

Site of the Saionji residence

The Saionji were a prominent noble family that headed a school of Japanese lute (*bina*) music and included many powerful political figures renowned for their cultural activities. One of the most prominent members of the family, Saionji Kintsune (1171–1244), was an extremely influential politician who served as Grand Minister. He built the Saionji temple and also constructed a smaller temple, known as Myo'ondo Temple, in its precinct. Saionji Kintsune was also responsible for building Kitayama-dono Villa, where the Kinkakuji (Golden Pavilion) now stands.

The composition of Japanese *waka* poetry played a central role in the cultural life of the nobles who lived in and around the palace. Saionji Kintsune read the following poem at a literary gathering at Saionji in Kitayama:

Let us plant mountain cherries
along the peak along the ridge,
so that generations yet to come
can look back and see
what the spring was like for us.

(Yamazakura / mine ni mo / o ni mo / ue okan / minuyo no haru o / hito ya shinobu to)

(From the poetry collection named *Shinbokuken wakashu* (1235), No. 1040)

In 1878, Myo'ondo became a Shinto shrine. It was renamed Shirakumo Shrine after the village of Shirakumo just to the north of the site. Much later, Saionji Kinmochi (1849-1940), another famous member of the family who served as Prime Minister of Japan twice in the early 20th century, founded there his private preparatory school, Ritsumeikan.