

Dazaifu Tenmangū Shrine

Dazaifu Tenmangū Shrine is one of Japan's most important Shinto shrines. It is the head shrine of more than 10,000 across the country dedicated to Tenjin, the deity of learning, culture, and the arts. Many visitors to Dazaifu Tenmangū are students and their families who come to pray to Tenjin before important examinations.

Tenjin is the deified spirit of the revered scholar, poet, and bureaucrat Sugawara Michizane (845–903). Born to a family of scholars in the imperial capital of Kyoto, Michizane excelled at his studies and grew up to become a renowned politician and scholar. Michizane became a beloved figure, famed for dazzling foreign delegations and even the emperor with his poetic compositions as well as improving the lives of impoverished farmers under his administration. However, jealous rivals conspired against him, resulting in Michizane's exile from the imperial court to Dazaifu. There, he was excluded from society, experienced terrible living conditions, and died just two years later.

The shrine's origin story tells that after Michizane's death, one of his retainers was transporting his remains in an oxcart for burial. Suddenly, the ox came to a halt and would go no further. Believing this to be a sign of Michizane's will, the retainer decided to bury him at that spot. Some years later, the emperor ordered shrines built to deify his spirit, including one erected in 919 at the site of Michizane's grave. This grew into Dazaifu Tenmangū Shrine.

The shrine precincts preserve many architectural and cultural treasures. Michizane himself created or owned many of the artifacts housed in the shrine buildings and museums, including his calligraphy. Tenmangū's main sanctuary (*honden*) is known for its rich colors, elaborate carvings, and gracefully curved roof. The current building has stood for over 400 years and has been designated an Important Cultural Property.

Some of the shrine's other notable sites and artifacts include 11 sacred ox statues placed around the precincts; tranquil Shinji-ike Pond, shaped like the Japanese character for "heart," which visitors cross to enter the shrine's realm of the sacred; and the approximately 6,000 trees of more than 200 species of plum, which erupt in red and white blossoms between late January and early March. The plum was Michizane's favorite tree and its blossoms were the subject of many of his poems. According to legend, the tree from his garden in Kyoto could not bear to be without him, so it uprooted itself and

followed him to Dazaifu as a *tobiume*, or “flying plum tree.” This is the tree that stands directly to the right of the main sanctuary.

Today, Dazaifu Tenmangū receives over 10 million visitors a year and holds over 100 rituals annually. The largest yearly ritual is the Jinkō Event (*jinkōshiki*), where the spirit of Tenjin is carried in a portable shrine from the main sanctuary to the site of his former residence to spend a night. Dazaifu Tenmangū’s rituals are notable for participants who dress in clothing from the Heian period (794–late 12th century), as well as for the rituals’ emphasis on learning and the arts, including poetry recitations, calligraphy displays, and prayers for success on examinations.