Sugawara no Michizane and the Early Heian Court

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At the time of his death, Michizane officially was regarded as a criminal, yet only a few decades later he was being worshiped as a god. The cult of Tenjin is a fascinating and important subject in itself, both because it is a vital part of Japan's religious and intellectual history, and also because it helps to clarify how popular images of Michizane arose. The study of Tenjin worship, however, presents complications of its own. For example, its terminology is sometimes ambiguous. Michizane and Tenjin were regarded as two aspects of the same individual, and so when later documents referred to "Tenjin," they sometimes meant the man and other times the god. Similarly, Tenjin worship was a product of Shinto-Buddhist syncretism, and thus most of its institutions were simultaneously Shinto shrines and Buddhist monasteries until the two religions were forcibly separated following the Meiji Restoration. Moreover, neither an accepted core of doctrine nor an extensive organizational structure ever developed. Instead, the cult consisted simply of reverence for a deified ancient hero who was worshiped throughout Japan at independent shrines, great and small. In these respects, Tenjin worship resembles other aspects of Japan's native religious heritage. Lacking both unified theology and institutional hierarchy, it is best described in terms of its historical evolution.

THE PROCESS OF DEIFICATION

Traditionally, the story of Michizane's transformation into the god Tenjin begins with a series of misfortunes that befell the men who had falsely accused him. In 909, his political rival Tokihira died in his prime at the age of thirty-nine. Thirteen years later, the crown prince, then only twenty-one, also passed away. He was Tokihira's nephew, the child of Emperor Daigo and Tokihira's sister, whose marriage had followed Michizane's exile. The crown prince's demise was blamed on the wrath of Michizane's vengeful ghost, and so one month later Michizane was belatedly pardoned. Still, this did not placate the wronged minister and troubles at court continued, particularly among Tokihira's descendants. One of his grandsons was named the new crown prince, but he died in 925, a mere child of five. In 930 Japan suffered a drought, and just when arrangements were being made to conduct prayers for rain, a black cloud suddenly appeared and thunder resounded through the heavens. Lightning struck the palace and killed four courtiers, among them Kiyotsura, the man who years earlier had reported Michizane's supposed "confession" to the court. Emperor Daigo, shocked by this incident, soon fell ill, and three months later he too passed away. The lightning was attributed to the workings of Michizane's ghost, who now came to be feared as a thunder god. In the following years, most of Tokihira's descendants died at relatively young ages. The only exception was his second son, Akitada (898–965), who lived modestly, worshiped Michizane's spirit every day, and so was able to enjoy a long and successful career at court. At Kitano, just north of the capital, a shrine was dedicated to Michizane in 947, and forty years later, it was formally recognized by the government. Already, Michizane was known by what would become his familiar appellation, "Temman Tenjin."

This account is not inaccurate, but it does oversimplify a highly complex sequence of events. Closer examination reveals that Michizane's deification was the result of an intricate synthesis of Shinto and Buddhist ideas, and an intermingling of popular and aristocratic cultures. This diversity of origins explains Tenjin's rapid acceptance as one of the most widely worshiped gods in Japan's pantheon of deities. In addition,

Michizane's descendants had reestablished themselves as court scholars, and they too contributed to their ancestor's rise to the status of a patron saint of literature. The process by which Michizane came to be identified as Tenjin can be divided into four stages. In the century before Michizane's death in 903, beliefs that provided the basis for his deification already had appeared. Then, during the approximately four decades immediately following his demise, his sons were summoned back to court and returned to their old offices, while Michizane himself came to be feared as an angry ghost and thunder god. In the brief span between 941 and 947, his identity as Tenjin was clearly established through a sequence of revelations, and his spirit was enshrined at Kitano. Finally, by the end of the tenth century, the court had succeeded in pacifying his spirit, and his apotheosis as patron saint of literature was complete.

The Japanese had long divided their native gods into the categories of Heavenly and Earthly Deities, "Tenjin" and "Chigi" respectively. These Tenjin—the sun goddess Amaterasu among them—had been worshiped since time immemorial. In 836, the government ordered that prayers be said at Kitano to the Heavenly and Earthly Deities. Thus, nine years before Michizane was even born, Tenjin in the ancient sense were already worshiped at Kitano. Moreover, during his lifetime, prayers were addressed there to Raikō, the Thunder Lord, another deity that would soon be associated with Michizane's spirit. In the early Heian period, Kitano was the site of a pasture where the imperial guards kept their horses and where emperors had gone hunting. Michizane, however, seems to have visited Kitano only once, despite a later oracle that claimed it had been one of his favorite spots. Probably it was not Michizane but the Heavenly Deities and Thunder Lord who had enjoyed Kitano, and since Michizane had come to be associated with those deities, his spirit too was assumed to reside there. The confusion of Michizane's spirit with the ancient Heavenly Deities also helps explain the great number of shrines dedicated to Tenjin. Some of them originally had been dedicated to ancient but ill-defined Heavenly Deities that later were mistaken for Michizane as the popularity of the newer Tenjin worship spread. Even today at a few shrines neither the priests nor the faithful are certain whether the Tenjin they worship is Michizane or an older Heavenly Deity.[1]

Fear of angry ghosts was another essential element in Michizane's deification that already was well established during his lifetime. In 863, the court for the first time had sponsored a Spirit-Pacifying Ceremony (Goryōe), consisting of lectures on two sutras followed by song and dance. Its purpose was to appease the angry spirits of six individuals who had been victims of court intrigue and as a result were thought to have rained pestilence on the nation. Curiously, the rites to pacify them had begun not among the aristocrats who had caused their demise, but among commoners far removed from political struggles at court. Eventually, Michizane's name would be added to an expanded list of eight angry spirits who were customarily propitiated to put an end to epidemics or other natural disasters.[2] Already in this earliest stage of Tenjin worship that preceded Michizane's death, the foundations for his deification had been laid. Shinto deities were worshiped at Kitano, and Buddhist rites were performed to pacify the angry souls of courtiers who had died in disgrace. The Spirit-Pacifying Ceremony in particular demonstrated a close tie between popular and aristocratic beliefs. These seemingly disparate threads would become increasingly intertwined as the new Tenjin worship evolved.

The calamities that followed Michizane's death are the most conspicuous events in the second stage of his deification, the years between 903 and 940, but two other developments were equally important. The first occurred not at court but at Dazaifu. There, in 905, one of Michizane's former servants built an altar at his grave site. Michizane had been dead only two years and was not yet worshiped as a god, but he had been buried in the precincts of a Buddhist monastery, and so the altar must have been for regular memorial services. Fourteen years later, Fujiwara no Nakahira (875–945), Tokihira's younger brother, was ordered to sponsor the construction of a more substantial building there. No mention was made of Michizane, but at the time the court was dominated by Fujiwara no Tadahira (880–949), another of Tokihira's brothers, who is said to have maintained close ties with Michizane. Possibly he had proposed building the new edifice as a memorial to the falsely accused minister. It evolved into Anrakuji, one of the major Buddhist monasteries in Dazaifu. Around 1100, influenced by Tenjin worship, it gradually began to incorprate Shinto practices.[3] Following

the Meiji Restoration the original Buddhist elements were eliminated, and today it is known as Dazaifu Temmangū, which, along with Kitano Shrine, is one of the two most important centers of Tenjin worship. Kitano may be more famous, but the Dazaifu Shrine has the distinction of being the oldest institution dedicated to the worship of Michizane's spirit.

The second important development was the return of Michizane's sons to the capital, perhaps through the intercession of his loyal friend Haseo, who remained an influential figure at court. In 906, Michizane's oldest son was summoned back from his exile in Tosa, the most isolated province in Shikoku. He was promoted one grade and resumed his position as president of the university. Two years later, a younger son became the fourth Sugawara to pass the civil service examination and subsequently was named professor of literature.[4] Positions at the university, particularly in its literature program, were becoming a Sugawara family preserve. Although later generations did not quite equal Michizane's literary achievements, they did produce able men who helped restore the Sugawara family name through their accomplishments and at the same time actively contributed to maintaining the principal institutions at which Tenjin was worshiped.

The founding of Anrakuji in Dazaifu and the reprieve of Michizane's sons were important, but not nearly so dramatic as the catastrophes that followed: the deaths at court and the lightning that struck the palace. Of these misfortunes, only the death of the first crown prince was blamed on Michizane's spirit in the laconic early chronicles. Apparently, fear of the late minister's revenge and his identification with the thunder god did not develop quite so rapidly as later accounts suggest. By the end of the Heian period, however, the stories had been much improved. Tokihira's death in particular was elaborated to include colorful details of spiritual battle between esoteric monks and Michizane's angry ghost. These later accretions may be fanciful, but at least one of the details is highly significant. After Tokihira fell ill, he summoned the holy monk Jōzō to say prayers on his behalf. Jōzō's father—none other than Kiyoyuki, Michizane's old scholarly rival—then went to visit the ailing Tokihira. Suddenly, Michizane's spirit appeared in the form of two green serpents protruding from Tokihira's ears and

16. Serpents appearing from Tokihira's ears
Source: Temmangū goden.

demanded that Kiyoyuki instruct Jōzō to abandon his incantations. The frightened Kiyoyuki did so and Tokihira's breathing soon ceased.[5] This anecdote, vividly portrayed in illustrated versions of Michizane's life and deification, probably contains at least a kernel of truth, for later well-documented events would reveal that just as Kiyoyuki had first contributed to Michizane's downfall, so he and his sons would later contribute to his deification.

The death of the first crown prince in 923 was the first incident unquestionably blamed on Michizane's ghost at the time it occurred. One month later, an imperial edict posthumously pardoned Michizane, returned his offices, and promoted him one grade to the senior second rank. The edict specified that its purpose was to pacify his ghost. It was drafted by another of Kiyoyuki's sons. In the death of Tokihira, the role of Kiyoyuki and Jōzō had been ambiguous; whereas Jōzō had prayed for his recovery, Kiyoyuki had demanded that the prayers cease. The ensuing events, however, clearly point to a guilty conscience—or fear of Michizane's posthumous revenge—on the part of Kiyoyuki's sons. Also, a comparison of the origins of Anrakuji in Dazaifu with the developments at court reveals a pattern in the reactions of men from different social strata to Michizane's unhappy end. Among those of humble estate, prayer for Michizane's salvation was begun by a man who sympathized with him, his own former servant, and some decades later, other people from outside court circles would turn to him for support in their quarrels with government. In contrast, among the nobility, concern was expressed principally by those who had reason to fear his wrath, for example, the son of a former rival. Similarly, when deadly lightning struck the palace in 930, frightened courtiers soon concluded that Michizane had become a thunder god seeking fiery revenge.[6]

The idea that Michizane's ghost desired to punish his former enemies spread rapidly and appeared next in a surprising context. In 939, when the warrior Taira no Masakado (d. 940) turned from quarreling with his neighbors in the Kantō region to outright rebellion, a prostitute is said to have received an oracle from Hachiman, the god of war, naming Masakado the new emperor. According to the oracle, Michizane's ghost had composed the proclamation. This incident is in keeping both

with Michizane's mortal duties as a drafter of government documents and with his posthumous activities opposing the dominant political faction at court. It is recorded in *Shōmonki* (A chronicle of Masakado), an account of the rebellion thought to have been compiled in 940 by Buddhist monks in the Kantō region. Even though this particular anecdote may be a creation of *Shōmonki*'s compilers, it remains significant, for it shows that by 940 an awareness of Michizane's ghost as an enemy of the court had spread all the way to the then-remote Kantō plain. Several shrines dedicated to Tenjin there are thought to trace their origins to this incident.[7]

In the decades immediately following Michizane's death, the second stage of his deification, he had come to be regarded as a supernatural being. An altar was built at his grave site, and he was granted a posthumous reprieve after courtiers had come to fear his revenge. Because records from this period are encrusted with later legends they do not always leave a clear picture of events, but they do demonstrate that already less than four decades after his death, aristocrats in the capital and commoners from Kyushu to Kantō knew of Michizane's spirit, and at least some regarded him as a threat to the court. Michizane's angry ghost was feared as a thunder god, but he was not yet clearly identified as Tenjin, an established member of the Shinto pantheon.

The third stage in Michizane's apotheosis was short but eventful. It lasted from 941 until 947 and witnessed a series of miraculous episodes and oracles that revealed many colorful details of Michizane's posthumous existence. They identified him as the new deity Temman Tenjin and culminated in his enshrinement at Kitano. Contemporaries were so struck by these wonders that they left meticulous records. Although some of the stories seem fantastic, they were recorded as fact. The first and most awesome of the divine revelations were experienced by Dōken, yet another of Kiyoyuki's sons. Like Jōzō, he had turned to religion, taking Buddhist vows at Mount Kimbu, a cultic center for the mountain ascetics (*yamabushi*). In 941, after meditating and practicing religious austerities there for twenty-five years, he presented the court a startling account of his recent experiences.

At noon on the first day of the eighth month, after praying and fasting in a cave for twenty-one days, he had suddenly

17. Lightening strikes the palace
Source: Temmangū goden.

passed away. A meditation (*zen*) monk greeted him and escorted him to heaven, where he met Śākyamuni, who had assumed the form of Zaō Bosatsu, the god of Mount Kimbu. Dōken was also introduced to a less familiar deity, Nihon Daijō Itokuten, whose name might be translated roughly as "Japanese Chancellor Awesome Deva." This turned out to be Michizane, who revealed that earlier he had been filled with anger and had planned to destroy Japan. Subsequently, however, esoteric Buddhism had calmed his wrath by one-tenth, and so he no longer intended to do great harm. Dōken told him that in Japan, everyone, high and low, knew him as "Fire and Thunder" (Karai) Tenjin and revered him as they did the Buddha. Michizane, however, protested that Fire and Thunder Tenjin was only his number-three messenger. He further noted that unless he became a Buddha, he still intended to punish those who had wronged him, although he would answer the prayers of those who worshiped him. After his meeting with Michizane, Dōken learned that it was this number three messenger who had caused the lightning to strike the palace.

Dōken then visited hell, where he saw four men in torment. One wore only a shirt on his back; the other three were naked. The one with the shirt revealed himself to be the former Emperor Daigo. He explained that along with three of his ministers—the men who were naked—he was being tortured for his sins, one of which was driving Michizane into exile. Daigo begged Dōken to have the court offer prayers for their salvation. Finally, thirteen days after he had passed away, Dōken miraculously returned to life and reported this strange experience to the court.[8]

Dōken's account made important contributions to the process of Michizane's deification. It is the earliest source to assert that he was widely worshiped as the Thunder God, although it also claims the belief to be false and raises Michizane to the status of the Thunder God's master. This view of Michizane as superior to the Thunder God would be mentioned again in an oracle six years later, but it would not be stressed in subsequent narrations of the Tenjin legend. It represents an early attempt to portray Michizane as a somewhat less terrifying deity. Another contribution of Dōken's account was, for the first time, to place Michizane's spirit in a well-defined religious

context, that of esoteric Buddhism. This too helped make Michizane less frightening, for it suggested that he could be appeased by Buddhist rites. Tenjin worship would long remain closely tied to Buddhism; however, esoteric beliefs do not figure conspicuously in later practices. By placing Michizane above the Thunder God and in a Buddhist context, Dōken helped establish him as more of a god than an angry ghost, although most of the specific details he reported failed to become major elements of Tenjin worship.

Dōken's personal background helps explain why he became involved in the process of Michizane's deification. As a son of Kiyoyuki, he may have felt a sense of inherited guilt because of his father's involvement in Michizane's downfall. Moreover, although his was a minor court family, he chose to join the mountain ascetics, men usually of dubious social status. Thus he had entered into the world of popular religion, where fear of angry ghosts had originated, and so he was able to serve as a bridge between it and the court.

In the seventh month of 942, just a year after Dōken's mysterious experience, a poor woman, Tajihi no Ayako, received an oracle from Michizane. He revealed that he was now known as Tenjin and wanted her to build a shrine at Kitano, a place he claimed to have formerly enjoyed visiting. Ayako was too impoverished to carry out this request and attempted to satisfy Michizane by worshiping Tenjin at a humble altar near her hut in the capital. Word of Ayako's oracle seems to have spread, for in 945 a report from Settsu province, just southwest of the capital, stated that hundreds of people—men and women, noble and base, young and old—had gathered and were heading for the capital, singing and dancing as they went. They claimed to be worshiping "Shidara" deities. The word "*shidara*" usually referred to the rhythmic clapping that accompanies a song, and so the name of the deities and the description of their worship suggest a popular religious movement, perhaps like the "*Ee ja nai ka*" ecstatic dancing of 1867. In the case of the 945 incident, the worshipers brought with them three portable shrines. The principal one, complete with a *torii* gate, was dedicated to Ayae Jizai Tenjin. "Ayae" probably was the woman Ayako who had received the oracle from Michizane, and a contemporary source specifically identified the "Jizai Tenjin" with him.[9]

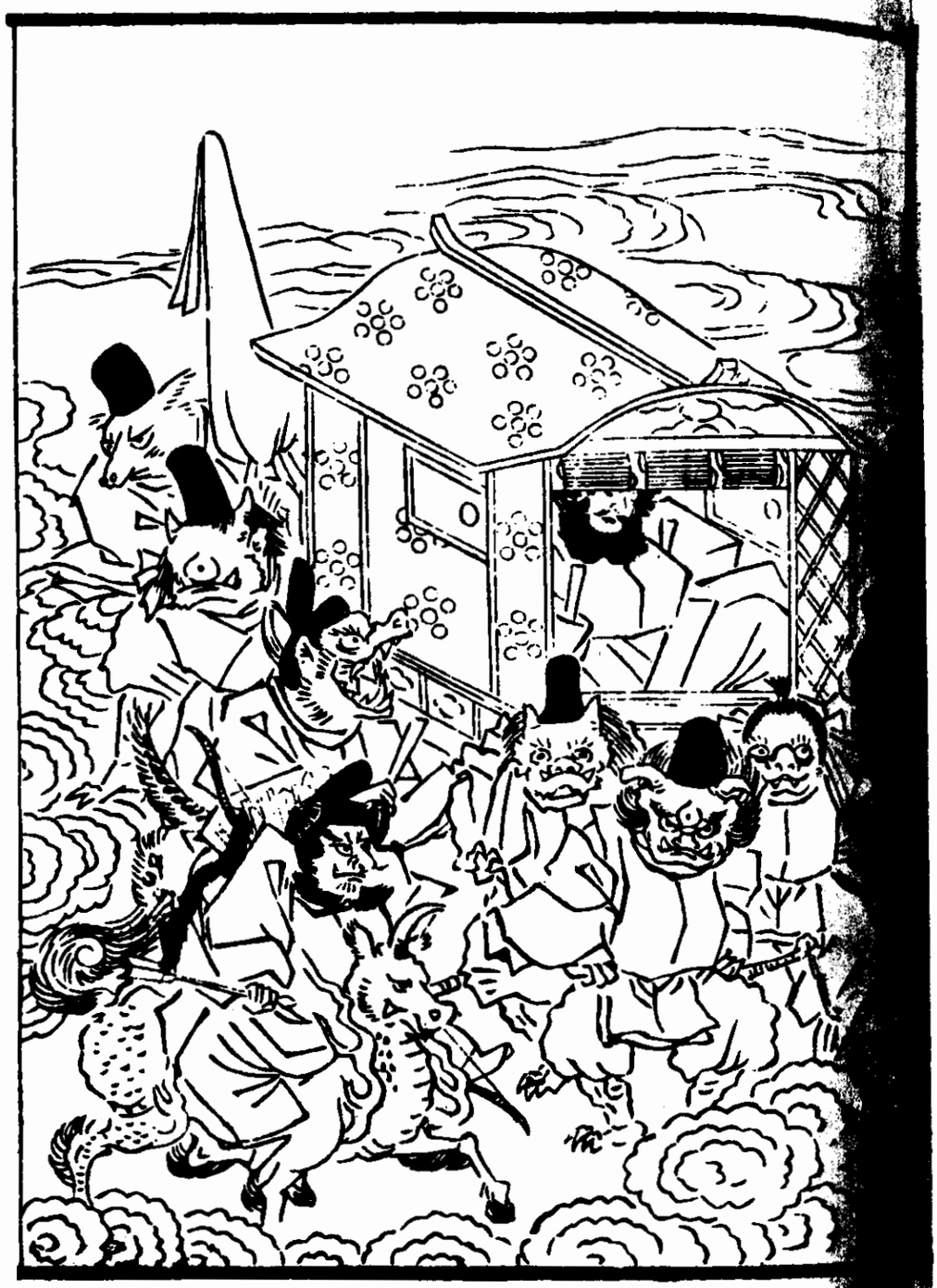
Ayako's oracle and the incident of the Shidara deities present a very different aspect of early Tenjin worship than did Dōken's account. For the first time Michizane was referred to as Tenjin without the Fire and Thunder prefix that Dōken had used. Also, this new Tenjin clearly belonged to the Shinto tradition. These elements did become essential features of later Tenjin worship. On the other hand, at least in the case of the Shidara deities, the older image of Michizane as an angry ghost and enemy of the court was still preserved. The exact nature of those deities and why they were being brought to the capital were not specified, but they probably represented a popular reaction to government policies. Here again, the common people were regarding Michizane sympathetically as a divine ally in their protest against the established order in the capital, a role previously attributed to Michizane in the Masakado Rebellion. Further aspects of Tenjin worship had appeared, but Michizane's ghost was not yet considered fully pacified. He was still viewed as a potential threat to the court.

The third stage in Michizane's deification ended with the founding of Kitano Shrine in 947. Two completely different accounts of that event survive. According to one, in the sixth month of 947, Ayako finally was able to carry out Michizane's instructions and established a shrine at Kitano. A second version states that three months earlier, another oracle was received by Tarō, the seven-year-old son of Miwa no Yoshitane, a Shinto priest from Ōmi, a province just east of the capital. Portions of this oracle roughly paralleled what Dōken had reported previously. The thunder demons—105,000 of them—were Michizane's followers, and he had sent them to punish disbelievers. Michizane promised, however, that he would reward those who worshiped him. The most significant difference between Dōken's account and this oracle was that Dōken presented Michizane in a distinctly Buddhist context, whereas this new oracle was predominantly Shinto in tone. Michizane stated that he bore no grudge against the popular Shinto deities of Kamo, Hachiman, and Hie, but lamented that he was not similarly worshiped. For the first time, he appeared in the context of established Shinto cults. Once again he requested that a shrine be dedicated to him at Kitano and mentioned that pine trees would grow

there, the earliest association of Michizane with the pine tree. The oracle concluded, however, on a Buddhist note with a request that a Lotus Meditation Hall (Hokke Sammaidō) also be established there.

After receiving this oracle, the Shinto priest Yoshitane went to Kitano, where he met the Buddhist monk Saichin whose monastery was located there. While they were discussing what should be done, suddenly a thousand pine trees miraculously grew overnight, just as Michizane had predicted. Since the oracle thereby was proven genuine, they established the shrine as requested. Ayako is not mentioned in the earliest record of this story, but later accounts attempted to fuse the two different versions by stating that she cooperated with Yoshitane and Saichin.[10] In its three founders, Kitano Shrine brought together three different elements of Japanese religion: folk Shinto as personified by Ayako, probably a shaman not associated with any religious establishment; institutional Shinto as represented by Yoshitane, a professional priest at a regular shrine; and Buddhism, as embodied by Saichin, a monk whose name points to an affiliation with Saichō, the founder of Enryakuji, the great Tendai complex on Mount Hiei, which later came to control Kitano Shrine. Anrakuji, the temple in Dazaifu dedicated to Michizane, was already over forty years old, and with the creation of the shrine at Kitano, the institutional foundation had been laid for the metamorphosis of Michizane's angry spirit into the benevolent deity Tenjin. Moreover, divine revelations had helped place Tenjin in the context of established religious beliefs.

During the final stage in Michizane's deification, beginning immediately after Kitano Shrine was founded in 947 and lasting until the end of the tenth century, the institutions dedicated to Michizane were brought under the control of the court, and Tenjin came to be officially recognized as a deity. Just two months after Kitano Shrine had been established, the head of the Sugawara clan appointed the monk Heichū to become the first intendant of Anrakuji. He was a grandson of Michizane, and so initiated the tradition, maintained to the present day, that the men in charge of the temple (or the shrine it later became) all have been direct descendants of Michizane. Anrakuji had been founded by a commoner, but it was now under the



18. An oracle at Ōmi: Michizane and the thunder demons
Source: Temmangū goden.

control of a court family. The same process would soon occur at Kitano Shrine. In 959, it was rebuilt and expanded by Fujiwara no Morosuke (908–960), the most powerful man at court and a son of Tadahira, the Fujiwara minister who had remained friendly with Michizane. Ironically, Morosuke prayed that Tenjin protect coming generations of Fujiwara regents. In the following years, the shrine's original founders began to quarrel over control of the institution. The feud was settled in 976 when the government ruled that, following the precedent of Anrakuji, the Sugawara family should have control of the shrine. Since they had long maintained ties with Saichin's Tendai sect, the Sugawara supported him. Ayako and her followers, who had their roots in popular religion, were expelled.[11]

Once Michizane's descendants had gained control of the religious institutions that enshrined his spirit, Tenjin began to acquire the civilized qualities of the historic Michizane. In 986, when a group of literati presented a collection of their poems to the shrine, one explained that they did so because "Tenjin is the progenitor of literature; the lord of poetry." The image of Fire and Thunder Tenjin gradually diminished, and Michizane no longer inspired cults of ecstatic dancing among the populace. He did remain one of the eight angry ghosts to whom Spirit-Pacifying Ceremonies still were performed sporadically, but aside from that context, Tenjin had come to be regarded as thoroughly pacified, and the places at which he was worshiped, although founded by obscure figures, were under the control of court aristocrats. As a result, in 987, Kitano Shrine was formally recognized by the government, and four years later it appeared on an exclusive list of nineteen principal Shinto shrines. The shrine's glory was crowned in 1004 when Emperor Ichijō (980–1011, r. 986–1011) formally visited it. Michizane himself was not neglected. In 993, he received two final posthumous promotions: first to minister of the left and then, five months later, to the highest court rank and office, grand minister with the senior first rank.[12]

Less than a century after he had died in disgrace, Michizane had been posthumously promoted and was worshiped as a god at a shrine that had been ranked among the most important in the land. Various causes contributed to the rapid spread and

prompt official recognition of Tenjin worship. First, even before Michizane's death, Heavenly Deities, also known as Tenjin, were part of Japanese religion, and fear of angry ghosts was widespread. These beliefs provided a broad and secure foundation upon which later Tenjin worship arose. Second, from its inception, Tenjin worship combined elements from both of Japan's two major systems of belief, Shinto and Buddhism. The cult of Tenjin was thus an integral part of Japan's syncretic religious tradition. Only after the Meiji Restoration did shrines dedicated to Michizane become strictly Shinto. Third, although Michizane himself was very much a man of the court and Heian nobles are usually regarded as isolated from the lower classes, Tenjin worship grew out of a fusion of aristocratic and common cultures: it was not simply a phenomenon of a small elite. And fourth, the continuing admiration for Michizane's poetry among men of letters led them to hold an enduring reverence for Tenjin, an attitude promoted by Michizane's own scholarly descendants, who encouraged government sponsorship of Tenjin worship. As court patronage gew, the popular elements that had contributed to Michizane's deification became less conspicuous, and in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries Tenjin appeared most often as a benevolent god of literature.

THE EVOLUTION OF TENJIN WORSHIP

The decades of warfare and political instability that accompanied the establishment of the warrior government at Kamakura also witnessed a religious revival. Sects of Buddhism promising easy salvation appeared, and itinerant preachers spread the new doctrines throughout Japan. Men of more ascetic temperament turned to the teachings of Zen, which eventually found an audience among members of the samurai class. These new forms of Buddhism were the predominant force that molded the evolution of Tenjin worship in medieval times, as faith in the now benevolent Tenjin spread anew among the populace and reverence for Michizane's literary talents grew among men of letters associated with the Zen sect. Tenjin worship thus changed but did not lose touch with its origins. Michizane's desire for vengeance was no longer a banner under which commoners protested

government policies, but Tenjin remained a popular deity. Chinese had lost its preeminence as a literary language, but poets still presented their compositions at Tenjin shrines.

During the Kamakura period, one way in which Tenjin worship was incorporated into the new Buddhist ethos was that Tenjin came to be regarded as the Japanese manifestation of Kannon, the bodhisattva of mercy.[13] This was an expression of the then-popular doctrine that Shinto gods were Buddhist deities reborn in Japanese form. Identifying Tenjin with Kannon reinforced Tenjin's benign image and helped Tenjin evolve into a compassionate deity who protected the falsely accused and rewarded the honest. The promise of reward to those who worshiped Tenjin resembled the prospect of salvation offered to believers in popular Buddhism.

The cult of Tenjin also adopted methods for proselytizing that were used by the new Buddhist sects. Japanese preachers employed illustrated scrolls as a means of impressing on their audience the history and marvelous powers of their doctrines. These texts, known as *engi,* recounted the lives of men who established sects and the stories of how principal religious institutions were founded. Among the earliest of them is *Kitano Tenjin engi.* The oldest surviving text, dated 1194, presents a colorful narrative of Michizane's life and deification written in the vernacular—Japanese—not the learned *kambun* that previously had been used to chronicle his achievements. The first illustrated version appeared twenty-five years later. Today, approximately thirty illustrated versions, along with many unillustrated ones, are extant, making this one of the most frequently copied of all *engi,* a fact which is one measure of Tenjin's popularity.

The scrolls, which are generally similar, combine fact and legend in recounting the story of Michizane's achievements, downfall, and posthumous revenge. They conclude with a series of anecdotes telling of how those who worshiped at Kitano Shrine were rewarded whereas the disrespectful were punished. These stories, relatively late additions to the Tenjin legend, reveal the missionary intent of the scrolls. *Kitano Tenjin engi* presents what came to be an orthodox version of Michizane's life and deification, and also constitute the most familiar expression of Tenjin worship in the graphic arts. Although these works originally had been the product of aristocratic hands,

they were soon put to use in propagating belief in Tenjin's powers. Today, the most famous of them, the oldest illustrated version, has been designated a national treasure and is on display at Kitano Shrine.[14]

During the Muromachi period, Zen, a sect that appealed to the elite, replaced the popular Buddhist sects as the most significant influence on Tenjin worship. The ties to Zen Buddhism manifested themselves both directly and indirectly. During the medieval period, Zen monasteries became centers that preserved Japan's heritage of Chinese learning and produced a massive corpus of *kambun* literature. As admirers of Chinese literature, Zen monks revered Michizane's accomplishments and composed poems in Chinese praising him. They esteemed Michizane so highly that they converted him posthumously to their sect. A legend first recorded in 1394 stated that in 1241, just after a Japanese Zen master had returned from studies in China, Tenjin appeared before him and begged to become his disciple. The Zen master responded by suggesting that Tenjin go to be initiated directly by his teacher in China. Tenjin then miraculously crossed the sea and appeared in the garden of the Chinese master, where he identified himself with a poem in Japanese. The Chinese sage immediately recognized the great Michizane, instructed him in the secret teachings, and presented him a Buddhist robe. Tenjin then returned to Japan and reported his success to the Japanese master. Although the historic Michizane chose not to visit China as a diplomat, ironically, he was credited with journeying to China as a pilgrim over 300 years after his death. This story became a popular theme among Japanese painters, who often portrayed Michizane wearing the garb of a Chinese Taoist monk and carrying a plum branch.[15]

Zen was also associated with the cult of Tenjin indirectly through *renga,* or linked verse, a form of Japanese poetry influenced by Zen aesthetics that flourished during the Muromachi period. It consisted of a series of short verses, often written by a group of poets each of whom in turn contributed a verse that was linked to the preceding one until a set number of verses had been composed. Poetry in Japanese had been composed at Kitano as early as 1204. It was intended to be for the pleasure of the Tenjin. Other gods were treated to music or sutra readings, but since Tenjin was a patron of literature, he was

entertained with poetry, and because Chinese was no longer fashionable except in Zen monasteries, the poetry was in Japanese.

Renga were first composed at Kitano Shrine in the early fourteenth century when the form was in its early stage of development, and as it matured during the following century, the shrine became its principal center. A Renga Hall (Rengadō) was established there and the Ashikaga shoguns placed in charge of it leading poets, among them the greatest of all *renga* masters, Sōgi (1421-1502). Sōgi did not relish the post and resigned before a year had passed. This, however, was not a sign of disrespect toward Tenjin, for in fact some years earlier Sōgi had made a pilgrimage to the shrine at Dazaifu and had written an elegant description of it. That shrine also became a major regional center for linked poetry, and even today, a neighborhood adjacent to it is known as Rengaya, literally, "*Renga* House," presumably because it was the site of an establishment comparable to Kitano's Renga Hall. *Renga* poets made Tenjin one of their own just as the Zen monks did. In 1373, a child was said to have brought a poem in one hundred links to the mansion of an aristocratic poet, who thought this strange and so had him followed. The child went to Kitano Shrine and suddenly disappeared. Obviously, it was a messenger of Tenjin, who himself had composed the poem. When *renga* poets assembled, they hung a portrait of Tenjin to lend the occasions sanctity and provide poetic inspiration. Some centuries later, writers of comic verse (*kyōka*) did the same to add an air of mock solemnity to their gatherings.[16]

During the Edo period, images of Tenjin again changed to reflect new trends in thought and society. If in the Muromachi period Tenjin had been a Zen monk and linked verse poet, in the Edo period he became an inspiration to secular scholars, a god of calligraphy to schoolboys, and a hero of popular dramas to the merchant class. Confucianism had come to replace Buddhism as the dominant intellectual tradition, and Chinese studies once again achieved a popularity comparable to that which they had enjoyed in the early Heian court. Edo period scholars thus felt an affinity not just with Tenjin as a god of learning but also with Michizane as an intellectual progenitor. A list of those who expressed their reverence for Tenjin would include most of the

great Confucians of the day, among them Hayashi Razan (1583–1657), the founder of the orthodox Neo-Confucian tradition patronized by the shogunate; Kinoshita Jun'an (1622–1689), an early private teacher of Confucianism; Kaibara Ekken (1630–1714), a popularizer of Confucian thought; and Ogyū Sorai (1666–1728), a follower of the "Ancient Learning" (Kogaku) school.

In keeping with rationalistic Confucian ideas, some of these men criticized the ancient legends. For example, Kaibara Ekken denied the truth of such obvious fabrications as Michizane's miraculous journey to China and denounced stories of Tenjin's divine retribution as even more objectionable than Tokihira's slander. "Tenjin," he argued, was characterized by the qualities of honesty, purity, and moderation, and so could not have been responsible for such violent deeds. By the early nineteenth century, Rai San'yō, the scholar whose name appears with Michizane's on the facade of the Boston library, went so far as to defend Tokihira, whom he argued was only protecting his position as other Fujiwara ministers had. According to San'yō, the man responsible for Michizane's (not "Tenjin's") downfall was in fact Uda, who should have realized that after he abdicated, Michizane would no longer be able to protect himself. As long as Uda remained emperor, Michizane would command respect, but as soon as Uda retired, people would claim that a professor of literature was corruptly dominating the government. Moreover, it was only natural that a son should hate his father's favorite, who could use his connections with the father to restrain the son. A son, Daigo for example, would prefer to select as his own retainers men closer to himself in age and inclinations, such as Tokihira. This was true among commoners and all the more true among emperors. What an emperor feared most was having a sibling threaten his position, and so only a few words from Tokihira were required to arouse Daigo's natural fears. Uda was mistaken in thinking that his testament, a single sheet of paper, could restrain his son. San'yō concludes by suggesting that Michizane should have realized the insecurity of his own position, and so he must take partial responsibility for his own downfall since he personally had encouraged Uda to abdicate. In this last point, San'yō is clearly wrong, but otherwise his analysis is remarkably perceptive. It completely rejects

traditional views of Michizane as a deity, Tokihira as a villain, and emperors as anything but ordinary mortals.[17]

The Confucians were not the only scholars to admire Michizane; respect for Tenjin also was expressed by representatives of other intellectual traditions. The monk Keichū (1640–1701), a pioneer in the National Learning (Kokugaku) tradition, and Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843), an anti-Chinese Shinto nationalist, both worshiped Tenjin. Even one specialist in Dutch learning, Maeno Ryōtaku (1723–1803), went to pray at Dazaifu before he began to assist in translating the first Western medical text into Japanese.[18] The catholic appeal of Tenjin worship transcended the boundaries of intellectual affiliation, which in the Edo period became more clearly marked than in Japan's earlier ages.

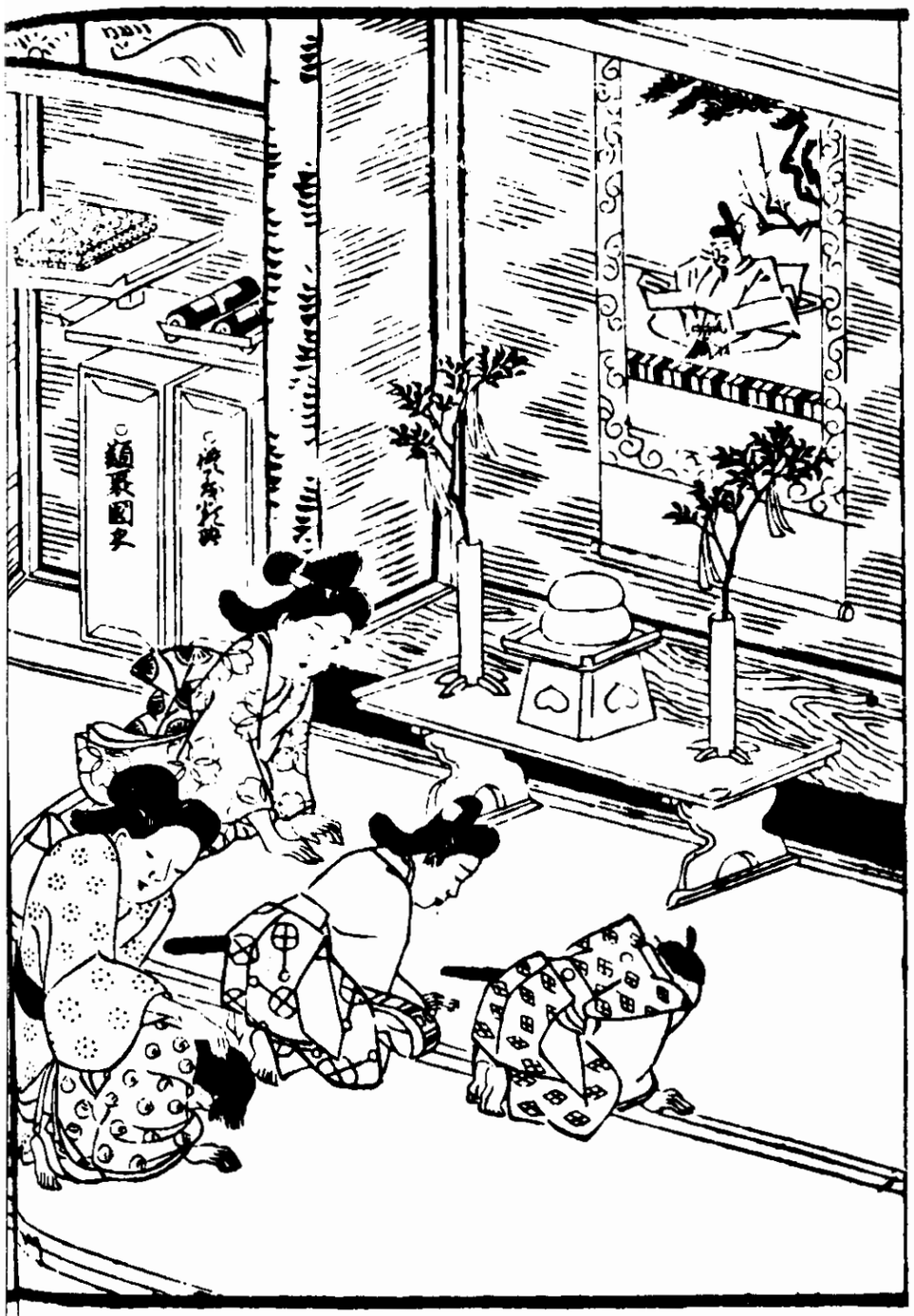
In addition to new intellectual traditions, educational institutions also expanded in the Edo period. Many schools were founded, some for the samurai elite and others for the commoners. In addition to educating Japan's youth, many schools also propagated faith in Tenjin. Those run by feudal domains for their samurai continued the ancient Confucian Memorial Rites that had been performed a thousand years earlier at the court university. A few schools, however, altered the rites by placing an image of Michizane next to a central image of Confucius. Schools for commoners did not hold Confucian Memorial Rites, but most conducted "Tenjin Lectures" (Tenjinkō), ceremonies that traced their origins to the late Kamakura period. As conducted in the Edo period, the lectures began with a school's pupils presenting offerings of food and drink before an image of Michizane while praying for success in their studies and especially in their calligraphy. Their teacher would then offer a lecture on Michizane's virtues and achievements. The service would conclude with a reading of a text known as the *Tenjin Sutra* (*Tenjin kyō*). It was only a few lines long and invoked Tenjin's name in language mimicking that of a Buddhist sutra. Rituals such as these were continued into modern times. In Japan's prewar higher schools, student assemblies were held before an image of Michizane, and at least as late as the 1960s Tenjin Lectures were conducted in a few rural communities.[19]

The popularity of Tenjin spread to the theaters as well. Earlier, noh plays had alluded to Michizane and to legends

associated with him, but the first full account of his life in dramatic form was written in 1713 by the greatest of Edo period playwrights, Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1724). Although Chikamatsu's play did not prove to be a lasting success, it became the model for *The Sugawara Secrets of Calligraphy*, completed in 1746 and still among the most frequently performed works in the puppet theater and kabuki repertoires. In part, the popularity of the work can be explained by the skillful way in which it blended elements of historical fact and ancient legend with values, customs, and events of the eighteenth century. For example, the play took the fact that one of Michizane's daughters had married a prince and improved it by having the daughter elope with the prince against parental wishes, thereby introducing the familiar dramatic conflict between duty (*giri*) and human feelings (*ninjō*). Another key element of the play was, as its title suggests, Michizane's attempts to pass on the secrets of his calligraphy. As noted, his contemporaries did not regard him as a great calligrapher, but in medieval times his writing was praised, and by the Edo period, when no authentic examples survived, he was revered as the supreme master of the brush. In the play, Michizane teaches his secrets to a humble retainer who runs a village school. The most famous scene, combining comedy and melodrama, takes place there and must have reminded most of its original audience of their own schools, where they had been first taught of Tenjin's noble deeds.[20]

During the Edo period, Tenjin worship attracted ever more followers, and the Meiji Restoration in no way diminished its popularity. At least one early Meiji leader, Ōkuma Shigenobu, was a devoted follower of the Tenjin cult, the story of Michizane's virtues continued to appear in textbooks, and the plays about his life remained staples in the playhouses. One important change, however, did occur: in April of 1868, just months after the Restoration, the new government embarked on a policy of eliminating Buddhist elements from Shinto shrines. For the first time, Tenjin and the shrines dedicated to him became purely Shinto. The official effort to separate the two religions proved so successful that today Tenjin's ancient ties to Buddhism have been largely forgotten. Although in one sense this represented a radical break with the past, in another sense it was typical of the history of Tenjin worship, which had always adapted itself

19. Children being taught to worship Tenjin in an Edo-period household
Source: Temmangū goden.



to changes in Japan's intellectual climate rather than adhere to immutable doctrines. As with other manifestations of native Japanese religion, the cult of Tenjin lacked systematic theology and elaborate institutional organization. It consisted instead of individual shrines—some famous, others obscure—all dedicated to the spirit of a man, Sugawara no Michizane, who had come to be revered as a god. Over the years, new stories of Tenjin's miraculous deeds appeared and popular images of Michizane changed. The deeds of the historic Michizane alone remained unaltered, providing a foundation upon which the elaborate cult of Tenjin grew.

Michizane was, of course, no god. Contrary to Kaibara Ekken's claim, moderation was not one of his virtues. He indulged all too willingly in the academic feuds of his day. Moreover, despite good intentions, he did not prove to be an outstanding administrator when he served as a provincial governor, nor was his record in high office one of remarkable accomplishments. Nonetheless, he remains a figure who was indeed deserving of admiration, if not necessarily deification.

More than any of his contemporaries, he was able to take advantage of the flexibility offered by Chinese poetry to treat, for example, social and philosophical themes, to present vividly detailed imagery in poems of considerable length, and to express his personal feelings and experiences. As a result, he produced a body of literature that remains worthy of serious attention. His best poems can be appreciated simply as works of literature, and other works offer valuable insights into his personality and the times in which he lived. Had he written only in Japanese, literary convention would have restricted his range of expression: the standard form of Japanese poetry in his day consisted of only thirty-one syllables, perhaps ten words, and decorum insisted that poets limit themselves to courtly themes and language. Writing in Chinese, however, he was able to graphically show his compassion for the suffering of the poor or his grief over a son who had passed away; he could comfort himself during his years in exile by recounting the events of his life. In addition, the use of Chinese had powerful symbolic value for it demonstrated Japan's commitment to the Sinocentric norms then accepted throughout East Asia. In more practical terms,

it facilitated the conduct of diplomacy and thereby allowed Japan to keep abreast of developments in neighboring countries. Had men like Michizane not kept alive a tradition of Chinese learning, Japan would have been indeed isolated.

Michizane's official career, too, was noteworthy, even if he failed to make a lasting contribution to Japanese political history, except in the negative sense of being among the last of the rivals whom the Fujiwara expelled from the court. The very fact that he attained sufficient influence to threaten the Fujiwara, however, was in itself a remarkable achievement. His was an aristocratic age in which men customarily did not rise above their families' ascribed status. Success on the civil service examinations offered the best chance for an individual to improve his position at court. The efforts of his immediate ancestors had established the Sugawara as a family of scholar aristocrats, and starting from this foundation, Michizane advanced to enter the highest rungs of court government. By Heian court standards, he was a man of modest origins, yet for a short time he was the most powerful man in the government. He attained that position in part as the result of happenstance: he had returned from a tour of service in the provinces just as an energetic and culture-loving emperor was looking for political allies. But in part he had earned the recognition that the emperor bestowed on him. The Chinese values of the day recognized his classical training as properly qualifying him as a government leader. Moreover, he had years of administrative experience, both at court and in the provinces, and he had shown himself to be a forthright critic of Fujiwara attempts to abuse their prerogatives. His tragedy was that the Confucian ideal of the scholar-official was not a realistic one, at least in the context of Heian Japan. A sensitive yet outspoken poet like Michizane was temperamentally unsuited to the political struggles that went with high office.

Michizane's posthumous deification was in itself a complicated and fascinating process. It was an attempt on the part of those who had slandered him to purge their guilt, but it was also a natural outgrowth of existing religious beliefs and occasionally even an expression of antigovernment feelings. Today, he has been worshiped as a god for well over a thousand years, and the

accumulated trappings of divinity occasionally have obscured our view of Michizane the man. He was, however, indeed a remarkable figure deserving the highest respect for his real achievements as a poet, scholar, educator, diplomat, and official. He did not need to be deified to be remembered.