

Theory, Practice, and Politics of Japanese Poetry

Course Description

This graduate seminar offers a comprehensive overview of the trends, turns, techniques, and theories developed within and applied to the study of *waka* and *renga*, two major types of Japanese vernacular poetry (*uta*).

Waka stands on a time-honored tradition, which qualifies this format as one if not the most representative of the Japanese canon. It features ubiquitously in writings from the eighth to the nineteenth century and has catalyzed broader interests—both secular and religious—by intersecting with genres as diverse as court and warrior tales, personal diaries, Buddhist parables, and Noh librettos. Likewise, the medieval art of linked poetry known as *renga* builds upon and expands this legacy to produce an aesthetic that crosses stylistic, thematic, and material boundaries. The variety of literary theories arising from the practice of *waka* and *renga* have become a pillar of Japanese culture as we understand it today.

This course aims at tracing the “metahistory” of *uta* as the most enduring rhetorical constructs in the intellectual landscape of pre- and early modern Japan. By looking not only at the discourse of poetry and its historical transformations, but also at how scholars have approached this topic from the Meiji period onwards, we will bring to the surface the performative power of the poetic medium as well as the social, political, and identitarian stakes involved in its making. In this sense, Japanese poetry will serve as a petri dish for examining different methods of inquiry—diachronic, interdisciplinary, transnational—while also prompting us to rethink literature and literary theory in-between the “East” and the “West.”



Instructor: Dr. Pier-Carlo Tommasi (he/him)

E-mail: tommasi@hawaii.edu

Class Time: W 3:00-5:30 pm

Room: HOLM 241

Office Hours: TR 12:00-1:00 pm

Office: Moore Hall 387

Skills (SLOs)

Learn how to use important reference materials related to pre- and early-modern Japan.

Recognize major tropes of Japanese poetic discourse by becoming familiar with *waka* and *renga* collections, as well as treatises on poetic thought.

Apply an eclectic approach to the study of literature and its socio-historical dynamics.

Organize data and develop new interpretations of primary sources through a critical lens.

Reassess the value of empirical research and context-sensitive knowledge vis-à-vis Euro-American theories.

Challenge and raise awareness of your own positionality as a scholar.

Responsibilities & Expectations

Students who possess a cursory knowledge of Classical Japanese literature and grammar (JPN461 or equivalent) will particularly benefit from this course. However, there are **no strict prerequisites** since **all readings are in English** originally or else appear in translation.

This class operates in a **colloquium format**, with short lectures interspersed with discussions and contributions from students. Lessons will typically consist of three blocks:

1. Guidance to digital and analog research tools, basics of paleography (if students so wish), and interpretive strategies when dealing with Japanese poems.
2. Introduction to the day's topic and discussion of primary sources in translation. Students majoring in Japanese will be encouraged to consult the original texts in annotated print editions.
3. Review of current scholarly works, followed by class discussion on literary theory and methodology.

Coming to class well-prepared is crucial for a successful session. Students will be expected to reflect and articulate their opinion on weekly readings by posting comments on the e-learning platform Perusall.

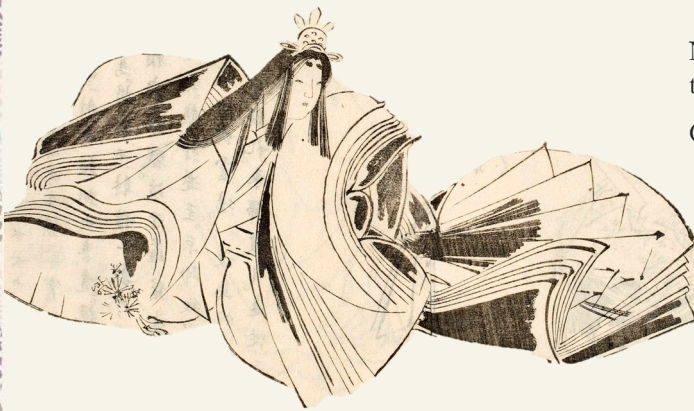


Textbook

None. The Instructor will supply all readings through handouts and online postings.

Optional reference books and dictionaries:

- * Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 1997.
- * Steven Carter, *How to Read a Japanese Poem*. Columbia University Press, 2019.
- * *Waka bungaku daijiten* 和歌文学大辞典. Koten Library, 2014.
- * *Utakotoba utamakura daijiten* 歌ことば歌枕大辞典. Kadokawa Shoten, 1999.



Evaluation

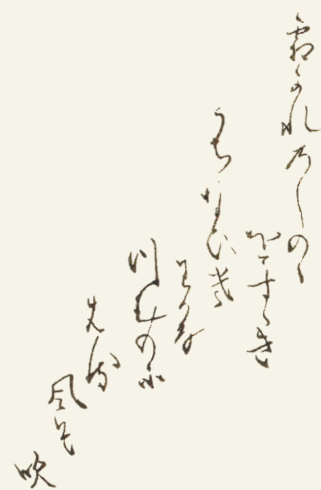
PARTICIPATION (30%) – This includes attendance and performance in class discussions. All absences must be excused.

PERUSALL ANNOTATIONS (20%) – Details will be provided on the first day of class.

BOOK REVIEW (20%) – A 1,500-word book review to be workshopped in class. More info on a separate handout.

FINAL PAPER & PRESENTATION (30%)

*According to UH General Catalog, letter grades indicate the following:
A=excellent achievement; B=above average; C=average; D=minimal passing; F=failure)



Final & Presentation

Your **FINAL** paper should be a **Word file, 8- to 10-page long, Times New Roman, 12-point font, 1-inch margins, double spaced, paginated**. You can consult *The Chicago Manual of Style*, but any citation style is fine. The format is flexible, but ideally, you should ask yourself a question and try to answer it by applying the knowledge and tools acquired through the course. Here I suggest two possibilities.

- a. **Essay:** formulate a question and provide an argumentative answer. Your research question may well be interdisciplinary and transregional in nature, i.e., look at phenomena across time and space beyond “traditional” Japanese poetry *stricto sensu*. However, if you decide to focus on modern or contemporary literature, the topic should resonate with the critical issues that have been brought up in class. Your paper may also problematize a translation of Japanese (meta)poetry among those available to the Western readership—in English, but not necessarily: If you know other languages, I encourage you to apply those skills!
- b. **Translation:** If your area of specialization is pre-modern Japan, you may produce an original translation of a (meta)poetic work—an excerpt will suffice—discussing how the study of that particular text can deepen our understanding of Japanese literary field and/or shed light on literary theory in more general terms. For the task, I invite you to analyze the primary source(s) of your choice within a specific theoretical framework to either confirm or contest its validity. If you wish, you can also provide a brief historical contextualization. N.B. You can also contribute to an ongoing DH project by transcribing and annotating a sixteenth-century poetry scroll recently acquired by the Hamilton Library.

An alternative to the written paper is the **creative output**, which involves audio-visual tools such as podcasts or youtube videos. Either way, remember to provide a list of consulted references. If you are a Japanese major, your bibliography should include *at least* one secondary source in Japanese. I recommend you visit my office to discuss the bibliography and which option you prefer.

At the end of the course, you will deliver a class **PRESENTATION** (ca. 30 minutes) based on your paper, sharing your work in the way you find most suitable (conceptual map, close-reading activity, guided discussion, PowerPoint, etc). Group presentations are welcome. Feel free to team up with one or more classmates to present a tandem research project on a common topic or text. ⚠The final paper shall be either individual or collaborative. In the latter case, you must specify the contribution of each person that has participated.

Other Issues & Links

- ◆ Students are expected to adhere to the [Student Conduct Code](#).
- ◆ [Kokua Program](#): UH is committed to full inclusion of all students. Please inform me early in the term if you may require accommodations or modification of any of course procedures.
- ◆ UH believes in zero tolerance for sex/gender-based misconduct. Anyone wishing to make a report relating to sex discrimination or harassment may do so by reporting the concern to the [Title IX Office](#) Coordinator.
- ◆ Office of [Veteran Student Services](#).
- ◆ Taking care of yourself physically and mentally is a fundamental part of your learning experience. In these stressful times, [Counseling Services](#) may be very useful.

