

A Historical Walk Around Kyoto

Photo by Ryotaro Nakajima



Plum Blossom Festival

Sugawara Michizane (845–903), who is revered as a master of learning, is enshrined in Kitano Shrine. He loved plum tree blossoms so much that about 2,000 plum trees are planted in this shrine. The Plum Blossom Festival (*baika-sai*) is held on February 25. Local *geiko** have held an open-air tea ceremony on this day since 1952.

* *Geiko* is the Kyoto name for geisha, a Japanese woman who is a highly skilled entertainer. Visitors can learn about the traditional culture of Kyoto from the *geiko*.

Famous Poem

Sugawara Michizane was not only a scholar, but also a prominent politician. However, he was relegated to a lower position because of slander, and he was transferred to the west of Japan (Hakata city, Kyushu area) from the capital, Kyoto.

He composed a *waka poem*** there:

East Wind,
bring me the perfume of plum trees.
Plum Trees,
never forget to blossom in spring,
though your master is far away from Kyoto.

He died of an illness never returning to Kyoto. Then, a series of lightning strikes and outbreaks of fire occurred in Kyoto. In addition, all the politicians who masterminded the plot to demote him died of an illness, one after another.

People believed that these were caused by Sugawara Michizane wreaking vengeance, and they built shrines to appease him in Kyoto and Hakata.

** Traditional Japanese poem consisting of 31 syllables