Every year, thousands of high school students make their way to the Dazaifu Tenmangū Shrine, a few miles south of Fukuoka City. After lining up and waiting their turn, these young pilgrims pray to Tenjin, the ‘God of Letters’, for success in passing their university entrance exams. The shrine is housed in a distinctive building, with a sweeping roof of thatched bark and lacquered crimson beams dating back to the seventeenth century. It has a far more ancient heritage, however, stretching to an era over a thousand years ago when Dazaifu was known among the courtiers of Kyoto as the ‘distant court’ of Heian Japan.

In life, Tenjin was the renowned scholar Sugawara Michizane, whose prodigious talent illuminated the imperial court at Heian (Kyoto) during the late ninth century. Such was his skill in composing Chinese verse that even visiting emissaries sent by Tang dynasty emperors were impressed. Although he hailed from an illustrious noble family, however, factional infighting at court led to his appointment as governor of far-off Dazaifu in 901. As an administrative centre Dazaifu was second in importance only to Kyoto, and to be governor was the highest post in the realm outside the imperial seat at Heian. At the same time it effectively meant banishment from court.

Condemned to a life of reluctant exile, Sugawara died in Dazaifu two years later in 903. His demise cast such a shadow over the court, especially among his former enemies. In years to come his hand was seen at work in a wave of ominous signs, most conspicuously in 930 when there was a severe drought and lightning struck the palace. Now feared as a thunder god, Sugawara was formally deified in the form of Tenjin in 947.
when the Kitano Tenmangū Shrine was built on the outskirts of Heian in an effort to placate his angry spirit. In Dazaifu, meanwhile, a small altar had appeared in his memory as early as 905, and the cult of Tenjin would become a feature of devotional life at the Anrakuji Temple later built on this site. Buddhist elements were finally removed in 1869 when Shinto shrines and temples were separated by order of the new Meiji state, and this grand building took its present form as a place devoted solely to the cult of Tenjin.1

References to the Sugawara legend abound in Dazaifu. Inside the entrance to the shrine marked by an imposing torii gate is a statue of an ox, recalling the animal that effectively decided the location of Sugawara’s grave when, carrying his body during the funeral procession, it suddenly collapsed and died en route. The approach to the shrine is lined with stalls selling umegae-mochi, a red bean-paste cake taking its name from plum branches. In the inner courtyard is the so-called tobi-ume (flying plum), a tree recalling the poems that Sugawara composed before his departure for Dazaifu, in which he begged his favourite plum tree to let the wind carry its fragrance to him far away in exile. The legend holds that the tree was so moved that it uprooted from his garden and flew to join him there.2 Today the surrounding area is also covered with thousands of plum trees. Other nearby attractions set up in the post-war era to lure the hordes of visitors include a rusting amusement park. A more recent addition, reached by escalators running through a tunnel cut into the hillside, is the futuristic new Kyushu National Museum, concealed from view on the other side.

The name Dazaifu translates literally as ‘Great Government Headquarters’. According to the Nihon Shoki (Chronicles of Japan), an official had been appointed to the post of Tsukushi Dazai, or ‘Viceroy’ of Tsukushi, as early as 609 to represent the Yamato court and receive overseas guests.3 How much authority this title initially carried is open to question, but the idea of a permanent government presence certainly took hold in the middle of the seventh century. In the years following the Yamato fleet’s crushing defeat at the Battle of Paekchon River in 663, new headquarters were built for the viceroy here in the relative safety of this site a few miles inland from the shores of Hakata Bay. The