
*“The autumn breeze rises on the shore
at Fukiage-and those white
chrysanthemums are they flowers? Or
not? Or only breakers on the beach?”*
~Sugawara no Michizane



Life of a Scholar and Statesman

I was born August 1, 845 AD as Sugawara no Michizane, not too long after my grandfather abandoned our family name Haiji, and profession as ceramic funerary

smiths. With this decision to reinvent our family to build us up in honorable status, I was born into a family of scholars, poets, and diplomats. My family has always been active and influential in the court: encouraging Japan's embrace of Chinese culture, editing Japan's impartially sponsored anthologies of poetry in Chinese, serving as both professors and presidents of the Confucian-oriented university *Daigaku-ryō*), and participating the last two official mission to China.

With expectation to continue honoring the Sugawara name in both action and profession, I began my own studies in scholarship under the tutelage of my father. Prodigious in my studies of Chinese literature in my youth, I attended university (862-870). In order to gain entry into the bureaucracy of the Japanese I passed the civil-service exam, and took the first steps into my new role, minor as they were in the beginning.

After ten years (877AD-887) as professor of literature in Kyoto, I was appointed governor of the Sanuki Province (Kagawara prefecture today) on Shikoku island, but returned to Kyoto in 890. After this, promotions seemed to just fly by, as Emperor Uda moved me up the ranks of court rapidly, favoring my family name and reputation

over the Fujiwara family who were already firmly cemented in the royal family. The Sugawara family now rivaled the Fujiwara family in power and counterbalanced in influence.

In 899 the Emperor Uda's son Daigo, the succeeding emperor promoted me to minister of right, out of four positions, I became one of the two most powerful politicians in court, the other being Fujiwara Tokihira. Suffice to say, he wasn't very happy with having a rival rise to the challenge for gaining influential power, especially with the foothold into the royal family that my family already had.

Two of my daughters were embraced by the royal family, one a consort to Emperor Uda and the other married to Tokiyo, the brother of Emperor Daigo, building a sturdy foundation for me to act in the court where I promoted scholars of the Sugawara family name into positions of power within the court. With every move to cement my position, I made the Sugawara family a dangerous rival to the Fujiwara family. At this point, I should mention that before I arrived at the position of power that I'm in, I had several other opportunities to climb the political ladder in my younger days. Whether this was for humility's sake or a show of honor, well that's lost to history.

With every step I took to gain more power, I caused further upset to the Fujiwara family at the challenge. Unfortunately, where I had the ear of Emperor Uda, the Fujiwara family had the ear of Emperor Daigo. In 901, I was accused of treason and plot to overthrow Emperor Daigo in favor of his brother Tokiyo, who was married to my daughter. With circumstantial motive and false rumors of conspiracy, Emperor Daigo was convinced and had me exiled to an administrative post on Kyushu Island, separated from my family and disgraced from my position.

At this point, the story would be over but it isn't. In the Shinto religion it's believed that the spirits of those dishonored become restless spirits when dishonored wrongfully. Sometimes they were vengeful in their restlessness. Following Sugawara no Michizane's death in 903, history and myth collided spectacularly.

Vengeance and retribution: Tenman-Tenjin

Six years after the death of Michizane, the Fujiwara family began experiencing no shortage of unexplained tragedy, that eventually spread throughout the court and royalty akin to divine punishment. Meanwhile across the capital, there were natural disasters, plagues, and drought suffered by court and citizens alike.

In 909, Fujiwara Tokihira, Sugawara no Michizane's direct rival died from mysterious circumstances, followed by his nephew, the 21 year-old crown prince Yakusakira in 923. Two years later, Tokihira's grandson 5 year-old

Yoshiyori-both sons of Emperor Diego-died as well, and a rumor that Michizane's spirit was exacting vengeance for the Fujiwara family's hand in his disgrace and exile.

With the rumors growing louder and gaining traction, the court acted out of a desperate attempt to placate Michizane's spirit. Anything documentation related to the false charges brought against him, along with the record of his exile was ceremoniously burnt and his status in the court posthumously returned. This it seemed was not enough to stay Michizane's vengeful spirit.

In 930, a spectacular lightning storm repeatedly struck the imperial palace, smiting the man who Fujiwara bribed to accuse Michizane of treason and several other officials (their involvement is unclear).

Emperor Daigo died the same year at age 46, and disasters of fires and plagues came over the capital since Michizane's death. In addition, several citizens were haunted by visions where Michizane called himself Tenjin and demanded a shrine be built in Kitano. Encouraged by the string of deaths, natural catastrophes, and hauntings that the unjust actions against Michizane angered the gods, a final attempt at placation was made.

As demanded, a shrine to house and honor Michizane's remains and literary works was built in 947, another in Disdainful to enshrine his grave, and in 987 he was deified and given the title Tenjin as the final act of reconciliation.

Sources:

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I encourage you to check out these sites about Tenjin, as well as look into him on your own. An interesting historical figure with a mythology to remember.