**Stone Lanterns**

More than 600 stone lanterns line the paths around Sumiyoshi Taisha. Almost all were donated by merchants or business associations, a practice that became popular in the early eighteenth century. The custom-made lanterns, each engraved with the names of its donors, were intended to win the favor of Sumiyoshi’s deities and to advertise the donors’ businesses.

The names inscribed on the lanterns represent a wide range of industries, including indigo dye, fertilizer, and glass manufacturers; safflower wholesalers; and dealers in used clothing and toys. About half the donors are in businesses related to the sea, such as fishing or shipping. The shrine was built on the coast—for centuries, Osaka Bay lay just beyond its western gate—and people whose livelihoods depend on the sea have long sought its blessings. Nearby Naniwa harbor connected the Kansai region, including the old imperial capitals of Nara and Kyoto, with the Seto Inland Sea and beyond. Between the seventh and ninth centuries, it was the departure point for trade and diplomatic missions to China. Later, in the Edo period (1603–1867), it anchored an important domestic trade route to the Sea of Japan and Hokkaido.

Merchants involved in the Sea of Japan trade donated many of the stone lanterns on the grounds. Their *kitamaebune* (literally, “north-bound ships”) sailed through the Seto Inland Sea and up the Japan Sea coast to Hokkaido, trading goods at ports along the way. At its peak in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this trade helped shape Japan’s economy, and it left lasting marks on Japanese culture. For example, traders brought kelp harvested from the cold waters of Hokkaido back to Osaka, where the city’s cooks embraced its distinctive umami flavor, creating *kombu dashi*, a kelp stock that is a foundational ingredient in Japanese cuisine.

The largest lanterns at Sumiyoshi Taisha were donated not by seafarers, but by an association of toy and doll manufacturers. The lanterns stand on the inner side of the canal near Sorihashi, the shrine’s famous arched bridge. The lantern to the south of the bridge represents companies from the Osaka area, while the one to the north is for companies from Tokyo and other parts of Japan. Fans of Japanese action figures and other toys will find a few familiar names, such as Bandai Namco Entertainment, alongside many that are obscure or forgotten.

The toy-makers’ lanterns have been refurbished and enlarged many times since they were first donated in 1762. On four occasions since 1928, the lanterns have been hoisted up and given new, larger stone bases with room for more donors’ names. The most recent addition, which took place in 2020, marked the crowning of the new emperor and the start of the Reiwa era. The lanterns now tower more than 10 meters above the ground.