

The Origins and Purpose of *Dosojin*

Although it is impossible to date all the many *dosojin* in the area, most are believed to have been carved around the late Edo period (1603–1867) and early Meiji era (1868–1912). Local historians believe they were most likely created by itinerant stone carvers hired by locals who could afford to pay for such offerings. Even today, stone carvers are sometimes commissioned to carve new *dosojin* to mark a special occasion or location.

The works generally come in one of two forms: a simple inscription, often just the three characters of the word *dosojin*; or a representation of human figures, usually a man and a woman. The couples are frequently depicted holding hands or with the male deity's arm around the female deity's shoulder. Other couples are shown exchanging a cup of *sake*, with the male deity holding the cup and the female deity pouring. Occasionally, they even embrace. Though children rarely appear, these stone carvings are a physical manifestation of the deity of marriage and fertility.

Originally, pilgrims and other travelers prayed to these roadside gods to keep them safe on their journeys. But people here began to see the *dosojin* as deities who could assist them with everyday concerns, and prayed to them for help in finding a marriage partner, getting pregnant, harvesting a bumper crop, or simply raising a healthy family. Entire villages are thought to be protected from misfortune by these simple stone figures.