

Japanese Language and Literature

Journal of the American Association of Teachers of Japanese

jll.pitt.edu | Vol. 59 | Number 2 | November 2025 | DOI: 10.5195/jll.2025.373

ISSN 1536-7827 (print) 2326-4586 (online)

Contesting the “Classical,” Creating Communities: The “Intercollegiate Classical Japanese Poetry Contest” within the Landscape of 2020s North American *Bungo* Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

On December 6, 2022, the authors convened the first virtual “Intercollegiate Classical Japanese Poetry Contest”—also known as *Reiwa yonen sankō jūsanban utaawase* 令和四年三校十三番歌合 (Three-Schools Poetry Contest in Thirteen Rounds in the Fourth Year of Reiwa)—between our first-semester students of classical Japanese language (*bungo*). The contest is shaping up to be an annual event, with sequels involving a new set of institutions held in 2023 and 2024. This paper presents our reflections on this project, including its genesis, its outcomes, and its prospects. In addition to exploring the value of creative composition in classical language education, we argue that such approaches challenge the perception of *bungo* as “dead,” and we outline the process we undertook to incorporate this particular assignment into coursework and class time. Within the landscape of *bungo* pedagogy in North America, experimental approaches such as our contest promise to foster community, enrich understanding of *bungo*, and bolster student interest in classical language and culture.

So many Japanese-language writings produced in Japan from the seventh century through the Second World War are based on the rules and conventions of what is now known as the “classical” language (*bungo* 文語).¹ The influence of *bungo* continues to be felt in contemporary Japan across diverse contexts, from literature and proverbs to video games and popular culture. Despite a considerable gap between *bungo* and contemporary standard Japanese, for second-language learners, knowledge of the former indisputably bolsters competence in the latter.



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Indeed, a grounding in *bungo* remains a crucial prerequisite to the graduate-level and scholarly study of Japanese language, literature, history, and culture—regardless of era.

As educators in the field of classical Japanese, we know how difficult it can be to persuade students—not to mention colleagues and administrators—of the curricular relevance of any historical language without living native speakers. Compounding matters, the “polycrisis” facing the humanities has meant that language and literature departments are beset by budget woes while public and official opinion is increasingly hostile to the “frivolous” and “impractical” liberal arts.² Such an atmosphere of crisis is arguably more severe for classical languages than their modern counterparts: American Sanskritist Sheldon Pollock (2011) has documented the erosion of knowledge of the classics in India and voiced concern for the shrinking ranks of philologists in North America.³ Pollock’s concerns have been echoed by scholars of different backgrounds and expertise (e.g., Canfora 2014). While “utility” remains a sore point for premodern studies worldwide, in North America, Greco-Roman classics have also been subject to scrutiny for their historical roles in perpetuating racist and otherwise exclusionary narratives (Hanink 2021). An analogous problematic besets the Japanese classics, which are frequently colored by orientalizing, essentialist, and nationalistic views of “Japaneseness” both within Japan and abroad (Shinada 2000; 2001; Shinada and Saitō 2019).

Even in Japan, *bungo*’s place in the curriculum is far from secure. As the Heisei era (1989–2019) gave way to the Reiwa era (2019–), a nationwide debate simmered about the utility of *bungo* in Japan in connection with the Ministry of Education’s new Curricular Standards (*gakushū shidō yōryō* 学習指導要領) for secondary education (MEXT 2017). Even as these standards promote new approaches aimed at improving student engagement with the historical language, they reduce and disperse the classroom hours dedicated to *bungo*. This development prompted prominent scholarly associations in Japanese humanities fields to voice collective disapproval for these new standards (Nihon bungaku kanren gakkai renraku kyōgikai 2019). The same year, a public debate was held at Meisei University, and—even if both sides of the issue were represented—the question put forward was blunt: “Do we actually need the classics?” (*koten wa hontō ni hitsuyō na no ka* 古典は本当に必要なのか; Katsumata 2019; Iikura 2020). If *bungo* is impugned in Japan, that can only bode ill for its study in our far-off corner of the Western Hemisphere.

In 2003, Haruo Shirane raised an early alarm about the imperilment of

bungo in the United States (Shirane 2003), and, two decades later, it certainly sometimes feels as though the study of *bungo* at the undergraduate level in North America is on the wane. And yet there are reasons for hope. Although data published by the Modern Language Association has shown a general decline in the study of non-English languages in the United States since 2008, their most recent report reflects sustained interest and a growing share of enrollments in the major languages of East Asia, including Japanese (Looney and Lusin 2008; Lusin et al. 2023). To be sure, data specific to *bungo* are harder to come by, but robust interest in *bungo* pedagogy is evinced by such initiatives as the regular meetings of the Classical Japanese Special Interest Group (SIG) of the American Association of Teachers of Japanese (AATJ) at the Association for Asian Studies' annual conference, and the Ohio State University's annual "Teaching Classical Japanese: A Practitioner's Workshop," which began in 2021.⁴ The AATJ Classical Japanese Special Interest Group first compiled a list of North American institutions that offer *bungo* in 2009. At the time, these totaled an impressive forty-four. This list became the point of departure for an unscientific survey the three authors conducted in the fall of 2023 (for an overview of the results, see Appendix A). In that survey, we found unexpected stability in *bungo* offerings, with twenty-five of thirty-seven respondents writing that they offer classical Japanese language on a regular basis. Only four institutions reported complete discontinuation of *bungo* instruction, while the remaining eight respondents reported offering *bungo* on a sporadic basis. However, several expressed optimism about the possibility of offering *bungo* more regularly in the future. Furthermore, we are aware of universities where *bungo* continues to be taught from which we were unable to obtain a response. For now, we estimate that at least thirty-five institutions in North America offer instruction in *bungo*. Yet, while *bungo* continues to be offered, several respondents note declining enrollment, in many cases stemming from the elimination of *bungo* as a requirement for undergraduate majors and even for graduate students.⁵

Our survey suggests we might counteract adverse forces in the humanities by building on the improbably strong foundation that the classical Japanese language enjoys in North America, a foundation whose strength we believe stems from the enduring appeal of Japanese culture and the dedication of many *bungo* teachers. As a part of ongoing efforts to safeguard and cultivate *bungo* education, we argue for the need to expand the scope of our pedagogy to include not only classical grammar and

syntax and an appreciation for premodern literary forms, but also an awareness of the unbroken community of learners, scholars, and poets that *bungo* has fostered from antiquity down to the present.

In that spirit, we conceived of and hosted the first so-called “Intercollegiate Classical Japanese Poetry Contest,” convened on December 6, 2022. (In cheeky deference to the nomenclature of poetry matches of yore, we billed the event as *Reiwa yonen sankō jūsanban utaawase* 令和四年三校十三番歌合 in Japanese.) This telematic poetry contest paired original poems by first-semester *bungo* students from three institutions—Brown University, University of Colorado Boulder, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa—with the three presiding faculty serving as “judges” (*hanja* 判者) who offered evaluative comments on each poem, but then asked the audience to vote on the winner via a Zoom poll, *shugihan* 衆議判-style.⁶ Students were each assigned a topic, designed to nod to tradition while remaining relatable to pupils who resided in unlike climates and topographies: Falling Flowers/Falling Leaves (*rakuyō* 落葉 / *rakka* 落花), Landscapes (*sansui* 山水), Moon (*tsuki* 月), Love Embittered (*uramuru koi* 恨恋), Travel (*tabi* 旅), and Hometown (*furusato* 故郷). Students were encouraged to look at “precedents” for their topic but to compose creatively based on their own real or imagined experiences—the latter often being the case historically with *daiei* 題詠, or topic-prompted composition. This exercise was intended as a capstone for their first semester of *bungo* study, where students could apply their knowledge of auxiliary verbs and particles, expressing themselves in a language that they had thereto only approached as readers or interpreters. Preparing an original poem for this event allowed students to approach what they had learned in a new way, exploring the expressive potential of an ostensibly “dead” language.

In this paper, we assess the status of *bungo* within the landscape of North American higher education and discuss our experiences in including this event as part of an introductory *bungo* course. While tracing the steps that led to the successful hosting of the inaugural Intercollegiate Classical Japanese Poetry Contest, we will articulate a rationale for incorporating “creative,” “participatory,” and “active learning” style approaches into the *bungo* curriculum and the implications of such approaches for the field of premodern Japan studies writ large. We will also share reflections on the implementation of this event for anyone who may wish to incorporate a similar capstone into their curriculum. We view this report as part of an ongoing conversation about how to enhance classical language pedagogy.

In addition, we posit that community-building experiments such as this event promise to boost student interest in premodern Japan and, with any luck, help to forestall downward trends in enrollments.

I. *Utaawase* from the beginnings to the North American classroom

The term *utaawase* 歌合 is normally glossed as “poetry competition” or “poetry contest,” but it might be more aptly translated as “poem coordinating” or “poem matching,” because much of the appeal of the event derived from its facilitation of encounters between two poems by different poets on the same topic. *Utaawase* was just one of many types of matching games that were popular among the courtiers of Japan’s Heian period (794–1185). Indeed, the contests were emblematic of a “logic of doubles” that, as Thomas Lamarre argues, pervaded and underpinned the order of early courtly culture—mirroring dualities such as *kana* and *mana* in script, Yamato and Kara (i.e., China) in poetics, or left versus right in the bureaucratic apparatus (Lamarre 2000: 73).

An *utaawase* in the Heian period was an event in which two teams, conventionally designated Left and Right, “compete in a series of rounds in which pairs of poems written on a set topic are assessed by one or more judges; the team with the larger number of winning poems at the end of the contest wins the competition” (Ito 1982: 202). The poems (*waka* 和歌 or, more broadly, *uta* 歌; literally, “song”), were composed in the *tanka* 短歌 (literally, “short *uta*”) form, which consisted of five lines that followed the syllabic pattern 5/7/5/7/7, for a total of thirty-one syllables.⁷ *Tanka* were a central feature of the aristocratic social interactions of the Heian period, from courtship and correspondence to statecraft and ceremony.

The first recorded *utaawase* were held during the time of Retired Emperor Uda (866–931; r. 887–897), who continued to preside over important cultural events even after he had ceded the throne to his son Daigo (885–930; r. 897–930) (Heldt 2008: 81–86). Many early *utaawase* were social events that included musical performances and dazzling displays of the matched poems along with miniature dioramas known as *suhamas* 州浜 (Sorensen 2012: 164–173). Men and women from across the social spectrum of the aristocracy attended in magnificent robes. At the contest’s end, a lavish banquet with copious wine would continue into the morning (Ito 1982: 203–206; Lamarre 2000: 71). These elaborate *utaawase* were expensive and difficult to organize, and they gave way to simpler affairs as poetry increasingly became a professional pursuit in the late Heian period. From about the mid-late twelfth century, *utaawase* were

more austere events that focused on the poems and their evaluation as opposed to redistributive merrymaking. Some *utaawase* were held over the course of many days or weeks, even months and years in some cases, and could be conducted entirely on paper (Ito 1982: 207–208). Judgments were increasingly nuanced, handed down by masters interested in developing a language for poetic critique. Such judgments could be controversial, and challenges to them by participants created considerable tension around certain *utaawase*, particularly as different “poetic schools” began to coalesce (Brower and Miner 1961: 249–253; McAuley 2019: 5–7; McAuley 2020: 26–39). In essence, by the late twelfth century, *utaawase* had transformed from the sumptuous banquets of Retired Emperor Uda’s day into quasi-scholarly literary projects.

The Intercollegiate Classical Japanese Poetry Contest sought to balance both the festive spirit of the earliest *utaawase* with the scholarly erudition of postclassical matchups. In our judgments, we explored the literary accomplishments of our students—inadvertent or otherwise—considering the poems in terms of both content/conceptualization (*kokoro* 心) and form/language (*kotoba* 詞). As judges, we balanced critiquing our students’ poetry in the manner of “professional” *hanja* of the late Heian period with fostering a constructive and encouraging educational experience.

The idea of harnessing the *utaawase* format in an educational setting is not new. Decades ago, Sonja Arntzen documented an example of students applying their knowledge of poetic tropes in creative assignments within her course on Japanese literature in translation (Arntzen and Brown 2001), and our survey results suggest that many instructors have toyed with versions of poetry contests in their classrooms using the English language. Recently, a modern event inspired by traditional *utaawase* was held at the University of Southern California, which, in addition to “matching poems” in English, attempted to replicate the multimedia spectacle of early *utaawase* through the inclusion of classical court music.⁸ What sets the Intercollegiate Classical Japanese Poetry Contest apart from previous incorporations of *utaawase* into pedagogy is the involvement of three different classes at three different schools in a continent-spanning virtual setting. We believe that intercollegiate cooperation represents a distinctive, accessible, and resource-conscious way to enhance the sense of community among *bungo* learners while also cultivating a more vital relationship between that community of latter-day learners and *bungo* itself.⁹

II. *Bungo*, dead or alive

Approximately one millennium ago, Murasaki Shikibu (ca. 970s–ca. 1010s) authored the world-famous *Genji monogatari* 源氏物語 (The Tale of Genji; ca. 1008). Around the same time on the opposite edge of Eurasia, a scribe in England was committing the legend of Beowulf to parchment. In the intervening ten centuries, the Japanese and English languages have undergone radical evolutions, such that each of these texts is indecipherable to native speakers without instruction.¹⁰ However, Old English and *bungo* are only partly analogous, developing in divergent directions after the production of these monumental literary works. While the Old English of Beowulf was effectively replaced by Middle English after the Norman Conquest of 1066, and requires significant scholarly mediation for modern readers (Hogg 1992), the *bungo* of *Genji monogatari* evolved into what we might call a “working classical language,” still productively used for centuries after Murasaki’s time, deliberately preserved and standardized through institutions like the imperial court, Buddhist temples, and later, the modern Japanese nation-state. Hand in hand with reinforcing grammar and imparting lessons about cultural history, our *utaawase* activity served as a forum for collective reflection on the lofty but worthwhile question of what *bungo* is—as a *dead*, a *living*, and a *classical* language.

In North America, modern Japanese somewhat necessarily acts as a kind of gateway to *bungo*. (This differs strikingly from the situation with, say, Latin, which can be studied without any knowledge of a modern Romance language.¹¹) Most students of *bungo* in North America arrive in the *bungo* classroom not through a global approach to historical languages like Attic Greek, Coptic Egyptian, and Sanskrit, but rather as one step—nowadays often a merely optional step, alas—in the middle or end of a course of study in the modern language. Given that most North American *bungo* students are not accustomed to the study of historical languages, *bungo* education requires educators to also explore the question of what, exactly, *bungo* is. The number of different terms used to speak of the premodern Japanese language in contemporary Japan belies the difficulty not only in pinning down what *bungo* is in relation to the modern language, but also our ability to define the value of *bungo* education for a second-language learner of modern Japanese.

Bungo (along with the curious palindrome *bungobun* 文語文) seems to emphasize the dead letter of an exclusively *written* language in opposition to *kōgo* 口語, the spoken tongue. To call it *bungo-tai* 文語体,

meanwhile, reflects the enduring ideology of Meiji-era statecraft by suggesting that *bungo* is but one “style” of the unitary “national language” (*kokugo* 国語). It is put on the same level as not only *kanbun kundoku-tai* 漢文訓読体 (“Literary Sinitic gloss style”) but also the *desu masu tai* ですます体 and *de aru tai* である体, whose use one must master to be deemed a proficient communicator in the modern language. *Kogo* 古語 (“archaic speech”) and *kobun* 古文 (“archaic writing”), by contrast, relegate the language to the deep past as the historical Other of *gendaigo* 現代語, the modern standard.¹²

In today’s North American *bungo* classroom, *bungo* is primarily approached as a “dead” or historical language, primarily the language of Heian courtiers. Depending on the instructor, some minor detours might be taken to explore the peculiarities of the languages of the Nara (710–794) and Kamakura (1185–1333) periods or even perhaps that of the early modern Edo (1600–1868) period, insofar as they contrast with the “standard” classical language of the Heian court. Priority is rightfully given to examples that are *found* as opposed to *fabricated* by instructors, as these examples bear the weight of authenticity. In our survey, nearly every respondent—present company included—agreed that parsing and translating “found” or “authentic” texts was the primary focus of their pedagogy. To be sure, this foregrounding of “authentic” *bungo* is in line with the teaching of other premodern languages. Yet parsing old texts risks leaving students with an oversized impression of Classical Japanese as a historical artifact—rather than as a living classical language.

While the courtly tongue of Murasaki Shikibu and her peers may be “dead,” *bungo* remained and remains alive in important ways. In his handbook of sociolinguistics, Alberto Mioni synthesizes helpful criteria for defining classical languages: a language is classical when it “has the properties of (a) standardization, (b) autonomy and (c) historicity, but is (d) deprived of vitality” (Mioni 2004: 314). In other words, the classical language’s rules are formulated on the basis of a rarefied subset of works (a) from a circumscribed period in time (c) such that it is distinct from other forms of the language (b). By (d) “deprived of vitality,” sociolinguists mean that a classical language eventually will have no native speakers despite its continued use. Yet Classical Japanese doubtlessly enjoyed vitality of a certain sort for at least nine centuries after *Tale of Genji* was written down. Throughout the ensuing centuries, *bungo* was an autonomous standard that writers emulated as they produced texts in a variety of genres. At least until the end of the Second World War,

classical Japanese saw widespread use in various spheres—parts of Japan’s juridical code were inscribed in *kanbun kundoku-tai*—a style of *bungo* heavily influenced by the glossing of Sinitic (classical Chinese) texts—until well into the 2000s (Saitō 2021: 5–6). Even today, Classical Japanese is still used in imaginative and ceremonial contexts, whether to endue scenes from the *Legend of Zelda* video game series with a legendary temporal depth (figure 1) or to celebrate the ascension of the Reiwa Emperor with poetry about throngs of tourists in twenty-first century Kyoto (Kamens 2025). Our intercollegiate *utaawase* was meant partly as a corrective to the impressions of *bungo* as a “dead” language by placing students in a position analogous to centuries of Japanese poets who expressed themselves through *bungo* despite not being native speakers. When composing their own poems about contemporary subjects, students discover that *bungo* is not just a fossil to be studied, but a vital mode for expression. Just as Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694) could use this “classical” language to write about the rental market in early modern Edo, we believe today’s students should feel empowered to craft classical verses about smartphones and climate change.



Figure 1: Auxiliary verb *mu/n*, historical pronouns *sa* and *nanji*, archaic imperative conjugation (*meireikei* 命令形), and other *bungo* features in text from a recent *Legend of Zelda* game. The glowing text reads: *Hikari ga shimesu saki ni suishō o sasageyo. Sasureba nanji ni ja o harau hikari o ataen* 光が示す先に水晶を捧げよ／さすれば汝に邪を祓う光を与えん (Nintendo 2023; author’s screenshot, August 2023).

Mioni allows that classical languages are not “totally dead” (Mioni 2004: 314), so perhaps it is productive to reimagine *bungo* as neither dead nor living but *undead*. This tongue-in-cheek metaphor points to concrete pedagogical challenges. How do you teach a language that, like a ghost, is simultaneously present and absent in modern Japanese? Students encounter this spectral quality when they realize that irregular (or “paranormal”?) verb forms preserve something of classical conjugations, or when they see that formal written Japanese and even everyday spoken Japanese retain numerous *bungo* expressions. In guiding students toward this recognition, instructors can help students to understand the ways the classical “haunts” the modern. In many ways, however, *bungo* might be more “zombie” than “ghost” in that, used outside the classical period, it becomes a reanimated medium. When reading a Heian text, students ought to regard *bungo* as an artifact, but in more contemporary contexts—whether advertising copy, video game dialog, or their classmates’ *tanka*—they should appreciate it as a revived style deployed for specific aims.¹³

All this raises questions about linguistic ontology to which even we as specialists have no answers, but these discussions are worth having in the context of any classical language class. Challenging the notion that Classical Japanese is merely a static object of study, our *utaawase* experiment prompted students to experience *bungo* as a creative medium, much as it was for centuries of Japanese poets. Students grappled firsthand with the peculiar temporality of classical languages—at once historical relics and undying modes of communication. As they crafted their poems, students navigated between adhering to traditional conventions and finding ways to express their own sentiments, in accord with the ways Classical Japanese has been used and approached throughout history.

III. *Waka*, work, and play in the *bungo* classroom

The *waka* is perhaps one of the most enduring vehicles of *bungo*’s vitality across history, and as such, it presents distinct challenges and opportunities in *bungo* pedagogy. Self-contained and concise, *waka* can appear as manageable object-lessons in comparison to long, unbroken prose texts, but, given their imbrication in tradition, they can read as opaque even to students who have mastered grammar and vocabulary. In our survey, of the thirty respondents who reported they continue to teach *bungo* either regularly or irregularly, twenty-four noted they use *waka* in some contexts in their teaching, especially as examples of grammar. Despite this usage of *waka* as examples in the *bungo* classroom, only sixteen respondents

reported that they integrated some sort of composition activity (poetry or prose) into their teaching practice, and only ten of these sixteen assigned compositions in *bungo* rather than in English or modern Japanese. As to why they chose not to include such activities, respondents cited concerns that they might be “too advanced” or might not fit well in an introductory course. Others expressed commitment to the traditional “read, understand, and translate” methodology. Though we recognize the “tried and true” value of traditional pedagogy, we maintain that the socio-pedagogical function of poetry, so well-attested from the classical to the modern period, makes it well-suited to the setting of a language class.¹⁴ In taking this approach, we were inspired by none other than Watanabe Yasuaki, Director General of the National Institute of Japanese Literature and a prominent scholar of Japanese poetry, who argues that the study of classical texts ought to take the form of “participatory active learning” (*sankagata no akutibu rāningu* 参加型のアクティブ・ラーニング). His directive according to which “we should *play* much more with the classics”—whose very “essence lies in internalizing the weblike connections between words”—became a guiding principle for our *utaawase* (Watanabe 2020: 372; emphasis added).¹⁵

Despite the prevalence of *waka* poetry and composition exercises in some *bungo* classrooms, the teaching of *bungo* remains anchored to the method of learning grammar and parsing and translating passages. This fact is evident in the widespread adoption of Shirane’s *Classical Japanese: A Grammar* (2005), which is structured around such an approach. Over two-thirds of respondents to our survey use *Classical Japanese: A Grammar* as their course’s main textbook, or else as a supplementary text. To be sure, survey comments indicate that instructors employ the text in diverse ways, sometimes treating it more as a reference tool than as a step-by-step guide to instruction. Nevertheless, the persistence of this grammar-translation model remains apparent. A standard introductory *bungo* course based on *Classical Japanese: A Grammar* will usually conform to the following pattern: First, the instructor introduces the fundamental components of the language, such as verbs, adjectives, auxiliary verbs, and particles. Second, learners are required to memorize specific elements, including vocabulary, conjugation patterns, and different syntactic constructions. Finally, significant time is dedicated to applying this knowledge through practice drills, translation exercises, and reading classical texts sentence by sentence with the aid of annotations and word lists.

Meanwhile, recent studies on Latin pedagogy have yielded empirical support for the utility of creative writing, gaming, and edutainment in classical language learning, while Japan-based teachers of *kanbun* 漢文 (Literary Sinitic) at the secondary and tertiary levels have begun to experiment with *kanshi* 漢詩 (Literary Sinitic poetry) composition assignments.¹⁶ Yet, such methods are still seldom employed in the North American *bungo* classroom.¹⁷ Through the convening of our Intercollegiate Poetry Contest and in this paper, we propose to supplement traditional *bungo* pedagogy with “active learning” methods. That is, we contend that one component of ensuring the continued vitality of *bungo* education in North America should involve the encouraging of original composition in the *bungo* classroom. In our case, we included these activities with the intention of building toward the crafting of an original *tanka* for the contest. However, because we also acknowledge that it is unrealistic to expect students in a first-semester *bungo* class to fully grasp the intricacies of classical *waka* poetry, we adopted a more “liberal”—or, for poetry fans, “Reizei-school”—attitude toward adherence to poetic standards, encouraging students to compose with a degree of freedom so long as they demonstrated their knowledge of grammatical rules.¹⁸

In scrutinizing the final output (see Appendix B), a “traditionalist” reader—or, again, for poetry fans, someone from the “Nijō school”—inevitably will be offended by the occasional “poetic malady” (*uta no yamai* 歌の病) or by the flagrant appearance of such newfangled words as *sumaho* スマホ (smartphone) and *okonomiyaki* お好み焼き (savory pancake), which deviate from traditional standards that stipulate a poet’s lexicon be restricted to the words that appear in the so-called *Sandaishū* 三代集, the first three imperial anthologies of *waka* poetry.¹⁹ In the face of such critiques—which we indeed received during and after our poetry contest—we align ourselves once again with Watanabe’s directive that we should all “play” more with the classics.²⁰ More fundamentally, we invited students to find their own voice in an approach that resonates with the teachings articulated in Reizei-aligned treatises. The revered *Maigetsushō* 毎月抄 (Monthly Notes), for instance, dictates that teachers should guide “with an eye to the temperament of the pupil.” This treatise further contends that insisting all students conform to a single, rigid model favored by the teacher would ultimately do “terrible damage to the Art of Poetry” (Brower 1985: 420). Likewise, we feared that placing undue emphasis on adhering strictly to the rules of *waka* would have only deterred engagement among our first-year *bungo* students and stifled their

enthusiasm for learning.

In turn, it must be recognized that a tacit assumption prevails within “traditionalist” thinking that only the “authentic” language found in premodern texts is amenable to rigorous analysis, whereas “reenactments” of classical languages are fundamentally “artificial” and do not belong in the classroom. However, it should be remembered that after the end of the Heian period, *bungo* ceased to be anyone’s native language, and the language of *waka* poetry especially had to be *learned* by newcomers to the tradition. Simply put, trying one’s hand at composing *tanka* using *bungo* is in many ways more traditional than refusing to do so on traditionalist grounds. Classical texts should be studied carefully, even with a degree of veneration, but they should not be fetishized. We therefore choose to embrace informed anachronism and engage with the Japanese past in ways that can speak to undergraduate and graduate students in contemporary North American classrooms.²¹

IV. Learning in style

This in its own way constitutes an instance of what is variously classified as kinesthetic, active, participatory, or creative learning (Katopodis 2020), which in this case means an embodied way of grasping the unfamiliar texture and behavior of *bungo* by fitting novel *bungo* utterances into the *tanka* form. Kinesthetic learning, understood here in the broad and figurative sense of learning by doing, engages students who otherwise have difficulty mastering new material through the necessary mainstays of *bungo* pedagogy.²² We were gratified to hear our students report that tricky auxiliary verbs only “clicked” for them when they had to slot them into the five- and seven-syllable lines of *tanka* while considering the ramifications of their choice on the poetic images and sentiments they wished to evoke. The activity was made *literally* kinesthetic when we required our students to submit their handwritten poem drafts on traditional paper slips (figure 2).²³



Figure 2: Example of poetry slips (*tanzaku*) distributed in class for a mock poetry contest (courtesy of the authors)

There is a lively debate on the salience and applicability of learning style theory in the field of educational psychology. Like most of their colleagues throughout higher education, it is unlikely that specialists in Classical Japanese will have secondary expertise in pedagogical sciences. (We, the present authors, do not.) Yet, introducing a set of scalable actions to make the traditional classroom more dynamic is not beyond our reach and can go a long way in enhancing student experience. In his popular book *Small Teaching*, James M. Lang stresses that college-level teachers of any subject can make “small but powerful modifications to our course design and teaching practices” (Lang 2016). Our *utaawase* enacts at least three such small modifications. First, the act of composing a *tanka* in grammatical *bungo* involves what Lang calls “retrieving” (41): it prompts students to retrieve knowledge that they have mastered in previous lessons. In a hypothetical (but perhaps not wholly unfamiliar) “bad” classroom, knowledge is left unretrieved, save perhaps for a midterm or final exam, at which time it may be “retrieved” in a frenzied panic. Relatedly, *tanka*

composition also engages what Lang calls “connecting” (91): by bringing various grammatical elements together in the space of an original *tanka*, students will gain an experience-based understanding of how case particles and auxiliary verbs interact on the level of an utterance. Finally, the *utaawase* event engages what Lang dubs “motivation,” by which he means a marshaling of positive affect in the classroom (219). *Small Teaching* argues that emotions are underutilized in the “bad” classroom, except for the often-counterproductive emotion of anxiety whipped up by a pop quiz or, in the case of *bungo*, spot translation (220). Characterized by laudatory judgments, our *utaawase* was a festive event that motivated students to show off their creativity and hard-won mastery to their peers on campus and at far-away universities. This was achieved without stirring up many of the bad feelings engendered by competition through our decision to insist on anonymity and to organize the teams of the Left and the Right randomly, without regard to a student’s home institution.

Student feedback overall suggested we were successful in requiring students to both “retrieve” and “connect” what they had learned in their first-semester *bungo* courses, and that they felt “motivated” to pursue further study. For instance, in a post-event survey, one student commented: “Doing projects such as these takes away some of the fear of working with an unfamiliar language, and makes me want to continue expanding my classical Japanese skills.” Another student summarized their experience as follows: “Having to actually apply classical Japanese while writing a waka definitely reinforced what we had learned in class and increased my understanding of classical grammar. I also learned more about the possibilities available to me in terms of how to convey certain ideas via waka, or how certain waka themes are talked about.” Whatever the value of this “anecdote,” we are encouraged by students’ enthusiastic responses and their newfound confidence.

V. Groundwork and guidance

Although we did not require our students to compose as if they were professional poets of the twelfth century, we wanted them to approach the task of composing their own *tanka* with the confidence that comes from familiarity with the form. The three authors took different approaches to acquainting our students with *tanka*, but we all made efforts to incorporate poems into our teaching material from early in the semester.

There is undoubtedly a learning curve when it comes to appreciating traditional *waka* in all their rich allusivity and lexical austerity. A *waka*

may not be a full grammatical sentence, and may well stretch polysemy past the breaking point. Consequently, poetry can be less accessible than prose to *bungo* beginners. When chosen carefully to match students' progress, however, poems can not only be excellent examples of the potentials of the classical language but also provide opportunities for students to become familiar with a form that is ubiquitous in premodern texts. There is also something to be said for the reward of a challenge. If students find themselves able to read and parse a *waka* impromptu, it imbues them with great confidence in their ability to apply their knowledge of *bungo*. This was the inspiration behind one instructor's decision to begin each *bungo* class session with a poem, beginning in the second week of the course. In this "poetic warm-up" exercise, the instructor would write the chosen poem on the blackboard in five lines entirely in *kana* (so as to not obscure any possible double-meanings or *kakekotoba* 掛詞), and ask one student to read it aloud. After asking for initial impressions or interpretations, the instructor and students would work together to understand it line by line. In course evaluations, this was praised as both a fun and empowering way to start each class session.

The *waka*-a-day warm-up predated the planning of the *utaawase*, but all three authors coordinated to incorporate similar exercises in their own classrooms as preparation for the event. The discussion of the poems was expanded beyond grammatical mechanics to include elements such as poetic devices and conventions, political and social functions of poetic discourse, and the development of a self-referential poetic tradition. However, because an introductory language course must remain focused on grammar, the time available for such discussions was limited to a few minutes per session. Nevertheless, when it came time to compose their own verses for the *utaawase*, our students were familiar with not only the structure of *tanka* but many of the techniques of traditional poets, especially those for conserving syllables and drawing on famous poems of the past to expand the world of one's own composition ("allusive variation" or *honkadori* 本歌取り).²⁴

Traditionally, attaining mastery of the canon involves a yearslong process of steeping oneself in the waters of the "Poetry Bay" (*waka no ura* 和歌の浦)—as poets of old would say, leveraging the metapoetic resonance of this celebrated place name. However, such an undertaking lies far outside the scope of a first-semester *bungo* class. Fortunately, databases have appeared in recent decades whose search functions can simulate something of the experience of knowing the canon. Hosted by Koten

Library 古典ライブラリー, *Nihon Bungaku Web Toshokan* 日本文学 Web 図書館 features corpora of *waka* and other poetic genres. Now available as part of the JapanKnowledge online suite of resources, the *Shinpen kokka taikan* 新編国歌大観 is likewise searchable by incipit, line, and word.²⁵ Furthermore, Thomas McAuley's expert English translations of over six thousand *waka* provide students with a sizable archive of poems, many of them open-access, whose meanings they will not need to decipher entirely on their own.²⁶ While students were introduced to and encouraged to use these tools to research traditional poetic treatments of their topic in the weeks leading up to the event, they were not *required* to use them. For future incarnations of the *utaawase*, the authors envision an assignment predating the submission of poem drafts that would involve students using these databases to find, parse, and translate examples of poems on their designated topic.

All three instructors had students prepare their draft compositions a few weeks in advance of the *utaawase* so that some class time could be devoted to “workshopping” their initial attempts. These workshop sessions involved a mix of student-led peer evaluation and one-on-one discussions with the instructor intended to help improve accuracy of expression. We offered guidance to help students best convey their intent by optimizing the expressive potential of the classical language used within their compositions. Furthermore, to make students reflect on the challenges of poetic translation (and to ensure we understood their intended meaning correctly), we also asked them to submit an English-language version of their work. Looking back on the creative process, a student commented:

The most challenging part was trying to fit all the ideas and words I wanted to express into the syllabic pattern, while also maintaining a smooth, rhythmic feeling of said pattern when read aloud. This resulted in having to switch the order of my lines several times while playing around with the syllables, thereby also requiring me to rethink where I want my points of emphasis to land, which again affects my wording -- and the cycle just repeats. It's fun to challenge oneself creatively like this, however.

Over the course of the semester, we also designed a variety of immersive, multi-sensory activities as part of our preparations for the event. These were intended to boost student enthusiasm for the poetry contest and equip them with tangible takeaways. For instance, instructors

led calligraphy lessons to introduce the students to the basics of cursive script (*kuzushiji* くずし字) and had them practice through imitating calligraphic versions of the *Hyakunin isshu* 百人一首 (One Hundred Poets, One Poem Each), an activity that matched nicely with the *waka*-a-day warm-up.²⁷ Prior to the *utaawase*, we also supplied our students with colored slips of paper known as *tanzaku* 短冊 (figure 2), which are associated with the Tanabata Festival in contemporary Japan but were originally used for poetry rather than wishes. Not only did these paper slips help randomize the assignment of topics as in a sort of lottery—a practice known as *tandai* or *saguridai* 探題 in premodern Japan—but they also allowed us to introduce a significant aspect of the material culture of *waka* (Beppu 2012). At the end of the course, students inscribed their completed *tanka* onto these *tanzaku*, adding a touch of “material culture” to the composition activity. In the post-contest survey of one author’s students, all respondents reported that these creative activities mobilized their understanding of *bungo*.

VI. Event and evaluation

Before the scheduled event, students’ compositions were anonymized. Each poem was assigned “randomly” to either the team of the Left or the team of the Right, as in a traditional *utaawase*, although the instructors made some effort to “match” poems that would speak to each other within topics. In addition, we lightly curated each team with an eye to a diverse mixture of students from the different universities, such that the event would not feel like a competition between schools. Because the only prize at stake was bragging rights, the instructors felt this was one way through which to foster an inclusive and jovial atmosphere at the event itself.

Anonymization was an important component of our approach to this event. Students often do not feel comfortable sharing their creative work, especially in a public forum. Furthermore, both judges and audience could more easily appreciate anonymized poems as stand-alone compositions. After all, the anonymization of poets is far from unusual in the history of *utaawase*: as we learn from chapter 61 of Kamo no Chōmei’s *Mumyōshō* 無名抄 (Nameless Notes; ca. 1211), it was quite common indeed, but the purpose behind concealing poets’ names was usually to avoid the sort of embarrassment that arises in cases, for instance, when the judge was asked to evaluate the poem of some high-ranking aristocrat.²⁸ For our event, anonymity was less a political than a therapeutic strategy, pursued out of respect for the sensitivities of our students. Our choice was well-received

by our student-poets, as evinced by the following comments: “I liked that the different colleges were split as left and right teams rather than as individual colleges. [...] The anonymity of the poems was reassuring.” Namelessness also added a fun sense of mystery to the contest, as students could “see the poetry through their [classmates’] eyes” and guess which ones were written by their friends.

After settling which poems would be “matched,” the instructor assigned to judge each round prepared brief written comments intended to elucidate the history and conventions of each topic and help the audience appreciate the poems from literary-historical and literary-critical perspectives by analyzing use of language, expressive choices, and unwitting or witting allusions to the poetic canon. Above all, the instructors aimed to treat each poem as seriously as the literary compositions to which they attend in their academic research. Using major databases and dictionaries, we checked intertextual cues and underscored classical rhetorical figures such as *utamakura* 歌枕 or allusive toponyms. Moreover, although not traditionally expected in *utaawase*, we encouraged students to add short prefaces (*kotobagaki* 詞書) in classical Japanese prose to shed light on the circumstances of their poems’ creation. When included, we also took these *kotobagaki* into account for our evaluations. While students demonstrated various levels of ability and some were more natural poets than others, the instructors approached the task of judgment with warmth and positivity. Therefore, judgments eschewed prescriptive “rules” from centuries prior in favor of a focus on how students used Classical Japanese to express themselves within the bounds of this twenty-first century exercise. Such an approach to judgments—examples of which are documented in Appendix B—was established in the spirit of reanimating *bungo* for our present-day students.

The first Intercollegiate Classical Japanese Poetry Contest convened on Zoom on December 6, 2022, 4:00 p.m. Eastern Standard, 2:00 p.m. Mountain, and 10:00 a.m. Hawai‘i. The event was scheduled for a total of ninety minutes, with approximately five minutes allotted for each of the thirteen rounds. Before beginning the first round, the instructors briefly discussed their objectives with the event and laid out the (n)etiquette, or the ground rules, the most important of which was a directive to be respectful and conscious of one another in the virtual space of the event. Accordingly, we directed our participants and audience alike to remember that we were present in that space in the spirit of collegiality, and therefore any criticism should be both constructive and polite. During each round,

one instructor read the poems of the Left and Right aloud twice, and then yielded the floor to the instructor who was serving as judge for that round, who read out their prepared comments on the compositions. Comments were also solicited from the audience in the Zoom chat, and the three instructors worked to respond to these as appropriate for approximately one minute following the judge's comments.²⁹ Finally, the participants in the audience, which included all of our student-poets as well as invited guests, were asked to vote on the winner of that round via a Zoom poll. The winner of the Zoom poll was declared victorious, and all three instructors then congratulated both poets before moving on to the next round.

Overall, we endeavored to create a welcoming environment that would foster positive reinforcement for our students, building up rather than tearing down their work. By the same token, students' "grades" for this assignment were based on criteria such as participation, timely submission, and responsiveness to the instructor's and/or peers' feedback during workshop sessions. In hindsight, the result was a collective initiative that was rewarding and refreshing for most participants, with two students sharing the following impressions of the event:

- [1] I was mightily impressed by all of the participants in the intercollegiate *utaawase*. The content was fresh, yet incorporated classical writing techniques and allusions brilliantly. I could feel that all of the poems had a personal flavor to them, as if they could have only been written by each person. That balance of traditional aesthetics and contemporary worries and celebration was a fusion that brought lots of feelings to my heart as I listened. Through that, I wondered if the participants of *utaawase* in Heian Japan felt the same way I did just now?
- [2] Hearing everyone's discussions and thoughts on these poems was not only a good learning experience, but it was also fun. I think this *utaawase* was able to culminate a semester's worth of classical Japanese learning by emphasizing the collaborative and living nature of classical Japanese language, language appreciation, and language discourse. Despite the language's roots in Japan, I think it was all the more meaningful to then conclude our studies by hosting an event with fellow Japanese language studies colleagues in the US to broaden our horizons on the reach that classical Japanese has on foreign Japanese literary scholars too.

VII. Conclusions

The place of *bungo* is by no means guaranteed in the North American university classroom. It seems remarkable that the language continues to

be offered at over thirty North American institutions amid a general crisis of the humanities. As educators with the privilege to offer *bungo* courses, our task is to maintain relevance and engage our students with innovative curricula. To that end, it becomes crucial to move away from a crisis mentality to a “futurology of the classics” (*koten no miraigaku* 古典の未来学), as Araki Hiroshi argues.³⁰ One way to do so could involve viewing classics not as static objects but as a continually evolving “textual heritage” (*tekusuto isan* テクスト遺産), as Edoardo Gerlini and Kōno Kimiko propose (2021: 220–225). Another approach might emphasize the impact that premodern language and literature can have now on our and our students’ lives, as Christina Laffin argued in a recent talk at Waseda University.³¹ Building on this agenda, the *utaawase* format helped students deepen their appreciation of *bungo*’s vibrancy and foster a learning community beyond the bounds of classroom and campus.

The Intercollegiate Classical Japanese Poetry Contest was imagined as a means of cultivating a sense of investment and personal ownership in the learning process for students. Through the exercise of composing their own *tanka*, students reinforced their grasp of grammar rules and vocabulary but also cultivated a deeper personal connection to each other and the subject matter. The poem-a-day warm-up was instrumental in introducing *waka* as a distinctive genre with its own rules, conventions, and aesthetics. It also served as a means to mitigate the centrality of top-down instruction and transform grammar study into a more collaborative endeavor. We introduced students to online databases, typically utilized for research purposes, and encouraged them to locate relevant examples from these corpora. Students then produced their own poem drafts and workshopped them. Some also tried their hand at calligraphy and had the chance to interact with forms and reproductions of premodern materiality. Together, these strategies worked to further engage students with the classical Japanese language and helped them to synthesize cultural and linguistic knowledge gained over the course of the semester.

Most importantly, the event made the students aware of a wider community of learners and scholars engaged in the study of premodern Japan and *bungo*—something that would have scarcely been possible before the virtual encounters made possible in the Zoom era.³² Our post-pandemic times have witnessed a surge in the use of digital tools, unlocking novel avenues for communication and online interactions among both students and educators. And as it turns out, nurturing collaborations among teachers can create enjoyable and engaging

experiences—with potentially wider implications for knitting together a community of young learners and scholars alike. An event such as our *utaawase* can also highlight the importance of *bungo* classes to college administrations, increase the visibility of premodern Japanese literary studies on campus, and expand our outreach efforts among student bodies. In particular, the participation of community members interested in classical Japanese poetic forms such as *tanka* and *haiku* can help bridge academic and public engagement, and potentially offer a model for similar events conducted in other languages.³³ As one student noted in the post-event survey: “The topic of *bungo* is incredibly niche in the West (even in Japan perhaps nowadays), so seeing other people actually interested and engaging with it makes me have hope that we can have scholars carrying on our love for *bungo* through the generations.”

With this lovely aspiration in mind, we conclude with an invitation to consider yet more alternative teaching methodologies to facilitate language acquisition and bolster the interest of our students. The Intercollegiate Poetry Contest serves as just one example of a vibrant field populated by determined teachers paving the way for the future of *bungo*. Moving forward, we envision the development of new composition assignments for our introductory *bungo* courses, encouraging creative and critical engagement with diverse textual genres such as *renga*, *haiku*, and even personal letters that students from different schools could ideally exchange throughout the semester.³⁴ Further, we recognize there are numerous untapped possibilities when it comes to integrating technology into our teaching practices. One might involve students critiquing and refining AI-generated poems.³⁵ Imagine students using generative artificial intelligence to create a *tanka* on a designated topic, then enhancing these initial drafts by leveraging their knowledge of classical grammar, vocabulary, and poetic conventions—even as a preliminary *utaawase* contest with non-human poets! This suggestion is just one of many strategies available to innovate in *bungo* education and make a more compelling case for its inclusion as a Japanese major requirement.³⁶ By espousing innovative teaching methods, we can not only preserve but also invigorate the study of *bungo*, solidifying its place within East Asian Studies departments and infusing new life into the field of premodern Japan studies.

APPENDIX A

Results from an Informal Survey of Classical Japanese Pedagogy in North America (Fall 2023) Summary and Visualization of Data

In the fall of 2023, we conducted an informal survey of Japanese pedagogy in North America via Google Forms. Our starting point was the forty-four colleges and universities listed on the webpage of the AATJ's Classical Japanese Special Interest Group as institutions where Classical Japanese is taught. We directly emailed premodern Japanese literary studies specialists at each of these forty-four institutions and asked them to respond to five questions about their pedagogy. In order to target institutions not included on the previous list, we included a sixth question in which we asked respondents if they knew of other institutions that might have begun offering Classical Japanese since this list was compiled in 2009; we reached out whenever this yielded a new lead. Respondents were also given space to comment freely; the below data partially reflects our understanding of their comments as well as their objective answers. Some respondents reported that Classical Japanese was no longer offered at their institution, whereas thirty respondents indicated that a course is offered at regular or irregular intervals.

At our institution, we offer classical Japanese . . .

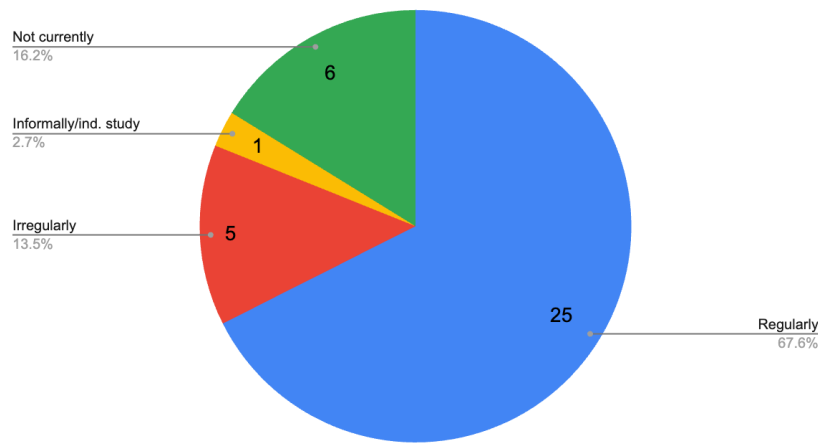


Figure A.1

Counting one respondent who offered *bungo* as an independent study, we were able to survey a pool of thirty-one respondents who confirmed they offer *bungo* at their institutions. The response rate was high but not 100%, and we are

aware of universities where *bungo* is offered from which a response could not be obtained. Nonetheless, we believe the respondents represent a significant share of colleges and universities where Classical Japanese can be studied in North America. Encouragingly, we discovered at least as many institutions not on the older AATJ list to offset the handful of respondents who informed us they no longer offered the language.

Our working hypothesis was that most *bungo* courses nowadays are based on the parsing and translation of “authentic” and “historical” source texts (one respondent rightly challenged us to problematize those terms!). To test this, we asked whether the below statement aligned with each respondent’s approach. The responses confirmed our hypothesis, but also indicated that most instructors are also incorporating innovative approaches into their classrooms.

My classical Japanese instruction method is based primarily on parsing and translating authentic and historical texts.

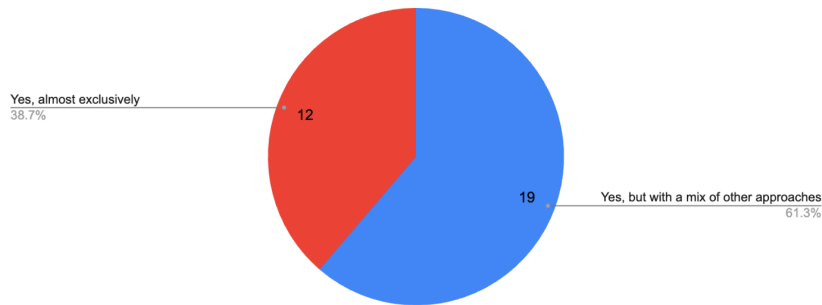


Figure A.2

A secondary hypothesis held that Haruo Shirane’s textbook and reader had become the most widespread course materials used in North American *bungo* pedagogy since their publication over a decade ago. To test this, we asked respondents whether they used this textbook and whether they supplemented it with other materials. We did not specifically ask how Shirane’s textbook was used, but some respondents shared a bit about their methods in their comments.

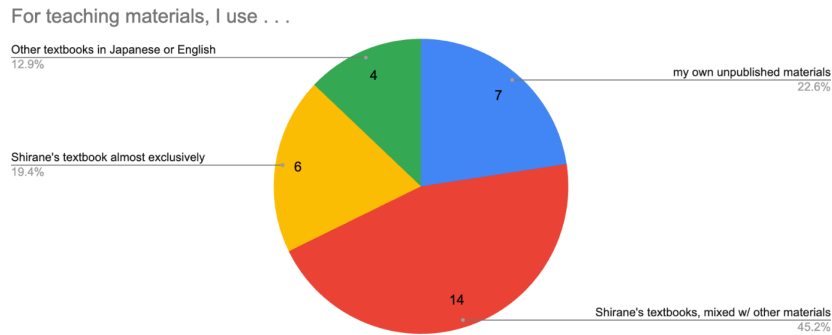


Figure A.3

About two-thirds of *bungo* courses make use of Shirane's English-language textbook and reader, but most of those courses supplement these with additional materials. Nearly a quarter of courses are reportedly based on unpublished materials prepared by instructors. Other textbooks in English (including John Timothy Wixted's *A Handbook to Classical Japanese* and Tadashi Ikeda's *Classical Japanese Grammar Illustrated with Texts*) as well as textbooks used in Japanese high schools were also mentioned.

Finally, we were curious to know how widespread composition activities were in *bungo* pedagogy. Many instructors mentioned incorporating English-language or modern Japanese composition activities into their other classes, while a smaller number noted they asked their students to compose in *bungo*. A fair number of respondents reported that they did not include composition in their teaching.

Do you incorporate a poetry or prose composition activity into your teaching?

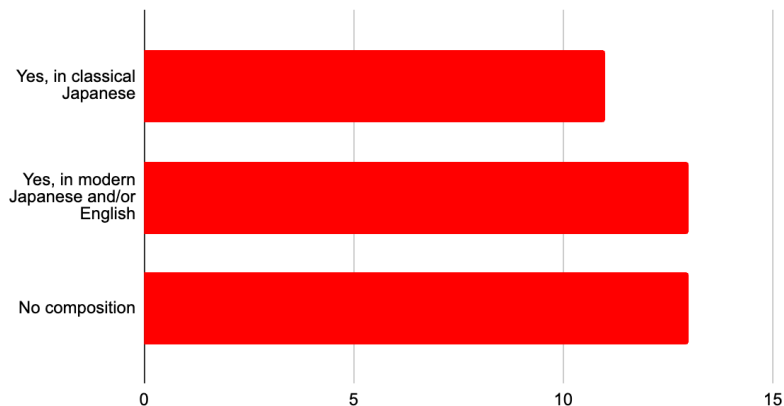


Figure A.4

We would like to thank all our respondents for their participation.

Respondent universities:

Arizona State University
 Brown University
 Columbia University
 Cornell University
 Dartmouth College
 East Carolina University
 Florida State University
 George Washington University
 Harvard University
 Indiana University
 Stanford University
 University of Alberta
 University of Arizona
 University of British Columbia
 University of California Santa Barbara
 University of California, Davis
 University of California, Irvine
 University of Chicago
 University of Colorado Boulder
 University of Hawai'i at Manoa
 University of Iowa

University of Kansas
University of Maryland, College Park
University of Massachusetts Amherst
University of Michigan
University of Montana
University of Oklahoma
University of Oregon
University of Pittsburgh
University of Tennessee, Knoxville
University of Texas at Austin
University of Toronto
University of Utah
University of Virginia
University of Washington, Seattle
Washington University in St Louis
Wellesley College

APPENDIX B

Edited transcription of three rounds from the 2022 Intercollegiate Classical Japanese Poetry Contest

Round #4: Landscapes 山水

Left		Right	
<i>Miwataseba</i>	見渡せば	<i>Miwataseba</i>	見渡せば
<i>Tsukisenu ao ni</i>	尽きせぬ青に	<i>Mauka makai ni</i>	山海（マウカ・マカイ）に
<i>Nogarezu ya</i>	逃れずや	<i>Tsutsumarenu</i>	つつまれぬ
<i>Hirogaru kiri ni</i>	広がる霧に	<i>Michi ni wa sawaru</i>	道にはさはる
<i>Usuakari kana</i>	薄明かりかな	<i>Mono naku mogana</i>	ものなくもがな
As I look around In the endless blue There is no escape In the widespread fog A faint light (glows)		As I look around Mountains and sea envelop me. If only there were no Obstacles on my way!	

Judge 1 (Marjorie Burge): The Left's poem here draws on an established trope of "landscape" poetry in the *waka* tradition which center the poet and his act of looking in the first line with *miwataseba*. It's a nice, even five syllables, which works well as a first line. *Watasu* of course indicates that the act of viewing is spread over an expanse, but with the rest of the poem, particularly with *nogarezu ya* in the third line, there's a feeling of restrictiveness—it is as if the poet is attempting survey an expansive landscape but is hindered by the *ao* that surrounds them, and the mist that seems to grow, and the only relief is the faint light glimpsed through the mist. This poem feels more like an aborted landscape, in that the poet strains to see but cannot. I like the way the poet has used a rhetorical question in the third line: could there be any way to escape from the *ao*? No, there cannot. The poem ends with the noun *usuakari*, "faint light" and the exclamatory particle *kana*. Because there is no predicate, it leaves us as readers to find a connection between the first and second halves of the poem. This sort of technique is common in early medieval *waka*: the juxtaposition of two images, but not the explicit connection of them.

The Right's poem echoes the Left's in some really interesting ways, because it also begins with *miwataseba*, and we also have an expansive vision that is sought by the poet, and the road they seek to travel is also "enclosed," here by mountain and sea. However, *nogarezu ya* has a very different tone than *tsutsumarenu*, which suggests being wrapped/enveloped, embraced, or hidden. The poet here appears to be on a journey, and is pronouncing a desire for safe travel, something commonly seen in travel poetry, where it was possible to speak such an outcome into existence. The glosses for the characters *yama* and *umi* as

mauka and *makai* clearly suggest this poem belongs to one of our University of Hawai‘i poets, but I am a big fan of these sort of orthographic techniques, a common feature of *Man’yōshū*, because they help expand the world of the poem beyond the 31 syllables; here, these glosses go a long way toward helping us envision what kind of landscape that surrounds the poet—the mountains on one side, the ocean on the other, the poet in between, just hoping he will be able to navigate the space between them successfully.

I really enjoyed both poems, and I’m anxious to hear what everyone else thinks about them. [...] It’s a tough one, but could the Right pull it off this time? It looks like the Right has pulled it off this time. Congratulations!

Round #7: Love Embittered 恨恋

Left		Right	
<i>Ne mo nakanu</i>	音も鳴かぬ	<i>Mune no naka</i>	胸の中
<i>Sumaho no soba ni</i>	スマホの側に	<i>Nokoru utsuro zo</i>	残るうつろぞ
<i>Machikanetsu</i>	待ち兼ねつ	<i>Chiri hai ga</i>	塵灰が
<i>Kimi no koe o ba</i>	君の声をば	<i>Ochitsukinikeru</i>	落ち着きにける
<i>Kyō mo kikazu ya</i>	けふも聞かずや	<i>Kotsu tsubo gotoku</i>	骨壺ごとく
I wait in vain beside my silent smartphone am I not to hear your voice for yet another day?		Oh, the cavity left inside my chest, How it resembles ash and dust Finally settled in an urn.	

Judge 2 (Pier Carlo Tommasi): Our next round focuses on *uramuru koi*, a.k.a. break-up poems. In the annals of Japanese poetry, one of the first mentions of this topic appears in *The Poetry Contest in Six Hundred Rounds* and has remained a staple of *waka* composition ever since. I would argue that what makes love poems so fascinating is their narrative quality, because they can convey a fragment, if not the entire storyline of a romance within the short span of thirty-one syllables. This is what happens in both of these poems.

The poem of the Left brilliantly actualizes the long hours of wait and despair for an unrequited love by transforming the speaker's smartphone into a post-modern bird, whose song alone can soothe the aching heart. After reading the first line, one would anticipate a more conventional *tori* (bird), but is instead greeted by a *sumaho*, which offers a refreshing and unexpected twist. The third line's use of *machikanetsu* is also impactful. I suggest this author may have drawn inspiration from Kakinomoto no Hitomaro, given the use of this expression by the celebrated *Man'yōshū* poet.

If the poem of the Left portrays the hopeless waiting of the beloved, the Right's poem moves us forward in time to the literal "burial" of the relationship. *Utsuro* and *kotsu tsubo* are strong words to find in the context of *waka*, but they really capture the profound grief that comes with lost love. This, combined with the emphatic particle *zo* and the combination of perfective and past auxiliary verbs (*nikeru*), underscores a sense of definitive closure.

These are my reflections on these remarkable poems. I now open the floor for discussion. [...] Shall we call it a tie? As Fujiwara no Shunzei or Teika might say in such cases, *yoki ji to su beshi* 良き持とすべし. What a beautiful tie! Congratulations to both teams.

Round #13: Hometown 故郷

Left		Right	
<i>Tabetashi na</i>	食べたしな	<i>Ito umaki</i>	いとうまき
<i>Okonomiyaki ga</i>	お好み焼きが	<i>Imo o omoiidete</i>	芋を思ひ出でて
<i>Natsukashiku</i>	懐かしく	<i>Kishikadomo</i>	来しかども
<i>Haha no gohan mo</i>	母のご飯も	<i>Niwa arenikeri</i>	庭荒れにけり
<i>Machikirenu kana</i>	待ちきれぬかな	<i>Sato mo kawareri</i>	里も変はれり
I miss <i>okonomiyaki</i> and cannot wait to eat my mother's food!		Thinking of the flavor of the very delicious potato, I came (home), but the garden was desolate! My old village has changed.	

Judge 3 (Jeffrey Niedermaier): With both of these poems, what a wonderful way to end our competition! They use one of the five senses which is relatively rare in *waka* poetry, which tends to harness all of the senses. Both poets use this sense to resounding effect to create an incredibly tender nostalgia for their hometowns. And, of course, the sense I'm talking about is taste: the taste of home cooking. Taste appears less often in traditional *waka* but it is by no means without precedent. There is a very ancient precedent for it in the *Man'yōshū*. In the ancient era of *The Collection of Myriad Leaves*, Yamanoue no Ōkura sang about how eating melons and chestnuts called to mind his children back at home and caused him not to be able to sleep for all the pangs of longing that he felt. So even though these poems may seem almost naïve and innocent in their desire for home cooking, they're also deeply steeped in a kind of tradition that connects the sense of taste with the *furusato*. If I had to characterize them, I would say that the poem of the Left with its cute and endearing diction is full of innocent anticipation, whereas the poem of the Right takes the moment of homecoming and then adds in that great pathos of recognition—like an early poem about the *Kitaguni* or North Country—recognizing that a place has changed with the ages while the poet has been the way. And the desolation on the right, just like the anticipation on the left, are moving in almost equal measure.

So let's hold a vote and see who's going to take the cake—or the *okonomiyaki*, as the case may be. Which of these “Proustian” poems wins? [...] Could it be? I think I have to call it from the Right. They came from behind.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to express their gratitude to the many colleagues who generously shared their perspectives by filling out our informal survey on *bungo* language pedagogy in North America. Special thanks to the AATJ Classical Japanese Special Interest Group for their support, particularly to former coordinator Jack Stoneman and to Paul Warnick for his on-site assistance during our Boston roundtable in March 2023. Our appreciation also extends to Satō Sekiko 佐藤勢紀子 for the invitation to present at the seventh research seminar of her BUNGO-bun Project (KAKEN Ref. No. 20K00720). We are grateful to all the attendees of these events, as well as to the anonymous reviewers, for their insightful feedback. We also wish to acknowledge Satoko Shimazaki (University of California, Los Angeles) and Danica Truscott (Harvard University) for their collaboration in organizing subsequent Intercollegiate Poetry Contests. And, of course, we wish to express our utmost appreciation for our student-poets, whose enthusiasm and creativity have been the driving forces behind this entire project.

NOTES

- ¹ The authors note also the large corpus of writings in Chinese or Literary Sinitic (*kanbun*), and refer here only to those writings that can be considered to be in “Japanese” (*wabun*).
- ² Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon (2021) contextualize our current moment of “crisis” within a longer history of persistent crisis in the humanities at the university level in both the U.S. and Europe.
- ³ While Pollock’s focus is on the state of classical studies in India, he compares the situation to the decline of humanistic studies and “global premodern language-based studies” in North America (Pollock 2011: 23–25).
- ⁴ For the AATJ Classical Japanese Special Interest Group, see <https://www.aatj.org/sig-classical-japanese>. Information on the most recent meeting of the Ohio State University Teaching Classical Japanese: A Practitioner’s Workshop can be found at <https://easc.osu.edu/events/teaching-classical-japanese-practitioners-workshop-iii>. The Classical Japanese Portal (<https://cjp.asc.ohio-state.edu/>), hosted by Ohio State University, is an intriguing example of an interactive, multimedia platform designed to help students wade through premodern literary texts and improve their knowledge of *bungo*.
- ⁵ We regret that our survey did not ask respondents about whether *bungo* is required as part of a Japanese major, or what typical enrollment figures are. Anecdotally, we understand that *bungo* enrollments are down generally despite

the course continuing to be offered at so many institutions, and that this downward trend may be related to a decrease in institutions that include *bungo* as a major requirement.

- ⁶ The collective participation in the voting process was meant to be reminiscent of the premodern practice known as *shugihan*, a participatory debate format where the entire assembly contributed to deciding the winner of each round.
- ⁷ For the purposes of this pedagogy-focused article, the authors determined to use the term *tanka* to refer to a transhistorical, living genre that conforms to the traditional 5/7/5/7/7 meter and the term *waka* to refer to the historically bound corpus of *tanka* composed in the premodern period. Nonetheless the authors are aware of the significant overlap and entanglement of the two terms, whose uses are highly contextual.
- ⁸ For more information, see <https://prod.libraries.usc.edu/events/uta-awase-modern-take-traditional-japanese-poetry-contest>.
- ⁹ According to our survey, only ten instructors—the authors included—reportedly incorporate composition assignments in their *bungo* teaching (see Appendix A for more detail). For recent examples of creative composition in a Japanese class, see Koyama Junko (2021) and Mitarai Yasuhiro (2023). See also the workshop, “The Power of Translation: Who’s Afraid of Poetry?,” organized by Thomas McAuley and Janine Beichman at Waseda University in 2019, featuring a *hon’yaku awase* 翻訳合 or “translation contest.”
- ¹⁰ Of course, North America is not a monolingual continent; many universities across the continent offer instruction in Spanish and French. Though Latin was an ancestor to modern Spanish and French much in the way *bungo* was to modern Japanese, the texture of the gap between *bungo* on the one hand and Latin and Spanish would still seem quite different to students at a hispanophone university such as Colegio de México, where we have heard that *bungo* is occasionally taught. To our knowledge, *bungo* is not presently taught at any of Canada’s francophone universities.
- ¹¹ Shirane’s English-language *bungo* grammar and reader were conceived in part to address this discrepancy in accessibility, but the barrier of script and the modern Japanese vocabulary used to parse and analyze *bungo* grammar remain as obstacles, prompting Shirane to recommend his materials to learners with at least an intermediate level in modern Japanese (Shirane 2005: xix).
- ¹² For the compartmentalization of classical language as “rhetorical” during Meiji-era Japan, see Tomasi (1999). For the influence of Meiji-era nationalism on present-day academic inquiry, see Lamarre (2000: 1–10) and Yoda (2004: 44–99).
- ¹³ The potential for this “revived” style as deployed in contemporary media to attract students to the *bungo* classroom has been noted by many. Most recently,

Małgorzata Citko-Duplantis presented on the topic “Digital Games in Teaching Classical Japanese” at the AATJ Classical Japanese Special Interest Group meeting at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting in Columbus in March 2025, arguing that video games can be a draw for students to the *bungo* classroom.

- ¹⁴ See, for instance, Ariel Stilerman (2017) and Robert Tuck (2018: xix–xxiii).
- ¹⁵ The original quote reads as follows: 古典を使って、もっともっと遊んでよい。古典の肝は、結局言葉の網の目のようなつながりを内面化するところにあると思う。
- ¹⁶ For Latin, see Koutropoulos (2011), Hunt (2018), and Vascheva et. al (2023). For innovative *kanshi* composition assignments in Japanese *kanbun* curricula, see the special issue of the journal *Kanbun kyōshitsu* 漢文教室 entitled *Kanshi o tsukurō* or “Let’s make *kanshi*!” (Kanbun kyōshitsu 2023).
- ¹⁷ In premodern Japan studies, there has been a growing call to make instructional materials more responsive to contemporary trends and to leverage students’ prior familiarity with J-pop products (Citko-DuPlantis 2024: 132–133), though these initiatives appear to be aimed more at literature and cultural courses than *bungo* per se.
- ¹⁸ The history of *waka* is characterized by “conservative,” “progressive,” and “liberal” trends in versification, as evinced in the debating among medieval schools (Tommasi 2022: 230–234). Reassessing this polyphony of approaches from a contemporary viewpoint, our method drew inspiration from the pedagogical principles of the Reizei 冷泉 lineage. Adherents of this school, while respectful of tradition, did not shy away from incorporating neologisms and colloquialisms into their compositions—an ethos we imparted to our own students. For a concise summary of Reizei-school poetics, see Steven Carter’s introduction to Brower (1992), especially pp. 6–14.
- ¹⁹ See, for instance, Fujiwara no Teika’s pronouncement in *Eiga no taigai* 詠歌大概 (Essentials of Poetic Composition; ca. 1222): “The vocabulary should be restricted to words used by the masters of the Three Anthologies” (De Bary et al. 2001: 203).
- ²⁰ The authors here would like to acknowledge the public criticism of our event (sent out to the Premodern Japanese Studies [PMJS] listserv in May 2023) that stemmed primarily from this part of our approach. While in an ideal world we might have had our students study the “poetic ills” of the various *karon* 歌論 (“poetic treatises”) of the Heian period, we did not have adequate time in an introductory course, where our focus was on the grammar of the classical language. We also did not require that students adhere to the language of the “Three Anthologies” primarily because we wanted to encourage our students to compose poetry that was meaningful to them (should they wish to do so), and

for some students this meant incorporating neologisms such as *sumaho* that might best capture their own lived experiences. The fact remains that many contemporary North American undergraduates conceptualize poetry as fundamentally personal and rooted in one's individuality; this is in some ways at odds with how Heian and medieval *waka* poets saw their craft. However, since our intent was to help students experience *bungo* as a productive "living" language through which they might express themselves, we did not require that they reconfigure their poetic persona to match that of classical *waka* poets, but rather welcomed any and all approaches to composition so long as they adhered to the rules of *bungo* grammar.

- ²¹ In other words, instead of focusing on recreating the past with utmost precision, we sought to "project" it into the present and, hopefully, the future, coupling affect and cognition in an embodied activity aimed at maximizing the learning experience of our students. Here, we borrow Araki Hiroshi's use of the term "projecting" (*tōki* 投企; Araki 2020: 22–28). Takemura Shinji (2020), part of the same volume, while focused on primary and secondary classrooms, provides valuable insights on how to implement this idea of "projecting classicism" into the classroom. On historical reenactment outside *bungo* education, see McCalman and Pickering (2010).
- ²² Note that restrictive definitions of kinesthetic learning would encompass only movement-based activities, for instance interpretive dance. For a comparable approach that integrates material literacy and "critical making" in the teaching of Japanese tea culture, see Stilerman (2025).
- ²³ The value of such "experiential" activities in increasing student engagement has recently become a lively topic of discussion among *bungo* instructors. At the AATJ Classical Japanese Special Interest Group meeting at AAS 2025, Gian Piero Persiani presented on "Experiential Learning in the Classical Japanese Language Classroom," wherein he outlined successful classroom activities that included a calligraphy workshop, a session on book history, and a *Hyakunin isshu* card game competition.
- ²⁴ In something of a reverse of this, Jin Zhong utilizes modern poetry as a means of introducing Chinese-speaking students to classical Japanese grammar and bridge the gap between the ancient and the contemporary world. See Jin Zhong (2009: 97–101). For *honkadōri*, see Bialock (1994).
- ²⁵ The two databases are subscription-based and therefore inaccessible at many North American universities. While we acknowledge the privilege of access, we would also like to point out that incorporating these resources into our teaching served the aim of expanding that access. Incorporating specialized resources such as these not only into our research but also into our teaching makes purchasing a subscription a more compelling proposition for institutional libraries.

- ²⁶ McAuley's translation of the *Eikyū hyakushu* 永久百首 (The Eikyū Era Hundred Poem Sequences) is freely available on his blog *Waka Poetry* (<https://www.wakapoetry.net/poems/other-collections/eikyu-hyakushu/>), alongside many other translations and *waka*-related resources. McAuley's translation of the *Roppyakuban utaawase* 六百番歌合, published in 2020 as *The Poetry Contest in Six Hundred Rounds: A Translation and Commentary*, also proved a particularly useful resource for students because of the wealth of *daiei* composition examples, which helped students familiarize themselves with the topics they were randomly assigned. Similarly, the recently launched *Tale of Genji Poetry Database* (<https://www.genjipoems.org/>), created by J. Keith Vincent and his students, promises to be a valuable resource for anyone looking to incorporate poems from the *Genji monogatari* into their *bungo* creative assignments.
- ²⁷ One instructor took their class to the university library to explore firsthand original Japanese materials (*kotenseki* 古典籍), with a focus on poetic works. This approach hinges on the idea of “*wahon* 和本 literacy” as developed by Nakano Mitsutoshi (2011) and, in the anglophone sphere, Laura Moretti (2016). We were also inspired by the strategies and benefits of incorporating elements of book culture into the classroom laid out in Sasaki Takahiro (2023). Sasaki's essay appears in an edited volume by the Dōshisha Daigaku Koten Kyōzai Kaihatsu Kenkyū Sentā 同志社大学古典教材開発研究センター (Center for the Development of Educational Materials on Classical Japanese Literature). This new Center—and particularly the research cluster informally known as Kotekiri no Kai コテキリの会 (abbreviation for Koten kyōzai no mirai o kirihiraku! kenkyūkai 古典教材の未来を切り拓く！研究会)—was established at Dōshisha University in 2021, and since has been at the forefront of innovative *bungo* pedagogies, serving as an inspiration for the three authors.
- ²⁸ For an English translation of this section of the text, see Katō (1968: 396).
- ²⁹ It must be acknowledged here that while the comments in the Zoom chat were overwhelmingly positive in accordance with our (n)etiquette rules, one invited guest made several critical comments about the use of modern neologisms in certain poems. One of the instructors promptly reminded everyone of the parameters of the assignment (namely, that students were not required to use only the language of the “Three Anthologies”) and moved the conversation forward. However, several students commented later that these comments felt disconcerting and out of place with the general tone of the event.
- ³⁰ See Araki (2020). On the notion of pedagogy as a future-oriented project aimed at fostering global citizenship, see also Bourn (2021).
- ³¹ The presentation took place on June 2, 2023, under the title “The ‘More-than-Human’ and Ecocultural Perspectives on Premodern Japanese Literature:

Current Approaches and Experiences of Teaching in Canada.” Information about the event can be found at <https://www.waseda.jp/flas/gjs/news-en/3618>. The authors extend their gratitude to Christina Laffin for sharing her insights and PowerPoint slides.

- ³² On the increasingly crucial role of technology in creating and sustaining community-based knowledge acquisition, see Zhu and Baylen (2005). Along these lines, the second Intercollegiate Poetry Contest, held on December 7, 2023, saw the organizers inviting “guest *hanja*” to further enrich the event and offer students exposure to diverse voices in the field; this practice continued in the third Intercollegiate Poetry contest, held on December 6, 2024. Of course, telematic encounters were possible long before the 2020 pandemic, but the habituation of students and instructors alike to Zoom has made it a resource even after the era of compulsory remote learning.
- ³³ The Intercollegiate Classical Japanese Poetry Contest was attended by members of the Tanka Society of America, who offered generously positive feedback to our students. One of the authors presented the event as a model for English-language poetry contests in K-12 classrooms for Teaching East Asia’s Poetry in the Classroom Series in April 2024.
- ³⁴ Given that the epistolary genre uncovers connections and continuities of experiences across various times and places, incorporating hands-on applications of premodern letter-writing conventions (*shosatsurei* 書札礼) would be especially suited for a second-semester *bungo* class.
- ³⁵ On AI and *waka*, see Jin (2021) and Takeishi and Jin (2023).
- ³⁶ For other intriguing examples, including the employing of divination poems (*uta uranai* 歌占い) to enrich active learning experiences, see Hirano Tae (2019). A case in point is *Kaiun ☆Seimei Uta Uranai* 開運☆せいめい歌占 (“Fortune-Boosting Seimei Poetry Oracle”), which features an interactive website (<https://ssl.japanknowledge.jp/utaura/>) where users can pose any question to a virtual soothsayer modeled after Abe no Seimei (921–1005) and receive a *waka*-style fortune-telling message based on an Edo-period divination book. We believe these resources may encourage students to draw connections between past and present and to apply their knowledge of *bungo* beyond the classroom. In fact, some students already engage with Classical Japanese outside our instructional settings, as evidenced by those who occasionally seek feedback on *tanka* they compose for friends.

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