1. What are Jizo?

Jizo are statues of Buddhist bodhisattvas. Many Japanese people are not able to distinguish between the Japanese words Butsu, Hotoke, and Bosatsu. The word Butsu originates from the Sanskrit word for ‘Buddha’. The word for ‘Buddha’ used to be simple noun indicating a ‘person who achieved enlightenment’. However, ‘Buddha’ is now also used as a proper noun in honor of the progenitor of Buddhism, Siddhārtha Gautama. The Japanese-origin reading of the Chinese character for Buddha is Hotoke. The word Bosatsu originates from the Sanskrit word bodhisattva, which itself means ‘practitioner of austerities’. In addition, Amida is a Buddha whereas Kannon is a bodhisattva.

The word Jizo originates from the Sanskrit name Kshitigarbha, which means ‘virtue of the earth’. The original meaning of Kshitigarbha was expressed with Chinese characters and became the word Jizo. This means that Jizo are of Indian origin. Regardless of this fact, Jizo blend in with the Japanese landscape. In modern Japan it is common to find Jizo enshrined by the roadside. One person who recognized this right off the bat was Koizumi Yakumo, born Lafcadio Hearn. Mr. Yakumo said, “It is no exaggeration to say that the Jizo are the most Japanese of the various Buddhist images found in Japan. …the most well-known of the Jizo are the Koyasu Jizo, which are for those hoping to be with child. In Japan it is rare to find a road that does not have a Jizo present.”

Incidentally, having Jizo enshrined on city-owned land is not a violation of the Japanese Constitution, and there is a Supreme Court ruling to that effect.

2. The Jizo of Kanazawa

Besides being found on the roadside, Jizo are also enshrined at temples. Jizo enshrined at temples fit into two categories: Jizo as the temple’s principal object of worship and Jizo enshrined next to the principal object of worship. In the case of the Jodo Shinshu school of Pure Land Buddhism, since adherents are charged with dutifully carrying out the teachings of Shinran, it is inconceivable that a Jizo would be enshrined as a principal object of worship. However, even in Jodo Shinshu temples you will find Jizo enshrined on temple grounds in locations other than as the principal object of worship. One example of this may be found at Renge Temple in the Wakamatsu-machi area of Kanazawa City.

As Mr. Hearn pointed out, among the Shinto and Buddhist images enshrined on the roadside, Jizo are the most common. Indeed, in Kanazawa City Jizo seem to be overwhelmingly common. Of particular note is the image found in the north of Kanazawa City in Kanaiwa- kita that the locals call a Jizo despite the fact that it is an image of Kannon. Among the Shinto and Buddhist images enshrined by the roadside, it is common to find Jizo statues in Kanazawa City, so it is thought that even other Buddhist statues became known as Jizo. In this way there are examples seen all over the country of locals calling other Shinto and Buddhist images Jizo despite the fact that they morphologically different.
3. Jizo and Dosojin

It is said that Jizo were enshrined on roadsides due to the fact that Dosojin were already enshrined there. People took this basic concept and applied it to Jizo as well. Dosojin are enshrined at the borders of settlements or villages. Their main purpose is to calm malevolent spirits on the road and protect travelers. The beginning of Basho Matsuo’s Oku no Hosomichi mentions Dosojin. However, in the current Kanazawa City area the practice of enshrining Jizo by the roadside began in 1582 and before this no traces of Dosojin can be seen. Dosojin are mentioned in literature from the 11th century, but it is unknown whether the Dosojin faith was a countrywide phenomenon.

Let us analyze examples within Kanazawa City of the syncretic erecting of Jizo on the roadside where Dosojin are normally found. The oldest surviving Jizo found on the roadside in the Kanazawa City area is the Kamewari Jizo found on a path in Dendoji-machi. It is said that this Jizo was erected at the end of the Muromachi period (1336-1573) in memorial of those that perished during the Ikko-ikki uprising. Regarding the Jizo found at Zenkoji-zaka in Kodatsuno (erected in 1582), considering that no temple with named ‘Zenko’ exists in the area, the temple must have been destroyed and only the Jizo remains. This means that it is possible that the Zenkoji-zaka Jizo was not originally erected by the roadside.

The Gema Jizo of Ishibiki (erected in 1592) was erected to wish for the safety of those transporting boulders for the construction of Kanazawa Castle. Although the purpose of erecting Jizo for safety is the same for Dosojin, Jizo were originally erected to obtain benefits in this world through the observance of Buddhist teachings, so there is no need for a forced theory of syncretism between Jizo and Dosojin. There is a legend that says that the Enmei Jizo of Kanaiba-kita (established between 1661 and 1672) cured smallpox. This purpose is common to Dosojin. Another commonality to Dosojin is its use as a boundary marker. However, this Jizo is enshrined at a lay ancestral hall adjacent to a charnel house, which is a Buddhist place. Dosojin are not Buddhist deities, so there is no need to theorize on the syncretism between this Jizo and Dosojin.

The Daien Temple Jizo of Tera-machi (erected between 1661 and 1672) was on the way to Daijo Temple. Although it is possible that this Jizo acted a road marker, there was already another Jizo acting as a road marker from the middle ages, so there is no need to theorize on the syncretism between this Jizo and Dosojin.

The six Jizo of Kyusho Temple in Horikawa-machi (erected between 1703 and 1708) were erected on the way to where executions were carried out to calm the spirits of those executed. Like Dosojin these Jizo serve a memorial purpose, but the similarity end there.

The Gidai Temple Gappa Jizo of Juichiya-machi (erected in 1719) also served as a road marker, but shares no other similarities with Dosojin. The Senkoji-machi Jizo (erected in 1729) was erected as part of a memorial for Buddhists who passed away. The Magira Jizo (erected in 1759)
shares no similarities with Dosojin.

Other than serving to mark a boundary, the Kanaiwa-nishi Enmei Jizo son (erected in 1766) shares no similarities with Dosojin. In 1833 the Tenpo famine started and the Jizo found in Takaike-machi, Kasamai, and Kaminaka-machi were erected to memorialize its victims. The seven Shichine Jizo on the approach to Mount Utatsu were erected to memorialize seven people who in 1858 made a direct appeal to the lord and were executed. The Jizo that were erected on the roadside in the Edo period (1603 to 1868) in what is now the Kanazawa City area were mostly erected to memorialize the dead or to memorialize those who suffered violent deaths. Since Dosojin along the road are there to calm malevolent spirits, you can say that Jizo are similar to Dosojin in this respect. However, already in the Heian period (794 to 1185) Jizo were erected for people who may go to hell, to help people who went to hell, or to obtain benefits in this world through the observance of Buddhist teachings. For those interested in learning more, please read volume 17 of the Konjaku Monogatari-shu. The functions of Jizo have continued since the middle ages and through the Edo period to this day. In conclusion, at least for Kanazawa City, it is incidental that the places Jizo were erected to memorialize the dead or to obtain benefits in this world through the observance of Buddhist teachings were along the roadside.

The practice of erecting Dosojin statues in Japan began in the Edo period. My thoughts are as follows. In the Edo period there were some regions in which Jizo were erected on the roadside and other areas where Dosojin were erected. It was later that scholars of Japanese literature and culture started to think about a link between Jizo and Dosojin. The 1825 essay Kanso Zuihitsu even states that it is a perversion to equate Jizo and Dosojin. At least for Kanazawa City, it is my conclusion that the Jizo erected on the roadside have nothing to do with Dosojin.