

【Chichibu Jinja Shrine】

Chichibu Jinja Shrine is one of Japan's oldest shrines, and it celebrated its 2100th year in 2014. The shrine is known for its lovely *gongen-zukuri* architecture, the striking wood carvings of its eaves, and for its central role in the Chichibu Night Festival. Visiting the shrine is said to grant a number of blessings, including academic success, familial safety, and prosperity for one's descendants.

Chichibu Jinja Shrine was founded during the reign of Emperor Sujin, the legendary tenth emperor of Japan. At the time, Chichibu was considered part of Musashi Province (now the areas of Saitama and Tokyo). The shrine was established by the provincial administrator to honor his ancestral Shinto deity, Yagokoro Omoikane. Later, the administrator himself was enshrined as Chichibu Hiko. During the Kamakura period (1185–1333), the area was controlled by the Taira, one of the great military families of Japanese history. They incorporated the Buddhist deity Myōken (Sanskrit: Sudarśana) into the shrine, and renamed it the “Shrine to Myōken” (Myōkengū). Combined worship of both Shinto and Buddhist deities continued until 1868, when it was outlawed by the Meiji government, and Myōken was replaced with the Shinto deity Ame no Minakanushi no Kami. In 1984, Prince Chichibu (1902–1953), the younger brother of Emperor Shōwa (1901–1989) was enshrined as Chichibu no Miya Yasuhito Shin'ō. These four deities are known as the “four pillars” of Chichibu Jinja Shrine.

The current shrine building was constructed on the orders of Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616), a powerful warlord who united Japan under a single government. After it was burnt down during the Battle of Mimase Tōge (1569), Ieyasu ordered the shrine rebuilt. In 1956, it was designated a national Tangible Cultural Property.

The eaves on each of the shrine building's four sides bear impressive wood carvings. These were supposedly carved by the legendary artist Hidari Jingorō (fl. 1624–1644), a virtuoso who is also credited with the famous “Sleeping Cat” (*nemurineko*) carving at Tōshōgū Shrine. According to legend, Jingorō's right arm was chopped off by jealous rivals, forcing him to carve with his left hand. Afterward, he adopted the name “Hidari,” which means “left.”

The front (south) side of the shrine is decorated with myriad colorful carvings. Of particular note are the tigers just under the eaves on either side. These tigers, called the “child-rearing tigers” (*kosodate no tora*), were included in recognition of Tokugawa Ieyasu's patronage. Supposedly, the warlord was born in the year, day, and hour of the tiger. Oddly, a leopard is portrayed among the tiger cubs. Tigers are not native to Japan, and by the early seventeenth century, when the carving was made, it was still not known

exactly what female tigers looked like. Evidently, Jingorō saw a leopard and assumed it was a female tiger, and this became the reference for his carving.

The west side of the shrine building is decorated with a carving of a trio of monkeys who lounge just below the eaves. Unlike the traditional three wise monkeys (*sanzaru*) who “hear no evil,” “see no evil,” and “speak no evil”—a common motif in Japanese Buddhist art—Jingorō has carved the “three rowdy monkeys” (*ogenki sanzaru*) who “listen closely,” “look intently,” and “speak clearly.” Whether rowdy or wise, the monkeys are generally thought to be wards against evil and misfortune.

The north side of the shrine building is carved with the “North Star Owl” (*hokushin no fukurō*), who ceaselessly guards the main sanctuary. Rather than rudely point his backside toward the deities enshrined within, he looks over his own shoulder while dutifully facing inward. It is from the name of the *hokushin no fukurō* that the shrine is said to bestow academic success “without grueling effort” (*fu-kurō*).

The east side of the shrine building is carved with another of Jingorō’s masterpieces, the “chained dragon” (*tsunagi no ryū*). According to legend, the carving was once a dragon that lived at the bottom of Tengaïke Pond near Shorinji Temple (#15). Whenever the dragon became rowdy, a puddle would form below the carving, and so chains were added to keep him from thrashing.