

## Kankō Historical Museum

Sugawara Michizane (845–903), sometimes known as Kankō, is enshrined at Dazaifu Tenmangū Shrine as Tenjin, the Shinto deity of learning, culture, and the arts. Sixteen displays of traditional Hakata dolls illustrate the story of Michizane’s remarkable life and death. There is also a wide variety of “Tenjin dolls” (*tenjin ningyō*) from across the country and artifacts from Dazaifu Tenmangū’s many rituals.

### The Life of Sugawara Michizane in 16 Scenes

Hakata dolls (*hakata ningyō*) are unglazed ceramic dolls produced in the Hakata district of Fukuoka.. Their origins date back to the seventeenth century, and the dolls are known for their elegance and minutely sculpted detail. Those displayed here are dressed in finely tailored miniature kimono—a rarity even among Hakata dolls.

#### 1. Plum Blossom Poem (849 CE, age 5)

Michizane was a talented student and poet as a child. In this scene, he is composing a waka, or classical Japanese poem, which was an extraordinary feat for his age. The poem reads:

*Utsukushi ya  
beni no iro naru  
ume no hana  
ako ga kao ni mo  
tsuketaku zo aru*

So beautiful,  
the crimson hue  
of the plum trees’ bloom—  
how I wish to adorn  
my cheeks with it.

#### 2. A Mother’s Prayer (859 CE, age 15)

Michizane suffered from frail health, so every day his mother went to a local temple and prayed to Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion. She asked that her son succeed in his studies and grow up strong, and her heartfelt prayers were answered.

3. Master of Pen and Sword (870 CE, age 26)

Because Michizane grew up in a family of scholars, his peers expected him to have little in the way of physical ability—but in fact, he was a skilled archer. Here, Michizane is participating in an archery competition and hitting the mark every time, achieving a perfect score.

4. Professor of Literature (877 CE, age 33)

In an era when Chinese language and culture was predominant in the imperial court, government offices were given to those who could prove their mastery of the Chinese classics. At the extremely young age of 26, Michizane passed the highest-level exam at the court's bureaucratic training institution, and at 33 he earned the top position of *monjo-hakase*, or "Professor of Literature." In this scene he is teaching students.

5. Poetic Diplomacy (883 CE, age 39)

Michizane sometimes met with foreign emissaries to entertain them and demonstrate Japan's cultural achievements. To welcome visitors from Balhae (a kingdom that once occupied northeastern China and the northern Korean Peninsula), Michizane skillfully composed and recited a poem in Chinese. His prowess left a lasting impression.

6. Compassionate Bureaucrat (886 CE, age 42)

Michizane was sent to administer distant Sanuki Province (now Kagawa Prefecture). He sympathized with the impoverished peasants and put his administrative skills to work assisting the poor, eventually earning the respect of the people. His experiences in different regions of Japan enabled him to introduce government reforms. Here, Michizane is opening up the rice stores to distribute food in a time of drought.

7. Brocade of Autumn Leaves (898 CE, age 54)

On a fall trip with Emperor Uda (866–931), Michizane visited a shrine on Mt. Tamuke in Nara. There he composed a famous poem later selected as one of the hundred poems for the classic anthology *Hyakunin isshu*:

*kono tabi wa  
nusa mo toriaezu  
tamukeyama  
momiji no nishiki  
kami no manimani*

On this day's journey  
I have even failed to bring  
a gift of sacred streamers  
to the Hill of Offering  
a brocade of autumn leaves,  
should the gods accept.

Here, Michizane follows as the emperor rides beneath the brilliant foliage.

8. The Emperor's Gift (900 CE, age 56)

Michizane wrote a poem called "Thoughts of Autumn" at a court poetry contest. Here, Emperor Daigo (885–930) is so impressed that he removes his own robe and gives the lavish garment to Michizane as a reward. This unusual gesture was a tribute to Michizane's extraordinary talent.

9. Demotion and Exile (901 CE, age 57)

Michizane was a highly successful government minister, but this brought him into conflict with the Fujiwara family, which held considerable influence over the imperial court. Jealous rivals spread rumors to implicate Michizane in a conspiracy, leading the emperor to exile him from Kyoto to Dazaifu. In this scene Michizane hears that he is being demoted and expelled from the capital.

10. Farewell, Plum Blossoms (901 CE, age 57)

Plum trees were introduced from China and considered symbols of high culture. Michizane's fondness for them was well known, and before departing Kyoto he composed a sorrowful poem addressed to one of the plum trees in his garden:

*kochi fukaba*  
*nioi okoseyo*  
*ume no hana*  
*aruji nashi tote*  
*haru na wasure so*

Should the spring breeze blow,  
let it carry your scent to me,

my blossoming plum!  
Even with your master gone,  
never forget the spring.

According to legend, after Michizane's departure the tree could not bear to be without him. It uprooted itself and flew to Dazaifu, earning the name *tobiume*, or "flying plum tree." It stands now in front of Dazaifu Tenmangū Shrine's main sanctuary, where it blooms each year. Some scholars also interpret the plum tree as a metaphor for Michizane's family, most of whom he left behind. In this scene, he is composing the plum-tree poem as his wife weeps.

11. Leaving the Capital (901 CE, age 57)

In this scene just outside of Kyoto, people along the roadway witness Michizane's departure (represented by the procession in the background). They are sorry to see him leave for distant Dazaifu, feeling that his banishment is unjust.

12. Parting at Dōmyōji Temple (901 CE, age 57)

On his way to Dazaifu, Michizane visited his aunt, a nun at Dōmyōji Temple in Kawachi Province (now Osaka Prefecture). Although the two had much to discuss, the emperor's men woke Michizane at dawn and forced him onward. Here, his aunt watches as he departs.

13. Arrival at Hakata Port (901 CE, age 57)

Only Michizane's son Kumamaro, his daughter Benihime, and one retainer were permitted to accompany him. After a long and exhausting journey, the small group finally arrives at the port in Hakata Bay. On the left, a fisherman coils a rope to make a seat for Michizane to rest.

14. Remembrance (902 CE, age 58)

In Dazaifu, Michizane took up residence in a dilapidated government residence called the Nankan, and other city officials were forbidden to speak with him. On the anniversary of the previous year's poetry contest (see Display 8), Michizane took out the robe he received from Emperor Daigo. Instead of feeling resentment, he composed a poem praying for the emperor's well-being and expressing his continuing devotion. In this scene, he gazes at the folded robe, head bowed.

15. Prayer on the Peak (902 CE, age 58)

Despite a terrible storm, Michizane climbed to the peak of Mt. Tenpai, approximately 5 kilometers southwest of Dazaifu Tenmangū, to plead his innocence to heaven. Here he is shown holding a *fuzue*, a staff used to offer letters to nobility and emperors (to avoid passing them directly). Michizane is using the *fuzue* to present his plea and praying amidst the thunder and lightning. In Kyoto, legends tell of disaster wrought upon the capital by Michizane's vengeful ghost, but Michizane bore the capital no ill will and instead often prayed for the welfare of country and emperor.

16. A Place of Repose (903 CE, age 59)

Michizane passed away at home, beset by illness brought on by poor living conditions. A retainer loaded his remains in an ox cart for transport, but soon after, the ox suddenly came to a halt and refused to go any farther. Michizane's retainer decided the cow's refusal was a sign of his lord's will, and that he wished to be buried there. After interring him, the retainer built a shrine there. This is the origin of Dazaifu Tenmangū.

### Tenjin Dolls

These miniature dolls of Michizane spread across the country as local souvenirs sold at shrines, and are said to have originated during the Muromachi period (1338–1573). Local artisans make Tenjin dolls with different materials and styles depending on their region of origin. They are made for a variety of purposes, ranging from offerings to children's toys.

### Dazaifu Tenmangū Shrine Festivals

Over 100 rituals are held at Dazaifu Tenmangū throughout the year, including the annual Jinkō Event (*jinkōshiki*). In this autumn festival, Tenjin is carried from the main sanctuary to the site of his former residence to spend a night. Dazaifu Tenmangū's festivals are notable for Shinto priests and participants donning the traditional clothing of the Heian period (794–late 12th century). They also emphasize learning and the arts, including poetry recitations, calligraphy displays, and prayers for students' success in school examinations.