

# Niō guardian figures – fierce protectors of Buddhism

*Nestled inside great gates of Buddhist temples you can find some particularly threatening figures. When you walk through a Buddhist temple gate with a pair of Niō guardian statues on either side of you, it's reassuring to know beforehand that they are on the side of the good.*



**This pair of Niō or Kongō rikishi guards a main entrance to Koyasan in Wakayama. Created in the Edo period, they stand in the large temple gate above called Daimon.**



Their expressions are often so fierce, and the power conveyed by their exaggerated poses and musculature so strong, that this pair of heavenly kings as they are sometimes called can appear out of place in the grounds of temples belonging to a religion espousing peace.

However, in this instance the force they embody is to protect Buddhism, and their intimidating expressions are aimed at evil forces that might be looking to do harm.

These Niō figures are also known as kongō rikishi and are thought to have their roots in Hindu gods which protected Buddha. There are various names for the figures and portrayals vary to an extent. Generally, the figures have bare torsos displaying

exaggerated muscles and veins. In a pair of kongō rikishi one will have his mouth open said to be making the sound 'Ah', this figure having the name Agyō, and the other will have his mouth closed making the sound 'Un', thus the name Ungyō. Often the Niō figures have, respectively, a staff or thunderbolt and a sword\*.

There are several notable Niō pairs that can still be found in situ. While Tōdaiji temple in Nara is most famous for the giant image of Buddha in the main building, the temple's Nandaimon gate houses probably the best known Niō guardians, sculpted by two great artists of the Kamakura period (1185-1333), Unkei and Kaikei. Nearby Hōryūji temple boasts the oldest extant Niō figures, dating from

711. Visitors can no longer walk through the Hōryūji Chūmon as originally intended, but that doesn't diminish these guardians in any way.

Today there are many impressive Niō guardian sculptures that are valued and admired as works of art. Such was the skill of their creators, that even now centuries later when in many cases the original vibrant paint work or lacquer has come off, the guardian figures still seem to possess great energy and continue to send out their warning loud and clear to those who would do ill.

\* See the Japanese Architecture and Art Net User System (JAANUS) [www.aistf.or.jp/~jaanus/](http://www.aistf.or.jp/~jaanus/) and search 'Niou' and 'Kongou rikishi' for more details as well as good pictures of the Niō guardian figures at Tōdaiji and Hōryūji temples.

## Letters to the Editor

The Editor of *Japan Reports* welcomes any comments and suggestions you may have.

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