

A Minister in Life; a God in Death

Deified as the god Tenjin after his death in 903, Sugawara no Michizane (845–903) was a historical figure from the Heian period (794–1185). The son of a scholarly aristocrat of middle rank, he rose under Emperor Uda's patronage to be Minister of the Right, one of the top positions in the government, through sheer power of intellect rather than family connections. Michizane's success eventually aroused the resentment of his more highly-born rivals. As a result, after Emperor Uda's abdication in favor of his son, Emperor Daigo, Fujiwara no Tokihara, the Minister of the Left, invented false charges against Michizane that resulted in his banishment from the court in Kyoto. He was sent to the city of Dazaifu in Kyushu, which was the seat of government for Kyushu and the place where emissaries from China and Korea were received.

Before leaving Kyoto, Michizane begged Retired Emperor Uda to help clear his name. The last place Michizane stayed in Honshu was Hofu, then a provincial government administrative center. Michizane was received kindly because he had blood ties with the local Haji clan. He also lingered in Hofu because, still hoping that the charges against him would be dismissed as false, he was reluctant to make the final sea crossing over to Kyushu.

Michizane finally reached Dazaifu in 901 and died in 903, just two years later, of what legend says was a broken heart. The miracles that occurred in Hofu on the day of his death—a single beam of light shining into the sea, a mysterious cloud covering the peak of a nearby hill—convinced people that the soul of the man who had never wanted to leave Hofu and Honshu in the first place had returned in death. If his soul had come back, they reasoned, then it would need a place to live. That is why the Hofu Tenmangu Shrine was built in 904, just one year after Michizane's death.