

History of Sandankyo Gorge

Sandankyo Gorge celebrated the 100th anniversary of its discovery in 2017. More than a century ago it was a largely unexplored ravine, mentioned only in the 1768 book *Matsuno Ochibashu*. The book described the upper reaches of the Ota River and parts of present-day Sandankyo Gorge, including Tatsunokuchi Torrent and Sarutobi Rock.

In 1917, photographer Kuma Nanpo (1876–1943) began exploring the gorge and was entranced by its scenery, which reminded him of Chinese ink paintings with landscape motifs (*shan shui*). This type of artwork had become popular among independent-minded members of the literati from the Edo period (1603–1868) onward. Based on *Matsuno Ochibashu*'s comparison of the gorge with two natural landmarks in China—the towering Mt. Emei in Sichuan Province (called Sanga in Japanese) and the lengthy Three Gorges in the middle of the Yangtze River (called Sankyo in Japanese)—Kuma came up with the name Sandankyo.

Charmed by the beauty of the gorge, Kuma began promoting it with the help of local residents, including primary school teacher Saito Rosui. One goal was to preserve the beauty of Sandankyo Gorge forever, so the group started a movement to designate the gorge a Place of Scenic Beauty under the Historical Spot, Scenic Beauty and Natural Monument Preservation Law. Sandankyo Gorge was designated a Place of Scenic Beauty in 1925. After the designation, Kuma's next goal was to establish trails so people could walk through Sandankyo Gorge and enjoy the scenery. Maintaining the gorge's natural state was a strong consideration when building the trails, which were planned to interfere as little as possible with the environment. These paths are the same ones used by hikers today.

In 1953, the gorge was designated a Special Place of Scenic Beauty under the new Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties, and in 1969, the Nishi-Chugoku Sanchi area, including Sandankyo Gorge, was made a quasi-national park. These designations, made possible by the efforts of Kuma and the local residents, contributed to raising awareness of Sandankyo Gorge as a tourist destination while preserving its natural beauty. In recent years, Sandankyo has been featured in both the domestic and foreign media, and it is becoming well known as a place where visitors can enjoy the peace as well as power of nature. The gorge is now being preserved thanks to the efforts of local residents who have taken to heart the mission that Kuma Nanpo first established.