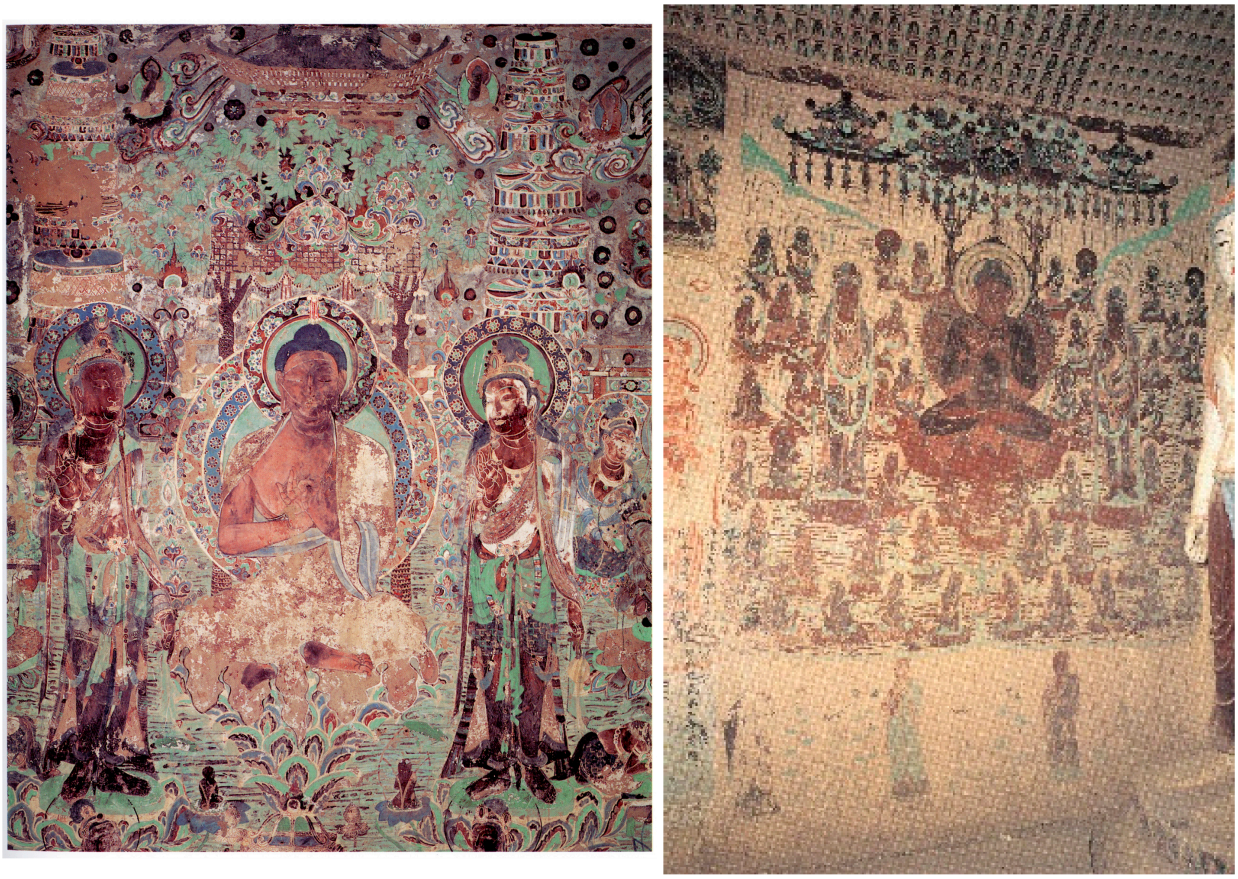
Pure Land Buddhism was introduced by monks of the seventh century. Kyŏnghŭng, in particular, advanced Pure Land practice by systematizing stages of training toward rebirth in Amitābha's land (McBride 2020, pp. 33–56). Soon, the Grotto of the Amitābha Buddha Triad (Amit'a Yŏrae samjon sŏkkul 阿彌陀如來三尊石窟) was constructed in Kunwi on the rocky cliffs of P'algongsan Mountain in North Kyŏngsang Province (see Figure 8). It was dedicated to prayers for Kim Inmun (629–694), the younger brother of King Munmu.



Figure 8. The Grotto of the Amitābha Buddha Triad in Kunwi[5].

In the stone Buddhist triad, the principal Buddha sits cross-legged upon a cuboid-shaped pedestal, with a disproportionately large head marked by an *uṣṇīṣa* (a protuberance symbolizing supreme wisdom). Kim Inmun's memorial triad is dated to around 700, which is significant as it is the earliest known stone Amitābha Triad in Korea. It also demonstrates the integration of Pure Land devotion into the aristocratic and royal spheres of Silla Buddhism. In this context, the two Buddha triad plaques discovered in Wŏlji are understood.

Similar to Kunwi Grotto, the two triads of Wŏlji were produced between the late seventh and early eighth centuries under royal patronage. The central Buddha is seated on an adorned lotus pedestal and framed by a mandorla composed of floral rosettes and honeysuckle rinceau designs. His hand gesture depicts turning the Dharma wheel, called *Dharmacakra mudrā* (Chŏnbŏmnyunin 轉法輪印). He is flanked on either side by two attendant bodhisattvas, i.e., Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta. Across China, Korea, and Japan, particularly during the seventh and eighth centuries, such triadic images were generally associated with Amitābha. The iconographic type first emerged in Dunhuang, then appeared in Silla at Wŏlji, and subsequently was transmitted to Japan, as seen at Hōryūji Temple (see Figures 9 and 10). This trajectory illustrates the international diffusion of Amitābha imagery and Wŏlji's contribution to this broader trans-East Asian tradition (Choi 2004).



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 9. (**a**) Amitābha Buddha triad in the Amitābha Pure Land transformation tableau 阿彌陀淨土變相 on southern wall in Dunhuang Mogao Cave No. 220. Details: 642 (Tonko Bunbutsu Kenkyusho 1981, p. 26). (**b**) Amitābha Buddha triad with fifty bodhisattvas 阿彌陀佛三尊五十菩薩圖 (Amitābha Preaching Assembly 阿彌陀佛說法圖) in the southern section of the east wall in Dunhuang Mogao Cave No. 332. Details: 698 (Tonko Bunbutsu Kenkyusho 1981, p. 94)[6]



Figure 10. Upper half of Amitādha Paradise, a wall painting in the Golden Hall of Hōryūji, color on fresco secco, late 7th century, 266 cm wide.[7]

To date, the two Buddha triads from Wŏlji have generally been identified as Amitābha Buddha triads (Yang 2023, pp. 176–77; H. Y. Kim 2023, pp. 49–53). An exception is Moon (2024, p. 372), who identifies them as Śākyamuni Buddha triads rendered in the Gupta style, arguing that they reflect a new iconographic format introduced by Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664) and Wang Xuance 王玄策 (fl. seventh century). Although his proposal remains a subject of scholarly debate, his criticism of the Amitābha identification is unconvincing. He argues that the two attendant figures cannot be identified as Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta because they lack conventional attributes such as the kundikā (water flask) and scripture. However, comparable examples of Amitābha triads without these iconographic markers are also found in Tang-dynasty sculpture and mural paintings (H. Y. Kim 2023, pp. 52–53). Indeed, Moon (2024, p. 358) himself acknowledged that he had been unable to consult Kim and Yang's articles before completing his own study.

As for this issue, I concur with the prevailing scholarly view, drawing upon the location and method of enshrining the plaque Buddha triads. Nine of the ten Buddha plaques were buried in the southeastern section of the pond, near the water inlet. The concentration of the Buddha images within a specific area strongly suggests intentional ritual placement, with an arrangement that is not accidental. The Office for Buddhist Residence (Sŭngbangjŏn 僧房典) may have been responsible for overseeing such rituals, although the *Samguk sagi* (B. Kim 1145, Chapter 39) merely records its name without further explanation. They were likely placed within a small Buddhist cabinet (*bulgam* 佛龕). Nail holes along the edges and projecting pegs at the bottom of the plaques were found. Additionally, a lacquered wooden plaque was discovered near the Buddha plaques. It bears an inscription of five characters, which Yang (2023, pp. 179–81) reads as "*Wangsa gam cheil* 王寺龕第一" (Royal Temple Cabinet No. 1). She further suggests that the cabinet may originally have been installed within a wooden structure in the large island or on the eastern embankment

of Wŏlji. Yet, she also admits an issue with her interpretation. According to the excavation reports, there were no traces of such architectural remains in the vicinity of the waterway and the eastern embankment. I suggest another possibility: they were placed in boats and floated on the waterway. Subsequently, they feature the Amit'a Buddha in front of water and the island mountain, i.e., Pure Land, in the west, when observed from the eastern embankment. It can be compared with the ceremony of the Amida Buddha on a boat, as we will examine in the next section.

The last category of gilt-bronze standing Buddhas appears to have been produced between the eighth and early tenth centuries. They vary considerably in both size and form; they range from 8 to 35 cm in height. They were likely enshrined by individual devotees as personal votive objects within portable shrines. Most of these statues were recovered from Building Site No. 4 (Park 2023). This distribution suggests that the primary locus of Buddhist worship shifted from the southeastern to the northwestern area over time. It also indicates that Amitābha Buddha was no longer accorded the same prominence as in earlier periods.

3. Hōjōji and Byōdōin in Heian: Western Paradise of Amida

The introduction of Chinese culture to Japan is usually dated to the fifth century, but there are no definitive records concerning the earliest transmission of Daoism into Japan. Daoist terms, texts, tropes, and techniques were imported from the mainland, often alongside Buddhist scriptures, through Korea, from roughly the early fifth century through to the late eighth century (Kohn 2000, p. 821; Richey 2015, p. 2). Penglai (J: Hōrai) mythology was welcomed among royal and aristocratic families and was soon adopted in their garden culture. Prince Shōtoku 聖徳 (572–621) was known as the earliest person who incorporated it in a temple garden (Kenshin [1238] 1912).

> Jōrinji Temple [also known as Tachibe Temple]: Prince Shōtoku is said to have built Mount Penglai himself. The turtle rock is about four or five *shaku* (about 1.2–1.5 m in height). 定林寺〔名立部寺〕. 太子自造蓬萊, 亀大四五尺許云云.

Apparently, the turtle rock was named based on the shape of the animal and furthermore intended to represent Mount Penglai, drawing on the mythology that a turtle carries Mount Penglai on its back. The Daoist motif was also employed in the aristocratic residence. In 622, Prince Shōtoku's political patron, Soga no Umako 蘇我馬子 (551?–626), commissioned an island garden known as *Shima no Shō* (島ノ庄), adopting a Chinese-style garden design introduced through Korean immigrants. This project not only marked the beginning of the Japanese pond-garden tradition but also established the island-in-pond layout as a lasting feature of Japanese garden design. During the Nara and Heian periods, it became customary for both imperial and aristocratic gardens to incorporate a central island within expansive ponds, while some gardens featured multiple islands (Cao and Xu 2004, p. 32). More importantly, this Daoist-inspired pond-garden tradition provided the spatial and symbolic foundation for the later visualization of Amitābha's Pure Land in temple gardens.

Compared with Daoism, Pure Land Buddhism was introduced to Japan about two centuries later. Pure Land scriptures were transmitted from China during the first half of the seventh century (Ono 2015, pp. 46–47). Devotion to Amida can be traced back to the Nara period, when it primarily served its purpose mainly at funerals. During the early Heian period, however, Pure Land belief became more deeply embedded in religious life as a means of personal salvation. After returning from Tang China in 847, Ennin 圓仁 (794–864) established a hall dedicated to the worship of Amida. Pure Land thought gained further prominence within the Tendai tradition during the tenth century, when Genshin 源信 (942–1017) provided its theological foundation in conjunction with the doctrine of the Final Dharma

(*mappō* 末法), predicting that the world would collapse in 1052. In this doomed age of decline, Amida was worshiped through the practice of "the ceaseless chanting of Amida's name" (*fudan nembutsu* 不斷念佛) (Brown 1974, pp. 215–25).[8]

Initially, Amida Buddha was worshiped in small temples, and the paradise of Pure Land gradually expanded in major temples built under a palace style, called *shinden zukuri* 寢殿造. Before discussing such temple gardens, it is necessary to first examine the architectural formulas of this palace style. In the palace complex, *shinden* (raised main hall) faces the garden to the south, flanked by opposing annexes known as *tainoya*. The south garden provides space for imperial ceremonies. It typically includes one or more islands connected to the northern and southern shores by vermillion arched bridges. Together, the main hall and the garden generally occupied about half of a standard estate (Inaji and Virgilio 1998, p. 13). By the late Heian (898–1185) period, they had become a defining feature of the *shinden-zukuri* style of aristocratic residences. This style ideally has a symmetrical layout, but in reality, it is often asymmetrical in form. An early example is Higashi Sanjō Palace 東三条殿.

Located in the Left Capital of Heian, Higashi Sanjō served for generations as a principal residence of the powerful Fujiwara aristocracy. Emperors Ichijō (r. 986–1011) and Sanjō (r. 1011–1016), both grandsons of the regent Fujiwara no Kaneie 藤原兼家 (929–990), were born there to his daughters and raised under his care. The residence also served as a dwelling for Emperor Kameyama (r. 1260–1274) after it was destroyed in 1159 during the so-called Heiji Rebellion. According to the reconstruction by Ota Seiroku (Inaji and Virgilio 1998, p. 11), the palace departed from the symmetrical layout characteristic of Tang palace architecture (see Figure 11).

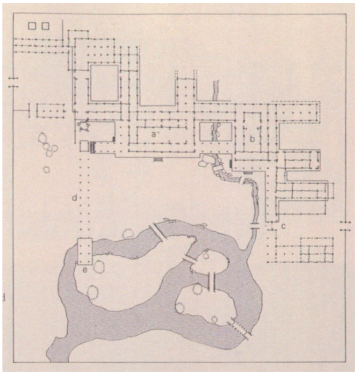


Figure 11. Ground plan of the eastern Sanjō Palace.

The pond assumed a markedly curvilinear and intricate form, with a small central island flanked by two larger islands. The palace buildings were interconnected, creating a sequence of courtyard gardens (*tsuboniwa*, literally "box gardens"). Unlike the standard Tang palace layout, the eastern annex was omitted, resulting in an inverted L-shaped building complex. These features present notable typological parallels with the Silla pond. The Heian palace, however, also differed significantly from Wŏlji. Its three islands were connected by vermilion bridges, and a sand-covered forecourt (*nantei* 南庭) adjoined the pond. These features indicate that the Heian pond accommodated a wider range of court rituals and ceremonial activities, whereas the Silla pond was intended as a more contemplative landscape experience.

Before long, Pure Land temple gardens[9] were constructed in *sinden-zukuri* style. In 1019, the imperial regent Fujiwara no Michinaga 藤原道長 (966–1028) took Buddhist vows and undertook the construction of Hōjōji 法成寺 on a massive scale on the western bank of the Kamo River in Kyoto. It was completed the following year and later became a residence

mansion for Michinaga. The temple was destroyed by fire in 1058 and rebuilt afterward, but it eventually degraded in the early fourteenth century. Yet, we are still able to reconstruct its general appearance and the rituals performed in detail through archeological works and literary evidence from *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* (*Eiga Monogatari* 榮花物語).

Among all the buildings, the Amida Hall was constructed first in the compound; the eleven-bay structure was built in 1022 alongside two other buildings of the Hall for the Ten Purifications (Jissaidō 十齋堂) and the Lotus Meditation Hall (Hokke-sanmaidō 法華三昧堂). This indicates that the Amida Buddha held precedence in the precinct. It remained a core part of the compound even after the main hall was constructed in 1024. The location of the Amida Hall merits special attention. While the temple had a south-facing orientation, as was the case for Higashi Sanjō Palace, the Amida Hall was placed on the western side of the pond that occupies a large part of the courtyard, apparently an embodiment of Pure Land (see Figure 12).

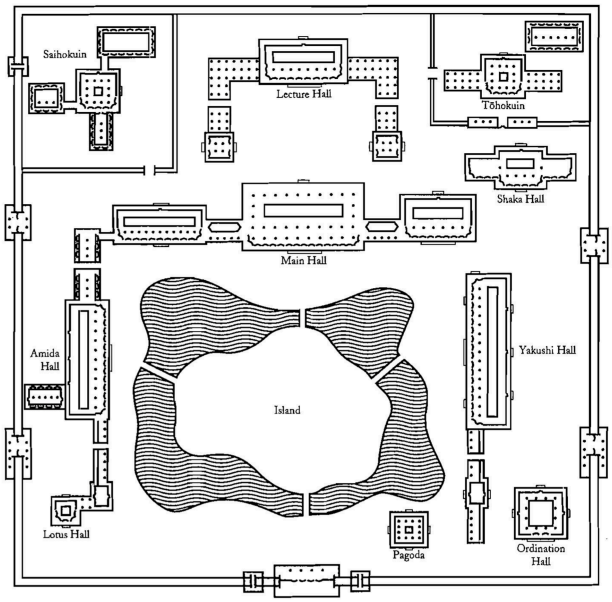


Figure 12. Amida Hall in the Hōjōji Temple. Source: (Yiengpruksawan 1995, p. 653).

The contemporary record of the *Eiga Monogatari* describes in detail how the temple was conceived as an embodiment of Amitābha's Pure Land. On the occasion of the dedication of the Golden Hall, held on the fourteenth day of the seventh month in 1022, artificial lotus blossoms carrying Buddha images surrounded by halos of light were floated upon the pond. The surrounding hills were adorned with various exquisite garden plants, while the trees were described as bearing leaves resembling green pearls, gold, amber, and white crystal, corresponding respectively to the seasons of summer, fall, and winter. This carefully constructed garden landscape was intended to materialize the world of the Pure Land as described in the *Lotus Sutra* (McCullough 1980, p. 553). Similar descriptions also appear in accounts of the Lantern Festival held on the tenth day of the third month in 1023 (McCullough 1980, pp. 587–89). The most dramatic scene occurred on the fourth day of the twelfth month of 1027. Upon his death, Michinaga crossed the eastern bridge to the central island, then proceeded across the western bridge and entered the Amida Hall. There, he drew braids connecting his hands to those of the nine Amitābha Buddhas. Lying with his head to the north and facing west, in the manner of Śākyamuni's nirvana, he softly chanted the name of Amitābha Buddha amid the monks' recitation of sutras. He was said to have passed away while aspiring to rebirth in the Western Paradise (McCullough 1980, p. 763). Michinaga's entire process

clearly shows that the island in the pond served as a transitional place from this world to Pure Land.

The construction of Hōjōji marked the beginning of an extensive building period that lasted over a century. Dozens of temples were erected during this time and Amida iconography was prominently displayed in many of them. While they mostly vanished, Byōdōin 平等院 has survived to today. Situated on the bank of the Uji River in Kyoto prefecture, it became the property of Michinaga in 999, and then it was inherited by his son Fujiwara no Yorimichi (992–1074), who converted it into his private chapel in 1052. One year later, the Amida Hall was constructed, and it has remained intact until now. The seated Amida statue is a surviving masterpiece of Jōchō 定朝 (d. 1057), who also constructed the Buddha in the main hall of Hōjōji. The statue is surrounded by a radiant aureole that towers over the worshiper.

The Amida Hall is more widely known as the Phoenix Hall (Hōōdō 鳳凰堂) in light of the two phoenixes crowning its rooftop. The hall is flanked by two opposing lateral corridors and supported by a rear corridor (see Figure 13).[10] Such a layout is more symmetrical than the L-shaped case of Hōjōji Temple. A more fundamental innovation is that the hall was built in an east–west orientation. The two flanking corridors also point eastward toward the pond. The Amida Buddha statue is situated on the west side of the hall, which is located on the central island (*nakashima*) in the middle of the pond. Worshippers thereby face west across the pond, which evokes the watery paradise of Pure Land (Kōen [1169] 1965, 1053/10/25). Simultaneously, the hall is reflected in and appears to be floating on the water, giving a sense of otherworldliness. While gazing at the hall or its reflection on the pond, people could imagine themselves entering this transcendental realm (Y.-J. Kim 2021, p. 763). The practice of visualization (Ch: *guan*, J: *kan* 觀), described in the *Amitāyurdhyāna Sūtra* (Kanmuryōjukyō 觀無量壽經), helps devotees reach Amitābha's Western Paradise. Moreover, the opposite side of the pond, i.e., the eastern area, was fashioned with exotic intricacy and otherworldly contours. These features collectively resonate with the Pure Land described in the sutras, where extraordinary topographies and blooming lotuses serve as signs of spiritual rebirth.

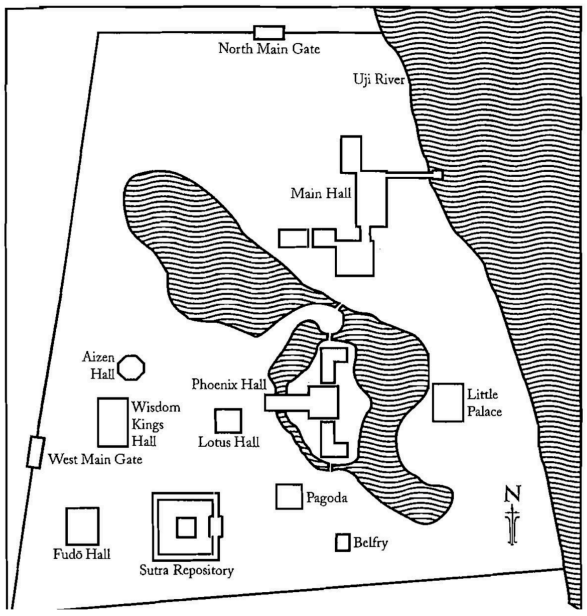


Figure 13. The Phoenix Hall, pond, and Little Imperial Palace (Kogosho). Source: (Yiengpruksawan 1995, p. 654).

Byōdōin provides the full embodiment of the Pure Land landscape, but it also adopts Daoist motifs. One example is the image of one pair of phoenixes carved on the roof ridge. The bird hints at the appearance of a sage in Confucianism, but it is more widely known as a good omen along with dragons and tortoises in Daoism. Such magical birds typically appeared as bronze acroteria crowning palace buildings, as is the case with the Phoenix watchtower of Jianzhang Palace, where the Grand Fluid Pond was situated (*Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature* [1982] 1996, p. 132). The bird continued to appear in the Daming Palace of Tang China. The two L-shaped corridors of Hanyuan Hall 含元殿 were named the Pavillion of the Soaring Simurgh (Xiangluange 翔鸞閣) and the Pavillion of the Resting Phoenix (Xifengge 棲鳳閣). The bird motif would have been familiar to the Japanese through diplomatic contacts with Tang China. Between 630 and 838, Japan dispatched fifteen envoys, including Awata no Mahito 粟田眞人 (d. 719), to visited Chang'an and the Daming Palace.

Another adaptation of Daoism is observed in the so-called "flying gallery" (*feige* 飛閣), the double-tiered wing corridors extending from both sides of the main hall. In Han China, *ge* structures served as symbolic and functional elevated pathways, reflecting cosmological and imperial authority (Y.-J. Kim 2025, p. 16). In the flying gallery of Byōdōin, the lower level consists entirely of columns, allowing the wind to pass freely without obstruction and creating the impression of soaring through the air with outstretched wings. The term flying gallery first occurred as the raised gallery that connected the Jianzhang Palace and the Weiyang Palace (*Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature* [1982] 1996, p. 128). It originally symbolized the dwelling place for immortals and was later absorbed into Chinese Buddhist architecture; it can be seen, for example, in the idealized monastic complexes of the Western Paradise, depicted in the murals of the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang (see Figure 8a). It was later adopted in the annexes of the Phoenix Hall in Japan (Cao and Xu 2004, pp. 45–46). As such, Byōdōin achieved the splendor of Pure Land, yet Daoist residues are still observed in the architecture.

Amida halls continued to appear within or beside ponds in later periods. Notable examples include Jōruriji 淨琉璃寺 (1047), Hosshōji 法勝寺 (1077), Chūsonji 中尊寺 (1105), and Mōtsuji 毛越寺 (ca. 1155) (Ledderose 1982, p. 109). Among these, Hosshōji is noteworthy because its enormous Jasper Pond (Yaochi 瑤池) derived its name from the mythology of the Queen Mother of the West. This mythological tradition is distinct from the eastern Penglai cult and therefore falls outside the scope of the present study. Accordingly, it will not be discussed further here.

4. Concluding Remarks

Pure Land Buddhism prospered in Tang China, but it was not adopted in the imperial palace architecture. Emperors identified themselves as Sons of Heaven, and they practiced ancestral sacrifice, believing that their spirits returned to respond to their worship. This Confucian ritual included religious and supernatural elements, which were not incompatible with the Buddhist underpinning of salvation in another realm. More importantly, Daoism was established as the official religion from the beginning; this was partly a nationalistic reaction against the foreign religion of Buddhism (Miller 2003, pp. 10–11). Overall, the Buddhist realm was not materially expressed in Chinese gardens. They developed the tradition of native philosophy, such as the *Book of Change* (Lu 2010, p. 28).

In contrast, the pond gardens of the Heian court embodied the splendor of the Buddhist world. Fujiwara regents were de facto rulers, but they still differed from emperors in status. They could not establish comparable sacred prestige beyond the human realm, and thus they were deeply committed to the Amida cult and to the hope of rebirth in the Western Pure Land. Fujiwara Michinaga made the first earthly copy of Pure Land paradise

in Hōjōji, where he famously chanted Amida until the last day of his life. The construction of Pure Land paradise culminated in the Phoenix Hall of Byōdōin, where a viewer can contemplate the Amida Buddha statue over the pond in the west. Yet, it still retains Daoist residues, such as a "flying gallery" and an image of a phoenix.

Compared with the Daoist garden of Tang China and the two Buddhist gardens of Heian Japan, Wŏlji is more complex and heterogeneous, with multiple ideas. Garden Daoism exerted structural principles, such as the number of the three islands and piled rocks. Excavated bones of wild animals confirm that the garden area was used as a hunting park or zoo for the ruling family. Such a "secularized" landscape was intended not only to provide rulers for their pleasure seeking but more importantly served as an ideological tool for confirming their legitimacy and expressing the glory of the dynasty.

Yet the Silla pond demonstrates its agency and originality in its layout, orientation, and shoreline. From the seventh century onward, the number of islands in a pond garden was often reduced to a single island, as seen in Tang China and Paekche, but King Munmu reverted to the earlier layout of three islands. In my view, the Silla ruler deliberately chose the original model to assert cultural authenticity over Paekche and even the Tang. In addition, Wŏlji's eastward orientation and undulating shorelines differed markedly from those of the Han and Tang ponds. These reconfigurations not only evoke the East Sea but furthermore reflect the king's geographical awareness of his realm and, in modern terms, an emerging sense of national identity vis-à-vis neighboring countries.

Most importantly, King Munmu expressed his commitment to Buddhism by locating Wŏlji to the north of the royal temple. Its Buddhist character was further reinforced in the following centuries through the production and installation of numerous Buddha images. This development did not occur immediately after the pond's construction, as the earliest Buddhist artifacts recovered from the site date only to the late seventh century. Among these were two Buddha triads depicted on gilt-bronze plaques. They have been interpreted as representations of Amitābha Buddha, a view that I support in light of the location where they were discovered. While the majority of artifacts were recovered on the western side of the pond, these plaques were found buried in the waterway between the southern island and the eastern bank. Their placement corresponds closely to a fundamental spatial feature of Pure Land imagery—a blissful realm situated beyond a body of water when viewed from the east.

Nevertheless, Pure Land Buddhism did not constitute the dominant theme of Wŏlji. Among the many excavated Buddha images, only two are identified as Amitābha representations, and they were found in a limited section of the pond complex. Moreover, dragon-related rituals played a more primary and enduring role, given the quantity of the excavated artifacts and related buildings. The Silla pond therefore should not be understood as the material expression of a single doctrinal system. Rather, it embodied a synthesis of multiple religions, integrating elements of Daoism and Buddhism as well as both foreign and indigenous beliefs.

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Notes

[1] This article was first conceived while I was auditing Professor Yukio Lippit's course, "Introduction to Japanese Architecture" in Spring 2025, which provided the initial inspiration for this study. An earlier version of the paper was presented at "From Huiyuan at Mount Lu to Fazhao at Mount Wutai: An International Symposium on the Origins and Development of the Pure Land Tradition through the Lens of Sacred Site Transference," held at Tsinghua University, Beijing, on 18 June 2025. I am deeply grateful to the symposium participants and the three peer reviewers for their critical comments and constructive suggestions.

[2] Wang Yuanzhi 王遠知 (528–635) predicted the rise of the Tang, circulating an omen that Li Yuan 李淵, the later Gaozu, was as a descendant of Li Er, the earthly manifestation of Lord Lao (Kohn 2000, pp. 340–41).

[3] Colonial scholarship was further developed by the mythologist and historian Mishina Shōei 三品彰英 (1902–1971). Framing Korean history in terms of "heteronomy" (taritsusei 他律性), Mishina (1940) argued that Korea had historically depended on external powers for its political and cultural development, thereby providing an ideological rationale for Japanese colonial rule. In his view, Korea was continually shaped by successive waves of change originating on the Asian continent. Yet, because of its peninsular location, it remained peripheral to these historical currents rather than participating in them as a central actor. Consequently, Korean history was also characterized by "dependency" (fuzuisei 附随性). For further discussion, see (Hirafuji 2013, pp. 92–97).

[4] (B. Kim 1145, Year 679, Second Month): "重修宮闕, 頗極壯麗."; Year 679, Eighth Month: "創造東宮, 始定内外諸門額號".

[5] For the overall history of Amitabha triads in Korea, see (McBride 2020, pp. 78–101).

[6] https://www.heritage.go.kr/heri/cul/imgHeritage.do?ccimId=1612820&ccbaKdcd=11&ccbaAsno=0001090000000&ccbaCtcd=22 (accessed on 30 June 2026).

[7] https://www.heritage.go.kr/heri/cul/culSelectDetail.do?pageNo=1_1_2_0&ccbaCpno=1123714750000 (accessed on 30 June 2026).

[8] https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=146748518 (accessed on 30 June 2026).

[9] For the overall history of Pure Land temple gardens in Japan, see (Motonaka 1994, pp. 224–374).

[10] For the (Yi et al. [1530] 1969) and its Pure Land context, see (Yiengpruksawan 1995).

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