

Komainu Guardian Statues

The pair of stone *komainu* statues that stand near the second torii gate protects the grounds of the shrine from evil spirits. *Komainu* came to Japan from China with the introduction of Buddhism.

Typically, the statue on the right, considered a guardian lion, has its mouth open, as if pronouncing “a,” the first syllable of the Sanskrit alphabet. The statue on the left, considered a watchdog, is typically carved with a closed mouth, as if pronouncing “um,” the final syllable of the Sanskrit alphabet. Together, these two syllables form the sacred Sanskrit word “aum,” meaning the beginning and the end.

This “aum” feature can be seen at temples across Japan, including in the statues of two fierce warriors, or Nio, that are found in Niomon, Nio gates.