Dazaifu is a town of approximately 70,000 people located about fifteen kilometres southeast of Hakata Station. Today, it functions largely as what Japanese term a ‘bed-town’, a bedroom suburb to nearby Fukuoka City, but it is also a popular tourist destination, attracting an estimated seven million visitors a year. These two functions reflect something of the town’s history. It has always had close ties to Hakata, although in the past the relationship was reversed. Today, Dazaifu is a satellite to the larger city, but, in the eighth century, when Hakata first appeared in the historical record, it is described as being Dazaifu’s harbour. At that time, Nara was Japan’s capital and Dazaifu was, in effect Japan’s ‘second city’, or, as the great poet Kakinomoto no Hitomaro had put it just a few decades earlier, ‘the emperor’s distant court’.¹ It was the administrative centre for the nine provinces of Kyushu and responsible for overseeing Japan’s foreign contacts. Hakata was merely the port of entry for the larger metropolis, Dazaifu.

In some respects, the history of Dazaifu parallels that of the more famous Nara. Both were created around the turn of the eighth century, Dazaifu circa 663, Nara in 710, as part of Japan’s efforts to create a ‘modern’ centralized state. They were planned cities, laid out in the Chinese manner on a rectilinear grid, Dazaifu being 2.6 by 2.4 kilometres, about one third the size of Nara. Major religious institutions were established within the two cities, but on both sites the most important ones were just outside the city, due east of the main government office buildings. The cities subsequently lost their function as administrative centres, Nara more dramatically in 794 when Japan’s capital was established at what became the modern city of Kyoto. Dazaifu’s decline was gradual. Through the Heian period, the government continued to appoint officials

¹ Or ‘palace’ or ‘capital’, Man’yōshū poems #303–304. See also (in what is a useful introduction to Dazaifu’s history) Mori Hiroko, Dazaifu hakken: rekishi to man’yō no tabi [Discovering Dazaifu: history and poetic travel] (Fukuoka: Kaichôsha, 2003), pp. 31–3.
to staff its offices and some of them did indeed go there to assume their duties, but by the end of the tenth century, much of the planned city had reverted to rice paddies, and eventually the government headquarters too fell into ruin. Both cities, however, survived in a new form, becoming ‘monzen-machi’, literally ‘towns before the gate’. These were settlements that grew up in front of religious institutions and catered to the needs both of those institutions and the pilgrims who came to worship at them. That is why the centres of both modern Nara and Dazaifu are found to the east of the archaeological sites that the ancient government offices have become. As Nara and Dazaifu evolved into cities of religion, the harbours that had once serviced them grew into the modern metropolises of Osaka and Fukuoka. Today, the two ancient capitals attract both commuters and tourists. The commuters spend their days working in the nearby cities but return home to the smaller, more liveable, towns at night. The tourists follow the opposite pattern, coming on day trips to see what remains of the ancient administrative and religious centres but spending their nights at hotels in nearby cities.

Superficially, tourist patterns in the two towns may seem similar, but one suspects that a survey of visitors would reveal a significant difference in their goals. Nara is a UNESCO World Heritage Site that draws visitors from all over the world. They go to see its many shrines, temples, and museums, which house a total of 127 designated national treasures: ancient buildings, statues, paintings, and so forth, among them the most conspicuous being the massive bronze Great Buddha at Tōdaiji, nearly fifteen metres high. Tourists may offer a prayer at the shrines and temples, but that is probably not the main reason for their visit. In contrast, Dazaifu, lacking spectacular attractions, is little known outside Japan. Its two principal tourist attractions are an ancient Shinto shrine, Dazaifu Tenmangū, and the adjacent Kyushu National Museum, opened only in 2005. Compared to the grandest of Nara temples, the Tenmangū is modest in scale. Its only officially designated national treasure is not a great work of art or spectacular object but an incomplete Japanese copy of a seventh-century Chinese text that is of great scholarly value, since it is the only portion of the work to survive. It is not, however, something that tourists would flock to see, even if it were on display. The museum is housed in an impressive modern building and puts up important shows—in January and February of 2011, for example, an exhibit of paintings by van Gogh—but since it is new its own collection is relatively modest. It owns only three national treasures: a fifteenth-century painting, a fourteenth-century sword, and a thirteenth-century manuscript, the earliest one extant, of a history of