

CHAPTER SIX

The Ninth and Tenth Centuries

Principal Characters

Sugawara Michizane, whose spirit is worshiped as the Shinto deity

Tenman Tenjin

Fujiwara Motosune, regent and chancellor

Fujiwara Tokihira, Motosune's son, Minister of the Left

The Emperor Koko

The Emperor Uda, Koko's son

The Emperor Daigo, Uda's son

Prince Tokiyo, Daigo's younger half-brother

Tachibana Hiromi, court scholar

Fujiwara Sukeyo, court scholar

Miyoshi Kiyoyuki, court scholar

Misake Yasunori, priest of Dazaifu shrine

The twenty-second of September: eve of the autumnal equinox. Darkness has fallen but the shrine's compound is alive with light. The main hall glows, and, radiant in front of it, drawn up close, the ornate portable shrine, the *mikoshi*, waits on its stand.

Days and weeks of preparation have ended. Town elders met with priests to review their responsibilities. Those whose hereditary task it is, hauled in clean rice straw, stripped it, and wove it into heavy ropes, yards long, tapered at the ends but in the middle thicker than a stout man's arm; they coiled the new ropes and bore them to an altar in the hills for purification and dedication; finally they raised their ropes--sacred ropes now with zigzag strips of white paper hanging from them--high onto the stone torii gates: taboo against the entrance of evil.

Those priests who will officiate have undergone ascetic withdrawal from their families; sequestered at the shrine, they purified themselves for the rites to come.

The young men of the town who have been entrusted with the mission of carrying the mikoshi have themselves withdrawn from mundane life; quartered together at the shrine, they practiced with the heavy mikoshi, attached its dangling ornaments, formed a team; they cooked their own rice in the ritual way, over wood fires, and eaten the simplest of foods; they performed rites of purification.

All this and more has taken place. Now we are gathered. Some in the crowd come forward to pray.

To the mythic sounds of flutes and drums priests dressed all in white file into the sanctuary. Taking positions in two rows facing each other, they form a passage from the main altar to the mikoshi. The chief priest enters and stands between them. Facing the altar, he unrolls a scroll and intones his prayer. He praises the deity, begs him to manifest himself, to descend to the earth he once walked as a man so that his people may press close in worship.

The other priests, raising lengths of white cloth to screen the passageway from their eyes and ours, herald the deity with a soaring cry of wonder. We are plunged into darkness. The priests' paeon swells to climax. The lights flash on. During the blackout the chief priest has ushered the deity from the altar of the sanctuary to the altar of the mikoshi. The Great Autumn Festival is under way.

Youths clad like attendants to the nobility come forward to receive their banners, emblems, staves, pikes, bows with quivers of arrows, and lanterns-- lanterns on tall poles, lanterns hung on frames, dozens of lanterns, all blazoning the shrine's plum blossom crest. The young men, trained and ready, shoulder the heavy poles of the palanquin bearing the mikoshi. The long procession forms as it moves out of the compound: the ninth century brought to life in costumes, equipage, and manners.

Lay persons like me follow at the rear, over the two drum bridges, through the gates, into the banner-lined street. There is no height that gives a view of the whole train: the files of priests, the files of attendants, the shrine maidens, the booming drums, the flutes; the chief priest on his horse; the deity's white horse with its empty saddle; the ox-drawn carriage like those that carried the nobility, this one with a small boy solemnly representing the deity; the hand-drawn carts bearing symbols and flags; the chattering, snapping lion's head stooping to children, who, if they are brave enough to put their heads into the gaping mouth, will be granted a healthy, lucky year. The bobbing lanterns stretch ahead.

Far across the rice fields and the trees and the new houses of those who commute to the city, a great fire is set to blazing on the mountain that legend says

the deity climbed; we can see its glow on the horizon. Kanzeonji's temple bell is rung in salute.

We move slowly, our pace set by the lumbering ox. Walking under the stars, I think how different is this procession from the festivals that I have seen at other shrines. They were boisterous, spurred by a deity on the loose, rampaging in the streets, tossing his mikoshi, stopping for drinks with favored families, savagely striking at houses out of favor.

Not this god. Our passage is sedate, dignified. We are enacting the decorum of the ancient court of which he was a member. Our deity is composed, refined.

He was not always so. He began violent and vengeful. It was his vengeful violence that made him a deity, a process we can trace, step by step. The story is compounded of fact and legend, difficult to separate, and we cannot always be certain which is which.

Our destination tonight is the site of a run-down cottage where the court noble Sugawara Michizane endured the last two years of his life. Under house arrest, branded a criminal, stripped of rank and position, exiled to Dazaifu, he suffered here, despondent and ill, until death took him in 903.

When a man from the capital died at Dazaifu his ashes were sent back to his home, but it is said that Michizane did not want this. To circumvent the regulations it may have been necessary to bury his body secretly. We are told that faithful servants placed his remains in an oxcart and started for the mountain graveyard. Just outside Dazaifu, close by a high ridge, within the precincts of a Buddhist temple, the ox lay down, refusing to go farther, and at that spot chosen by the ox, burial took place. This beguiling story has inspired the several handsome sculptures of a recumbent ox seen at the shrine today, and the presence of the ox tonight, but there are those who say it is only a legend. Whether or not an ox selected the gravesite, there is no doubt about the place: the main altar of the shrine rises directly above it.

Nothing especially remarkable so far, but at the capital six years later the man who had been Michizane's rival and who had contrived his banishment, who had then become prime minister and undisputed head of the government, Fujiwara Tokihira, died at the age of thirty-nine in the prime of his life.

Thirteen years later, in 923, the crown prince died at twenty-two. He was a nephew of Tokihira, whose sister had been married to the emperor shortly after Michizane was sent into exile.

Now it dawned on people that Michizane's malevolent spirit was at work. Stories circulated about the strange circumstances of Tokihira's death. A Buddhist priest had been summoned to his bedside to pray for his recovery. The monk's father also came, and he was the scholar who had hatched the plot against Michizane. Suddenly two green serpents emerged from Tokihira's ears, demanding that the father get his priestly son out of there. The frightening order was obeyed, the prayers ended, and Tokihira died. People understood that Buddhist exorcism had stymied Michizane's ghost until it appeared so fiendishly to the father with the guilty conscience.

Courtiers and commoners alike now knew that Michizane's embittered spirit was abroad. At the court spirit-pacifying ceremonies were conducted; Michizane's sons had already been called back from their exile and their careers rehabilitated; a quickly drafted imperial edict announced that in order to calm his spirit Michizane was posthumously pardoned, promoted in rank, and restored to the high office he had occupied. (Also, unfortunately, the emperor ordered that all records of the banishment be burned, making it impossible to know exactly how the plot was perpetrated.)

The troubles did not end. Two years later, in 925, the new crown prince died. He was Tokihira's grandson and he was only five.

In 930 a severe drought was broken by a terrible thunderstorm. Lightning struck the imperial palace, killing four courtiers, among them a man who had been involved in Michizane's exile. The emperor was so shocked that he sickened and died.

This calamity linked Michizane with the Thunder Demons. Since they were worshiped at Kitano, a shrine on the outskirts of the capital, Kitano became the focus of prayers to Michizane, and naturally, spontaneously, so did all of the many other Thunder Demon shrines from one end of Japan to the other. The new deity had acquired a nationwide spread of shrines.

Things had been happening at Dazaifu, too. One of Michizane's devoted attendants had erected a mausoleum over the grave, and there he performed Buddhist memorial services. After Tokihira's untimely death, his younger brothers found it wise to take precautions: they built a chapel to enclose the altar. Others, both from the capital and from Kyushu, added their contributions of money and land as endowment. The memorial to Michizane absorbed the old Buddhist temple and took its name, Anrakuji. The institution that is today a Shinto shrine existed for more than nine centuries as a Buddhist temple.

A Buddhist temple dedicated to a Shinto god might seem incongruous to outsiders, but those who built the temple saw no contradiction. The Japanese draw no hard line between their religions. Their deities mingle and merge; no clutter of dogma fences them off. The gods are venerated simply and directly. All prayers are valid.

In the capital, Tokihira's direct descendants continued to die off at ages alarmingly young (although his brothers' families flourished). There were more oracles, more revelations. One came to a Buddhist priest called Doken. Doken may have inherited a guilty conscience, for he was another son of that conspirator who at Tokihira's deathbed had been confronted by the two green serpents.

Doken reported to the court that after twenty-one days of prayer and fasting in a remote mountain cave he had been transported to heaven, where the Buddha introduced him to the deity who had been Michizane. When Doken informed him that in Japan he was honored as the Fire and Thunder Tenjin, Michizane protested, saying he was more important than that; the Thunder Demons were merely his messengers, and yes, he had dispatched them to strike the palace. He added that previously he had been so filled with anger that he had planned to destroy all Japan, but Buddhism had calmed his rage by one-tenth, so that now he intended to punish only those who had wronged him. Doken went on to visit hell, where he found the former emperor and his ministers writhing in torment for the evil they had committed against Michizane; the emperor begged Doken to have prayers said for his salvation.

Having heard Doken's report, the court intensified its services, while people in general rejoiced that Michizane had assured Doken that he would answer the prayers of those who worshiped him.

In the capital a year later, in 942, a poor woman named Ayako, who was a shaman and therefore accustomed to hearing divine utterances, received an oracle from Michizane: he wanted her to build a shrine for him at Kitano. Too impoverished to do that, Ayako could only put up a humble altar near her hut, but word of her oracle spread among the common people of the capital region. To them Michizane was a hero who had stood against government injustice. He had struck down their oppressors. He was a rebel against authority and he brought out the latent rebel in them. A singing, dancing crowd converged on Kitano and they built Ayako's shrine.

Theirs was simple, folk belief, but orthodox Shinto also heard from Michizane. In 947 another oracle was issued through Taro, the seven-year-old son of a Shinto priest. In it Michizane complained that he was not being worshiped as

impressively as were Hachiman and other major Shinto deities, and again he requested a shrine at Kitano. The boy's father hastened to Kitano, where, as vowed, a thousand pine trees sprang up to verify the oracle. The shrine was built, supplanting the earthier one of Ayako's followers.

The court continued to be nervous. Disasters occurred just as they always had--the usual disasters: fires, floods, drought, pestilence--but now they raised racking questions. Had Michizane's spirit inflicted them? Had enough been done to mollify him?

He had been restored to the eminence he had achieved in life, but perhaps that was not enough. So they promoted him to the loftier post that his rival Tokihira had occupied. Finally, desperately, toward the end of the century, they gave him the highest rank that existed, Senior First Rank, and the highest office that existed, Grand Minister. They hoped he was satisfied. They had run out of earthly honors.

In the realm of the divine, he was already established as a deity, and an imposing one. The Thunder Demons were Tenjin, Heavenly Deities, and his association with them made him a Tenjin, too. (He bypassed the lesser category of Earthly Deities, though he had certainly been mortal.) His shrine at Kitano had been officially recognized and given elite status. The ultimate accolade came in 1004, when the emperor came to pay his respects with prayer.

By then a transformation was well under way. The Sugawara family had been given control of both Anrakuji at Dazaifu and Kitano at the capital. When Michizane's descendants took charge they set about to change the image of their ancestral deity. Fierce avenger gave way to a gentle god of scholarship, literature, and calligraphy, who answered prayers for scholarly advancement and excellence in the arts. Today it is a rare student who does not come to one of his shrines petitioning to get into the right school or university. Priests dislike talking about their deity's career of vengeance but they cannot erase it. Underlying the figure of the noble scholar is the antiestablishment militant with the power to right wrongs.

The figure we celebrate tonight as our procession moves toward the place where he spent his last unhappy years is sedate and gentle and dignified, all of these, but he has the force to erupt against injustice and to champion its victims. He has the majesty of righteousness.

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The Sugawara family to whom Michizane was born in 845, shone in scholarship, not politics, but scholars were essential to government. Scholarship meant proficiency in Chinese, and Chinese was the language of government (as in Europe Latin was the official language of state and church through the Renaissance). Scholars were part of the same bureaucracy as politicians. In the hierarchy of the court they climbed the same ladder of rank.

The Sugawara were not an old family; they dated from Michizane's great-grandfather. The family had produced scholarly officials before him; for example, two family members serving under Otomo Tabito at Dazaifu in 733 were good enough poets to be invited to the plum blossom party (mastery of Chinese meant the ability to make an acceptable poem). But it was great-grandfather who made it possible for the family to rise to high rank. His character and his learning made him tutor to a crown prince who became a powerful emperor and who gave his old teacher a major promotion and willingly granted his petition to change his family's name from Haji to Sugawara. The change freed his descendants from the constraints tied to the old name, those of being a "service family" permanently locked in the lower ranks. One of the duties traditional with the family was providing funeral wares and services: a family legend said it was one of their ancestors who originated the haniwa clay figures, ending the live burial of a deceased bigwig's entourage.

The new Sugawara family that great-grandfather founded was not entitled to high rank by birth, as were noble families like the Otomo and the Fujiwara, but a Sugawara with ability and luck could climb into the higher ranks.

Michizane's grandfather did just that. His scholarship got him appointed to the 803 embassy to China, a dangerous honor but one that he survived. At the Chinese court he so distinguished himself that when he made it safely home he was granted fifth rank, the breakthrough that moved him from the minor to the major aristocracy. He went on to success as an educator and a scholar-poet, and he achieved the lofty third rank, putting him in the select company of only seven or eight men at any given time who rose that high; most of them of course were from noble families.

Few of grandfather's poems have survived. One that has is a cheerful comment on his own musicianship. "As a child I enjoyed music, and as an adult I appreciate it all the more.... Unfortunately I am completely unable to play any stringed instrument or produce a single note on the flute." But, he rejoiced in elegant Chinese, he could whistle.

Michizane's father also made it to third rank, and so from Michizane's earliest years there was pressure on him to succeed, all the more so because his elder brother died young, leaving him the only son. High rank would not come automatically: he had to seek it, as his father and grandfather had, through the examination system and the university.

He was a precocious child but not a healthy one; probably he studied too hard. When he was still young he entered the Sugawara school, established by his grandfather to prepare students for the university entrance examination. Competition to get into the university was fierce; it was not unusual for men in their forties to be taking that examination. He passed it at eighteen. Five years later his father promoted him to graduate student; no doubt there was talk of favoritism.

The next hurdle was the civil service examination. Only the able and ambitious attempted it. Most students shied away: after a few years of study they took minor appointments and disappeared into the bureaucracy, never becoming important enough to be mentioned in the annals. Michizane aimed higher. He tackled the examination and at the unusually young age of twenty-six he passed it.

Early in the next year, 871, he received his first appointment as a junior official. His principal duty was to draft state papers, which had to be written in Chinese both precise and elegant. In addition to the documents he wrote in line of duty, he drew up many petitions for senior officials whose Chinese was not as assured as his. On occasion he wrote both such an appeal and then the imperial reply. Obliging powerful men did his career no harm; he became a personal friend of the most powerful of all, the regent Fujiwara Motosune. (As usual, the Fujiwara were firmly in control of the government.)

Michizane's reputation as a poet grew, too. He was sometimes called to the court to produce the kind of formal poetry required on ceremonial occasions. Such poems were not mere diversion; they were an essential part of the ritual that propelled government.

He advanced steadily. In 877, at thirty-three, he achieved one of his greatest ambitions: he was appointed professor of literature at the university. He was the third generation of his family to hold that post, something unprecedented. He had a right to be proud, and he was. His honors had come to him, he wrote, because of his talent and ability.

Then in 880, when his father died, he inherited control of the Sugawara school. There were other preparatory schools but the graduates of the Sugawara

school were the most successful in their later careers. While Michizane was its head it trained several hundred students, and they went on to dominate the university and to spread Michizane's influence throughout the bureaucracy.

Whichever school they attended, graduates remained fervently loyal to their teacher. Academic cliques generated spiteful feuds and rivalries. Michizane himself was certainly partisan. He was accused of favoritism, sometimes justly. He was quick to criticize but bitter when criticism was aimed at him. Because he considered few men his equal, he made few friends. He did, however, accumulate enemies.

Rivals accused him of writing an anonymous poem that slandered an important Fujiwara statesman. Michizane wrote that the blame fell on him because the poem was "technically superior." The incident could have wrecked his career but fortunately it blew over.

A year later he was indignant because critics had sneered at poems he had written in line of diplomatic duty, an exchange with the ambassador from Parhae.

It was forty-five years since the last Japanese mission to China, and relations with Korea were, as usual, strained. Japan's diplomatic activity was almost entirely restricted to Parhae, a country nearly forgotten today, but then in the flourishing middle of its two-hundred year history. It lay in southwestern Manchuria and the northeastern part of the Korean peninsula, and because it was as enthusiastically Sinophile as Japan, it was in Michizane's time Japan's chief conduit of Chinese culture. It was Parhae, for example, that brought China's latest, improved calendar, which the Japanese used to regulate their days until the sixteenth century.

Trade was important, too, briskly conducted under the pretense that it was "tribute." The Parhae delegations brought ginseng, honey, and furs, including tiger, bear, and leopard. The Japanese sent silks and brocades. That was the official trade. The Japanese court banned private trade between merchants, but it was certainly larger than the official trade.

Late in 882 a large Parhae embassy sailed across the Sea of Japan to a port on Japan's west coast far north of Hakata and Dazaifu. They spent the winter there, probably busy with illicit trade, and in the spring crossed the mountains to the capital on roads which, by government order, had been repaired and cleared of "corpses left by the roadside."

A hundred and forty-eight women dancers and 107 musicians had been rehearsing all winter to entertain them. An essential part of the protocol was the

exchange of poems, in Chinese, of course. It was official business in which each side was on its mettle, for it represented its country's culture.

Aware that the Parhae ambassador was a poet of note, the Japanese bolstered their delegation with their two finest poets, Michizane and his father-in-law, temporarily shifting them into diplomatic service with suitably high rank.

In the face of temptation to prepare poems in advance, Michizane persuaded his delegation to forgo ready-made verses: they would rely on the inspiration of the moment. "Each time we joined together to exchange poems," he wrote, "we loosened our belts and collars, and traded many cups of wine."

He also noted that, "Alas, writers always belittle each other." When it was over, the barbs came. He fumed that last year his enemies had charged him with that scurrilous anonymous poem because it was so well made; now they "grumble how crude my poems." He conceded that some were irregular, "but all were composed spontaneously" and at least one "was a work of rare genius. ... When a wise man speaks, the fools all take delight."

Despite such discords, those were years of fulfillment and satisfaction. Then that agreeable world fell apart. On the sixteenth day of the New Year of 886 the court announced its new appointments. Michizane was named governor of Sanuki Province.

For the next four years he would have to live in Sanuki and administer it.

He knew that as an official of the court he could be appointed to any position appropriate to his rank, but having established himself as a scholar it never occurred to him that he would be sent to the provinces to deal with the nitty-gritty of government. He was devastated.

It is difficult to comprehend the bleak sense of exile that mortified a courtier when he was sent to the provinces--and the provinces began at the borders of the capital. To a man of middle rank with no hope of going higher, provincial service meant a chance to accumulate a nest egg that would make life easier, but it was a sacrifice. Extended service in the provinces marked a man as ordinary; children raised in the provinces could never overcome the stigma of being rustic.

Michizane was not being banished but he felt that he was. His term in Sanuki loomed as drudgery with only clods for company, cut off from family and friends, scholars and poets, the business and brilliance of the court.

His friends tried to console him. Regent Fujiwara Motosune went out of his way to be kind, but Michizane left in tears. He went alone. He did not take a wife (he had more than one, for he fathered twenty-three children), and he would not scar a child's life by contamination with yokels.

He was lucky that his assignment was to flourishing Sanuki (today with almost identical borders it is Kagawa Prefecture). On the island of Shikoku, across a narrow island-studded channel of the Inland Sea, it was a few days' easy journey from the capital. It was not a large province, but it was so productive that its tax assessment was among the highest in the country.

Nor was it a cultural backwater. It had produced notable scholars, including the great Buddhist priest Kukai.

Kukai had died only fifty years earlier but already he had become a revered, almost mythical figure. His birthplace drew a steady stream of disciples, his family home had been turned into a temple, and around his name were clustering the legends that would transform him into a saviour, a miracle-worker, and a deity.

Michizane came without an aura of greatness, lonely and unsure of himself. He felt that he was unsuited for his job, and he was right. He lacked the necessary training and he lacked the temperament to deal with the practical affairs of government. He was told that his two immediate predecessors were remembered with respect and affection; that did not raise his confidence.

Describing his first tour of inspection, he wrote:

Opening the prison door I check that no one is unjustly held.

Lightly raising my reed whip, I gently chastise habitual wrongdoers

I try to teach the youths and lower classes to respect their elders and superiors.

His good intentions are evident, but throughout the poem runs the plaint of a man uneasy in unfamiliar territory: "I try to focus my vision [but] ... my talents are limited.... My thoughts are shallow."

If I govern poorly, my good name will be ruined.

How can I earn a good rating and advance in the world?

He had a staff of three or four from the capital but a governor had to depend on the local officials. He knew that, but it was hard for him to forge good relations with men he considered common.

They too had pride. They were the landed gentry, an aristocracy in their own right, families with a long history in their districts. They were possessive of their land and their peasants, and they could be intolerant of the courtiers who came like carpetbaggers from the capital.

It was the local gentry who actually governed the people and collected from them the taxes that supported every level of the ruling class, from village to province to the aristocracy and emperor of the court. All of the country's wealth was produced by the peasants. They were squeezed and squeezed again.

Michizane was right to "fear that the poor and weak will suffer at the hands of the rich and powerful," but he seemed helpless to do anything about it.

"I have tried to be honest and conscientious," he wrote, "but how bitter to be surrounded by corruption." Corruption was built into the system. Officials, both local and from the capital, were allotted shares of the province's taxes as part of their salary. It was a temptation, rarely resisted, to take more than was authorized, or to keep the good quality and remit the bad. Few governors did not go home gratifyingly richer after their term of office.

Michizane was one of several governors whose shipments of the silk which was part of their provinces' taxes drew sharp criticism from the capital: it was so thin it was "Just like a spider's web in autumn" or so coarse it appeared to be "woven from fibers of weeds." Each negligent governor was sent a bolt of properly woven silk from the government warehouse in case he had forgotten what good silk was like.

Michizane recorded few triumphs as governor. One came early. When he first arrived at Sanuki's capital he was pleased to find a lotus pond nearby. Flowers were abundant that year and the next. "I addressed my fellow officials and had them compose poems in praise of the blossoms," and because the lotus is a sacred flower in Buddhism (deities are often pictured seated on a lotus), "From among the countless plants in the pond, I plucked enough to distribute to the twenty-eight temples in Sanuki." He hoped that this would help the people "gain salvation" and he reported that it did indeed inspire joy and piety, as well as impressing his fellow officials, who "praised me as their leader."

The greatest disaster that he faced was a drought that came late in his tour. In 888 the lotus pond and most of Sanuki's irrigation ponds dried up. Prayers went up from both Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples:

The shrine priests are exhausted from running about distributing offerings.

The monks in meditation weary of sitting and reciting sutras.

Finally Michizane took matters into his own hands. He climbed the height called Fortress Mountain to Sanuki's preeminent Shinto shrine and addressed a no-nonsense prayer to the deities: "The Governor of Sanuki, Senior Fifth Rank Lower, Lord Sugawara, reverently prays to the gods of Fortress Mountain with offerings of wine, fruit, incense, and cloth."

In case those bribes did not soften the gods' hearts, he reminded them that generosity has its limits. "Sanuki contains eighty-eight villages with two hundred thousand inhabitants." If rains come, "if not one village experiences calamity and not one mouth voices complaint, then the holy offerings of food, cloth, and jewels will be pure and plentiful.... But if the benevolent rains are few ... the people will be filled with anger. Both gods and men will suffer. The rites of worship will fall into disuse. As gods, you may judge this. Do not begrudge your divine assistance. I beg you to accept this prayer." The blend of blandishment and blackmail worked. It rained.

The court permitted Michizane to spend the second winter of his term at home and so he was able to attend the enthronement of a new emperor, one who would have a profound effect on his life.

The previous emperor, who had reigned under the name of Koko, was an anomaly; he had come to the throne at fifty-five in a period when child emperors were the norm. The Fujiwara chancellor would select a young imperial prince born to a Fujiwara mother, put him on the throne, and then rule for the boy as regent.

Fujiwara Motosune had done that ten years earlier, but his choice had turned out to be psychotic with homicidal tendencies; it had been necessary to retire him at the age of sixteen, and before Motosune picked another child he wanted a little time to assess the candidates. He resorted to Koko, an imperial prince not in line for the throne, who was to serve for a few years as a stopgap, with the clear understanding that none of his sons was to succeed him.

When Koko fell ill three years later, Motosune was ready with the child of his choice. However, the dying emperor had a change of

heart. Adroitly outmaneuvering Motosune, he managed to make his own twenty-one-year-old seventh son the crown prince. This was unsettling but Motosune had to accept it; he took what comfort he could from hearing Koko bid his son to rely on Motosune's counsel.

Dutifully--and because he had no choice--the new emperor, who took the name of Uda, directed an eminent scholar named Hiromi to write an edict confirming Motosune's powers as chancellor. Etiquette demanded that Motosune decline the first invitation. In drafting the second edict Hiromi for some reason changed the term for "chancellor" to the word *ako*.

Motosune had served Koko as *ako* without objection but now a scholar named Sukeyo informed him that in ancient China the title of 'ako' was honorary, conveying neither duties nor power.

Fujiwara Motosune had no interest in empty titles and, moreover, he suspected Uda's motives. His father Koko had demonstrated that he wanted to reassert imperial authority by loosening the Fujiwara grip on power; the son seemed to have similar ideas. He had not had the benefit of a Fujiwara mother and upbringing in a Fujiwara household; apparently he needed a lesson in government. Motosune turned the academic squabble into a contest of wills. He sent word that since the title of 'ako' conferred no duties, he would perform none, although if Uda wanted him as chancellor he would gladly serve as he had before. Then he retired to his mansion. As long as he stayed at home, no other important official dared offend him by reporting for duty. Government halted.

In this dilemma Uda called for a scholarly debate between Hiromi and Sukeyo. It was no help. He wrote in his diary that both their arguments seemed reasonable. "But the day was hot, and my heart was filled with anxiety. Thus I could come to no decision. All affairs of government, great and small, have stagnated. All the provinces and all the ministries complain ceaselessly."

The emperor was so distraught that he became impotent, compounding his anxiety. His physicians were able to cure that but the political crisis continued. Four months passed. Uda announced that the word 'ako' had been used contrary to his wishes. That was not enough. Four more months went by before he caved in. In the late autumn he accepted one of Motosune's daughters as his consort, so that a Fujiwara heir could be hoped for, and legal experts were summoned to determine Hiromi's punishment for his "misdeed" (he was pardoned almost before he was

sentenced). Motosune was satisfied. He took up his duties and the court began to function again.

Because the ‘ako incident’ occurred while Michizane was governor of Sanuki, he was not directly involved, but he had been in the capital when it began and he followed it intently after he returned to Sanuki. Both scholars had been students of his father, both were friends of his, and Sukeyo had married one of his daughters. He wrote in a poem that “ugly disputes ... make me glad I am not ... at court,” but when Hiromi wrote asking for support because all the court scholars had turned against him, Michizane responded with a blunt letter to his friend and benefactor Motosune. He defended Hiromi, pointing out (as apparently no one else had) that although in ancient China ‘ako’ was indeed an honorary title, in later times it meant ‘chancellor.’ He made it clear that he thought Motosune was not being the “model of behavior” he was “supposed to be.”

It is not known whether this letter helped to settle the dispute; Motosune may have received it after the affair was resolved. But it had a decided effect on Michizane’s career: it strained his relations with the Fujiwara and it brought him to Uda’s attention as a man who dared to stand up to the Fujiwara.

A retiring governor was supposed to remain at his post until the records of his administration were inspected and approved. Michizane couldn’t wait: he headed for home as soon as his term was up. The required audit was slowed because he was not on hand; it took a full year, a year in which he was not eligible for a new appointment because he hadn’t been cleared from the old.

But he was home, and again he was being called to the palace to offer poems. Uda had literary tastes, and during the year a warm relationship developed between the forty-seven-year-old scholar and the twenty-four-year-old emperor. Beyond that, because Michizane had the administrative experience of governing a province, he appeared to be a likely ally in Uda’s push to restore power to the throne.

Early in 891 Michizane received a new appointment. Fujiwara Motosune had died a month earlier and his son Tokihira was only twenty-one, too young to exert the power he was heir to. Uda seized the chance to appoint his own men to key positions. He made Michizane the head of the office that assisted the emperor in affairs of state. With this appointment Michizane crossed the line from scholarship to politics, the first of his family to find himself on the track to political power.

He was almost derailed three years later. In 894 he was appointed ambassador to China. Had he made the journey he would have been absent for a year or more and, considering the dangers, he might never have returned; but the mission was never sent.

There are those who see his appointment as a Fujiwara plot to get rid of him, but the embassy was probably Uda's idea, part of his effort to revive tradition. It had been more than fifty years since the last mission to China, and certainly Michizane was the logical choice as ambassador: he was the country's leading Chinese scholar; he had diplomatic experience in receiving missions from Parhae; and his grandfather in 804-805 and an uncle in 838-839 had served in the two most recent embassies to China.

It is clear that Michizane considered his appointment an honor—he continued to use the title of ambassador for more than three years but he had no desire to make the journey. He took the lead in urging that it be postponed and then cancelled.

He offered a bundle of reasons. To build and outfit four ships and assemble the required gifts would have been a huge expense, and the court was pinched financially. The T'ang dynasty that had ruled China for almost three centuries was crumbling; China was torn by strife and rebellion; there was reason to doubt that the Japanese would be properly received or even safe. The voyage would have been even more dangerous than usual because Korean pirates were harassing the sea routes. In earlier times the missions had satisfied the court's desire for cultural advances and exotic goods; now those needs were met by the missions from Parhae, by Chinese merchants, and by the private travel of Buddhist monks.

Underlying all this was a growing sense of independence: the Japanese were feeling more self-assured about their culture; they no longer felt a need for Chinese tutelage. It would be nearly four centuries before Japan sent another official embassy to China.

That issue disposed of, Michizane continued his rise to power. The emperor pitted him against the ranking Fujiwara, Motosune's son Tokihira. Since Tokihira was who he was, he started with higher court rank, but Michizane's promotions came faster. Rank does not tell the whole story: through most of the decade from 891 to 701, Michizane's duties were distinctly more important. He wielded more influence; he was Uda's confidant, his most trusted adviser.

The daughter that Motosune had placed in the emperor's household as part of his price for settling the 'ako' affair became pregnant, but Motosune's dying

prayers that the child be a boy were not answered. The baby was a girl and females were no longer in the running for the throne. (After the sour experience with Koken/Shotoku there was not another empress for more than eight centuries.) So Uda was able to pick his own heir and Michizane helped him choose. Since they could not incense the Fujiwara, they regretfully passed over Uda's favorite son in favor of one with a Fujiwara mother. Michizane then took a hand in educating the boy with poems meant to elevate his taste and build his character.

Once he had things arranged to his satisfaction, Uda wanted to retire. Apparently he believed that he could control the government and his young son from retirement, as some emperors had done in the past. Michizane persuaded him to wait a couple of years, but in 897, on the same day that the court celebrated the coming of age of the thirteen-year-old crown prince, Uda made his announcement, proclaiming that "until the young emperor has matured" the affairs of government should be conducted by Tokihira and Michizane. His testament to his son included obligatory praise of Tokihira but a glowing assessment of Michizane: I have taken him as my mentor," he wrote, and he urged his son to do the same.

On this same day that the young Emperor Daigo was enthroned both Tokihira and Michizane were promoted to senior third rank. Six years of rapid advancement had brought Michizane even with the head of the Fujiwara. Until then their relationship had been cordial; now there was strain.

The difference in their ages sharpened the difference in their temperaments. Michizane was a scholarly conservative who held to precedent. Tokihira was practical and energetic; he saw the need to curb extravagance and make sweeping reforms in finance and administration, moves that to Michizane must have been radical and ill conceived.

The tension between them was aggravated because Tokihira was being frustrated in his attempts to make one of his younger sisters the new emperor's consort. His first try was blocked by Uda's mother, who arranged that her own daughter be chosen (thus marrying Daigo to his aunt). When that young woman died in childbirth, it was believed by many, including her mother, that her life had been taken by the malevolent spirit of Tokihira's rejected sister (the spirits of living persons, as well as those of the dead, could roam abroad to take revenge). That was more than enough reason for the mother to again block Tokihira's imperial matchmaking.

Meanwhile, Michizane's daughters were doing very well. One had become a favorite consort of Uda (in his testament to his son, Uda urged him to be guided by this lady in matters relating to the women's quarters, always a hotbed of jealousy

and intrigue). Another daughter was principal handmaid, the highest woman official at the court. And a third was married to Uda's younger son, Daigo's half brother, as soon as he came of age.

All court families sent daughters to the court to attend the emperor. The Sugawara family had done so before. The children born of those daughters had no political significance because then the Sugawara family had no political significance. Michizane's daughters did have political significance, and marriage politics was a game the Fujiwara could not afford to lose.

Michizane tried to assure Tokihira that he was not a rival: "Blessed by our ruler's limitless beneficence, I know contentment. Why should I thirst with ambition?" But in everyone's eyes he was a rival: Uda had placed him in that position. And to most of the court he was an interloper: his scholarship did not entitle him to political power. In his rise he had passed many men who were bitterly envious.

Early in 899, about a year and a half after retiring, Uda arranged that Tokihira and Michizane be appointed to the two highest positions in the government (the position of Grand Minister was honorary and often was not filled): Tokihira as Minister of the Left, Michizane as the slightly lower-ranked Minister of the Right.

Michizane tried hard to decline: "Humbly I must state that I am not of noble birth; my family is one of scholars. Through the generosity of the retired emperor, I attained the rank of high court noble, but as a result of today's promotion I can neither sleep nor eat because of my apprehension. People's hearts are not filled with tolerance. Demons gaze with envy and bring misfortune to those who prosper. I beg his majesty to consider my position and permit me to decline this office."

He was in danger and he knew it. Three times he tried to decline. Uda would not hear of it; he thought he could protect his man. Michizane was not so confident.

His worries deepened when a scholarly sin that he had committed nine years earlier came back to haunt him. He had been appointed to administer the civil service examination to a student named Kiyoyuki. As custom required in order to prevent favoritism, Kiyoyuki was from a rival faction. He was thirty-eight years old. Although he had made slow progress through the university, his teacher wrote that his "talent surpasses that of his contemporaries." (Gossip said that when Michizane read that he crossed out "talent" and inserted "ignorance.") Michizane failed Kiyoyuki and there is little doubt that he was being unfair, because his decision was reversed. Although Kiyoyuki went on to become professor of

literature and president of the university, he advanced slowly, dogged by Michizane's slur, and he never shed his bitterness.

Now he sent Michizane a letter that purported to be a friendly warning: "When a student at the university I secretly immersed myself in the occult sciences. Since ancient times, diviners have investigated the occasions when ... retainers overthrow their lords.

Determining the years of such momentous events is as easy as pointing to the palm of one's hand."

Michizane may not have been versed in the art of divination, but like almost everyone else of his time he believed in it, and Kiyoyuki was citing the latest, most up-to-date methods from China.

"Next year will be indicated by the conjunction of signs ... foretelling a change in the mandate of heaven"--in other words, a rupture in the imperial lineage. "The second month will be particularly inauspicious."

Then he bore in on Michizane. "It is my humble observation that you have risen above your status as a scholar and surpassed others to become a great minister"--a career so spectacular, he declared, that it outshone all but that of Kibi Makibi, the only other scholar who had risen to be Minister of the Right. "It is my hope that you will know contentment" --Michizane had used the same euphemism for renouncing ambition-- "and recognize your proper status. You ought to return to the mountains and devote yourself to the beauties of the clouds and mist."

Kiyoyuki soon took his ominous predictions to the court. Confidentially he divulged to Tokihira and a few others what he said the stars had revealed: that Michizane was plotting to overthrow Daigo and put his younger brother Prince Tokiyo on the throne. Since Tokiyo was married to Michizane's daughter, Michizane would be dominant as the emperor's father-in-law and grandfather of a future emperor. Somehow all the whispering was kept secret; neither Uda nor Michizane learned of it.

The new year of 901 began auspiciously. On the seventh day Tokihira and Michizane were both raised to second rank, an honor awarded only to men of great distinction.

Twenty-two days later, on the twenty-fifth of the month, the plot was sprung. An imperial edict stripped Michizane of all rank and honor, labeled him a traitor, banished him to Dazaifu.

Caught by surprise, Uda rushed to the palace to protest. The conspirators had anticipated that: he was blocked from entering. He unrolled a mat and sat in front of the closed gate until nightfall.

On the thirtieth Uda again went to the palace and again was refused entrance. He kept vigil at the gate all night. With the morning, the first day of the second month, he gave up and returned to his residence. A few blocks away, armed guards surrounded Michizane as he began his journey into exile.

Tears were shed. His family had been scattered: his four grown sons stripped of their positions at the court and banished to distant provinces, widely separated from each other and from their father; his wives and daughters held in the capital; Prince Tokiyo forced to become a monk.

We do not know how many were permitted to accompany Michizane: a few attendants. It was a small and woeful party that the guards herded out of the capital.

On that first day they reached Yamazaki, where travelers boarded boats to go down the Yodo River to the Inland Sea. At Yamazaki, Michizane was permitted to visit an elderly aunt who had retired to a nearby Buddhist nunnery. They talked all night, until morning brought another tearful parting.

It is generally thought that from Yamazaki his journey was by boat, down the river and then along the coast of the Inland Sea, moving by day, tying up and spending each night ashore, as was usual for the travel of officials in no hurry.

It must have taken more than one day to row down the meandering river, and so, on the bank of the Yodo, Michizane got his first taste of the indignities that lay ahead. The orders carried by the guards brought them all the hospitality the local people were capable of; the same orders directed that Michizane was to be treated as a criminal: he was to be given no food or assistance, not even spoken to. Those with him had to forage for all they got.

Long ago the government had established stations for water travel all along the coast. Just as the post stations that dotted the highways provided food, inns, palanquin bearers, and fresh horses (to those entitled to ride), the water stations supplied accommodations and boats for the next leg of the trip.

The small boats hugged the coast as they were rowed from haven to haven. (They had a sail but it was useless unless the wind was behind them.) Boatmen

were cautious, loath to risk their boats or themselves. High waves, strong winds, or rain could keep them in harbor for days on end; if an ominous cloud came up while they were under way, they would scurry for the nearest anchorage. Michizane asserted that once he was put on “a boat with a damaged stern.”

The winter days were short and so was each day’s progress; the weather was cold, uncertain, and often unpleasant. Michizane wrote that “on the route were over fifty way stations”; if that was an exaggeration, the journey must nevertheless have taken more than a month.

Michizane was not well when he started; grief and shock worsened his health. Afloat or ashore he was uncomfortable. His poems indicate that at only two stops was he treated with civility: at Akashi, a week or so into his journey, where the station master braved official wrath by showing sympathy, and at Hofu, much closer to his destination, where a distant branch of his family, still bearing the old name of Haji, were the local power, and were too independent and too far from the capital to care much about its commandments.

At last they reached Hakata and moored for the last time. Although Dazaifu had long since been told that he was coming, his house was not ready. He was kept at a shabby inn for two nights. “Curious spectators” peered “through the small gate.”

*I was nauseated and my chest ached. I was exhausted and my feet were weak....
Gloomy despair tortured me.*

Moved into “a deserted official residence” at the scrubby edge of the city, he found the rafters decayed, the well clogged, the narrow garden choked with weeds, the fence broken. He made some repairs and tried to resign himself to the loneliness of house arrest.

His health grew worse. He could not eat:

Farm children brought me vegetables,

And my kitchen helper made me a thin gruel. I wasted away...

No longer called upon to celebrate official occasions, he wrote poems that were personal, autobiographical, and eloquent. He remembered past glories, scourged his slanderers at the court, lamented his “too severe” treatment. He found solace in the poetry of Chinese sages who had suffered as he was suffering.

Religion took on new meaning: I clasped my hands in prayer and took refuge in the Buddha, and turned my heart to the practice of meditation.”

He never lost all hope that he would be reprieved and called back to the capital. But “Letters from home ceased to arrive,” and fate seemed to be closing in. “Surely here I will meet my end.... My bones will be buried in exile.”

He died in 903, on the twenty-fifth day of the second month.

*

When I arrived at the shrine and announced that I wanted to spend a year in study there, the chief priest turned me over to an affable priest named Misake, head of the shrine’s cultural research office. Misake soon became a good friend. He found an apartment for me, very near the shrine, and encouraged his staff to help me.

In later conversation Misake told me that his ancestor had been a student of Michizane’s, that he had accompanied Michizane into exile, served him in his last years, buried his body, erected the mausoleum over his grave, and tended it for the rest of his life. “It was my ancestor, Misake Yasuyuki, who founded this institution.”

That came of the long relationship between Yasuyuki’s family and Michizane’s, Misake said, dating back to the times when the Sugawara bore their old name, Haji; perhaps the name Misake indicated that they had once brewed saké. I remembered the Haji family’s traditional responsibility for funeral services; that would have included providing ceremonial wine. Listening to Misake, the continuities of Japanese history became very real.

I was still getting settled in my apartment when one morning the two attractive young women in the office told me that an important service would be held that evening, not at the shrine but at a place they called Tofuro. They offered to guide me.

It was my first visit to the site of Dazaifu, that Distant Capital born out of emergency thirteen centuries earlier. Walking among the old foundation stones in the darkness, I could not make out the grand design but under the open sky I felt the majesty of the setting. At the far end of the expanse an altar had been set up, flanked by fires in standing braziers. The flames picked the scene out of the night: the altar, the gathering of white-robed priests.

After the opening rite of purification and the chief priest's prayer at the altar, musicians in the costume of the ancient court moved to the low platform set before the altar and took up their instruments to entertain the god and accompany the dancers. To plaintive flute, staccato drum, and words so old their meaning has been lost, a young boy offered a dance out of ancient ritual. Solemnly he traced the directions, forward and back, sometimes taking up a fan, sometimes a serpentine clacker. He yielded to the radiance of shrine maidens in bright flowing robes; surely they too pleased the spirit at the altar.

A group of townsfolk, men and women, came to the stage with koto, flute, and drum. From them rose a song of haunting loveliness. Another group, and our aureole of light was filled with a second song as moving as the first. Someone whispered that the works of both songs were poems composed by the deity during his earthly life.

At home I looked up those poems. The first marked one of his last court appearances as poet. The ninth day of the ninth month brought the annual Chrysanthemum Festival, celebrated at the palace with a gathering of poets to compose on a theme chosen by the emperor. In the year 900 the festival poems so pleased the young emperor that he called the poets back for more the next day, this time on the subject of "autumn thoughts." Michizane, then fifty-six, offered this poem to the sixteen-year-old Daigo:

*Over the years, your minister has experienced joys,
But tonight everything seems to stir only sadness:
The cold voice of the cricket in the blowing wind;
The falling leaves of the Chinese Paulownia, struck by the rain.
You are at your peak; I am growing old.
Your generosity is boundless; my repayment is slow.
How can I relieve such feelings?
I drink wine, listen to the koto, and recite poems.*

The young emperor was so moved by this poem that he gave Michizane a robe.

One year later, in dismal exile, Michizane took out that robe, wept, and wrote what is today his most loved and remembered poem. Set to music, it was the second song:

*Ninth Month, Tenth Day
This night last year, attending at the Seiryō Palace,
I spoke my sorrow in a "Poem on Autumn Thoughts."
The robe His Majesty bestowed on me, here with me now--*

Each day I lift it reverently, bow to its lingering fragrance.

The autumn moon rose, the stars were joined by the lights of aircraft taking off from Fukuoka airport. Their swift course across the sky, the hum of their engines, did not seem anachronistic. They reinforced the timelessness I felt at the site of the Distant Capital on that crisp autumn evening.