

## **The Plum and the Ox: Symbols of Legends**

The plum and the ox are two key symbols associated with Sugawara no Michizane (845–903), the man who after his death became Tenjin, the god enshrined at Hofu Tenmangu Shrine. As an aristocratic aesthete of the Heian period (794–1185), Michizane was a great lover of flowers, plum blossoms in particular. Legend has it that when he was banished to Kyushu, he first stopped off at his Kyoto mansion to bid farewell to the plum tree in his garden. When Michizane got to Kyushu, his three favorite varieties of tree—the cherry, plum, and pine—are supposed to have tried to fly after him. The cherry withered away from loneliness; the pine tried to follow him but ran out of strength; only the plum tree made it all the way, flourishing and giving comfort to Michizane in his exile. In this way, the plum blossom became the symbol of Tenjin and appears as the crest of many Tenmangu shrines in Japan. It is also the reason why there are around 1,100 plum trees in the grounds of Hofu Tenmangu.

In Shinto, every god has their own designated animal servant or messenger. In the case of Michizane, that animal is the ox—and there is an anecdote that explains why. Michizane died in exile in Dazaifu in Kyushu in 903. Despite his disgrace, as a man of a certain stature he was still entitled to a grand funeral with an ox-cart to carry his body. As the funeral cortege was making its way to the burial ground, however, the ox pulling the cart sat down and refused to budge. This was interpreted to mean that Michizane wished to be buried precisely at that spot. Ever since, the seated ox has been one of the symbols of Tenjin, the deified Michizane, and it is believed that the deity is enshrined within seated oxen images. There are three statues of seated oxen at the Hofu Tenmangu.