

# The Custom of Painting *Jizo* Statues in the Central and Northern Kinki Regions

— Studies on the Dissemination of Painted *Jizo* —

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*Jizo* (Ksitigarbha) worship is one of the most popular folk beliefs still alive in regions of Japan. In many local areas, however, such traditional folk cultures have become diluted with the country's postwar economic growth, urbanization, and rationalization. Furthermore, folk beliefs are now undergoing an irreversible decline due to Japan's falling birthrate, aging population, and growing number of non-religious people.

Despite these circumstances, local communities in the Kinki region, including Kyoto, still keep their folk beliefs alive by holding Jizo-bon festivals at the end of the *bon* season in August, when the spirits of the dead are said to return home to their families. A unique custom in preparing for this event is painting of stone Buddha statues. The distribution of this practice follows unique patterns in Japan, suggesting that each region has its own manners and customs.

Many mysteries concerning *jizo* painting remain. There is extremely little research on the custom because few documents are found to explain its origin and the process of handing it down, making it difficult to clarify the whole picture. In addition, since *jizo* painting was passed down by oral tradition in each region, local communities likely did not recognize the custom as part of their culture and had little interest in writing it down.

With folk beliefs further declining in local areas, this study examines the unexplored custom of painting *jizo* statues based on field surveys conducted in the central and northern Kinki regions.