あ - ん, Komainu and Niô…

Komainu (狛犬 literally “Korean dogs”) are figures resembling lions. The origin of this term is obscure since the guardian animals are lions rather than canines. They are placed in pairs in the inner sanctuary of a Shintō shrine. They appear at its portal, or on both sides of the entrance. When inside the Shintō sanctuary, they are called jinnai komainu 陣内狛犬 and are mostly made of wood or metal; The outside pair of stone lions, called sandō komainu 参道狛犬 (approach way komainu) are an extension of the former and are from a later tradition that broadly developed during the Edo period. They are believed to be the protectors of the sanctuary. Some of the guardian lions have a single horn, and this feature is also found on lions in China guarding the entrances of tombs. The common belief that all Shintō shrines have komainu is as false, as is the idea that Buddhist temples never have them: Kiyomizu-dera in Kyoto contains a beautiful pair of komainu, as do many other Buddhist precincts.

Ni-ô (仁王) are the 2 muscular guardians posted at the entrance of Buddhist temples in Japan, Korea and China, in a separate structure, called niomon in Japan (the nio-gate). They are naked except for a piece of cloth or scarf around their waist often looped around their shoulder and whirling above their heads. They are also called kongōrikishi (金剛力士) in Japanese. According to tradition, they both emanate from a single entity, Vajrapani, one of the earliest bodhisattva, guiding the Buddha armed with a thunderbolt to keep all evil spirits at safe distance. Yet in Indian Buddhism, Vajrapani is not as frightening as his dual representation in China and Japan, with knotted muscle and a terrific face showing fury ready to burst. The Komainu at the entrance of Shintō shrines (mostly) and the Ni-ô at the doorway of Buddhist temples share a common bond: they are saying the same thing. One is starting the word “a-um” or “om” by opening its mouth, and the other is finishing the word by closing it. The first is called Agyo (阿形, “A” shape) in Japanese, and the second is Ungyō (吽形 “UN” shape). In case of the Ni-ô, Agyo often wields a thunderbolt and is on the right side when facing the temple, and Ungyo is either barehanded, often with one closed fist, or carrying a sword or another weapon, and is on the left. In the case of Komainu however, the orientation of Agyo and Ungyo varies. For somewhere with a Chinese influence, both lions are Agyo, and in some regions such as Fukui, Ungyo is placed on the right.

Independent of their orientation, however, an interesting thing is the late adoption of a pair of stone guardians in the shape of lion at Shintō shrines, just like the ni-ô guarding the Buddhist temples, and even
more remarkable is the adoption of the exact features of their faces, pronouncing the same word, “Aum”, with a clear Buddhist origin. That is one more example of the complex syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism into one faith, as can be seen by the fact that many Buddhist temples host one or more Shinto shrines (like Sensō-ji in Asakusa, Tokyo), and that some Shinto kami are also personified as Buddhist bosatsu (bodhisattva), such as Hachimaniii. The sound “om” is a sacred word in Indian religions (including Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism), and is written with two letters of the Devanāgarī Sanskrit alphabet: ओ म often reduced to ō in India. The vowel “O” (ओ) can be further divided into the two consecutive vowels “A” (अ) and “U” (उ), so that it thus becomes spelled अ उ म: “aum”. “A” (अ) and “M” म are considered to be the alpha and omega of the Sanskrit alphabet. They also happen to be the first अ and last ऐ sounds of the Japanese syllabary. It is also said that this sound contains all other sounds, all words, all languages, so “aum” is a representation of the All. In Indian religions, “aum” is the primordial vibration that existed at the creation of the universe, just like in the Christian statement, “in the beginning was the word”iv.

“Aum” is also the symbol of several important triads, like earth, atmosphere, heaven and the union of the three major Hindu gods, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. According to Hindu philosophy, the letter “A” represents creation from Brahma’s golden nucleus; the letter “U” refers to Vishnu the God of the middle who preserves this world, and the letter M symbolizes the final part of the cycle of existence. In other word, the beginning and the end are separated by time. Agyo pronounce the first “A” and Ungyo the last “M” of the sound “a-u-m”. The middle “U”, representing duration, or time is left unsaid, at least symbolically since there are only two niō or two komainu. By crossing the Buddhist temple gate, by entering the shintō shrine, the visitor is actually cutting into Agyo and Ungyo’s speech, and, while moving through, may become the third invisible entity, time. Furthermore, keeping in mind that Ni-ō at the Buddhist temple entrance are a duplication of the single bodhisattva Vajrapani, one can either consider these representations as the passage from dualism to unity or three (counting the space between them) subsumed to one. Thus, the next time you cross between two komainu or two niō, reading the deities’ lips and completing their phrase by your movement, you will indubitably feel yourself part of the cosmos...

---

i The original model which stands at the Qianling Mausoleum in China was sculpted around 706, and is also the model for the lions at the entrance of Chinese restaurants all over the world.
ii See Kotera Yoshiaki The Birth and Habitat Distribution of Shrine Guardian Lions, Japanese Religions, Vol. 34 (1): 7-23
iii Some further syncretism may be seen in the shintō kami Koyasu-sama, supplanted by the female bosatsu Kishimo-jin nursing a baby and being a secret representation of the Christian Virgin Mary during the persecution against Japanese Christians.
iv “… and the word was with God and the word was God”, first line of St. John’s Gospel.