

# Tenjin Festival in Tokyo

By

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March 2nd, 1971. Although it is early in the afternoon and an ordinary weekday there is a considerable number of people visiting the small Tenjin Shrine in Yushima, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo. It is the time of the shrine's annual plum blossom festival. As it is the case for most other *matsuri* in Tokyo a number of small stores are lined up along the two short stone-paved ways leading to the shrine. They offer mostly dolls and sweets for the children.

The festival starts on February 25th, the day Sugawara Michizane died in his exile in Dazaifu, Kyushu (903). The victim of intrigues, he was exiled and died after a few years lamenting his miserable lot. But after his death he became a revengeful spirit (*onryô* 怨霊) and a thundergod. As such he tried repeatedly to take revenge on his enemy Fujiwara Tokihira until he finally succeeded. Tokihira fell sick, a terrible flood occurred in the capital, and all this was attributed to the spell of Michizane's unconsolated spirit. To calm this revengeful spirit he was enshrined in the Kitano Shrine in Kyoto. There he was gradually merged with a Tenjin already enshrined. But the belief in Sugawara Michizane as Tenjin spread over the country replacing more and more the many local Tenjins who existed before.<sup>1</sup> In the description of his wanderings through Hell the monk Nichizô tells about his encounter with this spirit.<sup>2</sup> There he says that the spirit gradually was being purified and finally became Tenjin, the friendly and helpful god. Whether Michizane was a famous calligrapher seems to be rather questionable, but he was a sort of a wonder child and reached the rank of a *Monjô Hakase* (文章博士), the highest scholarly rank, at the age of 32. After his death his fame as a scholarly and literary man was further upheld and transferred to his spirit. Therefore, from very early

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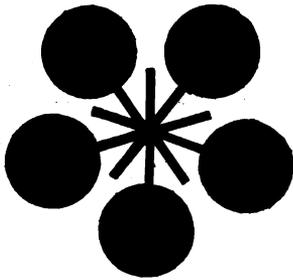
1. Hori Ichirô, Art. "Tenjin shinkô" (Belief in Tenjin), *Nihon shakaiminzoku jiten*, ed. Nihon Minzokugaku Kyôkai (Tokyo: Seibundo Shinkosha, 1957), vol. 3, pp. 973-974.

See also: Miyamoto Mizuo, Art. "Michizane", *Setsuwabungaku jiten*, ed. Nagano Jôichi (Tokyo: Tokyodo Shuppan, 1969), pp. 338-339.

2. "Kitano Tenjin no koto," *Shintôshû*, transl. Kishi Shôzô, *Tôyo Bunko* 94 (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1969), pp. 214-221.

times he was venerated as the tutelary deity of scholarly and literary activities among the literati of the time. But his reputation as tutelary deity of poetry and writing spread also among the common people over the whole country.<sup>3</sup>

The plum blossom festival does not only commemorate the day Michizane died. The flowers of the plumtree in his garden gave the occasion for one of his most famous poems when he left for his exile.



Plum blossom symbol of Tenjin

The flowers should have the wind bring their smell to him their master in the far away Kyushu. And the legend has it that the plum blossoms flew thousands of miles to the lonely Michizane in Dazai-fu. Therefore, the plum blossom is the symbol of Tenjin (see cut).

But, viewing the plum blossoms is only one purpose for the shrine visit in this time of the year. Many of the women visitors are dressed in a good kimono and the men in a good suit.

Why?

This time marks the final stage of the so called "examination hell". The next day the entrance examinations into the famous state universities were to be held. Therefore, it was a busy day for the shrine. From time to time one could hear the voice of the shrine priest (*kannushi*) singing prayers and incantations for a group of shrine visitors praying for success in the coming examination.

Right in front of the shrine, a little to the left, there were two stands where the people could hang up the "*ema*" (絵馬) or votive plates. On the front side these white wooden *ema* show a blooming plumtree and a lying cow together with a stylized plum flower and the stamp of Yushima Shrine. On the rear side there are four columns to be filled in by the petitioner. From right to left things should be written in the following order: address and name of the petitioner, the content of his wish and the date of the examination (see photo on p. 151)

At random I have copied down the inscriptions of a total of 31 *ema*. I am quite aware that, considering the great number of *ema* hanging on the two scaffolds, mine are an insignificant selection. In spite of this I would like to present the results as follows. 8 of the *ema* in consideration were hung up by female and 23 by male students. I can say "students" because all the petitioners in question were actually students of some sort. One tried for a Junior High School, five for

3. Hori, op. cit., p. 974.

Senior High Schools, one for a Business or Language School (probably to learn English) and the rest of 24 tried for universities. About half of these students mentioned only one school, 7 mentioned two, the rest mentioned three and more, one cramming a total of six names in the narrow space.

Eleven petitioners did not specify which department they wanted to enter, but I think in most of these cases the department of literature might be rightly assumed. The rest choose a department as follows: engineering 2, science 2, economics 3, medicine 6. It remains to add, that one student did not mention any university but just wrote "graduation", which is the exact opposite of all the others. And during the time I was copying the inscriptions a few people noticed this "unusual" *ema* and were seemingly amused, saying that you do not need to hang up an *ema* anymore for graduation. It must be said that either in fact or in the mind of some students the really difficult point is the entrance examination and not so much the graduation. The university entered still determines to a great degree the future career of a student.

Altogether 28 universities were mentioned, almost all of them in Tokyo. Since the number of the selected *ema* was rather small, only six universities appeared more than once: Tokyo and Keio University 5; Waseda, Nihon and Tokyo Medical University 3; Jiei University (medicine) 2. Two girl students did not hang up an *ema* but wrote their examination number, the name of the school and a petition on a stiff piece of paper the size of a postcard and tied it to a plum tree in front of the shrine.

While I was at the shrine, all the young people who hung up an *ema* were accompanied by an elderly person (probably a parent or a relative, a young friend). Some did not just hang up the *ema* where there was some free space available but read and considered quite a number of already hanging *ema* before they decided where to hang up their own. This could then be in a bunch of others already hanging there. One lady came and searched anxiously for quite a while for an *ema* in order to add the name of another school. Therefore, it seems to me, the people coming to the shrine to pray for success of the examination do this with consideration. They might act under the actual stress and anxiety to secure a place in a good school, but they seemed to take it seriously, in the sense that this prayer really ought to bring about the fulfillment of their expectations.

To illustrate this point a little further, I would like to describe the actions of a mother, probably in the late thirties, and her son. At the bottom of the wooden stair leading to the worship hall they took off their shoes before climbing the few steps. To the left of the hall, close to the veranda, an old man was sitting, preparing and handing out

the *ema*. The visitors squatted down in front of the low table, gave a few coins as a gift and wrote their names and wishes on the *ema*. Finally they received a printed explanation of the meaning of the *ema*. After that they moved to the inner side of the hall and knelt down there in front on an altarlike table, on which three metallic *gohei* (御幣) were standing. The priest of the shrine chanted a prayer on behalf of the petitioners. After the short ceremony was finished, the lady and her son went to the *ema*-stand in front of the shrine and, following the advice of his mother, the young man looked for a good place to hang up his own *ema*. Then the two went together to a small hut right behind the stone fence surrounding the shrine, where they bought an *o-mikuji*, a written oracle. They had to shake a wooden box until a small bamboo stick fell out. According to the stick's number they received an oracle sheet and read it attentively together. Then they knotted the paper to the iron gate and left.

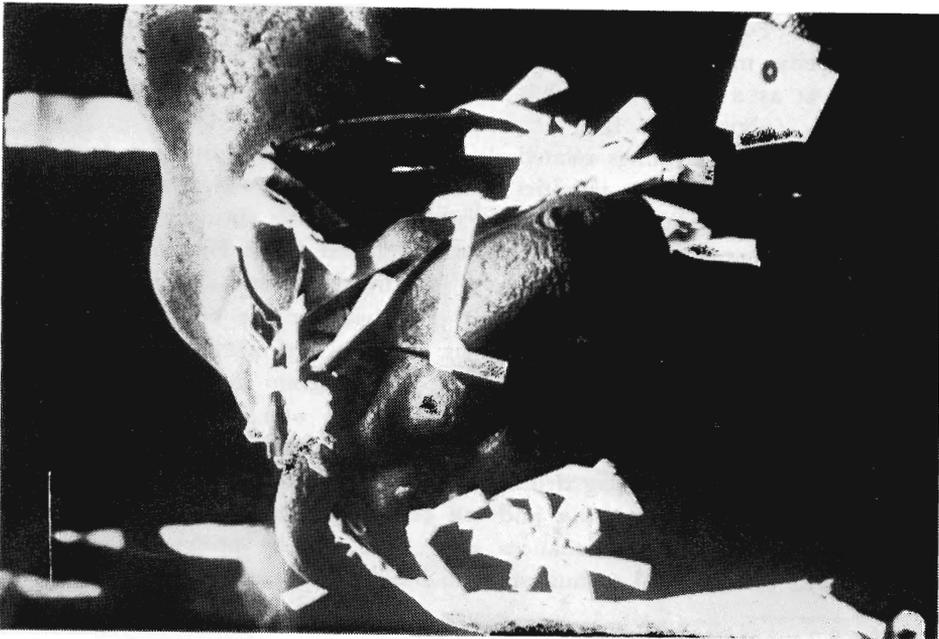
The young man sitting in the small hut was dressed in a white *kimono*. Over that he wore a black *haori* (a sort of Japanese coat) and looked therefore as if he were an attendant at the shrine or a *kannushi*. But he was just a university student doing "Arbeit", i.e., part-time work, to earn some pocket money. He was selling oracle strips and *o-mamori* (amulets). Besides the price of these articles he did not know much of the shrine and the ceremonies being held there. But the visitors, judging from his dress, asked him this and that so that he often did not know how to answer their questions. Yet, since most of the visitors came to buy an *o-mikuji*, he had a fairly good idea of their expectations. He told me that on that particular day the number of students hoping to get into Tokyo University was the highest among the visitors of the day. The university is located about 15 minutes walk from the shrine and was scheduled to conduct its entrance examinations on the following day.

But Tenjin is not only to help through the examination hell. He is the tutelary deity of brush writing as well. That's why on the first day of the festival a ceremony of brush writing took place as an offering to Tenjin. Whoever wanted to participate could join and the white sheets with the large characters were displayed for the time of the festival in an open hall opposite to the shrine's *kagura* stage. Besides the actually written characters, there were at least two so-called "fudezuka" (塚筆), burial sites for brushes, on the shrine compound. In such places the brush of a famous writer is buried and the place is marked with an artistically carved stone monument.

To the right of the shrine and hidden by the *o-mikuji*-seller's hut, there was a monument of a lying and resting cow with two square columns made of stone behind it. Both columns bore inscriptions and



The *ema* are hung up.



The cow decorated with *o-mikuji* stripes (written oracles).

the plum symbol of Tenjin. The cow itself had pieces of red and white cloth bound around the neck, much the way children wear a bib. The inscriptions on the cloth showed that the donator wanted a wish realized but the wish was not further specified. The date when the offering was made, was added, in one case with the remark "*kichinichi*" (吉日), i.e., an auspicious day. On one piece the donators had added another date for each name mentioned, probably the respective person's date of birth. But there was no further indication of the content of the wish itself.

As a sort of offering a small sweet cake in the shape of the plum symbol and a five-Yen coin were placed on the pedestal of the cow's figure. On the cow's neck, however, there were a number of small *o-mamori* (amulets) made of bright red cloth with the name of the shrine and the wish for success in school woven in it with gold threads.

The cow appears also on the *ema* offered at the shrine, so it must have some relation with Sugawara Michizane or Tenjin. But what relation? In the stories of Sugawara Michizane and Kitano-Tenjin there is a passage which might bring some light on this relation. Michizane was to be buried at a place called Yotsudô. A strong cow from the Tsukushi region (Kyushu) was used to pull the cart with the body. But suddenly, at a certain point of the way, the cow stopped and did not move any further. So the people said, this is a sign that Michizane wished to be buried on that very place, which was Anrakuji.<sup>4</sup> For that reason the cow might be considered a messenger for a deity, manifesting the wish of the deity. As such it would be looked at as a being which has direct and intimate connection with the deity. (photo on p. 151)

These are the things related directly to Tenjin as a tutelary deity of scholarly and literary activities which could be observed at the plum festival of this particular and rather well known little shrine in Tokyo. It may be noted that the festival which lasted from February 25th until March 15th was organized not just by the shrine and its *ujiko* (氏子: parishioners). The pamphlet published for the occasion cites furthermore local tourist organizations and an organization of shop-owners of the area around the shrine. The program includes various features like brush writing, recitation of poems and songs, Japanese dance and traditional music, especially the so-called "Tenjin-daiko" (天神太鼓), a group of big drums beaten in front of the shrine. Open air performances of *Ikebana* and tea ceremony were also held. But almost all of these performances were done not by professionals in their field but by local enthusiasts who indulged in such activities as a

4. "Kitano Tenjin no koto," *Shintôshû*, p. 203.

hobby beside their ordinary job.

The shrine is said to have been founded in the 14th century and later restored by Ôta Dôkan and probably by others. It is built halfway up a gentle slope looking down to Ueno. Very recently a huge multi-storied mansion has been built on the opposite side of the main road leading down the hill. The huge complex stands in sharp contrast to the darkened age old wooden structure of the small shrine, but it seems to symbolize somehow the inner situation of the shrine, where the traditional ideas of belief still continue to exist in the middle of the wave of modern thought and science.