

## Hiraizumi: a unique Buddhist political center in the twelfth century

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### Introduction

In this paper, I will explain the ways in which Hiraizumi was constructed as a unique political center and a Buddhist utopia toward the eastern end of Asia in the 12th century. Recently, several archaeological remains of Buddhist temples and gardens were discovered in Hiraizumi, inscribed it on the World Heritage List in 2011. However, because it is a tiny historical town in Japan, historians and scholars of other related disciplines have not paid much attention to Hiraizumi's unique history at the international level.

Hiraizumi is located at the northeastern part of Japan, where the diffusion of Buddhism that originated from the Indian subcontinent is seen. The area was the east end of the *ritsuryo* regime and kanji character, both of which characterized Chinese centralized power, and the outer area of the Chinese grid city system which were based on Confucianism (fig. 1). Moreover, the area where Hiraizumi is located, from 39° n to 40° n, constitutes the border of southern and northern cultures in the Japanese archipelago from the prehistoric to the historic era (fig. 2).

Furthermore, from the 11th century, the centralized political power exercised by the *ritsuryo* regime in Kyoto gradually weakened. Concurrently, Pure Land Buddhism, which was thought to be the means to save the Buddhist faith, was very popular among

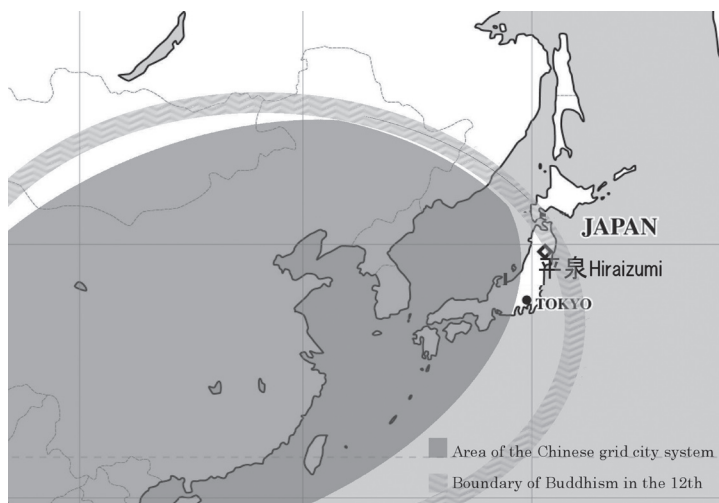


fig.1 Map of the location of Hiraizumi

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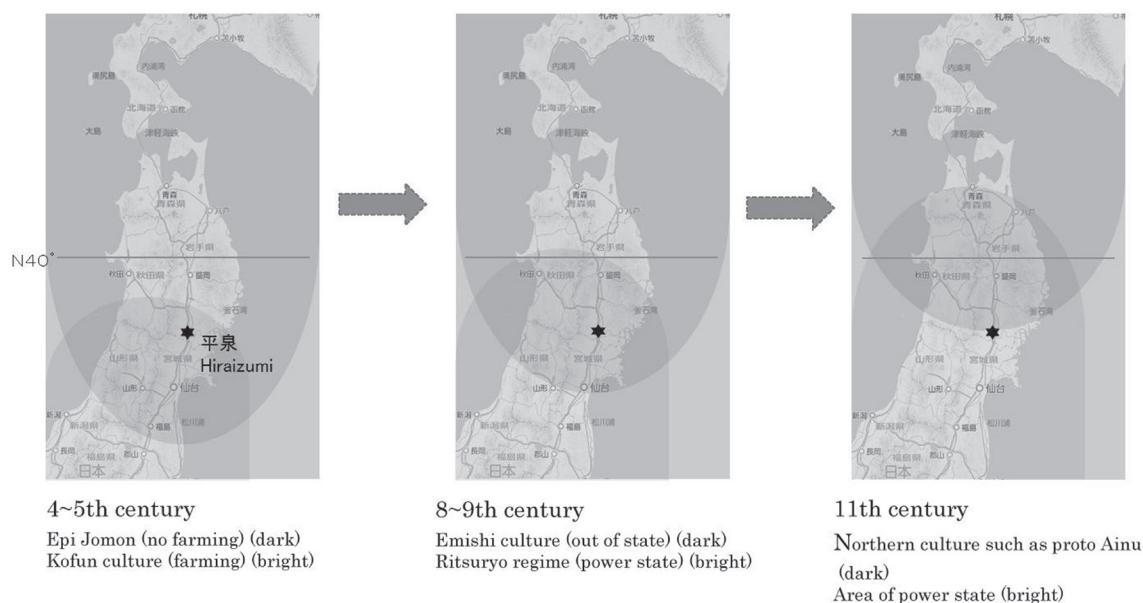


fig.2 Area of the north and south cultures around 40° N from prehistory to the historic era

nobles. This is the historical background of Hiraizumi established as a Buddhist utopia.

Therefore, Hiraizumi should be discussed not only from the domestic perspective but also from an international one, so as to clarify the significance of this unique political center, characterized by a deep religious ideology, located at the periphery of a centralized political power regime.

Although there are many subjects that can be considered in relation to Hiraizumi, I focus on the unique religious relations between “Hiraizumi no Tachi” (hereafter Tachi): the political and administrative base, and the temples, which were constructed over 100 years.

### Historical background of Hiraizumi

Hiraizumi is located at the northern part of Honshu Island of the Japanese archipelago. Here, the Oshu Fujiwara clan reigned over the Tohoku region (67,000km<sup>2</sup>) from the end of the 11th to the end of the 12th century.

In the 12th century, small local political powers, which were somewhat independent of the central government, emerged in many places in Japan. The largest local power was found in four generations of the Oshu Fujiwara clan, from Kiyohira to Yasuhira. They enlarged their territory and power by exploiting the revenue derived from special products in this region, such as gold dust and valuable horses, in addition to the privilege of the descendants in terms of their noble lineage and the role of the important local government status delegated by the central government.

Hiraizumi extends 2.5 km from north to south and 2 km from east to west; it is bounded by the Kitakamigawa River in the east, the Koromogawa River in the north,

the Ootagawa River in the south, and the low hill range in the west from north to south. It seems that Hiraizumi had a large population in the 12th century, and the concentration of people in this area delineated the characteristics of a “city.” After Minamoto no Yoritomo, inaugurated as the first Kamakura *shogunate*, destroyed the Oshu Fujiwara clan in 1189, Hiraizumi became a much reduced, small, yet scattered village except for two temples of Kanzan Chuson-ji and Motsu-ji. As of the early 21st century, the ruins of Hiraizumi from the 12th century, including the landscape of the surrounding area, have remained intact.

In Japan, most of the rulers, including the Oshu Fujiwara clan, followed Buddhism after the 7th century. With the diffusion of Pure Land Buddhism in relation to the Mappou thought, they funded the construction of temples in Kyoto and other areas in Japan, where they could contemplate the Pure Land in their mind. In Hiraizumi, since the first lord Kiyohira built his political base in the area, three temples were constructed successively: Kanzan Chuson-ji (by the first lord), Motsu-ji (by the second lord), and Muryoko-in (by the third lord). Because the original temple buildings were subsequently burned or demolished, most of them either remained in ruins or were reconstructed. However, we can illustrate the prosperity of Hiraizumi by Buddhist cultural assets, from the historical records such as *Azuma Kagami*, written as the chronicles of the Kamakura *shogunate*, and from other archaeological discoveries obtained over 50 years.

### The process of temple constructions in Hiraizumi

The first temple, Kanzan Chuson-ji, was constructed at the beginning of the 12th century. The first lord started to build a pagoda on the top of the Kanzan hill in the north of Hiraizumi as the symbol of the center of his territory. During the first quarter of the 12th century, successive temple halls were built, such as Kyozo: sutra repository,

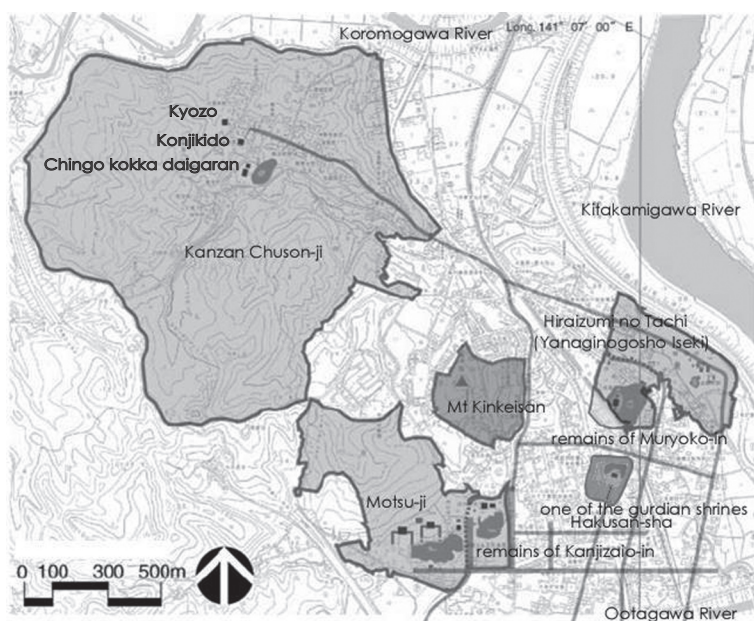


fig.3 Map of the central area of Hiraizumi

Konjikido: a golden hall that is the only surviving building from the 12th century, and Chingo kokka daigaran: a large-scale Buddha hall for protecting the nation, which enshrined Buddha Shaka and contained the first Pure Land garden in Hiraizumi (fig. 3).

Construction of Motsu-ji was begun by the second lord, Motohira, in the mid-12th century and was completed in the third quarter of the 12th century. It was located on flat land at the southwest corner of Hiraizumi, and the precinct of the temple extended to the northern mountainous area behind the main halls. The main halls enshrined Yakushi, and a Pure Land garden was constructed in front of them. Next, to the eastern boundary of Motsu-ji, with another Pure Land garden, Kanjizaio-in temple was built by Motohira's wife. The earthen wall that reached to the top of Mt Kinkeisan in the north divided the two temples.

Finally, Muryoko-in was constructed by the third lord, Hidehira, in the late 12th century and is now in ruins. It was modeled after Byodo-in in Uji, which was built in the mid-11th century. The earthen walls enclosed the precinct of Muryoko-in, and there were three islands in the pond, with the Amida hall built on the largest one. The remains of a stage for religious dancing were discovered in the pond facing the Amida hall, which represented the Buddhist Pure Land like the mural paintings in the Magao cave in Dunhuang, China. It is considered that Amida hall was placed between the east shore of the pond and Mt Kinkeisan, as per the Pure Land imagined in the 12th century.

#### **Other facilities in Hiraizumi and its surroundings**

In addition to the temples, there were several facilities in Hiraizumi.

##### **\*Tachi**

It is now called Yanaginogosho Iseki. It was apparently like a palace, serving as the residence and government office for four successive lords of the Oshu Fujiwara clan for 100 years. The oval moats and earthen walls enclosed the Tachi, with its entire area extended almost to 5 ha. The three lords repositioned the main buildings to depict the deep religious relationships between the office and temples. Additionally, a bridge was constructed on a wet low area between the office and Muryoko-in to connect and to unify the buildings.

##### **\*Kara Gosho**

This was a private residence of the third lord, Hidehira, and the fourth lord, Yasuhira, built near the east gate of Muryoko-in. However, the site is known by historical documents but the archaeological remains have not been clear yet.

##### **\*Temples' attachments**

There were some high floor storage and ox cart parking facilities that faced the road nearby Kanjizaio-in. Apparently, these were attachments of Motsu-ji in view of the location.

##### **\*Guardian shrines**

There were five guardian shrines in Hiraizumi. According to *Azuma Kagami*, they were put at the cardinal compass points. It is not certain which shrines correspond with the existing ones; one of the shrines containing the remains of a garden pond found in front of the main building is called Hakusan-sha.

\*Industrial remains

Some remains of kilns for glazed ware, roof tiles, and remains of bronze bell casting for a temple have been unearthed. It is clear that these remains were operating temporally in sequence with the life of the temples.

\*Roads

The 30 meters wide main road started from Motsu-ji, heading east, and other paths crossing it connected the temples and Tachi to each other.

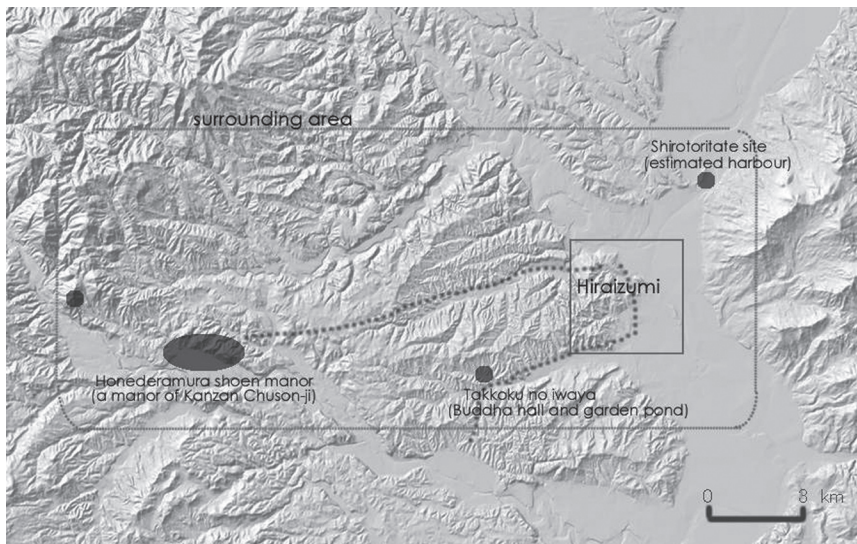


fig.4 Map of related sites surrounding Hiraizumi

In the surroundings of Hiraizumi, there were several other related facilities (fig. 4).

It has been identified that one of the harbors of Kitakamigawa River, put at 5 km northeast from Tachi, saw many goods and products related to Hiraizumi being loaded and unloaded there. At 6 km southwest from the center of Hiraizumi, a Buddhist hall, accompanied by a pond, has remained, which enshrined Bishamonten, which was known as a guardian of the northern area. Additionally, a Buddhist image, thought to be Amida, remains carved on the rock wall. Moreover, 15 km west-southwest from the center of Hiraizumi, a living rural landscape has retained the scenery of a manor of Kanzan Chuson-ji since the 12th century.

### Evaluation of Hiraizumi as a World Heritage

Hiraizumi was inscribed on the World Heritage List as “Hiraizumi—Temples, Gardens, and Archaeological Sites Representing the Buddhist Pure Land” in 2011. The summary of the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of Hiraizumi is to have realized

the ruler's ideal Buddhist land in a three-dimensional way on this earth. The decision by the World Heritage Committee was as follows:

The four Pure Land gardens of Hiraizumi, three focused on the sacred mountain Mount Kinkeisan, exemplify a fusion between the ideals of Pure Land Buddhism and indigenous Japanese concepts relating to the relationship between gardens, water, and the surrounding landscape--- The four gardens were--- symbolic manifestations of the Buddhist Pure Land on this earth, a vision of paradise translated into reality through the careful disposition of temples in relation to ponds, trees and the peaks of Mount Kinkeisan. The heavily gilded temple of Chûson-ji - the only one remaining from the 12th century-, reflects the great wealth of the ruling clan.--- The four temple complexes of this once great center with their Pure Land gardens, a notable surviving 12th century temple, and their relationship with the sacred Mount Kinkeisan are an exceptional group that reflect the wealth and power of Hiraizumi, and a unique concept of planning and garden design that influenced gardens and temples in other cities in Japan.

The aforementioned decision demonstrates how Hiraizumi is evaluated from the global perspective. The central subject of the evaluation is comprised by the four Pure Land gardens. Mt Kinkeisan has been included as a component because it functions as an essential element of the ensemble, although it does not directly represent the Buddhist Pure Land. On the contrary, Tachi (Yanaginogosho Iseki), which was nominated along with other components, was excluded from the component parts because it did not demonstrate any relation to the Buddhist Pure Land or any contribution to the OUV.

#### **The ideology of the Oshu Fujiwara clan as Buddhist rulers**

Four successive lords of the Oshu Fujiwara clan wanted to rule over their territory as a Buddhist Pure Land, and Hiraizumi's development of over 100 years reflects this political thought.

The first lord, Kiyohira, began to construct Kanzan Chuson-ji soon after he had moved his political base to Hiraizumi. A pagoda built at the top of Kanzan was the symbol of the center of his realm and of his Buddhist world. He built temples in all 10,000 villages over the country. His Buddhist thought was clearly manifested in *Kuyogammon*, which was dedicated to the celebration of the completion of a large temple guarding the nation (Chingo kokka daigaran). He stated, "Although I am a descendant of barbarians, I can construct the Buddhist Pure Land on this earth, and I would lead all livings to the Pure Land equally under Buddhism by building the temple." In addition, his body was enshrined under Amida Buddha hall, which was gold-leafed and heavily decorated; his successors were also enshrined there.

Four lords of the Oshu Fujiwara clan intended to represent the Buddhist Pure Land in Hiraizumi, where they established their political center without changing the natural topography. Moreover, the development of Hiraizumi as a Buddhist political center over 100 years illustrated the careful disposition of temples and the alternation of the main Buddha of Pure Land gardens. The main Buddhas of four gardens were Buddha Shaka, Yakushi, and Amida, who represented the ideals of the present, past, and future respectively. Finally, the construction of Muryoko-in to the west of Tachi represented the ultimate Pure Land of Amida, which consisted of the ruler's residence, temple buildings in the pond, and a sacred mountain, all of which were the essentials of the Pure Land. Moreover, the third lord, Hidehira, who donated the temple, devoted himself to Buddhism as a priest.

### Association of the temples with Tachi

It is certain that the domination by Oshu Fujiwara clan based on Buddhism was characterized by a close relationship between the political and administrative offices, Tachi, and the temples (fig. 5). Konjikido, which was an Amida hall and the mausoleum of the Oshu Fujiwara clan, was built facing Tachi in the southeast direction, and the main buildings in Tachi were facing Kanzan Chuson-ji. It has also been noted that both were connected by a straight path.

Motsu-ji was built with the axis precisely corresponding to North–South and East–West, and Kanjizaio-in was also thus built. The base point of the temple layout was the summit of Mt Kinkeisan located at the north. Together with the construction of the

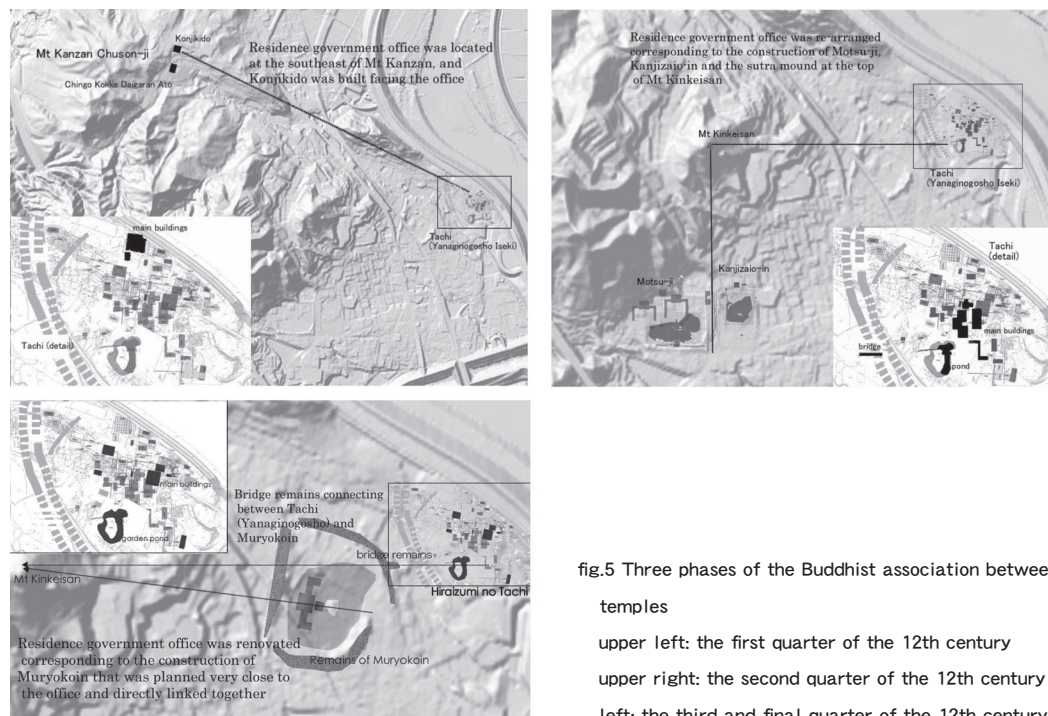


fig.5 Three phases of the Buddhist association between Tachi and temples  
 upper left: the first quarter of the 12th century  
 upper right: the second quarter of the 12th century  
 left: the third and final quarter of the 12th century (as of 1189)

temples, the main buildings of Tachi were re-arranged, depending on the axis from Mt Kinkeisan toward the east.

Apparently, the main buildings of Tachi were once again re-arranged because of the construction of Muryoko-in's Amida hall during the rule of the third lord, Hidehira. A bridge over the wet low land connected Muryoko-in with Tachi, which showed a landscape of the Buddhist Pure Land as if Muryoko-in was the "Buddha world" (*Higan*) and Tachi was the "this world" (*Shigan*). Some of the Buddhist drawings have depicted them together as the essential elements for the Pure Land. In addition, behind the Amida hall, a sacred mountain, from which the Amida Buddha would come down, was located.

### Town planning and the contemplation of Pure Land in Japan

Since Buddhism had diffused into Japan in the 6th century, temples were laid at the center of each political base. After the adoption of the grid city system from China in the 7th century, the palace became the focal point of the city center so that temples were gradually confined to the city's outskirts, although the magnificence of their architecture was retained.

In the late 11th century, some city-like clusters, such as Shirakawa and Toba, were formed in the suburbs of Heiankyo. The clusters consisted of not only temples but also palaces (*Gosho*) and were built close to each other. By unifying politics and Buddhism,

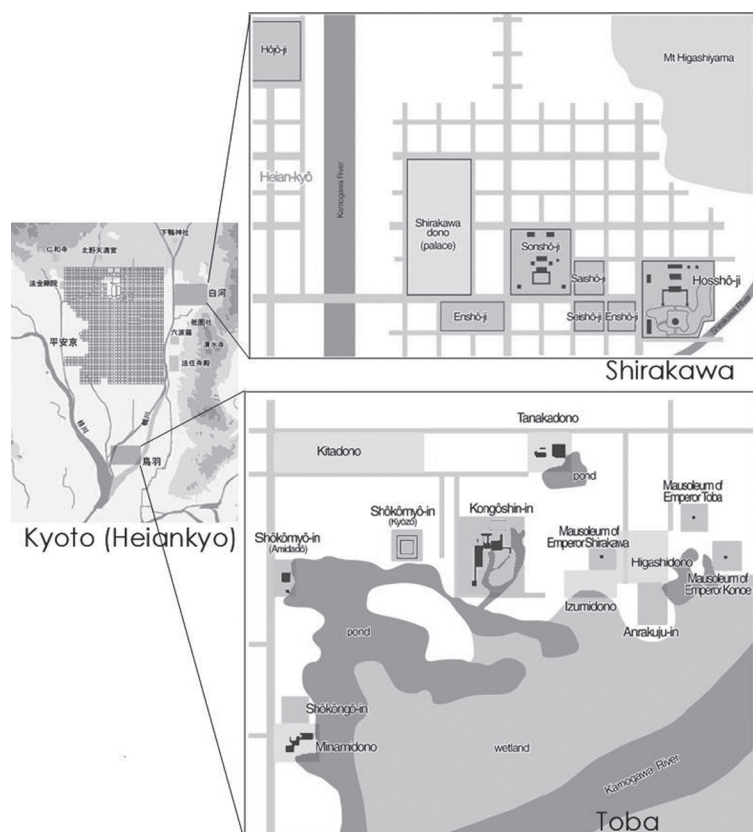


fig.6 Ruler's ideal land constructed at the outskirts of Heiankyo in the 12th century



they became the ideal lands for rulers (fig. 6).

In the 12th century, Hiraizumi gradually developed as a city. However, it did not adopt the Chinese grid city system for its construction as Heiankyo and other political centers had done. The temple areas covered most of Hiraizumi, and the administrative area was located at the east end along Kitakamigawa River.

The construction of the Buddhist Pure Land came from the economic and political powers of the rulers, and its natural topography was an essential element for the 100-year development as a Buddhist political center. The important role played by Tachi in the construction of Hiraizumi is shown by the disposition of temples in the Buddhist thought and by the arrangement of the main buildings in Tachi as corresponding to each temple. Thus, the concept in the construction of Hiraizumi was far different from that of the Chinese grid city system.

### **Conclusion: a unique political center under Buddhism**

Religious and political powers have significantly influenced the design of the political centers across the world. In Europe, the main religious facilities, cathedral and church, and the political base, such as the palace, were both built in the center of the city, surrounded by castle walls. In Islamic countries, a circular wall enclosed a city where a palace and mosque were located in various patterns. In South East Asia, the main temple was put at the center and was surrounded by small political offices. In East Asia, while the palace and temples were laid in the city center, surrounded by rectangular walls, there were no Buddhist positional relations among them. On the contrary, a focus on the careful disposition of a palace and a temple in Hiraizumi, indicating “this world and that world,” was based upon Pure Land Buddhism.

The diffusion of Buddhism from India to the east of Asia invented a unique political center representing the Buddhist Pure Land. This Pure Land should be explained by considering not only the precinct of each temple but also the entire area of Hiraizumi because the residential area, government office, and the temples were associated with each other beyond each precinct. The concept of the Chinese grid city system fully transformed into the new concept that saw Buddhism in the periphery of the Chinese centralized power area. Therefore, Hiraizumi ought to be studied from the global perspective.

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## Souces

- Fig.2, 4 and 5 : GIS map by Geospatial Information Authority of Japan (alteration)
- Fig.6 : *Inseiki no Kyoto Shirakawa to Toba*, Kyoto City Arcaeological Research Institute, 2007 , (alteration) (in Japanese)