**Festivals and High Culture at Dazaifu Tenmangū Shrine**

Sugawara Michizane (845–903), a renowned scholar, poet, and administrator, is enshrined at Dazaifu Tenmangū Shrine as Tenjin, the Shinto deity of learning, culture, and the arts. Throughout the year, more than 100 events are held at Dazaifu Tenmangū to celebrate Tenjin and to gratify him through the cultural pursuits he enjoyed. Some of these festivals originated as courtly activities that were first brought to the region by officials from Kyoto when they were posted to Dazaifu. Although their practice has largely died out, these echoes of the Heian-period imperial court (794–late 12th century) are preserved as yearly events at Dazaifu Tenmangū.

Michizane was a passionate practitioner of many of the aristocratic arts and cultural pursuits of the Heian period. He admired the plum blossoms of early spring, composed and recited poetry, and celebrated the Tanabata star festival. Three of Dazaifu Tenmangū’s traditional festivals pay tribute to these ancient pastimes: Kyokusui no En in spring, Tanabata in summer, and Zangiku no En in autumn.

Kyokusui no En (“ceremony of the winding stream”) is a poetry composition and recitation event held beneath the brightly colored plum blossoms. It was first celebrated in Dazaifu in 958. On the first Sunday of March, participants in Heian-period attire gather in one of the shrine’s gardens to take part in a ceremony modeled after one held at the imperial court in Kyoto. After a traditional dance performance, poets line up along a stream in the garden for the main event: composing a *waka* poem on a strip of paper before a floating cup of sake reaches them from upstream.

Tanabata (“ceremony of the seventh evening”) is an annual festival celebrated throughout Japan on July 7. According to a legend imported from China, the deities Orihime and Hikoboshi fell in love but were forced to part. Afterward, the two were permitted to meet only on the seventh day of the seventh month. Michizane knew this legend well, and even composed poetry about it. At Dazaifu Tenmangū, thousands of colorful strips of paper inscribed with wishes are hung from branches, and the festivities include musical and dance performances by participants dressed in *yukata* robes.

Zangiku no En (“ceremony of the last chrysanthemums”) takes place in late November and is another ceremony once held at the imperial court. It was introduced to Dazaifu in memory of Michizane, who loved chrysanthemums. Participants drink sake infused with chrysanthemum (a symbol of longevity) before joining a calligraphy ceremony. Colorful potted chrysanthemums and the skillfully rendered works of calligraphy are offered to Tenjin as prayers for continued improvement.

Many of Dazaifu Tenmangū’s other festivals and events place a similar emphasis on learning and culture, such as the late-February *baikasai* (“plum blossom ceremony”), where shrine maidens (*miko*) dance with plum branches in hand. There is also the Special Prayer for Success on Examinations (*tokubetsu juken gо̄kaku kigan taisai*), where students pray for academic success on October 18—the date that Michizane passed the Heian period’s most challenging examination.

It is thanks to Dazaifu’s prominence as the Western Capital that high culture flourished so far from the imperial court, but it was Michizane and Dazaifu Tenmangū that ensured many cultural pastimes of the Heian court continue today.