

## **Kitano Tenmangu Shrine**

### **[LEGENDS / HEIAN / KITANO-NISHIJIN]**

In the year 901, the scholar, statesman, and poet Sugawara no Michizane (845–903) was exiled from Kyoto after ending up on the losing end of a power struggle in the emperor's court. Soon after his death in exile two years later, the city was struck repeatedly by disease and natural disasters. These calamities were attributed to the vengeful spirit of Michizane, whom the court quickly rehabilitated and honored by building a new shrine, Kitano Tenmangu—the first shrine in Japan to enshrine a real person as a deity.

Because of Michizane's academic achievements and dedication to poetry, he came to be honored as Tenjin, the patron deity of scholarship and the arts. Kitano Tenmangu and other Tenmangu shrines, of which there are more about 12,000 throughout Japan, are often visited by students who come to pray for good luck in their academic pursuits. These visits are especially frequent before exam season.

Besides aspiring test-takers, generations of aristocrats, high-ranking samurai, and members of the imperial family have visited Kitano Tenmangu to pray over its 1,100-year history. Many illustrious devotees have dedicated precious items to the shrine as signs of gratitude, including works of art, swords and pieces of armor, and handwritten documents. Some of these heirlooms are on display at the Treasure House on the grounds.

The shrine buildings have been reconstructed several times over the centuries. The current main building, designated a National Treasure, was erected in 1607 and consists of a worship hall (*haiden*) and a main sanctuary (*honden*) connected by a corridor (*ishi no ma*), all under one roof.

There are statues of oxen along the approach to the main building and throughout the grounds, because the ox is considered the messenger of Tenjin. The connection comes from Michizane having been born in the year of the ox according to the East Asian zodiac calendar.

Michizane is said to have loved plum trees, so Tenmangu shrines tend to have plum groves on their grounds. The plum flowers bloom in February and early March, when Kitano Tenmangu holds a plum festival. Plums harvested from the shrine's trees are preserved and sold to visitors in December. The preserved plums are steeped in hot water that is drunk as part of a cleansing ritual to encourage good luck in the new year.

In autumn, the leaves of the approximately 400 maple trees next to the main building turn a fiery shade of red, attracting considerable crowds. Another popular event is the Kitano Tenmangu flea market, held on the 25th day of every month.