

Chichibu Yomatsuri (Night Festival)

History of the Chichibu Yomatsuri (Night Festival)

The Chichibu Yomatsuri (Night Festival) is held on December 2 and 3 to honor and express gratitude to the deities that are enshrined in Chichibu-jinja Shrine. During the festival, six floats are paraded through the neighborhood of the shrine, stopping for live performances of music, dance, and Kabuki theater that take place within the floats themselves. The six floats include two "flower parasols" (*kasaboko*), lantern-covered platforms carrying halberds that act as physical representations of the deities, and four *yatai* floats, which carry musical ensembles. The festival has continued in its current form for over 300 years and is regarded as one of Japan's "three great float festivals" (*nihon sandai hikiyama matsuri*).



It is uncertain exactly how long ago the festival was established, but it is thought to predate Chichibu-jinja Shrine, which was founded over two millennia ago. The shrine is located in the center of the Chichibu Basin and looks out at Mt. Buko. The shrine's sacred grove, Hahaso Forest, was a place to worship the mountain from afar, and it is also regarded as the residence of the Buddhist deity Myoken (Sanskrit: Sudarśana), one of the deities enshrined at Chichibu-jinja Shrine. According to legend, Myoken (considered a female deity) and the male dragon deity of Mt. Buko are in love, but the dragon deity is officially married to the spirit of Suwa-jinja Shrine. Each year on December 3, Myoken travels from the sacred grove to Suwa-jinja Shrine to beg for a single night with her lover. By tradition, when the float from

Motomachi passes it along the parade route, the musicians quiet their instruments and the onlookers whisper so as not to disturb the negotiations. If all goes well, Myoken and the deity of Mt. Buko meet at Kamenoko Rock, a statue of a turtle enshrined in Chichibu Park near Chichibu City Hall.

Most elements of the modern festival, such as the floats and fireworks, have evolved or been added over time. During the Kamakura period (1185–1333), around the same time that Myoken was incorporated into Chichibu-jinja Shrine, sacred horses were donated by the shogunal government. This donation is reprised each year with two sacred horses that accompany the floats on their tour of the local shrines and are donated to Chichibu-jinja Shrine at the end of the festival.

The modern Chichibu Yomatsuri largely developed during the Edo period (1603–1867). At the time, a festival known as the “Great Festival to Myoken” or “Great Festival of the Eleventh Month” was held in early November. The festival was spurred by the economic success of the “grand silk market” (*kinu no takamachi*) that was held near the shrine. Silk merchants came from the surrounding regions to sell their wares and then took part in the festivities. As the region blossomed economically, the scale and splendor of the festival increased as well.

For a period of years, the six floats that have come to represent the Chichibu Yomatsuri were made illegal. The floats were introduced sometime in the mid-seventeenth or early eighteenth century. During the last century of the Edo period, in response to what was seen as the degeneration of the common people, the government heavily restricted nightlife culture, including float-parades and Kabuki theater. Then, beginning in 1827, religious festivals were halted outright. Six districts in Chichibu resisted the government restrictions, and for 50 years until the ban was lifted, they continued holding annual festivals—three of the districts one year and the other three districts the next. These six towns are represented today by the six floats that circulate during the festival. The floats are made using traditional Japanese wood joinery techniques, and do not contain a single nail.



Chichibu-jinja Shrine

Chichibu-jinja Shrine is one of Japan's oldest shrines, and it celebrated its 2100th year in 2014. The shrine is known for its lovely *gongen-zukuri* architecture, the striking wood carvings of its eaves, and for its central role in the Chichibu Yomatsuri (Night Festival). Visiting the shrine is said to grant a number of blessings, including academic success, familial safety, and prosperity for one's descendants.



Chichibu-jinja Shrine was founded during the reign of Emperor Sujin, the legendary tenth emperor of Japan. At the time, Chichibu was considered part of Musashi Province (now the areas of Saitama and Tokyo). The shrine was established by the provincial administrator to honor his ancestral Shinto deity, Yagokoro Omoikane. Later, the administrator himself was enshrined as Chichibu Hiko. During the Kamakura period (1185–1333), the area was controlled by the Taira, one of the great military families of Japanese history. They incorporated the Buddhist deity Myoken (Sanskrit: Sudarśana) into the shrine, and renamed it the "Shrine to Myoken" (Myokengu). Combined worship of both Shinto and Buddhist deities continued until 1868, when it was outlawed by the Meiji government, and Myoken was replaced with the Shinto deity Ame no Minakanushi no Kami. In 1953, Prince Chichibu (1902–1953), the younger brother of Emperor Showa (1901–1989) was enshrined as Chichibu no Miya Yasuhito Shin'o. These four deities are known as the "four pillars" of Chichibu-jinja Shrine.



The current shrine building was constructed on the orders of Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616), a powerful warlord who united Japan under a single government. After it was burnt down during the Battle of Mimase Toge (1569), Ieyasu ordered the shrine rebuilt. In 1956, it was designated a national Tangible Cultural Property.

The eaves on each of the shrine building's four sides bear impressive wood carvings. These were supposedly carved by the legendary artist Hidari Jingoro (fl. 1624–1644), a virtuoso who is also credited with the famous "Sleeping Cat" (*nemurineko*) carving at Toshogu Shrine. According to legend, Jingoro's right arm was chopped off by jealous rivals, forcing him to carve with his left hand. Afterward, he adopted the name "Hidari," which means "left."

The front (south) side of the shrine is decorated with myriad colorful carvings. Of particular note are the tigers just under the eaves on either side. These tigers, called the "child-rearing tigers" (*kosodate no tora*), were included in recognition of Tokugawa Ieyasu's patronage. Supposedly, the warlord was born in the year, day, and hour of the tiger. Oddly, a leopard is portrayed among the tiger cubs. Tigers are not native to Japan, and by the early seventeenth century, when the carving was made, it was still not known exactly what female tigers looked like. Evidently, Jingoro saw a leopard and assumed it was a female tiger, and this became the reference for his carving.

The west side of the shrine building is decorated with a carving of a trio of monkeys who lounge just below the eaves. Unlike the traditional three wise monkeys (*sanzaru*) who “hear no evil,” “see no evil,” and “speak no evil”—a common motif in Japanese Buddhist art—Jingoro has carved the “three rowdy monkeys” (*ogenki sanzaru*) who “listen closely,” “look intently,” and “speak clearly.” Whether rowdy or wise, the monkeys are generally thought to be wards against evil and misfortune.



The north side of the shrine building is carved with the “North Star Owl” (*hokushin no fukuro*), who ceaselessly guards the main sanctuary. Rather than rudely point his backside toward the deities enshrined within, he looks over his own shoulder while dutifully facing inward. It is from the name of the *hokushin no fukuro* that the shrine is said to bestow academic success “without grueling effort” (*fu-kuro*).

The east side of the shrine building is carved with another of Jingoro’s masterpieces, the “chained dragon” (*tsunagi no ryu*). According to legend, the carving was once a dragon that lived at the bottom of Tengaike Pond near Shorin-ji Temple (No.15). Whenever the dragon became rowdy, a puddle would form below the carving, and so chains were added to keep him from thrashing.



Chichibu Matsuri (Festival) Hall

The second floor of the Chichibu Matsuri (Festival) Hall, located near Chichibu-jinja Shrine, contains a variety of exhibits detailing the history of the Chichibu Yomatsuri (Night Festival), as well as many of Chichibu's other unique festivals and cultural events. The first floor contains replicas of the *yatai* and *kasaboko* floats, as well as a small theater where visitors can watch a short film introducing each of Chichibu's main annual events. The display has a projection mapping system and powerful audio setup that bring the replicas and exhibition space to life, recreating the atmosphere of the Chichibu Yomatsuri right inside the building. The Chichibu Matsuri Hall is open until 5:00 p.m, and closed every 4th and 5th Tuesday except for national holidays.

