

THE TENJIN CULT:  
A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SYNCRETIC CULT  
OF A HEAVENLY DEITY IN JAPAN

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**Abstract**

*All over the world, people profess many religions and beliefs. Nevertheless, the religious life of Japan and its traditional practices remain a mystery to the West. This study analyses the history of one branch of the sophisticated religious system of Japan, namely the Tenjin cult, or Tenjin worship (from its appearance in the 10th century to the present days) and the modern implications of this cult. We demonstrate how, moulded by indigenous beliefs, an “earthly” man became a “Heavenly Deity”, who, in turn, under the influence of Buddhism, was transformed into a bodhisattva, and, in parallel, shaped by Confucian ideas, he turned into the “deity of learning”. We also reveal the syncretism of the archaic attributes and the borrowings throughout the history of the cult and use different examples to illustrate the main features of the religious life of Japan during various historical periods.*

**Keywords:** Tenjin cult, Sugawara Michizane, vengeful spirit, Buddhism, *honji suijaku* discourse, Confucianism.

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**1. Introduction**

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In this paper we analyse the history of Tenjin worship and demonstrate the syncretism of the archaic attributes and the borrowings throughout the history of this cult, using various examples to illustrate the main features of the religious life of Japan in different historical periods. The word “cult” indicates the ritual practices related to faith in Tenjin, a branch of the sophisticated religious system of Japan. Tenjin means “The Heavenly Deity”, who is the deification of a scholar, a poet and a politician named Sugawara Michizane (845–903).

Japanese researchers have published an extensive corpus of primary sources for Tenjin worship. The most important of the written sources are included in the three volumes of *Kitano shi* (Collected Works of Kitano Shrine), compiled by monk Shūen in the middle of the 19th century and printed in 1909–1910. Many historical

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records were published in *Shintō Taikai* (Compendium of Shinto Sources), in the volumes *Kitano* (Kitano Shrine) (*Shintō Taikai*, 1978) and *Dazaifu* (Sanctuary in Dazaifu) (*Shinto Taikai*, 1991). These written sources are mostly texts created inside the cult's tradition including stories of the origin of the Tenjin sanctuaries (*engi*); liturgical texts, records of revelations and believers' visions; and prayers. These sources as well as those generated outside the cult provided the materials on which our research is based. Consequently, all our primary sources can be divided into the following groups:

- Michizane's poems and other works (*Kanke bunsō. Kanke kōshū*, 1966)
- Various Michizane's biographies, historical chronicles and legislative acts (*Shintō Taikai*, 1978; *Seiji yōryaku*, 1964)
- Texts created inside the cult's tradition and mentioned above (*Jisha engi*, 1975; *Shintō Taikai*, 1978, 1991)
- Literary works including stories about Sugawara Michizane and Tenjin (*Shōmonki*, 1975; *Ōkagami*, 1960; *Gōdanshō*, 1997)
- Historical accounts including stories about Sugawara Michizane and Tenjin (*Fusō ryakki*, 1932; *Gukanshō*, 1967; *Jinnō Shōtōki*, 1965).

The most comprehensive monographs about Tenjin cult are *Tenjin worship: a study in educational history* by Endō Taisuke (Endō, 1966) and *The Tenmangū Shrine* by Takeuchi Hideo (Takeuchi, 1968). The former systematically lays out the history of the Tenjin cult and its forms in different historical periods, while the latter describes the history of the Tenjin worship, concentrated mostly on the famous shrine of Tenjin in Kyoto, Kitano Tenmangū.

Western and Japanese scholars have thoroughly researched some aspects of Tenjin worship. Their works are described briefly by Robert Borgen in his monograph *Sugawara no Michizane and the Early Heian Court* (Borgen, 1994: xxi-xxi, 341-342). In addition, other scientific sources highlighting different aspects of Tenjin worship were published after 1994 and listed in the *References and bibliography* at the end of this paper (Teeuwen et al, 2003: 145-176; Kawane, 2003; Makabe, 1994; Murayama, 1996; Okamoto, 2013; Plutschow, 1996, 2003; Takei, 2008).

Through the analysis of the primary sources which enabled us to reconstruct the history of the formation of the Tenjin cult, we have produced a monograph written in Russian language where we have considered the origin of Tenjin worship in detail and provided full textual evidence (Fedianina, 2014) which will be touched on in Chapter 2, as a systematic summary of our findings elaborated in our monograph.

Regarding the periodization of the history of Tenjin worship based on the association of *buddhas* and local deities *kami*<sup>2</sup>, we distinguish three main periods in

<sup>2</sup> *Kami* are sacred beings or spirits worshiped in indigenous Japanese beliefs.

the development of the Tenjin cult, which will be further examined:

1. The formation of the cult in the 10th century – the beginning of the 11th century.
2. The development of the cult within the *honji suijaku*<sup>3</sup> paradigm starting from the 11th century up to the middle of the 19th century.
3. The institutionalisation the Tenjin worship as a Shinto cult from the second half of the 19th century till the present day.

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## ***2. The formation of the cult***

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The Tenjin cult originated in the early 10th century, and its formation lasted till the beginning of the 11th century. As mentioned above, Tenjin is the deification of Sugawara Michizane, an official who began his career in 867 by serving as a supernumerary junior secretary (*gon-shojo*, the junior sixth rank) of Shimotsuke province (nowadays Tochigi Prefecture). Michizane pursued a brilliant career until his exile in 901, when he fell victim to court intrigue. Through political machinations, his rivals from the Fujiwara family, the most influential clan in Heian period (794–1185), accused him of forcing Emperor Daigo (reign 897–930) to abdicate, and, as a result, Michizane was exiled to Kyushu Island, where he died in 903.

After Michizane's death, his spirit became the object of worshipping in two places: in Kyoto, the ancient capital of Japan, and at the place of his death, Dazaifu, on Kyushu Island and both places have remained the main centres of his cult so far. It was in this era when a vast array of new deities emerged, as emphasized by Kasai Masaaki:

*The emergence of new deities [...] accompanied the emergence of a new political system of Regents and Chancellors. Deities from the old myths were an ideological pillar of the ancient centralized state, organized according to the principle of Chinese Law. However, they did not work well within the new political system; thus new myths were required* (Kasai, 1975: 493).

As periodization was an important aspect in our research, we identified the following sub-periods which followed the main steps in the formation of the Tenjin cult.

The first sub-period revolves around the worship of Michizane's spirit in the context of indigenous beliefs (the first third of the 10th century) and is marked by the following events:

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<sup>3</sup> The *honji suijaku* concept will be explained in more details in Chapter 3.

905 – Michizane's spirit started to be venerated at his grave in Dazaifu (Anrakuji temple on Kyushu Island).

923 – Michizane's vengeful spirit was pacified in Kyoto, the capital.

930 – Michizane's vengeful spirit was identified as a heavenly deity (*tenjin*), particularly Ikazuchi (the god of fire and thunder who had already been worshipped on the north-eastern outskirts of Kyoto, in Kitano). It seems that this association with Ikazuchi happened after the lightning had struck the Imperial Palace twice.

According to this chain of events the worshipping of Michizane in Kyoto was fuelled by beliefs in vengeful ghosts, *goryō* (spirits of political victims), related to the faith in wrathful *onryō* (spirits of the dead causing harm to people in the world of the living) whereas on Kyushu Island the veneration of Michizane began to gain prominence as ancestor worship immediately after Michizane's death and it was perceived as a positive manifestation of his spirit.

The second sub-period centres on the development of the Tenjin cult in the framework of Shinto-Buddhist syncretism (the middle of the 10th century) and emphasizes the 300-year-long history of interaction between Buddhism and the indigenous beliefs of the Japanese Islands. The main historical events which further shaped the Tenjin cult are listed below:

940s – The Buddhist monks of Tendai and Shingon schools confined and softened the formidable destructive forces of Michizane's vengeful spirit.

942–947 – A sanctuary for worshipping Michizane's spirit was established on the north-eastern outskirts of Kyoto, in Kitano.

947, 976 – Members of the Sugawara family were appointed as the heads of Anrakuji (a Buddhist temple) and of Kitano (a Shinto Shrine).

Buddhist monks tried to soften the formidable and destructive power of Michizane's spirit, but, at the same time, the Sugawaras, a family of Confucian scholars, and their disciples made significant efforts to venerate Michizane as a man of letters, scholar and a great poet.

The third sub-period already establishes the official recognition of Tenjin cult by the Imperial Court (the second half of 10th century – the beginning of 11th century) through the following events:

959 – Fujiwara Morosuke (909 – 960), the grandfather of two emperors, built a new sanctuary in Kitano because he admired the personal qualities of Michizane who was considered by many of his contemporaries a connoisseur of Confucian teaching and a high moral person.

1001 – The shrine in Kitano was included on the list of the largest shrines (19, later – 22), according the ranking system of the top Shinto shrines, *Nijūni-sha*.

1004 – Emperor Ichijō (ruled 986 – 1011) visited the shrine in Kitano<sup>4</sup>.

During this sub-period Michizane started to be regarded as the patron of poetry and literature. Moreover, Morosuke's victory in the political struggle within his family gave him opportunity to support the veneration of Michizane's spirit, while the political system of regents and chancellors became more powerful through new myths meant to back up its legitimacy.

Thus, a century after Michizane's death, the Tenjin cult had already taken shape and its roots stretched back to ancient folk beliefs such as the ancestor worship and the faith in Thunder Deity or in vengeful spirits. Over time, the folk elements were gradually ousted and the Tenjin's "oppositional" angry spirit turned into a peaceful patron of poetry and literature. The new spirit and deity caught the attention of the Imperial Court and the Tenjin cult was institutionalized. Its quick development was caused by the combination of Buddhist and Shinto<sup>5</sup> traditions which will be explored in the following chapter.

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### ***3. The development of the cult within the honji suijaku paradigm***

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The evolution of Tenjin worship from the 11th century till the middle of the 19th century was guided by the concept of *honji suijaku* (translated as "original substance, manifest traces")<sup>6</sup>. As a matter of fact, this is the longest period in Tenjin cult and it can be further divided into three sub-periods.

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#### ***3.1 The conflation of Tenjin and Kannon, 11th – 12th centuries***

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Satō Hirō in *Honji suijaku no kinsei* (Concept of *honji-suijaku* in the pre-modern period) tried to pinpoint the changes of this period:

*The idea that "this" and "other" worlds were separated from each other slowly began to appear in the second half of the Heian period (794–1185) on the Japanese Archipelago. Over time, the idea became perceived as a real fact. Due to these changes in cosmological beliefs, the entities perceived in ancient times as sacred,*

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<sup>4</sup> Today the main yearly festival in Kitano, *reisai*, is held on the very day when Emperor Ichijō made his first visit here: August 4<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> We are aware of the arguments around using the term "Shinto" (arguments around "What is Shinto?"), therefore we would like to emphasize that we are using the word "Shinto" to refer to Japanese indigenous beliefs.

<sup>6</sup> The concept of *honji suijaku* refers to Shinto-Buddhist correspondences and in that period defined local deities, *kami*, as manifest traces of original substance (*buddhas*).

*i.e. deities-kami, saints, the images of Buddha, etc. now came to be seen as local traces of the Buddha of the “other” world. More precisely, local traces were considered as manifestations of the original invisible true essence of the Buddha who had taken visible shape for salvation of all men (Dolce et al, 2013: 217).*

In the 11th – 12th centuries, due to the prevailing concept of Shinto-Buddhist correspondences (*honji suijaku*), Michizane came to be perceived as the embodiment of Kannon, the *bodhisattva* of compassion (*skt.* Avalokiteśvara), whose cult was quite common in medieval Japan.

In the 940s, Tendai and Shingon Buddhism influenced the development of Michizane’s worship, and his spirit was associated with the dwellers of heaven, the so-called *devas*. Later, his spirit (or Michizane himself) became a good deity who protected the Buddhist teachings and its followers as well as the people who were falsely accused of a deed they had not committed. The analysis of the written sources dating from the 10th century to 12th century allowed us to reconstruct the process of matching Tenjin with Kannon. For instance, in 1194, the first *engi* dedicated to Tenjin, called *Kitano Tenjin engi* (The Origins of Kitano Tenjin Shrine), consisted of a biography of Sugawara Michizane and a historical account of the origin of the shrine in Kitano, Kyoto (*Jisha engi*, 1975: 144-168). In terms of the *honji suijaku* paradigm, this *engi* confirmed that Tenjin was the incarnation of Kannon (*Jisha engi*, 1975: 167-168).

The process of conflation of Tenjin and Kannon in the 11th – 12th centuries underwent several changes: 1) Michizane’s spirit became Deva (the defender of the Dharma, the Buddhist cosmic law), 2) Deva became a good and saviour deity, who, in turn, became 3) an embodiment of Kannon *bodhisattva* (*bodhisattva* of compassion).

In Medieval Japan, famous historical figures and personalities as, for example, Kūkai (774–835), the founder of the Shingon school, or Prince Shōtoku Taishi (574?–622?), were deified and included in the *honji suijaku* paradigm. Their spirits were considered to be saviour deities helping the followers to be reborn in the Pure Lands of the “other” world. According to *Kitano Tenjin engi*, Tenjin helped people to reach the Pure Land (*Jisha engi*, 1975: 167-168) and he was addressed as a saviour deity in some written vows dating from the end of the 12th century (Makabe, 1994: 7-8). Another important source, *Tenjin koshiki*, makes Tenjin its central object of worship within the Buddhist tradition. The first *Tenjin koshiki* appeared probably at the beginning of the 13th century and the texts portrayed Tenjin as a reincarnation of *bodhisattva* Kannon (*Shintō Taikai*, 1978: 313).

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**3.2 *Tenjin as the embodiment of Kannon during the period of Buddhism domination, 13th –16th centuries***

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During this period, Zen Buddhism spread in Japan and Michizane's poems, which showed a deep understanding of Chinese culture, came to be highly admired by the Zen monks who even declared that Sugawara Michizane was a Zen follower. According to a legend (*Ryōseiki*, "The story of two saints", recorded in 1394), Tenjin travelled to China to study Zen (*Shintō Taikei*, 1978: 393-396). Due to this legend, classic paintings of Tenjin dressed in a Chinese robe and carrying a branch of plum blossoms started to be produced in great numbers.

This era also brought about significant changes in the *honji suijaku* paradigm. The interpretation of the *buddhas* and the local deities relationship came to be reversed. The *honji suijaku* might have been reinterpreted to give higher value to Japanese deities perceived as "the original substance". Moreover, the interaction between Japanese Buddhism and Shinto presented "a more dynamic and variegated religious world, where paring of Buddhist <originals> and local <traces> did not constitute one-to-one associations, but complex combinatory networks based on semiotic operations, doctrines, myths and legends" (Teeuwen et al, 2003: publisher's summary). So Tenjin was associated not only with Kannon *bodhisattva*, but also with other deities of Indian origin such as Shōten (*skt.* Ganesa), Daikokuten (*skt.* Mahakala), etc.<sup>7</sup>

The Tenjin cult began to spread not only at the Imperial Court, among the monks and highly educated people, but it also became popular among commoners. Tenjin was worshipped as a saviour deity, the patron of poetry and literature and a lot of poetic competitions were held in his honour. Tenjin was venerated in villages as the Thunder god (the god of thunder and lightning, rain and fertility) and, as a result, its cult spread in the agricultural communities.

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**3.3. *Tenjin as the embodiment of Kannon during the period of predominance of the Confucian component, from the 17th century till the middle of the 19th century***

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This period corresponds approximately to the Tokugawa era (1600–1868) which is viewed as the pre-modern period. Satō Hirō wrote about the religious transformations of this epoch in *Honji suijaku no kinsei* (Concept of *honji-suijaku* in the pre-modern period):

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<sup>7</sup> The principles of *honji suijaku* association revealed in the Tenjin cult in mediaeval and premodern Japan are the subject of Nobumi Iyanaga's article "The Logic of Combinatory Deities: Two Case Studies" (Teeuwen et al, 2003: 145-176).

*In pre-modern Japan changes of cosmological views influenced the honji suijaku concept and its content was transformed. The interest in the reality of the “other” world was gradually lost and the concepts of frailty and variability of “this” world came first. During the Middle Ages, Indian Buddha, Chinese and Japanese deities were in some way connected with the <true essence> of the Buddha and helped people to be reborn in the “other” world. In pre-modern Japan they lost the role of saviours and acquired ability to improve the human soul (Dolce et al, 2013: 227-228).*

This era was marked by the significant influence of the Neo-Confucian teachings. Divine Tenjin and the historical Sugawara Michizane were greatly honoured by Hayashi Razan (1583-1657), Muro Kyūsō (1658-1734), Rai San'yō (1780-1832) and many other Confucian scholars. They criticized the legends about Michizane in accordance with the rationalistic Confucian traditions. It is quite a paradox that the Confucian scholars, while trying to debunk the ancient myths, actually created a new idealized image of Michizane and contributed to the birth of new legends. It was the very period when the slogan “Japanese spirit – Chinese knowledge” (*wakon kansai*) became widely spread. In the 14th century, a text ascribed to Sugawara Michizane referred to this slogan for the first time. The concept was very popular in the 17th – 19th centuries and it was persistently attributed to Michizane, despite the obvious falsification (Endō, 1966: 223-232).

Furthermore, prayers created in the whole country were recited in numerous schools to encourage pupils to embrace various studies as Michizane did. On the 25th day of each month the lessons in the majority of schools were replaced by a visit to a temple or a shrine to participate in the celebration in honour of Tenjin. Number 25 had a special meaning in Michizane's life because he was born on June, the 25th, two main decrees (referring to his highest appointment and his exile) were signed on January, the 25th, and he died on February, the 25th. Therefore, the 25th day was considered *en-nichi* – a “memorial day” when the ceremonies dedicated to Michizane are still carried out in Tenjin shrines.

In a number of fief schools (*hankō*) and common schools (*terakoya*), where the Confucian moral teaching was the main subject, prayers to Confucius were accompanied by prayers to Tenjin (Endō, 1966: 238-303).

Michizane's spirit and Tenjin also became the main characters of popular plays. A classic play *Sugawara Denju Tenarai Kagami* (Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy Sugawara) was first performed in 1746 in Osaka. Tenjin was revered as the Deity, the patron of literature, calligraphy, poetry and arts, the defender of those who had been unjustly accused, etc. In this period when ethical or Confucian component was very important, Tenjin was considered to bring success in the classroom and, accordingly, he was worshipped as the patron of learning.

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**4. The institutionalisation the Tenjin worship as a Shinto cult from the second half of the 19th century till the present day**

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After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, religion turned into a tool for ideological transformations needed for fundamental changes in politics, economy, social sphere, culture and everyday life as well as for the consolidation of the nation. Shinto became a spiritual instrument for revival of the Emperor's power and the "Kami and Buddhas Separation Order" (*Shinbutsu hanzen rei*) had a huge impact on Tenjin cult. This order issued in 1868 by the new Meiji government meant the separation of the native Shinto deities from *buddhas* and, consequently, the Buddhist temples were cut off from the Shinto shrines, officially destroying the idea of matching *kami* with *buddhas*. As a result, the order triggered forcible separation of the Tenjin-Kannon association and the concept of *honji suijaku* lost its importance, though some trances of its previous influence can still be found in the Kannon Temple, situated near Kitano Tenmangū Shrine in Kyoto – a reminder that, historically speaking, both used to be a single complex.

Since the Shinto-Buddhism separation, the Tenjin worship has functioned as a Shinto cult. In 1871 the unification of Shinto shrines led to the development of the hierarchical system of shrines which included central government shrines (*kansha*) and lower shrines (*minsha*) (Fridell, 1975: 149). Within this context, the two main centres of Tenjin worship listed among the top-ranking shrines, Kitano Jinja (former Kitano Jinja, nowadays Kitano Tenmangū) and Dazaifu Jinja (former Anrakuji Temple, nowadays Dazaifu Tenmangū) were assigned ranks within *kansha* and received governmental support. Kitano Jinja was an imperial shrine of the 2nd rank (*kampei chūsha*) from 1871 through 1946. Dazaifu Jinja was designated as a national shrine of the 3rd rank (*kokuhei shōsha*) which in 1881 became an imperial shrine of the 3rd rank (*kampei shōsha*) and later, in 1895, an imperial shrine of the 2nd ranks (*kampei chūsha*).

The Tenjin cult received support and recognition from the new government and there were around 14,000 sanctuaries dedicated to Tenjin in the late 19th century (Takeuchi, 1968: 324). In this period, the cult acquired a nationwide character. At the same time, the image of Michizane began to develop heroic traits. Studies belonging to that period described Michizane as a man of utmost devotion to the Emperor. From 1888 till 1946, the government issued 5-yen and 20-yen bills with the portrait of Michizane. In addition, the slogan "Japanese spirit – Chinese knowledge", formerly attributed to Michizane, was modified into "Japanese spirit – Western knowledge".

In 1872 the School System Ordinance (*Gakusei*) made elementary school compulsory. The story of Michizane's life and the history of his cult were presented and explained in school textbooks. Over several decades of the Meiji period (1868–

1812) the Michizane's representation changed considerably from a brief historical review of his life to texts illustrating his devotion to the Emperor.

A new directive concerning Shinto was issued on December, 15th 1945 and its title clearly reflected its content: "Abolition of Governmental Sponsorship, Support, Perpetuation, Control and Dissemination of State Shinto". Along with this directive, the intricate rankings of shrines were also revoked in 1946. The separation of religion from state was confirmed by the Constitution of 1947 and the main Tenjin's shrines lost the governmental support.

Today Sugawara Michizane is known as a poet, a politician and a Confucian scholar and is mentioned in the history textbooks. In parallel, Tenjin is revered as a deity of learning, *gakumon no kamisama*. People all over Japan go to Tenjin's shrines to pray mostly for success in career. Before entrance examinations, young men visit such shrines to pray to pass the examinations and to offer votive tablets (*ema*). Tenjin's sanctuaries continue to follow agricultural, seasonal and family rituals and the impressive number of shrines confirm the popularity of the cult. For instance, the official site of Kitano Tenmangū proudly informs that "there are as many as 12,000 shrines dedicated to Sugawara no Michizane in Japan".

Although Buddhist and Confucian teachings had an impact on its form and contents, the Tenjin cult is predominantly pragmatic and has no deep philosophical content. Since it carries a practical or utilitarian meaning, people from any confession or religion feel free to ask Tenjin for help or express their gratitude for his assistance.

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## 5. Conclusions

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The analysis of the history of Tenjin cult illustrates in detail "the combinatory character of pre-modern Japanese religiosity" (Grapard, 1992: 13). In our paper we have offered the periodization of the Tenjin cult which has given us an opportunity to trace the changes of the cult according to the transformations in the religious thought and life in Japan. Since the evolution of the Tenjin worship corresponded to the evolution of local beliefs, Buddhism and Confucianism in Japan, the analysis allowed us to understand the modern implications of this cult as well.

In the 10th century, Sugawara Michizane was regarded as a Heavenly deity according to the traditional popular beliefs incorporating ancestor worship, the faith in the Thunder Deity, the worship of vengeful spirits of the dead (influenced by Indian beliefs which entered Japan along with Buddhism). Later on, this Heavenly deity became associated with a *bodhisattva* under the Buddhist influence.

The compositional nature and flexibility of the cult adapted perfectly to the flavour of time. In the Tokugawa period, the Buddhist component of *honji suijaku* discourse was diminished while the spreading of Confucianism made Tenjin a patron of scholarship. After the Meiji Restoration, the complex of “originals and traces” lost its visible Buddhist components. Today Tenjin is venerated all over Japan in the Shinto shrines dedicated to the deity of learning, *gakumon no kamisama*.

The syncretic character of the cult demonstrates that there were no clear-cut religious or ideological systems (neither Shinto, Buddhism, Confucianism nor any other imported continental teachings) which exclusively controlled its form and contents since the various components of the cult gained prominence in a certain period only to diminish in the following eras.

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