

The Origins of Faith in Tenjin

Sugawara Michizane (845–903) was a leading court scholar, historian, poet, and political figure of the Heian period (794–1185). He rose to the second-highest office in Japan's imperial court, and his daughter became the consort of Emperor Uda (866–931), but he lost crucial backing when the emperor abdicated in favor of his son, Daigo. After feuding with the formidable Fujiwara clan—the power behind the throne throughout much of Heian Japan—Michizane was falsely accused of conspiring against the young Daigo, stripped of his ranks and titles, and exiled to a post in Dazaifu.

Despite this setback, Michizane bore no ill will against his perpetrators and led a virtuous life until his death, two years after his exile. Many found strength through Michizane's integrity in the face of adversity and he was widely admired. After his death, the ruling powers posthumously reinstated Michizane's ranks and titles. Dazaifu Tenmangu and other shrines were subsequently built and dedicated to Michizane, deifying him as Tenjin, the deity of learning, culture, and the arts.

The tale of the Tenjin faith's evolution is partly depicted in painted scrolls, and some scenes from the scrolls are exhibited here. One features an iconic scene in which an ox pulling Tenjin's funeral cart lies down and refuses to budge. Michizane's followers interpreted this as a sign that Michizane wished to be laid to rest at that spot and buried his body there.