

【Tobacco Jizō】

This small shrine is dedicated to Jizō, a Buddhist deity who is seen as a protector of children and travelers. Statues of Jizō are common throughout Japan, and he is distinguishable by his smooth-shaven head and kindly expression. The red knit hats and colorful bibs that statues can often be seen wearing are offered by individuals in the hope that Jizō will watch over and protect their children.

Typically, these small roadside shrines are established and maintained by their local communities. Prior to World War II, this neighborhood contained a red-light district, and because of Jizō's relevance to issues of pregnancy and protection, the shrine was often visited by the sex workers who worked in the area. Normally, sticks of incense are burned as offerings when praying at a shrine, but the sex workers offered cigarettes instead. Over time, this association with tobacco attracted smokers who came to pray for the will to quit the habit or protection from its health risks.

Customarily, a prayer is performed by lighting a cigarette or stick of incense. The flame is extinguished by waving it rather than blowing on it, and the incense or cigarette is then placed on the tray at the front of the shrine. To attract Jizō's attention, visitors drop a coin into the offering box and strike the side of the small singing bowl to the right with the small mallet. The palms are then pressed together in front of the chest before bowing and offering a prayer.